



Jefferson Pinder (b. 1970, Washington, D.C.) has produced critically acclaimed performance-based and interdisciplinary work for over a decade. His work has been featured in numerous group and solo shows including exhibitions at The Studio Museum in Harlem, the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut, The High Museum in Atlanta, the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and Tate Modern in London, UK. He received a BA in Theatre and MFA in Mixed Media from the University of Maryland, and studied at the Asolo Theatre Conservatory in Sarasota, FL. He was an Assistant Professor of theory, performance and foundations at the University of Maryland from 2003-2011. Since moving to Chicago in 2011, Pinder has been an Associate Professor in the Contemporary Practices department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He is currently represented by Curator's Office (Washington, DC).

Artist Talk

Sunday, January 10, 2-3 pm

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SPECIAL THANKS to those who assisted the artist in making the exhibition possible, including Abigail Ayers, Mahwish Chishty, Wa Chontong, Dave Dahl, Paul Dueth, Jacob Fishman, Jeremy Freedberg, Howard Harris, Dean Harris, Kirsten Leenaars, Lionz of Zion, Scott Mallory, Peter Reese and Pablo Van Winkle.

Lead Sponsor



Jefferson Pinder: *Onyx Odyssey* is partially supported by the host committee: Dawoud Bey, Anita Blanchard and Marty Nesbitt, Rebecca and Jack Drake, Denise and Gary Gardner, Walter and Shirley Massey, Eric and Cheryl McKissack, Madeline Murphy Rabb, Lisa Wainwright and Bruce Doblin.

Hyde Park Art Center is a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. As an open forum for exploring the artistic process, the Art Center fosters creativity through making, learning about, seeing, and discussing art—all under one roof. The Art Center is funded in part by: Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Field Foundation of Illinois; Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts; Harper Court Arts Council; Harpo Foundation; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Illinois Humanities Council; Irving Harris Foundation; Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; National Endowment for the Arts; National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Illinois General Assembly; Polk Bros. Foundation; David C and Sarajeane Ruttenberg Arts Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

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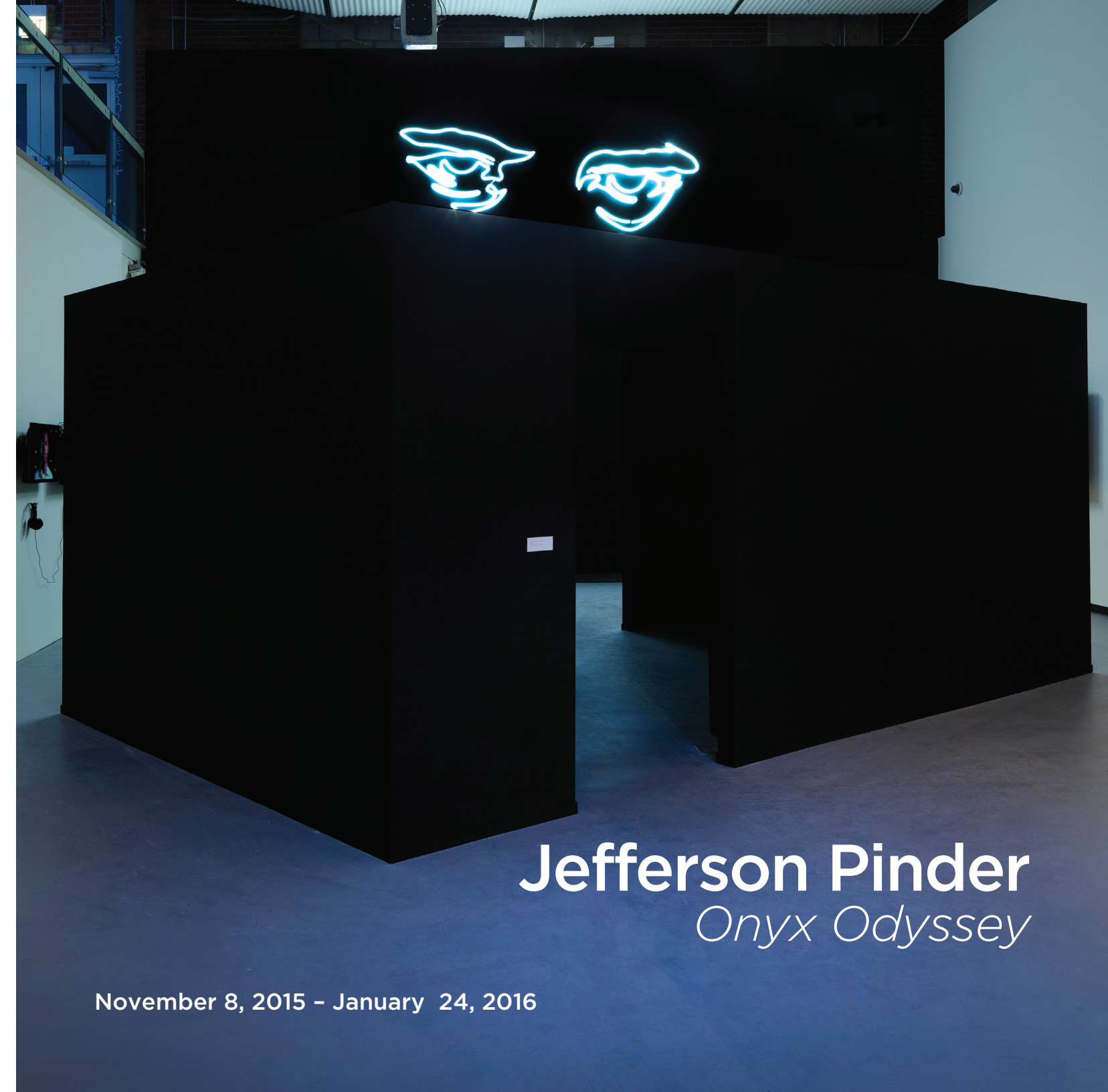
Top left: *Moriaen's Shadow*, 2014, zinc organ pipes, audio, dimensions variable; *Countermeasure*, 2015, multi-channel HD video, 50 minutes

Top right: *Gauntlet*, 2015, charred billy clubs, invisible wire, dimensions variable; *Assimilated*, 2009, mercury neon, charcoal, 72 x 44 inches

Bottom: *Overture (Start of Ethiopia)*, 2015, two-channel HD video, 8 minutes. Seen through doorway: *Monolith (Dream Catcher)* 2015, black one way glass, West African masks, LED, 8 x 4 x 1 feet

Inside: *Countermeasure*, 2015, multi-channel HD video, 50 minutes

Cover: *POTUS*, 2015, mercury neon, 4 x 10½ feet



Jefferson Pinder

Onyx Odyssey

November 8, 2015 – January 24, 2016

Hyde Park**ART**CENTER

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WHAT IS BLACKNESS? On a literal level, blackness is a color property we experience through sight resulting from the absence of light. In cultural discourse, blackness is a state of being constructed by an exponential variety of experiences that make up a person’s character in relation to the color of his or her skin. Scholar Rone Shavers explains “‘blackness’ is a specific set of cultural and social tropes that mark and define an ethnic or racial identity and implies a shared notion of historical, social, and cultural traditions.”¹ These definitions of blackness inform the haunting, mysterious, and powerful work of interdisciplinary artist Jefferson Pinder. The exhibition *Onyx Odyssey* presents Pinder’s recent explorations on the topic of being black that reconsider clichés of blackness to illuminate the perpetual and vibrant shifting of black identity spanning the trajectory of time.

Emerging onto the contemporary art scene in the “post-black” moment at the turn of this century, Pinder’s artwork stands out for its material directness and heightened sense of physicality used to openly address the limitations, ironies, and contradictions in historical representations of blackness in America. Rather than use humor as a strategy that diffuses racial tension, he heightens this tension to create a dynamic experience for the viewer. His knowledge of performance comes from formal training in theater and dramatically charges his sculptures, paintings, prints, and installations. He traces the development of his creative voice to the influences of playwrights, authors, and poets Amiri Baraka, August Wilson, and Ralph Ellison, to name a few. Their ability to awaken society to systemic racial injustice and connect to the individual on a human level reveals an honesty that Pinder achieves through his commitment toward the black male body in his performances and art objects.

The black male experience is central to understanding Pinder’s work. The gendered, racial body was the focus of the Whitney Museum’s groundbreaking exhibition *Black Male* (1994). Curator Thelma Golden wrote, “One of the greatest inventions of the twentieth century is the African-American male — ‘invented’ because black masculinity represents an amalgam of fears and projections in the American psyche which rarely conveys or contains the trope of truth about the black male’s existence.”² Pinder’s study of the black male builds on Golden’s realizations and further complicates the notion of invention by referencing a selection of black figureheads from The Reconstruction and Civil Rights Era to the Black Power and Black Lives Matter movements. Through Pinder’s work we are reminded that the black man has always reinvented himself by performing blackness — in 40 million ways, according to Henry Louis Gates Jr. — as a way of addressing the alienation of time and place. This displacement is expressed in Pinder’s work through the intergalactic imagery spread throughout the show.

Onyx Odyssey includes several works that directly references historic black figures such as WEB DuBois, Huey P. Newton, Sir Moriaen, and Barak Obama. Housed in the black screening room, the video work *Overture* grounds the exhibition and presents Pinder’s non-linear adaptation of WEB DuBois’ 1911 history play *The Star of Ethiopia*. The script charted the journey of African Americans from Africa to overcoming slavery. Unlike DuBois’ celebratory, epic production, Pinder’s short video is eerie, modest, and subtly fierce. Containing untrained actors cast from the streets of Chicago, the piece projects the mythic “mother of men” floating through the desolate streets of West Loop/Garfield

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Park as if to survey the current condition of contemporary black community. A set of prints installed on the second floor contain a floating skull layered atop the iconic image of Black Panther co-founder Huey P. Newton enthroned and armed with guns. Newton presents a tragic black figure that began with an ambitious and militant plan to ensure the rise of Black Americans, but in the end (and after prison and legal battles), Newton was murdered in 1989 outside of a drug den, allegedly trying to buy drugs.

A more virtuous soldier is the namesake of the metallic pipe installation *Moriaen’s Shadow*. Sir Moriaen, the only Black Knight of the Round Table (c. 13th Century), fought Sir Lancelot while on his quest to find his father and legitimize his bloodline. Considering this connection, the pipes become armor for strange knights with pitched hats that appear both alien and reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. Each of the men referenced in these works perform acts of resistance in a variety of ways and draw renewed attention to their distant narratives.

Barack Obama is the only living historic black figure referenced directly in Pinder’s work exhibited here: a large neon installation hovering above the gallery on a black wall. Titled *POTUS* (acronym for President of The United States) and newly commissioned by Hyde Park Art Center, this work is a line-drawn depiction of Obama’s angry eyes. The leader of the free world has a strong presence in the show as a significant and contradictory figure of black power in America.

In opposition to the president’s Big-Brother-like gaze, the site-specific work *Countermeasure* presented on the Jackman Goldwasser Catwalk Gallery was inspired by the recent waves of protest associated with the Black Lives Matter

movement. Presented in cool blue tones, the large-scale work features the reputable D.C. breakdance crew Lionz of Zion interpreting gestures of riot. Endurance is a reoccurring theme as a metaphor for the black experience in Pinder’s work, as is (in)visibility of the body through sound and light. The new work in the exhibition, already mentioned and including *Monolith* and *Gauntlet*, confirms ideas of containment in Pinder’s work and questions how we move within set social boundaries and controls.

Onyx Odyssey presented at Hyde Park Art Center marks the most significant exhibition of Jefferson Pinder’s work in Chicago to date. This exhibition fulfills our mission to support Chicago-based artists by providing a formidable platform to present conceptually challenging artwork that adds to the current discourse on pressing social matters in our community. As the title suggests, an odyssey can be a meandering adventure of epic duration, quite possibly without any resolution. For artist Jefferson Pinder, the journey provides a metaphor for the black American experience and raises questions about the history, myth, and meaning of blackness that construct a racial identity. We look forward to growing the conversation generated by this important and relevant work.

Allison Peters Quinn
Director of Exhibition & Residency Programs

¹ Shavers, Rone 2015. “Fear of a Performative Planet: Troubling the Concept of “Post Blackness.” In *The Trouble With Post-Blackness*, eds. Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, 82. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

² Golden, Thelma. 1994. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art; 19.