

## **keyon gaskin's [lavender]: a self portrait**

### **...a living sculpture of un/becoming, to be every/thing, and no/thing**

Berette Macaulay

keyon gaskin's *[lavender]: a self portrait* was presented by On the Boards as an off-site performance at Oxbow Gallery in Georgetown, Seattle. gaskin is a formless, indefinable artist based in Portland, Oregon, who "prefers not to contextualize their art with their credentials." So how do you write about someone who endeavors to remain contextually unfixed?! In what I read as a continuum of their 2015 work it's not a thing, gaskin has created another subversive and mysterious experience, pushing further into the uncategorizable. *[lavender]* (the color) is a work of gesture around ordinary objects stripped of context and granted little to no symbolism for us to exalt. We came to watch, and to be watched, rarely knowing when these roles would shift or with whom. As an exhibition of immersive theater with a rotating cast of performers,<sup>1</sup> the audience or viewers double as objects or performers with the artist as a presence in the room, watching the proceedings with minimal engagement. gaskin's *self portrait* contorts the traditional authority of a static two-dimensional "self" within a portrait.

We had to check in at a desk just inside the door.

We were then handed a pressed cardboard spiral bound book before weeding into a low-lit space.

It was kind of like a program but not, because really, it was another artwork—of poetry, scribbles, collage works, and a page of lavender sequins.

Vignettes were set up at various corners in the room.

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<sup>1</sup> Rotating Cast March 22-24, 2019 at Oxbow: David, Karen Nelson, Vivian Phillips, Fox Whitney, and Markeith Wiley

A single lamp was placed at the center of the space,  
and a potted plant – devil’s ivy...

A person was seated on a raked set of deep wooden stairs (that lead up to a blank wall), another potted pothos vine balanced atop their head while they very, very, very slowly shifted  
their seat down  
each step.

...a simmering pot of water on a hot plate in another corner.

Sound mixes of Hip Hop and House filled  
the space

We were clustered at different points without knowing shit about  
where the starting point was.

There was a sound mixer board and computer on the floor under a work  
lamp,

–eventually we saw the artist sit by it on the floor.

*We starting yet?*

*Nope.*

*Maybe not right here.*

It was opening night so there was also a buffet table of finger foods and wine that kind of ended up as part of the performance, partly because it was in the way.

*On purpose?*

*Don’t know.*

I ate the strawberries and some hummus and waited on the stairs.

It had already started.

**Who is a portrait?**

We might understand portraiture as an image on a cold gallery wall; and a dance performance as the *feeling* of a person embodied on a stage. Alternative expressions of either might still yield the expectation of a clear distinction between the artist a between the artist and the viewer, or the performer and the

audience. gaskin intentionally creates within the slippages of these roles and...  
it's disconcerting.

What is a *self*?

re/con/textualize

the formal form

the aesthetic dictate

UNLEARN<sup>1</sup>ing a fetishized politik

to un-

fix an identitarian

credential

as evidence of *Being-ness*

to *be* here

in space

take it up

to exist

This performance/exhibition is an abstracted gesture of a *self*, occupying a gallery, as an ephemeral artistic labor that cannot be *collected*. And thankfully, in no way does it signal (or aspire to) a reach for permission to *belong* or to be understood—by black or any other name. It is after all, an allowance we see white artists and writers embody, to abstract themselves to infinitude, a right continuously denied within the “subtitles” and feelings of otherness. This claimed allowance is the insistence that embodied *presences* can impact space without the use of voice, showing the face, or narrativizing a character. But since gaskin is a black person erecting this work in a white space within a white geography, one must look to the elusive power of how they conceptually background this fact so effectively.

What is a portrait...?

...if we are set within it

as impermanent

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<sup>1</sup> UNLEARN is a name of a recently released book by Humble the Poet

i m  
n a  
a t

e d pieces in a gallery

collecting moves

like debul<sup>1</sup> walks

unmasking Artaudian rounds

shapeshifting

re/turning

queering

objects stalked

where no one is

and everyone is watching

gazing | ungazing

who's grazing

the audience?

who's the agent?

If “self-determination is a drag,” as Fred Moten says in *Black and Blur* (214), then how do we unsettle or rupture the ontological nightmare of “Black [as] a modifier that changes everything” that Treva Ellison, et al describe in “We Got Issues: Toward a Black Trans\*/Studies? Is it possible to transcend the powerful tendency of “blackness to change all that comes after it?” All my life I’ve wanted to escape the absurdities of how nuanced socio-cultural narratives are contracted into violent (non)descriptors of the black body. It is palpable, though not an immediate catharsis, to experience gaskin’s experimentation in negating *the gaze* by *othering* other things other than being black. There is trickery, an invisible mask employed without the tired reactionary assemblages to look back at the gazer. In fact, in comparing *it’s not a thing* to [*lavender*] one can even assert that gaskin is making us exchange powers of the gaze while shifting our focus elsewhere, like an illusionist, intentionally offering no hint as to where our focus actually is or will go next. Just try to figure out your own trick.

<sup>1</sup> Debul (devil) masks traditionally worn by secret society members in processional street dances in colonial and post-colonial Sierra Leone.

Where is a portrait?

you watch

yourself

d

i

s

s

e

m

b

l

e

and

re/

form

wards

p

u

p

u

ground

dancing still by the DJ mixer

fabulating the interpretive walk

of their embodiments to re/ground something familiar:

*will they drop that plant?*

*what's that smell? is that Ramen noodles boiling?*

*that lampshade makes a cool spotlight in the center tho...*

*maybe we should we sit under it,*

*or stay away...?*

*just hug the walls*

*can't see them*

*move around, look for them*

we move in a memory of an imaginary apart/ment  
a mapping  
of *thing-ness* with/out agency

By using their “lived experience,” by foregrounding “the ordinary” as a concept of particular exception for engaged inter/actions, gaskin has managed to make a work that refuses the singular significations of radical spectacle expected of black bodies, of “contemporary” or “conceptual” black artists by rejecting categorization, thus refusing adjacent codifications, and thereby eluding commodification. FREEDOM! - from the occupation of blackness! Or, at least a type of freedom that comes close to fulfilling curator Cédéric Fauq’s call in “Curating for the Age of Blackness” (2019) to “*unperform*” blackness. In Ligia Lewis’s minor matter, keyon gaskin unperforms as much as a dancer, speaking into a microphone with a sweaty bare back to the audience: “I want to be intentionally boring.”

**When is a portrait?**

ever

“the residual value of resurrection is b e l i e f”<sup>1</sup>

no beginning

no reason

no moment

for all the moments

By abandoning the aesthetic dictates of beauty, edginess, or even legible arrangements of banality, gaskin conceptually offers an unconventional cure

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<sup>1</sup> From a public lecture with Theaster Gates on May 2nd, 2019 at Kane Hall, University of Washington Seattle

that we need, or at least that I need, to what J. Halberstam calls the “toxic positivity of contemporary life” (*The Queer Art of Failure*, 2011). And Hallelujah for that. It’s a delicious fuck you to the demands art and social practices value as successful, that further flattens any chance of a complex existence. “Resist Mastery!” (Halberstam, 2011), forget the master’s tools. And released of such concerns, we can get to some realness worth witnessing...

### Why is a portrait...?

a flower, a colour, a wig of steaming Ramen, a pair of leopard print stilettos,  
one body glides slowly over to the lamp  
another is at home among us in a robe carrying a coffee mug with a cell  
phone in it  
blasting out Rihanna inside it,

“*sex with me’so amazin*”

making selfies with us strangers

“*stay up off my Instagram with your temptation*”

the only picture portraits are digital, taken by them

and, the book of poems

a reflective glitter page

each one, teach one,

flashlight apps on

we refract it against the walls

and our uncertain bodies

making a live disco sculpture,

of everything and nothing

...but an *unfinished sympathy*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Unfinished Sympathy* is a 1991 composition by the UK based Trip Hop group Massive Attack.

gaskin “performs” a clearance in this work, a way we might create the same in ours...for black artists and non-artists alike. As artist Edgar Arceneaux quite rightly cautions “to become too heavily invested in a category over 10, 15, 20 years may not bear the fruit that you want.” Make nothing of this one color, in order to make more with all the colors.

Maybe the drag of Being-ness here can be riffed mystically as an ancient memory, existing long before any record of time, reaching into the future, whipping ahead of horizons, and warping back around to a longer memory we have yet to imagine, but are creating right now. I don’t know if this is the invitation to the color of [*lavender*] but it is all we could hold from the final sculpture gathered at the center – the shoes, the cup, the phone with photos of us, the lamp, the devil’s ivy, the cooked Ramen noodles, cold, sticky, and dragged across it all...

did we witness gaskin’s portrait, were we in it,  
or were we the portrait?

We returned the book though.  
We could keep nothing,  
but ourselves.