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Artists of Color Offer Strong Personal Visions Around Los Angeles Galleries

by Jody Zellen



As I was writing recently about Yashua Klos' works at UTA Artist Space, I could not help but reflect on the depiction of the black body in various forms recently showing in Los Angeles. In my weekly art outings, I have noticed a predominance of figurative imagery depicting aspects of ordinary life by African American artists. It is hard not to look at these exhibitions without thinking about what connects them at this particular moment in time. Are Black painters suddenly focusing on the representation of their communities and families, or have they always done so, but galleries have shunned interest until now? In light of recent events and the numerous attacks on people of color, it is an opportune moment for these bodies to be made visible.

Over the last month I have visited these exhibitions: Amy Sherald (b. 1973) at Hauser & Wirth; Khari Johnson Ricks (b.1994) at Night Gallery; Evita Tezeno (b.1960) at Luis de Jesus; Sedrick Huckaby (b.1975) at Philip Martin Gallery; Che Lovelace (b.1969) at Various Small Fires; Willie Birch (b.1942) at Kayne Griffin, as well as "Shattered Glass," a large group exhibition at Deitch Projects. My intention

here is to map out what I saw and highlight a few works of interest that may be indicative, but in no way to attempt to produce a definitive essay on Black art in Los Angeles.

Sedrick Huckaby states: "Ordinary people matter ... The African American family and its heritage has been the content of my work for several years. In large-scale portraits of family and friends I try to aggrandize ordinary people by painting them on a monumental scale." Huckaby is a Fort Worth, Texas based artist who describes the works in his exhibition "Estuary" as "dealing with death in the black community, diversity in the African-American family and the continuation/continuity of life." The painted portraits depict individuals in memorial T-shirts: they are expressions of love and loss. In addition to the paintings, Huckaby also creates sculptures, often pairing these works together. For example, "Amen" consists of two large-scale oval shaped portraits. One is of a young girl and the other of an older woman. The sitters look out of their frames toward each other, both wearing commemorative T-shirts that say "Amen." In front of the paintings is a life-sized sculpture of a boy made from newspaper and wood pulp. This textured construction of the youth — which feels like the person who has passed — gazes calmly and stoically, though created from discarded materials.

While no definitive conclusion can be drawn from the viewing of these disparate approaches, what is significant is the fact that artists of color are being seen and exhibited at all. Until recently that was a rarity. The works I saw are personal explorations of what surrounds these artists, what plagues them and how they make sense of the world we share, but not on equal terms. Is there a difference in these presentations of Black art in contrast to explicitly political exhibitions of the past? (For example, "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" at the Whitney Museum in 1994.) How have times changed? Has the reception of figurative, conceptual, or even political art changed? What makes today's climate different?

The differences are clear, even stark. What cuts across lines of race, time and context is that artists communicate from the heart. The proliferation of works by artists of color currently and recently on view in Los Angeles illustrates the scope and diversity of personal experience and creativity. They constitute a collection of visions that imply not only what is but what can be.