

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Sightlines

Where the Black girls are: A review of Deborah Roberts' 'I'm'

Ranae Jarrett

27 February 2021

## SIGHT LINES

### Where the Black girls are: A review of Deborah Roberts' 'I'm'

The art world is a sadly integral player in upholding systems and people in power



Image: Deborah Roberts, "The duty of disobedience," 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas. 72 x 100 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

It would be easy to remark on the load of references permeating through the artwork of Deborah Roberts, from Zora Neale Hurston, Glenn Ligon, Andy Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Pablo Picasso among others. It would be easy to chart the course from the upsetting pre-Modern depictions of

Black girls and women in art history to the nuanced and multidimensional renderings we are only recently beginning to see in the mainstream. It would be easy to pose a connection to Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" and her unrelenting view into the lives of Black girls.

Such tasks are not easy because they are obvious, but because Roberts' work overflows with a cultural richness I would normally take great pleasure in unpacking. But "I'm," the artist's first-ever solo museum show in her hometown warrants something more personal. As years of educating the people around me on the depth of Black art and Black personhood have taken their toll on my patience, I leave the intellectual wealth of Roberts' work for you to uncover for yourself. This time, for once, I'm going to let this radiant work about and for Black children be about and for me, a fellow Black girl.

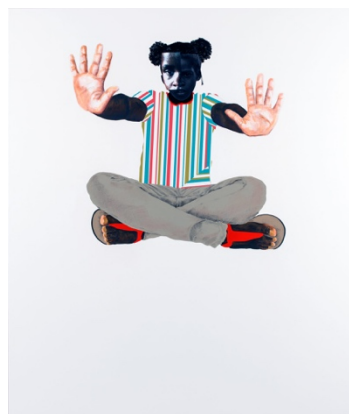


Image: Deborah Roberts, "Fighting all the ISM," 2019. Mixed media collage on canvas. 72 x 60 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

Black children know joy. We know sadness and confusion. We know double-consciousness. We know what it is to feel colored against our sharp white backgrounds. We know what it is to be disappeared in the black void that is the indifference of the world. We know how our facial expressions, our tones of voices, and the postures of our bodies turn into misunderstandings.

We know fear, too, because of all those misunderstandings. We know that we are powerless in our youth. We know how to assimilate and how to code-switch. We feel how the years we are cute quickly turn into the lifetime we become threatening. We know how to bloom without casting too large a shadow over others.

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But it is not until we grow up that we discover we ever knew these things. And it is perhaps never that we uncover what it is to be a child simultaneously so hyperaware of the space our bodies take up and so clueless of why that space should be so distressing.



Image: Deborah Roberts, "Jamal," 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas. 65 x 45 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

The Black children in Roberts' mixed media collage paintings and silkscreen works are as fragmented as any understanding one can try to make of them. Roberts emulates the incongruity of the interior self without visually tearing apart the bodies that hold them. Complexity generates a kind of beauty in these images. Roberts places the figures in disjunctive postures that disrupt the notion of symmetry as the measure of beauty.

Rather than fragmenting the bodies, the collage symbolizes a making whole out of many. The dynamically angular figures move the eye down unexpected pathways. The eye even jumps from picture to picture to compare the facial features on different bodies. The artist remixes collage pieces across artworks, giving new context to the expressions the figures muster. An eye on one body may appear bold and fierce while conjuring a sense of sadness on another.

Through this dance, the viewer recognizes the insufficiency of our surface-level understanding. Our interpretations of the bodies and expressions we see are not full representations of an individual's interiority. The work it takes to truly see Roberts' figures mimics the work we must learn to do to see the Black people we encounter in life.

When I approach Roberts' artwork, I see a mirror. I remember I am only a makeshift semblance of all the bits and pieces I've stitched together in some narrative about who I am supposed to be. And when I see the fragments placed carefully to create an image of a human on the wall, I experience the relief of knowing that I'm not the only person etched in this fragility. In this fabricated world, the idea of wholeness is a false one. It is only in our little pieces, no matter how paradoxical or discordant they may be, that I can see her, and she can see me. That release from the world of pretend is what frees a person to be anything at all.

Roberts splices the collage with pieces from famous figures such as the late Congressman John Lewis as well as unidentified Black people. Her work scrupulously elevates Blackness to the heroism of the most influential among us and grounds us to the realm of the ordinary. Blackness is not a monolith and it is neither god-like nor subhuman. Roberts reflects the multitudes we contain from person to person and even within our singular bodies. When this becomes our mirror, we see that we are deserving of both basic human needs and recognition of our excellence.

Why is it that we are so surprised every time the image of Black excellence comes to the forefront that we become incapable of seeing or speaking about it with clarity? Amanda Gorman's delivery of a poem at President Biden and Vice President Harris' Inauguration rightfully stole the show. But the narrative of that moment on news outlets and social media was shock that such a young woman could overcome so much difficulty and deliver such beauty on the national stage.

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Image: Deborah Roberts, I see you (#17 of 24), 2019. Silkscreen on paper. 17 x 11 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Mark Poucher.

Yet, we see this every day. Tyler Mitchell became the first-ever Black photographer to shoot the cover of Vogue in 2018 at the age of 23. The country watched as Helen Butler, LaTosha Brown, Stacey Abrams, and so many other Black women organized in their communities to rewrite the election.

Roberts has an international career under her belt, so why is this the first we see of such major recognition in her hometown? If Black lives matter, why do we wait so long to cherish their presence and give them their due?

For all of its progress, the art world is a sadly integral player in upholding systems and people in power with limited perspectives that fail to celebrate these artists as soon as they have earned it. When will these systems and the people perpetuating them find new ways of seeing Black excellence as not an outlier or miracle, or better yet, step down and make room for people who do?

Representation matters both in the art we consume and in the choice of artists we raise up. When we have the audacity to tell our own stories, we bless all the children in the world who might otherwise not have known the beauty and validity of their complexity with care, understanding, and visibility. Roberts' representation of Black childhood is not about accuracy but about capturing an abstraction of the body that leaves enough room for interpretation that Black kids can find themselves in it.

I am no longer a Black kid, but I am a young Black woman who is starting to find healing and repair my ruptures with art like Roberts'.

Deborah Roberts' "I'm" is on view at The Contemporary Austin's Jones Center on Congress Ave. through August 15.