

The background is a dark, almost black, field of fine, light-colored dots, creating a halftone or stippled effect. In the center, there is a large, irregular shape cut out of the background, revealing a natural wood grain texture. The shape is roughly triangular with jagged, torn edges, particularly at the top and right sides. The wood grain is oriented vertically, with the top of the shape being narrower and the bottom being wider.

ALEXIS  
PESKINE

POWER FIGURES





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# POWER FIGURES

*'It was my philosophy teacher from the Antilles who reminded me one day:  
"When you hear someone insulting the Jews pay attention; he is talking about you!"'*  
Frantz Fanon quoting Aimé Césaire.

GH: Before talking about your work, could you tell me a little about your background?

AP: My name is Alexis Peskine. I'm a visual artist, born and raised in Paris. My father is French and Russian and my mother, originally from Salvador de Bahia, is Brazilian. My father's father was from St. Petersburg and his father from Lithuania. So my great-grandfather was a *Litvak* – an Ashkenazi Jew – who left St. Petersburg in 1915, when my grandfather was four years old, to emigrate to New York. Eight years later, the family migrated again, this time to France, where they became naturalised French citizens. During the war my grandfather was twice captured by the Gestapo: originally because they suspected he was Jewish – but couldn't prove it, and later for being involved with the Resistance. This time he was deported to Dachau, and fortunately liberated by U.S. army forces, in 1945. My Brazilian grandfather was a woodworker and my mother's mother a seamstress. I mention these details to give an idea of the historical narratives that run through my immediate family and to suggest the different cultural traditions I inherit. Interestingly, my Lithuanian great-grandmother was an ironmonger who used to sell nails. Perhaps it's just that family history of wood and nails expressing itself through my art today!

Although my grandfather and father were not practising Jews, the traumatic experiences on the Jewish side of the family influenced how my father raised me. My father was only two years old when his father was interned in a concentration camp. So, we grew up in a left-leaning household, and we were all deeply suspicious of nationalist ideas and ideologies. But I was born into another generation, and had to contend with a different kind of metropolitan racism, including constant problems with the police, who'd continually stop and search me and check my ID. They harassed me because I was young and Black and looked, to them, like a 'suspicious foreigner'. Like a lot of Black people, I became disappointed in the Left – just as many Black women were disappointed by Feminism – because there was an absence of diversity there, and they abandoned us to our own struggles. It wasn't just police brutality either, it was the denial of housing and jobs, racist books, cartoons and jokes in the media, skinheads and right-wing extremists attacking us in the '80s and '90s... all the trappings of ingrained systemic racism. So, from an early age, I was interested in racial dynamics, the politics of identity and the 'Black Experience.' If I spoke out as a Black person in France, no one would be interested. But by weaving these issues into my art, I'm allowed to talk about things without being dismissed, and people start taking an interest in things they wouldn't normally notice.

GH: When did you first realise that your path lay in the visual arts?

AP: At one point in my schooling I needed to re-orient myself and went to a vocational school in Paris to do a CFA in Graphic Arts. During that time, I was very influenced by my aunt, Marianne Rachline, who took me to see many exhibitions. I remember how





passionate she once became at a show of Bouabré's small drawings. She was very knowledgeable about art and design, as well as cinema, fashion and literature. Whilst listening to her took quite some effort, she taught me so much. Even today, if you look at my pieces, the aesthetic is very 'clean' and that's a legacy from having worked in graphic arts.

GH: What drew you away from continuing on to become a graphic designer?

AP: I used to play a lot of basketball as a youngster, and, when I was seventeen, I left my family behind to go play ball in the States. This meant I was able to follow my chosen path and pay for my studies. I did my first arts degree in Washington D.C. at Howard University, which is one of the best known of the HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges & Universities), before doing postgraduate studies at M.I.C.A. in Baltimore. Then, while trying to make it as an artist in New York, I lived in Jersey City for two years. That exposed me to Black American arts and culture and to Black American struggles and resistance, both past and present, and I became familiar with what's called the Black Experience, which paralleled the Afropean and Afrobrazilian ones of my own family. My experiences in the States changed me completely, and I was never the same person again. When you travel, you see other places and unfamiliar things, and it's impossible *not* to understand the world in a completely different way. Of course that's true of anyone who travels - but being an artist adds another dimension on top of just being a traveller.

GH: In her book on Mark Rothko, Annie Cohen-Solal, talks about certain artists being '*dépaysagé*' (stateless) - that is becoming nomads who exist between the different worlds. She describes how when Marcus Rothkowitz, a rebellious immigrant (whose Latvian Jewish family escaped the Russian *pogroms*) arrived in New York, he turned to art because it was only amongst similarly *dépaysagé*, immigrant artists that he found any acceptance.

AP: I can certainly relate to what you say about Rothko being a Jewish immigrant in New York. Instead of *dépaysagé*, I often use the term 'rootless' in English, and for me that sense of rootlessness is an important part of who I am as an artist. I work in Paris, in New York, in Salvador, Brazil and, lately, in Senegal - where I love being. There's a palpable energy in Dakar that feels like Paris must have felt in the '20s, or New York in the '80s. The place has a creative buzz, and it's still possible to achieve so much without having to spend ridiculous amounts just to rent a studio or whatever else you need. Moving around a lot, as I do, it can feel as though you don't belong anywhere and then, eventually, you arrive at a place where you realise you belong everywhere.

GH: Moving between all those places must raise questions about your core identity. Who *is* the essential being operating in those very dissimilar cultural spaces, communicating in different languages and yet still expressing a unique inner self?

AP: Identity is a much more complex proposition than most people realise, and for me especially. It's always changing and evolving. I like the definition put forward by Amin Maalouf, the Franco-Lebanese writer, in his book *In the Name of Identity*. Maalouf states that identity can be composed of a plurality of different cultures coexisting together, whereby one element enriches another and the result is more, rather than less, complex. Writing in French, he stresses that he is not *less* French because he's also Lebanese, his identity comprises both of those things inextricably bound together. So too, I can reflect parts of my mother's Brazilian culture and still be very French. I could be French *and* Buddhist just as I could be French *and* Jewish, or Muslim. They're not mutually exclusive domains. Maalouf defines a person's core identity as comprising all those myriad things that stop him or her from being *identical* to anyone else. So, identity measures differences not similarities. It's not something that ropes you in to some narrow, imaginary and indefinable notion of 'Frenchness'.

Everyone's identity is made up of at least two distinct parts: innate characteristics and more plastic capabilities that evolve often because of choices made over the course of life. Obviously much of your identity derives from attributes that you're born with and can't make decisions about. When earlier you asked me to present myself, the first thing I said was, 'I'm a visual artist.' That has become a definitive part of my identity, regardless of everything else I am - or do. But there are things that define you in ways that are imposed on you from outside. The obvious example here is simply having coloured skin. Skin pigmentation is genetically transmitted, and the amount of melanin formed in the skin confers definite advantages in equatorial regions. But the possession or absence of those genes has societal consequences, and that's a heavy load to bear, particularly when what is projected onto you is neither who you really are, nor what you have become. And you can't just ignore it; because it conditions the way others regard you and therefore how you interact with them. On a psychological level it determines so many things beyond your control.



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GH: When you first arrived in the States as a Black man who was good at basketball, you must have become aware of different stereotypes and projections other than those familiar French ones. Also, being outside your normal reality you become a prime representative of the place you left - 'the Frenchman'. I wonder did you start to read different sorts of things?

AP: Sure! I realised just how French I was when I went to the States! At Howard I began reading much more. I read Frantz Fanon, who was highly regarded there. Fanon speaks, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, about how Black people are 'seen' (actually the way they're hardly even seen at all) by white people, and, as a trained psychiatrist, he recognised that this dysfunctional interaction severely damages the root identity of all Black people who assimilate this way of (not) being seen by white people. From Fanon, it was a short step to his teacher, Aimé Césaire, and that led me to read about the *Négritude* movement. What most struck me was how this entire intellectual movement had been hidden from us in France. It's quite a shock to encounter the writings of Senghor, Césaire, Fanon, etc. in translation, and realise how important they are outside of France. You wonder why they're not being taught in French schools, and realise that their ideas must still unsettle the French establishment today.

GH: So with the ideas we've been discussing, of cultural hybridity, identity and your roving lifestyle, how do these all filter back into the art you create?

AP: My art is really an expression of my feelings, my emotions and oftentimes also my frustrations about this environment where I find myself. I recognise, to put it more poetically, that I carry within me the experiences of many peoples, but I also have this deepening awareness of the Black Experience and the struggles of the people who share that with me. That is the part of my 'identity' that surfaces, and to which I give priority. That's where I choose to join with the world and express myself. There are many related issues but they can all be gathered under the heading of questions of equality. At first glance, I might look quite laid-back, but innerly there's a deep sorrow and anger at the centuries-old cycles of cold-blooded injustice swathed in denial, disdain and deceitful compassion that exist around me. I'm trying to make a difference and make changes as I navigate the world into which I've been dropped. I'm also trying to become more vocal about things I see in front of me that I want to confront.

GH: Can I ask you about the people you choose to portray? What is it that you're looking for in them, and do you give them any particular directions when you photograph them?

AP: Not really. It's an interactive process - I'm looking for something that interests me in the face, the ability to express certain emotions perhaps, or the way certain features already express inner feelings, or characteristics that attract my attention. It's also my choice to depict Black people and especially those darker hues within the range of Black people. That's because of the way that colourism has worked against them, and they have been regarded as unattractive - even within our own communities. It's all part of the work I'm engaged in.

I don't really give the subjects any directions as such, but I'm very present when I'm shooting and perhaps my own face is expressive of things that are important to me - so it becomes an interactive exchange. I'm looking for those inner qualities to shine through, trying to bring them out and make them clear. Ultimately, I'm trying to convey something that is greater than both my subjects and me - and that's not something that you can so easily explain.

GH: What happens next?

AP: It all begins with the photographs of people - either known or unknown individuals - that I choose to portray. I select particular portraits to enlarge, and refashion them using the roughest and most ordinary of materials, planks of plain wood and iron nails. The unfinished wood is initially stained with earth, water and coffee grounds. The nails are of different gauge, shank and head size, and can be found in any ironmonger's shop, as too can the matt black paint I use. Finally, to adorn the heads of the completed nail portrait, I use gold or silver leaf, which contrasts with the mundanity of the other materials. Those everyday materials are all I need to create the impression of large-format black and white photographs. The nails pick out the highlighting effects of light rippling across the surface of black skin, and by driving the nails to different depths, I can suggest other kinds of contouring too, so the final work shifts between two and three dimensional effects as the viewer moves.

GH: Given the title for this exhibition and your basic technique of hammering iron nails into wood, there must be links to those old Kongo wooden figurines covered in nails that functioned as ritual power-objects.

AP: Yes, the people of the Congo Basin would use rough wooden effigies full of nails, which they called *Nkisi N'Kondi* (pl. *minkisi*), as sacred ancestor figures providing protection and serving to heal people. Those figurines could have positive or negative powers depending, but the number of nails in any one figure seems to suggest the relative power of the spirit that the carving represented. Such ideas were part of my early thinking, when I originally decided to use nails as a medium of expression. *Power Figures*, the name commonly used for them in the west, seemed to be a perfect title for this show, since I'm talking about both power and protection. One of my original intentions was to reclaim ownership and take back power for the Black people presented, and that's a form of self-protection. There's no doubt that the act of nailing things into wood is a disruptive and violent action. Yet, it can also be soothing, releasing energy and calming you down. In Chinese acupuncture needles inserted into the skin promote healing by releasing trapped energies. So the painful, intrusive nature of the act and the positive, healing aspects of the process coexist within the same ambivalent metaphor. When I talk of healing, I'm primarily thinking about the person performing the act - the artist himself. But it also embraces those viewers who see and react to the work, and on a larger scale the idea of healing the trauma of the history of slavery, inequality and discrimination.





*Power*, 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 195 x 250 cm.





It's also interesting to think about how nails function when joining wooden things together, providing strength, shape and structural integrity. The nails hidden inside are essential to the creation of packing cases, furniture and even houses. So the nail itself becomes a symbol for the way Africans and the Afro-American culture (of both north and south Americas) have functioned in relation to the wider societies within which they operate. Though unseen and forgotten, they have been instrumental in creating some of the strongest economies and the most influential cultures in the world. So I take the rough, commonplace, inanimate and normally invisible nail and reposition it, to make it visible, vibrant and alive. By exposing the nails on the surface, they become the focus of attention and that's what I want to emphasise – the way each nail is unapologetic about its own existence and experience. This parallels the Black person's experience. Black people are always expected to be invisible and to keep quiet about their presence. For me, the nail becomes metaphorically associated with the Black Experience - the two are inseparable. Just as the protruding nails of the *minkisi* symbolise prodigious spiritual power, so do these nails, covered in gold leaf, epitomise the power of transformation and radiate transcendence.

GH: Looking at the way you externalise the nails on the surface reminds me of how Fanon sees aggressivity against the Black man as inflicted by a way of looking that is tantamount to a physical assault: '*I had to meet the white man's eyes. A weight burdened me.*' Do those nails, puncturing the wooden surface or skin also symbolise the myriad pinpricks of those wounding glances?

AP: That's a valid interpretation, but these metaphors can carry many meanings at once. You could also interpret it as the rearranging of those unseen nails on the surface of the sensitive skin as protective armour. In that reading, as well as ennobling the armour, the gold leaf reflects the hostile gaze back at its source. The *minkisi* power figures certainly embodied magical abilities to defend humans against malign influences from the 'evil eye'!

GH: Just before, you used the word 'unapologetic' to explain the nails, and that's a perfect word also to describe how your sitters look back at the viewer. There's a direct, unembarrassed engagement with the viewer that is striking in its self-possession.

AP: They're questioning. They know everything. They know how white people live in their world and they know how they are regarded. It goes back to what W.E.B. du Bois called 'the peculiar sensation of double consciousness' which he defined as a sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of others. But he was talking about the African-American experience of the early nineteenth hundreds, whereas my work is more contemporary and describes the Black Experience of the present day. In that sense it's pan-African. My subjects' portraits go beyond that - they have a certain posture, and there's something impenetrable about their gaze, which means you can't look through them. The Black identity is a result of how Black people were stripped of their power and made into objects belonging to others. Even though social norms have moved beyond segregation and discrimination, they're still deeply embedded in our society today. So that gaze of impenetrability has a lot to do with reclaiming our bodies as our own. These power figures function to regain that aura of power and personal space.

GH: The one work in which that unflinching gaze is absent is actually entitled *Power*. It's different from the other works in that not only are there two figures, but also both have their eyes closed so the effect of that impenetrable power gaze is altered entirely.

AP: Well there's not just one kind of power, there are many kinds. Here I wanted to address another stereotype, that of the Black male figure. They have been so demonised: they're brutally aggressive, have lots of women and as fathers – they're always absent. I took this picture of someone I actually know very well, and I chose to shoot him together with his daughter. The image isn't about him personally though because my work is larger than just the individual subjects. I wanted to show a Black man being protective of his daughter and, in the process, reveal the delicate sensitivity - even softness - that he displays towards her. It becomes clear that his gentle, shielding gesture nurtures the power that his daughter radiates. Soft power has an aura that can be seen. Humanity, sensitivity and tenderness are qualities always attributed to white men, as though Black men are incapable of helping others or caring about their children. So I'm using dark-skinned individuals in this manner to present them in ways they are seldom shown. At first, I worried that it might be seen as cliché, but there's still a need for such things to be portrayed within the art of Black people. This work pays homage to that aesthetic which was so effortlessly handled by the Black sculptor, Augusta Savage.





GH: For me, these twin figures emanate another kind of power, veiled perhaps, but nevertheless palpable. One senses a deeper level shining through the individual portraits; they feel otherworldly, almost like *orisha* spirits.

AP: Those *orishas* are spirits of the old ways of Black African people that were maintained in exile. Sometimes I do catch glimpses of another level. Maybe deep down inside I believe in a spirit world – a world of ancestors and other forces – things which scare me and which I don't really want to confront directly, yet. Still I think that there are those things within me. They're not mine, but somehow they've been given to me to express. I recognise them as gifts: first of all the ability to be completely free – being able to do what I want and to express myself as fully as possible in the way I want. That possibility wasn't given to others who paved the way for me. Secondly, I am trying to reduce the surrounding chaos, to restore the equality that should exist, as a way of paying homage to this force – these spirits perhaps – within me. Some people say they see a power in this work, and feel a presence. If there is such a power then it links back to the ancestors, to the history of violence that we've endured and must continue to confront. These are things I don't yet understand at all: like aligning oneself with natural forces; like the spirituality that results from it; like me finding my place in the universe. I know I haven't mastered it yet – but I know it's there inside me.

© Gerard Houghton, October Gallery, August, 2017





*Aljana Moons I*, 2015. Edition of 5.  
C-print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 84 x 150 cm.









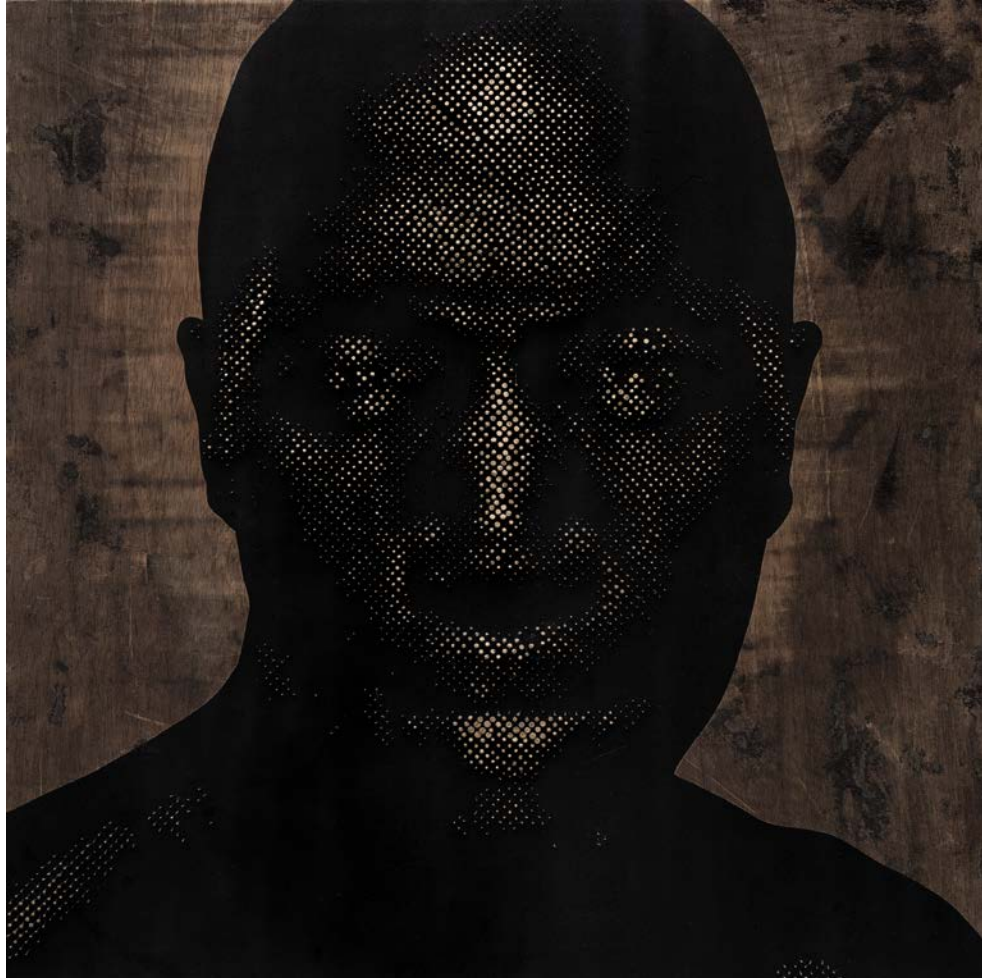
*Aljana Moons IV*, 2015. Edition of 5.  
C-print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308gsm paper, 81 x 150 cm.





Left: *Niñeen* (detail), 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 240 x 250 cm.  
Above: *Nyjur*, 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 100 x 100 cm.





Above: *Timbuktu*, 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 100 x 100 cm.  
Right: *Nilotic Night*, 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 100 x 100 cm.





Left: *Futa Tooro* (detail), 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, earth, coffee, water and acrylic on wood, 150 x 150 cm.  
Above: *Soninké Whispers*, 2017. Moon gold leaf on nails, paint and satin varnish on wood panel, 241 x 247 cm.

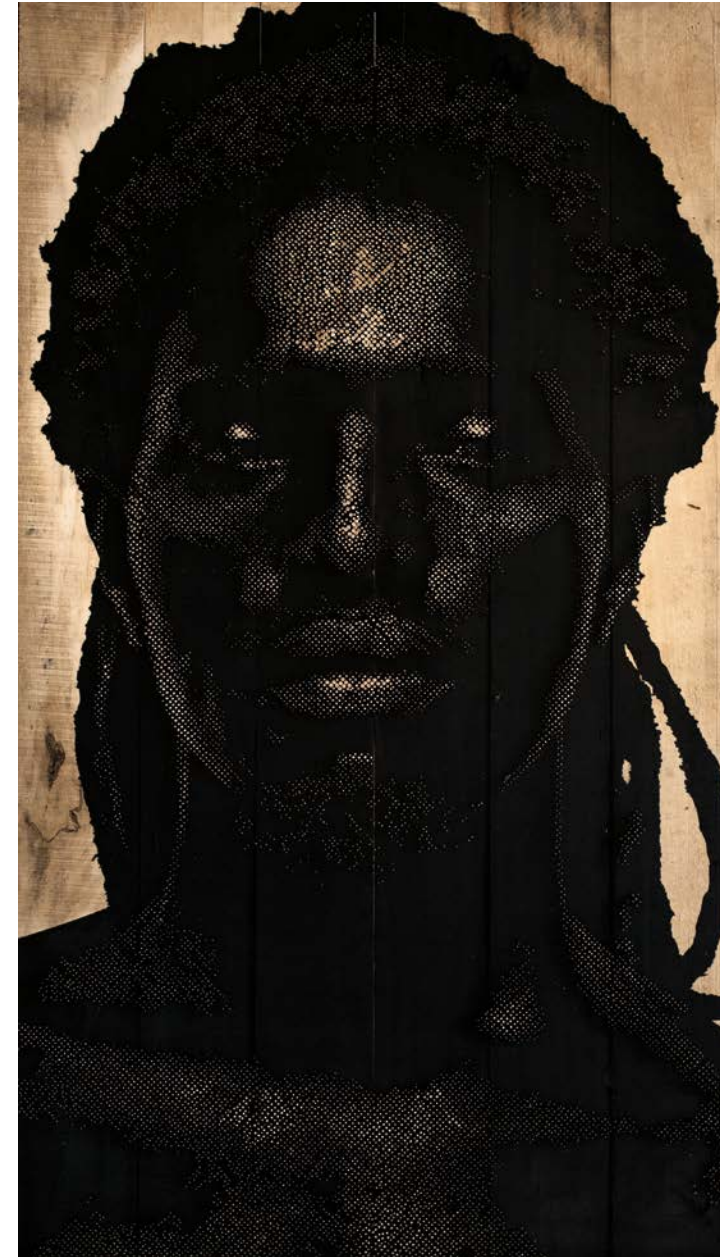








Right: *Shrine*, 2016. Moon gold leaf on nails, mud, paint and varnish on samba wood, 250 x 250 x 50 cm.



Left: *Boy Dakar*, 2016. Moon gold leaf on nails, lacquer & varnish on wood, 200 x 110 cm.



Right: *Time & Essence*, 2016. Moon gold leaf on nails, lacquer & varnish on wood, 200 x 110 cm.



# ALEXIS PESKINE

b.1979, Paris

## SOLO EXHIBITIONS (Selected)

### 2017

*Alexis Peskine: Power Figures*, October Gallery, London, UK

### 2016

*Raft of Medusa: Le Retour de la Vague*, Galerie Le Manège, Institut Français, Dakar, Senegal

### 2015

*Silent Stars*, The Devon House Mansion, Kingston, Jamaica

### 2014

*Aljana Moons*, SLP Gallery, University of San Diego, California, USA

*une galerie en chantier, des artistes qui partent en live*, Galerie Véra Amsellem (re-named 5 Contemporary Art Gallery), Paris, France

### 2013

*Tellement au-dessus de la France*, Galerie BE Espace, Paris, France

### 2011

*Alexis Peskine*, Adam Studio, Paris, France

*Alexis Peskine: International Identity*, Zidou-Bossuyt Gallery, Luxembourg, Luxembourg

### 2010

*Vibrant*, Essie Green Gallery, New York, USA

### 2009

Alexis Peskine, exhibit coincided with Paris City

Council campaign against skin bleaching, 18th arrondissement City Hall, Paris, France

*Négrifique!*, Galerie Nordine Zidou, Paris, France

### 2008

*Alexis Peskine, Freedom Fried*, N'Namdi Center for Contemporary Art (formally G.R. N'Namdi Gallery), Detroit, USA

### 2007

*Paris Noir: Reflections From The Dark Side of the City of Light*, Obsidian Arts Center, Minneapolis, USA

*Cloué: Bound by History, Class and Color*, Real Art Ways, Hartford, USA

*The French Evolution, Race, Politics & the 2005 Riot*, Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA), New York, USA

*Life Still*, Art core - NYC Gallery, New York, USA

*Content & Characters*, Harriet's Alter Ego, New York, USA

### 2006

*The French Evolution: The Work of Alexis Peskine*, Busboys and Poets, Washington D.C., USA

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Selected)

### 2017

*Transvanguard 2017*, October Gallery, London, UK

*Dandy Lion: (Re) Articulating Black Masculine Identity*, Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, Miami, USA

*Frieze New York*, New York, USA, with October Gallery, London, UK

*Art Paris Art Fair*, Paris, France, with October Gallery, London, UK

*Cape Town Art Fair*, Cape Town, South Africa, with October Gallery, London, UK

*Afriques Capitales*, 100% Afriques, La Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, France

### 2016

*1:54 Contemporary Art from Africa* with October Gallery, Somerset House, London, UK

*Re-enchantements, Dak'Art Biennale*, The Old Court House, Dakar, Senegal

*Afrofuturism Short Films Program*, Detroit Institute of Arts Detroit, USA

### 2015

*Prizm Art Fair*, Miami, USA

*RITES*, Zuckerman Museum of Art, Kennesaw State University, Atlanta, USA

### 2014

*Ceremonies of Dark Men*, Lincoln Theatre, Washington D.C., USA

RAW Material Company, Dakar, Senegal

*Addis Foto Fest*, National Museum of Et-a, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

*2<sup>nd</sup> International Biennale of Casablanca*, Casablanca, Morocco

*Afrikadaa, Dakar Biennale*, Biscuiterie de Medina, Dakar, Senegal

*Noir & Blanc/Couleur*, Musée de la Carte à Jouer, Paris, France

### 2012

Issy-les-Moulineaux Biennale, Paris, France

1st Biennale Internationale de Casablanca, Casablanca, Morocco Casablanca Biennale

### 2011

*Dias Paris*, Musée du Montparnasse Paris, France

### 2010

*Modernitiés and Résistances/To the World's Blows*: Biscuiterie de Medina, Dakar, Senegal

*2010 Fine Art*, Cape Town; Johannesburg; Durban, South Africa

*Permanent Collection*, the New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, USA

DD172 Gallery, New York, USA

*Rencontres d'Arles : On the Roof*, Arena Corner, Arles, France

*Alexis Peskine & John Waxxx*, Ooh La La Gallery & Lounge, Paris, France

### 2009

*Untitled* (group photo exhibition), Galerie Intemporel, Paris, France

### 2008

*Transformers*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, USA

*Politique, Musique, Témoignages, Débats, Agapes*, Beaux-Arts for Fulbright's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Réfectoire des Cordeliers, Paris, France

*National Black Fine Art Show*, New York, USA touring to: Galerie Intemporel, Paris, France; Galerie Bourbon-Lally, Haiti

*Garveyism*, Rush Arts, New York, USA

### 2007

*Martin Luther King Jr; Life, Times and Legacy*, The Amistad Center, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, USA

### 2005

*Intro Spective*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, USA

### 2004

*Masters of Arts in Digital Arts Thesis Show*: Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, USA

*Black: The Race, The Culture, The Class*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, USA

### 2003

*National Black Fine Art Show*, New York, USA

Kenkeleba House, New York, USA

## AWARDS

### 2007

Hennessy Black Masters Art Competition

### 2004

Fulbright Scholarship, The Franco-American Exchange Commission

### 2003

Betti Robinson Leadership Scholarship

### 2002

Verizon HBCU Student Art Competition



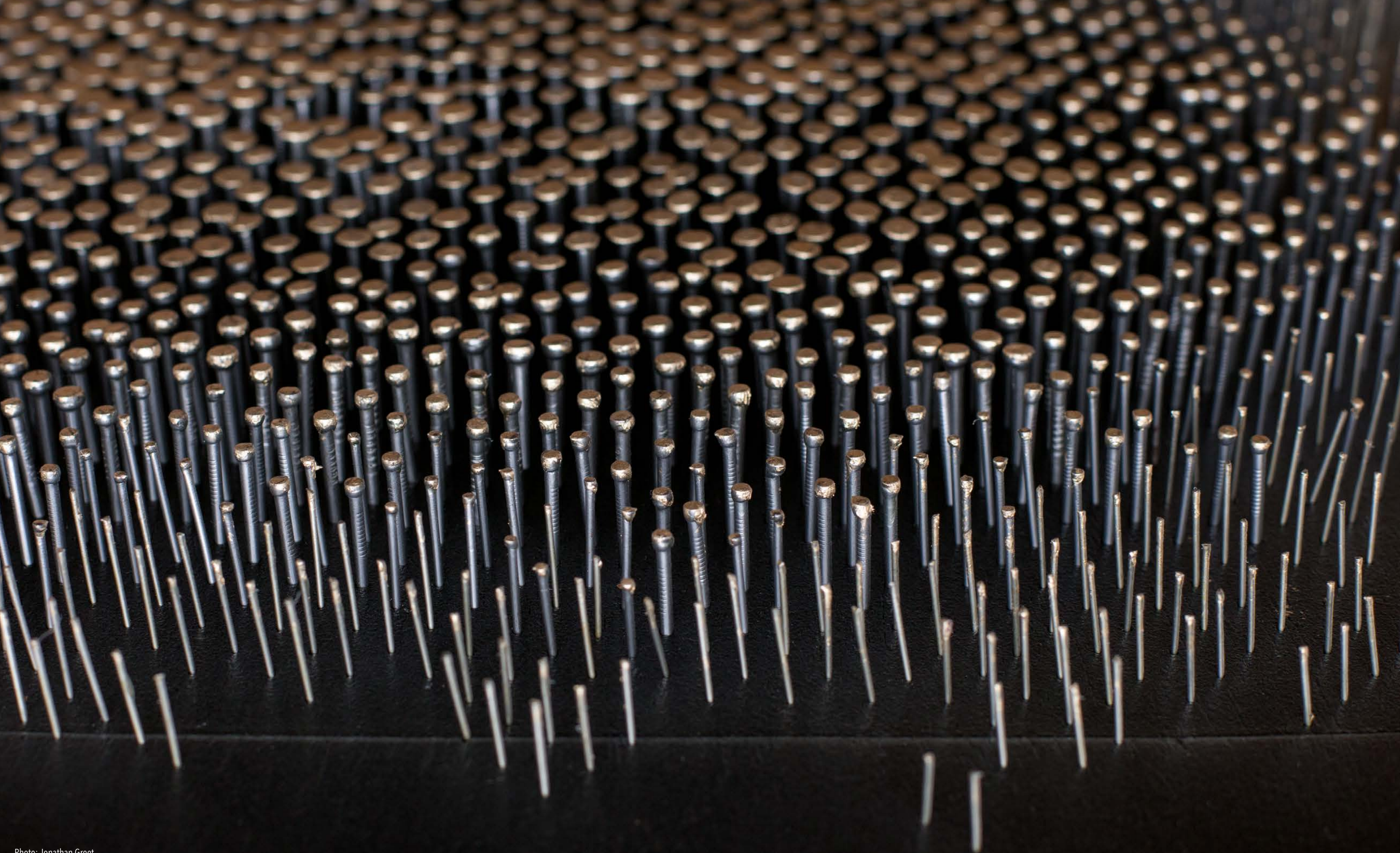
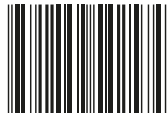


Photo: Jonathan Greet.





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