

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

MARTOS GALLERY

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.

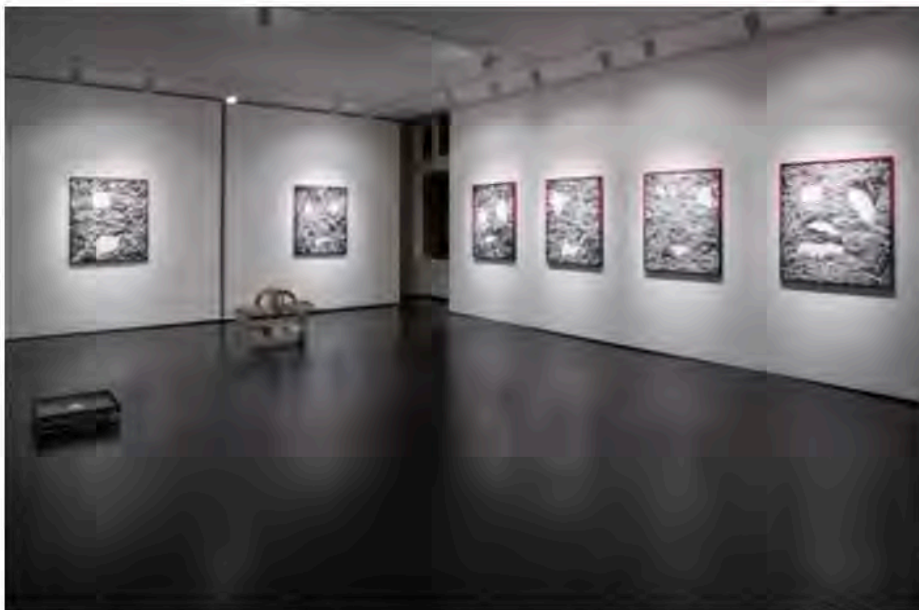


photo: Matthew Miller

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?*

MARTOS GALLERY

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.



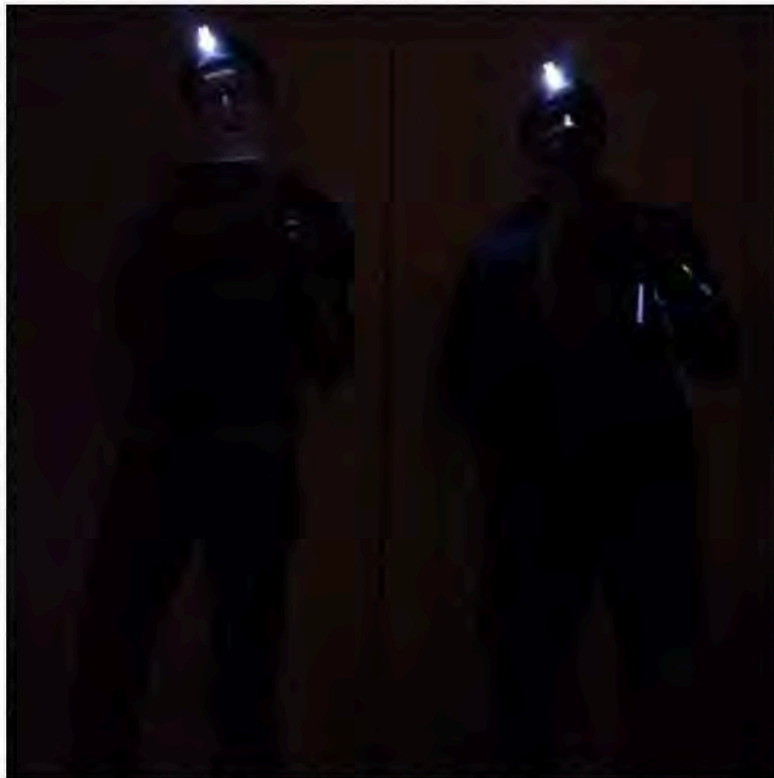
WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT installation, PDX CONTEMPORARY, 2013

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

MARTOS GALLERY

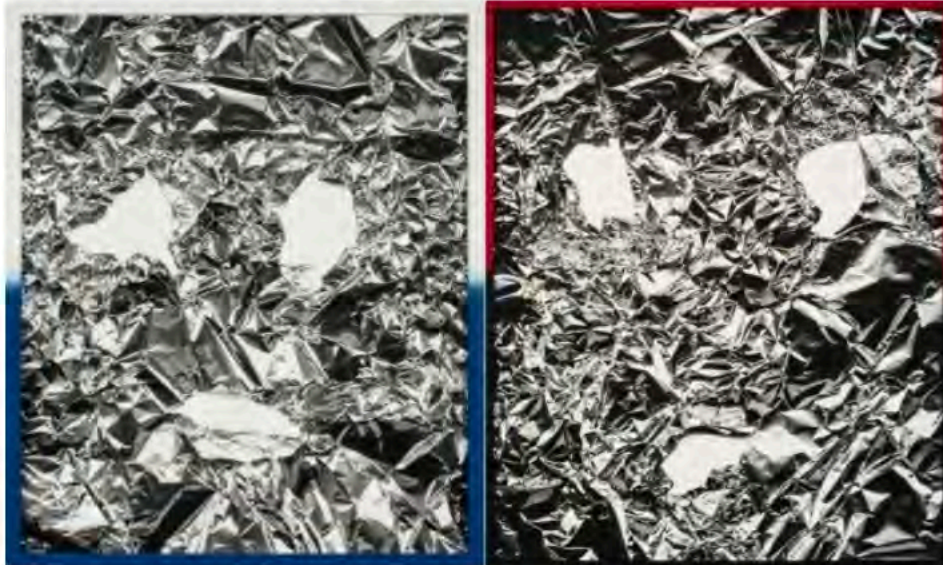
if you were walking down the street and hearing fragments of various conversations, or eavesdropping on hearing two lovers talking.



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.

MARTOS GALLERY



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.

MARTOS GALLERY



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.



WHEN WILL MY LOVE BE RIGHT, 2013

MARTOS GALLERY

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!)

MARTOS GALLERY

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

MARTOS GALLERY

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.