

# ARTFORUM

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OPENINGS

## DIAMOND STINGILY

JOHANNA FATEMAN

cover page image:

Diamond Stingily, *Kaa* (detail), 2015, Kanekalon hair, plastic barrettes. Installation view, Ramiken Crucible, New York.



above:

*Forever in Our Hearts*, 2014, mixed media, installation view, the Egg, Chicago

right:

View of “Diamond Stingily: Elephant Memory,” 2016, Ramiken Crucible, New York Photo: Dario Lasagni



**DIAMOND STINGILY** tells me it’s important to keep a journal in order to look back, to see how you’ve changed. And, she adds, it’s even more important to see how you’ve stayed the same. The New York–based artist, who was born in 1990 and grew up on Chicago’s West Side, began writing at age eight in a diary given to her by one of her grandmothers—a Christmas-themed volume with a tiny padlock and Victorian-era white girls printed on its cover. In 2014, the carefully penned cursive text within was published as a foldout poster as *Love, Diamond* by Dominica, a press run by the artist’s friend and mentor Martine Syms that is “dedicated to exploring blackness as a topic, reference, marker and audience in visual culture,” as described on its website. Stingily knew Syms from hanging out at the defunct Chicago printed-matter shop and venue Golden Age, which the older artist cofounded, and it was Syms who got her to New York: She flew Stingily out for a video shoot (*Notes on Gesture*, 2015, a stylishly edited video of an extra-animated Stingily performing a range of gif-able moments, was the

centerpiece of Syms’s celebrated 2015 solo debut at Bridget Donahue), and Stingily told Syms not to book her a return flight. She moved to New York with one suitcase and a few hundred dollars, and got a job at a dog boutique in Chelsea.

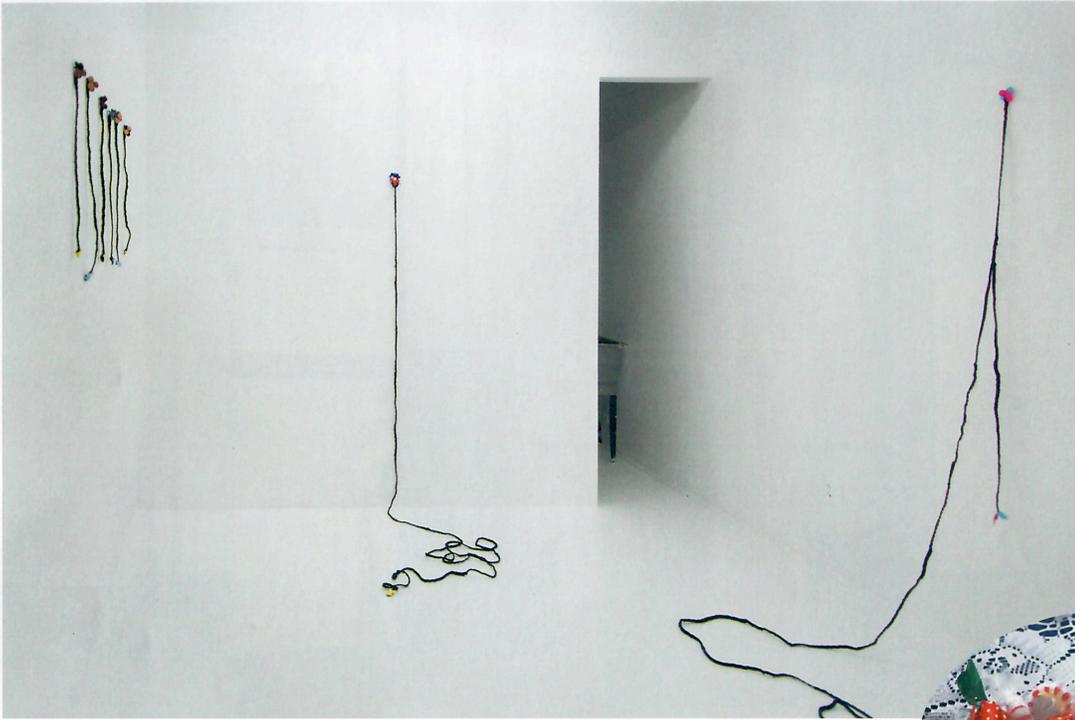
*Love, Diamond* is a terse and poignant record of Stingily’s hopes (“Dear Dairy [*sic*], I wish for one day that I can be a teenager”) and sibling drama (“Byron is the meanst [*sic*] borthor [*sic*]”). It also serves as a fitting introduction to her work, which merges a startling child’s-eye perspective with a spare, lyrical style. In her poetry, Stingily favors plain language and isolated images; her visual art has a kindred crystalline quality. In her subtle, stripped-down videos she leaves much unsaid, and the breathing room around her understated sculptures, made from beauty supplies or hardware, draws out their symbolic and melancholic power.

For her first exhibition, at the artist-run gallery the Egg in Chicago, in 2014, Stingily created a window display,

having become familiar with the form while spending time at her aunt’s hair salon, where her mother works as a stylist. In an otherwise vacant storefront space, the artist (who didn’t go to art school and had previously thought of herself mainly as a writer) placed a dish of Starlight Mints and foil-wrapped strawberry bonbons on a lace tablecloth beside a worn Bible, vases of fake flowers, a framed greeting card, and a few copies of a poetry zine. This publication, *Forever in Our Hearts*, 2014, resembles a photocopied funeral program for the author’s own “homegoing,” replete with clip-art doves and calligraphic typeface. One mysterious and vivid poem, characteristic of Stingily’s oeuvre, evokes family mythology and trauma:

*When my dad was a toddler he almost lost his tongue.  
When I was a toddler I almost lost my skin.*

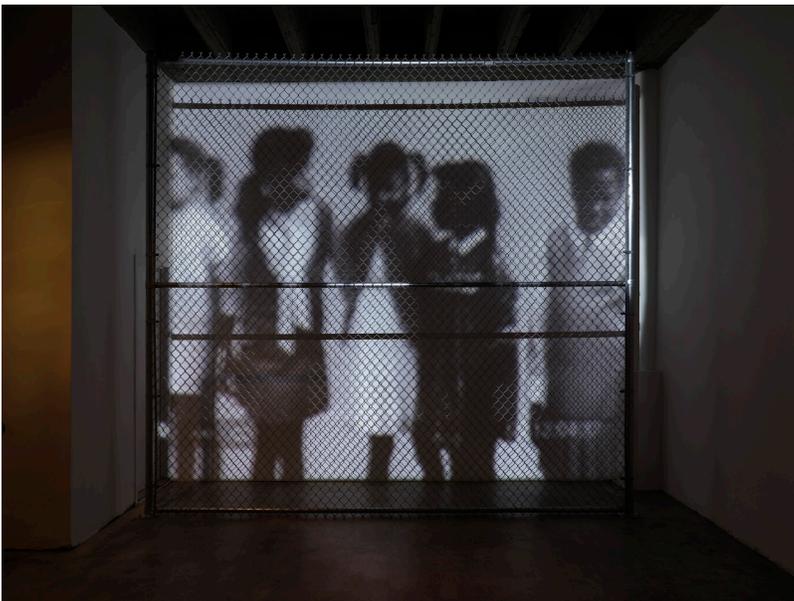
*Same happened with my sister when she got caught under a treadmill.*



left: View of “Diamond Stingily: Kaas,” 2016, Queer Thoughts, New York.

below: Diamond Stingily, *Forever in Our Hearts* (detail), 2014, the Egg, Chicago

below left: Diamond Stingily, *How Did He Die*, 2016, chain link fence, digital video (8 min 38 sec), installation view, Ramiken Crucible, New York



Stingily’s braid works, made from synthetic Kanekalon hair, are eerie—or enchanted—fragments of African American hairstyles. For her first New York solo exhibition, at the gallery Queer Thoughts last year, she anchored these disembodied plaits with “knockers” (elastic ties with ball-shaped decorations) at the top, and clamped them at the bottom with classic little-girl molded-plastic Goody barrettes. Some of these talismanic pieces, pinned to the walls, were of a realistic size; others were absurdly long—up to twenty feet—and trailed onto the floor. “Kaas,” as the show was titled, refers to the wise snake character of *The Jungle Book*, but braids-as-serpents also suggest

Medusa, a fearsome figure Stingily entangles with Kaa in her parable-like accompanying statement, in which a girl is teased for looking like both of them.

Her sculpture *Elephant Memory*, 2016, the title work of a subsequent solo show, at Ramiken Crucible, combines various shades of the store-bought hair not with cute or colorful accessories but with forbidding steel chains and sturdy hooks more befitting the exhibition’s explicit allusions to the threat of violence and to the troubled threshold between public and private. A group of battered apartment doors, weary sentinels armed with baseball bats in the darkened gallery, composed the solemn suite *Entryways*, 2016; nearby, projected behind a section of chain link fence, footage borrowed from a 1967 documentary looped: Black schoolgirls (many with braids in their hair) sing happily at the playground, but one unnerving chanted refrain—“How did he die?”—evokes looming tragedy. Stingily tells me she plans to make a much longer braid for a commission at the New Museum in New York; it will cut through gallery ceilings to hang, both girlish and Gorgon-like, from the fourth floor to the lobby.



above: Four stills from Diamond Stingily's *Toma*, 2016, digital video, color, sound, 10 mins 22 sec



Stingily leaves much unsaid, and the breathing room around her understated sculptures, made from beauty supplies or hardware, draws out their symbolic and melancholic power.

When I ask what else is on the horizon, she lists a swirl of ongoing projects, most of them collaborative in nature and engaged with a new generation of DIY media platforms. Her refreshing take-it-or-leave-it attitude to white-cube exhibition space and, for that matter, institutional opportunities, is the result of her—and her scene's—ability to create and present work without it, online and off. “If you wait on someone,” she says, “you’re going to be sorry.” That said, it’s clear that what she does is not “internet art.” She hosts a monthly broadcast on the online radio station Know Wave called *The Diamond Stingily Show*, welcoming artists, poets, and friends to a free-form conversation interspersed with music; *Middle School Minor* is cryptic, casual, anything-goes webzine (“It’s supposed to be like when you have a friend and y’all share a notebook in class”) begun in 2013 with Austin-based artist Rachael Milton; and Stingily is directing short film portraits of the luminous personalities around

her, a series she inaugurated with the whimsical, sardonic *Toma*, 2016, which aired on the public-access online station 8 Ball TV. It seems even social media, with its broken, corporatized spaces, isn’t particularly needed now, or even that interesting to comment on.

In her solo work, though, Stingily’s main subject matter remains her family. She tells me that an upcoming show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit will mostly likely focus on her father. At the moment, she’s preoccupied with finding a way to merge a mold of her teeth with a baseball for a new sculpture series: It’s a scary riff on the bats from the *Entryways* works, and also a once-removed reference to her other grandma, Estelle. She’s as influential as the diary-giving grandmother, Stingily says. Estelle kept a slugger by the dead-bolted door and a supply of strawberry bonbons inside.

*Diamond Stingily will create a new work for the group exhibition “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” curated by Johanna Burton with Natalie Bell and Sara O’Keeffe, which opens at the New Museum, New York, September 27, and will remain on view through January 21, 2018.*

Johanna Fateman is a musician, writer, owner of Seagull salon in New York, and frequent contributor to Artforum. She is currently coediting a collection of Andrea Dworkin’s writings for Semiotext(e).