Filthy Dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

ART

We Know You’re Sugar, We Know You’re Sweet
Like A Sucker: Devan Shimoyama’s “Sweet”

Posted on November 10, 2017 by EMILY COLUCCI
In his chapter “Fading, Twisting and Weaving: An Interpretive Ethnography of the Black Barbershop/Salon as Cultural Space” from *Performing Black Masculinity: Race, Culture and Queer Identity*, Bryant Keith Alexander explores the role of the Black-run barbershop as a space for community-building and performing Black masculinities away from hegemonic white culture. “I remember,” he begins, “the meaningfulness of going to the barbershop as a child. Those experiences were mixed with dread and excitement. The dread concerned my father’s tyranny about getting a haircut. The excitement was the social context of the barbershop” (136). Alexander, certainly, isn’t alone in his observations—you just have to watch one of the *Barbershop* franchise to see how importance the barbershop is for Black kinship.

As Alexander continues, “The barbershop becomes a place where Black men find sustenance, supportive and empowering reflections of our own reality and possibility. A place where context and contact are linked in ways that are both inclusive and exclusive, creating a contract of particular social relations” (152). However, as a Black gay cisgender man, Alexander is all too aware that barbershops are not always these fraternal spaces for queer folks. His sexual identity and particular performance of masculinity set him apart from hypermasculine shop-talk about sports, women and Beyoncé (her body
not her music). “While my identity is gendered,” he reflects, “it does not always fit comfortably within conversational spaces marked by heterosexual discourse, which is often the case in the barbershop/salon” (150).

Devan Shimoyama, Off The Charts, 2017, oil, collage, glitter, flashe, jewelry, feathers and fabric on canvas on panel (Courtesy the artist and De Buck Gallery)

It’s this tension that artist Devan Shimoyama (https://www.devanshimoyama.com/) explores in his current exhibition Sweet (https://www.debuckgallery.com/exhibitions/sweet/) at De Buck Gallery. (https://www.debuckgallery.com/) Titled after a slur for a flamboyant gay man (there’s a reason E. Patrick Johnson’s seminal Black gay Southern text is named Sweet Tea (https://www.amazon.com/Sweet-Tea-Black-South-Caravan/dp/080783209X)), Shimoyama, through his vibrant and ecstatic paintings, investigates the awkward sense of belonging in these typically hetero-masculine spaces, as well as the seeming compulsory performance of a certain style of masculinity. Echoing Alexander’s observations on being a gay man in a barbershop, Shimoyama details in the show’s press release, “After discussing with other men who share my identity as a gay black man, I realized many of us find ways to mask our queerness in this setting regardless to how out and proud we are in our personal lives. We mute ourselves, close our eyes.”
However, Shimoyama doesn’t simply present a critique of barbershops, which, despite their perhaps restrictive heteronormativity, still remain essential spaces for the Black community. He, instead, constructs his own brightly colored, fantastically femme version of the barbershop—one built to encompass non-normative gender and sexual identities. Maintaining an acknowledgement of the barbershop’s continued importance, he provides a glimpse at an alternative.

![Installation view of Devan Shimoyama’s “Sweet” at De Buck Gallery](https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/larger-3-e1510154370945.jpg)

Installation view of Devan Shimoyama’s “Sweet” at De Buck Gallery (Courtesy of the artist and De Buck Gallery)

And he does this through the materiality of femme fabulousness. With the paintings lusciously drenched in feathers, glitter, sequins and jewelry, most of the works in *Sweet* consist of singular male figures—both men and young boys—getting their hair trimmed by disembodied hand reaching from outside the picture plane. Reimagining the barbershop as a queer utopian space, the figures are rendered, not in the rich blackness of his previous exhibition ([https://filthydreams.wordpress.com/2016/06/05/a-drop-of-sun-under-the-earth-devan-shimoyamas-mythological-black-queer-masculinity/](https://filthydreams.wordpress.com/2016/06/05/a-drop-of-sun-under-the-earth-devan-shimoyamas-mythological-black-queer-masculinity/)) at Lesley Heller Gallery ([http://www.lesleyheller.com/](http://www.lesleyheller.com/)), but in a multitude of surreal, almost fluorescent tones—hot pink, warm light orange, deep purple and fuchsia. With baubles for eyes and sparkling jewel teardrops falling on their faces, these men and boys are transformed into near-mythological figures.

Even the decor and architecture of the barbershop have become queered. For example, the typically mundane barber’s cape becomes a lush feather frock in works like *Make A Wish*. Similarly, the cord jutting from an electric razor is a string of pearls in *Lil Man*. 
One painting, in particular, seems to capture the themes confronted in the surrounding paintings. Titled CTRL, the painting addresses the figure’s control of his own as he maintains his own look standing in front of a bathroom mirror. However, the key part of this painting lies on the sink—a stack of three books including Samuel R. Delany’s impenetrable sci-fi classic Dhalgren, Hanya Yanagihara’s tragically traumatic A Little Life, and Afroturist role model Octavia Butler’s Bloodchild. While Delany and Butler’s allegorical works speak to Shimoyama’s similar use of fantasy to gesture toward other worlds and possibilities, Yanagihara’s A Little Life represents a sense of (in the novel’s case, doomed) friendship between men.

With these books providing hints at the thematics that traverse the exhibition, Shimoyama imagines a world beyond, as José Esteban Muñoz would say, the prison house of the “here and now.” This is more than just an escapist fantasy. It’s a significant glimpse at the potential of spaces of belonging for queers of color, albeit, at the moment, fictional.
However, Shimoyama’s sights are set beyond just the specifics of the barbershop itself. He, throughout *Sweet*, explores how the construction of Black male subject—both within and without the Black community—is defined by both heterosexuality and a particular performance of masculinity. In E. Patrick Johnson’s influential study *Appropriating Blackness*, Johnson, through analyzing Black cultural production like Eddie Murphy’s homophobic rants, shows how these “work to signify black masculinity and heterosexuality as authentic and black homosexuality as trivial, ineffectual, and, indeed, inauthentic.” He explains, “black authenticity has increasingly become linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations. That this particular brand of masculinity epitomizes the imperialism of heterosexism, sexism and homophobia, therefore, is not surprising. The ironic and paradoxical manifestations of these oppressions enacted by black heterosexual men, however, might reveal the slippage between the mask of black masculinity as always already heterosexual and the unacknowledged desire of the homosexual Other.”

Like Johnson’s reference to this slippage, Alexander in *Performing Black Masculinity* also sees the barbershop as a place for the physicality of touch between men. As he writes, “I am also reminded of how the Black barbershop has always been a particular locale where physical male contact often seemed mediated by necessity and convention” (153). Like Alexander’s observation, Shimoyama’s barbershops
are populated by barbers visible only by their hands. Long-nailed fingers snip at the hair of the figures with no definite identity markers. By distilling the barber to only the hands, Shimoyama not only changes the power structure between male barbers and their similarly male patrons to a more indeterminate performance of gender dynamics, but he also allows for a representation of the sensuality of care and touch.

But the paintings are not the only works in the show engaging with Black masculinity. Shimoyama also shows two wall-mounted velvet sculptures, examining another symbol of Black masculinity—the hoodie. From an everyday mode of dress to an indication of deeply entrenched and life-threatening racist perceptions, the hoodie has certainly become a fraught symbol for Black men, particularly, of course, synonymous with the murder of Trayvon Martin. Shimoyama’s hoodies, with these various references, become haunting elegiac tributes, further emphasized by their titles *Shroud I* and *II*. Though the hoodie has become a much-used symbol for contemporary artists desiring to reference violence against Black men, Shimoyama’s interpretation of the hoodie engages with these issues without fetishizing or making a spectacle of Black death (*cough* …Paul Chan


While, in some respects, *Shroud I* and *II* might seem like outliers in the barbershop-heavy exhibition, the hoodies feature many of the same materials as the paintings—feathers, glitter, sequins. These materials seem to work on two levels. On one hand, like the barbershop, they portray a similar queering of traditional Black masculine performance. On the other hand, the hoodies also point to the danger that all Black men—regardless of their performance of masculinity—have to live under in a white supremacist society.
Despite the ghostly elegy represented by *Shroud I* and *II*, Shimoyama’s *Sweet* maintains a sense of hope. We even see, in a corner of *Make A Wish*, the seminal Obama “Hope” campaign poster, which, from a 2017 perspective, seems more than a tad bittersweet. Overall, though, *Sweet* proves how art, particularly for queer people of color, can provide space to imagine other possibilities of being and belonging.

![Image of Devan Shimoyama's Cut 4 Me](https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2017/11/cut4me-800x960-e1510155094455.jpg)

Devan Shimoyama, *Cut 4 Me*, 2017, oil, silkscreen, collage and glitter on canvas on panel (Courtesy the artist and De Buck Gallery)

In *Performing Black Masculinity*, Alexander writes of barbershops: “The construction is done with delicate razors—controlling coifs, straightening hair-lines, defining lips by shaping mustaches, jaw lines and beards. Knowing of course that sometimes razors cut, which reminds us that Black masculinity is forged out of resistance against forces that are both internal and external, and the boundaries of sexual identity are limited and fixed” (153).

But as razors cut, so can hands as Shimoyama reveals in *Cut 4 Me* and *Take Me Apart*, which present hands snipping barber’s scissors in half as if a representation of the queerness disrupting the normative masculinity in barbershops. This gesture is not only one of disruption, it’s also transcendence—an assertion of femme aesthetics as a means to construct a celebratory queer world. Above all, it’s an act of freedom.