

PRESS RELEASE

Martine Syms

Loot Sweets

July 15 - September 25, 2021

I think the first image I sent to you was of lot #25. It was a blue minidress the color of a surgical mask, a little girl's dress with puffed shoulders and covered buttons, all of its weird sadness amplified by a frost of discolored white lace. I thought of you immediately when I found it; we'd just seen each other for the first time in months and had spent our half hour together discussing celebrity memorabilia auctions and fallen starlets, our conversation centered on a shared obsession for the narrow distance between fame and obsolescence. Your hair was burgundy and long that day, and I told you how much I liked it as you were leaving. "Thanks," you said, moving closer in your conspiratorial way so that everything you said felt like a secret. "It's my Velvet Rope hair."

It seemed somehow fated to me when I received an alert one week later from the Beverly Hills auction house, Julien's, with a subject line that read *ICONIC TREASURES FROM THE LEGENDARY CAREER AND LIFE OF JANET JACKSON*. I forwarded it to you with a million exclamation marks, shocked and thrilled by the supernatural prescience of your latest look. "OMG," you wrote back. "I just found out Janet is a Taurus, so this feels divine."

Over the next days, we ransacked the PDF, sending screenshots of childhood drawings and decaying dolls, teddy bears that would have been absolutely meaningless outside of our understanding of what they had witnessed. I liked the sad things, the wilted things, the grade school trapper keeper and the childhood costumes that indexed the full scope of our cultural depravity. You sent me images of a Rhythm Nation tour jacket and a flogger, pictures of YSL jewelry and suits that seemed to still contain the power of Jackson's body in spite of her physical absence. In contrast to my lust for shabby emblems of loss, everything on your wish list was vibrating and alive, packed to bursting with evidence of Walter Benjamin's aura. "I'm going," you wrote under a screenshot of the Demeulemeester suit attached to Lot #599, and I knew it was a promise.

The first day of the sale was May 14th, and you and Liv brought me along by sending videos and live updates, photographs of the masked crowd and the auctioneer. You sent an image of a red velvet cupcake topped with a chocolate wafer that bore Jackson's signature, and I imagined you plucking it off and receiving it as though in communion. The body of Janet seemed evident everywhere in these pictures, the full arc of her life indicated by an accumulation of personal property that had no value whatsoever outside of the violence of our desire.

There is a video of you taken with the things you brought home from the sale. In it, a headless man wearing a pair of white gloves unzips the first of several garment bags to reveal Lot #1134, a leather vest and jacket by Alexander McQueen. There is a moment when he slips a felty finger under the metal tag inscribed with McQueen's logo and brandishes it, as though to prove to you the value your purchase. "You like that? You like it?" he asks you, somehow not registering that this object is not a jacket at all, but rather a psychic shortcut that circumvents the barricades erected between fan and idol. "I love it," you answer him. It made me laugh a little, dear Martine; the headless man doesn't know the half of it.

— Text by Alissa Bennett

Martine Syms (b. 1988, Los Angeles) is an artist who has earned wide recognition for a practice that combines conceptual grit, humor, and social commentary. She has shown extensively including solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and ICA London. Syms' recently presented exhibitions include *Aphrodite's Beasts*, Fridericianum, Kassel; *Martine Syms - SHE MAD S1:E4*, Tramway, Glasgow; *New Media Series: Martine Syms*, Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis; *BOON*, Secession, Vienna; *Shame Space*, ICA Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond; *Contemporary Projects: Martine Syms*, Serralves Museum, Porto. She is in a band called Aunt Sister and hosts CCartalkLA, a monthly radio show on NTS. She also runs Dominica, a publishing imprint for artist books and is the author of *Implications and Distinctions: Format, Content and Context in Contemporary Race Film* (2011).