

## Kalup Linzy

Text by James Franco

Kalup Linzy is a versatile performer and artist who uses multiple voices, personas and media in his work. But underneath all these different faces and forms there is a common and sincere longing for love, identity, and artistic purity.

I first met Kalup when he gave a talk to the Columbia graduate art students for their visiting artist lecture series, which I had been crashing every week. Before Kalup, they had had some heavy hitters: Marina Abramović, Robert Gober, Sophie Calle, and Lawrence Weiner, but on the day Kalup spoke, I had an epiphany. I knew that he was going where I wanted to go.

At the lecture, Kalup showed us a few of his videos: the “Conversations wit de Churen” series and an animation piece called L’il Myron’s Trade. I was immediately struck by the pared down, do-it-yourself aesthetic and the underplayed humor: the characters gave no hints that they knew what they were saying and doing was funny – all the scenes were played with earnest melodrama. They were performing in soap-opera inspired scenes but using profanity laced dialogue that cut to the essence of the melodrama. They would demand sex, confront each other over sexual practices, and talk about artistic struggles with intense earnestness and no subtlety. But, on top of this blunt presentation, there was something else that was unusual about these performances—there was something undermining the straightforward mimesis of the portrayals, something besides the cheap sets, wigs, and costumes. Later I learned more about Kalup’s approach: He had prerecorded all the voices on his own and the actors had lip-synched to Kalup’s recording. So, while the actors were giving earnest portrayals with their facial expressions and body language, “their” voices were signifying something else: Kalup’s own, very personal expression.

During Kalup’s lecture, he said that he had studied play writing at art school, but this lip synch technique goes one step further than an author’s dissemination of his ideas and creations into other performers via a script. By writing the text and giving voice to it himself, Kalup ensured that the performances grow directly out of the author’s voice, his audible voice. In some ways this feels like the ultimate theatrical dictatorship; I’m sure there are many writers or directors that would love to be able to have the actors say the lines exactly how they intended them. In fact that is exactly what many directors in conventional theater and film try to do: they choke an actor’s performance so that the performance is exactly as the director imagined, at least on the surface. The danger of this approach is that it can kill an actor’s individuality and his artistic vitality. Normally, when a director overexerts his control, actors become robots.

Kalup’s videos, on the other hand, depict mechanized performance without the dictatorial control. Rather than an overbearing director’s narrow vision, Kalup’s pervasiveness in his pieces arises from a pure, artistic place, albeit a lonely one. The fact that Kalup does all the voices arises out of his DIY aesthetic. These pieces are not attempts to mimic established modes of entertainment, they are using those modes and transforming them into a personalized presentation because that is the only way Kalup is able to participate in this kind of performance; at least it was the only way he was able to when he graduated from art school.

At the Columbia talk, Kalup freely spoke about the history of soap-opera viewers in his family going back to his great grandmother. He said that when he was growing up soap operas were ubiquitous in his Florida neighborhood and that much of the socializing among the adults was based on discussions about the soaps. Not only that, Kalup said the adult conversations he overheard would transition smoothly from talk about the lives of real people in the neighborhood to talk about the lives of the characters in the soap operas. For soap-opera fans, the characters on TV can seem more like friends than characters in a television show. For example, if a soap opera actor is greeted by a fan on the street it is likely that the actor will be greeted by his character’s name. But there was one major difference between the soap opera fans in Kalup’s childhood neighborhood and the families on the television: Kalup’s family and neighbors were primarily black and the characters on screen were primarily white. Most people who write about Kalup’s work discuss the disparity between the races of the actors in his videos and the entertainment forms that inspired them, and the transformation of a melodramatic white medium into a personalized and comic execution with black actors.

Kalup has taken the original form of soap opera and transformed it to reflect his own feelings and surroundings, but I think, at least during the time of conception, the revision of the material along racial lines was a less conscious consideration than a desire to simply enter a world that had captivated him as a child.

Eventually Kalup and I began working together. Most recently he came on the ABC soap opera General Hospital with me to perform as “Kalup Ishmael,” a performance artist and collaborator with my character “Franco.” Having

now worked with Kalup, I have gained a deeper understanding of the inspiration for his work. In my view, Kalup's work is a post-racial attempt to incorporate himself into the adult word/ soap- opera world that he witnessed as a child. Because the adults of his childhood made little distinction between fiction and reality, there was a meshing of the real world and the fictional. This crossover went in both directions: the soap operas weren't only pulled into the real world, the real adults were pulled into the soap opera world. Kalup's videos represent the slippage between his childhood neighborhood and the soap operas. The characters in his videos speak in a very specific and heightened vernacular that isn't found on network soap operas; it is closer to the unique way the people in his neighborhood spoke. Behind the videos I can feel Kalup's younger self trying to make sense of the world around him and trying to fit in. As a young, black, gay man it probably seemed like the easiest way to fit in was to become one (or many) of the characters that the adults watched on television.

But the young Kalup experienced soap operas through the filter of the opinions of those around him, and thus, his perception and eventual portrayal of this world is inextricably filtered through the experiences of his Florida childhood.

The tension in Kalup's videos is between the artificial and the personal. The lip- synching distances the characters from reality, almost like a cartoon effect, where the actors are akin to drawn animation that are given voice separate from their visual manifestations. The dislocation of performer and voice creates gaps within the performances that make them both ironic and more essential and heartfelt. Because all the voices are Kalup's, the viewer knows something is not quite right with the characters even though the actors are skillful at lip-synching.

The videos are able to laugh at themselves and be serious at the same time. Even if the characters are not aware of their comedic presentations, the videos are certainly aware. Like cartoons, the videos produce satire because the pretense of mimesis has been eschewed. Kalup's videos satirize soap operas, the music business and the art world because they are aware of the technical distance between themselves and the real thing.

But this distance is where Kalup is able to slip himself in: because the do it yourself aesthetic is so premeditated, Kalup himself is bared: we see and feel him doing everything. And because he is not trying to make the videos pass for real soap operas, he can cut to the essence of the genre: the need for love, success, artistic expression, and acceptance. The characters talk about these subjects in simple and naked terms (although the dialogue is intensely stylized and patterned for both comic and dramatic effects) because this is not the real soap world, it is the world of Kalup's emotions and desires exploded and crafted and heightened into art. The approach allows him to be naked because he has harnessed the genre and molded it to his needs.

One of the latest steps in Kalup's relationship to soap operas has been his appearance on General Hospital. When he and I were preparing for the episode that was filmed at MoCA's Pacific Design Center space, he told me that being on General Hospital was a dream come true, and that it had actually helped his family to understand his work. In some ways, by being on the show, Kalup had fulfilled the desire of his younger self: the desire to enter the adult world and the soap world, to participate in that world and be acknowledge for who he is. As we prepared for the show, Kalup compared the work on a professional soap opera to the work that he was doing on his own: he said that initially it felt as if his own work was personal whereas work on a network soap opera felt as if he was part of a larger, less personal project. This is certainly true, but by being on General Hospital Kalup had infiltrated his dream world. He not only participated in a medium that is still primarily full of Caucasian actors, but he did it in drag. Art and life, desire and irony had all fused: Kalup was a romantic expressing himself in the highly codified world of soaps, a world that also happened to be his fantasy world. Kalup's fictional creations had become real, real for his family because they were presented through the fictional vehicle, and real for him because the soap opera, something that for so long had been the inspiration for his work, had enveloped him and his creations and brought them onto the same plane as themselves. It is significant that his character's name on General Hospital was Kalup Ishmael because it fuses his real life and fiction.

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