

KAMEELAH JANAN RASHEED

American, born East Palo Alto, CA, 1985

Lazy Equation, 2019

Inkjet print on paper, 20 x 16 inches

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Language is a key element of Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s work as both an educator and an artist. In her artwork, she takes simple phrases and puts them into a visual form that questions their assumed meanings. Complicating the format and content familiar from textbooks, Rasheed creates subtle references to racial relations and the expectations placed on marginalized groups.

Lazy Equation uses mathematical symbols and short statements—printed in white text on a black background—that read like math and social science textbooks taken apart and reassembled. The first line is simple arithmetic: $1 + 1 = 2$, but Rasheed calls into question the validity of the elementary calculation by placing the left-hand side of the equation in quotation marks. This intervention asks the viewer to reevaluate the equal weight of the numbers added. The two statements that follow create a relationship between ideas about who is considered fully human. The footnote numbered 16 following “we already human!” contradicts the exclamation with a cautionary “not yet.” This annotation, and those implied to have come before it, suggest that this is one of many ways the notion of universal humanity is negated by a history of anti-Blackness. Rasheed continues by adding, “But lazy equations can trick our efforts,” to point out how complacency can undermine the work toward racial equity.

At the time I am writing this in 2020, protestors across the United States and in several European countries have accepted the risks in refusing COVID-19 stay-at-home orders to gather, and speak out against and demand change to the carelessness with which Black lives are frequently taken by the police and vigilantes. Many of the voices raised have pointed to the systemic ways in which the humanity of Black people has been challenged, especially in the United States, historically and in the present. Yet Rasheed gives us hope by adding a comma at the end of the last line of *Lazy Equation*, indicating a pause rather than a conclusion, and suggesting that there is much more to say about efforts to ensure it is known that everyone is already human.

—Alisa Swindell
Curatorial Research Associate