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

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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.