



DISCONNECTING, RECONNECTING... DISCONNECTED:

Works by Lawrence Graham-Brown

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The Wash, 2010. Latex and enamel paint and collaged paper on canvas, with detergent bottles, loofah, fabric, toilet paper and paper towel tubes, dish scrubber, soap box, hand towel, body wash puff, Comet container, bird decoy, and twine.

THE WASH

“I remember my dad saying “you have three strikes against you in this world. Every black man has two: that you’re black and you’re a man. But you’re black, and you’re a male and you’re gay. You’re going to have a hard fucking time. If you’re going to do this, you’re going to have to be stronger than you ever imagined.”

(From the opening sequence of *Paris is Burning*.¹)

Lawrence Graham-Brown’s most recent works to date are a series of found-object sculptures that incorporate discarded televisions and TV antennae. They include a surprising mixture of other materials, such as dreadlocks, an African sculpture of a wooden penis, and the artist’s own blood. These visceral sculptures are permanently ‘tuned-in’ to a channel viewers can’t ignore.

In *Disconnecting, Reconnecting, Disconnected Diptych*, 2011, two televisions sit side-by-side, their screens covered with layer over layer of red paint into which cut paper images are embedded. Here, Graham-Brown crafts an emancipatory narrative by combining figures from stylized pornographic cartoons with Lions of Judah and colonial-period representations of slaves. These images are beamed in from nearby television antennae adorned in red, black and green. Channeling another energy,



Detail of *Battyman Time Now (Abeng)*, 2010. Latex and enamel paint and collaged paper on canvas.

clusters of dreadlocks replace the television's cut-off electrical plugs.

These sculptures do dual duty as fetishes; besides the wooden dildo, one of them incorporates a more contemporary rainbow flag. Graham-Brown calls attention to social inequities by crafting sculptures that leave little room for narrative interpretation. No changing the channels here. Graham-Brown is tuning us in to his program,

which is all the more convincing for its engaging materiality.

If his sculptures suggest ritual usages, these are literally enacted in the artist's live performances. In *Ras-Pan-Afro-Homo Sapien*, first performed at Real Art Ways in 2010, Graham-Brown creates a powerful ceremony in which his repeated incantation of phrases – “Battyman time now, battyman century!” and “Don’t ask, don’t tell?...You don’t ask! I tell!” – offers an opportunity for the artist and audience to share in a metaphoric, cathartic release from an unpleasant and oppressive history. While he leads the audience through this ritual, a helper circles him, shaking a ceremonial cowrie shell rattle, splashing him with rum, and blowing clouds of powdered talc into the air around him. Functioning like religious rites, these performances clarify that what is at stake are beliefs: the belief in what-is-right and the artist’s desires and demands for

cultural equality. Graham-Brown’s art lights the way to the possibility for a culture unencumbered by racism and homophobia.

As an openly gay Jamaican-American man, Graham-Brown uses his work to challenge the racist and homophobic attitudes held in a broad variety of cultures. His work’s ritual and cathartic power draws public attention to the existence of popularly-held prejudices, and acts as a palliative gesture to dispel the trauma and shame to which people of color and queer people are routinely subjected.

Graham-Brown was born and raised in Jamaica, a country with an infamous lack of tolerance for homosexuality. The situation in Jamaica is dire, with murders and frequent physical assaults of individuals *presumed* to be gay, lesbian or queer, often as acts of mob violence. This attitude of prejudice

Battyman Time Now (Abeng), 2010

against “battyman,” a pejorative local term for male homosexuals, is spurred on by popular cultural icons who frequently reference violence against gays and lesbians in their song lyrics. In one song, *Elephant Man* (Neil O’Bryant) has declared “When you hear a lesbian getting raped / It’s not our fault ... Two women in bed / That’s two Sodomites who should be dead.” This prejudice is evident in popular politics as well; in Jamaica, homosexual intercourse between consenting men is not only illegal, but is punishable by 10 years of hard labor. This disposition remains evident in Jamaican-American culture as well. And while LGBTQ persons may be relatively safer here in the United States than they are in Jamaica, *relative* safety is not an acceptable status.

Interestingly enough, this attitude of intolerance is evidently not indigenous to Jamaican culture; it seems to have

arrived in the decades following the colonization of the country, first by Spain, and later by England.

Seen against this backdrop, Graham-Brown’s work is notable for its bravery and forthrightness, and for offering of a provocative model of resistance. The painting *Battyman Time Now (Abeng)*, 2010, for instance, is a simplified

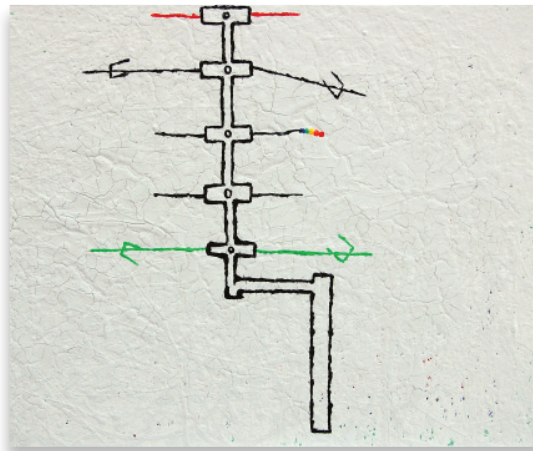
depiction of a protest placard striped with red, black and green whose words echo the painting’s title. Abeng is the Akan (Ghanian) word for conch shell, and during colonial times, these shells were used as horns to call slaves working in sugarcane fields. The anti-colonial Maroons, who established free communities in Jamaica’s mountainous interior also blew them to pass coded





Made Nigger Joe Shit in His Eyes and Mouth, 2007. Latex and enamel paint, ink, and paper collage on canvas.

messages to each other. The painting's bright yellow enamel background and the small bit of collaged paper in the painting's lower left corner remind us that the work was "Made in Jamaica". This painting does not mince words or intentions. Its graphic simplicity makes the artist's demands clear, and Graham-Brown's color choices – red, black and green, commonly associated with the Jamaican Rastafarian movement – are intentionally culturally-specific.

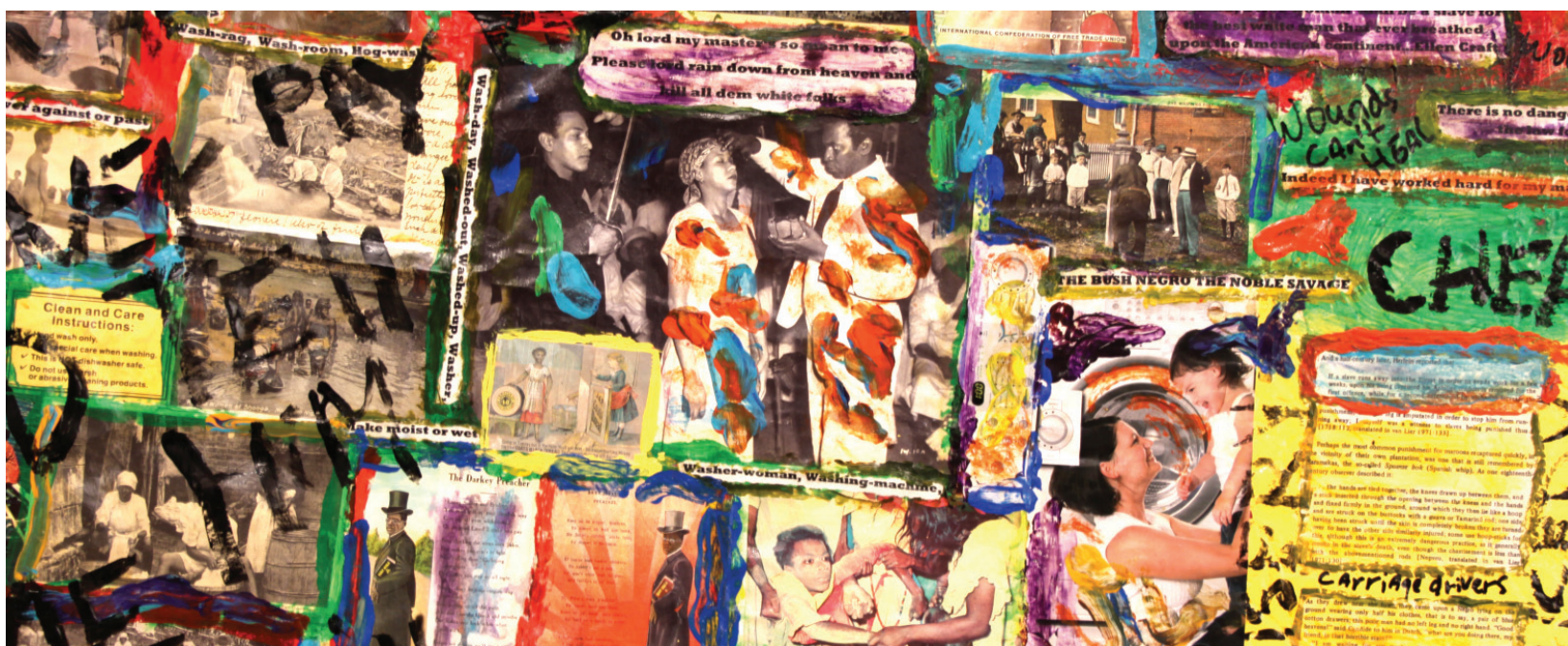


Disconnecting, Reconnecting, Disconnected Study, 2011. Latex and enamel paint on canvas.

A body of paintings on textured backgrounds again proves Graham-Brown's investment in material vision. The artist begins by drizzling lines of white paint over a white background, allowing them to dry before adding subsequent layers, thus creating a fine, net-like surface that captures and diffuses linear passages of black enamel paint. In *Four Points Restraint on the Heterosexist Whipping Post, 2010*, the artist depicts two individuals: one figure,

wielding a whip, presides over the second, who is shackled to a table. The demand "leave battyman alone" is painted alongside them. In *Conflicts With the Holy Ghost, 2010* one figure prepares to sodomize a second figure chained to a post bearing a cross as its standard. Viewers are left to parse the consensuality of the relations between these figures, but the artist yet again implies a situation of colonial domination and slavery.

In Graham-Brown's painting *The Wash, 2010*, clippings from detergent advertisements and images of washing machines taken from popular magazines are collaged alongside printed texts and images from history books and gay pornography. This image pastiche is affixed to the canvas over painterly horizontal bands of red, yellow and green while hand-painted texts of shaky black letters fill in the surrounding



The Wash (detail)

space. A selection of ready-made cleaning items – a used pot scrubber, discarded detergent bottles, and a loofah among them – hang with twine from the painting’s bottom edge. The textual quotations in the painting include pointed references to cultural inequities: “Pretending to be someone else in order to survive” and “Working for them white folks man only leave us with high blood pressure.” Graham-Brown brings relief

to the pain these problems cause, if only temporarily, through a combination of public complaint and ritual magic. ‘Wash,’ as Graham-Brown explains it, is the verbal barrage a frustrated individual unleashes on another in order to get an issue off their chest. Lawrence Graham-Brown’s work, then, functions as a wash in the deepest sense.

Dean Daderko
Brooklyn, 2011

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¹ Paris is Burning. Dir. Jennie Livingston. Perf. Octavia St. Laurent. 1987. DVD, Miramax Films, 1991.

Lawrence Graham-Brown (born in Jamaica, lives and works in NJ) is a multi-media artist who works in sculpture, painting and performance, among other media. His work has been presented by the Queens Museum of Art, El Museo del Barrio and the Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance in New York; Real Artways in Hartford, CT; the 2008 Shanghai Biennial in China; and at the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston, where he has participated in numerous exhibitions.

Dean Daderko is a curator based in New York City. His most recent exhibitions include *Pièce de Résistance* at Larissa Goldston Gallery, *50 Artists Photograph The Future* at Higher Pictures, and *Liberty & The Land: Benny Andrews and William Villalongo* at Cuchifritos, all in New York. He has curated exhibitions for Visual AIDS, Artists' Space and Art in General in New York, and the Center for Contemporary Art in Vilnius, Lithuania. His writing has appeared in publications by Rutgers University, The Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio. He is currently leading the graduate seminar class Queer Strategies at Yale University.

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Opening Reception:
Friday, March 4th, 6–9pm
with a performance at 7:30pm

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591 Broad Street

Newark, NJ 07102-4403

p. 973 622-1600 f. 973 622-6526

www.aljira.org

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Cover: *Ras-Pan-Afro-Homo Sapien*, 2009. Latex and enamel paint, jewelry, pins, banknotes, silk flowers, dried plant, feathers, stamps, and collar on shirt, on a mannequin form.