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Powerful statements, modest means: Robin Rhode's 'Born Frieze' opens at Lehmann Maupin

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Robin Rhode's exhibition of work from 2015, 'Borne Frieze', is on show at Lehmann Maupin's Chelsea space in New York. Pictured: *Chalk Bike*

'Exercise goal achieved!' cries Robin Rhode, peering down at the Apple Watch on his wrist and then raising both arms in triumph. 'I did it – phew!' But there's no stopping him. The South African-born, Berlin-based artist is in the midst of an invigorated lap around Lehmann Maupin's Chelsea space, where his third solo exhibition with the gallery – titled 'Born Frieze' – is on view until 21 August. Loping among the show's four installations, he punctuates rapid-fire comments

with claps and snaps, his infectious personal intensity rivalled only by that of his work.

'I wanted to use the architecture of the gallery to create environments for my pieces, so I could work throughout each space, all the way down to the floor,' says Rhode, 39, pausing in the darkened front room filled by *Light Giver Light Taker* (all works 2015). Two giant lightbulb sculptures made of charcoal and chalk, respectively, lie on the dark grey floor, which bears the whirled traces of Rhode's dragging and pulling of their opaque forms.

Animated by strobe lights, the scene transforms a universal symbol for ideation into outsized drawing tools poised to go another round, evoking the lightbulb-illuminated coal cellar of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Inspirations for the piece include a t-shirt depicting 'Black Inventors and Their Inventions' such as Lewis Latimer, who drafted patent drawings for the likes of Alexander Graham Bell and later improved upon Edison's electric light with carbon filament bulbs. Rhode bought the t-shirt at a New Orleans supermarket in 2007 and frequently wears it while at work in his studio, he explains, 'because in Southern Africa where I'm from, the idea of a black man inventor is totally foreign'.

Unreliable light sources, however, are commonplace in his native country, where an energy crisis fueled by a floundering power monopoly has led to frequent blackouts. 'Issues in Johannesburg – the power cuts – were another point of inspiration for this piece,' says Rhode. 'Light is becoming quite scarce at the moment.'

Another room is devoted to *Chalk Bike*, for which the walls have been coated in black chalkboard paint and hung with white window frames that open inward to suggest an exterior scene. An actual bike, its steel frame whitewashed in chalk, stands among sketched cycles, and the floor is dotted with newspapers on which sit sneakers darkly haloed in spray paint. The work is a reference to an initiation rite that Rhode recalls from high school: underclassmen were forced to play-act with chalk drawings. 'With this particular environment, the chalk stolen from the classroom and the drawing on the concrete walls of the school now manifests itself into the actual chalk bicycle,' says the artist, who points to the newspaper pages of last week's *New York Times* as a way of dating the work.

Wafting through the exhibition is the deep, deliberate voice of South African poet and activist Don Mattera, whose dreamy elegy, *The Moon Is Asleep*, accompanies Rhode's film of the same name. Evoking both *Sesame Street* and surrealism, the Super 8 footage shows a boy (the artist's son, Elijah) sleeping against a wall that becomes a canvas for a shifting ocean of wavy lines and phases of the moon.

'These low-fidelity materials and techniques – black and white, chalk and charcoal, Super 8 film – are present throughout the show,' says Rhode. 'I'm a firm believer that we can make so many powerful statements by using very modest means.' Exercise goal achieved.

Slideshow



Rhode says, 'I wanted to use the architecture of the gallery to create environments for my pieces, so I could work throughout each space, all the way down to the floor'



An example of this is *Light Giver Light Taker*, which factors whirled traces of where Rhode has dragged and pulled the opaque forms of the oversized bulbs across the floor



The macabre *Evidence* is made of vinyl, charcoal, and barbed wire



Still from *The Moon is Asleep* - the Super 8 footage shows a boy (the artist's son, Elijah) sleeping against a wall that becomes a canvas for a shifting ocean of wavy lines and phases of the moon



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'Borne Frieze' will remain on show until 21 August