

On Site

Exhibitions, installations, etc

Ulysses Jenkins ***Without Your Interpretation***

ICA, Philadelphia, US

Televisions used to be heavy, with physical depth and heft. Unlike contemporary flat screens, these old CRT monitors had an intense spatial quality, the solidity and stolidity of an immovable force. In *Without Your Interpretation*, the first retrospective exhibition of American multimedia artist Ulysses Jenkins, one first encounters these behemoths as sites and targets of ambivalent violence.

Across this body of work, the television is variously an object of ire, power and beauty. In the first gallery are six photographs documenting *Just Another Rendering Of The Same Old Problem* (1979), an MFA thesis performance in which the artist, wearing only nipple pasties and silver boxer shorts, aims a toy gun at a tan dildo whose tip has been painted black. A small adjacent television is caught in the crossfire.

In the second gallery, the landmark video *Mass Of Images* (1978) shows the artist holding a sledgehammer aloft above a stack of TVs, but crucially not striking them. This looming threat is interspersed with stills of racist caricatures from moving image history. On the opposite wall hangs *Two Zone Transfer Alter* (1979), a totemic sculpture combining a photograph of the artist and his collaborators having their shoes shined, a grass skirt, feathers, a vinyl record and three masks of American presidents in blackface. A snarling Richard Nixon bursts through the frame of a TV, tins of shoe polish affixed to the channel controls.

These three objects foreground Jenkins's abiding concerns: the problem of media influence on public understanding of race, sexuality and political structures as well as the ancient and ineluctable quality of these problems. As an artist who has operated at the cutting edge of technology for 50 years,

early to adopt video cameras, video phones, TV broadcasts and nascent forms of live streamed performance, Jenkins has maintained an optimism about artistic incursions into televisual space. What takes place on screen bursts into the world without care. Yet he returns the gesture, charging back into the constructed space to represent, reimagine and repair the damage. And let's not forget the military origin of the avant garde.

Jenkins has spent a career on the front lines, as a central node in American contemporary art: studying with legends ranging from Nam June Paik and Charles White to Chris Burden and Eleanor Antin; collaborating with contemporary masters like David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger; teaching the next generation at universities in Southern California for some 40 years. As with so many African-American artists, and indeed many of his collaborators, it is a travesty that a

major retrospective is occurring so late in Jenkins's career.

But the untimely quality of this exhibition dovetails with one of Jenkins's unifying themes: the doggerel. His is not an art of smooth or straight-ahead rhythm. It is rough, textured, recurrent, looping back into histories both ancient and modern. Through his musical project *Otherversions*, Jenkins has engaged the sonic modes of cosmic jazz, funk, new age and Fourth World music as well as their eclectic philosophies. In his video collaboration *Self Divination* (1989) with Buddhist monk and sand painter Matthew Thomas, he follows the thread of that ancient and transient discipline. The grain begets the RGB phosphor which begets the pixel. The weightless speck is made visible when brought into a whole, a history, an unending pattern of call and response between artist and world, between now and then, between now and forever. Lucas Matheson



Ulysses Jenkins, *Two Zone Transfer Alter* (1979)

Constance Mensch