

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Culture Type
Exploring the Subjectivity of Black Children
Victoria L. Valentine
12 April 2020



Exploring the Subjectivity of Black Children, Works by Deborah Roberts Have Recently Been Acquired by Museums in Boston, San Francisco, and Scotland

Stephen Friedman Gallery in London recently announced 10 institutional acquisitions that occurred over the past year. Works by six artists on its roster, including Deborah Roberts, Yinka Shonibare CBE, and Denzil Forrester, have been acquired by museums around the world.

“Adam and Eve” (2013) and “The British Library” (2014), installations by Shonibare, were added to the collections of Zeitz MOCAA in Cape Town, South Africa, and the Tate in London, respectively. Forrester’s painting “Family Living” (2004) was acquired by the UK’s Government Art Collection.



Image: Acquired by MFA Boston: Deborah Roberts, “We are Soldiers,” 2019 (mixed media collage on paper, 155 × 203.2 cm / 61 × 80 inches). | © Deborah Roberts, Collection of Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts, USA (Accession Date: February 26, 2020)

Meanwhile, four works by Deborah Roberts are now represented in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (“We are Soldiers,” 2019), Institute of Contemporary Art Boston (“Ulysses,” 2019), San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (“Red, White and Blue,” 2018), and the Scottish National Galleries (“Head Nods and Handshakes,” 2019).

Austin, Texas-based Roberts makes collage works and mixed-media paintings that explore preconceived social constructs around race and gender and beauty and masculinity. Her subjects are black children whose fragmented portraits speak to their complex identities and tenuous innocence.

Having developed her work over the past 30 years, Roberts has been exhibiting for about 20. In 2008, she was named artist of the year in Austin. Several years ago, she made a shift. Roberts pursued a master’s degree in black studies in conjunction with an MFA from Syracuse University (2014) and re-focused her practice. She invoked new ideas about what had always been familiar in her work, themes such hair, identity, the body, and the gaze.

Subsequently, over the past five years, Roberts’s recognition has grown exponentially. In 2018, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art presented “Deborah Roberts: The Evolution of Mimi.” The survey featured more than 80 paintings, collages, and serigraphs made between 2007 and 2017.

Roberts joined Stephen Friedman in 2018 and has also been represented by Vielmetter Los Angeles since 2019. Forthcoming in the fall, The Contemporary Austin is presenting her first solo museum show in Texas. “Deborah Roberts: I’m” includes all new works and is scheduled to open Sept. 12.

Both joyous and sobering, the portraits convey solitude, as well as community and camaraderie. Roberts’s depictions of the subjectivity of black children have garnered a level of appreciation and demand that has positioned the artist to be selective about who buys her work.

25–28 Old Burlington Street London W1S 3AN
T +44 (0)20 7494 1434 stephenfriedman.com

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The concentration on black studies was transformative. “I felt that I was immersed in the beauty of Blackness, our place in this society and what we have accomplished in spite of it all. I remembered just soaking in all in and feeling that it was not enough. I needed and wanted more,” Roberts said in a conversation with Valerie Cassel Oliver published in the catalog for “The Evolution of Mimi.”

“I began to infuse the work with what I was learning. Hopefully, you see this information translated into the work. It is about asking the questions, sharing histories and embracing power.”

Acquired by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, “We Are Soldiers” exemplifies Roberts’s work. Three girls dressed in matching school uniforms, two donning bantu knots, express their individuality through their sock choices. As the title of the work references and the clenched fist and bandaged wrist of the figure bringing up the rear indicates, the trio appears to have endured a symbolic “battle” in the form of a challenge, micro-aggression, or daily indignity, perhaps. They confidently stride away and soldier on, perfectly postured, heads on a swivel, exiting the far left of the canvas.

In “Ulysses,” ICA Boston notes, “Roberts fashions the figure of a young Black boy who stands demurely to the left of the canvas, appearing to be held back or in place by an unknown white hand. This presence of the white figure, even fragmented and disembodied, is an important illustration of Roberts’s interest in how representations of Black youth are often filtered through a dominant white gaze.”

Both joyous and sobering, the portraits convey solitude, as well as community and camaraderie. Roberts’s depictions of the subjectivity of black children have garnered a level of appreciation and demand that has positioned the artist to be selective about who buys her work. She has told her galleries to prioritize museums over individual collectors, according to Artsy.

Roberts prefers that her work goes to an institution, such as SFMOMA or ICA Boston, so it can be displayed publicly. Including the recent acquisitions nearly 20 museums have added her work to their collections, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Brooklyn Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among them. Roberts said her hope is that “someone who looks like me can be inspired by my work and think, ‘I could do this, too.’”

Bookshelf

Two volumes published in 2019 explore the work of Deborah Roberts. “Deborah Roberts: if they come” accompanied her first exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London. “Deborah Roberts: The Evolution of Mimi” documents her exhibition at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art and is edited by exhibition curator Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, with contributions by Kirsten Pai Buick, Erin J. Gilbert, Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Antwaun Sargent, Franklin Sirmans, and an interview by Valerie Cassel Oliver.

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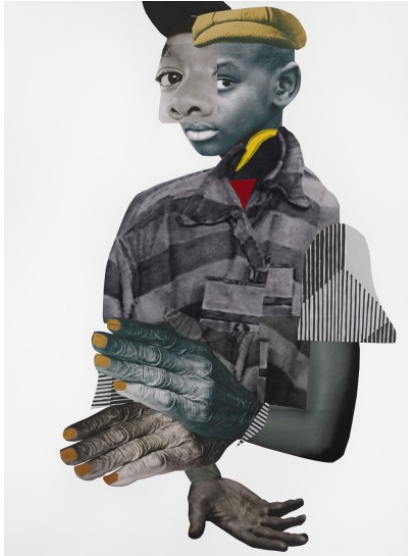


Image: Acquired by Scottish National Galleries: Deborah Roberts, "Head Nods and Handshakes," 2019 | © Deborah Roberts, Scottish National Galleries, Scotland, UK / American Patrons of the National Library and Galleries of Scotland, UK



Image: Acquired by ICA Boston: Deborah Roberts, "Ulysses," 2019 (mixed media and collage on linen, 165 x 114.3 cm / 65 x 45 inches). | © Deborah Roberts, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Boston, Massachusetts, USA (Promised gift of Fotene Demoulas and Tom Coté)



Image: Acquired by SFMOMA: Deborah Roberts, "Red, White and Blue," 2018 (mixed media and collage on canvas, 183 x 152.4 cm / 72 x 60 inches). | © Deborah Roberts, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California, USA