

Osman Can Yerebakan, "Arthur Jafa retells New York film history," Plaster, April 15, 2024

PLASTER

Arthur Jafa retells New York film history

Osman Can Yerebakan reviews the American artist's concurrent New York shows, which recast Taxi Driver and envelop visitors in a black mirror of images



Arthur Jafa, "BG," 2024. Film Still. © Arthur Jafa. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Two and half years ago, on a cold November night in Harlem, the fourth floor of a former brewery on West 127th Street was crackling. On a screen, giant chunks of black earth ebbed and flowed like the delirious Atlantic, while actual plates of paella were passed around downstairs. Later, the empty dishes were almost hopping like the sizzling cuts of dark, wavy earth upstairs because the music had started and the crowd was responding. We were at the former space of the now-shuttered gallery Gavin Brown's Enterprise for a screening of Arthur Jafa's film AGHDRA (2021). The Spanish dinner was handled by Rirkrit Tiravanija who fed the zealous crowd with crispy rice before they ascended to absorb Jafa's dizzying scenes of topographic disarray.

In this massive single-channel video, the sun was far off, hovering above the horizon before the lumpy, magma-like landscape swallowed the solar orb; we were passengers on an invisible boat, with our destination left vague. The unforgivingly choppy ride on wavy lava, however, was a task we were committed to. The 85-minute video showed AI-generated imagery of gargantuan coal-coloured rocks operating like ocean waves. After the turbulent collage of imagery in Jafa's most celebrated video work, Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death (2016), this film's slow-burn quality had a hallucinatory appeal that stirred senses of comfort and peril into a baffling elixir.



4 photos

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Jafa is back in New York with concurrent exhibitions at Gladstone Gallery and 52 Walker. At Chelsea's Gladstone, the 1 hour, 13 minute-long new film, titled **BG** (2024) combines the experiences of watching *Love Is The Message, The Message Is Death* and *AGHDRA*. Similar to the former, the work features existing imagery—in this case, Martin Scorsese's Hollywood classic *Taxi Driver* (1976)—slowly looping into a collage of sequences that defy the original's plot line or any traditional cinematic narrative in general. The video starts with the film's bloodbath climax in which Travis Bickle, Robert de Niro's racist taxi driver character, breaks into a hotel to rescue the child sex worker Iris, played by Jodie Foster, from a group of pimp paedophiles. Jafa has altered the original's white pimps with Black actors through digital manipulation, returning the script to Paul Schrader's original screenplay in which the characters were written as Black. Scorsese and the producers altered the characters' race to avoid criticism and offered the role of lead pimp to Harvey Keitel. "How can you?" one pimp screams against Bickle's bullets while grabbing him with his last remaining strength; once the scene reaches its finale with de Niro's gesture of pretend trigger pulling with his bloody fingers, Jafa's edit turns into a medley of scene cuts. In another critical scene, the protagonist encounters a group of Black pimps at a diner. The work echoes *AGHDRA* with its lingering nature, asking the audience to slow down and sit for the artist's boiling sequences that repeat, break, and repeat again. Jafa's way of conveying a statement is both in-yer-face and veiled; the looping violence in the six-minute finale never feels numbing despite multiple repetitions. It rather remains hammering, just like the artist's shattering take on representation and white America's misguided correctionalism.

Information

Arthur Jafa: 'BG' , runs until 4th May 2024 at Gladstone Gallery, gladstonegallery.com

'BLACK POWER TOOL AND DIE TRYNIG' is on view until 1st June 2024 at 52 Walker. 52walker.com

Credits

Words: Osman Can Yerebakan