

Anti/Bodies a Spectacle of Strangeness

An Autograph project

At the point of 'first contact', between white Europe and the natives of North America, a term to describe otherness entered the Elizabethan vocabulary. *Indian*, though originating from Columbus' mistaken continental drift, was the term for anything other than familiar. Flora and fauna from the New World were also described by the same word. Non-white, indigenous others were in the same league as other species: they were sub-human. Visits made by captive Native Americans to Britain cultivated a European fascination for human curiosities. With no exception even the fabled Christianised Pocahontas, Native American tourists were exhibited in zoos, travelling freak shows, lecture halls and the royal courts. And it was clearly their perceived difference that lent reason to the holocaust the European subsequently committed to American soil.

When the American, in league with the European in a cross-continental economic industry, enslaved the African in the Caribbean and America, the *reason* of racism was institutionalised in the modern mind. The reason being otherness: the alien, bereft of the higher mind. The origins of otherness, and subsequent oppression, can be traced in modern sci-fi, in the mega movies in pre-millennial cinemas. Aliens, the futuristic other, slip neatly into two categories: lovable curiosities, innocent of human aggression; or evil empires, colonialists, with reptilian limbs that defy the aesthetic eye. Black men with walk-on parts as pimps; or Uncle Toms, the banjo-playing stereotypes who moved liberals to tears, just like ET.

The concept of the freak show originates at the point of first contact-now NASA-speak for alien-human interaction. But it departs from racial otherness, into broader explorations of physical difference. Curators in travelling galleries as sub-human oddities exhibited disability, obesity, disfigurement genital and other so-called anomalies. The fascination for the freak pervades the modern consciousness, playfully, and with guilt, in both popular and high culture. From the *Jerry Springer Show* to Jake and Dinos Chapmen.

Despite the advances of feminism and queer politics, culture-and especially gay male culture-increasingly fetishises the body beautiful. Glossed images of gay men portray a white sun-tanned physical virility, that through sheer abdominal strength (one could be forgiven for thinking), would ward away HIV infection. Queer art contradicts this self-imposed curriculum of body fascism. Here, the terminology of the freak can be seen as a metaphor for those with culturally forbidden lives/desires, who are dislocated, estranged, alienated and marginalised. This is the point at which, race, gender, sexuality and disability meet in common territory.

Ajamu's photographic project super-imposes the curatorial aesthetic of the freak show upon concepts of physical difference- Ajamu explores otherness

in its most bizarre form of incarnation. Photographic practice, itself engaged in the objectification of the physical, is scrutinised. By basing his portraits on unearthed archives of American freaks, Ajamu's aesthetic manifesto materialises. Deeper still, embedded in his consciousness as queer black men, is an undertaken to prove a notion of shared experience.

It is an expression of wander, almost as if his character has found a home among the oddities. Like Queer, like Nigger, like Cripple-these terms of abuse are reclaimed as our own.

Anti- Bodies is an undertaking to reclaim lost identities, forgotten personalities, who celebrity faded in the age of political correctness. As a body of work still in progress, it is as much an historical, documentative project, as it is a hymn to difference. It embraces a diverse range of souls, reinvents them as fascinating but also beautiful beasts in a queer territory, where black and gay are one and the same time in the spectrum of difference.

Dylan Joshua Potter is the Director the future perfect Festival celebrating Sexual Difference and cultural Diversity.

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