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BEYOND BEYONCE, JAY-Z AND SOLANGE: ARTIST ARTHUR Jafa
TAKES THE STAGE IN LONDON

By Miss Rosen, July 28, 2017



One of the first things taught in art class is the concept of “negative space”: that which is the ever-present reality in which all things exist. It is the air we breathe but cannot see, the atmosphere that fills the void and holds the most complex and compelling forms. It is what you see when you actually look, when you focus on the very idea that absence is a presence all its own.

“How do we imagine things that are lost? What kind of legacy can we imagine despite that loss and despite the absence of things that never were?” American filmmaker, cinematographer, artist Arthur Jafa asks in his new exhibition, *A Series of Utterly Improbably, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, currently on view at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, through September 10, 2017.

Featuring the work of Ming Smith, Frida Orupabo, and MissyLanus, Jafa has transformed the gallery into an immersive, hallucinatory experience that is driven by the desire to visualize that which has been erased: the history of Black America from the Middle Passage through the present day. As his ancestors have done for hundreds of years, Jafa draws upon what remains to elucidate the hazy and horrific history of life in the United States.

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Jafa, who has most recently worked with Jay-Z to direct the music video for “4:44,” with Solange for “Cranes in the Sky” and “Don’t Touch My Hair,” and with Beyoncé on parts of “Formation,” is the first-name in videography. But his work crafting images of Black life has been going on for decades, whether collaborating with Spike Lee on Crooklyn or with his ex-wife Julie Dash on Daughters of the Dust, which is said to have inspired the look of Lemonade.

Music, which fills negative space in such a way that it draws us into the void, has been transformed through the advent of videography. We now live in a world where sight is inherently connected with sound, and yet there remains a gap between the influence of Black music and that of Black visual art, the latter having been marginalized until recent years.

As an artist who transforms sound into sight, Jafa is well-versed in the potent power of the intangible and the way in which it speaks to the soul. Here, in *A Series of Utterly Improbably, Yet Extraordinary Renditions*, the artist is using the visual realm to reach beneath the surface and seep deep into the marrow of the bone.

The exhibition opens with a photographic montage of Jonathan P. Jackson during the Marin County courthouse incident on August 7, 1970, as he kidnapped Superior Court judge Harold Haley from the Marin County Civic Center in San Raphael, California. The event resulted in a shootout leaving four men dead, including both Jackson and Judge Haley, and set off a nationwide FBI manhunt for Angela Davis (on charges for which she was fully exonerated).

Jafa transforms an archival photograph from the Marin Independent Journal into wallpaper for the show, giving us a glimpse at Jackson at his most vulnerable. It stands in stark contrast the artist’s series *Black Flag* and *Black American Flag*, both made in 2017, which are profound subversions. They are completely open to interpretation, to do as you wish, to see what you wish to see in the blackwashing, so to speak.

A Series of Utterly Improbably, Yet Extraordinary Renditions keeps hitting, time and time again, never telling you what to think but making you feel all kinds of things. It is art as provocation, and yet it’s easy to recognize that the history of the nation is far more incendiary than any representation could ever realize. In this way, Jafa has set his sights to the pinnacle, to manifesting absence so devastating you can feel your blood run hot—then cold...—and then hot again, until you are spinning on a psychotic merry-go-round, evoking the sensation of trauma on a visceral and a spiritual level. And just like trauma, nothing is really clear; it’s a barrage of sensations, experiences, perceptions, and ideas that can leave to in a state of siege and yet—it is in this place that things come undone, that presumptions are shaken to the core and the walls of indoctrination, disinformation, and delusion begin to crumble.