

I spent much of my time during a visit to Paris to see a performance of Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, picking my way through the layered, blurry divisions between the act and the actual. Where did the fallout of the protest stop and the act itself begin? By the time I arrived for the evening performance on a wet Friday evening at Le Centquatre, the vehement protests I had read reports about earlier that week were nowhere to be seen.

Making my way past heavily manned banks of *Gendarmes*, motionless in their exaggeratedly wide stances for added effect, I entered Le Centquatre through a side entrance reserved for press for 'my own safety'. As we waited to enter the exhibit itself and guests began to gather, I glanced at fellow visitors, each of us looking furtively around, an inaudible but commonly acknowledged tension seemed to hang low above us. We were led mostly in silence down to the lower floor of the space by unsmiling aides, the tension mounting, as we followed obediently and mostly in single file down the ramp towards the exhibition space.

We paused in a waiting room seated on chairs set in a square formation ensuring each of us had a good look at each other and given the topic of the day, I couldn't help but notice the contrasting skin colour between my fellow guests and those that had taken our coats, or the security that ushered us through metal detectors towards where the performance was to begin.

As our group were led down a concrete hallway I thought about those that had waited on us and about Richard Wright's ruminations on the Negro in *Native Son*. The Negro was always acting. By this point the tension in my group had heightened and we were asked to sit by our straight-faced 'administrator' on a numbered seat and await our turn to be called. She looked directly at me when I arrived to take my seat. A penetrative, somewhat confrontational look.

Silence befell us. We waited anxiously as our administrator (one of the actors) glared ominously round at us all and slowly called out our numbers one by one. When a number was called someone would rise and walk. Walk into an unknown, alone. A highly effective introduction to the experience which did well to immerse us in to the unsettled feeling of one who's future would not be their own.

When my number was up I stood and walked pensively into the dark shroud of the exhibition space and was immediately confronted by a statuesque figurine on a revolving plinth of The Hottentot Venus herself. The human likeness was uncanny, her skin glistened, her back arched as if mid-dance. A frame of poised, kinetic energy with a radiant, unfettered luminosity that cameras today still fail to capture and though I knew well the premise of the performance, I was still taken aback when the figurine's eyes caught my own.

For me there is just a single powerful moment in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* when our 'hero' Solomon Northup attempts to flee and passes in the undergrowth a slave about to be hung by a couple of blood-thirsty yokel-types. As they pass we are taken for a moment into a specific world. A world invisible to the untrained eye, namely those on the outside of this

vernacular. Blink and you'll miss it, but there is a moment of eye contact between Northup and the slave that is an eloquent summary of a 'black experience' that exists to this day.

It is this eye contact that is at the intelligent and powerful core of Brett Bailey's exhibit B and the reason this work should be seen by all, particularly the 'black community' that have opted to segregate themselves through protest without witness. A balanced audience will in fact make this work, that I deem to be one of the most important works of art made about race to be stronger. It is this eye contact one as a black person can deploy walking down any street in any part of the world and identify another often solitary soul. It is a look of solidarity, of identification, a bosom of comforting familiarity, that even if your conversation goes no further the acknowledgement lingers. Why we might ask is this look a necessity, why the reassurance of identifying with our own kind? Why does the skin still make for such a signification of 'otherness'? Does it provide a moment of security amidst the societal insecurity?

Yet in the context of Bailey's work this eye contact is the question. Bailey asks a question of his audience as they stand in front of each 'exhibit' as the exhibit stares right back at the viewer unflinchingly. This eye contact puts you in the same scenario maybe 200 years before during which time you're told this creature in front of you is not of you. You're told this, yet the look is challenging directly what you been told and what you're parents have been told. The exhibits ask questions of you. They ask you to sustain a conversation with your eyes. They ask if you'll stay and face them their plight and what they have been told that they are, or will you look away?

The actors themselves do an extraordinary good job at this inaudible discourse. Through it they explore how one may either maintain a dignity, or plead to a part of humanity that might retain a flicker of remorse, or they hold within their eyes and slumped shoulders a spirit that has been broken, yet has no choice but to go on. In the eyes alone they carry the deep psychological scars that exist for many to this very day and can be understandably witnessed in the outrage towards this work without even seeing it.

As I write, the chorus of the Exhibit B protest and subsequent fallout and shut down at the Barbican Centre in London still looms large. Twitter was aflame with vastly polarised opinion. I watched the leader of the petition, Sara Myers, appear on Newsnight proclaiming Bailey's work offensive on behalf of the entire 'black community'. I've witnessed a collective objection to art based on criteria, absent of any objective or critical engagement.

I do know the pain of this protest. It is the heartfelt, deeply engraved scar every black person wears every day but many of us do our best to pretend isn't there. It is worn lonesomely at the wine-soaked private views at art galleries, or hugging the shadows on a dimly lit street, or as the hired face of 'otherness' positioned outside every nighttime entertainment spot around the country.

Much of the power of this work lies in this confrontational context. Bailey challenges a number of tropes from the colonial legacies of western history, as well as those of today. Even the very notion of an imported exhibit is under Bailey's critique, objects are arranged as would be spoils from a successful crusade. So benign in their presentation, one can for a moment, just for a moment forget there may lay a human being amongst these pleasantly arranged spoils. Until that look finds you again when the exhibit stirs. The look that asks you is this really all we are? The look that asks you are we doomed to fail? As we wandered the exhibit the presence of the actors becomes subtly more unnerving, and the visitors concentrate on each shape or sound, moving through the space gingerly, clearly unnerved by the spectacle. At one point I leaned near to one of the other guests to read one of the informative plaques that accompany each exhibit detailing a history, an incident and a hideous outcome. He turned and was startled. I couldn't help but chuckle a little.

I sat in a fug of frustration but not surprise at the response to Brett Bailey's work, but I do not lack empathy or understanding towards the way people have responded. Though my empathy is as real as my deeply furrowed disconnection from its bellicose rhetoric. During a recent Facebook conversation about said protest a friend proffered that he considered the protest in London and its consequent outcome to be one of power. A comment that stayed with me, but grew progressively weaker with distance. Was it a move of power? The voice of disillusionment from a significant portion of British and French society had indeed embedded itself into a wider consciousness, but I wondered if such an act of self-segregation would eventually do more harm than good? Through these act of these protests it might be said we may find the answers and the reason for such a strong response to the concept (and I note again, without experience).

When I heard Exhibit B was to be shown in Paris, though it wasn't possible to show in London, I winced a little. As the anger of the protests in Paris shows, France has arguably more trouble dealing with and integrating the spoils of its own history. Many a Black or Arabic French citizen will tell you the frustration in trying to scale the social or professional ladders of the French system. The problematic discourse of the British Black community which for me conversely and unfortunately adopted some of the supremacist rhetoric that is usually the preserve of those in a position to oppress showed me a lot, exposing of the sensitivity in dealing with these issues because we're still dealing with them. It is apparent when the destabilizing rhetoric of the British government around immigration is emblazoned in neon across the side of immigration enforcement vans, or visible is the disillusioned voice of young British men who can only find solace in nihilistic gang groupings or extremist cells. The more I think about Bailey's work, the more I think that maybe we're actually just not ready to see it. We're not ready to look at the raw scars of a history that is still bleeding. The anger towards his work is misdirected but it makes for an accessible scapegoat. As we've seen recently across the world through the eyes of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner or those of Jimmy Mpenga, the plight of 'the other' still exists and it is painful and we clearly are not ready to look at it. We see it through the appropriation and commercial influence of the black image that yet remains so vastly disconnected from the black reality across the world. The

psychological hangover is such that it does even breed an inferiority complex, one that is self defeating in its own defensive rhetoric. I understand why and Bailey's work is actually important for this very reason.

The reaction has led Bailey to defend the work within the performance, which for me weakened it a touch but it was understandable. As we left the performance there is a final room with testimonies from the actors. They write about why they took part and why they see this work as important. I felt this room should have been left empty, this justification unnecessary. Bailey could have left the viewer to walk back into the actual from the act without knowing when. Leaving those lines blurry.

I left Le Centquarte with a number of thoughts in mind, I took a different route to back to the Metro and finally did find a small group of protesters. Huddled in a small square now quite a distance from the exhibit space due to the numerous barriers placed by the Gendarme, they were fenced in, standing in the rain defiantly chanting "Exhibit B! Exhibit B!"