

Hate the Game

Revisiting the strategic essentialisms of the 1990s, Salad Hilowle's complacent debut at Cecilia Hillström hints at the bankruptcy of Sweden's cultural economy.

By Matthew Rana 12.04.23 Review



Salad Hilowle, *Black Portrait of Francis Bacon*, inkjet print, walnut frame, museum glass, 52 x 68.5 cm, 2019.

Since *Vanus Labor*, his celebrated Bernadotte Award show at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in 2021, Salad Hilowle has established himself as one of Sweden's most promising young artists and filmmakers. His autoethnographic investigations into the presence of Afro Swedes in Swedish art history and the visibility of Black bodies in Swedish culture have been exhibited widely in his home country, including the Gothenburg Biennial, and he has had institutional solo presentations at, among others, Stockholm's Kulturhuset and, currently, Eskilstuna Art Museum.

Somalitown

Salad Hilowle

Cecilia Hillström Gallery, Stockholm
30 March — 6 May 2023

Somalitown, Hilowle's first show at Cecilia Hillström Gallery, is a modest presentation of mostly new works centred around markers of traditional Somali culture such as headrests ("a symbol of vigilance," according to The Met's online catalogue of African Art) and macawiis,

a sarong-like garment worn below a man's waist. The latter's bold geometrical patterns are a recurring visual motif in the exhibition, framing a trio of prints based on material from the artist's archive of family photographs and reappearing in the sculpture *Macawiis* (2023), a length of sarong fabric encased in resin. Here, the decisive moment of undressing is captured in a twisting and strangely foetus-like form leaning precariously against the gallery wall.

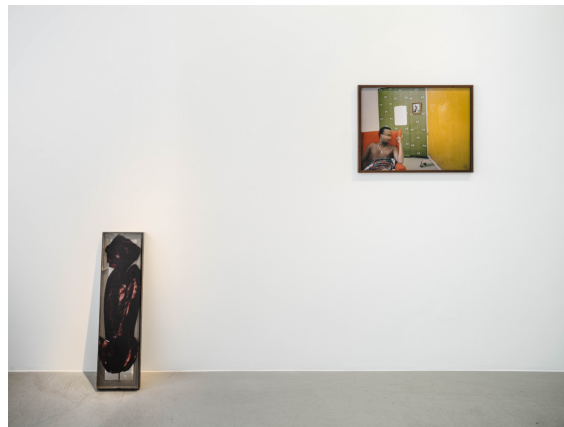


Salad Hilowle, *Headrest I–V*, 2023, installation view, Cecilia Hillström Gallery, Stockholm.
Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

The *macawiis* shows up once again in *Black Portrait of Francis Bacon* (2019), a riff on Bacon's *Double Portrait of Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach* (1964), on permanent display at Moderna Museet. Hilowle is pictured with a bolt of floral-print cloth loosely tied around his waist, reclining on a red armchair, his chest bare and face blurred; a framed reproduction of Gustaf Lundberg's 1775 pastel portrait of Couschi or "Badin," the well-known former slave and foster son of the Swedish queen Lovisa Ulrika, hangs in the background. Displacing the violence of Bacon's desiring gaze onto his own body, this image from Hilowle's student days, although staged, has a rawness that contrasts with the more recent works on view, which feel rather more constrained by the commercial setting.

Indeed, there is a sense in which *Somalitown* is hampered by its mode of address. The show's title references a pre-election gaffe by Sweden's former Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, who, while speaking on the government's policy of social integration, remarked: "We don't want Chinatown, Somalitown, or Little Italy." Just as the unfortunate term "Somalitown" panders to a predominately white electorate by raising the spectre of an Other that cannot be integrated within the dominant order, Hilowle's signs of difference cater to a culture of whiteness that ultimately seeks to disarm difference and domesticate it. A culture, in other words, that not only 'tolerates' certain forms of difference, but also strives to appropriate them in order to both profit and signal its own virtuousness, politically progressive agendas, and (ostensibly) anti-racist values.

I cannot begrudge Hilowle for playing what artist and critic Olu Oguibe calls the strategic-essentialist game of “double Dutch” – a reference to Yinka Shonibare CBE’s famous series of paintings from 1994 using Dutch wax fabrics – forced upon racialised “Outsiders” who risk participating in the Western cultural marketplace, which remains overwhelmingly white, Euro-American, and male. What’s more, for Sweden’s current government, a right-wing coalition of economically liberal and ultranationalist parties, difference is anything but tolerable (as Oguibe emphasises, only those who must constantly battle for their existence must also strategise it). Still, this is a surprisingly complacent and underwhelming offering from an artist whose best works are characterised by their boldness and complexity. More disappointing, perhaps, is what it suggests about the state of the Swedish culture game, and the high stakes – for some – of buying in.



Salad Hilowle, *Macawiis*, epoxy, metal frame, 86 x 24 x 5.5 cm, 2023 / *Black Portrait of Francis Bacon*, 2019. Installation view, Cecilia Hillström Gallery, Stockholm. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Béranger.

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