



PECK SCHOOL OF THE ARTS

Wade Hobgood, Dean

INSTITUTE OF VISUAL ARTS

Since 1996, the Institute of Visual Arts (Inova) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Peck School of the Arts has established an international reputation as a contemporary art research center. It is comprised of three gallery spaces in the Peck School: Inova/Kenilworth, Inova/Arts Center and Inova/Zelazo (the Mary L. Nohl Galleries). The mission of the Institute of Visual Arts is to engage the general and university publics with contemporary art from around the world through exhibitions and programs. Inova is recognized for the high quality of its programs and for the opportunity it offers artists to experiment in the creation of new work.

Bruce Knackert, Director of Galleries

Nicholas Frank, Curator

CREDITS

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Design: Craig Kroeger

Photography: John Riepenhoff

Back cover photo courtesy of G Fine Art.

Acknowledgments: G Fine Art, Washington, D.C. and Cultures & Communities and the Department of Visual Art at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.



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JEFFERSON PINDER ANTHOLOGY

INOVA

FEBRUARY 25-JUNE 14, 2009

JEFFERSON PINDER ANTHOLOGY

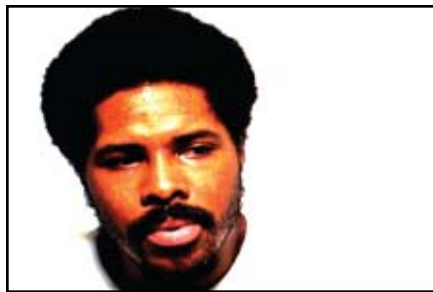


Jefferson Pinder will be in residence in conjunction with the Multimedia & Performance symposium at Inova/Kenilworth on April 4, 2009. He will present an artist talk at 10:30 am and Inova will host an artist's reception from 4:30 to 6 pm.

Inova/Kenilworth West Gallery & Screening Room

2155 North Prospect Avenue Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202 414.229.5070 inova@uwm.edu arts.uwm.edu/inova

Gallery hours: Wednesday-Sunday, 12 noon-5 pm & Thursdays till 8 pm



## “to make and unmake”

*Washington is a town of marble and mud.*

— President Gerald Ford

Washington D.C. is a nexus between the beaten and the powerful. Here, in a White House partly built by slave labor, our first African American chief executive now presides. This fulcrum at the heart of America’s complicated evolution provides D.C.-based video artist Jefferson Pinder with a potent backdrop for his deeply personal investigations into the meaning of racial identity.

*Jefferson Pinder: Anthology* is the first comprehensive survey of the artist’s performance-based video work, bringing together two installation pieces and eleven short-format videos made between 2002 and 2008. Consistent themes run through Pinder’s oeuvre. The first is movement, in the sense of walking, running, riding and dragging, and in the sense of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and ’60s. The Freedom Riders drove, walked, marched and ran, and when necessary, refused to move. With straight-forward performative gestures, Pinder embodies the cynicism and the optimism of these various senses of motion and stillness in two videos from 2006. He drags the yoke of the slave “mule” stereotype behind him in *Mule*, and in *Dakar (Spinnin)* he literally spins his wheels as he pedals a stationary bike past scenes of present-day Africa flashing behind him on a screen. In both works, whether or not he’s getting anywhere is left unresolved.

Another major theme of Pinder’s work is struggle. His take also includes notions of how to deal with freedom and the subtler oppressions of post-emancipation racism. In the quick and quick-witted *Ali* (2008), Pinder assumes both roles, of the beaten and the powerful, by alternately becoming the punching bag and Muhammad Ali himself, landing those famously fleet and fierce blows. Ali lost his heavyweight title, and most everything else, when he took an unpopular and power-challenging stance against the Vietnam war. His bold pronouncements and involvement with the Nation of Islam also drew the ire of white racists and believers in the status quo. Ali was then and remains anything but invisible, yet he has become a kind of grand realization of Ralph Ellison’s unnamed narrator.

Pinder identifies as a video-maker more with MTV than with such early performance-based video conceptualists as Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. The videos of Lynda Benglis, Howardena Pindell and Adrian Piper provide better context for Pinder’s concerns with the ways personal identity filters outwards through the skin and into the eyes and ears of an audience. Another predecessor, Ana Mendieta, adopted different make-up complexions to shift her gender and ethnicity in her photographic series *Facial Cosmetic Variations* (1972), and Pinder’s contemporary, Xaviera Simmons, a black artist, dons blackface and plays with racial stereotyping in her photographs and videos. Like them, Pinder jukes any simple notion of who possesses another person’s identity. Never speaking in his own voice, instead using the supposedly universal language of music as a soundtrack, Pinder’s style of deadpan is as emotionally complex as Buster Keaton’s and Harpo Marx’s. With his background in theater, Pinder knows that tragedy is the closest cousin of deep comedy.

Portraits not only present faces, they look outwards. As dynamic portraiture, Pinder’s videos boldly face the discomfort inherent in any close examination of American race relations. Attorney General Eric Holder recently called us “a nation of cowards” for refusing to meaningfully confront social segregation. He reminds us that despite Obama’s election, we have a lot of work left to do. Pinder’s videos may walk various lines of blame and guilt, but they do not point fingers or pick victims. Importantly, Pinder’s work is not only a projection, but a mirror: appearing in most of his videos, he, too, is potentially complicit in the cycle. By implicating himself and his audience in an interplay of light and dark, Pinder illustrates legacies of oppression, but refuses to engage the common polarities of the American racial dialogue.

In his work, Pinder is most visible as the median signifying whatever territory exists between extremes. “Between-ness” is perhaps his deepest subject. *Invisible Man* starts with a black screen and progresses, one light bulb at a time, to reveal the artist, staring in his standard-issue gray business suit, until the bulbs overwhelm the camera’s receptors and turn the whole screen a blinding white. Not only a brilliant exploitation of the video medium’s inherent material content, *Invisible Man* is the artist’s most direct exposition of between-ness. He is visible only between the polarities of black screen and white light. The character Pinder creates in the videos in *Anthology* is uncompromisingly complicated, a figure outside of categories who refuses to

refuse any role if it might enlighten. *Shoeshine Variations* (2007) is unusual in that the artist himself does not appear in the piece. However, he is a presence hovering between two opposing views of submission and revolt, between the “shoeshine boy” who accepts his lot and brings pride to his task, and the rebel who overturns the presumed order. By presenting these roles side by side, Pinder suggests a Dalai Lama-like middle way between the fiery by-any-means-necessary rhetoric of Malcolm X, and the non-violent resistance of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. In *Juke* (2006), ten characters with varying shades of black skin are starkly contrasted against a featureless white background running continuously through ten adjoining screens. Each character lip-synchs a different pop song made famous by a white singer. Again, Pinder’s color lines are drawn in the literal and metaphorical lights-and-darks of the video format, this time with the music soundtrack also implicated in his play of flipped expectations.

Equality is more visible than it has ever been in America. President Obama has correctly cast himself as the fulfillment of President Lincoln’s vision of a more perfect union. The work in *Anthology* predates the historic election of our nation’s first black president, but it reinforces the truth of Holder’s words: much work remains to be done. Obama is but one dream fulfilled. On an earlier, smaller, and more personal scale, Pinder recognized that, even alone in his car, he felt embarrassed singing along to his favorite white-pop songs. He dealt with this paradox by making *Juke*. We may not all essentialize the hope of true acceptance as well as he has, but we may get there still.

### Nicholas Frank, Curator

#### NOTE

The essay title is taken from Frederick Douglass, “The Color Line,” *North American Review* (1881). The epigraph is from an essay by President Ford that appeared in the *The New York Times* in 1998.

### ARTIST STATEMENT

Over the last few years my work has begun to embrace citizen science. In American society, we all play an important role in representing our “tribe.” Once we begin to embrace these perceptions we empower ourselves to change generic notions of identity. I believe that art can be more than an aesthetic experience: at its best, it can provide a theatric venue for self-examination. In my video work I’m portraying stereotypes and archetypical images of blackness through the simple act of putting myself in front of the camera. Grappling with what it means to be black today, I stand at the center of this complex and public dissection.

Inspired by the combination of moving images and sound, I create music videos in a non-commercial folk tradition. I use metaphors, allegories and visual tropes to construct a poetic experience beyond narrative. Saturated with rhythms and beats, the work is animated by the passion of personal truths and the power of cultural connectivity.

### Jefferson Pinder, February 2009

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Jefferson Pinder explores black identity in experimental videos and films that offer personal and social commentary in accessible and familiar formats. Inspired by soundtracks, music videos and physical theatre, Pinder uses hypnotic popular music and surreal, minimal performances to illuminate the subject of blackness. Though the work has a regional style and flavor, Pinder stresses the universality of his themes and travels around the globe to seek inspiration. He has recently spent time in Dakar, Mexico City and Hanoi working on projects that deal with race, identity and social mobility.

Pinder’s work has been in numerous group shows at venues including The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, the Zacheta National Gallery in Warsaw, Poland and the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery (*RECOGNIZE! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture*). Currently, he is showing new work in *After 1968*, a traveling exhibition that originated at the High Museum in Atlanta. Pinder received his B.A. in theatre from the University of Maryland, and studied at the Asolo Theatre Conservatory in Sarasota, Florida before returning to receive his M.F.A. in mixed media (2003). Based in Washington, D.C., Pinder is now an assistant professor at the University of Maryland, where he teaches art theory and foundations. He is represented by G Fine Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. and Patricia Sweetow Gallery in San Francisco.

### CHECKLIST

#### West Gallery

Jefferson Pinder with Matt Ravenstahl  
*Passive/Resistance*, 2008  
color video  
5:04

*Juke*, 2006  
10-part color video  
variable lengths

*Shoeshine Variations* (diptych), 2007  
HD digital video, 2-channel projection  
3:24

*Fisticuffs*, 2004  
8mm film transferred to video  
3:47

#### Screening Room

Jefferson Pinder with Stevi Calandra and Jeff Stein  
*Marathon*, 2003  
8mm film transferred to video  
5:00

*Dakar (Spinnin)*, 2006  
color video  
3:40

*Mule*, 2006  
8mm film transferred to digital video  
2:32

*Processional*, 2002  
8mm film transferred to digital video  
8:44

*Exorcism (Blowin Smoke)*, 2006  
color video  
2:31

*Car Wash Meditations*, 2005  
digital video  
4:40

*Invisible Man*, 2004  
digital video  
5:14

*Ali (Shadow Boxer)*, 2008  
digital video (silent)  
0:49

*Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien(White Noise)*, 2008  
stop action animation from digital photos  
5:49