

PAUL STEPHEN BENJAMIN

Black Summer

June 29 – August 26, 2023

Opening Reception: June 29, 6–8 pm



Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Summer Breeze*, 2018, three-channel video, color and black-and white, sound, continuous loop (20:55 mins)

New York, NY - **Efraín López** proudly presents its inaugural exhibition, *Black Summer*, a solo presentation by Atlanta-based artist Paul Stephen Benjamin. This marks Benjamin's first solo exhibition with the gallery.

Benjamin's interdisciplinary practice consists of painting, sculpture, video, and photography. Throughout his practice, the artist's work functions to reference integral moments in Black history as well as art history. While spotlighting multiple iconographies, materials, and mediums, he creates multi-layered works that operate through questions surrounding abstraction. Benjamin's work burgeons from a place of lived experience to contend with the contradictory and prepossessing realities of existence. While creating works that speak to moments in history, the artist focuses on material culture and research to develop a balance between concept and aesthetics.

In *Summer Breeze* (2018), presented for the first time in New York, the artist creates an immersive installation consisting of varying-sized tube television screens stacked upon one another to create a sculptural structure. The background wall of screens plays a repetitive loop of a young Black girl playing on a swing set, while a small formation of televisions in the foreground displays performances of *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday in 1959, accompanied by Jill Scott's 2015 performance of the same tune. The stacking of screens, sounds, and time creates a layered environment of symbolism and representation, displaying a powerful reclamation of the lyric, "Black bodies swinging in the summer breeze," historically sung to mourn the deep pain caused by the long legacy of lynchings. This piece operates between the contradiction of Black joy and survival displaying a juxtaposition of pain and pleasure to communicate themes of violence, oppression, and peace. The slippages of this work function across the representation of the figures in the work, seeming to dissolve in a ghost-like light in a number of

stages. The foreground works with a sharp resolution of color, figure, and depth while the background dissolves into a world of blue-gray enveloped light. Sonically, this work immerses the viewer in the sweet yet haunting song reiterated throughout history; while changing in the space of time the urgency of the message continues to be relevant to events of today.

Black Suns "Ode to Tom Lloyd" (2023) is constructed of 48 fluorescent black light tubes forming the shape of sunbeams. This work is dedicated to Tom Lloyd, who was a pioneering artist working in the medium of light. While this work nods to the minimalist lighting structures that are synonymous with Dan Flavin, Benjamin references familiar forms found in Lloyd's lighting sculptures while bringing his own persona into the piece. In making this interpolative reference to Lloyd, Benjamin continues to build off of his own repertoire of black light works. Benjamin often references the color black as a starting point for his process. This piece utilizes UV-A light typically used to illuminate a fluorescent glow in reactive colors in the absence of visible light. While emitting these waves of light along with some blue and violet visible light waves, this work creates an amethyst-colored glow that envelopes the gallery and viewers in the work. This work functions to reveal what is not seen, no one is immune when they go into the space of having details revealed. No matter how perfect or imperfect you are, the black light will reveal many different things. In their ability to uncover and expose that which is concealed, black lights defy assumptions of darkness and visibility.

Paul Stephen Benjamin was born in Chicago, IL, and lives and works in Atlanta, GA. He earned his BA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and his MFA from Georgia State University in 2013. Recently Benjamin has exhibited at Hammonds House Museum, Atlanta, GA (2023), *Blackness* at the Montresso Art Foundation, Marrakesh, Morocco, (2023), The Thoma Foundation Art Vault, Santa Fe, NM (2022-2023), and a solo exhibition at the Van Every-Smith Galleries, Davidson College, Davidson, NC (2022). He's been included in solo and group exhibitions at a variety of institutions and art spaces, including Prospect.5 New Orleans, LA (2021-2022), Gavlak, Los Angeles, CA (2021), *The Dirty South* at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond VA (2021), David Lusk Gallery, Nashville, TN (2021), Crystal Bridges Museum and the Momentary, Bentonville, AR (2020), The MAC, Belfast, UK (2019), VCU Institute for Contemporary Art, Richmond, VA (2019), The Havana Biennial in Matanzas, Cuba (2019), Marianne Boesky Gallery, NY, NY (2019), Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, WA (2018), Telfair Museum Jepson Center, Savannah, GA (2018), The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY (2017), Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, GA (2017), High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA (2016), among others. He has received a range of awards and fellowships, including The Hudgens Prize (2019), Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant (2019), Hambidge Distinguished Fellowship (2019), The Southern Art Prize (2018), The State Fellow of Georgia (2018), Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (WAP) Fellow (2017), Artadia Award (2014), Winnie B. Chandler Fellowship, and the Forward Arts Emerging Artists Award.

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