

MARTOS GALLERY

Cooper, Ashton, "Invisible Man: Ashton Cooper considers the strategic refusal of legibility,"
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Invisible Man

Ashton Cooper considers the strategic refusal of legibility

By **Ashton Cooper**



Pope.L, Well (elf version), 2017. Copyright the artist. Courtesy the artist, Martos Gallery, New York, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Martos Gallery, New York, 3 May – 24 June

This debut show in Martos Gallery's new Chinatown space takes its name from Ralph Ellison's classic 1952 novel. The press release features an excerpt: '...it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination...'

The artists in the show – Torkwase Dyson, Kayode Ojo, Pope.L, Jessica Vaughn – have adopted a strategy of refusing legibility outright. It's as if they have taken that 'hard, distorting glass' and put it to their own uses. Here, opacity is a tool to deny control, and ambiguity is a mode of discourse. There is a lot of good work being done lately around the issue of opacity and marginalised bodies, much of which looks to ideas laid out by Édouard Glissant. 'Why must we evaluate people on the scale of the transparency of ideas proposed by the West?' the writer and philosopher said in a 2009 interview with Manthia Diawara. 'As far as I'm concerned, a person has the right to be opaque.'

A wry meditation on transparency sets the tone for the show in the form of Pope.L's *Well (elh version)* (all works 2017), a single glass of water perched atop a slim white shelf hung 178cm high (just slightly higher than the top of this writer's head) and occupying a small room of its own. The water may be translucent, but it doesn't reveal anything about itself.

Two more such water-glass pieces populate the main gallery space along with the artist's *Pedestal*, a water fountain hanging upside down from a pedestal attached to the ceiling. The sides of the fountain are removed to reveal the internal mechanism, and a photo timer is rigged to it so that water squirts into a hole in the floor directly below it every two-and-a-half minutes. Transparency is at play here too. We can see the internal mechanics and the countdown on the timer, but none of this reveals any underlying logic. By using a public water-fountain, Pope.L also invokes a potent symbol of racial segregation in the US, which suggests his timed water drips are governed by a system without sense.

The history of segregation also feels embedded in Vaughn's choice of worn seatbacks and bottoms taken from the Chicago Transit Authority in *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005*. Arranged in a large grid on the wall measuring about two-and-a-half-by-six metres, the seats reveal threadbare spots, brown smudges, and host little hairs here and there. Though not actual relics of segregated public transit, the seats evidence the residue of the bodies governed by such systems, historical and present day. Moreover, Vaughn pokes at the primacy of the supposedly neutral grid in the history of conceptual and minimal art by blemishing it with very real bodily marks.

Dyson's abstract paintings are gestural and expressive while simultaneously exploring the scale of objects tied up in histories of oppression. For example, the three paintings on view here deal with the Dakota Pipeline, and Dyson's white, rounded forms correlate to the circumference of such pipes. Dyson challenges the abstraction/figuration opposition by allowing shapes to function formally and politically.

With *Invisible Man*, curator and gallery director Ebony L. Haynes gives us a primer for how to make a show about identity that is subtle, thoughtful and forward-thinking. She doesn't rely on reductive truisms, but instead points back into history to consider the evolution of ideas about identity and visibility. Ashton Cooper

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