MOUSSE

Do You Believe In Evil?: Julia Phillips and Aaron Gilbert
Julia Phillips and Aaron Gilbert in conversation

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Julia Phillips, *Extruder (#1)*, 2017
Courtesy: the artist

The artists Julia Phillips and Aaron Gilbert discuss their respective practices, and respond to each other’s, in this discussion. Gilbert calls Phillips’s work “equally delicate and devastating,” both “calculated” and “intense;” she calls his “free of decorative elements” and possessing “undeniable beauty.” He describes his own work as about “love as the way we experience, and come close to knowing, the divine or the sacred;” hers, in her words, involves “forceful transgressions of boundaries.”

JULIA PHILLIPS
Aaron, I came across your work at the Brooklyn Museum when I went to see the show *American Identities: A New Look* in late 2016. I was by myself and remember encountering the painting in an intimate way. There was no one else interrupting my physical approach to the modestly sized canvas showing a scene that my eyes had trouble removing themselves from. In the scene, a woman seems to be kneeling by a bathtub and bathing a young child. With careful focus, she lifts the young one’s head above the water by the chin. She holds a bar of soap, ready to clean the small person. The child is in a surreal and awkward proportion to the woman. It seems to be two-thirds of the length of her body and too big for what clearly seems to be an infant. The body language of the child is helpless as it floats in the water with just one toe touching the surface, and at the same time trusting whatever it will receive from the woman. The woman seems to concentrate on what she is doing and empathizes with the child, whose eyes are open, directed upward, not clearly toward the woman. There are no smiles or attempts to cheer up. The woman must be on her knees, gracefully and effortlessly bending over the edge of the tub. Her

hands are delicate and soft as if the child's chin had no weight. A watch is carefully placed on the slippery edge of the tub; maybe she has taken it off a sense of care, to avoid scratching the skin of the child. There is a beautiful sense of time in the painting. It's not so much the watch, but the water freshly dripping down from the child's hairless head. Another object is resting on the edge of the tub, possibly clothing for the naked child, or a washcloth that is thoughtfully placed close to, but not touching, the water. There is wholesomeness to the home this scene takes place in. It is a warm place where the woman can wear short sleeves. The door frame is painted in a warm pastel pink, and the woman, who seems to be so deliberate in all her gestures, lets the child float very closely to the bath curtain that was pulled to the side and must be clean of mold. The painting is free of decorative elements and the undeniable beauty of it lies in the moment of the scene.

AARON GILBERT

That painting, *The New One* (2007), was a birth painting. So it's this mother pulling the child from the water; from one plane of existence to another. It's so interesting to see how the precision with which you describe my work is a reflection of how calculated, and how intense, your own work is. When I first visited you at the Studio Museum, your composure and presence felt so specific to your sculptures. Not in the choice of content, but in its exactness of execution, and in how far you were willing to pursue a question that is difficult to confront. This work is equally delicate and devastating. It is too fragile to be utilitarian, but it presents itself in front of us, at the scale of our bodies. These sculptures feel like a direct document of a certain kind of poison in this world. A physical symbol of the metaphysical. To experience this work is to feel the presence of an idea being crystallized.

JULIA

Yes, crystallized in human-relating form. I think of the body as a symbol to make psychological, social, and emotional experiences and relations visually accessible. Sometimes the body can help us to identify with experiences that are not our own. The body allows us to determine a common ground, a familiarity and mutuality. It somehow allows for communication about relational ideas beyond verbal language. We can better identify with the sensual ideas and experiences of others if we understand how they affect us, physically and psychologically. And because these two are so connected, the body and the mind, and the body is visible, the mind can visually manifest itself in bodily form. Using the body as a metaphor is a way of drawing the viewer into an idea that also exists on other levels.

AARON

What is the nature of these ideas? They touch on pain and abuse. Do you use intimacy to depict personal interactions, or as a metaphor for the societal and political?

JULIA

Extruder (#1) (2017), for instance, is exactly that for me. Yes, we see a cast of a behind, and a partial mask with a pipe going through the mouth, and an auger as a potential penetrator, and most of the round pieces in the work resemble a phallic proportion and diameter. It can be read sexually. And, as you say, even in reference to intimacy. This reminds me of the text "Sex in Public" (1998) by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, where they talk about the societal idea of intimacy, having to exist in the most private and isolated space. Well, that's how I read it. And that it can actually cause a problem in terms of protection, as the private space in its isolation has no third-party monitor. What is so desirable about intimacy, as depicted in your work, can be a big thread on the flip side. Nobody to interfere or step in, or regulate except the two (or few) entities.

AARON

There's always this phantom presence of the human body in your work, but the materials you depict implicate industry, and institutions.

JULIA

Yes, back to *Extruder (#1)*. The piece is very metaphorically composed, in terms of its elements. There is a violent interaction, and an intended result: the spilling of the liquid that is coming out of the end of the pipe. It is therefore a forced extrusion: taking out something that was meant to stay inside. An exploitation, a possible analogy to a colonial intervention. And the pipe could serve as a signifier of an industrial force. While the body that is marked by the two casts is not specific to one gender, there is the idea of a forced penetration: the strap and buckle underlying a controlling aspect, and the ruptured holes in both casts symbolizing forceful entry.

AARON

You mention colonialism, and truly the first thing that came to my mind when I was trying to decipher your work was *Open Veins of Latin America* (1971), Eduardo Galeano's seminal book documenting the plunder of Latin America's natural resources by U.S. corporations. The book's title is bodily in a way that mirrors your work. Your sculptures summon a conversation about the sadistic. They call up these existential questions about our nature as humans: questions that go all the way back to our origins. How ancient of a language do you put on these questions? These pieces could be described as artifacts that have a sole purpose of committing evil acts. Do you believe in evil? Which is a certain inverse of saying: Do you believe in the sacred?

JULIA

I do believe in evil acts. And I am interested in what drives us humans to commit them. Forceful transgressions of boundaries being one example. Self-serving manipulation being another. And both are based on the idea that—not necessarily sacred—but ethical acts are led by the understanding that the human body, as well as the psyche, shall be maintained in their wellness. I like to think of evil as one end of the spectrum of the human psyche's capacity. I believe that we have it within us and have ideas for it. Otherwise there wouldn't be a market for horror movies and thrillers. A fascination. I remember the mindset I was in when I had the idea for the piece *Exoticizer, Worn Out* (2017) in reference to Josephine Baker's banana costume. I wanted to be in the position of the freak designing such a thing, with as much attention to detail and strategy. How far does the distance have to be between the banana stems, so there are enough gaps to peek through at the wearer's crotch? I was fascinated by and wanted to make clear the distinction between the person wearing the costume and the person putting it onto somebody.

In my work many of the subject-object relationships are controlling and oppressive. I am starting to become interested in those relations, where it’s not clear which side you’d rather stand on. One work that feeds into this idea is *Observer* (2016). Observation is something that can happen with a whole range of intentions, and it can happen within a trustful relationship.

AARON

You refer to these as manifestations of the inner psyche. But this work is so intense, there is no neutral position in it. It makes me want to keep flipping to this older language. Are these profane objects? Do you believe there is a sacredness to the human body?

JULIA

The pieces are manifestations of psychological experiences. And sometimes tragedies and failures. For instance, some of my works show drips of liquid. It’s a recurring element that I use. It is a metaphor for the result of failures to contain or hold together a state. The spills reference bodily liquids like blood, unbirthed matter, and undigested substances that weren’t supposed to leave the body in the shape of spilling. Like ruptured skin, our protective layer. Liquid as a symbol is an ambivalent bodily trace. Just like sweat can be a result of a healthy and intended physical challenge, or it can represent a dramatic exhaustion. When I think about sacredness and the body, I think about respecting the body’s protecting boundaries.

AARON

Octavia Butler, in *Parable of the Sower* (1993), laid out a template for a near future where a breakdown in reliable infrastructure ushers in a semi-anarchic society where bands of people use guns and technology (for instance control collars) to force their will on others. It seems, in this moment, we are standing at the advent of two things: incredible technological breakthroughs and a breakdown of the necessary infrastructure to protect us from an escalation in fascism, or its inverse, anarchic vigilante groups. Either one conjures a return to the overt cruelty and barbarity that existed in the Americas those hundred and fifty or five hundred years ago.

JULIA

I am thinking they still exist. What I have in mind is police brutality and mass incarceration on an industrialized and institutionalized scale. Only today—as opposed to a hundred and fifty or five hundred years ago—fake justification has to be put around it, like the instrumentalization of drugs. Not on the consumer level, but the state level. Grada Kilomba speaks about it in an interview linked to my website, it’s part of a documentary called “White Charity” (2011).

AARON

Absolutely. I was just speaking with my teenage son about Kalief Browder, privatization of prisons, and the utter pathology of a society that creates institutions that steal people’s lives for profit. The work feels intentionally located in the past: depicting metal pipe, leather straps, iron prods and skewers. These feel like meditations on past acts of cruelty. Are there specific histories this work is calling our attention to? Of colonialism? German history?

JULIA

I felt like German history was brought to me only through one lens as a young person growing up there. The history that we were taught focused on World War II. The broad approach to face that history was important, yet it came at the cost of other histories. It took me well into my twenties to learn about Germany’s colonial history. In terms of the formal elements in my work that you address, visually I am influenced by functional objects like furniture and armor. I like the idea of a chair. The only language you need to know for using it is your body. There are particularly intuitive mechanical elements that have become part of my visual language: wing nuts, straps, spikes. I think these are what some viewers might associate with torture and BDSM. I get it. These are elements that can be read as stimulating and simultaneously aggressive and therefore evoke the coexistence of pleasure and pain. Personally, if something as psychologically delicate as sexual desire can be found in the form of an object at a store with a bar code, the desire simply dies. So I am not interested in that industry. The theories that feed my interest are colonial histories, gender studies, Black feminist thought, psychoanalysis, and questions of belonging. The conceptual framework my work originates from is about observations of relations. Oppressive, codependent, but also supportive. I think of my shows and bodies of works as musical albums, following a certain concept and mindset. I would like my work to turn in a direction with a more reconciling and redemptive tone. Some titles already exist, like *Stabilizer* and *Supporter*. I just don’t know what the works look like yet. There are plenty of relationships that I find particularly metaphorical to the human, social, and political condition and that play a role in our intimate as well as our public lives.

AARON

It’s interesting to hear you speak of reconciling. Is it part of some desire to prevent past horrors from revisiting us?

JULIA

I think part of my desire is to give the psyche a visual, nonverbal language, and a voice that can be heard by a broad range of audiences, ideally. What we do with what we hear is our own responsibility. Your work often depicts touch. The nature of the touch, and the fact that there is touch, seem equally important. And furthermore, when looking at the work it has a symbolic meaning, a “stand-in” dimension.

AARON

Touching is a way of knowing, of reaching beyond ourselves. The specifics of how we lay our hand on a thing or a person says everything. I think your work and mine examine two opposing ends of intimate human interaction. Much of my work looks at love as the way we experience, and come close to knowing, the divine or the sacred. There is a special flame or light that exists in humans that we call love. And if that were to be extinguished entirely, sadism and cruelty would be all that remained in its wake. This opposing end is where I see you focus your work. What are these things, love and cruelty? Why do they exist? I’m interested in the answers that people have built to these questions since ancient times through mythology. To me love is the most powerful, most transformative thing I’ve experienced. I have a girl who is two and a half. There was a moment when she was weeks old, and I was holding her and gently talking to her, and her eyes locked in to my lips. She knew, in that moment, that the noises coming from them carried meaning. They weren’t arbitrary. My father used to talk to me about how

language, in its essence, is metaphysical. And in that moment of holding her—which inspired the painting *Grace* (2018)—I felt like both the words coming from my mouth, and this new being in my arms, were alien, and magical.

JULIA

The agents in your paintings find themselves in the safety of their own constructed intimacy, away from a third-party gaze. You speak of agents and entry points. What is it that the viewer is invited to enter? Do you think about outside forces that are banned and have been overcome in your intimate scenes? What are the agents isolating themselves from?

AARON

I like domestic scenes because they can display the messiness of conflicting impulses that are inside of us. A painting of a love scene can lay bare these truths of what happens when two people become entangled in each other's lives. At the same time there are outside forces whose weight we have to contend with in our most private interactions. When you say "banned" it makes me think of anti-miscegenation laws. Echoes of those legacies are always in my work, but it's not usually a starting point. With *Phantom Limb* (2014) I wanted to make a painting about how the ghost arm of an amputee still visited his estranged lover at night and touched her in a way that he was no longer emotionally able to. And my desire is for the lives of the people I paint to be as multifaceted as my own world. So as I'm initially drawing the image, I'm thinking of how legacies of racism and colorism add layers to their interaction. None of these histories define these figures, but they add nuances to the power dynamics. With *CitiBank* (2016) I show a bank teller and a customer engaged in a conversation that goes beyond protocol. A note is held up to the glass. I leave the specifics of the interaction open to multiple interpretations (a flirtation or a heist), but what is clear is that the power and agency of both figures is not owned by any institution. In *CointelPro, The Pestilence that Crawls by Night* (2014), I wanted to show the intrusion of CIA surveillance into the most private shared moments of the families of civil rights activists. It was important to me to show a thin wall separating the humans who sell themselves to be agents of a surveillance state, and those who sacrificed personal safety for a liberation cause. To place them in adjoining rooms, fully human, breathing on opposing sides of the wall. Any fascist apparatus is made up of humans with the same base desires as those they are harming. Looking back I remember stories my mother would tell of my parents being surveilled during the 1970s and early 1980s. So I think my way of processing the political has always been through the personal.

JULIA

I remember taking the past election personally. In times where the personal is so political, I am drawn to artists who work autobiographically. Especially in contemporary Black popular music, I am struck by the amount of expressions of vulnerability and their political significance, thinking of Nneka, Jay Prince, Beyoncé, Kendrick Lamar, and Tyler, the Creator. Are you consciously depicting alternative, counter images for pop-cultural depictions of love? Our youth culture obsession conversation comes to mind. And the question of the need for love, and the kind of love as something that matures with us as we go through different ages in our lives. The images easily accessible and brought to us through media in an overflow are the ones of youth culture. Is your work a reaction to a drought?

AARON

I love that question. I think love fills this profound need at all stages of our lives, and the nature of how we need it shifts as a newborn, as a young child, as someone elderly. I'm weary of the way youth culture is placed front and center in the art world. Artists are the worst. Their content and focus is so shaped by market values. A result of neoliberalism and secularism is this trend where all spiritual and mystical experience is discarded, and the only acceptable transcendent experience is the kind of falling in love that is idealized in pop music and rom-coms. And there's this dual mechanism reinforcing it: corporate marketing that places teenagers and young adults as the center of the universe, and Cold War propaganda where youth culture and its raw individual self-expression were the prized jewel of capitalism. In the end, it's a question of where we place value. Of all the pop songs in the past twenty years, how many of them place the voice or the needs of a young child or an elderly person at the center? I'm sure I'm missing a few outliers, but it feels like we have to go back to Michael Jackson or Stevie Wonder with this one ("They Don't Care About Us" and "Earth Song" at least felt age-neutral). I think we often are too narrow in who we give voice to in our narratives. There's room for a fuller breadth of human experience, and I pose this mostly to myself as a question of what work I should be making in the present.