

# ARTFORUM

“Fictions”

THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

“FICTIONS” marked a set of endings: It was the fifth in the Studio Museum’s “F-show” series, which began with the landmark 2001 exhibition “Freestyle” (curated by Thelma Golden, the show proposed the contentious, generative term post-black), and was the last to be on view in the museum’s current home in Harlem. (A new, David Adjaye–designed building is due to open in 2021.) But the show, curated by Connie H. Choi and Hallie Ringle, was also a space for beginnings: None of the nineteen artists, all of African and Latin American descent, had previously shown at the venue, and the exhibition focused on nascent narratives.

On the museum’s basement level, Sherrill Roland’s and Sable Elyse Smith’s works faced each other in a dialogue on incarceration. Roland’s “Jumpsuit Project” began in 2016, after the artist spent ten months and two weeks in a Washington, DC, prison in a case of mistaken identity. Dressed in an orange jumpsuit, as if still imprisoned, Roland stages conversations and delivers lectures in which he challenges public prejudices about the prison system. For “Fictions,” he presented that jumpsuit and photographs documenting past performances, and a rectangle of orange tape (roughly the size of his former prison cell), which was stuck to the floor, as if to designate the museum, too, as a space for this subject matter. Smith’s approach was also quasi-documentary, eliciting the audience’s empathy through the imaginative reconstruction of an image. Two five-by-seven-inch photographs, *7666 Days* and *7666 Nights—Falling*, both 2017, were matted on forty-eight-by-forty-inch seas of black suede. Up close, both images appeared to be family photos, but the rigid poses of their subjects were partially obscured by overlays and backdrops, including a waterfall and an ocean at sunset. The date stamp on one image suggested that it had circulated within some internal cataloguing system, and indeed both were taken in a prison’s visiting area. The depicted prisoner would have had to work to earn their right to such an image, which in turn calls attention to the labor involved in imagemaking—and, as with Roland’s work, argues forcefully that the supposedly democratic tool of self-representation is unequally distributed.

Upstairs, the conversation shifted to questions of urban planning and street life, focusing on specific neighborhoods and the materiality of their built environments. Patrick Martinez’s *los angeles landscape (echo park)*, 2017, appears to be a portion of a stucco wall whose purple-painted surface has been repeatedly graffitied and, in turn, repainted

by its owner. With an inset neon sign and an advertising banner wrapped around its corner, the wall feels excised from the city, a site of perpetual reconstruction. A similar vocabulary informs Krista Clark's *Stopped, Westviews Through Ontario*, 2017, in which found materials such as tarps, wood scraps, and foam constitute an installation reminiscent of a construction site. Clark considers this work a drawing, and indeed its apparent spontaneity and precarity lent it a sense of impermanence, as though it were a sketch for a future place.

But interiors, too, proved to be important sites for narrative. Genevieve Gaignard's intricate installation— demarcated by a wallpapered corner of the gallery—contained five works, including Hammons' *Little Helper*, *Reclaiming My Time*, and *Nevertheless, She Persisted*, all 2017. Each of these three pieces includes a hand-painted mammy figurine. In the first, the doll is perched on a table, bent over her embroidery—a flag that closely resembles David Hammons's iconic *African American Flag*, 1990. In the second, the doll is encased in a grandfather clock, eyeing the severed head of a white woman in her palm. In the third, it stands in a birdcage, in the midst of writing a letter that reads, *I'M OUT!* Though humorous, these reclamations of racist cultural artifacts also speak to real concerns about self-preservation and racial imagination: One of Gaignard's photographs hanging next to the clock depicts the artist in blonde tresses and a yellow dress, standing next to a poster that proclaims *I PASSED FOR WHITE*.

**Every story, we are told, has a beginning, middle, and end. But when we fold in herstories, their stories, and oral histories, this arc wobbles and fades, loops back on itself.**

Every story, we are told, has a beginning, middle, and end. But when we fold in herstories, their stories, and oral histories, this arc wobbles and fades, loops back on itself. As the title's plurality suggests, "Fictions" did not prioritize any single story. Instead, it featured a set of narrative strategies focusing on collapse and regeneration, using collage, compilation, reconstruction, and rehabilitation. The show was ultimately interested in those middles: What repeats, overlaps, climaxes, is obscured? Against the troubling sonic undercurrent of "God Bless America" as sung by the looped voices of Aretha Franklin and Lil Wayne in Paul Stephen Benjamin's powerful video installation, even seemingly nonnarrative works—including figurative paintings by Amy Sherald and Walter Price and striking photographs by Texas Isaiah—were constructive, filling in gaps in visual culture by making black and brown bodies visible.

Mira Dayal is an artist and critic based in New York.