

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Frieze

Deborah Roberts shines a light on the mistreatment of Black girls

Lise Ragbir

19 March 2021

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Deborah Roberts Shines a Light on the Mistreatment of Black Girls

The artist's homecoming exhibition at the Contemporary Austin is both deeply moving and tragically timely



Image: Deborah Roberts, 'I'm', 2021, installation view. Courtesy: The Contemporary Austin.

On 29 January, a week after Deborah Roberts opened 'I'm', her solo exhibition at the Contemporary Austin, a nine-year-old Black girl was pepper-sprayed by law enforcement in Rochester, New York – on the other side of the country – after the girl's mother called the police for help with a domestic dispute. The incident was recorded on video, in which the officer can be seen handcuffing the distraught girl and threatening her with pepper spray. 'You're acting like a child,' he says, to which she replies, 'I am a child.'

Days later, as the horrific event gained media attention, Roberts wrote on her Instagram account, 'We should be surprised at the horrible treatment of a nine-year-old little girl who was pepper sprayed a month ago, I'm not.' Best known for her collaged depictions of Black children that draw attention to the often brutal treatment of this segment of the American population, Roberts is more observant than prescient. That the latest works in 'I'm' seemed to predict the Rochester incident is only further proof of the urgency of her practice.



Image: Deborah Roberts, The duty of disobedience, 2020, mixed media collage on canvas, 183 x 254 cm. Courtesy: The Contemporary Austin. Photograph: Paul Bardagjy

In addition to never-before seen black-on black-collages inspired by the chalk drawings left at crime scenes, and life-sized collages of Black children who effectively occupy the galleries, 'I'm' showcases Roberts's first audio-visual installation. Under dim lights in Contemporary Austin's largest gallery, What If? (2020) recalls old photobooths or church confessionals. Standing approximately seven feet tall, the black box-like structure houses two confessionals, divided by one wall, each guarded by a heavy black curtain for privacy.

As a former Catholic school-girl myself, the installation evoked complex emotions of guilt and punishment before I stepping inside – feelings that took on a new meaning once I pulled the curtain back. Here, visitors are encouraged to literally put themselves in someone else's shoes by strapping their feet to the floor with restraints not unlike those used to bind people to electric chairs. The booth's black-painted walls are beautifully adorned with felt names of African-American girls. A video montage plays in one of the two confessionals: Roberts's own hands can be seen laying down images of blonde and blue-eyed women as the voice of James Baldwin voice questions how we've developed our standards of beauty. The video is a visual exercise in how Roberts assembles her collages, while also prompting questions about the white gaze. The other confessional contains a mirror; I listened to a woman's voice in a pair of earphones as I stared at myself, perhaps being implicated in her confession.



Image: Deborah Roberts, What if?, 'I'm', 2021, installation view. Courtesy: The Contemporary Austin. Photograph: Colin Doyle

'Don't judge me,' I heard, and steeled myself a little. My confessor began to describe the ways she felt Black girls are inferior. 'Black girls are way more sexually mature than white girls. That's why they don't take care of themselves. That's why they have kids so young.' She continued: 'Eight years old, a little me, just like me ...' I thought of my eight-year-old daughter, who

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was busy touring the rest of Roberts's exhibition with my partner while I sat there. Dramatic overhead lighting cast the shadows of prison-like bars, installed on the booth's ceiling, across my face. 'Impossible first names ...ugh. Why they do that!? Tawanna, Doeshka ... Oh God, Moesha what's up with that? No sense of pride. They create the problem, that is why they're so disposable.'

Roberts was once an eight-year-old girl in Texas who knew that she wanted to be an artist. She grew up not far from the Contemporary Austin. It has taken decades for Roberts to claim her place in some of the world's preeminent museum collections – including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – but over the course of those years, she has not only honed her work, but also her observation skills. 'When people weren't watching me, I was watching them,' she said in a recent phone call. 'Just because I wasn't in the spotlight didn't mean I wasn't thinking, making, working hard. And in some ways, laying low – that silence – let me figure out what I wanted to say.'



Image: Deborah Roberts, La'Condrea is a noun., 2020, silkscreen on paper, 76 × 56 cm. Courtesy: The ContemporaryAustin. Photograph: Paul Bardagjy

'I'm' demonstrates the range of ways the artist explores underrepresented narratives. Upon entering the gallery, visitors are welcomed by three of Roberts's text-based works: La' Condrea is a noun. (2020), We ≥ They (2020) and Anqwenique is mild as milk (2020). The titles of each work correspond to text silk-screened on sheets of paper, roughly the size of picket-signs. Both La' Condrea is a noun., and Anqwenique is mild as milk, bear a red spell-check squiggle under the girls' names – an indicator of how even these girls' names are policed by computer software.

While Roberts's text-based works have appeared in other exhibitions, in 'I'm', surrounded by collages of boys and girls of increasing sizes, words take up even more space. From the text-pieces on the wall to the sounds of What If?, Roberts challenges us to think about the meanings we attach to words. '[Words] rarely mean one thing,' she told me. 'For instance, African-American names carry pride and reflect a culture, but they also carry the stigma of humour and racism.' As she continues to shed light on the most vulnerable members of society, in an era when a police officer is comfortable threatening and assaulting a nine-year-old girl, Roberts wants us to remember that 'Language is so significant. Words matter.'