

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Deborah Roberts, *If they come*

By Daniella Rose King

2019

In November 1970, as Angela Davis was incarcerated while awaiting trial for politically motivated charges, James Baldwin published an open letter addressed to her. Its final sentence read: 'For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.' This has been abbreviated by artist Deborah Roberts to *If they come* for the title of her exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, which runs from 7 June until 20 July 2019. In Roberts' first solo presentation in Europe, she highlights affinities between herself and Baldwin, who penned the letter upon his own return from a European tour to the US, as well as socio-political parallels between 1970 and 2019. Baldwin's letter was written at a time of societal upheaval, on both sides of the Atlantic, as anti-war, feminist, black power and international Pan-African solidarity movements took the world stage, and nascent culture wars backlashed against the civil rights movements of the previous decades. Almost fifty years later, the world is again facing increased turbulence and uncertainty; it seems that our historical continuum has reached a peak where Baldwin's words and Davis' persecution are again all too prescient and pertinent.

Born in Austin, Texas, in 1962, where she is still based, Deborah Roberts works across media, primarily painting and collage, to deconstruct mainstream, insidious and tightly held images of beauty, black femininity and childhood. Creating her subjects as composites of found images, imagined patterns, constructed postures and poetic titles, Roberts portrays a direct refutation and complication of the depictions of black bodies that have been circulating within the media since the dawn of the photographic era. Her project is one that simultaneously highlights, disavows and recreates the hierarchies, standards and narratives created and disseminated by institutions that have served the interests and sustainment of white supremacy. Throughout the new works shown in *If they come*, Roberts constructs new archetypes – images of fictional black boys and girls of ages 9 to 12 – who take on poses of strength and power at the same time as showing vulnerability and ambiguity. Challenging the criminalisation of black children, particularly boys, that is rampant globally, but nowhere more so than in the US, Roberts has her subjects stare defiantly at the viewer, elevated on metaphorical pedestals, clad in the regalia of pop culture's superheroes. Her visual counterpoints seek to subvert and challenge our dominant visual cultures. Yet, her subjects inhabit multiplicity and hybridity as various other subjects constitute them – including the faces of adults, and of individuals from different ethnicities – to suggest the constant, unfixed process of subject formation, particularly at this pivotal time in a person's development from child to adult.

If they come explores Baldwin's message of solidarity and togetherness in the face of division, nationalism and tribalism. Itself riffing off Pastor Martin Niemöller's poem 'First they came...' it speaks to the contingency and interconnectedness of persecution. What does the representation of childhood throughout popular culture, advertising, world events and the media have to do with the re-emergent nationalism, tribalism and white supremacy that is fuelling the breakdown of society and rise of xenophobia, racism, and structural inequality in not only the United States and United Kingdom, but globally? Elsewhere in his letter Baldwin writes, 'When I was little I despised myself, I did not know any better.'¹ This heartbreaking sentiment gets at the core of Roberts's project, and what is really at

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stake in terms of representation, the public imagination and the aesthetics of speculative worldbuilding.

This exhibition consists of a number of works in which the artist creates an incredibly flat surface and plane, of paint and collage in equal measure, that serves to propel the image into space. In *Red, White and Blue* (2019), colours shared by the flags of both the US and UK, two black girls stand back to back, sharing a pair of boxing gloves, with fists raised in a defensive, yet playful stance. One is wearing a hijab and looks out of the frame, the other stares out directly, engaging the viewer and pulling them into the work, or perhaps making them feel like a voyeur caught peering at and complicit in the scene. This image alone provides an almost mundane vision of blackness; that is, of black Muslim subjectivity, a representation that is rarely offered in mainstream media without the attachment of Islamophobic tropes.

Either by the hawk or by the dove (2019) shows a tiny girl midstride with one fist casually raised, a universal symbol of solidarity and resistance, and with strong allusions to the black power movement. In *Man[ly]* (2019) a young boy stands facing the viewer with his fists clenched and raised up to his ears. Appearing to mimic a 'manly' gesture, his small size, questioning stare and closed legs belie his intentions. It is a poignant and sweet image that may be indicative of innocent play and role play, or a more nefarious portal into the toxic masculinity that society continues to uphold and reward. Roberts displays her subjects in a variety of poses that occupy the spectrum of power and vulnerability, reminding us of the potentiality of childhood, and arguing for the suspension of judgement of her fictional black subjects. She recasts little girls as powerful figures, who hold onto each other to save themselves from caving under the weight of standards of white beauty and femininity. These children do not exist outside the mainstream, but find ways to inhabit, occupy and see themselves in the icons our popular culture creates, including super heroes and Disney princesses.

A bow-legged girl stands facing the viewer in *I am the seed and the bloom* (2019), her two white, adult-sized hands clutching clumsily and carelessly at a number of sunflowers. Her stare is solemn and resolute, hand to head, with her posture and stance speaking to the possibility of the title. *Sewed together* (2019) shows a very young girl standing sideways, with arms constricted by her shirt. Have her arms been tied down as a childhood prank, or a more sinister punishment? Or maybe she is playfully hiding them? Like in many works in the series, this figure depicts a sense of corporeal and psychological alienation – capturing the rapid changes and resulting detachment caused by the onset of puberty, and the criminalisation, pathologisation and policing of blackness that begins in childhood and progresses with age – visually exacerbated by the fragmenting, cut- and-paste process of the collage's construction.

Working with found materials – whether images of faces she culls from online searches or the names of black girls sourced from her friends and family – and with a foundation in painting, Roberts explores the slippages between text and image, as well as topics of family, beauty and global understandings of blackness and belonging. As such, her work is in dialogue with a range of divergent artists, including Kurt Schwitters, Kerry James Marshall, Hannah Höch, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Carrie Mae Weems, Romare Bearden and Glenn Ligon, to name just a few constellations. The political potential of collage is utilised in the manner of Höch, Schwitters and Bearden, who each deployed it to address notions of cultural identity, propaganda, politics, exile and difference. Collage was not only accessible as a

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medium, but it also made use of culturally loaded source material that already carried meaning and transmitted information, and therefore offered a way to subvert many of the socio-political and aesthetic rigours and rules of the contemporary moment. Much like the upheaval that spurred collage as an artistic movement at the end of World War I, today we see a renewed necessity for a visual language to describe and deconstruct the inequities and violence of our era.

In 1994 the Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote about cultural identity as 'constituted, not outside but within representation'² under 'constant transformation'³ through external forces of history, power and culture. Identity was not a fixed position, but a multiplicity of differences. Through her collages that deconstruct, fracture and assemble, Roberts suggests a visual paradigm to Hall's theory. Her subjects are constituted within the systems of representation but remain engaged in a process of endless transformation. Similarly, they are specific as well as universal, as Roberts herself remarks, 'one of the gifts of the work – to see people differently, and not just as one being. Blackness is global.'

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Text included in 'If They Come', published by Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

1 James Baldwin, 'An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis' in *The New York Review of Books*, 7 January 1971.

2 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 236.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 225.