

A PHOTO-BODY ON DRUGS SMELLS.

Marvin Luvualu Antonio

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On October 20th, 2014, 17-year-old Laquan McDonald was murdered by police officer Jason Van Dyke in the city of Chicago, Illinois. An autopsy report found traces of Phenylcyclidine or PCP in his blood stream. In 1986, Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men was launched to critical acclaim and is among the top 10 best selling men's fragrances worldwide. Since 2007, after studying the results of Pat Thomas who discovered fragrances can be used to keep zoo animals curious, Rony Garcia has been using Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men along with heat and motion technology to determine the size and rituals of jaguars in Guatemala. Biopower, the way in which technology is used to monitor and navigate bodies both animal and human, if there is a distinction, is an effective trap that gets us every time we are high.

Artwork in vitrines left to right:

Angel Dust, inkprint, newspaper, 2016
Jaguars Like It, Calvin Klein Obsession for Men, 2016

DRI (detect, recognize, identify), clay, thermal imaging camera, iPhone 5, 2016

Antibodies, Sony monitor, media player, USB, cables, 2016

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 photography but you have moved 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 see 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 that data 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 and I understood 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. It can be fractured and shared and disseminated, and so the photo-body encompasses all of these things, all of these layers.

LT: Chemicals appear in this work in multiple and nuanced ways, with references to photochemicals, chemical drugs, Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men perfume and the hormones of jaguars. I am interested in how you are layering these substances in the work and what happens when they are brought into proximity. How are you thinking about these connections?

MLA: I was thinking about these various chemicals as technologies and how these substances can be used to document and also track a body. In researching chemicals and their uses I became really interested in the many unseen and often unregulated ways chemicals are used in surveillance. It was strange to me because when I think of systems of surveillance I usually think about photo-based technologies or physical devices or strong machines and so it was interesting to shift away from those devices to look at these less tangible or more organic methods of surveillance. Substances related to the chemistry of the body or the chemistry

of animals and the ways that a technology can seep in through chemical compounds in order to gather information or to document, regulate, track and capture a body. It is a kind of surveillance that transcends the lens; it is within the body, part of the body.

The Calvin Klein perfume and PCP work as methods of surveillance outside of photography. Chemical compounds can be used to attract bodies to the lens or to allow a lens to track a body. Scientists studying jaguars in Nicaragua found that they could lure the animals to their thermal imaging cameras by using Calvin Klein Obsession for Men. And a body on drugs acts in ways that can be detected as dangerous. What I am trying to say is that it is no longer about looking at something, but instead it is about looking within. Looking inside is what I mean by a photo-body that smells. There is this barrier that goes from the surface to the interior and it is becoming more translucent.

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. 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?

MLA: The reason I was attracted to Browne's text in the first place was because the notion of surveillance theory or technology being used to track and watch the black body was a very new idea to me. These are issues and ideas that 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 on a panel 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 and how internalized it is. This is really 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 multiple and 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 when I 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 the black body is constantly being monitored and so any form or any gesture that

is outside of oneself is being sniffed out. This is what means when I say, "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 and weaving them together to try and understand what is going on. Ultimately, I'm interested in extending my experience through different networks and different narratives 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 this important moment that 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 do feel 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 sameness is really strange and I am just beginning to realize that.

MARVIN LUVUALU ANTONIO

Marvin Luvualu Antonio is a multidisciplinary artist whose work explores but is not limited to the topics of identity politics, objecthood and the artist as subject. He has recently been published in the ROM's Every Object Has a Story: Extraordinary Canadians Celebrate the Royal Ontario Museum and was selected for 2014's AGO/AIMIA photography scholarship prize. He is currently completing his BFA in photography at OCAD University and is represented in Canada by Clint Roenisch Gallery.