

ArtSeen

Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility

By Zoë Hopkins



Sandra Mujinga, *Spectral Keepers*, 2020. Tulle fabric, cotton fabric, nylon thread, threaded rods, wire clamps, and cellular concrete, four figures, 109 7/16 × 31 1/2 × 15 3/4 inches each; four baskets, 30 5/16 × 30 5/16 × 38 3/16 inches each. Private collection. © Sandra Mujinga. Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London. Photo: Plastiques.

My visits to the Guggenheim are usually textured by a particular, peculiar kind of vacillation between looking and watching. Every so often, I momentarily abandon looking at the artwork to approach that famously curving white banister and cast my gaze down and across the rotunda. I

observe fellow museum goers observing the artwork or—like me—quietly looking out across the rotunda. I am disquieted by my own desire to watch, to participate in this eerie scopic drama. And I am aware that I, too, am subject to the same surveillance that I am practicing, that I have nowhere to hide in the panoptical circle of the museum. I don't like this double bind, but I find myself in it anyway.

How ironic—and how fitting—that its rotunda is presently the site of an exhibition investigating the tensions, violence, and thrills embroiled in visibility and invisibility. Born out of Ashley James's incisive curatorial mind, *Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility* assembles the work of twenty-eight artists from the 1960s to the present who engage the racial fault lines that govern seeing and being seen. Refreshingly, the exhibition doesn't center or pander to mainstream liberal calls for representation, recognition, and visibility. Yet it doesn't dismiss these concerns wholesale, either. Instead, it does the difficult work of navigating a strained simultaneity of desires: the desire to shirk the limitations of racialized invisibility and the equally serious desire to find liberation in the protected dark, to turn into the clandestine world of *blackness* as both a chromatic and political signifier.

Going Dark requires a certain humility from its visitors. With assiduous intensity, the artists require us to dismantle the instincts to discern and divine, urging us to abandon ways of looking conditioned by an episteme that privileges immediate legibility. The exhibition opens with a selection of photographs by Ming Smith, which carefully utilize a blurring technique to obscure and protect figures in the frame. In her works like *Shango (Invisible Man Series)* (1991), we see only the flashing shimmer of a stage performer's garment as it whirls against the night sky. Motion becomes a kind of shroud, a layer of secrecy which Black people—and their cultural practices—can steal into.

The visual and formal vocabularies of artists like Smith—and many others—clearly privilege darkness, shadow, and opacity. But what of the *going* in going dark? Crucially, the exhibition turns not only on its titular adjective, but also on its verb: it is as much about visibility and concealment as it is keeping these practices in dynamic motion and flight. Take, for example, Sandra Mujinga's three-channel video installation *Pervasive Light* (2021). Here, a partially articulated Black figure flickers in and out of a dark background, slithering across the generous three-paneled space. Though her

garments glint with fiery crimson tones, Mujinga's figure embodies liquidity as she glides in and out of sight, at once a presence and trace.

Nearby, Sondra Perry's *Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II* (2013) occasions a similar volatility, a velocity too swift for the eye. Using digital whitening, the artist almost completely masks the racial identity of her performers (who are Black), as they frantically spin, shake, and thrash against a white background. The literal whitewashing of the performers instantiates a surprising moment of going *bright white*: they refuse the visual expectations heaped onto Blackness through casing themselves in its opposite.

Then there is the matter of our own bodies, our own movements, our own moments of opacity. As viewers, we too become implicated in the artists' quests to be hidden, finding ourselves enticed into their umbral paths of retreat. Lorna Simpson's *Specific Notation* (2019) is mounted not in the classic Guggenheim niches, but on a wall facing opposite one of them. To encounter the work, we must enter space behind the wall, which is invisible to those beyond it. In turn, the large-scale print—which pictures a Black female face sinking into an undefined field of brushwork—reads like a reply to the stealth that is required to view it. We echo the figure's furtive immersion.

For about half of my time at *Going Dark*, I did not have access to my phone, that appendage-like apparatus which has become so indispensable to our ways of seeing. I had surrendered it (for the duration of the exhibition) to a small, locked pouch designed for American Artist's *Security Theater* (2023), a site-specific installation whose daring materials list includes items like "CCTV cameras," "AI," and "4k monitors." Upon giving up my phone, I was permitted to step into a curtained room—hidden from view of visitors elsewhere in the rotunda—where eight screens ran CCTV footage of the museum. When I entered the room and positioned myself before the CCTV footage, I was thoroughly unnerved not by the fact that I had relinquished my own technology of surveillance, but that doing so ultimately gave me license to surveil. To go dark here means to hold the power of sight, to negotiate the world from the fringes of its perceptual economy....

Before leaving the museum, I go to the front desk to have my phone pouch unlocked. I try to open it using Face ID and am gleeful when (on the first attempt) my phone doesn't recognize me. I leave the museum and slip into the generative tension of the evening shadows, grateful that it is nighttime outside.
