

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Vice
The Artist Changing the Face of Black Girlhood
Antwaun Sargent
6 March 2018

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Even Beyoncé adores Deborah Roberts's collaged portraits of strong, beautiful black girls and women.



Left: Deborah Roberts, *The Plea*, 2017. Right: Deborah Roberts, *Not today*, 2017. Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson Gallery

At the age of 55, the painter Deborah Roberts has become an art star basically overnight. In a year's time, she has sold out a Chelsea gallery exhibition, shown her work at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and has had three medium-scale collages purchased by Beyoncé Knowles. For nearly two decades, Roberts has made work, painting, collage, and prints that focus on the lives of black girls and women. But in an art world that has long concerned itself with male artists and has embraced the exploration of the black male body and identity, no one really cared.

"I feel validated, but I hope I'm not dying," Roberts said recently, laughing. "I've been working at this and talking about this same thing and all of a sudden, it's like someone said, 'You know what? You're right.'" She added, "I am very humbled by the attention. But I never gave up. I didn't conform to what society thought was good or bad work. I just kept saying, 'This work is important, black women and girls are important.'"

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In her two recently opened exhibitions—Deborah Roberts: The Evolution of Mimi on view at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art through May 19, and Uninterrupted at San Francisco's Jenkins Johnson Gallery through March 17—the Austin, Texas, based artist presents an array of fictive visions of young black girls constructed out of found images of black women from magazines. Portraits, like Baldwin's Promise and Unbothered, are images of black girlhood that critique narrow beauty standards, colorism, and the stereotyping of black girls and women emotionally, physically, and sexually. Not Today, a collaged construction of a black girl with her hand raised, is a picture of power. The gesture evokes the way young black girls I knew said during recess, in a moment of playful defiance, vulnerability, and agency: talk to the hand. It's a small moment of black girlhood rarely seen in art.



Left: Deborah Roberts, Bare feet girls grow up mean, 2017. Right: Deborah Roberts, About Face, 2017. Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson Gallery

"I talk a lot about vulnerability because there are different types of black women," Roberts explained. "I wanted to talk about [in these shows] how we become women. We start off as black girls, and we soon become black American women. So what does that trail look like? How do we begin? How has our beauty been imagined? Those are the questions we should be asking ourselves."

I had the opportunity to catch up with Roberts and talk about the power of expanding existing notions of beauty and black girlhood through collage, who she

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wanted to see in magazines as a young girl, and why black girls need to see images of themselves.

VICE: Why is it important for you to use the young black female body as the site of investigating beauty, power, and identity?

Roberts: It's about the first act of freedom. When you are seven or eight, and you want to start to wear different clothing or do your own hair because you are starting to enter into your own idea of who you are, where are the examples of little black girl beauty for you to look to? When I first started to think about doing this work, there were no African American women artists exploring this part of our identity. I couch my argument in the fact that black women start as vulnerable as anyone else. But society puts so much on us that you have to grow up fast to take on this role as protector-of-self before any other girl. We have to get out and fight the struggle. We have seen images of beautiful and successful black women, and we know that we have to get there, but how does it start? It's very important for me to show that in the work. There has to be someone looking at the vulnerability of black women.



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Deborah Roberts, *Black Eva*, 2017. Mixed media on paper. 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.88 cm). Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson Gallery

In collages like *Black Eva*, you are literally constructing new black female identities. How does your work contest existing notions of what beauty is?

In *Black Eva*, I really wanted to talk about colorism. How sometimes dark skinned girls are labelled as ugly and not as attractive as light skinned girls with the "better hair." When I was growing up and I looked at fashion magazines, I saw primarily white women. They were thin, they were gorgeous, they had beautiful eyes, and their skin was flawless. There was no one who I knew that I thought was as beautiful as in those magazines. So for me as an artist growing up I wanted to challenge the partial viewing of beauty.

Who wasn't in those magazines that you wished you had seen?

I liked Mary McLeod Bethune. She was a powerful woman! But by the normal standards of beauty she is ugly, but she is not! She is absolutely wonderful. So I am interrogating the notions of beauty that say Mary McLeod Bethune was ugly. When I construct my collages, I use different shades, parts of different faces, but I also make the girls strong, approachable, vulnerable. It's important for me that the little girls I create have a presence in society, so she can take her seat at the table, so she can be seen and treated just as fairly.



Left: Deborah Roberts, *Be Still*, 2018. Right: Deborah Roberts, *Baldwin's Promise*, 2017. Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson Gallery

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One of the things that's interesting about the way you make your collages is that you use real images of black girls and women, like Michelle Obama, that you find in magazines. They are defying traditional ideas of beauty, power, and the stereotypes that have long plagued black women.

The magazine images of the women and girls I use in my collages have literally paved the way. A lot of my work comes from pop culture and society's response to pop culture. When Michelle Obama was leaving the White House and that woman said, "Now we won't have an ape in the White House," it was horrific for me, because we know she is a very beautiful woman, a very strong woman. She has her own ideas of who she is and it is important in the work to show that linkage and example. A lot of times in my work you will see hands holding other hands to show the pulling up of each other, so we can all move forward. It's important to pay homage to the black women who have paved the way. A lot of us learn from watching other black women.

Your practice also involves investigating the black femme identity through language. In *Pluralism #6* you list the names of women and girls. What is the significance of that kind of cataloging?

I asked my friends to send me names of relatives or friends, and they sent more than 250 names of black girls and women. Names reveal a lot about classism, stereotypes, and history. As I was typing the names on my computer, red lines appeared under the names as if they were spelled wrong. This Western idea of what's right and wrong was telling me all these black women and girls' names were wrong. These names are American names—they are born out of our experiences here. They don't come from nowhere else. How can they be wrong? By presenting these names as art, I am honoring them.



Deborah Roberts, *Unbothered*, 2017. Mixed media on paper. 30 x 22 in. (76.2 x 55.88 cm) Signed verso by artist, lower right corner. Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson Gallery

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What is your hope that the work does in the lives of black women and girls?

Going to Spelman for the opening of my show and being around those 18- and 19-year-old young black women was eye opening for me. I got a lot of love and a lot of tears and a lot of "This is me. This is how I felt. My body was different than my peers, and I was teased for that." I told them, "I felt the same thing growing up and that you are perfect." It's important that black girls know and see that they don't have to conform. You often don't know what you are doing in the studio, and you hope that your message gets across, that people understand it, and I now know this is important work.