



Title

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Cover image: **Fig. 5** Still from Abattoir, U.S.A.!, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; exh. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London).

Aria Dean: Abattoir

by Rosalind Hayes • 24.04.2024

In her solo exhibition *Abattoir*, the American artist Aria Dean (b.1993) invites visitors into modernity's concealed underbelly. Drawing on myriad cultural and historical reference points, she asks us to acknowledge the fundamental relationship between Western culture and institutionalised killing. The exhibition comprises a ten-minute video work and a sculptural installation, each of which dwell on vacant containers: the slaughtering bay and the vitrine respectively. Displacing the spectacle of violence, these works instead question how knowledge is produced within such spaces and how that process, in turn, defines who we are as human beings.

Exhibited in the main gallery of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (ICA), *Abattoir* encloses the otherwise large, bright space to create a gloomy substructure within. A double swing-door **FIG.1** opens into a darkened room lit only by the projection of *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* **FIG.2**. The video is a slow-paced and explorative animation that drifts through a fictitious abattoir-type structure. It begins in an airy, Victorian-style glasshouse **FIG.3**, before descending into a confined, disorienting passageway **FIG.4**. After crossing several more thresholds, the viewer arrives in a large, white-tiled chamber with a blood-slicked floor **FIG.5**. The room is reflected in the gory substance, creating an illusion of depth. Above this, rows of metal hooks are suspended from the ceiling, which shift rhythmically back and forth in menacing unison. Throughout the video, neither humans nor animals appear; only the aftermath of slaughter is made visible.

Death is a difficult phenomenon to represent, not least when many of the structures built to contain it also function to obscure it. Such is the case with abattoirs, which emerged as a distinct architectural typology in the nineteenth century – first in France, before spreading to other metropolitan centres across the world.¹ In the strictest sense, an out-of-town abattoir is a modern, scaled-up and mechanised counterpoint to the leaky, disorganised slaughterhouse that traditionally served urban localities. Removed from the public sphere, slaughter effectively became a taboo subject and, as the scholar Cary Wolfe has argued, a sacrificial form of violence upon which modern ways of life depend. In his book *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* Wolfe reflects on the category of 'the animal' and how it lays bare the construction and maintenance of difference – in other words, which animals are deemed 'killable' and which are not

- in order to think through the political use of violence within human society.²



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Aria Dean: Abattoir* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2024. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; photograph Rob Harris).

The central role of violence within the modern Western world, especially as it intersects with Blackness, is a recurrent subject in Dean's work. A multidisciplinary artist and writer whose practice incorporates sculpture, moving image, installation and writing, Dean interrogates common understandings of not only how race is construed, but also how it interacts with the role of form in modernity.³ Drawing on the work of Georges Bataille and a range of Afropessimist theorists, such as Hortense Spillers, she posits Blackness as a fleshy 'base materialism' that 'frustrates the tools and categories that art depends on, such as symbolism, signification, representation, and meaning'.⁴

Recently, Dean has turned to the mechanised practice of animal slaughter as a means of exploring similar themes. In *fragment from skinning cattle by power 1867 (fig. 122 in gideon)* (2022), for example, a vibrant red rubber screen is stretched taut across a wooden frame. Fluid shapes, abstracted from an architectural text about slaughterhouses, are incised on the surface, their forms resembling the titular flayed skin. The work luridly approximates the visceral harvesting of materials from non-human animals, a process that, by the nineteenth century, had become increasingly optimised by compartmentalised labour on the so-called disassembly line. Indeed, Henry Ford purportedly drew inspiration from Chicago's meatpacking district for the mass production of Model Ts - a fact that is noted in the accompanying exhibition pamphlet for *Abattoir*.

Industrialised death - and the abattoir more specifically - can be

understood as a material and conceptual base for modern societies that are structured around urban capitalism. Dean unpacks this in reference to Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which she defines as 'a theory of politics and sovereignty that centers on "the right to kill"'. Dean urges visitors to recognise that the 'mundane' fatalism of an abattoir is the expression of 'where necropower is exercised [...] to define the contours of the human'.⁵ By referencing the United States in the work title, she proposes that the country is itself also governed through a similar operation of biopower.

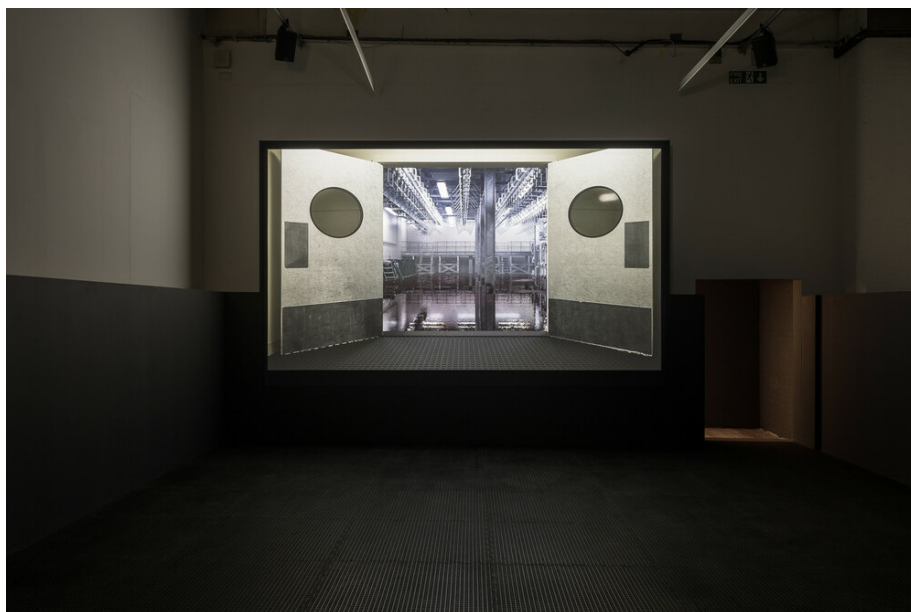


Fig. 2 Installation view of *Aria Dean: Abattoir* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2024, showing *Abattoir, U.S.A.!*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; photograph Rob Harris).

As a kind of unseen spectacle, however, abattoirs problematise forms of representation. Designed to conceal slaughter from public view, abattoirs raise the issue of how to adequately acknowledge their function without revealing any stage of the process. Dean challenges the in-built obfuscation of slaughter in *Abattoir, U.S.A.!* through a combination of material and sensory cues, which attempt to replicate the film environment in the gallery. The video – which was created in the videogame generation software Unreal Engine – accentuates the first-person perspective with sumptuous textural and light effects. In the gallery space itself, the enclosed white-walled chamber resembles the animated version **FIG. 6**, while the scent of the dimpled rubber floor tiles encourages a more embodied response. The soundtrack shifts between a stirring fantasy mode that heightens the movements on screen and a distorted instrumental rendition of the pop song 'I Think We're Alone Now', lending a twist of perverse humour.

Lingering on spatial and perceptive triggers rather than moral binaries, the video is pitched as a critique of melodrama in Dean's

accompanying text. There is certainly much to consider in terms of the relative conservatism of much mainstream film-making – Dean’s suggestion that melodrama is a common thread between Hollywood and fascist cinema, in particular, warrants further exploration. However, the relationship between her critique of this specific film genre and the exhibition’s subject-matter could have been made clearer. Nevertheless, in the restless exploration of the abattoir space, the video’s disembodied viewpoint allows a somatic response to arise from the structures that cultivate slaughter, rather than relying on a spectacular depiction of the act itself.

The trace of interspecies violence is made almost tangible in *Vitrine** **FIG.7**, a sculptural installation in a space that abuts the video room, comprising four empty glass cases lined with red velvet. As in *fragment from skinning cattle by power 1867 (fig. 122 in gideon)*, here the velvet surfaces are disturbed by the singeing of the work’s title in one corner, which resembles a brand trademark. It is perhaps here that we can best understand the nonhuman as a form of ‘base materialism’ through which the terms and practices of modernity become evident. Firstly, the brand, as both a scalded trace of human dominion and a capitalist metaphor, again reveals the profound material and conceptual resonances of the species line constructed between humans and others.⁶ Secondly, the vitrine is a form of containment upon which human exceptionalism partially rests. Used to display and categorise specimens, it is a symbol of knowledge production in which diverse objects are organised according to particular Euro- and anthropocentric framings.

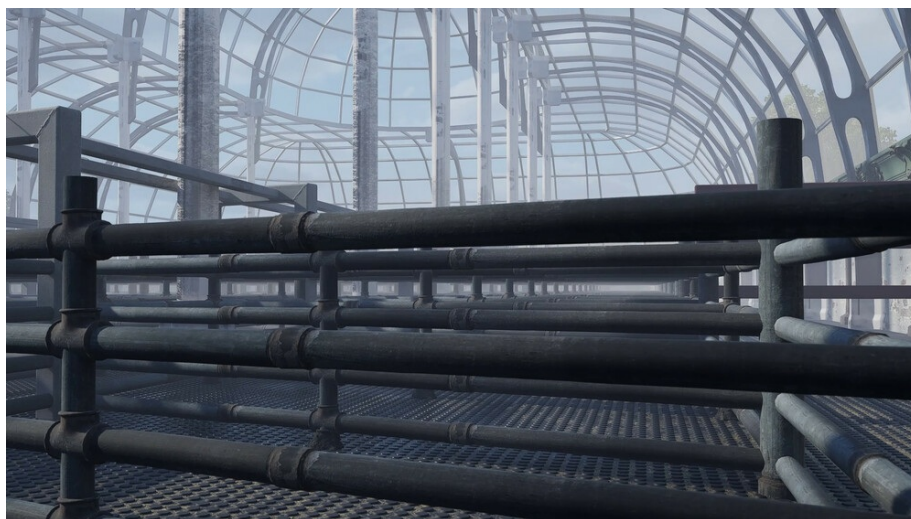


Fig. 3 Still from *Abattoir, U.S.A.*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; exh. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London).

Rather than filling the cases with curios, Dean, in a nod to Minimalism, leaves them empty: their vacancy become a means of museological critique, prompting the system of display to reveal its own ideological trappings. In particular, the binary between

humans and nonhumans is muddled by the objects' scale, which one could just as easily describe as pig-, seal- or iguana-sized as human-sized. With the capacity to contain any such dead specimen, the vitrine takes on a funerary aspect, perhaps pointing to the deathly effects of capitalist modernity upon all planetary species.



Fig. 4 Still from *Abattoir, U.S.A.*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; exh. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London).

On the wall next to the vitrines, a poem approximates and questions the didactic function of a traditional gallery wall text. Opening with the lines 'Captured air that details an undermining / trickeries against oneself', it is suggestive of the purpose of both abattoirs and vitrines to confine non-human life and place it on the periphery. Here, Dean demonstrates that such spaces of 'captured air' are evidence of a culture capable of remarkable dissonance concerning the centrality of violence to civil society. As she notes in reference to necropolitics, the maintenance of human exceptionalism inevitably entails the threat of dehumanisation, a dynamic that we see increasingly actualised around us – most abhorrently at this present moment in Palestine.

In this exhibition, Dean uses installation and film to turn the slaughterhouse and the vitrine – two institutions of human exceptionalism – in on themselves. Although it would have been instructive to see more of her work on this topic, *Abattoir* nevertheless prompts questions of how, and how far, violence is socially tolerated – questions that are ever more fraught and yet imperative to answer.



Fig. 5 Still from *Abattoir, U.S.A.*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; exh. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London).

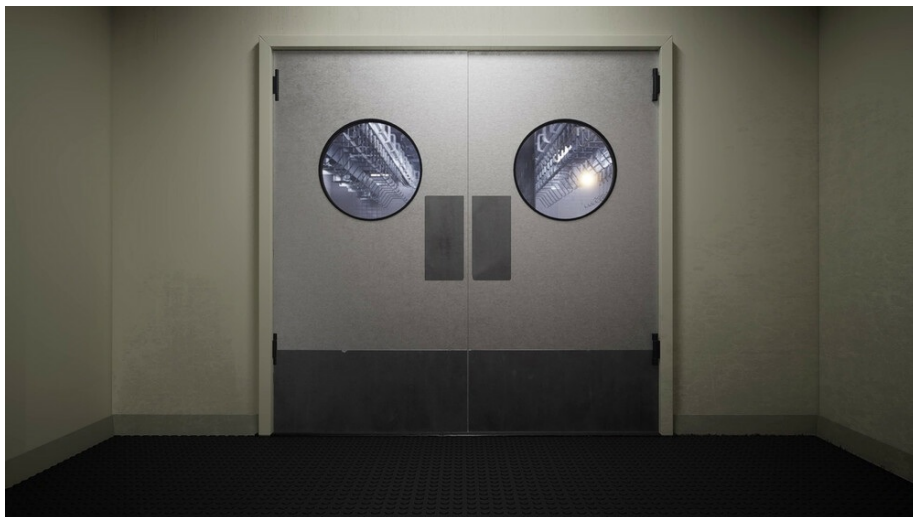


Fig. 6 Still from *Abattoir, U.S.A.*, by Aria Dean. 2023. Video, duration 10 minutes 50 seconds. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; exh. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Aria Dean: Abattoir* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2024, showing *Vitrine**, by Aria Dean. 2024. Glass, velvet, wadding, hardboard, plywood and acrylic, 4 parts, with accompanying vinyl text on wall, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist, Greene Naftali, New York, and Château Shatto, Los Angeles; photograph Rob Harris).

Exhibition details

Aria Dean: Abattoir

Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
8th February–5th May 2024

Footnotes

- 1** See P.Y. Lee, ed.: *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse*, Durham NH 2008.
- 2** C. Wolfe: *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, Chicago 2013.
- 3** For more on form, aesthetic history and Blackness, see R. Bradley: *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, Redwood City 2023. An excerpt of the book can be read in *e-flux Journal* 140 (November 2023), available at www.e-flux.com/journal/140/572463/the-critique-of-form-excerpted-from-anteaesthetics, accessed 20th March 2024.

- 4** A. Dean: 'Black Bataille', *November* 1, available at www.novembermag.com/content/black-bataille, accessed 17th March 2024.
- 5** Exhibition text for *Aria Dean: Abattoir* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2024, available at www.ica.art/media/08881.pdf, accessed 20th March 2024.
- 6** See N. Shukin: *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Terms*, Minneapolis and London 2009, in which she considers animal signs and 'the material histories of economic and symbolic power that are cunningly reified in them', p.3.

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