

DECODERS - RECORDERS

This exhibition brings together—for the first time—two artists from different parts of the world who introduce forms of composition, notation, drawing and gesture as ciphers of suppressed social histories and clues for our present predicament.

Samson Young, a classical composer by training, makes works on paper, videos, performances, and complex installations that explore the geopolitical underpinnings of sound and linguistics. Born and based in Hong Kong, Young travels widely to conduct research, taking a particular interest in borders and binaries. He attends closely to the remaining dichotomies between “east” and “west” in places like his home, where colonial structures continue to define large parts of everyday life, setting the very basis of sounds, communication, musical training, and production.

Included in the exhibition are selections from several key series. *Muted Situation #5 (Muted Chorus)* is part of a series of documents of choral and compositional performances, directed by Young, which involve intentionally muting certain layers of sound in order to recalibrate the way we perceive vocal arrangements. For Young, this deliberate suppression of the previously dominant voices “is a way to uncover the unheard and the marginalised, or to make apparent certain assumptions about hearing and sounding.” The performances are striking, thought provoking, but also disarmingly awkward and silly—a tendency that runs through many of the artist’s projects, such as the other video in the exhibition, *Lullaby (World Music)*. Here, Young employs an abstract rendering of the Cantonese version of “Bridge Over Troubled Water” to send up global charity efforts, and at the same time question the very nature of borders and translation.

Alongside these works, *Decoders – Recorders* includes selections from a set of new, large-scale drawings, shown here for the first time, each titled *Ancillary Motion*. These works depart from the artist’s well-known notational sound drawings—which are made in response to field soundscapes around the world—and instead form coded scores. While these works operate formally as evocative abstract drawings, to a trained musician each reads as an experimental score dedicated to a specific instrument. The exhibition also includes collages from the series *To Fanon*, where, in a kind of inverse ontology of *Ancillary Motion*, Young has obfuscated his own previous scores with layers of print materials that refer to history, nature, theory and music, and including notational direct terms, rendering them un-playable but layered with new meaning. They live on instead as a strange visual key to other aspects of the artists process.

Steffani Jemison, similarly multi-faceted, makes performances, videos, drawings, and sound recordings that explore forms of communicating outside of tacitly agreed upon or dominant languages. Over the course of the last ten years, she has created a body of work that reveals these alternative gestures, an evolving strategy where abstraction becomes a form of political resistance. Born and based in the United States, her work constitutes an in-depth investigation of physical expressions, stories, and codes of black vernacular history and contemporary engagement in America.

For the exhibition, the first opportunity to experience the full range of Jemison's work in the Netherlands, De Appel has commissioned a new video, *In succession*, realized through a process of collaboration with performers recruited by the artist, and inspired by news stories from the early 20th century of everyday people coming together in acrobatic formations to do miraculous things. One news item of particular relevance involves three black men, who in 1920, formed a human pyramid to save a white woman from a burning building. Alongside this new video commission, *Decoders – Recorders* includes an earlier video by Jemison, *Escaped Lunatic*, which questions the perception of young black men in American public space. Like Young's choral ensembles, this video is imbued with the tragicomic – its serious subject mixes with a playful sense of physicality and timing.

Specially conceived for Looiersgracht 60, a selection of new and existing drawings on clear film, all from the evolving series *Same Time*, continue Jemison's interest in characters and markings from slave narratives, constructed languages, outsider artists, alternative alphabets, and utopian fiction. These works propose opacity as political strategy, and intentional obscurity as a way of re-claiming subjectivity and power. While spare and simple on the surface, each work corresponds to complex personal and social histories in which whole new forms of language were invented as a means of survival.

In situating these practices side by side, *Decoders – Recorders* demonstrates unique ways in which each artist embraces acts of coding, hiding, and abstraction to render historical research and express the otherwise unexpressable in contemporary social life.

– Rachael Rakes