

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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Cutting edge

Deborah Roberts uses collage to address urgent questions of race and sexual identity. By Jonathan Bastable

Below, Deborah Roberts, *Red, White and Blue*, 2018. Left, the artist at the Rauschenberg Residency in Captiva, Florida, 2019

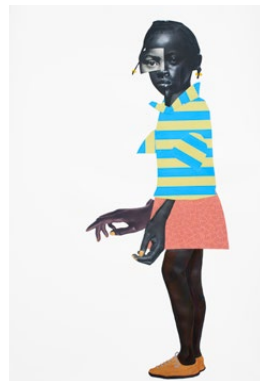
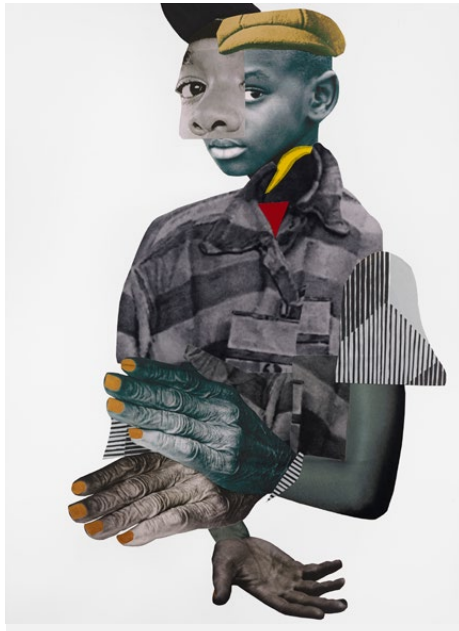
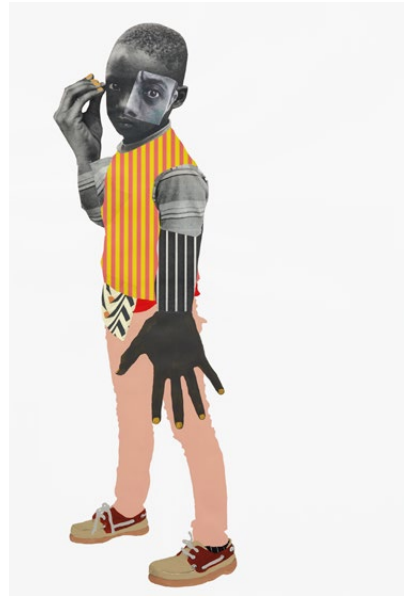


The term 'photocollage' could be defined as the act of taking things apart and reconfiguring them in a radically new arrangement. The word 'revolution' could be defined the same way – which is surely why collage has long been deployed by artists for subversive or change-driven ends. Hannah Höch and John Heartfield in pre-war Germany, Alexander Rodchenko in Soviet Russia, even Peter Blake in swinging London, they all wanted to dismantle the world and remake it differently. The American artist Deborah Roberts, who has a solo exhibition this summer at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery, is glad to place herself in that tradition. 'My grad-school thesis was about using art and collage to gain political influence over people, to gain agency,' she says. 'So yes, I definitely use the technique in that way.'

Roberts's art is not biting satirical or overtly topical. Many of her artworks depict young African-American girls, and could be seen as affectionate »

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[ON SHOW: LONDON]



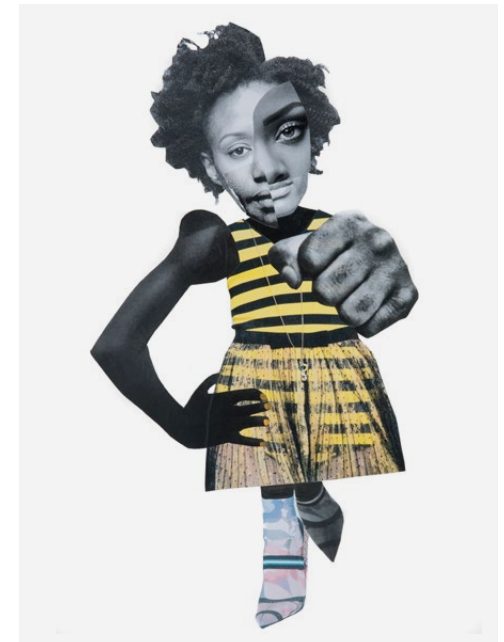
Right, Deborah Roberts, *Unfinished*, 2018;
Bea, 2018. Opposite,
clockwise from top left:
Armor, 2018; *America's*
Unfinished, 2018;
Sewed Together,
2018; *Head nods and*
handshakes, 2019

memories of her own Texan childhood, or perhaps composite portraits of school friends. It turns out, though, that the elements of each figure are usually nameless. 'Most of them are found images,' says Roberts. 'I put a lot of work into looking for faces, trying to find the humanity. It's the humanity in the faces that allows people to make a connection. So I make use of historical images, pop culture, black culture...'

Yet the political dimension of the images is impossible to ignore. These girls, the naive figments of Roberts's imagination, have a latent strength, and say something about a struggle that is taking place in the real world. 'Yes, the giant boxing gloves, the Muhammad Ali fists, they are acts of power,' says Roberts. 'I speak as someone who has pushed to have my place as an equal. Some of the most important decisions we make as women happen at age eight, nine, 10. And we don't realise it, because they look like they're just choices: what sort of dress we want to wear, what make-up... The clashing stripes and the patterns of the clothing in the works, some of them don't go together; they represent choices about identity.'

But the message is not just about women's experience or questions of race. 'You should know that the hands and the facial features in my work are not all black,' says Roberts. 'The idea is that we are all humans together.' And some of the new works on show in London go beyond feminist concerns to tackle the formative pressures on boys in particular. Is that a stretch of the imagination for her? 'It's a leap because I am female. But I see a toxic masculinity, a notion that men have to be a certain way in order to be macho: the black man as the power figure. Those are the issues I am struggling with. I started on the boys because so many people were clamouring for it, though there is still much to do with the girls and women.'

Some of that work happens in other media, by other means. Roberts has exhibited an installation called *A Bunch of Black Hoes*, consisting of nine identical garden hoes set on separate plinths and beautifully presented in a neat grid. It is a shocking work, the force of which derives - of course - from the ironic misogyny of the title, and from the semantic gulf between the two current uses of the word. Roberts's interest in words is also evident in a work entitled *Sovereignty*. It is a simple typed list of the inventive given names of African-American women: Chumiqa, To' Mana, Cleastine, VeEtta,



Soyette... 'There are lots of jokes about those names,' she says. 'I was laughing with a friend about them, and then she said: "Wait a minute, this is important, the first act of free slaves was the naming of their children." Later, when I tapped the names into the computer, I noticed that the dictionary put a squiggly line under every single one of them: not correct! They are not in Webster's, and so don't count as words! I thought, oh my God, that's the work. The title *Sovereignty* refers to this country [the USA], because those names were born of this country and they should be here. Now I have a sense of pride about them.'

Much of Roberts's work seems to be about pride in the best sense of the word, about the universal value of knowing who you are and not giving a damn. 'People are moving towards tribalism - and if you don't fit the tribe's mould, then you are pushed to the margins,' says Roberts. 'What I am saying is: that can't happen.' Her art seems to be both a social weapon and a committed form of language. And as Roberts says, quoting Roland Barthes, 'Language is a skin.' •
'Deborah Roberts: If They Come' is at London's Stephen Friedman Gallery until 20 July.
www.stephenfriedman.com

This page, Deborah Roberts, *Bea*, 2018. Mixed-media collage on paper, 70 x 60 inches. Deborah Roberts, *America's Unfinished*, 2018. Mixed-media collage on paper, 44 x 32 inches. Deborah Roberts, *Head nods and handshakes*, 2019. Mixed-media collage on panel, 50 x 22 inches. Deborah Roberts, *Sewed Together*, 2018. Mixed-media collage on paper, 44 x 32 inches.