

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Somerset House
Get Up, Stand Up Now: Q&A with Artist Deborah Roberts
Bridget Minamore
30 August 2019



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Deborah Roberts makes collages using photographs, magazine clippings and images from the Internet. She creates a unique visual language, evoking African-American womanhood, to explore the subjects of beauty, identity and politics. Forcefully confronting the hyper-sexualisation of women, and the media's privileging of whiteness and youth, Roberts' figures often take the form of young African girls whom she presents with strength and power. Her composite figures represent an expanded view of beauty that prioritises marginalised narratives, while fighting discriminatory perceptions of the Black female experience. Her *Untitled* piece in [Get Up, Stand Up Now](#) suggests bodily fragmentation, but the composite figures at the forefront of her world also exude imagination and vitality.

I absolutely loved your piece in the exhibition. Did you start out wanting to do a portrait of a little girl, or was the process more organic?

Well, all my works are of girls. I was working within notions of blackness and black beauty and identity politics, the way they have historically been structured. Where if you do not have blonde hair and blue eyes, then you aren't considered beautiful. All my work was coming from that idea.

Is your piece part of a series?

No, it's one individual piece. The way I work, I ask 'what do I want to talk about?' Do I want to talk about police violence? Do I want to talk about people not putting black kids on pedestals? It depends. At that time [it was] the freedom to walk down the street uninhibited, the idea of being free. I always tell people there are only two Black kids I know who are free in America, and that's Willow Smith and her brother. They are free people, they seem like they don't have that baggage that we carry, even though it has to be on them. So this piece in particular, it was along those lines.

Do the different parts of the collage mean anything in particular?

When I talk about the west, it's a white hand coming out of her back. She has a more African pattern on her skirt, her lower body; the subtext to that is that she birthed black babies and black individuals. And I took her hands and folded them.

Yeah, one hand is sort of pulled in, curved towards her.

That to me is a coping mechanism. When people get in my face, the first thing I do is cross my hands, so I'm saying you have crossed the line.

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Close-up of 'Untitled 2018', Deborah Roberts

What's really interesting to me is even though it's not one a given theme, in the exhibition, childhood comes up so, so much. It feels like childhood is something that so many Black artists are foregrounding, and I wondered why you think that is.

You don't know that you're Black until that first person tells you. It shapes you, and the way that they tell you also shapes you. I think a lot of people are recognizing that, and we're bringing those memories and those feelings from when we were told we were Black. What does that feel like when you know then you're told that you're different and lesser? I think more artists are really reaching back and trying to explain, this is not anything new, this is not 400 years ago. We are a product of what society has told us, and we're trying to break through that lens. And so I think that's why a lot of people are doing it. That's why I'm doing it. Or part of why I'm doing it. The other part is, black girls are sexualized very early. They are seeing as more sexual in their peers, less innocent, they can handle it... but they're kids. They can't handle it. They may have attitude or don't cry, doesn't mean that they're not innocent and don't want that stuff to happen to them.

Which is maybe why I think your piece works so well. In the piece it feels like the little girl is looking at you with these really big wide eyes. There's something about that, that feels not just innocent, but very honest, which is really lovely.

Thank you, that's what I was trying to say. That's why I couch my argument about blackness and identity in the contemporary art world through a child's eye. There's multiple layers underneath the work that I want people to dig through.

Do you think a lot about your audience when you make work?

I do, I do. But it's surprising: I don't think about the people who purchase the work, I think about the little girls I'm talking about and talking to. I got some really hard work to do ahead, and I'm trying to figure it out. There's a lot that's going on right now in the United States, it's scary.

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Speaking of the States, the other thing I was thinking about was how you were born and raised in Austin, Texas, and you live in Austin now. Does where you live influence your work? Texas is one of those places that even here in London, it's an America that we feel we know more than pretty much anywhere else.

Yeah. It's an American horror story! You can say it. One of the things about living in Austin is it is not black enough. So my work is not influenced by anything here. I have to get it from social media, when I travel, things I read about.

Are there any places or specific things—beyond the broader hyper-sexualization in black girlhood—are there any places or specific things or people that influence your work?

Oh God, yeah. I mean, I could tell you Hannah Hoch and those guys have influenced my work, and I definitely want to be a part of the canon. I want to be included in the canon when you talk about collage artists, and how they use the politicized body to gain power. But it's so weird because I love Norman Rockwell, I love Vincent Van Gogh, I love Rembrandt, Michelangelo, I love when people do the human form. Kerry James Marshall, I look at Carrie Mae Weems when she does black and white photography. There are so many different visual languages out there that we can feed off of. Toni Morrison right now, she's in my studio whether she knows it or not. She's sitting in there, I can hear her talking, and so I'd get another book.

When you talk about a canon of collage artists, I'm really fascinated in what it means to be part of that. You're putting things together, but also breaking things apart but in very different ways. Or similar ways!

Right. It's very political, you can gain agency through collage. It is a medium where you can strike down a lot of stuff by using certain imagery together: big hands, big eyes, small eyes, little legs that sometimes could be interpreted as powerless, and hands and gloves and fists and all the things that I use in my work. But I will tell

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you this—people think collage is very simple, easy. But in order to make it look that easy? It takes many, many, many hours. And not everybody can do collage well. It's like making a pie! It's a lot of ingredients. Now on their own they all have their own agency, but together they have power. Separately, they're just individual. But when you put it together, it's something that you could feed people with.



Untitled 2018 / The Dark Continent Series No.9 / Aljana Moons - Deborah Roberts / Lina Iris Viktor / Alexis Peskinel

Interview by Bridget Minamore

Bridget Minamore is a British-Ghanaian writer from south-east London. She is a poet, critic, essayist, and journalist, writing for The Guardian about pop culture, theatre, race and class. Titanic (Out-Spoken Press), her debut pamphlet of poems on modern love and loss, was published in May 2016.

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