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Diamond the Kid

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It would be an oversimplification to describe Diamond Stingily as ‹honest›: what else can a contemporary American artist who is young and an individual be? Stingily’s meditation on the function of her chosen everyday (often found) objects gave way to a show primarily about memory (demographic and individual). It is witty and sobering, at times uncanny, but never lacking in candor. In the palatial Kunstverein, the observant artist constructs a temporal and local critique of class in America with the gaze of a woman who was once a child.


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Stingily operates in a world both material and mythological. *Wall Sits* at the Kunstverein München (September 21 – November 17, 2019) seeks our attention as a pivotal show. The occasion marks both the artist's freshman institutional solo exhibition in Europe, and the first presentation of newly appointed director, Maurin Dietrich—it is a bold debut, integrally rich, intimate and rousing. «The found object's resolute literalness crashes into the implication—which is *felt* through the object's existence as sculpture—that things are not as they seem. The point is, I suppose, that things are never as they seem,» wrote Mitch Speed in *Mousse* last summer. His essay «Passive Voice: Notes on the Found Object, Now» ponders Michael E. Smith's limp, hanging parrot, *Untitled* (2017), and the curious sculpture of Nina Cassel—Stingily's work too. Recalling *Elephant Memory*, her 2016 exhibition at Ramiken Crucible in New York City, he says: «Each of our perspectives engages in a relationship of consonance and dissonance, agreement and difference, with another.» He recognises the artists as operatives in the wake of Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgy: their work is «[distant] from its naturalized perceptions of a lived material world.»

It is this point—things not being as they seem—that Stingily wove so diligently into every element of the exhibition. The ambiguous verb-subject agreement of the two words chosen to title the show, «Wall» and «Sits,» inspires intrigue. It is the plural of ‹wall sit,› an endurance-training exercise used to punish Stingily, born in Chicago in 1990, and her siblings during their childhood. In order to execute a wall sit, one must ‹sit,› back against the wall, feet flat on the ground, knees bent at a ninety-degree angle. Though incredibly painful, there is a sporting, competitive element involved in the action. The very phrase affords our first insight into the mind of Diamond. It is a product of both public and private memory—Stingily's own—and introduces the themes that dominate the three rooms housing her work: childhood, competition, and the inevitable disappointment that follows an attempt to achieve the unachievable, at no fault of the individual.



Installation view of Wall Sits, 2019 at Kunstverein Munich; courtesy artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; photography: Margaritas Platis

Five neutral-toned wooden doors line the wall to the right of the staircase one ascends to enter the exhibition space. Each is unique and scuffed, as any well-used door would be. Adorned with clunky hinges and locks, they are individual and solemn, animated only by worn-looking baseball bats—equally individual—that coyly guard the foot of each door. Stingily's assemblage of domestic materials allows her to restore power to otherwise helpless objects. Though titled *Entryways*, the 2019 work comprises doors that lead to nowhere. Each stands upright, obediently and anthropomorphically, a few feet from the wall behind it. They are fixed in place by rather cruel looking metal poles, screwed to the weary woodwork with even more bulky metalware. They—restrained in a most American way—are objects to be controlled. "I hate talking about my family," laughed Diamond when I asked about her grandmother, Estelle. I sought further information as to Stingily's mention of Estelle's own bat and door when in conversation with Alex Gartenfeld, artistic director at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. The conflation of the intense private and public has permeated much of Stingily's oeuvre. She switches seamlessly between her roles as voyeur and public critic, remaining always a victim of nostalgia.

Diamond Stingily is fascinated by demise. Her 2014 show (her first show, which «no one came to, but one person») *Forever in Our Hearts* at EGG, Chicago comprised a memorial to herself. In the glass shopfront, Stingily arranged decorative tablecloths among plastic flowers, a bowl of sweets, an image of herself and her grandmother's bible, which was opened and raised, facing outwards unto the street, as if asking to be read from. «You were speaking about death in a way that was also about living,» noted Rindon Johnson, with whom Stingily was in conversation on the occasion of her spring 2018 show at the ICA Miami, *Life in My Pocket* (her first solo museum exhibition). Stingily sidesteps morbidity, rethinking instead the inevitable, sincerely. She draws on her experience of attending funerals as a Black American, where the end of a life calls for a celebration of the departed. Just as *Forever in Our Hearts* ruminated death with words on life, *Wall Sits* demonstrates lack and want through the employ of abundance.

The application of her chosen objects to the gallery space assesses affluence through a display of plenitude. In order to critique matters of access, or rather a lack thereof, Stingily repeatedly places us in positions where we are taunted with, yet simultaneously and categorically denied, opportunity. The marriage of the opposing is a point of central conflict in her work. One cannot walk through a door that leads to nowhere; that is quite clear, and a door that leads to nowhere needn't be defended either. Stingily's readymades exist not for the sake of wit; the composite objects are allegorical of a frustration that is demographically specific. How else could this be understood, if not conveyed by means both universal and personal?

Stingily often returns to the idea of entrance-as-exit. Her five doors are unopenable, yet the poised, tensile position of the bats provokes us: it is as if we're waiting for an intruder. But how to intrude on a space that doesn't exist? As one moves into the largest atrium in the Kunstverein München, Stingily continues her demonstration of dichotomy. The room contains *In the middle but in the corner of 176th Place* (2019), an installation dedicated to personal failure in the face of public expectation. More than seven hundred trophies sit on industrial shelving, archivally. Moving between and around the units is comfortable despite the pressure insisted by the statuettes. They're the type to award to a high schooler, and are small and somewhat cheap-looking, invoking weary nostalgia.

Here, the windows are plastered with newspaper; the papery, translucent impasto of the yellowing material seals us from the outside, and the trophies glow dully under light usually allowed to pour into the deep room. The covering is not unlike that which would follow an ‹everything-must-go› sale, and so the room and its binary contents are rendered markedly separate from the surrounding pastoral gardens. I ponder the tedium, of want money and

property. Under the low light, the trophies appear ever more guilty of chicanery.



Installation view of Wall Sits, 2019 at Kunstverein Munich; courtesy artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; photography: Margaritas Platis

Palm-sized dancers, soccer players, baseball players, gymnasts and athletes stand poised and flex in their moment of glory, proudly arranged, outnumbering us. The figurines demonstrate the instance of victory in the form of a gaudy object to award to someone who will never be quite that good. They are designed to be shown off. It is a study of public triumph, yet private failure. It is Diamond's criticism—drawing both on her experience as the sibling of athletes and her adolescence during the era of overpraise—of the very human and very American obsession with victory. Why thrust the spoils of an unplayable game unto us, asks Diamond. Her installation deliberates fiscal discrepancy, a grossly underdiscussed nuance of the intersectional discourse the child she once was didn't have the means to define.

The work also brings to mind the exhausted idea of the ‹American Dream›. Each of her statuettes has a plaque reading one of, perhaps, ten phrases: innocent statements that could have been spoken by a person of any age, though the social standing of this person is unmistakable. The phrases lucidly further Diamond's critique of discrimination, the chronically American affliction. They consider access in the face of expectation, and animate the idealized figurines. «I DID IT FOR THE GLORY» reads one engraving. Though the figure writhes triumphantly, he excuses himself. A charging, golden football player reminds the public: «IT CAN BE VIOLENT IF IT TAKES YOU OUT OF THE ILLUSION YOU'RE SELF-SUFFICIENT,» his golden toes barely making contact with the plastic plinth atop which he strides, to glory. «I DID THE BEST I COULD WITH WHAT I HAD,» pleads the twirling gymnast. «WE DIDN'T HAVE THIS SPORT WHERE I WAS AT,» states the footballer, and the swimmer, and Stingily herself. We're asked: how to win a race with shoes tied? «I knew my suburb was different from other people's suburbs. Like, how come our suburbs ain't got a mall? Why we ain't got a skate park? Why don't we have a lacrosse team?» Stingily asked Gartenfeld, rhetorically, with the irritation of a willing child.

Diamond Stingily does not code-switch. Her drawl is unmistakable, even when embossed her trophies. Her phrases are clearly those of someone speaking African American Vernacular English. *In the middle but in the corner of 176th Place* is a sober comment on the correlation between cash and race. She is often tongue-in-cheek, very funny in fact, both in practice and conversation. «Regardless of what I say, you're going to take what you want from it.» she laughed when I questioned whether she was worried about the biased and, at times, discriminatory gaze of a very white public distorting her artistic intention. It must be noted that many of those coming to view the show would likely have no personal experience to play against those delineated in the artworks.



Installation view of Wall Sits, 2019 at Kunstverein Munich; courtesy artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; photography: Margaritas Platis

Stingily's sculptural works, formed of found and reused materials, are pregnant with the experience of the individual and the collective. She demonstrates the grace of adaptation. The third (and brightest) room in the exhibition space houses *Double Dutch Ropes* (2019), the latest iteration of a motif Stingily has employed many times. It has a title as explanatory as explanatory can be, though the objects themselves lend less narrative clarity than the doors and statues. The too-short Double Dutch ropes are formed of cheap and durable knotted telephone cord. «Black people funny as hell,» she noted as we lay on the ground in this room, under striped sunlight—I agreed. The thin shadows were formed by wrought iron grates fixed to the windows. They were fixed to the interior of the gallery, the implication being that we are outdoors, finally.

Stingily offers her ropes as the tools with which to ‹make› fun. «I made friends through being on the playground … Double Dutch is mainly, like, a black girl thing, I think it is. I didn't know white girls that knew how to Double Dutch, I still don't know any that grew up Double Dutching. I think it shows a class system in a way, I don't know if rich white girls would use telephone cords to jump rope, I don't know if they would,» noted Stingily as she demonstrated how she constructs the ropes in a video for ICA Miami. It is a specific game, as are the social circumstances that surround the need to utilize such industrial material to

engage in the pastime. The frayed, multicolored ends of the wires appear hostile and industrial, yet under the white sunlight, following a tiring meander past the trophy-stacked shelves, the ropes bestow playfulness. They’re simply hooked onto the walls, and there is more than enough floorspace to start jumping, in the shadow of the grates.



Installation view of Wall Sits, 2019 at Kunstverein Munich; courtesy artist; Queer Thoughts, New York; photography: Margaritas Platis

Through an objective rearrangement, multiplication and knotting of her chosen objects, Stingily contorts and regurgitates the ‹American Dream,› deconstructing it in incredibly plain, and again, honest terms. *Wall Sits* ponders access. Who is allowed to do what. Where. And with whom. Stingily succeeds in her attempt to challenge the idea of monolithic a Black experience. She does so without sacrificing her integrity as an artist and individual, pandering neither to performative feminine or racial imagery. It is a body of work recollective of her youth, which she is able to hold up as a mirror to the social condition of American upbringing. The collection and re-use of her chosen objects—doors and baseball bats, trophies and shelves, telephone cord, newspaper, railings—is intelligently considered. The readymades straddle both autobiography and public criticism in an animation of childhood memory. Rather than ascribing aesthetic value to her objects found, Diamond Stingily asks: how can I use this?

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