

For Keioui Keijaun Thomas, the Body Becomes a Vessel

The artist's installations, now on view in Manhattan, showcase her arduous journey from tokenism to transcendence.

By Laura Zornosa

July 13, 2021

Keioui Keijaun Thomas is a bath taker.

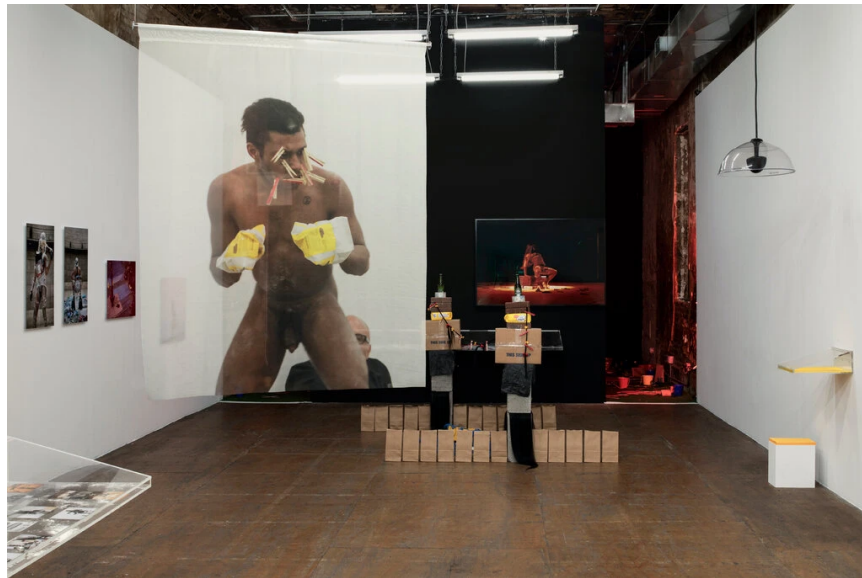
This Brooklyn-based artist takes three baths a day: one in the morning, one midday to reset and one at night. Usually, she arranges her crystals, flowers and essential oils and flips on a podcast, often true crime.

In late June, at an artist residency in rural Wisconsin, she bathed overlooking a cornfield. Natural springs throughout the grounds' 1,000 acres fed a hose that filled an outdoor tub.

Thomas, 31, carves out space and time to move through life with care. That sense of intention defines her solo exhibition at Participant Inc., a nonprofit art space on the Lower East Side. She typically creates live performance and multimedia installations, which she then tours as evening-length performances.

The title of this show, "Hands Up, Ass Out," alludes to the protest slogan "hands up, don't shoot," which took hold after the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. The phrase hangs heavy with submission — but Thomas is quick to invert it.

"There's relinquishing of power," she said. "But then to be 'ass out' is like stepping back into your power. Because it's like this is *my space*."



An installation view, "Keioui Keijaun Thomas: Hands Up, Ass Out." Daniel Kukla

"Hands Up, Ass Out," curated by Shehab Isis Awad, will culminate on July 18 with a 24-hour premiere of Thomas's latest video, "I Looked Up at the Sky and I, Imagined All of the Stars Were My Sisters." It will be shown on the gallery's website, Participant After Dark.

The exhibition spans seven years of work, from 2014 to 2020, a time when the artist presented her pieces across the globe, from Mexico City to Finland. In 2014, she graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with her master's degree. "The Poetics of Trespassing," her thesis work — included in the Participant show — landed her an invitation to the Spill Festival in London. Robert Pacitti, the founder and then-artistic director of the festival, first saw her work in Chicago.

“I was instantly struck by the intensity of her presence. In performance mode, she has a tangible agency which fills a room — really, it’s electric,” Pacitti said in an email. “There is a constant reconfiguring of space, physically, politically, emotionally — there is transformation at play. And all presented with such strength, and yet also a unique grace.”

Step into Participant Inc. and the first thing that greets you is silence. “The Poetics of Trespassing” contains three videos, originally performed as one piece and later filmed for camera. They play without audio on three Sony box monitors.



“Window View: Covered in Lube.” Loaded symbols like flour highlight the materiality of our economy and its dependence on disposable labor. Daniel Kukla

This early work explores “thingliness,” as Thomas puts it — how Black bodies are used as disposable labor and domestic service. In one video performance, Thomas becomes a broom itself, sweeping flour from the floor, first with her hands, then with her mouth, the head of a broom clenched firmly between her teeth.

In “The Poetics,” she said, “I began thinking about ideas of visibility, hypervisibility, thinking about, what does it mean to trespass versus pass in the world, looking versus seeing people?” Thomas added, “And this idea of Blackness outside of a binary structure or codependent structure.”

Thomas identifies as Black, trans and femme — converging identities that have been reduced, exploited and oppressed throughout history. “Hands Up, Ass Out” maps the artist’s journey from that tokenism to transcendence.

Loaded symbols like flour and coffee highlight the materiality of our economy and its dependence on disposable labor. Her recurring use of coffee grounds evokes plantations and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In one video, Thomas slowly pastes coffee filters onto her bare chest with a paintbrush, her movements dripping with intention.

“The body is central to everything,” Thomas said of her work. “But it also is, like, the body is meant to be shape-shifting. And, for me, like a new language.”

This focus on the body — from references of physical labor to a hanging sheer panel of a nude Thomas — deliberately connects the dots between the three core pieces of the show. The artist draws from the physicality and athleticism that have played a prominent role in her life.

Growing up in Florida, she played football starting at seven and *almost* became a collegiate track runner. But she gravitated toward art throughout her childhood and ended up at the School of Visual Arts in New York instead.

In the second section of the show, “Distance is Not Separation” uses the body as a vessel for thinking about identities — like Thomas’s — that are often “boxed in.”

“The body is always adapting to what language needs to be read,” Thomas said. “In many ways, the body is transcribing that for me.”



“Hair Line Towers: Hang Me Out to Dry,” which references the caretaking work that Black women and femmes often take on. Daniel Kukla

In the center of the floor sits another sculpture. Twin towers of cinderblocks, bags of sugar, red bricks and full bottles of Heineken beer form a bridge of sorts. Between them hang strands of Black hair, sporting yellow flower hair clips and red twin-bead ponytail ties, which exude physicality, too. The work references the role of the hairdresser: Caretaking work — often undertaken by Black women and femmes, Thomas seems to say — cracks open moments of release from tokenization through its intimacy.

Awad, whom Thomas refers to as a “sister-friend,” formed a bond through the value they place on care. Awad’s curatorial agency, Executive Care, revolves around trust, slowness and mutual aid. The pair met two years ago at Nowadays, a bar in Ridgewood, Queens, where Thomas was working the door. Collaborating felt natural to Awad, who identifies as nonbinary, trans femme.

Thomas “knows exactly how her work functions so well to the point that it gives you — it gave *me* language to know myself better,” Awad said. “It gave me language to know, to move around the world and inhabit my body even more authentically.”

By the time Thomas created “My Last American Dollar” — the chronological end of her work — she felt closest to her own authenticity. The show traces a path from subjugation to emancipation by the last room.

“It takes you from moments of bleak, stark reality of living in a Black, talented body into taking you to the party,” Awad said. “The party that we’re hosting for ourselves, because we’re not gonna wait any longer for someone to give a party for us.”



“Middle Passage: After the Party,” which traces a path from subjugation to emancipation. Daniel Kukla

“My Last American Dollar” opens onto a literal party scene. White duct tape marks the haphazard lines of a football field — the place where Thomas felt most free as an athlete. The field is strewn with foil confetti, which Thomas said is a kind of shielding armor for those who completed the journey.

The AstroTurf installation, bathed in red light, turns the football field into a safe harbor, a manifestation of Thomas feeling comfortable in her own skin, as an artist and as a person. At the same time, its video components reference the Middle Passage — the arduous journey of the artist’s ancestors. In this sense, the field is a place of commune, where people of color come together to celebrate arrival.

On a screen in front, Thomas stands atop two overturned shopping baskets, both featuring bathroom-style logos of cartoon women. She poses, triumphant and free, in front of crashing waves.

“I really want people to come into the show with this idea that this is where we are,” Thomas said. “This space is for you. This space is built for us to come and take up space.”

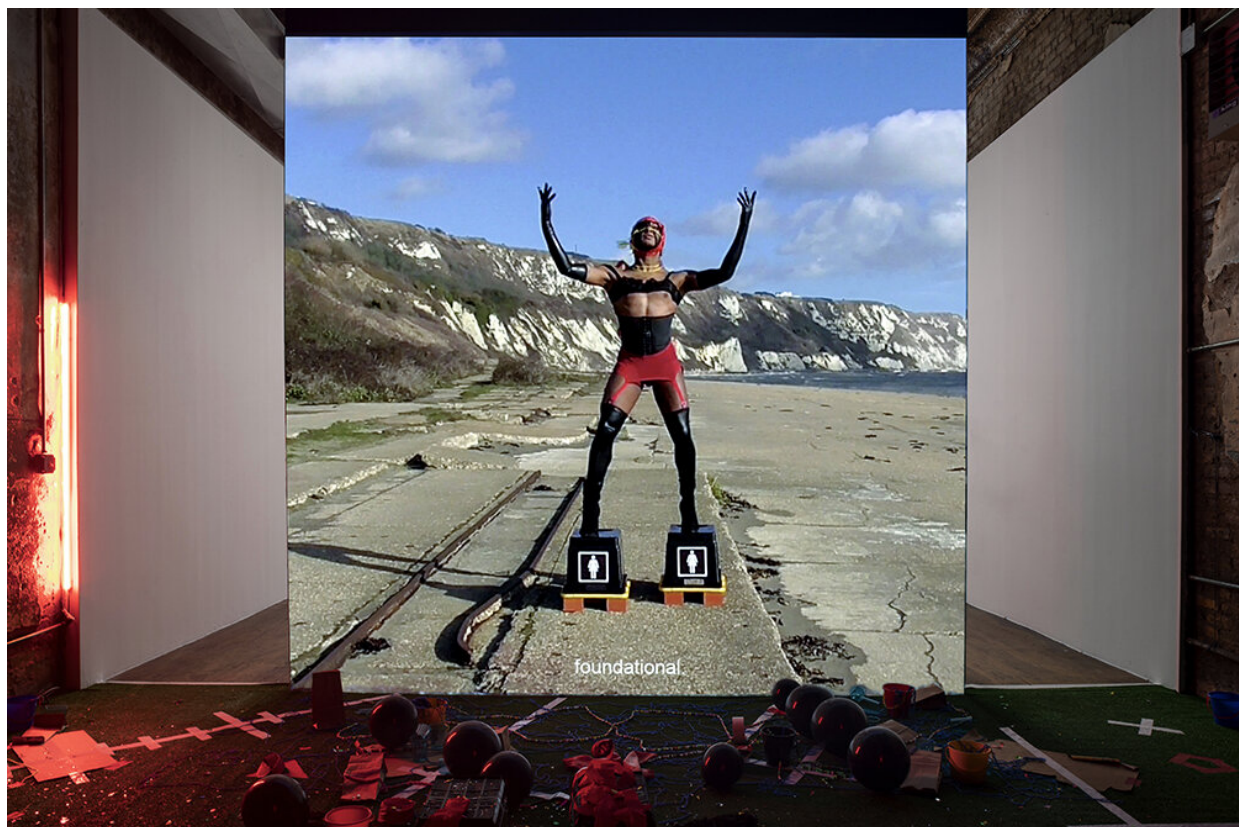
Keioui Keijaun Thomas: Hands Up, Ass Out

Through July 18 at Participant Inc., 253 E Houston St # 1, Manhattan. participantinc.org.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: The Body Becomes a Transcendent Vessel

JUL 12 EXHIBITION REVIEW: KEIOUI KEIJUAN THOMAS "HANDS UP, ASS OUT"

REVIEWS (/CULTURE/CATEGORY/REVIEWS)



In the Reflection of Ancient Tides, 2018 (still), in *Keioui Keijuan Thomas: Hands Up, Ass Out*, curated by Shehab Awad as Executive Care*, 2021 at Participant Inc, New York. Photography by Daniel Kukla.

Written by Jan Alex (<https://museemagazine.com/search?q=jan%20alex>)

In her first long-form solo exhibition, NYC-based multidisciplinary artist Keioui Keijuan Thomas brings a remarkable artistic chapter to an end and teases at what is to come. The exhibit, "Hands Up, Ass Out", now on display at Participant Inc. (<http://participantinc.org>), is a captivating and evocative experience, one which captures an artistic perspective rooted in self-expression and an attention to every layer of the creative process. Through this engaging and provocative exhibit and its

accompanying performances, Thomas offers a unique and immensely creative perspective on the experience of a young, black, LGBTQ+ person in a society still marred by tokenization and oppression.

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Representing a culmination of her body of work from the last 6 years, the exhibit is the result of the longtime collaboration between Thomas and curator Shehab Awad. The body of work on display is intended to bring this chapter in Thomas’s artistic career to a close, while simultaneously hinting at what comes next. Composed of elements both new and old, the exhibit brings together fresh iterations of past performances, image-making, writings, and choreographies to provide a cohesive window into Thomas’s artistic journey.



Keioui Keijuan Thomas: *Hands Up, Ass Out*, curated by Shehab Awad as Executive Care*, 2021, installation view at Participant Inc, New York. Photography by Daniel Kukla.

The exhibit is both archival and performative, a collection of multidisciplinary fragments, which are overwhelming in their variety at first, but meld together into a narrative of affirmation and transcendence. Designed to be experienced chronologically, the exhibit begins with a three-channel silent video installation that reflects on performative works by the artist from 2014. Mounted on wooden pedestals, three old-fashioned Sony Trinitron monitors offer a window into the beginnings of this artistic chapter and into Thomas’s deeply personal brand of performance. The lack of audio/voice seems an intentional absence, as if to prime the audience for what is to come. The statue sitting amidst the monitors, identical to that being assembled onscreen, a physical reconnection between past and present.



BLACK BODIES, 2018 (still, detail), in *Keioui Keijuan Thomas: Hands Up, Ass Out*, curated by Shehab Awad as *Executive Care**, 2021 at Participant Inc, New York. Photography by Daniel Kukla.

The interconnection, the subtle reminders of what was just seen, and her ability to plant her words and performances in the minds of the viewer. These are perhaps the most striking features of Thomas’s work. The trail of ephemera, photos, performance, writings, and sound that runs through the exhibit is both subtle and unavoidable, it captures and informs the mind and propels you along as you make baby steps towards understanding the remarkable vision of an artist who seems to have surpassed affirmation and transcended a need to be understood.

“Hands Up, Ass Out”, is on display at Participant Inc. (<http://participantinc.org/seasons/season-19/hands-up-ass-out>) until July 18th, and will culminate with a 24 hour live stream of Thomas’s new performance “*I Looked Up at the Sky and I, Imagined All of the Stars Were My Sisters*”.

Keioui Keijuan Thomas (/culture/tag/Keioui+Keijuan+Thomas), Participant Inc.
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