

Creators

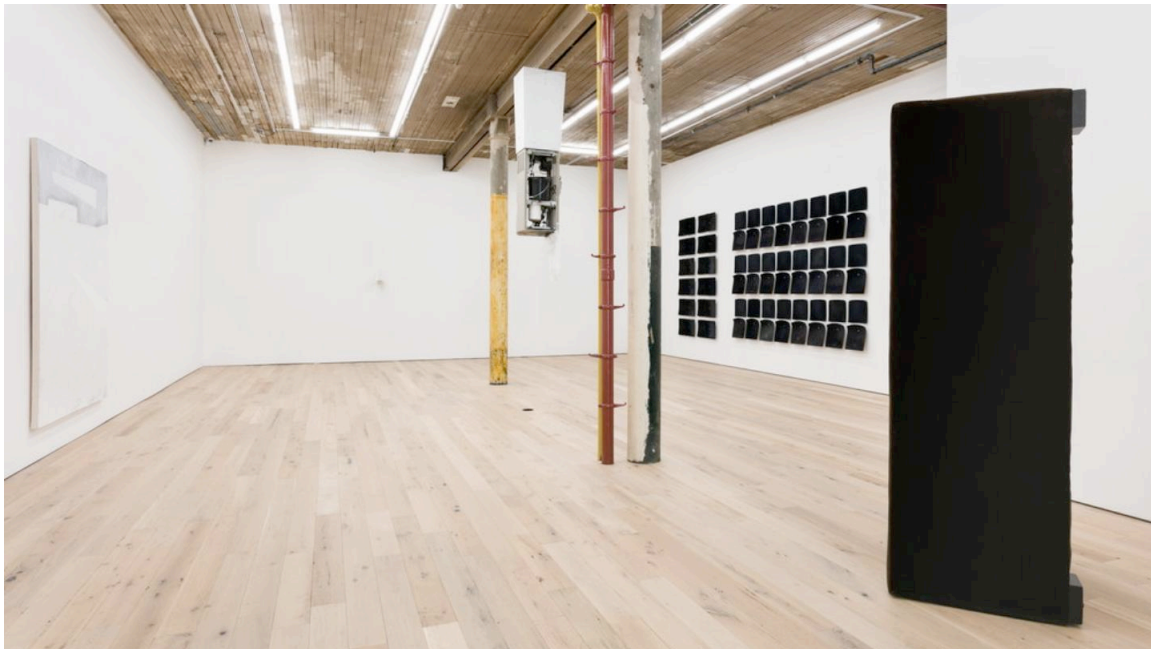
EXHIBITIONS

'Invisible Man' Inspires Conceptual Art About Blackness



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Jun 21 2017, 2:41pm



Installation view, *Invisible Man*, Martos Gallery, New York, 2017

The inaugural show at at Martos Gallery's downtown space takes its name from Ralph Ellison's enduring 1952 novel about black visibility.

The great American writer Ralph Ellison's National Book Award-winning novel *Invisible Man* has had an enduring influence on black consciousness and art. The 1952 book's soul searing, introspective observations about the conditions of black life inspired, for instance, the painter Kerry James Marshall's seminal 1980 work *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, as well as a series of post-war images by the photographer Gordon Parks. With Ellison writing passages like, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me," and "when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed,

everything and anything except me," it's not hard to understand why Ellison's book, penned nearly seven decades ago, still speaks to contemporary realities of black life.

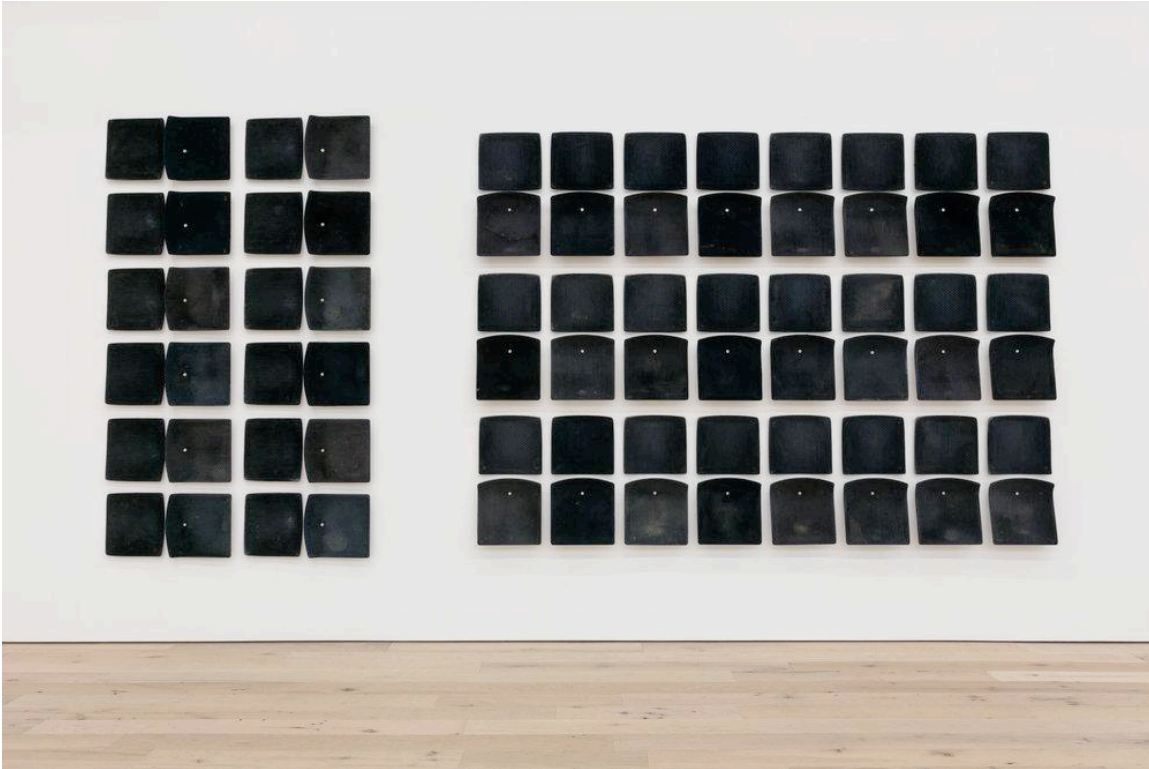
Ellison's central argument, that racism has rendered black people both visible and invisible, inspired Martos Gallery director Ebony L. Haynes to explore the concept in a show titled after the book. *Invisible Man*, the inaugural exhibition in the new downtown Manhattan gallery, mounts painting, installation, and sculpture by Torkwase Dyson, Kayode Ojo, Pope.L, and Jessica Vaughn, four black artists who address aspects of blackness in abstract and conceptual forms that imply bodies unseen.



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This exhibition is something I've had in mind a long time," Haynes tells *Creators*. "At its crux, it's a show of really great artists whose practice is conceptual or minimal in its installation." Over the years, Haynes has spent a lot of time with the artists in their studios and believes their practices are similar in the way that they think about the body in space. For Haynes, the show is a way to think about the black body in a gallery and how Ellison's depiction still resonates today. "The book, for me, is

about the systemic racism that's projected onto the black body," she says. "But although all the artists in the show are black, the work was chosen because its not just limited to the experience of blackness."



Jessica Vaughn, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005 (detail)*, 2017, 36 individual pairs of used machine fabricated public transit train seats (Chicago Transit Authority 1998-2011), 98 x 225 x 0.25 in.

The exhibition features works that literally omit figurative representations of either the black or white bodies evoked by the art on view. Jessica Vaughn's wall sculpture, *After Willis (rubbed, used and moved) #005*, features 36 individual used, machine-fabricated public transit seats. Collected over a period of a decade from Chicago Transit Authority buses, the used seats feature the grooves of countless bodies that once sat in them. The work also alludes to very real black bodies, like Rosa Parks and the women who led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the 1950s and the segregation of black and white bodies in many aspects of contemporary life.



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

Pope.L's installation *Pedestal*, a Elkay drinking fountain deconstructed and hung from the ceiling, alludes to the segregated black and white drinking fountains installed throughout the South during Jim Crow. The work releases water into a hole in the gallery's floor every two-and-a-half minutes. The gesture alludes to Pope.L's "Hole Theory." In a book titled after the theory, the artist writes, "Hole Theory engages

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lack/Across economic and cultural/And political boundaries/[Lack is where it's AT]." Pope.L's theory is rooted in the social conditions of 1980s black life, the drugs that flooded the community, the jobs that left it, and the culture, like Hip-hop, that sprung from the era's black rage.



Pope.L, *Well (elh version)*, 2017, wood, glass, water, dimensions variable

The body is further implied in Pope.L's *Well (elh version)*, a glass of evaporating water on a small wooden shelf, and in Torkwase Dyson's minimalist suite of abstract paintings. *Transpose*, *Torque*, and *Time*, are three large-scale works in white that cover black geometric elements

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using the dimensions of the body and space. The work references the actual circumference of the Dakota Access Pipeline and the bodies at Standing Rock that protested it. The larger themes of the work are rooted in state-sanctioned displacement and environmental racism that, for instance, produced inner city ghettos, predominantly white subdivisions, and Native American reservations. Kayode Ojo's untitled installation of a found dark chocolate sofa turned upright and draped with a sequined gown is the lone work that implicates the body in domestic space.



Kayode Ojo, Untitled, 2017, dark chocolate ABC Home sofa / couch, women silver sequins long sleeves formal evening prom maxi cocktail party dress, 91 x 30 x 40 in.

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"Maybe sometimes there's an assumption made when you enter a show of all artists of color that you will be able to take away what you should immediately," says Haynes of the deeply layered works. "I think these artists are an example that there are many different practices and ways of representing the body." She adds, "The works of these artists just so happen to execute an idea that I had of representing an absent body. The works, literally with the forms they create, do this very well and speak to the lack of visibility of artists of color in the gallery space."



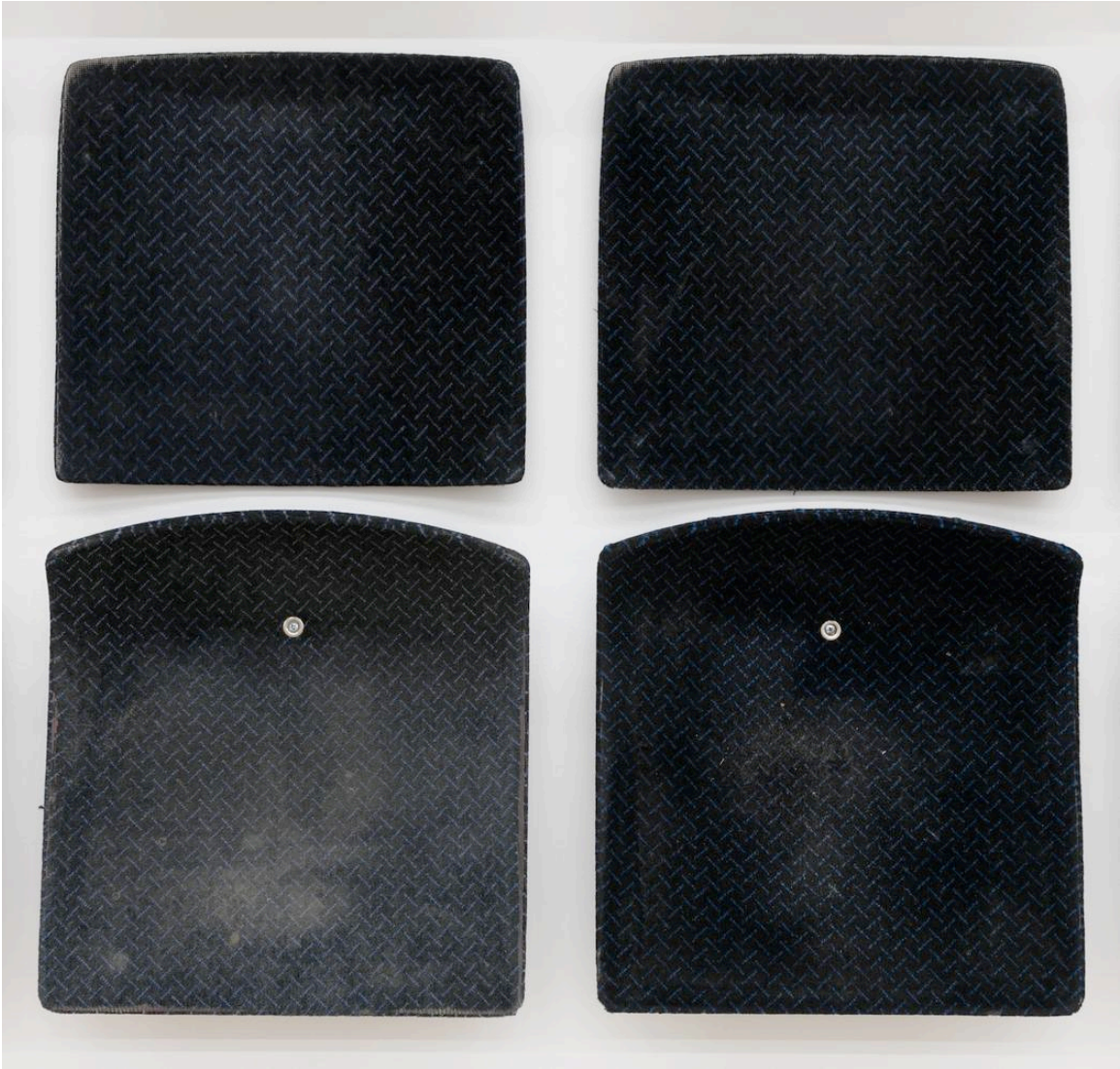
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