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Art on the Move

Martine Syms: *NITE LIFE*

Curated by Franklin Sirmans

It is impossible to fully comprehend another's experience from a distance. Despite knowing this, I wanted to learn about Miami from the comfort of my home, even while I dreamed of learning about the city up close and personal. It was that selfish, sometimes lazy, though genuinely curious impulse that says, "teach me" about the other, but in my own language. Edward Behr, war reporter, put this hopeless contradiction in stark and harsh terms calling his book, "Anyone here been raped and speak English?" Though the question was posed to Europeans being airlifted out of Congo in 1964, it has been invoked by thinkers in different guises ever since.

I had known of Martine Syms' work for a while and had seen it online—which is a great place to see it—and spent some time with it in February at White Flag Projects in St. Louis before getting her number from our mutual friend Edgar Arceneaux. I knew Martine was concerned with throwback things like typeface, specifically in the realm of "graphic design," "publishing," and the more arty performance and video. She calls herself a "conceptual entrepreneur." Those interests in real world things in addition to the ability to make gallery shows, which she demonstrated so well this fall in her first New York solo show at Bridget Donahue, "Vertical Elevated Oblique," make her one of the most interesting emerging artists there is at this moment in time.

As inferred by the reference to Edward Behr above, Syms is also a bit of a social anthropologist. She works from a standpoint and vision of wanting people to understand each other better and she is an expert in transmitting valuable information in a way that is as seductive as it is constructive. She speaks from the point of view of a person of color in her late twenties, as she herself is, and dares you to preconceive of what that might mean or not mean.

In April of this year, Syms presented a performance and outdoor installation of a text piece called "Nite Life", commissioned by O, Miami and based on the history of Overtown. Like Watts in Los Angeles, Bronzeville in Chicago, 3rd Ward in Houston, Treme in New Orleans, or Harlem in New York, Overtown represents a central node in a history of blackness in American cities. In fact, Syms' original project was guided by a 1963 performance by Sam Cooke that happened at the Harlem Square Club in Overtown. "Using archival materials, oral history, memoir, and fiction, "Nite Life" enacts the intergenerational dialogue produced by the music itself." The call and response of Cooke's performance plays out anew in the hands of the young artist. Syms' performance, of course, minds the wake between lecture and performance, begging the question "is it art?" Ironically, Syms' performance took place, not in Overtown, but in Wynwood, while her related banner of text was sited in "Miami's most rapidly changing luxury destination, the Design District," as described by Nina Johnson-Milewski in the Miami Rail.

Knowing of Syms' project obliquely, how could one resist playing it out in a different setting, and one that could actually bring the ideas or even the images of the project to the moment and spread it around the town via Locust Projects' "Art on the Move"? On buses and bus shelters around Miami and in the window space of Locust Projects, back in the Design District, Syms' work gives us a nod to history in the present. Her brilliance as a poet comes to the fore in snippets of text she has reconstituted and appropriated from old signs advertising musical

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performers in Overtown in the 1950s and '60s that were created by Clyde Killens, a famous promoter and impresario of the "nite life." Killens died in 2004 at the age of 95.

One of Syms' boards reads in block type simply "FRI SAT SUN" evoking the highlight and relief of what those three days represent to people who work for a living on a traditional work week's schedule. "Darling it wont be the same always," another board reads poetically, quoting the lyrics of a popular tune. "TO NITE," and "NEVER NEVER" also feature alongside old images of performer's photographs from posters with expressionist flourishes of primary color contrasting the black and white of the signs. The performers that Killens promoted and who played in Overtown often came via gigs in Miami Beach where they were welcome to perform but not to rest their bodies. Segregated from the hotels on the beach, they came to Overtown to play and to rest and be comfortable in an otherwise inhospitable southern American city. For Locust Projects' "Art on the Move", it is perhaps more than fitting to open during Art Basel Miami Beach with work that will traverse these two very different cities. Combining music, culture and history with a nod back to fifty years ago, we might reconsider where we come from and where want to be in the present.

Franklin Sirmans, 2015