

*A reflection on Destabilization: The Colour of our Skin*

Kitoko Mai

As a Black, non-binary woman with an invisible disability I am constantly surviving and resisting the oppressive narratives that white supremacist patriarchy attempts to place on racialized peoples. I am used to walking into a room and unsettling white folks because the colour of my skin causes them to feel threatened. I am used to my disability being overlooked, because white folks find it difficult to imagine a Black body possessing anything but exploitable strength. Even as a young child, I picked up on the narratives informed by white supremacy, patriarchy, and ableism. I knew that my body, when postured in a bold and confident way, could be interpreted as threatening or masculine, so I intentionally softened my body language and tried to appear delicate. I tried to quiet the parts of me that threatened white supremacy in order to survive it. I was so focused on combating the white patriarchal gaze, that I lost sight of myself.

The exhibit, *Destabilization: The Colour of our Skin*, features the work of Heidi McKenzie and Shantel Miller, two women of colour who have come together to present work that displays acts of resistance and survival as they navigate their own lives within white, patriarchal culture. The works of both artists challenge the white patriarchal gaze, pulling from their personal narratives to put a spotlight on Black and Brown bodies.

For me, Miller's work suggests a narrative. In *Self Portrait* (2019), I see a subject who appears to be deep in her internal world. The pink on her lips shows that she is developing her voice and, as there is a pink rectangle behind her, she is connecting her voice to specific parts of the world. In *I Have Authority* (2020), the subject is striking a dominant pose, facing off with the spectator and taking her power. Miller creates a hierarchy with the viewer, collaborating with their identity and lived experience to create a unique relationship. The fact that this subject's skin is coloured in brown, shows that her relationship to her blackness, to her skin, is healthy. In contrast, for me, the grey skin in *Self Portrait* implies that the colour has been sucked out by white supremacy. To me, the subject in *Self Portrait* is working towards reclaiming their Blackness in the face of white supremacy. *We're At War* (2021), features two subjects' heads facing each other with mouths open wide. One subject is painted in brown tones and the other in grey. This piece suggests an internal battle between different parts of the self. Perhaps this battle has to do with how she engages with her blackness, with the ways she is seen versus the ways she sees herself, or with the ways she chooses to survive.

Heidi's McKenzie's work, according to the Hamilton Artists Inc. website, "graphically recounts the stories of racialized intergenerational trauma". Trauma lives in our bodies, and we carry it with us wherever we go. We inherit it from our ancestors and we collect new traumas as we survive individual and/or collective violence in the present. In Heidi McKenzie's work, I see Brown bodies surviving, resisting, and healing from the violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, and perhaps ableism.

*Boxed In* (2020), is an abstract self-portrait. This piece consists of 15 boxy, ceramic sculptures, each with a close-up photographic image of the artist's body. According to McKenzie's own writing in the exhibition notes, the creation of this piece began after her healing crisis where she was literally boxed in by the physical limitations of her body. Across from this piece is *Body Interrupted* (2016), a sort of fragmented ceramic tapestry of her father's life and his battles with illness. Each bone-coloured ceramic piece possesses a photographic image from a moment in McKenzie's father's life, including images of scars and his "emaciated" 85-year-old body. The whole piece looks incredibly fragile, and I found myself walking on eggshells as I navigated around the work. I felt similarly when viewing *House of Cards* (2019). The piece contains 26 thin porcelain slabs, stacked as a house of cards. Each of the ceramic cards possesses a photographic print from a moment in McKenzie's father's life as an immigrant from Trinidad who was trying to build a home for his family in Canada. Throughout his life he endured violent racism and survived multiple health issues.

Both Miller and McKenzie have created works that stem from deeply personal places and display acts of resistance and survival within white supremacist, patriarchal culture. Their works are specific to their lived experiences and identities, and it is through this specificity that spectators can feel a sort of kinship as they undergo their own process of establishing or reclaiming a sense of self in a world that seeks to eradicate difference.

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This essay is published on the occasion of the exhibition *Destabilization: The Colour of Our Skin*, on view in Hamilton Artists Inc.'s James Gallery from June 10 – July 15, 2022.

Kitoko Mai (they/them), is a writer and multidisciplinary performance artist. They create performance-based works that challenge the notion of binaries in both content and form. Their work is rooted in social justice, femme aesthetics, and the pursuit of messiness. Kitoko is the recipient of the 2021 Promising Pen Prize from Cahoots Theatre and the 2020 Gilded hammers Emerging Artist Award. They were a founding member of the community arts collective, Care Collective/Femmepire and are currently taking part in a micro-residency at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre.