



Blond Beast of Prey

Ashraf Jamal

University of Johannesburg, South Africa

This item has been published in Issue 01 'Transitory Parerga: Access and Inclusion in Contemporary Art,' edited by Vlad Strukov.

To cite this item: Jamal A (2020) Blond beast of prey. *The Garage Journal: Studies in Art, Museums & Culture*, 01: 188-204. DOI: 10.35074/GJ.2020.11.012

To link to this item: DOI: [https://doi.org/ 10.35074/GJ.2020.11.012](https://doi.org/10.35074/GJ.2020.11.012)

Published: 30 November 2020

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Against the backdrop of a global outcry and the battle against systemic racism, this essay examines the role of whiteness—as an idea, rather than as a racial category—in the maintenance of an acculturated system of power. I argue that race and racism are not the root of the problem but the symptom, and that the deeper issue resides in the in-

humanity of institutions: in this case, the institution and culture of art, its values, its manifest self-regard, its exclusionary and controlling force. Through an examination of works by the artist Russell Bruns, I consider how, within the physical and ideological skin of whiteness, this malevolent project is challenged.

Keywords: amoral/extra-moral, black lives matter, idea of whiteness, systemic racism

1. Finally



Figure 1. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' *Happy Mother's Day* (2020) (courtesy of the artist)

Being famous is like being white, says Chris Rock (2014). There's something horribly jarring about this assertion. Is Rock's tongue in his cheek or mine? Or is he just being brutally honest? Is there no immunity for the black body, no VIP status without fame? The equation is absurd, but it is precisely this absurdity, and the gross inequality upon which it feeds, that Rock draws our attention to. Is this the point—that black life doesn't matter? Did it take the live-streaming of George Floyd's murder—'murder porn,' as Killer Mike (2020) called it—to snap the earth's axis? Optics matter. Are we 'finally' prepared to deal with the violence of systemic racism? Not just with the protests the murder inspired, but with the violence built into governance, norms, the dangerous presumptions of a mad white man in power? A new world disorder of poverty, plague, panic, outrage? Is this the world Pankaj Mishra (2017) saw hurtling towards us, the 'age of anger'? As one toxic wit would have it, poverty is the new minimalism (Milburn and Nicodemus 2020). Have we arrived at the end point of all our excesses? Has systemic abuse—economic, cultural, racial, sexual (the list knows no end)—'finally' arrived at its nadir? ENOUGH! NO MORE!?

'Finally.' A word drunk on optimism, treacherous to boot. We know that 'final' solutions are never good. Change is not the handmaiden of expectation. The world does not become a better place simply because we claim it to be so. If the murder of George Floyd has provoked a global outcry against hate-power-racism, it is doubtless because we think that such appalling moments should lead us back to reason. But what if reason is doomed? How, 'finally,' does one change the world for the better? Why was George Floyd's murder, more than any other destruction of black life, the trigger? Was it the instantaneity of its exposure? Was it because it occurred at a time when no one felt immune, and was, therefore, perversely democratic? Nothing levels difference like a plague. But how much of it was about a name, George Floyd, easily pronounced within a hegemonic monolingual culture, even as so many other black names are seen as 'exotic' or 'other'? Barack 'Hussein' Obama still smacks of gall in the hateful mouths of those who cannot stomach discordances in the received perceptions of power, be they visual or aural. Like power, language disarticulates far more than it articulates. Revolution requires a name, a face. One cannot anticipate whom that name, that face, will belong to. The tipping point is never clear. Now we know. It is George Floyd's name, his face, which has 'finally' sunk in.

The historical record will engage all these questions, and more. The story will contain much symbolism; the toppling of monuments, and so forth. When reason fails, symbols are always to hand, ripe for extraction, distraction, manipulation, and exploitation. As Floyd's features are emblazoned across the world, others are torn down. Creation begets destruction. The cycle is age-old, and predictable, yet the outcome is not. Celebration and destruction, in and of itself, cannot save us. It cannot answer for systemic cruelty—centuries old, legislated, institutional, implacably insidious, immune to both rage and reason. It is this far deeper problem which prompted Chris Rock to say the unsayable. If black life matters little, if white life is sacrosanct, then how—'finally'—does one change the system? How does one psychologically, epistemically, ethically, realign a rotten imbalance?

Chris Rock's conclusion that only black fame is akin to whiteness is appalling because it exposes the sovereignty and immunity accorded to whiteness, a condition deemed inviolable, undivided, supreme. But what of fame? Is it a worthy quality, or an obscenity? How do we square fame and liberty (the vapidness of the former, the criticality of the latter)? George Floyd is only famous because he is dead. His actual life, in the eyes of the world, did not matter. Fame abstracts and subtracts. Fetishistic, it commands either revulsion or deference. It is trenchantly historical, never immortal. Spin-doc-tored. Secular. Jesus, too, is a secular construct, as is the church. The desire to conceive fame otherwise stems from a desire to quit mortality, or at least to believe that it is the fate of the chosen few to do so. However, as Mark Rowlands (2008) notes, fame is "congenital," a symptom of [...] cultural degeneration.' (p. 27) Fame generates more hurt than satisfaction. Its economy is built on desire and lack. It presupposes exemption, but from what? As an idea, 'black fame=whiteness' is aberrant, out of joint. This is Rock's point, but the depth-charge that his statement triggers runs deeper still. One cannot ignore the asymmetry of blackness and whiteness. If the world is rapidly and desperately trying to right this pernicious fact, it is because we need to understand the cause. George Floyd's murder, the countless murders of black men and women before him, and doubtless those that will follow, are the monstrous seeds for an education. The question is whether this education will be wholly embraced; whether blackness will finally be conceived as an integral dimension of life, and not as its other—that which Achille Mbembe (2017) has described as capitalism's 'nocturnal face' (p. 129).

An education is much needed, true, but what happens when scholarship is cynical, opportunistic, expedient, or exploitative at the very instant of its 'inclusivity'—when it mirrors the problem? What exactly, in other words, is this education we urgently need? Is it revisionist? Deconstructive? Anarchic? Utopian? Stoical? Ethical? How must institutions move 'forward' at a moment in which centrism is vilified, the world snarled in insoluble extremes? Can we advance despite our aberrant foundation? The frenzy to reform systems grounded in inequality—to engender progressive ideals—reveals the dire paradox we find ourselves trapped in. It is bitterly ironic that, at a juncture in which we desperately need an ethical revolution, our knowledge systems (in the broadest sense) are either ill-equipped or hijacked by dogma. My Android offers daily accounts of individuals in the art world (who represent systems) speaking plaintively of guilt and correction, of seeking indemnity through 'inclusion.' But how, when the rot runs deep? When systems consciously engineer what Friedrich Nietzsche (2015) termed 'the narrowing of education?' (p. 17).

The art world is racist. Every system is. More than half the world's art has no place within its idolatrous self-regard. Of course, changes are underway. Revisionism is the new norm. Women and black artists are being integrated into the art system. This is for the good (it is not too little too late), but revisionism fails to address the economy of the system, its exclusionary and fundamentally inhumane modus operandi. Nothing changes overnight. It is the education we receive, the petrification it perpetuates, that requires

transformation. In 1872, the ever prescient Nietzsche (2015) observed how 'the current system reduces scholars to being mere slaves of academic disciplines, making it a matter of chance, and increasingly unlikely, for any scholar to turn out truly *educated*' (p. 17). It is because of the limit built in to how we look, to what we value, that we fail to advance. The righteous, closed circuit of contestation built in to cultural critique comes in the way of feeling, which is why the global outrage regarding Floyd's murder is fundamental. It is against the death of feeling, upon which systems subsist, that we refuse corruption, enslavement, dogma, order—*whiteness*.

In *Anti-Education: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (1872), Nietzsche (2015) makes a stunningly simple and critical point: 'a living thing is alive' (p. 24). This is no tautology. It is a witheringly obvious, yet repeatedly discounted fact. It is also the foundation for the defining phrase of our age: BLACK LIVES MATTER. This is not just a slogan or matter of opinion. It is not only an existential outcry, which some perceive as a threat (prompting the glazed and inured counter claim that 'all lives matter'). It is an ontological and lived consciousness, an implacable and indisputable call to look, feel, understand, embrace, support. BLACK LIVES MATTER is far more than an appeal; it is an actuation. We cannot continue to suppress a lived and living condition, steal from it its being, dub it the 'nocturnal face of capitalism' (Mbembe 2017: 129). After centuries of wrongdoing and protest, we require more than the toppling of monuments, more than calculated concessions. We require new conditions for existence. Whiteness maintains its global dominance because it has sold itself to the world, constructed its sovereignty, and is thus seen as such. One can address neither global outrage nor the seismic shift in Black Consciousness without addressing its nemesis, whiteness; a condition engineered as a fait accompli.

But of course, no condition ever is. Power is always-already presumptive and embattled, even when unquestioningly assumed. No system is immune, especially one that claims the contrary. The fact that we are trained to fetishize, revere, honour, and bow down before white power should alert us to the nefarious nature of our education. We are conscripted or indicted, included or excluded. Today, we read of countless instances in which systems have either manipulated or paid lip-service to diversity. The system, as they say, is rigged. And so we cry foul! Notwithstanding the fact that privilege, ever odious, is not easily sacrificed, one hopes that the stanchions and screens installed to monitor and vet us are falling by the wayside—*finally*.

2. Shameless

Enter 'Shane Malone,' who wears whiteness in all its monstrous self-assuredness. The alter ego of the photographer and videographer Russell Leo Bruns, Malone is dressed in his customary black Ray-Bans and gray power suit, sleekly fitted to a ripped body (Tom Ford?). Through 'Malone,' his 'fine art agent,' Bruns coolly insinuates himself into power's specular domain; Tate

Modern, Zeitz MOCAA, and a host of other institutional fortresses, arteries, public and domestic spaces (be it a plane bound for Croatia, the London tube, a city street, sporting goods emporia, beach, or private home). Context is everything, and everywhere loaded. At Tate, the most frequented contemporary art museum on earth, Bruns, a visitor, sets up a tripod and photographs himself as a contributing participant of a group show. His relevance is produced by association. All of Bruns's occupational stunts occur by proxy. For the artist, it is the ease of his ability to do so that is alarming; the fact that he is never policed, never challenged, that, in fact, he is unseen, despite his flagrant presence; whether as an odalisque reclining on a rain-sodden London pavement, or as a wannabe power-broker in a plush armchair in a sporting goods shop, his swagger matched by the Cristiano Ronaldo poster beside him. Anywhere, and everywhere, the world becomes Bruns's personal and private domain. He is not a citizen amongst others, but a sign, par excellence, of an exclusive and exclusionary system. This, of course, is Bruns's point. Why is it that he can bend the rules? Is it simply his charming shamelessness that allows him to shape-shift a norm—the role one performs on a plane, how one comports oneself on a street, in a shop or museum? Yes, and no. His swagger is, rather, also designed to provoke awareness of the power afforded to whiteness; in his case, a Greco-Teutonic, masculine ideal thereof. Most importantly, it is the very immutability and paradoxical invisibility of that power that is concerning. Bruns sets himself up as both exception and banality. It is this compound, this mix, that reveals the insouciant normativity of whiteness as something presumptive and, critically, unseen. After Jean Baudrillard, Bruns constructs whiteness as something more visible than the visible. It is not his physical presence that matters, though it is everywhere evident, but that which it represents; for what the artist fundamentally does is riff on whiteness. Given the moral prurience and corruption that defines our age, this stunt or trick—whiteness as *trompe l'oeil*, substantive-yet-depthless—is provocatively instructive.



Figure 2. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' *When it Rains it Pours* (2018) (courtesy of the artist)

Armed with his pocketable photographs, he, 'Shane Malone,' carries them everywhere as signs of his gift and status. That the photographs are seemingly innocuous, nondescript shots of the office (the drudgery of an eight-hour day), reveals the double-bind built in to the shoot, its exceptionality and banality—or rather, the exception built in to the banal. His photographs are odes to Robert Owen (cit. in Wade 2019), the Welsh social reformer, who, in 1810, campaigned for a forty-hour work week with the winning slogan 'eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest.' Like Owen, Bruns claims relative sovereignty and rails against servitude. He is the delusional projection of a fantasy. He is whiteness as the marker for immunity; the problematic other amidst a revisionist purge. The projection is more split than cracked. Bruns announces himself, his person, as an artwork twice-removed. He presents himself as someone he is not, with photographs he is unable to speak on behalf of. He is an entitled body which is also compromised, on the verge of its superannuation. His precarity, however, is never the focus. What Bruns draws his audience towards is the gloss that conceals it.

Bruns's set-up is tactical, alienated, Brechtian. Defamiliarization is vital. The gall, gumption, and arrogance that 'Malone' displays in the insinuation of his presence at Tate is amplified by an accompanying text: 'The pleasure is all mine' (Bruns 2018). Bruns is no extra; he is the main event. The strategy is as visceral as it is seemingly delusional. Bruns places himself at the epicenter of all he is, makes, and fakes. It is not only the artist's alter ego which is central, but his id; the 'innate,' 'instinctive,' 'primary' culture and condition of whiteness upon which the performance depends, and gorges itself. 'Malone' is a 'pest,' one that the art world, in its craven bid for inclusivity, is 'trying to purge' (Bruns 2020, personal communication²). However, 'says Bruns, 'Shane Malone, or strictly "Shane," is not going away.' Shane (read 'shame') is 'the institutional self'; a fly in the ointment, an 'institutional blind-spot,' an unassailable and noxious oxygen that the art world finds difficult to filter.

It is Bruns's capacity as a white male artist to absorb the world and reflect it through his particular person which explains the presumption of his self-presence. He is the inverse of the reverential gallery-goer. Nothing subjects him to a state of awe. No world exists that cannot be redacted to fit his image. What Bruns makes of himself may look and smell like narcissism, but it is far more than that. Narcissism is pathological; messing with it is not. Instead, Bruns weaponizes his body, his look, what it means to be *in the look*, to own the world he inhabits (Hugo and Nazario 2016: 28). Aware of his perceived pedigree—his handsome physique, his cultivated animality, his aura of authority—Bruns performs whiteness. If the institutions he exposes turn a blind eye, this is because it is difficult to objectify that which perceives itself to be immune. This is especially so when it appears in the guise of a gender and beauty presumed to be superior. Bruns is not retroactively critiquing power, but insouciantly outing it. It is because he is invisible—the direct result of an inherited and optimal visibility—that he becomes beyond reproach, and worryingly so. After all, power is never blind, whiteness never immune. It is also enslaved to its hubris. It too requires examination. Bruns's antics expose the

paradox of whiteness; its transcendent principle, its hocked reality. Above all, Bruns asks us to consider a different condition for the indifferent existence of whiteness.



Figure 3. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' Art (2018) (courtesy of Russell Bruns)

Every space Bruns occupies becomes his theater. He is the central, typically solo, occupant. The presumption is that the artist has claimed his place in the world, when in fact, Bruns is performing his claim upon it. The distinction is crucial. The artist presents his body as an *idea of whiteness*: this is his leverage. He is by no means as famous as Chris Rock, but he has an idolatrous ideal working in his favor. He is the slick, blond God. For all the talk of its superannuation, the allure and power of whiteness remains omnipresent, 'beyond' critique. Is this the delusional fulcrum of its strength, the making of its mania? Why, to date, has it never been successfully challenged? Because it is far more than the sum of its symbolism? Because its face is not its true source? Because its power is never merely engraved? Because it is ineluctable, obscure, fathomless? And is this not how power is sustained? What, then, is one challenging when one challenges white power? Its structure? Its affect? Its overweening desire to thrive at the expense of all else? Or its strategic and exploitative inclusivity, which sustains its remove? Its death cult, driven by the transubstantiation of itself into a universal principle? As for the arts, is it precisely therein that its order is made manifest? Whiteness as the art institution's bedrock and ethos, its 'temperature'; whiteness as climate control? And is it not in this critical regard that, despite the many claims advanced in the

name of diversity, it remains little more than the new face of whiteness, easily flipped, depending on the given expediency? At no point will it absolve itself of its privilege and power. Its immunity is writ large. But it is also profoundly invisible (in the manner, say, of God).

It is because of its monopoly on the global imaginary that whiteness does not crumble in the face of critique. As is the case with any capitalist principle, whiteness absorbs contradiction. Like any sovereign currency, it will not be bested. Whiteness resides at the epicenter of the infernal machine of capital. Bruns knows this. He realizes that 'a moral way of engaging with it is not productive' (Bruns 2020, personal communication). This is because whiteness, as an idealized and supremacist construction, is intrinsically amoral. It operates beyond the bounds of morality. How else does it exempt itself from wrongdoing? It can't. Belief to the contrary is the byproduct of a sophisticated dissimulation: ad-speak, production design. The power of whiteness is not innate; it is produced. Whiteness, therefore, is not the polar opposite of blackness. The two categories are not contrary protagonists in a dialectic. Their relationship is asymmetrical. Any external challenge is precisely such: external. For the sovereignty of whiteness to collapse, we require quite another strategy, one that is just as amoral, that is extra-moral. This is because, as a condition of and for power, whiteness is daemonic. It is impervious to morality. It may comport itself 'self-critically,' it may acknowledge difference, but its mechanism always overrides its dissimulated conscience. This is Russell Bruns's point and crux: whiteness consumes, subsumes, and deflects everything in its path. Its monuments may topple, but what of its unassailable core?



Figure 4. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' *Recharging with Roy Keane* (2018) (courtesy of the artist)

It is because Bruns lives inside the skin of whiteness, because he knows its arrogance and its deceits, that he has chosen to adopt the very extra-morality upon which it subsists. What better way to do so than to become Nietzsche's blond beast of prey—to occupy a system without reason or pretext, and, from within, to work to destroy its hidden cornerstone? Nietzsche's blond beast is a terminator—maleficent, predatory, and rapacious, who avidly prowls the earth in search of prey. Amoral, his rule knows no bounds. Nietzsche's beast is also his *Übermensch*, unchecked by custom, subject solely to personalized and craven urgencies. Bruns assumes this corrosive force under the guise of Shane Malone. That he does so shamelessly, without self-awareness, is the measure of his success. However, he is no Jordan B. Peterson, that latter-day faux Nietzschean, who, under the veil of stoicism, rallies disgruntled white men who desperately seek to restore an emasculated power. On the contrary. As the blond beast of prey, Bruns incarnates the monstrousness of white power. He reveals it for what it is (presumptive, absurd, staggeringly self-assured), all the while dissimulating its opposite. Bruns succeeds because he has hot-wired white power's DNA and the imperious malevolence that feeds it.

Like Nietzsche, Bruns recognises the toxicity of the supremacist ideal. Like Nietzsche, he realizes that he is a dimension of the problem he seeks to undo, that he is a decadent. Defamiliarization is no longer a rhetorical ploy. It cannot liberate him from the burden he must assume, the decadence he must embrace. If Nietzsche needed Zarathustra to arrest and reflect upon the inevitability of fate, *amor fati*, Bruns needs Malone. This is because nothing, finally, is ever fated. It is only sloth or defeat that presupposes this. One must go to war with oneself, devour one's own monstrousness. If Bruns does so, it is his method that requires our attention; what he does to himself, how he goes in for the kill.

Designed for an Instagram culture, Bruns's videos are languorous. One shows a close-up of his armpit as he applies roll-on deodorant (accompanied by Beethoven). In another, we see his strong calf caught in the reflected glow of his equally powerful forearm as he pumps iron (this time, to the tune of vapid synth disco). In a third, he lathers his blond locks and goatee with *Let's JAM!* extra-hold condition and shine gel. But the apogee of self-love is surely when Malone drips sunblock onto his inner-thigh, smoothing it into his skin. All the videos are shot in slow-mo. By slowing the camera's movement, Bruns heightens the self-regard that is his focus; whiteness as erotic opiate. It is the slowness that underscores a consummate ease, as though every part of his body were a shrine to himself, an aggregate of his total perfection: the pornographic perfection of whiteness.

If morality (increasingly in evidence, increasingly righteous) would damn the artist's focus, it is because it is designed to trigger outrage, and the guilt upon which it feeds. Framed within the specular economy of white privilege and narcissism, Bruns presents the horror that lies at the core of white power. What Bruns triggers, as well as outrage, is self-disgust and shame, the agonistic inverse of any sovereign or imperial power. As

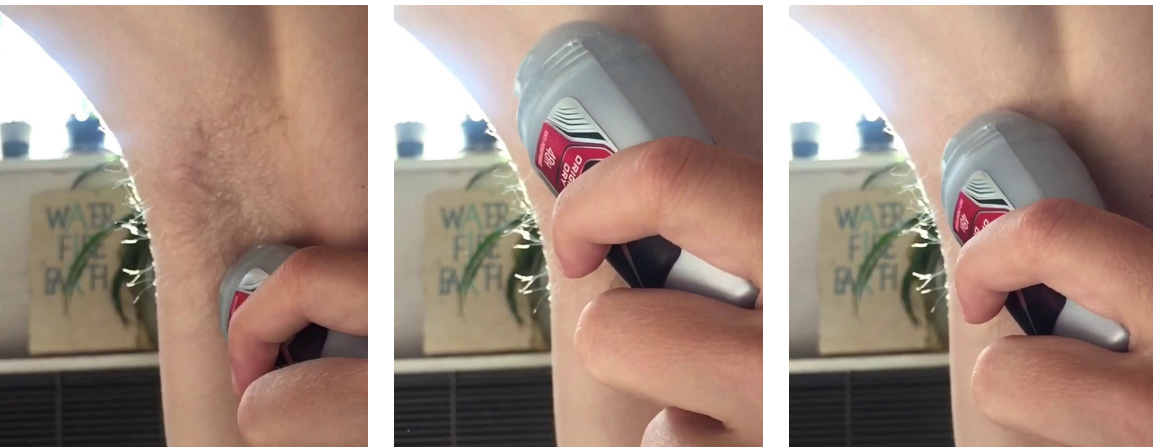


Figure 5. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' stills from *Roll on for Real Art* (2018) (courtesy of the artist)

the blond beast of prey, however, he does not traffic in shame. Horror of horrors, Bruns, as 'Shane Malone,' does not resent himself. Nor does he resent the world. Instead, the occupation of his body by proxy is seamless, smooth. There's the rub, like a lotion on the skin. It is this concupiscence, this eroticized idolatry, that reveals power's vulnerability, its persistent and obsessive need to self-minister. Power must be palpated, adored, revered, and worshipped if it is to believe in its existence. In this narcissistic regard, white power is peculiarly Greek, produced repeatedly in its own idealized image; mask-like, funereal, iconic, adamantine.

By refusing to position himself in an aggravated relation to whiteness and power, Bruns also refuses art making as a form of glaringly social, or self-, critique. Instead, he is inured to the worlds he occupies and transforms. Everything is a prosthetic extension of himself; everything his acquired domain. In his love affair of hand and thigh—his creaming of himself as a palpably erotic and symbiotic act—Bruns superimposes a twinned video of himself painting a black wall white (a superimposition within a superimposition, the exercise of white power over and above a black undercoating). Here, whiteness is reaffirmed as an occupational rule. But the most peculiar aspect of the video is the voiceover, in which Bruns (2018a) repeats the following lines: 'Take a chance on mystery / I call this the ensuite of the art world / I call it the coupe of the art world / I call this queen-size of the art world.' What is he referring to? The white walls that define the gallery aesthetic? His lean, white thigh and hand? The lotion, spread onto (and into) his body? Whiteness as a symbiotic crush? As for the ensuite, coupe, and queen-size—are these extensions of a luxurious white self? And what of the 'mystery'? Is it the inscrutability of whiteness? The movements of his hand across his thigh are rhythmic; his voice incantatory, hypnotic. We are in the midst of an orgy, a religion, a piety, a grotesque presumption. Most of all, we are in the midst of a shameless performance of inherited, acculturated, institutional authority.



3. A Uniform Glow

In *The Global White Cube*, Elena Filipovic (2014) notes that whiteness (as the defining color against which to exhibit art) first assumed dominance in 1929 at New York City's MoMA: 'The walls became somewhat lighter upon arriving on American shores and even whiter over the years.' MoMA's 'essence' came to define the museological project:

'Windows were banished so that the semblance of an outside world—daily life, the passage of time, in short, context—disappeared; overhead lights were recessed and emitted a uniform, any-given-moment-in-the-middle-of-the-day glow; noise and clutter were suppressed; a general sobriety reigned' (Filipovic 2014: 45).

It is the normativity of whiteness as a backdrop and condition which defines art's aesthetic, cultural, and political project. It is the ubiquity of its seeming normalcy, its 'sobriety,' which reigns unchecked, and which Bruns has made his defining metier. It is he who has become the white wall, the embodiment of its culture. By riffing on the art world's pretense, by making himself anachronistic and timeless, he reveals the power of whiteness, its insouciant control. No different to a controlled lighting effect, he emits the 'uniform' glow of power. Bruns's strategy is ingenious. He does not speak truth to power; he reveals its conditioning. It is by occupying his

Figure 6. Russell Bruns/'Shane Malone,' stills from *Malone HQ (Coming Soon)* (2018) (courtesy of the artist)

white body—as *idea*, as fantasy—that he reveals the all-consuming reach of whiteness. Normativity is never normal.

What makes Bruns's videos strangely compelling is their compulsive iteration of a single and singular idea: whiteness as a strategy of containment and control. If his videos are neither a mode of socio-political nor auto-critique, it is because the artist is not interested in deconstructing the problem of whiteness, but in revealing its neurotic-yet-complacent conviction. Bruns occupies the space of authority, literally. He lives inside its skin, its muscle, its self-aggrandizing beauty. Why? Because critique in and of itself is insufficient. Rather, what is needed, and rarely performed (because of attendant guilt), is shamelessness. It is by being without shame, without doubt or inherited guilt that Bruns is able to speak to power's ego and id, its conscious and unconscious rapacity, its exclusive cruelty, its monstrous beauty.

What distinguishes Bruns's performance of whiteness is his deadpan wit. His performances are both mirthless and hilarious. He is never, however, the butt of his own joke. Instead, his wit decompresses the assault. We, his audience, are in on the deceleration of power; caught in slow motion in the instant of its manifestation. Bruns is a confidence artist. The heist is physical and ideational. The trick lies in the strategy. Whether his body is exposed (in all its unctuous glory) or sleekly suited (his white shirt rakishly unbuttoned to the navel), Bruns always appears as the consummation of his focus. There is, however, a caveat, a certain seediness, which Bruns assigns to his alter ego. For all his invasiveness, 'Shane Malone' remains a marginal character, a wannabe. Why? Because at this historical moment, white power seeks to sacrifice its own—as a means of shoring up power through a ruthless system of culling and inclusion. Is revisionism a tactical lie? Or was whiteness, as an ideal, writ in the heavens, never about the flesh? Is this why Bruns appropriates and expropriates himself and the world he inhabits?

As Filipovic (2014) reminds us, whiteness is 'no tabula rasa'; it is 'an indelibly inscribed container' which 'confers a halo of inevitability, of fate, on whatever is displayed inside it' (p. 45). Bruns knows this strategy well. He is the white cube, the container, the art world's nefarious ideal. Never 'blank,' never 'innocent,' he is the point-interface-cruX where 'ideology and form meet' (Filipovic 2014: 45). Useful, versatile, commonplace, 'Malone' emerges as whiteness's *bête noire*, its nadir and comeuppance. Bruns takes on immunity by performing it. It is he, paradoxically, who is the answer to Chris Rock's nightmare. If he is able to expose the monstrousness of injustice, it is because he lives inside the contained (yet uncontainable) skin of control and threat. Standing at 'the precipice of great change' (Keys 2020)—as the earth's axis snaps, as the art world begins to confront its misbegotten impunity—Bruns emerges as its blond beast of prey. He arrives upon the scene, always, without pretext or reason. Predatory, callous, inured to feeling (other than a feeling for the self), Bruns's alter ego manifests a peculiar kind of cultural degeneration. The orbit he occupies is Instagram, a domain that feeds narcissism. Inside its mediated skin, the confidence artist walks a tightrope between vapidness and value. Inside an urgent and insurgent din, he chains himself to himself,

cavorts and reclines, as he doubles in on himself and kisses his own reflection.

4. High Noon

From the inside, Bruns has literally, physically, pushed and punctured the envelope of whiteness, not only its skin but its *cultural* DNA: the dementia at the root of its power. He reduces the acategorical to a category, allowing us to reenvision its now compromised possibility. He does so by basking within its high noon—an hour which for Nietzsche marks a state of emergency—its self-regarding reflected glow, its calculatedly normative and ‘uniform, any-given-moment-in-the-middle-of-the-day glow’ (Filipovic 2014: 45). By exposing its aesthetic, ideological, and political manufacture, its seeming seamlessness, he asks others who inhabit its power, who breathe within it, to challenge its rarefied *idea* of itself. Guilt and contrition are insufficient, and besides, they are symptomatic of an impossibility, because whiteness cannot be deterritorialized through the expression of subjective pain. Because it is constitutively amoral, because it thrives beyond the constraints of morality and the dialectic which sustains it, it cannot be reached and compromised reactively, nor even symptomatically. It has designed itself to be immune and impervious to critique. This is why Bruns chooses to parasite its immunity by living within and alongside it. I cannot think of another artist who has displayed this Nietzschean intelligence. What Bruns presents is a future—the future of whiteness—that demands not only a continuous relationship with its indivisibility, but also a discontinuity. This requires making the indivisible and invisible visible in the instant that its immunity is performed.

As Nietzsche reminded us, our high noon is also our midnight. It is a reckoning. Whiteness was never merely a rhetorical ploy; it was a profound secret, an enigmatic absolute; Greek in origin, godlike in effect and affect. As an economy and system of power, it is impossible to localize. For all its noisome omnipresence, whiteness-as-power is a stealth machine which evades the stable, visible, and articulable forms typically assigned to it. That this sleight of hand is poorly understood is at the root of the problem. Whiteness is not merely a racial category; it is not a condition or state that can be grasped relatively, though this relational and Manichean dialectical engagement persists. If whiteness is seen to exist in relation to (and in conflict with) other racial categories, this is so because it allows for its readability. However, whiteness is not only a racial optic and paradigm. It is far more complex and sinister. By placing whiteness at the forefront of a conflict, as the decisive problem, one fails to understand that its power is not fundamentally racial, but teleological; whiteness presupposes triumphalism, always, in the midst of the conflicts it defers to.

It is as an a priori conception that whiteness is inviolable, absolute, and therefore unquestionable. Can it sustain this conceptual immunity? Is it truly an *idea* far greater than race? Is the error not in reducing it to a level and mortal playing field? Otherness is not produced because of whiteness, as is typically assumed, but in spite of it. The relationality is always privative.

This being the case, the diminution of all those who live beyond the pale of whiteness will not be resolved through conflict or resolution, but through the production of a radical alterity which is as discontinuous, as disengaged, as immune to the secular-material-racial fixities which obsess us. This view flies in the face of the urgencies of our time. If it has merit, it lies in the fact that conflict—whether hysterically excessive, violent, or reasonable—cannot unfound a condition that is not solely civilizational and cultural, though civilization and culture have played a vital role in its production. More disturbingly, whiteness is a pathogen—a bacterium, a virus, the root of a sickness, which, thus far, we have merely addressed reactively. By assigning it a body, we suppose that its strength lies therein. Russell Bruns reveals this body and reminds us that it is nothing more than the sleeve of power. To survive its power over us we must radically forget it, thrive in spite of it, render it null and void. One must realise that the pale skin of power is its decoy, never its source. Of course, this is more easily said than lived.

Achille Mbembe (2017) was not kidding, although he has been rebuked for his closing statement to *Critique of Black Reason*: 'Black criticism, the proclamation of difference is only a facet of a larger project—the project of a world that is coming, a world before us, one whose destination is universal, a world freed from the burden of race, from resentment, and from the desire for vengeance that all racism calls into being' (p. 183). We remain in the infancy of this realization. Or worse, in the brutal and barbaric time of denial. Afflicted by literalism, exercised by rage-despair-hopelessness, worse, by the utter collapse of reason, we now find ourselves incapable of realizing its potency. Mbembe presents that which we refuse to vault: power. Instead of striving to overcome power, we seek it avidly. Instead of neutralizing its insidious and inviolable immunity, we want a piece of it. This is why whiteness-as-power will not be vanquished in the foreseeable future; why terror will reign; why those haplessly trapped in the skin of an idea will be victimized; why the institutions that have subsisted in this idea will be compelled to bend, but, I believe, will not 'finally' relent. This is because the reign of whiteness is not solely a race-based logic but an epistemological one, which is systemically designed to absorb difference. Today, at this moment in history, we are confronting our high noon—a glaring moment, devoid of subtlety, driven by a conflict which at its manic root is blind to consequence. For all its bravura, its inflated-neurotic-hysterical divisiveness, it fails to understand the root cause of pain and terror—whiteness as pathogen—which will remain and will not be vanquished. I have seen this pyrrhic battle and subsequent defeat at work in my homeland, South Africa, where a transformative and inclusive vision is anything but; where revolutionary change, the clarion call the world over, is reduced to a calculatedly simplistic algorithm: black against white, system against struggle, in the sanctified name of a cause. Will we ever free ourselves from this enslaving and reductive urgency? Will we ever redeem ourselves from the fetish of whiteness-as-power? Revolutions fail far more often than they succeed. Innovation-as-radical discontinuity is rare. Which is why, tragically, Russell Bruns remains an anomaly.

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Author's bio

Ashraf Jamal is a research associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He is the co-author

of *Art in South Africa: The Future Present* (1996) and co-editor of *Indian Ocean Studies: Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives* (2010). Jamal is also the author of *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art* (2017), *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (2005), *Love Themes for the Wilderness* (1996), and the award-winning short fiction, *The Shades* (2002). His latest book, *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art* (2021), will be published in 2021.

Address: VIAD / Room 120, FADA Building, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

E-mail: ashraf.jamal59@gmail.com.

ORCID: 0000-0002-1132-0769.

ISSN-2633-4534

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