

## Performing For You, For Me, For You

*Performing For You, For Me, For You* is a group exhibition that delves into the struggle between how today's youth perceive themselves and how they present themselves to the world, an outgrowth of the interplay between self-perception and external gaze.

In the 21st century, new screen-based technologies and corporate-owned social media make us all observed, constantly look into mirrors, and create our avatars. At the same time, the pressures of living in global, increasingly multiethnic and xenophobic societies, compel us to brand ourselves by our gender, our sexuality, our heritage, and countless other descriptors. The societal gaze puts us in a state of perpetual performance and self-reflection, putting our ever-changing selves at risk of being solidified and fixed into a passive state, defined and constrained by our gender and ethnic identities.

Artist Emily Mogami articulates the pressure of performing for the external gaze in her performance *What Channel Today?* (2022). Wearing a bold dress, an eccentric wig, and a TV set-like headpiece, Mogami traverses the city streets while embodying her confident persona—a “channel” for public consumption. The work echoes Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, an analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, where she wrote that women “connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” and become sexualized objects under the male gaze.<sup>1</sup> By putting her head in a cardboard TV set, Mogami not only acknowledges her performance of a persona, but she also whimsically fights the gaze back and reclaims her agency by creating “the representation that (queer) Asian women need and bringing to life her hidden desires and emotions.”

As French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre illustrated in his famous example of a café waiter in the 1946 essay, people perform expectations of their social roles, yet these are only “representations,” separate from who they are, their “being.”<sup>2</sup> In her digital animation *Adapt, React, Perform* (2022), Mahira Naznin critiques the societal need to control the image of a woman, and through it, a woman herself. Plumping up her lips, changing the framing of her eyebrows, and adding makeup, Naznin transforms her latest passport photo to mimic the idealized images of women on Instagram and Tumblr. Her escalating manipulation—dragging, enlarging, pinching, tightening of her image—crescendos into a rejection of the ludicrous expectation to contort herself into a prescribed representation to please the male gaze. Finally, by erasing her current face, Naznin reveals her younger self, unbound by the socially labeled womanhood. With this act, she rebels against an identity that is imposed on her and deconstructs her performance of femininity.

simone madison hunter's tactile piece *Black girl, take cover* (2022), with its intricate beaded kanekalon hair tassels, grapples with the intersectionality of being a Black woman. The embroidery on the quilt, referencing Nina Simone's *Four Women* and Tupac Shakur's *Keep Ya Head Up*, confronts stereotyping of Black women as unfeminine and highlights the ongoing mistreatment and erasure of Black women, both in the society-at-large and intracommunally. In the 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois famously coined the term “double consciousness,” describing the African American experience of “always looking at one's self through the eyes of” a racist, white society and feeling a “twoness.”<sup>3</sup> In her work, hunter pushes further. “Double” becomes “triple,” when the weight of being perceived through a racial identity is amplified and complicated by gender stereotypes. hunter questions the negative connotations of Black femininity—“obscene, gross, and masculine”—and asks whether Black can be “feminine” at all. Made to comfort the artist, tired of creating desperate, mournful work, the quilt acts as both a metaphorical and literal shield against racial and gender gaze and protects her authentic self.

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Feminisms*, 1975, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Chapter Two: Bad Faith,” *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1992), 87-88.

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

Each artist featured in this exhibition—Mogami, Naznin, and hunter—provides a poignant lens through which we are asked to question our perceptions of identity and subvert the societal gaze that seeks to define us. Crucially, like Jean-Paul Sartre, they seem to suggest that the very act of being defined has a potential of propelling us beyond that definition. In this paradox, there is both captivity and freedom. While today's youth struggle to remain authentic and reconcile with our identities, in the very act of rebelling against those labels, we transcend them.

Written by Phoebe Wang and Elif Usuloğlu