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PAPER

Artists Jayson Musson and Alex da Corte Play Easternsports

By Gabby Bess



When asked what was the inspiration behind Easternsports -- Jayson Musson and Alex da Corte's first collaborative piece that opens September 19th at ICA Philadelphia -- the contemporary artists listed off references ranging from Ja Rule, Missy Elliot, MC Hammer, and "the club" to Jim Henson, Oskar Schlemmer's Das Triadische Ballet, and Don Quixote. From a collage of reference points, the resulting film is an absurdist's update of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* for a pop culture saturated world.

Like his art-pundit alter ego, Hennessy Youngman or Plastic Little -- Musson's rap group that plays on hip-hop's tropes -- Easternsports showcases Musson's instantly recognizable brand of hyper-observational humor. Combining forces with Alex da Corte's fantastically colorful, pop art visuals -- and an original score by Blood Orange's Dev Hynes -- the two artists welcome you to the world of Easternsports.

First question: what exactly is an "eastern sport"?

Jayson Musson: Ha, a very important question. The title for this project comes from a poem I wrote many sun cycles ago when I was in my early twenties. In the poem, I make reference to a westerner's knowledge of Buddhism as "easternsports." It's a comment on the notion that, as Westerners, our identities are not fixed. From our position of privilege we're able to explore or dabble with cultural exports from other parts of the world, religion being one of them. Westerners are encouraged to "find themselves" and in that process we try on, then discard many ideologies, thus reducing them to trite intellectual garments, or a light pastime much akin to sports.

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Can you take me through the process of figuring out how the video project was going to take shape after you two decided you wanted to work together?

Alex da Corte: We have been talking about working together for years and years. At some point, after the ICA approached us about doing the show and we settled on the format: I supplied the video/visuals and Jayson supplied the script. We decided that the video play would focus on archetypes in popular culture -- and poking holes in the symbols associated with them. In both of our works, we have explored these arenas before -- in Jayson's Hennessy videos and in my True Life project, which revolved around Eminem -- so it seemed fitting to start there and go further down that rabbit hole.

When ICA commissioned you to work on a project did they have a specific idea of what they wanted to see from you?

AC: Kate Kraczon approached us with the idea that this collaboration would highlight parts of our practice that were not as well known. So for Jayson, that would be his use of language and text -- which had largely been part of his earlier Plastic Little/Too Black for B.E.T. work. And for me, that meant video, which -- although I studied and employ as part of my process -- I had never focused on video as the centerpiece for a show.

JM: That being said, they had no real idea what to expect from us and for some time we didn't know what to expect from this collaboration either. Video and writing are very amorphous concepts. For me, all my art actually comes out of writing and language -- even my paintings -- so when approached with the idea of writing for this project, the question for me was, really, What kind of writing?



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How did you decide to base the script around Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*?

AC: *Our Town* does a great job of painting a picture of a microcosm that can be endlessly analyzed and reanalyzed. Our concerns were similar, but the microcosm has changed slightly. It is focused more on the queer sci-fi periphery rather than the traditional hetero-normative white center.

JM: Shout out to heroic white men, though -- you Jack Sparrow-ass, swashbuckling, self-anointed-saviors of the world.

When did you meet Dev Hynes? How did he come to collaborate with you on the score for *Easternsports*?

AC: I met Dev through mutual friends. He had come to a show of mine in London at White Cube and soon after we discussed the *easternsports*. He generously scored the entire two and half hours of video in Philadelphia this summer. Since Dev is also a synesthese, he scored the work based on the colors in the videos. We are still in awe of him and his contribution.

JM: Very much so. He's incredibly humble and was so truly happy to contribute that I'm honestly still flabbergasted that someone of his immense talent is even involved. I'm a bum, and as much as I love and respect Alex as an artist, I've known him for too long so he's a bum. But Dev is a fucking rock star.

Jayson, most of your work has been critical or a parody of the art world. Your latest show, *Exhibit of Abstract Art* brought to life the Modern art from the world of the comic strip, *Nancy*. *Easternsports* doesn't look like it takes itself too seriously either. Is it another critique of the art world or something else? I have this image in mind:

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AC: I think it is a critique of something else, but life imitates art and vice versa -- that something else is maybe what all of the characters in *Easternsports* are trying to define, us included.

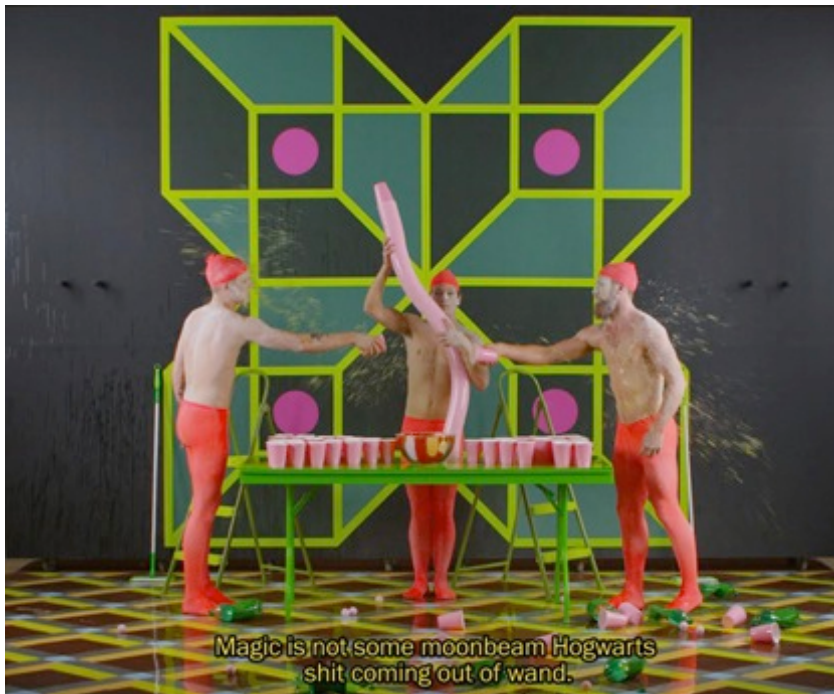
JM: It's a mixture I think; throughout *Easternsports*, there is in fact much humor; as is my tonal tendency, and Alex's beer pong from Scene 3 is hilarious, but the humor is situated in relation to questions about life, love, identity, death, ritual and God, or, as a young viewer commented on our dual dispositions, the humor is situated in close proximity to a lot of "darkness." But in terms of it being a critique, I'd have to say it's more of an exploration than a critique.

Alex, you've said that your work is preoccupied with modern allegory and how music and film both shape and obscure our experiences. Did you have that in mind when filming *Easternsports*?

AC: Yes for sure. The allegories I was referring to could be substituted with Jungian archetypes. This is how *Easternsports* started, and these archetypes are formed, or proliferated through platforms like cinema, or theater, television and the internet, and printed matter. In *Easternsports*, Jayson and I are trying to understand how this constant dance, between what we desire and what we are, defines our actions and what relics result from this. If life is a stage, what is the dressing room like?

I'm laughing so much at this image and caption. Can you explain what is going on here:

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AC: This image is part of the four-channel projection from Scene 3 in Easternsports. During this scene, several individuals perform rituals -- for meditation, for heroism, for transcendence, or for occupational necessity. These men perform and reveal the absurdity of one particular ancient ritual -- beer pong. Which raises the question, "What is winning if losing is drinking?" and how do we win at masculinity?

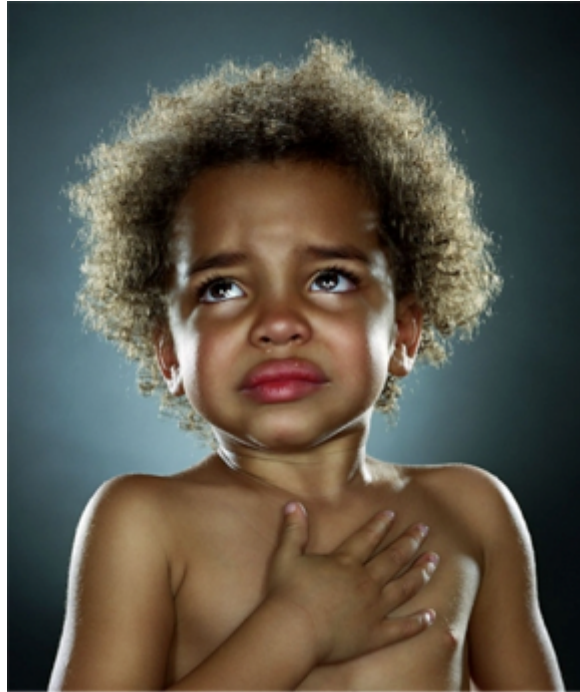
JM: And the narration in that scene addresses the practitioners of these performative archetypes. That particular caption is a segue into a sequence where I ask the viewer what they consider to be the hallmarks of being an artist.

How would you describe Easternsports in a tweet?

AC: I don't tweet but I imagine Jayson would use the words "had me like..."

JM: Alex doesn't tweet, so I guess I'll answer this: Easternsports had me like

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How would Hennessy Youngman describe Easternsports?

JM: Hmm... probably like: SON, WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS SHIT? YOU SAID EASTERNSPORTS BUT WHERE THE FUCK THIS KARATE AT, B? WHEN IP MAN GON' SHOW UP?

Easternsports opens September 19th and runs until December 28th at ICA Philadelphia. Opening ceremony, 6:30 - 9pm.