



**Jamal Cyrus *Kennedy King Kennedy*, 2015**  
 laser-cut Egyptian papyrus backed with handmade paper  
 triptych, 27 x 16-3/4 inches each

***Kennedy King Kennedy*** is the most recent triptych in a series of papyrus works by Jamal Cyrus that explore, with soft-spoken purpose, the dissident perspectives gradually lost to history. More often than not, the conflicting reports and hasty reactions immediately following an event will settle, over time, into a single accepted narrative. It's a natural abridgement: new facts come to light, cooler heads prevail, and people move on. Witnesses that might shade or contradict the conventional wisdom die off. Slippery, unstable interpretations harden into canon. It can be comforting and useful, but the process has obvious flaws. Inaccuracies are perpetuated, nuances are shed, and the privileged classes sanction the version of events most convenient for themselves.

Cyrus works with newspaper pages of days past that reintroduce some of our collective omissions. Voices that, for the sake of efficiency, we've chosen to ignore get another hearing. The pages he selects are laser-cut onto papyrus, creating precise but barely legible artifacts. Paper islands are cut free; letters lose their insides, images fall apart. His use of papyrus, one of the earliest known writing materials, lends historical weight to the comparatively disposable daily news. The freshly made relics are Gnostic Gospels of the recent past: heterodox, contentious, and cryptic discoveries from the cultural margins, professing arcane knowledge and overturning received doctrine.

While other works in the series focus on linguistic biases or ulterior motives, ***Kennedy King Kennedy*** functions more in the arrangement of its parts. Its three pages lament the

assassinations, respectively, of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy. All the pages are from the *Chicago Daily Defender*, one of the more influential African-American publications in the country. Although the articles have no discernable agenda other than an expression of grief, the choice of news outlet does emphasize the victims' shared commitment to civil rights, and a tacit conjecture begins to suggest itself. There's no shortage of conspiracy speculation around these assassinations, but the possibility that all three are connected goes far afield of Oliver Stone.

A little more than a month after Robert Kennedy was murdered, the *Daily Defender* quoted a speech by Coretta Scott King in which she linked the three deaths: "It cannot be a coincidence that all three of the murdered people were actively engaged in the cause of social justice... The real threads [connecting the crimes] are embedded in the social order... After John F. Kennedy was murdered, my husband wrote that the assassination was predictable, given the climate in Dallas. Well, the same could have been said for the climate in Memphis or Los Angeles." This is the larger, sadder, more intractable conspiracy of repressive social control and reactionary fear of progress. It's much nimbler, much more destructive, and much more real than a magic bullet. In this framework, the three Ks in Cyrus' title aren't a specific accusation: they're an undeniable reminder of our savage inheritance and the suffering we inflict on our heroes.



Detail from *Kennedy King Kennedy*

Jamal Cyrus (born 1973, Houston, TX) lives and works in Houston. He received his BFA from the University of Houston in 2004 and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2008. In 2005 he attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He was an Artist in Residence at Artpace San Antonio and has won several awards, including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, the Artadia Houston Award, and the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship. He is a member of the artist collective *Otabenga Jones and Associates*, and has participated in national and international exhibitions, including *Day for Night*, the 2006 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Menil Collection in Houston (2007), The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington DC, The California African American Museum, Los Angeles (both 2008), The Kitchen in New York (2009), The New Museum, New York (2011), The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2012), and the Studio Museum, Harlem (2013).

Cyrus' work is currently included in the traveling exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and on view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in SF through October 11, as well as *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 To Now*, currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, through November 22, 2015.