

JARET VADERA: SPECTRAL SIGNS AND FUGITIVE IMAGES

Working across various media, Jaret Vadera creates complex, cerebral artworks that generate and celebrate multivalence, strategically deploying paradox, entropy, and translation to decolonize ways of knowing and seeing initiated by Enlightenment rationalism. To critique prevailing epistemologies, Vadera's work often plays with representational modes that commonly serve as proof, document or evidence: photographs, maps, infographics, x-rays, and fMRIs. He challenges the objectivity and authority attributed to these forms by consciously introducing glitches and aberrations, contaminating them with traces of subjective irreverence.

In *Untitled III* (2009), Vadera restages an early twentieth-century colonial photograph of the English monarch and the Prime Minister of Nepal triumphantly standing over the body of a recently shot tiger, simultaneously standing in for all three characters. In the image, two ghostly figures, one dressed in a striking body length black sheath, equal parts *Matrix* and *Game of Thrones*, the other in a pristine white jumpsuit and a mask, as if to avoid contamination, stand in a misty field. On the ground in front of them lies a third figure, Vadera again, face obfuscated, in grey fatigues, their camouflage pattern wryly evoking the tiger's stripes. Despite the Manichean color scheme, Vadera's decision to play all three characters subtly confuses the hierarchical structure of the original image, scrambling colonial power relations through the uncanny replication of the performative self. And by extending that performative gesture to the tiger, Vadera expresses a trans-species empathy that pushes ethics beyond the limits of the human.

Critical of the seemingly endless cycles of capitalist production, a condition that the contemporary art world is particularly culpable of, Vadera has become increasingly ambivalent about making objects. Instead, he presents constellations, presenting new and extant work in shifting arrangements that suggest new relations and meanings depending on the juxtapositions within a particular constellation, and the broader exhibition context. Drawn to found objects, Vadera uses cheap dollar store materials to embellish and transform them, a nod to the make-do aesthetics of his early childhood spent in immigrant neighborhoods in Toronto.

Indexing history through its abraded but gilded surface, *X* (2014) references the use of the titular letter in algebra, where it serves as a designation for the unknown variable, the solution of the equation. As Vadera evocatively notes, in this particular knowledge system X marks the "location of the unlocated;" it is a spectral sign, "a presence marked by its paradoxical absence." As such, it catalyzes "the desire to know, to solve, to colonize." Vadera's X poignantly encapsulates our existential discomfort and enduring fascination with the unknown, an anxious compulsion that drives the quest for knowledge, often leading to injustice and destruction. Yet it is also important to note that here X also designates an entity that is variable, multiple, unfixed, suggesting a complicated relationship between knowledge and fixity. Does the unknown merely indicate that which lies beyond the limits of current knowledge or can it point to something more profoundly troubling, an ontological disquiet that results from our acceptance of multivalence as an inevitability.

X appears alongside the short video *On Kings and Elephants* (2015). As an accented robot narrator tells three different versions of an ancient parable, in which a group of blind men attempt to describe the figure of an elephant, the text repeats in yellow subtitles on an otherwise empty black screen. Each man provides a distinct answer, his experience of the elephant's body limited to the part his hands could access. Those who touch a leg think it is a pillar. Those who touch the trunk think it is a waterspout or pipe. The ear is mistaken for a fan or carpet. The belly a big jar. An illustration of man's inability to fully grasp the vastness of the divine, the parable reveals the limits of objective knowledge. Knowledge and meaning are both partial and positional. Whole or absolute truth is impossible to comprehend, as perception and cognition, visual and otherwise, are limited by our embodied subjectivities.

Sleepwalker (2016), the third component of the constellation, is a photographic self-portrait loosely inspired by science fiction films. Bathed in the soft but antiseptic bluish white light that seems to always illuminate future utopias, the artist's face is captured as it begins to emerge out of water, its outline drawing our gaze to his eyes, their unflinching stare looking out not at but through us. What meanings does this triangulation suggest? Pushing us to philosophically reflect on the unknown, the first two works introduce doubt and uncertainty into our perception and interpretation of the third, in terms of both medium and subject matter. We question both the veracity of the photograph, and the singularity of the self that is portrayed in it. Pictured at a threshold between discrete states of being, symbolized by the transition from liquid into air, this is a liminal self, opening up into an abundance of potential. Evoking images of birth or awakening, the self-portrait is transformed from an image of being into one of becoming.

In the related *Chronoma* (2016), Vadera plays a time traveler, a mysterious figure spanning past and future, gradually accruing elements of both into his being. Here the cool blue light is stronger, emanating like an aura from behind the artist's body, which is turned away from us. A huge bundle-like protrusion rests on his head, embellished with plastic tubes and a glittery

fringe. Is this a turban or his hair? Is it the elaborate, possibly ceremonial, headdress of a shaman or the hastily thrown together belongings of a refugee? Or is it a symbolic self-portrait of the artist as a spiritual and temporal wanderer, bearing the burden of his shifting subjectivity on and in his head. Together the position of light and body partially silhouette the figure, making it difficult to definitively identify details. The image, like the figure it represents, never rests. It remains fugitive.

Interested in parallels between the Internet's hive mind and the neuronal networks of our brains, Vadera uses the Web's algorithms to demonstrate how contemporary technologies continue to shape and colonize vision and knowledge. If the Internet is a type of collective consciousness, an archive of the present, then the search engine emerges as a key structure through which we understand, remember, and are remembered in our increasingly digital world. To create the black vinyl wall piece *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* (2015), Vadera fed the individual words of the titular phrase into an image search engine, selecting a representative image for each from the results. These images were then digitally abstracted and combined to create a suggestively ambiguous form that, like a Rorschach blot, allows for multiple interpretations. Finally, an invisible world map, indicating the geographic origin of each image file, is overlaid on top. The resulting shape is both corporal and mechanical, like a cyborg or some type of alien technology. Vadera's aphorism is an adaptation, or better yet a "mistranslation" of a lyric from a famous reggae track by Max Romeo and the Upsetters: *I'm gonna send him to outer space, to find another race*. While the original talks about banishing the devil from earth into space, Vadera's phrase parallels afrofuturist strategies, embracing interstellar travel as a way to transcend racial injustice on earth. Here, the unknown of space symbolizes limitless potential, holding the promise of self-discovery and transformation, where racial identity can open up beyond proscriptive and prejudicial binaries. This space of multivalence, of infinite and radical difference, is where Vadera is most at home.

~Murtaza Vali is a critic and curator based in Brooklyn and Sharjah.



Untitled III, c-print, 2009, 7 x 11 in.