

# MARTOS GALLERY

Pedro, Lalia, "When Conceptual Art Makes You Acutely Aware of Your Body," *Hyperallergic*, June 9, 2017

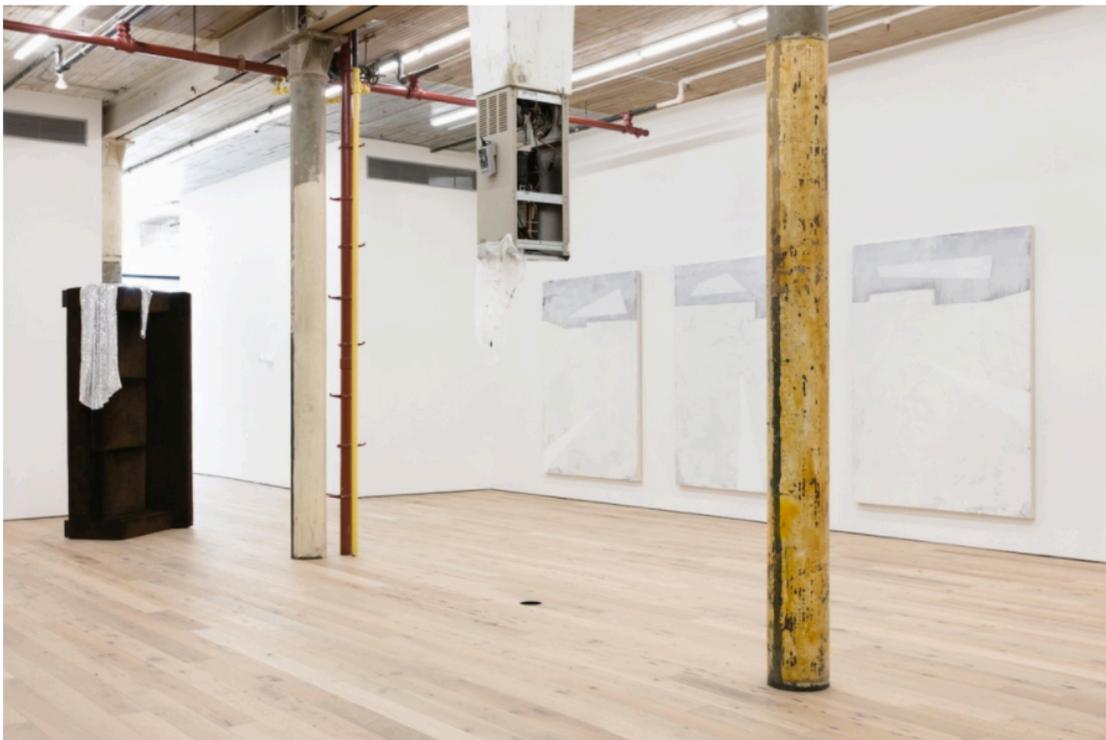
## HYPERALLERGIC

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### When Conceptual Art Makes You Acutely Aware of Your Body

*Invisible Man*, a group show at Martos Gallery curated by Ebony L. Haynes, gathers works by four artists that subtly call attention to embodied experience and the histories embedded in utilitarian objects.

Lalia Pedro | June 9, 2017



Installation view of *Invisible Man* at Martos Gallery (all images courtesy Martos Gallery)

At the new Martos Gallery space in Chinatown, Ebony L. Haynes has organized *Invisible Man*, a tautly minimal and conceptual exhibition that draws sharp, revealing connections between the works on view and the human bodies circulating among them. *Invisible Man* is a major contribution at a moment when the phrase “blockbuster conceptual art show” sounds oddly reasonable. If the concurrent Felix Gonzalez-Torres exhibition — which takes up all of David Zwirner’s 20th Street space and spreads across the city in a series of billboards— is a significant theoretical, historical, and affective grounding in a crucial point in the development of conceptualism, *Invisible Man* is an eloquent argument for the continued relevance and potential of contemporary conceptual work.

The space at Martos are soaring, all high ceilings and flooding light, and Haynes has filled it with just seven pieces: two by Pope.L, an installation by Jessica Vaughn, a work by Kayode Ojo, and a trio of paintings by Torkwase Dyson. The individual works are substantial, but as a group they lay bare historical and emotional complexities tied to bodily experience. These include both the physical sensations the works evoke and the narratives surrounding specifically coded bodies in specific times and places. Because each of the works has its own gravity, the layers and patterns of their relationships take time to emerge. Slowly, the subtle or unsettling rapports between the works accrete into a bone-deep sense of collective magnitude.

The exhibition’s most conspicuous object, suspended from the ceiling near the center of the gallery, is Pope.L’s “Pedestal” (2017). It consists of a public drinking fountain hanging from the ceiling; a trickle falls, periodically, into a small, circular hole cut in the gallery’s floor. Paired with “Well (elh version)” (2017) — a single glass of water (which must be refilled, periodically, with an eye dropper) installed on an adjacent wall — the physical effect is almost torturous, the sense of thirst palpable. Thirst may be a universal experience, but the inherited historical dread of the public drinking fountain — the violence built into that smooth-sided and simple machine — is not.



Pope.L, "Pedestal" (2017), acrylic paint, drain, Elkay drinking fountain #EFA201F, hardware, hole, photo timer, plastic pail, plastic sheeting, solenoid, tape, tubing, and wood, dimensions variable

The ambiguity of a body that is simultaneously understandable to most humans, but also freighted by difference — coded for some in ways impossible for others to experience — is the essential theme of this show. The physics of the inverted drinking fountain — heaviness, dread, disorder — can be reasonably read as universal evocations of discomfort. Beyond this initial access point, however, is the bloody significance of the drinking fountain in US history: the brutal delineations it exemplified in the Jim Crow South, whose particular horrors resonate in particular ways for particular people. These layers of specificity find an irreducible counterpoint in "Well (elh version)," an ordinary glass of water. The delicacy of the glass and the tenderly physical, fundamental necessity of the substance itself circle back to the human experience in an unsettling

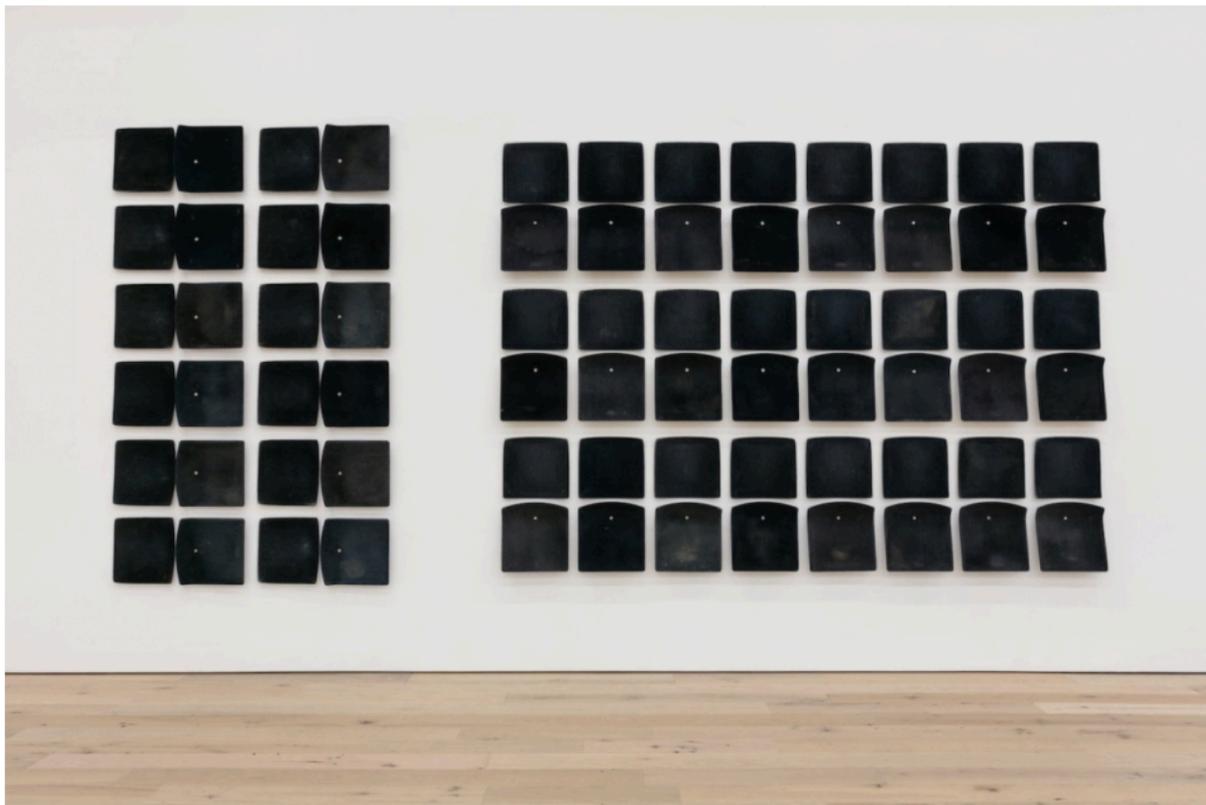
conflation of poignancy and absurdity: there is a deep imbalance in the horrifying historical power of so banal an object. The glass and the liquid inside it are almost totally lacking in color and texture: history fills these in.



Installation view of *Invisible Man* with works by Torkwase Dyson

History and place are also central themes in Torkwase Dyson's work. An accomplished technician whose meticulous abstract paintings and drawings bring architectural complexity into the two-dimensional plane, Dyson has tended to work nearly exclusively in black. She constructs extraordinarily seductive, triumphant, and historically nuanced compositions from contrasting textures, saturations, and luminosities in acrylic, lacquer, and other materials. Here, Dyson has leached the blacks from her palette and presented three paintings in shades of whites and grays that feel and look connected even as each is compositionally whole.

Her geometries, which achieve a fine balance between Euclidian precision and the human tactility of an occasionally jarred line, are warmed and opened by the color shift. “Transpose” (2017) contains a spiral or vortex near its center built out of swipes of subtly varying whites and grays, which feels a bit like a portal: it invites the eye into the composition and draws the body closer to the painting. Meanwhile, her signature geometric punctures intercede in sharper whites, at the top and bottom of the canvas, with a deeper gray segment at the top composed of the multiple layerings and sheer drips that Dyson has been building on since her *Water Table* series. Because the paler palette creates a more open sensation than in paintings that feature her denser, anchoring blacks, here the viewer is left to fill in her relation to color and map it onto her own body. It’s an invitation that feels like an imperative.



Jessica Vaughn, “After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005” (2017), 36 individual pairs of used machine fabricated public transit train seats (Chicago Transit Authority 1998–2011), 98 x 225 x 1/4 in

Opposite Dyson's paintings is Jessica Vaughn's installation "After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005" (2017). Constructed from used Chicago Transit Authority seats, the installation uses scale, color, and an abstracted grid to question the relationship between the intrinsic functionality and lived meaning of objects. Perceived in a vacuum, "After Willis" is a formally lovely, minimal composition of shapes in space. Looking up to its highest point, the feeling is not far removed from a sacred or sublime experience. Once the materiality of the objects themselves is considered, the work is transformed: the material is not only banal, but literally made to be used by thousands of people in a not terribly dignified way. Like Pope.L's fountain, Vaughn's public transit seats — and questions about who is allowed to use them, in what context, and according to what physical, deterministic criteria — take on historical, embodied meanings.



Kayode Ojo, "Untitled" (2017), dark chocolate ABC Home sofa / couch, women silver sequins long sleeves formal evening prom maxi cocktail party dress, 90 x 40 x 30 in

In a show that ranges broadly and deeply across history, scaled to the epic even as it evokes the intimate, Kayode Ojo's "Untitled" (2017) offers an allusive note of personal intimacy. A sequined evening gown is draped over the arm of a velvety sofa resting on its side so the piece stands over seven feet tall. The materials are wonderfully effective together; there is something both heartbreaking and seductive about the bright sparkle cast across the dark, light-sucking fabric. It can suggest melancholy, abandonment, or resignation; certainly something is (literally) askew. Ojo's piece counterbalances the sweeping intensity of the exhibition, bringing history into its fundamentally human contours.

If *Invisible Man's* cerebral ambition — the abstraction of objects in space — runs all the risks of highly conceptual work, particularly that of being inaccessible or illegible without didactic narrative, it also rewards the effort put into reading and experiencing it. Given time, the show's evocations of physicality (drinking, sitting, looking hard into white space), yield a rich understanding of the body's central place in visual readings of history.

*Invisible Man continues at Martos Gallery (41 Elizabeth Street, Chinatown, Manhattan) through June 24.*