

CRITICS' PICKS



Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Summer Breeze*, 2018, three-channel video on 16 monitors, (color and black-and-white, sound, 20 minutes 55 seconds).

NEW YORK

Paul Stephen Benjamin

EFRAÍN LÓPEZ

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Psychedelic experiences are known to produce impressions both agonizing and euphoric. Evaporating linear time, these trance states suspend the boundaries between pain and pleasure, enacting a heady fusion. In Paul Stephen Benjamin's solo exhibition "Black Summer," the artist immerses visitors in this

otherworldly realm, presenting works wherein Black joy and loss seamlessly converge.

The centerpiece of Benjamin's intervention is Billie Holiday's 1959 performance of the anti-lynching elegy "Strange Fruit." The song's lyrics, which emanate from a vintage television set on the gallery's floor, have been abridged to loop the haunting refrain, "Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze." Flanking that set are two more TVs featuring Jill Scott's 2015 performance of the same tune which, like Holiday's rendition, draws its power from the same guttural ache. Behind the vocalists, a towering pyramid of thirteen television screens plays found footage, cast in vibrant cerulean hues, of a Black child on a swing set. Moving toward and away from the viewer in a continuous tidal wave, their guileless sway endows Holiday's mournful lyric with a surprising levity.

From the seemingly dissonant states of heartache and wonder of this installation, titled *Summer Breeze*, 2018, Benjamin manages to extract a profound harmony, mining its contours to unearth complex truths about Black life. As Holiday's quietly steadfast resolve in the black-and-white

broadcast rubs up against Scott's color video and fuller, more declarative voice, their words simultaneously memorialize the twilight of lives violently lost and celebrate the hopeful dawn of young lives just beginning. Under the sea of blue light and sonic reverberations, these affective and temporal polarities bleed together until they are one and the same.

On an opposite wall, the star-shaped cluster of black lights comprising *Black Suns (Ode to Tom Lloyd)*, 2023, floods the gallery with an indigo glow. An homage to the titular abstractionist whose work with photic technologies expanded the canon of Black artistry, its rays are both ominous and exhilarating, grounding us in the transcendent terrain of Black existence.

—Donasia Tillery