



Nikita Gale, *DESCENT*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 8 minutes 21 seconds.

Nikita Gale

COMMONWEALTH AND COUNCIL

fuck transparency. Nikita Gale's exhibition "DESCENT" was paced by a rhythmic guitar distortion and a stoic voice-over emanating from its namesake video. The title's multiple reads—hereditary descent, angled descent, dissent—were part of Gale's efforts throughout the show to scramble legibility, both visually and conceptually.

A long corridor lit green led to the gallery; the color, complementary to the occasional red glow of Gale's video, left a blinding afterimage of the silhouetted shapes that obstructed the hallway's other doorways. Gale had divided the main space with a series of improvised fortifications: The metal studs of an unfinished wall cut perpendicularly across the room in *DESCENT SCREEN* (all works, 2018) while caution-tape-like strips of towels and shirts partially dipped in concrete hung from metal wires, obstructing a pathway. Her improvisational use of these materials spoke to the ad hoc forms of blockades built by protesters with whatever they can get their hands on (pragmatically, symbolically), but the materials themselves gestured toward amateur soundproofing techniques (e.g., hanging towels

to insulate a room). In the center of the relatively bare space, a bent-metal sculpture most directly referenced a barricade, and like many of the objects in the room—fragments of acoustic foam, a tire, and a mic stand, some of them partially transformed—it retained its cultural referents but seemed to function solely as “evidence” of its supposed use. As the artist noted, “These materials are shorthand for ideas.” Gale’s dividers staged a hostile environment, restricting the viewer from accessing some objects. Pushing up against the walls—co-opting them—the work encapsulated the space in its entirety.

every two years my father tries to have a conversation with me. he usually calls me on my cell phone [*sound drops*] but this year he messaged me on facebook. *DESCENT* was projected on the gallery wall behind the temporary divider of metal studs. The video and its viewer were energized by a contagious beat and familiar, remixed music samples, but were also anchored by a calm and composed narrator. *DESCENT* is personal, autobiographical; it begins with the artist remarking that her estranged father has managed to find her on Facebook, his task made slightly more complicated since she stopped using his last name. In the same breath, the artist confesses she has not been transparent with us, her audience: Nikita Gale are her first and middle names. As she is about to state her surname, the video cuts to a bright-red screen, and the room is overwhelmed by the screeching sound of distortion. The redaction is visualized by an atomized white line whose particles flow in an unsteady stream, responding to the feedback, until they suddenly transform into a solid-white sound wave again and the voice-over resumes.

you descend. you inherit. The word *descent* derives from French, as does the artist’s legal last name. But this name also represents the oppressive systems that designated her ancestors as being “of the little garden,” labeling them according to their functionality within the institution of slavery. Her video script-*cum*-manifesto includes the entirety of the governmental form for a legal name change and explains why she will not legitimize the system by following its procedures. She instead proposes to double her “social self” by providing one name for “the administrators of capital” and another for personal use, making herself less accessible, less traceable. In *Poetics of Relation* (first published in French in 1990), Édouard Glissant argues that every individual in society should have the latitude to choose not to be understood or decoded. Gale positions her doubling as an empowering *opacity*, to use a Glissantian term. She explains and enacts a form of resistance to contemporary technology’s aspirations toward transparency and to the systems that attempt to contain, control, and classify her.

you are experiencing a drop, an omission. When read in dialogue with the video, the nonfunctionality of the surrounding sculptures infuses them further with the poetry of being uncategorizable, of rejecting explanation; the objects remain skeptical of the capital that could be extracted from them, from their respective countercultures, or from the artist herself. The objects' multiple, sometimes contradictory roles—as protective and restrictive structures—cultivate their opacity and stress the faults in the concept that legibility benefits those who are read.

—Lauren Mackler

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