



- 1 *You're a Winner Baby but at What Cost? (Blue)*
Video
5:02
2023
- 2 *Twinkle I*
Stoneware glaze and pearlescent lustre
26.5 x 26.5cm
2024
- 3 *Twinkle III*
Stoneware glaze and pearlescent lustre
28.5 x 27cm
2024
- 4 *Twinkle II*
Stoneware glaze and pearlescent lustre
27.5 x 28cm
2024

Tulani Hlalo (b.1994, Newcastle upon Tyne) lives and works in Glasgow. In *Eyes on the Prize?*, Hlalo continues her exploration into the highly staged world of competitive dog grooming, in which dogs are groomed into elaborate sculptural objects – including other animals, cartoons and objects. Her research into this raises questions about consent, expectation, and the representation of identity. These inform Hlalo's ongoing interest into the slipperiness of identity, belonging, and of “being inbetween cultures”.

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EYES ON THE PRIZE? TULANI HLAO

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These are not wild dogs. Their eyes, whilst swollen and enhanced to anime hyperreality, are quite literally glazed over.

For over a decade, Tulani Hlalo has been fascinated with the world of competitive dog grooming. During pageants, where groomers will groom their dogs live under time constraints, the dogs operate as atomised tableau vivants – individuated and self-contained works of breathing spectacle. They are physically inseparable from the animal that bears them, whilst simultaneously dissolving the dogs' identity and personhood into the de-naturalised aesthetics of their coats. Often the designs are referential of pop icons such as Sesame Street or Sailor Moon, further superseding animal identity into anonymised mass-cultural signifier. If Robocop represented the colonisation of the body by fascism and its technological interests, then these dogs tell a story of bodily colonisation by late capitalism's cultural logic.

Hlalo's video, *You're a Winner Baby but at What Cost?* (*Blue*) superficially reclaims some of the animacy lost in the animal transformation into sculptural object through casting herself present in the scene. In its staging, *You're a Winner Baby* reproduces the aesthetics of grooming pageant areas. The place where the ephemerality of the event are captured on camera; the accolades, the contestants, and most importantly, the final looks of the dogs, which from the moment they are finished, begin gradually growing out. In this space, the dogs' image are modified and hybridised, before being flattened into photographic index. Their bodily autonomy is subordinated into static posing, in a process necessary to transmit and reify their being.

The setting is reminiscent of old school photos, replete with their ugly crushed velvet and visual homogeneity, or a Hollywood screen test, wherein a potential actor is filmed unmoving in a neutral environment in order to analyse onscreen presence for their suitability for a given role. These films are purely functional and never intended to be shown publicly, but viewed as a kind of 'cinema' they become strange; somewhat unsettling. Actors sit, facing into the camera, attempting to convince it of the presence of that intangible *something*. That transcendent, glowing X factor that will ultimately be collapsed into the identical formal quality of the screentest. Seated, staring silently into the spiritual reality of the picture plain, they are at once both alive and dead – preserved in eternity.

But what is it that is emanating from Hlalo's work? What is their spiritual reality? In *You're a Winner Baby*, the artist sits in front of a pageant backdrop, made up in white face paint and a prosthetic dog's muzzle, wearing an enormous rosette modelled after those presented at grooming shows. The rosette, appearing to bloom from her made-up face (as a halo might), is unwieldy. The artist is clearly uncomfortable, struggling to maintain her pose. She props up, repositions, fidgets in her seat. It is clear though that in this fictional scenario these small movements – evidences of discomfort and production – are ancillary to whatever it is that is actually going on, yet precisely what is actually going on is never clearly defined. We know that we are witness to the culmination of an event which for its participants must be of great significance, however, in presenting us with only these fragments, even of what might be the climactic moment of ultimate significance, we are reminded of the absurdity, sanitised

artifice, and mechanistic bureaucracy of such jubilant spectacles.

Forced into this position of being uninformed, in a world of archives and constant access, is disquieting. So too is the feeling of being watched by the lifeless eyes, and the gnawing fear that we shall pass through life without having been *truly* seen, rather reduced to being monitored, accumulated and recorded in the cloud-based ledger.

This feeling of disquiet emanates from much of Hlalo's work. In *Eyes on the Prize?* pop and kitsch sensibilities are present, but so too is a post-apocalyptic atmosphere. The gallery surroundings are austere. The indistinct photo backdrop, the uniform inorganic blue walls and curtains that fill the gallery, and the spotlight ceramics creates a dislocation from any cultural context. Perhaps even any earthly context. But truly, what is most unsettling is that these artefacts do not come from another place. The disquiet lies in the stark reality that this is our fragile and preposterous world – that the figure in the video could be, or could become a feature in our reality, and that this whole bizarre technicolour world is based around actual real dogs.

A referential interest for Hlalo is the the memetic internet form of '*Cursed Images*'; those which depict everyday circumstances, corrupted in some way in order to render the scene eerie or disturbing. Often as an image they are low resolution, or poor quality, and ultimately designed to question the reason for their own existence as images. A recurring trope within this canon, is the distortion of the human form. Several extra fingers digitally added to a human

hand, or a face airbrushed of any features to leave only skin.

These Cursed Images sit so curiously because they present semi-believable corruptions of the real, and are effective because they are so closely aligned with the normal and boring. They complicate our understanding of what might be, and sit as containers of semi-rational possibility. Hlalo's deployment of cursed aesthetics does more than make the work immediately engaging through being on the borderline of being grotesque. They operate as a resistance to overtly political interests.

Living under a political paradigm neurotically obsessed with reducing the entire world to a system of observable, predictable (and manageable) categories, the genuinely weird can help to sabotage this quixotic, self-devouring project. In embracing Otherness, and embracing the expression and creation of things that cannot be subsumed by the market, then we embrace a form of radical resistance that will never deplete. Of course, it is not the only form of resistance we need. And sometimes it is necessary to operate within the market, and at other times it is easy to slip into repetitions of mindless novelty. But something you can always rely upon is this: people will always be weird, and will always do weird things.

And here we are.