

# DARK: A SHOW TO WINTER

CURATED BY THE BLOOD RAINBOW FAMILY

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The semantic history of “darkness” is characterized by a braiding of literal and figurative meanings. In its most literal sense, darkness is simply the absence of light. Tracing the word back to its earliest form reveals a far less concrete meaning: to conceal, to hide. Darkness, then, is not merely the condition of night or the ostensible blindness it imposes, but a state of protracted separation, an immersion in the unknown. Over centuries, these significations have merged. Now, the notion of physical darkness is always limned with a metaphorical depth, tangled up with broader connotations, such as spiritual crisis, confusion, disorientation, ignorance, and savagery.

Even the words we use to describe the movement of darkness corroborate its cultural status as a pejorative figure, subjugated by its binary master, “light”: night *falls*, darkness *descends*. And yet darkness is not solely the conclusion of an inevitable downward slide. It is also an originary state. In the Judeo-Christian origin myth, darkness precedes all existence, as an entity that is as unfathomably formless and omnipresent as God himself. Thus the decree “Let there be light” upends our understanding of darkness, suggesting an inversion of the well-established binary: light is the absence of darkness.

This linguistic slipperiness enacts the word’s diffuse meanings, consolidating knotty contradictions in a midnight state of signification. Darkness is unknown; it is hidden.

## XII. Absence of Light, Opacity

In terms of perception, darkness implies an inability to see: definition recedes into black, detail disappears beneath the slipcover of evening. Yet darkness does not necessarily translate to blindness. Over time, the eye adjusts. As light wanes, the retina becomes more sensitive, scavenging what light exists to calibrate accordingly. In near-darkness, a new kind of drama – subtle and chromatic – begins to unfurl. It speaks in glints and glimmers and tonal shifts that graduate so faintly, they are perceptible only from a distance.

The oil canvases of Molly Vidor (Portland, Oregon) plumb the depths of color, blacking out entire canvases in a single hue. While the monochrome paintings of Ad Reinhardt or Yves Klein communicate the extremes of acute flatness and infinite depth simultaneously, Vidor’s aggressively worked surfaces produce whispered topographies. The play of light across the layered paint introduces a nuanced richness that pulls the eye around the canvas, tracing the accumulation of paint. Following these sluices of paint, as in *Odetta*, 2010, the viewer is not rewarded with revelation or understanding, but the pure black brunt of the impenetrable. Darkness begets darkness.

The black paintings of Arnold Kemp (Portland, Oregon) are magnetic and absorbing; they threaten to swallow up the light in the room. Yet flecked with glitter or beaded with clusters of silver spheres or doll eyes, they pos-

sess a persistent lightness. Kemp stipples his paintings with hopefulness, as dense patches of craft-store doodads stand at odds with the weight of blackness. In the small, untitled black canvas from 2010 included here, there are no ornaments to convey that sense of light. It is a pure black created through accretion. The result is lustrous and deep, as if blackness represented an inevitable convergence of all colors, or a reversion to a chromatic origin. Here, lightness has been diffused into aura; it seems to shine just beneath the surface of the paint.

### **I. Shroud, Concealment**

*The Curtain*, 2009, by Thomas Moecker (Leipzig, Germany) is an expansive piece of fabric on which a barren, brooding landscape has been spray-painted in acrylic: blood-red earth, ashen sky, and a clear-cut forest of spike-like stumps that stretch into the dim and misty horizon. Pinned at two corners, it sags in rippling arcs that suggest a sinister grin or the length of a slumped and motionless human body. The fabric's slack folds warp Moecker's painted wasteland, distorting the illusion of the picture plane as a window or portal. This redirects the viewer's attention from what is depicted on the curtain to what must lie beyond it, tantalizingly out of view. Certainly, there must be something beyond, something that transcends the primitive tableau of the curtain's face. If the scene's desolation is brutal and scorched, the emptiness behind it is absolute. Moecker's curtain is a shroud-as-icon: more than give face to an ineffable presence, it reifies the fact of a deeply felt absence. It is an altar at which one can worship the unrelenting mystery of darkness and the profound silence of cries that go unanswered.

### **II. The Occult**

If the eye does adjust to the absence of light, darkness nonetheless exerts its influence over the objects it obscures. As the eye struggles to compensate, the concrete characteristics of objects blur, fuzz, and mutate; the imagination must fill in the blanks of what can't be seen. Invariably, these darkened objects become

menacingly *other*. They may be mundane to the point of invisibility in daylight, but, once night falls, they are charged with a terrifying potential. In the dark, a thing may be itself or it may take the shape of an uncanny double – our relationship to even the most familiar objects is disrupted. We insist that the nature of things remains stable in the dark, while secretly suspecting that they relent to wickedness and evil, and that our worst fears lurk in them, chillingly unseen.

Sebastian Gogel (Leipzig, Germany) confirms such fears with *Figur*, 2007. In passing, his painted bronze sculpture appears human. A second look and the sculpture is something other: a demonic being with a deeply creased countenance and a rough, mottled skullcap. *Figur* does not cower or betray awareness of its grotesque visage; it revels in its power to repulse, assuredly extending an all-too-human hand that beckons one nearer with a seductively wagged index finger. Gogel's sculpture is the substantiation of the mind's phantasmagoric play, the instant before the rescuing light switch dispels our paranoia.

Frank Haines (Brooklyn, New York) mines the harrowing depths of the occult through performances, paintings, sculptures, and synthesizer soundtracks that celebrate its transformative mysteries. After all, religious ceremony – pagan or otherwise – is an enduringly potent metaphor for the nature of art and the metamorphosis of base materials into something sacred and mystical. Through this process, materials transcend their essence to become an embodiment of the object of worship itself. In an untitled sculpture from 2009, Haines presents a skeletal figure – an X-shaped formation – that is unevenly coated in white, bubbled paint. Here, the cross, the symbol of Christian redemption, is upturned as an X, a figure of negation and void. Haines's works on paper also convey a sense of joyous sacrilege. Through a dynamic interplay that conjures Francis Bacon's bleary compositions, a smeared skull hovers above a black-and-

white checkered plane, framed by interlocking star patterns. Shimmering splashes of color shroud the piece like psychedelic fog. What is depicted is unclear. Its spiritual, if unholy, intensity, however, is unmistakable. That place of shadow – where imperceptible forces crest into light – is where the dark arts derive their power.

### III. Abjection

The latest body of sculptures by Jo Nigoghossian (New York, New York) is populated with forms that are broken, disfigured, filthy, and degraded. Her base materials – concrete and wood – are imminently physical in their block-headed inertia. And her treatment of them is, in turn, fittingly abusive, as she scores, scars, burns, and generally pushes them around with palpable contempt. The sculptures' surfaces are caked, crusted over, cracked, waterlogged, and mildewed. They look like they have existed forever. An untitled sculpture from 2010 presents a brunette wig, dipped in paint and concrete. It is literally fortified by grime, its shoulder-length locks solidified in stiff, gritty tentacles. Strangely, the abjection we encounter in these defiled objects is not entirely an effect of the sculptures themselves. Instead, it comes from the shadowy presence of their unseen creator, the black sun that charts their miserable orbit. Wretched and servile, Nigoghossian's sculptures exist as the residue of catharsis, the evidence of disgust and repulsion articulated as generative violence.

### IV. Destruction

Matthew Green (Portland, Oregon) adopts the gestures of subcultural sects to, more often than not, expose their shortsightedness or twist their meanings for his own purposes. Informed by his interest in punk culture, Green's work embodies an aesthetic of antagonism, which thrives on opposition and, therefore, an ability to respond and revise, if not corrode. In Green's hands, the vitriolic upheaval of punk can be winnowed down to a single chrome stud, embedded in a wall, as in an untitled sculpture from 2009. No longer a signifier of

revolt or danger, the stud – like the shock of punk in 2010 – is tidy, unthreatening, and easily passed over. In *Sometimes, I Miss My Mom*, 2009, a plastic Pepsi bottle with a sticker of the hardcore band Suicidal Tendencies plastered to it, punk is portrayed as empty and junky, another commodity with a label on it. Like waves of feedback from a guitar amplifier, Green creates by feeding the “signal” of punk rock – its ethos and symbols – back into itself, subjecting it to the same values of caustic revision the movement champions.

*In Nilbog*, 2010, Green disfigures a work of folk art – a cedar, chainsaw-carved lawn troll – by burning it. The scorched black surface of the troll communicates viscerally, while its spooky hints of ritual mayhem work more slowly, conjuring witches burned at the stake or churches burned to the ground by Norwegian black metal bands. Ultimately, the tenor of the work's “construction” resonates loudest, as Green proves the darkness of “destruction” is a tenable path toward creation and authorship.

### V. Madness

In the late sixteenth century, madness was commonly treated by placing the infirm in a darkened room or house. In a bizarre instance of the literal combating the figurative, an individual's temperament of “darkness” was treated with an immersion in physical darkness. In short, the fever was the cure.

For Alicia McDaid (Portland, Oregon), work and life are so thoroughly entwined, it is impossible at times to tell one from the other. In many of her performances, she cannibalizes popular culture, from Britney Spears to *The Golden Girls* to self-help psychobabble, to leverage its emotion-laden references as a stand-in for personal experience. We all perform these boundary transgressions, self-identifying through songs and television shows as if such conspicuous representations could be cobbled together into a unified sense of self or an approximation of so many unruly, competing emotions. In her photography, McDaid

documents freewheeling “performances,” in which she plunges herself into circumstances that are categorically outside of her life, only to inhabit them with a convincing, if theatrical, commitment. In a culture that aggressively maneuvers – through the most insidious and covert means – to destabilize personal identity, McDaid ups the ante by actively dismantling any semblance of personal coherence. And, like the most delicious aspect of reality television, we are left to wonder what is staged and what is real.

An untitled black-and-white photograph, shot in 2010 in collaboration with her now-husband Paul Wig, presents such a collision of reality and representation. We are positioned at the foot of a luxurious bed. A billowing canopy frames the shot. At the bed’s head, a bearded man, relaxed and shirtless, peruses a magazine, his bent left arm propping his head up. To his right, McDaid, nude, is caught in midair, joyously bouncing on the bed. Her hair flails, so that, in the image, her head has been replaced by an abstracted splash of black, like a void blooming on the surface of the photograph. The image is a manic expression of boundless love, taken while vacationing in Costa Rica with Wig. Compositionally, it is among her finest photographs. Of course, the viewer is still faced with the problem of making sense of it. Are we to participate in her apparent ecstasy? Or are we to read it with a dose of cynicism and assume that this, like so much of her work, shows her slipping into the skin of another character? We cannot tell if it is day or night.

## VI. Deception

Darkness dims intelligibility, obstructs our ability to make sense of what we see. If the world seems gripped by sinister potential when it is submerged in darkness, light restores our confidence that things are as they seem. It dredges our dreadful speculation into unthreatening daylight.

The videos of Alex Hubbard (Brooklyn, New York) are designed to limit, if not outright

hinder, their viewers’ ability to make sense of them. They eschew narrative for an emphasis on materials that scrambles our understanding of how video operates. Usually shot from an overhead position, the camera seldom roves, training its gaze on a fixed picture plane where Hubbard manipulates objects with abusive flair. Items are rearranged, paint and tar are spattered, mirrors are pummeled with a mallet, Mylar balloons blister from blowtorch kisses. All the while, Hubbard’s arms protrude, almost comically, emphasizing the real-time reveal of these events. The effect is perplexing: Hubbard crams the earmarks of nearly every method of art-making into these teasingly brief videos, including painting, sculpture, collage, performance, and video, usually couched in smirking art historical reference. However, these media are never used for their well-worn and proven effects, but to erode what divisions exist between them, to subject their self-evident attributes to a kind of formal darkening.

In *The Paranoid Phase of Nautical Twilight*, 1–3, 2009, Hubbard frustrates the scopophilic desires that moving images necessarily arouse. As a blackened frame, scored by dissonant white noise, gives way to tentative white lines and other effects, we cannot discern if the lines are drawn, if the scene is another of Hubbard’s depthless tableaux, if the soundtrack is linked to unfolding action, and so on. We are in the dark. As sections of this black plane are dislodged and tumble out of place, we see the artist hoisting a chainsaw, in eerie silhouette against bright pink light and billowing smoke. Hubbard is riffing on a tired convention of horror cinema, in which no barrier can prevent a crazed attacker from murdering his victim. Without the context of imminent danger, the chainsaw’s carving becomes hypnotically formal, a disorienting spectacle that allows viewers to comfortably study the screen, unaware they have been sutured into the vantage point of the trapped victim. By the time Hubbard, the would-be murderer, emerges from literal and figurative obscurity, it is too late. We have been manipulated to the point of

vulnerability by our desire to study the picture with detached scrutiny. Rather than lunge toward the camera, as horror films have conditioned us to expect, the artist merely walks out of the frame, exposing our voyeuristic fixation, our captive desire to go on looking, even in the face of imminent risk.

### **VII. Cessation (The Moon)**

The shelter of shadow and darkness also offers reprieve, a cessation from the obligatory comings-and-goings of the daylight hours. Night promises the redemption of solitude and silence: the profoundly private state of self-awareness that is being awake when everyone else is sleeping.

*Lake*, 2009, by Sven Stuckenschmidt (Berlin, Germany) articulates the peaceable exile imposed by darkness. His materials are utilitarian and starkly minimal: a photographer's lamp and a floor arrangement of black acrylic strips, which approximate a pixilated version of a lake's rippling surface. As the lamp's beam shines on the pattern below, it creates

an evocative image of a full moon reflected on water. The sculpture is ascetic to the point of invisibility: the presence of its few constituent elements is diminished by the transfixing play of light on the floor. The light is a basic visual element; its source is primeval, even innate; and it ignites the imagination, prods the montage of fantasy. Because darkness is also the space of unrealized potential, of formlessness awaiting its shape to be revealed by the dawn. And so as one peers into the radiant blackness of *Lake*, one also hears the stumbling and lunging of water, unrolling its interminable restlessness. The lapping segues to the wooden groan of pilings, or a rickety dock, bobbing in the drink. The sound of wind through branches, of evergreen needles shuffling in intermittent gusts that peal and shiver and whistle along the water's edge. The moon's bone-white reflection undulates and shimmers on the surface of the water. Still, it does not move. The moon is hypnotic in its calm command over the dark, and its easy, erasing defeat, as it dissolves in the downy smudges of morning light. ■