HYPERALLERGIC

Clifford Owens's Scatological Whispers

Louis Bury September 26, 2015

Clifford Owens, "Untitled" (2015), C-print, 30 x 30 inches (all images courtesy the artist and INVISIBLE-EXPORTS)

In the past five or six years, Clifford Owens's provocative performance work has begun to garner notable, sometimes polarizing, attention. Known for his charisma and his derring-do, Owens uses his body — and, often, the bodies of his audiences — as the primary material for risqué explorations of race, sexuality, identity, etiquette, and art history. Detractors consider his shock tactics mere sensationalism, as in a notorious 2011 performance at MoMA PS1, scripted for him by Kara Walker, that called for him to French kiss a random audience member and forcibly demand sex. Proponents acknowledge that Owens traffics in discomfort and vulnerability but consider such tactics part of a larger, studied program: the Walker piece, for example, comprised but one performance among twenty-five others in his landmark *Anthology* project, which, *in toto*,

constituted a brilliant and varied engagement with the lineage of African-American performance art.

Clifford Owens, “Drawings with Joan Jonas” (2005), graphite and charcoal on paper, 30 x 22 inches (each)

At **Invisible-Exports**, Owens’s eponymous exhibit reaches back to his prior repertoire of performance gestures as a way of subtly moving his practice forward. As part of his 2005 *Studio Visits* series, Owens collaborated with Joan Jonas to utilize his body as the means for making graphite and charcoal performance drawings. As context, six of those drawings, scraggly skeins of gray line, are on display at Invisible-Exports. For this new work, Owens revisited the practice of performance drawing during a month-long residency at the gallery. With the gallery stripped bare, he staged a series of performances for small audiences in which he put Vaseline on his own body parts and then, in a gesture similar to that of Kazuo Shiraga’s foot-paintings and Carolee Schneemann’s “Up to and Including Her Limits,” expressively used those slicked-up surfaces to affix coffee grounds onto watercolor paper.

The resultant works, fourteen of which are on display, look like chocolatey Rorschach inkblots. When viewing these untitled coffee drawings from a distance, you can glimpse in their dark, monochrome blotches things such as scratch marks, jellyfish, animal footprints, a splattered paintball, and a festival of balloons. But — fittingly, for an artist of unsettling intimacies — it is up close, where you can better discern texture and detail, that the drawings reveal an understated thoughtfulness indicative of Owens’s development as an artist in the decade since *Studio Visits*, which ought to complicate any assessment of shock’s role in his work.

Clifford Owens, “Untitled” (2015), coffee and vaseline on watercolor paper, 30 x 21 inches

The two drawings of Rothko-esque paper-wide rectangles, for example, appear relatively indistinguishable from one another until you get near enough to notice that, in one, narrow internal lines of white aerate the rectangle’s middle, while, in the other, the coffee grounds quietly thin out in density near the outer edges, as in a Robert Irwin dot painting. In another drawing — cauldron-shaped with what resemble little flecks of fire at the top — there are ridged impastos of coffee that, because of their dark color, can be perceived only from close proximity.

The decision to use coffee grounds and Vaseline to compose the drawings turns out to be a masterstroke on both a pictorial and, especially, a conceptual level. Even when viewed from up close, the grounds don’t look distinctly and unmistakably like coffee. Their earthy grains also plausibly resemble dirt and feces, the latter particularly in the works made from more aggressive gestures, such as the two splatter-bomb drawings and the one that looks like a series of marks made from scraping clean the sole of a shoe. The use of Vaseline as an adhesive is less noticeable — only the occasional outline of a faint, liquid stain — but no less unusual or compelling in its medicinal and sexual connotations. Compared to Owens’s earlier graphite and charcoal performance drawings, these newer works, thanks in part to their materials, have greater visual richness, depth, and warmth.

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More, even, than in their visual effects, the coffee and the Vaseline are ultimately most powerful in their conceptual evocations. The deep brown color of the coffee grounds evokes the skin tone of certain African-American complexions, a significant connection for an artist whose performances often put his own naked body on bold display. Indeed, the exhibit’s title, “Clifford Owens,” reinforces this connection, as if to say: *It is Owens himself who is being put forth in these drawings*. It isn’t, of course, the embodied Owens of live performance who is being put forth, but the contoured grounds do serve as pictorial traces of his various body parts. In the two drawings that resemble jellyfish, for example, we can clearly see that Owens’s forearms were used to create the fishes’ “legs.” And the two splatter works, I was told, were produced by his spitting coffee grounds onto the paper in, presumably, a single, forceful burst for each.

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The compositional backstory to each individual drawing isn’t provided by the artist or the gallery and the drawings are probably better off for it. The two splatter burst drawings are so powerfully visceral that learning the specifics of how they were made, even if intriguing, can feel like a bit of a letdown. Better to leave a bit of mystery to them. The Vaseline functions extremely well in this regard because it is so unnoticeable that you find yourself thinking little about it. Like every good lubricant, you forget that it’s there, even if it is the very thing facilitating, smoothly, the experience.

It wouldn’t be a Clifford Owens show if it didn’t elicit at least a few discomfiting scatological chortles. And, indeed, the three accompanying works in video and photography contain various forms of his characteristically stark bodily address, including a video, “Instructions #1 (Aaron Maier)” (2015), that contains a flailing naked man with an Abu Ghraib-style black hood over his head, as well as a dramatic overhead photograph of Owens lying naked in a grassy field, his eyes apprehensive and his thighs pushed together tight to tuck his penis out of sight. But perhaps the most striking feature of the show, given its author, is the relative absence of Owens’s own body and the several subtle ways he has found to hint at its prior presences. Even the apprehensive naked photograph of himself, while well within the affective repertoire of his live performances, feels of a piece with the rest of the show in its reluctance to self-expose entirely.

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Love them or hate them, Owens’s provocative self-exposures, at once calculated and spontaneous, will likely continue happening in one form or another. But, here, in these clever coffee drawings, he’s found a way to be a little less in your face about the exposures without, as in the Jonas collaboration, defanging the art of its carnal force. The scat quotient has been subdued in just the right measure; the tone is still loud, but a loud whisper. Whether this small-scale development helps move Owens’s larger performance practice further beyond the realm of shock for shock’s sake remains to be seen. But, at a time when the status of black bodies is as contested as ever in public discourse and civic life, we would do well to continue to watch what Owens does with his own body, and why.

Clifford Owens *continues at Invisible-Exports (89 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through October 4.*
