

RASHAAD NEWSOME

HERALD

OCTOBER 20 - DECEMBER 3, 2011

Marlborough Chelsea

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Dedicated to
FLORENCE AND BLANCH NEWSOME

HERALDRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY AMANI OLU

In August 2002, after years of unsuccessfully pursuing a record deal, Kanye West, through the initial support of Damon Dash and finally Jay-Z, becomes an official member of Roc-A-Fella Records. West shares his triumph with thousands of people at a live concert where he proudly declares: “... and I’m the newest member of the Roc-A-Fella team,” while Dash drapes a diamond-encrusted platinum chain around his neck. Dangling from his chain is the highly coveted Roc-A-Fella emblem. Jay-Z refers to this celebration as “Chaining Day,” a moment when a new artist receives a chain for signing with the label. Later, in 2003, West sets a precedent by featuring his “Chaining Day” footage in the classic music video for his hit single, “Through the Wire.”

Those familiar with medieval history may agree that West’s chaining ceremony has a striking resemblance to the time when Henry I of England knighted his son-in-law, Geoffrey V, Count of Anjou, in 1127, by hanging around his neck a blue shield emblazoned with gold lions.¹ In Jay-Z’s adaptation, West is the newly knighted and the Roc-A-Fella emblem bestowed upon him is his coat of arms. Instead of a shield, he receives an iced-out medallion from hip-hop’s elder statesman.

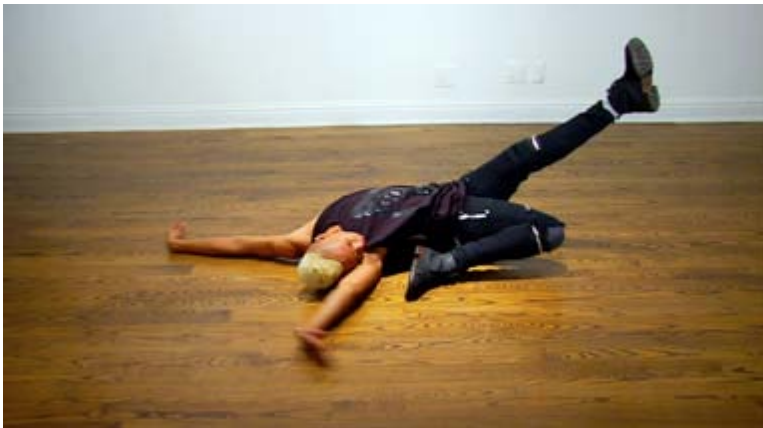
Though they are 900-years apart, these anecdotes connect via their relationship to heraldry, a subject Rashaad Newsome explores extensively in his two latest projects, *Herald* and *Swag*. Heraldry is the practice of designing, displaying, describing, and recording coats of arms and heraldic badges.² It originally served the need to distinguish participants in combat when iron and steel helmets hid their faces.³ Today, most people view heraldry as a part of their national and personal heritages, and as a manifestation of civic and national pride. No longer is it an expression of aristocracy; instead, it is a form of visual identification,⁴ similar to a logo.

In *Herald* and *Swag*, Newsome uses contemporary materials and imagery from various print publications to create collaged coats of arms, which he finishes in antique frames. *Swag*, part video and part original mix tape, provides the soundtrack. Newsome’s aim with *Herald* and *Swag* is to repurpose heraldic language. By replacing traditional heraldic rules/imagery (tinctures, charges, ordinaries, etc.) with status symbols (jewelry, diamonds, cars, etc.), the artist moves heraldry beyond its default position as a system of identification to a vehicle for translating hip-hop and pop culture. Moreover, his use of abstraction, appropriation, collage, color theory, and other artistic tropes aid in establishing his heraldic emblems as portraits of desire. The resulting collages realize heraldry’s lexical potential while adding visual currency to its coats of arms.

Many factors contribute to the evolution of language. Oftentimes, it is as simple as playing with words. One might argue that no group plays with words better than the hip-hop community does. For example, in 1980, legendary rap group Funky Four Plus One released “That’s the Joint,” an early influential rap classic. The origins of “joint” are beyond the scope of

this essay (though it likely originates from the pleasure gained from smoking marijuana, also known as a “joint.”), yet it is clear that “joint,” at least in this context, signifies alternative noun usage. In any case, the record was a major hit, cementing “joint’s” place in hip-hop’s lexicon. In Philadelphia, like many hotbeds for hip-hop music, “joint” was the word to use if one identified oneself as hip. “Yo, this is my joint” was a popular way to express admiration. It is unclear when and how it happened, but in mid-90s Philadelphia, “joint” evolved into “jawn,” a word that has its origins in and is famous to the area. According to celebrated linguist Ben Zimmer, “jawn” is “an all-purpose word to refer to different types of things and people.”²⁵

The development of Newsome’s collages share a similar trajectory. In his earlier pieces, he sought to translate heraldry’s vocabulary into hip-hop and pop culture terms by creating coats of arms that mirrored those of 16th, 17th and 18th century Europe. These works replaced the formal rules of heraldry in favor of luxury items of the variety associated with hip-hop’s aesthetic and appetite for all things bling (envision gold Rolexes in places of lions). In his presentation of these works, Newsome opted for a modest approach by mounting each collage to a white background, and then finishing them in clean, white frames. This aesthetic decision, which serves as the collages’ foundation, is Newsome’s “joint” phrase or, rather, the beginning of his lexical investigations into heraldry. As his commitment to studying heraldry intensified, he expanded the emblems to posit a conflated lexicon. Out goes the isolated, white-on-white presentation, in come the collaged, all-over backgrounds mixed with antique, luxury frames, which he alters with faux jewelry and refinishes in automotive, candy-colored paint. These aesthetic choices deviate from his bling-inspired coats of arms, choosing instead to create abstracted, over-the-top, visually excessive portraits of desire. These portraits include luxurious antiques, platinum jewelry, fast cars, and beautiful women, making them almost impossible to resist, as they speak to fantasy, human impulse and America’s capitalistic sensibility. Newsome’s familiarity with heraldry changed his perspective on its potential to communicate, thus prompting him to tinker with its lexical properties. Producing hip-hop aestheticized coats of arms is no longer his primary motivation. In contrast, he seeks to create meta status symbols of wealth and power that have roots in heraldry, yet play with the design formulas inherent to coats of arms. This is his “jawn” phase, the moment when he began to evolve heraldic language and its communicative possibilities.



Left: Still from UNTITLED, 2008; Right: installation view of UNTITLED (NEW WAY), 2009, from 2010 Whitney Biennial, New York, New York.

Constructing abstract backgrounds to accompany his coats of arms illustrates his first step at toying with heraldic language. The backgrounds begin as small, detailed images appropriated from various print publications and auction catalogs. Through image repetition, he produces collaged backgrounds that take inspiration from medieval patterns. These backgrounds consume the entirety of the piece, creating an all-over, three-dimensional effect. This methodology makes it difficult to process the backgrounds visually. Newsome intensifies this approach once he affixes the actual collage to the background. Because the collage is already loaded with an inordinate amount of visual information, these portraits of desire are almost impossible to grasp collectively. This is where Newsome initiates conflict. Like the knights of medieval Europe who fought often, the backgrounds “fight” with the coats of arms and vice versa for attention. Furthermore, the appropriated photographs that are the collage compete amongst themselves as well. Finally, each individual portrait of desire competes with the others in the series. The constant threat of war in medieval Europe necessitated heraldry to distinguish friend or foe on the battlefield. In hip-hop, rap battles are a requirement to determine the best MC. Knights battle for territory, MCs battle for rap supremacy. It is a difference between swords and words; both piercing physical and emotional armor.

Upon witnessing Newsome’s frames, it is clear that they play a significant role in understanding *Herald* and *Swag*. The artist uses rare, Sansovino-style frames that reference the Italian Renaissance to establish his portraits of desire as art historical documents. Also akin to this era, the visual properties of the collage influence its frame and its subsequent augmentation; for Newsome, dialogue between the collage and its respective frame is paramount. Once he selects a frame, he then sends it to an automotive body shop to give it a paint and faux bling makeover. In recent works, he adorns the frames with imitation leather and fur, thus adding yet another layer of visual information. These renderings find Newsome extending the same energy found in his collages to the frames, which is another example of the artist evolving language. Sansovino-style frames are luxurious antiques on their own, but Newsome augments them with bling aesthetics to initiate their own conversation, one that adds to the competitive dialogue discussed earlier. Newsome’s frames re-frame the convergence of heraldic history and aesthetics, hip-hop, pop culture, conflict, and the covetous nature of Veblen goods.



Left: Still from THE CONDUCTOR, 2005-2011, video; Right: Performance of SHADE COMPOSITIONS, 2009, The Kitchen, New York, New York.



Performance still from *FIVE*, 2011, ICA Boston, Massachusetts

Just as much as his portraits of desire compete for attention and re-position history, they also embody elements of performance and pageantry. Newsome is no stranger to these themes. His performance *Five*, 2010 and videos *Untitled (New Way)*, 2009, and *Untitled*, 2008, canonize various characteristics of New York City’s ball/Voguing scene, a community that places a premium on lavish performances and exaggerated behavior. Newsome, being a veteran member and champion of this community, brings this sensibility to *Herald* and *Swag*. This sensibility is primarily gestural, manifesting itself through his use of luxury items and the application of color, in both the collage itself and the antique frames. Luxury items perform in that they represent wealth and status. By augmenting antique frames to include faux bling, leather, fur, and candy-color automotive paint (both luxurious in their representation), Newsome is essentially “dressing up” his frames in an elaborate display of excess, loosely defined as pageantry. The artist understands the collective symbolism of these objects and the tropes he incorporates into his collages. Furthermore, he is aware of how said objects and ideas fold back into society as covetous. He plays with these symbols and notions by creating over-the-top portraits of desire that, in their own way, sing, shake, sparkle, and shine.

Heraldry is not simply a venue for Newsome to investigate the convergence of history and contemporary culture. He has personal motivations as well. Having spent years learning heraldic history and its rules, the artist is now an honorary Pursuivant, which is a junior officer of arms. His ultimate ambition is to become a King of Arms, the highest heraldic officer. In a video titled *Herald*, Newsome portrays a fictitious knighting ceremony where he becomes a Herald of Arms. Filmed in New York City’s St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral in slow motion black-and-white, the knighting ceremony departs from traditionalism in place of hip-hop aesthetics. Instead of hooded capes, men wear hooded jackets and bob their heads to a hard beat, Gregorian chant, hip-hop remix. There is nothing regal about this ceremony. When the Queen of Arms knights him a Herald of Arms, she does so aggressively and reluctantly, almost throwing the crown at him. Newsome does not receive the crown; he takes it, and then places it on his head. From here, the video turns into an abstracted, three-dimensional, color collage, marking his transformation as a Herald of Arms. The collage activates the screen with moving emblems that pulsates luxury items layered on top of an equally motion-heaving background. Later, a griffin appears in the form of a woman performing “Hair,” disputed sixth element of Voguing (the other elements include “hands,” “catwalk,” “floor performance,” “dip spins,” and “duck walk”). *Herald*, which lives in a luxurious antique frame, forever changes the language of knighting ceremonies.

To accompany his portraits of desire, Newsome produced a series of videos and mixtapes under the moniker *Swag*, which comes as little surprise since music and performance is central to his practice. *Swag* includes original music produced by Newsome and visual and recording artists Laurie Anderson, Stefanos Koroneos, Kevin Jourdan Zion Prodigy, Maluca Mala and Diplo, among others. These videos, like *Herald*, present pulsating coats of arms and Veblen goods. What makes them distinct is how Newsome treats the figure. In *Herald*, the figure is a dancing griffin. In *Swag*, the figures are women presented as desirable objects. They dance in a trancelike motion that is erotic and seductive; hence the ease at which it takes to ignore the palpating coats of arms. The corresponding music is experimental in how it remixes classical music. Newsome took a similar approach in *The Conductor*, 2005-2011, a video that remixes Carl Orff’s “Fortuna Imperatrix Mundi” and “Primo Vere, Omnia sol Temperat.” Ultimately, *Swag* expands on the concepts of *Herald* by playing with music production and video collage techniques. Musically it functions as a collaborative mixtape. Sonically, it brings Newsome’s version of heraldry to life.

Newsome is committed to creating a new heraldic language, one that uses hip-hop, pop culture, and Veblen goods as departure points. To establish this language, he abstracts, converges polarities, draws parallels, and experiments with fixed perception. Through hip-hop’s vocabulary, he provides access to heraldry, and then augments it to expand viewer expectations. It is a clever trick, the old bait and switch. Fortunately, in doing so, he opens the door to understand both cultural institutions better, not to mention how they intersect and why they exist in the first place.

OCTOBER, 2011, NEW YORK CITY

FOOTNOTES

1. Stothard, C.A., *Monumental Effigies of Great Britain* (London: n.p., 1817), plate 2, reproduced in *Heraldry in England* (New York: Penguin, 1946), plate 1.
2. Wikipedia contributors, “Heraldry,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Heraldry&oldid=452740271> (accessed September 12, 2011).
3. Brooke-Little, John, *An Heraldic Alphabet* (London: Macdonald, 1973), p. 2.
4. Slater, Stephen, *The Complete Book of Heraldry* (New York: Hermes House, 2003), p. 238.
5. Guendelsberger, Emily, “The Etymology of ‘jawn,’” *The A.V. Club Philadelphia*, <http://www.avclub.com/philadelphia/articles/the-etymology-of-jawn,55508/> (accessed September 12, 2011).



MARY, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 83 X 48 X 8 IN., 210.8 X 121.9 X 20.3 CM



BAPTISM, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 39 3/4 X 31 3/4 X 3 1/4 IN., 101 X 80.7 X 8.3 CM



BLACK BARBIE, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 56 3/8 X 43 1/2 X 3 IN., 143.2 X 110.5 X 7.6 CM



INTERIOR FIELD, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 36 3/4 X 31 3/4 X 3 1/4 IN., 93.3 X 80.6 X 8.3 CM



WAR OF THE ROSES, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 46 X 60 1/2 X 2 1/4 IN., 116.8 X 153.7 X 5.7 CM



SUCCUBUS, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 74 X 48 X 8 IN., 187.9 X 121.9 X 20.3 CM



SWAGGAL/CIOUS, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 20 X 23 X 3 3/4 IN., 50.8 X 58.4 X 9.5 CM



LET THEM EAT CAKES, 2011 COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 39 X 49 X 3 IN., 99 X 124.5 X 7.6 CM



SALTIRE COMPTON, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 17 1/4 X 14 3/4 X 1 1/2 IN., 43.8 X 37.5 X 3.8 CM



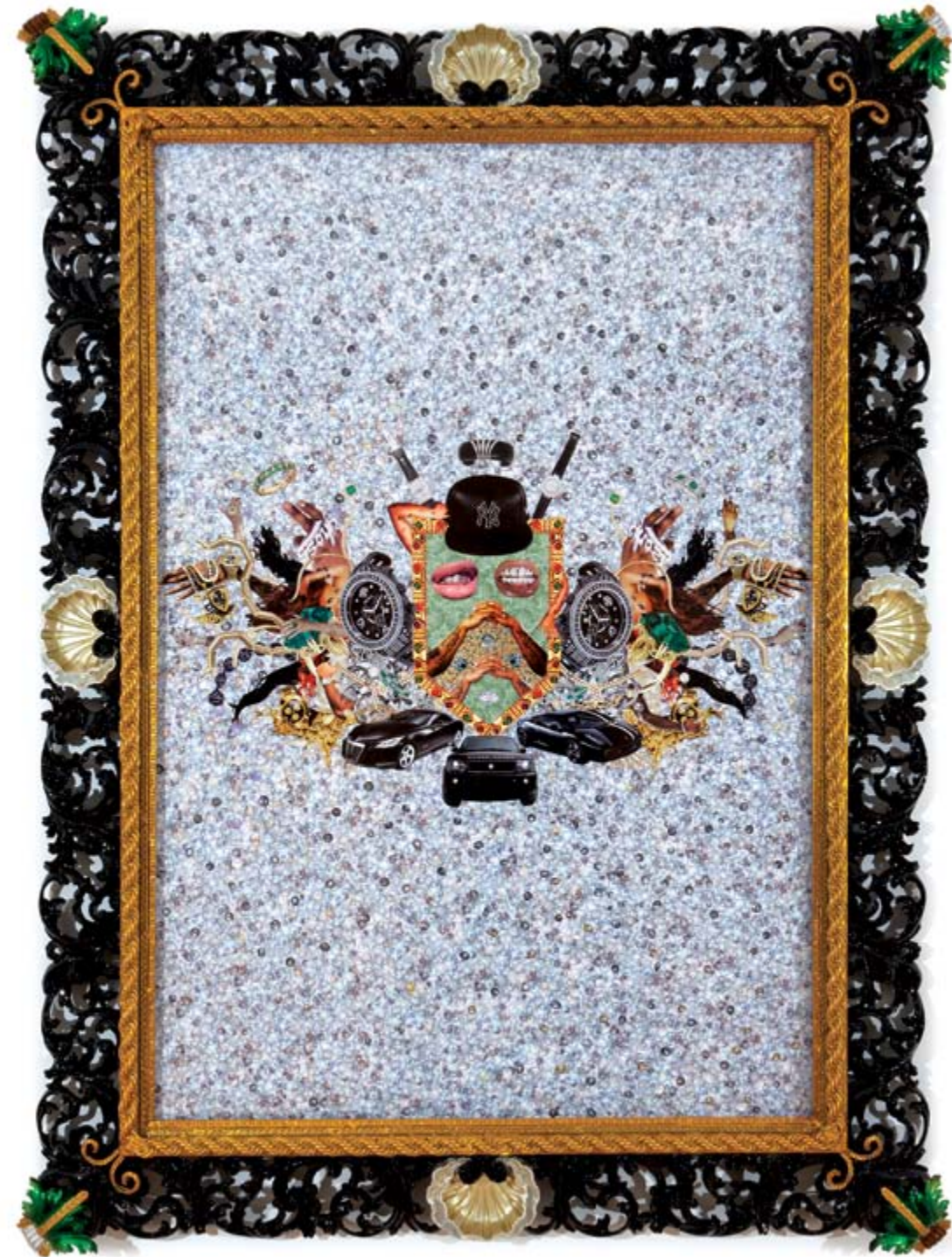
BLAZON, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 92 X 49 X 12 IN., 233.7 X 124.5 X 30.5 CM



37TH CHAMBER, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, WITH HAND-CARVED BEES, 51 1/2 X 41 X 5 1/2 IN., 130.8 X 104.1 X 14 CM



ONLY BUILT FOR CUBAN LINK, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 26 X 21 1/4 X 2 IN., 66 X 54 X 5 CM



GRAND MARQUIS OF BROOKLYN, 2011, COLLAGE IN CUSTOMIZED ANTIQUE FRAME, 77 X 57 1/2 X 2 IN., 195.6 X 146 X 5.1 CM



ALL BLACK EVERYTHING, 2011, COLLAGE, 30 X 22 IN., 76.2 X 55.8 CM



BLACK AND YELLOW, 2011, COLLAGE, 30 X 22 IN., 76.2 X 55.8 CM



WHAT'S BEEF, 2011, COLLAGE, 30 X 22 IN., 76.2 X 55.8 CM



WARRIOR CLASS, 2011, COLLAGE, 30 X 22 IN., 76.2 X 55.8 CM



UNTITLED DAME, 2011, COLLAGE, 22 X 30 IN., 55.8 X 76.2 CM



STANDARD #1, 2011, LEATHER AND JEWELRY, 36 X 36 IN., 91.4 X 91.4 CM

HERALD 2011

SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO WITH SOUND IN CUSTOMIZED FRAME, RUN TIME: 12 MINUTES



Above and right, stills from HERALD, 2011

SWAG 2011

MIXTAPE WITH FIVE TRACKS, SINGLE CHANNEL VIDEO WITH SOUND, TOTAL RUN TIME 15:55



Above, still from SWAG: DEVICES, RUN TIME 3:22
Below, still from SWAG: PAINTING OPPONENTS RED, RUN TIME 3:08

Above, still from SWAG: GRAND DUCHESS OF GAINESVILLE, RUN TIME 2:26
Below, still from SWAG: RAIN HAS FALLEN, RUN TIME 3:44
Not shown SWAG: DANCE OF THE SUCCUBUS, RUN TIME 3:55

RASHAAD NEWSOME

1979 Born in New Orleans, Louisiana

2001 BFA, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana

2004 Studied Film at Film/Video Arts Inc., New York, New York

The artist lives and works in New York, New York.

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

2012 Visiting Artist Residency, Museum of Glass, Tacoma, Washington

Artist-in-Residence, McColl Center for Visual Art, Charlotte, North Carolina

2011 Artist-in-Residence, Pilchuck Glass School, Seattle, Washington

2010 Visual/Interdisciplinary Arts Fellow, Urban Artist Initiative, New York, New York

2009 Artist Studio Program, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, New York

Community Arts Regrant, Brooklyn Arts Council, Brooklyn, New York

Van Lier Studio Residency, Harvestworks, New York, New York

Summer/Fall Artist-in-Residence Program, Eyebeam, New York, New York

Visual Arts Grant, Rema Hort Mann Foundation, New York, New York

2008 International Residency Program, Location One, New York, New York

Workspace Artist Residency Program, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, New York

Visiting Artist Award, School of Visual Arts/Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, New York

2007 Joint Multimedia Residency, BCAT/Rotunda Gallery, New York, New York

2006 Grant for Performance Art, Franklin Furnace Fund, New York, New York

2005 Artist-in-Residence, L'Entreprise Culturelle, Paris, France

Artist-in-Residence, Harvestworks, New York, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2011 *Herald*, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, New York

Rashaad Newsome/MATRIX 161, The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut

Shade Compositions, Galerie Stadtpark, Krems, Austria

2010 *Futuro*, ar/ge Kunst Galerie Museum, Bolzano, Italy

Honorable Ordinaries, Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York, New York

Rashaad Newsome: Videos and Performance, 2005-2010, Syracuse University Art Galleries, Syracuse University, New York, New York

2009 *Rashaad Newsome: Standards*, Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York, New York

2008 *Compositions*, Location One, New York, New York

2008 *Untitled (Banji Cunt)*, Talman + Monroe, Brooklyn, New York

LIVE PERFORMANCES

2011 *Hair Affair*, ArtBook/D.A.P., New York, New York

2010 *Honorable Ordinaries* (with Maluca Mala), Under The High Line, New York, New York

Shade Compositions, Greater New York, MoMA PS1, Queens, New York

Shade Compositions, First International Performance Art Festival, Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia

FIVE, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York

2009 *FIVE*, Eyebeam, New York, New York

Shade Compositions, The Kitchen, New York, New York

2008 *Shade Compositions*, Location One, New York, New York

2007 *Shade Compositions*, Dumbo Arts Center, Under The Bridge Festival, Brooklyn, New York

2006 International Electroacoustic Music Festival, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, New York

Shade Compositions, K.U.E.L., Berlin, Germany

Shade Compositions, Glassbox, Paris, France

GROUP EXHIBITIONS AND BIENNIALS

2011 *Summer Group Exhibition*, Marlborough Chelsea, New York, New York

Revel, Revel, Cave, Detroit, Michigan

Beauty Contest, Austrian Cultural Forum New York, New York, New York

Commercial Break, Garage Center for Contemporary Culture at the 54th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

White Night, Festival of Ideas for a New City, New Museum, New York, New York

2010 *Prospect 1.5*, Good Children Gallery, New Orleans, Louisiana

Free, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, New York

In the Company of..., Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, Connecticut

Boy, oh Boy, Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Miami, Florida

Word-Less, The Elizabeth Foundation For The Arts, New York, New York

Greater New York, MoMA PS1, Queens, New York

Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York

After Image, School 33 Art Center, Baltimore, Maryland

2009 *Art Hysteria*, Nicola Vassell Salon, New York, New York

That Was Then..., Rush Arts Gallery, New York, New York

East Coast Video, Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York, New York

After Dark, A.D. Projects, New York, New York

Fusebox Festival 2009, United States Art Authority, Austin, Texas

Pulse, Taller Boricua, New York, New York

African Americana, Brennan Courthouse, Jersey City, New Jersey

Stage II, The Project Gallery, New York, New York

2008 *The B Sides*, Aljira Center For Contemporary Art, Newark, New Jersey

2007 *We Are Familia*, Colette, Paris, France

New York Electronic Arts Festival, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Swing Space Program, New York, New York

Inspired In New York, The Sapphire Lounge, New York, New York

2006 *Beauty Shop*, Soul Gallery, Miami, Florida

Video Dumbo, DUMBO Arts Center, Brooklyn, New York

Believe, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, New York

The Summer Show, Grace Exhibition Space, Brooklyn, New York

Brother To Brother, Zero Station, Portland, Maine

Tina B.: The Prague Contemporary Art Festival, The Veletrzni Palace, Prague, Czech Republic

Open Zone, Ocularis at Galapagos Art Space, Brooklyn, New York

2005 *A TV*, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, New York

2004 *Live Fast Die Young*, DUMBA Arts Collective, Brooklyn, New York

2003 *Summer Salon*, DUMBA Arts Collective, Brooklyn, New York

2000 *No Frills*, The Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, Louisiana

Babylon Lexicon, Zeitgeist Multidisciplinary Arts Center, New Orleans, Louisiana

New Orleans Emerging Artists, Zeitgeist Multidisciplinary Arts Center, New Orleans, Louisiana

CATALOGUES AND MONOGRAPHS

2011 *Beauty Contest*. New York: Austrian Cultural Forum New York and MUSA Vienna.

2010 Biesenbach, Klaus, Cornelia Butler and Neville Wakefield. *Greater New York 2010*. New York: MoMA PS1.

Fassi, Luigi. *Futuro*. Bolzano, Italy: ar/ge Kunst Galerie Museum.

Bonami, Francesco and Gary Carrion-Muryari. *2010: Whitney Biennial*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art.

2008 *Untitled (Banji Cunt)*. Brooklyn: Talman + Monroe Gallery.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York