

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum
Deborah Roberts
Philomena Epps
26 June 2019

ARTFORUM

“Manipulation of the photograph is as old as photography itself”



Deborah Roberts, *Red, White and Blue*, 2018, mixed media and collage on canvas, 72 x 60".

“Manipulation of the photograph is as old as photography itself,” opens Dawn Adès’s introduction to *Photomontage* (1976). The term photomontage was popularized by the Berlin Dadaists—Hannah Höch, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, and so weiter—as a means to define their “anti-art,” the splicing and collaging of photographs with newspaper and magazine clippings, as genre. Their avant-garde dismembering of reality was rooted in political provocation, and the desire to reconfigure the world by reconfiguring images has endured throughout history.

Deborah Roberts’s practice has followed this sociopolitical lineage, marshaling those strategies to push back against entrenched ideas of beauty, black femininity, and white supremacy. For this exhibition, Roberts has created amalgamated images of children, combining found photographs with painted details and flat planes of color. Best encapsulated in *Armor or Red, White and Blue*, both 2018, running motifs of boxing gloves and empowered postures—raised fists, hands on hips, legs askance—imply resistance and black power while also mimicking the cartoonish choreography of superheroes. The message is occasionally more ambiguous, representing an oscillation between strength and vulnerability. A young boy in a Superman T-shirt crouches while covering his head in *The soil*, 2019, whereas a young girl carries a white face in *The burden*, 2019. Each of the show’s figures wields agency, refusing mere consumption by directly returning the viewer’s gaze in a stare that sometimes includes multiple pairs of eyes. The children’s dynamism and variety are reinforced by Roberts’s use of collage—here both a metaphor and a means to depict the multiplicity of black life. There is specificity and openness to their representation: The combination of the real (the photographs) and the imagined (the painting) echoes the

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Dadaists' manipulation of the familiar with the fictional, encouraging us to see the world anew.

— Philomena Epps