

Too Close *or* Comfort: Howard el-Yasin and Flora Wilds in *Accumulating Proximities*

By Laurel V. McLaughlin

Cotton, linen, jewelry,
Barbie shoes and purses
keychains, plastic beads, pins, skin cells,
pollen, dust, animal print bikini tops from 2000, 1960s
recycled cotton fabrics, microorganisms, wool, hair

This noncomprehensive heap of words culls the raw and fashioned materials gathered in the works of Howard el-Yasin and Flora Wilds featured in *Accumulated Proximities* at The Sue and Eugene Mercy Jr. Gallery of The Loomis Chaffee School, on view, September 14–October 24, 2023. el-Yasin and Wilds collect low-brow materials, deconstruct and reconstruct them in their studios, and ultimately re-present them in the rarified white cube gallery space and spaces outside of its homogenizing design. Their specified gestures of collection are more than one-off trysts with object-based Duchampian impulses or generalized commentaries on environmental precarity. el-Yasin ritually sources lint from New Haven laundromats and individuals across America, as Wilds harvests recycled 2000s-era fast-fashion on the Internet alongside Southern California and New York thrift stores. In their processes of collection, de/reconstructing, and re-presentation, Wilds and el-Yasin’s materials conjure consumer, affective, and biopolitical significations in braided accumulations that not only enter into the audience’s space, but get close, very close, maybe even too close.

Accumulations

Sludge gray, coiled, and stacked to the ceiling, the sheer scale of lint in *Grey Matter* (2020) composes a formidable, and yet pliable presence. In the center of the gallery, it cuts through whatever might remain on either side, phallically asserting a presumed patriarchal logic. Upon closer inspection, the limp, fluttery material sticks out at all angles from the column, resisting a monolithic mode. For years, el-Yasin has gathered dryer lint collectively from public laundromats in the Greater New Haven area. After he named the 5 Star, Alexandria’s, Bubble & Squeak, Campus, Cedar Street, Dee’s, Express, Green, Howe Street, Peoples, Super Wash, and Top Kat Super laundromats in a studio visit, the vastness of his collective networks took on new meaning. Lint itself is a human byproduct, as el-Yasin tells me, consisting of micro-fibers ranging from fabrics, to human cells, and environmental waste.¹ el-Yasin’s mere consideration of the banal material unravels the familiarity of the substance. el-Yasin describes finding “a nipple ring or earring, a piece of hair weave, a tampon, a child’s underwear, dirt, socks, etc.” in the samples he gathers, as well as the process of donning a hazmat suit to install the work while he has asthma.² Precarity is collected and stacked. And yet, the incredible intimacy—its unknowability and anonymity—is intoxicating.

¹ Studio visit with el-Yasin and the author via Zoom, July 26, 2023, and subsequent emailing, 11 August 2023.

² As told to the author in a studio visit with el-Yasin and the author via Zoom, July 26, 2023.

Opposite in its accumulation method, Wilds' floor installation, *BUT IM YOUNG* (2018), spells out its title in soft letter sculptures amassing itself into a swamp of y2K-era must-haves. High-heeled Barbie shoes meet the coveted tween markers of middle-class "success," the Tiffany heart-bracelet—both real and fake—and the terry-cloth of the ever-subtle Juicy Couture tracksuit. The 2000s-era pile doubles as a tween landfill of aspirational consumer dreams, driven by the conditioning motor of white capitalist heteropatriarchy. What was once motivated by scintillating suburban mall culture—a pastel San Diego variety in Wilds's case—is now replaced by the artist's online E-Bay perusing and thrifting, as she recalls the nostalgia of these epitomizing fads. Wilds can easily acquire these materials of her youth thanks to the fast-fashion that drives the industry, and the market practices that wrest labor from the worker with equal ease as the purchase of the consumer. In her processes of both collecting—an amenity of the middle class—and destroying and reconfiguring materials—a necessary pastime of working classes—Wilds reveals the tensions embedded in the contemporary material burdens.³

Stretched and Scaffolded Orientations

Grey Matter and *BUT IM YOUNG* depend upon gravity and the level quality of the floor for their spatial bearings, but *femininitude II (bikini quilt in the round)* and *swim ssssstretch 5* (both 2023), in addition to *We the People* (2022), lean, pull, and overlap with themselves and the other works in the gallery. They render tension within the materialities and their negotiations in space. *femininitude II (bikini quilt in the round)* and *swim ssssstretch 5* both use previously-worn swimsuits from Wilds's former home, Southern California (complete with tags and sizes), stretching them in ways that defy their polyester spandex and consumptive logics. For *femininitude II (bikini quilt in the round)*, a range of early twentieth-century to mid-century quilts compose two large circular shapes, in a process Wilds affectionately calls "rehabbing" used materials—or destroying them and reconfiguring them.⁴ The columnar composition of the circular quilts are joined by fast-fashion bikinis stretched in between each half. As "material synchronicities that stretch through time," they pull at one another, animal print swimsuit tops with straps flying in all directions anachronistically confronting the gridded lines of the quilts, pitting conceptions of class and self-identification, fast fashion and slow handmade functional objects, against one another from different centuries.⁵ In *sssstretch 5*, the bottoms of the swimsuits carry weight—both affective and material—of concrete and feminine expectations, which Wilds has previously "exercised" in various performance activations. Even in their inactivated states as sculptures, they exert society's conditioning upon womxn-identifying people, sinking us all lower into the ground.

The orientations created on the ground, in the round, and bringing us to the floor in Wilds' works, find complementary proximities in el-Yasin's *Grey Matter* and *We the People* (2022). *Grey Matter* initially shifts the orientational encounter from one of erection to one of soft tilt, articulating what el-Yasin understands as queer resonance in dialogue with the scholarship of

³ As told to the author in a studio visit with Wilds via Zoom, July 26, 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Artist Statement, Flora Wilds Website, Accessed 4 August 2023: <https://www.florawilds.com/>.

Sara Ahmed.⁶ In *We the People*, this lean is continued as the lint sculpture is scaffolded upon a wooden structure, comprised of tiles resembling roofing shingles. Creating a ninety-degree angle from the wall they seem to push themselves away, building atop one another in the effort to create a closed shelter. el-Yasin collected this particular lint from domestic spaces, through the willingness of neighbors, family, and friends with privileged access to in-home dryer units. In soft tones of mauve, gray, and beige, the lint tiles appear more uniform and approachable than the unruly stuff of *Grey Matter*. Seemingly tamed here, the lint takes on its softest version, a hospitable mode, even, perhaps evoking in its title what the Preamble to the United States Constitution attempted to promise as a precursor verbal container. el-Yasin demonstrates that even though orientations in the assertive tall tower and the stratified horizontal roof are controlled, the infinite variability of the materiality exceeds the corralling shape, conjuring its own entropic orientations outside of design. In turn, *We the People* will always exceed the homogenizing logic of the Union.

Urgency, it's Too Close

Wilds and el-Yasin lean into the sullied material histories they present. That is to say that they unveil the biopolitical urgencies intertwined in their fibrous collections and orientations. For el-Yasin, the question of access to dryers is not taken for granted, as communities gather in laundromats, share space, stories with laundromat workers, and even DNA cells with one another. He recalls a studio visit in which someone pointed out that dryer convenience or luxury is undoubtedly “American,” while the rest of the world relies upon free air and sun (although even these givens are becoming increasingly consumer products as evinced with the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change).⁷ In dialogue with this conversation of class is that of power as el-Yasin’s forms of the fibrous pile juxtaposed with the ordered logic of tiles recalls cotton bales and the labor of starching. el-Yasin conjures the material’s sinister history in the United States, in which enslaved people of African descent historically picked cotton at incalculable physical cost, many then continuously starching the cotton in shirt form for the white elite wearing the material. Such class and power implode in el-Yasin’s sculptures by the infinitesimally small fibers that cohere in the radical commoning that is lint as it indiscriminately congeals.⁸

For Wilds, the circuit of consumption dominating the fashion industry both provides the satiating trends she desired as a white femme teenager in the United States, and also leverages that desire against the labor of sweatshops (many divorced from visibility in the west and sited in the Global South), the psychological toll of pop culture on the youth of the next generation, and the unreachable standards of beauty for womxn-identifying people. The sssstretching of material belies the extractive tendencies pedaled to consumers on a daily basis that become measures of

⁶ See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2006). As told to the author through email, 11 August 2023.

⁷ I use the term “American” in quotations here and emphasize the use of United States in reference to the geographical region of the fifty states due to the inaccuracies and classism that pervades the use of “American” in relation to the United States alone, especially when larger areas of North and South America have historically used this term. I also acknowledge that both terms are colonial in origin. I am also thinking of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2013), in their deconstruction of capitalist logics in their fabulation of an undercommons.

⁸ I am thinking of the radicality of the commons as related to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), in which they propose that commons replace the oppositional binary of public and private.

performance within cis-het petrocapitalism, the very industry maintaining the circuit. The synthetic materials polyester, nylon, and acrylic, endemic to fast fashion products, are the chemical offspring of the oil system, or the oft-overlooked sinister underbelly of the fashion world. Moreover, Wilds highlights the pace at which such performance is measured through the highly consumed “fast” fashion versus the hand-me-down “slow” rhythm of quilted garments. The obsession with the new, the fast, the easy are distinctly “American” desires, Wilds subtly suggests through her pointed sourcing, and should be interrogated and reconfigured through examinations of our own complicity with these compounded systems and our handmade subversions of them.

In effect, el-Yasin and Wilds present sculptures that linger in the psyche of those that reside in the United States too closely for the soft and familiar materials they presume to exhibit. The works implicate viewers; they entangle us in their collections, reorientations, and proximity. They are too close for us to seemingly choose comfort.

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