

ARTFORUM



Devin Troy Strother, Mandy Harris Williams, and Alima Lee, *the worst witch*, 2018, two-channel video, color, sound, 8 minutes 6 seconds.

Devin Troy Strother

SHOOT THE LOBSTER | LOS ANGELES

Inside the witch's lair, the walls were black and the windows darkened. A small stream of light glowed from the bulbs lining the edge of her vanity mirror, the shelf of which was littered with burnt-down candles and talismans of Baphomet, a writhing snake, and an ankh. Opposite stood a black-tiled portal. Strewn elsewhere were less sorcerous decorations, including family photos and houseplants. This installation was not just the theatricalized den of a witch, the interior of her home, but was what the artist Devin Troy Strother conceptualized as the metaphoric space of her inner psyche—a privileged

and intimate site to which we viewers had been magically admitted, and which gave us access to her private thoughts in the form of a two-channel video piece, *the worst witch*, 2018, which was projected on two opposing walls.

Parodically sporting a pointy hat and a floor-length black dress, the titular character is a young black woman frustrated by rebounding spells and white magic. In one projection, she sits silently at the aforementioned vanity, gradually taking off the green makeup covering her face and neck. In the other, she airs her frustrations about “witchism” to a black cat played by a human wearing a mascot head. Wryly delivered, her monologue covers a range of irritations, including the facts that witches are the last to get makeup in their shade of green, that the Good Witch in *The Wiz* was light skinned, and that former president Barack Obama is reduced to the trope of the Magical Negro. Though comedically delivered, her laments are sober allegories for the oppressive perceptions and unjust expectations faced by people of color.

Built out of a collaboration with Mandy Harris Williams, who plays the witch and authored her dialogue, and Alima Lee, who directed and edited, *the worst witch* is Strother’s first exhibited video piece and an expansion of his decade-long practice of casting black women as protagonists in paintings and sculptures. As exemplified by the black witch, Strother’s women characters perform inside cultural clichés to catalyze complex dialogues about representation, undermining stereotypes from within. His works simultaneously challenge racial identity as a static entity, probe the ways in which the artwork becomes an icon of its maker’s race, *and* examine how people can be assumed to be representatives of their race as they move through the world. “I get really frustrated by the representation. It feels like every day I go out and I’m supposed to represent, like, this good witch,” the witch says. Strother’s video forcefully reckons with the ways in which representation facilitates the fetishization and commodification of people of color, the often frenzied desire to possess and fix them as stable signs of otherness.

Acknowledging these pitfalls of representation, Strother destabilizes the image and undermines its co-option where he can. Here, he achieved this by splitting the video into two facing and wall-size projections that, because of the small exhibition space, the viewer could not watch simultaneously. Within each channel, the video was further fragmented, frequently switching between a single feed, a split screen, and a smaller screen superimposed within the larger one. The supplementary feeds often showed the witch speaking from a different angle or at a different time. At certain points, she was shown in three contrasting moments. Overall, the work was constructed so that we would never grasp a single representation of the witch. In disrupting the wholeness of the protagonist, Strother left us with a representation of identity that was dynamic, forming and unforming itself as the witch slowly took off her green makeup.

—*Ashton Cooper*