

# HYPERALLERGIC

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THEATERS

## A Splintered and Sung Exploration of Black Women's Identities

by Benjamin Sutton on November 9, 2015

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*Okwui Okpokwasili performs in Ralph Lemon's 'Scaffold Room' at the Kitchen. (all photos by Paula Court unless noted otherwise)*

The title of writer-dancer-artist-choreographer [Ralph Lemon](#)'s new production, [Scaffold Room](#), describes equally well the contraption on and around which it's staged and the way the piece is structured. The work, a rumination on the public and private identities of black women in the United States, is an evolving construction assembled from pop culture materials, memoirs, science-fiction and dream narratives, quotations, samples, and personal reflections.

There are moments of intense energy, as when Okwui Okpokwasili jumps, screams, and spasms in place as if trapped in an invisible mosh pit, or when April Matthis lies calmly at the back of the Kitchen's vast performance space as a recording of a woman shrieking plays on a nearby speaker. The room frequently becomes claustrophobic with pain, anguish, fear, and grief, but also at times fills with desire and pleasure. There are also passages when the piece feels light and airy, as when Matthis sits center stage, half-singing, half-croaking [Beyoncé's "Party"](#) from start to finish.

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*April Matthis performs in Ralph Lemon's 'Scaffold Room' at the Kitchen.*

Beyoncé is foremost among *Scaffold Room*'s constellation of iconic women, though [Kathy Acker](#) and [Moms Mabley](#) also figure prominently, and along the way brief passages are devoted to Lady Gaga, Amy Winehouse, and others. But even the phrase “along the way” probably suggests more linearity than there is in Lemon's work. The entire dance-musical-performance art piece, which Lemon developed in collaboration with Okpokwasili and aptly [describes](#) as “a one-woman show played by two women,” is



*Detail of Ralph Lemon's 'Scaffold Room' installation in the Kitchen's gallery (photo by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)*

more about presenting facets of a history shared by many African American women, outlining elements of a psychological profile, and then bringing the audience into that headspace. The result is alternately irreverent, lecture-like, melodic, extremely sexual (the Acker passages), and brutally difficult — and it veers between these tones and registers as if turning on a dime.

As Okpokwasili (in the piece's first half) and then Matthis (in the second) dance, sing, read, speak, and, in those spacious moments of calm and quiet, command the room, a large projection screen intermittently plays videos of Lemon's muse of sorts, 86-year-old Edna Carter, whom he has known for years and who lives in the Mississippi Delta. The clips are also screening in full in *Scaffold Room*'s exhibition component in the

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Kitchen's upstairs gallery, though the rest of the installation — mostly groups of African-looking statues outfitted with miniature clothes and little gold chains — seems only loosely connected to the performance. The videos show Carter and members of her extended family dressed in retro-futurist costumes and performing a kind of pastoral, sci-fi narrative involving a satellite-cum-greenhouse in the woods. Fairytale scenes of a woman wearing a goat head and a boy in a giraffe mask as they explore a forest also appear fleetingly, and are referenced occasionally in Matthis and Okpokwasili's narration.

*Scaffold Room*'s flickers of connectivity and continuity are part of the loose framework that Lemon uses to describe a black, female experience and subjectivity that is at once specific and general, clearly informed by Okpokwasili and Lemon's own lives, but also by shared cultural and historical experiences, from slavery and the Harlem Renaissance up through the Black Panthers and Biggie. As the monologue engages with figures like Beyoncé, Gaga, and Winehouse, it also addresses the myriad ways that black women's bodies, voices, and experiences have been co-opted and commodified. The psychological portrait *Scaffold Room* erects is at times precarious and splintered, elsewhere tall and resilient, but consistently nuanced and complex.



*April Matthis performs in Ralph Lemon's 'Scaffold Room' at the Kitchen*

The exhibition component of [Scaffold Room](#) continues in the gallery at [the Kitchen](#) (512 West 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 5, while [performances](#) continue through November 10.

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