

Wake the Town and Tell the People

April 24th — August 15th 2016

by Suzanne Seesman

“The skin is also spatial in the sense that it expands and contracts. Indeed, the skin, as bodyscape, is inhabited by, as well as inhabiting, the space of the nation and the landscape...As a result, the skin is not simply in the present (in the here or the now); in so far as it has multiple histories and unimaginable futures, it is worked upon, and indeed, it is worked towards.”^[1]

- Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey

At eight-and-a-half feet tall and six feet wide, the stack of twelve speakers, three horns, and fifteen tweeters that make up Cosmo Whyte’s *Wake the Town and Tell the People* is a wall of amplification. As the sculpture’s plywood housing climbs to an arc, it curves steadily out and overhead, alluding to a cresting wave. Taking its title from the refrain of Jamaican recording artist U Roy’s 1970 hit *Wake The Town*, it communicates music’s ability to bombard, wash over, and move through human bodies.

Whyte’s sculpture lends its borrowed name to Mana Contemporary’s Spring 2016 exhibition, organized in cooperation with The International Sculpture Center, on view in the 5th floor gallery from April 24th to August 15th. The exhibition highlights the work of eighteen emerging artists. Like the show’s eponymous sculpture, and the dancehall anthem before it, the featured works operate imperatively. Each sculpture demands that we pay attention to our current moment and signals us to prepare for the future.

Yasmine Kasem’s *El Qamesha El Wahida (The Lonely Cloth)*, Nathan Clark’s *Monument: 3/28/15*, and Aylan Couchie’s *Sweat Lodge* use recognizable forms to capture our attention. A headscarf in cast bronze, a minimalist Tony

Smith-like monument, and a domed structure are artifacts that position us according to our familiarity with them. These object-images present what we know (or think we know), and require us to determine who we are (or think we are) in relationship to them. They start to do what sound artist and author Drew Daniel, writing for *The WIRE* magazine in the 2011, calls “hailing.” Borrowing this term from the early 20th century French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, Daniel uses “hailing” to describe the way in which pop and subcultural anthems use recognition to call us to attention and compel us to perform according to “identity politics as usual.”^[2] Things that hail us force us to speak and act in ways that are both familiar to, and determined by, existing regimes of power.

The sculptures of *Wake the Town and Tell the People* do call to us with familiar signs, but not to the purpose of easy identification. In these works, means do not match ends. Recognizing their signals, we stop and pull up close to them. Once there, in what we assume to be the proper stance, ready for what we expect will happen next, a shift occurs.

In Jamezie’s *5 minutes, 80 lbs.*, a message appears in deep rosy tones across the contours of two open palms:

"I am above and beyond the limits of your vocabulary, the shortness of your sight." The palms are presented face up, from above, with their outer edges pushed together. This vantage point positions us for identification. These hands could be our own, but the texts' accusatory tone places us elsewhere, outside, or against. Questions arise. Who is the "I"? Who is the "you" in possession of these words and this vision? Using text and imagery to register a protest against the constrictions of language and vision-based representation, Jamezie is attempting to turn the hailing process against itself. The tension and pressure of this process is registered both literally and figuratively through the skin.

For Drew Daniel, sound is the foil to music. Incomprehensible, confounding, and unorganized, it is sound alone that is capable of "blur[ring] the edges of any self that the subject-machine cares to hail." And, as such, the ear is the entry point and target for positively troubling forces. As Daniel puts it: "By contrast to vision, sound queers identity, and in the process offers a way out of the hailing game. It does so by being an involuntary solvent of the self. As everyone knows you cannot close your ears."^[3]

The artists of *Wake The Town and Tell the People* see the potential for disruption as far more expansive and open. For them, skin, and the skin-like barriers of the object world, are the entry ways, to which we should turn our attention.

In attempts to examine, complicate, and interrupt representational regimes of the powers that be, these artists show us the permeable surface layers of our world. Beneath Kasem's *El Qamesha El Wahida (The Lonely Cloth)*, is an outlined open bodily form. Under Clark's *Monument: 3/28/15* is the expansive terrain that dwarfs it; the interior of Aylan Couchie's *Sweat Lodge* directs our awareness to the health of absorbing and perspiring human bodies.

Throughout *Wake The Town and Tell the People*, sculptures grapple with constraint at the limits of language, representation, or architecture. Skin bruises, bodies sweat, and clay slumps. Fibers quiver, and fabric is stretched taught. For now, things cohere. These artists have used sculpture to show us the conditions of our current moment. Ours is a moment under pressure. Ours is a moment not of stillness, but of vibration. We are to "wake the town and tell the people" to be ready and aware of an imminent shift, a possible release. And, isn't this, after all, what sound is made of: shifts in material vibration?

[1] Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey. *Thinking through the Skin*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2001. Print.

[2] Daniel, Drew, *All Sound Is Queer* The *WIRE*. London. Issue 333: November 2011.

[3] Ibid.