

Civic Duty

Cell Project Space London 6 June to 21 July

'Civic Duty' brings together the work of four excellent artists from different generations: Adrian Piper (b1948), Donald Rodney (1961-1998), Carolyn Lazard (b1987) and Sam Lipp (b1989). In and of itself, the selection is worth making the trip to Cell Project Space. Although this is not foregrounded in the display, these artists all experienced some form of marginalisation in their lives, because of their sexuality, skin colour or health status (or all three combined). Much of their output can be placed at that delicate juncture where the individual collides with the institution and opts to push back with a mixture of wit and carefully controlled rage. In fact, if the exhibition had to be summed up in a word, 'control' would be it.

The first thing one sees on entering the gallery is an old motorised chair circling around the room as if it was being piloted remotely. There is something comical about its motions, even though its empty seat and yellowed cushion conjure associations with death and decay. The chair used to belong to Rodney, the highly politicised artist who in 1982 started the BLK Art Group with Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith. Rodney lived with sickle-



Sam Lipp
Walk 2019

cell anaemia (a condition that he often referred to as BLK BLOOD DISEASE) until his death in 1998, at the age of 36.

Rodney's illness meant that in 1997 he was unable to attend the private view of his own solo show at the South London Gallery (Obituary *AM*215). As a replacement and a marker of his absence, the artist submitted his motorised chair, now envisaged as a cybernetic sculpture titled *Psalms*. The piece is equipped with a computer program designed to map the room and self-pilot around any obstacles. It makes for a stark commentary on Rodney's struggle to retain a level of control in the face of debilitating illness and pervasive ableism in the art world.

A different form of control plays out in Lipp's paintings. Lipp is based in New York, where he runs a gallery called 'Queer Thoughts'. In the past, he has made photorealist paintings that comment on how civic spaces (including



hospitals) function as disciplinary environments. For this commission, Lipp produced three exquisite oils based on digital close-ups of US pedestrian crossing signs. The series is titled 'Walk' because each painting juxtaposes the unlit sign of the stop hand with a glowing silhouette prompting us to 'walk' across the room. So often welcomed in our daily lives, this invitation takes on a singularly coercive meaning next to Rodney's mobility chair.

In the adjacent room Adrian Piper is paired with Lazard to create an environment that feels in equal measure sterile and oppressive. Piper is best known for her performative interventions, particularly the series 'Mythic Being', 1972-75, for which she disguised herself as an androgynous and racially indeterminate New Yorker. Photographic documentation of the performance fed into several works on paper, initiating her lifelong love affair with Conceptual Art. The works shown here are recent examples in this vein.

Vanishing Point #4 and *#5*, 2009, were made using official Application for Employment forms (federal documents designed to enforce fair recruitment practice across the US). Piper sabotaged the ostensibly inclusive language of these questionnaires by writing down the wrong answers (to the question 'what kind of work are you applying for?' she replied, elusively, 'vanishing point'). She also erased the original script using graphite and sandpaper.

In keeping with the rest of Piper's oeuvre, the works in the 'Vanishing Point' series convey a desire to transcend a reality that is fundamentally structured around the principle of surveillance. This idea resonates with Lazard's adjacent piece, *A Conspiracy*. Originally created in 2017 for Essex Street Gallery in New York, the installation is designed to cover the entire ceiling with evenly spaced white-noise machines. Although the muffled vibration they emit is supposed to be soothing, they acquire an ominous quality through sheer repetition. I have always hated the sound, so it doesn't take me long to decide I feel claustrophobic, yet these machines are regularly used in hospitals to control all manner of physical and psychological ailments.

Lazard lives with Crohn's disease and is painfully familiar with the clinical world. Their writings on chronic illness and the limitations of western biomedicine are the most engaging texts I have recently come across on the topic. Their visual works are no less compelling (one of my personal favourites is *Get Well Soon*, a short film from 2015, available on the artist's website), yet this is only the second time that Lazard has shown in the UK, following a screening at LUX in 2018. I would love to see more of their work in this country. As a matter of fact, I left Cell feeling that the display as a whole had the potential to grow into a much larger exhibition. Who will rise to the challenge? ■

Giulia Smith is an art historian based in London.