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Jay Z's Sad "Picasso Baby" Vid Touts Art as the Mature Rapper's Bling



Photo: Kodaklens/ Courtesy of HBO

Language

English

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“Not as horrific as it could be, actually.” That was how one friend who had been at [Jay Z's marathon Pace gallery performance](#) last month summed up Mark Romanek's HBO clip for “[Picasso Baby](#),” which cuts together footage captured that day into a more or less conventional music video. That is perhaps the best thing you could say about it. The finished 10-minute opus is subtitled “A Performance Art Film.” In reality it bears the same relationship to performance art that a Lawrence Weiner text piece bears to a magazine ad for Viagra.

Essentially, after a short introduction where Jay Z talks in very general terms about himself as a performance artist, the film shows the 43-year-old rapper holding court at the middle of the white box,

a screaming throng of arty admirers surrounding him. One after another, a parade of New York creatives take their turn in front of Jay Z, copping a pose, or laughing self-consciously, or awkwardly dancing: Weiner, RoseLee Goldberg, George Condo, Jemima Kirke. And so on.

Romanek makes it all look like a good time — but, oy, I can't even imagine what hours of boring footage were left on the cutting-room floor. The art world does not distinguish itself here as a particularly interesting subject. Marina Abramovic tries to push Jay Z around. Judd Apatow pretends to be taking a call. Actress Taraji Henson kicks her feet in the air in delight as Jay Z raps about how he wants "a wife who will fuck me like a prostitute." The ever-whimsical Marcel Dzama waves an animal mask. There's some breakdancing. Mainly, everyone cheers as if they're at a high school pep rally. Edgy stuff.

The clip is out to strip-mine the art world for cachet. It has a problem, though, in that it is spectacularly hard to make the art world look less [pasty white than it is](#). Some self-conscious effort has been made to get black faces in the room, and a parade of worthy African-American artists get their moment, from graffiti pioneer Fab 5 Freddy to wizardly conceptualist Fred Wilson (to get the idea of how incongruous it would look without the conscious effort at color-correction, think of Kanye West's [impromptu performance of "New Slaves" at Art Basel earlier this year](#)). If this film does one positive thing, it might be to serve as a platform to promote artists of color. Maybe somewhere, some kid sucked in by Jay Z's monster hype machine will discover Wilson's thoughtful pieces about race.

Other than that... Jesus, this is one silly exercise.

Jay Z is a very gifted performer indeed, and the film does give you the sense of how he is still capable of winning over a crowd with pure charisma. The lumbering "Picasso Baby," however, is far, far, *far* from his best work. Instead of making songs inspired by the streets, he's making songs inspired by [sales pitches from his art dealer](#) ("Picasso Baby" being the subject line of an email from Salon 94's Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, pitching him an artwork). The cringe-inducing [lyrics](#) are a cartoonish homage to art excess at its most brainless: He brags about having "twin Bugattis outside Art Basel" and "going to Christie's with my missy." The track is so much about money, in fact, that it makes it hard to take seriously his overture that this video is somehow about celebrating the kinship of artists and musicians. Every single lyric is about art, not as a vehicle to expand your mind, but as something to own, as a symbol of rich-guy power. It's the anthem of an art *collector* not an art *maker*, the nadir being the following weird and hilarious directive he gives to his daughter: "yellow Basquiat in my kitchen corner / go ahead lean on that shit Blue / you own it."

The track sees Jay Z declare himself the “new Jean-Michel.” Fair enough. But he is aware that the story of [Jean-Michel Basquiat's](#) collision with the art world's culture of ruthless hype and materialism [did not have a happy ending](#), right?

To his credit, back in July, just after the filming of “Picasso Baby” at Pace, Jay Z and Beyonce [put in an appearance](#) at the rally for Trayvon Martin at One Police Plaza in New York. He declined, however, to address the crowd. Perhaps he was just tired from rapping for six hours straight for this epic piece of “performance art.” If it is credibility he craves, however, he’s got his priorities backwards.

[Interventions](#), [Performing Arts](#), [Music](#), [Jay Z](#), [Ben Davis](#)