

*Above: Deborah Roberts in the studio.
Left: 'Red, White and Blue' (2018).
Opposite, from left: 'Head Nods and Handshakes' (2019).
'My Body, Your Rules' (2018)*

PHOTOGRAPH: MARK POUCHER.
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RECLAIM THE FRAME

Deborah Roberts deconstructs conventional beauty standards with her mixed-media collages that celebrate Black bodies

By FRANCES HEDGES

You better watch me, sister,' warns Deborah Roberts, eyes twinkling from beneath her huge glasses and lips curving into a mischievous smile as she looks at me down the camera from her home in Austin. 'I'm a Texan – we talk!'

I am chatting with the artist over Zoom in the middle of a heat-wave that spans both sides of the Atlantic, but Roberts' enthusiasm – for art, for life, for the causes she champions – is so infectious that I find myself forgetting about the temperature, enraptured by her lively conversation. 'I'm a person who doesn't like to fail at things,' she tells me, launching straight into a story about how, while still at high school, she pushed herself to develop her artistic skills, 'just trying and trying until I succeeded'. That steely commitment to self-education, combined with her natural, all-American warmth, has stood her in good stead over the years, seeing her through periods of intermittent poverty to achieve the critical and commercial success she is experiencing today.

Known for her arresting mixed-media depictions of young Black girls and boys, created by collaging found images together with hand-drawn and painted details, Roberts traces her interest in perceptions of beauty back to childhood experiences of reading women's glossies. 'My mum was a house-keeper, so she'd bring home all these house-and-garden magazines full of wonderful families,' she recalls. 'Very rarely did I see photos of Black people, unless it was to do with some kind of disturbance or uprising. So I started painting images of what I considered to be beautiful, but that changed as I got older, because these glamorous women didn't look like anyone I knew.' Her early work reflected an urge to capture on canvas the real-life women she deemed truly 'beautiful or heroic' – doctors, singers, members of the congregation at her local church.

Although Roberts has since dismissed this creative phase as sentimental 'Black Americana', it laid the foundations for her later, more sophisticated deconstruction of the Western ideal of beauty, which for her is epitomised in the figure of the goddess Venus. 'She has blonde hair and pale skin, and she's thin and perfect – which is one version of beauty, but not the only one,' she says with conviction. 'As



women of colour, we take a lot of pride in our hips and butts – that's our sass, that's our crown. There's a power to that body, and to me, it's also beautiful. So the idea of Venus was made for me to debunk.'

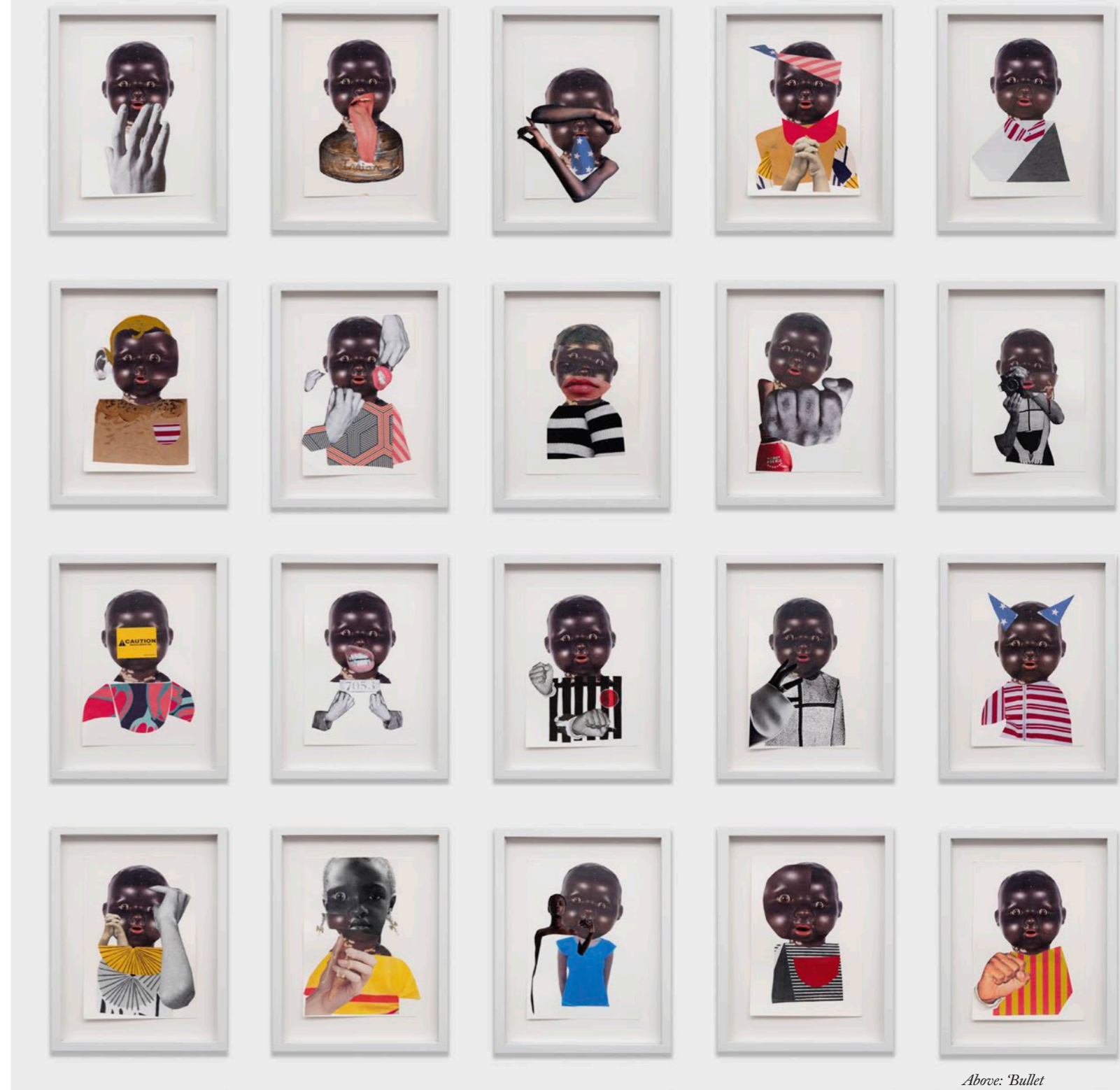
Knocking Venus down from her pedestal has been a long, and deeply personal, journey for Roberts – one that involved her revisiting the struggles of her own eight-year-old self. 'It's around that age that we start thinking of ourselves as beautiful or not beautiful – it's when I started wearing a little make-up and wanting to be more girlie,' she says. She began manipulating images of herself from that era – 'scratching out the eyes, making the face pink, putting rope on it' – to a point where they no longer resembled her. 'I don't think I

could destroy that face now the way I did then, but it was all an exercise for my new work,' she reflects. Children, in their naivety, optimism and fragility, have since become her central subject matter, a way of addressing the dangers inherent in an image-obsessed society. 'As a little girl today, if you're laughing out loud, or wearing bright clothes, or smiling too much, people think you want sexual attention,' she says. Black girls, she believes, are particularly vulnerable to this risk, and become correspond-

ingly hardened to it from a young age. 'By the time I was 17 or 18, I could already defend myself – verbally, or physically if necessary. Why should we have to start fighting these battles so early? It's important to figure out how we got to this point where we're seeing less innocence in children, because they're having to take on this armour right away.'

In 2011, Roberts' quest to understand and unpack challenges common to people of African descent took her from her home town in Texas to New York's Syracuse University, where she decided to pursue a master of fine arts degree, with a concentration on Black studies. 'I realised I had to go back to school, that more research was needed for my art to make sense,' she explains. 'That's where I read authors like Toni Morrison and Bell Hooks, who talk about human experiences and the idea of the body. They were the key ingredients that had been missing for me, and afterwards, my work just bloomed.' This enriched understanding of Black literature and history, combined with her interest in popular culture, has enabled Roberts to draw on myriad references in her artworks, from past greats such as James Baldwin to modern icons including Rihanna and Beyoncé. She also weaves in the stories of Black victims of atrocity past and

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Above: 'Bullet Points' (2017).
Left: 'Let Them Be Children' (2018).
Opposite: Roberts at work during her Rauschenberg Residency, Florida, 2019





'I'm asking you to engage with the person right in front of you, demanding you to view their humanity'

present: George Stinney Jr, the African American child wrongfully convicted of murder and executed in 1944, is the subject of one piece; Stephen Lawrence, the Londoner killed in 1993 in a racist attack, is another.

The fragmented nature of Roberts' collages, with their irregular shapes and hybrid body parts, evokes the sense of disjuncture common to the Black experience, where identity is a complex concept to be pieced together. Yet co-existing with these melancholy undertones is a certain defiant confidence manifested in her use of dynamic poses, vibrant colours and gaudy patterns – elements that she says are becoming even more pronounced in her current work. 'All those things that were seductive before are now blaring,' she explains. 'I don't know if it's do with what happened to George Floyd, or with Covid-19 and being in lockdown, but there's an urgency to what I'm doing. I'm not asking you to engage with the white space any more, I'm asking you to engage with the person right in front of you, demanding you to view their humanity. The presence of the Black body is there, and the space I normally give to the white gaze is gone.' She recognises that the battle to alter perspectives on race is far from won ('There's a lot of stress involved in trying to get people to see something different when they're comfortable with the status quo'), but remains optimistic that the tidal wave of emotion unleashed by the Black Lives Matter movement has, at least, inspired an appetite for progress. 'I'm hoping that something has changed,' she says. 'That this is no longer the fight of Black people and brown people, but a unified fight.'

Roberts' own efforts to break through cultural barriers have not gone unrecognised: today, her art is held by institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the National Galleries Scotland, while her collectors include Beyoncé and Jay-Z. How, I wonder, does she feel about the new heights of fame she has reached in the past few years. 'I'm a person who has been through the feasts and famines of the art world – I've had some successes and some failures,' she says with equanimity. 'But when you go to the dictionary and search "dreams come true", I know the name Deborah Roberts is going to be right there next to it, because what's happening to me now doesn't happen all the time.' Some myths – like Venus on her pedestal – may need debunking, but just occasionally, a worthy heroine gets the fairy-tale ending she deserves. □

Above, from left: 'The Feeding Ground' (2018). 'Either By The Hawk Or By The Dove; I Am The Seed And The Bloom; Sewed Together' (2018). Below, from left: 'Me Before You' (2018). 'The Soil' (2019). Opposite: 'Untitled' (2018)

