

Stephen Friedman Gallery

ArtForum
Deborah Roberts, The Contemporary Austin, Jones Center
Amarie Gipson
September 2021

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Image Deborah Roberts, *What if?*, 2021, panel, acrylic, felt, ink, mirror, linen, form lining, metal rods, metal rings, metal feet, bench, 84 × 96 × 48". Photograph: Colin Doyle

Black children are dressed in brightly colored clothing and posed in front of stark-white backgrounds. Their limbs are masterfully rendered in paint; their faces, however, are collaged, and the fragments vary in origin. These images appeared in Deborah Roberts's exhibition "I'm," the Austin native's first solo presentation in a Texas museum, organized by the Contemporary Austin's chief curator, Heather Pesanti. For more than ten years, Roberts has challenged perceptions of race and identity through her intricately constructed portraits. She uses her art to advocate against the violent adultification of Black youth.

The increased scale of her portraits—the tallest of which are six feet high—has allowed her figures to have more agency and her painterly hand to come to the fore. *This is who I am*, 2020, beautifully exemplifies this shift in composition. The bare-chested young boy depicted in this work—arms at his side, chest slightly angled, and eyes gazing straight at the viewer—is boldly rendered as a proud figure who demands our attention.

At the center of the gallery stood *What if?*, 2021, a seven-foot-tall black-box structure modeled after a Catholic confessional. The installation was a first for Roberts, as she primarily works two-dimensionally. Its title is taken from a selection in poet Claudia Rankine's 2020 book, *Just Us: An American Conversation*. The piece features two booths separated by a wall, with a long black curtain draped over the entrance to each one. In the first enclosure is a video: It starts off with a camera hovering over the surface of an empty table as an arrangement by New Orleans-born jazz musician Joe Dyson plays in the background. Eventually we see Roberts's hands laying out the elements of a collage—cutout faces, blocks of pastel paper—while the voice of American novelist and essayist James Baldwin states, "The country has arbitrarily declared that kinky hair, dark skin, wide nose, and big lips is a hideous thing to be afflicted with." Suddenly, a blond, blue-eyed woman appears, repeating the phrase "I am" as she recites the names of Black girls and women who have disappeared under mysterious—and likely violent—circumstances: Thawana, Quiana, Zakkiah, Janeah. Upon entering the second confessional, visitors are invited to sit before a large mirror that reflects those same names, memorialized in sculpted black

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felt and protruding from the wall of the cell. Via headphones we hear a cringe-inducing recording of a Black man implicating himself in the hypersexualization of Black girls. Immediately after this unsettling admission comes the voice of yet another white woman, bragging about how her eight-year-old daughter “will rule the world one day with her smile” because “you would never see her making trouble,” like Black girls do with their “crazy hairstyles” and “impossible first names like Thawana and Moesha.” Roberts juxtaposes the “innocence” of white girls with the perceived promiscuity of Black girls. What if? is an affecting experience, full of strangeness, horror, and grief, but the audiovisual components of the work still feel a little unresolved. Nevertheless, in a political and cultural climate as relentless as the one we’re in, Roberts deserves kudos for exploring such brutal content through what for her is a relatively new form.

Elsewhere in the gallery were three text-based silk-screen prints, including *We ≥ They* and *La’Condrea is a noun*, both 2020, that echo the three-dimensional text component of her installation. In both, the works’ titles are written across their paper surfaces in unfussy black typefaces that sit on white grounds. These pieces are subtle assertions of cultural pride; the former amends the expulsive hierarchies in language, while the latter honors an African American tradition that subverts conventional standards of naming.

Roberts’s visualization of Black children actively refuses the stereotypes that have fostered and continue to foster an environment that makes them more susceptible to harm. Perhaps the artist’s most evocative exhibition, “I’m”—which opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver this September—is a call and response that pushes visitors beyond the comfort of collage and into a realm of deep self-reflection.