

## DEBORAH GRANT BACON, EGG, TOAST IN LARD

Deborah Grant's paintings are dense—quite literally loaded with obsessive, code-like mark-making, collaged and drawn symbolic representations, and flat silhouettes; and with myriad personal, cultural, and art-historical references. Her work is a kind of hallucinatory exercise, sampling across time and genres to connect ideas based in history and personal experience with political and social issues of the present. Grant's distinctive and highly graphic visual style marries aspects of abstraction and illustration in a restrained palette of black, white, and red. She is influenced as much by pop-culture sources like vintage *Life* magazine photography, comic books, *MAD* magazine, and pulp images as by art-world referents like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bill Traylor, and Jacob Lawrence. The visual intensity of her work mirrors a narrative complexity that is driven by Grant's interest in the notion of "Random Select."

For Grant, Random Select names a process of invention and interpretation. Ideas both come to us incidentally and are summoned by design, and we make sense of them by both embracing chance and creating order. As a process of invention, Random Select allows Grant to maneuver between free association and research, following branches of thinking from impetus to hallucinatory end. As a means of interpretation, it provides the freedom for Grant, and for us, to read into her work—through the dense mark-making, between the symbolic references, within the layers of collage—to forge our own pathways and connections.

Random Select is also a character, a protagonist who propels the narrative forward in the body of interrelated work on view in MATRIX, in particular the painting *Suicide Notes To The Self*. The painting can be seen as a sort of dream, and within it the character Random Select operates to actualize the thought process, instigating and connecting the other references. Random Select travels through time and space, bringing together Jackie "Moms" Mabley, a pioneering comedienne on the African American Vaudeville circuit, and Francis Bacon, an Irish-born painter known for his grotesque, often violent figurative portrayals, in a London pub called

House of Chantilly. Although the association of the two historical characters might appear random, their biographies converge: both lived as out gay adults and both experienced traumatically violent events in their youth, exorcising these demons in their creative work by directly confronting issues of racism (Mabley), violence (Bacon), and sexuality (both). This desire (or perhaps compulsion) to confront humanity's messiness and even absurdity is significant. But equally important is their desire to generate something new, processing and in some sense reclaiming memory and experience through the filter of the world at large, and through the creative act transforming elements of their respective biographies into something complex and meaningful.

Francis Bacon, called by some a "sacred monster," rendered pain, death, sadism, suffering, and destruction in paint, primarily through the vehicle of the human body, to, as he said, "remake the violence of reality itself." His biography is marked by abuse; he was horsewhipped by stable hands at the request of his father, and sexually preyed upon by family associates. These events naturally were inflected in his life and work, as Bacon explored the relationship of violence and destruction to love and humanity, and perhaps made him more attuned to themes of suffering and redemption in politics, religion, and the world wars of his time. The circumstances of Moms Mabley's life—twice raped as a teenager, she became a professional comedienne against many odds—make her an interesting symbolic cipher for exploring other aspects of inhumanity, violence, sexism, and racism. In her comedic persona, Mabley sought to evade the categorical assumptions about race and gender, adopting an aggressive style couched within the familiar paradigm of the African American "granny," a so-called "queen of sass." Her humor was both topical and personal; it did not shy away from critical commentary, no easy feat in a career that spanned the early Jim Crow days to the black power movement of the 1970s.

In the MATRIX gallery, a sonic collage by Jennie C. Jones extends the narrative, creating an experiential rather than solely visual context. The ambient noise of a cafe locates us in the imaginary space of Bacon and Mabley's meeting, while layers taken from Mabley's routine about being "backhanded" in church and the sound of whips suggest the interior monologues of our protagonists as they come together.

Bacon and Mabley are the primary symbolic references, but their biographies open up to a much larger conversation about twentieth-century history. The density of the paintings sets an arena of complex relationships, and resonates both visually and metaphorically with Grant's ideas about narrative and truth. This massive work operates on both a macro and a micro level: graphic silhouettes read crisply from a distance, grounding the nonlinear narrative, while up close, line drawings of symbols, figures, diagrams, machines, and collaged photographic elements signal the underlying themes of psychology, war, sex, and death. The obsessively coded

mark-making posits information, the networks of words and ideas that connect events and figures, but refuses to resolve into any sensible or singular narrative. The precisely drafted, Rube Goldbergian detailing suggests the processes of knowledge construction and interpretation that operate in drafting histories, or even biographies. And the works are littered with peripheral references, at times specific (conservative economist Milton Friedman; W.C. Fields, comedian of the middle class) and at other times generalized (American flags, images of protests and other public events), literalizing the historical and social contexts in which Bacon and Mabley were formed, in which they performed and created, and upon which they made an impact. The imagined conversation between Mabley and Bacon prismatically refracts through the specificity of their biographies to signal larger cultural concerns, creating a kind of third space between oppositional ideas—fact and fiction, research and free association, order and chaos, symbolic language and abstraction, internal and external realities, violence and control, imagination and representation.

### Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



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Deborah Grant: *Songs of Solomon* "Ghetto Cry's Along The Black Delta," 2009; oil, archival ink, paper, and enamel on birch panel; 62 × 57 in.; courtesy of the artist.

REVERSE AND FRONT Deborah Grant: *Suicide Notes To The Self*, 2008 (details); oil, archival ink, paper, flashe paint, and enamel on five birch panels; 72 × 240 in.; courtesy of the artist and Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles.



Deborah Grant: *Morality is the Painful Luxury*, 2008 (detail); enamel on 48 birch panels; 99 × 227 in.; courtesy of the artist and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas.

Deborah Grant was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1968. She received a B.F.A. from Columbia College, Chicago, in 1996 and an M.F.A. from Tyler School of Art in 1999, with residencies at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1996, Studio Museum in Harlem 2002–2003, Headlands Center for the Arts in 2004, and A.S.A.P in 2005. This is her first solo museum exhibition. Upcoming exhibitions include *Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life*, The Jewish Museum, New York. Previously, her work has been exhibited in *After 1968: Contemporary Artists and the Civil Rights Legacy*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta; *The Old Weird America*, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston; *The Way We Rhyme: Women, Arts and Politics*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; *The "F" Word*, Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Ballroom Marfa, Marfa, Texas; *Greater New York*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City; *Seeds and Roots*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and *AIM 22*, Bronx Museum, New York. Grant lives and works in New York.

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