

# Four Studies of Black Healing

April 2, 2021

Care and community take different forms after a painful year of plague and protest.

**By Gioncarlo Valentine and Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.**

After a year of disproportionate loss from the pandemic and the continuous threat of police violence, on top of centuries of discrimination and disenfranchisement, what does healing look like for Black Americans? The photographers Gioncarlo Valentine and Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. traveled to Virginia, the Carolinas, Louisiana and Georgia looking for answers to that question — reaching out to friends and family, artists and organizations along the way. They sought to document the rituals and relationships that create space for joy, solace and restoration.

View & read the two chapters of this digital online:

## **Chapter 3**

### [Space](#)

*Locating the restorative properties of physical place.*

## **Chapter 4**

### [Care](#)

*Leaving a mark of love.*

# W

## Artist Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. on Making Work in the Margins



INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL BECKERT

Welcome to [Ways of Seeing](#), where two artists sit down to discuss [the nuances of their work](#), [trade industry secrets](#), and [catch up on their latest projects](#). The only catch? One of them is on staff at W magazine. In this week's edition, visuals editor Michael Beckert chats with Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., a talented photographer whose career has experienced a meteoric rise in the past couple years—he's shot a campaign for Telfar x Gap, commissions for *The New Yorker*, and a coveted Janelle Monáe September cover.

**You started off 2020 with a pretty major collaboration, photographing the campaign images for [Telfar x Gap](#) in January. Can you tell me more about that?**

[Telfar \[Clemens\]](#) and I had seen one another at parties, and just as a fellow creative Black person to a fellow creative Black person, we would say hi to each other out of an unspoken respect. I remember when they did their Century 21 collaboration, and they were selling

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the bags for a significantly lower price than they usually are. I had gone to the pop-up, and that was actually the first time that I had met [Telfar creative director] Babak Radboy, who asked me to shoot the campaign. I said to Babak, "Girl, you know these bags don't have the sensors on them?" As I was saying that to him, a friend of mine did end up taking one of the bags and we laughed about me saying something afterwards. I'm pretty sure Babak didn't do anything about it when I told him; he welcomes chaos and things that other businesses maybe have more of an ego about.

**You shot these images in Paris, and they debuted in that city's Gap storefront.**

The images appeared in Paris, but we shot them in Florence.

**What was that like?**

It was very exciting. The only other time that I had been to Florence was in 2016, for something related to NYU's campus there. My hotel at that time was in the same area as where we did this Telfar shoot. There was a dinner on the first night, and a show to debut the collection the following afternoon. The dinner experience was something that they wanted to have in celebration of themselves and this moment in Florence, and the larger creative community they are part of. All of the clothes that you see in the photographs, they are clothes from the fall 2020 Telfar show, but the images were used on the side of the Gap to announce their collaboration.

**How much time did you have to shoot?**

I had a full two days. I shot during the preparations for the dinner, during the fittings with all of the creatives. They were pretty clear that they didn't want the images to be a look book, even though I think the images do have a look book feel to them. My look straddles documentary and theater—and I guess that is somewhere between look book and candid.

**When do you feel the most connected to your work? Is it after you've created it, or once you've shared it via Instagram, or when it debuts in a Paris storefront?**

I think that dissonance only comes about when I work in an editorial capacity, and I don't work as editorially as often as I work for myself. And usually when I do have that feeling, I just don't share the image from that editorial thing. I try to only share things that I'm proud of which reflect me, or an experience I'm satisfied with. When I was making the Telfar images, it was an isolating experience. Seeing those images on the side of the Gap, that's just something that I could never have asked for. That's never really been a goal of mine, to participate commercially in such a large-scale way, but it was really beautiful to see the work that I did for the brand that I also have a lot of respect for, seen there. As an artist, you have to be the primary defender of your work, in addition to being the primary author of it.

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So when I put something out, it really is because I'm interested in sharing with folks. But if it didn't land with people for aesthetic concerns, I don't care so much about that.

**The last time we worked on something was actually for *W*—you shot some really beautiful images of [Ato Blankson Wood](#), who starred in Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play*. When we got the images back, there were some that included an anonymous pair of hands holding Ato's head. My team asked, "Whose hands are those? And why are they there?" I found myself unable to explain the purpose of this aesthetic choice beyond that it made me look twice at the photograph. How would you explain your choice to include extra, sometimes strange, details in your pictures?**

Working with the margins at first grew out of a political positioning, recognizing that the margin is an important way to read the center. And what's held at the margin—there's a lot of power there, because it isn't fully included. So, in the instance of the Ato portrait, I was using it fairly metaphorically. As with any tool that you employ, it begins to take on a life of its own and it reveals things that you hadn't necessarily planned for. But I think above all, tucking things into the margins of the photograph allows me to indicate that there is something beyond the focus, or the purported focus, of this image. And that's often why a lot of the people in my pictures aren't really looking at the camera as well, because that sense of eye contact really grounds the photograph and grounds the viewer's connection with the photograph in the individual. The individual, for me, is as important in the image as the space is. In order to equate them, I often have to downplay the importance of the individual, because that's typically what people are rushing to.

**Many of my favorite photographers have such a strong voice that, regardless of what they're shooting, whether it's Janelle Monáe for the cover of *King Kong*, or a personal project, you can place images from either shoot next to one another and see the conversation they're having about that artist. I do see a lot of consistency in your work. Do you actively try and achieve this consistency?**

No. There is a way I see that is undeniable, and a lot of my images do have a consistency that you're speaking to. I often work with people inside of their homes, even though a lot of the images that I've made recently are of people outside. Most of the recent ones haven't really used any added, artificial light, either. Oftentimes, working with available light, especially if I'm continuing photos with people inside, means working with shadows and working with darkness a lot more often. So I think that I approach every assignment in every work that I make with an effort to forefront what is foundational to that person's experience and what are their tools for fortifying themselves in that moment. I arrive at things thinking, "How can I visualize power? How can I visualize intimacy? How can I visualize warmth?" How can I do those things without exploiting this relationship or the environment that I have access to? How can I present these things in a way that is respectful and that is still engaging? Those are questions that I bring to each thing I do.

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**You're approaching your work with consistent questions, not necessarily with consistent visual tools or tricks.**

Yeah, I pretty much arrive at everything with the same questions around respect, power, and warmth. I did a commission for the Public Art Fund where I made a photograph for them that is not of people. It is more of a landscape image, but it references a landscape that has multiple uses for individuals. Even in the way I rendered that landscape, there is an abstraction to it. There is still an interest in privacy.

**Do you have moments when you're working in editorial spheres and you are being challenged to abandon the aesthetic choices that were the same choices that attracted the client in the first place? For instance, if they're saying, "No, we want them to look directly at the camera," or, "Why are you doing that thing in the margins?" How do you stay confident about that?**

I actually run into this every time I've worked editorially. I try to also view editorial work as a challenge to think about the history of the publication that has commissioned me. Who are the people that they often work with? What do those photographs look like? And I try to get into the headspace of the editors, the editorial leadership of that publication. A friend gave me a piece of advice when I was asked to photograph Rujeko Hockley for Cultured magazine: "You should make a photograph of her that shows what you think of her." It was a very simple suggestion, but what I took from it was that I should try not to be as elusive or ambiguous as I would choose to be in my own work. Then I can begin to make something that feels honorific but that also feels like it's part of me. Now, before I agree to an assignment, I talk to editors about what sense they have of my work, because that's how I'm going to make the work, and if that approach isn't interesting to you or isn't what you want, you should go to somebody else. And I'm totally fine passing up jobs. I say no to things all the time. So if it's not the right fit, it's just not the right fit but, for instance, this last thing that I did for the New Yorker—

**Oh, I wanted to talk about that!**

I was a bit confused on how I would approach this sort of assignment. And I was also startled that the New Yorker had even asked me to make these pictures, because I hadn't worked for them in two years. And I have never photographed a dancer before, but I also have encouraged editors to hire me for things that they may not immediately think of me for. So when I got to the park to scout locations for the shoot, I had spent some time with two places in particular. And when I was walking to the entrance of the park to meet Jamar Roberts, I saw this other place that was shrouded in darkness, but the light was hitting the stone really crazy. And I was like, "Oh, that could be really interesting." Where my practice is going in relation to these ideas of withholding is working more significantly with darkness and a lot of dark negative space. That was the first location that we photographed,

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and I was immediately satisfied by those images because it complemented the article's sense of mourning.

I'm willing to go back to an editor, talk to them about it and I'm always willing to defend the choices that I made, including the choices that maybe weren't the right ones. If it was shit, if I think it was shit, I'ma tell them, "Hey, this is shitty. I didn't like how this was approached." But if I believe in it and I believe in how it tells the story, then I have no problem advocating for myself. But if somebody else doesn't see it, I'm not going to spend too much energy on it because that is the responsibility of the editor's imagination. This happens to me in exhibitions too, with group shows: People who ask me to participate under a specific guise. And then, I offer them something and they're like, "Huh, why this?"

**Especially over the last few months, with the Black Lives Matter movement becoming a headline across media outlets again, I've seen the photography community band together, using its resources to do some concrete good. People are shifting their Instagram content from their own work to helping others, BIPOC photographers are sharing resources, and there are print sales like Reframing the Future, and Miciah Carter's project, See in Black. I'm wondering what the last few months have been like for you, especially on social media and seeing both real allyship and some that's performative.**

Something that I shared with a friend of mine, Gioncarlo Valentine, feels relevant. We had a conversation over Instagram Live about a month and a half ago. Gioncarlo, as somebody who takes up a lot of public space on his own Instagram and who writes for various outlets as well, is not only showing up in private and showing up among his trusted people, but trusts himself to show up in public as well. He trusts that public voice, because it's a tool, one that should not dull. So in terms of Instagram and social media, they don't feel like spaces that are any more intense right now than they usually are. Instagram is a space for cultivating information, a space for sharing resources, a space for encouraging action. Those are all things that we should welcome. When I do need to be quiet, sometimes I need to not talk to my friends, so that means not engaging with these extended friendships or these extended casual relationships on the internet. That's a fine thing to do, too. I don't talk to my mom every day. Some days, I really just need to be alone to orient. What is my work in this current moment? Not all of the work benefits this movement or is in mind of this movement—some of it is just, "How do I need to take care of myself today?", which abstractly is related to this movement, but directly, it's just related to me. So I don't think about this moment as being overwhelming. I think about it as just being another critical one within this ongoing struggle for liberation of Black people and demanding a standard of living for all people which includes, at the least, being able to live.

**I do think that white people feel overwhelmed, and that's actually the problem. The implication, then, is that you're feeling overwhelmed because you're not typically confronting this discriminatory part of yourself. Knowing that, it's interesting to**

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**consider that it's not any more overwhelming for you than it might be if you were pressured as a Black artist to speak about this.**

There's no pressure, no pressure to speak. When you allow yourself the energy to educate folks around how their actions are harmful—especially because we need to hear it from the direct source about how it's harmful in order to move forward—the overall tone ends up being sorrowful. But when you are working intra-communally, there is a lot more balance. So when I'm talking to other Black people, we're going to battle each other, and we're going to collect each other as necessary. We're going to hold each other accountable, but we're also going to celebrate one another. We're going to cook for each other and care for one another and we're going to be gentle with each other. When I'm sharing things online or I'm speaking up online, that's out of a responsibility to myself and it's also out of a responsibility for the people that I love and care for. And that is not something that I feel pressure from white people to describe. In fact, I find that a lot of the time, I'm talking to other Black people in the things that I'm sharing. When I'm talking to white people directly, I say that directly. I don't feel any pressure from white people to do anything. I'm actually, as I said earlier, more than okay having someone know I'm not going to speak on this and maybe redirecting them elsewhere.

I'm really grateful to work for myself. I'm represented by a gallery and the director of it is a white woman. We speak intermittently, but our relationship is rooted in how she can be a support to me and what it is that I need for my practice. It still is a one-to-one thing. Whereas somewhere like *W* is employed under this larger corporate umbrella. There's a lot under the surface there. There's a poison that feeds into the foundation of the way that all of these companies work. There's a lot of work to do to suck it out, but I would really be more comfortable with allowing these companies to fail and be replaced by something more substantive and more accountable. Something that, at its core, at its foundation, is already thinking about ideas of expansion and how we can actually be useful to our constituency as opposed to feeling like this is a phase that needs to be done. White people are going to be tired the second that it's time to go back into the office. White people are going to go back to their business of being inattentive, lacking discipline, lacking focus. It'll happen all over again. Something large will happen, and then it'll be like, "Wow, where are the black people?"

**The conversation, especially in the media industry, becomes even more complicated when you realize that as white people, when we, for example, report on Juneteenth, a Black holiday, we're somehow benefitting monetarily from people reading our story online. In that sense, the coverage of Juneteenth is somehow putting money in the pockets of white people.**

I enjoyed when Juneteenth was a thing that people just celebrated amongst themselves. I really don't like holidays at all, but for those people who did celebrate Juneteenth more actively, it felt really almost gaslighting to see various institutions cover the holiday. To get

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a notification on the phone from Apple News saying, "Hey, it's Juneteenth. Happy Juneteenth," is bizarre when this has been a thing for so long that other people didn't recognize.

I'll end here: much of the reason why Toni Morrison ended up winning the Nobel Peace Prize, in addition to her work, is because a lot of Black people were campaigning for her to win the Nobel Peace Prize and were campaigning for the institution to recognize her as someone who was deserving of it. So then eventually, she gets it. I was thinking about the way that you honor somebody like Toni Morrison who has spent her entire career thinking through the condition of Blackness in its variety. The way that you honor someone like Toni Morrison is actually through destruction. It isn't through giving an award, giving a prize, giving these material benefits but it actually is in destroying things as we currently understand them. It is really nice to be recognized for your work. It's really nice to have a moment of peace around your work, and to be taken off of your feet a bit because of all of the work that you've done—and Toni Morrison also very thoroughly enjoyed a party, and she very thoroughly enjoyed celebration and very thoroughly enjoyed gifts. So she definitely accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with tremendous honor. But I think Black people really throw a wrench into pretty much all means of doing anything, that it isn't enough to just give someone an award. It needs to be met with structural impact, structural change. It has to be a complete structural revision, but they have to be destroyed first, in order for something to be made of it.

**I end each interview by asking: what are you most proud of so far in your career?**

I'm most proud of the way that I practice photography. What is greater than the greatest achievement, for me, is the way that I photograph people: it's rooted in respect for people, rooted in wanting to see that person across varying stages of dignity and not simply within the aspirational stage of it, wanting to actually see a space no matter how messy or neat, and offer it a plane.



# Works for the Now, by Queer Artists of Color

Pride Month may be coming to a close, but the wide-ranging pieces shown here have staying power.

June 29, 2020, 3:00 p.m. ET

As the country wraps up [Pride Month](#) and continues to contend with ongoing violence against queer and BIPOC communities, it's paramount that voices from those communities are heard. Not all artists are activists, of course, but they are all keen observers, ones who invite the viewer to consider their way of seeing things, whether their chosen subject is as expansive as prison reform or as singular as their own sense of self. Each work tells a story, and here, we've asked 15 queer artists of color to elaborate on theirs. (Look for a coming compilation of works by queer Indigenous artists in the weeks ahead.)

*These interviews have been edited and condensed.*

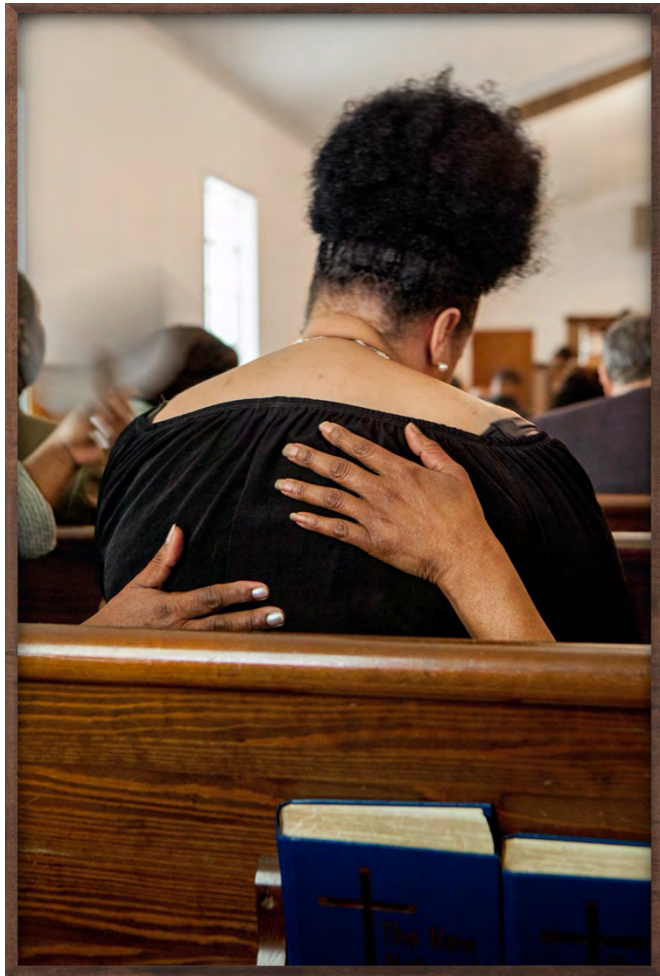


Brown's "Prune and grout" (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York

**By Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., 26,  
based in New York**

“Prune and grout” (2019) I took last year at a New Orleans bar. There’s a companion piece to this that shows a woman with her head down on the bar, as though she’s mourning someone’s absence. This image shows the logistical setup — the person pictured here was just helping me with the other shot, but there was such concern in his eyes. His hand, which is just outside the frame here, was holding that of the woman.

The image [at right] is from one of the rare occasions when I was invited to make photographs in a documentary context. I attended the funeral of a person who had a storied life, despite having suffered an incredibly traumatic racial violence early on. This was the only image I felt comfortable sharing with a wider audience; the guests’ identities aren’t disclosed, and yet it communicates why I was there and serves as a way of paying my respects. I noticed that those who had been closest to this person moved through the day with ease — mostly they seemed proud and at peace — and it made me think about the power the deceased had and whether forgiveness was a tool for cultivating that power. A lot of my work involves interiority, both of physical spaces and of individuals — I’m interested in what constitutes their foundation and enables them to act. Your attacker might not repent and the state might assist in perpetuating violence, so, in that lack, what tools do you have to fortify yourself?



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.’s “Oftentimes, justice for black people takes the form of forgiveness, allowing them space to reclaim their bodies from wrongs made against them.” (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.  
in Flushing, New York.  
*Right: To Keep Your  
Company (2019).*

**"HIS IMAGES SUCKED ME IN  
AND HELD MY RAPT ATTENTION.  
SIMULTANEOUSLY TENDER AND  
POWERFUL, THE PHOTOGRAPHS  
HOLD YOU CLOSE."**

**— JUSTINE LUDWIG**



## elliott jerome brown jr.

FLUSHING, NY | PHOTOGRAPHY

It's impossible to capture a memory in a photograph, yet that's exactly what Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. sets out to do in his mesmerizing images. By manipulating his intimate stills with the addition of objects and sculptural frames, he broadens the scope of the camera, creating varying angles and layers of time. Showcasing subjects with "backs turned, eyes closed, or bodies obstructed," he also explores the value of privacy in a medium that is all about exposure.

**ON VIEW:** After receiving a BFA from New York University in 2016, Brown participated in group exhibitions at P.P.O.W. Gallery, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and New York's La MaMa La Galleria, plus residencies in New Orleans at the St. Roch Community Church and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

**GOING SOLO:** This year marked not his first solo show—but his first three: Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York, Staple Goods in New Orleans, and Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York.  
[elliottjeromebrownjr.com](http://elliottjeromebrownjr.com)



# THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

ART GALLERIES – DOWNTOWN

Sept. 18, 2019

## Elliott Jerome Brown, Jr.

This young artist's titles are poetic companions to his lyrical photographs. "Syllables of joy and devastation" portrays a young person lounging in bed, regarding the camera with almost closed eyes. Neither posed nor candid, the shot captures an attitude of trusting indifference—an air of true intimacy. Many of Brown's subjects are shown from behind, a perspective that might come off as voyeuristic, but instead seems deferential to their privacy. In "Oftentimes, justice for black people takes the form of forgiveness, allowing them space to reclaim their bodies from wrongs made against them," a woman sits in church as comforting hands reach out to rest on both sides of her back. The point of view implies that Brown is attending the service, too.

—*Johanna Fateman*



Sophia Narrett, *Wishes* (detail), 2019, embroidery thread, fabric, 73 × 39". From "Do You Love Me?"

## "Do You Love Me?"

P.P.O.W

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., Kyle Dunn, Martine Gutierrez, Gerald Lovell, Reba Maybury, and Sophia Narrett were the six artists featured in "Do You Love Me?," a group show that took on a number of subjects, such as intimacy, sexual politics, and the body as a site of wonder and horror—ideas that, thankfully, moved beyond the exhibition's cheeky title.

Gutierrez explored the transmutability of gender and reality as it pertains to self-presentation. Two groups of seven small-scale, black-and-white photographs, *Girl Friends (Rosella & Palama)*, 2014, and *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie)*, 2014, portrayed the artist and a doppelgänger mannequin, similarly attired, in various settings. We saw the artist reaching out for a fake horse in *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie 5)* as Gutierrez's "twin" turns away from us in the background under a dusky, lunar sky. With *Girl Friends (Rosella & Palama 4)* the pair, in black evening gowns, are framed by heavy curtains on one side and a grand staircase on the other in a gilded, palatial room. As a reflective device, the dummy provides a clever, even humorous foil. But its

# ARTFORUM

effect was diminished by the works' formulaic repetition. (This was also true of the artist's constant presence, as she struck those all-too-familiar modeling poses while sunbathing, for instance, or hitchhiking. The work often struggled to surpass the clichés of its inspiration.) An exception was *Girl Friends (Anita & Marie I)*, wherein both characters, in diaphanous white dresses, gaze in awe through an abundant woodland scene of Pre-Raphaelite charm and light. The image recalled the aesthetic of the early-twentieth-century "Cottingley Fairies" photographs, which elaborately intertwined fiction and fantasy. A fellow traveler in the realms of the fanciful was Narrett, whose incandescent Rococo embroideries avoided the egotism that hampered some of Gutierrez's images. The artist's *Wishes*, 2019, is an intricately rendered blaze of gorily seductive florals and creepily surrealist tableaux, featuring rowboat orgies; lurid medical sex role-play; and manic bands of leaping, hypnotic rabbits, among other sinister sights. The six-foot-high cavalcade here was presided over by the artist, who depicts herself as a smiling mystic in the work, telepathically directing the gleefully macabre circus from a tree-house window.

The photographs of friends and relatives in domestic settings captured by Brown—a far cry from the reveries of Gutierrez and Narrett—made us feel as though we were looking through a pinhole into his life. Information regarding who or where his subjects are, or what their relationships might be, is left to interpretation. Clear narratives are further obscured via precise croppings of both objects and people, the formal tactic subtly articulating the peripheral status endured by black people in the United States. Brown's subjects' theatrical gestures, which convey exhaustion, victimization, and violence, evoke the pathos of a Greek tragedy. The most notable piece here was *Is it that I desire to see Jesus bend, to witness them at odds or in question? Jesus loves me, but I believe that Jesus is in process too*, 2018, which features a young man lying in bed, propped up on his elbows and wearing baggy shorts and a tank top while facing away from the viewer. The image is quietly intriguing, but generally the selection of Brown's work for this show didn't do his vision justice.

Maybury is an artist, essayist, and dominatrix who vivisected our capitalist patriarchy in eight acrylic self-portraits, collectively titled *The Consequences of His and Hers*, 2018–19. Maybury, clad in policewoman outfits, is depicted as "Mistress Rebecca," while other works feature hybrid renderings of her submissives in fetish attire. All of the paintings were made by her clientele—various of whom are nicknamed Horsey, Billionaire Heir, and the Dutch Wetter—in exquisite-corpse style and under her supervision. In her writings, the artist describes these artmaking sessions, her financial hardships, the aggravating behavior of men, and her life as a sex worker. These paintings manifest Maybury's anthropological interest in dismantling male power structures by working within them—insidious aspects of our culture that require fearless investigation, not our love.

— Darren Jones

# ARTFORUM



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., *He gave and he gave / but he wouldn't have given at all if I didn't let him in / if I didn't cover my body in soap three times / swish oil between my teeth 47 minutes ahead of the time / that I expected him. / (Wounded)*, 2018, archival inkjet prints on aluminum, wood, and brass wire, 31 x 31".

NEW YORK

## Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.

BAXTER ST AT THE CAMERA CLUB OF NEW YORK  
126 and 128 Baxter St  
January 9–March 2, 2019

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.'s *He gave and he gave / but he wouldn't have given at all if I didn't let him in / if I didn't cover my body in soap three times / swish oil between my teeth 47 minutes ahead of the time / that I expected him. / (Wounded)* (all works cited, 2018) features several images that sit behind a timeworn, family-style "collage" picture frame, decorated with gold accents. The frame strategically occludes much of what we see—through the apertures we take in a shirtless and barefoot man facing away from us; a boy lounging in a tank top and athletic shorts, his face hidden; and socked feet hanging in the foreground, unattached to any visible body. Other works here show people relaxing on couches, braiding hair, or eating together.

These informal, intimate scenes of black life—often tender—dominate Brown's first solo exhibition, "a simple song," the title of which is based on *I Wrote a Simple Song*, soul artist Billy Preston's 1972 record that talks about the disappointment of making deeply private music for public consumption. Brown addresses this quandary, too, with his partially obstructed photographs. Another work from 2018 captures a full-length oval mirror, a figurine, a dog statuette, and a strip of wallet-size studio portraits trapped beneath a sheet of glass on top of a table, or maybe a dresser. The top half of the mirror is partially obscured by a dark rectangle. When the piece is observed from another vantage point, the rectangle reveals a woman resting her head on her hand while glancing downward. She is an added jolt of melancholy—a kind of phantom who presides over this sullen tableau.

The show's centerpiece is *Ssssummmmmwhhhhhhhhhhere*, a sizable light-box piece depicting a young man lifting a couch. His face is blocked out, but his strained legs are visible. In front of the light box are bars, made from painted aluminum and willow. This odd addition puts some distance between the viewer and the work. Brown allows us to get close, but never *too* close.

—Megan N. Liberty



# FLASH ART

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. “a simple song”  
Baxter St. at the Camera Club of New York, New York  
by Sean D. Henry-Smith



**Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.**, *He gave and he gave but he wouldn't have given at all if I didn't let him in, if I didn't cover my body in soap three times, swish oil between my teeth 47 minutes ahead of the time that I expected him. (Wounded,)* 2018. Archival inkjet prints on aluminum, wood (sapele), and brass wire 31 x 31 in.

alternatively works in service of the full autonomy of those photographed. He instructs the viewer to do the work: instead of “who are we looking at?” we are to ask “*how* are we looking?” Only then we are offered the kind of proximity that lets us gather humbly in meditation in *Just beyond* (2018), or to giggle with the mischievous and knowing smirk of *On ice* (2018), as if Anansi himself was asked for his portrait. We sit outside the prayer and the laughter, but we are allowed a brief glimpse inside if we look with care.

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.’s song is not without complexity or rigor — in fact, it depends on it — yet it cuts to the necessary, the essential gesture. Gets deep in the groove and thumbs it quietly, hums a low hymn of ease.

Upon entering Baxter St. at the Camera Club of New York to witness Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.’s “a simple song,” I am drawn, moth-like, to the backmost wall of the gallery. The photo-sculpture

*Sssummmmmwhhhhhhhhhhhhere* (2018) features a large light box protected/intercepted/interceded by six beams made of aluminum and hand-woven willow — a labor-intensive material that must first be soaked for one week. Bold and sparse, the beams build toward and guard the light box, which illuminates a photograph of a couch being lifted and the legs of the lifter at work. The mismatched feet of the couch mirror the mismatched socks of the lifter. A wrinkled receipt worms nowhere. I can almost imagine the lifter doing this alone, a feat of impossible and allegorical strength. The exhibition, which is Brown Jr.’s first solo show, borrows its title from Billy Preston’s 1971 album *I Wrote a Simple Song*, and I see Preston’s song “John Henry” in the labor of the lifter, unafraid and determined, tossing the couch into the atmosphere. Brown Jr.’s photographs allow this kind of fiction-building in their quietude and openness, a kind of folklore to be told at the fire, in the living room. “Can’t you see the possibilities?” Preston sings, as does the photographer.

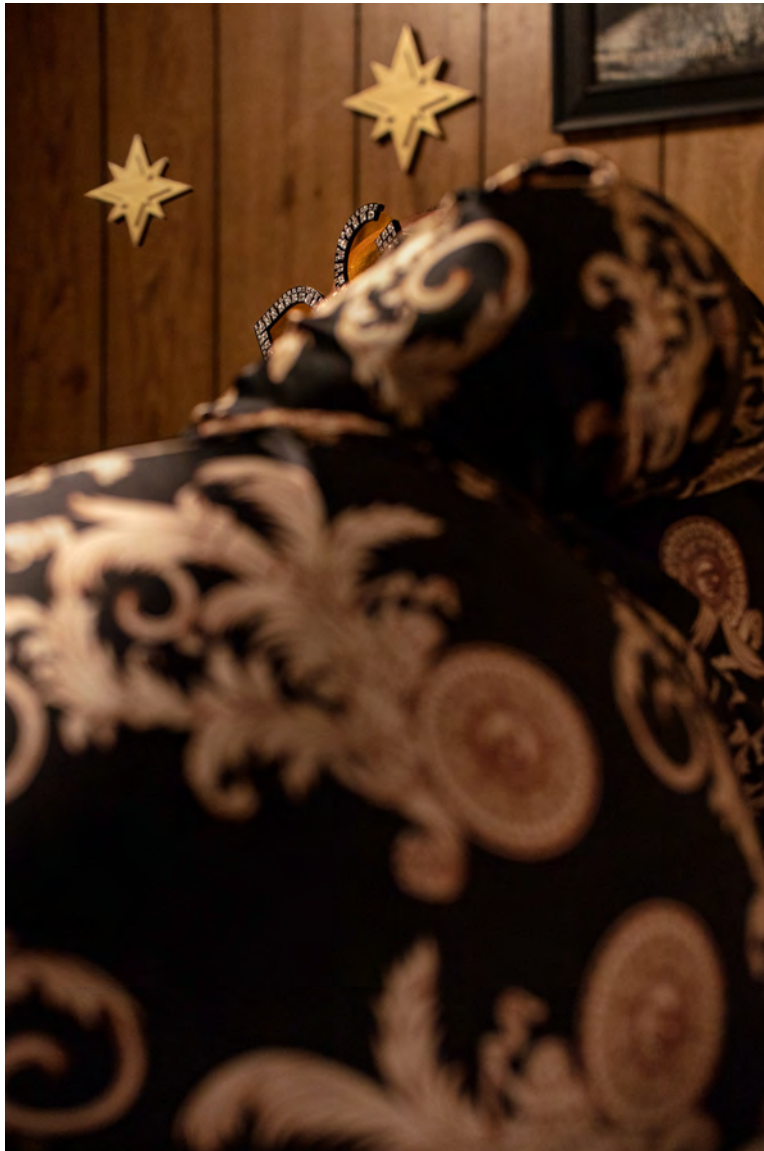
Brown Jr.’s offering of Black secrecy and intimacy presents a vulnerability that is not for the viewer but



# *BOMB*

The Potential of Additional Happenings: Elliott  
Jerome Brown Jr.'s a simple song by  
Stephanie E. Goodalle

*Photographic portraits that reveal and conceal.*



Feb. 25, 2019

# BOMB

Imagine you're visiting your friend's home for the first time. You can't remember the directions to the bathroom, and you accidentally enter the living room where a relative of your friend is preoccupied with some activity. You're nosy, so you stand there a little bit longer as curiosity gets the best of you. Every time you inch closer, something obstructs your view. You think you see one thing, but the possibilities are endless. More importantly, it's not your business. I constantly encountered some version of this scenario while visiting Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.'s first solo exhibition, *a simple song*, at Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York. Named after a track on Billy Preston's 1971 album, *I Wrote a Simple Song*, the deceptively direct, nine multimedia, photo-sculptural, and photographic images thrust visitors into the private and intimate daily occurrences of the photographer's family and friends.

*Sssummmmmwhhhhhhhhhhere* (2018) is a large lightbox image that emits a bright glow which drew me into the gallery. It features sepia-hued calf muscles dressed in mismatched Harry Potter-themed ankle socks supporting a squatting figure lifting a heavy piece of furniture that blocks the rest of the body. A metal and willow awning that Brown considers a totem or guide is installed in front of the light box, creating a physical barrier between the viewer and the piece. At the same time, the gallery space doesn't fully service the scale of *Sssummmmmwhhhhhhhhhhere*, as I was distracted by its glare reflecting onto other pieces.

*He gave and he gave, but he wouldn't have given at all if I didn't let him in, if I didn't cover my body in soap three times, swish oil between my teeth 47 minutes ahead of the time, that I expected him (Wounded)* (2018) is an excellent example of how Brown treats photographs both materially and conceptually. It shows on the left a bare-chested male figure wearing brown pants and seated in a thinking position. The back of his head is turned toward the viewer. The male figure on the right is reaching over the bed as if he is looking for something. His legs appear separated, but it's three sets of legs extended from the person's torso. In turn, the photo is blocked by a handmade frame. Brown uses sculptural elements to recontextualize the work in ways that the image itself is unable to do on its own. For example, a foot in the photograph is magnified by a circular portion of the frame.

*Grandma through the mirror* (2015/2018) and *Grandpa through the mirror* (2015/2018) attracted me with their quiet presence. The set of photographs shows Brown's grandparents resting in separate areas of their home of thirty-five years. Both are seated and contemplatively looking down. A large painting with four women in warm-toned dresses dancing in a gold frame behind Brown's grandmother and an African mask behind his grandfather are subtle markers of a black household. *Grandma through the mirror* was taken from a stairwell leading to an area that was off-limits to Brown when he was younger. These photographs implore the viewer to reassess ideas about privacy, space, and boundaries while also honoring family and culture.

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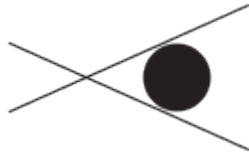
*Help me bear my weight* (2018) as well as *She threatened the most people off the dance floor. Fingers now laced quietly along the red countertop* (2018) are intensely intimate and tender. The first shows a figure focused on retwisting another person's locs while resting on a knee. The photograph is taken from below as if Elliott is spying on them. The latter image captures a reclining female form. Her unfocused backside rests in the foreground, and viewers can see the rhinestone sunglasses that peer over her shoulder. It is refreshing to see black people at rest, enjoying one another and presented with care.

Brown's sitters are not defined by outside factors; instead, they are simply being. Much like Deana Lawson, a major influence on his work, Brown shows that dignity, especially for the black body, can be defined in a myriad of ways. a simple song is a gentle tug and pull. Viewers are urged to come closer, but the images demand respect, privacy, and agency for their subjects.

*Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.: a simple song is on view at Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York in New York City until March 2.*

*Stephanie E. Goodalle is a curator, writer, and researcher based in New York. She is BOMB's Oral History Fellow.*

aperture



## For This Young Photographer, A “Simple Song” of Images

Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.’s photographs capture the private moments hiding in our everyday, public lives.

Luther Konadu | 3.28.2019

Looking at artist Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.’s photographs over the last few years, I can’t help but feel like I’m missing out on something, like catching the middle of a conversation between friends on public transit, or overhearing one side of a phone call. In the presence of Brown’s photographs, you remain in wonder, speculating within the gaps he leaves for us onlookers. Instead of giving in to photography’s susceptibility to spectacularize or idealize, Brown opts for the uneventful, seemingly inconsequential bits and pieces laden with history and elliptical meaning.

It’s no surprise that Brown’s recent solo show at the Baxter Street Camera Club was titled *a simple song*—a reference to a Billy Preston track, initially created as a hushed

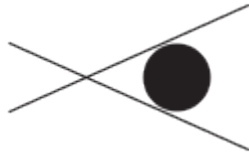
intimate recording, that later became propped up by label heads for commercial success. When I spoke with Brown recently, he described that act of communicating something private in public as being core to his overall practice. “I’m inherently dealing with visibility but privileging the interiority of the individuals and spaces I have access to,” he explained.

Throughout the works in *a simple song*, Brown manages to be plainspoken, but only enough to keep you at a distance. Every decision, from the images themselves to their idiosyncratic titles and their



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., *On Ice*, 2018.

**aperture**



physical displays, feels highly deliberate and considered. There's no identifiable beginning or end the viewer might try to piece together into a neat narrative. Over our conversation, we got further into the ways he continues to complicate his photographic practice through sculpture, and what it means to reach beyond the mere flatness of a photograph.

**Luther Konadu:** You briefly mentioned before we started talking that you might be working on a public installation. Have you ever done anything like that before?

**Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.:** No, I never have but always wanted to. Most everything that we interact with can be repurposed to structure a photograph. Everything is made out of a rectangle. Everything has a square in it. Everything that is a shape, a photograph can somehow occupy. I would like the opportunity to do something public and that can breathe in a different way in terms of who would interact with it and what the work is. A lot of the time, working with photographs, you end up working with them as these precious objects, and I'd like the opportunity to make something physical that can take some use or be impacted by the environment somehow.

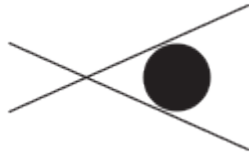
**Konadu:** Do you see that as something that is coming out of your recent work, in terms of incorporating relief elements into the photograph, which is otherwise flat on the wall?

**Brown:** That is an aspect of the recent work. The largest structure in my show at Baxter Street was a piece inspired by an awning, but didn't end up referencing an awning. It's made of willow so there's a natural element involved in its actual structure. It was an object that no matter how I handled it, I could make missteps or not be as gracious with it. I appreciated that one wrong move would not render this piece unseeable; it could still be shown in public space. Similarly, in another piece constructed after a traditional photo panel, a lot of the damages were a result of working through how to make this thing. The wire was coming out of the groove and breaking as I worked with it. I decided to intentionally wound some areas of the work so that it made sense. I think ultimately, because of the reference for that structure and thinking about how that structure may have lived in someone's house, or may have received some kind of wear over time, it works. The damages don't stop it from being displayed.

That process reminded me of my mother's collection of Lenox Angels. Lenox is a brand that makes plates and other dining ware, but they also make angels. They were specifically making these African-inspired angels where each of the angels was given a significant name. One of them represented music, another strength, and agility, et cetera. My mom has collected over fifteen angels and, over time, a lot of them have been broken. In the various houses—three or four homes—my mother has lived in since my parents divorced, those angels have always had a place to be seen in the house regardless of their damage. Sure, these items were intended to be protected, but the sentiment and the act of cherishing them are consistent; therefore, they'll continue to be displayed. I like objects from that perspective. They don't have to be perfect. They can exist publicly even as they've been transformed by time.

**Konadu:** The lightbox in the show feeds into this outdoor way of viewing images as it relates to advertising billboards. The scale of it is also something we haven't seen from you before.

aperture



It sounds like you are very much in that place of physicality: thinking about how objects in space enact with our bodies, trying to make a linkage between the two-dimensional way of working—collapsing our three-dimensional space into these flat surfaces—now that you are going back into a very physical mode of working. Was it inevitable that you'd take this new turn?

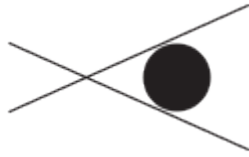
**Brown:** The very first piece I ever exhibited was in my junior year of college in 2015. And I was thinking about how I wanted to frame it, but something about the work didn't make sense in a traditional frame. I had this idea to instead frame it in ribbed undershirts that were stained and bloodied by a costume designer. The work was about internal dialogue and conflict, so I wanted to communicate a sense of abuse that was tangible. I knotted and stapled them around the piece and that was the frame. That was my first gesture as an exhibiting artist but also an artist that cared about each element involved in showing my work to people. And so, these dimensional qualities have always existed when I'm making a photograph. The flatness of the picture is something that I love but it's also a limitation. I love objects and the things they possess; how they can communicate various experiences and time. The objects in my images are oftentimes equally as important as the individuals in them. When I'm making a picture, I'm already thinking about how I can incorporate the space that the photograph is made into the image and *beyond* the image. The camera limits the frame to a certain view, so how can I embellish what is not pictured here?

**Konadu:** That's something I'm always thinking through with my own work. I'm always trying to figure out how I can continue a single image or multiply it in a way that the reference points to different directions. I think a great example of this in your work is a piece you have in the show right now: *He gave and he gave ...* (2018). That piece is almost disorienting. I have to slow down and look at it several times. I like what you are doing there. You are not making it easy for the viewer to passively consume the image. I think that ties into what you were saying about the frame and the image coexisting together.

**Brown:** I'm invested in how people live with photographs in public and private spaces. When I'm in public, I'm constantly observing spaces where images can or do inhabit and how I can use that in my own work. The same thing happens when I'm in an interior and thinking about how images inhabit people's private spaces. That piece was inspired by the way my grandmother collects photographs and the frames she uses to organize them. But more specifically, I had already been thinking about family photo panels and how I can use the frame to cause a tension with the photograph. I wanted to use my own photographs that would work in this fractured, compartmentalized, disjointed way, kind of against how the family photo panel was designed to function.

Family photo panels are traditionally used to organize photographic experiences that are somewhat scripted celebratory moments, experiences of accomplishment such as graduations or awards. Experiences are organized very neatly in these frames and I wanted to reference how sometimes experiences in my life are not neat. Things are haphazard. When you recall some of these experiences as a memory, there are certain memories that are pronounced that you are hyperaware of. There are other memories that are lost and not visible in the photograph that your memory





creates. That drove the way that I obscured and made visible the images in that piece. The title also helped reveal my inclination behind putting those two images together.



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., *Is it that I desire to see Jesus bend, to witness them at odds or in question? Jesus loves me, but I believe that Jesus is in process too.*, 2018

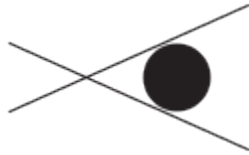
**Konadu:** I like how you play with a discontinuity in your work. Photography can easily fall into a narrative driven space, but you seem to jump in and out in the way you image the spaces, objects, and figures in your work. It sometimes seems like you are showing us something specific, but that leads us nowhere in particular. I'm wondering if you can speak about the usefulness in engaging with discontinuity in terms of how the individuals in your images are read.

**Brown:** The recent *Soul of a Nation* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum was talking about the history of photography as it pertains to black people's usage of it. It talked about the Kamoinge collective headed by Roy DeCarava, and the ways in which that collective practiced photography rooted in reality to prove their thesis. So, they go out and make photos of people on the street and of events and these photographs serve a particular purpose in terms of how you position them through history. But then it started talking about how the next movement of photography by

black photographers was led by people like Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson, who began to consolidate experience into these re-fabricated non-specific moments. So, when you think about Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table* series, it's a completely fabricated moment where she's thinking about a lot of different things and symbolizing them, as opposed to documenting how these things show up in reality. These are photographers who are conjuring an image within an environment that looks familiar. And so, it teeters on the line of a document versus a studio fabrication. And I think it is within that tradition that I work. I work in ambiguity in the way that someone like Lynette Yiadom-Boakye creates these characters that exist within an environment that can be either real or imagined or someplace in between.

These moments of happenstance where people are at leisure or in dialogue—that's something I'm interested in when framing my work. I don't work in series and so working within these structures allows me to imbue these singular images with a relationship to one another, but also with a multiplicity where their biographical context—presenting it on its own—might not allow. I'm

# aperture



making photographs that move around, challenge other images, offset them, complement and broaden the span of the moment and what they can be of service to.

I think that my practice is maybe more akin to how I see painters work with perspective and how you can be placed in multiple places at once. When I first saw Jonathan Lyndon Chase's paintings, it really shot my mind. The way he depicts the figure is exactly what I want to communicate in my work. He's able to make the bodies and the space transcend their natural limits and speak to this collective way we experience and recall things. I think other mediums are often more successful in doing that than photography.

**Konadu:** Some of your images carefully consider color, texture, and composition the way a painter would—I'm taken by those elements. Examples of this are in works like *96 degrees in the shade* (2017) or *An underline through dried cement* (2016) or *Mommy, Jayden and I at Christmas* (2016). It comes to be a deflection of direct observation of sorts from the viewer—we are not seeing a person but instead a picture of them. If I describe this as formalism, it is not simplifying the image but rather form acting almost like a blockade.

**Brown:** The form is definitely integral to how you navigate the work in terms of defining the viewer's distance to the piece. There are some photographic works by other artists that are confrontational. They position the gaze in the way that while you are looking at this work, this person who made the work and the people in them are looking at you. Notions of agency and power dynamics are integrated into such works. There are photographs that work to fold you into the experience of that space or event. In my work there are a lot of things that are peppered through the space. There are a lot of points that allow you to imagine further about this work because all of the work is about intimacy, maintaining a certain privacy, and discretion; naturally the viewer is not allowed mentally and physically to have a certain proximity to the work.

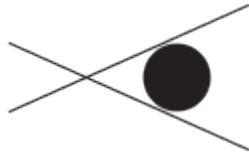
I think the form helps guide that. I think that process of your body relating to these works is a part of the work itself. When you think about the large awning structure I was talking about earlier, it dictates the distance you have to stand. I'm still working on the



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., *An underline through dried cement*, 2016.



**aperture**



language around this but the structure dictates that there's a certain way that you should behave when guiding these works. I don't think of that behavioral requirement as abusive or repressive but educational. Here is a way to relate to someone's life that does not require me to own or know everything, but requires me first and foremost to be respectful. When I'm making these works, I'm thinking about how I interact with others. It foregrounds behaviors within my own life.

**Konadu:** You talk about intimacy and private encounters as being central to your work. How is that sustained as you continue to move outward and become more extroverted with the scale of the work, the sculptural components, and potentially future public works?

**Brown:** It's amplified. Sometimes, when I think about these dimensional elements, it comes out of feeling like the photo is not enough to communicate what's on my mind. But the structures are often like periods or exclamation marks at the end of a sentence that would've already exclaimed or ended without those markers. The markers are helpful in contextualizing the work further. The intimacy is still there. Those are the moments I want to photograph. I'm really interested in the parts of ourselves that cannot be articulated or can't be made available to other people.

*Luther Konadu is a visual artist and writer based in Winnipeg, Canada.*

# CULTURED

## NON-CONFORMING NARRATIVES: FIVE PHOTOGRAPHERS UPENDING NOTIONS OF QUEERNESS

EM GALLAGHER | 09.27.2018

“You can embrace a term like ‘queer’ and not be defined by it,” Res says as I leave their studio. This idea is a throughline between the practices of five emerging photographers—Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., Lia Clay, Naima Green, Matthew Morrocco and Res—who represent the vanguard of the medium. Their recent work probes concerns shared by many young artists: How can the intersections of identity be expressed through an art practice? How should we navigate visually-driven social media platforms? How can artists communicate queerness differently in personal versus commercial and commissioned work? And what are the possibilities of expressing oneself as an individual while identifying with a larger community?

Attempting to fit these five young artists into a box would be impossible. Queerness refuses form in contemporary photography, and that very mutability injects images with a newfound energy.

### **Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.**

“Most of my photographs aren’t staged, but I do strive to make something that is theatrical,” Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. tells me at his kitchen table on a stagnant summer night. The dichotomy between



ELLIOTT JEROME BROWN JR. *LOW TACK*. 2018.

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natural and theatrical seems irreconcilable, but Brown proves otherwise. The photographer shoots candid moments, often of close friends, family and fellow artists. This could make for a straightforward narrative of personal intimacy—yet Brown finds a way to move beyond conventional portraits.

His collaborators are found with their backs turned, eyes scrunched in laughter and bodies contorted away from the lens. They shift our point of view, asking us to leave the literal behind. “There’s a reason why I insist the biographical information not be the most important reading of the image. I don’t want my relationship with the person I’m photographing to end the conversation.” Rather, Brown says, “I’m interested in the residue of presence or activity, which encourages a slower, more ambiguous reading, versus an image that explicitly shows that action.”

In repurposing biography, Brown’s work requires a reckoning with the broad words associated with identity politics. “At the beginning of college,” Brown remembers, “my artist statement literally said, ‘I am looking at the intersection of blackness and queer identity.’ I was being confronted with all these terms, and it took time to make them my own.” This process was helped along by the artist’s taking a series of self-portraits—an introspective process that solidified Brown’s interest in framing narratives, rather than playing a starring role.

In September, Brown braces for a new act: journeying to New Orleans, where he begins a nine-month residency program through the St. Roch Community Church in the 8th Ward.

Though this residency marks the first time Elliott Brown will live outside New York, he expresses a gravitational pull to the region. “I have a deep relationship with the South, though it feels internal rather than physical,” he says. Emanating an unmistakable warmth himself, Brown will have no trouble drawing from his new life and cast of collaborators.

# ARTFORUM



Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., *Devin in Red Socks*, 2016, ink-jet print, 24 x 36".

NEW YORK

## "Stranger Things"

OUTPOST ARTIST RESOURCES

1665 Norman St.

June 9–July 7, 2017

Sculptor Doreen Garner extends her inquiries into intimacy, hygiene, latent sexuality, and racialized violence in her first curatorial effort to date. From Chicana punk tattoo artist Tamara Santibañez to Hollywood special-effects animator Erik Ferguson, the artists in this group exhibition hit Garner's themes from many different angles.

Nakeya Brown's photo series "If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown," 2014, presents quietly domestic tableaux peppered with clues to a vibrant life: 1970s disco albums, salon hair dyers, curlers, and a flowerless African violet. In Ted Mineo's pictures *Mist*, *Not*, *Shipping*, and *Ride*, all 2017, common

objects are rediscovered as otherworldly specimens: Tinted by luscious studio lighting, objects such as rubber gloves and a mound of polymer clay float through bursting galactic droplets. Ferguson's *Day-Glo Untitled Video Compilation*, 2017, renders fleshy trunks and monstrous sexual appendages flailing through gleaming digital space. His body-horror animation corresponds with Jes Fan's futuristic sculpture—leftover props from a performance—*Disposed to Add*, 2017. Fan's tub is filled with wet, slug-like silicone tubes that seem as if they're the remains of some alien surgery.

In *Untitled: Bureau*, 2017, a sculpture by Garner herself, a wooden dresser bulges with frizzy black hair—her straightforward use of materials falls short of evoking the startling uncanniness her work is known for. Hair is also manipulated by Kenya (Robinson) with her suite of blond-haired brooms. These janitorial tools fitted with dangling synthetic locks, such as *Reclining Blue*, 2016, are a bitter statement on race and maintenance labor. But the daily negotiation of pain in black life shifts to tenderness with Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.'s photograph *Devin in Red Socks*, 2016. Here, a young man holds aloft a towel that conceals his torso as he poses in a bedroom. A tiny hole in his sock is a punctum—a wounded doorway for the heart to rush in.

— Vanessa Thill