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Deborah-Joyce Holman: *Close-Up*
July 10, 2025

The Close-Up Reveals Nothing: How Deborah-Joyce Holman Complicates Interiority

BY GERVAIS MARSH · FEATURES · JULY 10, 2025

Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Close-Up*, 2024, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

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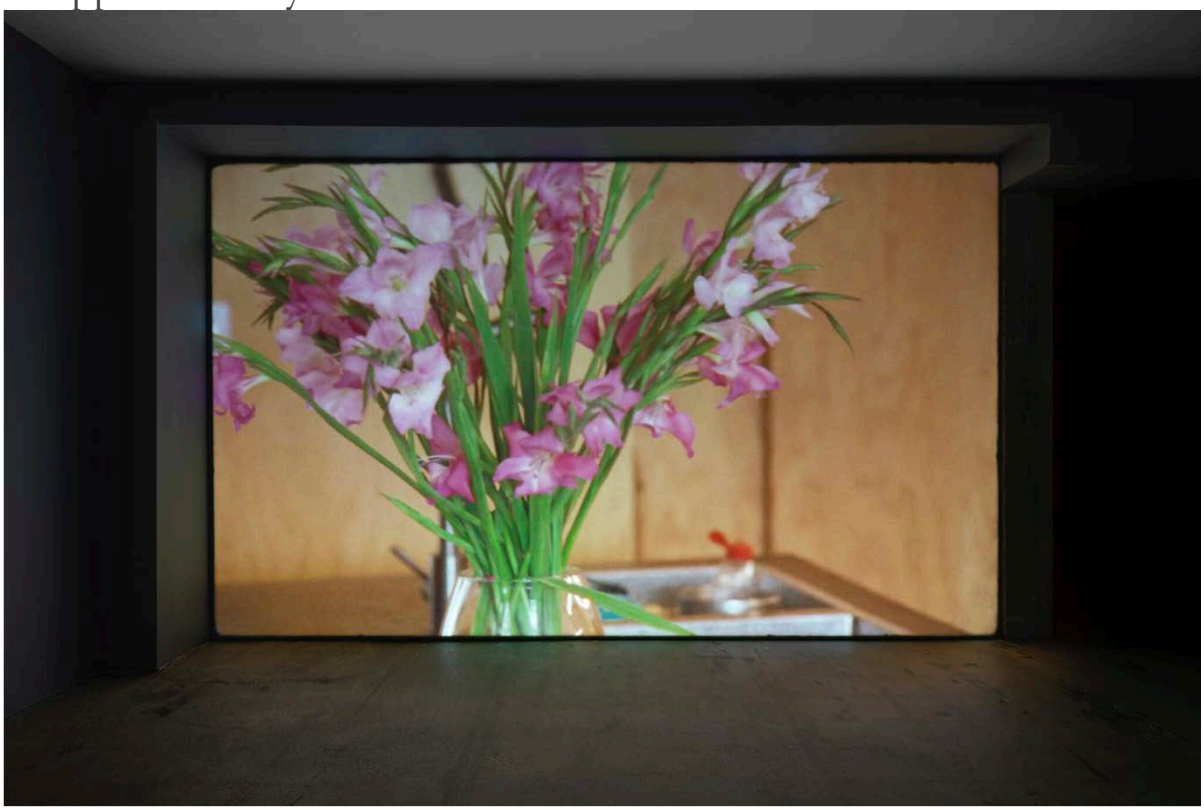
A soft, warm light morphs into a shadow of a woman's braided hair on the back of her neck. There is the sound of faint footsteps as she moves around her flat, shifting objects in the kitchen, the patter of water streaming out of the tap as she makes tea. For sixteen minutes and thirty-three seconds, I watched Deborah-Joyce Holman's film *Close-Up* (2024), relinquishing anticipation for what may happen next and settling into an ease of the ordinary scene. I observed actor Tia Bannon's unexceptional movements around the apartment, interwoven with glimpses of her surroundings: pink tulips in a vase on the kitchen counter, a cobalt teapot, and a striped rug beside a beige couch. The film restages a scene from Holman's previous multichannel video work *Close-Up/Quiet As It's Kept* (2023), organized earlier this spring at the Swiss Institute by curators KJ Abudu and Alison Coplan. While Bannon appears to wander casually throughout the flat, her gestures are highly choreographed, maintaining acute and calculated control of her detachment from the viewer.

Throughout the film, Holman complicates the mechanisms of the close-up as a technique for accentuating intimacy—a window into finer details and emotional resonances. Though the camera pulls the viewer close to Bannon's face, within the tight proximity of this encounter, her expression maintains a nonchalance. No explicit emotions are conveyed. Panning across a bookshelf in the living room, the camera catches titles of various texts: Elizabeth Alexander's *Black Interior*, Kevin Quashie's *Sovereignty of Quiet*, Rizvana Bradley's *Anteaesthetics*, Denise Ferreira da Silva's *Unpayable Debt*, *The Funambulist*'s 2021 "Against Genocide" issue, and Dionne Brand's *Nomenclature*. The collection of books attends to critical questions and theories of interiority, the dynamics of racial capitalism, and insidious manifestations of ongoing colonialism.

The interior is the boundless landscape of emotions that *we*, understood in the broadest sense, each possess. It is all that we feel, as our most

vulnerable selves—the intermingling of desire, pain, contradiction, grief, anger, resentment, love. Language cannot entirely grasp and describe the layers of our interior world, and constructing meaning may not always be possible or necessary. As we slip past the edges of one another in societies that have become increasingly alienating, it is overwhelming to recognize that each person we come into contact with holds a unique, complex interior life. When the holistic self is dismissed under the demands of capitalism, how does one contend with the well-being of another? This is intensely compounded by the logics of anti-Blackness, which seek to vacate Black being of interiority as further justification for gratuitous violence. Black personhood is so flagrantly disregarded, it is no wonder why so many writers, scholars, and artists feel the impetus to explicitly name and take care in deepening conversations of interiority. And yet, I am cautious when this impulse to profess interiority is incited *primarily* to combat and disrupt anti-Blackness. I realize the necessity of resistance through a myriad of tactics and am also vigilant of the limitations that arise when discussions of Black being are dictated by an oppositional dynamic that continues to center whiteness.



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Close-Up*, 2024, installation view. Courtesy of Swiss Institute.

For those of us who have always understood the interiority of Black personhood as a given, does it need to be named? To whom do we direct this clamor for interior recognition, and to what end? Black people make meaning in the world in uncontainable ways. Engaging the framework of interiority should not become a flattening, catch-all concept that limits extensive and multifaceted reflection. Complicating the dimensions, and perhaps, limits of the term is not meant to neutralize its importance amid anti-Black logics that inform perceptions and construct violent realities against Black people. Scholars and poets Elizabeth Alexander and Kevin Quashie have both developed their own theories of interiority from a rich Black feminist lineage, questioning the publicness demanded of Black life and a fixation on what can be seen or made transparent, alongside a neglect or disavowal of the emotional interior. For Alexander, interiority is a well of generative possibility, the "inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be," as she writes in *The Black Interior*. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Quashie perceives quiet acts as "a metaphor for the full range of one's inner life . . . the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty." Like both writers, Holman discerns this sovereignty in *Close-Up* as Bannon does not utter a single word; her quiet is not determined or employed as an apparatus beyond its actuality. Traversing anti-Black logics, Black people's quietude will always be a canvas of projections for those who attempt to dictate and reduce its breadth. So while I ardently acknowledge that language can be a tool for shaping one's own narrative, I also offer that we might release the interior from the duties of language to provide comprehension.

A reverie-like quality infuses the film the first time Bannon reclines into the couch, accentuated by the subdued lighting and sudden cut to a blank white screen. There is the tease of a more pensive moment, the chance to edge closer to her musings. Yet she remains in her own distinct orbit as the viewer hovers at the periphery. Stillness, slowness, and interiority are

often theorized as interconnected, a triad to conjure our innermost thoughts. Holman instead contains the viewer in the outer limits of Bannon's reality, tempering the boundary of relation.

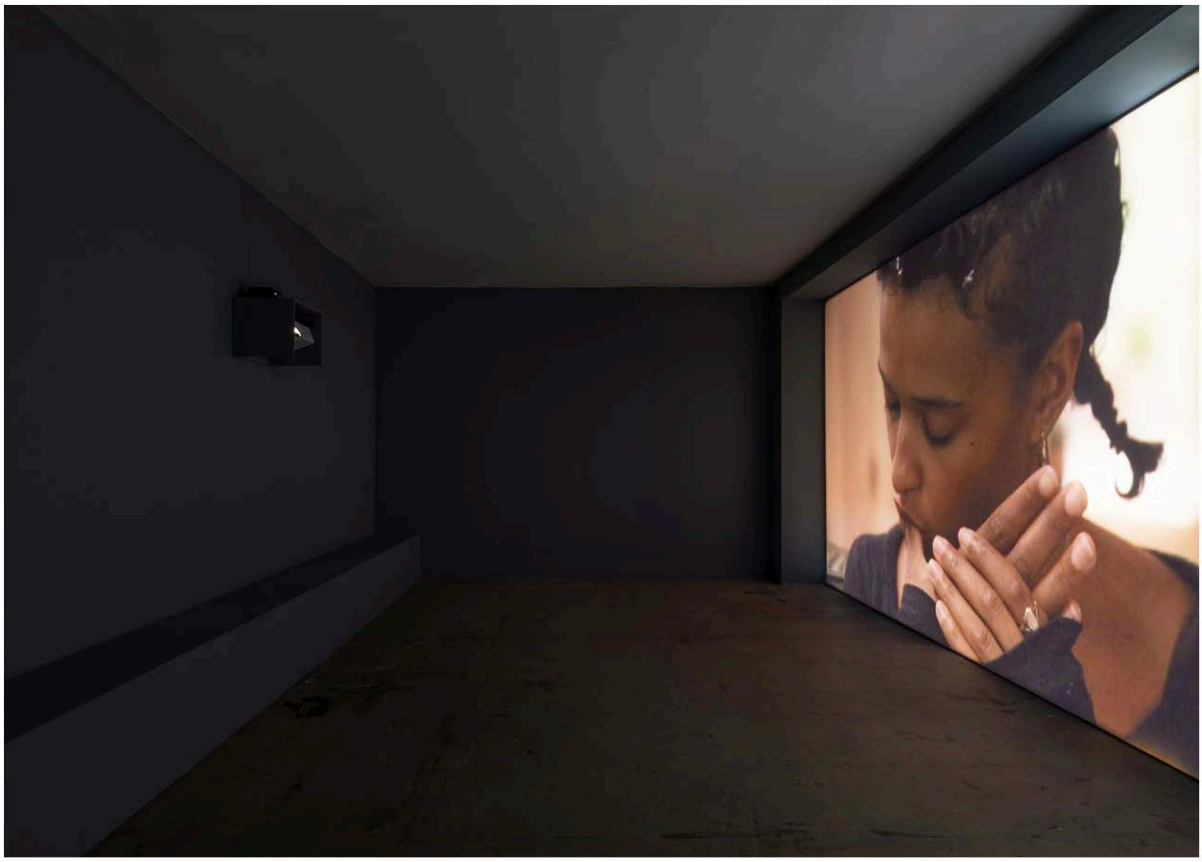
Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Close-Up*, 2024, film still. Courtesy of the artist.

With the increasing urge to call on interiority as a balm for anti-Black projections that vacate Black people's lives of psychic depth, I carry a festering anxiety that the cavernous emotional worlds we each hold may be slowly hollowed out in attempts to slightly loosen the grip of identity politics. In his 2017 essay "What Feels More Than Feeling?: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect," Tyrone S. Palmer echoes the question asked by writer Claudia Rankine in *Citizen.* Palmer underscores that to be Black and not perceived may be an increased threat, writing, "Black opacity often serves as a prerequisite for violence and functions to further entrap the Black in objecthood. . . . Often what is made opaque—Black interiority, feelings, desires—already cannot be thought within the onto-epistemological order of the Human-as-Man." If an incomprehensible opacity already shrouds the emotional realm of Black being, then is it a trap to enact *the opaque* in response to the anti-Black

logics that disavow Black personhood? Palmer's engagement with Rankine's question evokes an experience that exceeds the "normative" contours of emotion. He probes the seeming impossibility, in an anti-Black world, to conceive of Black people's interior lives.

The political-material stakes of asserting the interiority of Black personhood are vital. And yet in the appeal to mitigate harm and forge space for complex discussions of the vast lives Black people cultivate, I have a nagging feeling that this emotional interior will remain the screen for others' projections. Bannon's deadpan expression could be considered a form of refusal as the camera inches toward her face. Or it could be framed as a strategy of protection, safeguarding her thoughts from others. All possibilities, but I do not wish to confine her within a mode of defense or a response to structural surveillance. Her thoughts could be nothing, not as absence, but bypassing discursive frameworks rooted in extracting rational meaning. When Darlene Clark Hine named the culture of dissemblance, the forms of secrecy Black women enacted to protect their inner worlds from the extractive violence they faced in the Midwest after the Great Migration, she considered it a performative act of conviviality as the appearance of openness. If Black women appear accessible, then perhaps this will limit the reach of prying approaches and aggressive attempts at perception. Jennifer C. Nash builds on Hine's poignant text, even while holding that dissemblance can still leave room for Black women to become engulfed into the imaginary of others. In "Black Feminine Enigmas, or Notes on the Politics of Black Feminist Theory," Nash writes, "As black women claimed the privacy of their inner worlds, dominant society filled 'the space left empty' with projections and pernicious fictions about black women." If the extrapolation of Black women's lives beyond their control happens regardless, then it may be that different strategies must be honed, somewhere in the interweaving of dissemblance and opacity. The desire to retain oneself is also vital, to foster moments when there is no relation with the gaze of another. Bannon's gaze never directly meets the camera,

withholding any connection with the viewer through her eyes. It is a steady expending of energy to fight the penetrative inspection that is too often trained onto Black people's lives, and so in Holman's contending with the close-up I find some relief in Bannon's ordinary withdrawal.



Deborah-Joyce Holman, *Close-Up*, 2024, installation view. Courtesy of Swiss Institute.

In an interview with *PW-Magazine*, Holman cites theorist Evelynn Hammonds's 1994 essay, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," in a discussion of their painting series *Love Letter* and negotiating the pitfalls of visibility. "A question I have been working through," the filmmaker notes, "is how to navigate the dilemma between visibility and absence, invisibilization and active refusal." Hammonds's scholarship affirms the role of a "politics of articulation" to "build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for black women to speak and act." From her viewpoint, articulation allows Black women to take control over how they wish to share their understanding of self, a far

more intentional and political framing. Must articulation always be a process of vocalizing one's thoughts and self-perception, or are there other methods of expression?

For the last minute of *Close-Up*, the screen goes dark as Bannon gets up from the couch and walks up the staircase. We hear her footsteps slowly fade as the film ends. Presumably, she carries on in her flat as she has been throughout the film. Holman presents a comment through Bannon as the protagonist and her seeming non-performance that upends the utility of the film's preceding close-ups. Nothing else is given to the viewer, and in that is an articulation that one's existence need not be made available for anyone else. Rather than as resistance or refusal, this may be a question of orientation: how and to whom does one decide to orient oneself? As I sit with what has led me to this engagement with Holman's *Close-Up*—my internal dialogue on theorizing and wrestling with the proliferation of interiority as a concept to assert the emotional realm of Black personhood—I return to these questions: What do I choose to share? Why do I choose to do so? Do I share while holding expectations of others to respond in particular ways?

Anti-Blackness is the ground and the climate, the foundations for societies that must consider Blackness as nothing in order to exist. As Fred Moten offers, Blackness is prior not only to "logistic and regulative power" but to ontology itself. Holman prioritizes an interiority that is imperceptible, infinite, and nothing. An embrace of nothing defies logic and coherence; it cannot be grasped: the absence of anything. The antithesis of reason. It does not exist. *Close-Up* is not overdetermined by attempts to claim or substantiate the interior. It doesn't have to be acknowledged, calling to mind, too, Ashon Crawley's reflections on the profundity of nothing, as exemplified through the indecipherable manuscript pages of Bilali, an enslaved man who lived on Sapelo Island, Georgia, in the early nineteenth century. "Nothingness has at its core, meditation and celebration," Crawley writes in "Nothingness and the Aesthetics of Having Been," "often misunderstood because of its refusal

to give itself over to rationalist projects of cognition and thought." Bilali's script was written for him to understand; Bannon's thoughts belong to her. Interiority cannot be reduced to a discursive scaffolding. Black people's interior worlds, like all interior life, will never be able to be fully apprehended. The close-up reveals nothing.