

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE
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SEBASTEIN MILLER



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to personally thank the following people for their contributions to my first public art gallery show, for their support of my inspirations, and for their expertise in installing the exhibition and creating this publication.

John B. Aird Gallery

Carla Garnet

Philip Dwight Morgan

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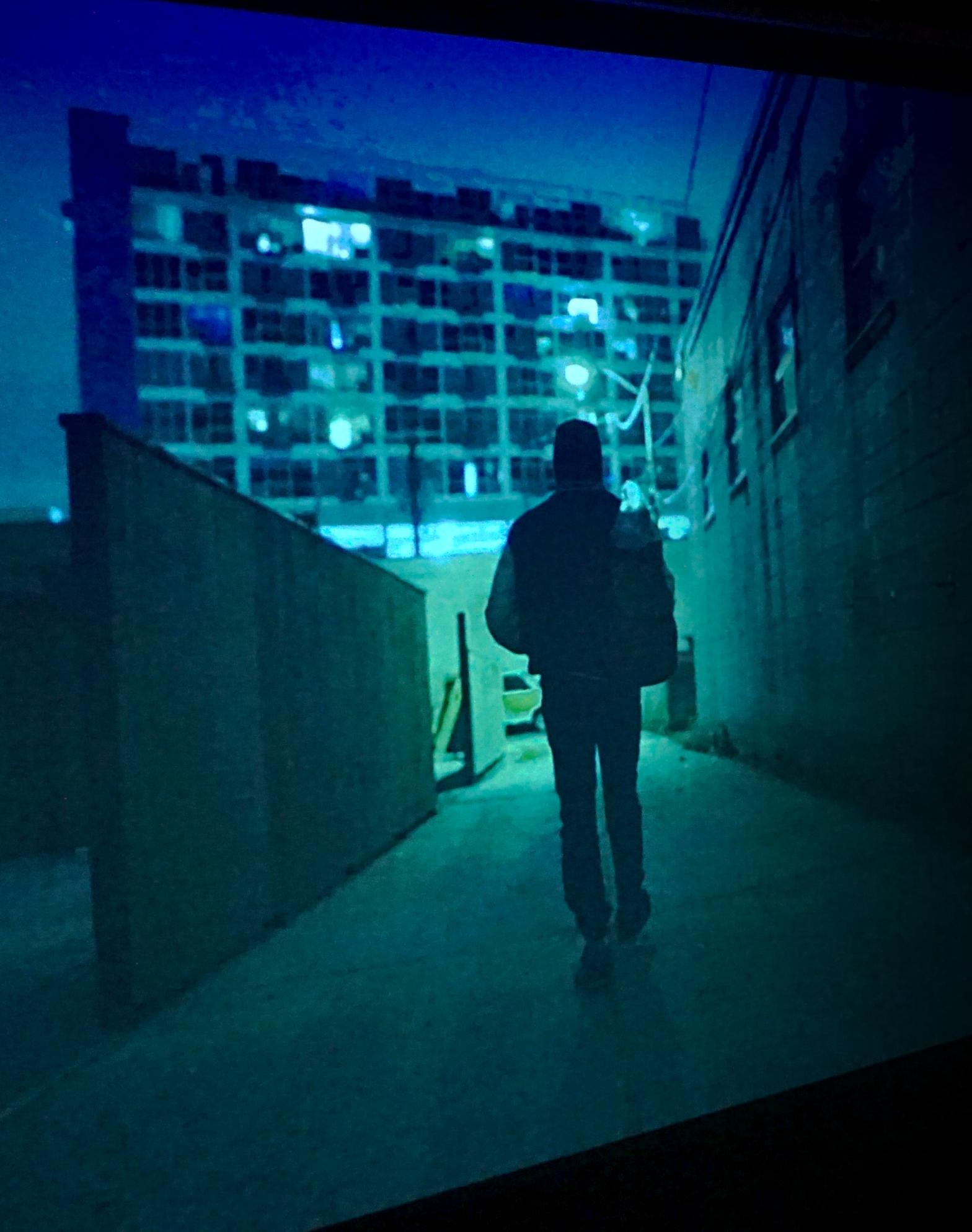
Jackson Abrams

University of Toronto

Matthew Brower

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FOREWORD

CARLA GARNET

The John B. Aird Gallery is pleased to present Sebastien Miller, *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE* a primary exhibition for the 2021 Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival. The exhibition is presented in partnership with the Festival, with Exhibition Assistance support to the artist from the Ontario Arts Council, and with publication support from the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. The exhibition is curated by the Aird's Director/Curator.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE a range of popular and historical images to explore political possibilities. The use of digital montage foregrounds his works' constructed nature, highlighting the gaps between posited futures and depictable reality. Through animated counter-narratives, the Toronto-based artist uses satire to comment on science, race, and the nature of resistance and to analyze how Black North American icons circulate in popular culture.

The exhibition includes nine Plexi-glass encased photomontage prints, three animated photomontages/Gifs, and a narrative video piece projected onto one of the Gallery's underground walls.

The accompanying publication, includes a short, brilliant essay by Phillip Dwight Morgan; a journalist, poet, and researcher, who writes about issues of race and representation in mainstream Canadian media and a response essay by Matthew Brower; a curator and writer who works on visual culture's effect on the collective political imagination.

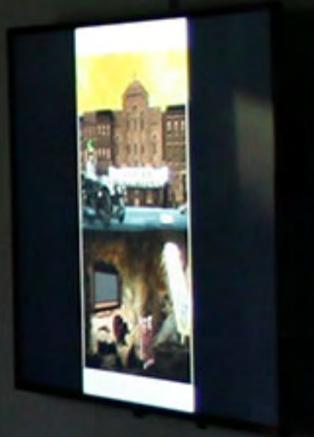
In addition to recognizing the support of the Festival and UofT, the Aird would like to acknowledge the ongoing support of its volunteer board of directors and the invaluable skills of its executive administrator Jennifer Vong.

ARTIST

DESCRIPTION

SEBASTEIN MILLER

In this project, I seek to engage my audience by showcasing popular pieces from my first collection: *Civil Disobedience* as well as some other timely and culturally relevant pieces. In my elements, collage is a process with the a means to a beginning of understanding and describing socio-political identities and spirituality, introspecting the past, present, and future.



SEBASTEIN MILLER

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

PHILIP DWIGHT MORGAN | 2021

“ Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives, but it is lived underground, in outer space.”

Jared Sexton, “The social life of social death: On afro-pessimism and black optimism”

“...all attempts to repress our/black peoples’ right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: “Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.”

bell hooks, Black Looks, 116.

At what point does memory obscure rather than clarify? In Sebastein Miller, *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE*, Miller pushes audiences to grapple with this question. Miller’s audacious images pull at the boundaries of time and legacy, mixing pop culture, protest imagery, and spiritual iconography to express his interpretation of history, culture, and human-consciousness.

The underground railroad, Martin Luther King Jr., N.W.A, Malcolm X, the 90s sitcom *Martin*: these subjects are so unapologetically Black in their constitution that they have escaped the gravitational pull of white supremacy. Yet, through their canonization, they remain suspended in time and place, trapped in memory and divorced from the cultures which created them and which they continue to create. In *MLK* (2016), Miller encourages viewers to engage Martin Luther King Jr. as both divine and human, past and present. Through this imagery, viewers are offered a glimpse into Miller’s world-view-an amalgam of cultural, socio-political, and spiritual experiences circumscribed by the Black radical tradition.

Various referencing photojournalism, album art, protest imagery, comic books, films, and video games, the cut-out style of Miller’s practice foregrounds the works’ constructed nature, highlighting the gaps between the images’ posited futures and depictable reality. In *Bohemian Grove* (2019), Miller turns his gaze to the private club of the same name where, in 1942, a group of wealthy, powerful white men gathered to discuss the Manhattan Project. Here, Miller offers a counter narrative to the violence and decadence of the notorious site, instead, re-imagining the gathering as a coming together of Black men to discuss and create a Black New World Order.

In *The Tree of Knowledge* (2021) and *The Path* (2020), Adinkra and Christian symbols allude to Miller’s complex political and spiritual formation as he rethinks twentieth-century Afro-American experience. Through the use of collage, digital montage, and video, Miller attempts to make sense of contemporary Black realities, exploring key tensions in Black male culture across inner/outer space and time. In the context of what bell hooks calls “imperialist, capitalist, white supremacist patriarchy,” Miller’s prefigurative debut exhibition is not only a commentary on civil disobedience but, is itself, such an act.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE and the POLITICS of PHOTOMONTAGE

MATTHEW BROWER

Since its beginnings, there have been strands of photographic practice that resist the medium's dominant function as a factual record by manipulating and combining photographs to make artistic and political statements. Some of these practices hide their seams and appear as documents of non-existing realities; sometimes with the hope of fooling their viewers (fakes) and sometimes to offer convincing visions of possible worlds. A different strand of this practice emphasizes the resulting image's constructed-ness by highlighting the seams where the photographs are put together. During the First World War, Dada artists developed this set of practices into photomontage and gave it an explicitly political slant. In the Weimar period, artists, including Hanna Hoch and John Heartfield, refined photomontage as an artistic form with political impact. In our current era of hyper-realistic CGI spectacles and deepfakes, manipulated photographs are commonplace and more convincing than ever before. In this context, photomontage's insistence on showing the seams has increased possibilities to be politically disruptive.

In its updated use of the aesthetics and techniques of photomontage, the artwork in Sebastien Miller's *Civil Disobedience* is political both in its content and its construction. The importance of this dual level of politicization to the work can be clearly seen in *The Flood* (2019). The piece is presented as a GIF in the exhibition and shows a scene of flying saucers hovering over a mountain landscape. The saucers are tractor-beaming up pairs of threatened and endangered species. Scattered around the image are bald eagles, rhinos, mountain gorillas, pandas, elephants, polar bears, and humpback whales. The only humans in the image are protestors in tiny vignettes at the bottom. The title frames this as an updated Noah's ark; it transforms the alien interventions from abductions to rescues. Yet, for an image titled *The Flood*, there is a curious lack of water; all we see is fire. In addition to a bar of flames across the lower edge, the image includes scenes of burning buildings and a gorilla in a burning ring of fire.

While the narrative of aliens rescuing animals threatened by the Climate Emergency is relatively straightforward, the space of the image is complex. The multiple layers of mountains that are combined in the image give a sense of deep space to the top and middle of the scene; the band of flames and interposed political scenes create a very shallow sense of space at the work's bottom. In other words, the scene initially appears coherent but the closer we look at it the more it resists resolving into a coherent space. Reading across the exhibition and placing the image in the context of *X's* (2016) depiction of flying saucers visiting the pyramids, locates the flying saucers as an Afro-futurist version of Noah's ark.

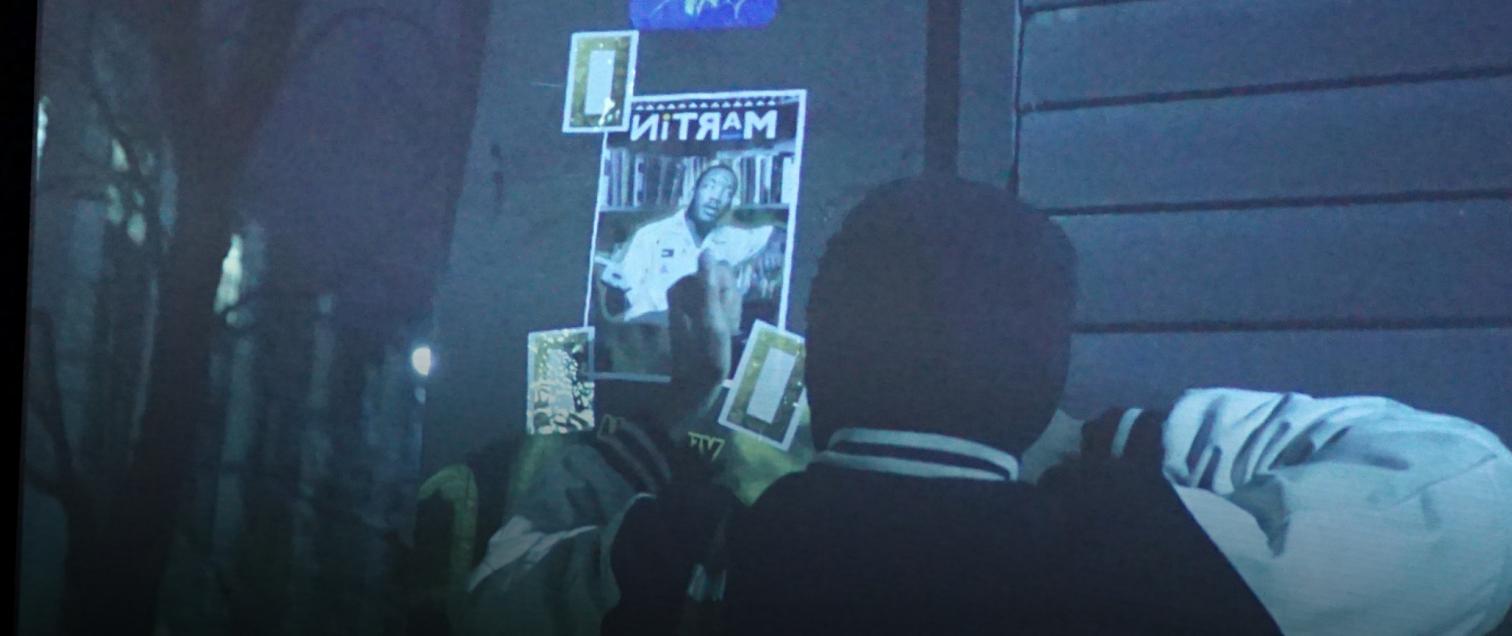
Noah collected animals to save them from God's wrath, releasing them from the Ark when the waters subsided. In this version, the Climate Emergency's production of environmental catastrophe necessitates a solution in which the animals need to Get Out of the Earth. This trip to space is not Elon Musk's solution of the rich decamping to Mars but instead depicts an outside force coming to save other species with no clear sense of when or if they'll be back. The inclusion of the protest march, along with other scenes, at the base of the image hints at deeper roots to the depicted catastrophe; one might wonder are they additional victims? Or the cause of the fire? The difficulty of resolving the elements into a single narrative is supported by the fragmentary structure of the image's construction; disparate things have been put together to form an image that tries to make sense of their relationships. The seams and the gaps remind us that what we are seeing

required work to put together. Like the animals on their way to the spaceships, the image hovers between readings. The image offers a way out but doesn't tell us exactly where they or we might be going.

Perhaps seeing where it's possible to go requires seeing what has been. Where *The Flood* invites viewers to see into the image (and then defers that invitation), *Bohemian Grove* (2021) is an artwork that looks back (in both senses of the word). The image literally looks back at us through the multiple gazes embedded in its collected figures. The majority of the figures look out of the image at the viewer. Some look straight on, some with side eye, some are glaring, some imploring, some are coming on, some are impassive, and some sneering. The multiple gazes unsettle the image's visual order and create a complex and unresolvable, or unstable, articulation of pictorial space. *Bohemian Grove* also looks back through the complex positions in social, cultural, and political history the figures reference. The histories, legacies, and mythologies of the assembled Black men bring with them multi-faceted, complicated, and sometimes-contradictory articulations of achievement and masculinity. Through its careful arrangement of these important figures, *Bohemian Grove* uses photomontage to create a political space that is as much social and temporal (historical) as it is visual.

At first glance, the image appears to belong to a recognizable genre: the square format, collage of important figures, and superimposed title suggests that this is an album cover and a riff on Sgt Pepper's. In that reading, the figures would be brought together to honor the artistic genealogy of Miller and celebrate his influences and the cue to reading the image would be deciphering the figures' identities. Above the figures, invoking the space of the grove, is a dark forest and a light sky. The title is superimposed at the top left in arched red letters that follow the tree line. The dense forest both creates a sense of deep recession (in its fading out) and flat space (in its indiscernibility). The bottom of the image is framed by overlapping, gold-toned, fire logs. The logs could read as a fence around the grove, the edge of a stage, or as a sign that this is glamping. The artist writes, "Them being gold is symbolic of wealth, luxury and strength."

Their rough arrangement in rows gives the figures the appearance of an audience in an amphitheater (making us the spectacle). The left side has a greater sense of depth and clearer rows. In the middle of the back row, the spatial recession



built into the portrait of the Wu Tang Clan anchors the image; the lenticular perspective of the source imagery fights against photomontage's assertion of flatness; The right side is flatter and contains more black and white imagery. The size disparities among the figures suggest a secondary spatial logic similar to medieval paintings in which scale relates to importance. The relative size of the figures speaks to their cultural weight and not just to their imagined distance from us in perspectival space.

What does it mean to name the space of the image *Bohemian Grove*? The original *Bohemian Grove* is a men-only campground in Northern California for the social and political elite. It has hosted multiple US Presidents and played a role in the Manhattan Project. Given its secrecy and documented ties to power, the Grove is a rich site for conspiracy theories. Given this controversial history, how can we understand the relation between these figures and this space? Are the assembled figures the men who should be running the world behind the scenes? Are they presented as images of Black masculinity that the artist finds empowering? Personally, I read the work's reframing of the Grove as a space of black masculinity as indicating that the work's secrets are not fully available to me; the logs mark a space I can't enter. Interestingly, this sense of the inaccessibility of the work's final meaning neither particularly disturbs me nor makes me want to stop looking. Like the rest of the works in the exhibition *Bohemian Grove* creates a politically charged space of representation that reveals tensions and possibilities without offering easy resolution; the works are unsettling because the issues they take up are not, in fact, settled. Keeping these conflicts open creates space for civil disobedience.



**WE WANT
FREEDOM**

"A collection of different pieces from the entire collection encapsulates themes that draw connections to propaganda, civil activists, war, iconic figures, and personal interests.

This was done through the use of various digital applications with a focus on collage, animation, and graphic design."



Civil Disobedience, 2018

Digital montage/collage print

Edition of 3

16" x 20" (unframed)

18" x 24" (framed)

MAGNUM
OPUS

MARTIN



"I explore Martin Luther King through a contemporary lens.

MLK was a man of peace, he chose his path and remained true to its principles inwardly and outwardly.

Connecting visual pop culture and black radical thinking, MLK emits a surrealist aura."

MLK, 2016

Digital montage/collage print

Edition of 3

16" x 20"(unframed)

18" x 24" (framed)

*“Malcolm X
in this piece comes
back from Egypt and
started to make more
connections between
racial oppression and
capitalism.*

*In 1964 he made a
speech called “The
Ballot or The Bullet”,
which focused on Black
Nationalism. I believe
his greatest work in life
was running operations
with a radical approach.”*

X, 2016
Digital montage/
collage print
Edition of 3
16” x 20” (unframed)
18” x 24” (framed)





"I create a scene using "The Tree of Life" and braided hairstyles to explore "The Path to Eternalness".

In the time of slavery, hair braiding was used to relay messages. The curved braids would represent the paths they would use to escape. The Tree of Life can be found in a widespread of religions and myths. According to the Bible, it grew in the Garden of Eden and the fruits it bore held the power to impart eternal life. Combining the symbolism of the braided paths and The Tree of Life, I question how we can partake in knowing more about ourselves and the path that lay within us.

I hope to expose other POC to spirituality so that they too might become curious about their own origin, divinity, and power."

The Path, 2020

Digital montage/collage print

Edition of 3

20" x 20" (unframed)

24" x 24" (framed)

"I continue with a series of spiritual Afrocentric images in the 'Tree of Knowledge', whose fruit floats in the ocean. This scene depicts a passage with walls adorned with Adinkra symbols; Nea Onnim and Woforo Dua Pa A. Nea Onnim means "He who does not know." and Woforo Dua Pa A means "When you climb a good tree."

The passage provides a precursor to the "Tree of Knowledge". The barren tree in water symbolizes change and transformation. Just as when the fruit is ready to pick, it sometimes drops from the branch. The books floating in the water are ripe with knowledge needed to inspire change. Drawing from Afrocentric spirituality, this symbolizes the origin of divinity and power.

Tree of Knowledge, 2021
Digital montage/collage print
Edition of 3
20" x 20" (unframed)
24" x 24" (framed)



BOHEMIAN GROVE



"Bohemian Grove is a counter-narrative to the private right-wing men's clubs in northern-California.

It bears the same name but with a collective of black men coming together to discuss and create a New World Order."

Bohemian Grove, 2019

Digital montage/collage print

Edition of 3

20" x 20" (unframed)

24" x 24" (framed)



WASHROOMS



"I continue with themes of Civil Disobedience in the iconic image of Malcolm X by the window with a rifle. I contemporize what Malcolm X meant when he said "By any means necessary".

Throughout history, Black people have experienced alienation. In this image a Mursi Warrior is seen protecting his wife and child from the earth."

BY
ANY
MEANS
NECESSARY



By Any Means Necessary, 2021
Digital montage/collage print
Edition of 3
24" x 24" (unframed)
26" x 26" (framed)





“The iconic image of Rosa Parks sitting on the Montgomery bus, contextualizes the social climate and Rosa Park’s moment on the bus.”

She sets the stage for seeing Black people in new spaces in this combination of minimalist architecture and Black bodies.”



IMMOVABLE



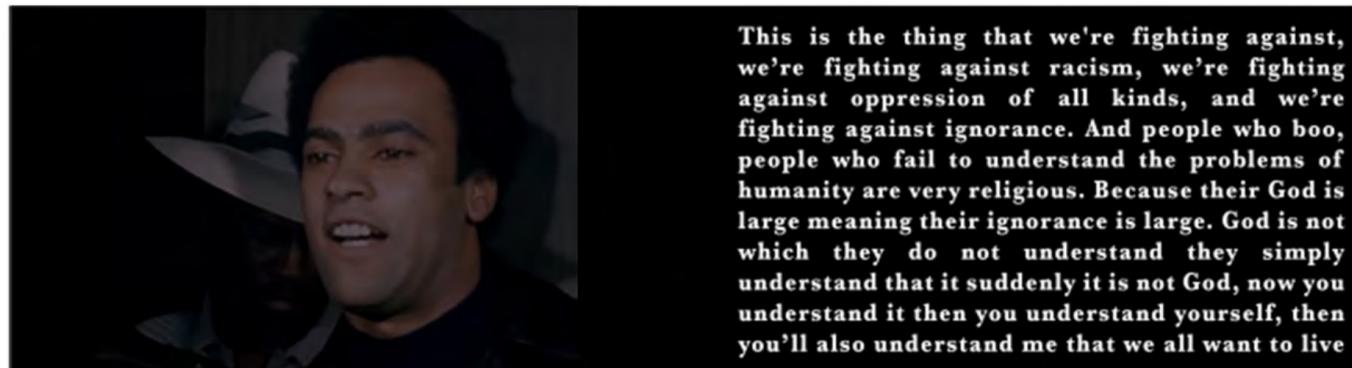
Immovable, 2021
Digital montage/collage print
Edition of 3
24” x 24” (unframed)
26” x 26” (framed)

Do you know why? Yes, Because I didn't think I should had to get up I had already paid my fare and I'm sure he didn't pay any more than I did, and I didn't think that once we take a seat under the segregation conditions that we should be made to stand up in a crowded bus.

"I create intersections between minimalist architecture and Black bodies. The image of Huey P. Newton sitting in a rattan throne chair, dressed in a Black Panther uniform, and holding a shotgun and a spear is empowering as is his "Power to the People" philosophy; All Black men and women are kings and queens."

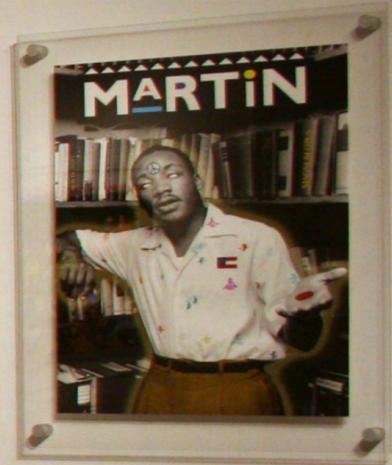


Power To The People, 2021
Digital montage/collage print
Edition of 3
24" x 24" (unframed)
26" x 26" (framed)



POWER
TO THE
PEOPLE







“ True knowledge of self can eradicate fear.

This image depicts the intersection between the allegory of “The Cave by Plato” and the mission Marcus Garvey embarked on.”



Plato Garvey, 2018

Digital montage/collage, animated GIF and in print

Edition of 3

16" x 20" (unframed)

18" x 24" (framed)

“With a sci-fi futuristic touch the mythos of the flood is conceptualized. With introspection, I questions if these disasters are a result of a resistance to change.

Through a misunderstanding of flow and evolution, do we resist growth?”

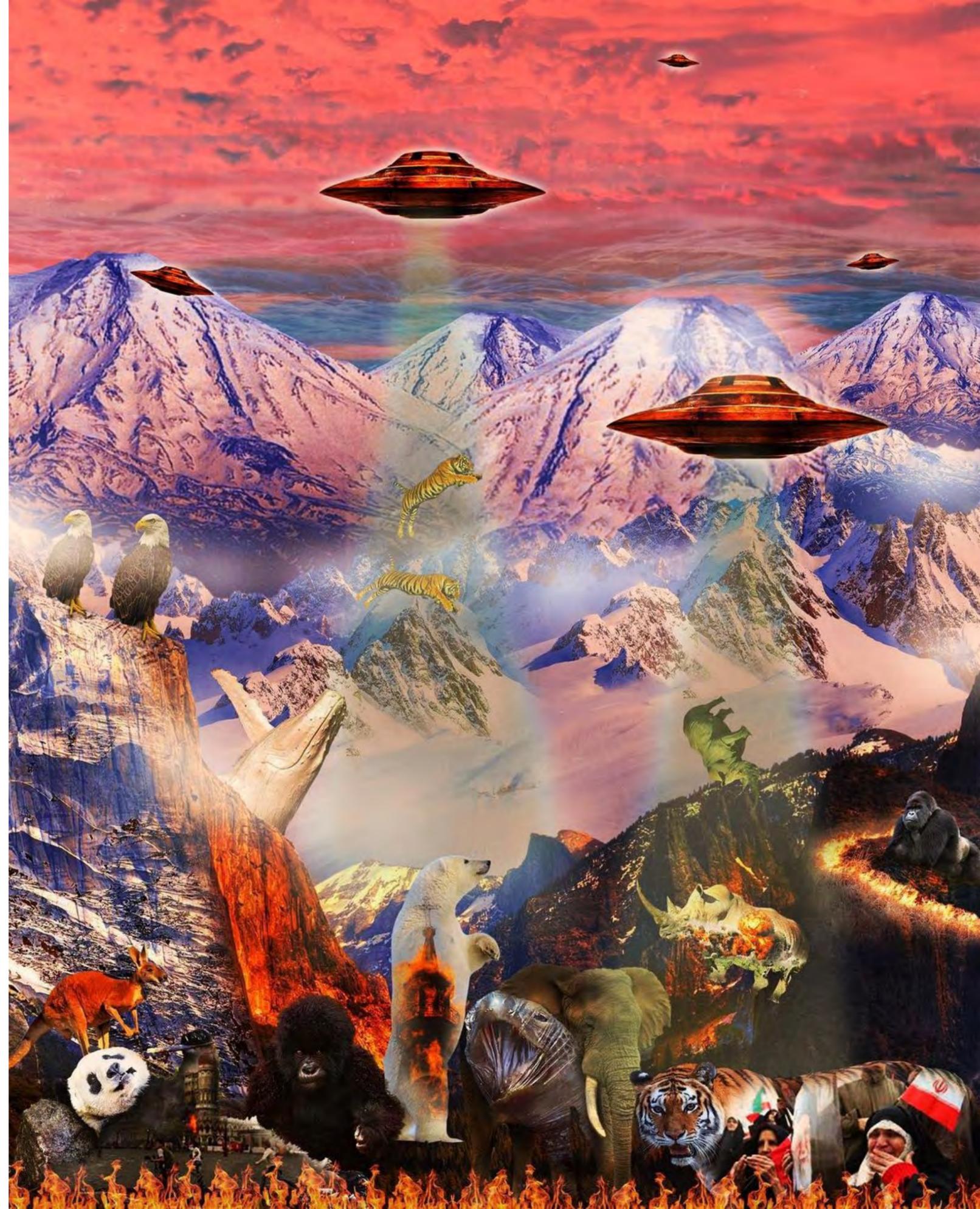
The Flood, 2019

Digital montage/collage, animated GIF and in print format

Edition of 3

16” x 20” (unframed)

18” x 24” (framed)



I WANT YOU FOR GOD'S ARMY!



"I recreated a propaganda war poster. Here a small crew of black panthers are calling all men to join and fight for God."

*Be All You Can Be 1, 2018
Digital montage/
collage, animated GIF
and in print format
Edition of 3
16" x 20" (unframed)
18" x 24" (framed)*

*“With the likeliness of a comic book,
I recreated a propaganda war poster,
imagining an army of black panthers
calling all men to join.”*

Be All You Can Be 2, 2018

Digital montage/collage, animated GIF and in print

Edition of 3

16" x 20" (unframed)

18" x 24" (framed)



WAR: GET USED TO IT!



"I contrast the relationship between the iconic album cover "What A Time To Be Alive" and what it would be like to be alive during war.

Mixing pop culture and war propaganda imagery, I connect the past, present and future."

*What A Time To Be Alive, 2018
Digital montage/collage,
animated GIF and in print format
Edition of 3
16" x 20" (unframed)
18" x 24" (framed)*

“During the Black Panther uprising, Ronald Regan created the “Mulford Act” to disarm The Black Panther Party.

In this image we see The Black Panthers taking over the white house and government.”

*Dysfunctional Ba\$tards,
2018*

*Digital montage/
collage print*

Edition of 3

16” x 20” (unframed)

18” x 24” (framed)





WAR TO END ALL WARS

"With reference to Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell To Arms", I imagine a scene where an army men disobey orders and protest in peace.

I create an anti-war poster, using the famous tagline "A war to end all wars", shifting the narrative to the realities of war.

Farewell To Arms, 2018

*Digital montage/
collage print*

Edition of 3

16" x 20" (unframed)

18" x 24" (framed)



THOUSAND

Civil Disobedience, 2018

Digital Video

Duration: 1min

Creative Director: Sebastein Miller and Charles Graham

Videographer: Omari Burke



BIOGRAPHIES

SEBASTEIN MILLER

Toronto-born artist Sebastein Miller is most recognized for his recent body of work entitled *Civil Disobedience*. Miller's new-media-practice involves sampling and mixing digital pop-culture imagery with social-political symbols, and collage-parties. In *Civil Disobedience*, the artist constructs photomontages that re-think the histories of the twentieth-century using Afro-Futurist emblems and found imagery. Miller's work provocatively explores some of the key tensions in contemporary culture from a Black male perspective. Various referencing photojournalism, album-art, protest-imagery, comic-books, films, and video-games; the cut-out style of his practice foregrounds the works' constructed nature highlighting the gaps between the images' posited futures and currently depictable reality.

PHILIP DWIGHT MORGAN

Phillip Dwight Morgan is a Toronto-based freelance writer of Jamaican heritage. His essays, op-eds, and analysis have been featured in *The Walrus*, CBC, *The Toronto Star*, *HuffPost Canada*, and *Maclean's*, among others. Phillip views writing as an act of political resistance and emancipation.

MATTHEW BROWER

Matthew Brower is a writer, curator, and culture sector leader. Currently, he is the President of the John B. Aird Galley Board of Directors. He has taught at the University of Toronto, York University, and Wilfrid Laurier University. He has produced numerous exhibitions of contemporary art

including *Threatened, Endangered, Extinct* (Open Studio); *Mediated Memory* (National Art Museum of China) for the Beijing Biennale; *Yonder* (Koffler Gallery), and *Suzy Lake: Political Poetics* (University of Toronto Art Centre). He is the author of *Developing Animals: Early North American Wildlife Photography* (University of Minnesota Press) as well as articles, interviews and reviews in *Antennae*, the *Journal of Visual Culture*, *History of Photography*, *Photography and Culture*, and *Society and Animals*.

CARLA GARNET

Carla Garnet is the Director / Curator of the John B. Aird Gallery and the JOUEZ curator for the annual BIG on Bloor Festival of Arts and Culture in Toronto. She has worked as the curator at the Art Gallery of Peterborough (2010-2013), as a guest curator at Gallery Stratford (2009-2010), as an independent curator (1997-2010), and was the founder and director of Garnet Press Gallery (1984-97). Garnet holds an Associate Diploma from the Ontario College of Art and Design and a Masters Degree in Art History from York University. Garnet is interested in the politics of the art exhibition and its potential to function as a common—a public space for dialogue. Her curatorial area of interest is work that explores the multiple subject positions and temporalities as a way to open up space for greater empathy. For Garnet, an artwork's significance is tied up with an ability to say what otherwise might be unsayable.

JOHN B. AIRD GALLERY

The John B. Aird Gallery (1985-present) is a self-funded nonprofit public art gallery with a director/curator, working board, and charitable-tax-status. The Gallery hosts up to nine exhibits per year, plus an annual fundraiser. These exhibits provide participation opportunities for up to four hundred artists yearly.

The Aird prides itself on being inclusive, hosting several-large-group-shows, and two or three annual Arts Council and/or Scotiabank CONTACT Festival of Photography funded exhibits that pay CARFAC fees.

The Gallery's mission is to provide a generous, safe contemporary art exhibition space where visual culture can be shared and explored by an audience as diverse as its makers.

We believe visual culture inspires, engages, and amplifies Toronto's communities.

In September 2019 the Aird Gallery moved from the provincial-government-buildings at Bay and Wellesley, to a temporary location on West-Queen-West. We foresee returning to our 3,500 square foot space on the second floor in the Macdonald Block before the end of the decade.

Our 2021 Scotia Bank CONTACT Festival of Photography project Sebastein Miller, *CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE* features a publication designed by Jennifer Vong with new texts by Phillip Dwight Morgan and Matthew Brower; will be available on the Aird's PUBLICATION page following its launch on September 11, 2021.

Installation images courtesy of the curator/director.

John B. **Aird** Gallery
Galerie John B. **Aird**



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