Credit: Neldy Germain. Freedom Flight (2020). Courtesy: Never Apart. Joy as Resistance.

Reclaiming Joy: An Exhibition Review of Joy as Resistance

Contradiction is a powerful tool. In a year that has forced us apart, technology has certainly made us more accessible to each other. More troubling, however, is that working, socializing, reading, learning from home has also made us more accessible to the world. The 'Home' *is* the 'World'.

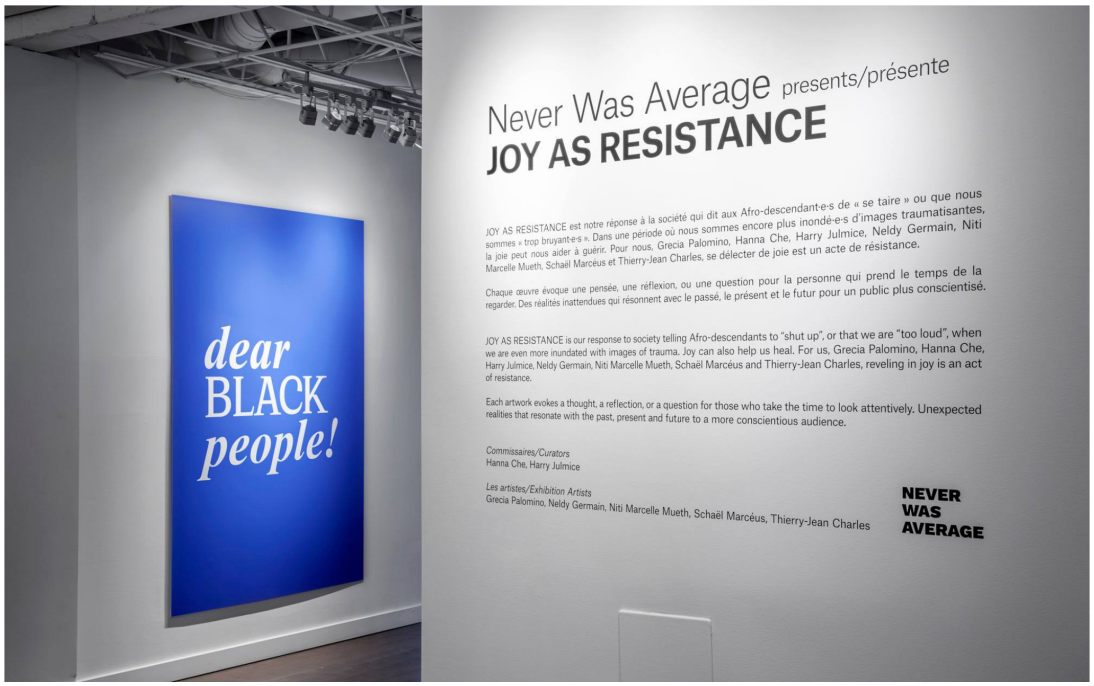
What then happens when voices rise against social injustices in the midst of a pandemic where we are all supposed to stay at home? Out of the isolation of a pandemic emerges a forceful need for communities – particularly marginalized ones – to physically come together. This contradiction has forced protests both on to the streets, but more importantly, into an online sphere where debate can turn into hate-speech in an instant. Where it can be moderated or censored on a whim.

This daily barrage of traumatic images, of difficult conversations happening in a world that's physically isolated but virtually connected, is what curators Never Was Average, Hanna Che, and Harry Julmice are responding to in the virtual exhibition *Joy as Resistance* at Centre Never Apart. Comprised of photographs, illustrations, and music, this exhibition showcases works by Montréal-based artists of African descent. The curatorial team position this exhibition as their "response to society telling Afro-descendants to 'shut up', or that we are 'too loud', when we are even more inundated with images of trauma."

Courtesy: Never Apart - Facebook. Credit: Grecia Palomino. Thierry-Jean Charles. Canela y Clavo (2020). Joy as Resistance.

The space of a contemporary art gallery is famously a silent one, and so it is a meaningful choice to take noise as the point of departure for this exhibition. It is almost as though the battle between celebration and quiet composure is happening right in front of our eyes. The neon-lit images in *Canela y Clavo* by Grecia Palomino and Thierry-Jean Charles, for example, immediately transport us out of the confines of the white walls to a place where one might find a party, or one might make a friend. The two self-portraits are accompanied by music, and as I clicked through the virtual gallery, I tried to imagine what it might be like if these sounds were flooding that space.

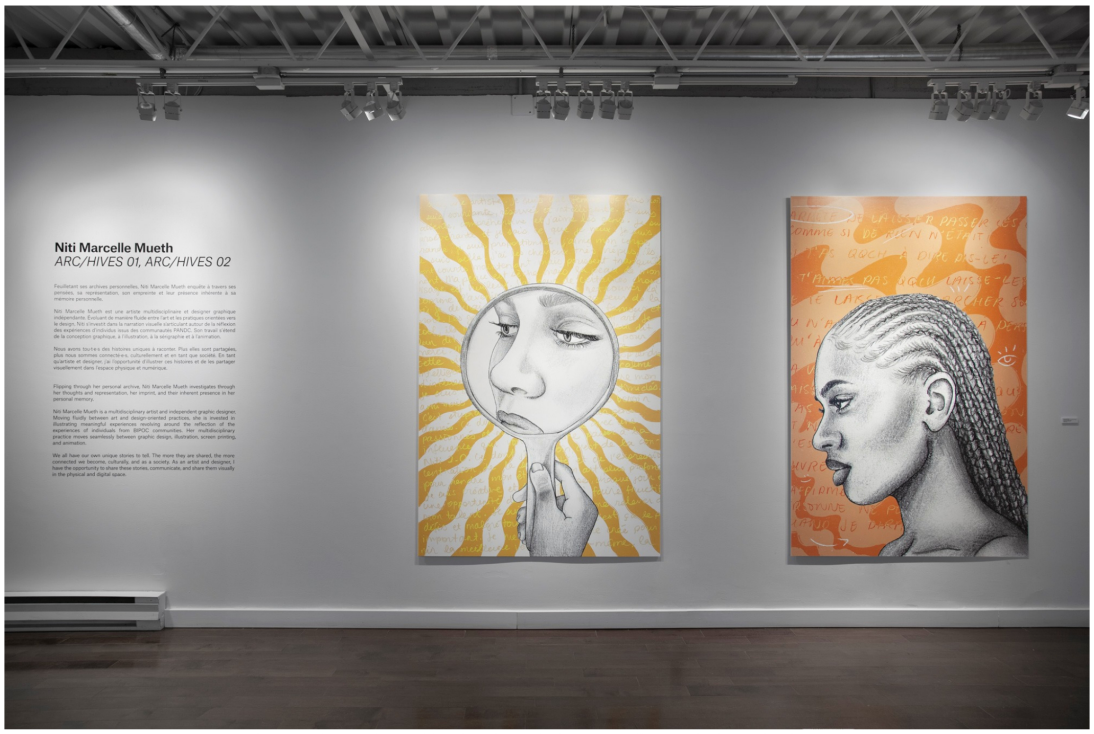
In the visual silence of the gallery, I found noise in text. The very first image upon entering the viewing room is a bright blue graphic announcing, "Dear Black People!", by artist Schaël Marcéus. Simple in its interpellation, the artist is nonetheless doing something profound. With only font and colour, Marcéus conveys a tone of celebration and love in way that is inviting. It is no coincidence that the exhibition begins with such a declarative statement, given that we live in a world of media buzzwords. Words that condition us to expect certain types of images. Here, our conditioning is challenged – the words "Dear Black People" defiantly elicit images of elation.



Courtesy: Never Apart - Facebook. Credit: Schael Marceus. June 8th, ILY. Joy as Resistance.

Words are also important in the artwork by Neldy Germain. Germain, whose process often starts with poetry before even composing an image, encapsulates a moment of release. His images *Weight Off I (one)* and *Freedom Flight* (see the featured image of the article), harmonize with his words: "Weight off one. Weight of one. Joy of many. Joy of one. Freedom". With the contradiction between heavy and light, oppression and freedom, this artwork manifests a simple but powerful act of inhaling the environment and exhaling only clarity and peace of mind.

Perhaps the most important contradiction that ties all of the pieces together is the one between images of the self, and images for the public. Palomino, Charles, and Marcéus all feature self-portraits in their works, but this contradiction struck me most vividly in the art of Niti Marcelle Mueth. Combining words with sketches and graphic design, in *ARC/HIVES 01* and *ARC/HIVES 02*, the artist holds up a mirror, illustrating a figure likely to be herself whilst simultaneously suggesting a reflection on the part of her viewer. Mueth looks inwards in order to say something outwards, where memories drawn from within the 'self' become a site for reclaiming a silenced voice.



Courtesy: Never Apart - Facebook. Credit: Niti Marcelle Mueth. Joy as Resistance.

Contradiction is powerful – so powerful, in fact, that it is most often used to divide us. The strength of this exhibition lays in its ability to take contradiction and turn it into a tool to build connections. Through contradictions, the curators challenge societal conditioning where words like 'resistance' *only* provoke images of pain. The artists, in their own ways, turn celebration into an act of defiance against oppressive systems that render these expressions as wrong. Indeed, what is the point of art if not to make noise?

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