

*Prospero, you are the master of illusion.
Lying is your trademark.
And you have lied so much to me
(lied about the world, lied about me)
that you have ended by imposing on me
an image of myself.
underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior,
That is the way you have forced me to see myself
I detest that image! What's more, it's a lie!
But now I know you, you old cancer,
and I know myself as well.*

Aimé Césaire, *The Tempest*

Where is the Lie?

The basement is a soundstage, the stage is a dream. The dream was a country, the country is a play. The play is a nightmare, the one that became real.

The American dream is performance par excellence—fake it until you make it. The props of success symbolize and eclipse this making. The home improvement show and its ubiquity is symptomatic of this—there is no more real symbol of the achievement of the dream than homeownership. As Jen Doll describes in her essay “How House Hunters Explains America”: “Perhaps the most American thing of all about House Hunters, in the end, is its underlying theme of unbridled domestic aspiration paired with the reality of compromise, the appearance versus the actuality of what we want and what we can have.”¹

If House Hunters disrupts the American dream with compromise, *Finishing a Raw Basement* dismantles it with harsher realities. There are reminders, some subtle, some explicit, of the emptiness of its promises, of how nightmarish it has always been. Systemic racism is the foundation of this dream; it is the tool and the material that built the master's house. If there is absurdity in Ilana Harris-Babou's work, it is because our world and its foundations are absurd. The performance of our making as a country is no longer to be believed; it's laughably bad, it's painfully laughable, it's worse. It is a dangerous and damaging acting out.

The artist and her mother play “construction experts” who have achieved that other dream of success—they are stars of a reality TV show. A popular format, which elsewhere in her work could be a cooking show or music video, serves as a framework to lull the viewer into an initial easy engagement. Humor plays this role as well; they are gentle messengers for the violence of the message.

Harris-Babou refuses to allow the audience to remain comfortably seated. The house lights are on. She walks us through the proscenium, across the length of the stage, backstage, down to the basement. The video moves through layers—the first, public one of reality shows is the face shown to the world, the

¹ Doll, Jen. “How ‘House Hunters’ Explains America.” *Pacific Standard*, 5 Feb. 2014, psmag.com/economics/house-hunters-explains-america-73724.

stage set for an audience. It takes a step back—to reveal the historical and systemic constructs that allow the stage to look the way it does. Finally, we are backstage, we arrive to the personal. Harris-Babou and her mother cease to be “construction experts” or actors, or even the artist and her collaborator, but are instead simply a mother and daughter—a black mother and daughter living in America in 2017.

This drawing back of the curtain is most poignant at the video’s end, when the mother is asked to describe the home she envisions her daughter living in. As she elaborates on the things she wants for her daughter (a studio, proximity to the ocean), she also becomes visibly emotional. The pain of black motherhood is apparent: the desire for more, the awareness of the continual threat that this *more* poses to a racist society.

Earlier in the video, the mother speaks about reparations. Reparations come from the same linguistic root as “repair” —they are an act of repairing or mending, most often by an aggressor following a war.

*Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.*²

This is the subtitle of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ essay “The Case for Reparations”, a devastating, in-depth exploration of systemic white supremacy and the economic injustices faced by black Americans throughout the country’s history. It is impossible to pretend that racism is not the foundation of the American dream, that it is not a nightmare masquerading as a dream. Slave ownership was an aspiration too, a prop and symbol of success.

The two construction experts move through the basement, describing its selling points (“modern, open-concept, rustic appeal”) and pointing out its problems (“Do you see that? I see that. Yes, I see that too.”) They briefly visit a deck with a pool, they realize how far they have to go. What does it mean to repair something? It is to restore what has been broken, to return it to a formerly health state. It is to make good, to compensate, to mend a deficiency. How often though, is a repair successful enough, complete enough, to erase the memory of what was broken? To hide the traces of the mended and its mending? Most often, the patch will still be visible, the new paint won’t match, the repair clumsy and insufficient.

The tools to attempt the repair are broken; they are dysfunctional objects. The ceramic hammer shatters on the nail. The exposed brick is only brick-red paint. The equipment will never match the scope of the foundational damage. It’s spectacle, play, drama. But there can be truth in theater, value in play, progress in rehearsal. A performance allows for the first enactment of a thing in the world, a rehearsal acts out possibilities. Symbolic action might instill some framework for concrete change. Television, theater, and contemporary art can be exaggerations of the world, a mirroring so distorted as to become uncanny, unsettling, unwanted. But perhaps they can also be the medium through which we first discover what is not yet truth, what is for now, simply a dream.

- Ana Iwataki

² Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Case for Reparations.” The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 17 Aug. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/.