



MATT BRYANS + DEMETRIUS OLIVER  
 ATLANTA

Hundreds of ghostly faces populate an imposing butte, confronting viewers as they enter Matt Bryans' installation of drawings [Atlanta Contemporary Art Center; October 13—December 9, 2006]. *Untitled (Faces)*, 2006, is an assemblage of hundreds of small, erased rectangular newspaper fragments that form alien faces, peering primates, and apparitions. Beyond, *Untitled (Aluminium)*, 2006, a primordial field of tiny, charred stalactite clusters, forms an amoeba-like floor installation. These stalactites are, in fact, totems of burnt balls of aluminum foil.

Bryans first effaces the politicians, sports personalities, and daily news features with his eraser. He then moves and concentrates the displaced ink to delineate human and animal specters. Frightened visages, veiled portraits, and black, almond-eyed aliens stare out at viewers from their peripheral posts along the edges of the mound-shaped membrane of newsprint fragments. Bryans' eviscerations produce holes that form empty pupils and complement the vacant expressions of his ghostly menagerie, underscoring the fragility of their existence and of his installation. *Untitled (Landscape)*, 2006, marks a recent departure from the subtle grays, beiges, blacks, and whites of drawings like *Untitled (Faces)*. In this imaginary landscape, a magical sky of aquamarine, violet, cobalt, and ultramarine blue swirls above verdant green and brown fields, maroon, sienna and ochre mesas, and a pinetree-studded winter wonderland. Recalling Oskar Kokoschka's *The Tempest (Bride of the Wind)*, 1914, the movement of color animates the sky. It spreads across hundreds of newsprint fragments, spanning approximately sixteen feet. Here, Bryans extracted pools of deep pigment from colored feature illustrations and travel advertisements. In some passages, images of mountains or trees escaped erasure, creating magical miniature vignettes resembling model train sets or dioramas. Elsewhere, the newsprint's thinness allows fragments of headlines and advertise-

ments to show through, returning the fantasy landscape to its popular culture context. In one sense, these are anti-drawings that engage the impossibility of total erasure confirmed by Robert Rauschenberg when he famously attempted to erase de Kooning's drawing in 1953. Erased images on mass-media fragments, Bryans' drawings undermine drawing as a fine art medium. Simultaneously, the isolation of these three delicate installations in the gallery's large white cube imparts a monumentality that contradicts the intimacy associated with the drawing medium.

In an adjoining gallery, Demetrius Oliver's large Cibachromes juxtapose cropped fragments of the artist's body with evocative objects. The Houston artist also often bases his work on American history and literature. Inspired by Herman Melville's obsession with the sea, *Anchor*, 2005, shows a rounded black garbage bag suspended from the neck of the artist posing as an anonymous man dressed in black. While the title suggests one interpretation, the ambiguity and anonymity of the figure open the image up to multiple readings. The burden around his neck references pregnancy. It also resembles the plastic bags often used by homeless people.

Four thin railroad tracks cross a clenched, upraised fist that dominates the digital c-print *Tracks*, 2002-2005. While Oliver's skin color remains indeterminate, the forceful gesture resembles a Black Power fist. The ink-drawn tracks refer to the Underground Railroad that carried escaped slaves to freedom in northern cities. Alternatively, they reference intravenous drug use that tragically enslaves and often kills young people in urban populations.

Isolated against a neutral white ground, a man's black leather belt encircles chunks of charcoal and creates a metonym for the artist in *Hearth*, 2006. The hearth has been the center of family life since prehistoric times. Here, the charcoal black hearth represents the black

man devoid of family or community. His isolation against the stark white background also accentuates his separation from mainstream white society. In *Seminole*, 2005, raw bacon strips form a mohawk on Oliver's closely shaved head. While the bacon suggests the centrality of fried food to southern culture, its rawness adds discomfort. The title further underscores the shared oppression of indigenous and enslaved people that has plagued American society.

Rich chocolate frosting smothers the artist's head in *Till*, 2004-2005, the exhibition's most unsettling image. Suffocating and silencing Oliver by covering his eyes, ears, and mouth, the sweet confection invokes grotesque burn scars or hideous facial deformations. As such, the image becomes an ominous reminder of the history of violence towards African-Americans. While the title may refer to tilling, thereby associating the rich dessert topping with manure, it also references the gruesome murder of Emmett Till. In 1955, the fourteen-year-old black boy was brutally killed for speaking to a white woman in Mississippi. Broadly published in print media, his disfigured face became a call to action. Like Bryans' eraser transformations of newsprint media into fantastic images, Oliver's performances for the camera produce thought-provoking transformations of the commonplace.

—Dinah McClintock

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Demetrius Oliver, *Seminole*, 2005, digital c-print, 34 x 48 inches (collection of Russell J. Drake, Birmingham, Alabama); Matt Bryans, detail of *Untitled*, 2006, burnt aluminum, variable dimensions (courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London)