

THE KITCHEN
NEW YORK CITY'S CENTER
FOR EXPERIMENTAL ART
AND THE **AVANT-GARDE**
SINCE 1971

HARMONY HOLIDAY: *BLACK BACKSTAGE* **MARCH 21—MAY 25, 2024**

BLACK BACKSTAGE, the first solo exhibition of artist Harmony Holiday (b. 1982, Waterloo, IA; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) builds upon her latest book, *MAAFA* (2022), an epic poem that explores the archetypes, archives, and sounds that form in the ruins of genocide and displacement. The term Maafa is a Swahili word meaning “great disaster” or “terrible occurrence,” often used by Black people across a global diaspora in reference to the enduring legacy and epigenetic trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Between 1501 and 1867, nearly 13 million people were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean within the route that became known as the Middle Passage. It is estimated that nearly two million Africans perished in this voyage—more lives lost than the combined number of American deaths across wars in the United States from 1775 to the present.

Living in the wake and profundity of such loss, the shaping of an afterlife becomes a strategic necessity, an ongoing dilemma and pursuit posed now by the artist via the frame of her presentation at The Kitchen at Westbeth. Here, Holiday as writer, dancer, and experimental filmmaker considers the potential for generative sites of enclosure, safety, and futurity for Black cultural production. Invested in somatic models of negotiating Black space and Black time, Holiday’s creative practice establishes the performance of Black public life as being defined by the fugitivity and improvisation of Black privacy.

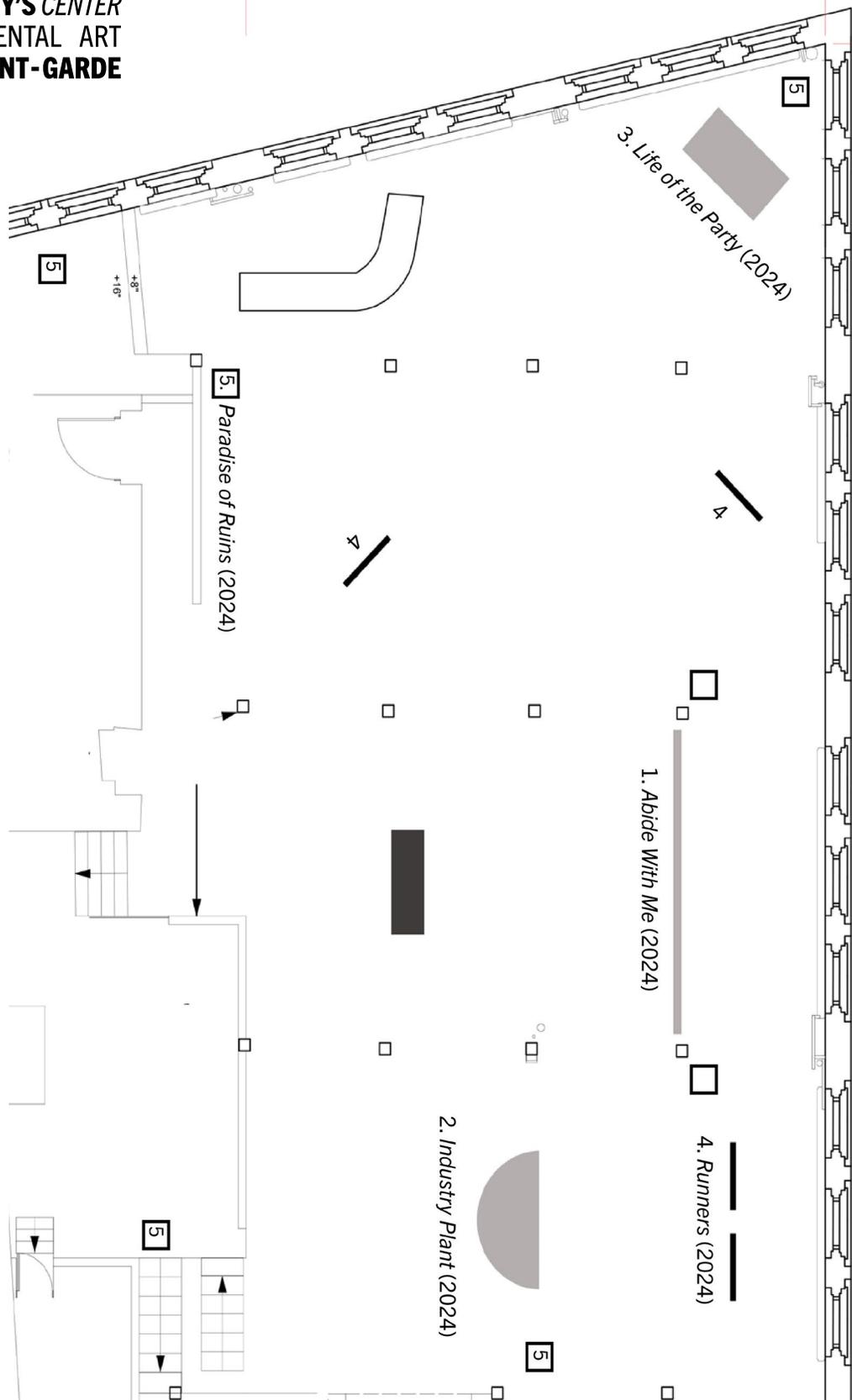
Central to the exhibition is *Abide With Me* (2024), a short film of collaged archival material and Fred Moten’s voice-over of a text written by Holiday that meditates on Black artistic identity before fame through a close look at the life of Thelonious Monk. In other sculptural and multimedia works such as *Industry Plant* (2024), *Life of the Party* (2024), and *Paradise of Ruins* (2024), Holiday finds an exchange of energy in what is unseen or unheard. “Inheritances looking for expression,” the artist writes, articulating a connection between the physical space of the backstage and the interiority it embodies. *Runners* (2024), four double-sided screen prints, draw parallels across figures and traditions of Black music. Installed immersively, the series of poems layered into archival imagery reimagine desire, expectation, and myth in the context of performance. Holiday’s “backstage” at The Kitchen unfolds as a thesis of rehearsal, resurrection, restoration, and collaboration.

BLACK BACKSTAGE is a porous archive with a myriad of performances and programs that blends and blurs scales of audience and participation. What emerges upends the troubled demands of Black celebrity and musicianship as a fetishistic fantasy shaped in the image, labor, and exhaustive engine of spectacle and entertainment. In *MAAFA*, the artist queries through a refracted lens, writing: “This is the story of a woman who has witnessed the massacre of her own family . . . A disaster is no respecter of mirrors / Do we have any black women in the epic hero position? / Any black witness?”

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1. HARMONY HOLIDAY

Abide With Me, 2024

Digital color video with sound

37:31 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Narrated by Fred Moten.

Produced with David Riley and Angelique Rosales Salgado. Additional archival research supported by Tsige Tafesse.

Abide With Me (2024) is a short film that meditates on Black artistic identity before fame through a close look at the life of Thelonious Monk. At the age of seventeen, already serious about composing and playing piano, Monk left his home in Manhattan's San Juan Hill to tour with an evangelist. From 1934–37 he played piano accompaniment to her faith healings. No one heard from him for three years.

Found video recordings layered beneath Fred Moten's voice-over of a text written by Holiday piece together these three years in the groundbreaking musician's life prior to becoming a signed artist. The film opens outward from collaged archival material depicting the specificities of Monk's life in less visible spaces. Holiday intersperses other clips of renowned artists like John Coltrane, Amiri Baraka, Lauryn Hill, Sun Ra, Tina Turner, Nina Simone, and Azealia Banks, not only on stage, but elsewhere in moments before and between performances when personality might slip a persona's grip—or, as Holiday's film narrates, "where the white gaze does not know how to look."

Her conception of the "backstage" in this work materializes with a close look of a soon-legendary Monk in a nascent space of discovery, reinstating, as Holiday explains, "the hero's journey of the Black performer as one that is defined by unseen glories, not spectacularized ones."

2. HARMONY HOLIDAY

Industry Plant, 2024

Half-circle stage, cotton stems, archival magazines, microphone, headphones

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Industry Plant is a semi-reflective, black, truncated stage overlain with stems of cotton like fallen flowers and archival issues of *Downbeat*, an American music magazine with a mission devoted to "jazz, blues and beyond." The work brings histories of Black labor into dialogue with questions of experience and memory of Black artists in the media and the music industry. The title itself interplays with the irony of this authenticity, and the manufacturing of public persona and celebrity rooted in resources and profit. The term "plant" here is dually connected as both organic matter and a symbol of surveillance, asking what it means to eavesdrop or listen in.

Holiday's half-circle of the stage gestures to writer and poet Henry Dumas's 1966 story "Will the Circle be Unbroken?" about a legendary soprano saxophonist, Probe, who has mysteriously returned from exile with a fabled "Afro-horn" able to project a "new sound" for an all-Black audience at the Sound Barrier Club in Harlem. The story describes a mystical confrontation with three white "hipster" critic types who attempt to "break the circle of the Sound Club," insisting entry to the venue. They are let in at their own risk, but as they listen, the force of the music retaliates against them, leaving them in suspended states of existence where their minds "go black."

The unknown sound that Dumas imagines on the page proposes that the labor and despair imposed by a certain kind of spectatorship can be defied by the groove of refuge. "Who gets to come in and where are we going when we enter?" Holiday asks, "How do you mend a circle with revenue at its center instead of authentic artistic evolution?"

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3. HARMONY HOLIDAY

Life of the Party, 2024

Vanity mirror and chair,
found archival magazines,
xerox reader, hot comb,
Sony TV monitor, head-
phones, liner notes
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

Life of the Party considers the preface or postscript to a performance. What is the space of rehearsal or performance that surrounds a stage, where undisclosed moments and encounters, mundane or vulgar, teeter the boundary of private and public? A vanity—often located backstage or in a dressing room for the purpose of preparing and fashioning appearance—is presented here as a disembodied site strewn with grooming tools, small belongings, archival photographs, and magazines. Holiday suggests a contrast between perceived items or gestures of care provided backstage by promoters or a venue on the occasion of a performance and the exhaustive demands of Black celebrity and musicianship.

Holiday questions the archetype of the critic or journalist as a persona that exists backstage, too. A silent black-and-white film on a Sony TV monitor introduces an embedded layer of media commentary with looping footage contemplating the dynamics of conversations or confrontations that might lead into or follow a performance.

A *BLACK BACKSTAGE* reader is available here as part of the installation for audiences to engage with throughout the exhibition.

4. HARMONY HOLIDAY

Runners, 2024

Four screen prints on cot-
ton fabric
Each: 48 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artist

How can poetry challenge the limits of legibility and give us new ways of reading the world? *Runners*, comprising four double-sided screen prints, draws parallels across figures and traditions of Black music. The series of poems layered into archival imagery reimagine desire, expectation, and myth in the context of performance. The title riffs on multiple valences of the word “runner,” from showrunner to runaway.

Prints designed in collabo-
ration with Angelique
Rosales Salgado.

Here, Holiday reflects on the legacies of artists Billie Holiday, J Dilla and Billy Strayhorn, Sam Cooke and D’Angelo, and Ye (formerly known as Kanye West) and Michael Jackson trying to “get off stage.” Centering the perspectives of the performers themselves, the works juxtapose written narratives with tabloid and media headlines, excerpted runaway slave ads, play-bills, and sheet music samples—materials in fugitivity from their sites of origin. Suspended from the ceiling, these prints and their application of text work within and against spectacle, taking alternative form alongside sound, light, sculpture, and film.

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5. HARMONY HOLIDAY

Paradise of Ruins, 2024

Compilation of sampled
audio recordings arranged
into seven channel sound

1:14:07 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

“I knew nothing Black performers did onstage was complete because I existed backstage,” Holiday writes. In the immersive sonic installation *Paradise of Ruins* (2024), the artist finds an exchange of energy in what has often been rendered unseen and unheard. Composed of found audio recordings arranged into seven channels of sound in the gallery, this work encompasses the voices, murmurs, shouts, whispers, or underground sensibilities and neglected codes that go unremembered outside of what is typically defined as an “archive.”

Holiday builds upon the archetypes and sounds that form in the ruins after genocide and displacement, and is inspired by the ways Black music is often born in these ruins—taken to the stage, the radio, and the album as both necessity and commodity. Occupying, compiling, and examining these ruins brings us to the site “where intentions are not blurred or drooping under the heave of spotlights and commercial pressures [...] remaining kinetic and not at the mercy of an album or live show’s limited duration.” The artist invokes paradise here as a Biblical and folkloric territory that does not bend to scrutiny or become over-determined, but rather carries the many meanings that emerge during process.

Expanded liner notes for this work are available at the gallery entrance as takeaway material.

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ARTIST BIO

Harmony Holiday (b. 1982, Waterloo, IA; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) is a writer, dancer, and experimental filmmaker whose work surveys music, ancestry, death and rebirth, and celebrity. She is the author of 5 collections of poetry including *MAAFA* (2022), and also curates an archive of griot poetics and a related performance and conversation series at LA's 2220Arts. At the core of her practice is a pursuit of visual and literary vocabularies that might best express the melancholic hope endemic to Black American social life. As Holiday navigates the depths of Black remembrance and loss, she sets her sights on the relationship between "the new", "the archival," and the spaces between them that defy linear time. She treats these energies as collectively improvising ensembles in which prose and poetry sit by turns comfortable and chaotic, next to images cribbed from Black artistic and private life. Most recently she has received awards from the Silver's and Rabkin foundations, and is completing a memoir *Love is War for Miles*, a biography of Abbey Lincoln, and collection of poems.

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