

Great Balls of Fire: Arthur Jafa at Gavin Brown's Enterprise

Set to Kanye West's languorously sublime hip hop gospel track, "Ultralight Beam," the visuals in Arthur Jafa's seven-minute film alternate between eruptions of joy and violence.



Louis Bury January 28, 2017



Installation view of Arthur Jafa's "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016) (all images courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome. All photos by Thomas Müller)

Arthur Jafa's supernova of a short film, "[Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death](#)," recently on view at Gavin Brown's Enterprise in Harlem, montages together found footage of African-American civic, political, and cultural life into a blistering visual manifesto on the ecstasies and agonies of blackness. The twin messages of the film's title may seem conflicting, but the ultimate

message, enacted in the film's form, is that these seemingly opposite terms are actually two sides of the same coin in African-American life.

Set to Kanye West's languorously sublime hip hop gospel track, "Ultralight Beam," the visuals in Jafa's seven-minute film alternate between eruptions of joy and violence. In one scene, police officers scramble to detain several bikini-clad young black women at a pool party; in the next, a black professional basketball player gracefully accelerates for a dunk. Riot police unleash fire hoses on civil rights protesters, boxers jab and weave, cops assault civilians, buildings burn in flame, musicians strut and pose across their stages, Hurricane Katrina victims console each other arm-in-arm through the flood, solar flares boil over on the sun's surface, partygoers breakdance and twerk. No scene lasts much longer than five seconds; most contain movements that, like Jafa's own editorial jump-cuts, bound and surge with balletic force.



Installation view of Arthur Jafa's "Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death" (2016)

Because much of the film's action synchronizes with the music in West's song (though there are occasional pauses for intra-diagetic music and dialogue), "Love Is the Message" recalls MTV music videos and Youtube mash-ups. As with these two genres, Jafa's film contains rapid-fire visual stimuli and emphasizes sonic pleasure. However, roughly half of the film's visuals confront systemic injustice and oppression, especially through images of police brutality; the film's seesawing violences and joys are aestheticized not as a means to dull the traumas of African-American life but to exacerbate and defy them.



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Black American joy, the film suggests, exists in the forms it does both in spite and because of black American trauma. The message can never be one or the other but, always, both at once: joy and trauma, love and death, positivity and negativity. "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death" is a stereoscope that allows us to see these twin poles — black brilliance and black oppression — overlaid against one another and combined into a single image. The end result, an amalgam of our species' best and worst behaviors, is a terrifyingly beautiful conflagration.

Arthur Jafa's [Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death](#) ends at Gavin Brown's Enterprise (429 West 127th Street, Harlem, Manhattan) today.