

Mirrors Never Lie: Reflections on the Artwork of Noah Latif Lamp

A mirror is a curious thing. It displays a representation of reality that is merely a reflection and not necessarily the complete truth. Holding up a mirror to ourselves is normal and somewhat practical. Yet holding up a mirror to others can be perilous. If we are not ready or able or comfortable enough to see what is rightly reflected back to us, we can lash out in unpredictable ways. A mirror held up to others can be interpreted as an act of violence.

Yet this is the job of the artist. All at once, he is activist and terrorist, helping others to come to a greater understanding about themselves. He is a mirror of who we are and who we've become, whether we like what he is willing to show us or not.

Artist Noah Latif Lamp is one such mirror.

Lamp grew up a bit of a nomad. A man mixed of culture, race and identity, he was sure of little else but the fact that he was going to become an artist. Raised in the company of artists, becoming one seemed normal, but it wasn't wholly decided until an epiphany at age 18 solidified within him the knowledge that art was the only thing he was going to do for the rest of his life.

One of his first major performances involved branding himself as a "rite of passage" in an art world that had yet to take him seriously. The brand's indelible mark, and the skin upon which it has been embossed, was sold and remains a part of Lamp's body until his death. While branding harkens back to a bygone era of enslaved peoples in the literal sense, it is also a nod to our current enslavement to the consumer brands that dominate our modern world.

And it is just this theme of time that Lamp plays with, again and again, throughout his *oeuvre*. In fact, his upcoming exhibition *Killing Time* might well be considered the culmination of his growth as an artist to-date. While his unique conceptual understanding of the world has always been absolute, communicating his views to the world have, at times, been met with confusion and controversy.

One such controversial touchstone in his career was his installation *Eden*, where he orchestrated the planting of marijuana seeds around Amsterdam. Fevered political backlash and the subsequent, inevitable media coverage resulted in a polarising view of the city, where the romanticism its inhabitants maintain for one of the world's leading cultural hubs was met directly by its seedier reputation. By visually turning Amsterdam into the "weed paradise" many holiday-goers take the city for, Lamp accomplished his goal to strip away the façades we construct as a society. Clearly, some did not appreciate the effort.

Lamp rationalises this point succinctly when discussing his motivation behind branding himself: "It is very important, with all work, that it hits something in you, behind those social layers. It came from reflecting on reality, in a way, that people have an emotional confrontation with themselves." And it is precisely the pursuit to generate those moments for his audience that spark Lamp's motivation and creative fire.

To illustrate this, as part of *Killing Time*, Lamp has collected over three litres of his own reproductive fluid. *Immaculata*, a cryogenic freeze tank filled with Lamp's sperm is, at first, a jarring representation of reality in both the object itself and the multiple acts that led to its creation. The artist views his work through the lens of the Immaculate Conception, the act that brought a Catholic Jesus into the world. Lamp himself is not devout, but the parallels to religion are clear: technology makes miracles possible.

Yet Lamp's body of work also forewarns us of the potential of a terrible fate wrought by technology. Another showpiece, *Open Source*, is a ready-made NFT comprising his own personally-collected digital data. The work highlights the lack of privacy we all endure while simultaneously taking the power back from online corporations and, as Lamp puts it, "cutting out the middle man."

So, then, we are confronted with an ambiguous dichotomy regarding the merits and drawbacks of technology. But that's kind of the point. As Lamp confides, "Our thinking is so abstract now that we need new ways to come into contact with our emotions. It's not about creating controversy. It's not about shocking people. It's about showing people the truth."

Throughout *Killing Time*, Lamp displays ambiguous truths in myriad ways to provoke emotion. His portrait of a newborn Adolf Hitler, his photograph of Jeffrey Epstein's front door, the image of a terrorist's hand as if covering up the lens of a camera all reference a gruesome reality through subtext. The implications of these works are more harrowing than the works themselves. They are radical, the artist asserts, without being visually radical.

Noah Latif Lamp's career has been an exercise in reflection. And, as a cultural revolutionary, he's surprisingly grounded. "I find that humans are my culture," Lamp explains when prodded about his personal journey. "We all go through the same things and try to say the same things, but because of culture – because of identity – we explain them differently. We explain them out of our context. What I try to do is to explain them out of context, without all the cultural baggage that comes with it."

If that's not a mirror worth holding up to others, I'm not sure what is.

Noah Latif Lamp's Killing Time will be open to the public from 16th September to 16th October at the Praxis Art Gallery in Basel, Switzerland. For tickets and information on the month-long, free exhibition, contact art@praxisart.org.