

# Night Owl

Curated by Archiebald Raphulu

MASSIMODECARLO VSPACE is pleased to present *Night Owl*, a group exhibition curated by Archiebald Raphulu. Uniting works by artists Anthony Akinbola, Alvaro Barrington, Dante Cannatella, Archiebald John Motley Jr., Devin Johnson, Catalina Ouyang, Bony Ramirez, John Rivas, Josh Smith, and Liu Xiaodong, the exhibition, *Night Owl* captures from many vantages the metamorphic power of life at night.

*I sold my soul to make it bright with electric light and now no one not I not she not they not he are interested in that thing and I and I I cannot go to hell I have sold my soul to make a light and the light is bright but not interesting in my sight and I would oh yes I would I would rather go to hell be I with all my might and then go to hell oh yes alright.* (Gertrude Stein, Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, Scene II)

Archiebald John Motley Jr.'s 1943 painting *Night Life* is a tour de force in American socialrealism. Completed roughly two years before the close of WWII and a decade after the end of prohibition, Motley Jr.'s bar scene is ecstatic, aglow with incandescent light and possibility. Unlike contemporaries Hopper and Benton, Motley Jr.'s regionalism draws from the artistic profusion of the Harlem Renaissance to capture the pulse of African American life in the first half of the 20th century. Cocktails glisten, cigarettes smolder, couples jostle and swing to the tunes of an unseen band. Jazz Age styles are irresistibly apparent—dapper suits, nipped waists, and brightly-colored fascinators. At the scene's far right, two solitary bargoers sit at adjacent tables: the man smokes; the woman stares listlessly at her martini.

For the contemporary night owl, scenes like this are hardly unfamiliar. Some eighty years later, the viewer is gripped also by the dramatic irony of history: that is to say, our retrospective knowledge of 1943 today, and of the cultural revolutions and atomization in the postwar decades and beyond that would radically reshape life, day or night. In this sense, *Night Life* is a sort of index for the exhibition, alongside which eight contemporary artists offer their own accounts of life at night. For many, night is a uniquely libidinal space. Half-dressed and lying prone, **Bony Ramirez's** masturbatory subject is clad in the evidence of his delight. The image, titled *Night Routine* (2022), is a far cry from Motley Jr., and

from others in the exhibition too (**Liu Xiaodong's** starry romance in *The Big Dipper 2* (2012), or **Devin Johnson's** atmospheric abstractions). The figure's auto-eroticism (as well as the viewer's own voyeurism) offers glimpses of through lines between sexual catharsis and the concealment of night. Elsewhere, works like **Dante Cannatella's** *Screen* (2020) explore a different libidinal aspect: the desire for freedom, rebellion, and dreaming that punctuates much of adolescent nightlife. Cannatella's subject, presumably a teenager, peers outward from behind a small tear in a screen door. Whatever his intentions, the figure's pursuit is clear—yearning beyond his confined interior for something in the night.

**Catalina Ouyang's** video *Strange Attractor* (2022) stands out also. Chapter One opens to an evocative image of Ouyang smoking in a car passenger seat, chauffeured along dimly lit streets by an aged man with white hair and glasses. What follows is almost rhapsodic: an increasingly esoteric conversation about “strange attractors” in astronomical predictive modeling is overset with dialogue from David Lynch's 1990 screenplay *Wild at Heart*; extracts from Louis Garrel's 1974 film *Les hautes solitudes* segue into recitation from Audre Lorde's “A Song for Many Movements”; in one chapter, Ouyang and a troubling acquaintance named “J” overstep a museum stanchion to find Balthus's infamously transgressive portrait of then twelve year-old Thérèse Blanchard (or, rather, one of his many). Ouyang's video is, in many regards, the exact sort of “chaos story” that the artist goes on to describe: “In these stories, the modernist bulwark of remedy, progress, and professionalism cracks to reveal vulnerability, futility, and impotence.”

At this opposite end, night is a space frequented—occasionally terrorized by the unknown and the uncanny; concealment harbors rudimentary fears of death and transgression. **Josh Smith's** grim reaper in *Clear Vision* (2017) is an interesting case. Styled after the classical personification of death, the reaper wields a scythe that, beneath the apricot harvest moon, appears oddly pertinent, almost pastoral. Joined by evocative textile work from **Anthony Akinbola**, mixed media by **Alvaro Barrington**, and painting by **John Rivas**, these works capture many covert and cathartic transpirations in the after-hours.

**Archiebald Raphulu**, b. 1996 in Johannesburg, South Africa is a cultural agent and independent curator based in New York with a focus on contemporary art. Raphulu is a recent graduate from the University of South Carolina at Upstate earning his BFA in Mass Communications. Having moved to the city mid-pandemic, Raphulu began his career in the art world with great ambition and pursuit for knowledge which informs much of his curatorial process. With beginnings as an intern for Ross + Kramer Gallery in Chelsea, New York, Raphulu now splits his focus between working closely with Danny Baez as a sales associate for REGULARNORMAL and Francois Ghebaly at their New York location as a Gallery assistant. Raphulu has organized multiple exhibitions in New York City and advised for a wide variety of private collections and acquisitions.

**Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola** (b. 1991, Columbia, Missouri) is a first-generation American raised between Missouri and Nigeria. Foregoing conventional approaches to painting and sculpture, Akinbola reimagines the construction of identity through startling original treatments of color and texture. His self-developed techniques explore the possibilities of totemic materials such palm oil, hairbrushes, and durags—fiber scarves used in the maintenance of Black hair. Characterizing his works as “metaphors for what a first-generation existence might look like,” Akinbola unpacks the rituals and histories separating Africa from Black America. His multifaceted compositions celebrate and reconcile diverse cultural narratives, creating multilayered works of art that engage consumption, respectability, and the commodification of Black culture. Akinbola was selected for the Anderson Ranch Art Center Residency in 2017, was awarded the Van Lier Fellowship in 2019, and was an artist in residence at Galerie Krinzinger, Vienna in 2020. He has featured in exhibitions at The Queens Museum, NY, Pace Gallery, NY, The Zuckerman Museum of Art, GA, Night Gallery, CA, Carbon12, UAE, and The Verbeke Foundation, Belgium, among others. Following his show at the Museum of Art and Design, NY in 2020, Akinbola mounted a significant solo exhibition in early 2021 at the Kohler Arts Center, WI

Born in Venezuela to Grenadian and Haitian migrant workers, **Alvaro Barrington** was raised between the

Caribbean and Brooklyn, New York, by a network of relatives. An unwavering commitment to community informs his wide-ranging practice. While Barrington considers himself primarily a painter, his artistic collaborations encompass exhibitions, performances, concerts, fashion, philanthropy, and contributions to the Notting Hill Carnival in London. His approach to painting is similarly inclusive – embracing non-traditional materials and techniques such as burlap, concrete, cardboard and sewing – and infused with references to his personal and cultural history.

**Dante Cannatella** (b. 1992, New Orleans) is a painter currently based in Brooklyn, NYC. Cannatella’s work is about when the landscape reclaims the city, when the lines between inside and outside are blurred, and how lives play out against the truth of uncertainty and impermanence. His gestural paintings reflect growing up amidst the destruction and rebuilding of New Orleans. Set against a backdrop of acid yellows, muddy pinks and greys, the figures are caught in the powerful forces of nature, commerce, and mass thought that shape both their inner worlds and outer realities. As in a play, figures and forms weigh against each other, assuming roles such as the self, authority, the conscious witness, the audience, and the Greek chorus.

**Devin B. Johnson** (b. 1992, Los Angeles) obtained his BA in Fine Arts from the California State University of Channel Islands (2015) and received a Master of Fine Arts at Pratt Institute (2019). He was selected for Forbes 30 Under 30 Art and Design (2022), was included in Cultured’s “Young Artists 2021,” and was one of sixteen artists from around the world selected for the inaugural year of the Black Rock Senegal residency (2020). His work is collected by the Columbus Museum of Art; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Longlati Foundation, Shanghai; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Pond Society, Shanghai; the Rubell Museum, Miami; and many others. Recent exhibitions include *Between Ground and Sky*, Nicodim, New York (2022), *My Heart Cries, I Set Out an Offering for You*, Nicodim, Los Angeles (2021, solo); *Long Walk*, Galeria Nicodim, Bucharest (2021, solo); *Melody of a Memory*, Nicodim, Los Angeles (2020, solo); *When You Waked Up the Buffalo*, Nicodim, Los Angeles (2020); Hollywood

*Babylon: A Re-Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome*, Jeffrey Deitch, Nicodim, AUTRE Magazine, Los Angeles (2020); *Atmosphere of Certain Uncertainty*, Residency Gallery, Inglewood (2019, solo); and *Incognito*, ICA LA, Los Angeles (2019).

**Archibald John Motley Jr.** (1891–1981) was born in New Orleans and grew up in Chicago. He became one of the first black artists to attend the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His artistic style emerged in the 1920s during the early days of the Harlem Renaissance, the cultural flowering of African American art, music, and literature that had its roots in New York and later reached other cities, especially Chicago, where Motley lived throughout his life. Motley was a highly original modernist of the twentieth-century American life: while fellow Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and Reginald Marsh gained much more representation than him for their American scenes, he developed a unique style for depicting places and people on canvas, always linked to the African American subject matter. His scenes portraying his community represent a sort of parallel universe of labor and leisure. Always in between the representation of people and places, his artistic style does not hide clear references to race, gender and sexuality in the American society, revolving around issues of slavery and racism as well.

**Catalina Ouyang's** work engages object-making, interdisciplinary environments, and time-based projects to indicate counternarratives around representation and self-definition. Ouyang's work addresses how a subject orients in physical and sociopolitical space: what histories and discourses are inscribed on the body, how the body exists in contingency with architecture and bureaucratic structures. Through both expansion and fragmentation, Ouyang proposes the body as a politicized landscape subject to partition. Working gnostically with materials, ideas, and stories that over years they build relationships with, Ouyang also attends to critical reimagining of historical formation wherein monstrosity, animality, and toxicity act as ciphers for the psycho-affective alienation of the minor subject. Recent solo exhibitions include *Real Art Ways*, Hartford, US; *Knockdown Center*, Queens, US; *Make Room*, Los Angeles, US; and *Rubber Factory*, New York, US. Ouyang's work has

been included in group exhibitions at the Sculpture Center, Queens, US (curated by Katherine Simóne Reynolds); Nicodim, Los Angeles, US; François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, US (curated by Kelly Akashi); BRIC, Brooklyn, US; Helena Anrather, New York, US; Asia Art Center, Taipei; and many more. Previous residencies include the OBRAS Foundation, Smack Mellon, and Storm King. They will be featured at group exhibition "52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone" at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum opening in Summer 2022. Ouyang received an MFA from Yale University in 2019. They are represented by Make Room Los Angeles, and Lyles & King, New York.

**Bony Ramirez's** rural upbringing in the Dominican Republic, his first encounters with Catholic imagery, and his deep interest in sources as varied as Italian mannerism, Renaissance portraiture, and children's illustrations reverberate within and around the fictional characters he creates. If each figure appears to be transposed into a changing theatre of symbolic surroundings and backdrops, it is the artist's technique that renders this possible. Ramirez creates his heavily stylized, proportionally distorted figures on paper, and adheres them onto wood panels featuring idyllic, colourful backdrops of Caribbean imagery. As Ramirez's characters, developed separately and simultaneously in oil stick, paint, and coloured pencil, make their way onto his works, so too do various other symbolic appendages. Ramirez uses a variety of objects which either complement the playfulness and idyllicism of his work, such as colourful beads, or contrast it by penetrating it with violence, such as real knives stabbed into the canvas.

**John Rivas** (b. 1997, Newark, NJ) is a figurative painter whose narrative is guided by the stories of his ancestors and loved ones. As a first generation American raised in Newark, New Jersey, Rivas' artwork is enriched with tales of family members many of whom he's met remotely or through photographs. He is concerned with the concepts of legacy, preserving the narratives of lost loved ones, and documenting his upbringing. Rivas' paintings occupy space like sculpture, juxtaposing unexpected objects, many of which are sourced from his childhood, against one another. His brush strokes and rubs of charcoal are expressive marks that add to the visual collage. Each painting celebrates the Latinx

concept of family and community through the lens of his Salvadoran roots.

**Josh Smith** (b. 1976) was born in Okinawa, Japan, and grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee. He now lives and works in Brooklyn. Josh Smith is distinguished by his mastery of multiple mediums, including painting, collage, sculpture, book, printmaking and ceramic, and his tendency to acknowledge trends in painting and sculpture by expressly upending them. Typically working in series, his most iconic works are gestural paintings that boldly feature his name as their subject, in which the letters fluctuate between signifiers and abstracted forms. Lately, the name has given way to more figurative motifs such as leaves, fish, skeletons, insects, ghosts, and sunsets. In selecting these rather arbitrary subjects and rendering them in a manner that is by turns aggressive, playful, repetitive, and oblique, using gloomy colour and broad brushstrokes, Smith compels us to move beyond aesthetics towards a focus on process and looking, inquiring the potentiality of abstraction. Recent solo exhibitions include: MASSIMODECARLO, Milan (2022); Museum Brandhorst, Munich (2020); Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn (2016); MACRO - Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome, Rome (2015).

**Liu Xiaodong** (b. 1963 in Jincheng, Liaoning Province, China) lives and works in Beijing. He is best known for his involvement in a new generation of Chinese realism characterised by the need to break free of historical or propagandistic motifs to express stronger emotions. Xiaodong is in search of scenes that are part of life. Looking for people's everyday existence, he depicts moments and stories from contemporary human life showing an extraordinary empathy, capturing not only the characters but also their environment. His practice tackles contemporary social issues including migrant displacement, environmental crisis, living conditions of the less fortunate and the results of ill-politics and economic disruption. Recent solo exhibitions include UCCA Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing; Faurschou Foundation, New York (2022); Dallas Contemporary, Dallas (2021); MASSIMODECARLO, London (2020); Louisiana Museum, Humlebæk (2019).