

MARTOS GALLERY

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Eating the Self: Arnold J. Kemp's Hungry Hydras

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Arnold J. Kemp, *FUNNY HOUSE
(SPEECH ACTS)* (2019). Epson
luster print, 60 × 40 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
JOAN.

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An errant internet search led artist, educator, and poet Arnold J. Kemp to the title of his recent solo exhibition, *False Hydras*. He came across the term while searching the web for something else, and was immediately struck by its “lyrical sound.”¹ Originating in the fifth edition of the role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)*, a false hydra is a “homebrew creature,” or a player-created monster.² The character often has pallid skin and a bulbous body with a long, serpentine neck. For *D&D* fans, the false hydra connotes paranoia, nervous breakdowns, dissociation, and ghostly appetites. It’s known for eating other characters and absorbing their memories, sprouting humanoid necks as it consumes its victims. Compared to other *D&D* characters, the false hydra’s powers are heady and abstract—not only are its victims disappeared from the life they once had, but its harrowing “mindsong” splinters the memories of all who hear it, its victims erased from the minds and hearts of loved ones.

A conceptual monster that ultimately caught on with fans, the false hydra was created by a *D&D* player, also named Arnold Kemp, who operates the popular *D&D* blog, *Goblin Punch*. The artist saw the coincidental doubling as a generative dare: “When I saw that the author was someone with the same name as me,” Kemp told *Artforum*, “I thought, *I have to take advantage of this.*”³ Although the literal creature didn’t make an appearance in his show, its metaphorical presence pulsed throughout JOAN’s gallery, where *False Hydras* was installed. Kemp found ways to absorb the multiplicitous heads and mutating forms of the character into his language, built around a grammar of referential gestures and biographic play.

Within Kemp’s language, surrogate selves amble about, cycling through an infinite number of personas, personalities, and narratives. The exhibition presented different versions of the artist, a merry-go-round that swirled fact and fiction together to comic effect. Kemp doesn’t trust the stability of the “I,” treating subjectivity instead as a readymade material to be warped, deformed, and rewritten. To accommodate this shapeshifting “I” in his work, narrative is abandoned and appropriated, perverted and stretched into bodily experiences that tap into the humorous and philosophical.

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The exhibition underscored Kemp's roving approach to genre and practice, threading together sculpture, photography, and print works, taking detours into conceptualism, literature, pop culture, disco, ancestral artifacts, and biomythography. Five large-scale photographs placed in corners of the industrial gallery, *FUNNY HOUSE (SPEECH ACTS)* (2019), set up an initial moment of obfuscation and unreadability, followed by punchline-like discovery. Each image is a close-up still of Kemp's hands wrangling a clay-like material, and I puzzled over the photographs before realizing he was manipulating a limp Fred Flintstone mask, the iconic caveman's visage melting like putty.

The center of the gallery held two sculptures, each stacked on a wooden platform. *Mr. Kemp (Yellowing, Drying, Scorching)* (2020) appeared on the left—a black vinyl chair overstuffed with copies of the novel *Eat of Me: I Am the Savior* (1972) by another Arnold Kemp, this time a 1970s-era Black writer. On the right was *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (2020), a work that features a pair of brown shorts tailored by Kemp's grandfather—yet another Arnold J. Kemp—placed on a craggy limestone pillar. The work also includes a flip phone from a past performance the artist staged with his father. Both sculptures function as defiant self-portraits that reflect and refract Kemp through a prism of spoken and unspoken influences.

Elsewhere, nine monotypes comprised the *INDEX* (2020) series. A set of crude faces, each print was made from a sheet of creased aluminum foil pressed onto antique paper from the late 18th century. The spectral imprints hung on the west wall of the gallery, but seemed to follow my every move as I navigated about the space, perhaps an invocation of the many ghostly Kemps. On the floor—lodged in the negative space between a sculpture and a photo—lay a sheet of cardstock paper with handwritten lines that offered a moment of pause and meditation. *I would survive, I could survive, I should survive* (2021) makes an edit to Gloria Gaynor's 1978 anthem, elongating the phrase into a mournful, conditional hymn. In this work and others, Kemp staged uncanny encounters between avatars of himself and the viewer. Each work slipped in and out of Kemp's biography while looping in a myriad of other Kemps, confusing our attempt to locate a solid "I."

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Born in Dorchester, Massachusetts, to Bahamian parents, Kemp spent his teen years visiting the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and taking classes at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts through an after-school program supported by the Boston Public School system.⁴ He studied art and literature at Tufts University, and his early forays into art-making were attempts to process and respond to the pain of the AIDS epidemic and the attendant right-wing misinformation campaign. In 1991, after moving to San Francisco to participate in ACT UP marches,⁵ Kemp began working at an experimental, artist-run nonprofit called New Langton Arts. It was through his association with New Langton that Kemp met many of the artists and writers connected to the rambunctious, experimental literary scene known as New Narrative. Alternatively referred to as a movement or practice (in line with its ethos, its exact form shifts depending on who is telling the story), New Narrative slid into consciousness in the late 1970s, emerging from writing workshops held by Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, two Bay Area poets who combined rigorous theorizing with personal vulnerability in ways that challenged the austerity of the prevailing avant-garde trends. Informed by the urgency of concurrent movements—gay rights, second-wave feminism, punk—the “I” of New Narrative writing is inhabited by wild glee, an authorial subjectivity that is stretched to fit the messy contradictions of the body, mind, spirit, and more, and buoyed by a desire to transgress formal and cultural norms.

When thinking about Kemp’s kinship with New Narrative writers like Glück, Kathy Acker, Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy, and others, some of his oblique strategies begin to clarify. He absorbed their habit of embracing a promiscuous collectivity that revels in the possibilities of creative, intellectual, physical, social, sexual, and political excess. In “Situations,” a 2017 essay, Kemp wrote that New Narrative writers “[suggest] identities that are as experienced as imagined and as concrete as hallucinatory.”⁶ Kemp, too, treats subjectivity as a vaporous substance, uninterested in adhering to labels that trap identity in “a singular programmatic stance.”⁷ In the same way that New Narrative writers expose language and gender as constructions, Kemp seeks out the “failures of representation,”⁸ as Stephanie Snyder writes, where the biographic narrative is abstracted and fragmented. For example, the *FUNNY HOUSE* series takes on a new dimension when considering New Narrative’s appropriation of high and low culture, its accumulation of personas and hybrids, and the way it foregrounds the performativity at the heart of living.

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At once silly and sinister, the shots of Kemp's hands wrestling with Fred Flintstone's collapsed face literalize the tensions between body and mask. In one photo, Kemp's hands seem to form an L-shape, his index finger protruding from one of Fred's eyes, while his thumb pokes out of the mask's mouth like a tongue. During a virtual conversation with Hamza Walker and Ian Cooper, Kemp explained that some viewers might fixate on Fred Flintstone, believing the work to be a dismantling of the "dumb American" archetype embodied by fictional and real characters like Archie Bunker or even Donald Trump.⁹ Although he leaves room for the viewer to fill in the gaps, Kemp is more interested in a kind of "spiritual devouring"¹⁰—a phrase he uses to describe a state of transcendence. Teased out of the dramas and fantasies of selfhood, the frozen scenes attune to the constant interplay between revealing and concealing. Within this play, Kemp locates sublime moments in which we realize subjectivity is infinite and unknowable. Kemp engages with the mask, his hands disrupting traditional modes of speech and vision and replacing them with gestural fits that try to capture the incommunicable, warping our sense of who is consuming whom.

Kemp applies this same warping logic to his surrogates. The artist Arnold J. Kemp has been mistaken for the aforementioned novelist, Arnold Kemp, on at least two occasions. Their relationship resembles an ouroboros, Kemp consuming the tail of his doubles, and vice versa. In *Mr. Kemp*, the artist transforms mistaken identity into a consideration of the ways we absorb others; how each of our "I's" contains a multitude of voices. Like the Flintstone mask, the sculpture conjured a range of reactions, from bewilderment to laughter, even—as I felt while trying to connect the Kemps—a desire to unravel my own sense of self. In blurring the lines between himself and the novelist, Kemp untethered subjectivity from its singular form, his way of troubling our definitions of the self and other. Any relationship risks a degree of devourment, a sense that the boundaries between you and me are vaporous, eager for the opportunity to merge and touch. Consuming another doesn't have to be a vampiric act; it can open pathways to deeper connections unmediated by our mechanistic and essentialist world.

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Like a false hydra hungry for sustenance, Kemp is not satisfied with one narrative, one mode, one subjectivity. His work sprouts a constellation of personas and selves, mixing lived experience, fictive flights, and the strange vortex of possibility between the two. The abstracted environments of the works at JOAN mimicked the sensation of living in our digitally-saturated world, where a simple Google or Facebook search of your own name can easily reveal the many others who embody a shared sense of “I.” Instead of feeling possessive over his identity, Kemp stretches his subjectivity to new, freakier possibilities, allowing himself to be swallowed by the many versions of his name. Though this loss of ego may elicit feelings of anxiety or terror, tapping into the mutability of identity can transport us to expansive new terrains, disrupting and delegitimizing our rigid social codes.

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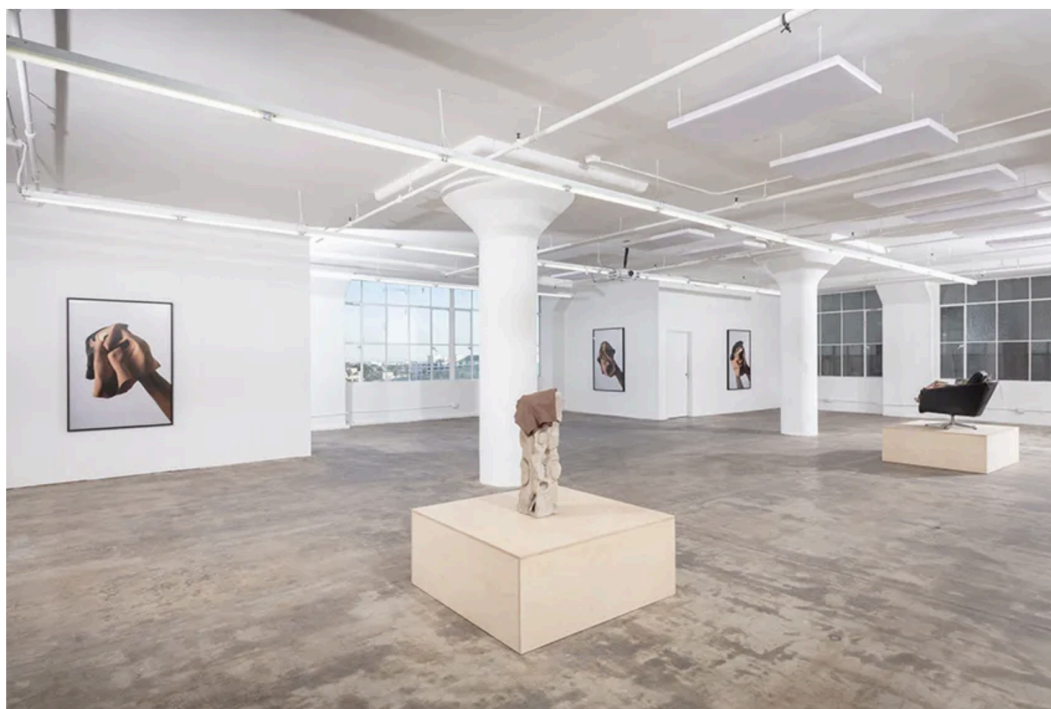
Arnold J. Kemp, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching* (2020). Vinyl covered chair with wooden frame and two vinyl covered seat cushions, 40 hardcover and paperback copies of Arnold Kemp's *Eat of Me I am the Savior*, and thermometer, 31 x 41 x 32 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and JOAN.

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Arnold J. Kemp, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching* (detail) (2020). Vinyl covered chair with wooden frame and two vinyl covered seat cushions, 40 hardcover and paperback copies of Arnold Kemp's *Eat of Me I am the Savior*, and thermometer, 31 x 41 x 32 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and JOAN.

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Arnold J. Kemp, *FALSE HYDRAS*
(installation view) (2021). Image
courtesy of the artist and JOAN.



Arnold J. Kemp, *I would survive, I
could survive, I should survive*
(2021). Permanent ink on neutral
pH paper, 7 x 5 inches. Image
courtesy of the artist and JOAN.

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1. Huey Copeland and Arnold J. Kemp, "1000 Words: Arnold J. Kemp," *Artforum*, March 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202102/1000-words-arnold-j-kemp-85004>. ↵
2. Ibid. ↵
3. Ibid. ↵
4. "Member Spotlight: Arnold J. Kemp," College Art Association of America, September 18, 2019, <https://www.collegeart.org/news/2019/09/18/member-spotlight-arnold-j-kemp/>. ↵
5. Ibid. ↵
6. Arnold J. Kemp, "Situations," in *From Our Hearts To Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*, eds. Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw. (On Contemporary Practice, 2017), 51. ↵
7. Ibid. ↵
8. Stephanie Snyder, "Arnold Kemp: Foiling," 2019, <http://www.a-j-kemp.com/index.php?/texts/foiling-by-stephanie-snyder/>. ↵
9. "Virtual Conversation: Arnold Kemp, Ian Cooper, and Hamza Walker Discuss *False Hydras*," JOAN, May 8, 2021, <https://joanlosangeles.org/virtual-conversation-arnold-kemp-ian-cooper-and-hamza-walker-discuss-false-hydras/>. ↵
10. Ibid. ↵



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