

Derrick Woods-Morrow

May 19–August 5, 2023

Gravity Pleasure Switchback

 GALLERY 400

For his first major solo exhibition, Derrick Woods-Morrow presents a euphoric dream state containing the phases and spaces inhabited by Black American Southerners. UIC Gallery 400 interviewed the artist to shed light on his processes in the studio and his conceptual thinking around representing sexuality, desire, rest, labor, and their relations to Blackness.

Aside from one work made in 2022, *Gravity Pleasure Switchback* is entirely composed of new work. Created with various collaborators and new media for you. What was the process behind the making?

The work was freeing to make but challenging to pare down how it should be displayed. I was in the glass shop with various teams of students and faculty at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). One of the two video pieces is a collaboration with K Anderson, a Ph.D. candidate at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. This was my first time working with a studio manager and research assistant; and many of the sculptural elements are collaborations with various fabricators.

I've been trying to take daily walks in the sun to center myself as the work feels scattered all over various parts of the United States. I've really enjoyed working

in this way because I am learning how to let go, how to ask for what I need, and how to trust others. I'm also leaning into believing in myself as a sculptor and learning more processes—it's helped me fall back in love with photography. Sound is very new for me, and I'm trying to use it ethically, not as an afterthought or add-on, but integral to an understanding of the work.

Throughout this show's development, we have talked a lot about various facets of Black life. That includes labor, rest, desires, burdens, dreams, and the notion of *wake work* as articulated by Christina Sharpe. Could you speak to these roots of the show?

The exhibition is for a conflicted audience—conflicted about pleasure, death, music, happiness, and equally, sadness. The work attempts to digest these feelings as they pertain to Blackness in its variance, but ultimately with the American South in mind. Even in Providence, RI, where I live now, an upwards of twenty percent of the enslaved that arrived to the United States came through its ports. The wake is very much alive here.

My office at RISD is in Providence's Market Square, which was constructed by enslaved laborers, and where commercial goods were sold. I'm in the *wake* every time I am here, but anywhere US

infrastructure exists. So, when I listened to Christina Sharpe speaking on the orthography of the wake in lectures, and shortly after uncovered the section titled “Wake Work” within her text, I was inspired by the variety of ways Sharpe registers Black resistance in the face of constant attempts at annihilating Black culture. As an American born Black person, I ask myself, where is it that the ramifications of enslavement fail to reach? Where is it that Black people with feelings, conscious or unconscious, can be untethered from the American South?

Could you talk about the work Black queer vigilance performs in the exhibition?

I am working within the *wake* or afterlife of slavery—I am seeking to find pleasure in the wake and survive. There is nothing queerer than survival. And as Joshua Chambers-Letson, scholar and friend to the late Cuban scholar, Jose Esteban Munoz has stated in *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life*, “We live in the face of historical and social conditions that produce an unjust distribution of death toward, and exploitation of, black and brown life and queer and trans bodies, actively shortening black, brown, Asian, indigenous, queer, trans of color life with alarming and mundane regularity. ... [P]erformance is a vital means through

which the minoritarian subject demands and produces freedom and More Life at the point of the body.” For me, the work in *Gravity Pleasure Switchback* is consumed with ideas of un/seen, and un/recognized, performance and seeks to activate even the remnants of Black life (lint from our clothes, fluid from our bodies, fences from our yards, and the places we lay our heads at night), illustrating forms of resistance from our un/imagined bodies navigating perverse vision and projected forms of expectation on our daily attempts at survival.

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Originally from Greensboro, North Carolina, Derrick Woods-Morrow makes work that reflects on his experience growing up in the Black American South and centers on the exploration of Black sexuality and the complex journey through this discovery. His work has been exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and many other institutions across the world.



Above: Derrick Woods-Morrow and K Anderson, *Southern Confessionals*, 2023, video still. Courtesy the artists
Front: Derrick Woods-Morrow, *Invitation to Access*, 2023, video still. Courtesy the artist

Related Programs

Opening Reception:

Friday, May 19
5–8pm
Gallery 400

Rest and Labor: A Gravity Pleasure Switchback Tour with Jaira Harrington and Yaz Tadross

Thursday, June 1
4–5pm
Gallery 400

Fissures of Displeasure: Lecture by K Anderson

Thursday, June 29
5–6:30pm CT
Virtual via Zoom

Currents: Performance by Gozié Ojini

Thursday, July 20
5–6pm
Gallery 400

Gravity Pleasure Switchback Curatorial Talk with Rachel Dukes, Kristin Korolowicz, Derrick Woods-Morrow, and Gozié Ojini

Thursday, July 27
5–6:30pm CT
Virtual via Zoom

Hours

Tuesday–Friday 10am–5pm
Saturday 12–5pm

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UIC Gallery 400 is wheelchair accessible. Audio descriptions are available in the exhibition. If you have specific access questions or needs, please call 312-996-6114 or email gallery400@uic.edu.