

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Sightlines

Seeing and being seen: In a solo museum show Deborah Roberts asks us to look

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

27 February 2021

SIGHT LINES

Seeing and being seen: In a solo museum show Deborah Roberts asks us to look

"I want you to see Black people as unique individuals," says the Austin-based artist

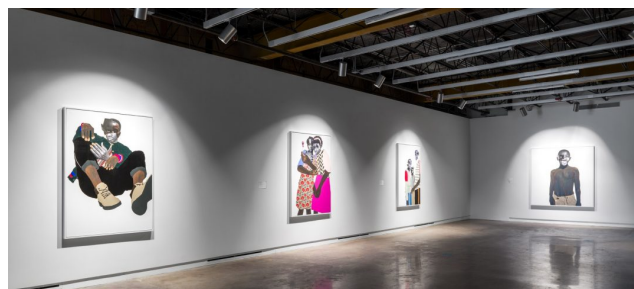


Image: Installation view of "Deborah Roberts: I'm" at the Contemporary Austin-Jones Center. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

Deborah Roberts solo exhibition "I'm" at the Contemporary Austin was originally scheduled to open in September 2020. The pandemic changed that, like so much in the last year. "I'm" opened in January and will continue through Aug. 15. It is Roberts' first solo museum exhibition in her home state of Texas. And it is also the first solo exhibition at the Contemporary Austin by any Texas-based artist.

Much of the press surrounding the show's opening remained focused on Roberts' biography. Articles in the New York Times, Texas Monthly and elsewhere told of her meteoric rise and much-deserved success in the last half decade. Indeed the story Roberts' emergence onto the national stage when she was in fifties sometimes dominates a discussion of her art.

Roberts, 58, has been a working artist in Austin since the late 1980s. For the first decades of her career, her figurative paintings were, as Roberts herself says, "Black Norman Rockwell." However, after she received an MFA from Syracuse University in 2014, her art changed tremendously. Still essentially figurative in style, Roberts art now centers on collage, using images culled from news, pop culture and various publications, combining them with painted details to create striking and complex composite figures of Black children and youth. Made of fractured pieces, Roberts' figures demand we look at the carefully, consider each feature, recognize their individuality.

Roberts is now represented by galleries in London and Los Angeles. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Austin's Blanton Museum, among others. Individual art pieces fetch upwards of \$150,000. High-profile private collectors of her work include President Barak Obama and Beyoncé. Yet the issues explored in Roberts' artwork have essentially remained the same throughout her career. She questions how Black people are seen, or not seen, by majority White culture — how the Black body has been treated in American history and is still treated in our culture today. As she told me in 2017: "My work has been exploring the same issues all along — how African American identity has been imagined and shaped by societal, White societal, interpretations of beauty."

The exhibition at the Contemporary, which takes up the museum's first floor, features new collages and paintings and an interactive sound, text and video installation. Outside on the Jones Center's expansive, prominent south-facing wall, is "Little man, little man," a figurative mural featuring images of a young Black boy, its title a reference to James Baldwin's only children's book.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Sightlines

Seeing and being seen: In a solo museum show Deborah Roberts asks us to look

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

27 February 2021



Image: Deborah Roberts, 'Little man, little man,' 2020. Collage printed on weather-resistant vinyl. Installation view at The Contemporary Austin — Jones Center on Congress Avenue. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist, Vielmetter Los Angeles, and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Commissioned by The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Colin Doyle.

After it closes in August, the exhibition will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. And Roberts will have a solo show in September at Vielmetter Los Angeles. When we spoke by phone in early February, Roberts was spending her first day working in a recently constructed studio behind her home, a private workspace she calls Turtle Studio. (She also maintains a larger studio elsewhere.)

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin: Congratulations on the new home studio. Why do you call it Turtle Studio?

Deborah Roberts: I call it Turtle Studio because I've always been slow and steady, I'm methodical and have had a plan. It's taken me a long time to get where I am, achieve what I have. I think that's turtle-like.

When I was thinking about this interview and how I wanted to approach it, I wanted it to be very positive. I want people to know that you can make it (as an artist) outside of Austin, but it's very hard if you put too much trust in people here to say when you're "ready."

These days, there are younger artists out there that believe in themselves and their practice, and they don't need to be validated by anyone and I think that's good. For myself, I think I put too much credence in waiting to be validated by people in the art world. I was a living working artist that for years was doing what I thought was good work. But that validation never happened. When my work started to change, and I knew I needed more, I went off and sought it. But when I came back (after graduate school), in 2014, I think I was still looking for the same validation.

That was one of the reasons I chose to organize the "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" (exhibition at the Carver Museum in 2016)." I was that caged bird in Austin. But once I decided to mentally let go of that idea that I need someone here in the art world to validate me and I could just do my work, everything just started happening for me.

JCvR: I remember the solo exhibition you had at the Dougherty Arts Center in the early aughts — the figurative paintings that you did before you went to graduate school. Do you think you'll exhibit any of that work again?
DR: Nobody wants it now. Everybody right now wants the collages that I'm doing currently. Maybe when I can do a big retrospective, I'd like for that older work to come out. I tell people who own it not to sell it right now and just see what happens to its value.

JCvR: Let's talk about your current show at the Contemporary Austin. I'm curious about the title: "I'm" versus "I am."

DR: Well, I chose the title "I'm" because I think that we Black people, we live in the margins of of society. We're not seen as a full person. I think we live in the apostrophe of "I'm." What I wanted to do this in this (exhibition) is I wanted to show that we have added things to the community, to this world and that needs to be recognized. We need to be as a full person. So the apostrophe was very important.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Sightlines

Seeing and being seen: In a solo museum show Deborah Roberts asks us to look

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

27 February 2021



Image: Deborah Roberts during her residency at the Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva, Fla., in 2019. Credit: Deborah Roberts and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and Vielmetter Los Angeles; Mark Poucher

JCvR: Why do you use collage? Your earlier work previous was straight-up painting, no mixed media. What's the strategy behind now using collage?

DR: The strategy is very simple. I'm trying to figure out multiple ways to talk about things like race, gender and colorism. (Collage) allows me to create different

pathways to talk about the multiplicity of the Black experience. Working with these fractured pieces, I build a whole person, a whole life. I make you look at each individual feature of a face.

I want to show Black people as individuals beyond a monolithic idea that Black people are all the same. Every experience is the Black experience to a Black person. Sometimes I use a particular face, or piece of a face — like (James) Baldwin's eyes — multiple times, in different figures. Sometimes I use a particular feature because it has so much of that innocence that I want people to see. I want you to see Black people not as partial people, but unique individuals.



Image: Deborah Roberts, "Portraits: When they look back (No. 3)," 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas. 45 x 35 inches. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

JCvR: I was really struck by your series "Portraits: When they look back" which all have black backgrounds. They're magnificent. It's a departure from all your most of your images which typically have figures set against a white background.

DR: I was thinking about all the names of all the Black missing women who went missing in the last few years. We were so consumed by Trump over the course of the last four years that we didn't notice that some 400

Black women have been reported missing. And they aren't the women who get media attention when they disappear, right? Why is there never a national plea to find them?

So I started the black paintings because I was interested in presenting a face that is seen but not seen, visible but also invisible. For me there's more language in the surrounding white space that a black body occupies (in my other work), so these black paintings are a kind one-off. I don't think I'll do them again.

JCvR: In a July 2020 interview in Portray magazine. You said "I want my work to be easy to approach because some work can be too hard and in your face that tends to make people feel guarded." Can you elaborate?

DR: There's a lot of artwork out there now that's in your face about what happened to us, about what's destroying Black people. And that work is very important. But I think that it's turning people off. It's like if someone who's yelling at you. The first thing you're going to do is turn away.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Sightlines

Seeing and being seen: In a solo museum show Deborah Roberts asks us to look

Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

27 February 2021

In my work, I need your attention for a period of time without you turning away, because my work is showing you the result of systemic racism, that it is the residual of slavery and of Jim Crow. I chose to take a different approach in my telling of that story. I want to lure you in with the innocence and the beauty of the work and then fill you with a message, which is, "I need you to see me. I need you to see Black people for the individuals they are."

JcVR: As a native Austinite what do you want people in Austin to see in this exhibition or understand about Black artists in this city?

DR: We're going through a renaissance of Black art right now and everybody is looking to buy art from Black artists. But what Austin needs to understand is that Black art shouldn't just be a fad. I've been working here for 30 years and it took getting recognized in New York City for people (in Austin) to know who I am.

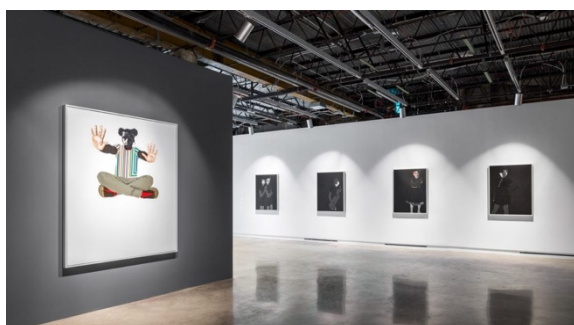


Image: Installation view of "Deborah Roberts: I'm" at the Contemporary Austin-Jones Center. Artwork © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy the artist; Vielmetter Los Angeles; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. Image courtesy The Contemporary Austin. Photograph by Paul Bardagjy.

There are Black artists here in Austin who are doing amazing work. Tammie Rubin is amazing. Betelhem Makonnen is amazing. So is Adrian Armstrong. And others. There's an Austin artist on that list, and guess what, it's not me: It's Dawn Okoro. There's lots of Black artists here who are doing great work, and have been here all along.

I want people to go to (this exhibition) and to see everything that I've been saying all these years. This show is in a different (visual) language than I had years ago — it's a growth from the Norman Rockwell-type portraiture work. But I'm still asking you to see that I have been here and done this type of work all along. And that work is about the same thing: These are our lives and we're telling you about them.

'Deborah Roberts: "I'm"' continues through Aug. 15 at the Contemporary Austin Jones Center, 700 Congress Ave. Due to the changing nature of the pandemic, tickets are released only four weeks at a time on Mondays.