Want to see new art in New York this weekend? Start in Chelsea with Shikeith’s evocative blown-glass sculptures at Yossi Milo. Then head to the East Village for Walter Pfeiffer’s career-spanning survey at the Swiss Institute. And don’t miss Ebony G. Patterson’s riotously colored collages at Hales New York in SoHo.

CHELSEA
Shikeith
Through June 25. Yossi Milo Gallery, 245 10th Avenue, Manhattan.
212-414-0370; yossimilo.com

There are three sculptures in Shikeith’s New York gallery debut, most notably a shoulder-high brown wooden cross, pierced with five peepholes to reveal flickering blue video screens, that gives the show its title, “grace comes violently.” There’s also a glass balloon, a tipped-over glass head and a delicate glass crib surrounded by hanging orbs, all using a color that this young Pittsburgh-based artist (whose name is pronounced like “shy Keith”) calls “haint blue,” a reference to the indigo paint that African-American Gullah Geechee people once used to ward off malevolent spirits.

Surrounding these are a series of large photo portraits of Black men, against black backgrounds, in black frames. They’re all frankly homoerotic, but sometimes the artist also tilts their nudity, or semi-nudity, in different directions. In one, two men extend their hands over the arching, sweat-beaded torso of a third, possibly blessing or exorcising him. Another shows a tattooed man in a gold chain and do-rag licking his lips. Closing his eyes, he seems at once present and remote, not fully captured by the camera.

It’s the evocative but never overly revealing way Shikeith portions out all this information, his combination of intimacy and inaccessibility, that makes the overall show so memorable. His practice may not yet be fully rooted — I don’t know whether “grace comes violently” is a photo show with sculptures, a sculpture show with photos or a single installation — but I’m excited to see where it goes. WILL HEINRICH

Grace is the condition of being blessed. It also describes a certain effortless movement: it is meant to come to us with ease. But for his debut exhibition at Yossi Milo Gallery, multidisciplinary artist Shikeith warns us via the show’s title that for Black queer people, “grace comes violently.” The gentle yet tense photographs, sculptures, and five-channel video-cum-sculpture work here redefine this quality of ease and divinity with remarkable power.

For the artist, grace is burdened by the past: like a spirit, it can be imperceptible but everywhere. Shikeith’s photographs indicate as much: They are cloaked in chiaroscuro, tainted with the shadows of history that continue to haunt the now. In the photographs Visiting Hours, 2022, and A Clearing, 2021, figures move in and out of illumination, their vaporous bodies flickering between a visible world and a spectral domain. The past is revivified not only in tone, but also in color. Deep blacks and browns are accentuated by “haint blue,” a hue traditionally used by the Gullah-Geechee people of the southeastern coast of the US to ward off evil spirits. The pigment is derived from crushed indigo plants which, when manually cultivated, can leave a long-lasting stain—like memory, or brutality.

Throughout the exhibition, this ghost color is mixed in with the shades of visceral life and resurrection. In a photographic diptych titled Feeling the Spirit in the Dark, 2021, the process of cleansing and rebirth is suspended in time and multiplied: Captured at two different angles, a man pours water on himself from a jug as the sole officiant of his own baptism. The regenerative power of water runs throughout the exhibition, where skin is slick with sweat. But this attention to the flesh coincides with a hushed interiority. Eyes—those proverbial windows to the soul—are always closed, downcast, or cropped out. Their inner life eludes our sight but grips us at a level of deep feeling, quietly.

— Zoë Hopkins

https://www.artforum.com/picks/shikeith-88600
Celebrated for his striking portraiture, the young multimedia artist conjures visions of spirituality, queer presence, and the ghosts of history.

Shikeith’s Black Uncanny

Tiana Reid
The artist Shikeith, born in Philadelphia, in 1989, as Shikeith Cathey, now goes by just his first name. But that does not mean that he is without antecedents, without family, or without history. With interdisciplinary work spanning photography, installation, film, and sculpture, Shikeith’s practice is in conversation with a rich canon of Black queer men—the documentary poetics of Marlon T. Riggs, the editorial sensibility of Joseph Beam, the ceremonial politics of Essex Hemphill, and the cutting lucidity of James Baldwin.

While Shikeith’s artistic universe addresses a number of masculine literary, musical, and cultural figures, his first universe, if we can call the vexed enmeshments of home a universe, was one of women. “I grew up in a household with my mother and my grandmother,” Shikeith told me recently on Zoom. He is from North Philadelphia but now lives and works some three hundred miles west, in Pittsburgh. North Philly, as it is called, is “kind of known for being the more volatile area, the more impoverished area in Philly,” Shikeith explains about his upbringing. “It was an environment that had limited resources, a place where, because of that, we had to utilize our imagination a lot as children.”

His maternal grandmother was a singer and a poet. “I got a lot of my creative skills from her,” he says, noting that she was very spiritual. “Among regular Black shit that people would expect,” he adds, hesitating, hers was a very “odd house.” He goes on to tell the story of how his childhood home was haunted by ghosts, including one named Tom, who his grandmother would lock in the basement for hours at a time. “Once, the pastor came over to the house, and the ghost took a glass of water and dropped it on the ground,” he recalls.

Shikeith’s short but active career has been touched by this familial gift: a Black uncanny, an awareness of hauntings, a surreality, a speculative nature. The titles alone of Shikeith’s recent solo exhibitions—Feeling the Spirit in the Dark (2020) at the Mattress Factory Museum of Contemporary Art, in Pittsburgh, and Imagining Flesh Through Shadows (2019) at the Alexander Brest Museum and Gallery in Jacksonville, Florida—speak to Shikeith’s interest in spiritual errancies. His work was also presented in Ceremonies, a 2021 online exhibition at the Yossi Milo Gallery, in New York, where he is represented.

The artist’s full-color portraits of Black men, from 2020, some of which will be included in a forthcoming monograph published by Aperture, are luscious stagings of the body—a thick black cloak, hands perched over a Bible, a Madonna figure, sweat bubbling up on the surface of skin, do-rags and chains transformed into ornaments—all sparkling under Shikeith’s photographic light. In the image O’ my body, make of me always a man who questions! (2020), a topless man appears to be floating underneath the four summoning hands of two men dressed in pastoral suits. Despite the languor of the clipped body, the way the main subject’s back is arched and the muscles around his ribs are protruding also suggests physical tension. A possession. Something clandestine. Shikeith’s Black uncanny, his aesthetic unhomeliness, indexes those feelings of strangeness and alienation attached to the intimate and the familiar. Though his work has been canonized in a quicksand of cultural highlights (“Black gay photography”) and though there is rescue and relief in his practice, his art does not fit squarely into the optimism sanctioned by much discourse around representation.

Shikeith’s ability to balance opulence with sparseness and excess with measure has been honed by a steady flow of commercial commissions. A few years after graduating, in 2010, from Pennsylvania State University with a BA in integrative arts (an interdisciplinary degree that aims to blend the creative and the professional), he moved to New Haven, Connecticut, earning, in 2018, an MFA in sculpture from the Yale School of Art. Since then,
Shikeith has been a frequent contributor to the *New York Times*, where he has photographed a number of subjects including a *T Magazine* fall fashion cover, the models Samuel Atewogboye and Mohamed Cisse for a spread on spring suits, and an exuberant cover for *The New York Times Magazine* featuring Lil Nas X to accompany Jazmine Hughes’s profile of the electric Black gay pop star for a 2021 cover dubbed “Hot Boy Summer.” Whether the images are fashion editorial or commercial portraiture, Shikeith says: “I think about them as extensions of my fine-art practice, meaning that I’m wanting to embark on assignments that contribute to a larger archive of material that I’m creating.” He adds, “When I first began making photographs in high school, I primarily focused on fashion because I was inspired by Tyra Banks’s *America’s Next Top Model*. That was literally the reason why I picked up a camera in the first place. So, it’s really nice to be able to come back around years later and contribute my own visual vernacular to the fashion landscape.”

When Shikeith and I connected in October, his work life was a little hectic, particularly leading up to the Perforama Biennial, in New York, where he showed notes towards *becoming a spill*, a commissioned, four-act “experimental opera” that blends modern dance and gospel songs. Shikeith and his crew spent the week before the two-night presentation prepping at a “residency” at the Rockaway Hotel in Queens. As did his film *A Drop of Sun Under the Earth* (2017) before it, notes towards *becoming a spill* evokes the writings of Audre Lorde. “I am essentially creating a biomythography that talks about the process of disentangling oneself from a lot of the ephemeral presences that continue to haunt Black queer men—particularly those that are connected to racism and homophobia,” he tells me a few days before the Performa debut. “It’s going to be set against the Atlantic Ocean in Rockaway Beach.”

It is rather revealing that Shikeith says the opera is set “against” the Atlantic, and not on, with, or beside the ocean. *Against* signals opposition. For Shikeith, the water is both a model of boundlessness and spillage and a history of terror and ruination. In a video created to promote and contextualize the Performa Biennial commission, he talks about the Middle Passage as a site of devastation but also one of escape, referencing the enslaved jumping overboard, sometimes en masse: “This word *spill*—which, for me represents a sort of freedom, a way of existing unpoliced and not constrained to the confines of any one particular forum—is very queer, a queer shape.”

In Shikeith’s photography, sculpture, and installation, we also bear witness to the psychic life of sexual subjection—what it means to be looked at, the subtle traumas of being perceived despite the elation of mutual recognition. In his video installations such as *to bathe a mirror* (2018) and *#Blackmendream* (2014), choreography and documentary performance narrate Black queer masculinities and desires. The opera, then, is an occasion for an altogether new sensorial experience: the smell of the salty ocean, the twenty-piece gospel choir led by Rashad McPherson, the movement of the dancers choreographed by Morgan Bobrow-Williams, their sheer costumes by Carlos Soto. One of the seeds Shikeith planted for the opera was a 2019 installation of the same name at Atlanta Contemporary, which used materials including paint, soil, mud, and audio recordings. “In that installation, I painted the room haint blue, which is a particular shade of blue that I use in my work. It comes from the Gullah Geechee who live along the coasts of the Carolinas and Georgia, the Low Country,” he says. “They created this shade from the indigo crop, using the paint to protect their interior space with the blue color of water to ward off evil energies from entering. They believed that haint blue was ghost tricking. Ghosts can’t cross water.”

*Haint* is one letter away from *haunt*. And *blue* one letter away from *blues*. Connecting these two ideas—blue and hauntings—is key to experiencing Shikeith’s artistic practice. In a 1983 interview with the scholar Nellie Y. McKay,
Toni Morrison, speaking on the heterogeneity of styles (plural) of Black art and Black literature, diagnosed a sign of the times: “Some young people don’t want to acknowledge this [supernatural element] as a way of life. They don’t want to hark back to those embarrassing days when we were associated with ‘haints’ and superstitions. They want to get as far as possible into the scientific world.” Perhaps this has changed since the early 1980s, and Shikeith is one example of an artist who invites the ghostly in, who acknowledges what has been left behind, what lingers, what is unknowable.

The opera, oceanic and spiritual, marks a turning point in Shikeith’s career as he actively tries to renew his established practice. Shikeith is best known for formal portraiture, crisp images of Black figures executed with conceptual clarity, but his perspective is an intense, enveloping, and often experimental style. In *The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it* (2014), which you might have seen as the cover of Danez Smith’s 2017 National Book Award Finalist *Don’t Call Us Dead*, two Black men are in flight, hands linked, reaching and floating away on a black balloon. “I think [Shikeith’s work] speaks to innocence, to vulnerability, to healing, and to friendship and love in a way that is super beautiful, and also super bare, and literally naked, without reaching toward a hypersexualized view,” Smith told *Gulf Stream Magazine*. “There are so many penises and they never feel sexualized, they feel vulnerable.”

Shikeith’s recent work, he says, attempts to obscure what was previously more readily available. “I don’t want things to be so easily consumed anymore,” he explains. “I want to withhold.” He juxtaposes his own photographs with archival images of Black men that he sources from an antique shop in Pittsburgh and from eBay. “I would seek out images that felt very queer or at least were depicting Black men in very intimate encounters.” Where the queerness of some of these photographs lies, of course, is complex, if it can be located at all. But they are queered through Shikeith’s arrangement and attention. “I lay them out like they’re family photographs in my house, so they’re just chilling on the mantels,” he says. “And people are like, That’s your grandpa? No—just the things that I’ve collected and want to cherish because they were out there sort of lost.” In his grandmother’s home, there were so many images of loved ones, family, extended family, ancestors, plastered all around the house. “I grew up in a home where photographs were stacked everywhere, not an inch left of space,” he remembers.

Still, it would be oversimplifying to mark Shikeith’s new direction using archival images as a clear-cut distinction to identify what came before as easy to digest. After all, since early on, some of his subjects have refused the capture of the photographic gaze. In *Kris* (2019), the figure is subtly slumped over, head bowed down, eyes closed, glistening with sweat. In *A Missed Prayer* (2017), two Black men embrace. In the foreground, the man is turned away so that the viewer can see only the back of his head, his ears, the nape of his neck, his shoulders. “Only God Can Judge Me” is splayed in large cursive lettering from his left to right shoulder. But behind him, a man crouches, sitting knees to chest, peering over, hiding but valiantly confronting the camera’s gaze. In *Brush your Blues* (2017), the back of two heads, necks intertwined, almost form the shape of a heart. And in the forty-four-minute documentary film, #Blackmendream, nine men speak—about a range of issues including anti-Blackness, masculinity, and emotions—with their backs to the camera. About a minute in, white typewriter-style lettering appears on a black screen, reading: “This work expresses my, and our, apprehension to be.”

With Shikeith’s distinctive noble vividness—clean edges, detailed visual contrasts, a confrontation, averted gaze, backs turned—a complexity emerges, marked by a deepening relationship between the photographer and the photographed. His approach begins with composition through
sketching but extends well beyond the time of the sitting. “For the most part, the people in my photographs are people I’ve photographed for years, since 2012 and forward,” he says. “I’m really interested in this progression. I change as an artist; they change as individuals. The one big goal in my head: to capture these people over time.”

Perhaps, then, Shikeith’s portraits are also self-portraits of a man whose eyes keep fluttering, whose self is irretrievable, troubling the distinction between who you’re really taking a picture of when you take a picture of someone else. He fashions a corpus saturated with liquid relation. As depicted across his oeuvre, spill threatens to undo any “us” that has formed. Desire spreads like ripples. Intimacy crashes like waves. History is already here. History haunts. Mixing ghosts and oceans, he constructs a way of making art that intensifies that one-letter difference between haint and haunt, between blue and blues. Ghosts are both welcome and in need of warding off.

These past two years, Shikeith’s life has been like the ocean—nothing constant but the ebbs and flows. “I am just surrendering to my life and not letting the Capricorn in me try to control everything,” he says, laughing. At the beginning of the pandemic, he lost the grandmother who had taught him so much about art and spirituality. Amid grief, he is also trying to prioritize fun and openness—eating, dating, unfamiliar experiences. “I just want to follow a feeling,” he states. And we’re all following him now.
The most arresting moments in this year’s biennial were also the most evanescent—the ones that interrupted performance’s recent, long disappearing act by transforming that absence into a capacious and expressive presence (call me sentimental). Take Shikeith’s notes toward becoming a spill, staged to overlook the Atlantic Ocean from Rockaway Beach.

A gospel choir flanked an illuminated platform, giving breath to the ecstatic and vital choreography of four dancers, clad in diaphanous mesh costumes in various hues of blue that echoed the shifting luminosity of the sea and the sky. Shikeith’s moving work, which continues his ongoing study of blue spaces, boundlessness, and contemporary Black queer identity, metaphorized diasporic longing, ancestral histories, and the ocean as a site of loss and refuge. At the golden hour, the choir repeated “We won’t rest until we’re free.” When the performance closed, the cast walked down to the waterfront, turning its back on a rapt audience for a minute of silence.

After two years—amidst the pandemic, between biennials—that have felt like a rehearsal for a future perpetually delayed, this show of endurance in practice was welcome. As in Shikeith’s gripping closing act, the abundant applause that followed spilled out, evaporating into the air.
Shikeith occupies multiple aesthetic realms at once. Working across film, photography, sculpture, and installation, the visual artist presents work that is edgy, yet sensitive to unspoken truths about identity, transformation, trauma and healing. Shikeith explores complex feelings in a relatable way, building off his experience as a queer Black man. Perhaps that’s why he’s able to reach people who may not otherwise see themselves as consumers or appreciators of art; his work encourages vulnerability and a deep connection to his subjects’ emotional worlds.

When I reached Shikeith over the phone at the end of September, the Pittsburgh-based artist had just taken a break from rehearsing for his experimental opera, *notes towards becoming a spill* (2021), on New York City’s Lower East Side. His week in the city had been productive: Shikeith rehearsed the choreography while the production’s costume designer, Carlos Soto, sketched his ideas as the dancers writhed on the wooden dance floor. For notes, a work about personal transformation, the dancers practice fluid rond de jambes that abruptly halt and shift to jerking movements; Rashad McPherson’s score equally delivers an eerie fever-pitch and Gospel-inspired vocals. The opera, which debuted in Rockaway Beach in October as part of the Performa 2021 Biennial, is Shikeith’s first foray into performance art.

“[I’ve] never worked in performance,” he said. “But I feel like what I’ve done lends itself to this kind of medium.”

If you’ve been following this visionary young artist’s hurdle toward success, you might argue that just about every medium serves Shikeith’s message. Interested in revealing the layered complexities lived by queer Black men, Shikeith deftly navigates between mediums to create provocative and immersive works of art. Dreamy, sensual, and emotionally charged, Shikeith’s oeuvre mines his personal experiences, and cycles through a metamorphic process of life, death, and rebirth.

Shikeith connects deeply with “a collective experience among queer Black men,” he explained. His work creates a vernacular for the sort of processional healing he hopes his community is inching toward. In works such as the film installation
To Bathe a Mirror (2018), as well as the photographic series that inspired notes, one can witness that journey. Allegorical threads like bodies of water and the color blue tap into the psychic experiences of Black people, their generational traumas and their ancestral histories; while evocative photographs of Black men unveil the pressures and stereotypes weighing them down.

Just as he weaves his way through mediums to formulate his ideas, Shikeith similarly traverses between commercial work and conceptual practice. In the last two years alone, Shikeith has presented in solo and group exhibitions around the country, including the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh; Yossi Milo Gallery, in New York, which represents him; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas; and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (the last of which acquired his photographic work, Hunter, 2019). At the same time, he has regularly photographed editorial campaigns for T: The New York Times Style Magazine.

During our interview, Shikeith speaks thoughtfully about his career path and runaway success, equally humble and proud of what he’s managed to achieve as someone who nearly didn’t pursue a career in art.

“I’m able to keep experimenting with all these fields that I have worked up to,” he said. “I feel really excited about that.”

Inclined to create since childhood—Shikeith’s grandmother was a poet and a singer, and his paternal grandparents were photographers and archivists—Shikeith developed a fascination with the camera in high school, inspired by the Tyra Banks-helmed reality show America’s Next Top Model. But as the first person to attend college in his family, he initially intended to become a plastic surgeon when he enrolled at Penn State University. Fortunately, a high school counselor sent him to intern at a creative agency before starting his freshman year, refocusing his career toward fashion photography and advertising.

After college, Shikeith landed a gig as a photo editor at People StyleWatch magazine but felt restless. “I started to want to use the camera to talk about personal things that I didn’t have enough confidence to talk about,” he said. “I had an urgency to wonder if other young, queer Black men from urban communities were experiencing the same things.”
Shikeith created a body of work that featured Black men on the edge of disaster. Moody, black-and-white images of his subjects saw them teetering on the edge of a roof or in ruined buildings, but there was a quality about the way they were posed and photographed that suggested emotional liberation. A friend encouraged the artist to apply for a grant through the Heinz Endowments, and, successful in his application, he created #Blackmendream (2014). The documentary project, which included interviews from Black men about their experiences and emotional worlds, went viral and became the platform from which Shikeith developed his artistic interests.

“[The video] was released in December 2014 and within a year I was showing at other galleries, [and participating in] lectures and talks at universities,” he said. “It was a quick whirlwind off this initial body of work.”
But it was his time at Yale University, where he earned his MFA, that honed Shikeith’s art-making practice. While he still leans heavily into personal narrative, Shikeith’s work is driven by research that involves site visits to specific bodies of water or ancestral homes, as well as lengthy internet searches. And where his early bodies of work tended toward the figurative, Shikeith today is increasingly leaning toward post-minimalist abstraction, without sacrificing his initial instincts. Organic materials like wood, water, glass, and gases double as aesthetic props loaded with meaning for their shape-shifting qualities.

His show “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark,” which he presented at the Mattress Factory in 2020, was a meditative chamber that showcases this evolution. Viewers stepped onto a wooden plank hovering over water, with a haint blue neon lighting the otherwise dark room. Shikeith describes the light as an amulet that “wards off ghosts and evil spirits,” while the water simultaneously “symbolizes […] purification (baptism) and the horrors and racial terror inflicted upon enslaved Africans during the forced voyage across the Atlantic (Middle Passage).”
Now, *notes toward becoming a spill*, which evolved from a photo series to an installation and now, an opera, similarly illustrates Shikeith’s interest in personal transformation. With the performers outfitted in flowing blue garments, and their movements displaying a kind of metamorphosis, Shikeith alludes to the personal evolution he believes is underway for queer Black men and the Black community as a whole.

For Shikeith, making this work is an act of love, a gift to those like him who have struggled and found a way to break through. “[I’m] creating ruptures in these worlds around us [that] have started to constrain us...I’m mixing and meshing and conjuring a magical recipe every time and seeing what occurs” he said. “There is always this revision and metamorphosis happening.”

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The Artsy Vanguard 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature recognizing the most promising artists working today. This fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard is a triumphant new chapter, as we present an in-person exhibition in Miami featuring the 20 artists’ works, including many available to collect on Artsy. Curated by Erin Jenoa Gilbert, sponsored by MNTN, and generously supported by Mana Public Arts, the show is located at 555 NW 24th Street, Miami, and is open to the public from December 2nd through 5th, 12–6 p.m.
Shikeith Cathey on creating closeness in a socially-distanced world

The artist talks to us about self-care, crafting intimacy and his new experimental opera on the psychic wounds that haunt black men.

Shikeith is an artist whose work investigates black masculinity and psychology via sculpture, film, photography, and installation. He was born, lives and works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has exhibited across America, and in 2020, he was awarded the Art Matters Foundation Grant and was selected for the 2020 – 2021 Leslie Lohman Museum Artist Fellowship.

Tell me about the exhibitions that you have participated in over the last year and a half.

At the start of the pandemic, I was going into my first exhibition, a large scale installation exhibition, which was at the Mattress Factory Museum in Pittsburgh, entitled Feeling The Spirit In The Dark. That was in 2020. And then also following that, I had another show at CAM in California, and I created a large installation for that group exhibition. Then, I had another show that was slated to be a group exhibition at MoCA Cleveland, but ended up being a solo show, because it was delayed due to the pandemic. Everything was back to back, and so I had three large scale installations that I created over the course of the last eighteen months.

It was pretty wild to do that kind of work. Those are the biggest installations that I’ve made. And they all happened while everything was going on in the world, but I will say that it was a great test for me as an artist to think more intimately about how I create space. I try to create these spaces that the audience can immerse themselves in, but now there are all these regulations about what we can touch and how we can be in the same space together. It made me realise that the core of my work is about creating closeness and intimacy.
Against social distancing, right?
I had to really reorganise how I thought. The spaces became a lot more meditative and allowed audiences to go within themselves more, which in the end, thanks to the pandemic, I think was super beneficial.

So has your way of making your work changed during the pandemic? Have you been in the studio a lot?
When the pandemic began I was in the midst of creating this series of portraits that required travelling, and it also meant that I would be engaging with people who were not necessarily people I had been around before. It was an intergenerational cast of people, so I had to really restructure my studio to be able to invite people in. But on another level, the isolation of the pandemic in itself made me go inside myself, and think a lot more about being alone, about yearning for intimacy and wanting closeness again with others.

That sounds beautiful.
I just began to write a lot more in my studio, too. And a lot of the language related back to these desires, of wanting again, to be next to someone and also the troubles that I would have from being alone. Part of being isolated was a kind of madness. I would start to spiral a little bit just from being by myself. But the art in itself, – that was produced during that period, or at least is coming out of that period – sparked the shift further away from the representational into a more of an abstracted figuration – where things become a lot more muted and hard to see.

One thing that you have touched on a couple of times that I want to ask you about is: how are you taking care of yourself during what’s still a really challenging time? And what are you doing to find solace?
I had neglected a lot of self-care practices for a very long time, but then I was also trying to navigate towards a peace that wasn’t really authentic. Over the course of the past year, I have started talking to a counsellor, which is something that I’ve never really done. Considering a lot of my work is dealing with this psychological landscape, that was something that I had avoided, but had always allowed the art to be a pull toward this release or cathartic experience. For me personally as an artist, I do prefer to communicate through this visual art, but it’s nice to be able to regain a voice. And I’m able to be proud of myself for taking those steps.
Well, let me congratulate you. I know, at least in the black community in which I was raised, going to therapy was not something that you did. And it’s something I firmly believe in, so good for you for taking those steps, and prioritising your emotional and psychological wellbeing and hygiene.

What I do is cook.

Okay.

I learned how to cook from my grandmother who passed away right at the start of the pandemic. I watched my grandmother and my mom cook in the kitchen, and it’s one of my favourite things to do. I’ll make a big pot of greens, or fry some chicken, and just have it there for just the process of it all, but that’s something that I really just enjoy doing to de-stress and think to myself. I’m from North Philly, so when I was coming up every Sunday, and I know this to be true for a lot of different black communities, Sunday is when you went to church and came home. Then, everybody got together and we’d eat, but in my family – even though my family was a Christian household – we didn’t necessarily go to church. It was always just creating that kind of space for ourselves. On Sunday morning we would clean. My mom would put on the music, and my grandmother and my mom would be cooking in the kitchen. And so, I think that practice is something that I’ve carried on into my own home because of how it made me feel; it still makes me feel good to do that. It’s good for the soul. You know?

Is there something that you’ve recently acquired – art, or an object, or even a subscription that you are loving right now?

I like to purchase photographs from eBay. I tapped into this black queer archive of found photographs that had ended up on somebody’s eBay storefront, and I’ve been able to connect the dots with all of these men. I uploaded one of the photographs to Instagram, and the guy in the image saw them and then he found me. Then he contacted me, and gave me the backstory. It was all from this black gay retreat in the 90s. He lived here in Brooklyn, where I’ve been for the past few months while working on Performa. We’re going to have lunch together really soon.

Tell me a bit about Performa and what they might be able to look forward to, as it’s about to begin.

I’m creating an experimental opera entitled Notes Towards Becoming A Spill, which gets its title from an installation that I created, and it’s also the title of a body of my photography. It’s a cast of twenty singers and five dancers. I’m going to be narrating. It’s about the dancing black male body and the process of becoming and untangling one’s self from some of the psychic wounds that continue to haunt black men. I’m very excited about it. I hope people come.

https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/7xb9a/shikeith-cathey-interview
Shikeith in Art in America

Shikeith is an artist and filmmaker based in Pittsburgh.

Still waters run deep (2021) is a five-channel video installation featuring found footage, sound, archival photographs, and video that I produced. The images are projected onto reclaimed ship sails suspended above a pool of water, and also spill onto the gallery walls. One video, which I consider the focal point of the installation, focuses on an eight-year-old boy from Florida who performs a majorette dance routine—a style of dance traditionally performed at historically Black colleges and universities. He’s shown alongside snapshots of Black men showcasing vulnerable expressions of masculinity (they are hugging, sleeping, etc.). In addition to these photos, collected from vintage stores, I also included a nineteenth-century daguerreotype of Renty, an enslaved man from South Carolina; distorted found footage of Black men wrestling; and a glitching projection of the color “haunt blue,” a shade of blue that enslaved people invented to ward off evil. Together, these elements create a complicated entanglement of moving images concerning identity, collective memory, and the ecstatic.

A looping soundscape features a poem titled “Memory’s Blood” (2021), written and recited by Jarred Strong, along with ambient recordings of children’s rhymes, cries at the sites of baptisms, and Southern blues music. The work is the latest in the series “Blue Spaces,” which I have been working on for three years. It’s a series about African American cosmologies of the blues, our intricate bonds to the aquatic, and the experience of coming undone.

— Shikeith
It is the picture of rebirth, an image of the unease of transition. Profusely the sweat gathers, beading across Prince Luxury’s face and chest. His almond-shaped eyes are shut as his tongue reaches across gold grills capped onto his teeth, licking away moisture from his upper lip. His body is there in the frame, but his mind is elsewhere. Looking at the artist Shikeith’s image titled *Prince* (2019), you want to see what the figure sees, but you can’t. Luxury’s gaze is hidden behind his eyelids: like an awning, they provide cover. What vision is he masking? An action of his own making? An imagined destination where the sweat of his labor marks him of value? A place where he is the center of his own desire? Of this image, Shikeith has noted that he seems to have caught Luxury in the middle of “an act of deviance.” What is captured is an autoerotic freedom.

*Utopia* is not a word that has been widely considered in the contemporary photographic works of Black queer artists. Much of their art has been flattened into the politics of representation. But Shikeith’s impression of ecstasy is an ideal, a warm depiction that insists on concrete possibility for another world. This work has roots in earlier art that explores subjectivities and social spaces beyond cultural and sexual limitations. Alvin Baltrop snapped black-and-white pictures while cruising New York’s collapsing Hudson River piers in the 1970s and ’80s. Those images reveal a secret world—in the liminal post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS space—that existed outside of that era’s dominant sexual appetite and presaged today’s wide embrace of dating apps such as Grindr and Tinder, and casual sex-worker sites like OnlyFans. Shikeith’s portrait of desire also recalls Lyle Ashton Harris’s images that parse gay male subjectivity and want. Harris’s early
1990s performances of masculinity transgressed the binaries of gender and race that governed how a Black man should act. In a self-portrait, *Snow Queen #1* (1990), Harris appears in a platinum blond wig; white powder covers his face. His body does not yet exist as normal: there is no place where his body can feel affirmed and complete without the possibility of harm.

While utopia often denotes otherworldly fantasy, unrestricted escapism, or sublime positivity, the late theorist José Esteban Muñoz, in his 2009 book, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, offered the idea of a queer utopia, one constructed with verisimilitude and operating against a history of lack and discrimination. Queerness belongs to the future, Muñoz claims in his study of performance, writing, and contemporary art, noting that it “allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.” Utopia is the search for safe space in counternarratives where queer acts, longings, and urges fulfill personal and communal yearning—and where desire flourishes beyond the confines of mainstream white, gay culture. Such acts offer care and delight, a way out of the margins. As Joshua Chambers-Letson, Tavia Nyong’o, and Ann Pellegrini write in their foreword to the 2019 edition of *Cruising Utopia*, “For utopia, though it bears many positive qualities, also bears negation, as originating from the Greek for ‘no place’ or ‘not place.’” They add, “Queer utopia is the impossible performance of the negation of the negation.”

“When idealizing what utopia looks like I immediately think of the use of photography,” the photographer Davion Alston explains to me. “This tool mastered the recording of truth, the reflection of what or who could be.” Alston’s recent series *stepping on the ant bed* (2020) documents the protests in Georgia against the killing of unarmed Black people such as Rayshard Brooks and Breonna Taylor by the police. He describes the work as a way for him to explore “desiring utopia in dystopia.” These black-and-white images capture protesters as they shut down southbound lanes of the I-75/I-85 highway. In the photographer’s prints, faces are intentionally obscured with blue, red, yellow, and green stickers. “Through this covering of faces,” he says, “I am able to think about the protection of identity due to surveillance and speculation as well as redefining what the landscape looks like in 2020.” The images allow for new imaginings of the expressions of the Black body beyond what is sanctioned. Amid the twin pandemics of racism and coronavirus, the pictures offer a look at seeking safety in protest, a way of gathering against governmental failure.

“I made the image knowing I wanted to talk about not giving a fuck,” the photographer D’Angelo Lovell Williams says of *Nah* (2018). It’s a self-portrait of the artist in a white dress, *swimming in a lake*, away from the camera, a gesture that refuses capture, finitude. The image is part of a growing oeuvre in which Williams creates scenes of aspiration and connection. “When I think about the formal,” he explains, “I think about themes of class, race, and social hierarchies that don’t allow Black and queer people to explore beauty and desire of each other’s bodies.” His aim is to reframe that censorship, visualizing what Muñoz addresses as a queer performativity that “is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.” In *Elysian* (2018), a figure obscured by parched foliage is seen tenderly pulling a lover into another world, where a moment of intimacy is possible. There is a radical physicality present that explores themes of surreal dualities, kinship, and discovery as a way to transgress the taboo. “I know our history with the natural landscape, and it’s lacking in regard to visual representation,” Williams says. “When themes about my work come up, I hear, ‘Oh, well, your work is sexually explicit.’ The gestures are about rejecting the labels that have been placed on us. I don’t have to abide by censorship on my own body or people’s bodies.” He adds, “It’s about going beyond a sense of the now.”

Photographers such as Daniel Obasi, Nydia Blas, and Naima Green also use the camera to exceed the present precarious conditions of racism, homophobia, and anti-trans violence. In Green’s portrait *Diamond, Brower Park* (2016), the subject’s eyes are closed. “That gesture offers a different way of thinking into oneself, the landscape, and creating a utopia in really blocking out everything and just being there and taking a deep breath in the moment,” Green explains. The image is from a series of portraits, called *Jewels from the Hinterland* (2013 ongoing), that captures creatives from across the African diaspora in urban idylls. *Hinterland*: an area lying beyond what is visible or known. This idea of a private space, only reachable by those in the know, was essential to Green’s pursuit to “create an alternative present” and “reclaim lively, lush urban space as Black space.”

Reclaiming urban space as Black space is also at play in Lauren Halsey’s digital collages that present queer Afrofuturist alternative realms. On social media, she borrows the name of the Black ready-to-wear label FUBU (For Us By Us) that, in the 1990s, represented cool urban self-realization, and hashtags her visions #fubuarchitecture. For the artist it seems to be shorthand for what an inclusive and self-reliant Black community could be. Her work *thang* (2020) zeroes in on South Central, Los Angeles, where Halsey is from. She remakes her neighborhood in her own image. Stylish Black women and men appear, cut from found
materials, as do pyramids, unicorns, statues, a Louis Vuitton–monogrammed California bungalow, and advertisements for local businesses such as Urban Books & Thangs. There are statements of empowerment against gentrification: we still here, there (2018) and the sprawling collage work gotta get over the hump? (2010), in which emblems of Black mysticism and informal communion collide. Halsey’s visual world-building sits in a history of queering the medium of collage that has long manufactured dreams, manifesting them through the construction of new material realities.

Like Mickalene Thomas, with her vibrant, collaged living-room tableaux, Halsey, who also draws on the Black cultural aesthetics of the 1970s, has used her collages as sketches for architectural installations such as Kingdom Splurge (2015), which she describes as an “endless becoming that entails liberation through Funk, fantasy architecture, and the experimental development of space.” A similar impulse is at play in Sadie Barnette’s New Eagle Creek Salon (2019). The project pays homage to and reimagines the San Francisco bar her father, Rodney Barnette, opened, in 1990, to serve a multiracial queer community marginalized by the city’s gay nightlife scene. The installation’s bar (activated as a social space), sculpture, and found party photographs of patrons and bartenders are glittering documents of history. Memory here is used in the service of futurity—or, as Barnette writes, the project is meant to “offer space for connection and new energies, to dance and dream.”

Muñoz opens Cruising Utopia with a provocation: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer.” It announces that queer people are not yet fully themselves in the world, and the process of trying to get there is the hard work of hope. The violence of the state routinely smashes the self, controlling what is possible—sexually, politically. Given this enduring reality, some queer artists dream in images, in defiance of the straight imagination. Their eyes desire narratives of longing and pleasure, free of trauma, with illuminations of relief. Through their pictures, other ways of existing are possible.

The line between pleasure and pain, sacred and profane is thin for Black queer men. In his latest show at Pittsburgh’s Mattress Factory Museum, ‘Feeling The Spirit In The Dark’, Pittsburgh-based conceptual artist Shikeith traverses this line in work that considers the afterlife of slavery and the many ways Black queer, male-embodied people are haunted by intergenerational trauma.

The show’s four installations, which explore the psychological impact of light, darkness, touch, and space on the Black body and soul, will host performances by musicians Rashad McPherson, Corey Staggers and Trapcry on 21 January and 11 February. Both Shikeith’s immersive environments and the work of his collaborators trace the history of Black people through music by sampling blues, jazz, gospel, and R&B, and examine the ways the echoes of the Middle Passage still reverberate within the Black collective consciousness.

Mia Imani The Black church is an undercurrent throughout the entire project. What is your relationship to the Black church?

Shikeith This work in particular is really engaged with sacred space and how sacred space is constructed within Black households. I come from a deeply religious Christian family. My grandmother, who I was raised with, always kept a Bible at the end of the stairs. Right outside of my childhood bedroom was a portrait of Jesus. So there was always the presence of the Black church within my house, especially the sound of gospel music, but then also music that might be considered secular, like Mary J. Blige and Lauryn Hill.

MI How did you come up with the concept for ‘Feeling The Spirit In The Dark’? What made you want to include live performance?
The show advances my construction of ‘blue spaces,’ site-specific installations interrogating the interior worlds of Black men, particularly my own. The show takes its name from a 1998 text by E. Patrick Johnson in which the author writes about how Black gay men move from place to space because they feel constrained within the Black church, but then also seek out another establishment for themselves. A lot of that movement happens underground, in the dark, where they could experience a sense of liberation, a sense they bury beneath their feelings about the church. As someone who identifies with that, I wanted to locate an erotic potential through the construction of these spaces for Black queer men.

This project feels as much like an act of spiritual cleansing as an exhibition. Throughout the show, and especially within the installation Feeling The Spirit In The Dark, blue as a color, a type of music (blues), an emotion, and a body of water flood the rooms. How do colour and sound play a role in exorcising traumas within the installations?

My earlier work dealt with the psychological landscape of Black manhood. I wanted to figure out how, through visual art, I could repossess Black male sexuality. Our bodies are haunted by the aftereffects of slavery, such as racism and homophobia. I wanted to create a form around that experience that didn’t rely on direct representation, and stumbled across this idea of ‘Blue space’ in my research. Bodies of water, for instance: as we know, Black people have a fraught relationship with bodies of water, particularly the Atlantic, from the Middle Passage. Bodies of water have also been a refuge for us, like the swamps on the escape routes of the Underground Railroad. Sonically, the blues played a huge role in how Black queer people have expressed themselves, thinking particularly of Kokomo Arnold, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.

History plays a key role in this project, in works like The Beauty of Recovering What Has Been Lost (2020). In that work, Black pain and potential are embodied by seven glass penis lanterns suspended from the ceiling in the formation of the Big Dipper constellation, a nod to the ways Black folx would use the stars to navigate north via the Underground Railroad. Which elements of the Black cultural archive helped you develop these works?

In his book On Black Men (2000), David Mariott writes about how the Black male psyche gets wound up in racial trauma, and the psychic wounds continue to haunt us and impact the way that we see one another and see ourselves. In works like The Beauty of Recovering What Has Been Lost, for instance, I’m thinking about lynchings, in which castration was common. The Black male penis was the most prized thing you could retrieve from the scene. I’m also thinking of Louis Agassiz’s daguerreotypes of slaves and other archival images of the Black male body that are profoundly affecting.

Many of your works in the project, especially Altar (Held After), which explores the relationship between the gloryhole and the church confessional, oscillate between two opposing states – such as sacred and profane – and in turn create a third reality between them. What do these liminal spaces represent to you.

It’s something that I attach a lot of wonder to. There’s a space of indeterminacy that I’m really after. A space that is unfixed from a destination. In that lack of fixity, an erotic or liberatory space can arise. Black people have always had to resist stasis, which I’m also trying to do through these oscillations. It’s from that resistance to stasis that our radical potentiality has so often emerged.

‘Feeling The Spirit in the Dark’ incorporates immaterial traditions of Black art, such as music and performance, with material traditions most closely associated with academic art, like minimalist sculpture and painting. How does the interplay of these mediums allow you to touch on different elements of Blackness?
One of my professors at Yale, the incredible scholar Rizvana Bradley, once said that ‘Blackness exceeds representation.’ I’m trying to create geometric abstraction while layering on minimalism and light art, but, you know, throwing some flavour on it. I think it’s allowed me to touch on the plasticity of Blackness.

MI How did Rashad McPherson, Trapcry and Corey Staggers get involved in the project?

Collaboration is a huge part of my practice. Corey is a saxophonist who I met during my time at Yale. Trap is someone who collaborated with on the sound production across all of my installations. Rashad is someone whose music I was listening to during the conceptualizing of ‘Feeling The Spirit In The Dark’. It’s an honour to be able to allow them to activate this installation through their individual performances, because I do feel like the installation is a sacred space.