

## Sondra Perry Explores the Intersection of Technology and Black History in America

BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 2016 AT 11-30 A.M.



Courtesy of The Kitchen

Who or what defines evil? In America, certainly after 9-11, it's a word that's been used to describe any act of insurgence against a vision this country has of itself as essentially good. It's a polarizing concept, refusing self-reflection in favor of a willful blindness — and, in its refusal, conflating power with virtue, might with right. In her ferociously witty and searingly intelligent "Resident Evil" exhibition, multimedia artist Sondra Perry dissects how this notion of evil infects black identity, how it colors blackness in America.

Just thirty years old and less than two years removed from Columbia's MFA program, Perry is already making a name for herself as a thinker and maker, creating videos and installations at the intersection of black history (both the personal and the collective), technology, and identity. As she told New Museum curator Lauren Cornell last year in an interview for *Mousse* magazine: "I'm interested in how blackness is a technology, changing and adapting, through the constant surveillance and oppression of black folks across the diaspora since the 1600s. Unmediated seeing isn't a thing."

What *is* a thing for Perry is the question of who is mediating — and how. Throughout the exhibition, she makes her own presence known as the designer of the stories she flashes before her audience. Sometimes she appears as an avatar, modeled in her own likeness. Her hand, though invisible, is felt when we see a cursor dance across a screen. She's the one we assume is behind the camera that paces her hometown of Perth Amboy, New Jersey, and enters her family

http://www.villagevoice.com/arts/sondra-perry-explores-the-intersection-of-technology-and-black-history-in-america-9404292



home at night. It's a sequence that puns darkly on the "first-person shooter" p.o.v. of video games, as well as that of footage taken from body cameras worn by law enforcement. Artist or gamer or stalker? Creator or hunter or hunted?

Perry takes the exhibition's title from the sci-fi/horror video game/movie franchise, which pits humans against zombies and other mutant forms. She painted the walls of the Kitchen's exhibition space chroma key blue (a/k/a blue-screen blue), an eye-punishing color used in the production of special effects, which allows designers to composite actors with backgrounds — to weave real bodies seamlessly into imagined worlds. If, on the one hand, this blue tips its hat to possibility — to the transcendence of reality — for the artist, it also speaks to disembodiment, to a kind of cold storage for slaughtered bodies.

Perry's avatar appears again in *Graft and Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation*, an installation for which a triptych of monitors has been fastened to the front of an exercise bike–cum-workstation. The artist's likeness, moving and blinking like an alien reptile, tells us of a scientific study that proves that black people who believe this world is just — who believe on some level that "they get what they deserve" — are more prone to suffering from chronic illnesses.

How to exorcise such evil from the mind and body within a context that writes fatal errors into the most easily corruptible of all operations, our stories? In the exhibition's titular installation, Perry addresses the racist narrative structures that shape ideas of blackness in the media. In one sequence, we watch footage from the 2015 protests in Baltimore that took place after the death of Freddie Gray; a protester yells at Geraldo Rivera for covering "the black riots," rather than Gray's story, for white news media. Later in the video, when Perry's camera enters her family home, it finds Eartha Kitt singing "I Want to Be Evil" on the television. Perhaps, just perhaps, the artist finds something to embrace in this desire.

One of the many consequences of the recent election is the widespread calling-out of "fake news." Facebook, Twitter, and other outlets have been charged with disseminating untruths that led to the election of Donald Trump. Even the savviest and smartest members of the media have been disoriented by the ways in which the incoming administration and its followers bend stories to their will and wish. Editor of the *New Yorker* David Remnick recently said of the normalizing of Trump: "I think I'm hallucinating."

In "An Open Letter to White Liberal Feminists," posted on the website of the African American Intellectual History Society, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, associate professor of Africana studies at Williams College, wrote of her white colleagues' distress at the turn America has taken: *I am delighted that you have received the potential awakening of a lifetime, and that now you might actually get what so many of us have been describing all along. Welcome to that deep perpetual angst.* 



Our country was a terrifying place for many of its citizens long before November 8; it's just that some of them — some of us — only recently learned exactly how and why ours is a nation to be feared. What we are seeing now is what America is and has been for some time. Perry's exhibition puts us in a mind to remember that all we had to do to know this was to watch closely, and pay attention.

Sondra Perry: 'Resident Evil' The Kitchen 512 West 19th Street 212-255-5793, thekitchen.org Through December 10