NICOLE MILLER
A Sound, a Signal, the Circus

Mildred Lane
Kemper Art Museum
March 25–July 25, 2022
“I think a lot about aliveness next to Blackness because I feel like I’m always so hyperaware of what those two mean in the States and how the history of my body is not aliveness. Or it is, but I feel like it’s underneath death.” These words by the St. Louis–based poet Precious Musa ring out across the space of the installation A Sound, a Signal, the Circus. What it means to be alive—specifically, the brilliance and the precariousness of life in a Black body—is an important entry point into the work of the artist and filmmaker Nicole Miller.

A Sound, a Signal, the Circus is a multisensory installation in which Miller explores and expands an understanding of synesthesia—a perceptual phenomenon where one sense is experienced through another—as it relates to Black experience in the United States. Through an intricate choreography of sound, moving image, and laser-light animation, the artist enacts what she describes as a kind of “ecstatic translation” in which the heightened, interior sensory experience of being in a Black body is transmuted into something external and destabilizing.

Miller’s twenty-four-channel soundscape anchors the exhibition, directing the viewer’s attention in the gallery. It is composed of recorded and appropriated sounds, texts, and music, along with edited excerpts from interviews that she conducted in St. Louis in the summer and fall of 2021. In these interviews, poets, dancers, educators, and teenagers of color share a wide range of perspectives—personal, political, philosophical, and creative—often drawing connections to their own bodies. Participants evoke the body variously as a repository of experience, as a palimpsest of histories, and as a locus of joy and trauma. Miller intentionally omits her own voice from these conversations. The viewer, like the artist herself, is positioned as an active listener, receiving these stories while contemplating their own body in the space of the gallery.

Throughout the soundscape Miller juxtaposes the informal stories shared with her by St. Louis youth with readings of formal texts by scholars and poets, including Hortense Spillers and Margaret Walker, along with recorded performances by such musicians and composers as Nina Simone and Max Roach. Themes of control, exhaustion, mortality, anxiety, self-consciousness, invisibility, vulnerability, disenfranchisement, survival, and self-care are woven throughout this sonic tapestry. At times a single voice projects across the soundscape; Miller also overlays many at once, resulting in a dense audio landscape that fully immerses the viewing body in sound.

A three-channel video both complements and provides a counterpoint to the soundscape. The video features footage of acrobats and dancers rehearsing—on a trampoline, in a park, on a basketball court, in an apartment—many of whom are preparing for roles in various circuses. Images of individual bodies are repeated across the three screens but shown in different angles and from different perspectives. The editing and cinematography of the video enhance the dominant sensation of constant transformation punctuated by instants of bright light. The sound of the video is diegetic in moments (we can hear the sound an acrobat makes as they bounce on a trampoline, for instance), but the relationship between the imagery on the screens and the soundscape is rarely synchronized. Miller intentionally inverts the conventional cinematic relationship between image (primary) and soundtrack (supplementary), creating a sensory role reversal that underscores the synesthetic quality of the installation as a whole.
The circus serves as a further point of tension, conjuring associations with not only extreme physical ability but also risk, spectacle, and empowerment. Miller is notably attuned to performances and performers. She gravitates to spaces of practice and rehearsal, framing expressive articulation—be it a young person telling their story, an acrobat training in a gym, or a poet honing their craft—as an ongoing process of preparation rather than a point of arrival or resolution. Miller’s focus on the labor of rehearsal, in this work and in her practice overall, intentionally shifts emphasis away from totalizing representations, especially of Black exceptionalism, and the inherent distortions of idealization versus lived human experience.³

Laser-light animations intermittently project onto the wall behind the three television monitors. The images produced by the lasers are the literal result of the translation of sound into light.⁴ They include abstract forms as well as select words and phrases derived from the soundscape that continually shift in shape, color, and legibility. The lasers thus transmute and amplify the expressive power as well as the disorienting effects of Miller’s use of screen shifts, fragmentation, and narrative strains across the installation. Light has been a central means of communication in the artist’s work, whether in the form of photography or film, or, in this instance, distilled to a material object in the form of laser animation. The encounter is intentionally overwhelming, with a visual and emotional intensity that is both captivating and disconcerting to behold.

Through these continuous transmutations—sound to light, light to text, text to sound, sound to video—Miller troublesthe easy faith in the notion of visibility as an antidote to erasure and exclusion, seeking to generate a different register capable of holding a multiplicity of stories and experiences. In this immersive environment visitors are implicated as spectator and subject; we are asked to question how we come to know what we know about bodies and the meanings attached to them.⁵ The sound of voices speaking and the sight of bodies moving through space set up the potential for a heightened attention to one’s own body and provoking fundamental considerations of whose bodies are valued in society, whose voices are amplified, and whose lives are cherished.

Meredith Malone
Curator

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Notes

1. Miller created the soundscape in collaboration with sound mixer and musician John Somers.

2. In recent years, a core aspect of Miller’s practice has involved collaborating with young people, especially youth of color. A Sound, a Signal, the Circus builds on the artist’s previous video installations, notably Athens, California (2018) and To the Stars (2019). Both of these earlier videos center the stories of young people in an exploration of how societal pressures and the violence of racism condition the experience of growing up in the United States, including how youth are represented and perceived.

3. Nicole Fleetwood’s discussion of dominant visual modes of representing Blackness and Black lived experience as exceptional or deviant is helpful to consider here. Fleetwood distinguishes between “iconic blackness”—larger-than-life personae (Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., for example)—and “spectacular blackness,” including criminal deviance and excessive bodily enactments. She counters these narratives with an exploration of localized, everyday images that are unfamiliar to canonical histories of Black American experience. Nicole Fleetwood, Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), esp. 37 and 47.

4. In collaboration with the laserist Zak Forrest, Miller produces her laser animations by “running an analog synth sound through a synthesizer, which moves around mirrors inside the laser with sound waves. This animates the beam of light very quickly, which changes the color and the size, the intensity,” Nicole Miller and Lauren Mackler, “An Introduction, a Prelude,” Michael in Black by Nicole Miller (New York: CARA/Public Fiction, forthcoming), 231.

5. “I’m trying to inform viewers of the kind of viewers they can be,” Miller has stated, recognizing the power of representation to shape reality and asserting her desire to share something of that capacity with viewers. Nicole Miller, quoted in “Nicole Miller: Mirror Images and the Power to Create Reality,” Artbound (November 16, 2015), 8, https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/nicole-miller-mirror-images-and-the-power-to-create-reality.
Appearances by
SOUNDSCAPE
Carolyn Buback
Garla Carter
Circus Harmony
Jacqueline K. Dace
JaiLi Deck
Antonio Douthit-Boyd
Kirven Douthit-Boyd
Alyssa Harris
Jessica Hentoff
Amber Johnson
Michelle Joseph
Lyla Lawless
Malinka Lopez
Cayleigh Moore
Precious Musa
Victoria Porter
Nyla Pruitt
Treasure Shields Redmond
Victoria Silvers
Anaya Walker
Geoff Ward
Daphnédev “Rosa” Yagaantsetseg

Video
The Ricardo Arts aka Freak Sinatra
Austin Bradley
Tiffany De Alba
Lukas Galante
Michael Johnson (MJ)
David Matz
De’Von McCullough
Elena Sanders

Artist Biography
Born in Tucson in 1982, Nicole Miller earned her BFA from the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles in 2005 and her MFA from the Roski School of the Arts at the University of Southern California in 2009.

Miller’s work has been widely exhibited both nationally and internationally, including solo shows at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita; the Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson; Ballroom Marfa in Texas; The High Line in New York; the Centre d’Art Contemporain Genève; LAXART and the California African American Museum, both in Los Angeles; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Miller is an associate professor in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego.

Nicole Miller: A Sound, a Signal, the Circus is organized by Meredith Malone, curator. The work is produced in collaboration with sound mixer and musician John Somers and laserist Zak Forrest.

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Programs

Artist Talk: Nicole Miller
Saturday, March 26  11 am

Kemper Live: Here and Now
Saturday, May 14  2–4 pm

This event explores embodied storytelling through circus arts, dance, electronic music, and spoken word. Performances by Circus Harmony, the Department of Music in Arts & Sciences, and local dancers and poets will occur simultaneously throughout the Museum.

Support provided by Women and the Kemper

Poetry Workshops
May 7, June 11, July 16  11 am

The Griot Museum of Black History hosts a series of poetry workshops that engage with the history of their location in St. Louis, led by poet Precious Musa and collaborators. Registration is required; visit kemperartmuseum.wustl.edu.

Tours

To request a tour of the exhibition for your class or group, please email kempereducation@wustl.edu.

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