

ELIZABETH COLOMBA

MEDIA/ PRESS KIT





BIOGRAPHY

b. Épinay-sur-Seine, France. Lives and works in New York, New York.
Elizabeth Colomba is a figurative painter who adapts the technical approach and themes (including the feminine sacred, mythology, history, and allegory) of traditional Western portraiture in order to interrupt stereotypical representation of the black body. By mixing classical painting with inherently black signifiers, including references to her own Caribbean heritage, she has developed a visual language to reconfigure the canon to include black subjectivity and its attendant narratives.

Elizabeth was born in France, descended from parents from Martinique. She received a degree in applied art from the Estienne School of Art, Paris, and also studied at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Colomba's paintings have been exhibited at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; the Balthus Grand Chalet, Switzerland; the International Biennial of Contemporary Art (BIAC), Martinique; Volta, New York; the Fondazione Biagiotti Progetto Arte, Florence, and the inaugural triennial at Columbia University's Wallach Gallery. Her work is included in the permanent collections of The Studio Museum in Harlem and Princeton University.

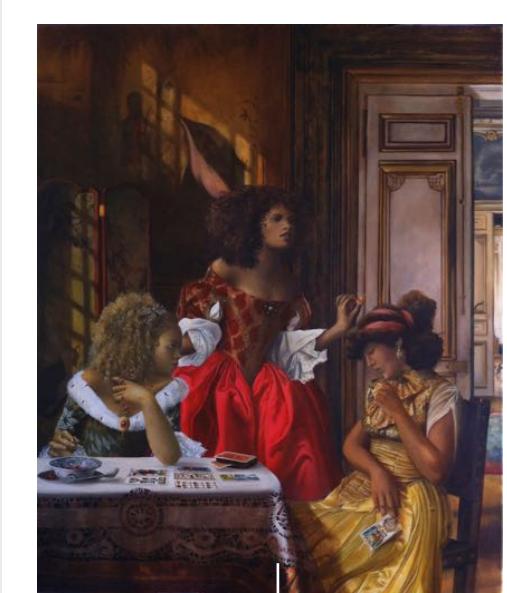
P R E S S
I M A G E S



Judith
Oil on
canvas



Daphne
Oil and gold
leaf on canvas



The Reading
Oil on
canvas



Colomba's *Shekere Girl*, 2012, shows her intricate, traditional technique with a vivid, contemporary spin.
Photo: Elizabeth Colomba, *Shekere Girl*, 2012. Watercolor on paper, 11½" x 8½". Courtesy of the artist.

PORTRAIT MODE

Painter Elizabeth Colomba Is Giving Art's Hidden Figures Their Close-Up

by DODIE KAZANJIAN

OCTOBER 10, 2018

A rainy morning in Paris in 1863. On the wet cobblestone street, a handsome black woman in a colorful head wrap, carrying an umbrella, is looking straight out from the canvas. I'm in the studio of Elizabeth Colomba, a French-born, New York-based artist, and this is the painting she's just finished. Slightly behind the central figure, a horse-drawn coach carries a well-dressed white man, holding a bouquet of flowers. To her left, a pink-gowned young woman and her tiny dog are about to enter a building, and in the background, a nanny and two little girls are heading for a park. The black woman's name is Laure, and she is on her way to the studio of Édouard Manet, who is using her as the model for the maid in *Olympia*, the landmark painting that shocked Paris and announced the arrival of Modern Art.

Colomba's painting could have been done in the 1860s. She's a new kind of history painter, an attractive, shy, yet highly ambitious artist in her 40s, telling stories about black women—usually real but sometimes imagined

—who lived in earlier eras. Her career to date has been largely under the radar, but, like Manet's Laure, she's on the verge of being discovered. With our increasing interest in racial identity, her current focus on redefining the role of black figures in Western painting history is catching the art world's attention. As the maid in Manet's *Olympia*, Laure is presenting a large bouquet of flowers sent by a client of the naked courtesan who lies on a flotilla of white cushions. (These are the flowers we see in the horse-drawn coach.) A great deal is known about the courtesan: She is Victorine Meurent, a favorite model for Manet and Degas, and an artist herself. (She's the subject of Manet's *Young Lady* in 1866 and the nude in his *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*.) Dissertations and novels have been written about Victorine, but until now, her black counterpart in *Olympia*—which is actually a double portrait—was anonymous.

"I do paintings that are based on real characters, people who are known because they are in famous

paintings,” Elizabeth tells me in her French-accented English. By “known,” she means recognizable but without names or identities. “I take them out of that context and give them a full scene. During the time when Manet was painting Olympia, I imagined, Laure must have walked to Manet’s studio, so that’s why you see her in the street with an umbrella and the beautiful gates of the Parc Monceau behind her. I give her center stage and a lightness of being that I’m not sure she had at the time.” Slavery had finally been abolished in the French Empire in 1848, and black women were just starting to find independence in a few areas—as nannies, servants, and artists’ models.

“The woman in the pink dress is Cora Pearl,” Elizabeth continues, “who became the most famous courtesan in Paris. She would dye her pug’s fur the color of her outfit.” Elizabeth’s painting Laure (Portrait of a Negresse) will appear in a

Elizabeth’s painting Laure (Portrait of a Negresse) will appear in a groundbreaking show, “Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today,” that opens this month at Columbia University’s Wallach Art Gallery and travels next spring to Paris’s Musée d’Orsay. Curator Denise Murrell has been researching the subject for the past six years, turning up material about Laure, including her first name (but not her last) and where she lived. Manet, whose description of her in his notebooks is “très belle nègresse,” used her in two other paintings, one a solo portrait. “My question always was ‘What can be said about Laure; what can we surmise about her life?’ ” Murrell says when I reach her by phone. “And that’s what I find so compelling about Elizabeth’s work—it’s exactly what she tries to do. In a very vivid way, she’s trying to imagine the lived reality of the models who posed for Manet and Marie-Guillemine Benoist. I found that a new turn, different from the work of other contemporary artists engaging with historical works of art.”

Colomba’s studio is on the fifth floor of a midtown Manhattan building. When I first visited her there last December, she was working at her easel on Spring, the last painting in her Four Seasons series. Six feet high

Laure (Portrait of a Negresse), 2018, takes as its subject the maid in Manet’s *Olympia*.

Photo: Elizabeth Colomba. *Laure (Portrait of a Negresse)*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 40” x 40”. Courtesy of the artist.



Colomba with *Winter*, one of her *Four Seasons* series, modeled on her late mother.

Fashion Editor: Phyllis Posnick. Makeup: Stéphane Marais. Produced by Patrick Van Maanen for Moxie Productions. Photographed by Anton Corbijn, Vogue, October 2018 /

Painting: Elizabeth Colomba. Winter, 2017. Oil on canvas, 72” x 36”. Courtesy of the artist.

grisaille, because this is the underpainting, in the old-master technique, that Elizabeth learned at art school. The color comes later.

The other three Seasons are against the wall in a small and stylishly furnished sitting area. Elizabeth’s mother, Lucianne, who died earlier this year, is Winter; a curator friend, Kalia Brooks Nelson, Ph.D., is Fall; Summer is a young woman whom Elizabeth stopped on the street to ask if she could photograph her. All four subjects are dressed in the elaborate clothes of the French Belle Époque, a time when this kind of formal luxury would not have been available to most women of color.

Elizabeth’s parents were born in Martinique. In 1971, seeking more and better opportunities, they moved with their infant daughter Myriam to Épinay-sur-Seine, just outside Paris. Elizabeth was born five years later. Precocious and artistically gifted, she announced at the age of six, “I’m going to be Picasso!” For 30 years her parents ran their own restaurant, which specialized in Caribbean cuisine. They encouraged her by decorating the restaurant with



The Library, 2005Photo: Elizabeth Colomba. *The Library*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 36" X 36". Courtesy of the artist.

her watercolors. Elizabeth's mother had taught her how to read when she was five, and reading was hugely important in her growing up. "Every night I took a book to bed and read by flashlight," she says. Her love of storytelling carries over into the paintings she does today. She dates the origin of thinking she could be an artist to a Father's Day project at her elementary school when she was eight. "The teacher said, 'We're each going to copy a painting as a

gift for your father.' She brought out a book on Impressionist artists. I saw a van Gogh portrait of a man in yellow, and I was sure I could do that—very arrogant! So I did it. It came kind of easily to me." At the exhibition, her painting was the focus of considerable adult amazement, and her father proudly announced, "My child is a genius. It's official."

The neighborhood library was her

second home. It was there, as a teenager, that she came upon *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, two volumes that had been conceived and funded by the French-American collectors and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil. "They were two beautiful books, with representations of black people in classical paintings and sculptures," she says. "I was so surprised, and I thought, If it made me happy to see people who looked like me in these settings, maybe it would make other people happy as well. That's when I knew that this was the right path for me to explore."

The first painting she did after that was a portrait of her great-grandmother, whom she had known as a child on family visits to Martinique. It was just the face, with a traditional, colorful Martiniquaise headdress. Next came *Seated*, a painting of a black woman in profile, positioned exactly the same way as Whistler's *Mother*. "I needed to represent black people in that classical style, as if they were part of that history, with the same social background and social equality." She was on her way.

Elizabeth's thorough grounding in traditional art techniques took place at the Estienne School in

Paris, followed by a year at the École des Beaux-Arts and by countless hours at the Louvre, studying works by Delacroix, Géricault, Ingres, and the Dutch masters—especially Vermeer. After art school, she supported herself

with odd jobs at advertising agencies, and had a studio in her parents' home. She and a school friend went to Los Angeles in 1998, mainly to learn English. Her friend's mother was a film director who had worked with the young Leonardo DiCaprio.

in *Total Eclipse*, a biopic about the violent relationship between Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud. Through that connection, Elizabeth met people in the film world, and this led her to jobs doing storyboards and illustrations for film scripts.

She eventually stayed eight years, living in a one-bedroom West Hollywood apartment big enough for her to carve out studio space. She painted every day and paid the rent with her illustrative work for movies, including Andrew Dominik's *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, and *A Single Man*, directed by Tom Ford. There were few connections between the art and film worlds then, and her paintings seemed very far from what was going on in the Los Angeles galleries. "I was having dinner with somebody at the Chateau Marmont," Elizabeth remembers. "She asked what I did. I said, 'I'm a painter.' And she said, 'What are you doing in L.A., then?' That single sentence was a revelation—and a turning point." Elizabeth realized that she needed to be in New York. In 2007, she began spending more and more time there.

A stranger in the city, she called on

her Parisian friends for introductions. One, Harumi Klossowska de Rola, the daughter of the artist Balthus (they had met through the actress Julie Delpy—another close friend), suggested she look up the French eyewear designer Selima Salaun. Elizabeth stayed briefly with Selima in her SoHo loft, then rented an apartment in Harlem. “I liked the idea of Harlem,” she says, “because Harlem is a Dutch name, right? And my painting is so much influenced by the Dutch masters.” She continued her movie work, which paid the bills, and kept her apartment in L.A. “I like to be cautious,” she says, “so I have a backup to a backup to a backup.”

In 2011, she finally moved permanently to New York.

The person who brought her into the New York art world was Deborah Willis, Ph.D., the powerhouse African American artist, curator, MacArthur Fellow, chair of the department of Photography & Imaging at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, and mother of the much-admired conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas. “I had seen a painting by her in a group show, of a woman dressed in red,” Willis recalls, “and I immediately said, I want to meet her.” (The group show was at MoCADA—Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts—in Brooklyn. It was the first time Elizabeth’s work was shown in New York.) They met in 2010. Willis

introduced her to her son, Hank, and to her niece, the curator Kalia Brooks Nelson. Kalia later introduced her to Monique Long,

then an aspiring curator, who later became a curatorial fellow at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Long organized a solo show of her paintings and drawings at a local gallery in 2016. The *New Yorker* described them as “opulent portraits of black women [that] redress the erasures of women of color in nineteenth-century art history . . . lush, ardent, and inspiring.” The Studio Museum in Harlem purchased one, and so did the Princeton University Art Museum. Helene Winer, co-owner of the blue-chip Chelsea gallery Metro Pictures, bought one for her personal collection.

Elizabeth and I are having lunch at Maison Harlem, around the corner from the light-filled

apartment she bought soon after she moved to New York. “She surprised all of us by just announcing one day that she’d done it,” says Long, who became Elizabeth’s manager last year. (The artist prefers this arrangement to having a gallery.) She’s never been married and doesn’t currently have a boyfriend. “I would love to have someone in my life, but I might be picky,” she says, laughing. “And it’s a little late to go down the aisle in a white dress, right?” She likes to cook her mother’s boeuf bourguignon for her friends, mostly artists, at her apartment. On Saturday mornings, she does kung fu (“I’m awful at it”), and she goes to the gym three or four times a week. But most of the time, she’s in her studio. In April, she premiered her first film, a two-minute

short for the Metropolitan Opera on “Cinderella,” starring the South Sudanese model Grace Bol. She finished Spring, the last of her Seasons, and all four paintings are currently on view, along with period portraits of Drexel and Rovensky women, in The Elms, a mansion now owned by the Preservation Society of Newport County in Rhode Island.

As if this weren’t enough, she has started making drawings for a graphic novel based on Stephanie St. Clair, a flamboyant Martiniquaise who arrived in Harlem around the 1920s and became the boss of a highly successful numbers racket —“almost like a Mafia,” she tells me. “She was not afraid of anybody, and she had no problem having people killed. She fell in love very late in life with an absurd black man who was anti-Semitic and cheated on her. She tried to kill him and ended up in jail. But she got out and died very wealthy.”

A graphic novel is another form of storytelling, but, as Elizabeth says, “painting is my thing, definitely.” She’s at work on a new series—this one on the theme of leisure. There will be black women wearing beautiful gowns in elite settings, enjoying themselves, not just there to serve or carry in the flowers. “I’ve started sketching some ideas for an equestrian hunting scene, based on Reynolds or Gainsborough,” she says. The final painting will be a huge still life with no people, black or white, spanning five canvases and called *A Seat at the Table*. “Dinner is part of leisure—it represents endless

hours spent feasting on extraordinary food.” Everyone’s invited to sit at this table of earthly delights. “Beauty is democratic,” she tells me. “It shouldn’t be a privilege to enjoy beauty.”



InStyle

The Badass 300

These tough, outspoken, compassionate women are unstoppable in their pursuit of a better world.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF PACHOUD/GETTY IMAGES

1 MICHELLE OBAMA "We're here because, becoming first lady, nothing could have been more important to me," she says. "I wanted to be a role model. I believe supporting girls' education, and having first lady is without question the most influential accomplishment of all. "My hope is that the most vulnerable among us have more than ever a sense of belonging. "She said it's a source of her power now.

2 RAHMLAH GADSBY "I have a calling to longer than a lifetime, though only one month

3 PHONIE WADLER At age 11, Wadler organized a weekend of free education to help poor African children. Today, her 20th annual educational conference in Philadelphia, the 10th year there, has given a boost to the My City for Girls scholarship program.

4 ANNEKE CARBUCCIA "The great thing about environmental issues is that they

5 STEVIA ACEVEDO She's a former congressional staffer and now executive director for National Council of La Raza. Her focus: making essential education for young women. "Our Girls United program brings girls from all walks of life to the table," she says. "It's about having those opportunities available to every girl."



"I used to care way too much what others thought of me. Now I don't give a hoot."

6 SIMONE BILES The gymnast made history as the first woman to land four all-around gold medals at the 2019 World Championships. "When I was younger, I never thought I'd be able to do what I do now," says Biles, who won three individual gold medals at the 2016 Olympics. "It's so surreal being on top of the world again."

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THE BADASS 50

1. ARIANA GRANDE

The 23-year-old singer has the most nominations at this year's Grammys, including best record of the year, pop vocal performance, and best pop duo/group performance. She's also up for best pop solo performance.

2. STELLA MCCARTNEY

Using fashion to bring her vision of a sustainable world to life, McCartney has created a line of vegan clothing, zero-waste garments, and the accessories of the Year. Her designs from her own collection, as well as those of brands like Stella McCartney and Gap, have helped to make the planet a better place.

3. GITA MEHTA RAO

Following the success of her first book, *How I Learned to Love Myself*, Rao has now chosen to lead the Feminist Industry Chamber (FIC) (formerly known as Project 50), which is helping to empower women by 50 percent by 2020.

4. LILIANA WENK

With a career spanning the globe, Wenk has become a go-to for her expertise in branding and marketing.

5. SEMI MAJDEH IRSHAD

As she has spoken out over Trump's anti-immigrant policies, and the mistreatment of US Troops, Irshad has become one of the most recognizable voices of the Year. Her comments on the president's treatment of immigrants have earned her a "good guy" status and gained her a seat on the US Congress.

6. ANGELA DAVIS

The civil rights activist and author has joined forces with activists across the country to protest police violence. Davis' work has inspired many to take action against systemic racism.

7. PAISMA LAKSHMI

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8. KATHARINE HEDD

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Health care professional. "We have to keep pushing for a just and equitable system in serving them," says the former Olympian.

10. REBOUCH TRAYSTER

The CEO of the fashion brand, which is focused on gender equality, and the founder of the Year. Her designs from her own collection, as well as those of brands like Stella McCartney and Gap, have helped to make the planet a better place.

11. KAYLA HOBAN

With a focus on accessibility, Hoban has created a line of clothing that is designed to fit all body types. "We want to make sure that everyone can feel good in their clothes," Hoban adds.

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she says. "I want to build a platform to empower women to start playing field."

15. MAMUKHEKA JAH

When she started her Kenyan business, Jah was given a loan by her grandmother for purchasing fertilizers. "She wanted me to start and run my own business," says her daughter, Catherine. "Kenya is a country where there is a lot of poverty, and we want to help the country through education," says Jah.

16. UTEKA KHARASOFF

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17. MAGDA MURAD

After her escape from ISIS, Murad has been fighting to protect women and children.

18. KAYLA HOBAN

By taking a break during the most difficult part of pregnancy, Hoban has been able to continue her work as a designer and a mother.

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A badass is someone confident enough to always lift other people up along the way with her.

—PAISMA LAKSHMI



Follow @paismalakshmi on Instagram (@paismalakshmi) to see her latest posts.

14. EDDY BIRIA

The Vice America correspondent for Bloomberg TV, Eddy Biria has been the show's chief anchor since the network's debut in 2010. "The show has been a huge success for Bloomberg," she says.

15. TOUGHIE LEWIS-HARDEA

This Atlanta program director for USA Network has become known for her energetic performances. "There's lots of energy," Lewis-Hardea says. "It's always been a lot of fun."

I'm grateful to have a seat at the table where I know that we can make a difference.

—SALLY KIM



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It's been a great year for us. We've had a lot of success, and we're looking forward to what's next.

—SALLY KIM

18. ANN MARIA ALVAREZ

After her escape from ISIS, Murad has been fighting to protect women and children.

19. AARON PHILLIP

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GRAZIA

IL FUTURO È NERO E FEMMINA

Il lavoro dell'artista **ELIZABETH COLOMBA** è una critica al modo in cui l'arte occidentale ha refigurato il corpo dei neri e soprattutto delle donne. *A Future - Made in Grazia*, la pittrice dedica una rielaborazione dell'eroina biblica Giuditta, con una sua introduzione

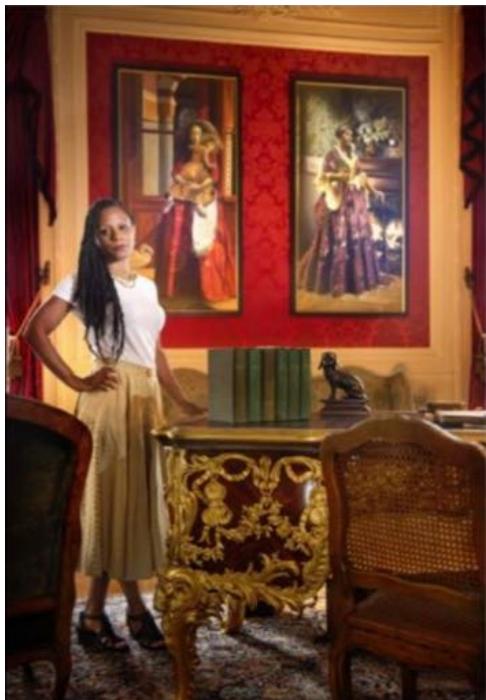
«Punto di partenza: come prima di sostituire i corpi canori e invecchiati secondo la mia estetica a filo frangaggio verde, un'infinita tecnica trasformativa e simbolica, ho tracciato diverse linee tematiche interpretando le eroini della Bibbia - scoperto che al di là del mito c'è un'altra storia, quella delle donne - compresa Giuditta, Maria Maddalena e inavvertita la Vergine Maria, di cui poco. Nel racconto biblico Giuditta utilizza le sessualità come strumento politico e informazionale di controllo per acciuffare al generale nemico, Oloferne. Alla fine ci domandiamo, «ma perché i suoi corpi si riconoscono la disperazione del loro destino?». In molti segni di affanni che ammetto, come Giuditta (foto per esempio, Giuditta a Mordet) con la testa tagliata di Oloferne coperta con le sue stesse capigliose - la sua iconografia. Certo di impegnarmi per raccontarne una storia con un'arma figura femminile. Tutto il mio cammino passa nel dipinto assorbiendo nell'elenco il vissuto intimo della creatività artistica, cioè le scatole nere le sue intenzioni, quelle le sue intuizioni».

Elizabeth Colombe

di Grazia Neri su pagina 202



Salón,
1886-87
de Clemente Zabala.
Óleo sobre lienzo



Art exhibit at The Elms explores what life could have been like for black women

By Sean Flynn
June 28, 2018

NEWPORT — White women of means from the Gilded Age are portrayed permanently in life-sized portraits on the walls of The Elms sitting room, women like Alice Drexel in a white lace dress or Mae Rovensky in a blue draped evening gown.

Now, they are joined temporarily by four black women in similarly elaborate dresses portrayed in life-sized portraits in luxurious settings. The portraits were painted in classical style by Elizabeth Colomba

"This was not a narrative these women were associated with," said Colomba, a New York-based artist who grew up in Paris. "But this is the life they could have had without slavery and colonialism."

John Baldessari, a noted conceptual artist, once said the average amount of time a person looks at an artwork is about seven seconds.

"That is not true of Elizabeth's paintings," exhibit curator Dodie Kazanjian said. "Her work confronts

you and you learn from it."

Kazanjian is co-curating the exhibit with Ashley Householder, curator of exhibitions for the Preservation Society of Newport County, which owns The Elms mansion.

People who tour this grand home are immersed in the lifestyle and the furnishings of Edward Julius and Sarah Berwind, who lived in New York City but spent their summers at The Elms, a 68,000-square-foot, 48-room mansion on Bellevue Avenue.

Berwind was the founder and head of the Berwind-White Coal Mining Co. from 1886 until 1930 and ran coalmines in western Pennsylvania.

The portraits created by Colomba are about the same size as the permanent portraits on the walls. "It happened by total chance," she said. "It's crazy, but it was meant to be."

"These ladies could have had teas together, but black women were not seen in these settings in that time period," Colomba said. "Leisure was denied them."

"It's important for Elizabeth's portraits to be in a house like this because of the conversation, but also the confrontation," Kazanjian

said. "These paintings are doing a job here. They are extraordinary images."

"We're delighted Dodie approached



Artist Elizabeth Colomba displays two of the four life-sized oil-on-canvas portraits being displayed at The Elms mansion as part of the Art & Newport exhibit. The paintings represent 'Fall' and 'Winter.' Credit: Dave Hansen, Staff Photographer



us about showing the exhibit here," Householder said. "It makes so much sense to have it here at The Elms."

The four portraits are entitled "Four Seasons" and were created between 2012 and 2016 as an allegory of womanhood. The woman from spring is in an English garden, the woman from winter in a cozy room with a fireplace and the women in summer and fall are in seasonal settings as well.

Colomba received her classical art training at the Estienne School and later studied at the Ecole Beaux Arts, both in Paris. Her paintings have references to the Old Masters.

For example, the background of the spring portrait is a nod to British artists Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Joshua Reynolds from the 1700s, she said.

"These may be 17th- or 18th-century settings, but they are not from a definite time period," said Monique Long, a New York curator who works with Colomba and was with her at The Elms this week.

Long last October approached Kazanjian, who is founding director of

New York artist Elizabeth Colomba and Art & Newport founder Dodie Kazanjian pose at The Elms with four of Colomba's life-size oil paintings, 'Spring,' 'Summer,' 'Winter,' and 'Fall.'

Credit: Dave Hansen, Staff Photographer

works with Colomba and was with her at The Elms this week.

Long last October approached Kazanjian, who is founding director of Gallery Met, the contemporary art space at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, about doing a Colomba exhibit.

Her exhibit opened Tuesday and will remain at The Elms until Sept. 23. Visitors view the paintings during their tour of the mansion with regular admission.

Kazanjian last year founded Art & Newport, which features art exhibits at different venues in Newport during the summers. She plans to make it an annual event. Kazanjian, who now lives in New York, was born and raised in Newport and has covered the art world for Vogue since 1989.

She is curating a current exhibition of New York artist Shara Hughes' paintings titled "Sun Salutations" at the Cushing Gallery of the Newport Museum. That exhibit runs until Sept. 3.

Hughes' work was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial in New York, where her vivid and fantastical landscape paintings earned the artist great acclaim, Kazanjian said.

This summer's season for Art & Newport is not over yet as far as exhibits and venues. "More to come," said Kazanjian.

THE CUT

BY NEW YORK



Columba at work in her partially-renovated studio.

Photo: Stephen Kent Johnson

Tour an Artist's Light-Filled Parisian-Style Studio in Harlem

ART AND DESIGN 2016

By Sarah Trigg

APRIL 22, 2016 8:00 AM

"The first thing I wanted was more light," says painter Elizabeth Colomba. She's discussing the renovation (that's still under way) of her 600-square-foot West Harlem apartment's second bedroom into an art studio. Paris born and raised and of Martinican descent, Colomba found the fifth-floor prewar apartment in 2013 after living in Los Angeles for eight years as a storyboard artist. She recalls the day she bought it: "This place was atrocious. My parents came here to see it, and my father was concerned, saying I don't think you should buy this apartment." She went through with it, and with the help of her trusted interior designer Juan Luna, she pried up layers of plywood, linoleum, and dried paint to uncover the now pristine wood flooring.

As for the studio's ceiling, Colomba

discovered the beams through an accidental hole made while tearing down the corner closet for the room to take cleaner shape. This decision also unblocked the sunlight streaming through her studio's only window. Colomba's design choices restage, in life size, the compressed pictorial spaces of her oil portraiture — mostly of solitary women (real and fictive) in domestic interiors loaded with Afrocentric references and mythology. With a traditional easel at her studio's center, Colomba cites the Old Masters as inspiration: "My favorite museum is the Louvre — all those classical paintings and the mastery of it brought me to painting." And of her decision to move to New York: "It's a return home, really. New York — it's more like Paris."



The Ceiling

In the evening, hidden lights illuminate the exposed beams overhead. Installed just below the ceiling to allow for more floor space, a shelf circles the room awaiting Colomba's art-book library — accessible by a ladder that she's in the process of customizing with metal hooks.

The Studio

Colomba replaced her studio wall with interior windows, similar to those in her paintings, allowing sunlight to diffuse into the entrance hallway that runs along the studio's perimeter

The Mirror

Near the studio's entrance a mirror brightens the corner with reflected light — doubling as a second window. "I did the aging effect, but then instead of putting a regular frame on it, my designer wanted to use the back of my canvas," says Colomba of the wood stretcher bars.



Her Painting Apron

Colomba's painting

apron dappled with her
richly-hued palette.

UBIKWIST

ISSUE N°3

ROOTS



Model: Sophie Thibault, Iris Le Perte,
Heckleche and morning models own

Hair: Leslie
Make Up: Shanti Bayne using M.A.C.
Nails: Monique Dukette

The Black Vermeer

By Kalia Brooks

From Martinique descent, born and raised in France, Elizabeth Colomba is a representational artist living in New York City. After receiving her degree in applied arts in Paris, she continued her studies while intensively developing her own style. Upon graduating from college, and trying out her skills in storyboard advertising, she moved to Los Angeles to pursue painting while working on feature films.

Her aesthetic draws inspiration from Old masters and refers to mythological, allegorical narratives, providing fictionalized documentary records. Depicting stories featuring black characters, are rising a complex issue about what it means for people to define themselves through images and the impact it has on one's psyche. It implies a pre-contemporary creation, an egalitarian existence, an honoring presence in a story where the black body was painfully absent from.

Nicknamed the black Vermeer, she generates a space for her subjects to inhabit the re-writing of their history, in that sense, she analyses the construction of identity and tangled interrelationship between past, present in our collective identity today.

Kalia Brooks is a New York based independent curator and writer. Brooks is currently an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Photography and Imaging at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Brooks is also a PhD Candidate in Aesthetics and Art Theory at the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts. She received her M.A. in Curatorial Practice from the California College of the Arts in 2006, and was a Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program 2007/2008. Her recent curatorial projects include Art in Odd Places, Windows on the City at Gracie Mansion Conservancy, Jamaica Flux: Workspaces & Windows 2016 at

Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, and the Philly Block Project at Philadelphia Photo Arts Center.

Kalia Brooks: How is the theme of "roots" relevant to your work as an artist?

Elizabeth Colomba: Roots... The majority of Blacks, who are not in Africa, share a background story of being uprooted and being forced to grow those roots elsewhere. The paintings that I create are an amalgamation of the old and new roots as well as a personal reflection of my place in the world. I do come from two very rich cultures (French and Caribbean) allowing me to extract elements from each, and create pieces inspired and reflective of these two influences. What I take from my French background is the use of painterly methods and techniques, the language, the fashion, the depiction of historical and literary figures while depicting the central character as Black.

My parents are from Martinique. They moved to France, where I was born, so my paintings reflect a confluence of histories: Black diasporic, French European and Caribbean. I use these histories to create a new language for my work. There is this certainly a double-consciousness that allows me to belong in all these worlds. I embrace different cultural identities, both strong and present in my life and seemingly inextricable. I believe these worlds are walking side by side in my paintings, sometimes brushing against each other and sometimes, for a brief moment, embracing.

In a way, I feel my paintings are creating roots for me, and others like me, in history of Western visual culture. Sometimes I use myself, a family member or a friend as models to make the idea of belonging even more potent. It's not so much about inserting Black into an existing piece of Western art as it is about generating a space to tell a different tale. My paintings are an imaginative attempt to reconcile through images a painful past, steeped in slavery and colonialism, and show an alternative vision of how we coexist today.

KB: What is your particular contribution to the visual language of painting, and why is it important?

EC: I like to either show the anticipation or aftermath of a scene in Western mythology. Even though it makes it difficult to identify the subject matter, it's a way for me to appropriate the story, and encourage the viewer to linger and question what she sees. For



example, the painting of Mary In the Hall (2008) is a representation of the Virgin Mary. Traditionally she is depicted wearing red and blue attire, sporting a veil on her hair and a prominent halo. I chose to show her just before the annunciation, as a teenage girl, on her way to read a book and enjoy some cherries. It's that moment before her life changes forever, thereby holding a moment that has not-yet happened and not-yet passed. So, now, how are you supposed to identify her as Mary? Well, I was lucky to have an art education in Paris, surrounded by countless works of arts, studying their stories, architectures, craftsmanship, and iconography. You are taught how to decipher the

meaning of a piece by taking in each of the elements. For example a poppy is more than a flower, it's a symbol of Christ, or blue symbolizes God like qualities, etc. Every artwork is more than what means the eyes, the story is symbolized in front of you, if you have the patience to decipher it.

To become the leader of your own destiny, you have to be able to see yourself represented visually. It's an acknowledgment of your importance and your active participation in building a History, a country, a past. As you peruse through a national museum, very rarely would one stumble on Black representation and if you do it will be secondary to the narrative of the image. The inequity is blatant and reflective of our status in Western visual culture at the time. That's when I realized the erasure of the Other in art (and I am part of the "Other"), and that invisibility inspired me to re-configure Western myths, religious iconography and folklore by pigmenting them, re-writing them with black ink. I do this to re-open the areas in our psyche that have been conditioned to label and suppress the Other, and be able to construct new identities.

KB: What is the consistent theme, idea or motif that you continue to return to in your painting?

EC: The consistent theme is my depiction of stories featuring Black characters, and raising complex issues about what it means for people to define themselves through images and the impact it has on one's psyche. I do this by re-defining the beauty canon as a constant in my work in order to develop a new mastery. By that I mean the importance of introducing new elements that reference a particular time period, fictionalized or not. When I refer to historical figures, for example, I paint them in a glorious light, introducing techniques that emulate old masters, like Vermeer, Da Vinci, Ingres, Jacques Louis David. The unexpected combination of old master techniques coupled with the juxtaposition of the black body sporting superb attires, "living" in ostentatious interiors, puzzles the viewer.

KB: Are you intentionally creating this confusion for the viewer? If so, why?

EC: Absolutely. It stimulates an internal dialog as per why there is "a

confusion," why marrying the two worlds could be an uncomfortable or a welcomed experience. It is not a visual context that the black body is typically seen in. My paintings are created to re-shape not only how Black people have been conditioned to exist in images, but also how Black people have been conditioned to reflect upon themselves through the apprehension of images.

KB: How, in your opinion, is the black body traditionally seen within painting?

EC: Standard representations of Blacks in European art typically show us as colorful ornaments to a portrait or a scene, we can also refer to figures in orientalist paintings, done more from a patronizing, Western, Imperial outlook. By steeping my technique into the "old world," through the means of Greek and Roman mythologies, as well as allegories which were traditional subject matters in the Western world chosen in a way to defined what was beauty. Aesthetics plays an important role in my work, as I like to think that beauty should be devoid of prejudice, and transcend skin color. It allows portraiture to become a political space. Being a Black woman, I naturally gravitate towards black female subjects. It's important for me to create a representation of Black women, which deviates from the expected roles of servants or the hyper-exoticized perception typical in Western visual culture. My aesthetic is a vessel to raise questions about class, race and gender as defining aspects in a society in which Blacks are to be included in the abstract ideals of freedom and equality.

KB: So how do the abstract ideals of freedom and equality relate to beauty and also to the storytelling of history that you spoke about before?

EC: In an ideal world, the standard of beauty is represented without prejudice. If we want this world to exist, we have to start visualizing that new story through images.

KB: Describe how you want to be perceived as an artist? How is that perception related to where you come from, where you are now and how you envision your future?

EC: To heal the present you have to take care of the past. The artistry of translating the visual quality of skin on canvas holds an important

place in my practice. It's a way for Black historical figures to regain their prestige in history. In the past, and certainly in the French tradition, history painting was considered a masculine enterprise. History painting, in the broader sense, includes depictions of moments in religious narratives, as well as narrative scenes from mythology, and also allegorical scenes. If you look at the artwork through out the centuries by artists like, Poussin, Jacques Louis David, Ingres, they were men whose artistry was not confined by their gender. There used to be a hierarchy in painterly representation, and it went like this: lowest on the pyramid of greatness was still lifes, then landscape, then animals, then portraiture, then a human figure being able to convey a story, and the top of it all was having the dexterity to paint multiple human figures able to convey a story! Therefore, in the patriarchal society, men decided women could go as far as making portraiture in terms of being recognized for their art. When you think about it, one of the most famous female, French Neoclassical painters is Elisabeth Louis Vigee Lebrun. Despite her virtuosity, the majority of her work is portraiture and landscape.

The goal of history painting was to teach, lead, instill virtue, and capture glory. There are many historical figures that aren't taught in schools to a large extent that made great accomplishments and contributions to American history. While a few are drawn by their contemporaries, other noble Black historical figures aren't documented in paint. For example, Frederick Douglass emerged at the dawn of photography in the mid nineteenth century and subsequently was documented as a kind of icon or prototype of celebrity, but there is no painting of him. Painting, in my opinion, anchors figures like Douglass who are lost to history through this visual tradition. Incredible people such as Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones who became the first African-American to sing at the Carnegie Hall in New York in 1892; Biddy Mason, was as a nurse, entrepreneur, one of the first African-Americans to purchase land in Los Angeles and amassed a small fortune; Phillis Wheatley was the first published African-American female poet. I have painted all of them, and more who I have not named here deserve to have their glory captured in painting!

There is a certain nobility in being immortalized with this medium. One of the first gestures, when one is elected president, is to have your portrait painted: it fixes you in time. And while I'm on the subject of time, the opulence implied for the subject to have time to pose, being able to afford the time it will take to be immortalized on a support, which also will pass the test of time, enhances the uniqueness of the process. Time is a luxury that was rarely associated with black bodies in history.

For example, these days, I'm experimenting with gold leaf. Its delicate nature married with oil creates a new challenge and results I'm happy with. The idea of associating gold matter with black bodies, emphasizes the idea of grandeur, but also pushes me to think about media as a way to shift a perceptual paradigm in which Black people are part of a different visual landscape.

I'm interested in exploring different illustrative media, perhaps a graphic novel, to continue shedding light on the legacy of black pioneers.

KB: What have you learned about yourself through painting, and is this the same opportunity that you want to give to the viewer?

EC: In my still lifes, I place different elements of my background. They are essentially exotic fruits treated as portraits or central characters. I also refer to a certain type of fabric, the madras, which became a part of Caribbean culture. A piece like *Armelle* (1997) features my cousin, and makes a bridge between many worlds: I refer to John Singer Sargent and Winslow Homer, two American painters, the Caribbean, my cousin being from there, and the European décor inspired by Dutch paintings. Because of the nature of my work, I have to dive into the past through research and assimilate information that I would never have discovered if my subject matter was different. I've learned that I am a storyteller and I love to express my stories visually. I've learned about unsung heroes, and wish to assert their importance as heroes in painting, for me and for everyone.

Contributor

Art & Culture Writer & Adviser: Talking all things artful

Painter Makes Beautiful Past for Black Women

06/22/2016 07:32 pm ET Updated Jun 23, 2016

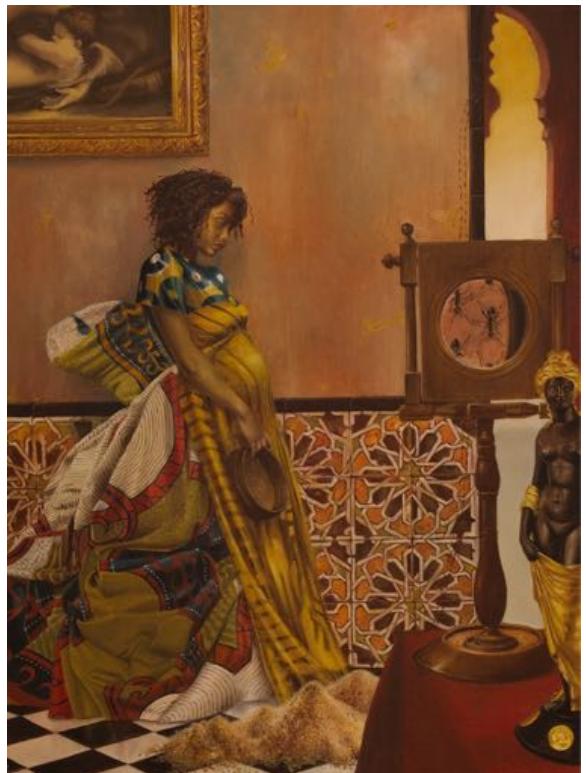


Image courtesy of Elizabeth Columba.

The Ants, 2011, 24 x 18 in

'Recently, I saw Elizabeth Colomba's work at the Long Gallery in Harlem, 'The Moon is My Only Luxury'

It was not only beautiful, but highly emotional, as black women are often portrayed in a limited context with a restricted history; this artwork enlarges their cultural equation by quantum leaps. The response was arresting as Colomba explained. "Women walked into the gallery and cried. It changed so much for them, it lifted their hearts." The very excellent curator Monique Long states that "Colomba's portraits of women, featuring oil paintings, watercolors, and drawings from 1997 to the present, draw upon American history, mythology, religious symbols, and the sacred feminine mystic to create an aesthetic vocabulary that distinguishes her work within the canon of black mastery and history painting."

When she could only find two books in her local library with pictures of women that exemplified her own likeness, it stirred something up in her soul, thus giving rise to her painters' voice and direction as an artist.

In Colomba's "Sempre Libera" (Italian for "always free") she portrays Matilda Sissieretta Jones, a splendid opera singer with bravura to spare. Colomba paints her with spot-on ecstasy

as she receives accolades, and resounding curtain calls during the late 1800s at Carnegie Hall.

The title of the painting is taken from the aria in *La Traviata* sung by the character of Violetta. In rich warm tones Colomba animates Jones, raising her arms, holding her shawl up in her hands as though she is a super hero; with cape aloft and eyes closed as she is "heard" as a star graced with impeccable ability, vibrant and majestic.

My absolute favorite is 'The Ants,' The color, balance, and character of this work is exquisite, opulent and rich with a beautiful pregnant woman in an abundant striking mustard colored gown with Autumn colored accents, walking across the floor as she might in a fairytale, depicting a life of indolence and luxury.

In Delilah, Colomba presents the biblical character luxuriant in bed, in the darkness, giving way to light, or possibly the other way around. Though her face is undrawn, her environment is not, she lays erotically in wait for Samson with scissors resting on a table, not far from her grip; the bed decked with sumptuous red velvet curtains, in the background a richly hued, earthy Middle Eastern carpet highlights her deep dark skin.

Daphne speaks to the Greek

mythological gure who was loath to accept the love of Apollo and though she begged her father the river god, Ladon, for help, he rebuked her by turning her into a Laurel tree. Colomba portrays her right before the transformation.

I am white, and I too felt emotional, as I thought of all the amazing black women in the world and how if history had been kinder, what that would have meant to them. Would their lives have been different? As a friend, sister, and witness to the individuality of black women and to the collective pantheon of the African American feminine, this survey of “another kind of life”, embraces and embellishes the identity of Black women. The wounds which lie beneath their psyche for being categorized as one thing or another might have been circulated under a different moniker than slavery & the subsequent cultural experience of nanny or housekeeper — until the scope of resolve to expand took over, offering a larger landscape during the past few decades, and continues on a vast course of international recognition which cannot be halted or ignored.

Since the past is prologue, I invite you to think about that for a moment and allow Elizabeth Colomba to take you to another place and time. It is a wonderful journey.

Bio: Elizabeth Colomba is from France, of Martinican descent, and lives and works in New York City. Born and raised in Épinay-sur-Seine, she received a degree in applied art from the Estienne School of Art, and also studied at École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. Her work has been exhibited at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; the Balthus Grand Chalet, Switzerland; the International Biennial of Contemporary Art (BIAC), Martinique, and Fondazione Biagiotti Progetto Arte, Florence



Image Courtesy
Elizabeth Colomba
Daphne, 2015.
36 x 24 in

THE BLACK WOMEN THAT ART HISTORY FORGOT

By Ayana V. Jackson
May 03, 2016

Artist Ayana V. Jackson interviews fellow artist Elizabeth Colomba and NY-based curator Monique Long ahead of Colomba's upcoming exhibition, *The Moon is my only luxury* opening May 3 at Long Gallery Harlem.



Mary in the Hall



Ayana V Jackson: When looking at Elizabeth's work one is immediately struck by its beauty but as you peel back the layers and begin to read the work other themes emerge. Can you speak a bit to this?

Monique: In presenting gorgeous figurative paintings, there is the possibility that they will be perceived as simply beautiful. I find this interesting because it doesn't necessarily happen in other mediums. For example, you can listen to a song by Nina Simone and appreciate the beauty of her composition, melody and voice but also recognise the complexity – her form of activism. Work like Elizabeth's can be deceptively simple. The viewer is first drawn in by the lush canvas and then you

Elizabeth's can be deceptively simple. The viewer is first drawn in by the lush canvas and then you might see all these ideas she's proposing. Beauty and politics or beauty and activism are not traditionally synonymous but they can co-exist.

Elizabeth:
As I think about this question, I wonder when they began to oppose each other. Obviously art was about beauty for a while. And then people began to move away from that and decided that art was not about beauty any more. You had to go further, you had to go with the sublime, or the idea of finding beauty in horror. I wonder when it started to separate instead of being hand in hand.

The Portrait

M:
It is a question I am interested in. In thinking about the politics of blackness, which I believe Elizabeth is also tackling, the academic Joan Morgan coined the term 'the liberation ethic', where an artist or any kind of creative person is held to a standard and rules of presenting their work in a certain way. [The perception is] If you are not working as an activist in an obvious or traditional way, it is not important.

A: You mentioned challenging or revisiting the canon. How do you feel Elizabeth is doing that and what do you consider to be the importance of such an action.

M:
I want to propose a conversation

about what black mastery is within this larger idea of the canon, an art historical narrative.

E:
Do I reconfigure the canon? I don't know if I reconfigure the canon, but I like the idea definitely, because I think that there is beauty in many things, in the entire human race.

One must find another way to include every human being in beauty – which is detached from the physical or a skin colour or hair colour or even hair texture. I think that is how I would define what I'm doing. Finding a new concept, a new visual expression.

A: So is your work political?



The Cup

Delilah



E:
Hopefully it is. I would say all good art is political or should be!

A: What is the role of historical narratives in your work? Why women?

E:
I like the idea of placing black characters, black figures into history. Historically, before there was photography it was only through painting and illustrations people could be represented. And we are hardly there at all. I remember when I was a young girl I loved going to the library. Specifically I loved the art section.

It was beautiful. Once I was looking through the section on classical arts and found two volumes called *Black Figures in History*. A collection of all the black figures you could find in classical paintings from the beginning of time to today. There were only two volumes. In an entire library filled with books about art, only two books included black people. It ticked me off. So I think that's where I got, not the idea, but the impulse to do more and attempt to recreate the history, that was forgotten or not presented. I want to change people's minds by visually introducing black people in historical context.

A: What is it about women specifically that interests you. What strikes you about their narratives?

E:
Being female, I'm naturally more inclined to present women. My mother was a huge influence on my life but also I am interested in the struggle of women in general. Throughout history, women have supportive roles, seldom the lead, even if they were key players.

We talk easily about men being heroes, however women do not get equal praise and are hardly represented that way. So I never questioned it. It just came naturally.

A: Can you tell us a bit about your

your process, research and your materials?

E:
Regarding the research, thank God for the internet. I research a lot. I usually start with an idea. Whether it's historical or about mythology. And I dig a lot of info around iconography, symbolism, and the meaning of objects, colour, animals, plants and so on.

I am fascinated with how in art history you can analyse a painting and discover attributes. Objects and colours are their own language. They can tell you things beyond the superficial



Daphne representation.

An apple, or a woman caressing a dog is not simply an apple or a dog; it means something. Even in the still lifes of Dutch Masters, a fly means something, a butterfly means something, the fact that this tulip is there, and it's faded or the presence of the moon... everything has its own language. That's what I love about painting. It's a language within itself. If you study it you can discover so many things. Classical art is so rich. And it is so sad that we are losing this. So I have chosen this way of speaking.

A: Monique, you are preparing an exhibition of Elizabeth's work. Can

you tell us about that? Your curatorial focus for it and perhaps we can end with a work that really speaks to you, and that represents where Elizabeth is at this moment.

M:

Sure. The name of the exhibition is The Moon is my only luxury. I wanted the title to be poetic and beautiful like the settings in which she places her subjects. The moon is a feminine trope and these references are very present in her work. There will be twenty works, drawings, oil paintings, and watercolors so it is a survey show, spanning 1997 – 2016.

We are focusing on her portraiture, specifically her portraits of women. The newest works are still lifes in the show. It opens May 3 and there will be an artist's talk scheduled during the course of the exhibition.

A: What works do you come back to?

E: It's always about the next one. I have many favourites. Some works that I don't own anymore. When I look at them on the internet, I'm like oh... this one was good. But I don't know if it's because of nostalgia or if it's because of the quality of it. Now I am working a lot with gold leaf so I like the idea of working with something else. Another material than oil painting. So it's very interesting. It is also really challenging because I am not a master at gold leafing so

sometimes it is a bit difficult.

A: Please tell us about the pineapple.

E:

The pineapple... well I want to do a series of still lifes about commodities including coconuts and sugarcane. It is about everything that is traded between the West Indies and other countries and how we exploit these things to make money, regardless of the people who are also being exploited. How a simple fruit or a simple thing can really be the desire and demise of a whole population.

At the same time the pineapple was a symbol of luxury, a symbol of wealth, because it was a miracle fruit. The first fascination was with the shape of it, the idea that you can eat such a thing. So for many it really was a real miracle. People were loaning each other pineapples for display. And not eating them because they were so expensive. Just to show their wealth. Later it would be sculpted on buildings and made into ornaments.

It interests me how there are two sides. On one hand you have the people who are cultivating it and get nothing from it, and on the other hand it is a commodity and the ultimate symbol of luxury.

My parents are from Martinique, so when I go to the island, I still feel this weird relationship between, I'm

going to call them 'the masters' and the people from there. Everyone is technically from there when you consider the time we have all been there, but the descendants of the people who owned the plantations are still owners and their presence as a group is felt.

So there is still a weird energy. It is still very present. I think these new works speak to that. It makes us understand that we are still in a way in the same dilemma.

M:

For me... I love the small works. Daphne is the signature image for the show. I believe it showcases her technical ability beautifully. The way she is able





Armelle

to master watercolour to the point where you aren't sure what the medium is. It could be oil for instance. It showcases many of the things that Elizabeth is wonderful at. For instance her rendering of fabric in the tradition of Old Masters and still life work within the work.

A: Can you tell us about 1492?

E:

It symbolises, of course, Christopher Columbus descending upon the Americas and how something can come out of nowhere and splatter you and stain you forever.

A: Like flour on a black dress.

E:

Not only on a black dress, but a silk dress. It's a precious material and you know it's not going to be easy to take out. I think it's just a meditation on how these events really changed the face of the world.

M:

[1492] can be perceived as abbreviation for imperialism; it connotes ideas of exploration and

abbreviation for imperialism; it connotes ideas of exploration and the oppression of people.

E:

And just having this woman in a beautiful gown handling a bowl of flour. The modernity of it and how it changed history. Eventually changed everything. Like a woman who is just handling flour to make some cake and spills it.



Ayana Evans & Zina Saro-Wiwa, 'Parasol', 2016 (video still).
Image courtesy of the artists and Tiwani Contemporary

STRANGE FRUIT: 'THE PINEAPPLE SHOW'

Tiwani Contemporary is hosting a collective show with an exotic fruit as its thematic fulcrum. Curated by Zina Saro-Wiwa of the Boys' Quarters Project Space (Saro-Wiwa's gallery based in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, since 2014), the exhibition draws together a group of artists working out of Nigeria, the UK and the United States, who have produced artworks that "explore the semiotics of the pineapple fruit." Arman Koushyar reviews the show for IAM.

'The Pineapple Show' (running from 9 July – 13 August 2016) is the strange story of an atypical protagonist, the pineapple, which is not allowed to express its own desires. It is used as a vehicle to project human consciousness and history, from the inane to the downright absurd.

Thus, the pineapple is as beloved as it is manhandled and this polysemy is challenged by curator, Zina Saro-Wiwa, in order to contest or to renew former narratives; narratives more European, more western, more imperialist, narratives that are not surprising when we recall the archetype of the banana.

Located at the source of French colonial iconography, the banana

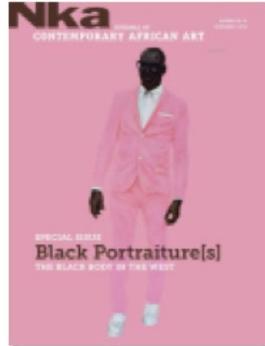


Elizabeth Colomba, Through the Heart, 2016. Watercolour, 26.7 x 26.7cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary

became the ultimate symbol of exoticism. Representing native fantasy, a dream of a different world, of a primitive state of being, the banana came to designate the overall primitivisation of the African population. In contemporary visual culture, the banana, like the pineapple, symbolises all this past absurdity – from the use of Senegalese sharpshooter in the advertisements for famous French brand, Banania, to Josephine Baker and her banana dance.

For 'The Pineapple Show,' ten artists have gathered together for a one-room exhibition and provide a re-enactment of the pineapple's history using a diverse range of media – painting, drawing, sculpture, video, sound, photography, performance and fiction. The pineapple is ultimately an object that is manipulated according to the viewer, denoting the artist's intentions. It is sometimes sensitive, perhaps sensual, and occasionally it is the victim of violence or slavery. But it also can be a source of inspiration, evoking many formal creations and this is what the exhibition seeks to attest. Even if there is an obscure background to these kinds of traumatised issues, there is – above all – a human echo. Exoticism no longer seems to exist; the pineapple is exorcised.

The artists who participated in the show include Elizabeth Colomba (Martinique/USA), Ian Deleón (USA/Brazil/Cuba), Ayana Evans (USA), Jowhor Ile (Nigeria), Odili Donald Odita (USA/Nigeria), Perrin Oglafa (Nigeria), Temitayo Ogunbiyi (Nigeria), Zina Saro-Wiwa (Nigeria/ USA/UK), Johnson Uwadinma (Nigeria) and Arlene Wandera (Kenya/UK)



PORTRAITS IN BLACK

STYLING, SPACE, AND SELF IN THE WORK OF BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS AND ELIZABETH COLOMBA

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

A central focus of the 2013 conference *Black Portraiture(s): The Black Body in the West* was understanding the relationship between representation and subject formation in the visual construction of blackness in the West. As the organizers explained, this requires a dialogue of sorts: an exploration of representation and its implications. If we think of these conversations as taking a kind of call-and-response format, we could ask: What are we responding to?

Black intellectuals, including Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass, have always been aware of the power of (self)-representation.¹ These women and men radicalized the visual technologies and aesthetic principles of their moment to project their personhood beyond the strictures of racist constructions that denied their subjectivity. Their self-representation was, on the one hand, a response to negative, caricatured, and violent forms of visual erasure. But as Richard J. Powell has pointed out, these acts reconstituted the black body while also reforming the aesthetics of portraiture, a genre that has often worked to marginalize, negate, or simply ignore expressions



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Two Men Standing*, 1970. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches (152.4 x 127 cm). Collection of the artist. © 2014 Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks / Licensed by VAGA, New York.

BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS JR., 1970
Oil and acrylic on canvas, 70 x 48 in.
Courtesy the artist and the Morris
Gardner Collection, New York



of Black subjects; altogether, by "making art's capacity to elicit the spirit of freedom" these women and men created a form of image making that was transformative.⁷ Rather than merely translating Blackness into readable forms for white audiences, they used portraiture as self-actualization. They created a mode of representation whose starting point was Black subjectivity in its own terms, in which we see both the performance of self and the knowingness of the black subject as a "deliberate vehicle in art and cultural discourse".⁸

This visual history is my starting point. It marks what scholars have pointed out are the "counter-narratives . . . critical genealogies and archives" produced by Black artists and intellectuals.⁹ I see these responses as having a dual function. On the one hand they are a response to mainstream, negative discourses that were powerful in their emphasis on self-actualisation. In approaching the ways the Black body has been imagined across media and across time, I want to examine this act of self-actualisation in contemporary portraiture. More specifically, I will look at how two contemporary artists—Hendricks and Colonia—use portraiture of Black subjects to challenge art history's meta-narratives.

Replete with different, evocative histories and profound discourses apart, the paintings I will briefly discuss here by Barkley L. Hendricks and Elizabeth Colonia resonate in their shared attention to surface. Upon first glancing at either of these two artists' works, one is immediately struck by their glistening luminosity expressed in strong, warm colors and sensitive detail. While Hendricks plays with a certain kind of pop-art abstraction, juxtaposing a monochromatic background with a bold gesture to the court portraiture of artists like Anthony Van Dyck, Colonia combines the symbolism, measured coloring, and precise detail of French still life and Flemish genre painting in her mysterious and mythical portraits of Black women.¹⁰ Both present us with portraits of Black subjects. And both draw on the iconological, space-making gestures made by earlier explorations of the Black body in Western art such as David Teniers's *Peasant Ballet*.¹¹ In so doing these artists propel us toward new discussions that open up the picture plane as they explore relationships between surface

and depth and interior and exterior that underpin the genre of portraiture. While Hendricks draws on the aesthetics of vernacular street culture, Colonia reanimates the canonical language used to authenticate the female form. Ultimately, what I hope to show is that for both artists portraiture emerges as a response to the expressions of oppositional and transfiguring aesthetic and social practices performed across the Black diaspora.

I begin with Barkley L. Hendricks striking painting *47th (Apo-Pariotic Brother)*. In the latter years of the 1960s the artist spent a week in Paris.¹² He recalls wandering through the different Parisian neighborhoods, taking photographs, watching people, and of course seeing art. On one particular day he walked through Pigalle, an area immortalized in the songs of Edith Piaf and the posters of Stockwell Graffiti, and notorious as the thriving center of Paris's red-light district. The area is also close to the Goutte d'Or, where a large number of the city's African and Arab populations have lived for years.¹³ Hendricks remembers it as a place of continual movement and change, where urban grit and sensuality constitute a place of constant parading, casual exchanges, and sexual posing. Noticing the well-dressed Black men and women, he was particularly taken by two performers wearing the well-tailored, skin-baring suits he recalls were fashionable at the time. He asked if they would mind having their photographic taken, and they agreed. The photograph inspired the double portrait and its pendant piece. Now in these portraits, like his others, Hendricks explores the possibilities of sexual acts and the projection of identity. In the process he isolates the Black body—here the Black male body—as a serious subject for art historical study, using the idealized language of the Grand Manner portrait that reached its apogee in the eighteenth century.

Influenced by the dramatic court portraits of seventeenth-century painters such as Anthony Van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens, the genre's greatest exponents included the eighteenth-century British artists Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough, as well as the nineteenth-century American painter John Singer Sargent.¹⁴ Conceived as a counter to the elevating ideals of history painting, the Grand Manner portrait depicted elites, using an

aggrandizing aesthetic and narrative style.¹ The Grand Master portrait is itself a kind of costume drama, where theatricality and pathos/romanticism audience in the atmospheric gestures of respect, brush strokes, and composition. Women and men are idealized as historical actors. They are of their time while also existing beyond it.

While portraiture is in essence a form of naturalization, the Grand Master portrait naturalizes and transforms others from the domestic surroundings of the everyday into classical subjects. In their size and sharp detail both APB and NSP allude to this painterly style. They are large in scale and focused in detail. Carefully modulated tones and sharply observed bodies portraying dramatically convey these men as psychologically heightened subjects—persons, not mere blurs. Such idealized projection has long been associated with whiteness.² Hendrick's decision to draw on the aesthetic of the Grand Master portrait to paint subjects derived outside the realm of canonical art history destabilizes the cultural boundaries signified by painting. As I briefly outlined earlier, Black subjects have always been creators of their own portraits.³ But I would argue that here Hendrick's self-conscious reinterpretation of the mythologizing tendencies of the Grand Master portrait radically alters the ways in which the Black body, and particularly the black male body, could be viewed in the postmodern cultural milieu of America in the 1980s and 1990s, the era when he began painting, and still today. This act is not simply a repositioning of the Black body into the art historical canon; rather, it emerges from the destabilization of the figure/ground relationship through a set of spatial aesthetics that I want to replicate further here.⁴

Hendrick was not limited in the spatial aesthetics of the Black Arts movement, nor did he find a home within the photojournalistic or street-oriented tendencies of mainstream American art. Yet his braggadocio style, attention to detail, and intense color fields engage all three movements.⁵ His photographic accuracy and sensitivity to color also reveal the influence of his teachers at the Yale School of Art, Walker Evans and Josef Albers, between 1959 and 1971.⁶ Maintaining a classically influenced painterly style, the artist disrupts with the accustomed background of more traditional

pictorialities. Although highly realistic, the limitchoking plane of color, smooth surface, and close cropping collapses the relationship between figure and ground. This flatness evokes the cool universalism of pop art, just as Hendrick's choice of subject resonates with the movement's collapse of boundaries between high and low culture.⁷ Painted in oil, the figures in these paintings glint, but in them the acrylic matte finish of the background creates the softness of character; through them the men are highlighted and propelled forward. Despite the paintings' obvious flatness, a clear depth of vision is being created. It is tempting to see this as a kind of iconoclastic the projection of an intimacy, an interconnectedness, that goes beyond the essential and physical reality we see.⁸ This notion of the seen is further complicated for contemporary viewers by these portraits' historical context. Painted in an era where the catchphrase "Black is beautiful" held international importance, APB and NSP—from their natural familiarity to the body our community the powerful meaning of this phrase and its transnational resonance.

By the time Hendrick came to paint these men, he had already traveled to Nigeria more than once, participating in the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture and visiting various cultural sites. For Hendrick it was a time of racial and political awareness, the beginnings of a Black diasporic consciousness that continues to shape his understanding of Black identity and particularly Black transnationality today.⁹ It was also for Hendrick a time of artistic exploration that allowed him to explore his fascination with sartorial splendor across national boundaries. In an interview with Thelma Golden he explains that "there was a style at the time, with the long, sit back cuts that you saw a lot of tall, graceful African brothers wearing."¹⁰ A Black American in Paris, Hendrick also remembers being inspired by different diaspora expressions of Black identity. Hendrick's collapse of the aesthetic relationship between surface/depth is, then, a response to the sartorial gestures he witnessed around him. It is fundamentally a spatial move. Hendrick transforms the canvas into something like a catwalk where these two brothers project themselves through their attention to detail. From the belt buckles to their hairstyles, indicating

the artist's own painting style of medium. The monochromatic background of APB and NSP is not intended as a screen or support for the projection of figures; rather, it is more like a stage upon which subjects dramatically enact their personhood. The two men in APB, for example, with their air of cool nonchalance, call up the status, sounds, and energy of the streets on which Hendrick first photographed them walking. They swagger just a little as they stand carefully balanced and well composed. Their bold button-downs and shiny silk jacket captures the air of the dandies of that 1970s look: iron, confident, and almost lyrical in its coordination. Their affective connotations, worn in their confident bravado and styled swagger—the finished "look"—rhymes with Hendrick's own painterly style that reclaims the culture of artifice underpinning the projection of subjecthood.

As I have already suggested, Hendrick's use of the language of the Grand Master portrait challenges the associations of whiteness, canonical art history, and theories of aesthetic judgment. It is not simply that he reimagines the idealized art subject as the Black male, but rather that his reimagining requires a new kind of aesthetic language. The Grand Master portrait was both classical and timeless in its contemporaneity but it worked to system, locate, and hold bodies in place. In attending to artist as a practitioner of art, Hendrick recalls the language of the street and the language of street photographers, from August Sander to Gordon Parks to James Barnor, who use the street as stage, as platform, as tableau.¹¹ In turning to street culture and the urban youth culture he saw around him in Paris, Nigeria, New Haven, and Philadelphia, Hendrick finds other sources, audiences, and spaces from which to approach, appropriate, and refine the genre. Formation sits on the surface to evoke depth below, but Hendrick's portraits almost always correlate the two. Artifice is not superficial, but in the historical language of the Black diaspora it is a form of composition. Attatched to their indomitable suits, in APB's Hendrick uses them to connect these brothers across the malleable surface. They are poised across the canvas, emphasized all the more by the rifling of clothing, color, and accessories rather than fixed one over the background. In this physical space, their self-possession, their

cool casual tailoring, and their own attention to surface detail project and project their into our space. They are subjects within, but also subjects outside, the frame. Emphasizing the tailored slickness of their indomitable suits, Hendrick's own painterly slickness creates an image of Black masculinity, which like their suits seems instantly recognizable yet remains aloof, expressive yet unengaged. This is not a cult for solidarity but a nod to the individualism and individual creativity of his subjects. It is an anti-totality; if you will, brothers they may be, but by drawing on fashion as the primary mode of expression in this and other portraits, Hendrick presents a form of masculinity that, particularly for no moment, is remarkable with regard not only perhaps yet related, unapologetic, and bold. Blackness is less a characteristic than a form of expression, carried sometimes easily and sometimes audaciously.¹² Here it is given a corporeal subjectivity that art histories and art critic Rick Powell has defined as "in-process identity formation."¹³

The background is more like a backdrop, and rather than being fixed or held in place, or particular to road to do, these men are hard to pin down. Subjectivity is in flux, which attends us to the culture of the street with its variation, its variety the quality, and its devotion to surface; whether in Paris, New Haven, Philadelphia, or Nigeria, the street is a space of motion, a space of formation. The street can be anywhere. If Grand Master portraiture emphasizes timelessness transforming the everyday into mythology, APB and NSP transform the here into anywhere. Although location is suggested by the titles, the collapse of the figure/ground relationship transforms these men on a spatial level. There Blackness does not ground them; rather, it seems to give them space to exist beyond the confines of temporality. This possibility of recognition, of being both and seeing others, underpins the process of identification, but as it describes the interactions that take place on streets across the world. In this Parisian brotherhood, dandies by another name, made what Monica L. Miller has elsewhere described as "Black postcolonial," a series of sartorial projections that "functions as a kind of eye on the world in which limitations imposed by race, gender, sexuality, economics or the demands of an artistic



Sacred果实, 2010 oil on canvas, 180 x 120 cm. Photo: Jason Lewis
Courtesy of David Zwirner

material acts, like moments, not impersonalities . . . a kind of Dreadlock dream."²⁷ And it is this spatial movement that Hendricks appears to have in mind fully there, as aesthetic that moves to realize perhaps, his own hopes for a diasporic expression of black subjectivity that could exist beyond the boundaries of nation, a hope he continues to express in his art and writings.

To conclude this reexamination, I want to briefly sketch out a more postcolonial emphasis of this spatial reevaluation and begin to think through

what a critical genealogy of Black portraiture might look like from St. Aphra and Steve Hendricks onto the lineage of the Grand Marais portrait to harness the spatial maneuver of ethnic culture and transform portraiture into a moving spectacle, where the transnational meanings of Black masculinity could be spatially expressed. New York-based French artist Elizabeth Colombe's paintings also revolve around a spatial disruption to the traditions of Western art in order to express alternative histories of Blackness and representation. Her paintings are a study in the tensions between movement and stillness. In many of her stills, she uses surfaces to render her acute observations into luminous forms. Imperceptible fluidity, flowing lines and coverings around little bodies that glide or sit or stand. Furnishings glint, while ornate chairs and tables of dark woods anchor her interiors, whose stillness is enlivened by the insertion of objects, artistic references, and figures.

In Adams Leigh (2011) Colombe draws on theadjacent themes of Haitian woman, reflecting Papa Leigh, the matriarch, intermediary, and voice of God, as a woman. The painting is full of symbolism—the number symbolizing vigilance, the cat as a symbol of freedom, and the cornucopia of fruit and bread a symbol of abundance and fertility.²⁸ Adams Leigh has the charisma and power of a John Singer Sargent portrait. With her red-gloved hand on her big ate skininess in the hands of a leather bodice overlaid with beads and pearls. Silver jewelry gleams over an ivory muslin silk gown. She stands on thick carpet, a rich floral design that is rhymed with the curvatures and carvings on the great chair and the basket of fruit it holds. Portraying an allegorical, mythical figure—one that Colombe associates with the Caribbean island of Haiti—this painting theatrically brings together myth and portraiture to construct a powerful narrative of Black femininity.²⁹ It draws on the society portraits of artists like Sargent, in which the female form and fashion continue into a powerful portrait of personality and excess.³⁰ Colombe's black subject perfectly adapts to this narrative of portraiture with her fluid colors, powerful posing, and steady gaze; however, she evokes an alternate history of Black identity, expression, and community. So with Hendricks,



Adams Leigh, 2011 Oil on canvas, 180 x 140 cm. Courtesy of Elizabeth Colombe

this defamiliarization involves the re-creation of a movement in space. We move into a space that lies beyond the upper-class drawing rooms and salons of Europe and seems to simultaneously exist alongside them. This is a space where alternate visual genealogies might be created from the movements of Black diasporic beings.

This "horizontal" space in the painting *Susted* (1997), here Colombe makes specific reference to James Abbott Michael Whistler's arrangement in Grey and Black No. 2: *Portrait of the Artist's Mother* (1871), replacing the white mother with this reclusive black woman. In her the woman is painted in grey, white, and ink-like blue. She is silent and smooth; her features and form are powerfully sculpted and visible whereas her impasto body anchors the painting. Dressed into the background behind her is a portrait of a legible black woman, which she looks past. The lines of their sight form a dynamic movement within the painting that punctuates its silence. Colombe has inserted Maria Callas from Bertrand's *Portrait d'une Nigresse* (1946), a painting inspired by the French decree to abolish slavery in 1794. In the paintings by Bertrand and Whistler, the female form figures as allegory and surrogate. In our case it is a new understanding of the malleability of figuration as pure color. In the other she stands as a symbol of sociopolitical critique. In both, the women represent the artist's desire for a new aesthetic language.⁷

Colombe's affirmation of these historical well-known-aesthetically-motivated figures, in other words, her work is not simply concerned with acts of citation. Behind the elderly woman in *Island* is a second painting of a tropical guererneque scene. It rises above her like an interiorization of a private reflection. While the landscape painting might reflect a point of origin, grounding the painting, it also troubles this protection. It evokes histories of trauma, spaces of encounter, colonization, and hybridity that reflect the complicated networks of movement shaping Black diasporic identity.⁸ Like Hendricks, Colombe draws on the history of portraiture as a genre, only to transmogrify its formality around the Black body. Hendricks uses his monochromatic backdrop to evoke the syncretic aesthetics of a transnational/Black self. Softening, Colombe's painting reconsolidates

the (domestic) space of portraiture as a site of encounter, or what Mary Louise Pratt has called a "territorial zone."⁹ Colombe takes the power dynamics of this encounter on its head, however. Her portraits do not point to an origin as much as articulate the constant series of translations that takes place in any kind of encounter—what Stuart Hall has called the "logic of cultural translation" within Caribbean diasporic culture.¹⁰ Here she stages the interaction of two visual histories: that of the black body and its canonical references. By using the language of portraiture to analyze skin texture, she collapses the hierarchical classifying shade of the canon and instead uses them to create an alternative mythology, an alternative genealogy of visibility derived from the cultures of Black diaspora movement and history. Colombe's portraits become the space in which these mythologies take shape, her subjects stage these transnational routes, histories, and dreams as they coexist in the paint.

Rather than inserting Black bodies into the canon, both Hendricks and Colombe imagine what a history of art might look like in which Black bodies are not only subjects, but their presence also requires new modes of aesthetic expression. Like artists who came before them, they draw on the corporeal and the diasporic experiences of their communities to reconceptualize the idealizing language of canonical art history.¹¹

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Notes

1. Adela Favre Thompson, *Black in the Space Between Art and Philosophy* (New York: Institute Editions, 1987).
2. Gwendolyn Zohore Shaw and Debra K. Healey, *Paints of a People: Painting African Americans in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Ashgate, October of American Art, 2005); Dorothy Nedderman, *Whistler's Mother: A History of the Painting* (New Haven and London, 1999). Considerable attention has been given to the history of the painting from social and post-humanist perspectives that is not at hand. See also M. M. Johnson (1997), John Mandel (1997), Priscilla Wald (1997), and Christopher Green (1997).

3. Hendricks, *Island*, *Painting in Oil*. Authorizing Black Resistance (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

4. Ibid., 21.

5. Michael Fernandes, *Bringing Black Performance History and Theory to Higher Education* (Chicago: Press, 2006), 13–14. For more on this see Barbara Harriet, *Disruptive Discourse: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1986*, 2006, Rutgers Women Art Art and Curatorial Catalogue (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007). See also Diane Vickers, *Whitney: Birth of the Cool* (ed. Diane Vickers) (New York City: Whitney Museum of American Art and Duke University Press, 2004); Shelly Lazarus (1996) *Duke University Press*.

6. Hendricks, *Painting in Oil*, 29.

7. Diane Vickers, *Whitney: Birth of the Cool* (ed. Diane Vickers) (New York City: Whitney Museum of American Art and Duke University Press, 2004), 11–12.

8. Michael Fernandes, *Bringing Black Performance History and Theory to Higher Education* (Chicago: Press, 2006), 13.

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