



PAUL ANTHONY SMITH:
Standing In

Blaffer Art Museum

October 22, 2022—March 12, 2023

^[1]Islands #4, 2020-21 Unique picotage with spray paint on inkjet print, mounted on museum board and sintra.



“Masks disguise the figure, allowing them to be free.”

—Paul Anthony Smith

The taking, editing, and broadcast of photographs has become synonymous with life in the 21st century, and the attendant image economy is one of the most pronounced socio-cultural conditions of the global-digital age. With cell phone cameras as near ever-present companions, we habitually document our encounters and experiences via snapshots, and brand ourselves into (online) being with this pictographic language. Instagram identities are ubiquitous today, if not expected, and cameras have exposed a wider spectrum of society than we ever thought possible – for better *and* worse; And yet, while we are now the most photographed populace in human history, the lens remains frighteningly invasive. To make a photo is to arguably “take” something of its subject – be it a person, place, or thing – breeding a consumptive economy of images akin to tele-visual colonialism. For as long as the camera has allowed us to “capture” and possess pieces of one another, and where we live, and eat, and gather, a negotiation of power has been embedded into every photograph shot, shared, and sold. This is especially true of the often-exploitative fields of ethnography and tourism, which covet the means to hold a piece of “the exotic” like a shellacked cabinet of pictorial trophies. How then to resist, or fight back against the ravenous appetite of the omnipresent camera? One may ask if the

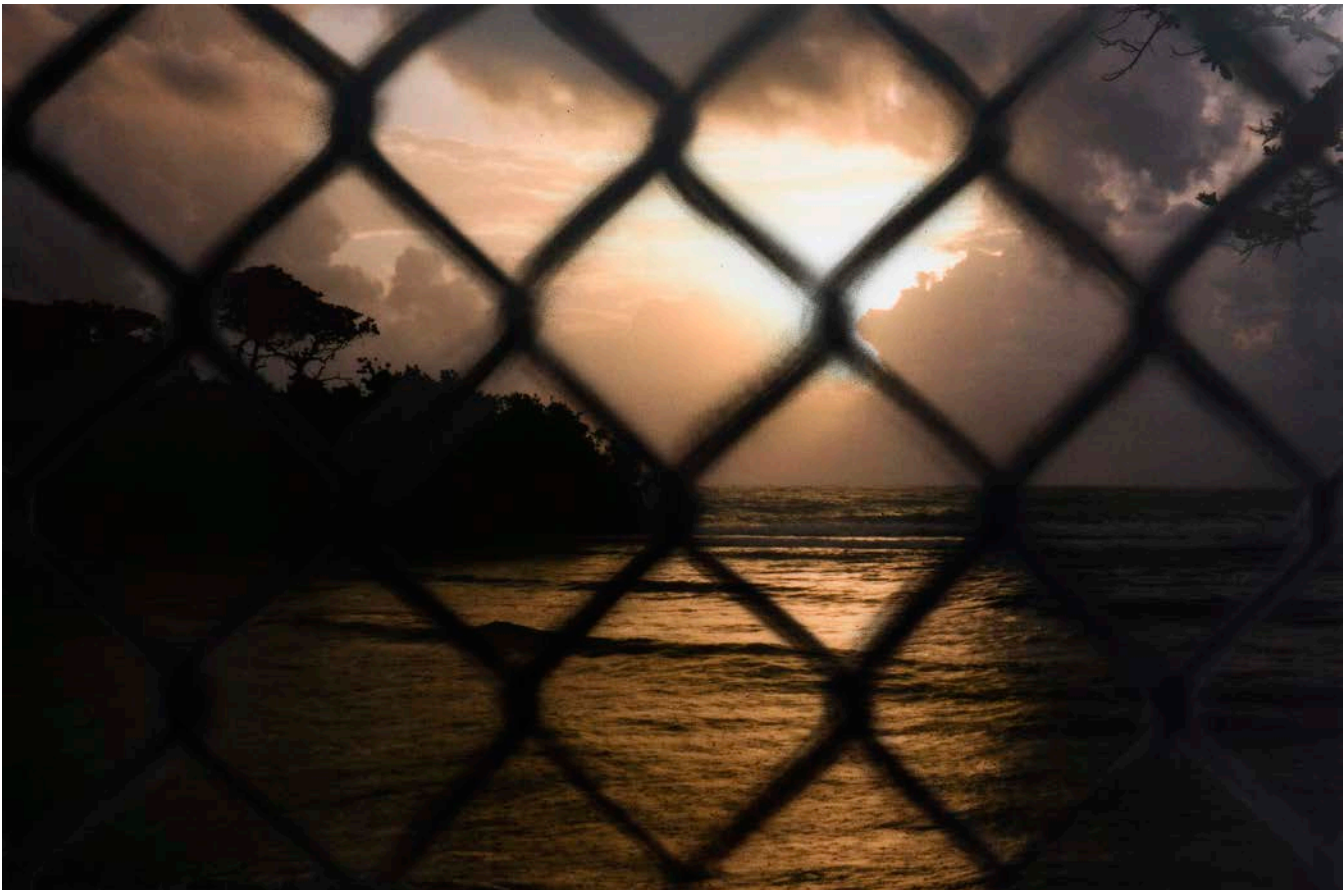
most effective strategy to protect said subjects would be not to take the photo at all, and especially not to share it publicly, or position this image as the subject of art. The collection and circulation of such imagery is, however, inevitable; not a question of if, but when, and how many?

The work of Jamaica-born, Brooklyn-based artist Paul Anthony Smith is an acknowledgment and intervention in this hegemonic enterprise of the photograph, and how it intimately reflects the politics of being and belonging. And while Smith does not call himself a photographer, nor present his photos as artworks unto themselves, his persistent engagement with the both the object and discourse of photography confronts its fraught DNA. The camera functions much like his diary in continued travel to Jamaica, Aruba, Barbados and the Caribbean diaspora in New York and London – retracing historic routes of migration and memory, at the same time he simply collects impressions of friends, family and community members. He does so with agency and ambivalence, creating a dangerous, but necessary arena where he simultaneously celebrates and shields all those before his lens. “Most [of his] images appear,” in the appraisal of curator Dan Cameron, “to have been taken either at street fairs or in more domestic settings,

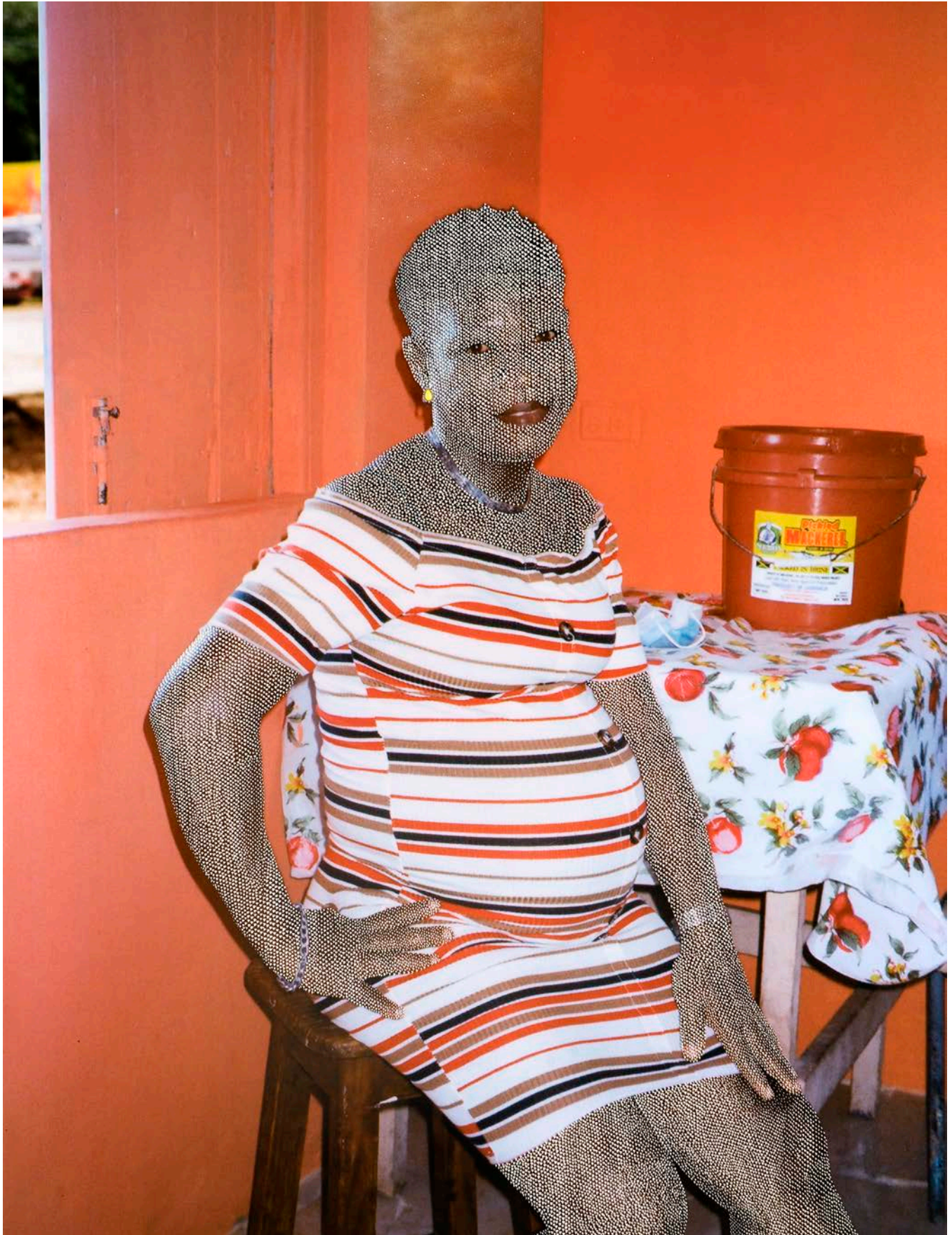
and almost all of them zero in on facial expressions or characteristic gestures by individuals who seem both anonymous and intimately revealed.” Smith himself wrestles anxiously with the “overbearing power” of what a photo can give, and take, from a person or place, and has described his process as “re-pixelating the image” to curb its growing potency in the digital era. The black body oscillates here, and critic Seph Rodney counts Smith as part of a generation of artists who “carefully calibrate how and under what conditions it is seen.” Infusing resistance in representation, Rodney continues, “[This body] is not ready for consumption. This body will not provide sustenance for appetites desiring the exotic, yet sumptuous ethnic flesh that in the larger culture is as much longed for as it is held in contempt.” Smith’s image is one that empathically reflects and endures the traumas of historical exploitation, inviting and deflecting the gaze as he re-routes existing narratives via physical obfuscation.

Both the stoic and smiling faces of Smith’s subjects belie what he has called “layers of unease” which are brought to the surface via a methodical technique the artist has dubbed “picotage.” With the same hand tool ceramicists use to cut shapes into clay, Smith tears small, rhythmic segments from the epidermis of his photographs to lift parts of the image without fully dismantling it. The laborious process is likened to the “flocking” of fabric and an 18th century French technique of making patterned holes, as well as the coming-of-age African ritual of “scarification” said to identify, embellish, and safeguard its subject. Others liken the effect to daubs of paint, and NY Times critic Holland Cotter once reveled in their beauty, describing the plucked veils as “clouds of scintillation.” All are relevant here, reflecting the co-existence of love and trauma. For while the admittedly “aggressive” result could be more easily accomplished with mechanical

^[2]*Centering the Periphery #6*, 2021 Spray paint on inkjet print on sintra.



^[3]*Black Woman and Child (After Sizzla 1997)*, 2021-22, Picotage and spray paint on inkjet print on museum board mounted on Dibond, and yellow earring.



^[4]*Untitled*, 2020 Unique picotage and spray paint on inkjet print.



^[5]*BB#4*, 2016 Unique picotage on inkjet print and colored pencil, mounted on museum board.



tools or digital facsimile, the time-consuming labor of picking each chad speaks to Smith's relationship with the subject/s of each photo. They are people and places that mean something to him, and their effigies ripple, as critic Jenny Bahn comments on how Smith "maims an image until it practically shimmers" – producing a lenticular effect that defies singular perspective. We must walk to and fro, back and forth, to engage images (and subjects) that flicker outside of either focus or containment. It is important to note that one of the first photos Smith practiced picotage upon was that of his mother, doing so in such a manner that rendered her unrecognizable to anyone but himself. Delicate and destructive at once, this obsessive, hand-wrought technique inextricably marries content, form, and autobiography as he scrapes the exterior to mine the interior. There is a "wistfulness" that follows which Cameron poetically identifies, of wanting to see and know more about each subject,

knowing every expectant dig will further distort the fleeting trace.

We do not directly see the artist in any of these images, but as he continues to survey the Jamaica of his past and the diaspora of his present – one photo at a time – Smith becomes the architecture that underpins the arena. Traveling the course of his life via the people and places that shaped its character, he explains, "I know these people, I've seen them growing up. It's like going back and living and understanding what life is like." And while they remain purposefully, protectively anonymous to the audience, their role in the formation of his being is palpable as Smith describes these people as "fragmented parts of my life," elaborating, "They're part of my lived experience of being behind a camera... They're connected to me." Over the ten years that this exhibition surveys, in the cartographic practice of mining

his biography by plucking at the memories that each person and place represents, Smith has come to identify many of these subjects as “stand ins” for himself. Within this quivering constellation of surrogates and avatars, Smith cumulatively positions memory as a surrogate for reality – embracing the blurred contours and obscured details of a life told not through a hall of mirrors, but in the reflection in/of others. It is a kaleidoscopic story told to us through a similarly cobbled mosaic, as critic Jason Foubert notes how the faces in Smith’s photos “have been consumed by the artist’s hand and absorbed by his memory.” Referencing both the thinking and lives of post-colonial theorists Stuart Hall and Franz Fanon, Smith emphasizes how this fractured identity has become endemic for those living between places, where, in his words, “you never really feel fully one thing or the other.” Part of many and none in the interstices of hybridity, Smith rakes his photographic archive like a farmer in a field – imagining a more liberated anonymity by scraping the signposts and redrawing the map.

Much like the brick walls and chain link fences that Smith paints into some of his images, the act of picotage can itself be seen as a filter that interrogates which parts of a person are allowed to “pass” through the politics of borders, migration, and society. Speaking to the multiplying screens in Smith’s work, curator Dan Cameron is again insightful when noting that, “By dividing a third or more of each work’s surface into crisply delineated picotage sections, Smith gets the resulting pattern to operate as an extra layer, a screen that overlays or slices diagonally through the picture plane. More pointedly, picotage acts to complicate our inspection of the photograph’s subject, so that we repeatedly end up trying to decode or unpack the image by peering through and around the patterns.” And yet rather than dwell behind their circumscription or reside in repression, Smith locates a liberatory dimension that can be located within the gaps, between the bricks. Based upon perforated breeze block walls popular in Jamaica in the 1950s, which both absorb heat and allow air to pass through, Smith’s architectures are purposefully

porous as he reflects, “Walls are meant to exclude but also protect, and in this case they are used as veils and disguises.” The precursor to these walls were elaborate picotage masks, inspired by the African Kuba tradition, which Smith “placed” upon consequently anonymous figures. Amongst these formative early works, where subjects are made simultaneously majestic and mutable, critic Robin Dluzen notes how Smith’s masking “alternates deftly between the suppression and power inherent in anonymity.”

Speaking to the charged emancipation one can feel when they are no longer assigned or identifiable, Smith argues, “Masks disguise the figure, allowing them to be free.” In the paradox of shedding inhibitions by acquiring armor, or being a “truer” self when the self is no longer visible (as seen in *Carnivale*), Smith reflexively elaborates, “Because these events happen, these people act out and not [like] themselves. They become something else because they become more spiritual, either from the dancing, the song, the drinks, or the camaraderie that occurs. They become someone else, that’s why I have to blur them or cover them up. *I find that I’m not myself. I’m more open.*” (my italics) Within this increasingly nebulous terrain, the picotaged breeze blocks, brick walls, and African masks have morphed into more intimate clouds and veils in Smith’s most recent works – obscuring, protecting, and mystifying their subjects. Between assimilation and adaptation, essentialism and evolution, cultural fluidity and code-switching, Smith’s picotaged palimpsest thusly asks the question, in his words, “when you come to a new country, do you become a hybrid of your surroundings? Or do you stay within your culture?” What the wearer chooses behind the mask flickers and dances amidst the flocked edges, each one lifting the image and revising the frame.

- SM 2022

Front Cover: Ras, 2013

Back Cover: *Untitled*, 2021

All images © Paul Anthony Smith. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



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About the exhibition:

Paul Anthony Smith: *Standing In*

October 22, 2022—March 12, 2023

This exhibition is organized by Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator, Steven Matijcio, and runs until March 12, 2023. Major funding for Paul Anthony Smith: *Standing In* is provided by the Stolbun Family Foundation, Leslie & Brad Bucher, and the John P. McGovern Foundation. Generous support is provided by Ingrid Arneberg, Andrew & Robin Schirrmeister, and Blaffer Art Museum Advisory Board members. Special thanks to Jack Shainman Gallery and the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City for their assistance in organizing this exhibition.

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Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston

Museum Hours

Tues —> Fri, 10am-5pm

Sat —> Sun, 12pm-5pm

Admission is always free

blafferartmuseum.org

^[6]Walk Bout 20, 2013-20 Unique picotage mounted on museum board.

