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## **Kalup Linzy: Romo Gallery**

Philip Auslander

So, anyway, rich and hunky Harry proposes to Taiwan ... you know, Taiwan, the gay African-American lip-synch performance artist? And poor Taiwan doesn't know what to do. He loves Harry, but he's not sure he can commit. He's not sure what his family will think, what his church will think. He talks to his sister on the phone, he calls a psychic, he calls his mother, who calls her mother.... He just can't decide!

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

These are the days of our lives. Actually, this is one day in the life of Taiwan, a character that artist Kalup Linzy portrays on video and in live performance. In *Conversations wit de Churen III: Da Young and Da Mess, 2005*, an episode in an ongoing video soap opera, Taiwan must choose between his lover and the life to which he is accustomed. Linzy tackles the ripped-from-the-headlines topic of same-sex marriage with humor and pathos. The video is no polemic--it takes the idea of two men marrying for granted and goes on to ask whether these two men should marry. At this stage, the signs are unfavorable: Taiwan seems unlikely to surrender the security of his family and church to be with Harry.

Although *Conversations* includes many of the tropes of downtown performance--over-the-top stereotypes, pop-culture references, drag, insouciantly bad acting, and tacky production values--it is affecting as well as campy. As much as television soap opera, it evokes the plays performed for primarily African-American audiences on the so-called chitlin circuit. The audiences for these plays, which typically feature broadly portrayed character types and melodramatic plots that often center on faith and temptation, value their familiarity. Linzy implicitly asks of his audience a similarly empathetic response, not just ironic appreciation.

As in other of Linzy's video works, the action in this episode takes the form of telephone conversations, in which Taiwan sounds out various members of his family and avoids Harry. While the round-robin phone calls may seem neurotic, they represent the support system that sustains Taiwan emotionally: the phone lines are the ties that bind. In this show, these ties were also represented graphically in four works on paper. Part of a series titled "Whatchu Lookin' At," 2006, each depicts a group of people gazing at something. In two cases, we see what they are looking at (a couple kissing and a couple fighting); in the other two works, we only see them looking. All of the figures are rendered in black silhouette as bodiless, cartoonlike heads. In two images, these are connected by rhizomatic tendrils, as if each group of heads belongs to a single organism. With Linzy's characteristically light touch, these drawings evoke the ways in which our communities are the audiences for our social performances.

In another video, *Lollypop, 2006*, two shirtless men in floppy hats lip-synch flawlessly to Hunter & Jenkins's 1933 recording of "Lollypop," a comic vaudeville blues piece given over to male-female flirtation couched in double-entendres. The result is disarming and subtly layered, as Linzy filters an older, somewhat declassé genre of African-American performance through a contemporary queer sensibility. His use of lip-synching creates enough critical distance to foreground the construction of gender and sexuality in both the song and his own video, but the spareness of the presentation also allows us simply to enjoy the music.

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