



THIS FACE
BEHIND
THIS MASK
BEHIND
THIS SKIN

DR. FAHAMU PECOU

This Face Behind This Mask Behind This Skin invokes an ontological urgency and reads with a mantric rhythm. This exhibition features the work of Dr. Fahamu Pecou, bringing together his recent series *End of Safety*, *Real Negus Don't Die*, and *We Didn't Realize We Were Seeds* and debuting a multichannel video installation featuring his short Afro-Surrealist film *The Store*.

End of Safety examines how cultural hegemony has shaped Black American identity, suggesting it is often imposed rather than self-defined. Pecou explores the tension between the imposition of Blackness and the comfort that arises from it. He confronts the idea of stepping beyond that comfort—imagining the delicate, dangerous, and necessary act of seeing ourselves free from the stories the world imposes.

Real Negus Don't Die, begun in 2013, is an evolving tribute to iconic African American figures whose lives and legacies shape the rhythm and resonance of Black cultural identity. At the heart of this series lies the word *negus*, an Ethiopian word meaning “king,” offered here as a nonbinary term underscoring royalty. Each piece is rooted in ancestral veneration through the vernacular tradition of the memorial T-shirt. These shirts, worn as mobile shrines, become public affirmations of grief, love, and unbroken lineage. They collapse time through the living subject who bears the images of Toni Morrison, Tupac Shakur, and Afeni Shakur, asserting that Black life cannot be flattened by death.

We Didn't Realize We Were Seeds explores Black identity across time and cultures, encompassing art, fashion, politics, and spirituality. Pecou employs *Afrotropes*—recurring visual forms that have emerged within, and become central to, the formation of African diasporic visual culture. He exercises his agency as an artist not only by referencing Afrotropes but by actively creating and reconfiguring them, giving these visual forms new life in contemporary culture. Durags become masks or crowns that adorn Black bodies. Backpacks rest on books as mobile altars of remembrance. Resin molds of Baule figures become surrogate sculptures of spiritual retention and contemporary sites for divine communication. These works open portals into Afro-Surrealist terrain and enact the “right to opacity”: the right to remain irreducibly complex and not fully transparent, yet open to resonance.

The Store is a short film composed of four vignettes, each centered at a corner store that doubles as a hood botanica, where patrons unlock portals into surreal, liberating visions. *The Store* reclaims symbols of survival and reframes them as gateways to Black sovereignty, memory, and futures.

Together, these series conjure what Pecou calls *re-memberance*: “the reconnection of mind, body, and spirit—a holistic treatise on Black being, becoming, and possibility.”



Fahamu Pecou. *The Store* (still), 2025. Video. Courtesy of the artist. © Fahamu Pecou

About the Artist

Dr. Fahamu Pecou, Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, is an African American interdisciplinary artist and scholar, born in 1975 in Brooklyn, New York. He received his BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1997. He later earned his MA and PhD from Emory University in 2017 and 2018. His work explores contemporary representations of Black masculinity and Black identity through performance, painting, mixed-media sculpture, and critical theory.

"NOT A GALLERY GUIDE"

This is a tool for self-discovery, for reflection, for return.

The following section offers questions meant to spark internal dialogue. Come back to them again. Let them encounter you in moments of stillness and quietude. Let them shift through you. Let them be sites of exploration for your being and becoming, deepening your witnessing of self.

"KEY"

"Quotation": Quotation marks rendered in bold Helvetica function as an *Afrotrope*, a term coined by Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson to describe recurring visual forms that have emerged within, and become central to, the formation of African diasporic visual culture and identity. Popularized by late fashion designer and artist Virgil Abloh, these stylized quotation marks act as conceptual tools signaling irony, reframing language, and inviting viewers to reconsider the enclosed words' function or meaning.

Strikethrough: The strikethrough, together with the text underneath, represents a refusal, but it also reveals a duality—a double consciousness shaped by spectatorship and the pressure to explain oneself to others. The liminal spaces between and after the questions below are a quiet invitation to look behind, within, to answer, and then answer again, questions meant for the self.

Answer the questions on the following pages.

FURTHER READING

The following curated reading list is a portal for deeper exploration. Take what you need. Leave room for what finds you.

Books

The Fire Next Time
by James Baldwin

Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Shaping Worlds
by adrienne maree brown

Parable of the Sower
by Octavia E. Butler

Sky Full of Elephants: A Novel
by Cebo Campbell

A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See
by Tina M. Campt

The Souls of Black Folk
by W. E. B. Du Bois

Black Skin, White Masks
by Frantz Fanon

Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance
by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o

Black Aliveness, or A Poetics of Being
by Kevin Quashie

In the Wake: On Blackness and Being
by Christina Sharpe

Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman
by Malidoma Patrice Somé

Essays and Chapters

Afrotropes: A User's Guide
by Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson, in *Art Journal Open*

"Be Here Now: The South is a Portal"
by Sara Makeba Daise, in *Root Work Journal*

"For Opacity"
by Édouard Glissant, in *Poetics of Relation*

"The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators"
by bell hooks, in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

"The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action"
by Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*

"Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power"
by Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*

"MASK"

~~Does a mask reveal or conceal?~~

WHAT MASK DO I WEAR AND WHY?

"Mask": Fahamu Pecou's work explores the mask as a spiritual technology—an instrument for social intervention and political strategy, and a vessel that holds memory, force, and truth just beyond the visible. Masks can represent multiplicity without fragmentation; they can be sites of self-articulation, connection, and revealing. Masks embody symbols and ceremony, fashion and function.

Fahamu Pecou. *Liminal 01: Spirit*, 2025. Graphite, acrylic, and cowrie shells; 60 x 40 in. Image courtesy of the artist. © Fahamu Pecou



"RIGHT TO OPACITY"

How do I define myself in clear, legible terms?

WHAT ARE THE WORDS I DO NOT YET HAVE?

WHAT MUST I EXPRESS?

"Right to opacity": In his 1990 essay "For Opacity," poet and novelist Édouard Glissant speaks to the right to remain irreducibly complex and not entirely transparent, to refuse being measured by someone else's scale of legibility. Opacity creates space for connection without complete understanding. It is both a refusal and a safeguard—for interiority, multiplicity, and the surreal.

Fahamu Pecou. *Keep What's in My Safe, Safe (Protection)*, 2024. Cast resin, Crown Royal bag, gold adinkra, and cowrie shells; 12 x 5 x 5 in. Courtesy of Johnson Lowe Gallery, Atlanta. Image courtesy of the artist. © Fahamu Pecou



"A BLACK GAZE"

~~What do people see when they look at me?~~

WHAT DO I WITNESS WHEN I CONFRONT MYSELF?

"A Black gaze": Black feminist theorist Tina M. Campt developed the framework of "a Black gaze" neither as an oppositional gaze to the white gaze nor as a Black perspective, but rather as a refusal of spectatorship. Rather than allowing the viewer to consume the subject, a Black gaze, in Campt's words, "transforms the viewer into a witness and demands a confrontation."

Fahamu Pecou. *Surrender*, 2023.
Acrylic on canvas; 60 x 36 in.
Courtesy of BackSlash Gallery,
Paris. Image courtesy of the
artist. © Fahamu Pecou



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Cover: Fahamu Pecou. *End of Safety: Illusion* (detail), 2023. Acrylic on canvas; 36 x 72 in.
Courtesy of BackSlash Gallery, Paris. Image courtesy of the artist. © Fahamu Pecou

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