Leila Timmins: I want to begin with the title of the exhibition since I think it is a nice entry point. Your earlier practice had a strong emphasis on the media of photography, then you turned away from images to work more with sculpture and installation. This work feels like a return to some of your earlier concerns around image making. Could you talk about what you mean by a ‘photo-body’ in the title of the work?

Marvin Luvualu Antonio: I think the show has a strong emphasis on image production that contextualizes and frames the work through the relationship between the body and images. It is hard for me to traverse images and the body as separate with the current state of technology. I’m thinking about the history and development of photography and the lens via the body. Traditionally there was a gap between the lens and the body, where the camera was held away from the body and used to distance oneself from and study other bodies. Now the world is mediated through our relationships to lens and screen, and from this I feel the body and lens are becoming entwined as one. The body and image are being translated into data, and data that is being disseminated at a rapidly increasing rate. When I was looking at the police dash-cam footage of Laquan McDonald’s murder, a bulb went off. This identity that embodied experience is tied to contemporary viewership and vice versa: I wanted to frame the work through this idea of the photo-body to explore the collapse of the boundary between images and the body, both how bodies are constituted through images and how images mitigate experience. The photo-body is a body that is documented and once the body is documented it becomes more vulnerable and susceptible to change and transformation. The body is documented, disseminated, and so the photo-body encompasses all of these things, all of these layers.

MLA: The reason I was attracted to Browne’s text, “Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness” has been particularly influential to this new body of work. The book takes a brilliant experimental and intertextual approach to insert a history of black lived experience into surveillance studies, drawing links between police brutality and racism, and the surveillance of black bodies. How do you see the effects of this surveillance manifesting?

LT: In our earlier conversations, you mentioned that Simone Browne’s new critical text, “Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness” has been particularly influential to this new body of work. I was interested in the notion of surveillance theory or technology being used to track and watch the black body was a very new idea for me, and it raised so many ideas and thoughts. I am thinking about but this work pointed to a bigger fissure where there are even more ways than I had realized for the black body to be monitored and attacked. I’ve felt this strong sense of no escape but I’ve wanted to better understand what that means. In the past I have thought more about the self-surveillance and self-regulation. I was a panelist recently with other artists of colour talking about self-care and we entered this conversation around monitoring the self and this idea of how to manage anger and frustration due to micro-aggressions or verbal and physical attacks and this frustration with self-control which I am relating to this sense of self-monitoring. This is the real place where the work began. I am trying to look at the kinds of self-monitoring as well as external monitoring that go on and the multiplicity and the interrelated effects these have. It is very strong and so when these two forms of monitoring compound together that is what I am thinking about. I want to watch the footage of Laquan McDonald walking through the streets high on PCP and being tracked. There was literally no escape. There was nowhere for him to go because he is constantly being monitored and so any form or any gesture that is outside of oneself is being sniffed out. This is what makes me begin, “technology always gets us while we’re high” because the more vulnerable we become, the easier it is for us to be tracked.

LT: The work moves between the lived realities of police brutality, such as with the police dashboard cam footage of the shooting of Laquan McDonald, and the hyperreality of Grand Theft Auto. Could you talk about this slip between reality and hyperreality in work?

MLA: I wonder if the perpetual police violence in America has become so commonplace that it almost functions in the same way as the game. You pick up your controller and then you literally go and ok, I’ve stopped here and this is where I was and then you go off. This relationship between simulated violence and real violence, I am wondering if there is no separation due to a lack of consequences.

LT: There is a poetry to how you are weaving seemingly disparate ideas together to create new links and produce new meanings. Could you talk about how you pull these ideas, events and texts together?

MLA: I think there is a privilege in the fact that I can be able to objectively look at these conceptual threads and weave them together. Even though there is a shared blackness, there isn’t a shared black experience and so I am coming from a position that would change dramatically if I crossed the border. But because I am making work from Toronto, even though there is a history of violence against black men in Canada, the conversation really centres on the African-American experience and so I am drawing from this place because I am also a viewer and this is where we are presented with the most information. That is why I am capable of picking things out and weaving them together to try and understand what is going on. Ultimately, I am interested in extending my experience through different networks and different narrations and drawing connections. I’m a diasporic body to the T and so my work is constantly undoing that and sort of drawing at different threads.

To me, this work feels almost like a moment. I stumbled upon the police footage after we had been talking and I knew it was a moment of violence. Could you talk about this moment of violence. I knew it was a moment of violence. I needed to draw from and expand, which is kind of fucked up because I feel like the experience of violence on black bodies is so common and they just don’t get like moments in time. It’s fucked up. And the work also feels that way, like another name, another moment in time related to police brutality. The violence is really strange and I am just beginning to realize that.

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