

filthy dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

A Drop Of Sun Under The Earth: Devan Shimoyama's Mythological Black Queer Masculinity

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Devan Shimoyama, *Every Lover in the Form of Stars (Tears of the Flamingo Prince)*, 2016
Oil, Flashe, collage, rhinestones, glitter, beads and foam on canvas (all images courtesy the artist and Lesley Heller Workspace)

In his seminal 1952 anticolonial text *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes, “I am black; I am in total fusion with the world, in sympathetic affinity with the earth, losing my id in the heart of the cosmos—and the white man, however intelligent he may be, is incapable of understanding Louis Armstrong or songs from the Congo. I am black, not because of a curse, but because my skin has been able to capture all the cosmic effluvia. I am truly a drop of sun under the earth.”

Like Fanon’s near mythic description of blackness, Pittsburgh-based artist Devan Shimoyama’s shimmering and sparkling art reflects this cosmic luminosity with a mesmerizing combination of unlikely materials. Currently on view in his debut New York solo exhibition at the Lower East Side’s Lesley Heller Workspace, Shimoyama interrogates the intersection of blackness, queerness and masculinity.



Pandora , 2016

oil, collage, glitter, color pencil on canvas

In many ways, Shimoyama’s work is reminiscent of Pittsburgh-born artist Cy Gavin’s paintings with his deep black colors depicting the black body, the tension between blackness and queerness and his transformation of his subjects into ethereal and near magical figures. Throughout their creative

output, both artists attempt to locate and represent a frequently silenced and unspoken history with connections to both the personal and political.

Celebratory and defiant, Shimoyama's paintings assert the beauty, complexity and presence of the queer black male body—a body that still remains shockingly underrepresented in mainstream gay culture. Even in 2016, the word “gay” conjures an image of an upwardly mobile, thoroughly middle class white man. Similar to the historically largely white feminist movement, the homonormative version of the gay community continues to restrict or willfully ignore the voices, concerns and bodies of people of color. If they are recognized, they are often fetishized as the perpetual erotic outsider.



He Whispers Light into the Night, 2015
oil, glitter, graphite, spray paint, beads on canvas

Combatting this silencing, Shimoyama places the queer black male body—frequently his own—as the unwavering central figure in his art. Not only simply depicting this body, Shimoyama represents the black male form through the materiality of queerness. Covered in rhinestones, sequins and black glitter, adding a thick and tactile texture to his paintings, Shimoyama transforms the drugstore

treasures of a drag queen's makeup kit into radiant and mysterious beings as seen in the rainbow-projecting sigh of *He Whispers Light Into The Night*. Rather than a symbol of monetary wealth and consumerist romanticism like Andy Warhol's Diamond Dust paintings, Shimoyama's shining materials present a self-fashioned, self-made performance of intersectional identity.

Eyes also play a significant role in Shimoyama's paintings whether the disembodied collaged photographic eyes floating through works like *Daphne's Prayer* or the inlayed jeweled eyes of *He Whispers Light Into The Night*. With their multiplicity of gazes, the eyes in his paintings seem to project a sense of witnessing, agency and power.



Daphne's Prayer, 2016

oil, color pencil, spray paint, glitter, collage, and jewelry on canvas

Not content to exist in realism, Shimoyama's series of self-portraits at Lesley Heller Workspace represent the black queer body as surreal, ever-changing and mystical. While some of his paintings like *Every Lover In The Form of Stars (Tears of the Flamingo Prince)* render the body in a rich black skin tone, other works also paint the body in a fantastical range of colors from vibrant green to purple. Adding to this sense of surrealism, the bodies are typically placed in forested and ambiguous

landscapes, giving the paintings, as well as their subjects, the feeling of existing both out of time and place.

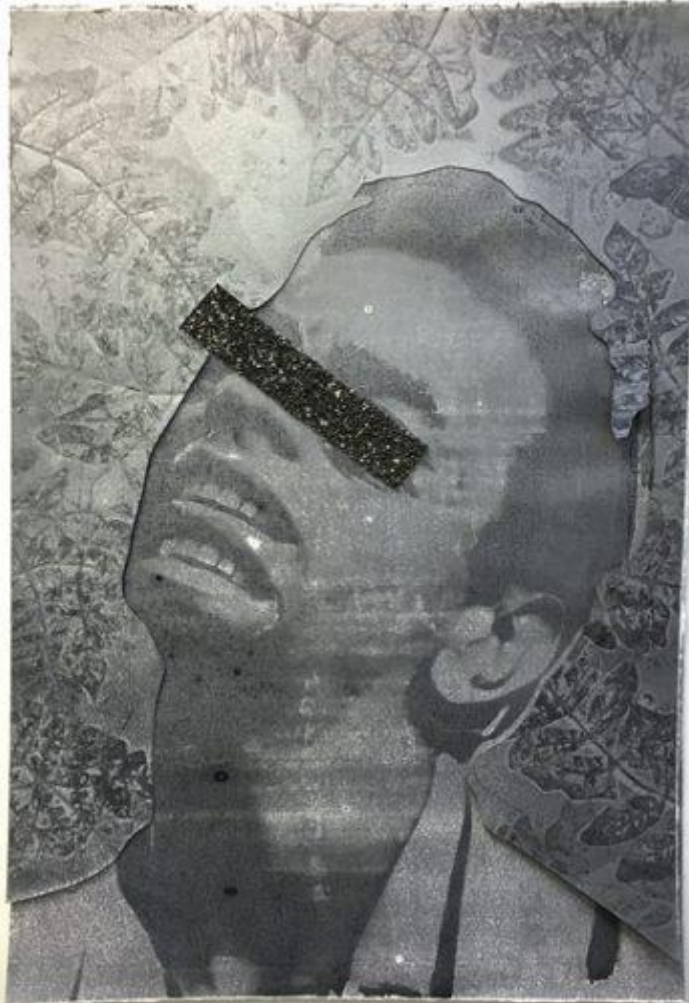
Describing his subject as “a creature of both mystery and magic in a developmental stage of locating one’s origins” in his artist statement, Shimoyama’s paintings look to the mythological as a means to glimpse queer utopia—a utopia before history, before the preconceived binary of masculinity/femininity, before white supremacy and of fluid desire before sexual identities. For black queer individuals, history is mostly inadequate. While, sure, a limited history exists, most black queer experiences pre-20th century and even well into the 20th century went unspoken, undocumented and unrecognized for generations. By looking to folktales, fairytales and allegories in his work, Shimoyama reaches beyond these restricted histories to a fantastical realm of queer potentiality and performative possibility, creating his own formational origin narratives.



Idol Eclipsed (Prince), 2016, monotype print and collage

Even though Shimoyama’s self-portraits return to mythological to find a unique form of black masculine performance, his series of prints entitled *Idol Eclipsed* delves into more recent musical icons of queer black masculinity—Frank Ocean, Prince and Johnny Mathis. Shimoyama renders all

three generations of black queer idols with glittery bars over their eyes like a blindfold. Even though all three men certainly created their own form of masculine presentation, each found mainstream success and crossover appeal to a huge swath of audiences.



Idol Eclipsed (Johnny), 2016
monotype print and collage

While Prince and Frank Ocean are certainly no surprise as symbols of black queerness, Shimoyama's inclusion of heartthrob Johnny Mathis is undeniably unexpected. A product of an earlier era, Mathis has always been elusive about his assumed queer sexuality. However, our preeminent filth elder John Waters points to Mathis as one of his role models. As Waters writes, "I wish I were Johnny Mathis. So mainstream. So popular. So unironic, yet perfect. Effortlessly boyish at over seventy years old, with a voice that still makes all of America want to make out. Heavenly, warm."

Well, that settles that.



For Tamir, 2016
chains, driftwood, acrylic paint and rhinestones

Even though *Eclipsed Idols* presents a dialogue with the public personas of three well-known musical stars, Shimoyama's moving *For Tamir* perhaps best and most memorably engages with the true vulnerability of black masculinity in contemporary America, as well as the innumerable losses endured by the community. A sculptural tribute to Tamir Rice—the 12-year old boy shot and killed by Cleveland police, *For Tamir* is a rhinestone-encrusted piece of driftwood that hangs from the ceiling. Resembling both a throne and a hauntingly empty swing set, *For Tamir* acts as a monument to and a reminder of the dangers for black men and children in America. For all the surrealism and mythological references in Shimoyama's exhibition, he finally asserts with *For Tamir* that these performative presentations come with life-and-death risks.

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