

HYPERALLERGIC

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GALLERIES

Police Brutality and the Possibilities of Evil

Sondra Perry's solo show at the Kitchen is more than an installation about the institutionally sanctioned killing of black people; it's about how we frame and understand that reality.



Jillian Steinbauer | 18 hours ago

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From right to left: Sondra Perry, "Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation" (2016), video, bicycle workstation, 9:05 min; "Resident Evil" (2016), 3D animation created with Blender open-source software, video on monitor on credenza, 17:29 min; "Historic Jamestowne: Share in the Discovery and Take Several Seats" (2016), used couch, S Curl Activator, spray paint, vinyl cover, cinder blocks (© Jason Mandella)

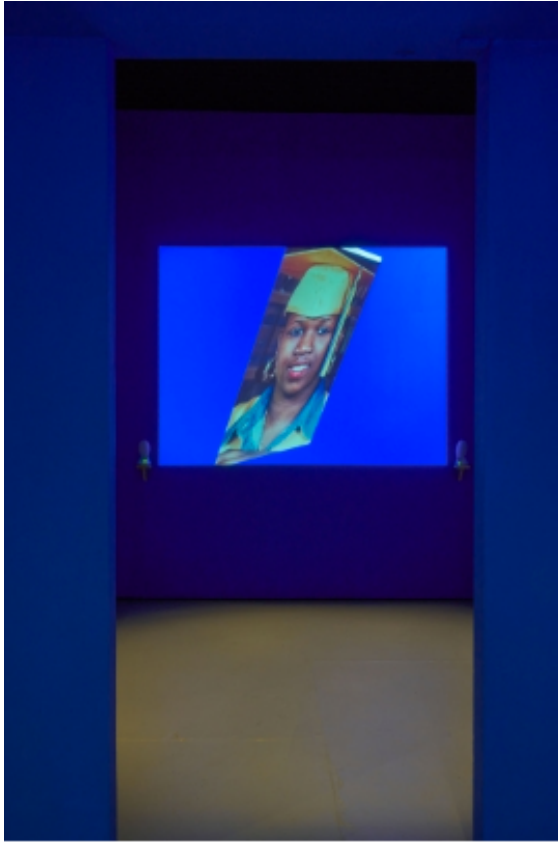
Most sci-fi and fantasy movies follow a basic script: Evil forces (aliens, zombies, Voldemort, the Matrix) amass their power, while a hero who doesn't know he is a hero dawdles through life. Someone calls upon the hero, who is put through a trial(s) and comes to understand his heroism. He eventually faces off against the forces of evil and wins — for now, until it's time to make a sequel.

Relations between black people and predominantly white police forces in this country also tend to follow a script: Police forces amass their power within a white supremacist society that stokes their fear of black people and arms them as if they were the military. Black people, who know they could become targets at any moment, attempt to go about their lives. With little to no provocation, a police officer faces off against a black person, assuming that he or she is evil. The cop wins by killing the black person. There are an unending number of sequels.

<http://hyperallergic.com/342917/police-brutality-and-the-possibilities-of-evil/>

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Sondra Perry,
 "nether..... 1.0.3"
 (2016), video installation (still features portrait of Tanisha
 Anderson), 5:10 min (© Jason Mandella)

in fleeting, rotating image windows. Blue is not neutral, and neither are the digital systems through which we consume these women's deaths.

Americans — at least liberal, art world-dwelling ones — are familiar with both of these narratives, but they wouldn't necessarily think to intertwine them. It's to Sondra Perry's credit that, in her first institutional solo show, *Resident Evil at the Kitchen*, she does so. This is more than an installation about the institutionally sanctioned killing of black people in the US; it's about how we see and frame and understand that reality.

The first indication of that is the space itself: the walls of the gallery have been painted chroma-key blue, a color used as a background for the overlaying of different images in film and the creation of special effects. The walls seem to suggest that we have entered a neutral space, one where Perry can create whatever kind of world she wants. But the first artwork we encounter,

[illegible]

Perry continues to dismantle the myth of technology's objectivity in "Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation" (2016), which features three monitors attached to an exercise bike. The star of the video is a talking avatar of Perry, a figure created by and modeled after the artist. In a computerized voice, the avatar discusses the deadly physical effects of the just-world belief and explains matter-of-factly — almost technically— what it's like to be black in the US: "What's familiar is our incredible exhaustion." "We are a problem to be fixed, and if we resist being that problem, we will be made a problem to be fixed." "We are not as helpful or Caucasian as we sound. We have no safe mode." "Just being who we are is extremely risky." At one point, the background music changes from heavy droning to calming synth sounds, and the avatar admits that "we looked up 'music for relaxation' on YouTube and found this." Why? Because perhaps, if the truth about being African American were presented by a supposedly neutral being to the tune of comforting music, we white Americans might finally believe it.

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Installation view, Sondra Perry, *Resident Evil* at the Kitchen (© Jason Mandella)

In the centerpiece of the exhibition, “Resident Evil” (2016), Perry considers this possibility again, in an even more complex way. The work consists of a wall-size 3D animation and, placed several feet in front of it, a video playing on a monitor on a credenza. The video seamlessly blends an array of police brutality–related media: footage of an encounter between Fox News correspondent Geraldo Rivera and activist Kwame Rose in Baltimore after the death of Freddie Gray, from the perspectives of both citizen with cellphone and Fox News; audio of a Democracy Now! interview with Ramsey Orta, who filmed the police killing of Eric Garner, and of a traffic stop recorded by Korryn Gaines (who was later killed by police); scrolling block text that recounts the first-person story of a SWAT team entering someone’s home. To these Perry adds snippets of a tense and swelling soundtrack, presumably pulled from the *Alien* movies (one of her stated inspirations for the show); a couple of strategically chosen songs; and eerie first-person nighttime footage of an entry into her own New Jersey home. Through it all, she seems to be trying on and testing different approaches: What’s the “best” way to present the reality of police brutality? How is that affected by who’s doing the presenting?

On the back wall of the gallery, behind the video monitor and credenza, looms the 3D animation: a large wall of digital, flesh-colored, constantly pulsing goo, possibly a vision of cells under a microscope. This, we’re given to assume, is the alien, the titular resident evil — until, when we read the press release, we learn that it’s a 3D rendering of the artist’s skin. With this single trick, Perry upends all of the assumptions at play in the piece: If the alien is our guide on this journey, the artist and creator, then maybe she isn’t also evil. Maybe the resident evil is the racist system that deems her alien.

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Installation view, Sondra Perry, *Resident Evil* at the Kitchen, with Eartha Kitt on the screen (© Jason Mandella)

But it doesn't quite end there. One of the songs highlighted in the "Resident Evil" video is "I Want to Be Evil," sung by Eartha Kitt. And in the show's press release and accompanying zine, Perry cites Sun Ra and his insistence that "black people need a mythocracy, not a democracy because they'll never make it in history ... Truth is not permissible for me to use because I'm not righteous and holy, I'm evil, that's because I'm black."

Maybe it's not as simple as good vs evil, because reality is inevitably more complicated than fantasy. Maybe racist institutions labeled Perry an evil alien, but she's now chosen to explore the possibilities of that role. Maybe, building on the ideas of her forebears, Perry is proposing evilness as a way of gaming a system that's already corrupt. All the wide-eyed witnessing and watching we've been doing don't seem to be making change; maybe Perry is suggesting that we need to find a way to get our hands dirty.

Sondra Perry: *Resident Evil* continues at the Kitchen (512 W 19th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 10.