

Nobody's Fool
at Carnation
Contemporary

— *Luiza Lukova*

Nobody's Fool, curated by art historian, cultural worker, and writer Ella Ray (she/they), opened at Carnation Contemporary on Saturday, October 23, 2021. The exhibition presents six contemporary artists whose work centers on each apex of the imagination of Black alternative realities. These realities depend on artists being afforded the opportunity to operate outside of racially charged and capitalistic systems. Weaving together a multitude of media, the pieces on view coalesce to map out a framework for working beyond their present conditions.

No other field than that of the (canonical) visual arts is more historically (and precariously) steeped in the trope of the white (male) artist. There exists an inherent tension in acknowledging that tearing down this model and building a new one might not be the domain of museums and galleries as we currently understand them. The art world cannot adequately function for artists of color when its very system is built off of an existing world of theft and anti-Blackness. To this effect, and what it means in terms of gaze and engagement, Ray tells me the execution of the show felt even more weighted. She notes, “While the portals, loopholes, maps, visions, and dreams created by these artists are technically on display for whomever is in the gallery, each work is speaking very specifically to Black participants. Knowing that the invitation to envision oneself in these futures and alternative realities is not extended to all audience members, space becomes less important.”

What feels uncompromising about this group exhibition is the way in which the artists have attempted to move beyond the white-walled room and the socio/cultural/systemic parameters it imposes. Here the work shifts expectations and aims to construct a new narrative that seeks to become the norm. As the focal point in the curator's selection of artists



and the resulting exhibition, Ray poses the question of “What would you amplify, glitch, flip, process, retract, or destroy to make it to the otherside?” The “otherside” here is malleable—at its crux it demonstrates a realm where these makers are addressing similar concepts and working toward different articulations of that dream space.

Entering the gallery, viewers first come across a GoldStar television placed on a short white pedestal, playing a video that seems to be aglow with bright neon colors and moving bodies. The only noise heard is the soundscape created by the echo of the work. The installation, *cavity*, by ariella tai (they/them), is a five-minute, looped film that tai has dubbed “a deadly siren song.” Audiences may be lured with a sense of familiarity given the material: existing media of Black performances from film, video, and television. Closer inspection reveals that the material is queered and is meant to subvert and dissect the original cinematic intention. The scenes on the screen shift rapidly unlike a traditional film. At first the digital video is washed in deeply textured blue, lines running across the face on the screen, only to shift into a bright pixelated purple that, haltingly, fills only the bottom half of the screen. The images expand and retract, depicting at times multiple frames within the larger material one, and are consistently manipulated in some manner. Among others, we see the characters of Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington) in “Scandal” and the vampiress Queen Akasha (Aaliyah) in “Queen of the Damned.” The characters act as heralds desirous of power, autonomy, frenzy, and answers. tai constructs an arena for their retribution, the possibility to exist beyond the limitations of their characters. *cavity* seems to imply a gap, a depression, a void to

Installation view. *Nobody's Fool*, Carnation Contemporary, 2021. (Photo: Luiza Lukova)



be filled only by re-conceptualizing an entire pantheon of Black characters.

Artists Mariah Green (they/them) and Nia Musiba (she/her) employ paint as their primary medium. In *We Are Not One Hundred Percent Ourselves*, Musiba uses vivid green and red colors to delineate the background from her figures, which are rendered in a smooth black and a textured off-white. The figures feature larger-than-life hands and bodies that contrast with small heads but are somehow humanizing nonetheless. Musiba presents bodies that could exist in surrogate spaces, free from homogeneity. There is levity in this type of play where bodies are fluid and averse to hyper-penetrative conventions.

In turn, Green eschews color, favoring solely black and white oils to depict their canvases as possible vehicles toward Blackness, expanding on the topics of Afrofuturism, transportation, and the “otherside.” *THE FOLD/THE ROOK* doubles as an image of a face and a wormhole. In the lower right hand corner, three wisping shapes appear almost as eyes with a pupil in the center, as if already possessing the ability to see the nearing of a tangible future. As an interpretative solution to the reality of space and time, viewers can speculate transcending this plane and accelerating forward to new horizons. Viewing these works becomes the first step in the process of moving past.

Carrie Mae Weems said: “Art is the one place we all turn to for solace.” For multidisciplinary artist Azha Ayanna Luckman (she/her), solace is found in the deeply intimate and candid moments she captures with her camera. *Black Cherry Reprise* and *I am called back into myself* are large-scale prints of medium-format self-portraits shot by the artist in 2021 and 2020, respectively. In the image on the left, Luckman gazes directly into the camera, a towel wrapped around her freshly-dyed, cherry red hair. In the image on the right, she looks away and into the light, giving us a view of her left profile with a shaved head. The ritual of changing one’s appearance is akin to shape-shifting, becoming grounded in a moment of transformation. With these two self-portraits, Luckman allows herself to be observed in two moments of revolution. While the body fluctuates and adapts, that which the lens captures remains and solidifies the becoming.

On either side of the parallel walls of the gallery are linocut and intaglio prints by artist, writer, and educator Melanie Stevens (she/her). Emphasizing storytelling at the core, these smaller framed pieces offer concentrated windows into this practice. Pushing against false narratives which supposedly center the African diaspora, Stevens sheds light on their harmful nature by juxtaposing and empowering her own reinterpretation of history. *The Fire Inside* mirrors tai’s *cavity* in its intensity and rage. The figure in the right foreground holds a lit torch while a fire in the background blazes through a large, plantation-style home. Through Stevens’s meticulous linework, we can almost see the flames flickering intensely. Speculative fiction can serve to sublimate the rest of our understanding of the setting. We are confronted with the image of how literal the fire inside this character has manifested itself; here it liberates and storms freely.

The violent chaos of white colonizer history has consumed and directed patterns of contemporary history making since the beginning of recordkeeping. Those who are not subsumed in these violent acts or prejudiced against them as a result are left to wonder how to effectively deal

Mariah Green, *THE FOLD/THE ROOK* (2021) and *X.1* (2021), Oil on canvas, 30×30 in. and 30×30 in. (Photo: Luiza Lukova)

Azha Ayanna Luckman, *Black Cherry Reprise* (2021) and *I am called back into myself* (2020), 120mm, 30×40 in. and 16×20 in. (Photo: Luiza Lukova)



Installation View. *Nobody's Fool*, Carnation Contemporary, 2021. (Photo: Luiza Lukova)

with this knowledge. Through serigraphy, artist and educator Kendyl Boyd (she/her) presents images interlaced with

text that prompt audiences to engage with themselves and their lived experiences. Her two pieces are shown in tandem and offer love, community, and understanding as reparative discourse. The text printed on both canvases is open, an interrogative: “What does love look like?” Its repetition conveys an urgency to engage, printed twice, once in red and once in blue and etched in the lower right hand corner of each work. In turn, one iteration of the same image is presented on each canvas, again in red and blue and diagonal from the question. The image in turn appears closed, enduring. From the artist statement we gather it is a photograph of the artist’s parents taken in the early days of their relationship. The in-between expanse from photo to present, and all that that time encompasses, is what visitors are meant to face. The simple phrase holds the weight of a universal relationship far heavier than that of just Boyd’s parents. As Ray tells me, “The works feel like a mirror—I see my kin, my family, my lovers, myself.”

Nobody’s Fool was born of the curator’s interest “in understanding the markings and language of these feelings/actions/callings/pursuits [of fantasy/pleasure/vengeance], finding overlap and divergence across artists, and seriously and thoughtfully engaging with dream-space.” *Nobody’s Fool* affords the imagination to build an ecosystem wherein there are no restrictions on creative output. The works exhibited could be seen as arbiters, halfway points between this world and another; an ecosystem whose framework is innately more kind and truthful for Black people, and presents the opportunity to see compositions of this nature all of the time.



Luiza Lukova is a visual arts writer, poet, and curator. She is an art historian with an academic background in Postmodern Art History and Literature. She is the co-founder of homebase, a non-traditional backyard gallery space in Southeast Portland. Her other critical writing can be found at *Art Practical*, *Art & About PDX*, *60 Inch Center*, and other journals. Born in Bulgaria, she is currently living and working in Portland, Oregon.

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Kendyl Boyd, *What does love look like? (Blue)* (2020) and *What does love look like? (Red)* (2021). Serigraph on canvas, 30×35in. each. (Photo: Luiza Lukova)