

Jefferson Pinder and the Art of Black Endurance

Isaiah Matthew Wooden

It is an early spring night in 2012, within one of the long, column-filled stretches of Washington D.C.'s now-shuttered Corcoran Gallery of Art. A man dressed in starched slacks, a crisp white buttoned down shirt, and a silver-clip-fastened black tie stands behind a deejay coffin housing two turntables. A vision of black respectability, he moves his hands eagerly and expertly between two red records, scratching them in opportune moments to fill the museum's reverberant halls with sounds and rhythms that call to mind the pulse of hip hop while registering as sonically unique. Before the man sits a long, elevated runway with a seemingly simple but rather intricate apparatus affixed to the top of it. The complexity of the contraption, which is composed of, among other things, wood, metal, plastic, and water and includes multiple spots for sitting, doesn't become fully apparent until six additional men clad in uniforms that copy the deejay's march one by one toward the runway and position themselves atop the device. Hailing from various parts of the D.C. area, the men each strap their feet to the apparatus before grabbing ahold of the padded rods situated in front of their perches and pulling them as if rowing a boat. Their movements are synchronized initially. However, as time passes and individual commitments to sustaining the action waver, that synchronization disintegrates. Collaborative effort morphs into intense competition, in fact. And, after minutes upon minutes of immense exertion, not even the thrill of victory can motivate the men to continue to put their bodies on the line. The action comes to an end accordingly. But not before throwing into sharp relief the tremendous energy often expended to maintain hegemonic masculinities. And not before inviting spectators to reflect on the exploitation and expropriation that are constitutive of racial capitalism. With his time-based endurance piece *Ben Hur* (2012), interdisciplinary artist Jefferson Pinder both powerfully explores and draws viewers to grapple with such complex themes.

First trained as a theatre artist and later as a painter and mixed-media creator, Pinder has focused his art-making practice in recent years on producing video works and performances that, like *Ben Hur*, ponder matters of blackness, labor, exertion, exhaustion, physicality, movement, struggle, and the imbrications there within. The resulting projects have been quite heterogeneous: from a Butoh-inspired escapist experimental film that, in part, contemplates the aftereffects of the Civil Rights Movement—2008's *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*—to a live video performance that presents carefully choreographed breakdance battles as a way to meditate on the dynamics of contemporary uprisings, such as those that emerged in the aftermath of the shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri—2014's *Dark Matter*. (1) "As an interdisciplinary artist, I create performances, video work, and objects that challenge viewers to think critically about our highly polarized society. I explore the tangle of representations, visual tropes, and myths—referencing historical events and invoking cultural symbolism," Pinder explains. (2) Reflected throughout the artist's diverse body of work are his investments in pushing and redrawing formal conventions and boundaries. Many of the artist's projects also betray a commitment to, as he puts it, "poetically open up a dialog" about racial and representational politics. (3)

Activating the black body in performance has proven an especially generative practice for Pinder. In addition to surfacing further the ways that, as Brandi Wilkins Catanese puts it, "blackness and performance are ineluctably linked," and, indeed, demonstrating how, as Nicole Fleetwood argues, embodiments of blackness are "always already troubling to the dominant visual field," Pinder's engagements with the black body have also opened crucial space for the artist to offer searing meditations on the knottiness of America's racial past and present as well as the contingency of black identity and racialized meanings. (4) To echo Michael Martin and David Wall, Pinder deploys the black body as both "a site and subject of expression" as well as "a metaphor and metonym for 'black experience'" in his work. (5) In so doing, he makes evident the ways the black body often serves as an object of fantasies and misrecognitions as well as an archive of racial histories and lived realities. He also potently exemplifies how, as Robyn Brentano writes, "Artists have used performance to challenge our assumptions about the relationship between art and life and, in the discoveries they make at the borders of experience, to find fresh ways to envision the world." (6) Pinder's work no doubt demands that spectators think and desire beyond the deficiencies of the here and now.

Notably, many of Pinder's performances stage actions that test the capacity of the black body to endure, especially when subjected to systems, structures, and apparatuses that, much like the one in *Ben Hur*, seemingly exist solely to engender

its failure. Endurance, of course, has been central to the practices of many performance artists over the years. The 1960s and 70s, in particular, witnessed a burst of work in which artists “highlighted the vulnerability of the body by putting themselves at risk of, at the very least, exhaustion, and at worst, serious injury or death,” as Valerie Cassel Oliver notes. (7) Although often absented from dominant art-historical narratives and records, many of those innovators were visual artists of color who sought to push their bodies to the limit in performance as a way to comment on the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions of marginalized communities in the U.S. and elsewhere. Pinder extends the tradition inaugurated by many of those early creators, who include, among others, pioneering figures like Pope.L and Sherman Fleming. While, like many of his predecessors and contemporaries, he has principally employed his own body in his work—as he does in his *Inertia Cycle*, a series that documents him carrying out various intensely physical tasks such as dragging a 300-pound log, an emblem for the weight of his struggles, through the streets of Baltimore City—several of the performances he has created, including the two this essay sharpens focus on, *Ben Hur* and 2014’s *Thoroughbred*, have seen him enlist others to carry out endurance actions.

To the genealogy of performance art, Pinder has contributed works that not only display a fascination with exposing the black body as a powerful tool for probing urgent existential and socio-cultural questions but that also reflect some of the preoccupations he maintains as an artist who came of age in the aftermath of the rights movements of the 1960s and 70s and who, for a time in the 2000s, was often heralded as an exemplar of what Studio Museum of Harlem chief curator Thelma Golden and artist Glenn Ligon designated as “post-black art.” (8) That designation has always proven an uncomfortable fit for Pinder, and his ambivalence about it has only intensified over the years as he’s shifted the primary focus of his artistic practice away from producing collages and other mixed media objects. He now considers the label outdated, in fact. Still, he acknowledges the tremendous impact it had on generating excitement about his work as he was emerging on the international art scene. As he remarks in a 2015 interview with Jordanna Moore Saggese, “I think the term ‘post-black’ was a phase . . . I’ve been very pleased that no one has referred to me as a ‘post-black’ artist in a while. But I don’t fault the term, as it created a fascination that fueled my career early on.” (9) Beyond generating buzz among curators, collectors, and spectators alike, another benefit of the “post-black” label and Pinder’s uneasiness with it was the motivation it provided for the artist to ponder and pursue a performance practice that would allow him to continue to investigate rigorously issues of form and race. Full of tension, contradiction, retrospection, introspection, and imagination, Pinder’s performance work eschews tidy categorizations.

As this essay's brief considerations of *Ben Hur* and *Thoroughbred* in what follows illuminate, it also actively resists totalizing interpretations.

Drawing loose inspiration from the galley scenes featured in classic Hollywood epics like the one with which it shares a name, *Ben Hur* sees Pinder redeploy a practice that he has returned to at various points throughout his career of utilizing iconic representations of slavery as a formal element in his work as a way to explore and harness their meaning-making possibilities. In the early 2000s, for example, the artist created a series of quilts made of vellum that he suffused with molasses, gunpowder, and rum, materials for which enslaved Africans were frequently traded and sold during the international slave trade. Across each, he imprinted graphics that at once recalled and abstracted the rendering of the eighteenth-century British slave ship *The Brookes* that prominent abolitionist Thomas Clarkson and members of The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade he helped found circulated widely in their efforts to expose the horrors of and to bring an end to the Atlantic trade in black bodies.

Reflecting on the choice to remix the iconic diagram, Pinder notes, "The cold, calculated manner in which the layout of slave ships was drawn has always fascinated me. Packed like sardines, these humans, my ancestors, were cargo." (10) Creating an aesthetically appealing pattern that beckons spectators to take a closer look, Pinder returns attention to this latter fact and, correspondingly, to the routinized violence and inhumanity of racial slavery with his *Slaveship Quilts* (2003). In repeating his take on the iconic eighteenth-century graphic across the quilts 156 times, he compels viewers to contend with the traumatic histories and legacies initiated and instantiated by the cross-oceanic voyages *The Brookes* and similar slave ships took. He also compels us to remember the myriad cruelties and indignities that the enslaved and her descendants—those for whom the 482 black bodies depicted in the remixed graphic stand in as substitutes—have had to endure in order to survive.

Even while its title and stylized movements gesture towards popular filmic representations of the quandaries a fictional hero navigating biblical times and lands face, *Ben Hur*, like *Slaveship Quilts*, also bids viewers to attend to the history of black bondage. Simultaneously, the performance, which is surely one of the artist's most potent and impactful, prompts considerations of the aftereffects of that history, drawing attention to some of the ways it continues to inform and shape the present. In making a spectacle of black male drudgery and exhaustion, *Ben Hur* begs questions about the intensive and mostly inconspicuous labor propping up various dominant logics, norms, and beliefs. As the performers' arresting and initially coordinated movements succumb to their competitive desires to outdo one another, the piece brings particular focus to the hard work required to shore



Jefferson Pinder, *Ben Hur*, 2012. Photo: Pablo Van Winkle. Courtesy Curator's Office, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.



Jefferson Pinder, *Thoroughbred*, 2014, Sector 2337, Chicago, IL. Photo: Vincent Gallagos. Courtesy Curator's Office, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

up the dominance and power of hegemonic masculinities. Jockeying for position within the hierarchy of masculinities, Patricia Hill Collins observes, is a pastime taken up and enjoyed by men of all racial backgrounds. (11) What the performer's attempts and failures to keep up their aggressive actions, in part, serve to illustrate is the ongoing need for a radical reimagining of black manhood and masculinity—and, more broadly, gender, which is always already racialized, and race, which is always already gendered. Somewhat paradoxically, they also serve to underscore the ways that, as Jack Halberstam puts it, "failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world." (12) To be sure, by engaging exhaustion and, concomitantly, failure as aesthetic strategies, *Ben Hur* summons viewers to contemplate *other* aims, aspirations, and modes of being—that is, aims, aspirations, and modes that, even while being vulnerable to them, fail to capitulate to the disciplining logics of normativity. Through its spectacularizations of black exhaustion and failure, the performance also calls forth, though somewhat less overtly, a consideration of the subversive (and, perhaps, though not necessarily, liberatory) possibilities of honing and engaging a practice of refusal.

As a stand-in for the myriad systems and structures sustained by the exploitation and expropriation of black life, labor, and bodies—most notably, racial capitalism—the rowing machine at the center of *Ben Hur* provides a literal platform to rehearse and enact various forms of noncompliance. That each performer initially strives to execute the instructions given to them and, indeed, to disregard the obstacles that the apparatus and their own bodies pose to continuing the prescribed action in perpetuity speaks to the tremendous influence and power that such systems and structures maintain, even among those targeted by their oppressions. Their ultimate refusals of the pressures to endure—no doubt, for some, the result of a conscious process, while, for others, a consequence of a reflexive one—recalls a long history of black embodiments of disobedience. Included in this history is Olaudah Equiano's choice to starve himself to escape the atrocities and despair he witnessed and experienced while being held captive on one of the Middle Passage's many cargo vessels. (13)

Also included in this history is the "array of tactics such as work slowdowns, feigned illness, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers" that, according to Saidiya Hartman, the enslaved deployed to defy "the constraints of everyday life under slavery." (14) The enslaved and her descendants, Hartman observes, have engaged in acts of refusal—acts that index desires to remake the world and, indeed to live life otherwise—even when it has been clear that they

would not or could not fundamentally alter or transform the existing state of things. The slippages between exhaustion and failure, failure and refusal, and refusal and disobedience that *Ben Hur* stages highlight further the range of strategies that have been necessary to thwart the systemic plunder of black life and bodies. They also serve to underscore a theme that reverberates throughout the performance: notably, that survival and endurance, while frequently elided, are not, in fact, one and the same.

Pinder subtly revisits this theme in *Thoroughbred*, a work first presented in 2014 as a part of the Dead Weight Performance Series produced by Lin Hixon and Matthew Goulish of *Every house has a door* at Chicago's Sector 2337. As with *Ben Hur*, the performance resonates with visions of black fugitivity, but also with the contradictions of living, being, and, indeed, creating in what Christina Sharpe terms "the wake." (15) At the beginning of the piece, four black performers station themselves on treadmills that Pinder outfits with clamp lights and rigs to operate via a remote control. Each initially dons running shoes and grey robes with hoodies that at once bring to mind popular images of notable black prize fighters like Muhammad Ali and the iconic self-portrait (or "selfie") of Trayvon Martin that his family and supporters disseminated globally in their efforts to seek justice for the teen's murder by George Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watch guard, in 2012 (Martin, notably, was also wearing a hoodie on the night Zimmerman senselessly shot him). The quartet stares forward blankly until, at the sound of a bell chime, Pinder, who sits unobtrusively at a small table placed behind them, powers each treadmill using the makeshift device he manufactured to control the machines's speeds. Walking measuredly and in sync at first, each discards their robe, revealing their naked bodies—a choice that, much like the matching ensembles that the performers in *Ben Hur* wear, serves to disabuse spectators of the idea that the performers are merely engaging in exercise.

Walking morphs into jogging, and, ultimately, sprinting when additional bell chimes prompt Pinder to further adjust the treadmills's speeds. With the sweat pouring off their bodies making the air moist and musty, and with their contorted faces offering windows into their exhaustion and suffering, the performers continue to struggle to keep up with the corporeal demands of their respective machines. When one, no longer capable of maintaining the action, presses the stop function on the treadmill, turns off the clip light affixed to it, and steps off the apparatus, the quartet becomes a trio, and, soon thereafter, a duo. The piece's final beats feature a lone performer determinedly running before finally giving in to fatigue and, thus, concluding the action. The insights about race, struggle, and survival that the performance yields, of course, continue to linger long after the final performer's clip light goes dark. So, too, do the conversations the per-

formance activates about the incompleteness of the project of emancipation and, correspondingly, the speciousness of discourses of racial progress.

Among the many remarkable things about *Thoroughbred*, of particular note are the interventions the performance stages and vitalizes regarding the various utopic narratives about race that the post-Civil Rights era has spawned. At the core of many of these narratives is a belief that an end to the conundrum of race is both inevitable and impending, despite ample evidence to the contrary, including widespread resistance to any effort to reckon truthfully with the ubiquity and singularity of anti-blackness. In casting literal spotlights on the naked bodies of four black performers as they run as hard and fast as they possibly can while going nowhere and, indeed, while having the conditions arbitrarily become even more daunting just as they are beginning to hit their strides, *Thoroughbred* powerfully renders these narratives fraudulent, illuminating the ways that, for black people in the United States, the struggle, to put it plainly, very much remains real. As Hartman points out, “. . . [B]lack lives are still imperiled by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago”—a racial calculus and political arithmetic that, for example, continues to cast blame on black teens for their own deaths at the hands of bigots. (16) The fight for black liberation is accordingly ongoing. *Thoroughbred* draws spectators to wrestle with these realities and, in so doing, demonstrates the efficacy of Pinder’s deployments of physical exertion in his efforts to elucidate and investigate urgent social and political themes. Simultaneously, like *Ben Hur*, the piece further affirms that there is an art to black endurance.

With an ever-growing body of work that probes the complexities of black history, life, and experience, Pinder continues to perfect the art of manifesting that art. Significantly, for the artist, the beautiful struggle continues.

NOTES:

1. For astute analyses of Pinder’s *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)* and other works, see: Faeda Chatard Carpenter, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

2. Jefferson Pinder, “About Jefferson Pinder,” <http://www.jeffersonpinder.com/about/> (accessed December 1, 2017).

3. Lex Kosieradzki, “Exhibiting Artist Interview: Jefferson Pinder,” *SomArts.org*, <http://www.somarts.org/pinder/> (accessed December 1, 2017).

4. Brandi Wilkins Catanese, *The Problem of the Color[blind]: Racial Transgression and the Politics of Black Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 1; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

5. Michael T. Martin and David C. Wall, "Where Are You From?": Performing Race in the Art of Jefferson Pinder," *Black Camera*, Vol. 2, No. 1: 72–105. Quoted on 73.

6. Robyn Brentano, "Outside the Frame: Performance, Art, and Life," in *Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object, A Survey History of Performance Art in the USA since 1950* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995), 31.

7. Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Putting the Black Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance" in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art Catalogue* (Houston: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2013), 14.

8. See, Thelma Golden, "Post-black" from the Exhibition Catalogue to *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

9. Jordanna Moore Saggese, "Fade to Black: An Interview with Jefferson Pinder," *The International Review of African American Art*, Vol. 25, No. 3: 43–47. Quoted on 43–44.

10. Heather S. Nathans, "Visualizing August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*," *New England Journal of Theatre*, 19A, 1: 75–86. Quoted on 83.

11. See, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

12. Judith (Jack) Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

13. See, Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano: Written by Himself*, ed. Robert J. Allison (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

14. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51.

15. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

16. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

ISAIAH MATTHEW WOODEN is a writer, performance-maker, and assistant professor of performing arts at American University. A scholar of twentieth- and twenty-first century American drama and black expressive culture, Wooden has contributed articles, chapters, essays, reviews, and performative writing to *Callaloo*, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theater*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *PopMatters*, among many others. He was born and raised in the great city of Baltimore, MD.