

Art Gallery Shows to See in July:
Shani Strand
by Dawn Chan



A still from Shani Strand's "R.I.P. He Deserves It," 2026, video and sound. Credit...Shani Strand, via Artists Space, New York

A thick scent of citrus and clove incense is the first indicator that Shani Strand's show seeks to overwhelm visitors with sensory stimuli. Her wall-size video projection goes even further. It has strobe effects and a grinning Pierrot as a protagonist — clown-phobes may want to steer clear.

Titled "R.I.P. He Deserves It," Strand's video, at one point, displays the phrase "Colonization in Reverse," which starts to explain the work's vengeful, playful energy. With a main character portrayed by several Black actresses in Marcel Marceau white face paint — already a reversal of blackface — Strand's video is less didactic than unsettlingly surreal.

In one nighttime scene, the clown sashays through a desolate overpass, a shovel in hand. A long line of female characters channeling a thirst for retribution into a runway-ready walk comes to mind: Uma Thurman in "Kill Bill"; the artist Pipilotti Rist smashing car windows with a flower; Beyoncé and her baseball bat in the music video "Hold Up."

A separate wing full of Strand's sculptures leaves the heightened theatricality behind in favor of strange poetry. Small clay balls, wrought-iron rods and spheres bedecked with cow horns appear strewn across the floor, surrounded by pools of resin and golden stains on walls. Strand's materials reprise Afro-Caribbean histories: Cow horns, for instance, were used as wind instruments by Jamaican Maroons who had escaped slavery.

But knowledge of those histories isn't required to appreciate Strand's show. In its vengeful clowns, hazy incense and sculptures given floor space rather than the pageantry of pedestals, there is an unavoidable sense of an old world order being upturned.