

Consuela Boyer



The triplets, *Blaque Woman* (2014),
photograph

When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong: the Incoherent Image in Consuela Boyer's Video Work

by Kristin Juarez

Consuela Boyer's video work *Blaque Woman* (2014) includes photography, sound, and performance and belongs to a series of investigation around the fabricated lives of the triplets Le-Ah Blaque, Anna-Renae Blaque, and Tiffany Blaque. Dressed as three distinct characters, Boyer changes everything she can about each of the sisters. Her hair, her clothes, her gestures, the syncopation, and modes of address range from hood to pious. In the real world, it is not unfathomable to consider that black triplets might find their comfort zones within distinct aspects of society, and together they reflect the diversity of Black life. But there is something unsettling about Boyer's performances because they are, in fact, not different people but one. As viewers, we are forced to reconcile how our desire to view and review authenticity imposed on Black people both restricts the possibilities of Boyer's characters, and divides Boyer's physical body into pieces that cannot be put back into place.¹ By misaligning the speed and synch of her speech to her body, Boyer's performance creates the effect of a glitch in the digital videos that causes our perception of her body-as-bodies to continually readjust.

Re-formatted for The Window Project, the Digital Art and Entertainment Lab's public art platform, the triplets will play at once providing them with a simultaneity of being. While the camera remains static in medium close-up, Boyer's body is mobile in her performance of the sisters. As the artist turns and gesticulates the camera is left running, as one long uninterrupted shot, giving the viewer the ability to consume her body, blurring the boundaries between her physical body and the performed

body. Dressed in a bright pink brimmed beanie and bandana, doorknocker earrings, lace camisole, and a lime green cardigan, we catch the first sister, Le-Ah Blaque, priming for a fistfight. This includes removing her earrings.² The next sister, Anne-Renae, attempts to seduce the viewer with a stylized coquettish weave, shiny chandelier earrings, and leopard-lined robe that she opens to reveal a negligee. The intensity of her gaze as her body becomes more exposed feels so successfully bold, that I can't help but be a little nervous. Boyer has made me fall into her game. The last sister, Tiffany, is a little preachy, and in contrast to her sisters she states, "I'm the kind of woman that doesn't necessarily need a man." She continues on to say she needs the women of this nation to realize that they are the backbone of the country. Wearing a body-conscious sweater, she speaks of uplift with soft eyes and make up. Relying on the guilty pleasure of recognizing an "authentic" black female body, Boyer plays with a viewer's tendency to believe that they recognize these individuals, splitting and fragmenting her body in order to fulfill this schematic categorization.

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In the videos of each of these performances, there is layering and manipulation of sound that both adheres and functions independently of the image. ~~Their voices~~ Her voice is slowed down and altered to a speed and tone that makes it sound like a man's. The music in the background of the two "ratchet" sisters sounds like the chopped and screwed sound of Houston rappers. And while her lips are visually synched to her voice in each video, her gestures do not always act in slow motion but at a natural speed. Further complicating the manipulation, other sounds that her body makes, like handclaps, maintain a natural duration. This unidentifiable

sliding moments of real-time versus slow motion, turn the performance into an uncanny spectacle, where her physical gestures, lips, and voice operate independently of each other, but sometimes align. The deep altered voice that synchs to her image stops being unusual, as we try to comprehend what Boyer's characters are saying and maintain a temporality closest to her actions in order to singularize or flatten her body into a coherent image.

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It is their excessive gestures and their cultural implications that make these videos first appear like a gag. The distinction between performance and imitation is central to Boyer's work, and what fuels its challenge to viewers to reconcile where the humor is, and at whose expense are they having a laugh. In an interview with Boyer, she described people's reactions to her as similar to Tyler Perry's Madea character, or Eddie Murphy playing an entire family in the Nutty Professor films. These are frankly disturbing cultural references that undermine the subversive potential of her work and drag. In one of her performances playing these characters, Boyer assured people that they could ask her anything. Questions included:

"Do you and your sisters have the same father?"

"Are you on welfare?"

"Where do you live?"



Le-Ah Blaque, *Blaque Woman* (2014), frame grab

So while her characters get relegated to the level of slapstick when the critique is directed at Boyer as herself, the audience reacts to Boyer as a stand-in for a particular fantasy of the black woman. The pervasive myth of "welfare queen" emerges once again in the space between Boyer's body and the audience. Boyer's work exposes difficulty in maintaining a critical and perceptual distance when attempting to pin down a real body that can slip in and out of our cultural confinements.

¹A seminal concept made clear by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008).

²Le-Ah's gestures seem "real" or authentic in the way that "keeping it real" demands.