

Nikita Gale

Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You! (2014),
acrylic, bubble wrap,
solitude, 4" x 6"



Ekphrastic Fear: The Invisible Bodies in the Work of Nikita Gale

by Kristin Juarez

With a background in advertising and archaeology, Nikita Gale's body of work often reflects on the unknowability of material objects by imbuing them with intensely personal and enigmatic addresses, dredging up the personal for others to view. For her work for Living Walls, the public art series established in Atlanta, she left the line "I almost loved you" dripping down a cinderblock wall. Beginning with the strict rigidity of font-like text, the artist's hand gradually slips into the messy and uncontrollable.

In Gale's *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* The viscous black acrylic gathers and pools over and within the bubble wrap. In an act of conjuring, its petite 4x6 inch size materializes the physical and temporal distance between two bodies as both insufficient yet palpable. The deflated bubble wrap encapsulates the compulsion, cathartic release, and futility of the puncturing process embodying both the passive-aggressiveness and longing the title is reacting to. Exposing itself as a reaction, or symptom of the unseen, the work emphasizes the traces of the artist's now-absent hand, as well as the phantom culprit the title alludes to. The personal exerts its presence at the expense of the bubble-wrap's original form and purpose, manifesting as an imperfect object to stand in for a relationship's emotional and durational arc.

Exposing itself as a reaction, or symptom of the unseen, the work emphasizes the traces of the artist's now-absent hand, as well as the phantom culprit the title alludes to.

For *Look At All Of This Fun I Had Without You!* the list of materials reads: "Acrylic, bubble wrap, solitude." Immediately Gale zeroes in on the verbal and material surfaces that individuals construct as deflection when a relationship turns sour. The slip from the tangible material into the invisible interior reflects a visual practice where marks are loaded with both subjective meaning and visceral physical presence. The relationship between text and image emphasizes the artist's weighted hand with a psyche and loss that could be read as her own. Because the words express such a familiar sentiment, the words are open for viewers to read themselves as the subject, or "I." Simultaneously, the direct address of "you" pierces the viewer in a way that feels vulnerable and emphatic, making you (as viewer) want to step aside and let the blame of "you" (as implied in the text) target someone else. By using "you" as the sentence's syntactical object, Gale pushes on the slippery nature of subject and object, creating the space for viewers to interpret, imagine, and replace real bodies out of abstracted ones. Gale's work also pushes on common conflation between artist and artwork, particularly through her employment of personal text, and the tendency to objectify artists.

Gale zeroes in on the verbal and material surfaces that individuals construct as deflection when a relationship turns sour.

The tension between text and image in Gale's work relies on "ekphrastic fear," which W.J.T. Mitchell describes as a desire for the visual to remain out of view in order to maintain the imagined subject.¹ The question arises, if we demand to maintain an imagined body over a real one, while also demanding that the artist's body stand in as the work he/she produces, what is the place and function of black artist's body?

¹W.J.T. Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other" in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 154.