

With a Fred Flintstone Rubber Disguise, Artist Arnold Kemp Explores What Masks Really Reveal

BY ANGELICA VILLA 



"Arnold J. Kemp: Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather" at Neubauer Collegium Gallery, University of Chicago.

ROBERT HEISHMAN.

Over 15 years ago, Chicago-based artist **Arnold J. Kemp** bought a rubber mask bearing Fred Flintstone's face from a street vendor in downtown New York on Halloween night. Years later, Kemp would rediscover the mask in his studio, and it eventually became a fixture in his artistic practice. His 2016 sculpture *Headless* shows the cartoon character's hollow head—lazy-eyed and bulbous-faced—painted silver and mounted on a metal stake. "I tend to collect things and I just have a feeling I will use them one day in a work," he said.

Since the '90s, Kemp has been fixated on masks and other modes of disguise, tapping into a sense that "masking up can in fact be much more revealing than intended," said Dieter Roelstraete, the curator of Kemp's current exhibition at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society at the University of Chicago.

Kemp's practice has long explored themes around identity, stereotypes, and general ideas of "sameness," all fueled by the disparate objects he has collected from various places he's lived—San Francisco, Oregon, New York, Richmond, and Chicago, where he moved in 2016 to become dean of graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

An exhibition in 2021 at JOAN gallery in Los Angeles, titled "False Hydras," drew on a series of encounters in which he'd been mistaken for another writer with whom he shares a name. For the project, Kemp collected copies of the other Arnold Kemp's 1972 tome *Eat of Me, I Am the Savior*, which tells the story of a young Black revolutionary, and placed them indiscriminately into crevices of a sleek midcentury chair. For a series made in the early 2000s, he photographed himself donning a mock Ku Klux Klan hood made from fabric styled after West African textiles.

"We are always moving in and out of masks. People call it code-switching now," Kemp told *ARTnews* in an interview, adding that his works interrogate collective shifts of "people looking alike, acting alike, and a very particular male genre of that sort of cloning." With materials often coming to him through chance encounters, Kemp says it begs the question of whether the archetypes he explores are "found or created and cultivated."

In "Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather," on view through April 10, the Flintstone mask reappears, visible in two large-scale photographs from the 2019 series "Funny House (Speech Acts)" that are mounted opposite each other at the gallery's entryway. On the opposite side of the dark-wood-paneled room sits a meticulous collection of 500 individually sculpted ceramic masks, neatly organized on a makeshift stage that spans nearly 20 feet and rises just a few inches off the ground.

In the pair of photographs, the age-weathered Flintstone mask folds over Kemp's own balled fist, forming a ghoulish expression. Here, as with previous work, Kemp uses this object as a proxy to explore larger tropes of a bygone era. Fred Flintstone, who made his debut on ABC in 1960, is part of a long line of male comedic personas with a chauvinistic flare—first popularized in Jackie Gleason with his two shows in the '50s and passing on to the likes of Archie Bunker in *All in the Family*, George Jetson, and Homer Simpson. Kemp describes the archetype as the "bigoted everyday man that we are supposed to think is funny." But, Kemp warned, he "can be very dangerous."

For Kemp, the mask in each photograph represents a hindrance to speech by blocking its handler's ability to verbalize something troubling. "The hand is not passively wearing the mask," he said. "It's actually moving it, like it's trying to speak through it or it's trying to say something that is difficult."

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There is a loss of language, and it almost ends up like a kind of a sign language.”

Pairing the mask with his own Black hand, Kemp said, is a way to upend expectations the viewer may have of the various “personages that the Black artist could inhabit.”

“Some of its power surely derives from the slightly stoic, restrained mood of the work’s presence in the gallery,” Roelstraete said. He and Kemp worked together for several months to compose the exhibition, which takes a minimal layout, with photographs propped against walls and close-to-the-ground floor installations, in an overall ornate space.

“I wanted to engage the floor space of the gallery,” Kemp said. “What can be hung on the walls of the space is very limited. The photographs have always had a sculptural feel for me.”



Arnold Kemp, *Looking at the Sun*, 2021.
ROBERT CHASE HEISHMAN

Across the room, where the show’s other focal point sits, is a collection of handmade ceramics that Kemp produced in the style of domino masks, which only cover the eyes. The installation, titled *Looking at the Sun* (2021), shows glossy versions of these face coverings, each made coarse by Kemp’s finger imprints and painted in varying cool-toned hues—purple, blue, green.

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For Kemp, the ceramic masks give the effect of a personified body, making the viewer feel as if they're being watched.

"There are all of these eyes in the exhibition that are actually looking at the viewer," Kemp said. "You're not really sure what you're looking at, you see the stage and you see the colors, but it doesn't come into focus really until you're almost right on top of it."

"Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather" takes its title from something the composer John Cage said when asked to describe his longtime collaboration with the choreographer Merce Cunningham. Cage compared their artistic partnership and its fluid nature to the weather, explaining, "It's less like an object and more like the weather because in an object, you can tell where the boundaries are, but in the weather it's impossible to say when something begins or ends." Kemp said his show is inspired by that quality of boundlessness that Cage discussed.

Kemp's interest in masks, or anything that might cover one's face, long predates the pandemic, and Covid-related masking wasn't on Kemp's mind in the making of this exhibition. Roelstraete, however, sees some correlations.

"Looking at the ceramic 'masks,' you are in some way reminded of masking's many conflicting meanings," he said. "You are tempted to start thinking about the dialectic of looking and being looked at, and how much of the human affront of two years' worth of Covid-driven restraints and restrictions may have something to do with the fact that we can't quite see or read each other like we used to."

There are only a few works on view in the show, and Kemp said that, in true Cage-like fashion, a visitor ends up becoming a component of the installation: "It needs the viewer to complete the meaning," he said.



Arnold Kemp, *Funny House (Speech Acts)*, 2019.

MARCH 30, 2022

Looking the Other Way: A Review of Arnold J. Kemp at M. LeBlanc and the Neubauer Collegium

BY ALEXANDRA DREXELIUS



Installation view, Arnold J. Kemp, "Talking To The Sun," 2022/Photo: Courtesy M. LeBlanc

Losses afflict the body in tragic theater. In Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus," the raped Lavinia seeks to scurry out of sight; her arms and tongue cut out by her perpetrators, she is without gesture or speech. In Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex," the horror-stricken Oedipus blinds himself; gouging his eyes out with golden pins, he submits to darkness. These theatrical blows are marked by mutilated sensation. Tongueless and fingerless, Lavinia is not only robbed of her taste and touch but also her instruments for communication—she cannot utter or jot a word. Eyeless,

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Oedipus relinquishes his ability to absorb and respond to visual information. In the absence of eye contact, he looks inwards.

Across two solo exhibitions in Chicago—"Talking To The Sun" at M. LeBlanc and "Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather" at the Neubauer Collegium—artist Arnold J. Kemp engages with looking through losses. Long occupied with making faces, Kemp continues to forge expressions through masks. Spanning pop culture's rubber Halloween heads and domino masks alongside esoteric leathery faces and crinkly shrouds, his facial facades are distinct for their voids. With holes for eyes and hollows for mouths, they look through you as you look through them. In contrast to ancient masks employed in Greek theater, crafted with overemphasized features designed to be recognized from far away, Kemp's masks are conspicuously expressionless. Like faces frozen before the moment of articulation—be it fury, elation or grief—these aspects merely gape. Stunned, they appear haunted by their own performance of apprehending and being apprehended.



Arnold J. Kemp, "Untitled (Index Series)," 2020, etching ink on handmade antique paper, 21 x 16.5 inches/Photo: Courtesy M. LeBlanc

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Four recent paintings on view at M. LeBlanc recall the homogenous voice and viewpoint of a theatrical chorus. As observational bodies, the chorus comments. Here, each white canvas conceals black ink abstract compositions. They bleed and ooze, sometimes pooling at the periphery or slipping around the canvas edge. However, their surfaces, covered in thin yet dense swaths of crumpled aluminum skins, are uniformly masked. Cunningly effacing a language of Abstract Expressionism, these compositions are cloaked by abstract and expressionless faces. Seizing on the iterability of these aluminum masks, Kemp layers sheets atop one another. Faces flop between figure and ground: as an eye or mouth comes into focus, another vague yet sensual crater recedes into the background.



Installation view, Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather, Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 2022/ Photo: Robert Heishman

The chorus motif extends to Kemp's exhibition at the Neubauer Collegium, curated by Dieter Roelstraete. Taking the stage, over 400 ceramic-slab masks lay atop a long, wooden riser. Titled, "Talking to the Sun," Kemp created these works by shaping clay behind his back. Working blindly, he poked two holes out with his fingers. Echoing the Oedipal gouge, he in turn creates the necessary spaces for sight—the ability to look through.

In each exhibition, Kemp's practice asserts itself through the act of transfers. Thoughtful pairings

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accentuate how Kemp's work looks back at itself. At M. LeBlanc, a suite of eight etching-ink monotypes printed on antique handmade paper put forth unique and unmoving impressions of the aluminum sheets reproduced in his paintings. At the Neubauer, two photographs detailing hands prodding through Fred Flintstone head orifices play up the act of poking behind Kemp's ceramic works. Arresting the roaming eye—an eye that looks the other way—Kemp's work seizes your attention through trenchant moments of returning a gaze. (Alexandra Drexelius)

"Talking To The Sun" is on view through April 23 at M. LeBlanc, 3514 West Fullerton. "Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather" is on view through April 10 at the Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 5701 South Woodlawn.

REVIEW: Arnold J. Kemp, *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather*



Installation view, *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather*, Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 2022. Photo by Robert Heishman.

REVIEW [Arnold J. Kemp, *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather*](#)

Feb 17 - Apr 10, 2022

[Neubauer Collegium Gallery](#),

The University of Chicago

5701 S. Woodlawn Ave.

Chicago, IL 60637

By Antonia Piedmonte-Lang

The Arnold J. Kemp exhibition currently on view at the Neubauer Collegium Gallery is subtle, but demanding in its subtlety; the way the

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objects are situated in the spare academic hollow on University of Chicago's campus. I walked in on a spring-like day in late February, as students streamed by on the sidewalks outside, and the air contained the soft, frenetic buzz of a Monday on a college campus, a slim and youthful air. Although I called ahead to schedule an appointment, I did so hurriedly, and forgot to give my name. The buzzer I pressed went to voicemail, but the "by appointment only" door was open. There was no one at the front desk. I could hear sounds on the floors above, distant and vague. The lights were dim, and it was strange to enter the gallery space all alone, without staff or guards. The stillness of the single room created an opportunity for looking that was closer to touching – a suitable modality for the work.

The most immediate element of the exhibition is a low wooden platform, or pedestal, upon which nearly 500 small masks are displayed. The viewer is required to walk up to the platform to see the objects, collectively titled *Talking to the Sun*. The hand-sculpted ceramic masks look up at the viewer with their blank eyes as the viewer gazes down at them. Although most are rectangular, they vary in shape and texture. Many have rounded edges and brows. They are also small and rigid, definitively unwearable. Running my eyes across them, they remind me of baked sugar cookies because of their shape and frosted surface. Excess clay collected around the eye holes calls attention to the process of making. Sometimes the eyeholes are closer together, sometimes one is sunken and the other a quite round circle. The glaze tones and uneven surfaces of the masks cause them to appear almost like the surfaces of the earth, sometimes even planetary; there seem to be little tributaries in the glazes, continental shapes drifting around in the small rectangular structures – almost then creating a kind of unity out of the army of them, an orderly constellation.



Installation view, *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather*, Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 2022. Photo by Robert Heishman.

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Two photographs from Kemp's 2019 *Funny House (Speech Acts)* series lean against the wall across from the ceramic masks. In each, a hand is thrust through the same found object— a rubber Fred Flintstone mask. The photographs' blank white background and crisp lines of the folded mask make a stark and impactful impression. The Neubauer Collegium's press release for the exhibition states "seen within the context of America's most recent political trauma, there is inevitably an element of cathartic, vengeful violence folded into the parodic spectacle of a black man's hand 'fisting' this talismanic symbol of straight white male entitlement." Yet the most interesting element of the photographs may be their nearly tender, or soft quality, the hand being captured in an exalted moment of performance. The photographs lean against the wall instead of being hung flat, pointing less to a moment of encounter than amplifying the gestures of an embrace; the hand pulls through to face the viewer, the photographs lean back gently. It is less confrontational, more oblique, and for that reason more multiplicitous in its activation of the viewer. Kemp intends these photographs to evoke a confluence of forces that "amuse, enchant, and frighten the viewer." Queer theory's attention to touch is applicable too— touch is a way of communicating, and fingers point through the mouth as if to speak. The hand is captured as it shapes the soft mask, thus it is involved in a moment of making as well as a moment of making visible the absent subject, the subject we cannot face here. This aspect of the photographs also draws attention to the "mouthlessness," or speechlessness, of the clay masks across from them. As the theme song goes, Fred Flintstone is from the stone age, so as the hand in the photographs mimic the act of molding clay, they also consume the other, and transform him into another entity – in this case, a multitude of protective stone masks. The circularity between clay and stone attends to material process, but it is also conceptually rich.



Installation view, *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather*, Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society, 2022. Photo by Robert Heishman.

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Throughout his career, Arnold J. Kemp has worked with masks in various media. As a Chicago based-artist of Bahamian descent, Kemp draws upon the significance of masks in traditions such as junkanoo, in which masks provide spiritual protection and anonymity to the wearer. Simultaneously, Kemp facilitates conditions for common cause by which objects blur boundaries with subjects and trouble the project of self-making. Writing on one of his most well-known works, a series of tin foil masks, art critic Stephanie Snyder writes of the Kemp's attention to the semi-reflective surfaces of his materials: "In the masks, Kemp also uses foil as a foil, to deflect menace, to fool and outsmart violence and predatory behavior, and to protect what is most critical, vulnerable, and precious: art, queer love, blackness, rage, justice ... " Art historian Huey Copeland perceives Kemp's work to revolve around fluid notions of identity and "a refusal of hard-and-fast demarcations between the West and its others." The act of obfuscation and the glimmer of representation: the material Kemp uses often has the capacity to reflect the viewer, but only partially, and thus the masks hide, protect, and evoke a kind of beauty derived from the partly present. *Less Like an Object and More Like the Weather* points to this fluidity in kind. The exhibit enables a way of drifting in and out of one's space and that of the objects. Of being called upon, then softening, coming into a dance with the artist's presence and one's own, being reflected and distanced, walking back out into the glistening spring day at hand.

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

August 19, 2021
Text by Allison Noelle Conner



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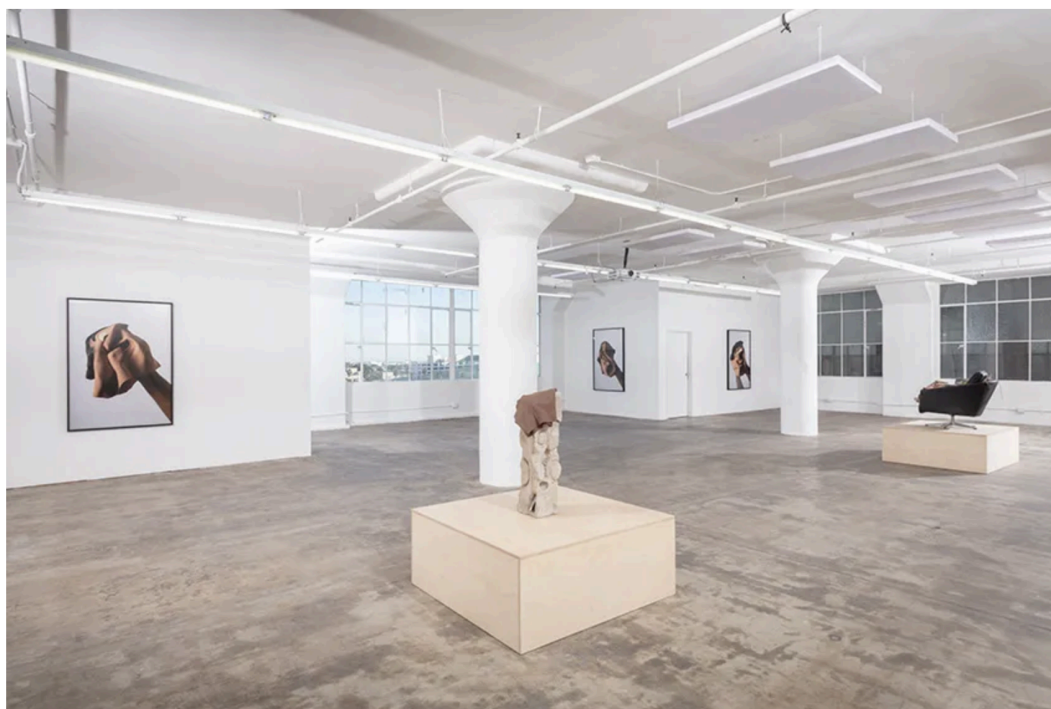
Arnold J. Kemp, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching* (2020). Vinyl covered chair with wooden frame and two vinyl covered seat cushions, 40 hardcover and paperback copies of Arnold Kemp's *Eat of Me I am the Savior*, and thermometer, 31 x 41 x 32 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and JOAN.

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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. ↵



Allison Noelle Conner's writing has appeared in *Artsy*, *Art in America*, *Hyperallergic*, *East of Borneo*, and elsewhere. Born in South Florida, she is based in Los Angeles.

The Emancipatory Formalism of Arnold J. Kemp

JULY 4, 2021

by David M. Roth



Selections from Possible Bibliography, 2015-20, black and white archival inkjet prints, 6.83 x 10 inches, each. Collection of Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art. Photos courtesy of the artist and and Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland.

Ask Arnold Joseph Kemp to define Blackness, and he might respond, as it he did in an interview conducted earlier this year, by reciting a poem he wrote called *Fire and Ice*. It contains what I'm guessing are more than one hundred stanzas. Each begins with the words "It is black," and proceeds with an A-through-Z litany of rejoinders that includes references to books, films, corporate brands, nature, food, sex, clothing, mundane objects, overworked cliches and much else. This free-associative marathon lasts about eight minutes, and by the end of it, you feel as if the artist has compiled a comprehensive guide to all things Black: one that affirms race but also refuses to be constrained by it. (Examples from the letter 'D' include: "It is black death. It is black denim. It is black desire. It is black devil. It is black dice. It is black dick. It is black door.")

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The reading is not part of the exhibition titled *I would survive. I could survive. I should survive*. Still, its appearance on the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art's website, as part of a Zoom conversation hosted by Sampada Aranke, the show's curator, serves as a perfect introduction to Kemp and the state of mind known as post-Blackness. It's a subject both Kemp and Aranke know well: He is dean of graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a former YBCA curator, and an artist known to Bay Area audiences from exhibitions at several local galleries, including Stephen Wirtz and Patricia Sweetow; she is an assistant professor at the Institute's art department and a visiting scholar at the museum, located on the UC Davis campus.



The term post-Black was coined by the artist Glenn Ligon and

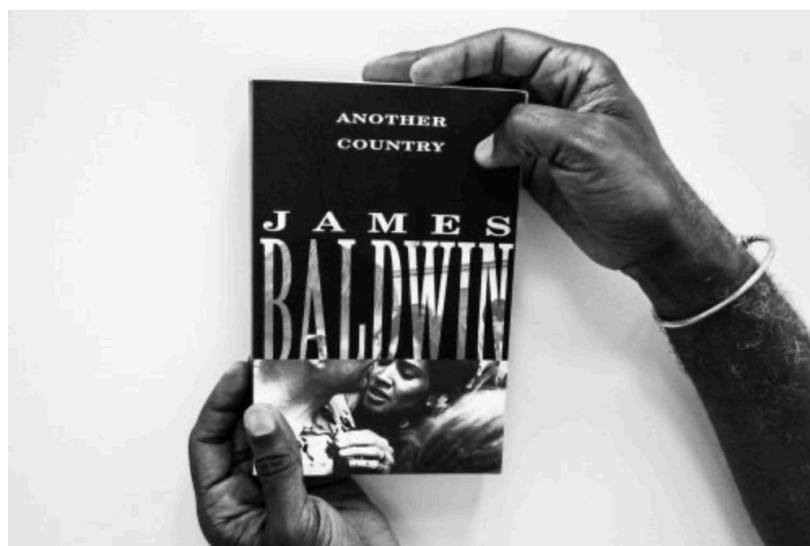
Installation view: Possible Bibliography

Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem. There, it became the basis for the groundbreaking 2001 exhibition (organized by Golden) called *Freestyle*. In addition to Kemp, it included Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Layla Ali, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Sanford Biggers and 21 other artists. Kemp's appearance marked his national debut and established the conceptual framework through which his work, and that of his peers, came to be seen. It doesn't deny Blackness or seek an alignment with the "post-racial" fiction imagined by former President Barak Obama. Instead, it represents a determination to push beyond the binaries that defined the Black Arts Movement and the identity politics that dominated multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

MARTOS GALLERY

Black artists of Kemp's generation – he was born in 1968 – found both to be overly restrictive in that they demanded political work that was pointedly didactic and, most often, figurative. Kemp's output is, for the most part, abstract; it encompasses painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance and writing – but not of a sort his elders would have endorsed. And while he pays homage to them, he does so without allegiance to anything save the notion that contemporary Black visual art – like jazz – is a collective enterprise with no hard-and-fast rules. For Kemp, it is mutable and multi-layered. It may valorize the efforts of individual virtuosos, but its value is measured by what it contributes to the collective dialog, be it among musicians on stage or with the community at large.

Thus, the title I would survive. I could survive. I should survive. is particularly apt. It is a compact, elegantly staged show that packs a wallop far out of proportion to its modest size. It occupies half of a medium-sized gallery and contains



Detail: Possible Bibliography

just two paintings, a sculpture, and a black-and-white photo montage comprised of 52 images that stretch across a long wall. The latter, titled *Possible Bibliography* (2015-20), shows the artist's hands in a variety of positions, lovingly embracing books by a group of authors (e.g., Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Fred Moten, Tricia Rose, Hilton Als) whose names, collectively, form a who's who list of Black American intellectuals. An exquisite display of serialism, the piece points not only to the artist's engagement with their ideas but to his physical relationship with books as objects, evidenced by what we see of his hands.

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Heavily creased, they more closely resemble those of an elderly laborer than those of the young-ish artist/academician seen in the Zoom interview mentioned above. The implicit message, if there is one, is that intellectual labor is hard work. Beyond that, *Possible Bibliography* challenges viewers to become conversant in Black thinking, which is a worthy goal in a university setting such as this. The danger, of course, is that it might be construed by some to mean that understanding Kemp is contingent upon absorbing the content of the books pictured. It's not. But it helps. So, too, does an understanding of mid-20th century Modernism and its strained relationship with blackness and Black artists, which is the show's real subject. The question it asks is: can the exclusionary (whites-only) legacy of Abstract Expressionism be re-routed to reflect a post-Black sensibility?



Night Watch, 2017-20, graphite, ink wash, and flashe on canvas, 69 x 69 inches

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Two large paintings, stationed at opposite ends of the room, answer with an emphatic yes. Both are, essentially, heavily embellished quotes from Ad Reinhardt's series of black paintings, made in the early 1960s as part of an effort to "purify" painting by purging it of references to everything but paint itself. But it was more than just Greenbergian formalism taken to extremes. The effort, heavily influenced by Asian philosophies, was an attempt to visualize nothingness and induce a transcendent state in viewers. The odd thing is, Reinhardt's own writings describe these works in terms that were almost entirely negative, and those associations, coupled with the common understanding of the word black to mean dark forces, throw Reinhardt's works into a different light than the one in which they appeared when he first showed them at the Museum of Modern Art in 1963. To be clear, Reinhardt wasn't using black to either promote or conceal a racist agenda, but his narrow (read: race-blind) view of it did rub some Black artists the wrong way. One of them was jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, who, in a 1967 roundtable discussion hosted by *artscanada* in which he and Reinhardt participated, criticized the painter for failing to recognize the more profound social and political implications of the color black.

For Taylor, wrote Nicholas Croggon in *Canadian Art*, *artscanada's* successor, black meant 'Black power': not only the recently emerged liberation movement, but also the longer history of the 'Black way of life' that sustained it. As such, directly countering Reinhardt's evocation of black as an idealized and universalist aesthetic experience, Taylor's black was contingent and concrete, tied to both the life of his local community and the political struggles of a global African liberation movement."

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Our Friends Teach Us Some Things and Our Enemies Teach Us the Rest, 2017, 69 x 69 inches.

The encounter, Croggon continued, "underlined the structural whiteness that defined the art industry of 1960s North America, in both its modernist and postmodernist guises. As the Black Power movement was at that moment very clearly laying out, such whiteness worked more covertly than other forms of racism, often involving a seeming embrace of both civil rights and Black voices. Yet, as was the case with Taylor, such voices were usually pressured to perform their specific 'blackness,' leaving unremarked the condition of whiteness that was assumed to underpin all representation and existence. This, for Frantz Fanon, was the hellish ontological circle that plagued the existence of the colonized: to be forever the 'other' to a universal white subject."

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Kemp's evocation of Reinhardt undermines that position in several ways. By hanging both paintings – *Night Watch* (2017-20) and *Our Friends Teach Us Some Things and Our Enemies Teach Us the Rest* (2017) – close to the floor, Kemp affords viewers a physical relationship to the works that a typical museum display would otherwise foreclose. And his sizing of them at a height and width equal to his own reach – 69 inches square – amplifies the impact. Kemp's real innovation, though, rests with his handling of the canvases' right and left edges. On them, he paints a spidery "scaffolding" interrupted by stains. So, instead of arresting our gaze at the surfaces as Reinhardt's paintings do, these works offer expansive perimeters that encourage navigation. Thus, formerly impenetrable surfaces become in Kemp's handling, portals to someplace *else*. They invite viewers to partake of what Derek Conrad Murray, writing in these pages about Oliver Jackson, called "the emancipatory pleasures of formalism."



Dark Glass, 2015, stained glass, welded steel, 7 1/2 x 20 x 20 inches. Photo: Cleber Bonato

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Those same pleasures extend to the sole sculpture on view, *Dark Glass* (2015). It's a 20 x 20-inch stainless-steel box set about six inches off the floor. Inside the shallow container rest three pieces of stained glass whose colors (red, green and black) correspond to those of the Pan-African flag, adopted by The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League in 1920, in reaction to a racist song from 1869 called *Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon*. The structure whose edges show visible discoloration from welding, recalls a crude cooking element, while the glass slabs, stacked one atop-the-other, call to mind Duchamp's iconic sculpture, *The Large Glass* (1915-23) and the old melting-pot cliché of disparate peoples united by shared values and beliefs. It is, in other words, a political treatise disguised as minimalist sculpture: the very definition of "emancipatory formalism."

#

*Arnold Joseph Kemp: "I would survive. I could survive. I should survive." At the **Manetti Shrem Museum of Art** through November 12, 2021.*

June 2021

Artists on Artists to Watch, and Maybe Even Collect

We asked 16 established names to suggest a fellow talent they feel should be better known.

By Noor Brara

The best direction one could give to someone interested in expanding their knowledge of contemporary art is to pay attention to what artists are paying attention to; artists always know before everyone else does. With this in mind, we asked 16 established artists from all over the world about a young or under-appreciated artist whose work resonates with them. They spoke about why these talents deserve more attention than they're getting, and why readers should take time to explore their oeuvres, which inspect, among other things, issues of identity, race, material culture, social justice, climate change and how we live.

For her part, the renowned 96-year-old Syrian-American poet and painter Etel Adnan, whom we interviewed for this story but who wasn't able to select just one artist, chose instead to share a bit of advice for all the artists mentioned — each of whom, she says, is rising in their own way. “The thing I want them to remember,” she says, “is that being an artist means you'll always be a little insecure and a little unsure because you don't know where you're going a lot of the time — every act of creation is new. You may have feedback, and there are moments when people will give you reassurance, but you won't have that always. But that's true of life in general, and people make too big a fuss over the struggles of being an artist, as though an artist's humanity is different from anyone else's, as though we are a different kind of creature. It's not. We are not. Keep going.”



Arnold J. Kemp's "Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching" (2020). Courtesy of the artist and Mar Gallery, New York. Photo by Tom Van Eynde

Mary Weatherford: [Arnold J. Kemp](#), 53

Arnold J. Kemp is an incredible artist whose own work has been overlooked because of his incredible career as an educator. The last mention of him in the paper of record was from 2001 by Holland Cotter ... so I see this as pure evidence that what I'm saying is the case, because it's taken two decades for it to happen again. Kemp makes photography, sculpture and painting, and is also a poet and a performance artist. This particular sculpture, which is brand-new — the first thing I thought about when I saw it was [Jorge Luis] Borges, who is one of my favorite writers. Reading Borges is such a pleasure because I understand that there's fiction masquerading as truth, and truth masquerading as fiction. And this particular sculpture comes closer to the mastery of Borges than any artwork I've ever encountered because of this novel that is stuffed in the pillows, which is indeed by an author named Arnold Joseph Kemp. And Arnold has been mistaken for the author Arnold Kemp. When looking at this chair, I'm wondering, because I know it's an artwork: "Is this a real novel? Is Arnold pretending that this novel exists?!" "#\$ this novel exist?" Arnold J. Kemp is also a creator of fictions, and his work is so meta and brilliant. There's a kind of cool delight I experience in walking around this sculpture in particular.

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ARTFORUM

1000 WORDS

ARNOLD J. KEMP

TALKS ABOUT "FALSE HYDRAS"

March 2021



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Opposite page: Arnold J. Kemp,
FUNNY HOUSE (SPEECH ACTS),
2019, ink-jet print, 60 x 40".

Below: Nisse Lindblom's
interpretation of Arnold Kemp's
false Dungeons & Dragons Hydra
monster, 2018.



IN ANTICIPATION of his solo exhibition “False Hydras” at JOAN in Los Angeles, Arnold J. Kemp sat down with me in Chicago to continue our dialogue on the means and meanings of Black queer and feminist critical practice in the age of the internet. A teacher, writer, curator, and artist, Kemp occupies multiple cultural roles, which are paralleled by the range of materials and media—drawing, painting, performance, poetry, photography, installation, sculpture—that have both intellectually informed and physically shaped his practice over the past thirty years. Yet as our conversation made clear, whatever the materials in play, there are certain thematic preoccupations that consistently animate his work: a refusal of hard-and-fast demarcations between the West and its others; an interest in the visual (de)construction of African and diasporic identities within and beyond the Euro-Americas; and an engagement with masks, doppelgängers, and surrogates, a whole host of other “Arnold Kemps,” whether long known or recently unearthed.

In “False Hydras,” as throughout Kemp’s oeuvre, such visual forms become vehicles of protection, dissemblance, and encounter capable of rewiring our understandings of what constitutes connection and of how signification emerges through the wedding of discrepant objects. If, as critic Stephanie Snyder has written, Kemp’s practice can be understood as working through the universal process of psychic symbolization from the perspective of a gay man of Bahamian descent living in the United States, then the following lines provide a telling snapshot of that process as navigated by one of many Arnold Kemps, whose voice serves to refract who we are, where we’re at, and where we might go.

—Huey Copeland

I STUMBLED on the show’s title, “False Hydras.” I was looking for something on the internet, and I came across this term, which has a really lyrical sound. I dug into it more deeply and discovered that it’s what they call a “homebrew creature,” made for the fifth edition of the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. The false Hydra is a monster that creates paranoia, rumor, and anxiety. When it eats someone, any memory of that person disappears, and the monster grows a new head resembling whoever it just ate.

The false Hydra was created by a person named Arnold Kemp, who runs a popular blog, Goblin Punch. When I saw that the author was someone with the same name as me, I thought, *I have to take advantage of this*. It was a chance to give people seeing the exhibition information about how my work is related to language and narrative, especially experimental writing, which could be novels, poems, plays, or even a D&D blog. There are different ways of entering my work, some of which are a little bit out of my control.

Initially, I was speaking excitedly with JOAN’s director, Summer Guthery, about Kathy Acker, whom I knew briefly. We were talking about Acker’s performative and literary practice, really her life, and how it sought to expand feminist and queer categories. Around the same time, my work

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Right: Arnold J. Kemp, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 2020, limestone, tailored shorts made by the artist's grandfather (Arnold J. Kemp), flip phone from a performance featuring the artist's father (Howard J. Kemp), 31 x 8 1/2 x 8 1/2".

Opposite page: Arnold J. Kemp, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching*, 2020, vinyl chair, vinyl seat cushions, thermometer, forty hardcover and paperback copies of Arnold Kemp's 1972 *Eat of Me: I Am the Savior*, 31 x 41 x 32".

was in a show curated by Nayland Blake at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia called "Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward." That show explored how the expanded influence of digital and online technologies, fandom subcultures, and artistic discourse was creating new possibilities for queer identification, changing how personal roles and forms of expression are defined in contemporary society. I began to think about how to extend what I was doing at the ICA with a piece called *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT?*, 2013. How could I continue that interaction between my work and the historical moment, presenting another model of identity that would be not only performative but *collaborative*, based on mutability and intersection?

Gossip has always been important to authors associated with the New Narrative movement, like Acker. When I think about the political dimensions of this, the thing that I really appreciate about Acker—and that some people appreciate about my work—is that it runs away from categories. I've had people say, "You're a painter, you're a writer, you're a sculptor." I take things from the real world—from real life—and mix them with fictions. In the case of *JOAN*, there are many, many Arnold Kemps, known and unknown figures, people who are related to me and people whom I've never met.

There are haunted surrogates in the show: One work, *Mr. Kemp: Yellowing, Drying, Scorching*, 2020, consists of a black lounge chair on which are placed multiple copies of *Eat of Me: I Am the Savior*, a book published in 1972 by a Black novelist with whom I also share this name. The work has this push and pull that I'm interested in. There's a lot of humor, but also this bodily weight. There's fact and fiction. I want the audience to wonder whether the books are found or made. There's a thermometer attached to the backside of the chair, which brings to mind Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*, 1965; it's a very crude way of dealing with how the temperature around this chair might change as different bodies come into proximity with it. I try to keep meaning open. There's the conjoining of Arnold J. Kemp, this fabulous queer Chicago-based artist in 2021, and Arnold Kemp, a Black nationalist author from 1972.

Then there's the sculpture *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 2020, which is constructed in part from objects owned by my late father or made by my grandfather, who was also named Arnold J. Kemp. My father just died in May of last year, and I had to realize this piece, since I had made other objects and performances with him while he was alive. He grew up in the Depression, and when he got his hands on something special, such as a Christmas gift, he wouldn't use it—sometimes he wouldn't even open it. So these shorts that my grandfather made as a gift to my father are in mint condition. And my grandfather, who was born in 1894, was this really incredible tailor. The shorts are juxtaposed against this limestone sculpture that I made in 1984, when I was still in high school. Then there's a cell phone that I used in a performance in 2003 with my father that was about communication between father and son. The whole thing crosses wires between the genealogical and the associative.

One could think of *Arnold Kemp* as an imposed patronymic that does not actually reveal anything about the possibility of those beings who bear it. It underlines the multiplicity of pathways that are open to Arnold Kemps,



At *JOAN*, there are many, many Arnold Kemps, known and unknown figures, people who are related to me and people whom I've never met.

MARTOS GALLERY

even as we uncover these other commonalities. I've been searching for a long time for these other Arnold Kemps. It's no accident that they come into the work. I was around when Facebook started, and I searched for all the other Arnold Kemps. At one point, we were all in touch with one another. The Arnold Kemps that I'm genealogically related to come from small Caribbean islands. My father was born on Cat Island, which is like the old-time soul—the Mississippi—of the Bahamas.

There's this tension between uniqueness and reproducibility in this name, Arnold Kemp, that gets used over and over. I have been working on a play that borrows the conversations, the language, and the age-related short-term memory loss of my aunts and uncles. The play will be populated by all the Arnold Kemps. I like it when my work makes me laugh, just as much as I like it when it scares me. I'll just say there's meaning in that. □



OCTOBER

Issue No. 174, Fall 2020

A Questionnaire on Decolonization

The term *decolonize* has gained a new life in recent art activism, as a radical challenge to the Eurocentrism of museums (in light of Native, Indigenous, and other epistemological perspectives) as well as in the museum's structural relation to violence (either in its ties to oligarchic trustees or to corporations engaged in the business of war or environmental depredation). In calling forth the mid-twentieth-century period of decolonization as its historical point of reference, the word's emphatic return is rhetorically powerful, and it corresponds to a parallel interest among scholars in a plural field of postcolonial or global modernisms. The exhortation to decolonize, however, is not uncontroversial—some believe it still carries a Eurocentric bias. Indeed, it has been proposed that, for the West, de-imperialization is perhaps even more urgent than decolonization.

What does the term *decolonize* mean to you in your work in activism, criticism, art, and/or scholarship? Why has it come to play such an urgent role in the neoliberal West? How can we link it historically with the political history of decolonization, and how does it work to translate postcolonial theory into a critique of the neocolonial contemporary art world?

—Huey Copeland, Hal Foster, David Joselit, and Pamela M. Lee

ARNOLD J. KEMP

The situation of art now, reflecting the current sense of postcolonial crisis, demands thinking about the neocolonial in connection with notions of cultural difference, where every notion of difference refers back to colonial fascination with a primitive other carrying a fixed ethnic identity. The product of a larger conceptual entanglement, coexisting with concerns of anti-racism and respect for traditional land rights, decolonization is more than just a rethinking of our relationship to images and objects. In my work in art and scholarship, the term *decolonize* has a bearing on image- and object-making and the histories and places in culture in which critical artwork circulates. Much like Kerry James Marshall, I don't want to be vague about the dialogues and conversations with history that my work seeks to have. In 1993, David Hammons said to me that he didn't care whether people understood his work, that he would even prefer if people thought that his work was from outer space. Perhaps this was because outer space would be a pre-colonized place where Hammons could set the terms for the consideration of his achievement. I said to Hammons that he sounded like Sun Ra, the legendary jazz musician who claimed to be from Saturn. Hammons replied succinctly, "Exactly!" Whether it is outer space or outer consciousness, the locus of artistic activity must not be colonized if critical artists mean to go someplace where others have not.

In 1998, during a studio visit with members of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, one of the members said to me in frustration, "All of the black artists we have visited make work about slavery. My question is, why don't you?" My answer was that, since she already knew this about black people, I didn't need to make work that illustrated this fact, that didn't trouble essentialist assumptions about my race, and that didn't refuse to perform what she would recognize as art and as black. Throughout my work these refusals have been nonnegotiable. I find that in the art world the colonized consciousness is one that has to negotiate. For this reason my work has existed outside of the art market and has made its way by being successfully exhibited and critically received in an apartment (*HOW TO MAKE MIRRORS*, 2nd Floor Projects, San Francisco, April 29–June 6, 2012), in a closet (*FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE*, MEΣ(s), A Project Space, Portland, OR, May–June, 2012), in an empty car garage (*NOT YET SEEN*, Cherry & Lucic, Portland, OR, October 15–November 16, 2016), and in an almost derelict building (*WHEN THE SICK RULE THE WORLD [CUANDO LOS ENFERMOS GOBIERNAN EL MUNDO]*, Biquini Wax, E.P.S., Mexico City, August 5–September 5, 2017). My desire to not negotiate the terms of my colonization, to show my work in spaces started by artists for artists, has paradoxically not prevented my work from being collected by institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Berkeley Art Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Portland Art Museum. It is, in fact, important that my work is shown in museums which participate in the colo-

nizing activity of building public collections, while I continue to operate in a mindset of a decolonized participant in artistic community-building.

In 2013 I met the Vancouver-based artist Raymond Boisjoly as the result of being on the jury for a biannual prize awarded to emerging artists by the University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery. During the jury's visit with Boisjoly, I found his ambitions to undo some of the structures that process his work through the filter of Indigenous art echoing my own concerns with my work being read through a lens shaped by centuries of white supremacy and xenophobia. At the end of the visit, I was not sure if I would ever hear from Boisjoly again, and then in 2014 he took up a six-week residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in the thematic program "In Kind" Negotiations. As the lead faculty of the residency, Boisjoly designed the program and invited me and Joar Nango, an architect based in Norway, to share leadership duties. Together we welcomed ten international artists of different Indigenous identities to work through Boisjoly's notion that "there is no particular way things are supposed to have been," an open-ended framework to discuss postcolonialism. Much of the discourse revolved around undeclared or partially declared intentions—a method of not saying directly. Boisjoly's message was aspirational in framing a parallel reality where things might have gone differently. His inviting me, a black artist of Caribbean heritage and Nango of the Indigenous peoples from Sápmi, the traditional territories of Sámi, seemed at once poetic and pointedly political. The gesture of invitation was suggestive of shared alliances and strategies for survival. As Banff is located on the lands of Treaty 7 territory, where the creation of Canada's first national park imposed boundaries and displaced the territory's original stewards, the people of the Stoney Nakoda, Blackfoot, and Tsuut'ina nations, it seemed most culturally appropriate that I would only attend at the invitation of peoples related to the land. My participation ensured that the residency would make space for the participants to locate themselves within a post-identity spectrum of engagement that lay somewhere between the Indigenous and the global.

At Banff I noted that colonization allowed for a false separation between people with shared interests. So I gave lectures, led seminars, and organized social activities that exposed the residents to ways of being in the world and in the studio that made room for thinking critically about issues of identity, indigeneity, and colonization embedded in the educational, artistic, and cultural structures around us. While acknowledging the role of artists in reflecting on social and political changes necessary for the expansion of art today, I was sensitive to the group's desires to dismantle traditional divisions established between design, architecture, and visual art. I gave the group permission to intertwine each discipline with methods and processes led by improvisation. I brought other role models, such as Adrian Piper, Kathy Acker, Alice Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, and Robert Farris Thompson, to the group. We took advantage of

chance, experimentation with localized raw materials, and punk and free-jazz aesthetics, and we tuned our relationship to place. Our actions and interventions at Banff ultimately added up to new knowledge and connectedness to the environment in which we stood. On that land decolonization was an urgent relational praxis of self-affirming, space-opening, and permission-giving embodiments rooted in culture and tradition that countered ongoing legacies of colonial violence and impositions of oppressive structures.

ARNOLD J. KEMP is an artist, a 2012 Guggenheim Fellow, and formerly Dean of Graduate Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Collaboration and creativity under a looming sky

DECEMBER 7, 2018 | OREGON ARTSWATCH

VISUAL ART

By LUSI LUKOVA

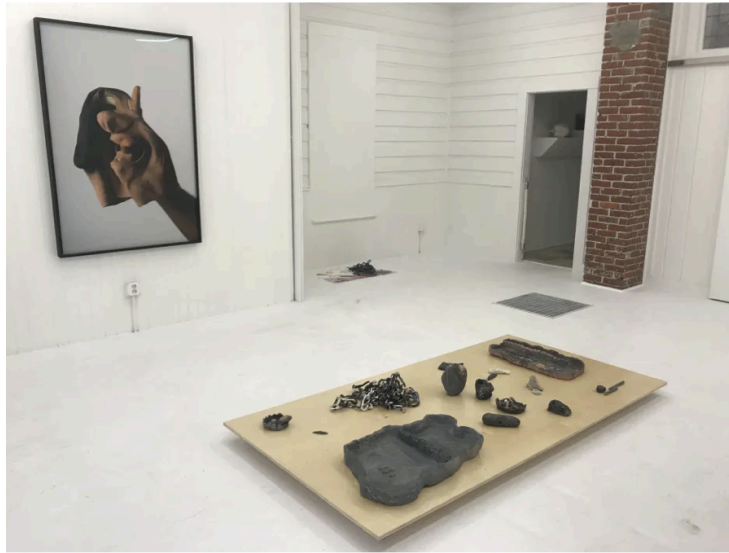
“The Big Dark is a cloud ... you appreciate it for reminding you that there is an above and a below. You could think of it like you think of a condition — something ominous or something pestering but also something you get used to, that you can’t do without.” In *The Big Dark* at [FourteenThirty Contemporary](#), Arnold Kemp and Kristan Kennedy form their own collaborative cloud of artistic expression.

The excerpt above comes from a text written by the artists and released as part of the exhibition that opened on Saturday, November 17 and continues through December 29th. The text is the story of Kennedy’s first experience of the phenomenon of “The Big Dark”: she first encountered it while driving on a day in which the sky was unnaturally gray and the air felt leaden. She describes it as an overwhelming cultural weight, a looming and protective blanket.

Kennedy’s first encounter with the expansive cloud wasn’t entirely metaphorical. In 2017, the National Weather Service identified an extreme weather pattern, a five-thousand mile cloud formation, a long river of rain. At five thousand miles, the meteorological phenomenon was bigger than the distance that physically separates Kennedy and Kemp’s home studios (Kennedy calls Portland home while Kemp lives in Chicago). The multimedia artists and educators have known one another since 2006 and have been in sporadic conversation ever since.

When Jeanine Jablonski, owner and director of Fourteen30, approached Kemp about showing new work, he suggested a collaboration with Kennedy. The Big Dark, the foundational concept, as conceived of by both artists exists in the past, present, and future. Like their friendship, it manifests in bursts but always shapes and defines immediate experience. Kemp explains that the exhibition afforded them “a chance to come together to draw again...to be in this very political moment and to present a model of collaboration across difference and to show how various interests could be combined to be a powerful force for good.” The works at Fourteen30 are all new though they were born of old ideas and conversations. The natural order of Kennedy and Kemp’s artistic practices coalesce here as if by no other choice, called on by this unrelenting condition of The Big Dark, this force that wills the creation of highly charged works. The artists grapple with finding clear skies and camaraderie on otherwise overcast days.

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“The Big Dark” (installation view), 2018; Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland, Oregon. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

The exhibition coalesces around a raised wooden platform at the center of the gallery with a variety of 3-dimensional works made by both Kennedy and Kemp. Their artistic impulses can be seen in the indentations and tangible finger marks left in the paper clay and terracotta used to shape them. *Maquette for ashtray: white burial cloud* and *Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha)* both done in paper clay and ink, were made by Kennedy and Kemp together. Kemp contributed *ash face* and Kennedy fashioned *Drawing Tool*. The three large “ashtrays,” wells to catch ash but also light and emotion under *The Big Dark*, create the springboard for the rest of the pieces to intuitively come together. If one were to have no indication of a figure’s creator, the works easily appear as a cohesive installation. Kennedy describes this as a purposeful moving “into a space where we are even more vulnerable and collaborating directly, with the clay but also by trusting each other with shared authorship.” Many of these smaller works are inspired by their friendship; thoughts around chains, be they physical chains or chains of ideas.

Particularly in *Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha)*, Kemp and Kennedy couple their distinctive styles for this piece in which an unfired small, white ceramic bone made by Kemp sits on top of a linen rectangle painted by Kennedy. Atop the linen rectangle, painted in the same abstract manner as one of Kennedy’s larger paintings, is a chain crafted equally by both. Knowing that two persons had a hand in their making, with differing stylistic approaches, makes these pieces an even more powerful example of unity and wholeness. Even the title itself connotes various degrees of interception: a chain that is outlined and then drawn, and so unites cohesively in the final arrangement of the piece.

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Arnold J. Kemp / Kristan Kennedy. Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha), 2018; paper clay, linen, dye, ink. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

All of these small works are impactful. Kennedy wants to move away from nominating these figures as purely “sculptures;” she sees the craft and skill employed here as more fluid and the function of the end products as more involved than that of a traditional sculpture. For example, Kennedy’s *Drawing Tools*, because it is covered in graphite could also be used as a surface to create a new drawing. The potential for multiplication is important and even when the works aren’t strictly collaborations, they are intrinsically interrelated. In wanting both makers to play a role in the cultivation of the objects, Kennedy and Kemp can make the work, in their words, about “negotiating their purpose and meaning together.”

On the left side of the gallery is Kemp’s *Untitled*, an archival pigment print of a contorted mask. The artist’s hand can be seen poking through the eyes and the mouth further twisting the image while offering his hand as the only obviously recognizable part of this work. As a result, the duality of expressing the self while simultaneously masking it speaks volumes in hushed reverence in this image. The mask by nature is meant to conceal and obfuscate, yet the very visible hand in the photo adds some potential for identification. In extending beyond the overt expression of our own experience as persons who are seen and, as a result, identified in some capacity, Kemp seems to question how this all occurs, and what efforts, be they internal or external, can muddy that experience. Kemp explained that he started on this line of inquiry in the late 90s with drawings of African masks, and the use of African culture and motifs in the Modernist and Postmodernist movements. More recent explorations of the same themes have embraced more personal references. This piece is one of a series of three prints created using a Flintstones cartoon mask to mimic the movement of satellite images of The Big Dark.

If we are to consider the gallery as meteorological narrative that tells of The Big Dark and its trajectory, Kemp sees Kennedy’s three canvases (*B.G.D.R.K.*, *C.A.P.D.S.P.N.T.M.T.* and *D.N.E.S.*) as seasons, summer, spring, and fall. Kemp’s print completes the cycle as winter. Kennedy’s paintings and Kemp’s print are identical in size to confirm this connection.

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Three large paintings by Kennedy occupy the gallery wall opposite Kemp's print. In *D.N.E.S.*, I immediately understand the Spring designation. The moody purples and ink splatters appear to me as the rain and dampness of April showers, that give way into the floral buds of orange tones on the canvas. Done in swift and large strokes, the motion of the work is reminiscent of the rapidity of Spring, how it comes to wash the earth and give way to Summer. To the right of *D.N.E.S.* hangs *B.G.D.R.K.*, the namesake painting of this exhibition. Perhaps the rendition of Summer, the canvas is overwhelmingly light, in direct opposition to its title. Yellows, light blues, greens, and pink tones form the calm background for a cloud-like shape done in grays and dark blues also pushing into the left-center of the linen canvas. Yet, as easily as one could see a cloud, it is a suggestion rather than a confirmed subject.



Kennedy, Kristan. B.G.D.R.K., 2018; ink, dye, bleach on linen. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

For *C.A.P.D.S.P.N.T.M.T.*, the piece nominated as Fall, Kennedy combines ink, dye, bleach, aluminum and clay on linen and once again purposefully departs from figural representation. The canvas breaks the chronology of the seasons but serves as a balancing point on the wall — heavily awash with bright hues of reds and pinks, it truly is the counterpart to the two more gentler canvases on either side. In foregoing overt subject matter, vulnerable expression and exploration are at the forefront of these canvases. They appeal not to logic but rather sensational emotion. A small clay face embedded into the piece towards the bottom left is the only indication of a link between the tangible world and the more abstract one in which Kennedy creates. This small clay sculpture is also a direct link to Kemp's work and confirms the collaborative impulse that guides the show.

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Kennedy's titles muddy more than they clarify. The works, similarly, don't offer clear formal guidelines but instead allow for flexibility in interpretation. This is by design and a mirror of the formulation of the guiding concept, *The Big Dark*. There is light and clarity to be uncovered in the embrace of openness

Both artists seem to gravitate toward forms that have the potential to evolve. Raw, yet utilitarian, each piece in this show has the potential to serve multiple functions. Kennedy's canvases are multi-use — they can be framed, pinned up, draped, or laid on the ground; they have no one specific employment or way of viewing. Just like the vague shapes and outlines she paints, they are constantly shifting and in motion, changing before an audience's eyes. For *The Big Dark*, while three are framed, and only one is laid on the ground, we as gallery-goers can imagine them outside the familiar confines of the frame and existing unfettered, totally free. As for Kemp's prints and sculptures, his approach to questioning individual experience, to gauging one's personal stake at what is done to us and what we do to ourselves, similarly allows for a flexibility in execution and contemplation.

According to the text "The Big Dark," "You can't hurry a cloud." In contemplating clouds, I'm struck by the word becloud and its synonym blur. This exhibition blurs the lines between individual artists and practices. The works becloud and defy neat or easy interpretations. *The Big Dark* can waft over you dramatically and instantaneously, with no warning as to its coming. It may come quickly or "[w]e might be waiting forever for that!" Waiting forever in anticipation for clarity, for answers, for reprieve. Yet, as all-engulfing as it may seem, there is also comfort in the Big Dark, a kind of light found in reaching out and grasping a familiar hand to hold in the dark. For Kennedy and Kemp, that hand is one forged of friendship and a shared creative experience.

The Big Dark is on view at [Fourteen30 Contemporary](#) through December 29, 2018. Gallery hours are Fridays and Saturdays, 12-5, and by appointment.

BAD AT SPORTS

WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT: A CONVERSATION WITH ARNOLD J. KEMP



by Sarah Margolis-Pineo | Mar 20, 2013 | Blog

IN BLACK AND WHITE SPACES WE CAN'T LOSE OUR LOSS, 2013

It seems impossible to enter an exhibition with the title *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT* without the expectation of heartbreak. This provocative phrase, taken from a 1980s soul classic by [Robert Winters & Fall](#), reads as an ominous declaration of sentiment that, beyond unrequited, has been

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relegated to a realm of social and cultural taboo. In a moment when debate over DOMA abounds, the political and personal are inherently interwoven in this new body of work by [Arnold J. Kemp](#), a Portland-based visual and performing artist who is recognized for using glitter and a Duchampian sense of humor to explore issues related to identity and subjectivity.

WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT, recently on view at [PDX CONTEMPORARY ART](#), was not all political machination wrapped in clever art-speak. Kemp certainly took a cue from the spirit of Robert Winters' early-80s falsetto, (a sound that can only come out of Southern California by way of Detroit!), to imbue his performance and *handmade readymade* objects with an endearing tenderness—sentimentality pervasive in popular music and cinema but still somewhat disconcerting in the realm of fine art. Stand out were Kemp's two pairs of handmade men's shoes each accompanied by two seashells, two-by-two creating a veritable Odd Couple of characters marooned on adjacent islands just barely raised above the gallery floor. Thinking about shoes in contemporary art, Christian Boltanski's piles and Bedwyr Williams' crusty size 13s—for example there's something tragic and futile with these works that is entirely absent when viewing Kemp's stunningly crafted footwear. His sculptures, contentedly paired in convivial conversation, exude a humble opulence. Though alienated from each other, the shoes seem at home with their chosen partners, both pairs of empty vessels enlivened by the echo of past and future inhabitants.

All was not harmonious in Kemp's installation, however. Photographs of portentous empty masks lined the gallery walls, and an index card reading: *EYES REMAIN RIVETED ON THE MOON THAT'S RISING FROM THE EDGE OF MAN'S SORROW*, added an uncanny punctuation mark to the entire tableau. *When will my love be right?* The specifics of to whom Kemp asks remains ambiguous. What can be gleaned from this body of work is that love and alienation, fulfillment and pain, presence and absence, all operate in tandem, and it is the space of art—abetted by pop music—where these dichotomies can meet.

I spoke to Arnold J. Kemp over chilled rosé and cured meats in downtown Portland.

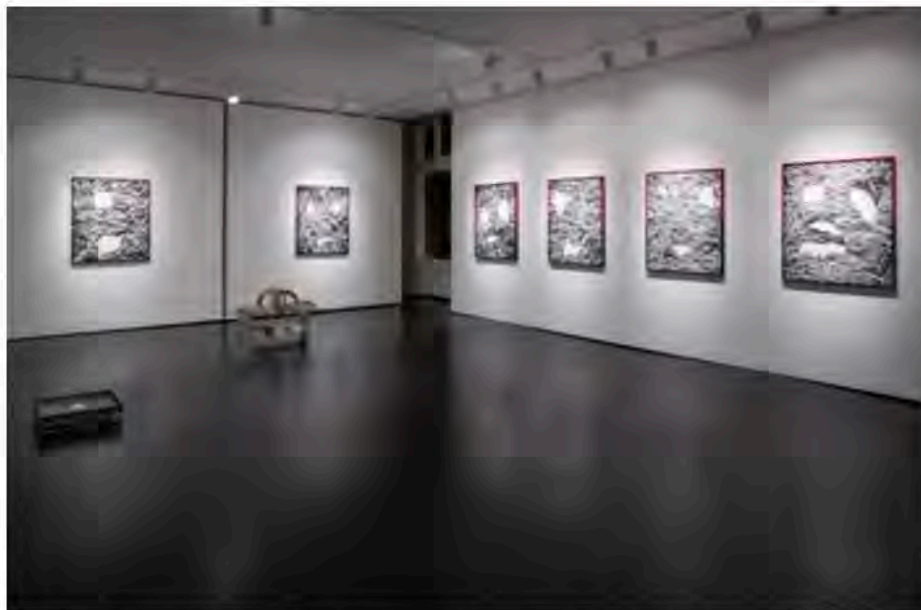


photo: Matthew Miller

Sarah Margolis-Pineo: *I was hoping that you could begin by elaborating a bit on your most recent body of work, *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT*, which seems to speak very much to your multidisciplinary and multisensory approach to making. How did the show come together?*

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Arnold J. Kemp: I come at things like a sculptor who is trying to make paintings. When I moved to Portland, I was very involved in making paintings that had a sense of humor. Sometimes they'd be all black paintings—*Vampires*—named for the idea that vampires don't have reflections when they look into mirrors. Another series were these glittering pink and black paintings that completely resembled the disco-era. But with this new work, I think it started with wanting to make something that people could really see my hand in. So, I don't know precisely how I arrived at it, but I was messing around in the studio with aluminum foil and what emerged were these mask-like objects. I have a history of drawing and creating things that resemble masks, but what was interesting about the aluminum foil, is that it really conveys the movement of my hand manipulating the material. I never thought to exhibit the objects themselves; instead, I used the quickest, easiest, and dumbest way of rendering them into an image, which was to use a scanner. With this series [of *Aluminums*], I began to play with framing—the frame around the image—as a way to emphasize the idea of painting.



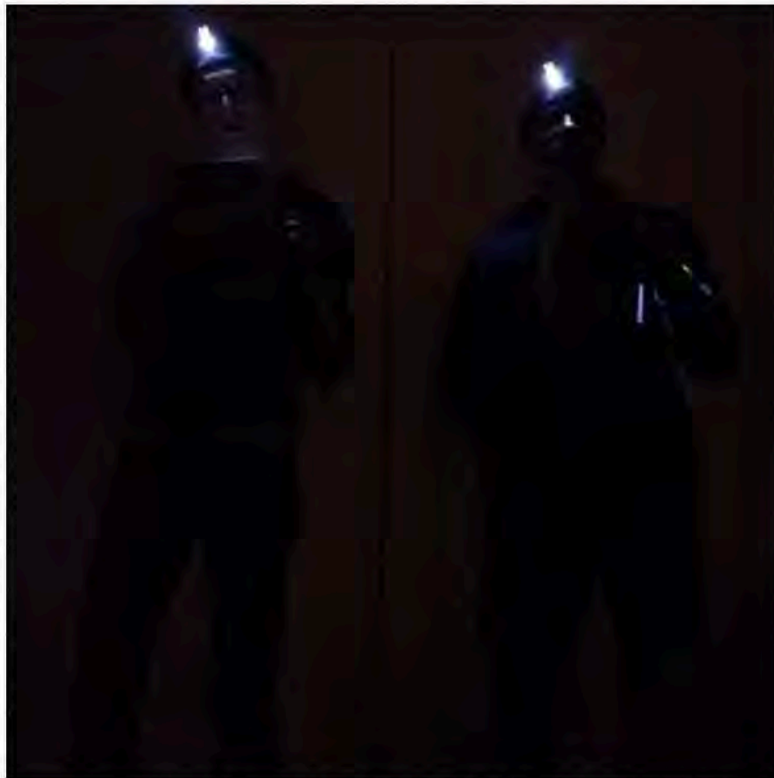
WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT installation, PDX CONTEMPORARY, 2013

AK: Other elements of the work are the handmade shoes and the 15-foot leather belts with the belt buckles spelling 'shy', which were displayed very low to the ground in steel trays that functioned almost as a piece of furniture. There was also the performance, *In Arms*. *In Arms* is sort of an abstracted, sad, love story that really relates to the main theme of the show: when will my love be right? As I was making this work, I got really involved with this one song with the same title from the 80s by this group Robert Winter & the Fall. I found it on YouTube—it's amazing!—The vocals are amazing. It's all about longing, yearning, and impossible love.

Having the play as a piece in the show—it was on the checklist, performed on one night only for 50-people—was very important to me because it made the exhibition something really special... [During the performance,] the gallery was completely dark and we all were wearing handmade headlamps so we could read the script as we were performing. And when I say "performing" we were more giving a good reading than actually performing. My direction to the actors, [Travis Nikolai and Sara Jaffe,] was to speak slowly and clearly so people could actually hear the words because the text is somewhat abstract. There are parts that are narrative that resemble what you would hear

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if you were walking down the street and hearing fragments of various conversations, or eavesdropping on hearing two lovers talking.



IN ARMS, performed at PDX CONTEMPORARY, 2013

SMP: *I'm interested in your use of the term readymade for something that is ephemeral – text based – distinctly non-material. I remember reading in an interview that Jonathan Lethem is not interested in originality, but rather, in expressing the grain of human experience, even if that means sourcing from plagiarized material. How do you approach using readymade text and is there a limit to sampling and re-sampling existing creative work?*

AK: It's not about originality, and it's not about waiting for inspiration as an artist. Ezra Pound said: *to make it new*; and Gertrude Stein said: *I've read everything!* Which I love! By using texts or words as readymades, I feel as though this play is put together like a sculpture—all these parts just come together. All of this stuff is in the world to play with and make with, and I just want to use it all. We have so much at our fingertips with the Internet, although I'd prefer to be in a library surrounded by books, which is where the material for this play comes from. To resist that would be resisting the whole way our culture is going with mixing and remixing, DJ-ing, and mashing up. The whole idea of the hip-hop posse has really fascinated me for quite a while. Warhol referenced the factory, and I think about the posse, and how it's fairly impossible for a single, autonomous artist working alone to make it—legitimately make it in the art world—whatever that means.



left: WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS (SEE BLUE SAY WHITE), 2012; right:
WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS (SEE BLACK SAY RED), 2012

AK: As for the text in the play, most of it was drawn from sources that came from a practice that was almost like contrived community building, rooted in my personal desire to have conversations with people like Angela Davis, Brecht, Billie Holiday, Mallarm... There could very well be 100 different people quoted in that script. There is a line that reads: *don't explain*; that's Billie Holiday. The whole thing is very research process-oriented. It's about being part of a community. And it's about love.

SMP: *Is it a collaborative work then?*

AK: Me and Angela Davis! A collaboration? Truly, I do consider my work a collaboration between myself and who the piece is dedicated to... The characters in the play are specific people, and I don't know if I want the public to know this, but one of those characters is me and the other character is someone I've been romantically involved with since 2003. For ten years, we've had this very intense, serious, in love, calling each other fiancés relationship, but there are impossible things and we're not together. He and I have performed this play once before at California College of the Arts, (CCA), as part of Bay Area Poet's Theater. We got rave reviews and I thought I would never have to perform it again—I would just publish it, but then this show came up: *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT*.

People *should* ask: who is he talking to? It could be those shoes. The shoes are very abstract to me—they could be very simple—but their simplicity is complicated by the fact that my father is an incredibly well dressed man who is very critical the way that I dress. His father made men's suits, and my mother's father made shoes. My mother comes from a family of six daughters and no sons, and my grandfather made the entire family's shoes—this was in Panama.

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WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT installation, PDX CONTEMPORARY

SMP: *Is that biographical reference important to the work?*

AK: Yes, it is. In addition to the shoes, there are seashells that certainly refer to my Caribbean heritage, but they also are echoes of the shoes. A seashell has a similar function and a similar shape to a shoe, and if you hold a seashell or shoe up to your ear, you're going to hear the ocean.

SMP: *In graduate school, Renée Green had us read Muriel Rukeyser's Life of Poetry, a text all about the revolutionary potential produced by the emotional stuff of poetry. Why bring poetry and love into your work?*

AK: Even when I was doing a lot of curating, I was always watching other artists. I had to write these curatorial essays and there was always this point in writing that I wanted to write about love—what love has to do with art making. It's not just a love of objects or love of museums, but heartache, the blues, jazz, Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Frank Sinatra, Shirley Horn, Betty Carter... All these amazing people who do take on love, bring it into themselves, and translate it into something that resonates with others. Love is very personal. I'm not talking about a universal love, although love is universal. My experience with it, which has to do with being black, being an artist, being queer, being a teacher, being part of a family, is very intense. This exhibition was really hard to put together emotionally and I'm always thrilled when even a bit of the conceptual intent comes through.

SMP: *It seems as though you're able to leverage your love of idols—Angela Davis and Billie Holiday—with a very personal, day-to-day, lived version of love, and the art making is where those two meet.*

AK: I don't know how, but I know it's purposeful.

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LET HIS BODY BECOME A LIVING LETTER, 2013

SMP: *What is your relationship to craft? Is there something about craft-based materials and processes—shoe making, for example—that allows you to approach a subject or articulate something differently than your work that comes from the trajectory of fine art painting and photography?*

AK: That's an interesting question. When I teach, I say to my students: *you can't make art by making art*. They might not know what that means at first, but I say it over and over again, and I applaud them when they don't make art. Making art by not making art is really a Duchampian thing, and it's funny to talk about Duchamp relative to craft, but someone made the toilet—it was *porcelain*—so someone had to make it! But anyway, back to the shoes. To give a little back-story, for a long time, I've wanted to do a project where I make mirrors by hand. I want to present handmade mirrors as paintings—I still want to do that project—but when I was about to, there was a shift in my social world that made me not want to make mirrors anymore. So, instead, I thought: I'll make shoes.



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AK: When people would ask what I was working on, I would say: *handmade readymades*. This idea of the handmade readymade, (and I thought was being clever), was at first a way to *get* Duchamp. Not, get Duchamp, because you really can't get over him or his work, but, I thought they could look, simply, like a regular pair of shoes—not like art—but like a finely crafted, all hand, no machine, leather shoe. I was able to connect with a very skilled shoemaker who is a cobbler from a really old Romanian family that had been in the business of making shoes for about 200 years and he has been making shoes since he was 12 years old. I saw an advert that someone had tacked up reading "Shoemaking Course", and because there was no venue for the class and people were flying in from all over the country to take it, I was able to offer space in the PNCA sculpture studio in exchange for taking the class for free, (although I did pay over \$1000 for a set of tools). The shoes that I made are not perfect. People ask all the time if I wear them—I could wear them—but I wouldn't sell them to someone to wear, because I think of them as sculpture, and I believe in this craft of shoemaking so much that I feel that I'd have to make 20 or 40 pairs of shoes before I was really able to sell a pair of shoes to somebody.



Calling the Ravens and the Raven are Coming In, 2009

SMP: *It seems to me that in this exhibition and your past work as well—and I'm thinking of the glitter works here—that you've intentionally played with concepts relating to luster and artifice, drawing attention to a painting as a painting or a poem as a poem in a very post-Brechtian way. Why this interest in artifice?*

AK: When I work, I try to make myself laugh. When I first made the masks, I had an *a-ha* moment: no one has made this before and it is so dumb! It was so dumb, and that's why it was so good. When I make the masks I'm laughing. Each one is unique and each one of the frames is also unique, (there's no edition), and there is some process to them, but in some sense, anyone could go to a hobby shop, pickup some black glitter and doll's eyes, and create something that looks very close to one of my paintings. In a way I'm daring them to—the black glitter is sort of a dare, as is the aluminum foil. (I dare someone to make the shoes!)

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SMP: My immediate referent with the glitter and dolls eyes is not necessarily this hobby shop kitsch, (although that's there), but instead, my first thought is of the counterculture—the Cockettes—and glittery gestures of resistance.

AK: There's a reason that all the glitter paintings are small—they're resisting the idea of the masterpiece, resisting master narrative, resisting hyper-masculine painters. When I went to the Museum School, I was taught by third-generation abstract expressionists who told me that I was too smart to be an artist and I would be a better artist if I thought less. I really struggled in art school to figure out how to be an artist—*how to resist and persist*—which is what my whole life has been about. And really, my work may come from thinking too much, but it also comes from looking at Jasper Johns, and I guess it all comes back to figuring out what art is for me.



PALLETTE, 2012

AK: One of my first big breaks was *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum, (2001), an exhibition that featured the first generation of black artists after Carrie Mae Weems, Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson, and many others that our generation really respects. There was a point though, when we had to consider: we love that conversation, but does it benefit us to be a part of that conversation or to try and move this conversation in different directions? I am continuously addressing this issue relative to my work: *Freestyle* and the post-black ideas about blackness, which really matter to me as someone from a really racist part of the country. The other piece here is my gay identity, which is maybe what you were getting at with the Cockettes reference and all the 60s glitter. I did spend 15-years in San Francisco, and a show that really changed my life was curated by Nayland Blake called *Situation* at New Langton Arts in 1991. The exhibition was a survey of queer artists. I walked in not knowing anyone in San Francisco at the time, and I thought to myself: I want to work here. That happened, and that led to everything else.

SMP: I'm curious: what is the Black Monochrome Machine?

AK: *Black Monochrome Machine* is an idea I came up with as a way of producing work. I've also created: Arnold J. Kemp, Principal of *Invisible Inc.* and *Black Arts Index*. These are entities that I was producing work out of—not as if I'm not the author—but as if I wasn't by myself. *Black Arts Index* was

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an idea that began in college; it was an actual index of references to blackness, from race to the occult and black magic. Another project under *Black Arts Index* and *Invisible Inc.* was an idea I had for a book about slavery. In 1993, I was walking with David Hammons and we walked by the work of an artist from his generation and he said to me: *Why is she making work about slavery? Everyone knows that we were slaves.* Art is not to tell us about what we already know, but there definitely is a market and a curatorial push that supports artists who deal with struggles of Africans derived people in this country. In my youthful naiveté I wanted to write this book to free those artists, but i could never write that book.



Arnold J. Kemp's recent exhibition, *WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT*, was on view at PDX CONTEMPORARY ART January 22 – March 2. Currently, Kemp is Chair of the MFA in Visual Studies Department at Pacific Northwest College of Art, (PNCA). In 2012, Kemp was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and his work has been collected by a number of institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Berkeley Art Museum. 1993-2003, Kemp was Associate Curator of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

Images courtesy of the artist PDX CONTEMPORARY ART unless otherwise specified.

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS



Arnold J. Kemp, *LET HIS BODY BECOME A LIVING LETTER*, 2013, handmade leather shoes, seashells, welded steel, 7 1/2 x 20 x 20".

PORTLAND

Arnold J. Kemp

PDX CONTEMPORARY ART

925 NW Flanders Street

January 22–March 2, 2013

Portland, Oregon–based artist Arnold J. Kemp's newest body of sculptures, photographs, and works on paper weave a poignant story of belonging and loss. The title of the exhibition, "WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT," is taken from a 1980s soul number by Robert Winters and Fall. It connects Kemp's poetics of desire and vulnerability to larger social and political concerns, while illuminating the coming-of-age story (perhaps also a coming-out story) that lingers, sweetly, within the work.

At the center of Kemp's project are four sculptures containing meticulously crafted wearable objects: a group of handmade belts with cast brass buckles bearing the word SHY, and two exquisite pairs of men's shoes—one formal, one casual. Kemp made the shoes himself. The work *LET HIS BODY BECOME A LIVING LETTER*, 2013, features lustrous black oxfords sitting alongside a pair of exotic seashells. Both objects possess aesthetic beauty far in excess of their practical function to provide shelter and mobility for two different species whose bodies are absent. Quietly, Kemp's alliterative nature morte draws our attention to the relationship between nature and culture, and nature and nurture. The belt pieces elicit similar musings: What does it mean to wear one's shyness on one's waist, so to speak?

Like an ocean crashing softly in a shell, Kemp's work whispers its politics. The artist's portrayal of black male subjectivity is playful, tender, and artisanal. Once during the run of the show, Kemp, who is a poet as well as an author, will perform a play composed of found and original material, giving human voice to the work's symbolic chorus.

— Stephanie Synder