

What to See in New York City Galleries This Week

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An image from Arthur Jafa's video "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death."
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise

Arthur Jafa

'Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death'

Gavin Brown's Enterprise 429 West 127th Street Harlem Through Dec. 17

Anyone within striking distance of Manhattan should see Arthur Jafa's searing seven-minute video "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." It is almost unbearably pertinent to our current racial divide.

On [view at Gavin Brown's Enterprise](#) in Harlem, the work comprises Mr. Jafa's New York solo debut. It is a documentary, an American history lesson and an often painful illumination of African-American life, all compressed into a great, indelible work of art. Mr. Jafa (pronounced JAY-fa) is a polymath known as a filmmaker, cinematographer and theorist of black culture, specifically of the black body as both a creative force (especially in music and dance) and an object of white violence.



The work revolves around this opposition. It is a brilliantly edited sequence of footage — mostly screen shots from feature or amateur films or television news, both recent and decades old. Scenes of black leaders, musicians, singers, dancers and athletes — the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Barack Obama, Jimi Hendrix, Nina Simone, LeBron James — as well as images of church soloists and choirs, alternate with video of acts of police harassment and brutality against black men, women and children, including a fatal shooting. These images pass quickly, carefully linked, slipping and sliding into one another; they sustain repeated viewing.

Mr. Jafa has dovetailed his images to Kanye West's sublime new song, "Ultralight Beam," which combines rap with periodic eruptions of gospel and features the Chicago artist Chance the Rapper. The contrapuntal energy of images and music is powerful; it opens you up to grasp, at a new depth, realities that you may think you already know. One is that black music from gospel and the blues forward is arguably this country's greatest cultural achievement. The other: that the tangled legacy of slavery is ever with us, its history and continuing sins more visible than ever. It diminishes all of us.

ROBERTA SMITH