vanessa german
Sad Rapper

509 WEST 27TH STREET, NEW YORK
SEPTEMBER 8–OCTOBER 22, 2022
OPENING THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 6–8PM

Kasmin is pleased to announce vanessa german: Sad Rapper. The artist’s first solo exhibition at the gallery will go on view from September 8–October 22, 2022, showcasing ambitious new freestanding and wall-based sculpture in an installation that confronts urgent social and political themes of racial oppression, structural violence, commemoration, and community. Conceived as a fantastical group portrait of figures from a single neighborhood, the exhibition draws on german’s youth in Los Angeles in the 1980s to expose the complex narratives that both represent and shape Black life and culture in the context of the American dream. This presentation is offered by german as a redemptive space in which visitors are invited to identify, experience, and begin to address the rage and grief engendered by both historic and ongoing racial violence in our society, to which the artist’s humanistic vision responds forcefully and compassionately. Over the first three days of the exhibition’s opening, german will be in residence meeting with visitors to carry out a series of healing rituals in the oral tradition.
Considered inextricable from her identity as an activist, German’s autodidactic artmaking has its lineage in indigenous and West African folk practices as well as Black Arts movements from 1960s onwards. Working primarily with assemblage, German sculpts wood and plaster which she then adorns with a vast range of materials—some found in her community, others sourced from across the country—including prayer beads, doll parts, handmade patterned quilts, skateboards, rope, silk flowers, cowrie shells, coke bottles, vintage porcelain bells, and astroturf. These “ingredients”, as German refers to them, form just one part of each work’s medium, and are listed alongside the metaphysical components that the artist sees as indivisible from the physical objects. Such juxtapositions create complex metaphorical meanings, where the resulting cacophony of language, texture, and image is freighted with both the emotional and the physical; the spiritual and the material. In German’s words, “the objects become both the wound and the medicine.”

While German’s work abounds with reference to the divine feminine and confronts racist tropes depicting Black women—the “mammy” and “workhorse”, among others—the artist’s considerations of Black masculinity are increasingly significant and especially present in the depictions of state-sanctioned violence toward the male body. A neon wall-based work, WHAT’S THE OPPOSITE OF A LYNCHING (2019) vividly brings into focus the haunting image of Black boys and men at the mercy of white supremacist violence. Sad Rapper, the title work in the exhibition, is laden with dozens of heavy prayer bundles formed by German from reclaimed denim pulled taut by blue string. Standing on a base painted with red and white stripes reminiscent of the American flag, the figure is defined by its precarity and tension, seeming almost as if it might explode. This sense of a heavy burden of grief, complicated by expectations of masculinity in society, asks us to confront how our world has been damaged by its patriarchal structures.

german offers a passage through all of these injustices—as the artist re-appropriates, re-conceptualizes, and resiliently transforms both her materials and the symbolic weight of the images with which she works, she occasions a transfiguration analogous to healing. The alternative epistemologies of Sad Rapper challenge dominant structures of power and knowledge, and in doing so project beyond Afrofuturism to a space of mystic imagination akin to a transcendental realm.

ABOUT VANESSA GERMAN
vanessa german (b. 1976) is a self-taught citizen artist working across sculpture, performance, communal rituals, immersive installation, and photography. Sad Rapper is german's first exhibition at Kasmin and follows her solo presentation with the gallery at the Independent Art Fair in May 2022.


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Image:
Sad Rapper, 2022
Photography by Jordan Whitten