

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Austin Chronicle

The postponement of "Deborah Roberts: I'm" let the artist make more timely art

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## The Postponement of "Deborah Roberts: I'm" Let the Artist Make More Timely Art

A pandemic delay allows Deborah Roberts to meet the moment in her upcoming show at the Contemporary Austin

BY ROBERT FAIRES, FRI., JULY 24, 2020

Deborah Roberts' solo exhibition at the Contemporary Austin was one of the most highly anticipated arts events of 2020 in Austin – and outside it, if an article in *The New York Times* was any indication. Now, because of the pandemic, "Deborah Roberts: I'm" will be one of the most highly anticipated arts events of 2021. The museum has shifted it from September to January, which may disappoint Roberts' fans, but the artist herself is fine with the delay.

"Because this is my hometown," she says, "doing this show at the Contemporary was a really personal act. I wanted to throw the kitchen sink at this show." More significantly, the postponement "has allowed something different to happen, which I'm really happy about." Originally, Roberts' focus had been "the body, what it's like to be in a Black person's body," but then the events of the spring – the murder of **George Floyd**, the deaths and injuries of others at the hands of police, the **Black Lives Matter** protests – began to enter into the art.

What Roberts calls "the new movement" driving BLM "helped me with the work."

That was one insight of many revealed in Roberts' hourlong Coffee Chat with fellow artist and friend **Betelhem Makonnen** on July 16, part of the weekly Creative Standard series from **Big Medium**. Whether or not you were well-acquainted with the art of this Austinite who's now an international sensation, the conversation was an enlightening glimpse into a major artist's effort to meet the moment in her work.

Roberts described her complex, compelling collages – images of African African children, their faces and bodies composed from multiple faces and bodies (children's and adults') – as "artifacts of this time, gathered from Black history, American history, art history, pop culture" to construct "a new identity with these images." She said it's important that people see the complexity in her work and what she's trying to say, that they look beyond her figures' exaggerated features to see the "innocence and beauty within that work," the "beautiful little kid that exists in this joined body." To her, "once you see someone is human and vulnerable, it's impossible to mistreat them. That's the basis of my work."

But the innocence and beauty of children has also made what's happening now difficult for Roberts to address. "It's really hard to use [a child's] body in relationship to violence and people displacing them and seeing them as invisible." She struggled with "what was the best way to talk about looting and rioting and racial protesting using children? I really had to think a lot about how to do that. It was a hard thing to do." Roberts admitted to making a few major changes to her work that can be seen in the new collages, but besides going darker with some colors, she wouldn't describe the rest. "I don't want to give it all away," she said, "because I definitely want people to come to the show."



Deborah Roberts' *The Burden* (Image via [thecontemporaryaustin.org](http://thecontemporaryaustin.org))

"Deborah Roberts: I'm" opens Jan. 23, 2021, at the Contemporary Austin – Jones Center, 700 Congress.

For more info, visit [www.thecontemporaryaustin.org](http://www.thecontemporaryaustin.org).