

## WATCHING ME:

On Being A Black Woman In A Surveillance State

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Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, film still. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York  
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One evening in late 2018, I quietly sat in the backseat of a rideshare with a sister-friend, creeping through rush hour traffic in downtown Chicago. We were headed to the Gold Coast for the opening reception of Martine Syms' exhibition *Incense, Sweaters & Ice*. Both of us were on our phones, texting, listening to music, and searching for an app called *WYD RN?* Another friend had suggested we download it prior to our arrival.

Upon reaching our destination, sister-friend and I eased through the entrance of the Graham Foundation's Madlener House, a 1902 Prairie-style mansion, and stepped into a foyer swarming with art folk. We made our way through the crowd, and quickly gathered the disapproving stares of several stuffy middle-aged women, some white, some Black, all of them curator, historian, academic-looking types. For a select few, we chose to return that gaze with a sparkly smirk or a warm nod, only to be met with a tight-lipped smile. We soon discovered that the exhibition was a multi-level, expanded cinema installation constructed around Syms' first feature length film of the same name, *Incense, Sweaters & Ice*.



Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, film still. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York  
© Martine Syms

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1 Was it the boisterous laughter that followed each passing ki with the very lovely Black Chicagoan woman working catering? If not, then perhaps it was our too-tall platform boots and exposed midribs sashaying from room to room? We chose not to concern ourselves with these questions, and instead collectively swooned over Syms' elaborate installation, and politely accepted each complementary pour of red wine with an enthusiastic:

“oh, yes please!”

and, “thank you much.”



Gallery view of “Martine Syms: Incense, Sweaters & Ice”, Graham Foundation, 2018 in the former dining and living rooms of the Madlener House. Photo: Nathan Keay. Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

On the first floor, there were two connected gallery spaces. A film played from three flatscreens at the center of both rooms, two of them paired back to back. The surrounding walls along with everything in between them were painted a lush shade of purple — from the windows, adorned with translucent vinyl cut in abstract patterns, to the steel mesh benches that encircled the screens, their arches made to resemble the shape of the historic Great Migration route from Louisiana to California. I sat down and started watching the film. Beside me, there were as many Black people as you might expect to see at a blue chip gallery on an opening night (non-Black bodies took up a majority of the space, as usual). A surveillance camera jutted from the ceiling above the screens, positioned out of our immediate sightline, but still far from inconspicuous. Yet another set of watchful eyes glued to my body.

The film begins with sequences of a Black woman dancing by herself in a nightclub. *Girl*, (performed by artist Katherine Simóne Reynolds) is relatively unengaged by those around her, instead it seems she is occupied by a text conversation with WB (a white boy that *Girl* met earlier that night). He never appears on screen in the flesh, rather, his presence is simulated by texts, selfies, and videos that pop up in intervals on opposite vertical sides of the flatscreen, mimicking the appearance of iMessages on a smartphone. When *Girl*'s scene came to a close, purple filled the screen in startling flickers. Following the response of other audience members, I moved to the opposite facing bench, where the film continued to play from another screen.

Another character, Mrs. Queen Esther Bernetta White<sup>2</sup> (performed by Fay Victor) suddenly appears in a sumptuous room draped from floor to ceiling in purple velvet. Her matching three piece skirt suit gives church formal attire. Immediately, she implores to the viewer, “who are you? I mean, *WHO* are you?” as she opens a monologue on self image and subversive etiquette. Her positionality as an elder and foremother demonstrates the influence of familial grooming and societal conditioning. She performs quite theatrically, singing and talking about brains, beauty, and breeding while playing the piano. These interludes point to the notion of performance, and suggest that any act carried out under observation can fall under that umbrella. This begs the question, if someone is operating based upon the belief or understanding that they are always being watched by someone, or something, when exactly does their performance end?

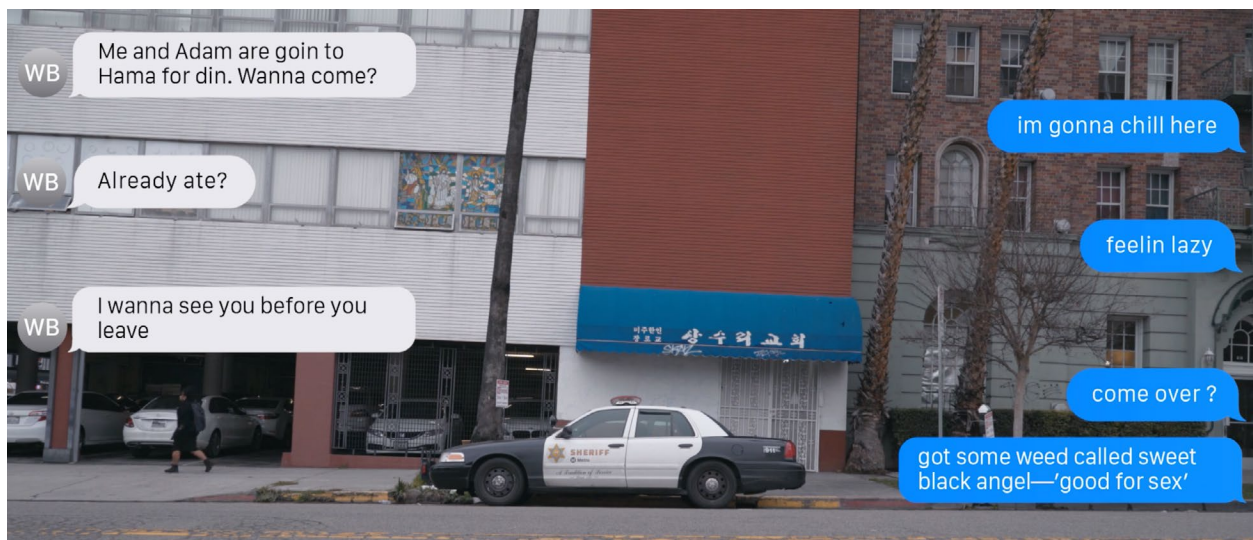
“What if you were to assume that you’re being constantly recorded, which in our contemporary moment of widespread surveillance is more or less true? You could say that there’s just a giant film production happening at all times. What happens to you and your being or identity within that reality? How are we performing or acting in this context? There’s a link between the production of self or one’s identity and the mediated production of images...” — Martine Syms, “Martine Syms discusses her Projects exhibition at MoMA”, *Artforum*, May 22, 2017.

Purple flickers mark the beginning and end of Mrs. Queen Esther’s intervaled appearances, a directional cue that persisted throughout the screening. These cues lured the audience into following Girl, a character inspired by Sym’s own mother, from state to state and screen to screen. Backtracking the path forged by Black folk during the Great Migration along Girl’s journey as a traveling nurse from industrial from L.A. to rural Mississippi. The episodic visual guided us through the dramas of being a Black woman watched — being held captive under the constant perception of others, becoming fugitive to “the gaze”, attempting to evade its violences by obscuring oneself under an illusive veil, and in turn, facing the existential dilemma of remaining unseen.

As the film went on, I began to register the role of the camera lens itself as an ambiguous yet active presence, embodying the ever-present potential image. Its foregrounded influence shifts perspectives while assuming the varied vantage points of WB, the surveillance camera, the voyeur, the documentary maker, the director, and the audience. The invasive, omnipresent perspective revealed Girl’s double presence within everyday life, both physical and virtual. Girl is quietly observed from the passenger seat of her car, the parking lot outside of her job, at the marketplace, across the dinner table on date nights, inside of her home, her grandmother’s house, her hotel suite and the bathroom inside of said suite.

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<sup>2</sup> An amalgamation of Syms’ great aunt, godmother, and Maxine Powell, the Director of Personal Development at Motown who also taught an etiquette class at Wayne State University for 30 years.



Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, film still. Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York and Sadie Coles HQ, London.

By shadowing her daily activities and creating cues that invited us to physically do so, the film's installation probed the concept of dislocation (from a homeland, a family, one's imagined self and projected self), exploring the proliferation of ways in which one's image is captured and transmitted in public and private life, from security cameras to smartphones. The more we watched, the more we submitted ourselves to the role of active participants in Girl's constant surveillance. Those of us in the audience became complicit; proxies. The resulting affect underscored the camera's problematic disposition, revealing a lack of true passivity within its observations — and how the dangers of such lack become especially evident when the lens is aimed at the body of a Black woman.

"At an early point during my research into artificial intelligence, I decided that recording is about death, not memory like I always thought. Phillip Auslander's concept of liveness points to a contradiction in the conditions of my visibility. I have to be repeatedly thrown against deathness to be alive. Whatever happens to a shitty JPEG or GIF has consequences on my body. It's called compression. The image is now a part of my flesh." Martine Syms, "The Image is Now Part of My Flesh", *Mousse Magazine*, Issue 67, April 1, 2019.

After exiting the viewing room, sister-friend and I climbed the stairs to the second floor, where framed prints populated walls covered from floor to ceiling in the text "GIRRLGIRLLLLGG-GIRLGIIRL" painted in purple. The prints consisted of select shots from the film overlaid with transparent vintage Blaxploitation movie posters, some of them depicting Black movie stars. People like Issac Hayes and Ron O'Neal, whose success in performing stereotyped characters lended their image to being mass-distributed, appropriated, pixelated, fetishized, and profited off of for several decades.

By creating double exposures using cinema advertisements and the everyday scenes captured in her film, Syms further illustrated her notion of “ambient cinema.” The everyday as a neverending production, and our active roles within it as stage performance. Folks stood in front of each print holding their phones methodically upright. I spotted my other friend, the one who told me about *WYD RN?* across the room in a shuffling crowd. She waved for me to come join her, and I finally discovered the purpose behind the app. It was an augmented-reality (AR) tool, immersing viewers deeper into the expanded cinema. When I focused my smartphone camera on the surface of each print, AR overlays of GIFs, videos, and iMessages from WB flooded my screen. At that moment, Girl became me.

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Martine Syms is an L.A. born and bred Black-American multidisciplinary artist working in video, performance, photography, and publishing. Her work has been shown at the Camden Arts Centre in London, the Berlin Biennale in Zurich, and the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, to name a few. Martine Syms is a conceptual entrepreneur, a teacher, a daughter, and a friend to many, but she too — like Girl, like Jill — is a Black woman watched.



Martine Syms, *Incense Sweaters & Ice*, 2017, film still. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, New York  
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