

Sandra Brewster

Works from series:

Smith

Blur



Sandra Brewster
Untitled (Blur), 2017-2019. Detail – Photo-based gel transfer on archival paper,
96 photographs, 25,4 x 17,78 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Georgia Scherman Projects

OPTICA CENTRE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN

Opens on

Saturday October 3, 2020, 1 pm to 6 pm

Exhibition

October 3 - December 12, 2020

Tuesday to Saturday, de 12 pm to 5 pm

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Video:

Walk on by

The Potential of Movement

Sandra Brewster has exhibited widely across Canada and the US, including a recent solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario. She has also featured in group exhibits, such as *What Carries Us: Newfoundland and Labrador in the Black Atlantic*, the first diasporic Guyanese art exhibit, *UnFixed Homeland*, as well as in exhibits in the Caribbean and across the African continent – Lagos, Addis Ababa, and Cape Town. Her practice visualizes the Black diaspora, at home and abroad.

Sandra Brewster's solo exhibit at OPTICA brings together images from *Blur*, its accompanying video installation *Walk on by*, as well as the *Untitled Smith*, work created over a span of eight years (2011-2019). While all these works build on the artist's long-standing interest in portraiture, what brings these images together is a contestation of the polarized view of Blackness as either hyper-visible or disappeared.

Blur plays with the traditional notion of head and shoulder portraits; it is a series of photo-based gel transfers of Black individuals including self-portraits of the artist, whose head, hair, and body, are all captured mid-movement. *Blur* is the Black body in motion, both collectively and individually. The kinetic energy of the images suggests what you might miss in a blink of an eye -- a liveliness or restless motion beneath the surface.

For Brewster, born in Toronto to parents from the Caribbean, movement is many things. In these continuing times of anti-Black racist violence, movement demands we remember that change begins with political movements. The aesthetics of movement is also another way to think about migration, not as a fixed goal, but as a landing without destination (Brand, 2002). There is a potential to move forward, to return, to live in the "black and blur" between (Moten 2017), as an opening to other places. Take Kumina, a religious practice of Congolese origin practiced in Jamaica, where djembe drumbeats guide the dancers' energetic and rhythmic motions. Miss Queenie, interviewed by scholar Maureen Warner-Lewis (1977), describes spirit possession in Kumina: "...is de ting dey call a spirit where you head 'pin roun' an' you pupalick 'pon you neck." [Translation: is the thing they call a spirit where your head spins around and your neck does a somersault]. The kinaesthesia of Kumina is a re-orientation of the body. The spiritual possession of Kumina invoked in a 'somersault of the neck' suggests the power of inversions. These rapid movements and embodied connections to elsewhere are the product of diaspora and creolization. In the Caribbean, where cultures interact and -- despite historical relations of dominance and subordination -- potentially turn power relations upside down, orients us to the possibilities of something new. The submerged has the power to become subversive, as these gestural portraits suggests.

Similarly, the soft blurriness and timeless quality of *Walk on by* (recorded on a Super 8 Camera), of Black citizens simply walking in the everydayness of Toronto, implies not a recent arrival but long histories of presence that nonetheless require a navigation of invisible societal dynamics that shape movement and freedom.

Like *Blur*, *The Smiths* draws on the power of repetition. In the days of phone books, the last name Smith would be repeated in long columns, conjuring as Brewster states "sameness and invisibility." In *Untitled Smith (Cold)*, multiples of Afro-silhouetted heads without faces, appear in a grid with the occasional pops of colour in clothing. In *Untitled (Plain Black)*, the Smith characters become monotone, with white Afros and clothing, almost as if a photo negative image. Over top these white Smiths are two detailed images of young men in sports and hip hop inspired clothing from the 1980s, drawing on Brewster's earlier portrait series *Little Boy* as well as Brewster's concern for how young Black men are imaged in society. In *Untitled (Whiteout)*, the Smiths are barely perceptible, almost completely whitewashed into the background. What are the disturbances in the embodied worlds of the Smiths (in North America) that requires Blackness to be assertive or to fade away?

Although Brewster's art practice is grounded in the experiences of the Black diaspora, her work asks us all to interpret our own (perhaps insurgent) relations to other worlds, in the spirit and in the flesh.

Author: Nalini Mohabir

Sandra Brewster is a visual artist based in Toronto.

Her work explores identity, representation and memory, centring Black presence. The daughter of Guyanese born parents, she is especially attuned to the experiences of people of Caribbean heritage and their ongoing relationships with back home.

Nalini Mohabir is Assistant Professor of Postcolonial Geographies at Concordia University.