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He Said, They Said

James Bantone at Coalmine

Otto Bonnen

For his solo show, *He Said, They Said* at Coalmine, James Bantone uses the essential aesthetic features of the barbershop to recreate a framework of exposure and community-generating. His transformation of the space into one dedicated to self-expression and queerness relies on the subversion of tropes such as ambiguity, exclusion, as well as empowerment. Dealing with different modes of self-concealment and self-expression, the exhibition enforces a form of self-determination while simultaneously creating allusions to the limits of social constructions.



Joe Gardner, in the body of a cat: «*Don't pay Paul any mind! People like him just bring other people down so they can make themselves feel better*.»

22, in the body of Joe Gardner: «*Oh, I get it! He's just criticizing me to cover up the pain of his own failed dreams*.»

This scene from the animated movie *Soul* (2020) introduces a New York City barbershop as a space of Black community. Using certain stereotypical clues like Hip Hop and Jazz record covers, posters of basketball players photos of Afro hairstyles on the walls, the protagonists' styles (Timberlands and diamond studs or Jordans with nanna pants to differ the generation difference between rap lovers), the background music, and the use of African American Vernacular English, the barbershop is pictured as a Black-coded space, as well as a place for looks, judgement and discussions surrounding identity and self-perception. Kemp Powers, co-director of *Soul*: «[The main character] has to pass through authentically Black spaces and there's no more authentically Black space than a barbershop.» [1] Especially for the ungendered soul, 22, who tumbles into the body of the middle-aged man—Joe Gardner—and is thus immersed in this place where people go to get styled and have a talk, the barbershop is figured as a platform for gossip and self-reflection.



Exhibition View, James Bantone – *He Said, They Said*, Coalmine, 2021. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.

At James Bantones' exhibition at Coalmine, Winterthur (20.11.20 – 27.03.21), panels with preview images for different haircuts—portraits of the artist's friends—are exhibited as two series. In one, the models' heads are seen from behind, in the shade of Bantone himself, who placed himself between the models and the source of light. The other presents the models from a frontal or side view, hiding the faces in the shadow of the photographer or intending a fake-face, a mask that reappears in other works of the exhibition. Green and white stripes on the back wall remind of the pattern on the spinning poles demarcating barbershop entrances, and two hairdressing capes hang on another wall, displaying black and red images of two men kissing. Instead of several barber chairs, there is only one, placed in the center of the

room like an instrument of torture or a villain’s throne. It faces a long horizontal mirror, in the reflection of which we see two larger-than-life figures—wallpaper prints—that frame the passage which leads to the back of the space. It is the same character, albeit in different poses. A recurring image of the artist’s alter ego.



James Bantone, *A Demon Hairstyle Guide 1-15*, 2020, prints on paper, wooden frames, 24x36 cm. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.



James Bantone, *Cuffin Season 01 & 02*, 2020, print on polyester, 145 x 110 cm. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist



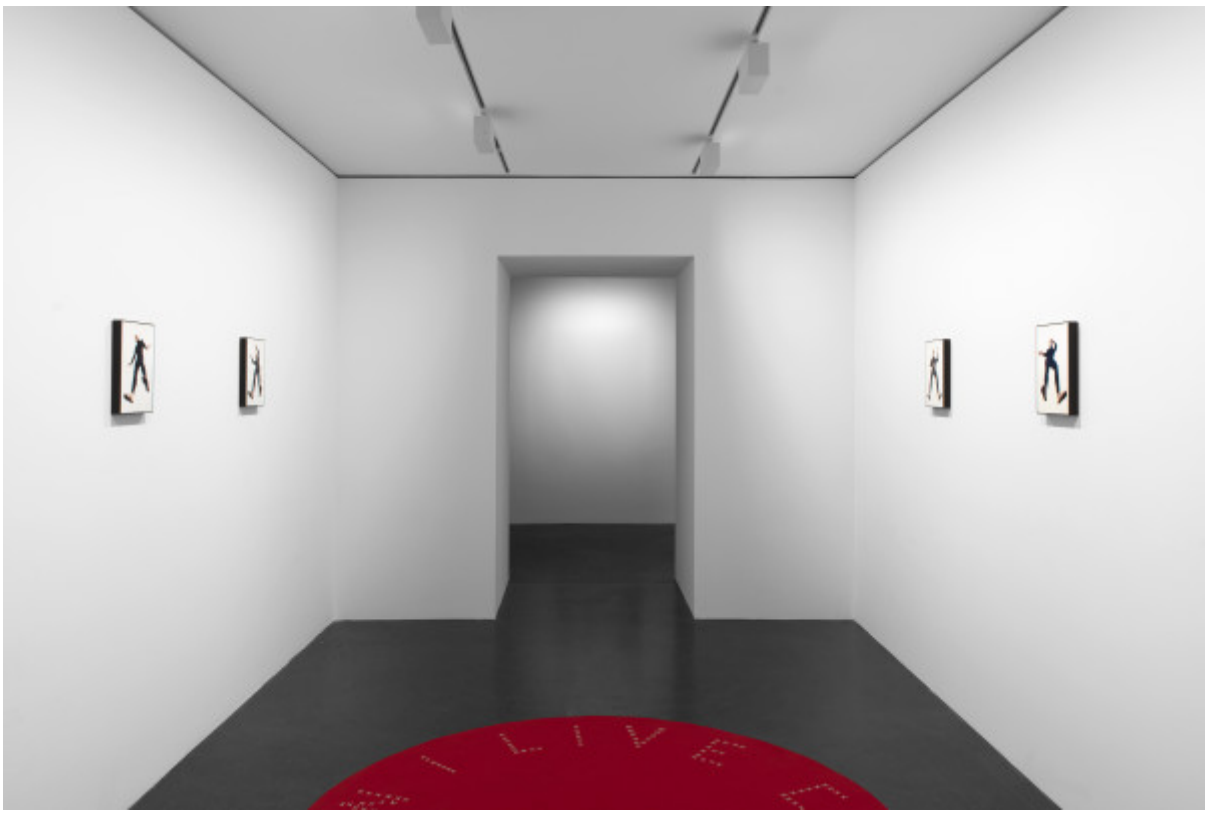
Exhibition View, James Bantone – *He Said, They Said*, Coalmine, 2021. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.



Exhibition Invitation. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.

The trickster is historically described as a carnivalesque irritation. He's an ambiguous outsider who often brings cultural enrichment in the form of jest or working as an ironical mirror of society. Usually dressed in an alienated costume of a trickster (as one can see on the exhibition flyer), Bantone's character in this show is missing his quirky characteristics: over-the-knee boots, opera gloves and the red-coloured suit all recalled the look of the androgynous satanic Santa-like nemesis of the *Powerpuff Girls*, Him. The character's eyes are closed, but his mouth is open. He snarls (almost smiles) with diabolic fangs. His frozen grimace holds its ambivalent expression in a weird countenance of aversion and resistance that seems to have resulted from an identitarian attribution, or a feeling of otherness. Affiliation does not exempt the self from insecurities or condemnations.

The attitude expressed by the fool's facial gesture is reflected in the postures of the character in the main room, as well as in the image series presented in the old vault at the back of the exhibition space. Adding to the exposure of the extremities, the loose green seams of the black patchworked suit—which remind more of a motion-tracking suit than the costume of a fool—reveal the character's complexion , subverting the assumption that the shared negative and positive experiences of a common identity can be marked by the colour of one's skin alone. In contrast to Bantone's previous presentations, like *Haunted Haus*, (2020-1) at Swiss Institute, NY, the maleficent, clowny persona is not just a physical mannequin anymore, it is a real body with bare feet and hands with long nails—captured in 2D and thus shifted into a representation field that is all too known from digital formats, expanding authenticity to the hyperreal, or even absurd, but above all, self-determined forms of expression.

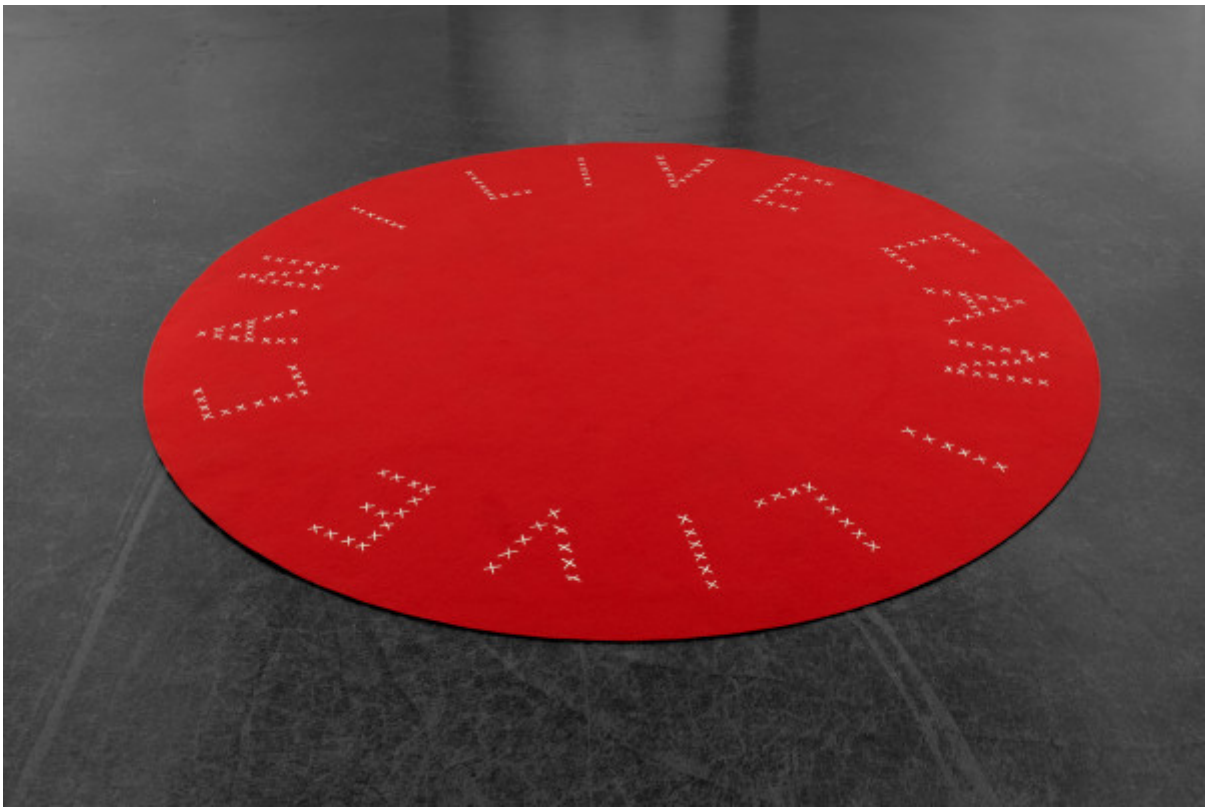


Exhibition View, James Bantone – *He Said, They Said*, Coalmine, 2021. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.



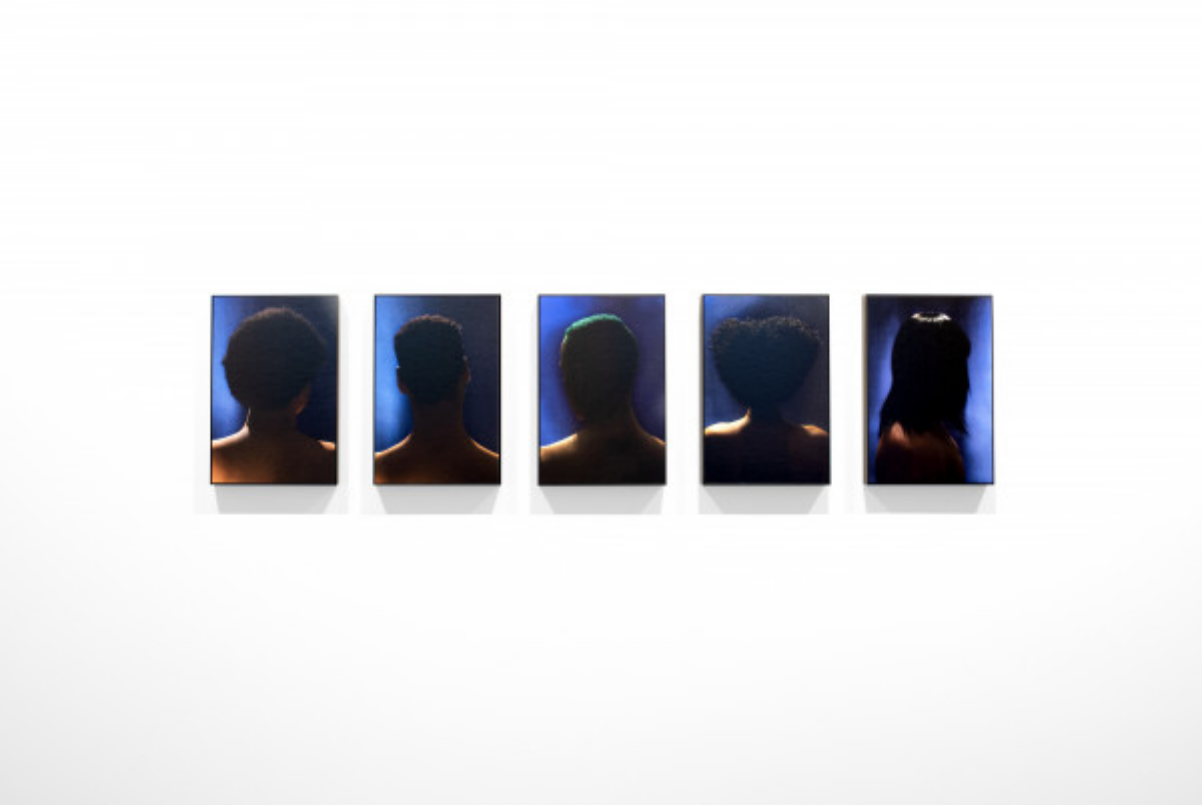
James Bantone, *Demon Tingz: Reloaded 1-6*, 2020, prints on paper, wooden frames, 30x20 cm. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.

On the two walls of the corridor-like vault, six photographs face each other. The masked trickster assumes different poses. The soles of his feet are placed in the foreground; an upward-looking perspective tapers his body towards its top. We see the figure from a position lower than the ground which evokes a heroic monumentality, giving sublime superiority to the character who bends downwards slightly, confronting the viewer with exalted gestures of sulkiness and defiant riposte. These gestures are poses made in reaction to personal confrontations, borrowed from reality TV shows, Instagram and TikTok. The latter, in particular, is a platform fundamentally conceived to stage the self and to be seen. All these sources unite that they become the basis for decontextualized dissemination and memes, while being in control of the viewers' gaze. It is therefore unsurprising that the stitched letters on the red carpet on the vault floor, shaped like a big «record» symbol, repeat the phrase «Can I live» from that one meme of Joseline Hernandez (*Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta*) responding to constant critique about her persona, hyperbolically intending that just being herself is a potential offense to someone else.



James Bantone, Can I Live, 2020, red carpet, ø 2m, polyester thread. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.

Parts of the internet, like queer memes pages or Black TikTok, have become virtual safe spaces. Zones that offer some kind of safety or liberation, directly comparable to «real» safer spaces, like barbershops. The possibilities of community-led distribution mechanisms or digital editing (the most common example being memes) provide users with the visual freedom to express themselves and, as Aria Dean writes, to create collectivity and relatability—as essential for Blackness as collective being. [2] [/b-n-l/he-said-they-said/pdf#edn2] Consequently, the harlequin's bodysuit, the background colors of the photos or the striped wall in James Bantone's solo show can be read as interchangeable surfaces known from blue or green screen sets.



James Bantone, *Blue Magic (Anti-Breakage Formula)* 1-5, 2020, prints on paper, wooden frames, 24x36 cm. ourtesy of Coalmine and the artist.



James Bantone, Demon Tingz: Reloaded (detail), 2020. Courtesy of Coalmine and the artist.

Still, community spaces do not necessarily free individuals from all insecurities. This is expressed through the character of the trickster who does not radiate only fun or only reactionary defiance. Last but not least, his eyes are completely closed, so that he has been

actively deprived of an indicator of direct address. Even being bent down has something docile about it, while he grimaces wickedly and shows clear gestures of denial. The costume alone provides free expression and a hiding place in equal measure, being just far enough removed from one's appearance to be judged for the actions in the costume, and just as body-related to be sufficiently self-determined, while emphasizing otherness. Especially for queer people, sitting in a barbershop, a gossip space that is charged with certain ideas of masculinity and heteronormativity, is a delicate play of disguise and codes. In the intimate setting between barber and customer, body language becomes crucial. Heteronormative codes will always have an exclusive effect, distinguished people through their coded characteristics and differences; welcoming and promoting exaggerated gestures such as quoting extravagant characters from pop culture is a reaction to these structures and often becomes a defense mechanism with self-entitled superiority. It's no secret nor a coincidence that queer communities embrace cartoon characters like Ursula (from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*), Jessie and James (from *Pokémon*) and Him (from *The Powerpuff Girls*). They are fabulous, eccentric, dramatical, often isolated, non-heteronormative and depictured as defiant. Not only for cartoons, breaking cultural codes down to simplified shapes, difference is a significant feature. Referring to evil cartoon characters or mean celebrities can help to express coded differences as defensive representation forms that are established through pop culture and thus to transform insecurities resulting from exclusion into self-constitution.

22, the lost soul, in the body of Joe Gardner: *«I wonder why sitting in this chair makes you wanna tell you things, Dez?*»

Dez, the owner of a barber shop: *«It's the magic of the chair.»*

[1] Rachel Hampton, Soul Co-Director Kemp Powers on the Pressures of Creating Pixar's First Black Lead, Slate, December 21, 2020, https://slate.com/culture/2020/12/pixar-soul-kemp-powers-interview-black-lead-barber-shop.html [https://slate.com/culture/2020/12/pixar-soul-kemp-powers-interview-black-lead-barber-shop.html].

[2] Aria Dean, Poor Meme, Rich Meme, Real Life Magazine, July 25, 2016, https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/ [https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/].

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