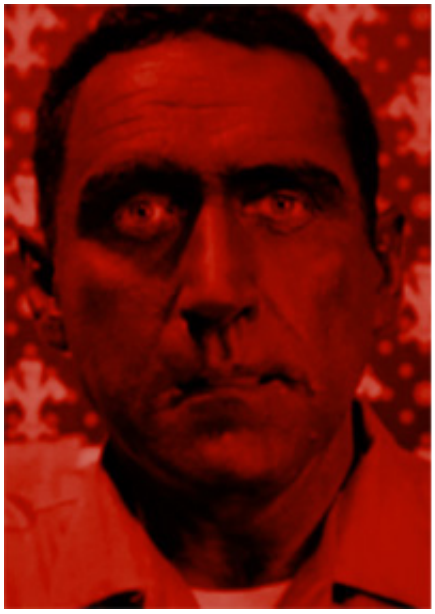
49. | Darkening Process





2014, France, 9 min 35, HD, colour, stereo.
Courtesy of the artist and Art Front Gallery, Tokyo.
Ed. of 5 + 2 A.P.

Dans son film expérimental, Darkening Process (2014), mounir fatmi explore la vie de John Howard Griffin, écrivain américain et activiste des droits civiques qui, exacerbé par l'injustice subie par les Afro-Américains pendant les années 1950 et 1960, alla jusqu'à noircir sa peau à l'aide de pilules et d'exposition prolongée sous ultraviolets. En dépit d'études en littérature française, en religion et en médecine, et malgré un service dans l'armée américaine, le seul métier que Griffin ait pu obtenir était cireur de chaussures. Le film Darkening Process est construit autour du plan rapproché sur une paire de mains frottant et cirant énergiquement un pied de chaussure en cuir noir. À vue d'œil, l'action s'assombrit fil de la vidéo, tandis que les mains appliquent une partie du cirage noir sur la peau.

La vidéo associe des fragments de Black Like Me, film de 1964 inspiré d'une autobiographie du même nom par Griffin. Le spectateur l'y voit poursuivi, le visage apeuré, tandis qu'une voix-off masculine, dont l'intonation rappelle le style documentaire, évoque comment pourchasser des noirs dans les rues du sud pouvait "s'apparenter à du baseball" ou à quelque activité de chasse. Tel pour un film d'horreur, les scènes du film sont retouchées puis superposées de filtres rouges, verts et sombres. La musique d'ambiance dissonante qui dure le long du film de dix minutes ajoute à l'effet claustrophobe, paraît interminable et semble ne laisser aucune voie d'évasion.

Ce film fait partie de la série de travaux intitulée The Journey into Shame, que fatmi a construit autour de la vie de John Howard Griffin. La série prolonge l'intérêt de mounir fatmi pour les thèses sur l'identité, sur l'idée de l'Autre, aussi bien qu'elle illustre sa fascination pour les archives, notamment celle des moments oubliées ou obscures de l'histoire, pourtant en résonance avec une époque contemporaine.

In his 2014 experimental film, Darkening Process, mounir fatmi explores the life of John Howard Griffin, an American writer and Civil Rights activist who was so frustrated by the injustice experienced by African Americans during the 1950s-1960s, that he took pills and had UV exposure to turn his skin black. For several months he travelled the south, looking for work and writing about his experience. During this time the only job that Griffin could find, despite having studied French literature, religion and medicine, and having served in the US Army, was shining shoes, and Darkening Process turns around a closely cropped scene in black and white that shows a pair of hands intensely polishing and scrubbing a pair of black leather shoes. Both the shoes and the hands get increasingly darker as the film continues, the hands rubbing some of the black polish into the skin, our eyes witness to the change.

Spliced throughout the film are fragmented scenes from Black Like Me, the 1964 film based on Griffin's autobiography of the same name. We see scenes of him being chased down the street, running, his face full of fear. In the same moment we hear a male voice speaking in a very documentary-style tone about how, for example, in the south it was for some, "just like baseball" to chase black men in the streets, and other haunting facts. These images from the film have been manipulated, transposed into deep reds, greens and blacks, as if in a horror film. The dissonant music that plays throughout the ten-minute film adds to the sense of claustrophobia and fear, we don't get an impression of their being an end, an escape.

This film is part of a larger series of work titled The Journey into Shame, which fatmi has made around the life of John Howard Griffin. The series continues fatmi's interest in exploring theories of identity, what is meant by the idea of the

Other, as well has his ongoing fascination with archives, particularly obscure or forgotten about moments in history that when revived, resonant with contemporary meaning.

Blaire Dessent, Janvier 2016.

Blaire Dessent, January 2016.

vidéo distribuée par Heure exquise ! www.exquise.org

“In the video Darkening Process (2014), archival footage of Griffin, along with black dancers and jazz musicians is tinted red, green, blue, and yellow in turn. These scenes are edited together with shots of Fatmi methodically blackening his hands—palms too!—with shoe polish, in a nod to the only job Griffin was able to get while black.”

Rahel Aima, Art in America, May 2017

exhibitions:

2018

Narrative Means - Goodman Gallery - Expo collective

This is My Body - Art Bärtschi & Cie - Solo show

2017

Darkening Process - Analix Forever Gallery - Solo show

Inside the Fire Circle - Lawrie Shabibi - Solo show

2016

Art Verona - Analix Forever - Art fair

2015

The Migrant (Moving) Image - A Tale of a Tub - Expo collective

Art Basel, Basel - Goodman Gallery - Art fair

2014

Walking on the light - CCC - Solo show

press articles:

Rahel Aima, Mounir Fatmi, Art in America, June 1st, 2017

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REVIEWS JUN. 01, 2017

Mounir Fatmi

DUBAI,
at Lawrie Shabibi

by Rahel Aima



Mounir Fatmi: *History Is Not Mine*, 2013, video, 5 minutes; at Lawrie Shabibi.

Tucked into a corner alcove of Mounir Fatmi's exhibition "Inside the Fire Circle" was a short video in which the artist sits down at a typewriter, picks up a pair of hammers, and begins to bang on the keyboard with them. The output is gibberish, of course, but the gesture is surprisingly gentle, even elegant. The artist resembles a well-dressed hotel pianist as he taps out a clattery patois that can be heard around the gallery. Titled *History is Not Mine*, the 2013 video is mostly black-and-white; only the typewriter ribbon provides a drop of red. The work melds a certain nostalgia for the refinement of the past with an underlying sense of ambivalence about claiming ownership over historical experience.

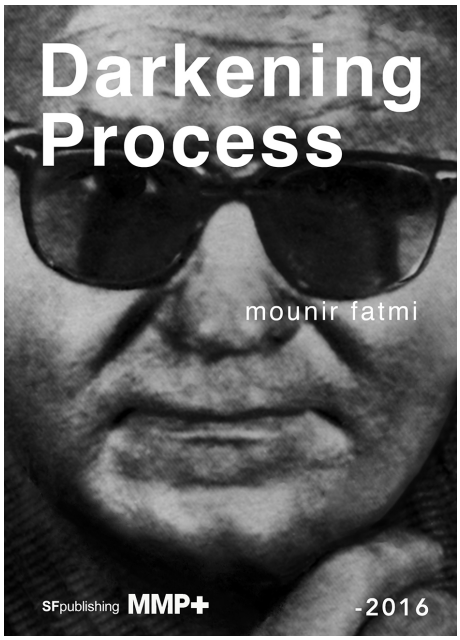
Typewriters also featured in the show's title work: a large new installation positioned in the center of the gallery. In this piece, waterfalls of jumper cables spill from typewriters arranged on a high table. The end of each cable is clipped to a blank sheet of paper on the floor. The configuration, with black cables running down one side of the table and red ones down the other, suggests some sort of analogue setup for automated writing, mindless and mechanized.

With only the occasional flash of color, the palette of the exhibition was predominantly black-and-white. The polarized color scheme hinted at the artist's interest in binaries, and where they break down. This interest is not confined to formal experimentation; several pieces in the show offered specific content related to black racial identity in the United States. These photo works focus on John Howard Griffin, a white civil rights activist from Texas who, in 1959, took medication and underwent UV treatments to darken his skin, allowing him to pass as black. He spent six weeks traveling in the segregated South before writing the bestseller *Black Like Me*. For the photo work *As a Black Man* (2013–14), Fatmi manipulated archival images of Griffin to allude to his "transformation" from white to black. An image of Griffin prior to his skin treatment is printed eight different times, appearing to darken progressively with each iteration. The series, arranged horizontally on a wall, ends with two shots of Griffin as a black man. In *As a Black Man*, as in

several other manipulated archival images depicting Griffin traversing the color line, Fatmi presents racial identity as malleable even as he invokes the historical role of photography in codifying racial distinctions.

Nothing in the exhibition suggested that Fatmi considered the limits of this malleability, or questioned the extent to which a nonblack person can access a black experience. The malaise evoked by *History Is Not Mine* seems to serve almost as cover for a deeper historical ignorance. In the video *Darkening Process* (2014), archival footage of Griffin, along with black dancers and jazz musicians is tinted red, green, blue, and yellow in turn. These scenes are edited together with shots of Fatmi methodically blackening his hands—palms too!—with shoe polish, in a nod to the only job Griffin was able to get while "black."

Perhaps Fatmi, who is Moroccan, has valid points to make about the fraught relationship between Arabness and blackness in North Africa—the history that is undeniably his. But his direct references to an Anglo, North American context make it impossible to separate his project from the ugly history of minstrelsy and blackface. Transposed again to Dubai, where slavery was abolished de jure only in 1963, the blithe obliviousness of this project is nothing short of chilling.



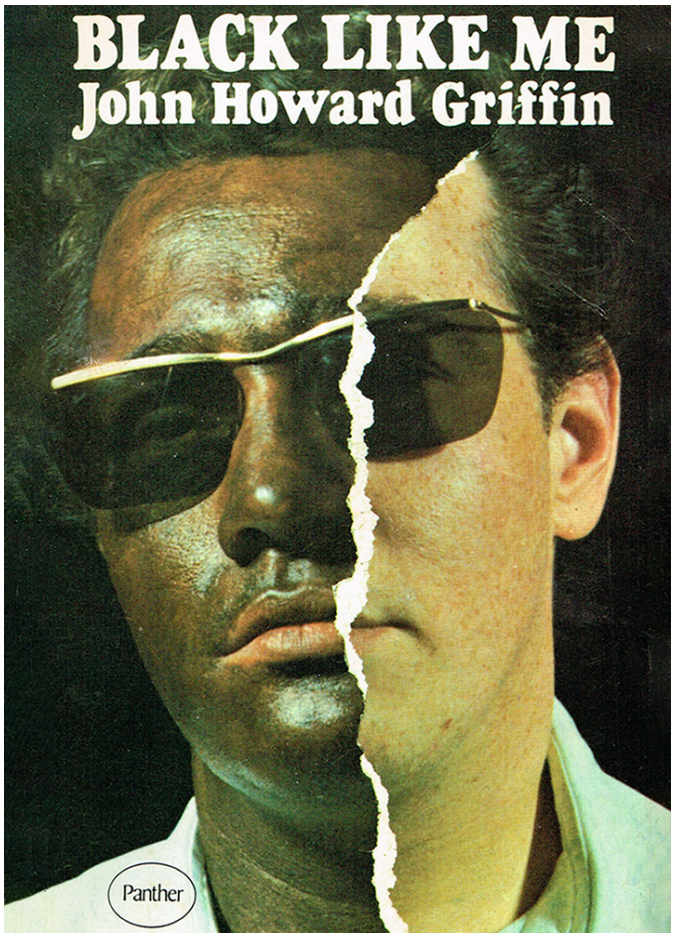
Darkening Process, SFpublishing 2024

Darkening Process is based on three projects about the idea of the Other: towards literature, figures and scientific experiments. The first project The Journey into Shame is in honoring John Howard Griffin, the white American writer and journalist, born in 1920, known for his fight against racial discrimination and best known for his book ‘Black like Me’.

Mostafa Aghrib, January 2016



In his experimental film, Darkening Process, mounir fatmi explores the life of John Howard Griffin, an American writer and Civil Rights activist who was so frustrated by the injustice experienced by African Americans during the 1950s-1960s, that he took pills and had UV exposure to turn his skin black.





Darkening Process

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Darkening Process

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