

# Soft Opening

Theo White  
“Oh, Freedom!”

March 15 - April 8 2018

Unit 7, Piccadilly Circus Underground Station

The first exhibition from Theo White (b. 1988 Trelawny, Jamaica), “Oh, Freedom!” sees the art director confront and reclaim black stereotypes found in early cartoons. Expanding his already collaborative practice, White works with photographer Giovanni Corabi to present seven costumed characters shot at Me'Lange Saloon in Peckham. These characters, dressed in designs made by Alfie Kungu, Oloapitreps and Nathan Jones, seek to subvert problematic imagery that attempts to reductively represent black culture. As one example, the watermelon character finds its genesis in cartoons of the later 19th century, that feature caricatured black men and women eating the fruit as if some kind of generalised accurate representation. In response, White playfully dresses his model in a watermelon dress, sat legs akimbo complete with matching red Nike shoes. Through deft juxtaposition of styling, context, casting and pose, the artist equally teases and disrupts our expectations of masculinity. Looking at the negative connotations of this imagery in a playful way, frees the images and their associated stigmas and re-establishes their viewpoint from White's perspective: we see what he wants to see in them.

Titled after a celebrated freedom song, for White the exhibition constitutes an opportunity to release his own concept of freedom onto the world. The artist explains,

“When I came to England in the early 90s I was living in Clapton and East London and I have lots of memories of the joyful days before things got fucked up. I want to get some of that back: these images are about remembering and freeing that joy. Instead of being in constant battle or competition with one another, we all need to love and celebrate each other. Gay or straight or bi or trans, as long as you're not hurting or harming anyone, you can do whatever the fuck you wanna do, just be free!”

Working for an audience as wide as Soft Opening, located in Piccadilly Circus Underground Station, White insists a message that can permeate and resonate is of utmost priority. If his audience are aware of these racial stereotypes and stigmas and can engage with those that's an added bonus, but if not, “they'll still see a black boy in a dress wearing Air Maxes, and that relates back to the title of the exhibition.” For White, freedom is unapologetic and it's his concern to emulate that freedom is not just a white privilege: “I wanna say to all individuals, we are all welcome to be free and accepted in life.”

The exhibition poster will be risograph printed in an edition of 100 to celebrate the exhibition.

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