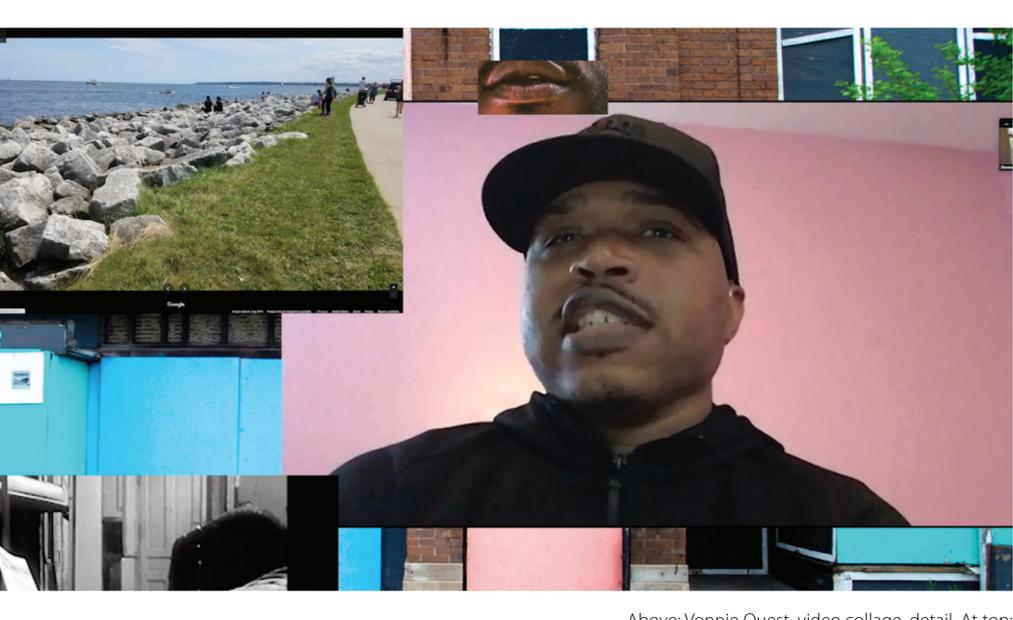




# THERE'S BLACK PEOPLE IN MILWAUKEE: ROSE THEATRE

VONNIE QUEST

DECEMBER 3 2021–  
FEBRUARY 6 2022



Above: Vonnie Quest, video collage, detail. At top: Vonnie Quest, collage, detail.

**“THERE’S BLACK PEOPLE IN MILWAUKEE?” THIS QUESTION HAS BECOME A MEANS FOR ARTIST VONNIE QUEST TO INTERROGATE THE NARRATIVE OF RACISM IN OUR COUNTRY AS IT RELATES TO SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIC PLACES IN OUR COLLECTIVE IMAGINATION.**

When Quest came to North Carolina from Milwaukee in 2018, he was struck by the number of times he heard this question asked with complete sincerity. The fact that there are entire regions and spaces in which Black culture is erased from our collective understanding of a place is not only disturbing, but is an example of the power of cultural narrative to perpetuate racism. Through film, archival research, interviews and photographic imagery, Quest confronts this narrative and creates a new vision of his home town using a historic theater as the nexus for transformation.

The Rose Theatre, originally built in 1917, was a 425 seat theater (later renamed the Regal Theater) and was built specifically for African American audiences. As often happened with Black businesses created in the early part of the 20th century, the Rose Theatre was demolished in 1958, its history erased. Quest recreates the theater space in the gallery using light, digitally constructed movie posters, and films. This immersive installation comes from the artist’s interest in exploring the ways that narratives, place, and politics are constructs that can be manipulated and transformed. As visitors to the space, we are confronted with the past, present, and future of The Rose Theatre. For Quest, process is as important as the finished product in creating this experience. Documentary film, archival imagery and imagined objects are all presented in a single space, demonstrating not only a new vision of an actual place, but the process of creating a story that transforms our understanding of that place, its people and its culture.

While the South is not a space devoid of Blackness in our cultural understanding, erasure is a real threat to Black culture and history across our region. Raleigh’s history of gentrification threatens to erase the story of traditionally Black spaces and businesses throughout our city. This installation explores the concept of how narratives about people and places are written after their spaces have disappeared and provides a vision for a future in which these spaces are celebrated, protected and ultimately ingrained in our collective consciousness.

**ANNAH LEE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR**



l-r: Vonnie Quest, movie poster; Regal Theater (formerly Rose Theatre) in Milwaukee.

## DEVON VONNIE SMITH

(b. Milwaukee, WI, 1991) is an interdisciplinary documentary artist currently living and working in Raleigh-Durham, NC. He uses video, archival material, and photography as a means towards exploring the intersections, mechanics, and deconstruction of narrative, place, and language. Through video art and experimental documentary, Vonnie interrogates normalized anti-Black violence. Abolition is at the heart of his creative practice. He received his MFA from UNC-Chapel Hill.

Vonnie has shown work at the Milwaukee Film Festival and Milwaukee Short Film Festival in Milwaukee, WI; Walker’s Point Center for the Arts in Milwaukee, WI; Gallery 400 in Chicago, IL; The Smithsonian African American History Museum in Washington D.C.; The Power Plant Gallery in Durham; Hayti Heritage Center in Durham; The Lumina Theatre in Brooklyn, NY; and The Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi.

In 2019, Vonnie was an artist-in-residence at the Power Plant Gallery at the Center for Documentary Studies with Duke University. He received a commission to develop work with the Southern Foodways Alliance for the spring 2021 symposium.



Vonnie Quest installing exhibition in ArtSpace’s Gallery 1.

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