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SHAME UTOPIA



**Portrait
HAMISHI FARAH**

Painting, like any sign system, has its grammar for producing truth. So what is a painter to do when their language can't say what they mean? Break it. Parallel to Black portraiture's shifting fortunes, Hamishi Farah has been challenging the idea that making the figure visible necessarily dignifies its subject, all while airing art's dirty secret: that the image's meaning is often "spoken" by whether or not it sells.

By Aodhan Madden





Hamishi Farah is a painter of faces. “The front of shop,” the camera’s favorite piece of flesh, the soul’s fingerprint. He paints Beyoncé’s eyes promising you their unreal love (*Beyoncé and Jay-Z [The Love of Things]*, 2023), Christ’s gashed complexion (*Ostentatio Vulnerum*, 2021), or eerily personifies a whale through its headshot (*Live-in Whale instead of Nation*

State idea, 2021–23). Across works that span conceptual painting and institutional critique, Farah continually returns to this circulating surface – the “human” face – specifically when multiplied, wrinkled and deformed by power.

Or scribbled on, as in the portraits *Matthew* and *Joey* (both 2020). Two young white men stare back through the

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camera flash, their faces vandalized with black marker. Beside their first names, there's no context. We don't know whether these are mugshots pertaining to an attempted robbery (as only an accompanying text confirms), or to some batshit attempt at blackface. Exhibited alongside other troubling visages in Farah's show "Antagoni" at Château Shatto, Los Angeles in 2020 – a hornet, a sumo wrestler, a man turned dark purple from accidental poisoning – his portraiture tests the moral and physical limits of painting as metaphysical face-lift, as an ambivalent escape from identity.

To this effect, Farah also included works by Rachel Dolezal in the show – the white art teacher and activist notorious for identifying as Black. He commissioned a series of self-portraits from her, intended to be exhibited as readymades before Dolezal's lawyers got involved (insisting they be shown under her name rather than his). Farah's artistic gesture thus becomes more about antagonism than appropriation: Where Dolezal's illustrative works use painting as a means of trading racial signifiers – a pictorial defense of her claimed "transracial identity" – Farah takes it even further. Exploiting the faults in any signifying system's claim to truth – to any symbol's claim to identity – he disputes the idea of racial representation as a self-evident equation. By confronting Dolezal's co-opted self-portraits with his own suspicious faces, Farah draws our attention not to what painting allows us to see, but to what, within it, remains unthinkable.

Antagonism accompanies us throughout his whole oeuvre, the work becoming a means to troll the deep-seated contradictions of liberal, "democratic" values within a society built on anti-Blackness. Take his notorious portrait of artist Dana Schutz's son, *Representation of Arlo* (2018), itself a response to Schutz's painting *Open Casket* (2016), exhibited in the 2017 Whitney Biennale. Schutz's painting is of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy who was abducted, tortured, and murdered by white Mississippi racists in 1955. His mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted on an open casket funeral so that the world could bear witness to the barbarism inflicted on her son. Schutz, through her characteristic neo-expressionist style, decided to "open" Till's casket again, a gesture that was decried in protests and open letters calling for the withdrawal and destruction of

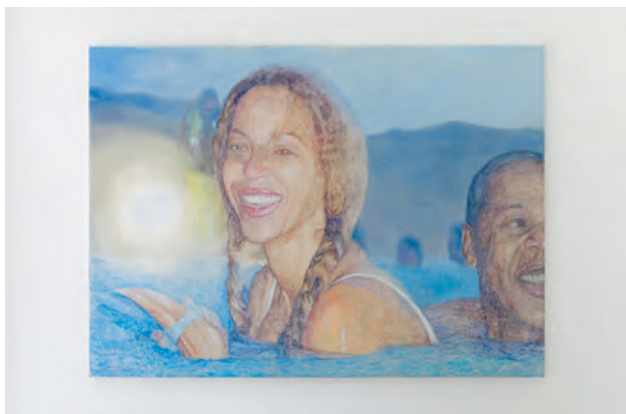


Ostentatio Vulnerum, 2021, oil on linen, 110 x 88 cm



Representation of Arlo, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 91 x 63.5 cm

the painting. Following this mediatized conflict, Farah's portrait of Schutz's son functions as both retaliation and *tragic* clarification: Not only did it cause further furore, but through positing a false equivalence between the two portraits, *Representation of Arlo* exposed the limits of empathy



within the ongoing context of institutionalized racism, while plainly pointing to the facts: only one of these children is no longer living. This gesture – not retribution, nor an explanation, but a kind of trigger – doesn't promise anything. Rather, it refuses an idea of painting that, however implicitly, seeks to restore the humanity taken away from its subject.

One could call this approach pessimistic, and it clearly is. Farah's portraiture project proceeds from the conceptual "problem" of Black portraiture in a world where, as Afropessimist thinker Frank B. Wilderson III writes, Blackness is "a condition of ontological death." This negativity is evident in his show "Black Painting" (2023) at Maxwell Graham, where Farah exhibited meta-anti-portraits of black chess pieces, the full set hung along one wall of the gallery. The reflective ebony surfaces shine in the foreground, fetishized and vulnerable, closed in by the blurred checkered war zone that recedes into the background. Regardless of their differing sizes, their small chips and cracks, everything remains generic, appearing under one condition: these are Black paintings, this is symbolic warfare. There is no other move to be made. The joke is both obvious and purposefully cynical. Here, visibility offers no redemption – no enlightenment nor revelation – Farah preferring a confrontation that returns us to the commercial reality of the gallery, the *white* cube, as a space where representations of (metaphorical) Black bodies are bought and sold as commodities. This is Farah's real subject: "the sadism of capital," as artist Hannah Black argues, inherent to the contemporary art market – where institutions and collectors buy their progressive politics through speculating on Black artists. This form of engagement only deepens racialized logics of property, subjected to the same boom and bust cycles as the market itself (as evidenced by the recent crash in demand for Black portraiture.) Farah thus succeeds in giving his "opponents" what they want *and* its opposite – a "Black painting" in the form of a mirror, reflecting both the material and conceptual violence of the exchange.



Farah's institutional critique is thus a sort of game. It's neither a purely analytical exercise nor a theoretical pursuit – approaches more easily identifiable in the work of his contemporaries Cameron Rowland or Aria Dean – but a medium-specific experiment in affective negativity. A poetics of shame. For this emotion is at painting's essence: what is shown, what should be, and who controls the means of representation. Take for instance Farah's most recent work, *Untitled* (2025). It's a portrait of Joe Chialo, a member of the German Christian Democratic Union and Berlin's former Senator for Culture and Social Cohesion, infamous for requiring all arts funding to be subject to a so-called anti-discrimination clause that forbids all beneficiaries from speaking out against Israel. Upon receiving the portrait, the Berlin-based Transmediale festival partially censored it, refusing to show it on the initially agreed-upon terms – they were expecting a portrait of Michael Jordan – and instead only allowed it to be on display while writer Tobi Haslett gave a lecture about the very painting itself. In his in-depth



Courtesy: the artist, Maxwell Graham, New York, and Arcadia Missa, London

analysis of the work and its humor, Haslett compares *Untitled* to a particular kind of shame painting, recalling Mike Kelley’s poster of conservative politician Jesse Helm (*Jesse Helms Protest Sign*, 1990) with a swastika on his forehead, or on the other end of the political spectrum, Gerhard Richter’s paintings of the Red Army Faction. These images are “dangerous” because of their inherent ambivalence: The very act of painting such a figure becomes just as shameful as the subjects themselves – an anti-heroic icky-ness that weakens painting’s role in the process of cultural memory. This is crucial because Farah’s work is not just a form of denunciation: not only does he ask us to confront, in the case of Joe Chialo, a photogenic human cog in the mechanism of state-sanctioned genocide, but also ourselves, at our own failure. This is how *Untitled* becomes a work about Palestine, for as theorist Sara Ahmed writes, “Shame binds us to others in how we are affected by our failure to ‘live up to’ those others, a failure that must be witnessed.”

This moment of witness is crucial to how Farah’s

paintings work, their hopeless – and maybe humorous – utopian promise. By painting power as a face that we can look at, Farah suggests a world in which art might be a medium through which we can at least behold the unfathomable violence of our society, in all its conflict and contradiction. Anything more than this – a utopia evoked but pessimistically dismissed – survives as a joke that we can only wince at – continually, and shamefully, deflecting our gaze. —

HAMISHI FARAH (*1991, Melbourne, Australia) is a self-taught artist, writer, and musician living in New York. Recent solo shows took place at Maxwell Graham, New York; Arcadia Missa, London (both 2023); Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg (2021). Group shows include “(near) near but – far,” transmediale 2025, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; “Undermining the Immediacy,” MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt am Main (both 2025); “Hoi Köln, Part 3: Nightmare of Painting,” Kölnischer Kunst-verein, Cologne; “Post Scriptum. A museum forgotten by heart,” MACRO, Museum of Contemporary Art of Rome (both 2024).

AODHAN MADDEN is a writer and artist based in Paris.