

*Beautiful and tough as chestnut/stanchions against
our nightmare of weakness*

May 28 – July 23, 2022

When air wiggles, one can yoke a recording instrument to the shape of the air— like a needle— and ‘write down’ what is sounded. Early recording technology would write the air on soot, wax, aluminum. Playback involves passing the needle back over the recorded grooves. To experience these early recordings as a form of figuring, picturing, or writing— rather than a precursor to vinyl and digital media— situates them with respect to the fraught relation in human natural language between orthography and utterance.

Perhaps we can echo Derrida and imagine that, like the needle that writes the air’s wiggle, the mark the hand makes has been made to serve privileged speech (especially the speech of a racial ‘charmed circle’) too long. What happens when the hand can do its own thing? Perhaps stemming from a relation to aniconism (refusal of the depiction of the divine or living), the Black lineages of abstract writing seek to explore this open space. Akin to Surrealist automatic writing or traditions of spirit writing, here the hand can follow its gestures without tying them to the semantic or value-generating marks we use to record the utterance. The hand’s silent music as it follows the groove it makes may allow a still pool of reflection to sprout.

In a new series of oil paintings for the Zurich project space Sentiment, Deborah-Joyce Holman engages a radical project of slowness, drawing on the language of the screenshot by magnifying stills of staged interior spaces of Black lesbian relation sourced from television and cinema. The conceptual choice of a laborious medium like oil, like the ‘true’ absence of the figure in the depicted staged interiors, indexes the artist’s grappling with the nature of representation and the potential of the hand in relation to the symbolic realm of the ‘real.’ The media industry constructs fictional or dramatized interior spaces with real coded symbols and semiotic choreographies; in magnifying or elaborating these stills, Holman explores how the depicted domestic site becomes an extension of the fictional protagonists and their attempts at real relation in the midst of an orchestrated nexus of semantic overdetermination.

While the works are in a sense figurative, in another sense they also refuse to engage the western dualism of abstract/concrete, preferring instead a liminal space that is flexible enough to engage not only the overdetermined narratives distributed in mass media (particularly regarding Black gay women and nonbinary people) but also what we might call the ‘asemic’ potential of the marks the hand can make with the oil medium. Figural strategies of absent presences stoke the perception of potential alternatives to value-generating semantic codes which are nevertheless not abstract or ineffable, but in fact registered in the body— in the hand itself, and the oil (which is itself a petroleum record of the cosmic cycle).

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¹ adeyemi, kemi. 2019. The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City. GLQ 25.4: 545-567.