

GALLERY AFERRO

UNUSUAL SUSPECTS: JERRY GANT

An Artistic Meditation of the Black Male Image in America

"Then 'Let the grown men come' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees. She did not tell them to clean up their lives or go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glory bound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have is the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it." - Toni Morrison, Beloved

The Unusual Suspects. What they do: Shift, illuminate, and stretch form into forevers graced by light. Fragment shape into syntax, while holding the lone line. Splice and dare color to match the merits of the visage that defies geometry. Well, usually. But that's on a slow day.

At the end of a recent conversation with Jerry Gant, right before we said goodbye, he said something that struck me as odd. *"We have to keep the grass green. On both sides."* We hadn't been talking about gardening, or lawns, neither was he speaking of the ubiquitous urban jungle, where he originated, was (and is) fertilized, blossoms, sows, reaps, and like all green things, returns to the soil in order to flip the bounty to replant and reinvest in the creative ury, joy and intensity of his hometown, the roiling artistic hothouse that is contemporary Newark, NJ. When Jerry Gant spoke of keeping grass green on both sides he was clarifying the utter necessity for collective growth, creativity, progress, and nurturing that goes both ways. An empty cup can't quench anyone's thirst, and the creative soul needs replenishment that reflects their demonstrated commitment to building and expanding creative community.

As a truly public figure in Newark, Jerry Gant's latest exhibition will allow face-to-face public engagement with this artist's groundbreaking artistic practice, as well as the artist himself. Be ready to experience memorable exchanges around art, creative thought, and the future of Newark itself. How's that for keeping it green? The exhibition and solo rotation installation 'Unusual Suspects' is curated by Linda Street and is the latest rotation of 'Activate: Market Street', the public art initiative developed by Gallery Aferro, recognized for powerfully impactful commitment to Newark's creative community. The largest and most ambitious artistic installation of its kind in Newark, Jerry Gant's 'Unusual Suspects' will occupy three storefronts along Market Street, one of the major corridors and gateways to downtown Newark. The imagery will engage one of the most widely contentious images ever: the Black male. Utilizing expressive and arresting line drawings, street-codified dialect, and doubled-entendre'd text; Gant guides the viewer through a world of neo-reality that may surprise some. Cultural theorist Kobena Mercer describes the body as a 'site of social identity in crisis', referring to 'the body' in general. Gant's exhibition reveals how much more intensely this resonates when the body is Black, and further, when it is Black and male. We're aware of this, certainly. But when you make your promenade down Market Street to view the installation, be prepared to expect the unexpected. There are no mug shots, rappers, or athletes. And best of all, no statistics. No numbers.

The artist's premise is this: numbers nod. Often in insidious directions, and often at stereotypes of pathology, thereby calling attention to more of what is routinely asserted and therefore, painfully constant) and for these reasons, eventually, numbers numb.

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So no numbers.
Well, there are.
Just not the usual ones.
Unusual ones. (Ask the artist what '85' is about.)

Unusual Suspects invites, and often gently, yet persistently insists upon the viewers' absorption of a visual landscape of archetypes that live deep within each of our personal and cultural tableaux, and these efigies live in our collective cultural memory, where they are instantly accessible:

Michael's imperious twitch & twirl spanning an eternal lifetime of concert stages.
Grambling State's marching band covering & consecrating hallowed ground in joyful jaunt and stretch.
Denzel's deliberate bent-legged saunter (or is it a ramble?) towards us on the silver screen.
Uncle David's heartbreaking knock-kneed strut on pay day.
Dr. J's funky in-flight aerial elegance.
Lee Morgan's disconsolate (yet somehow, audacious) stroll to the mike for the blusiest of solos.

You know these men, and love them. So do I. (Mapplethorpe did too.) The list could go on forever, (the feeling certainly does.)

But understand this: Gant's men, like the ones recalled above, require an investment. This investment requires that we meet the imagery where it lives, and where that is, is at a place of feeling. As witnesses to this artistic process, viewers are charged with confronting mainstream paradigmatic thought: systems of ideas and beliefs that posits the Black male body as an abomination to be feared and loathed as a matter of course, or objectified, at best. I

Instead, Gant's figures, from fresh youth to most distinguished elder, hold the participant (this work, again, is about keeping the grass green: in the process of looking, mere viewers grow into actual participants in the artist's modus operandi: we realize what's being communicated, and whether we agree or not, we feel something) accountable for the formation of ideas surrounding the representation of these bodies: our dreams, hopes, desires are all accessed, as we begin the task of unpacking what is entailed in this intimate engagement with images that are new to us, and yet intimately, and perhaps jarringly, familiar.

Lisa Bradley, Artist and Cultural Theorist, 2014

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