



NARRATIVE AS REALITY:
A WORLD REIMAGINED

ON THE COVER
Dominic Chambers, *The Night is Our Friend*

NARRATIVE AS REALITY: A WORLD REIMAGINED

**SELECTIONS FROM THE
JESSICA & KELVIN BEACHUM FAMILY COLLECTION**

SMU Libraries

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NARRATIVE AS REALITY: A WORLD REIMAGINED

CURATOR

Dr. Valerie Bennett Gillespie

EXHIBITION SUMMARY

A glimpse into the Jessica and Kelvin Beachum Family Collection beholds an artistic world of hope, Black joy, reality, and aspiration. Each composition within the collection offers a unique story. These non-linear narratives on the Black experience, with their own distinct actualities exhibit a reality not often portrayed, yet a collective lived experience that strives to represent a livelihood untouched. *Narrative as Reality: A World Reimagined* contains the work of artists, Dominic Chambers, Ryan Cosbert, Robert Hodge, Nelson Makamo, Delita Martin, Sungi Mlengeya, Mario Moore, Robert Pruitt, Athi-Patra Ruga, and Ferrari Sheppard. Artist as storyteller and aesthetic elegance collide in this breathtaking collection of work that bestows a world where narratives hold power and imagery conveys truth.

EXHIBITION SUB-THEMES

Identity. Representation. Empowerment. The Gaze.

DEDICATION

Dedicated to our children and the next generation of trailblazers. May you continue to excite yourself in the Arts and never lose touch with the beauty that they bring to our lives.

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Valerie Gillespie is an independent curator based in Dallas. She holds a doctorate in educational leadership from the University of New England in Portland and curatorial practice from New York University. Her undergraduate degree is in Studio Art and Spanish from Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia.

During her years abroad in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, Valerie studied art and architecture. While completing her artist in residence program with Università Iuav di Venezia in Venice, Italy, she studied painting under the guidance of Maurizio Pellegrin.

Valerie currently is the Director of Fine Arts at the Winston School and owner of Pencil on Paper Gallery in Dallas. Some of her recent exhibitions include curatorial projects with the 500X Gallery in Dallas and the Texas Visual Arts Association.

ABOUT HAWN GALLERY

The Mildred J. Hawn Gallery at the Hamon Arts Library holds exhibitions and programs that highlight the academic areas represented in the library's collections and the curricula of the visual and performing arts in the Meadows School of the Arts. In addition to exhibitions of their work, visiting artists may give talks and present workshops to university students and faculty, thus enriching the campus community experience. SMU Libraries and the Hawn Gallery seek to advance diversity, equity and inclusion through programming, staffing, collections and resources.

DEAN'S FOREWORD

MY INITIAL PHONE CONVERSATION WITH KELVIN BEACHUM '10, '12 TOOK PLACE IN LATE 2020. ALTHOUGH OTHER PEOPLE WERE ON THE LINE, MR. BEACHUM'S PASSION, PURPOSE, AND REVERENCE FOR THE ARTWORK REPRESENTED IN THE JESSICA AND KELVIN BEACHUM FAMILY COLLECTION SHONE THROUGH AND DREW ME INTO HIS WORLD. Kelvin spoke of how he and his wife selected each painting, the relationships they form with the artists, the depth of artistic research expressed in each work, the intention to create a home for their children filled with positive imagery of Black lives, and his overwhelming desire to share this passion with others, especially young people. The call lasted less than 30 minutes and ranks in my mind as one of the most significant and inspiring conversations in my career. Rarely do people capture in so few words the essence of their mission. Rarely are the words spoken with such conviction and desire to share the spark with others. The beacon lit; I knew SMU Libraries had to walk with the Beachums on their journey to highlight pieces from the collection with a broader audience.

Libraries are strongly associated with books and the written word, while museums lay claim to the preservation and veneration of visual and cultural arts. Strong narratives have the power to cross formats and structures. Hence, an art exhibition within a library. Literature and art alike assert themselves as cultural markers of time and place. Each unique set of words or brushstrokes tells a personal or societal story if we pause to look, listen, and reflect. Reflections are deeply personal and influenced by cultural norms and expert critique; they are, above all, subjectively human.

Generations of scholars, librarians, and museum curators have carefully stewarded the legacy of our cultural memory through what is studied, collected, and preserved. Existing canons, broadly defined as an ideal standard by which a thing is measured, shape cultural expectations of material importance or objective beauty. Yet, we must ask, 'Does the visual canon represent the combined experience and creative beauty of all people?' Libraries and museums are reimagining not only the canon, but the fullness of what is collected, who it represents, and what past, present, or future stories the material can tell.

As the Dean of SMU Libraries, I humbly invite you into the world reimagined through this exhibition, *Narrative as Reality: A World Reimagined/ Selections from the Jessica and Kelvin Beachum Family Collection*. I invite you to sit and carefully read the words of Dr. Valerie Bennett Gillespie, the exhibition curator, as she expertly guides your understanding of each work as it exists within the collection and through the eyes and intent of the artist. Read, view, and reflect on the subthemes: identity, representation, empowerment and the Gaze. Dr. Gillespie offers you a narrative constructed from each artist's reality as interpreted through creative expression. As with any good story, emotions generated from the experience can inform and reinform our perception of reality.

I'd like to take a moment to thank my SMU Libraries colleagues Jolene de Verges and Beverly Mitchell for embracing the notion of hosting, and planning, the exhibition within the Jake and Nancy Hamon Arts Library at SMU. As Director and Assistant Director, respectively, of the Hamon Arts Library, they are intimately familiar with how the arts continuously shape and challenge our understanding of the past and present as well as reimagine a future state of being. Many thanks to Paula Voyles, AVP for School and Project Development with SMU Development and External Affairs for approaching me with the initial concept of hosting the Beachum's collection.

A deep and heartfelt thank you to Dr. Valerie Bennett Gillespie, Exhibition Curator, for weaving a thought-provoking narrative from which we can learn. Further thanks go to Kristin Kimball, manager for Kelvin Beachum, for representing the ardent vision of the Beachums throughout the project. A final appreciation for Jessica and Kelvin Beachum for the privilege of collaboration and for entrusting SMU Libraries with the opportunity to share their collection with the larger SMU and Dallas community through this exhibit and all of the associated events and educational experiences surrounding the exhibit. Your vision and generosity made it possible for all of us to appreciate and enjoy.



HOLLY JEFFCOAT
Dean of SMU Libraries

JESSICA & KELVIN

“We want to look back on each piece and know it represents something we love, something we remember, something historically significant, or something we never want to forget. The intergenerational component is what is most special.”



BEACHUM

KELVIN BEACHUM, A MEXIA, TEXAS NATIVE, GRADUATED FROM SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY (SMU) IN 2010 WITH A BA IN ECONOMICS AND A MINOR IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT. IN 2012, HE COMPLETED A MASTER OF LIBERAL STUDIES IN ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS AND DELIVERED THE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS FOR THE SIMMONS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. JESSICA BEACHUM IS A DALLAS NATIVE. SHE GRADUATED FROM BAYLOR UNIVERSITY IN 2011 WITH A BA IN SOCIOLOGY AND WENT ON TO EARN HER BSN FROM DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY IN 2017. IN 2021, SHE RECEIVED A MASTER OF SCIENCE (MS) IN SCIENCE HEALTHCARE DELIVERY FROM ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY.

Beachum is a 10-year NFL veteran. He was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2012 and throughout his career has also played for the Jacksonville Jaguars, the New York Jets, and is currently signed with the Arizona Cardinals.

In addition to his commitments with the NFL, Kelvin is known for his dedication to end hunger by working directly with advocacy groups like World Vision and supporting community food banks across America. He also sits on the Entertainment Council for Feeding America. Beachum is an Executive Board member for the Simmons School of Education and the Lyle School of Engineering at SMU. He is an alternate union rep for the NFLPA and a member of the NFLPA Brand Ambassador Program as well as a Players Inc. Advisory Committee member. Beachum is a founding member of the NFL Players Coalition and sits on the Donors Choose Advisory Board and the African Acquisition Committee for the Tate Foundation. He is a professional speaker as well as an active investor, focusing mainly on the technology ecosystem.

Kelvin and Jessica are both committed to helping young people, especially minority and disadvantaged youth, develop the habits and skills for success. They have a special focus on encouraging minority youth to engage STEAM-centric disciplines and STEAM careers. They are passionate about addressing inequity in education with a specific emphasis on eliminating the digital divide.

The pair began their art journey in 2013 by acquiring their first piece. The Jessica and Kelvin Beachum Family Collection follows the quest to learn the story of what has happened in the art historical canon, what is happening presently, and what is still to come in the future. The full collection consists and focuses on historical relevance, artist research and scholarship, and capturing the times.

A family of strong faith, the Beachums are devoted to glorifying God in everything they do and use their time and influence to encourage others by advocating education, faithful devotion and being of service to others. The Beachums reside in Arizona with their three children.

A WORLD REIMAGINED

NARRATIVE AS REALITY: A WORLD REIMAGINED ADDRESSES THE STORIES SURROUNDING THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AND PROVIDES A STRIKING VISUAL EXPLORATION OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA ACROSS MOMENTS IN TIME. CONTENT TAKES SHAPE IN ART MAKING WHEN FORM AND PIGMENT COMMAND SPACE TO SURRENDER TO AN ARTIST'S INTENT. ART HAS THE INNATE ABILITY TO LEND ITSELF FOR VIEWERS TO SEE, DREAM AND IMAGINE A REALITY SIMILAR OR DIFFERENT TO THEIR OWN. THIS EXHIBITION INVITES THE VIEWER TO BECOME PART OF THE STORY THROUGH EACH COMPOSITION.

Every artist's marked approach to exhibiting their experience, displaying the reimagined and personalizing the beliefs they hold dear, gives way to a life unseen, or ignored. Through Black leisure, Dominic Chambers pays homage to a literary narrative where the artist invites viewers to rethink the Black intellectual. Chambers personifies an existence that for him, is reality, but one that is often masked and overshadowed by societal constructs. Abstraction and symbolism form amidst Ryan Cosbert and Robert Hodge who offer the struggles in our 21st-century America in a mixed media approach underlining the trauma faced by the underrepresented and marginalized. Nelson Makamo, Mario Moore, and Ferrari Sheppard paint imagery of our youth in their tales of childhood. Makamo's painting of five children in a line among a crowd (detail shown on opposite page, upper left), with their gazes pointedly towards the viewer, candidly display the innocence and intellectualism of children as inspiration. Moore displays a moment of happiness. His subject, a young Black boy at play with a police car passing in the shadows in an afterthought that dares the audience to denounce the title, *Joy and Pain*. Sheppard's *Girl talk* (detail shown on opposite page, bottom

right), seemingly nostalgic, with a delightful balance of the figurative and the abstract, imagines a world of happiness post discord. We are transported to notions of identity in artwork by Athi-Patra Ruga, with his attention to the cultural narrative of fiction and imagination. Tapestry gives life to

the essence of the woman in all her glory as pride and empowerment command the gaze of *Nobantu*. We see female empowerment continue to take form further in the works of Sungi Mlengeya and Delita Martin. Mlengeya's *At Heart* (detail shown at left) epitomizes power in the use of negative space. Two women stand before us, blurring the relationship between foreground and background. As one woman's hand rests upon the shoulder of another, the existence of community and sisterhood are delicately intertwined.



Similarly, Martin shows two women - one hand gently grasping the arm of the other as a gesture of walking away, glancing back towards the viewer. Connectivity and community express this reconstruction of identity behind the layers of decorative papers and hand stitching. Martin spares no detail in *The Soul She Carries*, relinquishing the representations of the woman's role in society.



Completing the narrative in this collection of work, perception becomes reality in Robert Pruitt's *Abduction/Annunciation* as he adorns the Black body in a loosely scripted narrative of a personal moment in time to which we are privy to. The perspective and scale of Pruitt's images place us within reach of the subject just close enough to feel elements of that reality but remain distant and untouchable. We are forever a spectator in this powerful work of subconsciousness. The artists within the Jessica and Kelvin Beachum Family Collection deliver snapshots of moments, public and private, that offer realities of their lived experience.

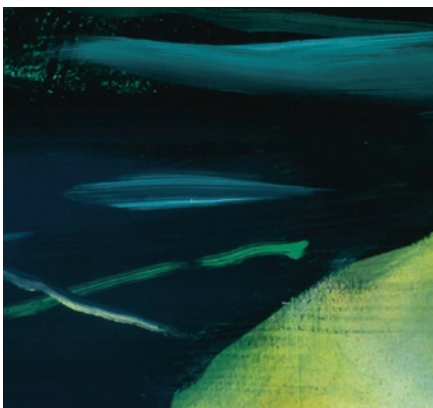
The works in *Narrative as Reality: A World Reimagined* bring the unique opportunity of a call to action in its awareness to a broader audience. Each artist communicates a contemporary relevance to a past, present or future time that generates conversations of an enduring narrative. The relevance of individual works becomes part of a dialogue among many and a cohesion of thoughts unfiltered. The artists in this stunningly honest and captivating collection unfold layers of experiences not only vital to the ongoing discussions in our contemporary world, but also possess glimmers of hope in the paradigm of humanity. These acquisitions from the thoughtfulness of the Beachum family, allow for a world reimagined where artists extend grace through creativity as they request the observer to see them as they see themselves.

Text by Dr. Valerie Bennett Gillespie.



“
I consider myself a student, and I consider the process of making art as an intellectual activity. The idea that museums exist because they hold intellect in the objects that they house is powerful. When I approach a painting, I have to think about the message I want to convey. My job is to offer my perspective as not all perspectives are told.”

Dominic Chambers



THE NIGHT IS OUR FRIEND EMERGED FROM DOMINIC CHAMBERS' FIRST POST YALE BODY OF WORK: THE PRIMARY MAGIC SERIES. PER CHAMBERS,

EACH PAINTING IS REFLECTIVE OF A PRIVILEGED PRIMARY COLOR TO A DOMINANT SCHEME. Each image portrays themes within magical realism and leisure with literary and historical references. In conversation with Chambers, he recounts his grad school days where he and a friend's affection for the poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant, sparked discourse on the significance of walls in our contemporary world and the philosophical sentiments behind walls themselves, and the barriers they present. Specifically, Chambers mentions his recollection of the literary critique, *When the Walls Fall: Is National Identity an Outlaw?* by Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant. Chambers explains that both philosophers argue that our relationship to the wall is antithetical, and that walls present a barrier between ourselves and another. In *The Night is Our Friend*, two subjects are resting on the *other* side of this wall. The light in Chambers' work presents opportunity on the *other* side. As both bodies reside on the opposite side of opportunity, Chambers considers Glissant's critique of this limitation, and sees it as a point of possibility within his painting. The wall, as a political barrier, presents as an obstacle, however the two subjects are unbothered being in the shadows. In this moment, we as viewers, are granted permission to rest, following in the footsteps of the subjects who have afforded consent through their own choice to do the same. The consistent theme of respite in Chambers' work is only matched by the equally consistent remnants of magical realism. This element takes shape as the two spirits that reside on the opposite side of the wall. These two [secret] self-portraits, or dancing spirits as they are affectionately referred to by Chambers, are the artist's silhouettes.

As Chambers meditates on the history of painting, he reflects on his relationship to color and the affect it has in all art. The conversation shifts to the relevance of chiaroscuro, a technique in art where strong dramatic contrasts between light and dark exists. Chambers presents us with a subtle, quieter drama in *The Night is Our Friend*. Technique and vibrancy shift to appreciation and responsibility as his internal dialogue embraces a deep obligation to the knowledge of art history and the ways he can explore and honor artistic themes, time periods and techniques through “Black eyes.” When asked about his life as an artist and his own ability to find moments of rest and leisure, Chambers shared, “My studio is where life makes sense. I get to wake up every day and paint and read and write stories. That's freedom. It's important to my existence.”



DOMINIC CHAMBERS
The Night is Our Friend, 2020
Oil on Canvas
70in x 77in



“*I try to use titles that offer some sense of entry and direction to the audience, but generally I hope for the work to spark a viewer’s own sense of narrative.*”

Robert Pruitt



ROBERT PRUITT

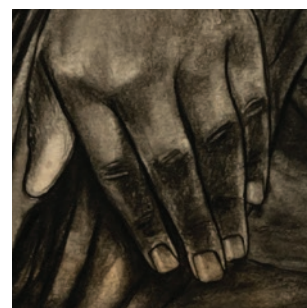
Abduction/Annunciation, 2017

Charcoal and Conte on Coffee-Stained Paper
60in x 84in

MUCH OF PRUITT'S ART GRANTS ITS VIEWERS THE ABILITY TO CREATE THEIR OWN NARRATIVES. *ABDUCTION/ANNUNCIATION* SOFTLY DEPICTS A FIGURE,

SEEMINGLY AT REST UNDER DELICATE FOLDS ON A COUCH. Initially, viewers can take in the beauty of this portrait's entirety through the tightly contoured lines perfectly aligned in the body's form, shaping the sheet surrounding it. Pruitt masterfully renders form in this work. The fabric dominates the scene but only for a moment as the viewer's eyes are shifted to the gaze of the woman. Ultimately, the socks on the subject's propped feet end the observation. The narrative has shifted.

Drawing inspiration from Henry Tanner's *The Annunciation*, Pruitt plays upon the title of this work that suggests something more than perhaps what viewers originally thought. Pruitt speaks on the contrasts of the intensity and serenity of his work in this "supernatural" event. "This work is the first of three images I made drawing inspiration from Henry Tanner's *The Annunciation* (1898). Tanner's painting depicts the Virgin Mary seated on a fabric covered bed, illuminated by light emanating from the Angel Gabriel. In my version, I am weighing the implications of transformation I find in Tanner's work but shifting the sense of an intense supernatural event into one of mundane serenity. The light is softer, and its source is 'off screen.' The scene becomes very terrestrial with any notion of the metaphysical hidden within the figure. The suggestion (possibly implied by the UFO print on her socks) is that the possibilities of fantastic transformations can be internal."



When asked about process, Pruitt notes, "I work from photographs that I make myself in the studio, usually with hired models. The model in this work is my wife, Autumn Knight. Models are usually dressed in whatever street clothes they wear to the shoot that I make changes to later in the drawing. I also add most of the objects and adornment later. I begin with washes of coffee, tea or fabric dye for my ground and complete the works in Charcoal and Conte. The coffee is used for its color and is intended to shift the sense of the 'neutral' associated with white paper to brown, a truer neutral in actual humans." *Abduction/Annunciation* masterfully conveys the beauty of the figure while highlighting the possibilities of this surreal scene. Subject, background, and objects marry into a place of solitude as the viewer is left to imagine what is next for the subject.



FOR HER STRIKING AND POWERFULLY MINIMALIST PORTRAITS OF BLACK WOMEN, SUNGI MLENGEYA, A SELF-TAUGHT ARTIST FROM TANZANIA, WORKS FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF HER

PHOTOSHOOTS. MANY OF THE WOMEN PRESENTED IN MLENGEYA'S PORTRAITS ARE WOMEN SHE IS INSPIRED BY IN HER DAILY LIFE. Sungi Mlengeya speaks of her desire for her models to see themselves in her paintings. She longs for them to know and understand just how strong they are.

Mlengeya works with themes surrounding unity, friendship, empowerment, and support. In *At Heart*, there is evidence of this unity and friendship in the closeness of the two women she portrays, one hand confidently and mindfully placed upon the other's shoulder almost as if to say, "I have you." Each pose is beautifully curated in Mlengeya's studio and often demonstrates the theme and story she wishes to tell. While each story presents the opportunity to shine after the painting has been created, Sungi recounts her process of allowing her mind to guide the composition. "I work in two ways. The first being more of a random process. I don't always sketch beforehand, but if I need more photos, I let my mind roam to find more ideas for the photoshoot. Before each shoot, I have an idea of what I want to try, and new poses can emerge and often be better than what I initially intended. The story often comes later. Also, in solo exhibitions, I come up with a theme through research beforehand, and the ideas present themselves before the painting begins. I enjoy switching between these two styles of working."

At Heart is a breathtaking image of strength and togetherness. There is power in the gaze of each of the subjects that is inspirational and motivating. Mlengeya speaks of her intent to evoke sentiments of strength and confidence in each of her works.

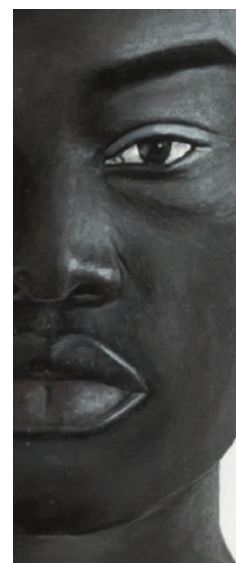
Mlengeya notes, "I want the models to see themselves in the paintings and just know how strong they are." *At Heart*, displays a reckoning of an awakening where the viewer can face the entities in their lives that may need to be confronted. An openness in the space within the composition gives way to this confrontation in a manner of silence, grace, and balance. The contrast of the subject's skin tones with pristine backgrounds that intersect the clothing of each woman questions the relationship of color, placement, and form. It is this intentionality in Mlengeya's work that parades the power of women and the beauty of togetherness.

"The women in my work are ordinary people, but they still have strength and power. I want my audience to know that each of us has that same power."

Sungi Mlengeya

SUNGI MLENGEYA

At Heart, 2020
Acrylic on Canvas
55.1in x 51.2in



MAKAMO'S WORK CAN BEST BE DESCRIBED AS AN EXPERIENCE WHERE VIEWERS ARE ABLE TO SEE, TAKE IN AND PUT ASPECTS OF THE COMPOSITION TOGETHER

TO FORMULATE THEIR OWN UNIQUE UNDERSTANDING. MAKAMO DESCRIBES THIS EXPERIENCE AS ONE WHERE VIEWERS VISUALLY PUT AESTHETIC COMPONENTS TOGETHER LIKE "POETRY" WHERE WHAT YOU SEE NOW CAN BE SOMETHING ONE CAN LEARN AND GROW FROM IT. Makamo's work speaks to the relationship of art in our lives, "Art imitates life and life imitates art, and if life imitates art, then it's almost a fair exchange." The use of black, red, and white hues in *Untitled*, with the addition of spectacles framing the faces of each of the five students in the foreground speaks to our world's upcoming generation. Makamo's desire to show youth in his work in a positive light is accomplished through the universal symbol of "glasses." Makamo notes that while the colors are simple, they hold great importance. "I have sort of simplified it by using simple colors, but those colors are quite strong to us. It's red, it's

black, and it's white as well. I have used one simple symbol that is quite universal which does not have a historical reference...when someone wears glasses, intelligent of the human being, it doesn't have history." Makamo continues, "Coming from a space where we didn't have a fair chance, because our history was always distorted, so it was difficult for us as Africans and even to this day, to actually say as Africans this is what we have in terms of materials... we relied entirely on art as a way to trace back to our roots...we use our art to connect with each other all over the world."



Makamo further expresses the dignity art brings within his culture, while enabling that connectivity among other cultures. Unity and togetherness lead Makamo's passion in the youth he represents. *Untitled*, portrays five young students, unlimited in their presence and optimistic about their future. This work embraces who we are as a people

and displays where humanity is going. This celebration of Black intelligence and the freeness that the youth possess inherently guides the movement and spirit of the work seen through vibrant reds and powerful Black brushstrokes in each of the student's uniforms. Pride and culture in the Black community, along with identity void of historical references are at the forefront of this powerful image. Makamo creates art not for scholars and lecturers, but rather, for anyone else and everyone else who deserves to see themselves through the work. A new generation of Black youth is presented in this image. Makamo speaks to the power of art as a way of humanizing the Black identity. "We have something so special that we often have to fight to show it to the world. But, maybe through artwork, through music, through other forms, we can challenge the world to look at us differently."



“My work is mainly focused on the youth, more than anything else. In most cases I don’t ask questions to my audience in my work, but I confront my audience. My practice doesn’t come from the influence of academia, it comes from the influence of every day. That has always been my interest because in a lot of things, the introduction to the thing that we do, from the musical perspective, from theater, from fine art, it has always come from historical perspective, it rarely comes from the moment as well. It’s always been a question of the youth. If you believe in the youth, you believe in the future.”

Nelson Makamo





My life's work is about an uncovering. My life and artwork are an uncovering to try and reclaim a dignity that literally through forgetting, through it being beaten out of you...revolves around my blackness, my queerness, and my very close affiliation and allyship with the feminine experience. That's where my story comes from. It is my politics. It grooms everything around me."

Athi-Patra Ruga

A CONVERSATION WITH ATHI-PATRA RUGA IS COMPARABLE TO STEPPING INTO THE PAGES OF A MYTHOLOGICAL AND

DEEPLY PROFOUND LITERARY NARRATIVE WHERE LIFE BEGINS TO MAKE SENSE THROUGH THE EYES AND HEART OF AN ARTIST'S PAST. Ruga

creates art through the lens of the Black femme experience.

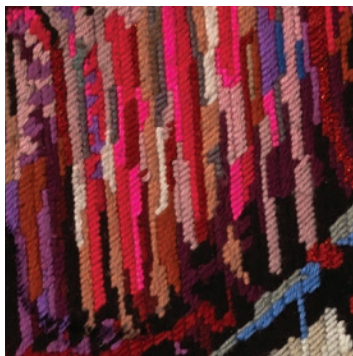
Presenting an existent response to a post-apartheid era where the traumas of the past are actualized in alternate identities, Ruga's work commands a relevant presence in the spaces it inhabits. The

beauty of Ruga's work is that it quite simply isn't about one thing.

Ruga mentions in his interview that the embodiment of many things is something that is enjoyable for him and a "condition" in the work. "My art is not about one thing.

I luxuriate in the fact

that I am a scholar without a degree. I luxuriate in the fact I can integrate theology, queer film theory, and speak to power through using archetypes that evoke camp, evoke anything but sexualized queerness. My work becomes about how do you enter my very confrontational Black queerness into the white cube." The aspects of time being nonlinear is highlighted in the body of work, *The Lunar Songbook*. One of the entities often omitted, forgotten, or even mis-represented, according to Ruga, is that of the history of the queer and femme modernist Black South African experience. Ruga spends time in his work inserting himself into the narrative, as this representation



is rarely seen in the art world. "Where are my friends in the work?" A question Athi asks and answers through his own action of creating art where the possibilities of representation are endless, and the stories become celebrations of freedom through trans-media work.

Nobantu and Umajola, one of the first works of art in *The Lunar Songbook*, takes its viewers through a literary journey beginning at Lovedale College where "girl meets boy, and boy is a prince." Nobantu and the snake is a story of the clash of modernity and traditional life in the 1920s and 30s. Drawing from literary references from *The Wrath of the Ancestors*, femininity and modernity collide as Ruga presents the young Black femme in South Africa in a non-binary, queer character based within the Eastern Cape, home of the Lovedale Press, a printing press established in the 1820s. Ruga explains how Nomalizo Khwezi is the embodiment of cosmology's literature and explains the need to not create a one-dimensional performance art character as a purpose in his work. In *Nobantu and Umajola*, Normalizo is presented to their viewer, dressed as Nobantu, and reflecting on their femininity. Ruga plays with double consciousness in this work with Normalizo, dressed in drag, as a parody to the double consciousness and obstacles Black women face in society with the rules that are placed upon them. Ruga describes the relationship of his imagination with Normalizo as a conversation. "I love the word conversation because it's still me being interrogated about my gaze. Whether I am queer or not, I still have the masculine gaze on things." Ruga continues, "History has allowed me into the actual corpus of the feminine experience, and I want to really approach Normalizo Khwezi as someone who is beyond all of that. The imagination is what really frees all of us from all of those things."

“
*I started creating the
Mayhem series the same
week after the first protest
for George Floyd. I saw this
photograph of a burning
police car and thought
to myself how chaotic
everything was and that
I needed to create work
surrounding this.”*

Ryan Cosbert



BROOKLYN NATIVE, RYAN COSBERT, WAS BORN INTO THE ARTS. HER MOTHER, PROLIFIC IN GRAPHIC DESIGN, AND HER FATHER, A PHOTOGRAPHER, INSTILLED IN HER A RESPECT FOR AND CURIOSITY IN ALL FORMS OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION. Cosbert’s time at the School of Visual Arts inspired her passion in abstraction. With a focus on history through her personal research and desire to enlighten her audience, Cosbert utilizes layers in her work, literally and metaphorically. These layers shed light on shared experiences and cultural narratives. Ryan states, “My main goal is to enlighten as many people as I can. I try to sit down and research about what I am interested in. I read a lot, watch documentaries, and enjoy scholarly articles. All of this goes into my work.” The tiers within Ryan’s work are a large part of her process. “I won’t stop until I feel confident in what I have.”

Mayhem No. 2 began as an all-black painting. It was later transformed through layers of gray, followed by red and white and bullets. The top gray section alludes to white on Black crime, while the bottom red represents bloodshed. Cosbert used a mixture of sand and gesso to enforce the bullets and provide texture to the piece. Perhaps the most signature element in Cosbert’s work is the grid-like presence of “tiles” – an homage to memories of her childhood home. Artistic process and intentionality collide as Cosbert reflects on her why. “In the beginning I was creating for myself, and the people around me were all people who looked like me, so they understood my work. It wasn’t until I had critiques from classmates that I then found out that not everyone understood the work.” Historical significance and social commentary are a shared experience for some, but for others, requires an educational complement. “I type descriptions for each work so that viewers can get a full history lesson on my research. Not everyone is going to understand it the way that I wanted it to be perceived, but that’s something I must learn to accept,” she shares.

In reflections of *Mayhem No. 2*, Cosbert further discusses her personal role in creating work that educates its viewers: “I have always done much research surrounding police brutality. It was always within me, but I didn’t fully know my emotions at the time. Before, I didn’t feel compelled to make art about it; however, after seeing the protests [and videos] this past summer, I felt I had to make something. I felt like it was the right time.” Cosbert’s *Mayhem No. 2* is one of many in this series that embodies the events in our contemporary history told through pattern, texture, color, and abstraction.

RYAN COSBERT

Mayhem No. 2, 2020

Enamel and Bullet Casings on Canvas

60in x 50in



**FERRARI SHEPPARD, A CONTEMPORARY
ARTIST BASED IN LOS ANGELES ONCE
SAID IN AN INTERVIEW WITH PHYLLIS**

HOLLIS, HOST, AND FOUNDER OF *CEREBRAL WOMEN* THAT, “THE ROLE OF AN ARTIST IS TO HOLD UP AND MAKE LIFE BEARABLE.” Sheppard spoke about the importance of art candidly in Hollis’ open and honest interview. Sheppard referenced art as essential in the beginnings of the pandemic and its continued relevance today. He communicated the movement of people falling back on the arts in a time of uncertainty. Sheppard holds true to his role as an artist through productions of work that speaks to a larger audience. *Girl Talk* presents six youth at play. The viewer’s eyes are guided throughout the composition in bouts of color from each young girl’s uniform. Placement of this color scratches the surface of where the viewer’s mind might feel it should be. Sheppard beautifully plays with the intentionality of form or lack there of with gracefully sketched charcoal lines and a dance of thick and thinly applied acrylic paint that commands space in its application. Movement is shown in an outstretched arm and hands clapping. The subtlety of a bent knee or arm is suggested with the slightest of brush strokes. Paint drips that flow upward almost as if to suggest that the painting itself was once something else merges the subjects in a familiar space; however, void of distraction of a specific background.

Sheppard’s brilliantly constructed lines and swift brushstrokes throughout suggest a liveliness among the subjects that evokes a sense of play that only children can convey. There is an emotion that quite possibly can be different for each viewer,

but present, nonetheless. Kristina Kay Robinson describes Sheppard’s work as, “Carefully rendered and emotional portraits with the edge of a deconstructionist.” Robinson notes that, “Sheppard continues his work in abstract expressionism. Interspersed with his own unique sense of figuration, a new visual language emerges to tell the story of this era from the point of view of someone who experienced it. As we

all come to understand the implications of previous decades, what will we do with the weight of these stories? As we make our way in America, who or what do we look to help us ethically manage what we acquire? To whose rules are we bound—most importantly, to whom do we owe our loyalty?”¹





“*The Americana series examines the 1950’s in the United States, specifically what is referred to as the ‘Age of Innocence.’ I call it the so-called, ‘Age of Innocence’ because for Black people in this country, it wasn’t that. These paintings are an examination of the humanity of Black people in America. I choose to look at that from the perspective of children, particularly focusing on the hand games of children, call and response, because that has always been something that has kept Black people going.*”

Ferrari Sheppard

FERRARI SHEPPARD

Girl Talk, 2020

Acrylic, Charcoal and
Enamel on Canvas

72in x 79in

**MARIO MOORE'S JOY AND PAIN AESTHETICALLY
ILLUSTRATES THE DICHOTOMY OF THE BLACK CHILD
EXPERIENCE. IN A CONVERSATION WITH MOORE, HE**

TAKES US BACK TO WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG CHILD. He reflects on his first memory and epiphany of being perceived as a threat due to his skin color. He was nine years old.

"I was looking at magazines and stuff I wanted to maybe have my grandmother buy for me. I saw this clerk looking at me and following me around the store. At first, I thought they were maybe just being helpful, but only after I left the store, I realized the clerk was gazing at me because I was a Black boy, and I might steal."

Joy and Pain is a painting of Moore's nephew. As he created the work, he notes the unequivocal conflict, teetering between a desire for his nephew to experience a childhood with excitement and joy while privy to the unavoidable suffering he will undoubtedly face at the hands of a society rooted in deep patterns of traumatizing the Black body. The police car in the background of Moore's composition highlights a reality for many: they are ever-present and always looking. "As I was painting, I didn't want to obstruct viewer with buildings or architecture. It just needed to be him and off to the side, the car."

Moore's process begins with sketches that are later transcribed to his hand made, linen canvases. For *Joy and Pain*, Moore worked from several photographs of his nephew doing cartwheels outside. He combined these images to portray a child at play amidst the vulnerabilities of being Black. *Joy and Pain* is just that; a paradox between childhood excitement and the stark realization of how the world views the Black body. A linear progression of the innocence of a child to adulthood in Black life haunts the stillness of this image. Movement comes to a standstill as this joyful experience is fastened with the harsh reality of the Black experience.



MARIO MOORE

Joy and Pain, 2019

Oil on Linen

36in x 60in



“
As Black artists often consider the kind of trauma that we see, one thing I want to try and avoid is retraumatizing the Black body. How do you show the pain and the suffering without retraumatizing that body? Joy and Pain deliberately is thinking about Black boys' lives and Black people's lives and how you can exist in one body having happiness and giddiness and being a child with hopes and goals, the beauty of life and aspirations, but at the same time in that same body, you have to deal with that trauma you are alerted usually at a very young age and as a young boy.”

Mario Moore



DELITA MARTIN'S *THE SOUL SHE CARRIES* IS PART OF HER SHADOWS IN THE GARDEN SERIES WHERE DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN CLAIM SPACE WITHIN

THE BORDERS OF HER COMPOSITIONS. MARTIN'S USE OF LAYERS AND MIXED MEDIUMS OFFER VIEWERS A GLIMPSE INTO THE REALITY OF BLACK WOMEN – often overlooked or diminished to the shadows and backgrounds of society despite their beauty and power. The full patterns within this work serve as an interwoven vessel in exposing how we “transition into our spiritual other.” The garden serves as the setting for where marriage into the spiritual space begins. The amalgamation of color, texture, pattern, and floral motif create the illusion of masked subjects while spectators are simultaneously confronted by fixed, piercing eye contact. Viewers are privy to this delicate yet profound transition into their intimate, spiritual space.

Martin, at times, draws inspiration from her late father, noting she doesn't remember his face, but vividly pictures his hands. She alludes to memories as snapshots in time. It is not uncommon for those snapshots to appear in some form of imagery within her work. The female subjects in Martin's work are a compilation of real women she has spent time with, past and present. Through shared time and space and interaction, observed gestures, head tilts and twinkles in the eye translate to moments of intimacy. Martin embeds these cherished elements into her work to capture subtle yet intense connection. These women claim the space while also sharing it. The formation of these relationships is an important part of the artistic process for Martin. She notes, “I got to see myself for the first time. I discovered that my process is part of the ritual. It's the ceremony of the ritual. The preparation of the inks, the paper, or whether I am on the floor or sitting on the table working – from my mind to my physical being, I am involved in the work.”

Each of Martin's works is a part of a broader conversation that evolves as she completes each piece. The narratives surrounding the groups of women who have been marginalized historically beckons to be heard through her larger-than-life compositions. Size is an active participant in the viewer experience. It places the spectator in a different position. Oversized images evoke questions surrounding their place in the gallery space. *The Soul She Carries* is confrontational and intentional, both in stature and story. Martin gives space and beauty and purpose to the women she depicts. She allows their identities to have deeper meaning in our world. While their images are masked in shadows, their spiritual souls are free to shine.

“The work is very confrontational and it's intentional because you're talking about a group of women who have been marginalized throughout history. And when I think of them, to me they're saying, “you will feel my presence, you will know me, you will know my name.”

Delita Martin



DELITA MARTIN

The Soul She Carries, 2017

Acrylic, Relief, Charcoal and Decorative Papers

Hand Stitching, Colored Pencil

70in x 52in

THE REVOLUTION WILL NOT BE TELEVISED CAPTURES THE

QUINTESSENCE OF TRANSFORMATION, ABSENT FROM SIGHT, AS MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ARTIST ROBERT HODGE INTERTWINES HIS LOVE OF ART AND MUSIC IN THIS MIXED-MEDIA WORK. The 1970s marked a time when the fight for freedom and equality were prevalent through various social and political movements. The intentionality of using reclaimed paper protects the notions of memories and history, packaged within the confines of this 51-inch by 51-inch work of art. The vintage off-air image,

significantly displayed as the work holds space to Hodge's childhood, cleverly offers viewers a colorful visual narrative to past events unseen. The poetry and lyrics of Gil Scott-Heron's *The*

Revolution Will Not Be Televised, best examines the embodiment of the world's greatest moments of change and liberation yet to be seen.



ROBERT HODGE

The Revolution Will Not Be Televised, 2014
Mixed Media on Reclaimed Paper, Hemp
Thread, Gold Leaf
51in x 51in





“The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” was inspired by a poem and song by Gil Scott-Heron. Scott-Heron first recorded it for his 1970 album *Small Talk* at 125th and Lenox and has been a part of my life since I discovered it in high school. The Revolution Will Not be Televised is made with gold leaf, hemp thread and reclaimed paper taken from Houston walls and corner store movie posters that populate the city. Underneath the color bars that are also associated with my childhood and a time when TV had a limit into our lives, lays various revolutions throughout history that we only read about, like The American Revolution, The French Revolution, The Haitian Revolution, The Chinese Revolution, The Russian Revolution and all the revolutions including Civil Rights and the Black Panther Movement. Heron said, ‘The first change that takes place is in your mind... so, when we say that the revolution will not be televised, we’re saying that the thing that’s going to change people is something that no one will ever be able to capture on film.’

Robert Hodge

NOTES & REFLECTIONS

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ARTIST BIOS

MARIO MOORE is a figurative painter who received a BFA from the College for Creative Studies in Detroit and an MFA in painting from the Yale School of Art. He lives and works in Detroit.

DOMINIC CHAMBERS received his BFA from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design and later, his MFA from the Yale University School of Art, where he studied painting. He has exhibited both in the United States and internationally.

ROBERT HODGE is an interdisciplinary artist. Born in Houston and raised in the city's Third Ward district, he studied visual art at the Pratt Institute in New York and the Atlanta College of Art before returning to Houston where he currently resides.

ROBERT PRUITT is Houston-based artist well known for drawings, videos and installations dedicated to examination of the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans. He received his BFA from Texas Southern University and MFA from the University of Texas at Austin.

Johannesburg-based **NELSON MAKAMO** uses his art to give a voice to the children of his birthplace, Limpopo, the northernmost province of South Africa. He is known for using a variety of expressive mediums such as acrylic, print, watercolor and charcoal drawings, to create candid portraits of children.

DELITA MARTIN creates large-scale prints onto which she draws, sews, collages, and paints. Martin received her BFA in drawing from Texas Southern University and MFA in printmaking from Purdue University and currently resides in Huffman, Texas.

SUNGI MLENGEYA was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. She is a self-taught painter whose figurative portraiture depicts the women that surround her.

ATHI-PATRA RUGA was born in Umtata, South Africa. Currently, Ruga lives between Cape Town and Johannesburg and his practice spans across the mediums of costume, performance, video, and photography.

RYAN COSBERT is an American painter, installation and mixed media artist whose research-based practice focuses on abstract works, along with political and historical narratives. Cosbert recently graduated from the School of Visual Arts (SVA) in New York City with a BFA in Fine Arts (Class of 2021).

FERRARI SHEPPARD is an American contemporary visual artist, known for his vibrant, hybridized paintings which blend figurative and abstract art. Aside from being a painter, Sheppard is a writer, photographer, activist and record producer. Sheppard attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE EXHIBIT, INCLUDING THE ARTISTS FEATURED ABOVE, SCAN THE QR CODE AT LEFT OR VISIT [SMU.EDU/NARRATIVEASREALITY](https://smu.edu/narrativeasreality).

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A WORLD REIMAGINED**

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