

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artsy

Deborah Roberts's Gripping Collages Reconfigure Black Girlhood

Jacqui Germain

17 September 2020



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Image: Portrait of Deborah Roberts at Rauschenberg Residency, Captiva, Florida, USA (2019). Photo by Mark Poucher. Courtesy of the artist.

Deborah Roberts wasn't born a triplet, but she often felt like it growing up. Two of her sisters and herself were all born within two years of each other. She remembers people calling the three of them, stringing together their first names so that it became its own uniquely muddled phrase. Knowing this, it's difficult not to think of Roberts's works: *We Are Soldiers* (2019), *Between Them* (2019), *An*

*Act of Power* (2018), and *The Sleepwalkers* (2017) all show three young Black girls with braids and barrettes, consciously or unconsciously mirroring each other as they make their way through Black girlhood.

Born in 1962 and raised in Austin, Texas, Roberts is one of eight; she has an additional sister and four brothers. She started exploring her artistic side in the third grade and quickly realized her drawings were good enough to trade for the things third graders treasure: pencils, popularity, and other odds and ends. "I could draw people under the table!" Roberts told me recently with a laugh, her wide smile widening even more at the memory.



Image: Deborah Roberts, *We are Soldiers*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

These formative years were also marked by Roberts's first glimpses of Blackness, femininity, and beauty—all pre-internet and largely portraying images that did not look like her. Roberts, just like generations of other Black girls before and after her, developed an understanding of beauty and femininity within this exclusionary context. "I think the foundation of not believing what I was seeing is what fuses this work—what holds this work together today," Roberts said. "Had I bought

into this idea that beauty was one way and not another, I don't know if I'd be doing this work." It wasn't until her artistic practice matured that she was able to more deliberately investigate and refute that conditioning, but even as a child, she recognized the incongruity with a skeptical eye.

Roberts's talent also laid the groundwork for shaping a sense of her own individuality. Early on, art was less a career path and more an enjoyable way to distinguish herself in her 10-person family. "It was something that was uniquely mine," Roberts said. "In a house with eight children, it's hard to have something that's yours." In high school, one of Roberts's art teachers provided an infusion of encouragement by exposing her to a wide range of Black artists and a much broader perspective of the art world at large. After graduating, Roberts studied at the University of North Texas, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the Pont-Aven School of Contemporary Art, then later earned her MFA from Syracuse University.

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Image: Deborah Roberts, *Rebels*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.



Image: Deborah Roberts, *After the thunder (RR)*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

"When the art came, it was hard, but I was so intrigued by the hardness of it. It kept drawing me in to get better at it," she recalled. "I learned the craft, learned how to draw, learned how to paint, learned how to watercolor. They're all different—different properties, different materials, different tools that you have to master."

After showing her work at several galleries in the mid-1980s, Roberts decided to open her own gallery space, naming it Not Just Art Gallery because she also maintained a framing business to ensure a more consistent cash flow. She hoped to increase her own visibility and gain access to the national art market, while regularly showcasing the work of peers she admired. The gallery operated for about 10 years, though it started failing in its seventh year. Today, she laughs at her own naivety, but the experience gave her an early taste of her work's viability in the art market.

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Image: Deborah Roberts, detail of Man[ly], 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Roberts's love of drawing blended with her collage practice to become the perfect outlet for exploring her persistent skepticism about socialized definitions of beauty. In addition to topics like colorism ("When they say you're pretty for a dark-skinned girl, that's no compliment") and the politics of Black hair ("Whatever good hair is"), the bulk of Roberts's work comments on the sanctity of Black girlhood. Her collages force viewers to make sense of images of Black girls that are visibly distorted and mismatched and yet still childlike and

innocent.

"At one point they say you're a little girl and somehow they treat you as an adult. So sometimes you have a big arm—you have to be an adult," she explained, referring to the oversized features or too-long limbs of some of her figures. "When I was drawing these little girls, I wanted to highlight that...[just] because society has set us up like this doesn't mean that we didn't want to be children, that we didn't want to be seen as innocent, that we wanted a childhood to be able to explore."



Image: Deborah Roberts, Hip bone, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.



Image: Deborah Roberts, The burden, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Some of her works depict Black girls with boxing gloves in place of hands. "When did the gloves of Black womanhood come on us? When is it, all of a sudden, that we have to defend ourselves?" she asked, speaking to such works. "It's around the age, I think, from maybe 14 to 22 [when] we have to start defending ourselves. And it's based on watching our mothers, our aunts, our community members and how they carry themselves—how we [learn to] defend our ideas of who we are."

Gradually, she distilled her approach into four key aspects—pop culture, Black culture, art history, and American history—and she continues to imbue varying degrees of each into her works. She mentions, for example, repeatedly using James Baldwin's eyes in her

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collages, Michelle Obama's fist, and portions of Willow Smith's face. "I think she has the most beautiful, soft face," she says of Smith's features.



Image: Deborah Roberts, detail of *We wear the masks*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.



Image: Deborah Roberts, detail of *Mixed hues*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

The piecemeal nature of collage allows her to create figures of Black girls—and as of a few years ago, Black boys as well—that are composites. On the surface, the arrangements might speak to the disfiguring and objectifying way a society marred by chattel slavery views Black children and Black people in general. But given the images of Blackness and beauty that Roberts and so many other Black girls struggle to reconcile with their own sense of self, Roberts's collage works can be better understood as a purposeful reconfiguring of Black girlhood. After all, how does a Black girl create a sense of self while being denied any kind of

mirror or reflection in society at every turn? How does a Black girl begin to shape her identity in the midst of a country that values her parts more than her whole?

Black women, and Black people in general, have always had to serve as each other's mirror in the context of a white-dominated world that refused to see us as either human or whole. The works, then, are defiant depictions of Black girlhood, amalgamations of each other collaged together to lay claim to both our humanity and our wholeness.



Image: Deborah Roberts, *From the beginning*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

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Image: Deborah Roberts, *I am not a man, I'm dynamite*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

Roberts draws a hard line against depicting explicit violence or the aftermath of violence in any of her portraits. The art world is slowly beginning to reckon with controversial claims of exploiting racialized violent experiences of being Black in the United States—typically shorthanded as “Black trauma”—for the voyeuristic desires of majority white arts patrons. But for Roberts, distancing her figures from overt physical trauma and suffering is a way to protect them while still commenting on the racialized trauma their real-life counterparts face. Her insistence on creating that visual distance allows her to prioritize their wholeness and dignity first and foremost above any message or humanistic appeal for empathy.

Instead, she mentions collaging a piece of candy in the hands of a figure with the word Pop! on the candy wrapper. The placement references 12-year-old Tamir Rice, a Black boy shot to death in 2014 while playing outside in a park with a toy gun, as young children are wont to do. “The idea of violence—I can’t [literally] put in my work, so I like the idea that it has, pop! pop! pop! because the sound of violence is pop! pop! pop!” Roberts explained. Her piece *Ghost gun* (2018), also in honor of Tamir Rice, is the closest to blatant representation, depicting a Black boy holding a colorful toy gun and a blue pacifier placed snugly in his mouth.



Image: Deborah Roberts, *When you see me*, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

In another instance, Roberts said, she might place cartoon monkeys on a figure's shirt as a nod towards that specific racist and dehumanizing characterization burdened on Black people for centuries—though she describes monkeys as “the nemesis” in her

work because she “hates the idea of anyone thinking we are less than human.”

When the conversation turns to *80 Days* (2018), one of Roberts's most celebrated and beloved works, her posture changes to that of an openly affectionate mother, welcoming a stranger's admiration of a child she holds dear. Part of a longer series of collage-on-canvas works called “*Nessun Dorma*” (Italian for “None Shall Sleep”), *80 Days* references 14-year-old George Stinney Jr. who was executed in 1944 for a murder he didn't commit—and who, to this day, remains the youngest American to be executed. The piece's title refers to the two and a half months from arrest, trial, conviction, and execution: just over 80 days.

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Image: Deborah Roberts, Head Nods and Handshakes, 2019. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

To be clear, Roberts is proud of all of her works, but this one obviously occupies a particular place in her own personal career archive. In 2019, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery selected 80 Days for its triennial exhibition.

“I am so happy that [80 Days] is at the National Portrait Gallery right now, sitting in the middle,” she said, smiling. Indeed, Roberts’s piece is installed on a broad wall between two other exhibition finalists, with George Stinney Jr.’s tilted head visible above crowd height.

“And they hung him high. Everyone has to look up to him,” she added. “I love it. I wanted that for him.”