


# BROADWAY

## HYPERALLERGIC

### Through Video and Collage, Abbey Williams Inverts the Paradigm of White Hegemony

In *Vignette*, Williams explores how Black affective space persists within and outside the constricted frame of the white gaze.

 Justin Kamp March 30, 2021



Abbey Williams, "Untitled (bitch session)" (2021), enamel, ash, graphite, jet on photographic paper, 21 1/2 x 29 x 2 inches (all images courtesy Sargent's Daughters)

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In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison describes how representations of whiteness and Blackness function in the American literary canon. “Images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable- all of the self-contradictory features of the self,” Morrison writes. “Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable.” This blank impenetrability is the manifestation of white hegemony, Morrison posits, while Blackness functions as its “reined-in, bound, suppressed and repressed” shadow. In her solo show *Vignette*, now on view at Sargent’s Daughters, Abbey Williams inverts this paradigm, reconfiguring whiteness not as a central monolith but as a narrowly-defined terrain over which Blackness can spill — unbounded, expansive, liquid. Across a series of works that incorporate video, multimedia collage, and works on paper, Williams explores how Black affective space persists within and outside the constricted frame of the white gaze.



Installation view of *Abbey Williams: Vignette*, Sargent’s Daughters, 2021

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The show's first video work, "Overture" (2020), is a showcase of both Williams's skill as a video artist and the larger conceptual concerns of *Vignette*. The opening credits of the 1964 Audrey Hepburn classic, *My Fair Lady*, with its dazzling close-ups of flowers in bloom, soon becomes a space of aural and visual redaction as Williams overlays the soundtrack with songs like Khia's "My Neck, My Back" and Princess Nokia's "Tomboy" and inserts black bars and song lyrics over the text of the movie's credits.

The juxtaposition is instructive — the movie's *Pygmalion* narrative, with its focus on proper speech and the narrowness of white luxury, is replaced by an expansive Blackness, manifest in both shifting black bars and the voices of women of color.

Williams continues her explorations of redaction and accretion in the show's central series of untitled works on paper. Over blown-up images of yuppie lifestyle ads from the 1980's, she spreads a mixture of enamel, graphite, and ash, with the resultant black amalgam pooling across and spilling outside of the edges of the prints. The unbounded pyroclastic flow of the material works in contrast to the geometric formality of the photo paper and the staged nature of its (predominantly femme) subjects, accumulating in reflective pools that sit atop images of staid dinner parties and stuffy suburban dens. The material itself brings to mind Frantz Fanon's conception of his own "dense and undeniable" Blackness, or the aesthetic qualities of "liquid blackness" as posited by the research organization of the same name — a viscous, formless thing, gliding, absorbing, and modulating.

While these central works of collage are *Vignette*'s connective tissue — bridging Williams's concerns with myopic whiteness, expansive Blackness, and feminine performance — it's the second video work, "Reprise" (2020), that may be the show's linchpin. Over the wheezing sighs of a bridge in high winds, Williams cuts in brief, unredacted flashes of the magazine images that form the basis of her collages before quickly covering them back up again. These black bars, however, are themselves opened up to reveal images of deep space — white luxury replaced with galactic endlessness. This visual turn represents another step forward in Williams's explorations of the affective potential of Black surfaces — not redaction, as in *Overture*, or accretion, as in the collages, but as infinite interior space.

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Installation view of *Abbey Williams: Vignette, Sargent's Daughters, 2021*

If *Reprise* is the culmination of the show's explorations of the metaphorical potential of Black space, the *Gem* series, along the gallery's back wall, illustrates the limits of metaphor. While *Vignette* is broadly concerned with representations of Blackness, the "Gem" series, with its tightly cropped images pulled from the pages of ethnographic travel books from the '60s, contains the only visible representations of Black bodies in the show. Yet these images are so small in their vast white frames as to be virtually indiscernible as people, their likenesses instead reduced to abstract facets, like gemstones on display. This, too, feels instructive: while Blackness may enter the vernacular and unfurl across infinite interior space, the "mute," implacable white gaze still only allows for the most tightly-defined representations of actual living Black people within its constrictive frame.