

Petzel

Ellen Y. Tani, "Best Show 2024: Nikita Gale, Petzel, New York," *Artforum*, December 2024.

ARTFORUM

BEST SHOW 2024

NIKITA GALE

Petzel, New York

By Ellen Y. Tani



View of "Nikita Gale: NOSEBLEED," 2024, Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

I SAW NIKITA GALE'S "NOSEBLEED" at Petzel just hours before visiting the 2024 Whitney Biennial, where another, more widely discussed work by the artist was on view: the Bucksbaum Award-winning *TEMPO RUBATO (STOLEN TIME)*, 2023–24, a silenced player piano that operated quietly in a dramatically lit room while visitors puzzled over its relationship to performance, property, and sound. "NOSEBLEED," on the other hand, gave us a diffracted experience rather than a central object, altering the architectural and semantic expectations associated with the exhibition as a mode of artistic presentation. Both environments questioned whether performance necessarily requires an embodied performer, and involved a certain refusal of the figure that has carried the artist's interest for years. Gale's interdisciplinary

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Ellen Y. Tani, “Best Show 2024: Nikita Gale, Petzel, New York,” *Artforum*, December 2024. practice choreographs the elision of sculpture, sound, film, light, and photography, resulting in uneasy and often uncanny experiences. In the past five years, the artist’s work has taken the form of increasingly immersive installations that are nevertheless characterized by absence—of sound, light, or a performing figure—and dysfunctional objects (such as representations of cones of light cast in concrete). Gale asserts opacity, refusal, and silence as both political positions and an unlikely form of representation; more specifically, as a mode of questioning what performance can be in the absence of a body. Silence, whether chosen or imposed, can provide a defense against surveillance, censorship, and exploitation: As the artist described in a 2022 interview published by Chisenhale Gallery, “Silence as something that’s imposed versus something that’s chosen . . . [is] the difference between choosing to be visible versus being forced to be visible.”



Nikita Gale, *TEMPO RUBATO (STOLEN TIME)*, 2023–24, modified player piano, audio, LED lighting system. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2024. From the 2024 Whitney Biennial. Photo: Ron Amstutz.

Much of Gale’s recent work has been shaped in collaboration with lighting designer Josephine Wang, yielding a conceptual approach to the aesthetic experience that is part institutional critique, part dramaturgy. In the ’60s, Conceptual art’s anti-formalist stance explored the

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While refusing to present a figure, Gale also refuses to see “the body” as an abstraction without specificity. The artist’s referents are often highly particular and deeply studied: Take *PRIVATE DANCER*, 2020, an homage to Tina Turner (the artist is a superfan). In a darkened room, a sculpture made of theatrical lighting scaffolds flickered in and out of visibility, illuminated by lights that were set to move in time with music from Turner’s titular 1984 album—although no music played in the space. “NOSEBLEED” merged Gale’s position as an avid fan of pop spectacle with the artist’s studies of archaeology and anthropology; from the nosebleed seats, the cheapest in the house, you might not be able to see the performer very well, but you have a great view of the crowd.



Nikita Gale, *ACCUMULATION (RENAISSANCE/ERAS)*, 2024, CNC-cut aluminum, dimensions variable.

As an environment for viewing ourselves within the apparatus of large-scale spectacle, the show positioned Gale in a long line of artists as people-watchers. Its eponymous artwork, *NOSEBLEED*, comprises a mirrored wall tilted forward at an angle, a tower of hot spotlights, and a black-and-white photograph blown up to cover the entire floor. From the entryway, the photograph was nearly illegible, but when viewed in the downcast mirror, reversed, it revealed a grainy image of a crowded arena taken from the perspective of someone

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Ellen Y. Tani, “Best Show 2024: Nikita Gale, Petzel, New York,” *Artforum*, December 2024. among the throngs of excited listeners, far enough away that the performer was unrecognizable. Eleven framed photographs and six sculptures rested on the floor. The photographs, also titled *NOSEBLEED*, shared in the depiction of round forms with a black center, ranging from grainy aerial views of stadiums and an open grave to those of an ear canal, a pupil, and the human throat. Elsewhere, the artist pieced together what resembled postmodern ruins: black, 3D-printed maquettes made of crusty graphite-coated pumice and foam, each combining different fragments of extant and unbuilt stadiums. Some were closed forms, referring back to the aerial imagery of stadiums, while others were open, uncannily resembling the curvature of a human ear.

The two largest sculptures (*SCENE 1* and *SCENE 2*, both 2024) rested flat on the floor, their tan velvet curtains billowing in unlikely swags over aluminum armatures that resembled painting stretchers. If the photographs made opaque references to the importance of embodiment to how performance is produced and perceived, the “SCENE” sculptures paid material homage to stagecraft, the invisible labor that creates the atmosphere of performance and shapes its meaning. They recall an earlier body of work, “*RUINER*” (2020–), in which the artist wrapped towels, dredged in concrete, through the openings of metal barricades to create sculptures of fluid and knotted entanglement that spoke to that period’s dynamic of bodily confrontation—both police brutality and protest—with a uniquely poetic intensity.



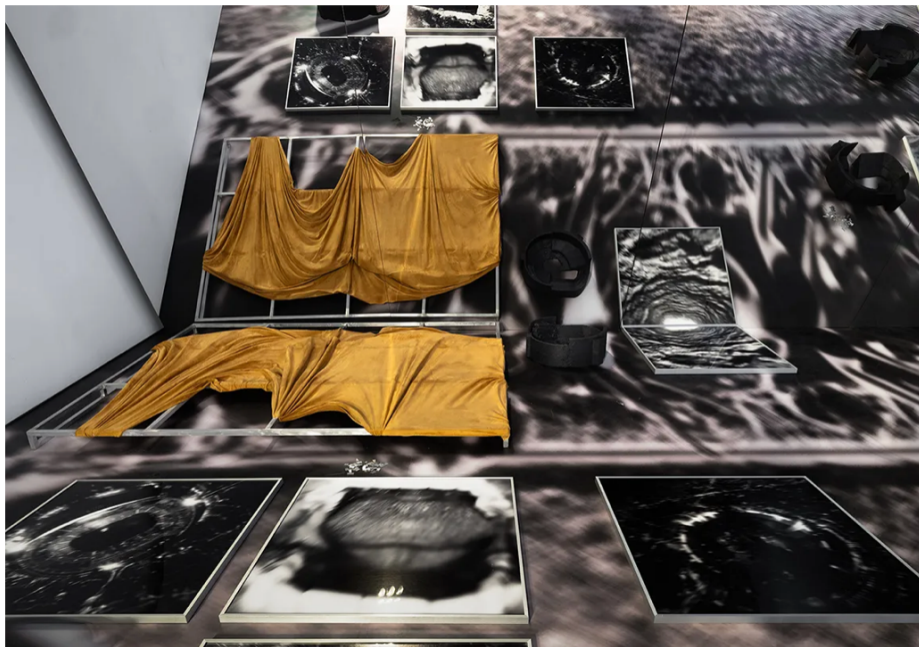
Nikita Gale, *PRIVATE DANCER*, 2020, aluminum trusses, lights, light control system (44 minutes 32 seconds). Installation view, California African American Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.

Most of us witnessed those traumatic events from a mediated distance, a condition of experience that shares in “*NOSEBLEED*”’s concern with the consumption of spectacle. But the demands for “solutions” to systemic racism on behalf of individuals and institutions in the past four years have yielded no resolution or answer, only slow change. Institutions have long believed in the

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Ellen Y. Tani, "Best Show 2024: Nikita Gale, Petzel, New York," *Artforum*, December 2024. optical representation of diversity over structural transformation toward equity. The artist's frustration of optical and acoustic access to a message—the functional goal of stadium architecture—undertakes a critical approach to representation not as a way of making something visually discernible but rather as a cultural process of meaning-making.

Ultimately, Gale invites us to sit with irresolution and ambiguity, presenting a scenario in which representation-as-disentanglement is not the end goal. As we navigated around the photographs and objects on the floor, peering over and into them curiously like visitors to an archaeological dig site, the installation seemed formally, conceptually, and perceptually inscrutable. But when we stepped back to view the reflection of the room in the mirror, those elements lined up neatly into ordered geometries; physical proximity to the objects didn't necessarily equate to their apprehension. The mirror's optical and architectural mediation—and its effect on our bodies—was impossible to ignore as both a dizzying and an organizing force. By suggesting a formal coherence, it offered structure to a viewing experience that, for me and my viewing partner, felt like circling around an absent center only to be spun out again by the work's refusal of any kind of enclosure. Our discussion circled around the topics of social-media-fueled narcissism and the false sense of collectivity that it offers, desire and decay, fascism and other tunnel-vision ideologies, apertures and gullets and holds and weather, the show resisting our efforts at sense-making.



View of "Nikita Gale: NOSEBLEED," 2024, Petzel, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Small piles of metal glinted in the light as I moved around the space, resembling disco ball mosaics or glitter. Collectively titled *ACCUMULATION (RENAISSANCE/ERAS)*, 2024, they nodded to post-Minimalism in their didactic titling and seemingly arbitrary arrangement, but their presence felt intentional, like ad hoc offerings that pointed to the almost religious draw of

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Ellen Y. Tani, “Best Show 2024: Nikita Gale, Petzel, New York,” *Artforum*, December 2024. two of the most hyped pop music tours in recent years: Beyoncé’s Renaissance World Tour and Taylor Swift’s Eras Tour. *Renaissance*, Beyoncé’s seventh studio album, is an homage to club and disco, and the visual aesthetic of the tour and the album was both futuristic and retro, saturated with reflective glimmers: Beyoncé adorned with a disco ball cowboy hat, astride a mirror-skinned horse, or wearing a gleaming multifaceted silver bodysuit. Swift’s Eras Tour also played with time, periodizing seventeen years of her discography into ten “chapters” that represented the different phases of her musical journey. What is renaissance—an era of revival and rebirth—after all if not an invocation of the past to help us make sense of the present? And what is pop music, which delivers novelty and reinvention in equal measure, if not that very reflection packaged and sold back to us? Contrasting with these reflective surfaces was the empty center of the stadium, which, like the room itself, seemed to swallow us whole, as if we were inside the body of a camera, a space of disorientation between viewfinder, lens, and mirror, itself a mechanical proxy for the relationship between the lens of the eye, the optic nerve, and the brain.

In “NOSEBLEED,” Gale approached the stadium concert as an infrastructure of social relations, a persistent concern of the artist’s interdisciplinary practice. The view from the cheap seats makes visible the arena as a site of physical gathering and shared listening, an increasingly rare occurrence at a time when algorithmic technology’s appetite for our attention often results in individuals scrolling alone, unaware of time passing. The mega-star pop concert remains one of the few experiences that produces collective awe, the kind with enough atmospheric intensity to shake our bones and give us chills. If, as the composer and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer wrote, “hearing is like touching at a distance,” even the most devalued position (the nosebleeds) still affords some kind of intimacy.

That intimacy is forged through technologies of amplification: powerful speakers, sequins and glitter, spotlights, backup dancers, a multiscreen jumbotron. Though intended to democratize the concertgoing experience, these technologies can only simulate a closeness between performer and audience. Even if you can see the sweat glisten on Beyoncé’s face on the jumbotron, it’s not the same as seeing that glow from fifteen feet away. The best performers have a gravitational force to their presence, but can that be evoked without a body? Here there was no music, only the faint buzz of the lights, and no performers to witness other than ourselves.

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