

HYPERALLERGIC

Using Abstraction as a Political Tool

On Documentary Abstraction, a show at ArtCenter/South Florida, asserts that abstraction — in painting, sculpture, and film — can document the sociopolitical zeitgeist.

Monica Uszerowicz November 29, 2017



Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, “13 sculptures from Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation” (2016-ongoing), wood, thread, colored gel, and metal (image courtesy Jane Lombard Gallery, all photos by World Red Eye unless otherwise noted)

MIAMI BEACH — In Tomashi Jackson’s video collage, “Forever 21: The Essence of Innocence Suite,” two women in headscarves lip-sync to Luther Vandross’s “Give Me the Reason.” “Give me the reason/to love you, girl,” he belts — a request with no conclusion. “Forever 21” could accurately be described as a colorful painting in motion, and its beauty is chilling when you consider the inspiration for its title: “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children,” a study published by the American Psychological Association. Black children, the study concluded, are perceived as less innocent than white children — they’re hardly considered children at all, which explains in part their subjection to brutal police violence. Give someone a reason to love them, Vandross seems to ask.



Tomashi Jackson, "Grape Drink Box (Anacostia Los Angeles Topeka McKinney)" (2017), mixed media on gauze

That such clear pain could be gleaned from an image so abstract is the crux of *On Documentary Abstraction*, a show at ArtCenter/South Florida asserting that abstraction — in painting, sculpture, and film — can document the sociopolitical zeitgeist and be utilized for research on complex histories. Jackson screened the film at a talk for the show's opening; in an accompanying text for the show, curator Rachael Rakes states, "In applying artistic processes to matters of the real ... it might be possible to influence not only perception but reception." In transmitting a message, perhaps abstract media can be more effective, more moving, than something straightforwardly figurative.

Jackson's art illustrates this point. In a *Hyperallergic* interview with Jackson from last year, Risa Puleo wrote, "While studying ... at Yale University, Tomashi Jackson noticed that the language Josef Albers used to describe color perception phenomenon, in his 1963 instructional text *Interaction of Color*, mirrored the language of racialized segregation." In response to these ideas, Jackson made abstract works that allude to "languages of color theory and human rights legislation." In *Brown v. Board of Education* — which Jackson studied at length — "colored" children were ordered to be segregated from "white" children, their "coloredness" existing in direct opposition to those without it. Jackson's work plays heavily with color, layering thick swaths of neons and pastels that contrast each other, often as directed by the light in that particular room or where your eye might land.

The artists in *On Documentary Abstraction* find ways to visually — and abstractly — allude to disturbing patterns and narratives in society. Jackson's "Grape Drink Box (Anacostia Los Angeles Topeka McKinney)" (2017), a neon-tinged mixed media piece on gauze, references instances of brutality. McKinney, Texas is

where, in 2015, police officer Eric Casebolt restrained Dajerria Becton, a black teenager, after attempting to break up a benign pool party of mostly black adolescents.

Torkwase Dyson's "Strange Fruit (He, She) and "Strange Fruit (She He)," a pair of dark and dense acrylic paintings, are equally striking. Inspired by statistical reports on public acts of trauma and torture, its title alone is a reference to the spectacle of black pain. Covered with dense glosses, the grid patterns beneath look like maps or dot charts, removed from their typical spreadsheets. The effect is again subliminal. One can intuit the inherent sorrow of this research simply by looking. Eugenio Espinoza's photographs feature geometrically patterned cloths resting on various surfaces — on a street, on a body — transforming the depicted environments into sculptures.



Richard Ibghy & Marilou Lemmens, "13 sculptures from Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation" (2016-ongoing), wood, thread, colored gel, and metal

For "13 sculptures from Each Number Equals One Inhalation and One Exhalation," Richard Ibghy and Marilou Lemmens mined data that examined human productivity over the past three centuries in various fields. The results are manifested into small playful sculptures, not unlike toys or abacuses; the amount of productivity correlates to the height of tiny sticks, the bright colors of gel panels, and the length of strings. Authoritarianism and imposed work ethics are vitiated in favor of color and play.

During Jackson's talk, she poignantly aligned her brown arm atop Rakes's white one, reminding the audience that all colors require other colors to define and differentiate them, and that it was Albers who said "only humans insist color is absolute." Even constructs perceived as fact are, inherently, more abstract than that.

On Documentary Abstraction *continues at ArtCenter/South Florida (924 Lincoln Road, Miami Beach) through December 17. Information on programming, including talks and film screenings, is available [here](#) and via the Miami Beach Cinematheque.*