



CURATOR'S STATEMENT

In the history of art, white supremacist ideals about beauty, lifestyles, purity, etc are all present. The great artists of the 1700s, 1800s, and early 1900s, made work ostracizing and exoticizing minorities. Which then became the standard for art, passing down malicious ideas for years. This contrast between obsession and excommunication creates strife within communities. This show was my desire to talk about these struggles in a way that was not harmful to the audience (i.e.: showing images of destabilizing and desensitizing violence), but also still very critical. I wanted to listen to the artists' concerns and ideas. The show started to generate these conversations in a way that is really positive and exciting. Oppression is not an exciting topic. But I think black students deserve more opportunities to feel joy and safety. Due to the way culture tends to police minorities for expressing concerns and rightful frustrations about white supremacy, I wanted to find a way for the group of artists and myself to resist white supremacy without being punished for doing so.

The wit and humor for the show is a coping mechanism. Personally, I find it difficult to make work that is serious, or overt without feeling drained and re-traumatized by the issues. Using this filter helps me funnel this resistance against white supremacy into something more helpful for myself. So I am able to think through my criticisms in a healthy way.

With this show, myself and the artists can start to envision something great for ourselves and find ways to keep pushing through. I wanted to make something I haven't seen during my time as a student at the Cleveland Institute of Art. I didn't want this show to be a way of CIA being able to say "you can't complain about diversity because we gave you that show that

one time." I have my own issues with white institutions, but I hope this show can be a step in the right direction and start conversations that need to happen. This exhibition is not a PR statement or tool to be misused by the institution for its own devices, but rather a jumping off point for real inward reflection.

My curatorial process involved the collection of diverse perspectives, which is important to me. I don't want the show's title or theme to be mistaken as a curator forcing people to be happy. If anything, I want to provide avenues to dissect emotions rather than dictate them. Ewuresi Archer's painting "Aaa Y3 Kama(You've Done Nice)" is infused with feelings of snarky dry sarcasm. Here Archer presents a sharp historical take on the intermixing of Western and African culture in Ghana. Another perspective can be found in Derek Walker's painting titled "Astronoir", which features an image of a figure wearing a Cleveland Spiders baseball jersey-- a direct "call out" of the Cleveland Indians (now Guardians) baseball team's history of racist imagery, which gives subtle, but biting criticism on the racism ingrained in American popular culture.

The poem by Destyni Green was commissioned closer to the installation of the show. I felt it was necessary to include her perspective because of how her poetry encompassed the feeling of the show. The line between joy and pain can be thin and indistinguishable at times. Green does a fantastic job stating just how freeing it is, to

understand how to give yourself joy. Having power over what you think is so vital. Burdening ourselves with every worldly problem is mentally damaging. It isn't possible to live only in a state of criticism, it doesn't often garner new solutions. Seeking revenge instead of seeking justice doesn't often heal anyone. Reaching to find a joy we could live in, to me, is much more ideal.

A FLUTTER STIRS UNDER THE HEART
ABRUPTLY ESCAPING OUR LIPS.
SOMETIMES IN A MOURNFUL CRY
IN OTHER TIMES, A GLORIOUS JOY.

WITH TIME COMES THE REALIZATION:
JOY AND PAIN RESIDE TOGETHER.
SEPARATED ONLY WHEN THE
RELEASE OF PAIN BECOMES THE
FREEDOM TO FEEL JOY.

LIVABLE JOY, ACHIEVED FROM
LIVING THROUGH THE HEART,
DIRECTING FLUTTERS TOWARDS THAT POWER.
ONLY THEN, FLUTTERS TURN SNICKERS
AND SNICKERS TURN INTO LAUGHTER.
- DESTYNI GREEN

CRITICAL ESSAY

THEA SPITTLE, INDEPENDENT CURATOR & WRITER

A teal green smiley face—formed by thick all-caps letters that spell out the exhibition title and participating artists' names—is the viewer's initial encounter with Amani Williams' curated group exhibition *Snickers That Turn Into Livable Joy*; snickers directed at a westernized art historical cannon, sexism, white supremacy, Eurocentric beauty standards and capitalism, too. Yet, as the exhibition title states, this jeering type of laughter transforms into something else: livable joy. This instantly recognizable titular emoticon holds within it a graphic connection to major themes of the exhibition: humor, wit and what it means to be genuine. The artists' material choices, subject matters, and curatorial decisions made by Williams are all unabashedly genuine. There is no diluting of brilliant bold colors, big dreams, or blemishes to be felt across the constellation of artworks by Ewuresi Archer, Sydney Nicole Kay, Crystal Miller, Kayla Sanford, Derek Walker and Amani Williams. The exhibition represents a “new chapter in the art historical narrative” (Amani Williams, exhibition statement).

Although *Snickers That Turn Into Livable Joy* is presented at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Williams's curatorial framework in and of itself is indeed the very context and site of the exhibition; meaning the exhibition could be presented in any location and maintain its original humorous, witty and genuine energy. I believe this is especially possible due to Williams's curatorial approach, one that unfolds through particular attention to time and space—or what performance studies scholar Kathleen Stewart refers to as atmospheric attunements: “an attention to the matterings, the complex emergent worlds, happening in everyday life” (Kathleen Stewart, *Atmospheric attunements*, 445). More specifically, I believe Williams' curatorial approach is an atmospheric attunement with the artworks themselves, as she engages their nuanced stories in relation to one another.

This attunement not only surfaces in the material and content relationships between the exhibited artworks (which I will later discuss), but also in the exhibition and artistic influences Williams references in the curation of *Snickers That Turn Into Livable Joy*. In conversation with Williams, I learned that she was inspired by La Tanya S. Autry's group exhibition “Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom” (2020). Autry writes, “[the exhibition] centers on the often overlooked dynamic between Indigenous and Black artists-- two groups who regularly fight the continuance of colonialism and the ideology of white supremacy-- while also recognizing their differing experiences...the artists reimagine signs and the relations of power, stress the importance of soulful communal regeneration, and reveal paths for building decolonized futures.” (La Tanya S. Autry, exhibition text, 4). Included in the exhibition was work by performance artist Tricia Hersey, also known as ‘The Nap Bishop,’ whose work calls for: ‘Rest is Reparations.’ The Nap Bishop preaches to her followers to resist grind culture produced by capitalism, and the devaluing of self in community by white supremacy. Both Autry's exhibition and *The Nap Ministry* led to an opening in time and space for Williams to experience these reverberations of joy and carry them with her to *Snickers that Turn Into Livable Joy*.

It is also through Williams's spatial organization of artworks that viewers can experience how her curatorial approach is atmospheric attunement. Installed in a single room, I become aware of three constellations of artworks

that converge into one point at the back windowed wall: the first artwork I see when entering the exhibition, Kayla Sanford's “Sphere of Influence.” The circular low table with intricate patterns of curvilinear forms made from glass murine is bordered by plush floor cushions, inviting me to sit comfortably as I receive signals from the adjoining constellations of artworks. Looking toward the room's entrance, a nuanced relationship emerges between Derek Walker's “Astronoir,” Sydney Nicole Kay's “Blended,” Crystal Miller's “I got big hair,” and Kay's “Move Me.” These four artworks share a devoted attention to material and environmental atmosphere, revealing how these three artists perceive and can build a future where they see themselves and their communities. Sparkling gems encrusting the surface of “I got big hair” help to bring out the glistening celestial forms in background of “Astronoir”, as well as the intricate lace that veils the subject in “Blended”: these details are crucial to establish the environmental atmospheres of their unique spaces.

Continuing towards the windows, four more artworks interact through this network of constellations: Amani Williams's “I'm A Hot Ebony, They Gon' Want It, If it's Me,” Sanford's “Chance for Change,” Ewuresi Archer's “Free Forever” and Williams's “World Renowned Artist.” The subjects' gaze in Williams's and Archer's paintings engage the viewer through direct eye contact, implicating the viewer in the social and historical realities of the subjects' environments, which can also be perceived through a witty portrayal of capitalism in “Chance for Change.” This gaze implicates and calls for viewers to think beyond an initial impression and travel deeper into the human psyche. Turning to the opposite wall a final constellation appears, one that is formed by an unabashed representation of self(ves). Walker's “Gem in I” and Miller's “(Hair)itage” present genuine modes of intimacy and joy with oneself, while Archer's “Aaaa Y3 Kama (You've Done Nice),” and Williams's “Me and Some Men: Sucking Me Dry” reflect on how oppressive forces can create partial versions of oneself, causing their subjects to compromise when they shouldn't. These formulations of self(ves) are then reflected back to the viewer in the mirrored patterned surface of Sanford's table “Notice Me.”

I lay out this analysis of artwork constellations to think with and through Williams's attentive curatorial framework, one that bluntly prompts viewers to perceive the interconnectedness of humor, joy, constructions of self with material specificity. These constellations of artworks emerge as structures of energy and transformation. In the words of scholar Sara Ahmed, “perception is a way of facing something. I can perceive an object only insofar as my orientation allows me to see it (it must be near enough to me, which in turn means that I must be near enough to it), and in seeing it, in this way or that, it becomes an ‘it,’ which means I have already taken an orientation toward it” (Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: orientations toward objects*, 27). Williams's curatorial approach manifests in a multitude of perceptions by both the exhibition viewers and the artworks themselves, reverberating through waves of glitter and wit in a ‘new chapter in the art historical cannon.’