

# Tanya Leighton

Press Release

Esteban Jefferson  
'PETIT PALAIS'

30 October – 18 December 2020

Tanya Leighton is delighted to announce the representation of Esteban Jefferson on the occasion of his first solo exhibition in Europe. 'Petit Palais' is a continuation of the artist's recent show at White Columns in New York, which probes the European sensitivity towards the systemic racism ingrained in museum culture.

Like its first iteration, the exhibition comprises three main elements: a group of large-scale paintings, a two-channel video, and a faux-marble floor, reconsidering the Beaux Art-style rotunda of the Petit Palais Museum in Paris and its overlooked statuary.

In this exhibition, Jefferson examines the colonialist implications of museum conventions instantiated in the rotunda of the Petit Palais. This non-place is a point of transit where visitors acquire their tickets and wait for their tours to begin. As such, the lobby's décor, two marble busts of an African man and woman, are not meant to be substantial, just a harmonious backdrop to the ticket desk or the information station, otherwise cluttered by video screens and public signage. It is in these ignored elements where Jefferson focuses his attention. Why are these sculptures not deemed important enough to be located in the main halls of the museum? Why do their labels simply read as 'Buste d'Africain' and 'Buste d'Africaine', instead of identifying their maker, their date, and especially, the subjects depicted?

In his paintings, the nineteenth-century architecture of the building crowded by busy museum-goers, appears faintly, in broad and soft washes of pink and sienna tones that evoke the marble that covers the room. In sharp contrast, the busts appear in full colour in a hyper-realistic fashion. Jefferson is interested in portraying "the serendipitous visual encounters between the museum's employees and visitors and these two busts", which becomes apparent in two new paintings selected for this exhibition that enact a significant change of strategy. One visitor, an older white woman taking a photograph of one of the busts, is rescued from the tanned, washed background, painted in full detail as well. The inspiration behind 'Flâneuse' (2020) is subtle but specific: it echoes Gerhard Richter's 'Betty' (1978), in which the celebrated German painter's daughter is portrayed similarly, and which itself, converses with Johannes Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' (1665). With this gesture, Jefferson, born in 1989, and whose artistic language is completely contemporary in forms and concerns, continues the ongoing dialogue between artists of all times, defining his multidisciplinary practice as an offshoot of painting. The installation at the gallery is completed by a 'marble' floor (a cheap linoleum which humorously

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versions this noble material, a staple in institutional buildings), and two stacked CRT monitors, one playing a tourist-style video showing a walk through the lobby, and the other, close-ups of wall labels at the museum, informative and well researched in most cases except for the busts.

Jefferson's critique of the intrinsically colonial gaze perpetuated by cultural institutions is part of the current public redress of systemic racism, exacerbated in the recent months by the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the US. Nevertheless, the subject at stake is not a North American, but a French museum. Are French institutions open to similar reconsiderations of their conventions, often uncontested since their foundation (in this case, at the dawn of the twentieth century)?

Jefferson wonders about the real, practical effects of institutional critique in art. Are artists able to effect authentic social change with their formal and semantic games? Adopting a truly institutional language, the artist writes a letter to the Petit Palais inquiring about the busts' location and documentation and includes a copy of it in the show as evidence of a move from artistic reflection to bureaucratic civil action. Will there be an answer, or will this exercise serve to track the futility of the endeavour?

— Laura López Paniagua

Esteban Jefferson (b. 1989) lives and works in New York. He received both his Masters and Bachelor degrees in Visual Art from Columbia University. His debut solo exhibition in New York, 'Petit Palais' took place at White Columns in 2019. Selected group exhibitions include 'Vernacular Interior' at Hales Gallery, New York; '1989-2019' at Chinatown Soup, New York; 'Material Witness Witness Material' at the Knockdown Center, New York; and 'Black Blooded' at The New Gallery, Charlotte.

In 2020, Jefferson was commissioned by New York Public Art Fund to make a new work for their 'Art on the Grid' project, which was exhibited at transit hubs throughout the city. He will participate in the forthcoming Triennale 'Estamos Bien' at Museo del Barrio, New York in 2021.

For more information and images please contact [info@tanyaleighton.com](mailto:info@tanyaleighton.com) or telephone +49 (0)30 21 972 220.

The gallery is open Tuesday – Saturday, 11am – 6pm and by appointment.