

Ordinary Violence

Sable
Elyse
Smith

Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence

Haggerty Museum of Art
August 17, 2018–January 27, 2019

Director's Foreword

In a 2017 essay addressing Sable Elyse Smith's work, Cora Fisher writes, "We can't escape the sense—at least for the moments we pass with the artist's father in this 10 by 10-foot room—that the cellblock eclipses the white cube. And that, in the end, Smith's passionate personal testimony overwhelms the cool aesthetic she designed to contain it."

While this aesthetic experience might be powerful anywhere, it resonates particularly strongly in Milwaukee. In 2007 the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee released a study documenting that 62 percent of men aged thirty to thirty-four from Milwaukee's 53206 zip code—where the population was 97 percent African American—had been incarcerated at some point. This neighborhood, in fact, had a higher percentage of incarcerated black men than any other neighborhood in America. In 2014 Alex Leichenger published an article in *ThinkProgress* entitled "How One Milwaukee Zip Code Explains America's Mass Incarceration Problem." And in 2016 director Keith McQuirter released *MILWAUKEE 53206*, a documentary film chronicling the impact of mass incarceration through the stories of three families living in that Milwaukee neighborhood.

This, among other reasons, is why the Haggerty Museum of Art is so honored to present *Ordinary Violence*. Through her powerful multimedia work, Sable Elyse Smith engages us in a highly charged aesthetic experience—at once personal and shared—that frames the impact of a deeply unjust social structure on every community, every family, every person. I thank Sable Elyse Smith for her willingness to partner with the museum on this extraordinary exhibition. I'm also grateful to Emilia Layden, Curator of Collections and Exhibitions at the Haggerty Museum of Art, for initiating and realizing that partnership. Finally, I thank the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for generously supporting this exhibition and the symposium accompanying it.

Susan Longhenry
Director and Chief Curator
Haggerty Museum of Art

Cora Fisher, "An Artist's Bond with Her Imprisoned Father," *Hyperallergic*, November 11, 2017. <https://hyperallergic.com/410947/sable-elyse-smith-ordinary-violence-queens-museum-2017/>.

Everyday Exposures in Sable Elyse Smith's *Ordinary Violence*

Sampada Aranke

On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives. To think about this simultaneous presence and absence is to begin to acknowledge the part played by ideology in shaping the way we interact with our social surroundings.

—Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

The opening scene in Sable Elyse Smith's *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* features a ubiquitous fluorescent lighting track seated in a standard office drop ceiling. This track emanates unsightly cold white rays and a strange green glow against the clip-in modular ceiling from which it hangs. The green glow is always there, but because fluorescent lights have a wavelength that is too short to be visible, our bare eyes can't see it. This glow, especially when filmed in extremely low light, is usually only visible by camera. This seems to be the best way to describe Smith's works: she captures and arranges light sources that can only be understood through modes of exposure. She makes the imperceptible perceptible in order to make visible the ordinary nature of state violence.

Smith's works bring into light those very conditions of violence that, once seen, can't be unseen; once felt, remain taut in our muscle memory. Black life in the United States is in many ways about being exposed: to everyday microaggressions, unsolicited looks, socioeconomic degradation, processes of criminalization and punishment, state violence, premature death.¹ While many of these exposures are spectacular in form, others are less nameable but indeed noticeable and felt. Smith refuses to reproduce spectacular scenes of antiblack violence, however, and instead aesthetically figures what historian Saidiya Hartman has theorized as quotidian "scenes of subjection."² Documenting the ways

that enslavement continued after Emancipation, Hartman's work lucidly elaborates "those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned."³ In step with Hartman's insistence that, to understand Black life, a historian's job is to make visible those crevices, shadows, and barely perceptible moments of subjection, Smith labors to theorize and aestheticize the imperceptibility of violence. Subjection in Smith's works appears, not as an overly hardened or clichéd variation of representations of crime, criminals, or prisons, but rather as a kind of sustained, droning undercurrent that is shaped by a gun's ubiquity, the racialized feelings of a phrase, or the enclosed gridlines of city streets. Smith exposes. She activates a set of disclosures that reveals how everyday life is itself the setting upon which one's proximity to state violence is mediated. By exposing those seemingly quotidian, banal, or unnoticeable details, she asks us to reshape our perceptual, affective, and embodied modes of attention.

This might be why Smith turns to the poetic as an approach to exposure. *Untitled* (2017), a work that tarries between sculptural genres, is a wall-mounted acrylic with bold, all-caps, and run-on text shaped to form a justified square. The text begins as if in the middle of a thought or conversation with an "I" who we come to realize is describing the protocols for prison visitation, including the strict rules on the limited objects the visitor is allowed to bring inside. The striking lack of punctuation and the spatial positioning between letters and words compress the text's speed and force. The reader is asked to parse words that appear at different levels of legibility. Some bold black letters pop out against the stark white gallery walls with clarity while others are too spaced out or form a shadow, troubling the overall legibility between thoughts and words. By the time we get to the final gut punch—SO HOW DO YOU CHOOSE WHICH PICTURES?—we are already overwhelmed by the premise of the entire bureaucratic hustle, let alone the emotional weight of choosing which family memories, portraits, or candids to share. It all feels like too many and too much—too many letters on the wall, too many

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Untitled, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.

thoughts racing, too much stuff to carry, too much vulnerability in one moment. And we haven't even entered the gallery.

Untitled offers a scene in which subjection is a commonplace combination of bureaucratic protocols and rapid-pace internal dialogue. Smith visually lays out the ways that language, in its very performativity, can induce the anxieties caused by the state's procedural mandates: there is no time for thinking about how emotionally draining it might be to see a loved one during visitation hours because, instead, the visitor has to be exposed to a version of the invasive processes of surveillance implemented by the prison industrial complex. These quotidian encounters are disorienting precisely because they bring into focus the way in which mundane acts of violence make themselves palpable.

For the Haggerty Museum of Art's iteration of *Ordinary Violence*, Smith's emphasis on the palpability of everyday violence is felt in *swear it closed, closes it* (2018), an architectural arch

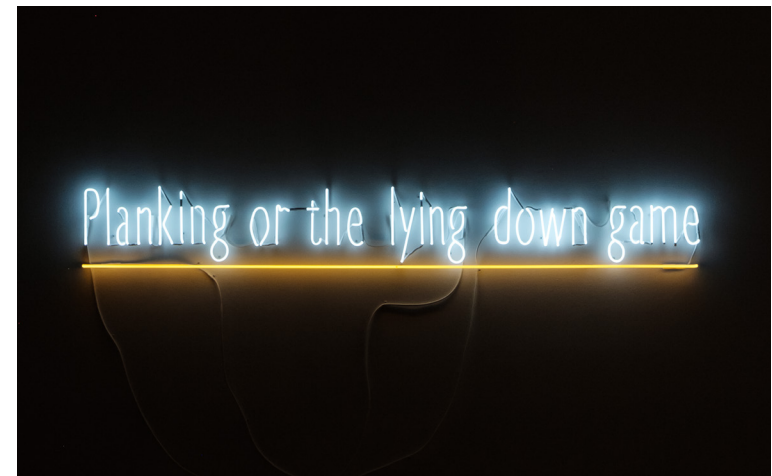
that resembles an enlarged metal detector, an arch constructed from the cold, uncomfortable, powder-coated aluminum tables and chairs commonly found in U.S. prisons. As the cold metal stools with their familiar harshness are lifted from the ground, the portal embodies the devastatingly familiar styles and shapes of surveillance technologies. The arch acts as an institutional structure, and the viewer must move through it in order to get to the next place. The disorientation of walking through an arch made of objects typically bolted to the ground makes those oftentimes imperceptible linkages between surveillance and incarceration palpable. These cold aluminum furnishings are often housed in visitation rooms that are hyper-surveilled by prison guards who monitor the brief moments of intimacy and connection between prisoners and their loved ones. By materializing this arch with the very furniture of prisons, Smith reconceptualizes surveillance as an everyday mechanism whose ubiquity structures even the most everyday activities.

Smith works across media, within a conceptualist tradition that allows the theoretical, affective, and social questions of a given project to lead to the materials that best execute its aims. Many of her works address the visual life of language, considering the shapes, sounds, and sensations of grammatical form. This approach layers a multitude of indirect art-historical citations and dialogues in her work—from Bruce Nauman’s neon signs to Glenn Ligon’s piercing text-based works that reference and outshine Nauman; from Chantal Akerman’s *News from Home* (1977) to Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance* (1988). At the same time, Smith opens up a horizon of iterative possibility in her choice of content. Her practice exists within a constellation of contemporary artistic practices that expansively address the role of mediated images, popular culture, and conceptualism in everyday Black life. For example, *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors* (2017) and Arthur Jafa’s *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016) were made concurrently, and while both works are in formal, social, and

referential dialogue, each was made without knowledge of the other. The striking coincidence marks a Black conceptualist lineage that feels prescient and endlessly dynamic.

Not only does Smith’s work take on the modes of violence in everyday Black life, it engages permutations of queer desire and pleasure, the formal textures of photography and video, the sensorial awareness that light and sound can make possible. These nuances in Smith’s particularly Black conceptualist approach enliven the possibilities of that tradition. In *Untitled: Father Daughter Dance* (2013–17), video loops act like conjunctive phrases; colorful marks approximate grammatical ellipses in her *Coloring Book Series* (2018); and in *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors*, kaleidoscopic cuts produce blurry visions of an incomplete experience. This, I believe, is how Smith’s visual and writing practice are coeval and cohesive; both are studio practices attentive to discursive force, and Smith activates this force in order to bring into light the everyday shades of Black bodily harm.

Take *Landscape II* (2017), a neon work that spells out “Planking or the lying down game” in cold white light that is upheld and emphasized with a yellow underline. The text



Landscape II, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.

references the peculiar internet craze where people are challenged to plank (lie face down with arms taut against the body and legs outstretched) in the strangest places they can find. Smith marks this viral phenomenon as senseless by fragmenting the text so that it approximates a body strewn across the golden glow of the underline, putting it in relation to other viral scenes of routinized antiblack violence. In this gesture, she offers a body whose glow palpably shines light on the discrepancy between pleasure and pain when we think of everyday phenomena in relation to Black life. We are asked to think of other forms of strewn, stiff bodies on the ground. We are asked to think about the relationship between the ethereality of play and the gravity of coercion; the conditions that differentiate the places where somebody finds fun and somebody else finds force.

This kind of interplay leads one back to Smith's light capture in *Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors*. In this eight-minute video work, we are given nonnarrative footage sutured together to form a fragmented, hallucinatory sensation. Storefronts zoom by as captured in grainy footage out of the passenger seat of a car, two unseen men undergo tactical training that involves shooting ice with handguns, and kaleidoscopic images of cops swirl in red and blue hues. The entire work migrates between a Black conceptualist *dérive* and an exposé on the mundane ways that violence meets the affective realms of everyday Black life.

Perhaps the most stunning moment in this video piece is a ninety-second clip of Smith's father shaving his head in a nondescript room. The camera is awkwardly positioned at an angle, and we only see his face and head from the nose up. Slowly and assuredly, his hand guides a hair clipper, which buzzes and glides carefully over his head. Meanwhile, Al Green swoons "something that can make you do wrong" as the legendary opening chords of the track "Love and Happiness" swell and then are swallowed before the musical drop. We aren't given the satisfaction of the next lines, the moments of that song that



Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.

rejoice around a particular relationship to love—that twisted, selfless/selfish force that makes you do wrong *and* makes you do right. Instead, Smith repeats those same opening chords and once again brings us to the brink of the musical drop; she gives us a sonic nonarrival that displaces and dissatisfies.

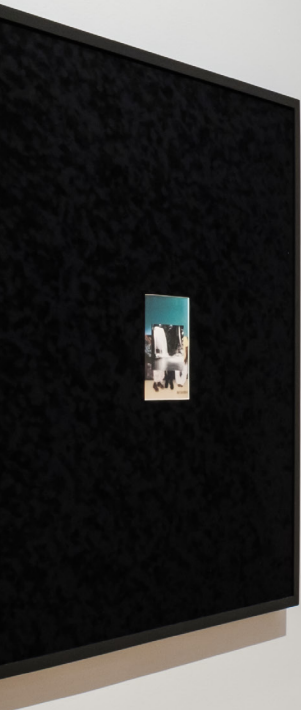
In this shot, the light beams onto the right side of Smith's father's forehead as he shaves, capturing a shine from somewhere off camera that is paired with the soft texture of his skin and the everyday labor of personal care. The meditative repetition of his movements unfolds in a way that allows us a quiet moment of reprieve, an exhale, a pause in an otherwise steady-paced series of sequences. A moment for himself exposes the tenderness of pain, an affective register that offers up a nonspectacular scene of subjection, a poetic grammar of the everyday, a palpable illumination of the seemingly imperceptible. As she does throughout her exhibition, Smith takes this activity and presents it as an opportunity to reconsider the ordinary exposures of Black life—a grammar that gives us fragments, scenes that display but do not clarify the image, and carceral landscapes otherwise difficult to see. ●

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¹ A brief and incomplete bibliography includes: Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Joy James, ed., *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Wahneema Lubiano, "Like Being Mugged by a Metaphor: Multiculturalism and State Narratives," in *Mapping Multiculturalism*, ed. Avery F. Gordon and Christopher Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 64-75; Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Julia Sudbury, "Celling Black Bodies: Black Women in the Global Prison Industrial Complex," *Feminist Review* 80, no. 1 (2005), 162-79; Julia Sudbury, "Unpacking the Crisis: Women of Color, Globalization, and the Prison-Industrial Complex," in *Interrupted Life: Experiences of Incarcerated Women in the United States*, ed. Rickie Solinger, Paula C. Johnson, Martha L. Raimon, Tina Reynolds, and Ruby C. Tapia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 11-23.

² Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Ibid., 4.



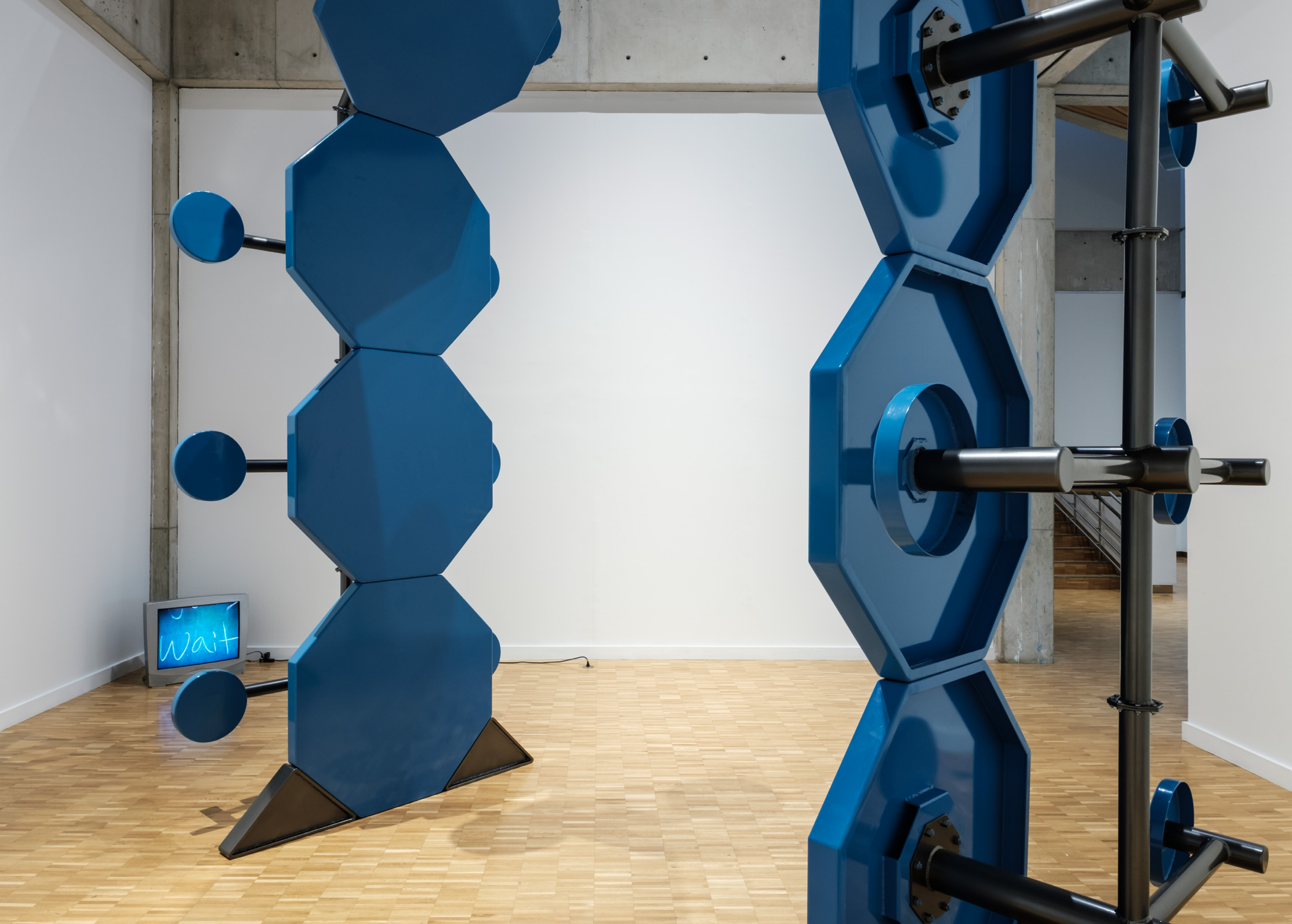
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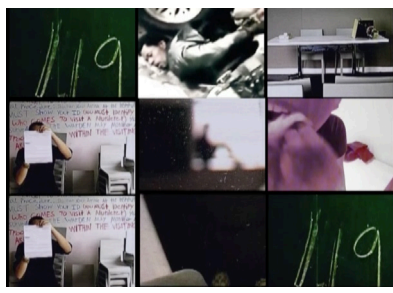


Planking or the lying down game

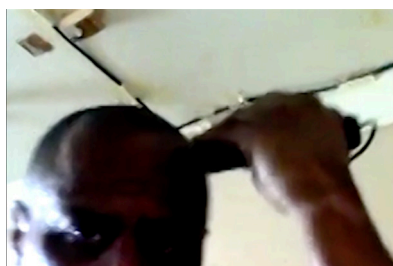








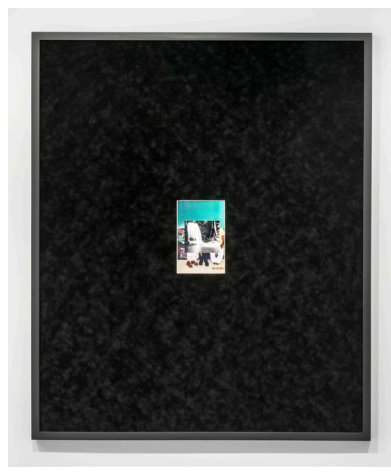
Untitled: Father Daughter Dance, 2013–17. Single-channel video, no sound, 10:13 min. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



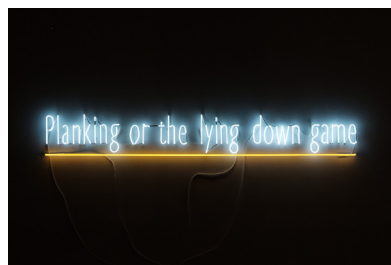
Men Who Swallow Themselves in Mirrors, 2017. Single-channel video projection, sound, 8:32 min. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



Untitled, 2017. Acrylic, 40 x 36 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



7666 Nights—Falling, 2017. Digital c-print with custom suede mat, 48 x 40 in. Private collection.



Landscape II, 2017. Neon, 10 x 108 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



swear it closed, closes it, 2018. Powder-coated aluminum, 172 x 144 x 68 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



Coloring Book 7, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper, 60 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



Coloring Book 7, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper, 60 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



Coloring Book 12, 2018. Screen printing ink and oil stick on paper, 60 x 50 in. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



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