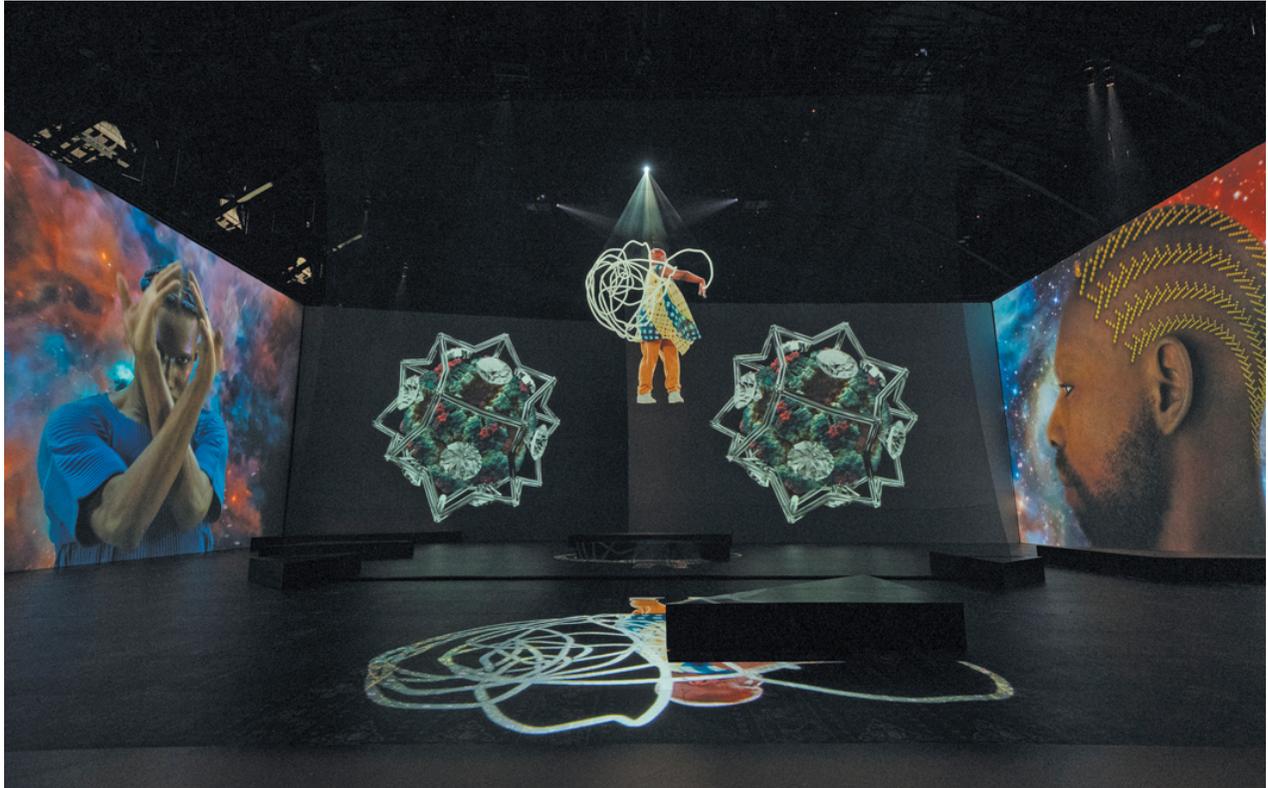


ARTFORUM

"Rashaad Newsome"

By Daniel Culpan

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View of "Rashaad Newsome," 2022. Photo: Stephanie Berger.

Rashaad Newsome PARK AVENUE ARMORY

For "Assembly," Rashaad Newsome boldly transformed the Park Avenue Armory into a multisensory video game-cum-twenty-first-century reboot of *Paris Is Burning*. With the show's title nodding toward a collective politics of radical reimagining, the cavernous Wade Thompson Drill Hall became the stage set for a pair of videos that immersed the viewer. Screened simultaneously across the walls of the 55,000-square-foot space, these works cascaded and pulsed, creating a fluid and hypnotic procession of brash shapes and bodies in motion.

In *Cornrow*, 2022, a dancer—his bright yellow hair matching his outfit—vogues against a twinkling intergalactic background. Pioneered by Black and Latinx queer communities in 1980s Harlem ballrooms (and served up for a new generation in the 2018–21 television series *Pose*), voguing was just one of many stylized forms of protest featured in the exhibition. For *Atmosphere of a Dream*

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7, 2022, rivers of luminous color corkscrewed across a far wall, while other figures swerved from the facade of a building that shivered, crumbled, and reformed itself like VR architecture. Hard-edge forms shimmered like diamonds, while a lone dancer was beamed high into the middle of the floor, as if duckwalking in outer space. If the music video for Madonna's 1990 hit single "Vogue" had been directed by Hype Williams, this might have been the result.

Beyond the main room, several of Newsome's digital-print collages hung upon a jeweled wallpaper that looked as if it were ripped straight from a Cartier catalogue: a high-end hymn to luxury. These pieces are fascinating many-layered portraits of bodies in transition. Take *Stabilizer*, 2020, in which a muscled torso segues into tribally tattooed flesh, as a head composed of wraithlike hands frames a luscious red mouth. In another, *Formation of Attention*, 2021, a chic cyborg stands in profile, admiring its nails like a model from a '50s cigarette ad. The frames for these glittering, ornate works become stages for these transgressive figures, embodying the "opulence" both vaunted and satirized ("You own everything!") by ballroom culture's subversive spectacle. This parody of capitalist excess is undoubtedly more plangent when witnessed on Park Avenue.

Indeed, Newsome is a sharp-eyed reader of surfaces—flesh, language, fashion—and the means by which they are both consuming and consumed. Tearing away the *Matrix*-like veil of fixed identities and concrete ideologies, he finds something real beneath the artifice: an uncanny beauty that refuses to be made insipidly pretty to fit socially acceptable forms. *Thee Variant*, 2022, is a coldly sexy, unnerving mannequin that's both genderless (combining a painted breast with a bulging leather codpiece) and a paean to Black femmeness, flaunting acrylic nails and stilettos sharp enough to draw blood. This work pays homage to a radical feminist credo that underpins the show, linking ancient transgender shamanism with Donna Haraway's human/machine hybrids. Another body, *Ansista*, 2019, is frozen mid-dip on a plinth, Louboutin heel raised to the gods.

The centerpiece of the presentation was unquestionably *Being*, 2019–22: a giant AI presiding over the auditorium, which was also the site of evening dance performances throughout the run. Part griot (an oral historian and poet in West African tradition) and part sharp-tongued queen reading the room, the nonbinary avatar appears like a deity projected from the future. With a face resembling a carved African mask, slickly choreographed body language (all wrist flicks and swishy hips), and narcotized speech patterns, the AI referred to the artist as their "father," recalling the self-created kinship networks of ball culture.

Being led a series of workshops, including lessons on how to vogue, critical-theory interventions inspired by thinkers such as Paulo Freire and bell hooks, and Q&A sessions in which audience members were asked to reflect on how they could help undo the "capitalist, imperialist, white-supremacist patriarchy." (However, the articulate entity became tongue-tied when one participant declared them "quite beautiful.") Synthesizing heavyweight theory with hyper-seductive imagery, "Assembly" felt like an anarchic rallying cry for an embodied politics where thinking and becoming are one. The category is *Liberation*.

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