

FORMS OF PROTEST

NIKITA GALE

TEXT BY
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Material forms of dissent fascinate artist Nikita Gale. Certain objects—like the electric guitar or the police barricade—surface again and again in Gale’s practice. What intentions, projections, and habits influence the shape and design of these items? How do they contribute to the cultural imaginary of the “rebel” or “protestor”? Gale, who has an Anthropology degree from Yale, uses her work to interrogate the adversarial position contained within particular physical arrangements. Attention is placed on what can arise out of these formulations, in terms of group dynamics and listening.

Gale’s early work was intensively focused on the electric guitar. She began researching its history while pursuing an MFA from UCLA, and discovered that in the 1960s guitar companies like Gibson modified the instrument’s body to resemble the paint and curves of hot rod cars and surfboards. These aesthetic choices, which are so central to American rock ‘n’ roll’s imagery, are not entirely neutral, but rather belie the interplay between the bias of their creators and consumer fantasy. The electric guitar came out of this push and pull, developing into a signifier of a certain lifestyle, and the freedom it promises. Gale’s guitar pieces exist between the operating mechanisms of the object and their symbolism. Parts of the guitar, such as XLR cable, conductive copper tape and guitar strings, are completely deconstructed and reworked in her sculptures. For her 2017 show *RIFF FATIGUE* at Los Angeles gallery Artist Curated Projects, none of

the works resembled a guitar. Rather, visitors encountered bits and pieces of the guitar in new and surprising assemblages, such as *PAST TENSE TINA* (2017) where guitar strings looped in and around an ethafoam tower. These two materials—one used for sound, the other used to package and protect instruments—act as a representative stand-in for silence and noise, intertwined.

Gale’s focus on guitars took an ambitious turn in her work for the Hammer Museum’s 2018 biennial *Made in L.A.*, which is devoted to Los Angeles artists. Specifically commissioned for the show, *PROPOSAL: SOFT SURROUND SYSTEM* involved video projection, guitar cables and layered prints and rubbings that climbed up the walls, floor to ceiling. Sculptures made of guitar stands and foam sat on the floor in front of the work, adding to its sense of monumentality. Looped projections of oscillation patterns and text with words like “RESISTING” and “RETREATING” interspersed the display. One of the most striking features of *PROPOSAL: SOFT SURROUND SYSTEM* was the graphite rubbings of street curbs that spread throughout the presentation. During our studio visit, Gale and I spoke about the Occupy movement in NYC. While the artist used the curbs as a general representation of the public space of the street, during the non-permitted Occupy protests they were an important demarcation. The curb was the dividing line between legal assembly on the sidewalk, protected by the First Amendment,

BIG BAD PICKUP, 2017 (details) Courtesy: The Studio Museum in Harlem and 56 Henry, New York (pp. 75-77)







ENTRANCE

retreating
retreating
retreating
retreating
retreating
retreating

Handwritten scribbles in white marker on a piece of paper.

White light trails or projections on the left wall, resembling a large, abstract shape.

White light trails or projections in the upper center of the wall.



or arrest on the street. Protestors had to navigate sidewalks nimbly, never stopping off the curb, in order to avoid enforcement by the policemen. To this viewer, the grey imprints of the curb in Gale's piece relayed the underlying friction between free speech and oppression in (seemingly) open, public space. In its entirety, the installation felt like a textured, visual score, tracing possibilities of action, sonified and yet to be sonified.

Organized on the heels of the *Made in L.A.* project, Gale's solo exhibition *DESCENT* at Commonwealth and Council delved deeper into the artist's focus on boundaries. Gale bisected the gallery with an open steel frame, snaked by metal conduit. A tire cuts through both sides of the structure, slightly bending the studs. Echoing the gesture of twisted metal, another sculpture in the room, *RECOMMENDATION* (2018), is a steel barricade, whose uneven legs set it diagonally askew. Its interior bars are warped and misshapen. The viewer is faced with metal lines enclosing negative space, which are absent of the drywall and cement that would typically fill these frames. Instead, the only filler one sees are the suspended towels set in cement throughout the entire gallery, either along clothing lines or wrapped on the floor. In an interview for *AQNB*, Gale described how she was first drawn to towels after discovering that many people use them as an inexpensive sound dampening material. But they also approximate the human form: "Towels are responsive to physical qualities of human bodies. They are soft and flexible. They drape. They absorb. They are also kind of abject." These cement towel works suggest a user that can wield the cloth's pliability to their needs before setting it in place, perhaps demonstrating Gale's ideal form of agency. Here, the boundary is self-appointed and stands in stark contrast to the outline of solid walls and barricades traced by the other sculptures.

In the accompanying press release to *DESCENT* the artist cites the concept of "opacity" explored by theorist Édouard Glissant as an inspiration for the type of refusal on view. In Glissant's 1990 text *For Opacity*, he explains that opacity is "subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics." In reference to the protest culture central to Gale's investigations, "opacity" signals a stance that emerges through and despite of existing margins. It is impenetrable because its formation is improvised and self-constructed.

Opacity also requires a different way of reacting and being with others. Gale mentioned that as a graduate student at UCLA studying under artist Andrea Fraser, she attended the Group Relations conferences. Founded in 1947 by the Tavistock Institute, the gatherings teach participants to unlearn unconscious, biased behavior in group environments. Attuned active listening is a key strategy. The Group Relations experience contributed to Gale's ongoing inquiry into sound's transformative capacity. Like the formula used in the seminars, there's a possibility that the sonic and material conditions of a space yield certain results. By interpreting the mechanisms of protest or resistance through physical objects in situ, Gale's work asks: How does a boundary speak? Who listens?

FIXED LOOP II, 2019 (detail) Courtesy: Martos Gallery, New York and 56 Henry, New York (p. 81)

PROPOSAL: SOFT SURROUND SYSTEM, 2018 Installation view, Made in L.A. 2018, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles Photo: Jeff McLane (pp. 78-79)

