

READER

Chicago's alternative nonprofit newsroom

The future according to Derrick Woods-Morrow The SAIC graduate stages his first major solo show at Gallery 400. Kerry Cardoza



Installation view, "Gravity Pleasure Switchback," Gallery 400, 2023 Credit: Courtesy Ji Yang

Water from the Atlantic ocean, the artist's bodily fluids, lint from laundromats in Black neighborhoods, a musical sample from Tyler, the Creator, and "believing in the possibility of a safe future" are just a handful of the materials used in Derrick Woods-Morrow's "Gravity Pleasure Switchback." The artist's first major solo exhibition, on view at Gallery 400, explores the relationship between rest and labor and the desire for community and isolation, centered on the experiences of Black American southerners.



The artist's first major solo exhibition explores the relationship between rest and labor and the desire for community and isolation.
Credit: Dabin Ahn

Much of the work here honors academic Christina Sharpe's concept of "wake work," an expansive idea that touches on paying attention to the realities of Black life, communal care, and the affirmation of life and ability to imagine new futures—all of which exist in the heavy aftermath of slavery. Woods-Morrow too is deeply interested in how to memorialize those lost to state-sanctioned violence while also carving out a path for joy; relatedly, he explores how efforts of work and rest are inscribed on the body. One installation features a pressed stack of clothing worn by Black southerners, crowd-sourced from the Internet. *Untitled (cowboy) – Good to me as I am you* contains a video of slowed-down footage from the 1972 film *Black Rodeo*, with a focus on the women and children spectators in the audience—a study of Black masculinity and the importance of female caretakers.



Detail from “Gravity Pleasure Switchback”
Courtesy Ji Yang

Throughout the exhibition are gorgeous sculptural shards of glass that the artist infused “with a portion of the Wendy’s” where Rayshard Brooks was murdered by a police officer in Atlanta, just weeks after the killing of George Floyd. In the final room of the exhibition, these glass sculptures are placed throughout the gallery, which is awash in a bright red neon light. The light wraps around a gnarled wire bed frame, in a bundle on the floor. A stack of milk crates sits off to the side, and a bright stage light shines down on the whole scene. A transparent filter is affixed to the front of the light, with a drawing of a sunset on it. The drawing is subtle, easy to miss if you don’t read the description on the wall—yet its hint of transcendent beauty provides a poignant counterpoint to the tragic presence of Brooks’ death. Here, Woods-Morrow summons the strength to imagine alternate Black futures: futures that are safe, queer, liberatory; in a word, free.

“Gravity Pleasure Switchback”

Through 8/5: Tue-Fri 10 AM-5 PM, Sat noon-5PM, 400 S. Peoria, gallery400.uic.edu