

Artist’s Choice

Less Is Morbid—Arthur Jafa

Originally from Tupelo, Mississippi, and trained as an architect and cinematographer, artist Arthur Jafa (b. 1960) is known for collages, montages, and assemblages that combine found images to imbue them with the emotional power of association. For this exhibition, Jafa has selected nearly one hundred works from MoMA’s collection and presented them alongside two objects that live outside its collecting traditions.

These additional items—a photograph of MoMA’s 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* and an abstract quilt by Gee’s Bend artist Lutisha Pettway—are design and conceptual references for the overall show. By placing disparate things in deliberate, sometimes jarring proximity, Jafa emphasizes what he describes as the objects’ “besidedness,” and creates unlikely relationships between artworks and between artists. Many of the works share an allover approach to composition in which the picture seems to exceed its physical frame. Jafa extends this strategy to his installation, where an entire constellation or galaxy appears to emerge from atomic units.

In many art museums, artworks are presented as evidence of individual genius, absent the contexts and environments that produced them. Here, Jafa attempts to proliferate these works’ social relations in a densely packed and rhythmically paced arrangement. He has named the exhibition *Less Is Morbid*, a pun on the expression “less is more,” attributed to modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. This equation of simplicity with clarity and beauty with reduction characterizes the values Western museums have long prioritized, meanwhile disavowing the importance of Black, working-class, rural, and feminine makers and communities. In reworking the phrase, Jafa embraces the excess and chaos of togetherness, suggesting an alternative to removal as a means of control: “The answer to disorder in the universe is not genocide,” he asserts. “The answer is in how we coexist.”

Organized by Arthur Jafa, with Thomas Lax, Curator; Abigail Gordon, Studio Museum/MoMA Fellow; Kennedy Hollins Jones, former Black Arts Council 12-Month Intern; Cam McEwen, Studio Museum/MoMA Fellow; Luiza Repsold França, Curatorial Assistant; and Lilia Rocio Taboada, former Curatorial Associate, Department of Media and Performance.

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