

# The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

## M. Lamar: ‘Negrothotic, a Manifesto, the Aesthetics of M. Lamar’

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 18, 2014

With “Negrothotic, a Manifesto, the Aesthetics of M. Lamar,” the composer M. Lamar offers a bracing alternative to the dispiriting traffic in blandly competent art clogging the New York gallery system these days. Surrealistic, campy and ferociously expressionist, Mr. Lamar’s multimedia work is a heady blend of music, performance, film and political allegory that grapples with the legacy of slavery in America.

The twin brother of Laverne Cox, the transgender actor known for her role in “Orange Is the New Black,” Mr. Lamar gravitated to radical post-punk, goth and heavy metal music scenes while a student at the San Francisco Art Institute. He studied sculpture in Yale’s M.F.A. program before dropping out to concentrate on music and performance.

“Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche, Part Two, Overseer,” a 10-minute, black-and-white film is projected on one wall in the darkened gallery. Harking back to the days of early silent movies, the film proceeds in a dreamlike series of vignettes accompanied by the sound of Mr. Lamar singing in a keening, operatic soprano. Playing the role of a mysterious black man called the Overseer, he’s a magnetic, androgynous figure with long, shiny hair, heavy eye makeup and a voluminous, raggedy cloak. In the most extreme scene, he subjects a group of naked young white men to a sadomasochistic ritual based on Robert Mapplethorpe’s famous photograph “Self-Portrait With Bullwhip.”

In a five-minute music video shown on a flat screen, Mr. Lamar directs naked young white men to kneel and put their heads and hands into a pillory, where they are forced to read copies of Toni Morrison’s “Beloved,” Hegel’s “Phenomenology of Spirit” and “The Cornel West Reader.” With these and other works, Mr. Lamar plumbs the depths of all-American trauma with visionary verve.

### **M. LAMAR**

#### **‘Negrothotic, a Manifesto, the Aesthetics of M. Lamar’**

*Participant Inc.*

*253 East Houston Street,*

*Lower East Side*

*Through Oct. 12*

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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## NY Culture

Updated Sept. 19, 2014 10:45 p.m. ET

### Fall Forward: Insiders' Picks for the Arts & Entertainment Season

From 'St. Matthew Passion' to the Passion of 'Scandal,' What 35 New Yorkers Recommend You See, Read and Hear This Autumn

#### *Justin Vivian Bond*

*Justin Vivian Bond is a writer, singer, painter and performance artist who will present "Love Is Crazy" at Florence Gould Hall on Sept. 25.*

As a part of the ongoing exhibition "NEGROGOTHIC, A Manifesto," the video artist, sculptor, countertenor and composer M. Lamar will be presenting the world premiere of a new requiem, "The Tree of Blood," at Participant Inc . on Oct. 5. M. Lamar's challenging, beautiful and intelligent work appropriates provocative historical imagery to stimulate discussion around the issues of race, sexuality, dominance, submission and subjugation in contemporary America.



## The Plantation Is Still Here: Inside M. Lamar's 'Negrogothic, A Manifesto'

October 3, 2014  
By [Emily Colucci](#)



Discipline 2. *All images and videos courtesy of the artist*

“The plantation is still here. The slave ship is still here. It’s just now in prisons. My work makes these connections.” That’s how the artist, musician, and performer M. Lamar explains his provocative exhibition *Negrogothic, a Manifesto: The Aesthetics of M. Lamar*, which is currently on view at Participant Inc. in New York.

Filled with imagery of whips, sadomasochism, cotton plants, and a penis guillotine, *Negrogothic*, which runs until October 12, portrays Lamar’s multi-layered examination of the continued social, political, and sexual resonances of these historical traumas. While perhaps best known in pop culture as actress Laverne Cox’s twin brother who also played the role of *Orange Is The New Black*’s “Sophia” before her transition, Lamar is a highly trained countertenor. Through his music, he has commented on the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, slave ships, and lynching. It comes down to a chilling and beautiful distillation of influences as varied as opera, spirituals, blues, and black metal.

Maintaining his interest in using music as a medium to investigate contemporary representations of blackness, black masculinity, and interracial desire, *Negrogothic* presents two surreal black-and-white videos: *Badass Nigga*, *the Charlie Looker of Psalm Zero Remix* and *Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche, Part 2, the Overseer*, which features Lamar as a ghostly black

figure placing whips into the asses of bent-over white men while singing an operatic love song to an overseer. With large stunning stills printed on canvas from each video lining the gallery walls, the exhibition also includes several unsettling props, haunting remnants from the filming of the videos. In addition, Lamar will perform a new requiem entitled “Tree of Blood,” a narrative piece combining his songs on lynching, on October 5.



Touching on topics ranging from his disdain for Beyoncé to the hyper-eroticization of the black body in Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*, and copious quoting of iconic black feminist theorist bell hooks, who Lamar calls “his North Star,” my conversation with Lamar was illuminating and exhilarating due to his utter fearlessness in discussing issues surrounding race and sexuality that are often repressed.

As we sat in the back room of Participant Inc., Lamar told me he titled the show, his first solo exhibition, after a term he created to describe his own work.

“I started using the term *Negrogothic* because I was reading about the Gothic novel in which there’s this blending of romance and horror. That seemed to be this thing that I had been doing in my work for a long time. And a more obvious thing: I’m a goth kid. I’m very invested in goth, metal, and punk subcultures and taking them with me.”

While he’s long been a fan of goth music and played in bands before his solo career, Lamar was also drawn to opera, particularly black sopranos such as Leontyne Price, Jessye Norman, and Marian Anderson. “What they did with their voices was almost like science fiction to me,” recalled Lamar. “They were in this very European form, but you could tell they came out of the gospel tradition.”

The defining moment in Lamar’s conception of his own ability to articulate a radical social critique through an operatic style came after hearing Diamanda Galás’s album *Plague Mass*. He was introduced to Galás’s work through his college roommate at the San Francisco Art Institute, and Lamar said, “That was the moment for me when everything came together—my rage since I was a kid and the urgency to say something about injustice in an operatic form.”

With songs such as “Swinging Low” and “In the Belly of the Ship,” which reference the horrors of lynching and the Middle Passage, Lamar’s music uncovers the hidden histories still prevalent in American culture, a devastating and significant theme that remains at the forefront of *Negrothic*. Pointing to Toni Morrison, whose novel *Beloved* appears in the *Badass Nigga* video, as an inspiration for his own mining of America’s painful past, Lamar observed, “I’ve always read a lot about history and have been troubled by the absences of black people’s contributions, which is a certain kind of violence. I’ve always been interested in creating these narratives in the way that Toni Morrison writes in the margins of what wasn’t written into history—all these forgotten things.”



Lamar is also concerned with exposing the political aspects of desire, particularly interracial desire. Pointing to examples from the millions of porn hits for the search “big black cock” to basketball announcers describing the players as “black studs” to a naked Jamie Foxx in *Django Unchained*, Lamar said, “I always like to say white men have an obsession with black bodies and black penises. I think how the black penis operates in the white imagination is a fiction. It’s this constructed thing with a mythic place. I think that’s the other side of the coin to black men being shot down in the street. This kind of thing in the imagination of white [police] officers or white people in general. And black people have internalized this fiction of the oversexualized black men.”

Through reoccurring scenes of sadomasochism and subjugation in his videos and archival prints on canvas, often using the whip as a symbol for a black penis, Lamar shows how sexual practice echoes these stereotypes, histories, and constructions of interracial desire. He identifies as a “practicing homosexual”—rejecting the largely “bourgeois and white” aspects of the term gay—and is in a happy long-term relationship with a white man.

“I’ve been out in the sexual realm and I have been in scenarios where people are living out various things that haven’t been spoken,” Lamar said. “As a first step—and we are still unfortunately in a first step about talking about all this stuff—at least if you have it out there, we can maybe get to a different place with it. Some people try to make desire apolitical. You can’t control who you love but you can analyze why.”



Central to *Negrogothic* and perhaps the most complex yet illustrative example of the artist's detailed examination of the American psyche is his video *Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche, Part 2, the Overseer*. The second section of a hopefully full-length film, the video has its genesis in Lamar's interest in combining the ideas of Michel Foucault's panopticon with Frantz Fanon's understanding of internalized racism and the white gaze. However, the film took a more concrete turn once Lamar learned about the tragic story of Willie Francis, a black teenager who was executed twice in 1946 and 1947.

"The first attempt to execute Willie Francis was unsuccessful because the police officer was drunk setting up the electric chair, which was passed around different Southern cities," Lamar said. "If that had worked, we probably wouldn't know his name. It was a question of cruel and unusual punishment. It went to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court said, 'Go ahead and try again.' The NAACP started talking to him and it came out he had a sexual relationship with the man he was accused of killing, a 53-year old white dude who owned a pharmacy. That was the concrete story that led to the show becoming more developed."



Fascinated by this story, Lamar attempted to research the possibilities of the history of homosexuality on plantations. Finding little to no information on the subject, Lamar decided to create a fictional realm of historical desire in his video.

“My work is invested in fiction,” he told me. “I kind of hate documentary work in a way. I’m interested in it as a genre, but there’s something about the notion of reality that I think is very limiting. For me, it’s very much about the imagination and the imaginary realm.”

Through these imagined dynamics of desire and sexuality, Lamar clearly references Robert Mapplethorpe’s censored and controversial BDSM-filled *X-Portfolio* photographs, particularly his memorable *Self-Portrait With Whip*, which depicts Mapplethorpe with a whip in his ass. Lamar’s is admittedly obsessed with commenting on Mapplethorpe’s sadomasochistic photographs as well as his eroticized images of black men in *The Black Book*. “[Mapplethorpe’s] use of the whip echoes him as a person who is deeply invested in white supremacist notions of blackness,” Lamar said. “There has been no evidence from reading his biography or looking at his work that he had a very humane relationship to black people or black men, specifically. It was all about shock factor.”

While other artists such as Glenn Ligon have previously addressed Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men, Lamar takes this critique one step further by refusing to reuse and reproduce Mapplethorpe’s problematic imagery.

“I never wanted to give viewers a black body they expect,” said Lamar. “Even in my life, while I’m very male-identified, I’ve never done masculinity in a traditional way. But in terms of the work, I wanted the figures in these films and in the images to not really be attainable or tangible—almost like a ghostly figure. If you watch *12 Years A Slave* or *Django Unchained*, there are all these black naked bodies and there’s this pornographic moment the viewer gets to have. I didn’t want to give viewers that kind of thing.”

Another unexpected yet thought-provoking moment in *Surveillance Punishment* is the sudden appearance of Jamie Foxx during his 2004 Oscar acceptance speech, during which he thanked his grandmother for keeping him in line as a child, saying “And then when I would act the fool, she would beat me.”

“Here you have this moment of grand success for this black man and you immediately go to him being beaten down,” Lamar said. “Like there’s inherently something wrong with black children that they have to be beat down and put in their place in order to succeed.”



An almost shocking moment of reality in the surreal and atmospheric video, the inclusion of Foxx’s speech further cements Lamar’s thesis of the inescapable connections between past traumas and the handing down of these historical legacies. Lamar’s grandfather grew up in a sharecropping situation and was beaten endlessly, which in turn led him to become violently abusive to Lamar’s mother and grandmother.

“There’s all this post-traumatic stress disorder that’s not talked about in black life,” said Lamar. “I would say we’re all contending with that. I think there needs to be public spaces and real public discourse about PTSD and the lasting wounds.”

Lamar added, “I’d like to think there’s a sense of great loss and mourning. We can’t even mourn enough for the lost bodies, the lost spirits, the lost souls. One of the things bell hooks talks about is the assassinations of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and even Kennedy—these figures that represented the possibilities of freedom. The levels of devastation and loss are almost inexplicable. I think about the particular loss of possibility with those figures, the continued losses and the losses before that—all those who died in pursuit of freedom. And in my Negrothness, that will always be a huge part of my work.”

Negrothotic, A Manifesto: The Aesthetics of M. Lamar *will be on view at Participant Inc. through October 12, 2014.*

*Emily Colucci is a New York-based writer and the co-founder of Filthy Dreams, a blog that analyzes culture through a queer lens. Follow her on Twitter.*



# GAY LETTER



Art by M. Lamar

SUNDAY 09.07.14  
NEGROGOTHIC

**M.Lamar** has been on our radar for a while now — the New York based artist has been producing interesting art (mainly performance based) for a while now. Even if you haven't heard of him, if you've watched **Orange is the New Black** then you will be familiar with his face. Lamar is the brother of actress **Laverne Cox**, and in one of the show's flashback's he played Sophia before her sex change. It's not related to this event, but interesting none-the-less. This Sunday we suggest you go check out Lamar's latest show which opening the fall season at **Participant Inc.** Titled **NEGROGOTHIC, a Manifesto: The Aesthetics of M. Lamar** "*This physical installation cross-references romanticism, surrealism, horror, pornography, gospel, metal, and early silent film to propose radical potentialities of blackness.*" The event is sure to be filled with some interesting characters. Also worth mention is a conversation between Lamar and his sister Laverne, which takes place on the 9th of September. The location for that conversation has yet to be announced... but stay tuned. We promise to fill you in! —*TOM*

FREE, 7:00PM, PARTICIPANT INC, 253 East Houston St. New York, NY.

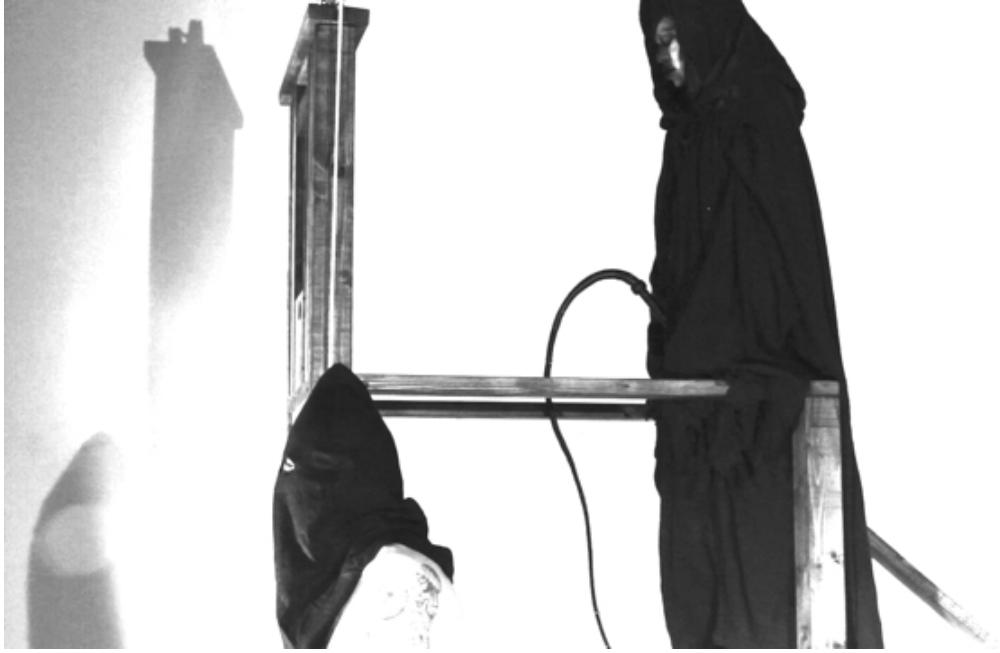
ART HAUS

## PHOTOS: M. Lamar's Negrothotic Exhibition Arrives in Downtown Manhattan



Earlier this month, M. Lamar participated in a shockingly candid discussion with twin sibling Laverne Cox at the Baruch Performing Arts Center as part of the this year's GenderFluid festival in New York City. Fans of the hit Netflix series *Orange is the New Black* may know M. Lamar as portraying the character "Sophia" before she arrives in prison. The real life M. Lamar is a singer-songwriter and visual artist who draws from his negro spiritual African American heritage. Lamar's work mixes romanticism with horror, shining light on on American white supremacy with a fresh perspective and hints of Southern gothic traditions, underground gothic, and post punk music. His exhibition *NEGROGOTHIC, A Manifesto* is currently running at Participant, Inc. on Manhattan's Lower East Side. *NEGROGOTHIC* features video, still photographs and sculptural props used inn Lamar's films.





*Images courtesy of Participant, Inc.*

# OUT

Entertainment Art & Books



*A still from 'NEGROGOTHIC: a Manifesto' | Courtesy of M. Lamar*

## Exploring M. Lamar's 'Negro Gothic Sensibility'

5.23.2014

**By Hugh Ryan**

Multimedia artist M. Lamar may have played pre-prison Sophia in *OITNB*—but he's more than Laverne Cox's real-life twin. Much more.

Before starting a conversation with musician and multimedia artist M. Lamar there are a few things you should read up on: doom metal, Robert Mapplethorpe, Frantz Fanon, Plato, Leontyne Price, bell hooks' concept of white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy, James Brown, James Baldwin, counter tenors, Cecil Taylor, the early films of Todd Haynes, Carrie Mae Weems, Kara Walker...

This list could go on forever—as could any conversation with Lamar. Thankfully, to enjoy his performances and their freaky bricolage of opera and heavy metal, raw emotion and formal training, flesh and spirit, there's no reading required. You simply have to be willing to go there.

“There,” in this case, being the deep recesses of Lamar’s psyche, where an entire universe of “negro gothic sensibility” is waiting for an audience willing to take the plunge.

“It’s always been a total vision that I have,” Lamar says of his work. He’s an auteur of an artist, determined to write, direct, and star in all of his own endeavors. Perhaps that’s one reason why Hilton Als labeled him a “diva” in the pages of the *New Yorker* (where he also wrote that Lamar is an “up-and-coming” luminary of NYC’s downtown performance scene).

This totality of vision is what drove Lamar from Alabama (where he was born and raised), to the San Francisco Art Institute (where he studied painting), to Yale’s prestigious studio art MFA program (where he switched over to sculpture), back to San Francisco (this time fronting a series of metal bands), and eventually to the galleries and cabarets of New York City, where his vision is finally blossoming into a series of performances. And a feature-length film. And a gallery show. And a haunting music video wherein naked white boys in a stockade read Hegel while Lamar croons “fuck you” to them in his evocative soprano.

And that’s not to mention the role he’s probably most well known for: Playing the pre-transition scenes of Sophia in the first season of *Orange Is the New Black* (a part for which he was particularly well suited, given that Laverne Cox—the actress who plays Sophia on *OINTB*—is Lamar’s twin sister).

For the last two years, Lamar’s been working on a show called *Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche*, which he performed at NYC’s La Mama gallery in January. It explores the story of Willie Francis, a 16-year-old black boy who was executed in Louisiana in 1947. Twice.

How is that possible? “I always say in America we can find a way to kill a black man twice,” Lamar laughs, but he’s only half joking. A drunken prison guard, he explains, installed the electric chair improperly the first time. Francis had been found guilty of killing a white pharmacist named Andrew Thomas, who was either his employer, his lover, or his abuser, depending on how you assemble the facts and rumors swirling around this nearly century-old crime.

The question of interracial consent and desire in a racist world is at the heart of *Surveillance*, which shuttles back and forth in time between the true story of Willie Francis, a hypothetical consensual slave/overseer relationship on a plantation in 1847, and the modern day. The film’s visuals are as visceral as Lamar’s vocals. When talking about his art, Lamar is an intellectual powerhouse, but his work is informed by that thinking—not constrained by it. It is as emotional as it is thoughtful.



*A still from 'NEGROGOTHIC: a Manifesto' | Courtesy of M. Lamar*

Much of his work focuses on black male sexuality, and white America's pathological fascination with it. "I'm very interested in white men and their preoccupation with certain kinds of stereotypes about black men and black men's genitalia," Lamar tells me. This interest isn't limited to gay men, Lamar points out—just look at all the white guys directing "big black dick" straight porn. In his music, Lamar turns the lens around, and looks at white people looking at black people. In so doing, he makes obvious the distance between the real lives of black men and the narrow ways in which they are portrayed in the mainstream (white) imagination.

Lamar is currently working on turning *Surveillance* into a feature-length film, which he hopes to complete later this year. Early stills and props from *Surveillance* (including a "penis guillotine" and a "Mapplethorpe whip"), as well as items from some of Lamar's older pieces, will form the basis of *NEGROGOTHIC a Manifesto: The Aesthetic of M Lamar*, a visual art show that will run from Sept. 7 through Oct. 12 at New York City's Participant Inc. Gallery. "It's going to be like a retrospective," Lamar says, "but *not*—because I'm too young."

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## M. Lamar and Participant Inc

Harpo Foundation is pleased to provide project support for “NEGROGOTHIC, a Manifesto” a solo exhibition of video, film stills, and props by artist, countertenor, and composer M. Lamar at Participant Inc. The centerpiece is a film adapted from Lamar’s music theater piece “Surveillance Punishment and the Black Psyche,” which proposes a narrative of a sixteen-year-old black boy sentenced to death in Louisiana in 1947 for killing his older white male lover, who is also his boss and a member of the KKK. Describing the work, the artist has noted: “NEGROGOTHIC politics resurrect, perform, and prophesy radical potentialities of blackness.”

Like the gothic novel, this project mixes romanticism with horror; the horror is American white supremacy. Born in Mobile, Alabama, Lamar draws inspiration from Southern gothic and underground, goth, and post punk music. At the center of NEGROGOTHICISM is the Negro Antichrist, a rock star or blues man like Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, with a big, operatic voice, and a deep connection to the supernatural. NEGROGOTHIC aesthetics transect romanticism, surrealism, horror, pornography, gospel, metal, and early silent film,” Lamar continues. “From the slave ship to the pillory... on plantations and lynching trees... within and beyond the prison and the grave... the NEGROGOTHIC binds archive to myth, merging bodily properties with supernatural possession.” (Excerpt from grant proposal.)

“NEGROGOTHIC, a Manifesto,” 2013-2014, still from video production. Filmed at Participant Inc on April 19, 2014. Directed by M. Lamar.





“NEGROGOTHIC, a Manifesto,” 2013-2014, still from video production. Filmed at Participant Inc on April 19, 2014. Directed by M. Lamar.



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