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Israel Aten
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Israel Aten's work is concerned with becoming. Not becoming something per se, but rather homing in on a state of metamorphosis in all of its turbulence. His paintings point to the violence that undergirds transformation: change is painful. While his sketchy, breathy forms evoke, at first, something like action figures, Aten likens them to devotional, saint-like figures. This allusion to religious iconography resonates with the spiritual undertones implicit in paying attention to a sense of becoming disconnected from an outcome. Simone Weil articulates, "I must love being nothing. How horrible it would be if I were something! I must love my nothingness," a position Ram Dass echoes in his aim to "become nobody." He continues, "When I was born, I donned a space suit for living on this planet, and everybody comes up and says, "What a nice suit!" and you're constantly looking into other people's eyes to see if you're really wearing a nice space suit. It's what I call somebody training." Imagine Aten's figure's engaged in the struggle to shed said space-suit. Identity can be an armor—self a disguise—what might lie beyond it?

In *Warriors in the Dance*, 2022 two angular figures meet in a fist lock, their symmetry slightly askew and fractured by a frenzy of geometric lines in soft, black acrylic. These lines, which appear almost pencil or charcoal-like, simultaneously erect and deconstruct, separate and bind, the figures. Perhaps it's a mirror image: this struggle internal. The linen hangs loose—Aten often drapes his canvases, also against each other, as in, *Abstract Machine*, 2022, a gesture indicative of his interest in pushing back at the parameters of how painting "ought" to be. The artist spent nearly a decade in Düsseldorf, before moving back to his native Detroit and the initial pull to study at the Academy of Art in Düsseldorf (he graduated in 2017) was Germany's art historical lineage—its early 20th century Expressionists, in particular. Bits of the history of painting, including Kirchner's sharp edges, but also Helio Oiticica's inventive installations or Wilhelm de Kooning's monstrous women on the verge, appear metabolized here. Processed by a dynamic unravelling.

The duality in the composition of *Warriors in the Dance*, as well as *Angelic Signs* (2022), points to Aten's interest in polarities, particularly the archetypal dichotomy of good vs evil that structures scores of narratives from ancient mythology to science fiction. For Aten, the way in which utopia and dystopia are at once opposing poles and can simultaneously collapse into each other, become indistinguishable, is endlessly fertile ground. Could they combust instead? From explosive confrontation, create something new? The paintings rehearse that combustion. They conjure it. This posture evinces the close connection between Aten's practice and the concerns and aesthetics of Afrofuturism. The affinity of his project and the Detroit-based electro-techno outfit Drexciy's 1994 *Acquatic Invasion* is evocative in this regard. *Acquatic Invasion* imagined their music as a "dimensional jumphole" to an underwater universe populated by a "Drexciyan" race of the descendents of pregnant enslaved women who drowned during their forced voyage across the Atlantic. While the narrative of Aten's project is more opaque, his paintings could be portholes to alternate realities of a similar order. In his case, rather than constructing a fantastical universe that the works emerge from or occupy, the paintings are charged with the work of spawning this futurity—to find forms for the friction and flux that might spur a different order of things.