

PLAY ON, PLAYA

BY ADRIANNE RAMSEY, CO-CURATOR

“If any one aphorism can characterize the experience of black people in this country, it might be that the white authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories of our bodies now. Why are white people allowed to tell our stories or put them on public display with no context?” – Elizabeth Alexander¹

As the United States transitioned from the postwar into the Cold War era, production and capitalism boomed. Goods were seen as equaling happiness; mass production was highly sought after; and the white middle class was advertised as the nuclear family. Images of blonde children playing in their front lawn, or a housewife preparing dinner for her family, or a household crowded around the television set as the evening wore down became highly popular and the de-facto representation of the American Dream. However, images of Black families and their children, and of Black people just being happy, were virtually nonexistent during the 1940s and '50s. Beginning in the 1990s, Black bodies on videotape experiencing some form of trauma or dramatics were sensationalized all over the U.S. Some prominent examples include Marion Barry, Magic Johnson, Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, and Clarence Thomas; in all of these cases, the Black body and the drama attached to each of these incidents were publicly consumed and commented on by masses of people. The constant airings of these events on the news were clearly aimed at gaining viewership numbers, without much, if any, concern for how these representations would affect the Black community. The 1991 murder of Latasha Harlins, which was caught on surveillance video, showed that Black children were also not spared from the public's hunger for a story. In present day, the practice of recording Black people being abused and/or killed by the police on a cell phone, with the video later posted to social media, has shown no signs of slowing down; recent examples include the police killings of George Floyd, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott.

The art world is not exempt from this pertinent conversation, as the misrepresentation of Black culture and life is mainly done through the circulation of images, namely photography and video. The question is, how do we rethink Blackness in the context of contemporary art and exhibition display? One of the cornerstones of michon sanders' practice is expanding the audience's view of the Black body, and re-framing the narrative that said bodies only go through violence and trauma. Through her transformative painting practice, the artist dismantles normative stereotypes by re-contextualizing histories relating to Black people. She also reverses

¹ Elizabeth Alexander. “Can you be BLACK and look at this?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s).” *Public Culture*, Vol. 7, Issue 1 (Fall 1994), 80

conventional modes of display, as her works give the Black body visibility instead of making it into a spectacle. In contrast to the exhibition's title, the works in *All I Have To Do Is Stay Black and Die* embrace new modes of Black identity, power, and representation.

sanders has created a wide variety of images that feature Black subjects, usually interacting with one another in a positive light. As seen in *Let's Keep This Between Us* (2022), two young Black children directly stare at the viewer, both of them bearing playful expressions, as if they just finished chasing each other around the yard. Black children often have to deal with racial stereotypes that they are more aggressive and violent than white children; because they are perceived as being dangerous, their bodies are often put in harm's way. sanders challenges this notion by instead presenting the children as enjoying themselves, thus taking us back to those postwar images of white children playing with one another. Why can't that be the reality for Black children as well? In another painting, *When Them Two Get Together* (2022), two aunties are seen chuckling amongst one another. Maybe it's because they're both wearing the same colorful clothes, or perhaps they're laughing due to an inside joke that only they know and understand. Regardless, you can feel the closeness and magnetic energy that radiates between them. All you need to know is that these are two beautiful Black women who are enjoying one another's company.

These representational paintings depict Black people being comfortable with one another, smiling, or caring for one another. This is a radical act in itself, as the works embody the evolution, complexity, and transcendence of Black life. Portraying Black people that have darker skin and natural hair, while using a stunning disposition of colors throughout the canvas, helps expand perspectives of Blackness. Too often are Black people of darker skin tones excluded from positive depictions of Blackness, and sanders works against this narrative. While the subjects' identities are deeply rooted in historical chronicles, they do not have to be chained to the signifiers of violence and suffering that Blackness so often is.

It is important to state that sanders does not shy away from said negativity – instead, it is quietly felt, rumbling underneath the surface as you move through the exhibition. *I Will Be Everything They Dream and More* (2023) showcases another young Black girl, who is embraced from behind by a blackened silhouette. While the identity of this protective, invisible figure is unknown, one can assume that they are trying to assist this young child as they begin their journey of being Black in America. The title is reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s seminal "I Have A Dream" speech from 1963, in which he hoped that one day, his four Black children would not be judged by the color of their skin, but the content of their character. In addition to her series of paintings, sanders has constructed several pieces, from a picnic table to a church

pew. The latter structure bears the text, "ALL ARE WELCOME" – directly referencing the artist's conflicted feelings about queerness and the Black church. While the artist further embodies this notion of welcoming throughout the show, one cannot help but remember those signs from the years of segregation – "WHITE ONLY" / "NO NEGROES ALLOWED" / "FOR COLORED ONLY." This exhibition and Sanders' representational practice not only inserts Black people into contemporary art, but invites the audience to get to know us a little better.