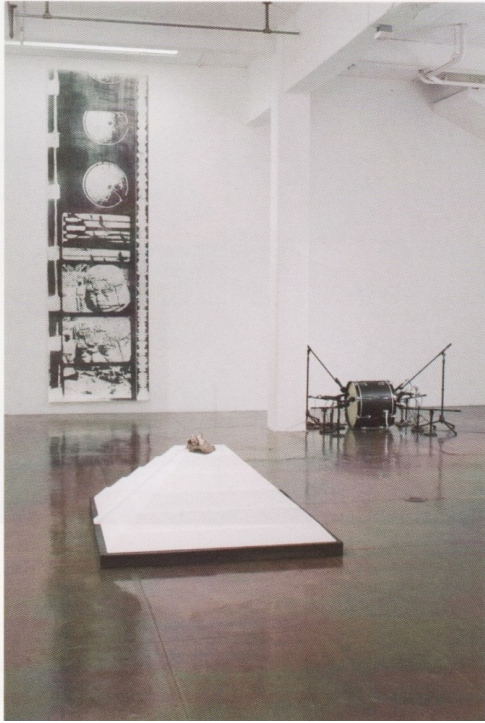


# IN M A N G A L L E R Y



L. *Phonic Substance*, 2010; installation view; originally commissioned by Artpace San Antonio; photo by Todd Johnson

R. Jamal Cyrus, *Untitled*, 2010: graphite and paint on paper; 93 x 7½

## SAN ANTONIO

### Jamal Cyrus Artpace

*I'm playing dark history. It's beyond black. I'm dealing with the dark things of the cosmos.* - Sun Ra

In *Phonic Substance*, Jamal Cyrus' Artpace 10.2 IAIR exhibition, the artist visually gestures toward a hybrid, cosmopolitan conception of Black political history and African Diaspora. His installation resonates with and extends the trajectories of Afrofuturism, a political and aesthetic movement emerging in the 1950s that interrogates notions of past, present and future in relation to technoculture, "progress" and Black racial formation. As Afrofuturism valorizes the past as a vital source of knowledge production, *Phonic Substance* excavates historic iconography in order to explore an alternative genealogy accounting for myriad parallels among global cultures.

Departing from his previous work that reckoned with Black political history in an overt manner such as the *Pride Records* series (2006) or *Lessons from Below* (2009) (with the collective Otabenga Jones & Associates), Cyrus deploys a toned-down approach in this constellation of objects. Hanging on the left wall of the gallery is a large-scale, vertical graphite drawing (all works *Untitled*) that duplicates a photograph documenting a UFO sighting that Cyrus was able to obtain from the U.S. government under the 1966 Freedom of Information Act. Bringing to mind FBI surveillance and the violent curtailment of the Black Panther Party, this work tenuously links radical Black struggle to the present situation of undocumented Mexican immigrants ("illegal aliens") in the United States.

Such associations further concatenate in another graphite drawing, mounted on the gallery's back wall, of a magnified 16mm filmstrip with seven frames. Images of a UFO transform over three frames into views of a stone-carved Olmec "colossal head," intimating cosmological parallels between pre-Columbian cultures and UFOs, which in the context of this show also connects to Black cultures. This linkage repeats within another sculpture: a diminutive, white pyramid whose top is adorned with a bronze conch shell. Both pyramid and shell forms possessed mythological significance in various ancient cultures, including Aztec to ancient Egyptian. Thematically cementing these associations as well as the phonic motif, finally, are two more discrete objects: a black concrete platform etched with a pattern of multiple sound lines, and a multi-miked black bass drum. While an audible sound component is ironically omitted, these seemingly dissonant elements, when visually re-presented in parallel arrangements, sound off a non-Western synchronic understanding of culture and history.

Like the stuff of sound, *Phonic Substance* is comprised of constituent parts that endeavor to collectively impart an impression. However, those parts fail to exceed their sum, to go beyond parallels or synchronicity, inadvertently leaving us with vacuous imaginings of a "global village" in which racial oppression and struggle are de-historicized, homogenized and neutralized. And while I applaud Cyrus' effort to go "beyond black," in the words of Afrofuturist jazz musician Sun Ra, absent is a more critical engagement with the complex implications of these connections in our present moment—a milieu in which Blacks and Latina/as comprise the highest incarceration rates in the country and are disproportionately hit by the subprime mortgage crisis. Through his deployment of hollow parallels, Cyrus' *Phonic Substance* effectively silences this racialized social discord.

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