

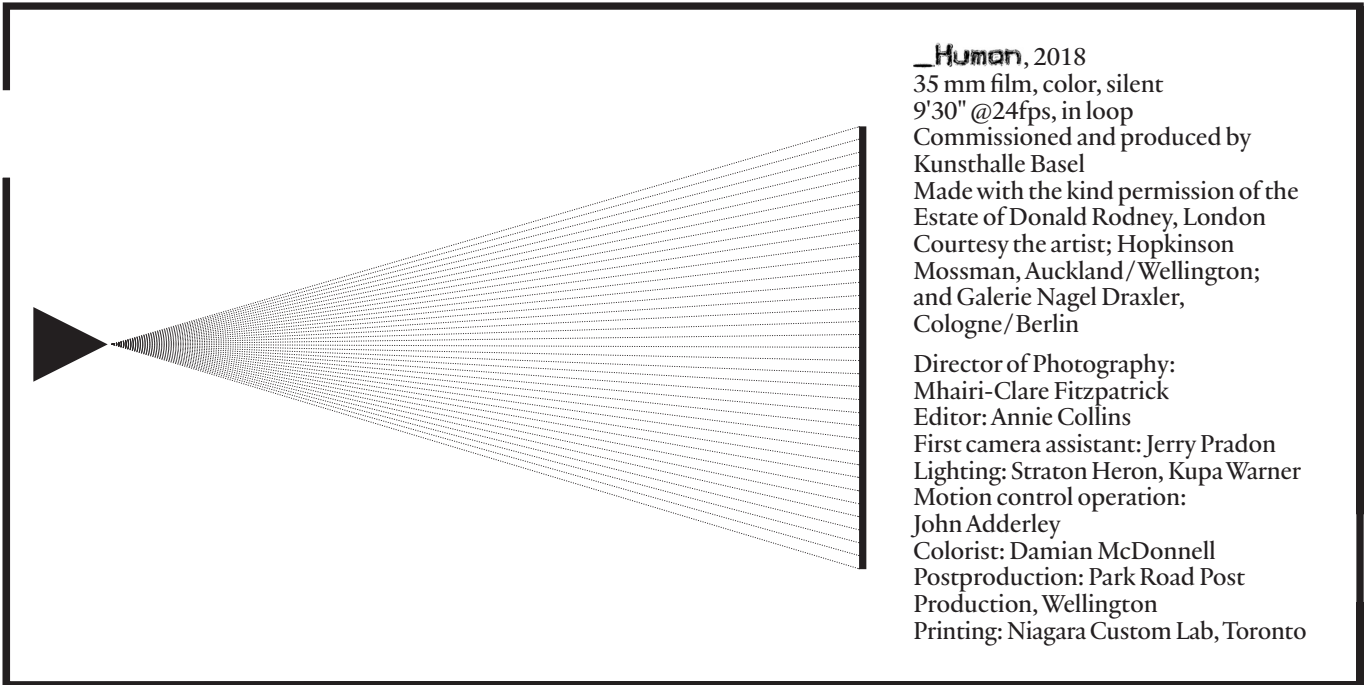
Human

Luke Willis Thompson

Kunsthalle Basel
8. 6. - 19. 8. 2018

EN
First there is blackness. It is already an image. Interrupting it, just a few seconds into *Human*, Luke Willis Thompson's new single-screen 35 mm silent film projection, is a strange and luminous apparition—some sort of peak perhaps?—that appears for just a few fleeting frames. Then blackness again, before a slow pan, a close-up of a nervous criss-crossing of lines and marks on what appears to be a brittle, dry surface. The lines don't quite form a grid, nothing so rational as that. This could be an arid landscape pictured by a satellite or a piece of charred tracing paper. That it is a close-up of skin—with its estuaries of wrinkles, melanin deposits, and potholes of pores—does not immediately suggest itself. Then, in a blue flash, a similarly ethereal and skinly combination of form and texture. No sooner has this image-burst passed, than another close-up appears, as if the camera were peering voyeuristically into an opening, exposing a crossing of thin metal bars. An X. The bars are, in fact, dressmakers' pins, usually holding pieces of fabric temporarily in place, but here they become monumental, structural even. The pins gleam in the light despite being flecked with dust of unknown provenance (have not scientists determined that most household "dust" consists of shed particles of skin?). And moving into and out of an inky blackness by way of the light's slow pulse is the central subject, before the camera circles beneath its minute architectonics, filmed so that it appears towering, larger than life. At no moment is it possible, beyond any reasonable doubt, to determine what it is you are looking at. The object is at once an abstraction and a piece of material evidence seen at such close proximity as to be unrecognizable, unnamable.

As with much of Thompson's work, *Human* is a distillation. It is the product of a dense enlacement of histories, at once personal and universal, and is by turns a sumptuous document, devoted homage, art historical resurrection, portrait, self-portrait, and biting manifesto. To speak of this work one first needs to speak of the British artist Donald Rodney, born in Birmingham in 1961, the youngest of twelve children born to Jamaican parents of the so-called Windrush generation. Rodney died in March 1998, aged 36, of complications caused by sickle-cell anemia, a hereditary blood disorder that overwhelmingly afflicts those of African descent (the gene's originary function being a defense against malaria). The late artist deployed his body as both evidence and metaphor, a palimpsest of the racism, police violence, and trauma historically and literally writ upon it. Rodney was part



_Human, 2018

35 mm film, color, silent
 9'30" @24fps, in loop
 Commissioned and produced by
 Kunsthalle Basel
 Made with the kind permission of the
 Estate of Donald Rodney, London
 Courtesy the artist; Hopkinson
 Mossman, Auckland/Wellington;
 and Galerie Nagel Draxler,
 Cologne/Berlin

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 Production, Wellington
 Printing: Niagara Custom Lab, Toronto

of a generation of artists who contributed to an emergent black British consciousness that irrevocably changed the landscape of British art. His perhaps most iconic work, *In the House of My Father* (1997), is a photograph he made while hospitalized, one episode among many following the numerous surgeries he underwent to alleviate pain and to postpone the death sentence of his genetic coding. In the image, one sees a close-up of Rodney's hand cradling a tiny sculpture of a house made just prior and bearing its own title, *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* (1997). Measuring not much more than a few centimeters in each direction, it is built from the artist's own skin and held together by pins and cellophane tape. This object, charged, thick with anguish, and so extraordinarily fragile as to be accessible almost exclusively by way of its photographic reproduction, is the basis for Thompson's film—at once a gesture of interpretation and appropriation, and an attempt to reactivate the stakes of Rodney's message, still so urgent today.

_Human features the house Rodney made of his epidermis, his black skin, twenty years on. Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist and anti-colonial intellectual, insisted that the history of racism is inseparable from what he termed an "epidermal schema." The artist Adrian Piper called it a "visual pathology." The very idea of white supremacy, they both understood, is constructed by the gaze and at the level of skin. Rodney knew well (the whole of his oeuvre declares as much) that the trap of reading the human in terms of black or white begins at precisely that corporeal border between self and world whose

material he was fashioning into a house. Thus by turning his own skin from the surface upon which racist ideology is projected into a metaphor for loss, memory, love, and home, Rodney demanded a thinking that both indicts and transcends the epidermal.

Just over three minutes into *_Human*, the film's seeming abstraction gives way to a strange shift in perspective. Now shot from above, capturing what finally reveals itself more clearly to be the delicate structure of a house, the viewpoint bears the characteristic movements of automated surveillance. The camera zooms in and out mechanically, circling the rudimentary architecture surrounded by fragments of "leftover" skin (diligently kept and cared for by the executors of Rodney's estate for the purpose of a possible future repair). To watch this sequence, and others, is to detect a logic that seems not quite governed by aesthetics or formal concerns. Instead, it is driven by a form of conceptualism that deploys cuts and shifts of perspective to entangle Rodney's biography with Thompson's own, and Rodney's critical commentary on his time with Thompson's on ours.

During different moments in the film, Rodney's house serves as an anticipatory symbol for the locations of contemporary violent events, such as London's Grenfell Tower, a low-income housing project consumed in a blaze of official neglect, or the house of Stephon Clark's grandmother in Sacramento, California, on whose porch Clark was shot down by police. Images of both of these sites were captured by helicopters, from above, and show the

architectural structures involved as we are shown Rodney's skin house. The automation of some of Thompson's camera's movements was conceived to replicate the surveillance images (having gone viral) of these recent scenes of violence, down to their precise angles of vision and zooms.

Thompson's careful reckoning of present injustice has yielded a film syncopated with trauma, not just collective but also deeply personal. To edit the imagery, he used data concerning Huntington's disease carried in the cells of his siblings. Although Huntington's is a disorder obviously different from Rodney's, it is similarly hereditary, and the fact that Thompson's siblings manifest the deterioration from it suggests that likely so, too, does the artist, who, as he watches his family succumbing to the disease, in essence already "lives"—or, more aptly, "dies"—with it anyway.

In many ways Huntington's disease and sickle-cell anemia are polar opposites. If sickle-cell anemia is, to quote sociologist Stuart Hall, an "emblematically black disease," Huntington's is a white one, affecting primarily subjects of European descent (Thompson's own affliction would thus be traceable to the genetics of his white/pākehā New Zealand mother, rather than his Fijian father). The investment in Huntington's research far surpasses that in sickle-cell research, a preferential interest indelibly tied to the logic of racism and, by extension, to the social distribution of death.

In the context of Huntington's disease, repetition is meaningful, because any repeat count over thirty-six of the DNA bases known as CAG within that specific gene (called HTT_HUMAN) virtually maps out one's (foreshortened) life expectancy. Thompson uses forty-two, the number of times his siblings' CAGs repeat, and other medical details as a kind of coding or score to structure the film, most palpably detectable in its construction from forty-two strips of film of varying length. Thompson's film consciously sets two illnesses into relation, mingling two life experiences that have little in common other than their prematurely fatal conclusion. Yet, this is also an act of subversion, shared by both artists' oeuvres: Rodney's displays a specific conceptual act also observable in Thompson's—an identification with the pain of others that transvalues one's own. In that light, one might look to Rodney's multiple self-portraits as police victim as conceptual precedents for Thompson's auto-portraiture.

If systemic racism has been a thread running through Thompson's performances, sculptures, and films, so too has a preoccupation with inheritance. This is the case in the performance he organized in which visitors could gain access to his family's multigenerational home (*inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam*, 2012/14), or with his extended performative action focusing on the tombstones of anonymous immigrants and laborers buried in a segregated cemetery in Fiji, in which the artist became the legal custodian of these markers, and cleaned and cared for them when government officials did not (*Sucu Mate / Born Dead*, 2016). There is also the set of films featuring the children and grandchildren of women who died at the hands of police brutality (*Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, 2016). Inheritance is all the more present in *Human*, not only genetic or artistic, but also in the sense of the contemporary Western colonial "inheritance" that continues to shape our present.

Human is the name of both a film and this first exhibition it appears in. As with all of Thompson's sober, meticulous presentations, this one reveals minute details as critical to the production of meaning. As per the artist's instructions, in Kunsthalle Basel's stairwell, the monumental fresco is covered and the windows are boarded up; Thompson likens the gesture to the space "holding its breath." This thinking of a space as if it were a person brings some of Donald Rodney's last words—"I can't breathe"—to inform details of Thompson's exhibition. "I can't breathe" were also the final words of Eric Garner—unarmed, black, and held in a chokehold by police on the pavement of Staten Island, New York, in 2014—uttered eleven times before he died. That the phrase, which has become vital as a rallying cry for Black Lives Matter and a metaphor for oppression, is on Thompson's mind should be no surprise. At the heart of his project is the attempt to make work of, and about, his time while looking back and also already indexing his own end. According to Thompson, the legacy that Rodney's *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* left him is to try to imagine something that doesn't live in the unequal present, but anticipates an existence after that present has ended.

Luke Willis Thompson was born in 1988 in Auckland, New Zealand; he lives and works in Auckland and London.

With kind support from Peter Handschin, Martin Hatebur, and Park Road Post Production, additionally supported by Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation and Panavision.

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Thanks to
John Akomfrah, Amgueddfa Cymru – National Museum Wales, Alex Davidson, Clémentine Deliss, Saskia Draxler, Beate Engel, John Gow, Jo Gow, Benjamin Grappin, Peter Handschin, Martin Hatebur, Antonia Hirsch, Sarah Hopkinson, Klein, Samuel Leuenberger, Kitty McKenny, Stuart McKenzie, Danae Mossman, Christian Nagel, National Museum Cardiff, Keith Piper, Sue Renault, Andrew Renton, Simon Robinson, George Rumsey, Christina Salampassis, Megan de Silva, Marc Spiegler, Polly Staple, Stoffler Musik AG, Diane Symons, Hannah Tempest, Tulia Thompson, Nicholas Thornton, Jenna Udy, and Dean Watkins

GUIDED TOURS THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

Every Sunday at 3 pm guided tour, in German

Curator's tour with Elena Filipovic, in English
17.6.2018, Sunday, 3 pm

Guided tour, in English
28.6.2018, Thursday, 6:30 pm
19.7.2018, Thursday, 6:30 pm

EDUCATION / PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Kunsthalle Basel Night
13.6.2018, Wednesday, 7–10 pm
With a live concert by the London-based musician Klein to accompany Luke Willis Thompson's new film.
Free entry

Live concert by Klein
16.6.2018, Saturday, 10:30–11:30 pm
In collaboration with Art Basel's Parcours Night (which runs 7 pm to midnight throughout Basel's historic center), Kunsthalle Basel once again hosts the London-based musician Klein, performing a live concert at 10:30 pm to accompany Luke Willis Thompson's new film. The exhibitions are open through midnight.
Free entry

Children's tour *I Spy with My Little Eye!*
24.6.2018, Sunday, 3 pm
12.8.2018, Sunday, 3 pm
A tour and workshop for children aged 5–10, in German, by reservation:
kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

Kunsthalle ohne Schwellen

4.–9.8.2018, workshops for disabled people
In the all-day workshop, participants explore the current exhibitions and try out different forms of artistic expression. By reservation:
kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch

In the Kunsthalle Basel library you will find a selection of publications related to Luke Willis Thompson.

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More information at kunsthallebasel.ch