



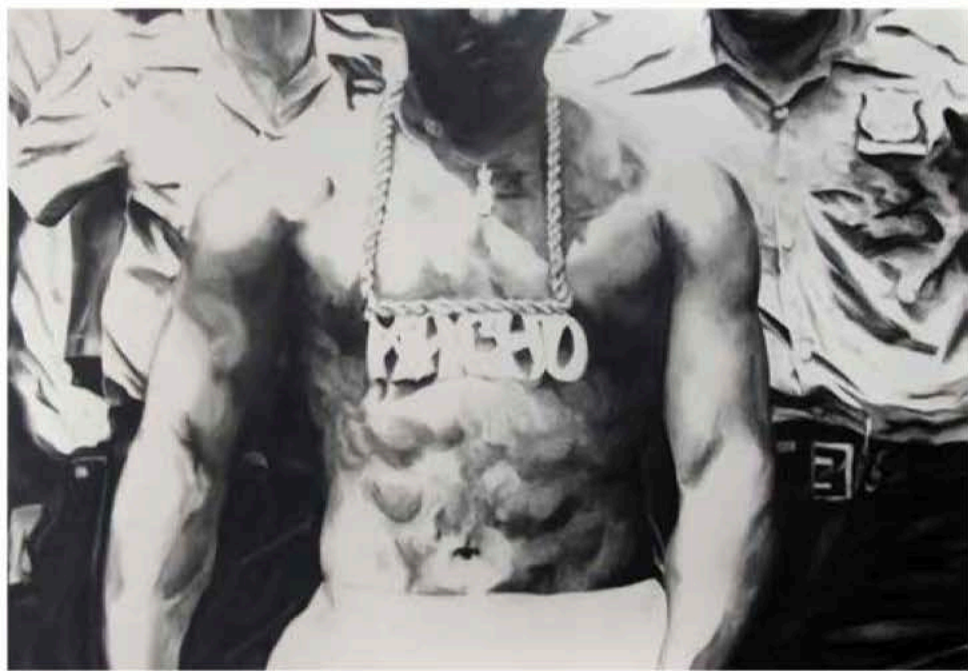
JULY 9 – OCTOBER 16, 2015

# (bǐ-twēn' hǐstə-rē änd thə 'bädē)

*BETWEEN HISTORY AND THE BODY*



THE 8TH FLOOR



Shaun Leonardo  
 (b. 1979, Queens, New York)  
*Champ*, 2014  
 Charcoal on paper  
 28 × 40 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist



Brendan Fernandes  
 (b. 1979, Nairobi, Kenya)  
*As One I*, 2015  
 15 × 9 inches  
 Silver Gelatin Print  
 Commissioned by the Seattle Art  
 Museum  
 Courtesy the artist



Brendan Fernandes  
 (b. 1979, Nairobi, Kenya)  
*As One II*, 2015  
 15 × 9 inches  
 Silver Gelatin Print  
 Commissioned by the Seattle Art  
 Museum  
 Courtesy of the artist

(cover)  
 Elia Alba  
*If I Were A...*, 2003  
 Photocopy transfer over muslin,  
 zippers, acrylic and thread  
 Length of each suit, 65 inches  
 Collection of El Museo del Barrio

*Between History and the Body* occupies a discursive territory in which ideas surrounding the construction of identity converge. Artists in this exhibition engage their own bodies, as well as symbolic stand-ins, to reflect on historical and current conditions of both empowered and oppressed communities to commemorate the less recognized past, while imagining futures in which greater freedoms can be attained. It is imperative that overlooked and omitted communities be accounted for in order for our understanding of collective history to be accurate. This space between the recollection of history and the physical reality of lived experience, where dreams and aspirations for different possibilities coalesce, might be described as a space of distortion and fragmentation that can only be transformed through active engagement, participation, and expression. In other words, artistic production affords an opportunity to recalibrate the future.

Some aspects of identity construction are externally imposed and others are generated as acts of resistance. While the artworks in this exhibition embody an expressive sense of agency, it is important to acknowledge the weight of history and how it continues to repeat itself in increasingly perverse ways. When we speak of identity, it is usually about “the other.” This raises questions about how the term “other” came into use - by whom and to what end? In the current political climate, the emotional poignancy of rallying cries like “BLACK LIVES MATTER” has not been as profound since the lead up to the Civil Rights Movement. It is clear that some of the most intense social justice issues faced in the United States today, such as income inequality and excessive police force, have exploded within and at the expense of othered communities.





Jean-Ulrick Désert  
(b. 1965, Port-au-Prince, Haiti)  
*The Passion*, 2006  
One of 46 prints,  
13 1/8 × 17 1/2 inches each  
Courtesy of the artist



Chungpo Tsering  
(b. Tingri, 1979)  
*When the Air is Thin*, 2014  
Charcoal on paper  
42 × 36 inches  
Courtesy of the Shelley and Donald Rubin Private Collection

For better or worse, in the context of contemporary art, “otherness” has currency that comes in and out of fashion. Art can illuminate seemingly novel forms of beauty (novel to whom?) heretofore unknown, or at the very least less known, to the mainstream. So while contemporary art is a figurative space where “otherness” is at times celebrated, the broader culture is often less comfortable with these so-called new forms of beauty. Yet “otherness” is relative to one’s own view of the world. As an exhibition, *Between History and the Body* is a platform for artistic questions, experiments, and fantasies surrounding identity and the body, both literal and abstract, ultimately exploring the role art can play in challenging and transforming problematic politics and habits around cultural difference.

The exhibition begins chronologically with Ana Mendieta’s *Untitled* (Glass on Body Imprints), 1972, a series of six photographs produced when she was working with

photography and 35mm slides. In this untitled series, Mendieta’s naked body is pressed against glass, contorting her form into less familiar territory. The glass imprints capture the tension between expression and repression of femininity. More broadly, Mendieta’s work communicates the struggles that come from losing connection with home at an early age\* followed by her concerns surrounding feminist issues.

Work by Jean-Ulrick Désert, Elia Alba, Paul Anthony Smith, and Nick Cave incorporate suits and masks that cover the body with varied intentions and effects. Jean-Ulrick Désert’s *The Passion* (2006) was initially staged as a participatory photography project in which he created all white football fan costumes, typically adorned with logos of soccer leagues common in Europe, particularly Germany. Désert’s recreation of the fan costumes - devoid of the colorful team logos - may be regarded as a whitewashing of the suits, which, in its colorless version,

conjures associations with the Ku Klux Klan in the United States. The forty-six photographs of different people wearing the super fan costumes are eerily militaristic, fundamentalist even, implying a violence in the anonymity of the portraits, and call into question the way in which aggression associated with sports culture is so widely accepted.

In a more playful, colorful vein, Elia Alba’s photo transfer sculptures stitch together a patchwork of skin tones and body parts, amplifying the absurdity of equating human value with skintone. In *If I were a...* (2003), each of Alba’s three female body suits are tried on by male performance artist Nicolás Dumit Estévez, demonstrating the continuity of humanity that connects each of these bodies of different races. It is just skin. Or is it? *If I were a...* asks the question of what it might mean to be “the other.” So while many of the distinctions in our culture are determined by the color of one’s skin,

Nick Cave (b. 1959, Missouri)

*Soundsuit*, 2011

Mixed media including rugs,  
afghans, metal, fabric, and man-  
nequin

98 1/2 × 21 1/2 × 20 inches

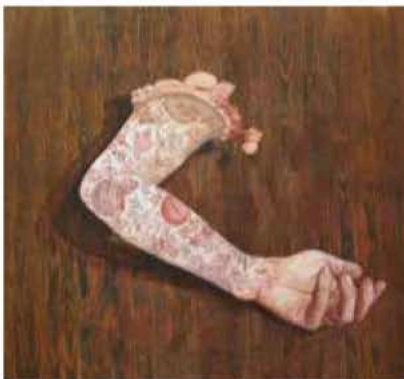
©Nick Cave. Photo by James

Prinz Photography

Courtesy of the artist

and Jack Shainman

Gallery, New York



Firelei Báez (b. 1981, Santiago  
de los Caballeros, Dominican  
Republic)

*Retablo (España en Las Americas)*,  
2014

Acrylic and ink on paper  
36 × 38 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Alba's three racially distinct sculptural costumes - activated by Estévez - affirm that human experience is universal. *Portrait of a Young Girl* (2012) is a folded photographic sculpture that hangs from the wall, which gives the fleshiness of her portrait more depth, while at the same time the look of someone that has been squashed, compressed, and restrained. Together, *If I were a...* and *Portrait of a Young Girl* give two perspectives on identity: one that is expressive and whimsical, while the other is turned inward.

Paul Anthony Smith's three works in the exhibition *Woman #4* and *Woman #5* (both 2013), and *Diamond Boston Bay* (2015), employ his picotage method of picking away at the surface of pigment prints. Smith's process might be understood as neo-pointillist, in which the dotted surface overlaps with a photographic image. Smith's picotage process creates iridescence, suggesting the surface qualities of a textile. Both layers are equally

important; the photograph is what is actual, and the diamond patterns of a Congolese Kuba tribe mask tell another layer of the subjects' stories. Both *Woman #4* and *Woman #5* are based on extra passport photographs sent to Smith by his mother after she moved to England in 2001. The artist writes that he kept them in a small envelope until rediscovering them almost 10 years later, "I then felt it was right to adorn her image with the Kuba mask for the trials she may face in life."

Further extending our understanding of the human form are Nick Cave's *Soundsuits*, which Cave conceived to "embellish the body while protecting the wearer from outside culture," in response to the 1992 police beating of Rodney King. Included in the exhibition is *Soundsuit* (2011), a patchwork of afghan blankets and rugs. The figure of Cave's *Soundsuit* is positioned in a mid-squat, with a rope-rug masking the figure's face, and a wide oval of a mouth, calling out. That the figure seems to be in the

(above top)

Nicolás Dumit Estévez

(b. 1967, Santiago de los Treinta  
Caballeros, Dominican Republic)

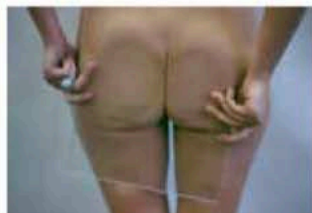
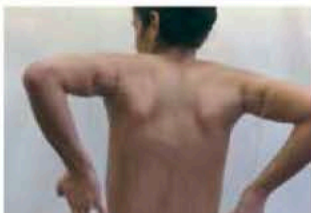
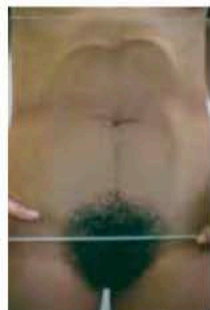
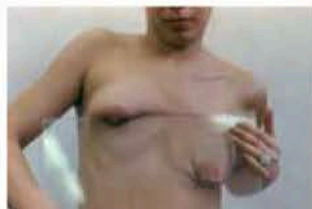
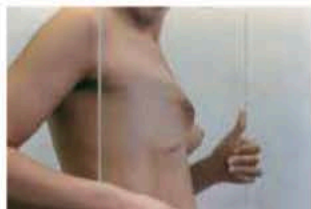
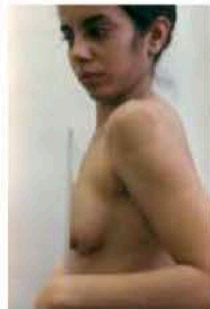
*USA Paradisiaca*, 2001

Video, 17:40 min.

Courtesy of the artist

\* Mendieta was one of 14,000 children who left Cuba without their parents between 1960 and 1962 for the United States as part of Operation Peter Pan to escape Fidel Castro's communist regime.





Ana Mendieta  
 (b. 1948, Havana – d. 1985, New York)  
*Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)*, 1972  
 Suite of six estate color photographs  
 16 × 20 inches each  
 Edition 7 of 10  
 Courtesy of the Estate of Ana Mendieta and Galerie Lelong

(right)  
 Jeffrey Gibson (b. 1972, Colorado)  
*White Power*, 2014  
 Found vinyl punching bag, glass and plastic beads, artificial sinew, brass and steel studs, wool military blanket, acrylic yarn, steel chain  
 42 × 14 × 14 inches  
 Courtesy of the artist & Marc Straus, New York

midst of movement, a gestural freeze-frame that gives off a sense of motion as you move around it, can be attributed to Cave's dance training with Alvin Ailey.

Brendan Fernandes, who also trained as a dancer, with a particular focus on ballet, has produced several projects such as *The Working Move* (2012), which documents dancers engaging with pedestals - the furniture of visual arts institutions. These sculptural performances highlight how visual art has converged with performance practices like dance, and the kinds of aesthetic decisions that go into performance-based artwork. More recently, Fernandes commissioned Pacific Northwest Ballet dancers to engage with plinths and masks selected from the collection of the Seattle Art Museum into the otherwise spare set. Two photographs *As One I and As One II* (both 2015) feature dancers, masks, and plinths, linking French ballet with African ritual. Together these objects suggest a more elaborate,

historically potent staging than *The Working Move*, but the minimalist composition opens up questions about the relationship between dance, visual art, and ethnographic objects.

Brendan Fernandes and Nicolás Dumit Estévez's videos *Foe* (2007) and *Tongue Training* (2001) both demonstrate the nuance of voice and pronunciation as signifiers of class and cultural identity. In Estévez's video, the erotic and comic converge in his tongue training, as he responds with his tongue to commands like *Gallop! Tiptoe! Run! Skate! Hop!* set to a vintage instructional soundtrack. Using his mouth as the site of an intimate performance, Estévez's tongue contorts and dances. The sensuality of these lingual movements is undercut by dramatic humor as Estévez's gloved hand appears briefly at the tip of his lips. In a more austere language based performance, Fernandes' *Foe* documents the artist's attempt to learn the correct Indian and Canadian English pronunciation of

excerpts from J.M. Coetzee's book *Foe* (a re-appropriation of Daniel Defoe's *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*.)

*Is Friday an imbecile incapable of speech? Crusoe motioned Friday near.*

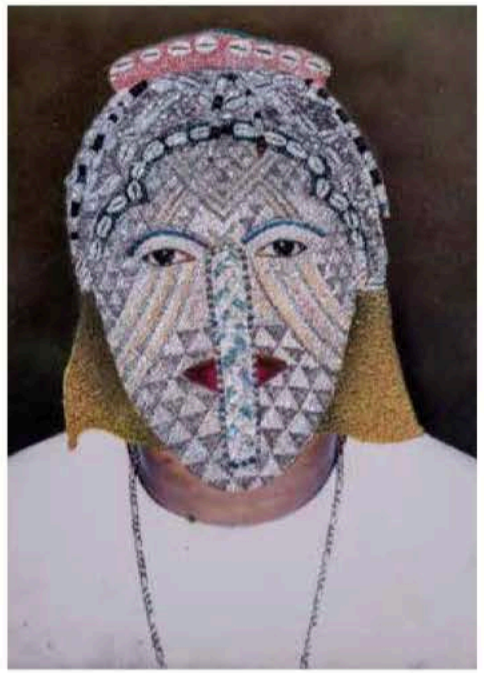
*"Open your mouth," he told him, and opened his own.*

*Friday opened his mouth.*

*"Look," said Crusoe..."they cut out his tongue"*

Fernandes' project is then restaged in *Performing Foe* (2009) in which the artist acts as speech coach and choral conductor, training a group of students how to pronounce the passage, again in the Indian and Canadian English with the inflection that the artist's speech coach taught him.

The color saturated and highly patterned paintings by Firelei Báez hone in on historical details of colonial life in the Caribbean. Drawing on her Haitian and Dominican heritage, Báez unpacks the restrictions placed on women of African descent, questioning traditional dress: for example in colonial era



Paul Anthony Smith  
 (b. 1988, St. Ann's Bay, Jamaica)  
*Woman #4*, 2013  
 Unique picotage with spray paint,  
 colored pencils and marker on  
 archival pigment print  
 30 3/4 × 23 1/2 inches  
 Collection of Elisabeth Ross  
 Wingate, courtesy of Zicher Smith  
 & Horton Gallery

Louisiana, women were required to wear head wraps in order to curtail what the artist describes as afro-textured hair. *Retablo (España en Las Americas)*, 2014, is a painting of a severed arm on a wood grain background. The surface of the arm is tattooed in Toile de Jouy-style print. *Retablo* is the Spanish word for offering, or sacrifice. The severed arm symbolizes the human cost of Spain's colonial presence in the Americas as well as the loss of individual agency. In this instance, the history of violence is written directly onto the body, as if recounting the dismembered limb's story.

Shaun Leonardo's recent drawings of slain African American men like Michael Brown and Eric Garner call into question which bodies matter. Shown alongside self portraits of the artist in struggle as a wrestler, *Michael Brown (drawings 1-6)*, 2015, and *Eric Garner (drawings 1-6)*, 2015, become intertwined with the tensions of Leonardo's practice, which engages,

through performance, the unrealistic demands society projects onto men. The artist connects the struggles of masculine culture, specifically black male culture and the expectation to perform their ascribed power on demand, with his own hyper-masculine performative persona.

The two sets of drawings commemorating Michael Brown and Eric Garner were made continually for six days after they were killed by police. When Leonardo links his self-portraiture to these drawings, the larger body of work takes on new meaning. Details of sites where the killings took place began to accumulate import for Leonardo: the onlookers, the police, the road and sidewalk where Brown and Garner's lives were lost. The camera documenting Garner's death and Brown's shrouded body, the repetition of these details in the press and in our minds both normalized and fetishized these tragedies. How do we move forward? Leonardo proposes hands-on interactive performances in

which he teaches participants and onlookers how to survive a chokehold. The physical enactment of both sides of a chokehold makes the power dynamic all the more palpable, perhaps allowing for more space to breathe.

Jeffrey Gibson's intricately beaded *White Power* (2014) punching bag pays homage to the power struggles against white hegemony. How do we undo the power structure that has shaped so much of cultural life in the Western world? Do we approach it physically? Or, do we generate ideological practice that is non-violent? Each of the works in Gibson's punching bag series begin as found objects that the artist reworks with beading, stitching, and tassels. If the punching bags are surrogates for the oppressor, his series of *Shields* (numbers 15 and 18 are included in the exhibition) serve as a symbol of protection. The *Shields* are paintings on vintage, pre-1900 ironing boards, which are imbued with the history of their original function in domestic





work such as butchering, ironing, and preparing hides. The *Shields* signal a shift away from traditional Native American daily life, which became increasingly domesticated and absorbed into the new American culture.

Saya Woolfalk's *Empathic Hides #4 and #5* (both 2014) are relics from her *Empathics* project, which charts a group of women whose narrative begins with the discovery of bones that are believed to be remains of plant-human hybrids. Archaeologists believe hides to be a pre-historic form of clothing, as well as an early form of currency, so Woolfalk's *Empathic Hides* speak to the impulse to cover oneself, similar to Nick Cave's *Sound-suits*, and also represent a highly embellished medium of exchange. A parallel project called *ChimaTEK* (*Untitled #3, #5, and #6* are in the exhibition) is a product line conceived to enable customers to transcend ordinary limits, including those imposed by racism, sexism and ethnocentrism.

Tibetan artist Chungpo Tsering's three charcoal drawings *When the Air is Thin*, *Selfie*, and *Untitled* (all 2014) tell a three-part story through portraiture in the style of Western religious paintings of saints. *When the Air is Thin* depicts a headless figure wrapped in a Chinese

brocade straitjacket (referencing China's colonial rule over Tibet) with a crown of singed matches. In *Selfie*, the figure's head is replaced with an assemblage of security cameras, which track the radical gesture of immolation. The figure in *Untitled* has a head of flowers, cradling a fire extinguisher, in a post-traumatic memorial stance. Together these works present a narrative all too familiar in conflicted territories: acts of resistance in the name of freedom, sometimes violent, sometimes as simple as a memorial.

Tsering's triptych of martyrs reveals a larger question about cultural preservation: when is memorialization no longer sufficient? Because ideas of identity, the body, and social constructions are in a continual flux, rendering memory as a static form doesn't do the subject justice. Filling in historical and cultural omissions involves revising inaccuracies of the past, but also requires engagement in the moment that provokes constant reconsideration. In a time when aesthetic and cultural difference contributes to visibility, which has both negative and positive implications, otherness can be valued and celebrated as that which connects us as human beings.

—Sara Reisman

Elia Alba (b. 1962, New York, NY)  
*Portrait of a Young Girl*, 2012  
Photocopy transfers on fabric,  
synthetic hair, acrylic  
32 × 15 × 6 inches  
Courtesy of the artist

(above left)  
Saya Woolfalk  
(b. 1979, Japan)  
*Untitled #6* from the *ChimaTEK* series,  
2015  
Mixed media collage on paper  
45 3/4 × 32 3/4 inches  
Copyright Saya Woolfalk, courtesy  
Leslie Tonkonow Artworks +  
Projects, New York

Between History and the Body is the second in a series of exhibitions focused on art and social justice organized by the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation.

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*The 8th Floor* is an exhibition and events space established in 2010 by Shelley & Donald Rubin, dedicated to promoting cultural and philanthropic initiatives, to expanding artistic and cultural accessibility in New York City.

*The 8th Floor* is located at 17 West 17th Street and is free and open to the public. Schools groups are encouraged.

Viewing hours are Tuesday through Friday, 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Saturday by appointment.  
[the8thfloor.org](http://the8thfloor.org)