positive images

Christina Coleman
There is a certain subtle poetry to the aesthetics of math—Euclid described a line as both an “idealization,” and a “breadthless length.” This poetry is picked up in the elegant, minimal forms of Christina Coleman’s latest work. Her gradients, implied lines, and bell curves link the logic of geometry with the fundamentals of drawing. But there is also a sinister quality to the simplifying poise of a graph—what complexities, what human chaos is seemingly “made clear” by its logic? The simplicity of its form is belied by the materiality of Coleman’s work and its provocation.

In 1994, political scientist Charles Murray and psychologist Richard Herrnstein published *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Never mind that Murray was a political theorist and not a statistician, never mind that Murray once burned a cross on a hill in his hometown of Newton, Iowa. In Murray’s view, the compelling graphs which “proved” the correlation between race, genetics, and IQ scores were beyond argument. Without commenting directly on the controversies of the book, Coleman’s new work in this exhibition explores the power and persuasion of aestheticized data.

Coleman’s graphs present the elusive certainty of data, the deceptive collusion of mathematics and social science. Drawing on data sets that collate population, academic achievement, and economic investments, these graphs point to the slippery space of indeterminacy between empirical knowledge and social policy. Built from stretched children’s hair elastics, Coleman’s graphs quietly suggest the ties between data and bodies. The other wall charts in the exhibition are delineated with strands of synthetic hair. Coleman uses this material to play with our expectations—who or what do we think of in association with synthetic hair? How does it invoke race and gender?

Coleman has been working with the tools and products of African-American haircare for many years. Transforming her media like an alchemist, Coleman paints with hair gel, makes porcelain casts of combs, draws lines with synthetic hair, and stretches hair bands into algorithms. The specificity of African-American haircare might be understood in her work as a multilayered index of Black identity. Hair plays a protean role in Black imagery—it is central to both negative stereotype and positive images. Black hair is called nappy or natural, frizzy or fabulous—this symbolic boundlessness suggests hair’s connection to the paradoxes of race, of its positive and negative social construction through the machinations of otherness and context. By melting and transforming, stretching and abstracting, Coleman uses her materials to suggest this very point—the malleability of identity.

Jessi DiTillio is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at Austin and a participant in the doctoral portfolio program in Black Studies. She researches modern and contemporary American art with a focus on art engaging the politics of race and gender, affect theory, and curatorial practice. She has held curatorial fellowships at the Visual Arts Center and the Art Galleries at Black Studies at The University of Texas at Austin, and The Contemporary Austin.
Part 1 / from a six-drawing series

2018 / graphite, compressed charcoal / 15 x 14 inches

Line Gradient

2018 / synthetic braiding hair / 44 x 32 inches

Implied Lines

2018 / synthetic braiding hair / 40 x 32 inches

Variation on the Pick #32

2018 / earthenware casting slip, ceramic glaze / 6½ x 2¾ x ¼ inches

UntitlEd

2018 / elastic hair bands / 30 x 90 x 2½ inches

Implied Lines

2018 / synthetic braiding hair / 40 x 32 inches
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October 4, 2018 – January 26, 2019

RECEPTION
Thursday, October 4 / 5–7pm

Christina Coleman is a visual artist working in sculpture, drawing, and installation. Utilizing various materials ranging from commercial hair products to traditional fine art tools, Coleman works through subjects including the body, space, identity, and abstraction. She holds a BA from the University of California at Los Angeles and an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin. In the summer of 2011, she was an artist-in-residence at the Contemporary Artists Center at Woodside in Troy, NY. From 2016 to 2017, she served as co-curator at de stijl PODIUM FOR ART, a gallery in central Austin. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group shows in Central Texas, most recently including I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings at the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center, The First Horizons of Juno at MASS Gallery, and A Spatial Continuum in Black at Texas A&M International University.

Variation on the Pick #31
2018 / earthenware casting slip, ceramic glaze / 6½ x 2¾ x ¼ inches

The Courtyard Gallery is located in the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center at The University of Texas at Austin and features artwork from alumni of the Department of Art and Art History in the College of Fine Arts.

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