

mayfield brooks, Letters to Marsha with Viewing Hours (a diptych), JACK, Brooklyn

Didier Morelli

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mayfield brooks

Letters to Marsha with Viewing Hours (a diptych), details of the performance, 2020.

Photos : Johanna K. Wilson, courtesy of the artist

mayfield brooks

Letters to Marsha with Viewing Hours (a diptych)

There was a tension in the audience, a palpable sense of expectation in the crowded lobby at JACK, waiting for *Letters to Marsha with Viewing Hours* (a diptych) to begin. Outside it was a cool February evening, the air thick with humidity; inside four-dozen bodies huddled in a liminal space, part of a community ready to bear witness. We came to experience dancer/choreographer mayfield brooks' work, to celebrate and be in the presence of ancestors.

Inspired by a missed connection with the queer activist Marsha P. Johnson in 1992, the event combined dance, installation, video, as well as written, recorded, and spoken love notes and journal entries. Tracing brooks' own evolution as a "Black, non-binary queer connecting specters of Black queer death to memory, movement, sound, humor, and pathos," the performance nimbly wove together strong visual imagery, haunting choreographic sequences, and electric oral recitations. Opening with *Viewing Hours*, the audience was invited in small groups (the first to enter were those who identified as persons of colour) to go backstage and contemplate relics from previous iterations of the work. In a procession between everyday life and the world-building of the oeuvre, we were then directed into a small, poorly lit back room where the artist lay covered by a mound of dirt and flowers. Standing close to one another while listening to a recording of brooks' voice entreating us to bear witness to racial violence, the visible rise and fall of the artist's breath under a bed of fragrant flowers was powerful and captivating.

Transitioning to the main stage, the audience scattered across chairs and floor pillows in anticipation of brooks' re-emergence. Entering the room wrapped in an emergency blanket that rustled with every movement, they proceeded to roll up a series of oversized blue steps onto an elevated platform. Every micro-gesture of this mesmerizing dance was acoustically enhanced as they gradually worked out of their

silver cocoon before washing the dirt off of their skin in a washbasin. In what followed brooks used isolated parts and/or the entirety of their moving body to generate compelling kinetic phrases that completely transformed their physicality and presence. Building towards a formidable embodiment of Marsha P. Johnson by donning a black sequin dress and a crown of flowers, brooks repeatedly stepped into the aura of the queer liberation activist to touch on the shared realities of queer Black life. Through a series of short scenes, punctuated by the sounds of pop music or brooks' own voice, poetry, and glossolalia, the event reflected on and unwound the binaries of life and death; strength and weakness; love and solitude.

An epic journey with multiple affective shifts, the evening closed with a heartfelt standing ovation from the audience and an invitation by the organizers to stay for cake and a discussion on reparations. Over the period of two hours *Letters to Marsha...* created a temporary garden, a site to commemorate and mourn queer Black lives, while challenging the profits and spectacle derived from their untimely deaths at the hands of police violence, white supremacy, and liberal complacency.

Didier Morelli

JACK, Brooklyn
January 30–February 1, 2020