

BLACK ICE

by Jessica Baran

*Do you ever see that stuff that be
when it get cold that ice that you can't see?
See that shit happens sometimes
Yep, black ice
— Goodie Mob, “Black Ice”*

*I am concerned with what is not in-between. I am concerned with what is not in-between us, or with the nothing
that lies between us. Which is to say that I am concerned with what that nothing that is. ...
— Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition**

Kahlil Robert Irving’s work communicates through fusion and gaps. While his sculptures resemble found object assemblages, they are in fact masterfully wrought ceramic forms that blend a range of tactile, media-specific processes and their respective historic traditions with digital techniques that connect them directly to the here and now. The leaps between deep time and the current moment, the handmade and cyber-ineffable, are duly enacted in the empty spaces between his works, which direct one’s eye and mind from the pavement to the clouds to the invisible systems that dictate movement amidst these realms. Collectively, these works fill out a world in which the viewer intuitively connects the discrete pieces displayed—segments of ersatz ceramic sidewalk, a vinyl strip of blue sky, page-like white tiles of collaged legal documents. In this cityscape set in the gallery space, Irving has fused the real and fictional, personal and civic, firmly local yet empathetically universal, but he has also left gaps—or vacancies—that allow for the interplay of ambiguities, some of which, like black ice, are representative of the inertia of historical oppression while others present the possibility of new futures.

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. [...] the problematics of everyday ritual, the stagedness of the violently (and sometimes amelioratively) quotidian, the essential drama of black life, as Zora Neale Hurston might say.¹

[STREET & Stars | (Memories < > Matter) fair and FREEDOM] Black ICE is the entry point into this world. Presented on a low wood platform recalling the design of St. Louis’ iron truss train bridges that cross over the Mississippi River, the room-spanning piece is composed of hand-pressed stoneware tiles, placed flush without mortar in a rectangular arrangement. Earth-toned, the base material is a mix of secondary clays found in quarries and made to resemble asphalt. Asphalt itself is an aggregate composed of materials specific to its location and liquid tar; similarly, Irving’s piece is an aggregate of symbolic elements that describe his life in St. Louis.

¹ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003. Pg. 1

Filled pothole-like crevices, a torn swath of corrugated cardboard, a crushed beer can, the lid of a smashed to-go container—all expertly rendered through a variety of ceramic processes and glazes—appear like trod-upon street detritus encased in the surface. While signifying the pedestrian materiality of post-industrial American cities, this crushed debris is also residue from the artist’s own history, such as a remnant of an early body of work from his student years comprised entirely of porcelain fast-food boxes. In reconstituting his own oeuvre alongside seemingly toss-away but meticulously crafted consumer trash, Irving poignantly upends traditional high/low value expectations, suggesting, alternately and at once, the precariousness of one’s personal and artistic identity and the preciousness of the commonly underestimated. Carefully gilded cracks further cue the viewer to the honorific and memorial dimensions of this work, which brings one’s attention back to the critical fact that it’s ultimately all raised off the ground, not to be walked on.

Crushed and embedded *trompe l’oeil* ceramic items covered in digitally-rendered decals call further attention to Irving’s complex play with tangible and conceptual dichotomies. A Vess soda bottle – smashed flat into a mold with tile pressed around it—was then imaged in 3D and transferred onto *[STREET & Stars [...]*’s substrate, presenting a cascade of subversions of authenticity. At once a direct and legible signifier of the artist’s home city, the piece is neither “real” in the sense of its physical properties nor conventionally illusionistic. Irving also adds a decal-rendered Ming Dynasty vessel from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection (with its colonial handle and spout removed); bits of a chain link pattern that adorned a gallery wall in the artist’s New York solo debut; repetitive patterns comprised of cigarette butts and fried chicken; and the tiny flower bud prints characteristic of German Meissen wares. In doing so, Irving recodes the municipal crosswalks of his day-to-day and imagines a future for public space unbound by all-too-familiar historical, colonial, and cultural boundaries.

Irving’s play with signification in *[STREET & Stars [...]* continues with the inclusion of what appear to be scraps of *trompe l’oeil* newspaper that are in fact digital collages that fuse screen shots of memes, Instagram posts, online news stories, Google searches, and other information culled from the internet. Densely layered nearly to the point of inscrutability, these montages allow the viewer charged glimpses into an array of concerns: an image of Goodie Mob’s “Black Ice” video on Youtube, former Missouri representative Bruce Franks stepping down from office, an article about the Smith family reunion², an image of the artist’s late mother, and an image of the recently deceased curator Okwui Enwezor (1963–2019). These fragments illustrate not only the new normal of infinite digital data but our mechanisms for coping with that onslaught by pulling out that which serves our personal narratives and needs. The inclusion of memes is especially operative here, as they demand a common reading while being effectively detached from their signifiers. Similarly, Irving’s work calls upon our capacity for complex association with his symbolic objects and imagistic quotes, untethered from their conventional cultural anchors. In the words of Fred Moten:

² [No author attribution], “Nationwide Reunion Celebration for Blacks,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 1990.

Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, the generative space that fills and erases itself. The space is, is the site of, *ensemble*: the improvisation of singularity and totality *through* their opposition. For now that space will manifest itself somewhere between the first lines of tragedy and the last lines of elegy. We can begin, perhaps; perhaps not begin but move on; naw, we linger in and over a formulation of Derrida’s “what is happily and tragically *universal* is *absolute singularity*.” There, here, the “not but of” that haunts here and there, the resonant sound and flashing light, the emergence of the ensemble of the senses, dawns on us iconically, but in a way that is always touched by, or bears the trace of, the fullness of the sign.³

Adjacent to *[STREET & Stars [...]* and acting as its foil and counterpart is *WONDER Land of many men, ro-man, Black and Black*—a square arrangement of un-mortared handmade tiles set on a low wood platform. Only small white ceramic fragments articulate its surface, lending it the appearance of a cosmos or night sky flecked with stars. In contrast with the larger piece, which tells an overwhelming and earthly story, this piece is a celestial reprieve—an open portal to an unknown futurity limned in the visual language of the urban everyday. *Sous les pavés, la plage*.

WONDER Land [...] and *[STREET & Stars [...]* were inspired by the Antioch mosaics, several of which Irving viewed at the Baltimore Museum of Art. The Antioch mosaics are a series of floor coverings made in the eponymous ancient city, located in present-day Turkey, in the 3rd century AD. These tiles embellished public and private spaces including homes, churches, and baths. Elaborately detailed, with imagery ranging from the pictorial to geometric abstraction, the mosaics served not merely to beautify the city but narrate its myths, civic values, and everyday life. Formally, the mosaic tiles resemble digital pixels, creating a connection between these ancient artifacts and Irving’s concern with virtual contemporaneity. Irving has translated these mosaics into his own vernacular, telling the Odyssey-like story of his creative development, personal experiences and losses, and his city’s racial and economic strife.

How do we recognize boundaries? How do we recognize edges? How do we begin to understand ourselves ending and others beginning?⁴

White matter, white text [State of Missouri, {Jason Stockley}] are four commercial white tiles imprinted with fragments of an acquittal document by Judge Timothy J. Wilson, signed September 15, 2017, in response to the actions of former St. Louis police officer Jason Stockley. The titles of each respective artwork indicate the pages Irving has excerpted from. Stockley, who is white, shot and killed Anthony Lamar Smith, a 24-year-old black man, while on duty in 2011; he was tried for murder in 2016 but ultimately acquitted—a devastating verdict that inspired several months of city- and county-wide protests. Stockley filed a defamation lawsuit in 2018 that was ultimately rejected by a federal judge, signifying the maddening abuse of white power and the violence of structural racism. Cut-up and layered to the point of illegibility, Irving’s

³ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Pg. 89.

⁴ White, Simone. Interview by Andy Fitch. *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 2018, <https://blog.lareviewofbooks.org/interviews/questions-inside-outside-talking-simone-white/>

document is printed on American Olean tiles—a consumer-grade product now carried at Lowe’s that, for over a hundred years, was produced at its eponymous New York State factory. In 1995 the company was bought out by a multi-national conglomerate and, in 2012, closed its last U.S. plant, rendering hundreds of workers jobless and hollowing out the veracity of its name.⁵ The material is itself an American fallacy as much as Stockley’s acquittal and lawsuit; neither local nor American, the prefabricated tiles resemble white sheets of paper and serve as metonyms for structural oppression. Irving has re-inscribed power by stamping his “document” with his own initials and Apple ID—boldly over-writing the certifications of state and federal power with his personal mark.

Have you ever suffered from political despair, from despair about the organization of things? What does it mean to suffer from political despair when your identity is bound up with utopian political aspirations and desires? How is identity reconfigured in the absence or betrayal of those aspirations? What’s the relation between political despair and mourning?⁶

The final component of Irving’s installation is *Low Sky* (*pixilated dreams* | *Fractured reality*), a narrow strip of vinyl that wraps around a single column in the gallery. Set near the ceiling above both of the pavement works and *White matter, white text* [...], the blue sky punctuated by clouds draws out the essential tension in Goodie Mob’s song, from which the exhibit takes its name. The intermittent incantation—“Touch what I never touched befo', seen what I never seen befo' / Woke up and seen the sun sky high, sky high”—questions the aspiration for (and perhaps the false lure of) a better life vs. the inevitable downward pull (and despair) of black ice.

Both *[STREET & Stars [...]* and *WONDER Land [...]* are in conversation with a number of floor-based works from the 1960s and 70s, most notably Carl Andre’s “Equivalents” series (1966–69) and Harmony Hammond’s “Floorpiece” sculptures (1973).⁷ Andre’s “Equivalents” consist of two layers of industrial-grade brick organized variously in rectangles and squares directly on the floor without mortar; they speak to the artist’s perpetual interest in numerical abstraction, the insertion of non-art materials into art spaces, and the economics of labor in art. Hammond’s rag rugs made of recycled cast-offs dipped in paint are also presented directly on the floor, but these “Floorpieces” engage a more pointed conversation about the elevation of handicraft historically associated with women and Black communities.⁸ Irving’s pieces draw elements from both—the urban materiality of Andre’s work and the socio-cultural critique and media discourse of Hammond’s—while ultimately eluding them.

Following this lineage from floor to pavement, David Hammons seems to be Irving’s closest forebear. Sampada Aranke explains: “If the street is where both radical protest and white

⁵ Michel, Christopher and Kelsey Boudin, “Farewell, Dal-Tile.” *Olean Times Herald*, December 13, 2012.

⁶ Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Pg. 93.

⁷ Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art+Textile Politics*. University of Chicago Press, 2017. Pg. 75-84.

⁸ Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art+Textile Politics*. Pg. 91-98.

supremacist violence most visibly take place, then turning to the pedestrian qualities of black life is of urgent political need.”⁹ Hammons, as Aranke describes, sees the streets as ground-zero for both anti-black violence and civil rights protest—a site of activation that allows for “play with the street audience” and that is fundamentally disengaged from the process of mediation. Aranke continues: “The streets traffic knowledge and meanings that exist outdoors and away from the window pane that frames what one sees from the comfort of the indoors. Hammons prefers to be outside, inhabiting modes of living that are relatively unseen if one is blind to their existence.”¹⁰

Irving is ultimately a conceptual artist like Hammons, whose primary medium happens to be ceramics. And while Irving has in fact produced works directly situated in the streets, he sees the gallery as a space to import the exterior world in order to elevate it. He also importantly fabricates anew that exterior world, shaping it into something similar to what exists but not exactly—his own placeless every place. In this way, he implicates the body not by his presence but by viewers’ engagement with his objects and the mark of his hand in his work. In that sense, Irving’s work realizes Aranke’s definition of a black radical aesthetic that evades the all-too-prevalent subjugation of black bodies in image culture. As Aranke describes it:

Contemporary black radical aesthetic practices that emphasize materials that surface, texture, and visualize blackness ineluctably trouble, if not unravel, the panoptic qualities of the visual itself. It is without a doubt that images play a hyperactive role in our understanding of black life, but what of the *material matters* of black resistance? [...] black radical aesthetic practices endeavor to recompose the relationship between the body and visibility, often by sidestepping representational mandates towards “accuracy.” Instead, these practices turn to the potentiality of abstract or conceptual approaches in materializing black corporeality. Much attention has been paid to the vexed relationship between representation and black cultural forms in light of white supremacist practices that have produced and policed images of black people along the spectrum of spectacular and quotidian violence. By emphasizing abstract and conceptual artistic practices, [...] black radical aesthetics builds upon the notion of blackness as an originary abstraction—a category created in the service of devastating material, corporeal, and psychological violences that trafficked through the Middle Passage and whose afterlives are still active today. Abstract and conceptual practices do not abandon the social, cultural, and material meanings that blackness invokes.¹¹

In contrast to Hammons’ direct engagement with the street and in the tradition of worldmaking artists,¹² Irving is building a new place in which he can exist, a kind of home, in the absence of being able to identify a suitable one in the “real” world. “Worldmaking as we know it always

⁹ Aranke, Sampada. “Blind Leading to Blind: Seeing Through David Hammons's ‘Blind Reality,’” CCA Wattis Institute, 2017. <https://wattis.org/view?id=421>

¹⁰ Aranke, Sampada. “Blind Leading to Blind: Seeing Through David Hammons's ‘Blind Reality’”

¹¹ Aranke, Sampada. “Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility,” *e-flux journal* #79, February 2017.

¹² Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Fray: Art+Textile Politics*. Pg. 45.

starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking.”¹³ Using the personal materials of his life and experience, Irving draws attention to community, shared experience, and shared outrage. While Hammons’ preferred site of artmaking was outside, his personal and interior life was consistently opaque. Irving inverts this dynamic by drawing the work inside while at the same time exposing his intimate self. Irving further troubles the traditional inside/outside dynamic in his use of digital and social media. Rather than depicting a Jamesonian world of information overload flattened to affectless disengagement, depersonalization and free association, Irving creates a space that is tactile, personal, and specific. He reinstalls the postmodern world with personal heft and in the process of doing so, suggests a kind of hopeful humanism as a way out of despair.

¹³ Goodman, Nelson. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing, 1978. Pg. 6.