

# THE VILLAGE VOICE

SEPTEMBER 17, 2021

## WRITER HILTON ALS DOES SOME HEAVY LIFTING AS A CURATOR

by Daniel Felsenthal



From Ana Mendieta's "Untitled: Silueta Series" (1978)

Curators occupy a tough position, reputation-wise. Their task of creating an artistic experience using other people's work can make them seem like the DJs of the art world. Yet even the most prominent curators are denied equivalent credit for being artists themselves. Similar to editors of literary anthologies, curators are responsible for finding contributors, soliciting work in what usually amounts to a headache of communication and logistics. Yet instead of having their names printed in big letters on book covers, curators' contributions are often buried. Maybe the issue is that they defy the ever-sellable archetype of the lonely visionary toiling away in a room. Instead, they're social visionaries hanging other peoples' art in rooms.

Hilton Als is the rare bird who gets a lot of credit for his curating. The reason might be that he's built his rep not in the gallery and museum scene, but as a writer, and thus as an auteur in the most traditional sense. A longtime critic for *The New Yorker* (and before that a staffer at this newspaper), Als became known for the personal insights and narratorial ambiguity of his magazine articles, his boundary-pushing essay collection *White Girls* (2013), and his masterful memoir *The Women* (1996). In another sense, Als' late turn toward curating, like much of his career, feels defiant toward solo-genius mythmaking: his world is a gregarious one in which all art forms speak to one another, and being around others is a prerequisite to having something to say.

At David Zwirner Gallery, where he's organized three shows during the past few years, both Als' cultural cred and his increasingly intimate takes on grouping work can make him seem like an artist in the gallery's stable. His 2017 exhibition "Alice Neel, Uptown" was as much about the titular painter as it was about Harlem in the mid-to-late twentieth century — Als himself grew up in Brooklyn during the same time period. His surprising follow-up, "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait Of James Baldwin" (2019), used artwork to illuminate the biography of a writer who, reflecting its curator, was black, gay, and in the public eye. These clear subjects, Als stated in a 2019 interview, allow him freedom: "...the minute I give myself any kind of frame for anything," he went on, "I want to disrupt it....I like having resistance."

Spoken like a true critic. Yet for his new exhibition, “Get Lifted!”, a group show at the East Village’s often-divine Karma Gallery, Als loosens the frame in favor of broad thematic strokes. The show is nominally about the spirit, ecstasy, bodies, and how art can help people survive difficult times — in other words, everything and nothing at once. Impressively, Als’ nebulous focus allows him to make the leap from being a curator-critic to something far rarer and more powerful: a curator-poet.

At his disposal, Als has the most luxe, and newest, of Karma’s three exhibition spaces, a beautiful, sterile former glazier’s workshop on 2nd Street just east of the Bowery. You expect such roomy confines to host large sculptures, yet akin to its predecessor in the gallery—a stunning survey of early drawings by Lee Lozano—“Get Lifted!” consists almost exclusively of wall-hung works, which range from miniscule to midsize. It encompasses more than thirty artists, including Neel, Senga Nengudi, Paul Thek, James Van Der Zee, and Diane Arbus, and spans paintings, photographs, videos, drawings, and ephemera. The pieces are ordered along a sort of line-of-best-fit, their juxtapositions evoking the poetic, fragmented novels Als has fawned over in essay form: Renata Adler’s *Speedboat* and Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights*. In order to find our way through the show, he asks us to cling to brief moments of association, hardly ever offering solid ground. Stacy Lynn Waddell’s gold-leaf-tondos anticipate Jesse Murry’s blurry, yellow watercolor horizon; a couple of frank nudes by Soma-ya Critchlow lead us into the smirking shenanigans of Arbus’ *Boy stabbed with a fake knife*, N.Y.C. 1961; the photoshopped fireworks of Kelley Walker’s altered print *Maui 1988* shine across the room at the similarly colorful explosions of a Peter Bradley acrylic. A couple of artists are very well represented — the celebrated queer photographer Peter Hujar and the Bay Area landscape painter Brett Goodroad. There are also a number of works from a few artists’ in Karma’s stable: Louise Fishman, Reggie Burrows Hodges, and the underknown downtown drag queen Tabboo!

Als’ voluminous selection, which includes abstraction, portraiture, and everything in between, means “Get Lifted!” has its weaker moments. But as with Philadelphia’s famed Barnes Foundation, the dense hanging of the art suggests we’re not necessarily encouraged to look at all the pieces individually. Barnes mixed in door handles and furniture with his impressionist masterworks not because he wanted to suggest that every work was the equal of all others — he owned some minor Renoirs, after all — but since he wanted to make a provocative statement about how one could view design and fine art on the same plane. Als presents us with a similar leveling, though his goals are not art-historical, but rather personal and emotional. White figures appear alongside Black ones; Black abstractionists next to white ones; queers with straights; artists Als has been championing for decades near those he discovered during our most recent pandemic. The works form a statement of identity, but one detached from ideology. They comprise an abstract portrait of Hilton Als, capturing a wide swatch of his aesthetic taste, while with a signature mix of coyness and courage, alluding to who he might be inside.

Of course, Als is in a privileged position, and one can wonder whether a less famous curator with equal vision and verve would ever get a crack at such an idiosyncratic exhibition featuring blue-chip artists. (The answer: No.) Yet Als justifies his project by including five poetic wall texts, one to introduce the show and four to separate it, loosely, into chapters. These texts eschew specifics, as well as any sort of signposting. Like the work itself, the language-centric writing is associative, and to the extent that it tells a story, Als seems to describe his own late career turn from letters to pictures:

For many artists, moving beyond the parameters of their medium is not only a way of testing form, but of describing “action,” or energy and the often vivacious spiritual component in art. Indeed, one could consider the spirit — how to represent it, and why — among modernism’s great subjects, and find, in its depiction, an abstract, or semi-abstract, portrait of the artist, free of the built narrative around the body, one that describes, instead, the artist’s essential purpose, which is to make art.

Beautiful, huh? Analytically, Als' reference to modernism harkens back to the early 20th century when poetry, and not the often empty, jargon-heavy theorizing of today, was considered visual art's literary pal. Every theorist Als mentions in his wall text has published poetry: Amiri Baraka, W.H. Auden, Peter Schjeldahl, and Toni Morrison; all, except perhaps Morrison, considered themselves to be poets. Als is not trying to educate us, or to instill us with a political perspective. Instead, he's asking us to respond to art the same way that it was made — with imagination.

The crown jewel of "Get Lifted!" is a small room behind the main gallery space. Inside are two vitrines full of photographs, ephemera, and text, each of which focuses on a dead artist: the poet and playwright Ntozake Shange and the composer and swami Alice Coltrane. Projected on the far wall — the largest work in the show by a long shot — is a Super-8 film by another late artist, Ana Mendieta, her torso's outline aflame. Facing it is the exhibition's smallest work, a Paul Pfeiffer video of Michael Jackson dancing, his form reflected over the center of the 6-square-inch LCD screen. The room makes for a disarming statement about the body and how people's spirits can transcend their physical limitations through art — and ultimately in death. But while we may read the link between these pieces literally, we can also understand them for their aesthetics, how they rub against each other like well-paired words, and for the enigma of their curation. As though his show is a beautiful sentence, Als asks that when our brains cannot manage the necessary leaps in logic, we rely on our guts. Parsing the sentence again and again, we realize each utterance is perfectly placed, that nothing could express this better than itself.