Double Consciousness

A Conversation with

Jefferson Pinder

BY LAURA ROULET

Installation view of "Onyx Odyssey" with (left to right): *Black Portal*, 2015; *Monolith (Dream Catcher)*, 2015; *Thin Skin/Shock Layer*, 2014; *Gauntlet*, 2015; and *Moriaen's Shadow*, 2014.

TOM VAN EYNDE, COURTESY HYDE PARK ART CENTER, CHICAGO

***Funknik*, 2014. Salvaged tin, wood, steel, linoleum, and audio, 80 x 60 x 52 in.; 45 minutes.**

PABLO VAN WINKLE

In a career that has evolved from the performing arts to performance art, Jefferson Pinder consistently probes themes of racial identity through live performance, video, and sculpture. Key works such as *Ben-Hur*, *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*, *Overture (Star of Ethiopia)*, and *Dark Matter* meld historical legacy with current events, adopting references from W.E.B. Du Bois, Hollywood cinema, and Afrofuturism. His mixed-media sculpture *Mothership (Capsule)*, assembled from lumber used to build Barack Obama's first inauguration platform and other salvaged materials, is a centerpiece of the contemporary art collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, with musician George Clinton's P-Funk concert prop "The Mothership" displayed in an adjoining gallery. A professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Pinder received a United States Artists Joyce Fellowship for performance in 2016, a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2017, and was honored by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden the same year.

Laura Roulet: *You began by training in theater. How did you make the transition to visual art?*

Jefferson Pinder: I loved theater, but then I noticed all of the production mechanisms that left actors without a lot of control. I wanted more control over what I created. I wanted to be the director, and I started a theater company called Middle Passage Guerrilla Theater Company with a couple friends out in Seattle. I was interested in the human condition and drama, so I began to invest my time in that. Eventually I went to grad school and had a horrible experience. That's when I began to transition into making more on my own, and I began my studio practice in the late 1990s.

LR: *What was your first video?*

JP: *Nothing Clear* in 1999. I got my hands on a Super-8 camera and focused on gentrification in Seattle's Central District. I had my first art show there that same year. It was collage, derivative of David Driskell, whom I admire. But the video really bridged the gap between my performance practice and my studio on Capitol Hill. With *Nothing Clear*, I was capturing black and white portraits of people on the street. It's a spontaneous collection of ghosts—black folks who are no longer there. That's why I'm really partial to 8mm film. It's nostalgic and seems to speak of another time.

LR: *If we compare* Marathon *(2003), an early work in which you are the performer, and* Ben-Hur, *a public artwork performed on March 22, 2012 at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in which you served as director, do they share related themes?*

JP: I would say I'm more than the director. I'm the artist. All the individuals represent me. They're proxies, stand-ins, representatives for private thoughts. The individuals performing in this piece represent something universal, and also something personal. It's like in *Revival* (2013) or *Juke* (2011), where I have black people lip-synching to "white" music such as Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" and country. That's my music, on my iPad; it has a connection to me. It also raises questions of who "owns" music, and how cultural stereotypes are formed. Directing, that's not sacred enough. This is empowering because these individuals are empowering your vision. If you work in performance art, you want it to be real. The performance is the thing. Capturing the moment can have a lot of power. I guess that's why I'm fascinated with performance being live and happening in the moment.

LR: *When you include other performers, they're not professional actors. Do you always know how something's going to end?*

JP: *Ben-Hur* is a durational work in which the individuals work together like a synchronized team, but some elements are out of their control. There are so many variables. It becomes exciting in the moments when you don't know what's going to happen next—you set up the environment, but anything can happen. After three weeks of rehearsals, I had an understanding of the individual performers—what they were capable of, when their energy was going to cut out—but then you put in 200 spectators. The performer who was a smoker was the most interesting to watch. Some days he'd push himself on the machine, and I was seriously concerned. Everyone is coming into the work with their own experiences and limitations. They're not trained performers. How do you rehearse this, and not lose the spontaneity? That's the big challenge.

LR: *How do you choose performers?*

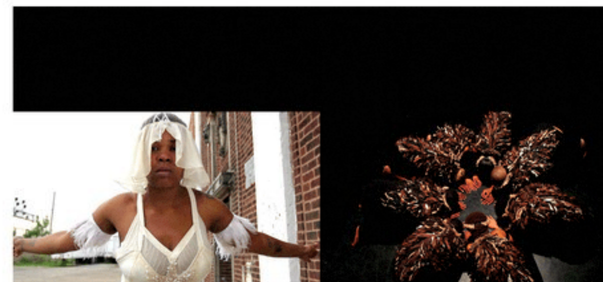
JP: I am drawn to people who believe in the absurdity of the work, who can be honest in the execution of an action. Sometimes it's people who want to work with me. For *Overture (Star of Ethiopia)*, I found Diamond Stingily, a strong, young black woman who was working at American Apparel. She was perfect. She represents a Du Bois-ian vision of the future. She continues to have an impressive career.

LR: *Can you talk more about the background of W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to* Overture (Star of Ethiopia) *(2013)?*

JP: I was working on a commission for the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The museum asked us to look into his legacy. Pageantry has always been fascinating to me as a means of communication. It's like a variety show. I had no idea that Du Bois wrote a pageant. *The Star of Ethiopia* was his dramatic, 10,000-year history of the black race. In 1911, it was performed in an open arena with thousands of people—it was the first dose of black pride and African American history. Duke Ellington, who saw it in DC, said it was transformative. It combines German opera with black spirituals. The last vision is of a veiled woman, a personification of black female strength who leads the race, flying away in a golden chariot, holding a bust of Abraham Lincoln. It's so bizarre, and ahead of its time. I recommend it. Thinking about Afrofuturism, how do you look forward and stay connected to the past? Du Bois was a visionary.

TOP: FRED BOLLERER/ CENTER: JEREMY FREEDBERG / BOTTOM: UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS, AMHERST

Above: *Ben-Hur*, 2012. HD video of "5 x 5" public art performance at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Bottom and detail: *Overture (Star of Ethiopia)*, 2013. 2-channel HD video installation, 8 minutes.



Mothership (Capsule), 2009. Salvaged wood, tin, 22-inch chrome ring, and audio, 92.5 x 75 x 86 in.

LR: *How did Afrofuturism become part of your work?*
JP: I first became interested in the terminology around 2008, but I was an Afrofuturist well before I knew what it was. Octavia Butler was writing Afrofuturist books before the terminology came about, as were George Clinton and Ralph Ellison, who was writing in an abstract, forward-thinking, innovative way. What's brilliant about the terminology of Afrofuturism is that it gives us a new way of talking about something very familiar. The term was first coined in the 1990s, but the ideas are seen again and again. African Americans have a particular cultural knowledge, or baggage, that's grounded in something real. Du Bois is a source of information about this "double consciousness." It takes a mighty strength to reconcile these two forces. It sounds like something from a science-fiction movie. You're dealing with a dichotomy, an alternate identity of being who you are, and then trying to figure out how to exist in the real world.

It's what happens when you superimpose the supernatural with the everyday. It becomes a new perspective on looking at things. I love how broad it is; it has depths and layers. I see it as strongly connected with magic realism.
LR: *Could you talk about* Mothership (Capsule) *(2009), which you made from President Obama's first inaugural platform? How did you get access to the material? Did you know what you were going to make from it?*
JP: I knew that I wanted to build some kind of vessel. A friend of mine, who worked at a local salvage yard, called me and said, "You'll never believe this, but Obama's inauguration platform just came in on a truck, and we can't tell anyone. We have to sell the scrap wood." So, I went over and filled my truck. A few older African American men were also going through the wood. I asked one man what he was going to build with it, and he said, "A deck." It makes you think about physical items that have a significance and how history manifests in different ways. It's never really gone.
LR: *What about the embedded meanings of materials and the importance of authenticity?*
JP: The materials speak to you. The history speaks to you. In the Quilts of Gee's Bend, one woman used fragments of her dead husband's work clothes. So, the quilt has the power to keep you warm at night, and it also contains his blood, sweat, and tears. Then it becomes sacred. That's what I'm seeking to do with my work. Somehow it's got to transcend. I aspire to this kind of purity. It's the same with the performances as it is with the objects. The viewer has to go on a journey and needs to feel in a different place after experiencing the work. In the best-case scenario, someone will be changed, transformed.
LR: *How did the platform become a space capsule?*
JP: I was thinking about vessels, about being in something protective. The rugged surface was like a reflection of the experience of that journey. The tin on the capsule is the brown skin that looks rusted and decayed, like it could have been dragged up from the bottom of the ocean. It's playing with the idea of a relic. The sound is an audio collage. I worked with Scott Mallory, an amazing new media artist, and we took sample sounds that had an abstract connection to Obama. There are all kinds of noises that come together to create a cacophony that plays through the bass speaker. In the end, it's a mesh of information that's only really felt through the skin. There's an ebb and flow, a heartbeat or pulse. We also used Obama's first speech about NASA and space exploration, and how he grew up in the '60s, connected with this idea of transformation. It was a really wonderful speech. All of these things come together to create a collage. There were many aesthetic choices made with the piece, in terms of my idea of connecting things that don't necessarily seem like they go together.
LR: *Your 2015 exhibition "Onyx Odyssey," at the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago, included other Afrofuturist works.*
JP: That's a great way of looking at it, though the *Chicago Tribune* wrote an incredible piece connecting it with Black Lives Matter. The thinking is pushing forward in new directions, but it's still grounded in where our

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Left: *Monolith (Dream Catcher)* (detail), 2015. Black one-way glass, West African masks, and LED, 96 x 48 x 12 in. Right: *Assimilated*, 2009. Neon and charcoal, 72 x 30 x 18 in.

society is right now. I liked that show. It was a different way of communicating, of thinking about legacy in the everyday. It worked because the pieces are an abstract expression of something that may be otherworldly, but when you come closer, it becomes familiar.

I was thinking that the dimensions of *Monolith (Dream Catcher)* are the same as those of the monolith in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The African masks were all acquired through eBay and Craigslist; people didn't want them anymore. The masks fuel the work. We don't know where they are from, but they're ubiquitous in African American homes. There were masks in my home growing up. We never really talked about whether they were real or not, or about where they were from. But somehow, if they were used in a ceremony, they became sacred. So, all of these collected objects become sacred again, empowered. You don't even see all of them, but it's a contained force.
LR: *Your work involves a lot of physical language, maybe body language from your experience as an actor.*
JP: It's visual language or body language. I spent a lot of time as an actor working on body language. Stage acting has got to be physical. The best actors are dynamic and physical, unscripted. For performance, I think spoken word gets in the way. The body has been really important for me.
LR: *How much does race still factor into your work?*
JP: I'm evaluating how I communicate about it. We're not talking about a small thing. It will always be central to my work, but maybe now I don't have to say it. Do I have to mention my identity in everything I do? In every work I've done, there are a multitude of other things to talk about as well. I embrace it on one hand; but on the other, I see the potential limitations of the conversation. We're moving toward more acceptance of a politicized gallery or museum world, so how do you be savvy within that framework?
LR: *How would you define the central themes of your work?*
JP: Endurance. People. I like making work that wrestles with history and challenges notions of blackness. In *Ben-Hur*, I was thinking of a 1950s cinematic representation of a slave galley. But when people saw it, they were thinking about a Middle Passage slave ship. Slaves didn't row then. It's not logical, but it's beautiful when you bring all these other associations into the piece. Formally, I'm mesmerized by the interaction between bodies, as activated by spectators. I'm also interested in stillness and darkness with some of the portrait work.
LR: *Why do you choose a coat and tie as the uniform for your performers, as in* Ben-Hur*?*
JP: Because it's a uniform for a particular kind of work. I think of my dad in the '60s wearing a coat and tie. Or the civil rights activists, going South and getting people to vote. The formality of the day, and countering the white man—that's how memory works in these visual images. Also it's absurd to do physical labor in a suit. Audience members became complicit in the performance. They were witnesses, watching people work. The relationship between the museum-goer, the grandeur of the architecture, the classical ideals of beauty, and the black body under duress. It's admirable, heroic. There's a particular strain of masculinity in the work. There are so few images of black masculinity with dignity.

Historically, black artists have been restoring a humanistic dignity to the arts. For many years, we've been forced to work with the white model of seeing the world. It's imbedded in the institutions of learning. Perhaps what I'm getting at is that many white artists never have to grapple with this sort of self-examination. For centuries, that was the story that was never told.

Laura Roulet is an independent curator and writer based in Washington, DC.

LEFT: TOM VAN EYNDE/ RIGHT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND CURATOR'S OFFICE, WASHINGTON, DC