

AARON FOWLER: Donkey Days, Donkey Nights, and Bigger Than Me

by Will Fenstermaker

Total | June 23 – August 25

Salon 94 Bowery | June 27 – August 10

New Museum | May 2 – August 19

As an editor, I distrust superlatives, but here goes one that's deserved: Aaron Fowler's *Donkey Days* is the best solo gallery show I've seen in New York this year. Fowler's assemblages are meticulous, intricate, and complexly layered, steeped with references and allusions—narrative, formal, and material—to art history, popular culture, and the artist's own familial and personal experiences. The eight works radiate wit, grace, and good humor, and are simultaneously innovative and catholic in influence. Despite their maximalism, I felt, after looking at them, more focused in my reflection on the vague and all-encompassing anxiety that has afflicted me the past two years.

Concurrent to *Donkey Days* are two other excellent solo exhibitions. I saw *Donkey Nights*, at Salon 94, first, and then *Bigger Than Me*, visible from the street, through the windows of the New Museum. To end a visit to the trio with Total's *Donkey Days* is, I would say, the right order. Each show is small, composed of recent work (with some coordination, the three could probably stand as one), and they present a portrait of the artist, his family, and friends that is positively transcendental and builds into a parable of how to be a social (and therefore political) being in America today.

In *Donkey Nights*, six assemblages hang from chains like medallions, spill off walls and onto the floor, or whirl with motorized parts. Fowler sources many of his materials from thrown-away objects and commonplace products—shattered CDs and mirrors, weaves, Swisher papers, tires, sneakers—and uses them to craft quixotic narrative tableaux. Quotes pulled from confessional Facebook posts or rap lyrics are overlaid in paint. A portrait of the artist's grandmother, *Jmae* (2017), is adorned with gold leaf and tagged



Aaron Fowler, *Donkey Gods*, 2018. Oil paint, acrylic paint, enamel paint, vinyl paint, mirror, concrete, hair weave, beard weave, screws, plexiglass, photo printout, pegboard, school desk chairs, Doc Martens, sneakers, socks, LED rope lights, paint brush, canvas, digital video, digital tablet, Newportts, blunts, fake plants and green foam blocks on school desks, 106 × 200 × 31 inches. Courtesy Totalah.

with emojis. Her pearl necklace (plastic yellow balls strewn across the floor) is printed with photos of her grandchildren. Also depicted are Fowler's cousin Antoine, several rappers, and the artist himself as a donkey, with a mirrored-mosaic surface like a disco ball and bullets for teeth.

The donkeys are a recurring motif. Recently, Fowler learned that a three-year-old girl named Logan might be his daughter—and, shortly thereafter, that she wasn't biologically his. Still, he was determined to be a part of her life, relocating temporarily back to St. Louis, where her school mascot was a donkey. In his art the animal often appears cartoonish, like a logo for human potential and fallibility.

Outside, at the New Museum, two of Fowler's large-scale assemblages are visible from the street. Lex Brown Town (2017) is a portrait of the artist Lex Brown, whom Fowler knew at Yale, and an homage to her performances dealing with racism and sexism. Miss Logan (2017 – 18) is a portrait of Logan as a mermaid, begun the day Fowler met the little girl he then believed might be his own. These two works inaugurate the museum's resuscitation of its famed window-installation series and the choice could not be more appropriate; Fowler's materials and social sensibility directly connect to the liveliness of the New York street outside the museum.

It is at David Totah's gallery across town, though, where Fowler shines. Perhaps the gallerist, who has a reputation as something resembling a modern mystic, and the artist, who deals here with his interest in Vipassana meditation, found synchronized minds. All of the works at Totah are dated to 2018 and many of them were only finished during installation earlier this summer. Painted on peg board and backlit with a LED panels, many of the works here make one's eye struggle to focus and read the image, as in a gilded Byzantine icon.

Meditation—of the traditional, spiritual kind, distinct from the business-cult of “mindfulness” preached on the American coasts today—is an uncomfortable practice. It's hard to sit physically still for long periods of time, and frustrating to maintain focus. The conditions of contemporary American life, by and large, are antithetical to the conditions conducive to reflection—we move too fast, talk too loud, do not often enough have our attentions called to our surroundings. Before installing Donkey Days, Fowler underwent an eight-day Vipassana meditation retreat. He was introduced to the practice—which involves continuous meditation over several days, a vow of silence, and controlled diet—by the artist Byron Kim, who features prominently in Donkey Gods (2018), the signature work of the show. In it, Kim leads a group comprised of Fowler, his father, brothers, and friends, who are shrouded in orange plastic and connected at their necks by an LED tube that leads also to the head of a donkey.



Installation view of Aaron Fowler: Donkey Nights, Salon 94, 2018. Courtesy Salon 94.



Exhibition view, Aaron Fowler: Bigger Than Me, New Museum, New York, 2018. Photo: Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio.

Cut out in Kim's hand is a monitor, visible behind the tableau's plane, as if he were holding a small television, which plays a video of the artists friends and family seated before the assemblage, meditating. Each was then asked to play a game of pin the tail on the donkey. At the points at which each person pinned their tail, Fowler attached an icon: a bedazzled tail made from cardboard, mirror fragments, and hair weave composing the tails' skirts, at the center of which is the subject's portrait. The placement of each tail is haphazard. One sits nicely near the edge of the picture, while another is drilled into the artist's brother's sternum. (These tails appear elsewhere in the show as isolated objects, but they don't quite work by themselves; cut off, they look like objects for art fairs.)



Aaron Fowler, *Donkey of the Lou (Self Portrait)*, 2018. Acrylic paint, enamel paint, sand, mirror, concrete cement, orange plastic wrap, screws, hair weave, beard hair, photo printout, plexiglass, cotton balls, LED rope lights, chains and pegboard on cubicles, 108 × 114 inches. Courtesy Totah.

The most affective work among the three shows is *Donkey of the Lou (Self Portrait)* (2018). Here, Fowler has torn the peg board, painted dark turquoise, in places so as to suggest shooting stars, while a moon embedded in its surface calls back to *You Are Not the Father* (2017 – 18) at Salon 94, which likewise contains a whirring globe in its upper left corner. Dusty, illustrative clouds muddy the vision. Fowler, depicted again as a donkey, wears a chain with a second ass around his neck. His hands grip his ankles and his eyes are closed in meditation. His black shirt, stamped in all caps with the word “undefeated” is modeled from a rocky, putty-like substance apparently made from cotton balls—if you can believe the transmutation. Behind the artist, beneath the starry blue sky, rendered in brown acrylic paint, is the skyline of St. Louis. Fowler's likeness, transcendent, his mirrored tail splayed out toward the horizon, is lifted over the surface, its shadow cast across the city.

Of course, you won't notice any of this immediately. First you'll notice the sand. Fowler hauled in several tons of industrial sand—which, when mixed with binder, forms the ground of *Donkey Gods*—to coat the gallery floor. The artist's effort in shaping this exhibition pays off. While the works themselves are equally powerful throughout the three exhibitions, seeing them displayed over this manmade beach—or, a little less so, pressed up against the window on the Bowery—is something else entirely. It's a cliché (and a particularly boring one at that) to speak of the transformation of the white cube, but if, in Fowler's work, the personal is political, then the immediacy of this reflective installation sends it back the other direction again. It was raining the day I saw Fowler's three shows, and the sand congealed as mud around my shoes. When I got home, I sat for a moment on my apartment's stairs, where I picked off the debris I'd brought inside from the sidewalk and the subway: artifacts of all the lives I'd just intersected: paper fragments, chewing gum, something that looked like part of a cigarette....

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