

# SWEETWATER,

*In Conversation with Christopher Aque* by Caroline Elbaor

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In the several decades that have passed since George Orwell first introduced the enigmatic, omniscient presence of “Big Brother” in his classic dystopian novel *1984*, the name of the would-be totalitarian leader has morphed into something less frequently associated with Orwell’s tale than with the rhetoric of today’s fear-mongering politicians—or depending on who you ask—the immensely popular international television franchise of the same name.

Generally speaking, the word surveillance tends to carry dirty connotations, conjuring images of corrupt governments or Peeping Toms. Yet, in a seemingly bizarre twist, despite the fact that the collective Western attitude towards “surveillance” in the broadest sense is one of disgust, we also seem to directly contradict ourselves by continuing to welcome it, with the tacit agreement that we remain hush-hush about its pervasive nature.

The work of New York-based artist Christopher Aque deftly manages to navigate this delicate divide, at once acknowledging the severe and lasting consequences of surveillance tactics while simultaneously managing to present the act in a somewhat softer—if not less threatening—light. He achieves this by focusing on the role of the incredibly-human experience of desire (in both the sexual and emotional senses) that is embedded within the act surveillance. Further to this, Aque creates what is arguably a meditation on how the desire impulse might be changing form in today’s circumstances, with surveillance as ubiquitous as it is. Surveillance is, arguably, deeply intimate, potentially even capable of linking us back to ourselves.

By factoring desire so heavily into the equation, Aque reorients the angle from which one might approach the issue of surveillance, opening up a highly original space in which to explore this contemporary phenomenon.



*Fall, 2018*

**Caroline Elbaor:** Could you explain for me how you personally connect the dots from today’s prevalence of surveillance to gay men in particular? Are you looking at this in contemporary circumstances or the history of gay men being surveilled/persecuted? I’m not meaning to ask a pointed question, but rather just genuinely want to know your thoughts.

**Christopher Aque:** Surveillance, in my work, can be thought of as a structure in which we are always (knowingly, complicity, but unconsciously) being watched, that our identities are always being deduced algorithmically based on our choices. And I find it very interesting that in that way, the private is always, repeatedly, continuously being made public. (All the more obvious with the recent Cambridge Analytica news.) I also started thinking about desire, similarly, though maybe more from the perspective of the surveillant—always looking and taking in data and processing it. There’s a way in which all bodies are abstracted, then, or at least depersonalized, a sort of weighing of various factors. It’s a bit inhuman but simultaneously carnal, or primal.

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When I conceived of the body of work that I developed for my last show (the “Identity Intelligence” photos), I was very much engaged with certain historical narratives of surveillance. And, of course, part of that narrative is that “being watched” is also feeling controlled. A few years earlier I had bought a 1950s spy camera, and it was really interesting to me to think of how the persecution of gays during the Cold War (aka the Lavender Scare) had this weird historical overlap.



*Identity Intelligence (Broome and Greene), 2015*

But all that in way is just sort of the backdrop to the work—like the known set of historical preconditions. And strangely, the tenor of this work really changed after Trump was elected—“difference” really came to the fore again as something that was threatening, and all these feelings of complicity” that I was engaged with became a lot more charged.

The new film that is part of the show at Regards, called “Idling” engages these feelings. Certainly there’s a connection to “surveillance,” in that I, with a camera, am watching men sunbathing in Prospect Park. But there are numerous tensions exposed here—the public space for private acts—by whom this public space is used—and even what the conditions are for my engaging as the surveillant.

To describe the film a bit more, it’s composed of 4 scenes, shot as the full duration of a Super 8 cartridge—just still shots of men sunbathing in the park. Doing nothing. They are all white, more or less my age, and shot during week-day afternoons when I was off from work. During the three and-a-half minutes of each cartridge, my body would shake and move slightly as I tried to hold the camera in place. This is all labour-intensive frame-by-frame, edited in post-production so that the body stays centred and the frame sort of jitters around the empty space of the monitor.

I had moved to Bed-Stuy the year before, and thought a lot about these shifting demographics of Brooklyn, how much whiter the neighbourhoods around me were getting, how I as a young artist was only fuelling and perpetuating these changes. I would go to the park a lot—obviously in part because I had the idea to make this video—but it also just gave me the sense that I was doing something. Walking around the wooded area between the Long Meadow and Flatbush Ave, I realized I had stumbled into a still-active cruising ground. Doing some further research later, it had been a common spot for black and Latino men from the neighbourhood. Suddenly there were so many other narratives at play in the video—of what gets to be visible, who gets to be seen, what acts are permissible, when and by whom.



*Idling, 2018*

**CE:** When you discuss surveillance and say that we are “always being watched,” who exactly are you claiming is the surveillant in this scenario? Who would you say is ultimately responsible for this invasive frightening type of surveillance you describe? I can guess in a vague way but I’d like to pin it down a bit more and hear it in your own words.

**CA:** The main surveillants who are “always watching” in this case are corporations like Google and Apple. (And this level of watching is ubiquitous and maybe even largely innocuous—I don’t mean to make it sound like a surveillance conspiracy. I might have the camera taped off on my computer, but I don’t truly believe that there’s an NSA agent accessing my footage 24/7 on the other side.) I mean more that our behaviours are always being tracked—and surveillance is probably more used to sell us services and commodities based on our proclivities than for any sort of political or law enforcement angle. It is indeed a form of policing, and one I think we will see more and more politicized.

In other words, being watched is constant, but maybe as much about others trying to figure out our desires.

**CE:** In talking a little bit more about surveillance, you seem (in my opinion) to be casting the act of surveillance in a neutral—or even negative—light, especially when it comes to the history of surveillance, and in particular, its history with gay men. But then you do something interesting: you assume the role of surveillant yourself. How do you navigate this? You mention this very tension. Can you expand on it a bit?

**CA:** I think my own role as a surveillant can be thought of in a few ways. One, I feel very complicit within these powerful systems, as I think we almost all are. After all, we willingly hand over a tremendous amount of information about ourselves to these corporations.

But in another way, I feel that looking (specifically, “desirous” looking) isn’t so different—if I see a cute guy on the street, I’m probably reading for codes to know whether or not he’s gay. It’s always a certain algorithm being processed in order to determine who someone is and what they want.

**CE:** I’ve been particularly interested lately in ideas of how fantasy and desire function today, and how they are impacted by the advent of affective technologies (this, of course, is all within the context of capitalism, and I should specify that I am referring in this case to life in contemporary work? Western society). I wonder how these questions might play out in your work?

I’m thinking specifically about how you say, “our identities are always being deduced algorithmically based on our choices” that you then followed that up by bringing in desire. Desire is painfully human—completely and inextricably tied to the most private and vulnerable parts of us—yet is simultaneously, in some ways, a product of affective technologies... Which is, bottom line, the product of capitalism. Do you have any interest in exploring the role of desire as influenced by capitalist constructs?

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**CA:** This is a really good question, and actually articulates the roots of my work more than you would ever know. (A lot of my earlier work was really obviously engaging these issues—thinking through melodrama and these almost campy things as this weird cycle of homosexual affect.)

Absolutely, desire is both the ultimate selling tool but also what we are being sold. And this is absolutely human. I think that is why you see so much hand in the work, or so much of me. All of this in a way is about my own desire, my own inhabiting of the world, how someone is sold to themselves.

A really obvious correlation can be made between the decline of cruising and hook-up apps. But it's also a weird problem—a desexualisation of space simultaneous with wide-spread gentrification in the city and the takeover of properties by banks and other huge corporations. (Maybe it's interesting to know more about me in the work here—I've had the same partner for 10 years. I haven't participated in any of this. So maybe that's a bit where the voyeurism comes in, but it's also a way of looking for myself in others, as I've said. Sort of seeing yourself reflected, or your desire acknowledged. Some recognition of yourself as a desiring/desirous body).

In that way, I think desire is really constant, but maybe becomes increasingly passive. I'm not sure if that "kills healthy experiences of desire," but I think it sort of renegotiates these terms... There's something impersonal about it... And in that way, feels very contemporary.