

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Mousse Magazine
Young Heroines: Deborah Roberts
Roxana Marcoci
April 2019

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Deborah Roberts, *Pluralism Series: The Blame*, 2016. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy: the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

In her mixed-media works, artist Deborah Roberts acknowledges the syncretic nature of black female identity. Debunking societal definitions of ideal beauty and dress, as well as stereotypes of social media, she questions the construction of race and the racializing gaze endemic to Western culture. Her collages and text-based works not only articulate a critique of accepted typologies of the unified self but also affirm the untold value of difference.

Consider the composite portrait of a preteen black girl. It combines a mix of features, skin hues, hairstyles cut and pasted from magazines or the internet, and sports clothes sourced from photographs or clipped from geometric designs. How to portray the complexities surrounding the construction of black female identity? Deborah Roberts points to the intertextual nature of collage to articulate a method of picture making that usurps, denaturalizes, fragments, and reconstructs her subject.

Roberts began her career in Austin, Texas, as a painter who communicated, as she put it, “the whole romantic idea of Blackness,” which explains why, in her early years, she was known as “the Black Norman Rockwell.”¹ All this changed when the artist switched from figurative painting to work in collage and hand-drawn text-based serigraphs, inviting a fierce examination of race, beauty, and gender identity.

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Her consideration of the individual spirit and the emotional expressiveness of black girlhood, and of the legacies of colorism and racism, are inspired by the consciousness of social advocacy by such civil rights movement predecessors as Romare Bearden, who documented the African American experience in richly textured collages, and Faith Ringgold, who poignantly articulated the role of black feminism. Although of different generations, all three artists form a link to the novelist, playwright, and activist James Baldwin, whose writings similarly raised questions amid complex political pressures obstructing the equitable integration of African Americans in contemporary society. In her collage Baldwin's Promise (2017), Roberts candidly uses the writer's eyes in a young girl's face. "It's this idea of seeing through his eyes or pulling back history and seeing the issues that he addressed in 1960, which we're addressing today," Roberts explains.² Roberts brings anonymous young heroines together not just with Baldwin's story but with those of so many female personalities. By grafting fragments of the human body—Rosa Parks's hands, Rihanna's eyes, Michelle Obama's arms, or Issa Rae's hands—of all those whom she calls her "breakthrough women,"³ Roberts imagines a future for the African American youth she depicts. Roberts calls out the existing intricacies of racial and class distinctions facing black girls and women in a society shaped by the consciousness of white discrimination.

In that sense, her work continues a lineage that goes back to the pioneering work of Hannah Höch, who, in a series of provocative photomontages she made between the mid-1920s and the mid-1930s, developed a critical language that challenged European gender definitions and racist and colonialist ideas. Among Höch's most powerful photomontages are those collectively titled *Aus einem ethnographischen Museum* (From an Ethnographic Museum) (1925-1930), in which she conjoined cutout pictures of Weimar women with pictures of tribal masks and sculptures from non-Western societies, thus offering a critique of the underlying racist, sanctimonious tone of the heterosexist patriarchy that equated women with the foreign and underdeveloped "other" during an epoch obsessed with eugenics.

When asked if she has a good story about herself as a young girl dealing with ideals of beauty, Roberts recalls: "When I was a girl I loved to have two ponytails until a bunch of girls told me that my hairstyle was lame, so I asked my mother to change it to three ponytails... I talk a lot about having natural hair in my work and that it is important to be who you are naturally."⁴ Roberts's powerful images of female strength contribute to a history honoring a new African American style identity, one that in the early 1960s gave rise to the rallying cry "Black Is Beautiful." The photographer and activist Kwame Brathwaite, who chronicled some of the most inspiring cultural, political, and social developments of New York's Harlem in the late 1950s and 1960s, organized *Naturally '62*, a fashion show featuring an all-black cast of models in Afrocentric designs and natural hairstyles that exploded into a global movement. Brathwaite was an influential voice in the national conversation on colorism and race pride within the black community and his portraits are testimony to the lasting power of fashion and photography as cultural and political tools.

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In a defiant reclamation of the African American heritage, Roberts has produced a number of text-based works. In the Resistance Series: The Blame (2017), she lists various black female names—Keshia, Jamaka, Lakesha, Queenlana, Tawonda—many of which have been subjected to racist and misogynist statements, which she includes in the margins of the print. Rendered in classic type- writer font, the serigraph’s message is an affirming call to celebrate blackness and the right to proper names nonconforming to WASP customs. “These are American names,” Roberts notes. “They are rooted in black culture, and black culture is a part of American culture. Black history is an American history. We need to cherish those names. And we need to cherish the girls who have those names.”⁵

1 Siddhartha Mitter, “Deborah Roberts Conjures Black Girl Magic,” Village Voice, December 6, 2017, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2017/12/06/deborah-roberts-conjures-black-girl-magic>.

2 Andrea Blanch, “Feature: Deborah Roberts,” Musée Magazine 19, April 16, 2018, <http://museemagazine.com/features/2018/4/16/feature-deborah-roberts>.

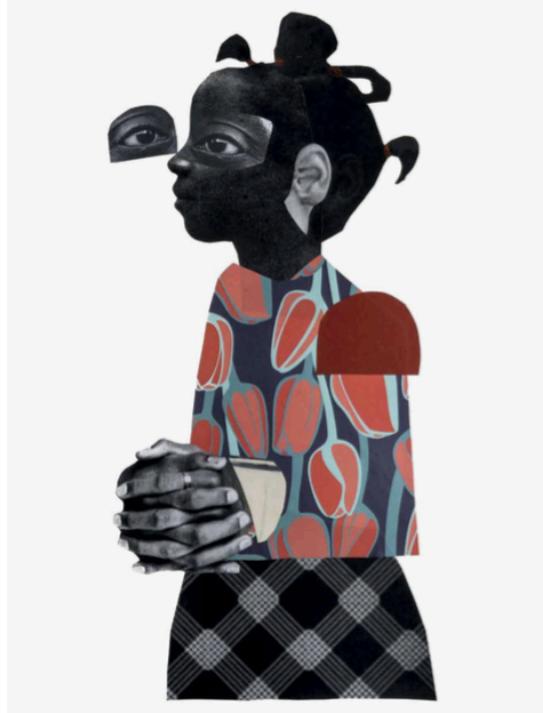
3 See Amy Larocca, “Her Breakthrough Women: A Portfolio by Multimedia Artist Deborah Roberts,” New York, February 5, 2018, 68.

4 Rebecca Marino, “Q + A with Deborah Roberts,” Conflict of Interest: Volume 3, November 2018, 12.

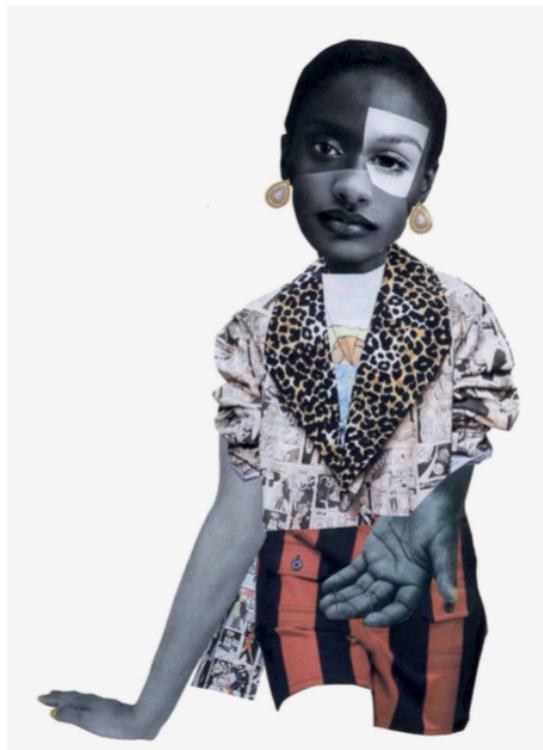
5 Jeanne Claire van Ryzin, “Deborah Roberts Faces Down Venus and Her Stereotypes,” Sightlines, December 29, 2017, <https://sightlinesmag.org/deborah-roberts-faces-down-venus-and-her-stereotypes>.

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Deborah Roberts, Baldwin's Promise, 2017. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy: the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London



Deborah Roberts, Then came you (detail), 2018. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy: the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London