

## Cruel Intentions: Bri Williams Harry Burke

Bri Williams's sculptures triangulate seemingly disparate subjects such as Baroque operas, contemporary rom-coms, and histories of subjugation. The artist's assemblages often incorporate soap in order to heighten the brooding affect of personal and found objects. This moldable and malleable material, which decays and preserves the items it holds, defamiliarizes everyday things and encourages new readings of the traumas that they carry.

*Sebben Crudele*, Williams's recent solo exhibition at Queer Thoughts, New York, took its title from an eighteenth-century aria by the Venetian composer Antonio Caldara. "I don't deserve to feel worthless... I love you, but you cause me pain," pine the lyrics, which evoke the turmoil of an insecure attachment.

The sculpture *Forward Hand Crack* (2019) features a whip enclosed in a headstone of soap placed upon a brawny wooden mantelpiece. The lash, an object of explicit violence, spirals like a fossil in its thick, lard-yellow encasement. Its pigmentation bleeds into the substance in which it is suspended. With mournful austerity, Williams presents an emblem of social death as an embalmed and ambiguous domestic ornament.

Nearby is a wall-mounted portrait mirror in an ornate wooden frame (*Closer II*, 2020) that again indexes the interior of a parlor. The glass surface is coated with glycerin soap, and the mirror reflects fuzzily. At first glance, the artwork radiates with the psychoanalytic insight that self-knowledge is elusive. However, deeper questions surface when Williams's propositions are read as an ensemble. Reassessing analytic theory through the lens of postcolonialism, thinkers like Ranjana Khanna have made the argument that psychoanalysis is an intimately colonial discipline. In *Forward Hand Crack*, the whip—a cornerstone technology of modern empire—is saponified, while in *Closer II*, the ideal of the universally legible self fades from view. These gestures address what Khanna describes as the psychological distress of "the impossible achievement of selfhood for the colonized."<sup>1</sup> If healing is compromised, Williams's sculptures seem to argue, by the mechanics of representation, could there be an alternative visual logic of apparition? The clouded mirror suggests an opaque ontology—a ghostly and indeterminate state of being.

The young Los Angeles-based artist's first solo exhibition, *Lying is the most fun*, was held at Oakland's Interface Gallery in 2018. Its title references Natalie Portman's line "lying is the most fun a girl can have without taking her clothes off" from the film *Closer* (2004), a "flamboyantly bad" (per *The Atlantic*) dramatization of unfaithful heterosexual desire, the soundtrack of which featured excerpts from Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790). The exhibition's disassembled centerpiece sculpture, *Medusa* (2018), consisted of a rearing carousel horse coated in murky, azure-tinted soap placed next to a crescent of uncemented bricks. Its head was attached to the gallery's wall like a taxidermied trophy, while a small, circular bike mirror protruded spookily from the hobby horse's neck. Freud read Medusa's "horrifying" decapitation as an allegory for the "terror of castration."<sup>2</sup> But as Khanna brilliantly argues, perhaps Freud was "acting out."<sup>3</sup> It can be

argued that the concept of castration anxiety emerged through Freud's projection of his own fears into the realm of feminized sexuality, an act of transference that effectively encoded the other as inferior. By interpreting Medusa as a decapitated fairground horse, Williams redirects the viewer's attention towards an infantilized masculine authority symbol. The loosely stacked bricks speak to the way in which the artist's work is at once de- and reconstructive: A patriarchal psychodrama is dismantled, and a queerer theatrics is proposed.

Carousels, like soap operas, accrue drama through repetition. One vehicle through which Freud addressed his patients' retroactive ties to the past was the idea of *Nachträglichkeit*. Though consensus is divided, many scholars have translated this into English as "afterwardsness." Ruminating on the concept's historical implications, Williams's work critically returns to the unresolved colonial othering that drives modern art, psychology, and romance.

- 1 Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003): 6.
- 2 Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920–1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology, and Other Works*. Translated and edited by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955): 273.
- 3 Khanna. 47.



00 Bri Williams, *Forward Hand Crack*, 2019, *Sebben Crudele* installation view at Queer Thoughts, New York, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Queer Thoughts, New York  
 00 Bri Williams, *Untitled*, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Queer Thoughts, New York  
 00 Bri Williams, *Medusa*, 2018, *Lying is the most fun* installation view at Interface Gallery, Oakland, 2018. Courtesy: the artist and Interface Gallery, Oakland.  
 Photo: Phillip Maisel



