



Review

The Dope Elf at Yale Union

By Laurel V. McLaughlin November 6, 2019

The Dope Elf invites audiences into the subtle plague of normative American life. Premiering during the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's TBA:19 Festival at Yale Union, Portland (later continuing at the Lab, San Francisco), the performance's tangled narratives unfold within its mobile set—a trailer-park/live-streamed, live-in residency imagined for the environments, people, and institutions it critiques.

During the three nights of the Gawdafful National Theater's run at Yale Union, writer and director Asher Hartman invited audiences to meander through the industrial space of the performance. Spectators trailed the actors through incongruous sets resembling a cardboard arcade, a split house/TV set, and a shack straight out of a Keebler cracker ad. Presented as a series of non-linear vignettes, the performance felt intensely personal, as the actors delivered intimate monologues or dialogues. At each "stop," characters divulged what Hartman describes as "psychic pain," which he explains as a theatrical technique that draws upon his own and his actors' emotional histories, be they painful, challenging, or humorous.



Paul Outlaw, Joe Seely, Jacqueline Wright (c), Michael Bonnabel, Philip Littell, Zut Lorz. *The Dope Elf*, 2019; performance. Courtesy of Gawdafful National Theater, Asher Hartman, Yale Union, and The Lab. Photo: Ian Byers-Gamber.

The characters' idiosyncratic behaviors are informed by this "psychic pain" stemming from the myriad socio-cultural ills instantiated by white privilege. The play does not define white privilege outright per se, but rather unveils its shape-shifting force, hinting at the sickly way it permeates human relations. It creeps into Gingy the Troll's soliloquy critiquing the cultural stereotypes that correlate work ethic with race, and it infiltrates Ken the Magician's sense of white hippie existential angst. It also seeps into Alfred and John's dynamics of queer love and power as well as the sexual and racial dynamics that bind Dirk to Alfred. And it consumes the character of the Dope Elf, a camouflage-and-plaid-clad creature with a hillbilly drawl who talks incessantly about herself, declaring "white dream that wakes up and says [innocently and darkly] what, who, *me?*"

The self-absorbed attitudes of the characters, the industrial space and gentrified area in which the play was performed, and even the pain on display, all worked together to expose the context and character of the slippery force of white privilege. The dream-like world of trolls, elves, and thrones asks its audience to consider how we unknowingly and knowingly accept systems and structures that perpetuate epistemological violence.

The Dope Elf concluded its performance cycle at Yale Union in Portland, OR on October 20, 2019 and will be followed by three new performances at the Lab in April 2020.

Art Practical invites the broader community to contribute reviews and commentary. We publish short format pieces that offer quick and timely responses to an exhibition, performance, or event on the West Coast. If you are interested in submitting a Review, please click this link for more information.

Comments ShowHide

Related Content



Tina Takemoto at the Center for Asian American Media

By Tina Takemoto



Living & Working: Brontez Purnell & Sophia Wang

By Art Practical Editors



Staged Intimacy: A conversation between Kevin Killian and Margaret Tedesco

By Kevin Killian Margaret Tedesco