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Not all will be Welcome

by Stephon Senegal

Art Basel Miami is an opportunity for artists like myself to network and interface with the best in our business and/or the worst. Aside from the artist types, Art Basel week now includes an influx of the ultra-rich and the uber famous. Each night brings a different flavor, yacht parties with billionaires, house gatherings with the famed and always mixed with some scholarly banter. Saturday was not much different. As I got deeper into the night, me and two other colleagues found ourselves in the throes of a hip-hop celebrity mansion party. Hip-hop culture is part of how my community connects. It is a representation of our story built from the trauma of chattel slavery and our resilience. Even though the spotlight of this party is famous Black and Brown, the crowd is overwhelmingly white and opulent. These are the type, I thought, they owned those plantations, robbed and whipped the melaninated, but tonight, they celebrated us or at least were entertained.

Amongst the few people of color I spot an icon in our culture. I rank his discography pretty high. The party is in full gear, but I manage to get his attention. We share a brief Black greet embrace and an exchange about my work and his. He is personable. I begin to leave, high from the smoke of a brief exchange of levity, I tap his shoulder to announce that fact. As he begins to turn, the security guard reacts aggressively and motions not to touch him. A little confused by his aggression, I stare at him, baiting. In those seconds I contemplate his conciliatory care with fairer complexions not even twenty seconds before. That aside, he calls over another guard to talk to me (backup I guess). This guy is much kinder but white. I assure the white guy there is no issue, we agree, and the white guy walks away. Funny enough, I have had a number of experiences with these security types. One such occasion resulted in a large brawl spilling into the streets. Though I and my other cohort successfully navigated that encounter, it concluded with gun shots. Nonetheless this was not the occasion for that and I was not with my typical band of hardheads. In this case, I opted to be calm in spite of his unnecessary posturing. In that moment I could not fathom why this brother felt threatened or felt there was a threat to his client, we were all Black after all. And with each attempt to assure him there was no threat, he became more belligerent. At some point, I put aside any additional politeness. I made sure to stand around for a bit in some expression of obstinance. I did not want to deprive him of any opportunities he may have felt like he wanted. I felt this was the least I could do since I did not initiate a more physical solution. Full disclosure, the physical option would not have been advisable. Their numbers and size were considerable (excuse my amusement). After a little more of the testosterone thing, I went to find my two colleagues who had no clue what had just happened or what could have happened. We left the mansion.

As we talked through the evening about the valleys and peaks of our industry, I could not shake an undiscernible feeling. I was bothered but could not pinpoint the why. These types of situations were not foreign, the prospect of conflict not alarming, so what is this feeling. As we talked, I engaged in a completely separate conversation with myself. Did I do the right thing, should I have met his posturing with a more explicit response (in spite of my acclaimed colleagues nearby) or maybe walked away sooner. I pondered, and then after some hours, in the early break of the day, it came.

The guard was a Black man. He was the variety of Black that was unmistakable from an optics standpoint (why couldn't the mean one be the pale guy). What was not immediately apparent became clear hours later, that feeling was disappointment. In the wake of my participation in the Slave Rebellion Reenactment (SRR), the idea of having to potentially hurt someone of color had become a perplexing proposition. A month ago, I had participated in an historical act of rebellion against a system that had robbed that Black guard and those before him of their identities and their dignity. In the midst of that situation, I felt an untraceable affection for the Black man in front of me. That experience along with the myriad of experiences brought on with my public art practice had heightened that affection and I didn't even realize it. In my personalized lore, SRR represented a fantasy realized. Only in my dreams had I imagined being at the forefront of our revolution, being the catalyst, the one who struck the first blow of our insurrection. The yearning of an untainted boy, this fantasy took shape in a two-day immersive performance with a united and harmonious community. My elation had been suppressed, I didn't want to accept the fantasy and yet it has grown into a belief, a desire. And yet, in that moment this individual had brought the realities of our plight to the fore. The scope of our burden and generational pain is vast and for many Black and Brown, imperceptible and like the trauma-soaked plantations, they are unaware. The clarity of these months brought inspiration but also a dose of reality. In the rebellion, not all will come, and frankly not all will be welcome.