

5-9-2015

House of Newsome: Remixing Masculinity

Betty Lou Starnes

University of Connecticut - Storrs, betty.starnes@uconn.edu

Recommended Citation

Starnes, Betty Lou, "House of Newsome: Remixing Masculinity" (2015). *Master's Theses*. 798.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/gs_theses/798

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Connecticut Graduate School at OpenCommons@UConn. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenCommons@UConn. For more information, please contact opencommons@uconn.edu.

House of Newsome: Remixing Masculinity

Betty Lou Starnes

B.A., Southeastern Louisiana University, 2012

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

At the

University of Connecticut

2015

Copyright by
Betty Lou Starnes

© 2015

APPROVAL PAGE

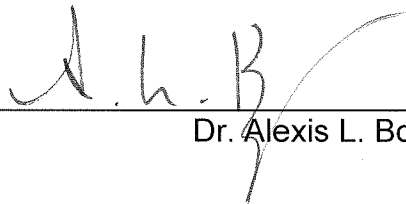
Masters of Arts Thesis

House of Newsome: Remixing Masculinity

Presented by

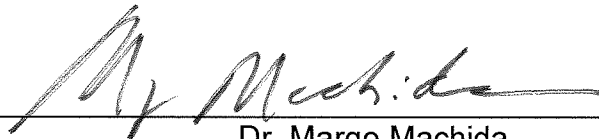
Betty Lou Starnes, B.A.

Major
Advisor



Dr. Alexis L. Boylan

Associate
Advisor
≡:



Dr. Margo Machida

Associate
Advisor



Dr. Anne D'Alleva

University of Connecticut

2015

To Memaw, with all my love.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee and the faculty of the Art and Art History Department for their guidance and encouragement over the past two years. Specifically I would like to thank Dr. Anne D'Alleva for appointing me to the SFA Research and Creative Activity Committee. Without her support, and the guidance of the committee's chair Professor Alain Frogley, bringing Rashaad Newsome to campus for a multi-day symposium would not have been possible. Dr. Margo Machida, from the first phone call about my acceptance into the program to the insightful words she shared with me at the final thesis defense, her advice and reassurance are irreplaceable. And finally to Dr. Alexis Boylan, who has continuously pushed my research, questioned every phrase, and challenged every argument. I am a better scholar because of Dr. Boylan's diligence, and I will always cherish her mentorship.

I would also like to thank the 2015 MFA and MA cohort. Your friendship and understanding throughout this challenging experience meant the world, and I will treasure our time together. Specifically I would like to thank Hannah Kennedy and Emily Mazzola for the late night edits, last minute prep sessions, and inspiring conversations that moved all of our research forward. The bond that we have cannot be replaced.

This entire thesis would not have been possible without the many conversations I have had with my friend and mentor Eddie Lanieri. Thank you for the call about "this amazing artist exhibiting at the New Orleans Museum of Art you just have to check out" that turned into fifty pages on an artist I have the utmost respect for. To Rashaad Newsome, you generously let me into your studio, beautifully answered each of my questions, and were gracious enough to come all the way to rural Connecticut for a two-day symposium. A simple thank you will never begin to cover the amount of gratitude and respect I have for your craft, talent, and kindness.

And finally, graduate school would never have been possible without the love and support of my family. To Ashton, thank you for answering my calls, being the distraction I needed each holiday, and the sister I have always wanted. To my Mother, you are my best friend and my biggest cheerleader. Thank you for believing in my ability to finish this thesis on the days when I could not see the light at the end of the tunnel. To Memaw, your practicality and perseverance have become the part of me that I lean on for support when I'm feeling challenged, and I will never be able to repay you for that gift. And last, but certainly not least, to the beautiful artist, my partner Georgia, who shared this experience with me. Going through graduate school together could have been an extremely stressful experience, but instead you've made it magical.

Table of Contents

Title	i
Approval Page	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One—“The Golden Age” of Masculinity	8
Black Male: Whose Masculinity?	
Golden’s Post-Black Aesthetic	
After Post-Black	
Chapter Two—“Watch the Throne” Discussions of Masculinity and Power	22
Heraldry and Symbols of Power	
<i>Sun King</i> , Biggie Smalls	
<i>Herald</i> , Newsome Claims the Throne	
Chapter Three—“Got to be Real” Choreographing Queer	43
Vogue Herstory	
Queer Performativity in <i>ICON</i> and <i>KNOT</i>	
The House Down, Parading Gender and Performing Authority	
Bibliography	61
Figures	67
Appendix I	122
Transcription of <i>KNOT</i>	
Appendix II	124
Transcription of interview between Betty Lou Starnes and Rashaad Newsome	

– Introduction –

At the opening of Rashaad Newsome's most recent exhibition, *L.egends S.tatements S.tars* at Marlborough Gallery (2014)(fig 1), bejeweled dome ceilings swirl and flip to a bombastic melody reverberating throughout the gallery. Candy colored collages leap out from their frames, as flurries of hair, powder pink lips, and glittering pendants float within them, mimicking the surreal spaces of the dance hall. *L.egends S.tatements S.tars*, laden with sparkling richness and enameling history, promises a sensory experience of transcendence. The room, the coats of arms, the impromptu performance on the night of the opening, all harmonize within Newsome's mix, rejoicing in the desire, power, and pageantry of European nobility.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that while Newsome engages with and celebrates normative hip-hop masculinity and traditional European symbols of power, specifically heraldry, he ultimately manipulates these languages through video and collage to break with binary constructions of male/female and straight/queer. Newsome's video and collage works pull together symbols of European iconography and the commodities of hip-hop culture, yet in this mixing process, he works to disassociate the viewer and ultimately renders these symbols as unreadable. Through these iconographic disassociations, Newsome breaks with the constraints of gender and sexuality, and moves beyond binary boundaries into a space of utopian fluid fantasy.

Newsome was born in Boutte, Louisiana in 1979 and spent most of his adolescence in New Orleans. He developed an early interest in the arts when he and his brother performed with his father, Blanch Newsome's bebop group called Jules

Carlos and the Bop-A-Deers in the city.¹ During high school, Newsome attended the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, while working as a studio assistant to professor and local sculptor, Madeline Faust.² These opportunities were unique to the Louisiana public school system and allowed Newsome to spend half of his school day fully immersed in studio art classes while developing his understanding of the practical processes needed to support an artistic career.³ After graduating high school, Newsome attended Tulane University where he earned his degree in art history, concentrating in Baroque and African art. In an interview with the artist, Newsome explains how his degree in art history still informs his creative process:

Because of the my education at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, and working with, as an assistant, to my talented arts teacher, I felt like I already understood how to make and was pretty comfortable with the process of making, so it was more about just gaining knowledge. That's why there has always been this sense of looking back but forward at the same time, because it comes from that training. For me, I am very comfortable making, so it is more about gaining the knowledge about what I am making so that it is conceptually sound.⁴

After graduating with a Bachelor's from Tulane in 2001, Newsome moved to New York City to pursue his artistic career. During Newsome's first years in New York City he

¹ Trent Morse, "Hip-Hop Heraldry," *ARTnews* 110, no. 9 (October 1, 2011): 66–68.

² The Louisiana Public School system summarizes the Talented Arts program: "Students who demonstrate high academic and intellectual aptitude or possess extraordinary talent in the visual or performing arts may be eligible for differentiated instruction. To achieve their academic potential, gifted students may be offered opportunities to master more rigorous content at an accelerated pace of instruction than their peers. Highly talented students may need additional educational support to pursue their art.", "Gifted and Talented Students," *Louisiana Department of Education*, n.d., <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/gifted-and-talented-students>.

³ Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

⁴ Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

became involved in the Ballroom scene. His knowledge of this community began as a teenager, but Newsome only became involved in the Ballroom scene after working part-time as a DJ, while pursuing his career as an artist. In 2002, through the recommendation of a friend, Newsome enrolled at Film Video Arts NYC to study post-production. In 2005 he continued his studies, taking classes in music production and programming at Harvestworks NYC.⁵ Manipulating these production programs would later become a large part of his practice. That same year, Newsome leapt at the opportunity to make artwork in Paris by squatting in a raw space with a friend.⁶ While in Paris and visiting to other squatting venues throughout Europe, Newsome began developing several projects inspired by the laws of heraldic tradition that would fuel his career over the next decade.⁷ Newsome gained a deep level of insight into the symbolic display of power and wealth throughout the Western canon by researching the heraldry of noble and national crests during his time in Paris and London. To Newsome their

⁵ “Artist Bio: Rashaad Newsome (b. 1979, New Orleans,...,” *Art Breaks*, <http://artbreaks.tumblr.com/post/19973117278/artist-bio-rashaad-newsome-b-1979-new-orleans>.

⁶ Newsome States in an interview with Laura Blereau, “At that time I thought New York was the center of the art world, and I wanted to be a part of that. After being in New York for a while, I found myself in Europe. When I went to Europe initially, I was working on “Shade Compositions,” and during my time there I conducted my own ethnographic research on black vernacular. I gained so much information on those trips, not only for the work but also on a more practical and financial level. New York is a really difficult place to live and maintain a studio practice. I was already aware of squatting from my early punk-rock days, so part of the experience in Europe was just finding a space to continue to create comfortably, yet nomadically. I did not want to leave New York and I feel like I’m such a New Yorker. But I knew that in order to continue to make the work I wanted, I needed to find some kind of loophole, and connecting with the squatting network was it.”, Laura Blereau, “Freestyle,” *Guernica*, March 17, 2014, <https://www.guernicamag.com/art/freestyle/>.

⁷ Melena Ryzik, “Blending Hip-Hop And Heraldry,” *The New York Times*, October 23, 2011, sec. Section AR; Column 0; Arts and Leisure Desk; ART.

pageantry and stylized extravagance mimicked the commodity-driven culture of hip-hop, as well as the competitive subculture of the Ballroom community. After returning to New York City, Newsome began exploring these relationships by appropriating imagery from sources such as *Essence* and *XXL* magazines and juxtaposing them alongside images from Sotheby's auction catalogs to create his own heraldic language.

Newsome began receiving critical and curatorial attention following his inclusion in the 2010 Whitney Biennial.⁸ After participating in several residencies both nationally and internationally, Newsome's work has been featured in the Venice Biennale, Armory New York, and Art Basel's Select Art Fair in Miami. He has had solo exhibitions at: Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York City; The Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art, Hartford; The New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans; The Drawing Center, New York City; York University, Toronto; Savannah College of Art and Design, Savannah; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Newsome has participated in group exhibitions at: MoMA PS1, New York City; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City; The Bearden Project at The Studio Museum Harlem, New York City; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco; Galerie Henrik Springmann, Berlin; Brooklyn Museum,

⁸ The 2010 Whitney Biennial was curated by Francesco Bonami and Gary Carrion-Murayari, "This year marks the seventy-fifth edition of the Whitney's signature exhibition. While Biennials are always affected by the cultural, political, and social moment, this exhibition "simply titled *2010*" embodies a cross section of contemporary art production rather than a specific theme... Balancing different media ranging from painting and sculpture to video, photography, performance, and installation, *2010* also serves as a two-way telescope through which the Whitney's past and future can be observed.", "2010 Whitney Biennial," *Whitney Museum of American Art*, <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2010Biennial>.

Brooklyn.⁹ Newsome's artwork is also part of several permanent collections, including the Brooklyn Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, as well as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He is currently represented by Marlborough Gallery.

Newsome's practice is informed by his contemporaries: Frank Benson, Sanford Biggers, Alex Donis, Awol Erizku, Rashid Johnson, Titus Kaphar, Kalup Linzy, Kori Newkirk, Jacolby Satterwhite, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, and Hennessy Youngman. Critical dialogues in the past years surrounding Newsome's exhibitions and performances, establish two flawed narratives: the first views his video and collage works as separate ventures, and the second oversimplifies Newsome's work as 'hip-hop heraldry.'¹⁰ Throughout this thesis, I complicate these interpretations to suggest that Newsome's appropriative process emphasizes how performance ties power to masculinity. By refracting art history through the lens of hip-hop, Newsome highlights alternative epistemologies of representation engaged in by American urban youth culture, where queer productively antagonizes hip-hop's masculine vigor and braggadocio. Furthermore, Newsome repurposes the same imagery and techniques from his collage works into the surreal environments of his video works, and utilizes his

⁹ "Marlborough Gallery — Rashaad Newsome Biography," *Marlborough Gallery*, <http://www.marlboroughgallery.com/galleries/new-york/artists/rashaad-newsome/biography>.

¹⁰ "Rashaad Newsome," *Artsy*, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/rashaad-newsome>.
Roger Catlin, "Rashaad Newsome's Bling at Atheneum," *Hartford Courant*, February 3, 2011, sec. CALENDAR, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/849738142>.
Tanekeya Word, "Interview: Rashaad Newsome," *Saint Heron*, October 24, 2013, <http://saintheron.com/art/saint-heron-x-rashaad-newsome/>.

Rozalia Jovanovic, "Rashaad Newsome's Hip Hop Heraldry," *Flavorwire*, May 6, 2011, <http://flavorwire.com/176992/rashaad-newsomes-hip-hop-heraldry>.

Voguers' bodies throughout his collaged compositions.¹¹ Newsome's appropriations move throughout collage and video, and understanding the porousness of this process is paramount to comprehend his artwork as a whole. The Ballroom community mutates into collage and video just as heraldry informs the way in which Newsome choreographs his dancer's bodies. The fluidity between Newsome's mediums that has been ignored in previous analysis should be entered into future conversations regarding these works.

Chapter One reviews artists and curators whose work merged dialogues between black masculinity with perceptions of queer identity. Examining the ways black masculinity was shaped during the 1990s and early oughts by Glenn Ligon, Jean Michel Basquiat, Kehinde Wiley, and many others, this chapter establishes the historical context for considering Newsome and his early works, which are informed by their pursuits. In Chapter Two, I move to unpack Newsome's understanding of heraldry, the Western canon, and hip-hop's cultural expansion, highlighting the way he constructs queer masculine spaces through ceremony in *Sun King* (2011)(fig 11) and *Herald* (2011)(fig 15-21). Further, I examine each work through the language of Ballroom culture in order to rectify its absence in previous analyses. Finally, Chapter Three explores Newsome's overt presentations of Ballroom culture and Vogue Femme in his most recent video works, *ICON* (2014)(fig 42-55) and *KNOT* (2014)(fig 26-35). Newsome choreographs Vogue performances against modified baroque ceilings; pulling from his own collages, the dancers blend gender and exemplify empowerment. While Newsome's early portraits celebrate the culture of masculinity that surrounds hip-hop by

¹¹ Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

depicting artists like Biggie Smalls and himself in ceremonial and stately portraits, these portrayals emphasize the performativity that ties power to masculinity. As Newsome's career progresses, the collage and video works appropriate so proficiently from their source that the surreal amalgamations surrender their original association with gender, class, and sexuality to Newsome's own meaning.

– Chapter 1 – “The Golden Age” of Masculinity

The body of the black male has been a battleground over agency, liberation, and submission. This long-standing tension has equipped African American artists with numerous historical stereotypes that reinforced the public and private oppression of the black male.¹² Throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, narratives of commodified black bodies have been rehashed, exposed, and destabilized by many African American artists utilizing a multitude of mediums and models. Newsome’s meticulous large-scale collage and video works, as a part of this history, pay homage to the longstanding practice of appropriation as a method of racial recovery. In a recent interview with Antwaun Sargent for *Complex* magazine Newsome explained, “In my work, I’m not interested in pulling from that old image library of blackness. The Sambo or the Mammy archetypes are all relevant depictions of black folk, but they aren’t depictions that were created by us. I’m interested in working from a new image library that was created by us for us... It’s all about power or perceived power.”¹³ Newsome expresses a desire to reconstruct historical image appropriations that creates images of authority, strength, and power not reliant on past racist propaganda. This pursuit for a

¹² Robin Bernstein’s text discusses how late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, minstrel shows, and advertising created the public perception that African American were impervious to pain and happy in their disenfranchisement. This is particularly reflected in children’s stories, where African American child would often be portrayed as lazy, naughty, and unfeeling, known to cut off each other’s appendages for entertainment., Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

¹³ Antwaun Sargent, “Interview: Artist Rashaad Newsome Discusses His ‘Knot’ Film in the Brooklyn Museum’s ‘Killer Heels’ Group Exhibition,” *Complex*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.complex.com/style/2014/09/rashaad-newsome-interview>.

new racial vocabulary, created “by and for” the African American community, requires unpacking the interplay between racial representation and the predominantly white American art market. This chapter locates the space where blackness was reflected and shaped by masculinity and sexuality over past decades.

Black Male: Whose Masculinity?

The discussion of race is obviously deeply vexed, varied, and complicated. I begin considering the twentieth century landscape of visual culture, race, and the American art market’s history with African American art, with renowned curator Thelma Golden’s series of canonical exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Studio Museum Harlem. Golden’s exhibitions intervened at a crucial point for African American artists in the 1990s, exploring how race was framed through the lenses of masculinity and social construction. After curating the Whitney Biennial in 1993, one of the most racially, gendered, and sexually inclusive biennials, Golden proposed a show that would investigate the intersections of race and gender representation of African American men, from the watershed year of 1968 to the present moment.¹⁴ *Black Male*, on view at the Whitney in 1994, challenged the ways black male bodies were confined, controlled and liberated by contemporary African American artists.¹⁵ By navigating through the cultural markers of Civil Rights, Black Power, Blaxploitation, and the emergence of hip-hop, the artworks of *Black Male* mapped public and private images of black masculinity

¹⁴ Thelma Golden et. al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden, First Edition (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994), 7.

¹⁵ Golden et. al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, 14.

that led to the overrepresentation, oversimplification, and sometimes incomprehension of the subject.¹⁶ The exhibition featured a multicultural scope of female and male artists, both established and emerging, that outlined how black masculinity had been publicly and privately employed.

Jean Michel Basquiat's inclusion in Golden's *Black Male* reframed the already iconic artist of the eighties. Cultural theorist Richard Schur explains, "this was a time when African American artists still found it almost impossible to enter the art world in spite of the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968."¹⁷ At the time of his death in 1988, Basquiat's work was repetitively pigeonholed as primitive "Afro-Caribbean Art Brut," and critics ignored the complex layering of word play and imagery that spoke to the contradictions of masculinity, authority, and originality permeating urban life (*King Charles the First*, 1982)(fig 2).¹⁸ His bombastic approach towards the canvas covered its surface with crowns, coded symbolism, commodified copyrights, and word play. Before bell hooks, Robert Farris Thompson, and several other theorists in the early 1990s recovered the oeuvre of Basquiat, his gestural painting and use of symbols were narrowly understood as an extension of Abstract Expressionism, produced by white male artists such as Jackson Pollock, Jean Dubuffet, and Willem De Kooning.¹⁹

¹⁶ Thelma Golden defines blaxploitation as, "Films that deride ultra-violent, ultra-romanticization of the worst aspects of ghetto culture, popular with black audiences for what was seen (through the violence and misogyny) as a pro-black stance.", Golden et. al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, 21.

¹⁷ Richard Schur, "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 643.

¹⁸ bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat," *Art in America* 81, no. 6 (June 1993): 75.

¹⁹ bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenua: Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 70.

Journalist Greg Tate exposes the incomprehension of Basquiat as an artist, “Blackness in Basquiat’s work is not the blackness of the cultural nationalists, though it has their intensity and anger—albeit as an emotional gateway through which to translate other emotional passions—but as a blackness that demands hermeneutic intervention, ardor, and respect.”²⁰ Basquiat’s legacy capstones the plight of the African American artist, by simultaneously performing the fantasies of arrogance and blackness desired by the cultural elite and not performing them enough.²¹ Golden, however, positioned Basquiat’s artistic career within the larger framework of black masculinity, highlighting his effort to deconstruct apprehensions toward black masculinity—the ultimate political and sexual threat to white masculinity—critiquing the racialized implications of commodity.

In the shadow of Basquiat’s mercurial career, the artists featured in *Black Male* use racist imagery as a vehicle to combat racial representations, reimagining the complexity behind these symbols. Glenn Ligon, artist and personal friend of Golden, for example, manipulated the trope of black bestial sexuality by repurposing Robert Mapplethorpe’s *Black Book* (1986) in Ligon’s *Notes on the Margins of the “Black Book”* (1991-93)(fig 3). hooks explains, in the *Black Male* catalog essay “Feminism Inside: Towards a Black Body Politic,” that although Mapplethorpe’s original photo series of nude African American men in

²⁰ Richard Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992), 58.

²¹ “For the white art world to recognize Basquiat, he had to sacrifice those parts of himself they would not be interested in or fascinated by. Black but assimilated, Basquiat claimed the space of the exotic as though it were a new frontier, waiting only to be colonized. He made of that cultural space within whiteness (the land of the exotic) a location where he would be re-membered in history even as he simultaneously created art that unsparingly interrogates such mutilation and self-distortion.”, hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat,” 74.

and of itself does disrupt the way the viewer sees the photographed body, it falls victim to subjectivity, she argues, and consequentially perpetuates racial and/or sexual domination of the white photographer upon his African American subjects.²² Ligon pluralizes the simplified stereotype of black male sexuality by annotating Mapplethorpe's photographs with notes on sexuality and homoeroticism outsourced from a multiplicity of perspectives and fields. As art historian Richard Meyer notes, "Ligon directs our attention towards the way *Black Book* functions as a symbolic battleground on which conflicting claims – about race, desire, art, and freedom—are registered."²³ Ligon's perspective is reflective of a trend within Golden's *Black Male* to explore masculinity that includes queer desires and aesthetics.

Indeed, Ligon, along with Lyle Ashton Harris' photographed self-portraits(*Constructs #10*, 1989)(fig 4), represent a larger emergence of queer visibility in African American art and culture, during the transition into the nineties. Both Ligon and Harris contribute to the intersectional dialogues of race and sexuality by exploring permutations of queer African American masculinity. Ligon and Harris use domestic and erotic images to reconcile their personal histories, exposing invisibility of homosexuality and embracing the performance of maleness by African American men. This transition is indicative of a larger trend, which Newsome owes allegiance to, highlighting the space between both identities.

²² Golden et. al., *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, 136-138.

²³ Glenn Ligon et al., *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming* (Philadelphia: ICA Philadelphia, 1998), 20.

Black Male's purpose, to first locate and then challenge the ways in which black masculinity had been discussed towards the end of the millennium, set the stage for further conversation; specifically, inspiring a controversial debate over which stereotypes were appropriate to manipulate and which were still offensive, despite their dual purpose. Art Historian Bridget R. Cooks unpacks the tensions created by *Black Male* as the show traveled from New York to Los Angeles. Cooks summarizes the fear community activists had regarding the perpetuated racist stereotypes of black masculinity, which ultimately led to three alternative exhibitions titled *African American Representations of Masculinity (AARM)*.²⁴ Cooks elaborates:

Because there is no way to say everything there is to be said, the burden of representation pressured the Whitney, Golden, and the exhibition's Black artists to create a project that could not meet the many expectations of Black representation. For both the Whitney and Golden, the rarity of contemporary exhibitions by Black artists organized by mainstream institutions increased the burden. *Black Male* was doomed to bear the impossible pressure of representing the individual experiences of its audience, or at least to represent every artistic interpretation of Black masculinity produced since 1968.²⁵

In an effort to broaden the scope of masculinity being displayed, community activist Cecil Ferguson curated three exhibitions running concurrently with Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition of *Black Male*, reflecting upon and confronting some of the

²⁴ Bridget Cooks, "New York to L.A. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1994-1995," in *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 126.

²⁵ Cooks, "New York to L.A. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1994-1995," 125.

jarring positions taken by artists in Golden's show.²⁶

Ferguson felt certain works and artists in *Black Male* were disrespectful, inspiring his oppositional programming. Ferguson found Robert Colescott's *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from American History* (ca.1975)(fig 5) particularly problematic. Art historian Ellen Wiley Todd summarizes how thematic patterns found in Colescott's paintings are, "known for their counter-factual historical narratives that produce ironic critiques of American racism."²⁷ Colescott's satirical substitutions of black caricatures, intended to highlight the absence of a legitimate African American voice in the grand narrative of American history, assumes a certain level of wit and sensitivity towards racial animosity. Subsequently, critics of *Black Male* argued that the exhibition offered opportunity for misinterpretation, broadcasting racially damaging and degrading messages.²⁸ Ferguson challenged *Black Male*, wanting to express the African American community's desire to establish its own identity through positivity and reverence.²⁹ Critics responded well to *AARM*, noting the sentiment of Ferguson's efforts as a much-needed perspective for larger discussions of black masculinity, while noting the narrow scope of masculinity being revealed in the artworks chosen by Ferguson. Cook cites Susan Kandel's review of *AARM*, "the overwhelmingly 'positive' images of Black men as heads of heterosexual families, creative musicians,

²⁶ Cooks, "New York to L.A. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1994-1995," 126.

²⁷ Ellen Wiley Todd, "Two Georges and Us: Multiple Perspectives on the Image," *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 13.

²⁸ Wyatt Closs, "A Personal View: Seeing and Being Seen," *The Independent Weekly*, February 22, 1995.

²⁹ Cecil Ferguson, *African American Representations of Masculinity*, ed. Mirian Ferguson, Exhibition booklet, 1995, 2.

and teachers 'risks oversimplifying the tangled realities the African American male must confront'... Fergerson's perception focused directly, and not ironically on the narratives of African American male survival and struggle."³⁰ In short, what both *AARM* and *Black Male* provided for the 1990s was a centralized platform to discuss racial representation more vigorously and dynamically than it had been in the past.

Golden's Post-Black Aesthetic

In 2000 Golden, recently appointed as chief curator of the Studio Museum Harlem, devised a series of exhibitions with associate curator Christine Y. Kim, *Freestyle* (2001), *Frequency* (2006), *Flow* (2008), *Fore* (2013), that displayed the work of emerging African American artists of the twenty-first century. At the time of *Freestyle*'s opening, Golden categorized this group of artists under the term "post-black." In her 2010 TED Talk, Golden speaks about how these exhibitions:

Set out to discover and define the young, black artists working in this moment who I feel strongly will continue to work over the next many years. This series of exhibitions was made specifically to try and question the idea of what it would mean now, at this point in history, to see art as a catalyst...as we define and redefine culture, black culture specifically in my case, but culture generally. I named this group of artists around an idea, which I put out there called post-black, really meant to define them as artists who came and start their work now, looking back at history but start in this moment, historically.³¹

³⁰ Cooks, "New York to L.A. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1994-1995," 130.

³¹ Thelma Golden, *How Art Gives Shape to Cultural Change*, TED Talk, 2009, http://www.ted.com/talks/thelma_golden_how_art_gives_shape_to_cultural_change?language=en.

Golden's decisively freeing, although controversial, abandon of race as a primary catalyst, sparked an increased interest over the past decade in recovering historical narratives that interpret power through remembrance and the rearrangement of symbolically racialized images. The exhibition series marked a transition, offering more options to artists who had been racialized from within and outside their communities. Golden defines post-black as an artistic movement that, "became a stance in this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in African-American art, and ultimately became part of the perpetual redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture."³² For Golden and her supporters, post-black served as a method to insert the African American narrative inside the Western canon of art while providing the artistic freedom to speak beyond their racial identity. Yet, the post-black movement, in its efforts to liberate, was dangerously close to abandoning race during a time when racial injustice and hatred was and is still strongly intertwined into our sociopolitical environment.

Since Golden's initial use of the term post-black, art historians and critics have grappled with the connotations of the terminology and its development over the past decade. Critic Cathy Bird surmised that the movement is not a conceptual framework as much as it is an improvisation of identity by a generation of artists born into a post-Civil Rights society.³³ Chastised for its complexity, messiness, and fluidity, post-black's initial panic centered on clarifying that the movement was not synonymous with post race, but

³² Jeffrey Kastner, Thelma Golden, and Michael Paul Britto, *Frequency: Studio Museum in Harlem* (New York, N.Y.: Studio Museum Harlem, 2005).

³³ Cathy Bird, "Is There a 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating the Legacy of the Freestyle Show," *Art Papers* 26, no. 6 (2002): 39.

rather a way for artists to destroy a 'correct' or singular way of enacting blackness. Campbell asserts, "What they are claiming is a blank canvas with no predetermined expectations, no complaints, no prohibition, only the full range of whatever unpredictable inventions the unfettered imagination can produce."³⁴ The freedom to sample at will and inventively manipulate how blackness is inhabited cannot be undone by the coming of age of the hip-hop generation.

Although Golden embraced the fluidity of her rising artists, from the very beginning she adamantly denied any intention to connect high art to the hyper-capitalism of hip-hop culture.³⁵ Unfortunately for Golden, the connection seems inescapable. Nearly every article that explores the influence of *Freestyle* mentions the ways in which it embraced artists who embraced and worked directly from the commodity driven economy of hip-hop rebellion.³⁶ Hip-Hop's influence has grown exponentially, nurturing artistic production more than a decade after the beginning of the post-black series.

After Post-Black

Newsome is positioned at the confluence of post-black fluidity and hip-hop's assimilation

³⁴ Mary Schmidt Campbell, "African American Art in a Post-Black Era," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3 (November 1, 2007): 329.

³⁵ Greg Tate, "The Golden Age," *Village Voice*, May 15, 2001, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-05-15/news/the-golden-age/>.

³⁶ As Gregg Tate posits after an interview where golden vehemently denies a corollary between the two fields, "The mark of hip-hop is everywhere in *Freestyle*—formally, semiotically, referentially, from the name on. From Sanford Biggers's fat lace-blanketed Buddhas to Julie Mehretu's topographic riots to Camille Norment's sonic headrush stripper asylum, this show unloads an obsession with reforming, reframing, and unbranding nomadic urban space.", Tate, "The Golden Age."

into the art world, as part of a generation of African American artists who grew up during a time when hip-hop culture evolved into a multibillion-dollar industry. Art historian and visual cultural theorist Derek Conrad Murray explains hip-hop's economic investment in art after the new millennium, "Hip-hop is a visually progressive art form in and of itself that continually fights for the control of its image. Hip-hop is all about visual agency. It fully understands the power of the visual image and its impact on ideological perceptions."³⁷ Like post-black artists, hip-hop moguls assert their achieved status and visibility by appropriating historical symbols of aristocracy and elitism. As Thompson highlights, "Hip-hop is not only an extension of a much longer history of refashioning status and prestige through shiny jewels, tactile surfaces, and sumptuous goods, but a mode of critical and comical reflection on the visual effect of commodity."³⁸ By the oughts, this methodology has been expanded by artists, using the commodity of hip-hop to continue conversations about class, gender, and racial appropriation.

In the early oughts, artist Kehinde Wiley became one of the first to bind a "high art" visual vocabulary with a hip-hop ideology and aesthetic. Wiley earned a MFA in painting from Yale in 2001, and has exhibited in New York since 2000, recently receiving the Medal of Arts from the State Department of the United States in 2015.³⁹ Wiley is devoted to representing black masculinity, empowering his sitters by

³⁷ Derek Conrad Murray, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle," *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (July 1, 2004): 7.

³⁸ Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 482.

³⁹ Dan Duray, "Xu Bing, Mark Bradford, Sam Gilliam, Maya Lin, Julie Mehretu, Pedro Reyes, and Kehinde Wiley Win U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts," *ARTnews*, January 15, 2015.

reinterpreting their position in history through large-scale, hyper-realistic, and luminous historical portraits, such as *Sleep* (2008)(fig 6). His widely recognizable chromatic style, elegantly posed sitters, and investment in recovery narratives have drawn the attention of art historians and curators. As journalist Chad Batkita explains,

Every Wiley painting is a two-punch affair — the masculine figures contrast sharply with the ornately patterned, Skittles-bright backdrops unfurling behind them. Based on design sources as varied as Victorian wallpaper and Renaissance tapestries, the backgrounds can look as if thousands of curling petals had somehow been blown into geometric formations across the canvas. For the moment depicted in the painting, the men are protected and invincible, inhabiting an Arcadian realm far removed from the grit of [urban] childhood.⁴⁰

Wiley designs tendril-like patterns that lift and envelop his sitters. Wiley's backgrounds are executed by a team of assistants at his studios, in China, Senegal, and New York, so that he is able to focus on painting the luminous skin of his portraits.⁴¹ Wiley's process of sourcing his models is equally arduous. Since 2000, Wiley has developed a street casting process: going out into various communities; approaching people based on a mix of the artist's desire and visual intrigue; and beginning conversations with those he encounters about being photographed in his studio.⁴² Once the model accepts, they will meet and peruse art history texts in search of a role in a work of art, chosen by both the sitter and Wiley, which they can emulate in their own clothing.⁴³ This process,

⁴⁰ Deborah Solomon, "Kehinde Wiley Puts a Classical Spin on His Contemporary Subjects," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/arts/design/kehinde-wiley-puts-a-classical-spin-on-his-contemporary-subjects.html>.

⁴¹ Jeff Dupre, *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*, Documentary, Short, Biography, (2014).

⁴² Dupre, *Kehinde Wiley*.

⁴³ Thompson, "The Sound of Light," 482.

according to Wiley, provides agency for the model to choose how their body is portrayed and represents urban African American culture in arenas it would normally have little access to.

It is undeniable that Wiley's paintings interrogate a similar framework of hip-hop as a 'neo-royalty' of American popular culture that Newsome also investigates. Murray argues, "The resplendent black male bodies in Wiley's paintings are branded iconic symbols with extreme marketing potential. If racial caricatures and stereotypes could dream, they would look like Wiley's fictive counter world—a sumptuous ghetto heaven where America's black villains find their beauty and humanity."⁴⁴ Yet, there is something troubling about Wiley's models, rendered as contemporary hip-hop dandies.⁴⁵ Wiley's work ultimately becomes formulaic, his models are tempered with the adopted poise of historical portraits and each background is plastered with stock-like decorative patterns.⁴⁶ The bodies in Wiley's portraits appear limited and awkward; trying to pull the language of portraiture forward, his sitters are defeated by the repetition of pose and surroundings. As part of the next generation of artists, Newsome builds from Wiley and Golden's efforts, orchestrating his own visual environment that appropriates from the canon and creates new ways to view masculinity through the lens of hip-hop, and further, Ballroom culture. For Newsome, hip-hop and the queer black body are the

⁴⁴ Derek Conrad Murray, "Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2007, no. 21 (September 21, 2007): 94.

⁴⁵ Matthew McLendon, *Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip Hop in Art* (Sarasota, Fla.; London: Scala Arts Publishers Inc., 2011), 64.

⁴⁶ Roberta Smith, "Review: 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic' at the Brooklyn Museum," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/arts/design/review-kehinde-wiley-a-new-republic-at-the-brooklyn-museum.html>.

driving force, while sampling from the Western canon and heraldic tradition are his secondary frameworks. Newsome elaborates:

We are seeing issues for the black community because popular hip-hop music isn't necessarily about affirming consciousness. It is about stories about strife that's works are predicated on narrow narratives about the black experience. Narrow in terms of where it says black people exist on the socioeconomic totem pole and narrow in the sense of how we define masculinity and femininity.⁴⁷

Newsome interrogates the visual performance of hip-hop culture's exclusive status and its connection to the stereotype of the hyper-masculine rapper. Exposing the performance of masculinity that is celebrated in hip-hop and Western canon, Newsome points towards their unseen agenda, which restrains a homosexual narrative.

⁴⁷ Antwaun Sargent, "Rashaad Newsome's Sixth Conductor," *Interview Magazine*, December 9, 2014, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/rashaad-newsomes-sixth-conductor>.

—Chapter 2—
“Watch the Throne” Discussions of Masculinity and Power

Historically, artists have illustrated the opulence of emperors, kings, and royal courts, flaunting the status and privilege of European nobility. Aesthetics of power and excess have been reframed and recycled since the Middle Ages, yet they remain images that mark importance and hierarchy, making arguments concerning which bodies are granted access to certain powers and luxuries. As we approach the contemporary moment, opulence unfolds through the lens of mass media. Music moguls and production managers manifest this same power in the iconography of celebrity. Newsome not only advocates for a canon that reinterprets how power and authority are represented, but also challenges the contemporary art market to see itself through the lens of visual culture. While Newsome engages with and celebrates mass media's authority, and traditional European symbols of power, ultimately employing these languages in *Sun King* (2011)(fig 11) and *Herald* (2011)(fig 15-21) to highlight the performance of masculinity within each portrait's construction.

Having learned the language and iconography of power early on as an art historian, Newsome pulls together symbols from the Western canon and hip-hop culture to disassociate the viewer's understanding of masculinity and authority. Through heraldic tradition, one of the most structured European forms for communicating heritage and position, Newsome relocates a historical language of power to a new geographic and temporal setting. Yet, the collaged image is not merely a historical quotation or simplified hybrid. Using *Sun King* and *Herald*, I argue that Newsome empowers and repositions the bodies of black men; blurring lines between the visual

arts and theatre; artist and Herald; performance and embodiment; authenticity and disguise. Deteriorating these binaries creates dialogues about masculinity that subvert the confining heteronormative values of hip-hop and the upper class. The pageantry of heraldry is Newsome's point of entry into exploring performed authority.

Heraldry and Symbols of Power

Understanding the complexities of western European heraldic traditions is essential in unpacking Newsome's appropriations of the symbolic powers of family, ruler, religion, and state. Newsome began assembling his first shields and contemporary crests, in accordance with the laws of heraldic tradition, after researching the history of heraldic crests and aristocracy during his time in Paris in 2005. After becoming familiar with the evolving styles of shields, crests, and coats of arms, Newsome branched further away from the traditional designs, creating his own contemporary interpretations. Yet, no matter how loosely interpreted, Newsome continues to return to images of historical authority. The need to understand how these symbols are traditionally created, as well as their function as markers of bodies and status, is inseparable from the artist's own interventions.

At its genesis, heraldry was a pragmatic tool used to visually identify those participating in public competitions of strength and agility during the late Middle Ages. Visual identification was crucial during the Medieval period due to wide spread illiteracy, enabling the members of noble houses to easily identify their comrades during wartime or politically charged festivities. By asserting claims of lordship and fidelity through the

language of signs, heraldry was enveloped into a pageant of political display that was systematic and yet artistically fluid.⁴⁸

The first records of heraldic seals appear throughout illuminated manuscripts, chronicles, and poems of the early twelfth century in France, England, and Germany.⁴⁹ These materials describe simplistic geometric shield designs, seen in artifacts like the Seal of Roger de Quincy, Earl of Winchester medallion (ca. 1235)(fig 7). The shields are decorated with chevron and checked designs, patterned uniformly across a flat plane. As the traditions of heraldry moved into the Renaissance, heraldic arms evolved from markers of individual status to hereditary emblems passed down through noble bloodlines. Crests expressed good breeding, lineage, and substantial wealth, promoting societal rank. Lineage lies at the heart of heraldry, adverting relationships between families, primarily through kinship and affinity. Heraldry provided an avenue to symbolically express ideals of chivalry and power through the visual language of *blazons* (shield designs). As heraldry gained prominence, the need for visual interpreters, fluent in the facets of armorial symbols, resulted in the sect of the Herald.

The establishment of the Herald is presumed to have developed as an immediate response, though only informally regulated at first, filling the demand for interpreters and record keepers for the new language of noble signs. It was the duty of the Herald to

⁴⁸ Peter R. Coss and Maurice Hugh Keen, *Heraldry, Pageantry, and Social Display in Medieval England* (Boydell Press, 2002), 9.

⁴⁹ Henry Bedingfeld, Peter Gwynn-Jones, and Earl Marshal, *Heraldry* (Seacaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books INC, 1993).12.

explain who was who; describe the meanings behind each noble's sigil during jousts or tournaments; and archive these descriptions through written records and rolls of arms.⁵⁰ The population of Heralds grew throughout all of Europe, but expansion was particularly great in France and England. As historians Peter Coss and Maurice Keen summarize, the development of the Herald demanded its own regulation and classification system: "The heraldic fraternity was divided early on into three grades: King of Arms, Heralds, and Pursuivants. King of Arms controlled a given province and Heralds acted under them, with Pursuivants as followers learning their profession."⁵¹ As the heraldic fraternity expanded, Heralds gained prestige and favor within the royal courts, and their duties shifted from record keepers of the heraldic history to royally sanctioned controllers and creators of arms, elevating the position's social rank.

When King Henry V of England created the William Burges Garter King of Arms, the heraldic brotherhoods gained social status as overseers of the Royal College of Arms in London (ca. 1670)(fig 8), which Newsome visited during his time in there. The Royal College of Arms policed and sanctioned coats of arms, repealing the noble's authority to assume arms freely without the permission of a Herald. Heraldic coats of arms became property that were strictly inherited as markers of privilege or acquired through royal sanction.⁵² By elevating the prestige of heraldic arms and routinely eliminating unsanctioned crests, Heralds brought international awareness to the

⁵⁰ Rolls of arms were another important source that maps the development of early heraldry over time and the beginning of its classification. Rolls of Arms are illustrated shields of arms that can depict the evolution of a particular set of arms or a variety of arms present at a particular event., Bedingfeld and Gwynn-Jones, *Heraldry*, 15.

⁵¹ Bedingfeld and Gwynn-Jones, *Heraldry*, 26.

⁵² Bedingfeld and Gwynn-Jones, *Heraldry*, 32-34.

emotional attachment citizens had to their coats of arms. Over the centuries, the code of heraldry was strictly enforced and continually recorded at the Royal College of Arms, enduring several fluxes in popularity.

The aesthetics of the Baroque shifted the emblematic use of royal propaganda, blanketing symbolic imagery beyond the crest and into every facet of noble and religious artistic production and resulting in the ultimate decline of heraldic brandishing by the sixteenth century.⁵³ Authoritative symbolism was embedded within dramatized paintings and architectural design to serve the body and power of the king. Historian Amy M.

Schmitter explains the importance of the bodies and power during the French Baroque,

Cycles of decoration portray either the virtues of the king, models of and for the king, and most importantly of all, the king himself in all his glory and power, embedded in allegorical narrations of accomplishment. And the task of portraying an embodied and absolute state power requires operations of representation beyond that allowed by the legible body.⁵⁴

The power of state, recognized through the body of the king, mimics the power found in symbolic allegiance, created by the heraldic sigil, to royal and noble lines. The Baroque movement imitated the sharply divided line put forth by the Royal College of Arms that dictated, through imagery, who is included and who is excluded. These functions of power are constantly reimagined throughout history as tools for political gain, religious advocacy and liberation.

⁵³ Carl-Alexander von Volborth, *The Art of Heraldry* (New York: Blandford Press, 1987), 77.

⁵⁴ Amy M. Schmitter, "Representation and the Body of Power in French Academic Painting," *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol 63 No 3 (July, 2002): 408-409.

Sun King Biggie Smalls

Returning to Newsome, overtime the power structures of cultural taste making have remained the domain of the elite, and although nobility has been replaced by celebrity, their cultural control remains paramount. Symbols of status, excavated from centuries passed, have reasserted themselves into contemporary narratives of hip-hop culture. A reimagining of royalty in the form of crunk cups, pimp canes, thrones, and self appointed titles of status have emerged within the arena of rap moguls, such as hip-hop artists Lil Jon, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and Kanye West (fig 9 & 10).⁵⁵ Art historian Derek Murray elaborates, “Hip-hop's decadence is asserted as a humorous representation of redistributed wealth and radical social resistance. Put more succinctly, hip-hop uses economic achievement and materialistic braggadocio as a form of resistance to white racism and its economic stronghold on the black community.”⁵⁶ Newsome makes the connection more directly, “Knights battle for territory just as MCs battle for rap supremacy.”⁵⁷ By positioning the rap battle as a contemporary joust, a fight amongst royalty for power, Newsome draws a parallel between these performances of

⁵⁵ Urban Dictionary defines crunk cup as, “A goblet or chalice that "pimps" carry around with them at social gatherings. Usually ridiculously decorated in a "sparkly" fashion.”

“Crunk Cup,” *Urban Dictionary*,
<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Crunk+Cup>.

⁵⁶ Murray, “Hip-Hop vs. High Art,” 10.

⁵⁷ Rashaad Newsome, Amani Olu, and Marlborough Chelsea (Gallery), *Rashaad Newsome: Herald*. (New York: Marlborough Chelsea, 2011).

unapologetically brash masculinity and control.⁵⁸ A visual battle takes place in both his video compositions and collaged constructions. Newsome uses color, decoration, commodity, and images of hip-hop icons to overload the frame. The imagery of the compositions is sourced from Sotheby's auction catalogs, *XXL*, and *Essence* magazines; each element is in competition with the other, vying for superiority.

Newsome's *Sun King* (2011)(fig 11) blends symbols of Baroque pageantry and hip-hop's gangsta rap culture of the 1990s. The collage reimagines gender in a portrait of rap icon, Biggie Smalls. Smalls' appropriation of classed symbols, like the crown worn in one of his final formal photographs (taken by Barron Claiborne before his death in 1997)(fig 12), was visionary in his connection of Baroque pageantry to hip-hop's investments in authenticity. The connection expands both of these styles' investment in maleness, highlighting their use of the same aesthetics of luxury and excess to unveil the performance behind gender tying the two together.

⁵⁸ Journalist Miles White defines street battling, "Street-level freestyle competitions called battle rapping is the arena where up and coming rappers face off in verbal duels that mimic the spectacle of hand-to-hand combat between competing opponents, where one risks humiliation in a culture where ubermasculinity is prized.", Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*, 1st Edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 68.

Newsome's portrait of Smalls is designed a geometric grid of bumblebees on top of a circular background of scanned black leather.⁵⁹ Centrally located upon black leather, Newsome's crest radiates from a gold encrusted sapphire. The body of the crest is balanced upon a red Ferrari and contains several strings of diamonds, encased in platinum and gold, weightlessly curling out from the center of the composition. Tattooed fists and fingers, which reference a Herald presenting coats of arms during a tournament (fig 13), are draped in weighted pendants that resemble shields engraved with the word 'money' and are intermixed within the radiating strands of jewelry. Symmetrically hovering on either side of the arrangement are two Armand de Brignac champagne bottles, a revered European brand in the hip-hop community, positioned so that the bubbling liquid could flow, fountain-like, away from the center of the crest when opened. Jutting from behind the sapphire sphere is a staff mounted with a *fleur de lis*, an homage to both the French monarchy and Newsome's hometown, New Orleans. Gold dollar signs are embellished in the frame's corners, and green and silver fists of money are molded into the top and bottom central portions of the frame. Newsome's antique frames are augmented by several styles of chains. Gold 'Dukie' rope chain loops the inner circular window, Cuban chain surrounds the blue field, and three rows of

⁵⁹ Since Newsome is drawn to Baroque imagery and heraldic shields this is likely a reference to the Barberini bees found throughout St. Peter's Cathedral and the Palazzo Barberini (Rome)(ca. 17th Century)(fig 14). According to Heraldic symbolism, bumblebees are, "a sign of industry, creativity, wealth, diligence and eloquence. Emperor Napoleon gave the **bee** considerable importance in the French armory by adopting it as his personal badge. They also appeared on the mantle and pavilion around the armorial bearings of the empire, as well as on his coronation mantle. The **bee** is undoubtedly the most popular insect found in heraldry, and even the **beehive** occurs often as a crest.", "Heraldry Symbols & What They Mean," *Hall Of Names*, n.d., <http://www.hallofnames.org.uk/heraldry-symbols-what-they-mean>.

Gucci chains trace the exterior of the frame, all of which are typically worn to communicate prestige and status in the hip-hop community.⁶⁰ The aesthetic extravagance of hip-hop continues into the candy-coated frames, custom painted by a luxury body shop in the Bronx featured on "Funk Flex Full Throttle," an MTV show about car culture, hosted by Funkmaster Flex.⁶¹ Newsome paints the frames in Lamborghini and Bugatti stock colors as a symbol of elitism and commodity in car culture.⁶² Since its early popularity in the 1970s, customizing cars to exhibit status has expanded into a multifaceted industry, one where trends are regionally diverse and consistently evolving. For the hip-hop community, color and detail on cars exhibit the creative state of mind needed to produce records that will influence the overarching art form of hip-hop's fashion and ingenuity.⁶³ This portrait is not just a portrait of wealth divinely ordained, but a wealth that begins and ends in creatively dominated commercial excess.

At the center of the sapphire is Claiborne's cutout portrait of Smalls (born Christopher Wallace, but also known as Notorious B.I.G.), wearing a crown precariously

⁶⁰ Gold chains are a continuous motif for Newsome in both video and collage. For Newsome and rappers at large chains have long stood as power symbols. Schoolly D, one of the originators of gangsta rap, explains in *SPIN*, "A lot of white people think that every rap guy with a gold chain is saying he's richer and better and more powerful. It's not something that was born and raised in America. It goes back to Africa. The gold chains are basically for warriors. Right now, the artists in the rap field are battling. We're the head warriors. We got to stand up and say we're winning battles, and this is how we're doing it." Since the eighties several type of chains have gained in popularity and the three Newsome utilizes are among the highest ranked., Schoolly D, "The Meaning of GOLD," *SPIN Media LLC*, October 1988, 52.

⁶¹ Ryzik, "Blending Hip-Hop And Heraldry."

⁶² Rashaad Newsome, mediated discussion Alain Frogley, University of Connecticut Storrs CT, February 20, 2015.

⁶³ Cey Adams and Bill Adler, *DEFinition: The Art and Design of Hip-Hop*, 1st edition (New York: Harper Design, 2008), 119-121.

tipped-to one side. Smalls is known as one of the most iconic rappers of 1990s hip-hop.

As Jack Hamilton advocates in *Slate* magazine,

Biggie Smalls didn't alter the hip-hop landscape so much as crater it, leaving behind an unfillable void and an unhealable wound. The Notorious B.I.G. is the greatest rapper who ever lived in the same way that Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player who ever lived: some people may argue but they are usually luddite classicists, incorrigible homers, or hipster contrarians.⁶⁴

Born in 1972 in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, New York he grew up surrounded by addicts and dealers in his neighborhood. At seventeen, Smalls was arrested for selling crack, spending several months in jail, and upon his release began gaining a reputation for his music. After having his mix-tape mentioned in a popular hip-hop publication *The Source*, Smalls was signed to Bad Boy Entertainment by Sean "Puffy" Combs. Smalls released his debut album, *Ready to Die* (1993), and became one of the most sought after performers of the 1990s as well as the face (along with Combs and Bad Boy Records) of a heated rivalry between East Coast and West Coast hip-hop. His immediate rise to fame and increasing tensions between Smalls and Tupac Shakur (West Coast rapper, signed to Death Row Records) led to deep-seated anxiety and defensive aggression for Smalls.⁶⁵ After Shakur's murder in 1996, many suspected that Smalls was involved, and in March of 1997, Smalls was shot by an unidentified gunman while in his parked SUV, after leaving the Soul Train Awards in Los Angeles, California.

⁶⁴ Jack Hamilton, "The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Biggie Smalls.," *Slate*, September 11, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/09/ready_to_die_twenty_years_after_the_notorious_b_i_g_s_debut_we_re_still.html.

⁶⁵ "Biggie Smalls," *Biography*, <http://www.biography.com/people/biggie-smalls-20866735>.

Smalls was due to release his sophomore album, *Life After Death*, that year and the record was an enormous hit. Even in death, Smalls is widely recognized as one of the decade's most talented rappers, and continues to be memorialized by the hip-hop community.

Smalls' character in hip-hop, though violent and misogynistic, was part of the genre's adoption of stereotypes that played upon artists' criminal pasts and broader white, middle-class fears of black men and violence because rappers, like Smalls, understood the power these stereotypes still held.⁶⁶ Videos, album covers, and press pieces about hip-hop artists invested in the vision of the black male body as a weapon of power and authority.⁶⁷ This weapon was cloaked in artifice, suggesting that characters created by rappers like Smalls are both performative for the sake of theatricality and yet, mirror their lived oppressions. As historian Davarian Baldwin explains, these musicians "were not invested in recreating a black community as an oppositional force, but demanded citizenship by being involved in their own consumption."⁶⁸ Smalls and others created a vision of consumption, and bourgeois mobility that brought hip-hop to a level of national awareness.

⁶⁶ Baldwin and many theorists of the hip-hop generation have reimagined the misogyny and violence of gangsta rap as an element included for shock and pageantry, but not necessarily reflective of the rappers' opinions. Baldwin interjects that, "Even in his misogynist lyrics, Biggie wasn't shy about passing the mic. He gives props to his 'honeys getting money, playing niggas like dummies' (1994). From This gangsta genre emerged a cadre of women artists headed by Lil'Kim of Junior M.A.F.I.A. and Foxy Brown of 'The Film.'" Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal, eds., *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2011), 241.

⁶⁷ White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z*, 72-73.

⁶⁸ Forman and Neal, *That's the Joint!*, 244.

Newsome's *Sun King* links Smalls' iconic status to Louis XIV, a monarch who centralized power and mollified an aristocracy through courtly manners and intrigue, with an image of Smalls that was widely reproduced after his death. Together, the picture and frame exemplify contemporary baroque authenticity. Newsome equates Smalls' embrace of pomp and circumstance with Baroque aesthetics' deep investment in the belief that more is more. Instead of pairing the figure with one chain, Newsome surrounds him with six and then covers these pendants with a dozen more floating diamond strands. Smalls' portrait surrounded by gleaming jewels and saturated hues that extend into the frame reinforces Newsome's commentary about the way rappers construct their identity to evoke a sensational desire from their fans. Hamilton continues:

Ready to Die was a tour de force of technique and creativity that by its end had made, and unmade, one of the most vivid characters in American popular art: the Notorious B.I.G. himself. That character was a work of staggering dimensions, physically and psychologically, a cold-blooded sociopath one minute and a brooding introvert the next, a swaggering lady-killer blessed with impossible sexual prowess, then a tragic depressive overcome by his own vulnerabilities... but above of all he was *likeable*, incredibly so. He wanted to rob you (or worse), and you almost wanted to let him, because he was the best rapper you'd ever heard in your life. The magnetism and the virtuosity were inseparable, the immense gifts of music and language paired with wit and ferocious intelligence.⁶⁹

Smalls continues to be martyred and commodified by both fans and hip-hop celebrities, memorializing how the rapper "covered himself in layers of expensive clothing and the regal air that led him to be dubbed the 'King of New York.'"⁷⁰ Newsome's Smalls is a self-constructed god-king advertising a new brand of black manhood, canonized in violent feuds, chinchilla furs, and an untimely death.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, "The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Biggie Smalls."

⁷⁰ Annette J. Saddik, "Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage," *TDR* (1988-) 47, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 111.

Yet, Newsome's depiction of black masculinity moves beyond the Smalls' character and the image of the hip-hop gangsta when *Sun King* is considered in relation to Newsome's third framework, the queer Ballroom culture of the 1990s and 2000s. Smalls' portrait and performance are connected to Ballroom through Newsome. Newsome's artistic practice continuously incorporates Voguers into every annex of his oeuvre and he has repeatedly asserted his investment in the Ballroom scene of New York:

Someone once asked me if I feel like there's a connection between [Ballroom culture] and hip-hop, and I think absolutely... These cultures came up at the same time. Once you throw homosexuality in there it creates some distance... the queer voice is always left out of that conversation, which is so odd, because that voice could be a real ally to the larger community.⁷¹

Thus, it is crucial to consider the dual parallels of cultural appropriation within Ballroom sub-culture and hip-hop, that often mirror one another visually; and secondly, then consider how Small's performance is located within the Ballroom pageant system. Consequently, my point is built by the differing connotations Smalls' body and Newsome's aesthetic choices hold for each community. Smalls is an example of what scholar Marlon Bailey describes as the Ballroom gender category "trade," which refers to

⁷¹ Sargent, "Rashaad Newsome's Sixth Conductor."

hyper-masculine cisgendered males within the Ballroom gender system, he describes.⁷²

This inversion of hyper-masculinity moves beyond hip-hop's constraining heterosexual maleness, indicating neither normative nor queered desire in the portrait. The connotation of trade, meaning an item to be bought and sold, disassociates the power binary between genders. Further, trades do not signal consistent heterosexual nor homosexual desires, bridging the distance Newsome speaks of between these communities. Smalls, as trade, destabilizes the photo's original performance and empowers an alternative authority in Newsome's image.

Secondly, the Ballroom community shares hip-hop's desires for authenticity and luxury, and like hip-hop, Ballroom culture imitates class elitism through performance. Ballroom performance is measured by authenticity, a way of gaining recognition in the Ballroom community and passing in society. As a member of the Ballroom community states, in the canonical film *Paris is Burning*:

This is white America. And when it comes to the minorities, especially black, we as a people for the past four hundred years are the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have learned how to survive. That is why in the Ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured

⁷² African American Gender theorist Marlon Bailey describes how the Ballroom's gender system is separated into six categories: (1)Butch Queens—biologically born males who identify as gay or bisexual performing masculine, hyper-masculine, or feminine (2)Femme Queens—transgender women or Male To Females in various stages of gender reassignment (3)Butch queens up in Drags—gay men performing drag who don't live as women (4)Butches—transgender men or Female to Male people in transition or masculine lesbians and women appearing as men regardless of sexual orientation (5)cisgendered women who are biologically born female, identifying as straight, lesbian, or queer (6)men/trade—biologically born males who identify as straight. The system is queer in that it allows for, and in many ways celebrates, sex, gender, and sexuality.", Marlon M. Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 370-371.

the great white way of living or looking or dressing or speaking, you [are] a marvel.⁷³

In *Sun King*, the highly saturated, sumptuous colors and collaged jewels that surround Smalls references royalty, but their decorative glamour can also be associated with Ballroom performances of ‘realness’ or passing.⁷⁴ Newsome reimagines Smalls embodying the ‘thug realness’ category of Ballroom pageants, where transgender men, drag kings, and trades compete to perform the most authentically ‘tough male exterior of the black urban working class.’⁷⁵ Adopting Ballroom culture as a lens, Newsome uses the more outrageous aspects visual consumption against itself, creating visual moments that reveal the fictions and affectations in Smalls’ persona. Calling attention to the act of performing gender and performing class, Newsome suggests a broader play with identity.

Newsome, in appropriating the image of Smalls creates spaces to see his gendered and racial performance, additionally allowing for a queered masculinity by unifying the desires for opulence both hip-hop and Ballroom celebrate. Exposing the similar aesthetic choices made in both communities, Newsome engages with queerness by manipulating hip-hop’s normative constraints. In an interview with the artist,

⁷³ *Paris Is Burning: On Race in America*, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guh29l2_Tu8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁷⁴ Marlon Bailey explains that realness is a construct within the Ballroom community that, “is fundamental performance criteria in the culture throughout the several decades that it has been in existence. Realness requires adherence to certain performances, self-presentations, and embodiments that are believed to capture the authenticity of particular gender and sexual identities.”, Marlon M. Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture,” 377.

⁷⁵ Bailey, “Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture,” 378-79.

Newsome explains his artwork's relationship to the frameworks of black masculinities and empowerment:

The struggle for pride and political agency as well as the imperative to 'be a man' has been central to the lives of black males. Yet, what it means to be a black man—in terms of both racial and gender [and I argue sexual] identity—has been subject to continual debate in public and academic spheres alike. My work brings together black "males" from various different communities to examine an alternatively demonized and mythologized black masculinity. Collectively, they offer a roadmap for new, progressive models of black masculinity that may chart the course for the future of black men.⁷⁶

Newsome's new model does not break with the conversation surrounding black masculinity, but extends the artistic interrogations of hip-hop masculine aesthetic to include a queer perspective. The pageantry of his collage work and his use of hip-hop and Ballroom culture's shared iconic figures reappears in video when Newsome crowns himself as a contemporary Herald.

Herald, Newsome Claims the Throne

At the end of his time in Paris in 2005, Newsome traveled to the Royal College of Arms in London and met with the Windsor Herald, who was impressed with Newsome's dedicated research and granted him the honorary title of Pursuivant. This title was the catalyst for a trilogy of videos, *Pursuivant* (2010), *Herald* (2011), and *King of Arms* (2013), featuring Newsome, as the protagonist, ascending through the ranks of heraldry. The second video, *Herald* (2011) (fig 15), visualizes a coronation when Newsome's

⁷⁶ Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

character is received as a Herald.⁷⁷ Throughout the trilogy, Newsome moves closer to becoming a King of Arms through pageantry and ceremonial gifts, tracing the artist's accent through the rank heraldic tradition.

Herald was filmed in New York City's Old St. Patrick's Cathedral that once housed the Archdiocese of New York (1815)(fig 16). Shot in black and white, Newsome, as the Herald, enters into the Cathedral dressed in a black leather cape embossed with his name and the number seven. The aisle is lined with cloaked figures in a uniform of black hoodies and baggy jeans (fig 17). Through Newsome's perspective, the viewer can see one male figure, dressed in the same attire, standing at the altar. The figure holds a gold rope chain attached to a scepter and is accompanied by a disinterested female figure (who Newsome identifies elsewhere as the Queens of Arms), dressed in flowing fabric with her hair styled in an Afro.⁷⁸ Both figures wear three identical medallions with a bust of Christ encrusted in diamonds. A subtle beat underlies the somber Gregorian chants that play as the scene unfolds. The camera repositions itself so that the viewer is able to see Newsome's face as he approaches the altar. His shirt is embellished with a heraldic shield that is extremely simplified for Newsome's usual designs. Newsome reaches the figures and kneels to be ceremoniously 'knighted' by the scepter. As he rises, the Queen of Arms fully extends her arm out, dangling a snapback leather cap surrounded by a leather crown from her fingertips (fig 18). Newsome eagerly snatches the crown from the Queen of Arms, and places it upon his

⁷⁷ Wadsworth Atheneum, *Rashaad Newsome / MATRIX 161*, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/22305195>.

⁷⁸ Newsome, Olu, and Marlborough Chelsea (Gallery), *Rashaad Newsome: Herald*.

own head, turning towards camera, obscuring from view the male figure holding the scepter as the video fades into a full color still of this moment.

The tempo of the beat intensifies and becomes more intricate as the chants begin to build to a crescendo over the last two minutes. Similar to Newsome's collages, the setting of *Herald* turns from one based in reality to one that is clearly animated and in an alternative space (fig 19). Newsome's newly crowned visage becomes frozen in time. His surroundings are enshrined in a frame and encrusted in jewels, black Bugattis, embellished rims, and watches dripping in bling.⁷⁹ With the narrative switch, a coat of arms is built around the still of Newsome, touting his elevated status. The shield is encased in an opal diamond frame, and as the video progresses, each facet of its armature is animated. As the music builds, two identical winged female Gryphons appear in the bottom corners of the shield. Holding gold rope scepters, they stand facing the viewer rapidly beating their bejeweled wings and whipping their hair. The Lamborghinis begin to smoke, and the eyes of the new Herald begin to glow bright white and flash in intensity. The erratic movements of objects and bodies climax as the shield and its figures implode into flames. *Herald* closes with a slowly expanding black coat of arms (fig 20). Newsome's collaged shield *FESS* (2011) is the central fixture of the snaking armature, leisurely swivels its radiating bands of jewels in front of the viewer in silence.

⁷⁹ Bling is defined by dictionary.com as, "Expensive and flashy jewelry, clothing or other possessions. The flaunting of such possessions of the flashy lifestyle associated with it.", "Bling | Define," *Dictionary.com*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bling>.

As the subject of power shifts from collage to video, the role of the Herald is increasingly tied to Newsome's personal place in the hip-hop community. His Herald is not a rapper or tastemaker, but instead is a commentator who critiques and recreates the narrative of hip-hop. Newsome's Herald is thus more akin to a Ballroom commentator. If his previous works made only subtle references to Ballroom culture, here Newsome seems to take a more concrete step to blend these two visual, musical, and dance cultures. Throughout *Herald*, Newsome embodies a contemporary Herald, whose duty is to create the shields of arms that replicate and critique how masculinity is performed in the hip-hop community. By seizing the crown that is reluctantly offered, Newsome pursues the title of King of Arms throughout the trilogy of video works. The Herald crowns himself as Charlemagne and Napoleon did before him, using the connections Old St. Patrick's had as "the spiritual hub for maintaining total allegiance to the Holy See that came to characterize the U.S. episcopacy."⁸⁰ The pageantry that surrounds Newsome's character embodies the elite culture that the hip-hop and Ballroom communities are in conversation with. Newsome unsettles power by exposing the intersections of desire and authority that characterize the queer subculture of Ballroom, heraldry, and hip-hop. As a commentator, because of his breadth of knowledge about each community's extravagancies, he explains each diamond's importance, each mogul's struggle to migrate from Bed-Stuy to national exposure, and each Voguer's death drop as a presentation of power.

⁸⁰ "The Basilica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral," *Historical Points of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral*, n.d., <http://oldcathedral.org/history/>.

Newsome's Herald's associations with hip-hop and court performance are easily recognized, but Ballroom culture is explicitly expressed in the second act of *Herald*. Undeniably tying together these two cultural forms, Newsome casts Vogue Legend, Dawn Ebony, as a heraldic Gryphon (fig 21 & 22). In heraldic shields, Gryphons were associated with the protection of gold, and denote strength, intelligence, military courage, and leadership.⁸¹ Newsome's Gryphon is enacting hair performance, a disputed element of Vogue, which comes from the trans community's contribution to Vogue Femme.⁸² Vogue Femme performers are part of Ballroom pageantry, battling with their bodies for superiority.⁸³ As described in the film *Paris is Burning*,

Voguing is the same thing as taking two knives and cutting each other up but in a dance form. Instead of fighting they would settle it on the dance floor, and whoever had the sharper moves, threw the best shade. The name is a statement in itself because some of the poses are pulled directly from the magazine.⁸⁴

Newsome's voguing Gryphon is the queered support of the Herald's coat of arms that uses the traditional techniques of crests to combine the power exerted in hip-hop and Ballroom performances.⁸⁵ Queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz states that "the dance

⁸¹ The gryphon is a composite creature, part eagle, the king of the birds, and part lion, the king of the beasts. Bedingfeld and Gwynn-Jones, *Heraldry*, 80-81.

⁸² Robin Cembalest, "Voguing Meets Drawing, and the Results Are Spectacular I ARTnews," *ARTnews*, March 13, 2014, <http://www.artnews.com/2014/03/13/vogue-meets-drawing-in-rashaad-newsome-performance/>.

⁸³ Voguing, which will be described at length in the following chapter, is a major competitive aspect of the Ballroom community and its pageants.

⁸⁴ *What Is Voguing? (Paris Is Burning)*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNdgyBCnW-8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁸⁵ International Heraldry states, "Supporters are figures placed on either side of the shield and generally depicted holding it up. These figures may be animal or human, real or imaginary. In rare cases plants or inanimate objects. Supporters can have local significance, such as the fisherman and the tin miner granted to Cornwall County Council, or an historical link, such as the lion of England and unicorn of Scotland on the

floor [is] a space where relations between memory and content, self and other, become inextricably intertwined.”⁸⁶ The symbol of the Gryphon is inextricable through dance to the strength that Ebony’s body performs. Her performance embodies the same self/other positionality that is part of Newsome’s role as Herald. Muñoz continues, “Being lost can be understood as a particularly queer mode of performing the self.”⁸⁷ Newsome and Ebony are lost in the characters they inhabit, but are also present within their own bodies, performing in ways they might outside the context of this video and the confines of a heraldic ceremony.

Each of Newsome’s sources is a self-referential art form, obsessed with status, authority and gilded accessories. In highlighting the more outrageous aspects of consumption within *Sun King* and the cultures he appropriates, Newsome forces the viewer to contemplate the various gendered, class, and sexual associations that are constructed. Newsome equalizes the playing field, critically engaging with contemporary models of hip-hop and exhibiting where queer bodies and alternative masculinities are still lacking visibility. Using the symbols of royalty to speak to black masculinity and hip-hop culture, Newsome exercises his appropriative language, creating crossover and conversation between hip-hop, manhood, and Ballroom gender and sexual cultures.

two variations of the Coat of Arms of the United Kingdom.”, James McDonald, “International Heraldry,” *Castles and Manor Houses*, October 1, 2010, <http://www.internationalheraldry.com/#supporters>.

⁸⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 66.

⁸⁷ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 75.

—Chapter 3—
“Got to be Real” Choreographing Queer

If in the last chapter I sought to make clear the connections between Newsome’s use of Ballroom and hip-hop cultures, in this chapter I seek to argue that he moves beyond simply replicating the Ballroom pageant system. Newsome rejects the limits of a gender binary, instead creating a surreal fantasy beyond gender or sexuality, where desire is nascent. It is important to highlight how desire and power extended beyond Newsome’s own sexuality. Consequentially, the queer that is depicted through the performers bodies is not solely trans, nor is it drag, nor is it gay. Newsome’s performers are intended to confuse the binaries of gender and sexuality through movement and physical presentation.⁸⁸ His dancers are less constrained because Newsome has removed the performance from a specific community and placed it within the context of the gallery space, Ryan Wong describes the effects of Newsome transposing Vogue into the gallery:

If, in Newsome’s hands, voguing loses some of the raw energy that comes with the battles and connoisseurship of balls, it gains slickness, choreography, and visual harmony. Vogue becomes the framework for a lavish visual experience, driven not by the dialogues between dancers and the emcee, as they are in traditional balls, but by Newsome’s vision.⁸⁹

In *KNOT* (2014)(fig 26-35) and the first half of *ICON* (2014)(fig 42-55), Newsome brings Ballroom’s performativity to the forefront, employing the dance style, Vogue Femme. The dancers’ bodies both perform in and are used to construct the alternative spaces

⁸⁸ Rashaad Newsome interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York, NY, February 13, 2015.

⁸⁹ Ryan Wong, “Rashaad Newsome Is Having a Ball,” *Hyperallergic*, March 11, 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/113664/rashaad-newsome-is-having-a-ball/>.

they inhabit, turning baroque ceilings into phantasmic dance halls. The canonical European architectural spaces and artworks Newsome samples, such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (1490), the London Oratory of Saint Philip Neri (1884), and Domenichino Zampieri's dome in Sant'Andrea della Valle (1608), communicate European and classical ideals of perfection. Newsome's surreal reconstructions appropriate queer desire from the Ballroom community and place it within the frames of these idealized spaces, neutralizing the authority of either culture over the other.

Vogue Herstory

Ballroom culture has in fact been a source of great debate, specifically concerning the issue of whether it reifies or liberates gender. Scholar Marlon M. Bailey recently published a critical analysis that unpacks Ballroom's complex history, characteristics, and contradictions. Bailey reinterprets traditional critiques of drag within the Ballroom community:

I argue that the performance and the gender system that it undergirds Ballroom culture offers far more cultural import because they reflect the possibilities of reconstructing gender and sexual subjectivities, for reconfiguring gender and sexual roles and relations, and for creating ways to survive an often dangerously homophobic, transphobic, and Femmephobic public sphere.⁹⁰

Bailey contends that, the broader sense of gender reconfiguration and its acceptance in the Ballroom community create a safe-haven, empowered by the pageant's runway,

⁹⁰ Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness," 383.

realness, and Vogue competitions. The criteria of categories, such as ‘realness,’ within Ballroom community imitate the normative performance of gender and sexuality as a means to judge the competition. ‘Realness,’ however, marks a subversive deception, based on the illusion of conformity, necessary to enact in the daily lives of Ballroom performers outside their LGBTQ community. It is likewise helpful to consider Muñoz’s argument about queer dance and its oppositional potential: gesture in Vogue contains a message of fabulousness and fantasy that one can be lost in, concealing the Other from heterosexual hegemonies and marking the race and sex of ones’ own body on their terms.⁹¹ Through ritual, all the qualities of counteridentification can to be understood by the members of the community, judges, and commentators at the ball as a means of recognition in order to be appreciated.⁹² Sharing these experiences, through performed ‘realness’ and gesture, structures Ballroom’s fluidity without restraining its gendered and sexual freedom.

The role of the commentator is particularly important when Newsome appropriates the experience of a Ballroom pageant. In the Ballroom community the commentator, is the master of ceremonies and acts as an intermediary between the audience and judges for the pageant. Their influence extends beyond the performance, as a keeper of the culture’s traditions, honoring the accomplished members of the community, the houses that are present, and Ballroom “Icons,” “Legends,” and

⁹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 80.

⁹² Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 132.

“Statements” who have passed.⁹³ Chanting is key for Vogue performance. When chanting, the commentator scats to the beat, as a jazz musician would, imitating the rhythm or performs stock chants that are widely used and manipulated in competition.⁹⁴ Vogue battles are a central facet in Ballroom pageants and are the annex which Newsome samples from most heavily. Though there have been stylistic evolutions of Vogue over the past several decades, including its genesis in full-body break dancing on the runway, old way style, and new way style, Vogue Femme and dramatics are the most important styles to unpack regarding Newsome’s oeuvre.

Queer Performativity in *ICON* and *KNOT*

Newsome’s interest in Vogue Femme began in 2000 when the artist became involved in the Ballroom community in New York. Scholar Jonathan Jackson writes that Vogue Femme is concerned with four major performance motivations, “stay[ing] true to the elements of Voguing, sens[ing] a close rhythmic relationship with musical or vocal accompaniment, becom[ing] possessed or emotionally invested without actually fighting, and distinguish[ing] an individual style.”⁹⁵ Vogue Femme is composed through five dance elements: floor performance, duckwalk, catwalk, dip spins, and hand

⁹³ Bailey explains Legends Statements and Icons as: the moment of the ball when the commentator recognizes the prominent and up-and-coming people in the rooms. In Ballroom culture, value and recognition are inscribed in the community. Each position is arranged in order of importance: Immortal Icon (founders of the Ballroom Scene), Icon (Ballroom history makers), Legends (multi-trophy winners with Ballroom histories or those viewed as veterans), Stars (up and coming legends), and Statements (up and coming Stars.), Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 136.

⁹⁴ Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 162.

⁹⁵ Johnathan David Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” *Journal for the Antropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2002): 36.

performance.⁹⁶ The final element is hair performance; hair performance was largely started by transgender Vogue performers and is controversial within the Ballroom community. Vogue Femme performances are meant to incorporate several elements simultaneously, and fluidly move between the beats of the music, while emphasizing the lines made by their body. Bailey also notes that it is gender, and descriptive gendered terms, that constitute how the dance is described; “ ‘Soft and cunt’ consists of clean soft and smooth hand/arm movements in a fluid and flowing way; ‘Dramatics’ are choppy and jerky spasmic. ...[and] aim to represent the shifting interplay between masculinity and femininity.”⁹⁷

Newsome uses all of the elements and versions of Vogue Femme (as well as old school breaking in Ballroom culture) throughout his video works to employ the community and celebrate the development of Vogue’s stylistic archive over the years. Newsome blurs masculinity and femininity through the Voguers’ performance by using iconic crests, artwork, and architectural spaces to reconstruct culture, disturb power, and reinvent the space where queer performativity exists. Because Newsome considers *KNOT* and the beginning of *ICON* to be an extension of the same conversation, and the videos’ elements of gender performativity overlap, I will discuss both works before returning to the theoretical implications of their elements.

Newsome’s 2014 video contribution to the *Killer Heels* exhibition at Brooklyn Museum, *KNOT*, opens with transgender Vogue Femme Legend, Dawn Ebony (fig 26). Dressed in lingerie, Ebony saunters towards a closet filled with Christian Louboutin

⁹⁶ Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing.”

⁹⁷ Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 175.

shoes encased in a gold chain; she sways her hips and pushes through the doors revealing the fourteenth century choir vault of Wells Cathedral (1176-1490; Wells, England)(fig 23). The vault's columns, ribs, and coffers are rapidly encrusted in gold chain and diamonds as four male performers catwalk into the frame(fig 27). Newsome includes commentary for the Vogue performance created in *KNOT* that is narrated by several commentators and hip-hop artists from the Ballroom community: Kevin JZ Prodigy, who Newsome has used in several of his live performances, as well as Cakes da Killa, and Ian Isiah (see Appendix I). Additionally, Newsome (for the first time) participates in the commentary of the pageant's procession. Kevin JZ Prodigy raps throughout the first scene as the four male dancers Vogue together upon the choir vault; their bodies are viewed from above and the stained glass windows of the choir's clearstory flash with light to the beat of the music. Each performer plays to the camera, rhythmically raising their arms above their heads while looking up and then caressing their way back down. As the performers continue to spin and dip, the four male figures flaunt the volume of their black skirts, paired with bright red Louboutins. The scene ends and a platinum diamond encrusted ring, encasing the dome of the Cathedral of Our Lady (1352-1521;Antwerp, Belgium) (fig 24), sits upon a starry spot lit background.

Laid upon the face of the pendant, floating above the dome, Legendary transgender Vogue performer, Tia Lavin, embodies an interpretation of da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (fig 28 & 29). Newsome narrates the performance as Lavin's arms gracefully cross and trace over her body as she lifts her legs vertically towards the viewer and reveals the red soles of her shoes. Her legs split and descend. When Lavin's

chest lifts from the waist and she spins into a floor performance, the dome and diamond and platinum rings begin to spin independently. Her performance is virtually spliced so that her serpentine movements glitch frantically, changing her position in the dome. Lavin's hand performance breaks through a diamond studded clock face that appears above her figure as she is standing. Her body and the pedant's movements are rapidly increased and disappear as Newsome finishes the verse. Prodigy's lyrics return as video vixen, Jaques, emerges facing away from the camera. Her figure quickly multiplies over the golden background filled with bubbles (fig 30). Jaques' bouncing bottom and thighs are mirrored across the plain to create an abstract pattern of flesh. The pattern morphs as she slowly bends at the knees into a squat; continuing to bounce her body to the music, Jaques throws platinum hair over her shoulder and gazes out at the viewer. The pattern distorts her body while highlighting her movements. Glass bubbles begin to float in front of Jaques' figure as an animated golden crest descends from above. The crest is centered on a ring of jewels filled with golden shimmering liquid, sitting upon two halves of a bejeweled oyster shell broach (fig 31). At the center of the crest, a female Voguer falls into a death drop and begins duckwalking while performing with her hands. On the outer edge of each broach a male Voguer's torso is attached to a gold mermaid's tail. He enacts hand performance while the golden tail subtly swivels. At the top of the golden ring, four pairs of legs kick in and out to the beat on a background of cerulean water. Newsome's leather snapback crown is centrally positioned on top of the central mirrored legs.

Prodigy fades and Cakes Da Killa begins his verse as another pendant appears. The Neo-Baroque domed ceiling of Oratory of Saint Philip Neri (1884; London, England) (fig 25) is surrounded by individually spinning concentric rings of white quartz, diamonds, and platinum. Legendary Vogue performer, Alex Mugler, dressed in Louboutin boots and a black bodysuit assumes the same pose as Revlon before him and begins a floor performance (fig 32). Mugler's movements are an acrobatic articulation of Vogue Femme in comparison to the flowing caress of Revlon's movements. As he continues to Vogue his shoes perpetually change and his body spins upon the rotating domed ceiling as the dome's central light source pulses in rhythm with his body. The scene ends in black. As Ian Isiah sings a melodic ballad, we return to the Wells Cathedral, the vault is flooded with a swarm of whirling Vogue performers and twirling heels (fig 33). The movement of their bodies resembles the mechanical stiffness of music box figurines, but these figures are not confined and isolated. The performers multiply and flourish throughout the architecture, sporadically moving across the plane, as Kevin JZ Prodigy performs the final verse of commentary. The viewer is pulled back into Mugler's performance upon the domed ceiling. He continues to articulate his movements, pulling his legs into angular poses and caressing his thighs and groin as his body rolls over the flashing lights at the center of the dome. The scene switches as Dawn Ebony, the Vogue performer who opened doors into this environment, returns, now sauntering in a field of decorative candy colored roses (fig 34). Ebony begins to catwalk and duckwalk as the flowers, whose central bud has been replaced by replicas of Newsome's rapping mouth that continues his performance, serenading her. Ebony's

environment flashes repetitively with an ornate picture frame surrounding another performance. A foundational collage of male torsos repeat into an abstract pattern; the central male figure facing away from the camera wraps his arms across his chest and caresses his back (fig 35). Ebony's performance continues as she whips her hair and works the floor. The male figure, Keyon Kiki Williams, sprouts four sets of hands that all begin their own performance, while one pair of hands opens a clutch from which candy-colored heels fly out. The video closes with a swarm of spinning figures overtaking the gothic ceiling.

In *ICON*, the video that debuted at *L.egends S.tatements S.tars* in 2014 (Marlborough Gallery)(fig 1), Newsome brings Ballroom's performativity to the forefront utilizing Vogue Femme dance style. *ICON* takes place in several surreal dance halls that are constructed from Newsome's physical collages that were hung adjacent to the video at *L.egends S.tatements S.tars*. As *ICON* opens, a sonic bass beat, that implements a metronomic cymbal used in Ballroom competition, is mixed with a distorted voice that repeats an augmented and cut off version of the word "bitch" throughout the entire video. The camera's perspective looks down upon vaulted ceiling of the Church of Santa Maria (1522; Belem, Portugal) (fig 36) as the title of the piece bursts through the ceiling in burning letters(fig 42). The perspective of the video expands, revealing that the Ballroom is constructed entirely from the vaulted ceiling. Vogue Statement Cassandra Ebony spins on the central joint of a rib vault wearing a

long golden do-rag.⁹⁸ The perspective zooms in and repeats the image of Vogue Legend Dashaun Evisu wearing a striped black and white top, on each of the eight ribs of the vault. As Evisu is duckwalking and hand performing, his body multiplies along the ribs, replacing the line pattern across the entire ceiling and punctuating each central axis with Ebony's spinning figure (fig 43). As the bodies reconstruct the architecture of the ceiling, the perspective slowly pulls back, and a section of white stripes overlap the ceiling in the foreground (fig 44). The stripes are part of Evisu's outfit, and the performer's body rejoins his costume. Evisu dances within the same space his smaller repeated image is constructing, rhythmically throwing himself into dip spins as the cymbals clash.

The Santa Maria Ballroom fades away and is replaced by a coat of arms upon a black background. The crests structure replicates the coat of arms of the Belgian Cardinal Mercier Archbishop of Mechlin (1130)(fig 37). Vogue Statement, Davon Mizrahi's nude torso sits behind the crest. Mizrahi wears a gold hat decorated with a curtain of gold chains, draping behind his shoulders to frame his figure (fig 45). The shield below is outlined in gold Cuban link chain, and two pyramids of wiggling golden filigree and tassels frame Mizrahi's figure. At the bottom of the shield, a gold medallion of Christ hangs between two silver Mercedes-Benz. Mizrahi gazes flirtatiously out at the viewer and enacts a hand performance above the shield. Inside the shield's segments are two interior windows divided by an encrusted watchband, with three of Newsome's

⁹⁸ Merriam-Webster defines do-rag as, "a piece of cloth that is worn on the head to cover the hair." "Definition of Do-Rag," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/do-rag>.

ceremonial portraits from *Herald* placed upon each gold watch-face equally spaced across the band. The two portions of the shield are transformed into battling dance halls. The walls, ceiling, and floor repeat the design of Newsome's collage *Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradigms* (2014)(fig 40 & 46). Below Mizrahi, two b-boys from "Street Masters Crew" Vogue and break dance in the ornamented space; as all three dancers perform the eyes of Newsome's portraits flash with white light.⁹⁹ Mizrahi raises his hands above his head and wiggles his fingers down in front of his body as golden glittering light rains over the entire scene. The scene is pulled into the upper divide of the shield where the first b-boy breaks on the floor, spinning, dipping, and walking on his hands. He then stands up, with arms extended, looking out expectantly as the screen refocuses on the lower divide of the shield.¹⁰⁰ The second b-boy begins his routine, but our perspective pulls back as he continues, revealing the full crest before the scene ends.

A circular medallion, floating upon a deep-blue bejeweled background is illuminated with cinematic searchlights, replacing the Archbishop's crest. Inside the medallion, a set of concentric diamond-encrusted gold rings surrounds the dome of Sant'Andrea della Valle (1608; Rome, Italy)(fig 38). Each of the rings and the dome

⁹⁹ Dictionary.com defines b boy as, "a boy or young man who likes or is involved in hip-hop culture," and "a style of acrobatic dancing that combines intricate footwork with spinning and tumbling, usually to funk or hip-hop music.", "B-Boy I Define B-Boy at Dictionary.com," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/b-boy>. "B-Boying I Define B-Boying at Dictionary.com," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/b-boying>.

¹⁰⁰ "In many coats of arms the shield is plain, but in many more it is divided into segments and this is called 'partitioning'...The lines of partition are not necessarily straight or "right", as in the examples. The following lines of partition are often found.", Eddie Geoghegan, "Coats of Arms in Ireland and from around the World," <http://www.heraldry.ws/heraldry/>.

individually rotate as Vogue Legend Alex Mugler, dressed in a black bodysuit, heels, and a seafoam-green wig, stares out at the viewer in his *Vitruvian* pose. The medallion flips to reveal another set of concentric rings surrounding the dome of Szeged Synagogue (1907; Szeged, Hungary)(fig 39) in which Mizrahi, dressed in Hood by Air, mimics Mugler's position.¹⁰¹ The medallion continues to flip and the bejeweled stars fly forward around it, as Mizrahi and Mugler work the floor, transitioning into catwalk, duckwalk, and hand performance (fig 47 & 48). The dancers battle from either side of the coin, flailing arms and legs; spinning towards the floor; flourishing their hands and bodies up towards the viewer; and stretching out towards the edges of the dome. Their bodies mime each other's movements, performing in tandem without existing on the same side. As Mizrahi and Mugler's performance ends, the screen fades to black and a chain link plain drops in from above on the crescendo of the cymbals.

Upon a chained background, Dawn Ebony stands at the center of the plain, which is constructed from the silver chain link armature in Newsome's collage *Ballroom Floor* (2014)(fig 41 & 49).¹⁰² Ebony raises her arms up and slams them down, in rhythm with the cymbals, and three of the same chain link patterned plains slide into view, creating a Ballroom for her performance. Her pulsing moves are powerful and full of

¹⁰¹ "The critically adored fashion label Hood by Air, founded by the former Vogue dancer Shayne Oliver, frequently incorporates references to voguing in their runway shows, and have had such an impact on the fashion industry that the New York Times recently speculated Oliver may have had an influence on the catwalks of Riccardo Tisci and Alexander Wang.", Kenya Hunt, "How Voguing Came Back into Vogue," *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/fashion-blog/2014/nov/18/-sp-Vogueing-dance-came-back-into-Vogue-madonna>.

¹⁰² The armature of the chain link is based off of the preliminary drawings of the Gloucester Cathedral vault in Gloucester, England., Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

energy, articulating the beat as she thrusts her left hand out, then bending and slamming her hands on her hips. Ebony stands and kicks out at the viewer, prancing and thrusting her chest. The chained environment intensifies each movement; spotlights punctuate the beat her body accentuates. Ebony begins a hair performance while still using her arms to punctuate the melody. Her hands curve and glide down and back up the center of her body, accentuating her breasts, waist, and vagina to emphasize its desired femininity. Her arms thrust out from her caress as she dives into a floor performance. When Ebony whips her hair and body upon the chain link with full force, her figure is momentarily absorbed in a silhouette of explosions, but she quickly returns and continues to dip and spin upon the floor. Ebony crawls across the room, kicking her leg back behind her and omitting a ball of light from her heel as it thrusts in the air. Four times throughout Ebony's performance, at the moment she slams her hands and hair into the ground with a clash of cymbals, her body is transformed into a silhouette of explosive flame (fig 50). The performance ends with the Ebony on her knees, spinning her arms in large circles and vigorously whipping her hair side to side. She slams her palm onto the chain link once more and her body incinerates. The Ballroom collapses and the screen re-oriens to Newsome's collage.

Ballroom Floor reappears, rebuilt in Newsome's virtual dimension against a black background, assembling the dividing bejeweled segments and their accompanying section of chain link.¹⁰³ Once fully rendered, the perspective shifts from its topographic view, that replicates the physical collage, and enters into a tilted landscape-like

¹⁰³ The bejeweled division is based off of the preliminary drawing for the Pantheon., Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

environment (fig 51). Baby Hurricane returns in a long white do-rag and black clothing, designed again by Hood by Air, and begins to Vogue at the edge on the collage-terrain. He performs on the lower level of the chain link grid, dipping and spinning on its edge, and then turns to run towards the center of the composition. Hurricane stops just shy of the first diamond in the central segment, and a link of the gridded chain unhinges and lifts, transporting the dancer into the surreal Ballroom Dawn Ebony had inhabited (fig 52 & 53). Mizrahi, wearing Evisu's graphic stripe ensemble and a black cardinal's hat, meets Hurricane in the Ballroom. Mizrahi grins and coyly gestures Hurricane forward. The two begin to battle. Their bodies harmonize, as Mizrahi drops to the floor Hurricane spins his leg out, releases a ball of light, and throws it over Mizrahi's floor performance. Mizrahi and Hurricane's movements are simultaneously feminine and masculine, matching lithe turns with groping splits. Hurricane releases another orb of light and holds it aloft as Mizrahi spins into his pose. The two performers make eye contact as Hurricane swallows the orb. Mizrahi twirls across Hurricane's body, as he ingests the orb, and snatches the doo-rag from his head. The entire battle explodes in fire as the dancers simultaneously spin into death drops(fig 54 & 55).

The House Down, Parading Gender and Performing Authority

By placing Vogue performers into these imagined spaces, Newsome constructs in *KNOT* and the first half of *ICON* executes two modes of world making by constructing relationships between religious iconography, non-chronological time periods, and Ballroom culture as a means of unsettling gender and transcending corporeality. To cite

Muñoz, the politics that surround Newsome display of queer performing bodies is, “not easily folded [into the] social fabric.”¹⁰⁴ Newsome rejects the complexity of Ballroom pageants in favor of imagining his own symbolic space of queer inclusivity within western European frameworks. The Vogue Ballroom, which imitates a fashion runway where performers walk to the end of the aisle and present themselves to judges, is transfigured into a royal ceremony. The commentator, described by Bailey as, the keeper of history and arbiter of taste for the Ballroom community, is now employed as a Herald for the jousting Voguers.¹⁰⁵ Mizrahi and Mugler’s figures embody the position of the *Vitruvian Man*, flaunting a new kind of perfection through the anti-normative disjuncture of race, gender, and sexuality through their performance (fig 47 & 48). I argue that these environments employ Ballroom pageants as historical processions, while reorienting the two frameworks to present a new kind of body and power. Muñoz elaborates,

Performance is capable of providing a ground level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere. Disidentificatory performance willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the “real.”... Disidentificatory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world. This reiteration builds worlds. It proliferates “reals,” or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for potential oppositional counterpublics.¹⁰⁶

Newsome’s surrealist designs that enameled the collages discussed in Chapter Two, are employed in this world making. Mizrahi’s embodiment of the Archbishop Cardinal (fig 45), through the coat of arms and the final performance in *ICON*, flirtatiously

¹⁰⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota Press, 1999), 86.

¹⁰⁵ Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 197.

challenges masculine conceptions of heraldry and conservative ideals of the Catholic Church while utilizing their iconography and decorative vocabulary. The dome's focal point, which is considered to be the junction between Heaven and Earth, illuminates the Voguers' figures. Flashing with white light like a strobe on a dance floor, Newsome morphs the divisions between divinely iconic religious figures and Icons of the Ballroom community. Furthermore, Mugler and Mizrahi's suspension above the domes, a space we understand as deeply concave, suggests that their bodies transcend the rules of gravity that constrain normative corporeality. These videos, as Newsome states, "queer all the things that we know, because everything converges at some point anyway."¹⁰⁷ The bodies of the Vogue performers collide and then are abstractly mirrored across the architecture and background of the surreal scenery. Their abstracted corporeality literally reforms these spaces, reflecting their authority and autonomy from place, space, and history. Newsome's bodily, environmental, religious, and heraldic distortions directly challenge power and reconstruct the 'real' moving beyond queer and straight.

Utopia and disidentity are also at play in the gender signals Mizrahi, Mugler, and Ebony execute throughout *KNOT* and *ICON*. Both Mizrahi and Mugler are cisgender males that would be categorized within the Ballroom community's largest category, Butch Queen, meaning that one can be very masculine or very feminine or both simultaneously.¹⁰⁸ Mugler's medallion performance in *KNOT* embodies the pain and

¹⁰⁷ Sargent, "Interview: Artist Rashaad Newsome Discusses His "Knot" Film in the Brooklyn Museum's "Killer Heels" Group Exhibition."

¹⁰⁸ Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 44.

pleasure the expensive red-soled Louboutins signify (fig 32).¹⁰⁹ The mixed emotions that are connected to the fetishized objects replicate how Mugler's soft Femme performance is disturbed as he whips his body and spreads his legs to grab his groin. This interruption in gender play is used as a way to undermine the viewer's assumptions.¹¹⁰ Mugler's performance and queer fluidity force traditional male and female traits to cohabitate without collapsing.

Fantasy and passing transcend the body's corporeal trappings during Ebony's bombastic solo performance in *ICON* (fig 49 & 50). As a Femme Queen in the Ballroom community, (meaning transgender women in various stages of male to female gender transition) Ebony's performance aims to embody the feminine while disregarding gender binaries. Her movements are sharp, articulated, and more masculine than any other performers'. When Ebony whips her hair, masking her face, it is aggressively energetic like Vogue Dramatics, but her hand performance caresses her curves, reinforcing the female fluidity of Soft Femme that her speed lacks. Ebony's feminine reality is further complicated when her figure is engulfed in a silhouette of flame, phantasmically embodying the power of her gestures. The explosions, for Newsome are a direct homage to the intensity of the forms dancers create upon the floor in competition.¹¹¹ Her explosive figure is a pure embodiment of fantasy and celebration that Vogue, religious, and heraldic symbolism gestures towards, and is a final denial of the body as a contained entity.

¹⁰⁹ Antwaun Sargent, "Post-Black Art in the Age of Hip-Hop," *VICE*, December 12, 2014, <http://www.vice.com/read/post-black-art-in-the-age-of-hip-hop-123>.

¹¹⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 81.

¹¹¹ Rashaad Newsome, Interviewed by Betty Lou Starnes, New York NY, February 13, 2015.

The movements of Newsome's performers inhabit several messages that link the spiritual drive of religious space into the subversive gender empowerment of Vogue Femme, and the symbolic authority of Western art and architecture. Vogue Femme is the language Newsome chooses to translate power and queer fantasy outside of the Ballroom community. The transformative property of dance and the fluidity of the Ballroom community provide Newsome with the means necessary to reimagine queer desire as unrestrained. His investments as a historian of artistic, cultural, and subcultural communities builds alternative spaces that create layered critiques on the visibility of queer desire within the larger constructs of masculinity in the hip-hop community. These phantasmic spaces imagine a new world making, which melds the masculine into the feminine, the secular into the spiritual, and the kinetic energy of dance into its fixed surroundings.

Bibliography

- "2010 Whitney Biennial." *Whitney Museum of American Art*. Accessed May 7, 2015.
<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/2010Biennial>.
- Adams, Cey, and Bill Adler. *DEFinition: The Art and Design of Hip-Hop*. 1st edition. New York: Harper Design, 2008.
- "Artist Bio: Rashaad Newsome (b. 1979, New Orleans,..." *Art Breaks*. Accessed October 25, 2014. <http://artbreaks.tumblr.com/post/19973117278/artist-bio-rashaad-newsome-b-1979-new-orleans>.
- Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- — —. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies* 37, no. 2 (July 1, 2011): 365–86.
- "B-Boy I Define." *Dictionary.com*. Accessed May 7, 2015.
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/b-boy>.
- "B-Boying I Define." *Dictionary.com*. Accessed May 7, 2015.
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/b-boying>.
- Bedingfeld, Henry, Peter Gwynn-Jones, and Earl Marshal. *Heraldry*. Seacaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books INC, 1993.
- Bernstein, Robin. *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- "Biggie Smalls." *Biography*. Accessed March 7, 2015.
<http://www.biography.com/people/biggie-smalls-20866735>.
- Bird, Cathy. "Is There a 'Post-Black' Art? Investigating the Legacy of the Freestyle Show." *Art Papers* 26, no. 6 (2002): 34–39.
- Blereau, Laura. "Freestyle." *Guernica*, March 17, 2014.
<https://www.guernicamag.com/art/freestyle/>.
- "Bling I Define." *Dictionary.com*. Accessed February 27, 2015.
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/bling>.

- Campbell, Mary Schmidt. "African American Art in a Post-Black Era." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 3 (November 1, 2007): 317–30. doi:10.1080/07407700701621541.
- Catlin, Roger. "Rashaad Newsome's Bling at Atheneum." *Hartford Courant*. February 3, 2011, sec. CALENDAR. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/849738142>.
- Cembalest, Robin. "Voguing Meets Drawing, and the Results Are Spectacular | ARTnews." *ARTnews*, March 13, 2014. <http://www.artnews.com/2014/03/13/vogue-meets-drawing-in-rashaad-newsome-performance/>.
- Closs, Wyatt. "A Personal View: Seeing and Being Seen." *The Independent Weekly*. February 22, 1995.
- Cooks, Bridget. "New York to L.A. Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art, 1994-1995." In *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum*, 110–34. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011.
- Coss, Peter R., and Maurice Hugh Keen. *Heraldry, Pageantry, and Social Display in Medieval England*. Boydell Press, 2002.
- "Crunk Cup." *Urban Dictionary*. Accessed February 27, 2015. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Crunk+Cup>.
- "Definition of Do-Rag." Accessed March 16, 2015. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/do-rag>.
- Dupre, Jeff. *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*. Documentary, Short, Biography, 2014.
- Duray, Dan. "Xu Bing, Mark Bradford, Sam Gilliam, Maya Lin, Julie Mehretu, Pedro Reyes, and Kehinde Wiley Win U.S. Department of State Medal of Arts." *ARTnews*, January 15, 2015.
- Ferguson, Cecil. *African American Representations of Masculinity*, 2002.
- Forman, Murray, and Mark Anthony Neal, eds. *That's the Joint!: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*. 2 edition. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Geoghegan, Eddie. "Coats of Arms in Ireland and from Around the World." Accessed May 7, 2015. <http://www.heraldry.ws/heraldry/>.
- "Gifted and Talented Students." *Louisiana Department of Education*, n.d. <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/academics/gifted-and-talented-students>.

- Golden, Thelma. *How Art Gives Shape to Cultural Change*. TED Talk, 2009.
http://www.ted.com/talks/thelma_golden_how_art_gives_shape_to_cultural_change?language=en.
- Golden, Thelma, Henry Louis Gates, and bell hooks. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. Edited by Thelma Golden. First Edition. New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994.
- Hamilton, Jack. "The Beatles. Bob Dylan. Biggie Smalls." *Slate*, September 11, 2014.
http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2014/09/ready_to_die_twenty_years_after_the_notorious_b_i_g_s_debut_we_re_still.html.
- "Heraldry Symbols & What They Mean." *Hall Of Names*, n.d.
<http://www.hallofnames.org.uk/heraldry-symbols-what-they-mean>.
- hooks, bell. "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat." *Art in America* 81, no. 6 (June 1993): 68–75, 117–19.
- — —. "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional." *Lenox Avenua: Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 65–72.
- Hunt, Kenya. "How Voguing Came Back into Vogue." *The Guardian*, November 18, 2014.
<http://www.theguardian.com/fashion/fashion-blog/2014/nov/18/-sp-vogueing-dance-came-back-into-vogue-madonna>.
- Jackson, Johnathan David. "The Social World of Voguing." *Journal for the Antropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 2002): 26–42.
- Jovanovic, Rozalia. "Rashaad Newsome's Hip Hop Heraldry." *Flavorwire*, May 6, 2011.
<http://flavorwire.com/176992/rashaad-newsomes-hip-hop-heraldry>.
- Kastner, Jeffrey, Thelma Golden, and Michael Paul Britto. *Frequency: Studio Museum in Harlem*. New York, N.Y.: Studio Museum Harlem, 2005.
- Ligon, Glenn, Thelma Golden, Patrick Murphy, and Richard Meyer. *Glenn Ligon: Unbecoming*. Philadelphia: ICA Philadelphia, 1998.
- "Marlborough Gallery — Rashaad Newsome Biography." *Marlborough Gallery*. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.marlboroughgallery.com/galleries/new-york/artists/rashaad-newsome/biography>.
- Marshall, Richard. *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992.

- McDonald, James. "International Heraldry." *Castles and Manor Houses*, October 1, 2010.
<http://www.internationalheraldry.com/#supporters>.
- McLendon, Matthew. *Beyond Bling: Voices of Hip Hop in Art*. Sarasota, Fla.; London: Scala Arts Publishers Inc., 2011.
- Morse, Trent. "Hip-Hop Heraldry." *ARTnews* 110, no. 9 (October 1, 2011): 66–68.
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press, 2009.
- — —. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. U of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Murray, Derek Conrad. "Kehinde Wiley: Splendid Bodies." *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2007, no. 21 (September 21, 2007): 90–101. doi:10.1215/10757163-21-1-90.
- — —. "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle." *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (July 1, 2004): 5–19. doi:10.2307/4134516.
- Newsome, Rashaad, Amani Olu, and Marlborough Chelsea (Gallery). *Rashaad Newsome: Herald*. New York: Marlborough Chelsea, 2011.
- Paris Is Burning: On Race in America*, 2007.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guh29l2_Tu8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
- "Rashaad Newsome." *Artsy*. Accessed January 30, 2015.
<https://www.artsy.net/artist/rashaad-newsome>.
- Ryzik, Melena. "Blending Hip-Hop And Heraldry." *The New York Times*, October 23, 2011, sec. Section AR; Column 0; Arts and Leisure Desk; ART.
- Saddik, Annette J. "Rap's Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage." *TDR (1988-)* 47, no. 4 (December 1, 2003): 110–27.
- Sargent, Antwaun. "Interview: Artist Rashaad Newsome Discusses His 'Knot' Film in the Brooklyn Museum's 'Killer Heels' Group Exhibition." *Complex*, September 3, 2014.
<http://www.complex.com/style/2014/09/rashaad-newsome-interview>.
- — —. "Post-Black Art in the Age of Hip-Hop I." *VICE*, December 12, 2014.
<http://www.vice.com/read/post-black-art-in-the-age-of-hip-hop-123>.
- — —. "Rashaad Newsome's Sixth Conductor." *Interview Magazine*, December 9, 2014.
<http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/rashaad-newsomes-sixth-conductor>.

Schmitter, Amy M. "Representation and the Body of Power in French Academic Painting." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no. 3 (July 1, 2002): 399–424. doi:10.2307/3654315.

Schoolly D. "The Meaning of GOLD." *SPIN Media LLC*, October 1988.

Schur, Richard. "Post-Soul Aesthetics in Contemporary African American Art." *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2007): 641–54.

Smith, Roberta. "Review: 'Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic' at the Brooklyn Museum." *The New York Times*, February 19, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/20/arts/design/review-kehinde-wiley-a-new-republic-at-the-brooklyn-museum.html>.

Solomon, Deborah. "Kehinde Wiley Puts a Classical Spin on His Contemporary Subjects." *The New York Times*, January 28, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/arts/design/kehinde-wiley-puts-a-classical-spin-on-his-contemporary-subjects.html>.

Tate, Greg. "The Golden Age." *Village Voice*, May 15, 2001.
<http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-05-15/news/the-golden-age/>.

"The Basillica of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral." *Historical Points of St. Patrick's Old Cathedral*, n.d. <http://oldcathedral.org/history/>.

Thompson, Krista. "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop." *The Art Bulletin* 91, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 481–505.

Von Volborth, Carl-Alexander. *The Art of Heraldry*. New York, N.Y: Blandford Press, 1987.

Wadsworth Atheneum. *Rashaad Newsome / MATRIX 161*, 2011.
<http://vimeo.com/22305195>.

What Is Voguing? (Paris Is Burning), 2013.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNdgYBCnW-8&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

White, Miles. *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap, and the Performance of Masculinity*. 1st Edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Wiley Todd, Ellen. "Two Georges and Us: Multiple Perspectives on the Image." *American Art* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 13–17.

Wong, Ryan. "Rashaad Newsome Is Having a Ball." *Hyperallergic*, March 11, 2014.
<http://hyperallergic.com/113664/rashaad-newsome-is-having-a-ball/>.

Word, Tanekeya. "Interview: Rashaad Newsome." *Saint Heron*, October 24, 2013.
<http://saintheron.com/art/saint-heron-x-rashaad-newsome/>.

Figures



Figure 1: Exhibition view of *L. egends S. tatemnts S. tars* at Marlborough NY 2014, courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 2: Basquiat, *King Charles the First*, 1982, Acrylic, oil blanket, wood 66 ¾ x 60



Figure 4: Lyle Ashton Harris, *Constructs #10*, 1989



Figure 5: Robert H Colescott, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware*: Page from an American History Textbook, 1975



Figure 6: Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2008, Oil on canvas, 132 x 300



Figure 7: *Seal of Roger de Quincy, Earl of Winchester (ca. 1235)*



Figure 8: Royal College Of Arms ca. 1670 London



Figure 9: Beyoncé, Mrs. Carter Tour Press Photo, 2013



Figure 10: Rapper Lil John, 2012



Figure 11: *Sun King*, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 12: Barron Claiborne, *Biggie*, 1997

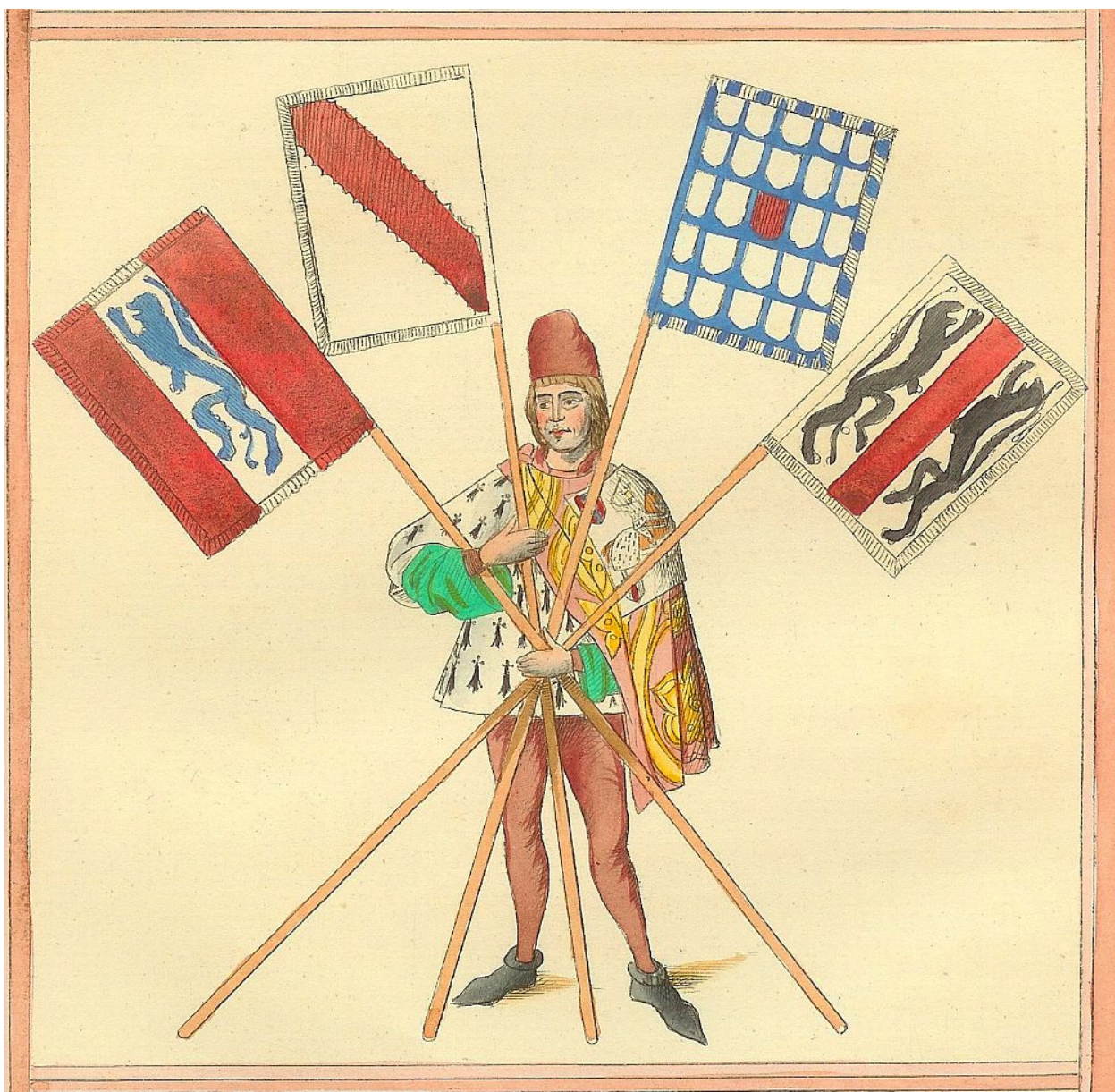


Figure 13: Olivier de la Marche, Hardoun de la Jaille, Anthoine de la Sale, *Traicté de la Forme et Devis comme on Faict les Tournois*, 1878



Figure 14: *Barberini Coat of Arms*, St. Peter's Basilica, Rome 17th Century



Figure 15: *Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 16: Old St Patrick's Cathedral New York NY, 1815



Figure 17: *Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 18: *Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 19: *Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 20: *FESS, Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

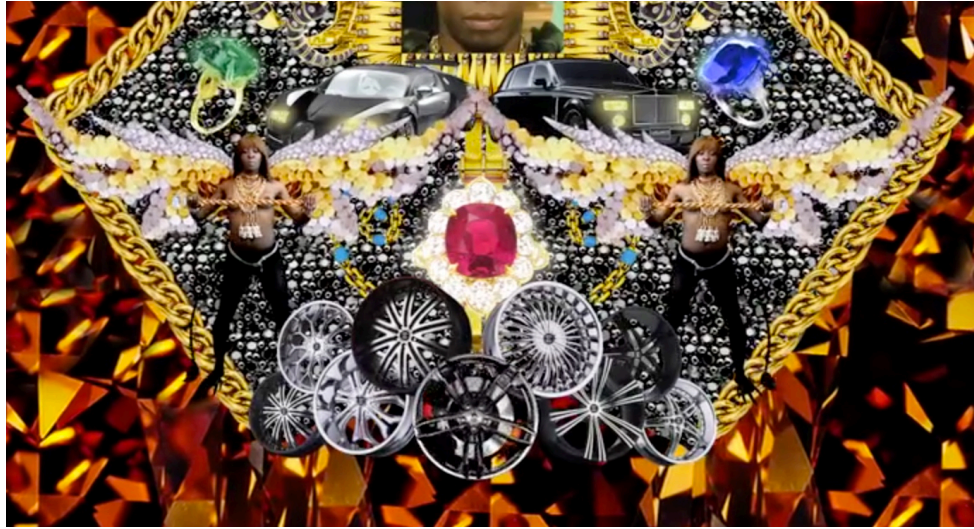


Figure 21: *Herald*, Single Channel Video Still, 2011, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 22: Heraldic Gryphon



Figure 23: Wells Cathedral, Wells, England, 1176-1490



Figure 24: Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp Belgium, 1352-1521



Figure 25: London Oratory of Saint Philip Neri, London England, 1884



Figure 26: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 27: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

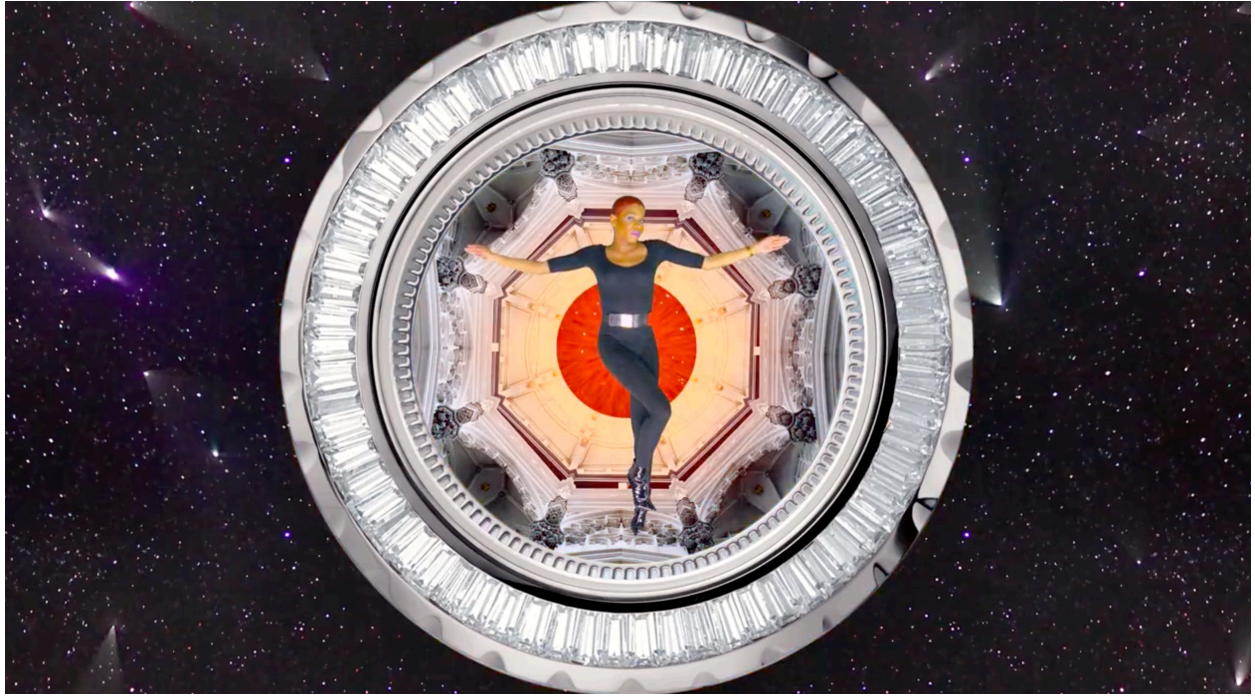


Figure 28: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

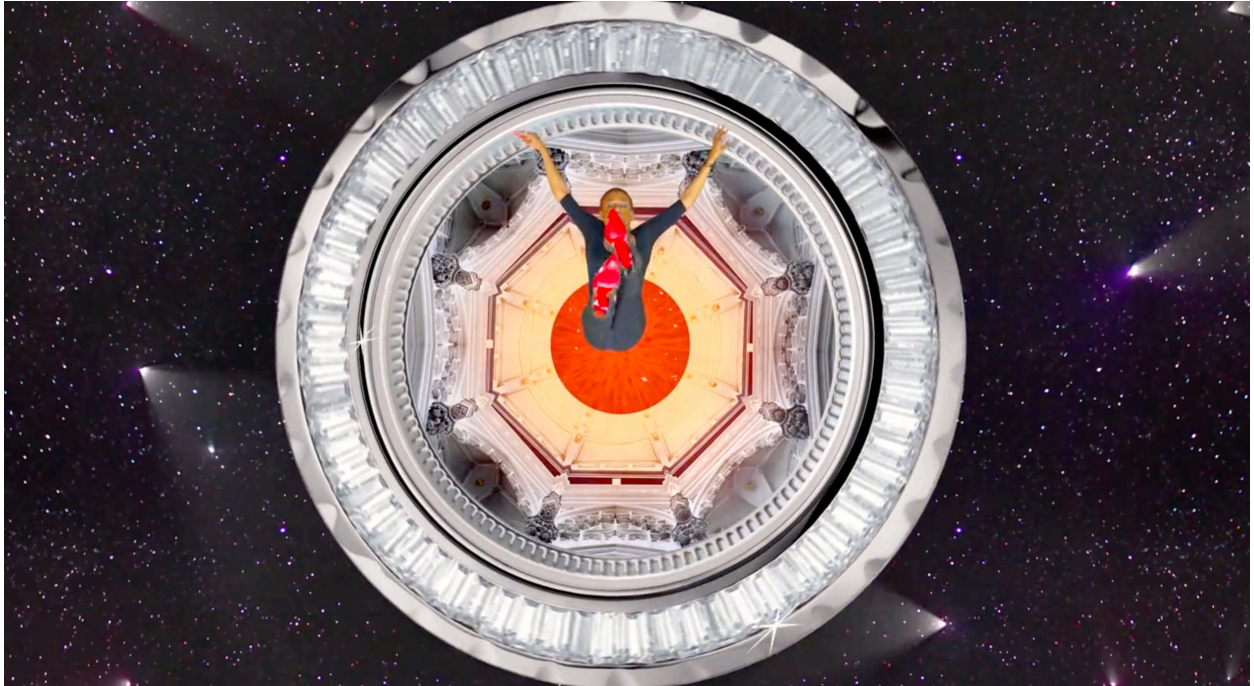


Figure 29: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

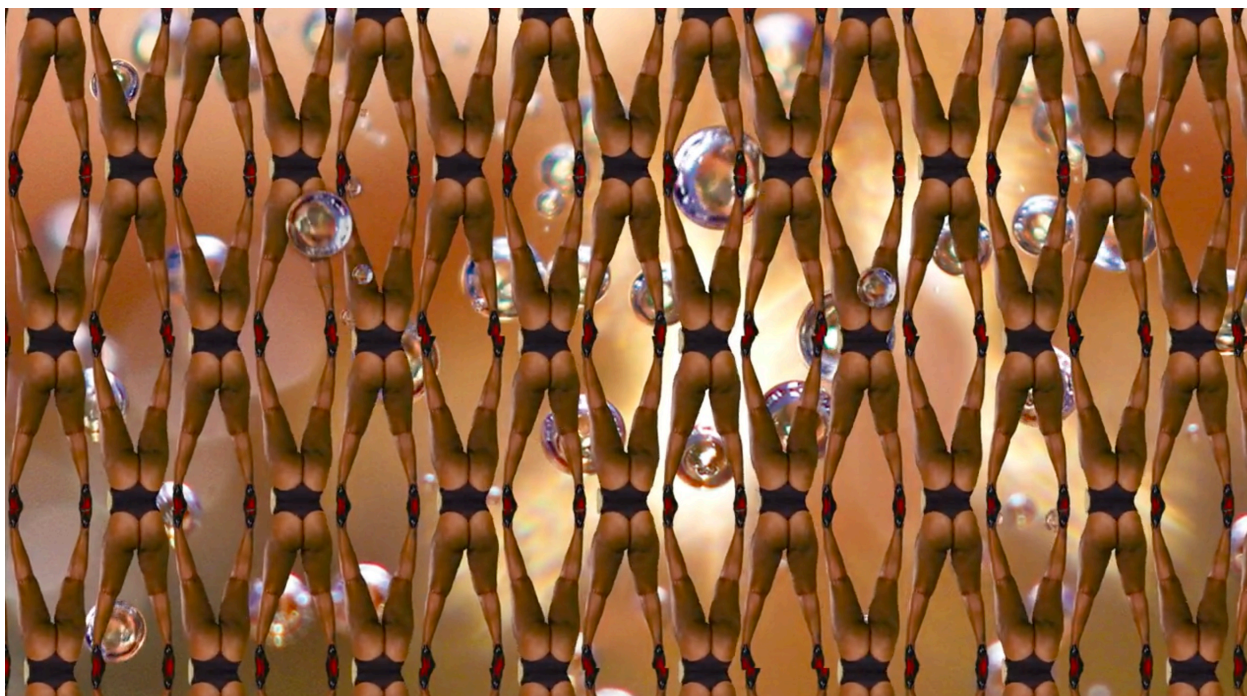


Figure 30: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 31: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 32: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 33: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 34: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 35: *KNOT*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 36: Church of Santa Maria, Belem Portugal, 1522

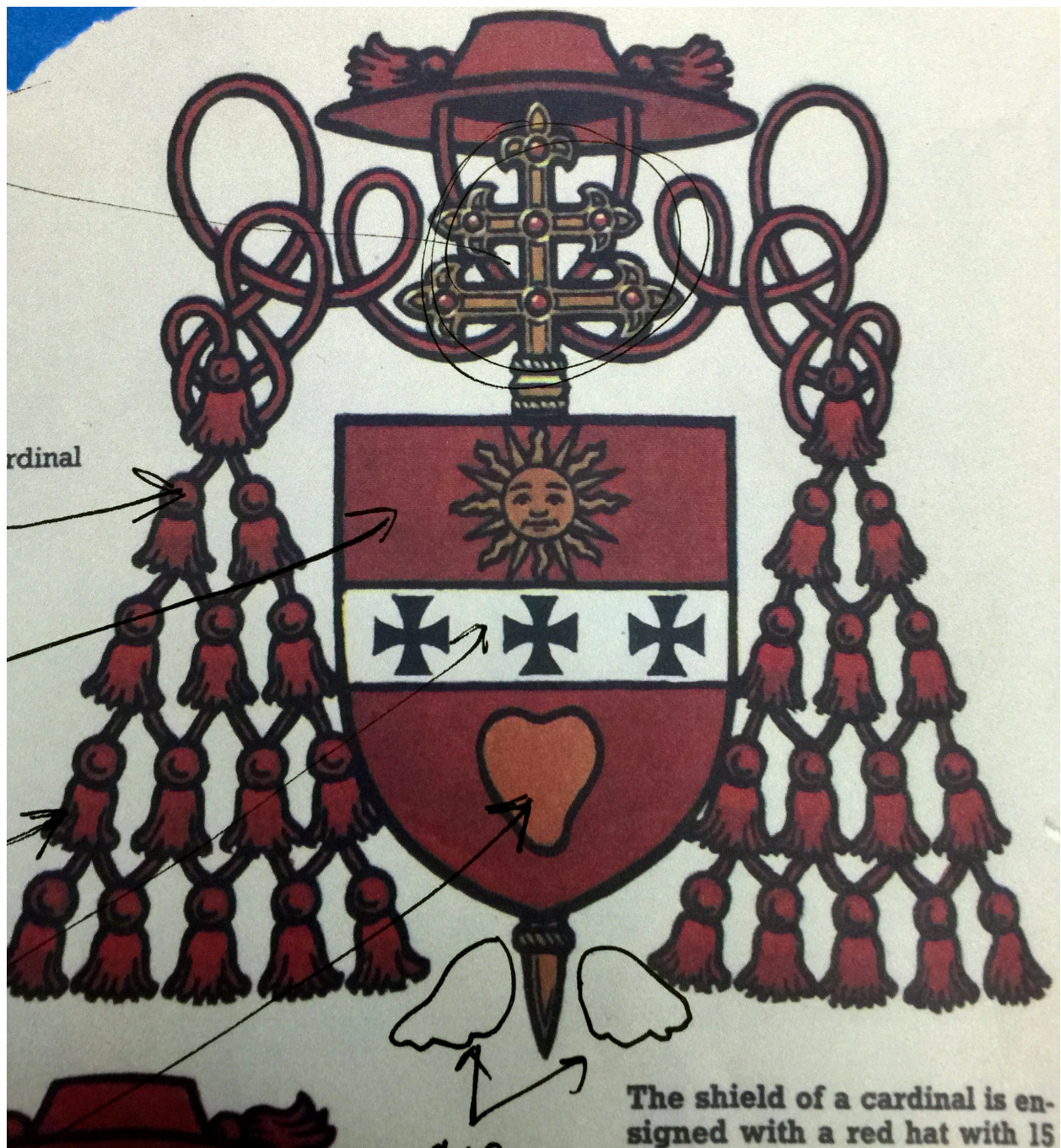


Figure 37: 1130 Coat Of Arms of the Belgian Cardinal Mercier Archbishop of Mechlin,
Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 38: Sant'Andrea della Valle, Rome, Italy, 1608



Figure 39: Szeged Synagogue, Szeged, Hungary, 1907

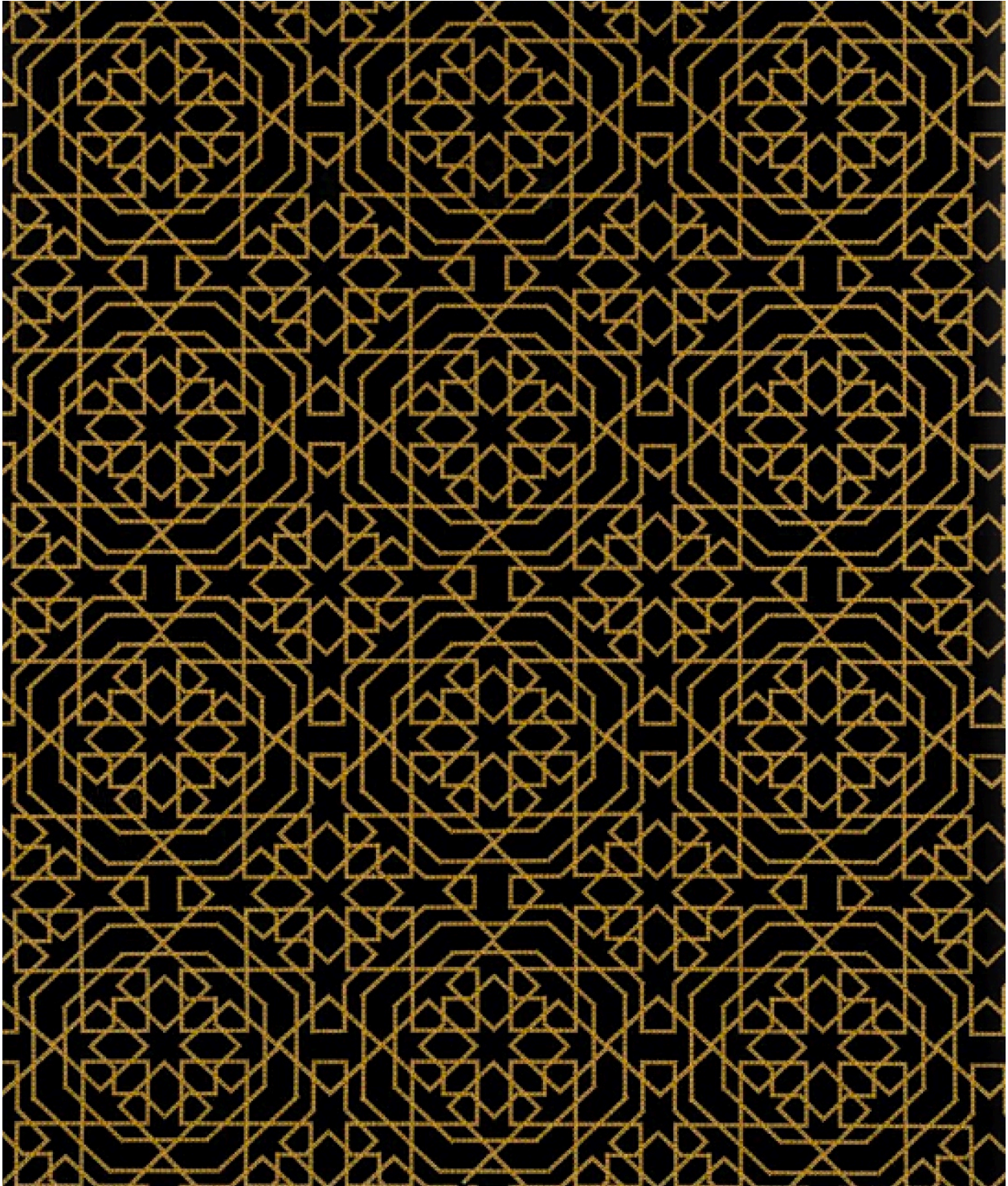


Figure 40: *Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradigms*, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

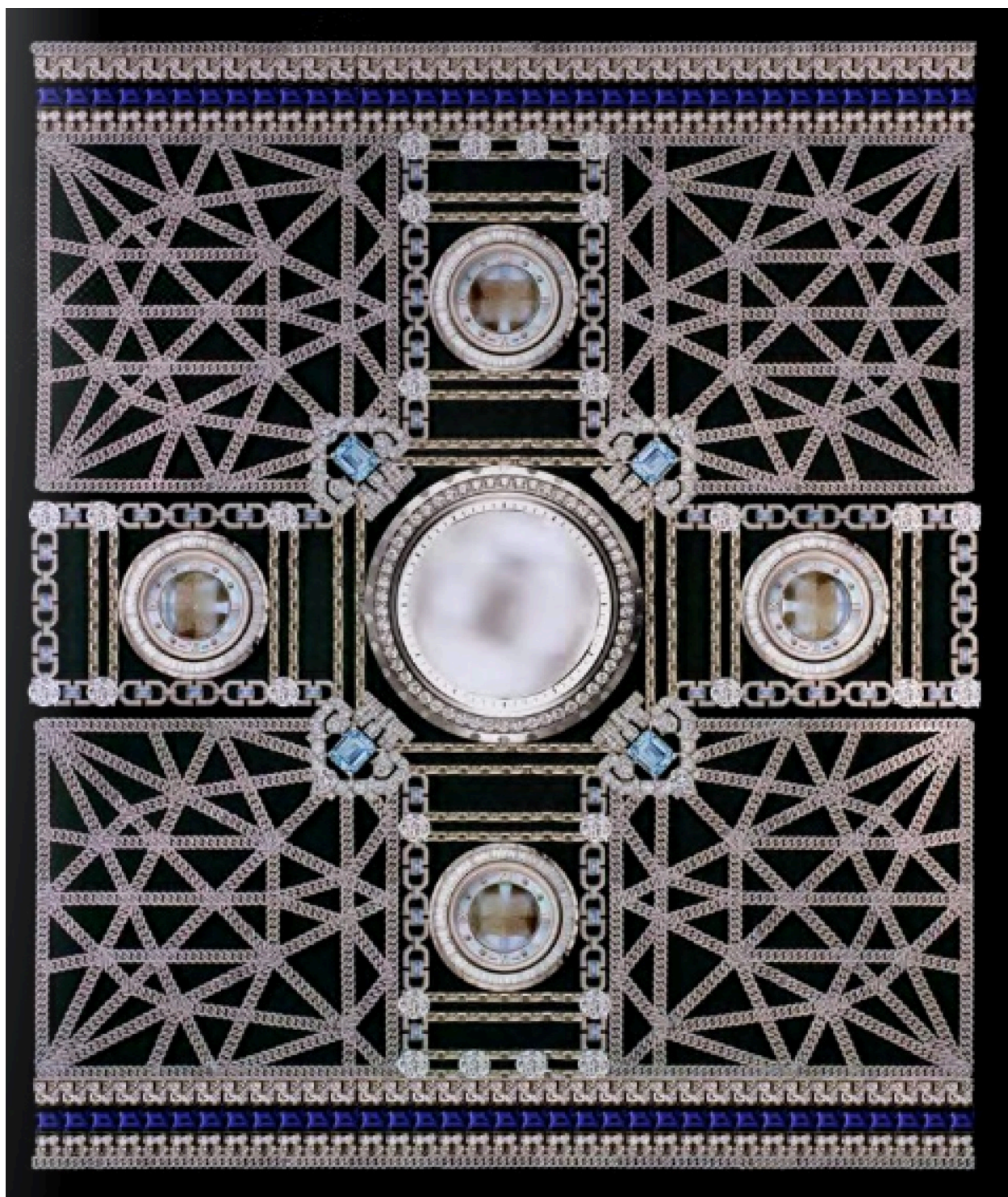


Figure 41: *Ballroom Floor*, Collage, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 42: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 43: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

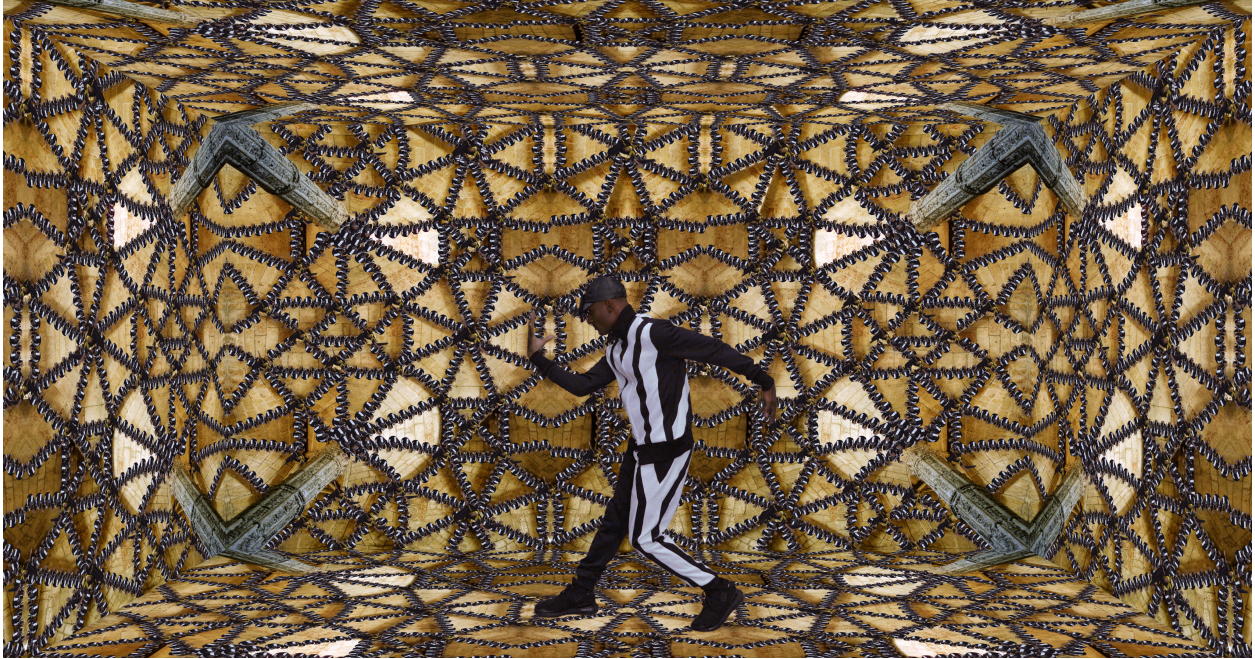


Figure 44: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 45: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 46: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 47: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

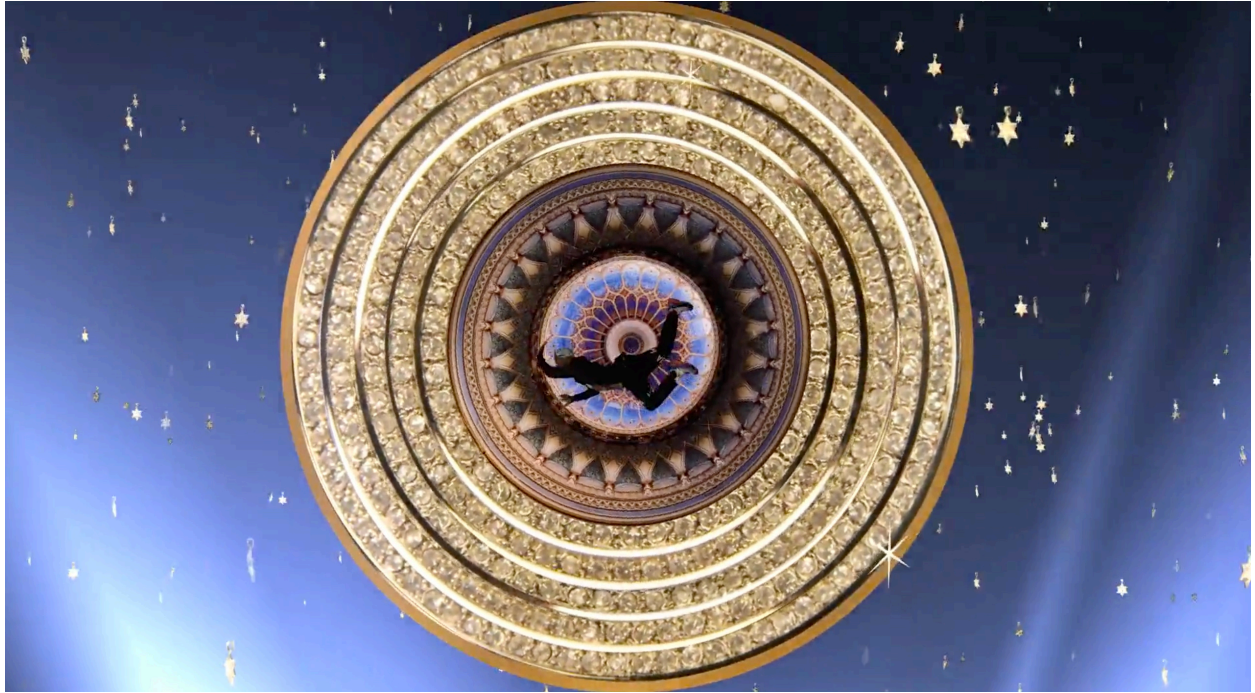


Figure 48: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

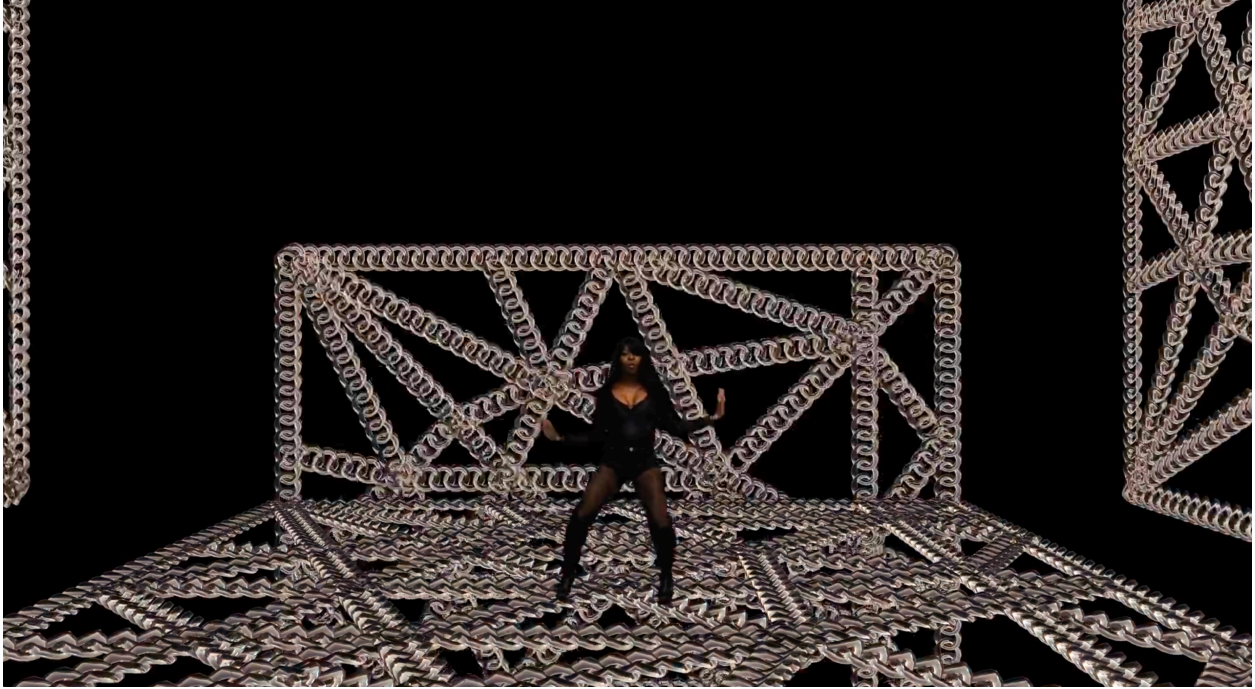


Figure 49: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

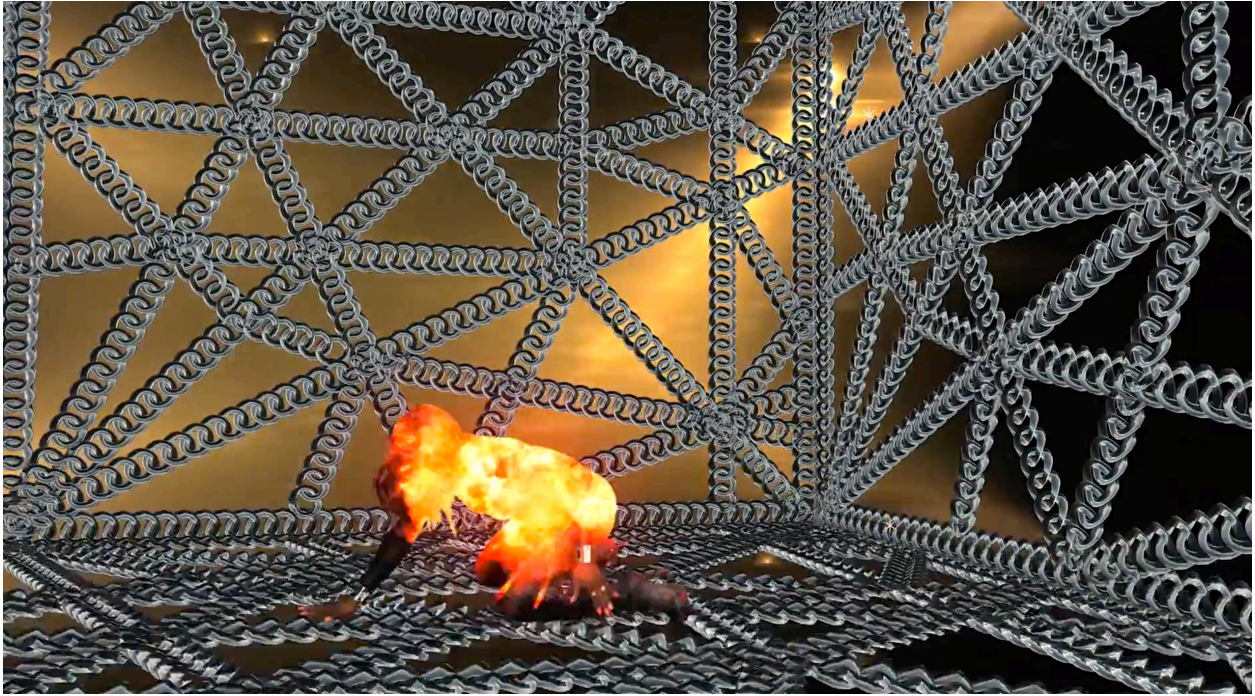


Figure 50: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

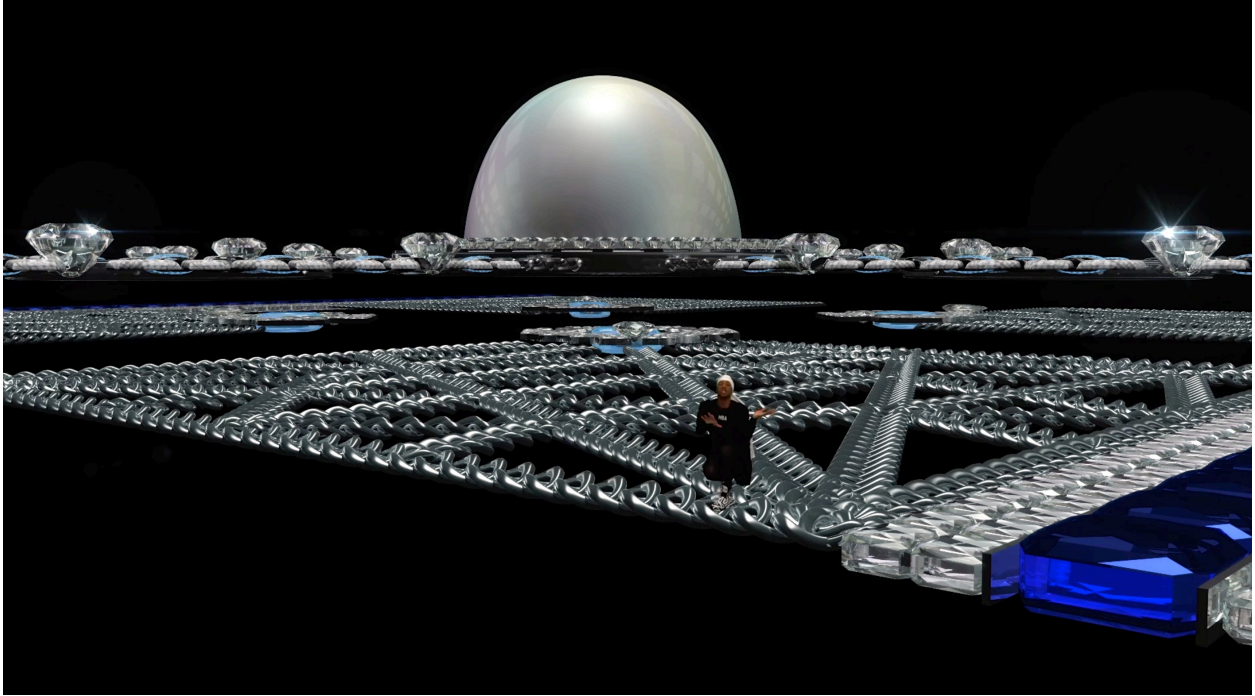


Figure 51: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

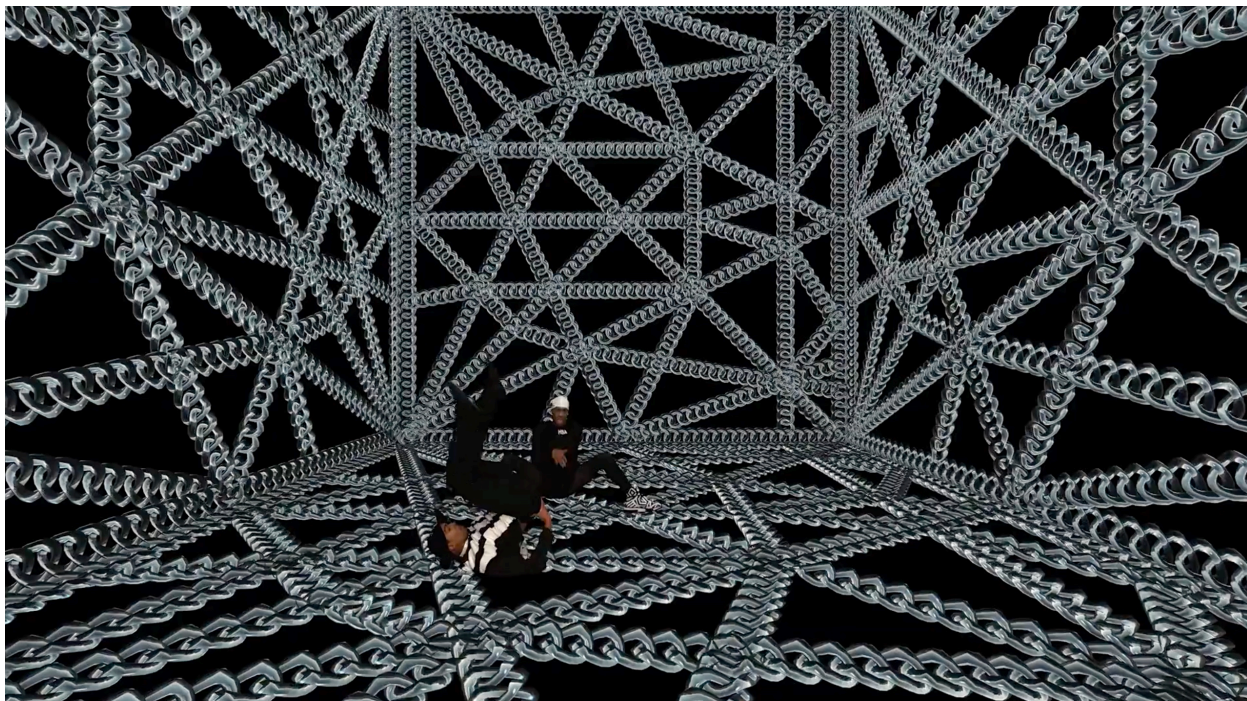


Figure 52: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

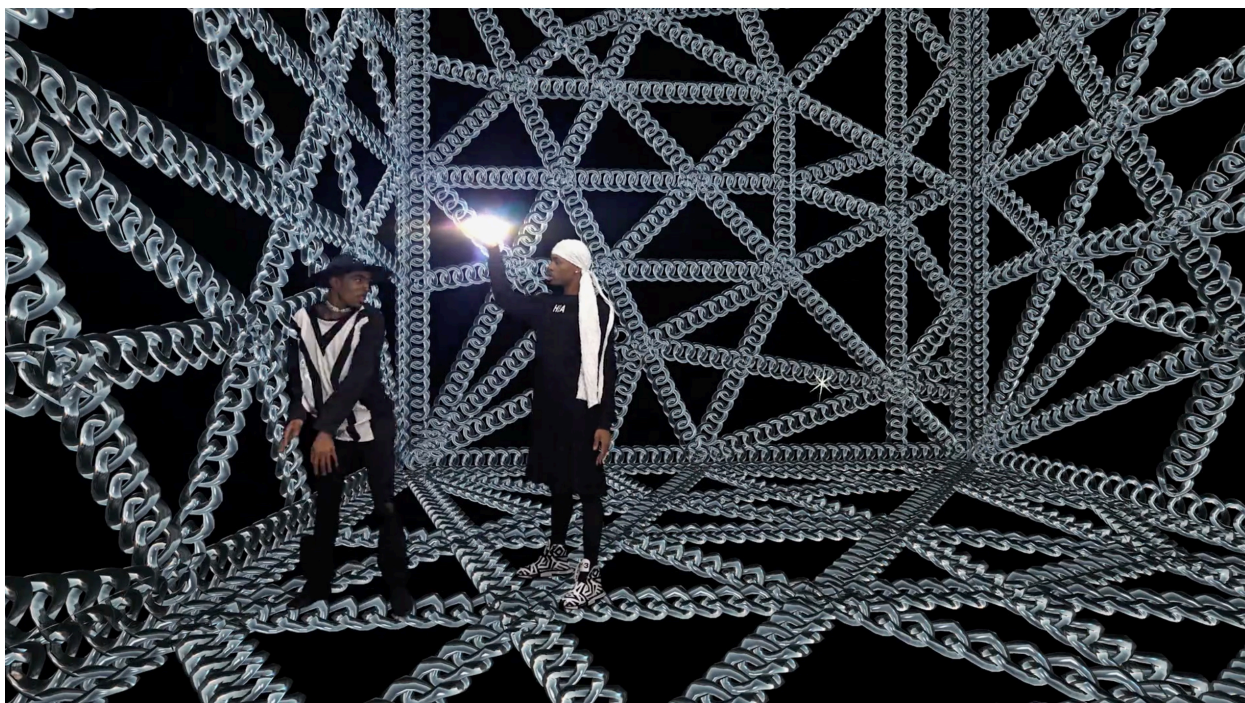


Figure 53: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

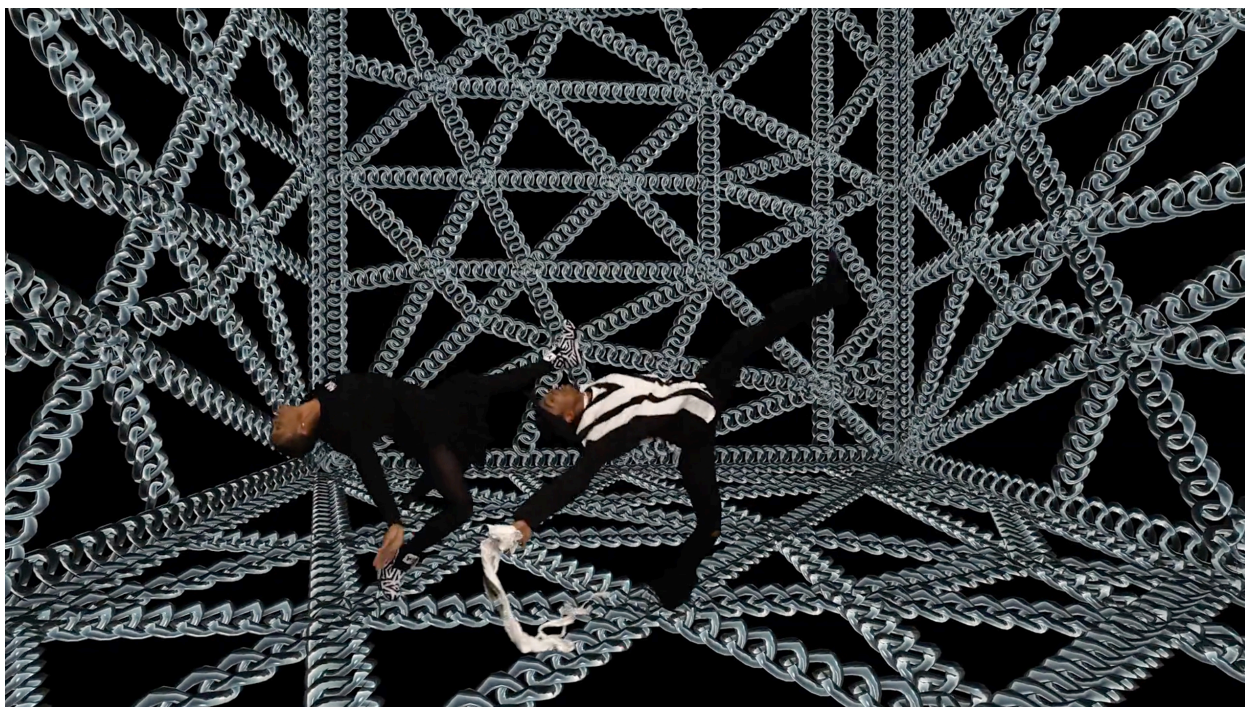


Figure 54: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome



Figure 55: *ICON*, Single Channel Video Still, 2014, Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome

Appendix

Transcription of *KNOT*, Single Channel Video, 2014

Kevin JZ Prodigy—

How should I do when I'm looking at you?
These red bottoms hurtin' let a bitch through
Clicking my heels call me Dor-thy
Me going home to the par-ty
Me say yes oh I want a drink
Get in my heels two shots let me think
Heels six inches I stand tall
Work seven inches no trip and fall
Super star super star model bad bitch
Sinister sinister serve it bitch, oh!

Rashaad Newsome—

Oh shit now Rashaad's out the gate
King of arms that made the swag the mix-tape
I needed a killa so I let them eat cake
Fresh out the oven you cats is half baked
I'm a Banji cunt in a bad mood
My girl is pussy cunt cat food
My minds in whole different realm
Iced out fleur de lis up in the helm
Flows is hotter than a motherfuckin kiln
I'm from that street called Elm
How I cut up the track got these artists overwhelmed

Kevin JZ Prodigy—

I give you what you want no questions from me
Rosé champagne feeling 'pretty
Sexy give me what you want
Sexy super nova cunt
around the way all the way this is how we play
Listen to my daddy hell noway another day
bitches feeling Kevin from Philly to the Bay
Rashaad and Kevin just a typical day
Aerial aerial my vogue is so ethereal
I'm so surround, y'all bitches in stereo
Wake up in the morning to a fresh bowl of cereal
It's your best bet not to be adversarial
Shit like that always ends in a burial
Bitched claiming their the voice please that hysterical
ha ha ha ha yeah WHAT!

Cakes Da Killa—

She so appealing might fuck you on the ceiling
How you feeling? Missed calls when I'm peeling
Drop a couple stacks, if you still in that's your business
Wannabee stars, lifestyle or fictitious
I'm just here to put it on for these bitches
Got a couple coins, write songs for these bitches
Tell these bitches chill, I drop bombs on these bitches
Thighs so mean when I walk it's malicious
Three wishes? fuck your man and his wishes
Gettem out of pocket sew 'em up no stitches
I'm that bitch and these niggas all know that
In a Kodak eight inches just to show that

Ian Isiah—

Coming through stomping in them nasty red bottoms
Kevin cakes the king of arms oh that's a problem
The way I work the hook. Make your favorite singer past tense
Now let the prodigy commence, oh!

Kevin JZ Prodigy—

Now what are you having? It's confidence
Step in the room not having it
Dressed to impress from head to toe
Full of successes you already know
Stopping down the runway tearing up the floor
Avalanche avalanche coming through the door
This is how it looks, this is how it feels
When you serve it in your, what? Your killer killer heels
Chanting:

Brrrrr kat give it to me, brrrrr kat serve it to me, brrrrr
kat give to me give it to me yeah!

(The rhythmic chanting continues, until the video ends.)

Appendix II

Transcript of interview between Betty Lou Starnes and Rashaad Newsome at Newsome's Studio, Queens NY, February 13, 2015. Newsome was given copies of the questions before the interview, he responded during the interview.

- BLS: Looking back on your early exposure to artistic culture in New Orleans, how do you feel the talented arts program and NOCCA (New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts) shaped that experience? How do you feel your creative process has been influenced by being from there?
- RN: In terms of NOCCA, I feel like the way it effected me was after I went to Lawndale High School in St. Charles Parish. Then I got into a talented art program, at which point I had a teacher called Madeline Faust, a well know public sculptor, who was the first real working artist I ever met. My father was an artist but he was a more of a singer so it was a different practice. She was the first working visual artist that I had met, and we became fast friends. I eventually started to assist her and she was the one who got me into NOCCA. That's how all of that happened, and in a sense, it just opened up the idea [to me] that being an artist was a reality because it wasn't a reality where I was coming from. Then I guess in other ways coming from New Orleans and I began to see its influence on my work and came to terms with that in 2012. When I went to do the show at NOMA (New Orleans Museum of Art) a lot of the work that references heraldry, which I had been doing for years, came from a time when I was working and researching in Europe. As part of the Great Hall Series, you are supposed to use the landscape as inspiration for the work you make for the exhibition. So I went back to new Orleans and spent time there and really saw the city with new eyes. I was able to realize how much the city really did influence my work. One of the conceptual underpinnings of my performance and video work is composing improvisation, which is a key component of jazz. So with New Orleans being the birthplace of jazz, I think [my video process] is coming [from] here. I think also my interest in performance and how I construct my performative gestures comes from growing up in this landscape where performance is so readily available and always around. The sense of pageantry in my work and ritual, the sense of color, all of these things play into my experience as a New Orleans native. Building community through the practice of the work is also coming from New Orleans. When I left New Orleans, there was only NOMA, CAC (Contemporary Arts Center), and the Julia street galleries, and that was it. It was really hard to find a place to show your work if you were a young contemporary artist, which ultimately influenced my decision to leave. It was a frustrating situation to be in, but my friends and I would have shows in our houses with bands. That scene that we were creating at that time turned into what we know as the Bywater galleries and the raw exhibition spaces, which are now super organized compared to

when we began this process a decade ago. I think that out of necessity when I was a younger artist, I had to build community [around the] artwork just to exhibit, and that has stayed with me in a way. That community-building is really a part of the spirit of new Orleans.

BLS: Would you expand on the decision to pursue a degree in art history rather than visual arts at Tulane? What were your favorite subjects in art history?

RN: During my time at Tulane, I was always making work and taking studio art classes, but I chose art history because that was what I was most interested in. At that point, I hadn't really realized how to pursue a career as an artist so it just felt natural to pursue my interest in art history. Because of NOCCA and working with Madeline Faust, I felt like I already understood how to make and was pretty comfortable with the process of making. So it was more about just gaining knowledge. And I still feel that way, you know? I didn't go to grad school in New York, but studied film in a proper film school that wasn't about theory so much, but was about lighting, post-production, and cinematography. In a lot of ways [the training I learned there was] preparing [one] for the film industry. However, I was still making artwork, and using those new tools as a way of learning to make performance video and experimental videos.

BLS: There's something about the Talented Arts program in Louisiana, and especially the New Orleans area, that just does such a great job of teaching you to be a maker. When you get into a college or secondary degree that exposes you to theories and you begin to understand the history behind artists, coming from an artist perspective, it's really desirable. It's absolutely apparent in your work that this has been to your gain.

RN: I guess that's why there's always been this sense of looking back but forward at the same time because it comes from that training. Yeah it was definitely a practical choice that I still feel the same way about. You know if I went back to school I think about what I might study and it's never a fine arts program. I've visited enough schools and done enough crits that it's very clear to me that you cannot learn to be a maker, but you can learn to use tools. In the end, you either are a maker or you aren't, so for me I'm very comfortable making, and it's more about gaining the knowledge about what I'm making so that it's conceptually sound.

BLS: I really love you're investment in the blending of the arts. It's such a forward move to advocate for that, and how visual art isn't always visual, it doesn't have to be part of specific art scene. In previous interviews you have been enthusiastic about the hip-hop industry merging with contemporary art. How do you feel about rap moguls like Jay-Z performing at PACE? Or your own experience working with record labels like Saint Heron. Is that exciting for you?

RN: I think it is and it's really a practical thing too. I think the art world in itself, in all of its beauty and I love what I do and I love being a part of the art community, but it is flawed in a lot of ways. I love making work, but it's terrifying as a practitioner of art to think about that as your only mode of income. There's the studio practice and there is the canonized art world. To me these are two very different things,

and some people would like to say there is the studio practice, the canon, and the intellectual academia, but all of these things are communicating and a lot of the things that are at play there have nothing to do with the validity of work being made or anything. It's a lot of emotions and a lot of egos, so many things.

BLS: It's a lot of market too.

RN: Yeah but not even just market, though market is a huge part of it. As a person who makes work, it can be terrifying to think that this outlet is the only way to support yourself. In a way, it becomes practical when you think of things like sustainability, because there's not always going to be a museum that's going to collect and show your work. There won't always be a gallery that's going to collect and show your work or place your work. I think also being an artist today is very different from being an artist in the past with [the influence of] technology. My most formal training is in film and video. That already is putting me in a specific location in terms of being an artist and opens up a certain amount of doors in which I can express myself. I like the idea of entertaining ways to do that outside of the 'white box.' I always want to be a part of an intellectual dialogue, about work and a critique about work, but I don't know if I agree that the gallery and the museum are the only avenue to create that dialogue.

BLS: How would you situate your practice in the larger context of the art market? I'm thinking about performance artists Kalup Linzy, Jacolby Satterwhite, and painter Kehinde Wiley, how their process involves another kind of sampling from the music industry, the canon, and Vogue culture.

RN: I feel like we get lumped together a lot and that there is some crossover with the interest in this critique of the Renaissance era or this subversion of practices. I feel like Wiley's version is very much about painting and the medium is very much situated in that. It is about reinterpreting that practice and making the black body more visible. I don't hear much about the queer gaze in Wiley's work, but to me, that seems to be a part of it as well. I just don't ever really read anything that speaks to it. But for me, his work is also very representational, where I feel that my work is more abstract. I try to avoid saying my work is 'about' because it locks it in to a certain presentation. To me, to create is to make an object that produces an affect, and there is this propensity for us to deconstruct the object that produces this affect, but once you do that the object continues to produce affects. So the way I approach my work is from a very process-driven basis. When I talk about my work, I talk about what I'm thinking about when I'm making it, but never a direct 'what 'about' statement. I feel like that's what separates us. I recently challenged myself to think about if I had to say one thing that my work is about, because there are so many different mediums and sources, what would I choose? What I came to is that there is a soulfulness in the work, which is very much in line with black culture. At the same time, soul lacks fixed boundaries and really becomes a feeling. I think that soulfulness is very much a part of the energy of New Orleans. And I'm pulling together these disparate materials and creating that soulfulness. I think that's why the sonic components are so important in the work because sonic stimulation definitely lacks any type of

explanation and is more about visceral response. That's why there is always this tendency to incorporate the sonic component to the work as a whole. My work is so much in conversation with abstraction and performance, and in some ways minimalism, which makes our conversations very different. But, with us both being black males, relatively close to the same age, and having an interest in the Renaissance, by default we get lumped together. But I agree, like you said, that when you see the writing on my work it is so much about that surface level of heraldry. There are so many hidden meanings within the work that are missed in those writings. I feel like heraldry is the convenient and comfortable way to unpack it, but they don't really fully unpack the work. You can try to be more generous with your viewer and put things together to try to make it easier to unpack, but I feel like the way I build that it's clear that there are accessible points on several different levels, in terms of history, Medieval, heraldry, and the superficiality of pop culture.

BLS: There's a word I keep circulating around when I discuss the difference between your and Wiley's work and it comes back to this actionable feeling. There's this energy that resonates within your collages, video work, and performances that you make that just isn't as much of a part of the dialogue that Wiley's work interrogates. And I find that striking about the pieces, especially sonically. Having seen *Killer Heels*, it just draws you in with the deconstruction of bodies and candy colors that are so reflective of Mardi Gras pageantry and drag pageantry. It's one of those things that I challenge myself, as a writer, to go deeper into the narrative of your work beyond the 'hip-hop/heraldry' dialogue that has been perpetuated through the general reviews critics and bloggers have published thus far. It's important to hear you echo that, talking about the importance of affect verses 'what it's about' and not defining your artwork as a tool of strength.

BLS: Like the line in the *L.S.S.* catalog, heraldry inspires your performance with "macho tinges of menace." Thinking about your practice, how does your artwork interrogate the larger framework of black masculinities? What do you feel your work is doing theoretically for masculinities?

RN: I wrote up an answer for that one actually because it was the question that struck my inspiration the most, "The struggle for pride and political agency as well as the imperative to 'be a man' has been central to the lives of black males. Yet, what it means to be a black man—in terms of both racial and gender identity—has been subject to continual debate in public and academic spheres alike. My work brings together black "males" from various different communities to examine an alternatively demonized and mythologized black masculinity. Collectively, they offer a roadmap for new, progressive models of black masculinity that may chart the course for the future of black male identity." I really thought about that question, because it's not so much about looking at a predetermined idea of maleness. The thing is that the idea of maleness is so murky in my work because I work with a lot of trans people and people who are in various states of maleness. I think in a lot of ways the work challenges the menacing outmoded stereotypes of black males being thugs and scary, and turns

this aesthetic into a king or nobility. So turning the thug into a noble and changing that idea because hip-hop is a consistent reference in the work. And there is a certain bravado associated with the black male identity within hip-hop culture. Sinister tinges came from Veronica's text because *Saints and Centers*, for her, felt like a real play with *momento mori* within those particular pieces. To me, when I was thinking about making *Saints and Centers* for *L.S.S.*, the work was all really in conversation with Baroque architecture. I was thinking about religious spaces, how they are created to induce this sense of spiritual euphoria and they are designed to make you look up. So I felt like the video (*ICON*), as the centerpiece of *L.S.S.*, was the soundtrack for this sacred space, which moves between a religious space and a set of a ball that was in conversation with a dialogue about battling which started in *Herald*. How MCs battle, how voguers battle, how knights battle. The space was a visual battle, each image battling each other to create a color field, a form, and the background battling the foreground. The frame battling the picture plane. Each piece battling each other. *Saints and Centers* were the saints in the religious spaces that I created, the eyes looking up, mouths are agape, and they are in this space between desire, death, and transcendence.

BLS: I had a similar feeling walking into the exhibition and experiencing it. I was looking at the augmented bodies of *Saints and Centers* as half armed for battle, and half fire and hair. It was really interesting how the collages reflected your work with transgendered performers within your video and performance pieces. Compiling these anthropomorphic armatured figures and looking at the dancing figures within *ICON* hitting the floor and turning into fire, it was such a powerful moment and a transitive moment. I felt that that was a spiritual transcendence throughout the entire space, in the environment, in the body, and the imagery that replaces it. Is that something you feel as well?

RN: Yeah, actually the *L.S.S.* pieces in the reinterpreted Dutch frames are each named after a Legend Statement or Star in the Vogue community that I am a part of and have worked with in the past. A lot of the forms in those works are very inspired by performances that I have staged with them, or performances that they have done within the scene. I began working on those four pieces when I was in residence at the Headlands. I had just performed *FIVE* at the Drawing Center, and was editing the film as the first part of my residency. I was looking at a lot of stills, pulling images from their performances, and putting them on the wall. I wanted to bring the gestures they were doing in dance and make a collage work. That was a really conscious decision for the whole show that I felt like, in a lot of ways, my work was being compartmentalized into collage, video, and performance, and not being seen as a larger conversation through multiple mediums. To me they don't read as separate, but they are being understood as separate. I wanted to make a conscious decision to bring them all together. Recreating those forms from the dances into the collages through other materials and explosions made sense because I felt voguing was such an explosive dance form in itself. I equate it to heavy metal, it's just very fast and very hard. So it's a

really hard punch in the chest, and that energy of the dance really fit with the explosions. When you see the limbs flailing and hair whipping it's a contemporary way to mimic brush stroke. The works are very much in conversation with Surrealism and how dimension is created.

BLS: Your investigation through the *Conductor* Series deeply examines the influence and trends within the New York hip-hop scene, but some of the compositions that are a part of your video works really remind me of the New Orleans bounce scene. You're not staging the bodies in drag (or other states of gender play) to convince your viewer but to puzzle them, similar to the artist Big Freedia. Do you feel a connection to southern hip-hop or bounce culture for both your collage and video pieces?

RN: I feel like *KNOT* really relates to this, because the basis for the composition is the brown beat, which is the beat that is the basis for all bounce music. That beat was made by Triggaman for Cheeky Blakk, and so that was something I wanted to use. I also used that in the *Conductor* towards the end, which brings the *Conductor* into a conversation that isn't always New York centric. I feel like *Conductor* looks at hip-hop nationally because I'm using the radio station to mine that national popularity and steer away from my own biases in music. I wanted to be reflective of the masses and the radio station seemed to be perfect for that because the question I was proposing at the beginning of the project was, "Who seems to be the most epic MCs, in terms of the hip-hop genre" to oppose *Carmina Burana* as the most epic choral piece to date. It was done between 2005 and 2012, and throughout that time, you can see how southern hip-hop starts to become very prominent within hip-hop music. You can also see how certain things are more invested in by the industry, and hip-hop becoming the big business that is now, the biggest money making genre within music coming out of America.

BLS: It is pop culture now.

RN: Yeah it is.

BLS: Definitely, hip-hop culture is no longer a marginal annex of popular culture, but is the epicenter that everything is responding to. Having it expand so greatly there is no way we can turn a blind eye to it. It's so interesting to see that genre's expansion, its influence upon the art market, and to then, think about Thelma Golden, in 2002, completely denying the influence of hip-hop on *Freestyle*, and how she doesn't see hip-hop and art ever coming together.

RN: It's so ridiculous, she could not be any more wrong. The egg is all over her face, it's such a weird thing to say. So like the *Conductor* to me reflects all of those various genres, and I actually feel that the most prominent style, as far as delivery and sound, is very southern now. You have all of these East Coast guys, like I work a lot with ASAP Mob, and those guys all take on this southern sense of delivery, which is kind of funny. It's definitely something I think about sonically when I'm composing, because for me it is indigenous to where I come from. Just conceptually, I like the idea of how free the queer artists are within that space. I remember being young and the first queer rapper I ever heard was Katey Red.

She was just out, she was trans living in the projects, and completely carving out that space for herself in hip-hop and living in it. It was so undeniable, talking about the realness of her, people just had to accept it. I feel like that's the space that Mikki Blanco, Jay Boogie, and Cakes da Killa are, in some ways, trying to hold now, but she was the pioneer in terms of that. So I feel like that spirit is in the DNA of that sound, which is why I like to sample it.

BLS: Yeah there is something about bounce that blends genders in a really interesting way that references how Mardi Gras and the drag scene had a link between those three fields.

RN: I touch on it in a newer way in *Shade Compositions* in Gratz. I incorporate the call and response elements of bounce. Normally in *Shade*, I'm conducting, but in that one I speak with the performers.

BLS: Along the same vein, I'm interested in the overlap of influences concerning Ballroom culture, the NY Vogue scene and the pageantry that surrounds Mardi Gras. How do you feel your cultural roots in both New Orleans and New York are reflected?

RN: When I'm thinking about that pageantry there is the pageantry of Mardi Gras and not just Vogue. But it's also the pageantry of the court system, and how these systems are a part of this language of power that has existed forever and just keeps taking different forms in different communities. It looks different, but it's always pretty much the same.

BLS: How do you see your artistic practice evolving? Do you feel that your connection with collage and media/performance has shifted to favor one practice over another? Now that you've played with work where you are directly linking everything, do you want to continue or abandon that?

RN: I definitely want to continue connecting them and I've been really excited to do more of the animation work. I like to push the medium as far as I can in one area of the work, and then push it into another form to see how far it can go there, which then inspires what I can do when I go back. When I first started the collage work they were really flat, and when I first started animation I began using after affects to push the dimensions, which then inspired me to create planes and levels in the collage and mimic that dimensionality.

BLS: That was something that I never realized until I was at LSS. When did you begin pushing the collage dimensionally?

RN: After the show *Herald* at Marlborough in 2011. When I began working on the mix-tape, it extended the conversations about battling and gaining street-cred by putting out a mix-tape. I created this collection of music over the years, but wanted to use video to activate the materials in animation. So the first time I did that, it was just a thing that I did to test the grounds for the animation work, and when I went back to collage, I started playing with plains in their construction. I'm very excited to still work with them in animation, but I still really enjoy the physical collage construction process because working with technology there is a certain relationship you have to that tool. Sometimes it's just nice to come to the studio and sit down to make something with my hands. The performance work is very

collective and involves a lot, not only physical making but administrative making so I like to fluctuate in between those. I think even moving sculpturally in the future because the frames are becoming more and more sculptural at this point that it's time for them to come off the wall.

BLS: Thank you so much for meeting with me, it was great to come visit and chat.

RN: Yes, I'm so glad you came and I didn't even know you were from New Orleans, that's fantastic.