

CARTER, XXAVIER EDWARD

Not everyone rebelled in the same way. Other inmates mutilated themselves. “Inmates were cuttin’ their arms,” Johnny says, “cuz they couldn’t take the tass [being beaten]. If they get messed up so bad they had to get to the hospital, they didn’t have to worry about tass. — Jay Warner [quoting Johnny Bragg], *Just Walkin’ in the Rain: The True Story of the Prisonaires, the Convict Pioneers of R&B and Rock & Roll*

Xxavier Carter has a list of approximately forty dedications to the entities that have ever made a mark on his body. From a pen in his pocket that once sliced his hand open to a flock of chickens that pecked his face, these are the physical, spiritual, and mental impressions lingering silently on the arc of his life. In *Rumor Has It*, Carter takes these memories and renders them freshly marked, in a visceral one-time performance that sums up his work thus far.

For two hours, Carter sits inside a coffin-sized box is constructed of two-by-four planks and viewers climb a small flight of steps to look at Carter through a two-way mirror. “I don’t want it to be a cage. I want it to be a box,” Carter says. The performance is split into four parts, called Perception, Confessional, Physical, and Reconciliation.

The first half of the performance is spoken, in a refrain that references the work’s title, followed by a mission statement. The second half sees Carter reopen his wounds with an made of two pounds of wax. Bronzed, it weighs twenty pounds. It’s the painstakingly crafted implement he uses to revisit his physical past—each wound, each accident, each trauma. Then Carter heals his wounds with a salve.

Carter does not see this ritual as self-harm, but rather as a repossessing of his tattered being, back and fully redeemed from the clutches of the everyday, or what Carter calls “the self-immolation that is required to get anything done.” He also takes inspiration from body modification rituals of the Sepik river Tribes in Papua New Guinea, which the Sepik see as a welcome gateway to adulthood. Carter wants his viewers to see work as similarly positive. “I’m happy to do this,” Carter says. “I want it to be cathartic. People can feel a sense of wholeness in witnessing something break apart and still end up living afterward.”

In summing up his work thus far, *Rumor Has It* uses motifs that Carter employed in previous works: box, monitor and two-way mirror, as well as the potential danger to his own person. Carter once constructed and carried an enormous wooden cross on his back—another “box,” he says—ten miles across Dallas, barefoot, and barely clothed under an unforgiving sun. He has ran naked on a highway in Taos, New Mexico. He says he has been lucky regarding the limited amount of police activity in his performances, if not in his daily life. Likewise, Carter’s four themes—Perception, Confessional, Physical, and Reconciliation—touch on his body of work in various ways, which include wrestling narratives back from the histories of religion, oppression, race relations, and the spaces where these ghosts burn together.

The inherent shock of some of Carter’s work could be mistaken for the twentieth-century performance art that incorporated pain from artists such as Vito Acconci or Chris Burden. The barrier of the screen in real-time softens Carter’s message, and instead a commentary on the detached tech-aided voyeurism of the present illuminates itself. Even more importantly, Carter simply doesn’t want to get distracted.

Yet Carter does want viewers to feel conflicted. Carter sees the work as a response to “the personal danger of being black in America and being an ‘other’ in America and not having the power structure on your side all the time.” He mentions that he receives more hassle just walking into a gas station fully-clothed than he does in any kind of extreme or disrobed performance. The real threat lies outside the box.

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