

ARTSLANT

HANNAH BLACK CONJURES A NEW DAWN IN THE TIMELESS LOOP OF HISTORY

BY AUDREY L. PHILLIPS

Berlin-based artist Hannah Black's solo presentation *Soc or Barb* at New York's Bodega lingers like a heavy fog drawn from today's political climate. The title, short for Socialism or Barbarism is borrowed from Rosa Luxemburg's early twentieth century wager on the future of capitalism. Its prescience is foreboding.

Entering the gallery, I am confronted by a clay audience of roughly shaped creatures. Black's fingerprints define and add texture to these tiny spectators, most of which are wearing cotton white t-shirts that have infinity signs on them. Though the figurative clay sculptures sit together in a group, they nevertheless feel isolated from one another. The stupefied gaze they collectively share is familiar: it is the same hypnotic captivation I observe when watching others stare at television screens or smartphones. These figures are doing just that, being together and separate at once.

Three wall-mounted flat screen televisions surround them, each looping a video depicting the sun at daybreak (New Dawn). The accompanying soundtrack is a compilation of personal conversations between the artist and friends, a fascist British song, Celine Dion's "A New Day Has Come," and academic recordings and readings by Octavia Butler and Kofi Agawu, amongst others. The un-synched audio weaves in and out of the installation, interlacing Black's boundaries between private and public space. Stemming from a private experiential place, the audio excerpts grow outwards with a variety of cultural signifiers that helps clue the viewer into the political overtones of the exhibition.

The installation's narrative is easy to follow: the clay figures or "beings" adopt a passive attitude as they watch the endless daybreak on each screen. It is as if they wait in anticipation of something, like instructions as to where to go from here. Off to the side, framed by a sunny LED glow, a Philips "Wake Up Light" clock displays "00:00." Time is moving and not moving. Is it the beginning or the end of time? The tension between the clock and the video loop brings me to a standstill. Almost as if I, too, were awaiting instructions. Is awaiting instruction at a time when action is needed a submission to fear, a response to feelings of helplessness? I see myself in the clay creatures and rehash what I've been thinking about since Trump won the election: how do I transform my passivity into effective action?

The work resonates deeply with me in this new Brexit and Trump era. That Black's title cites a moment in time, almost exactly one hundred years ago, reminds one of the cyclical nature of history—how it undulates politically, between right, left, and center in an endless loop. However, knowing that history is cyclical doesn't offer much comfort.

While polarities rhythmically shift, technology and power continue to grow exponentially. This infinite loop of life promises nothing. The work becomes as symbolic as the ongoing mass protests in the U.S.: both are simultaneously empowering and impotent. I want to know that the pain the country is experiencing is worth something that can yield a positive return. Leaving the gallery I found myself wanting something as reliable as Black's repetitive screens, a sense of comfort and knowing: a promise.

Soc or Barb ran at Bodega, New York City, from January 14–February 19.

—Audrey L. Phillips

Audrey Phillips is a Toronto-based writer. She is a regular contributor to AQNB.

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