

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Culture Map

Austin artist's larger-than-life mural installed downtown ahead of landmark show

Lindsey Wilson

23 September 2020

culturemap
A U S T I N

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Image: Deborah Roberts, Little man, little man, 2020. Commissioned by The Contemporary Austin. Photo by Colin Doyle

The collector made his first art purchase with his winnings from dorm room poker back in college.

The pandemic may have pushed artist Deborah Roberts' first solo Texas museum exhibition, "I'm," out to January 23, 2021, but visitors can view one of her works right now.

Little Man, little man has been installed along The Contemporary Austin Jones Center in downtown. It's the first outdoor mural for both the Austin-born artist and the museum.

Roberts uses mixed media from photography, magazines, and the internet on paper and canvas to depict African American children. Her work aims to start conversations about beauty, race, and identity in modern society, and invites her audience to examine the way societal pressures, violence, and even acquired norms affect how children, still one of the most vulnerable groups of people, grow up. It is, obviously, especially relevant work for right now.

Little man, little man features collaged images of a young Black boy in various gestures of action, printed onto weather-resistant vinyl and installed on the Jones Center's facade along 7th Street, adjacent to Congress Avenue.

The work is titled after author and civil rights activist James Baldwin's Little Man, Little Man, a 1976 children's book articulating the joys and struggles of Black childhood through the adventures of a four-year-old boy in Harlem.

As Roberts noted, "I wanted these collage works to demonstrate the emotional, celebratory energy of this young child as he tries to make his way into adulthood without being targeted or criminalized."

In addition to the mural, Roberts will present a selection of all-new works, including collages, paintings, and an interactive sound, text, and video installation. Though The Contemporary Austin is currently closed to visitors, the exhibition "I'm" will be on view at the Jones Center from January 23-August 15, 2021.

Chief curator and director of curatorial affairs Heather Pesanti, who organized the exhibition, says, "Deborah's work is incredibly resonant on many levels, as evident in this outdoor public artwork centrally sited in the heart of downtown Austin, a few blocks from the State Capitol. With subject matter encapsulating the unique experiences and point of view of a young Black child in America, and a larger-than-life scale traversing the exterior wall of the museum, Little man, little man is both hopeful and powerful."

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The young boy in *Little man, little man* is a complex, inviting figure: he displays an open, inquisitive face; playful yet wary body language; and vibrant clothing, including the bright blue and red details of his hooded sweatshirt, which invite the viewer to look closely and to acknowledge the child's perspective and autonomy.