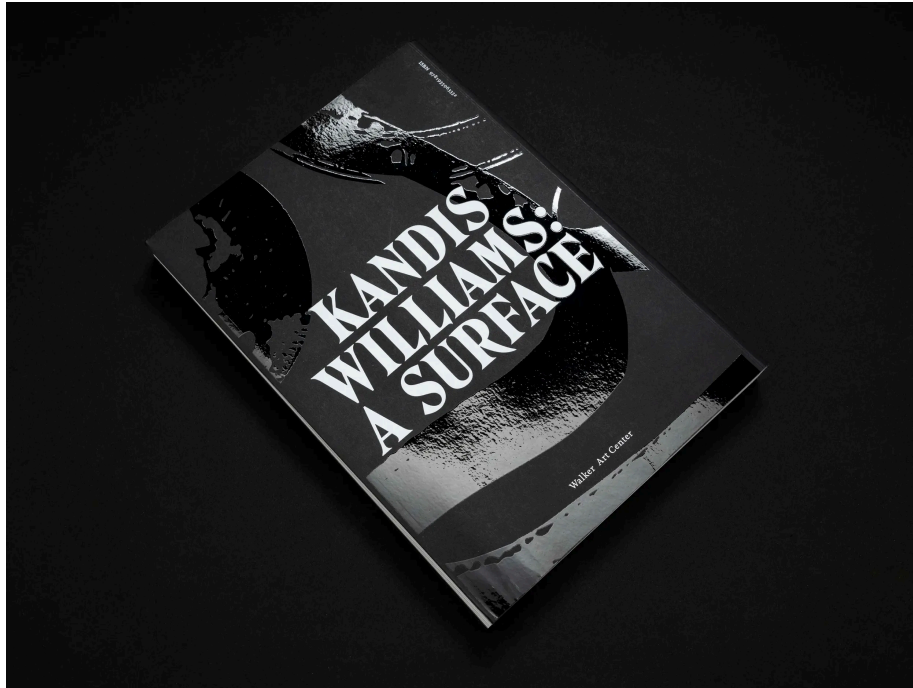


Kandis Williams: A Surface

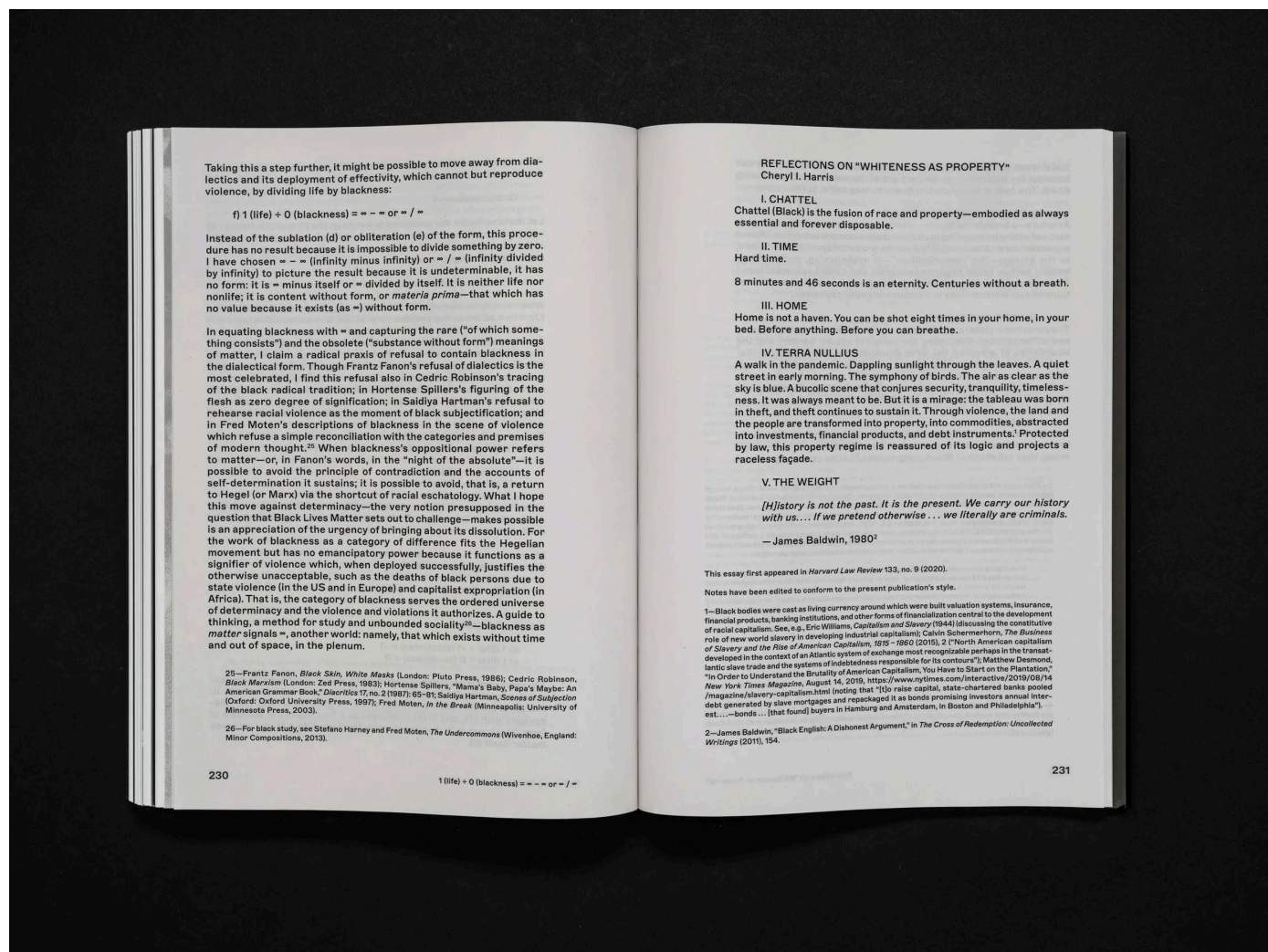
By Joel Danilewitz



The site of the archive is where the state reifies its authority, where policy consolidates history, and, in the process, indexes a margin that is both inimical to the state's goals and inseparable from its production of power. In America, collective memory tends to overly simplify, and at times erase, complex truths about race and gender. These gaps multiply in all directions, cropping up in healthcare, labor, sexuality, media representation, and politics. For Kandis Williams, generating counter-narratives against archival omission is a means of opposing historical omissions.

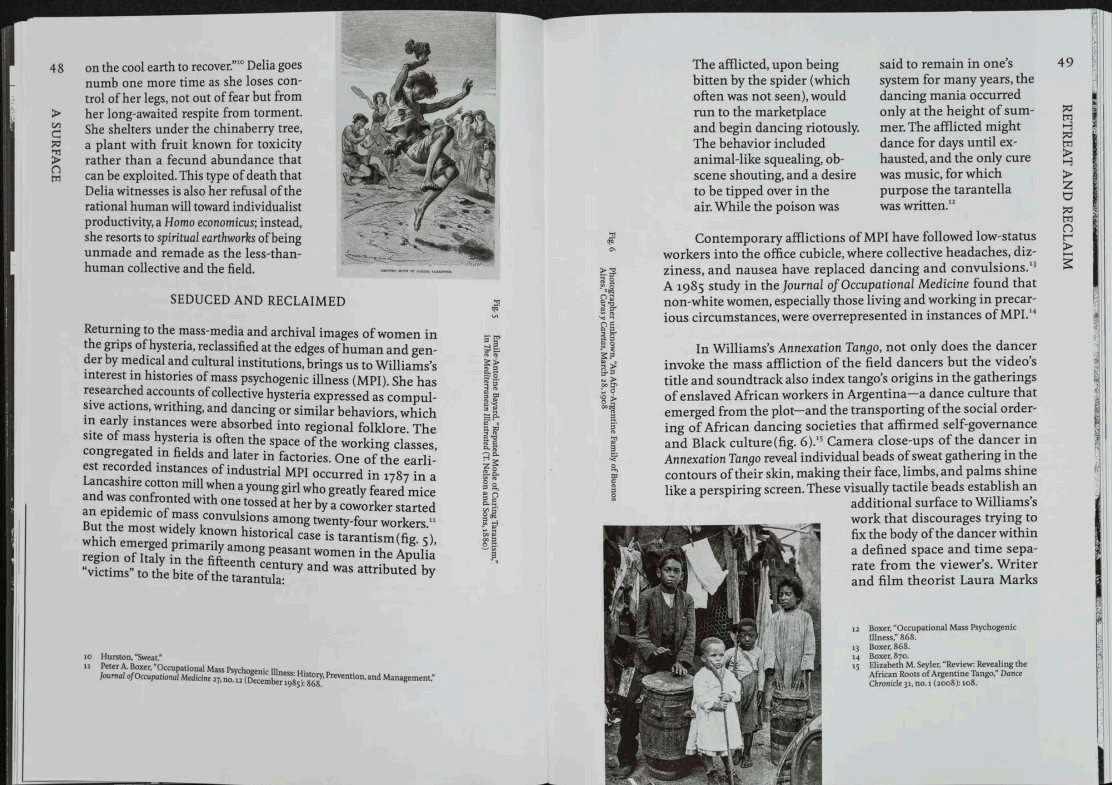
Kandis Williams finds inspiration in decay. Describing her hometown of Baltimore as full of “interiors and domestic spaces without doors, half-finished cement steps, those worn-out stoops that are very Baltimore,” her art often acts as an interruption into other artworks, along with initiating its own self-reflexive ruptures. Williams works across mediums, incorporating

video, performance, choreography, assemblage, publishing, and curating into her practice. Earlier this year, Walker Arts Center commemorated this polymath's work with a comprehensive, career-spanning survey.



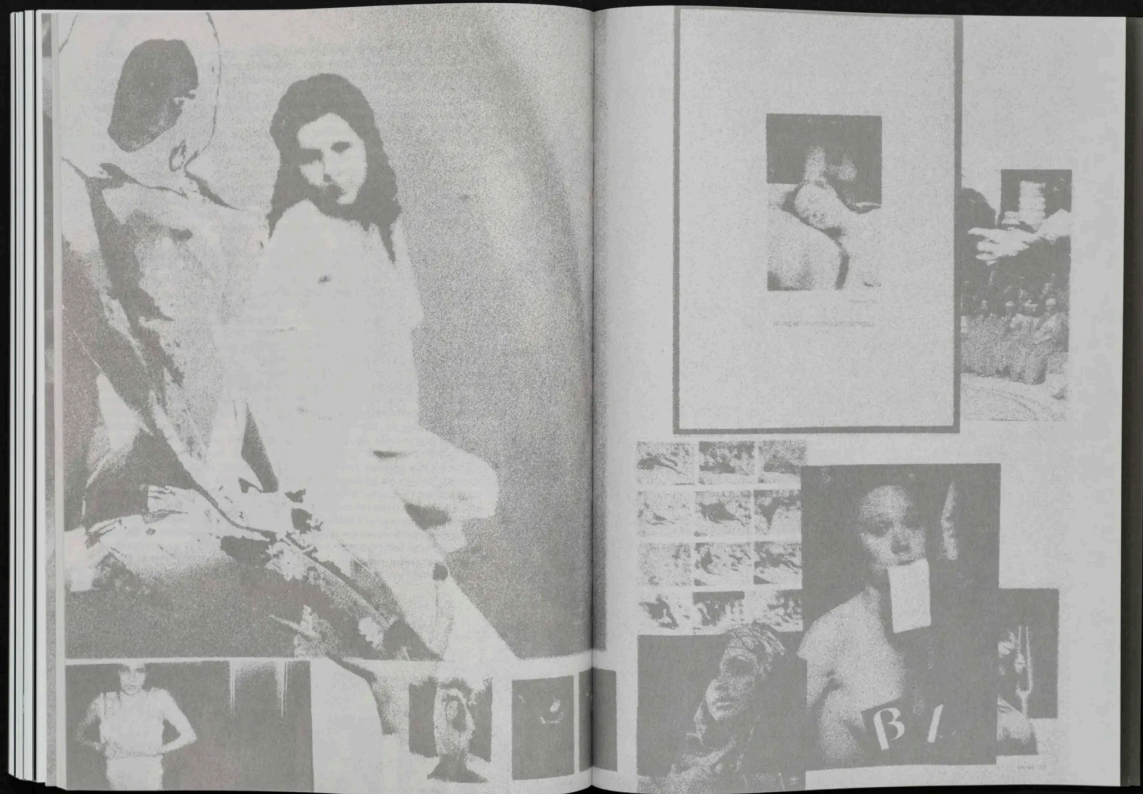
The monograph *Kandis Williams: A Surface*, published in affiliation with the exhibition of the same name at Walker Arts Center, elucidates the artist's methodologies for disrupting the normative temporal and spatial conditions that bring about racial and gendered embodiment in American culture. For Williams, collage is a useful technique and epistemological tool for reconfiguring the historical treatment of women and Black people.

Williams's mixed-media photomontages are sometimes sepulchral, frequently sublime, and always magnificently layered. The artist uses pop cultural references to demonstrate the past's recursive nature—racism and misogyny as visual regimes that continually reinforce themselves. History is a circle that enfolds itself, a process Williams proves in works like *Crowd on the marshes of Lethe*



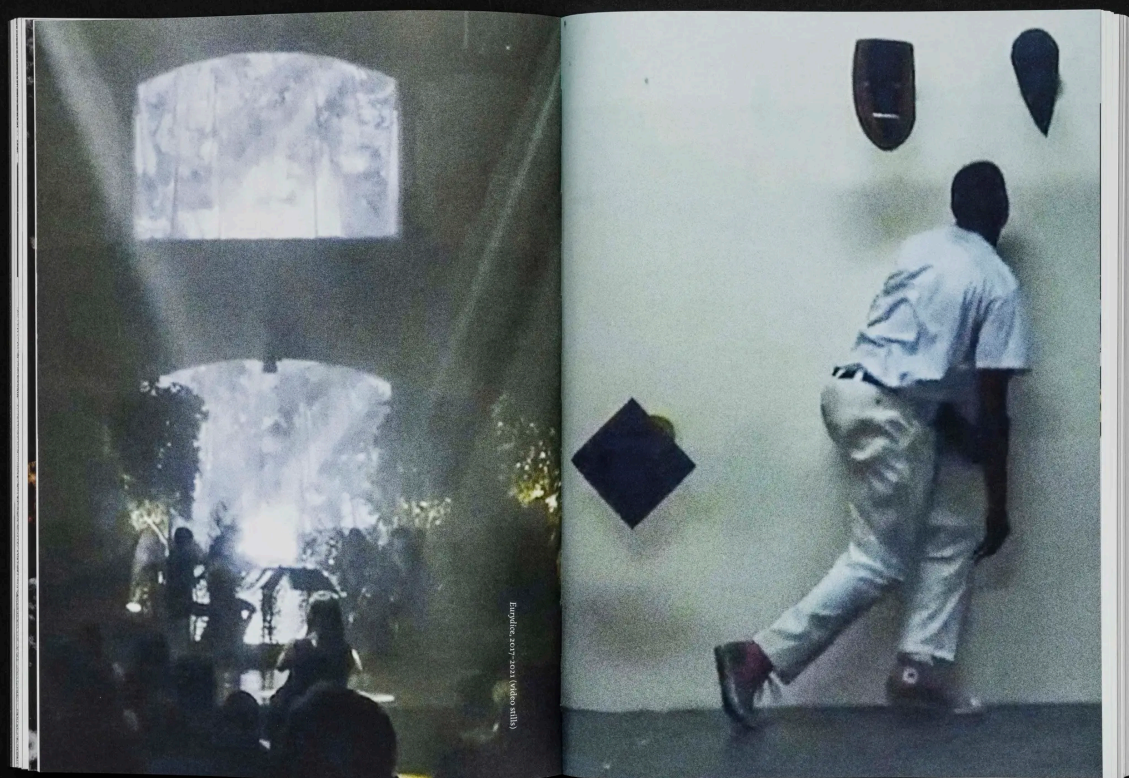
(2018). In this collage we encounter three rows of figures set against a dense, cloudy sky. The top row features a group of nineties supermodels, followed by a tableaux of ancient sculptures—Williams frequently references Greek antiquity and that epoch's preoccupation with idealized beauty. Beneath these sculptures are a row of Black slaves in shackles, with the errant model or statue pasted alongside them. Williams draws parallels between these grouped figures to highlight the different value systems imposed on humans in history, and whether those ideals are used to commodify bodies, valorize them, or, often paradoxically, both.

As with the aforementioned work, Williams's collages are animatedly allusive, pairing the far-flung Paleolithic world with instantly recognizable images of Marilyn Monroe and Britney Spears (see: *Venus is a Sacrificial Form* [2016]). Walker Art Center curator Taylor Jasper and ICA Philadelphia curator Denise Ryner contribute illuminating essays that, rather than simply "decoding" Williams's palimpsestic artworks, connect Williams to the greater tradition of Black feminist thought. Jasper discusses the "fragmentary" element of Williams's work that challenges normative conceptions of race and gender identity.



Regarding philosopher and writer Sylvia Wynter's subversion of "Man" as a universal subject, Jasper argues that Williams's reclamation of Black female agency resonates with Wynter's critique of "the ways in which Enlightenment-era humanism constructed a normative, white, male subject, relegating Black and Indigenous peoples to the margins of humanity." Ryner, invoking the literary critic Hortense Spillers, extrapolates the Black feminist scholar's work on the "theft of the body" into Williams's collaging. "The *theft* that Spillers refers to," Ryner writes, "is a rupture from Indigenous culture, place, and kin that continues to be experienced as a collectively dismembered and exiled body ... we see and experience this in Williams's sculptural montages." The concluding section, "A Kandis Williams Reader," provides further texts that were generative for Williams's practice, each reprinted in full.

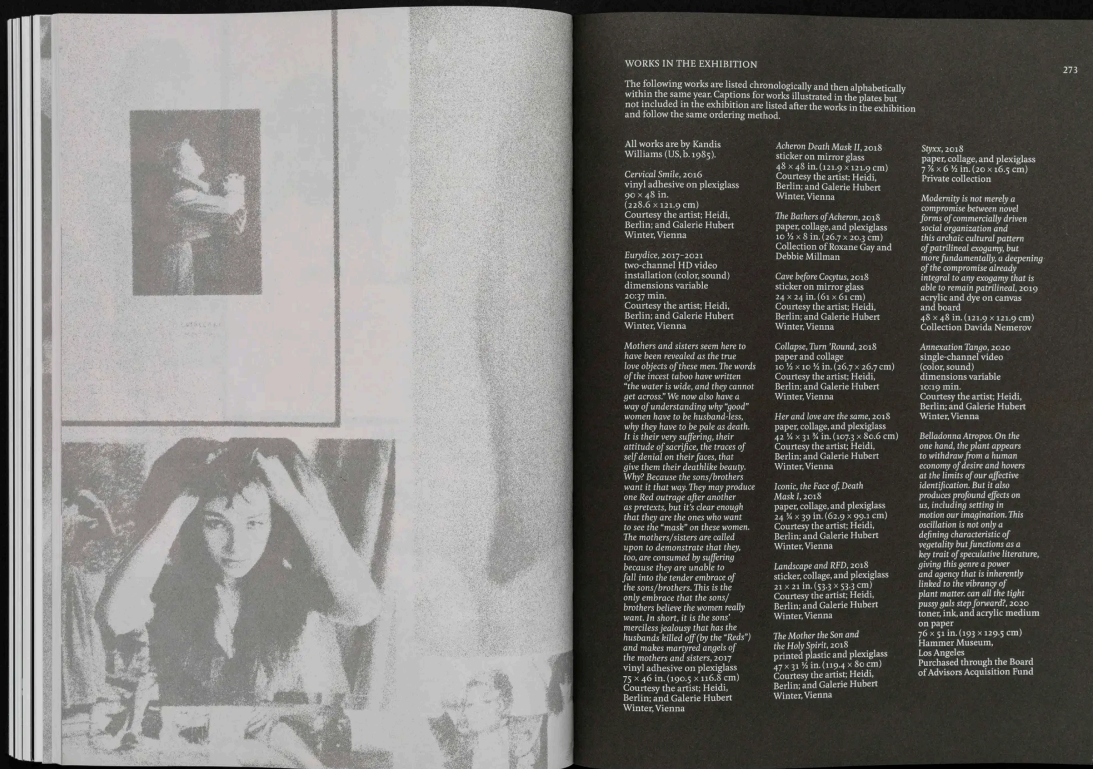
The scholarly essays instigate a rigorous reading of each artwork. The Gothic use of a serif black-and-white typeface, along with the stark displays of each artwork, imbue the monograph with a darkened air of immediacy. Designer Nazli Ercan's clean layout complements Williams's complexly rendered montages, enabling



close scrutiny of the artist's highly charged symbolism and intricately woven structures of imagery.

Throughout Williams's oeuvre, she has emphasized subtle and overt means of collective image-making and this historical process' impact on marginalized people. By juxtaposing, splicing, and reconstructing bodies through collage, Williams dispenses with proverbial debates regarding identity and gets to the heart of matters. She destabilizes the routine expropriation of corporeal autonomy, bridging temporal and spatial planes to provide alternative readings of racism and misogyny within art history.

Joel Danilewitz is an art writer who lives in New York.



WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

273

All works are by Kandis Williams (US, b. 1985).

Cervical Smile, 2016
vinyl adhesive on plexiglass
90 × 48 in.
(228.6 × 121.9 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Eurydice, 2017–2021
two-channel HD video
installation (color, sound)
dimensions variable
20:37 min.
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Mothers and sisters seem here to have been revealed as the true love objects of these men. The words of the incest taboo have written "the water is wide, and they cannot get across." We now also have a way of understanding why "good" women have to be husbandless, why they have to be pale as death. It is their very suffering, their attitude of sacrifice, the traces of self denial on their faces, that give them their deathlike beauty. Why? Because the sons/brothers want it that way. They may produce one Red outrage after another as pretexts, but it's clear enough that they are the ones who want to see the "music" on these women. The mothers/sisters are called upon to demonstrate that they, too, are consumed by suffering because they are unable to fall into the tender embrace of the sons/brothers. This is the only embrace that the sons/brothers believe the women really want. In short, it is the sons' merciless jealousy that has the husbands killed off (by the "Reds") and makes married angels of the mothers and sisters., 2017
vinyl adhesive on plexiglass
75 × 46 in. (190.5 × 116.8 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Acheron Death Mask II, 2018
sticker on mirror glass
48 × 48 in. (121.9 × 121.9 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

The Bathers of Acheron, 2018
paper, collage, and plexiglass
10 1/8 × 8 in. (26.7 × 20.3 cm)
Collection of Roxane Gay and Debbie Millman

Cave before Coyote, 2018
sticker on mirror glass
24 × 24 in. (61 × 61 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Collapse, Turn 'Round, 2018
paper and collage
40 1/8 × 36 1/8 in. (102.7 × 92.7 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Her and love are the same, 2018
paper, collage, and plexiglass
42 1/8 × 31 1/8 in. (107.3 × 80.6 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Iconic, the Face of Death
Mask I, 2018
paper, collage, and plexiglass
24 1/8 × 30 1/8 in. (62.2 × 77.2 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Landscape and RED, 2018
sticker, collage, and plexiglass
21 × 21 in. (53.3 × 53.3 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

The Mother the Son and the Holy Spirit, 2018
printed plastic and plexiglass
47 × 31 1/8 in. (119.4 × 80 cm)
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Spice, 2018
paper, collage, and plexiglass
7 1/8 × 6 1/8 in. (20 × 16.5 cm)
Private collection

Modernity is not merely a compromise between mood forms of commercially driven social organization and this archaic cultural pattern of patrilineal exogamy, but more fundamentally, a deepening of the compromise already integral to any exogamy that is able to remain patrilineal., 2019
acrylic and dye on canvas and board
48 × 48 in. (121.9 × 121.9 cm)
Collection David Nemerov

Annexation Tango, 2020
single-channel video
(color, sound)
dimensions variable
10:19 min.
Courtesy the artist; Heidi, Berlin, and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Belladonna Atropas, On the one hand, the plant appears to withdraw from a human economy of desire and hovers at the limits of our affective identification. But it also produces profound effects on us, including setting in motion our imagination. This oscillation is not only a defining characteristic of vegetal life but functions as a key trait of speculative literature, giving this genre a power and agency that is inherently linked to the vibrancy of plant matter: can all the tight pussy gals step forward?, 2020
water, ink, and acrylic medium on paper
76 × 51 in. (193 × 129.5 cm)
Hammer Museum, Los Angeles
Purchased through the Board of Advisors Acquisition Fund

