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# Didier William



James Fuentes Press

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**Didier William**

**Cover**  
***Kulot mwen bel pa ure, 2018***  
**Wood carving, ink, collage, and acrylic on panel**  
**64 × 50 inches**

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# Liberté, Égalité, Opacité

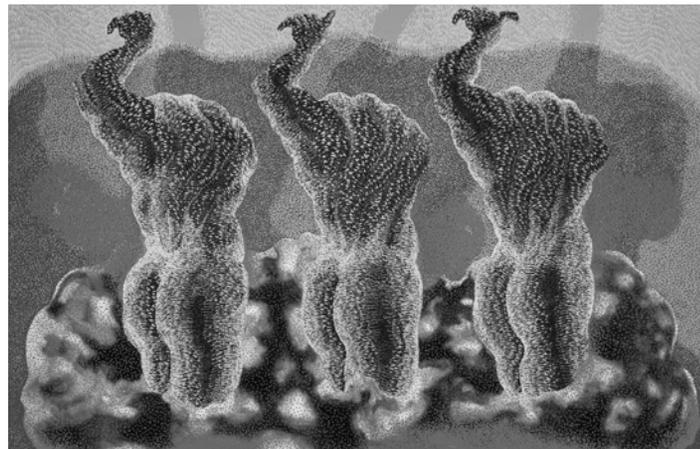
What is the meaning and role of the body in representing identity? Portraits—and traditional renderings of the body at work, at play, in battle, in repose—are classic and conventionally accessible means of conveying the moods and states of humanity. The forms in *Pulse*, Didier William's latest body of work, gesture towards a more boundless figuration. Though William borrows from the structure and scale of Romantic landscape painters like J.M.W. Turner and Alexander Cozens, he fully rejects the classical, hierarchical proportions of that era, where the bigness of God's nature necessarily dwarfs the comparatively featureless insignificance of human life, which is swallowed into the sublimity of the natural world. The Romantics painted during the French colonization of Haiti and during her

revolution (1791–1804). The Napoleonic Wars and French Revolution, happening around the same time, were rendered visually; Haiti's struggle, by contrast, was rarely depicted by that class of artists. William's massive figures—a kind of canonical and ontological correction—inhabit the otherwise unoccupied and cavernous realm between the heavens and the earth; in the spirit of the world's first independent Black nation, these bodies, both familiar and fantastical, eschew exclusionary Enlightenment ideas about physical proportionality. They reflect, instead, the artist's contemplation of Black futurity.

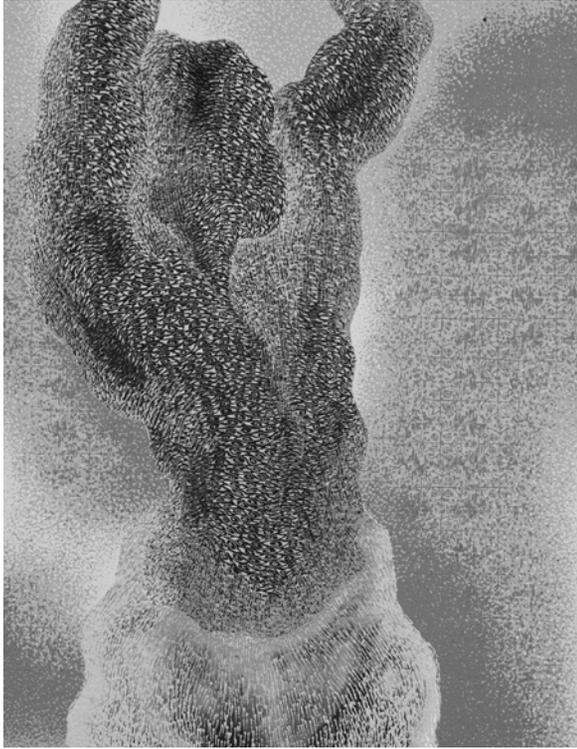
William's latest figurative works are of titanic proportions. *Dezabiqe* (2020), recalls Francisco de Goya's *The Colossus* (1808–12) [figs. 2–3], and *Manman an, pítit sî a ak lespri sen an* (2020) [fig. 1] is a triplicate of poor Atlas condemned to hold the Earth on his shoulders. A proliferation of eyes, hewed into the paintings' wooden panels, characterizes William's work. These eyes are not simply returning a hostile and subjugating gaze. They are like apotropaic amulets warding off the evil eye: an army of ever-watchful, unblinking, cyclopean eyes. They are the materialization of an autonomous and collectivized claiming of the right to look.<sup>1</sup> Broadly monstrous in their physical forms, there is

1 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

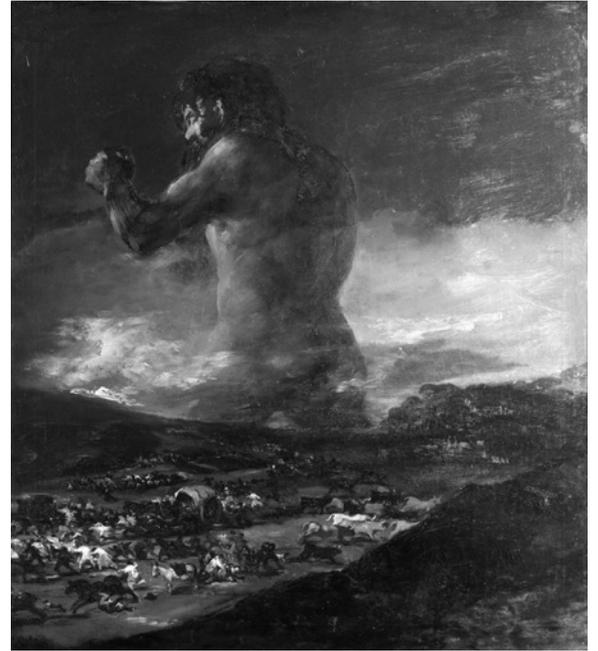
- 1 *Manman an, pítit sî a ak lespri sen an*, 2020  
Acrylic, ink, oil, and wood carving on panel  
65 × 102 × 2 inches



- 2 **Dezabiye, 2020**  
Acrylic, oil, ink, wood carving, and print  
on panel  
40 × 52 × 2 inches



- 3 **Francisco de Goya y Lucientes**  
**The Colossus, c. 1808–1812**  
Oil on canvas  
45.6 × 41.3 inches



an unfixeness to the personalities and loyalties of these one-eyed mythological creatures. The cyclopean blacksmiths Arges, Steropes, and Brontes forged the thunderbolts that enabled Zeus to lead the Olympian gods to victory in the Titanomachy, the battle between the new generation of deities and the twelve children of the primordial gods Uranus (who ruled the heavens) and Gaia (whose domain was the earth). Homer's cyclops were savage man-eaters, uncivilized and anarchic: perhaps "bad," and certainly not the subservient craftsmen in Hesiod's divine genealogy. In the epic poem, Odysseus—who craftily introduces himself as Nobody—intoxicates the cyclops Polyphemus with wine before blinding him with a giant stake. "Nobody has blinded me!" Polyphemus cries for help, the other cyclops leaving him to suffer alone at the hands of apparently divine punishment. Both homage and riposte to this mythology, William's eyes comprise a topography, a mapped storytelling and historicization of Black life. The bodies they surround, mark, and adorn are imbued with an intensity and unpredictability reminiscent of the prototypical Haitian battle for freedom and independence: a subjectivity with which whiteness is wholly unwilling to engage.

There is an illegibility to William's frequent use of Kreyòl-only titles, leading to characterizations of previous work as quintessential "New World' production."<sup>2</sup> The Kreyòl is as much a marker and negotiator of Haitian diasporic identity and expression

as it is an affordance of in-group privacy. The opacity this privacy affords is the opposite of understanding via "grasping," a gesture of "enclosure if not appropriation," as Édouard Glissant puts it.<sup>5</sup> We can interpret the figures' movements and interactions and postures, the theatricality narrating a story of tension and physicality—not unlike the drama of George Bellows' ring fighters. But, as a non-Kreyòl speaker, there is an ambiguity and exciting mystery to the game of visual interpretation without linguistic direction. "Liberté, égalité, opacité," goes William's motto of freedom dreams.

*Pulse*—the title of William's 2020 bicoastal exhibition, held at James Fuentes Gallery in New York, and M+B in Los Angeles—references the motif of hapticity, be it tender embrace or physical conflict. You can feel the pulse of someone's carotid artery by gently placing two fingers on the hollow of their neck, just beside the windpipe. You can hear someone's heartbeat/heart beat by putting your ear to their chest and listening to the organ's steady percussion. Intimacy is often most readily

- 2 Édouard Duval-Carrié, "Visuals of a 'New World,'" in *Didier William: Lakou* (Davenport, Iowa: Figge Art Museum, 2020).
- 3 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 192.

and viscerally understood through touch, but, in the time of this novel coronavirus pandemic (during which William completed this body of work), he compels us to consider how we communicate intimacy and closeness as we are forced to distance—when a freeness of touch has been (temporarily?) stolen from us. His work is animated by a sensory shift that juxtaposes our separations with figures that melt into one another and the spaces surrounding them, the borders that individuate them (and us) falling away.

With these giant figures collapsing the space between sky and earth and sea, William is also troubling the forward momentum of linear time. There is an element of surrealism to his figurative abstractions: the bodies he illustrates, the bodies of Black people, are disrupting and destabilizing space and time. Even in their muscularity, their mountainous steadfastness and strength, there is a delicacy and dreaminess to these images, as though we are looking at figures that are inhabiting some unearthly and ethereal plane: like a parallel universe or an afterlife. Some struggle and battle in the underworld, while others spend blissful eternity in the Elysian Fields. William's chromophilic embrace of vivid color invokes the idea of "the fall": a technicolored falling into (or from) states of grace or ecstasy, a heightened sensory perception reminiscent of psychedelic drugs made illegal despite their documented beneficial use as aids for introspection and

psychological repair.<sup>4</sup> Broadening our consciousness accordingly, then, the eyes are both ours and those of our ancestors; they are representative of a kind of intimate, shared looking that collapses physical and temporal planes. We are looking at them and they are looking back at us, and we look at and alongside one another together, even if we cannot be physically together.

There is a baroque element to these works, an epic and grandiose inspiration of awe within the subjects he creates. Some forms are familiar, while others we must strain our eyes and interpretative abilities to understand. But there is no concern with this lack of familiarity. In the formations of new intimacies and reminders of old ones, William's images recall a question posed by Toni Morrison about the position and purpose of, and alienation from, strangers. She asks: "Why would we want to know a stranger when it is easier to estrange another?" Both William and Morrison question humanity, because, as Morrison puts it, "the concept

4 David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000).

5 From Toni Morrison's essay "The Stranger," the introduction to David Bergman's 1998 photography monograph *A Kind of Rapture*. See David Bergman, *A Kind of Rapture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 3.

of what it is to be human has altered.”<sup>5</sup> This is especially so because blackened peoples are precluded from the category of the human as represented in its imperial form: take Leonardo da Vinci’s *L’uomo vitruviano* or *The Vitruvian Man* (1490), for example, a literal illustration of formal “perfection” and an ideological-aesthetic mold against which colonized peoples were forcibly contrasted. Morrison concludes by saying that there aren’t really strangers, “only visions of ourselves, many of which we have not embraced, most of which we wish to protect ourselves from.”<sup>6</sup>

William’s intervention is an invitation and a confrontation: it departs from the insistent and impossible attempt to assimilate Black people into the category of the human, and instead visualizes them/permits us to be as expansive as we want and need to be. If we cannot be “people,” if forever precluded from humanity, then let us be giants—let us embrace the mythological and spiritual. Let our personhoods and cultural expressions, historiographies and relations, transcend the demarcations of what has been historically permitted; let us welcome the unfamiliar—the variety of possible

outcomes—as we forge multidirectional futures and memories. Colors appear in space “as constellations [that] can be seen in any direction and at any speed.”<sup>7</sup> Black, as the hue-less color that subsumes all others and perfectly absorbs light; Black, as presented by William, is the beautiful multiplicity of material and metaphysical realities and existences.

6 Ibid.

7 Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color: 50th Anniversary Edition* (4th Ed.) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 39.

## The Beautiful Condition of Diaspora

I love thinking about the haunting presence of "home" as something that is immaterial but still very, very effective and present. I think therein lies the beautiful condition of diaspora. You are dealing with something that has very clear corporeal effects, but you can't quite see it, you can't quite touch it, you can't quite feel it. And even if I do go back to Haiti and face that moment of encounter, it's not going to be the Haiti that I've mythologized in my head. It is going to be something different, so that gap will always exist, that gap will also be present. And I think that gap deserves a space in the narrative.<sup>1</sup>

- 1 Interview with Didier William, December 14, 2019.

Didier William's large-scale mixed-media paintings explore the relationship between the formal possibilities and the narrative capacities of painting. Replete with vibrant primary and secondary colors, bold decorative patterns, and cut-through eye-shaped forms, they radiate a perceptible sensuality. Their titles appear in Haitian Kreyòl, unapologetic, most often with no English translations or subtitles. Inspired by memories of growing up in a resilient yet vulnerable Haitian community in Miami and coming of age when Black and brown immigrant bodies symbolized precarious living, his mixed-media pieces are pictorial rather than narrative. For William, the recurring motif of the stage evokes the unsettled sensation of immigrant life in the diaspora. There is always a performance to be "Black," a performance to be "West Indian" or "Caribbean," and a performance to *pale angle kòrèkteman*.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, for Kreyòl-speaking immigrant people, Blackness, Caribbeanness, and language competence are cultural markers that are in constant negotiation in determining belonging.

In most of his artworks, the body takes center stage, literally and figuratively. These bold, heroic, monumental figures tumble through the sky, embrace one another, and contort themselves in mobile fashion. William's paintings highlight a deep

2 Loosely translates from Kreyòl into English as "speak English correctly."

sense of vulnerability, yet their aestheticization is marked by a profound desire to transcend such vulnerability and become, rather, inherently provocative. These compelling works reconfigure the dynamics of the gaze. The cut-through eye-shapes of the muscular figures embody the authoritative tensions of *looking at*, *being looked at*, and *looking back*, intrepidly shifting the subject/object power dynamic. They encourage an active seeing experience, one that reveals the struggles that are tirelessly fought by those who live courageously at the margin, on the edge, and who constantly attempt to obliterate the variability of such positions. Moreover, the *looking at/back* experience is not simply occurring on the part of the viewer. Explicitly, by their presence, the eye-shapes that form these bodies bestow upon the viewer a cross between a defiant *look* and a dismissive *seeing*, one that Haitians refer to as *kout je*: a sharp side-eye that at its boldest and most direct evokes the presence of bodies that were denied the right to look back.

These paintings draw our attention to the provocative overtures made by the encounters among distinctive shapes, unexpected forms, lush textures, and brilliant colors. Thus, the method of looking is different. It needs to be decidedly sensorial. It needs to be deliberately engaging. It needs to be mindful of the resonances created at the points of encounter between the composition of painting, the materiality of printmaking, and the precision of

drawing and carving. It is in this context that we see and sense the raw beauty of William's work—*see* and *sense* the ways in which he deliberately “antagonizes painting with other mediums”<sup>3</sup> to explore the visceral spaces between representation and abstraction, belonging and alterity, subjectivity and identity. The paintings capture the essence of power, sensuality, and presence without shying away from the challenges hidden within the shadows.

These non-gendered, non-racialized bodies strikingly document an intuitive sense of resilience and profundity, visualizing universal elements of the human condition that are without regard for race, sexual orientation, or gender expression. We may be mesmerized by the beauty of their sensuous shapes and agile forms, but we are also transfixed by their shadows as they appear on the vividly patterned curtains, share the stage, and dwell on the ornate, painterly abstract backgrounds. Sinewy lines, seemingly frenetic curvilinear marks, guide our eyes to the ways in which William balances abstract sensibilities with expressive organic qualities. William's work captivates through its verdant affect and a hapticality that suggests a harmonious textured sensuality—a hapticality that allows “the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you ...”<sup>4</sup> His mixed-media works possess a compositional

<sup>3</sup> Interview with the artist, December 14, 2019.

logic that examines how painting, drawing, collage, woodcarving, and printmaking energetically coalesce on the porous surface of the stained wood. In these decidedly detail-oriented works, William explores the role of painting as a process that intertwines the hand with the mechanical nature of woodcarving and printmaking. This intermedial expertise allows the viewer to relish in his deft control and skill in emotive mark making.

William's artworks encourage a capacious reading of surface and materiality. For example, the audacious *pèsonaj* depicted in recent works such as *Makome* (2020) [fig. 1] and *Monkonpe* (2020) invite a theorizing of the interrelatedness of flesh and skin: flesh (surface) as a universal object shared by all, that which covers the body; skin (materiality) as a *specific* object, racially constituted and therefore subject to historical legacies and circumstances not afforded flesh. The assiduous *see/sense* of pieces such as *Makome* and *Monkonpe*—with their cut-through eye-shapes, intense dashes of color, and patterns of tiny, distinct dots that form the atmospheric abstract backgrounds—reminds us that skin is the nexus of racialization and flesh is what brings it forth. It is *on* and *through* skin that we can see the penetrative connections between what we know and

<sup>4</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 98.

- 1 **Makome, 2020**  
Acrylic, oil, ink, and wood carving on panel  
86 × 42 × 2 inches



## The Beautiful Condition of Diaspora

what we *want* to know. A tension arises from the ambiguity of this visual episteme, in which a certain yearning to go against the limiting constructs of the everyday is coupled with a hopeful longing for a different, possible, and potentially knowable future.

William investigates the multi-faceted political resonances of the everyday in works such as *Nou tout ansanm* (2018). Exhibited in *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows*—simultaneously held at Anna Zorina Gallery and James Fuentes Gallery in 2018—this work coalesces the eccentric urban landscape of the global Caribbean city that is Miami within the familiar conventionality of painting. The black and blue curtains that descend over the suspended bodies are reminiscent, for William, of the blue plastic tarps that covered the booths of *Ti Mache*, an outdoor flea market held in Opa-locka in Miami-Dade County. The booths were operated by Haitian men and women who sold sundries and food goods procured from Haiti. *Ti Mache*, a rich tapestry of aromas, scenes, and vibrations, William remembers, was a space that was “packed with Haitians at their most Haitian. Nobody was trying to acquiesce to anything or change their behavior ... a place where everyone spoke Kreyòl.”<sup>5</sup>

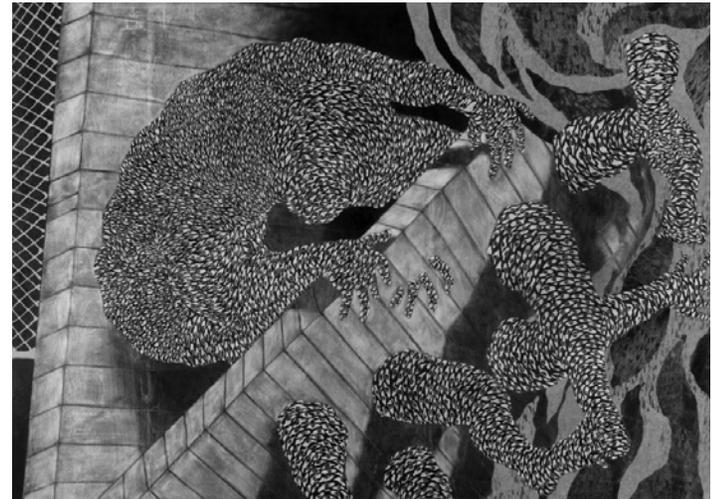
While this sense of community and shared identity is suggested in the title of the piece, the groundlessness of the bodies reminds the viewer

5 Interview with the artist, July 13, 2018.

of the destabilizing and precarious nature of immigrant living. An imprecise shadow of the body graces the stage floor, hinting to the presence of unrecognizable bodies teetering between an untethered space where light is obstructed by an opaque object. Images of machetes form a decorative configuration in the background, perhaps alluding to a vanishing tradition of *tire machèt*, a martial art still practiced in parts of Haiti. Drawing on personal memories, William visually articulates the complex social dynamics of contemporary immigrant urban living. We can almost feel the reverence for materiality generated by collage and the interiority of Black life generated by the vivid areas of color and patterning.

The works gathered in William's 2020 exhibition at the Figge Art Museum, titled *Lakou*, further demonstrated the wonder and ingenuity of his unique visual harmony and compositional dynamism. In *Kolan get manman yo* (2018) [fig. 2], for example, a disembodied figure struggles to regain its balance and rejoin its arms, fingers, and legs on stage. Or does it hang precariously on a ledge, not giving a damn as to what might be found on the unfamiliar landing, as the title (a most salacious and well-understood Kreyòl expletive) suggests? Through compositions like these, William creates a metaphoric language out of images, fashioning the body into a lexicon through which corporeality expresses the malleability of both race and gender. While there is no clear narrative visible in the works,

- 2 *Kolan get manman yo*, 2018  
Collage, acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel  
64 × 90 × 2 inches

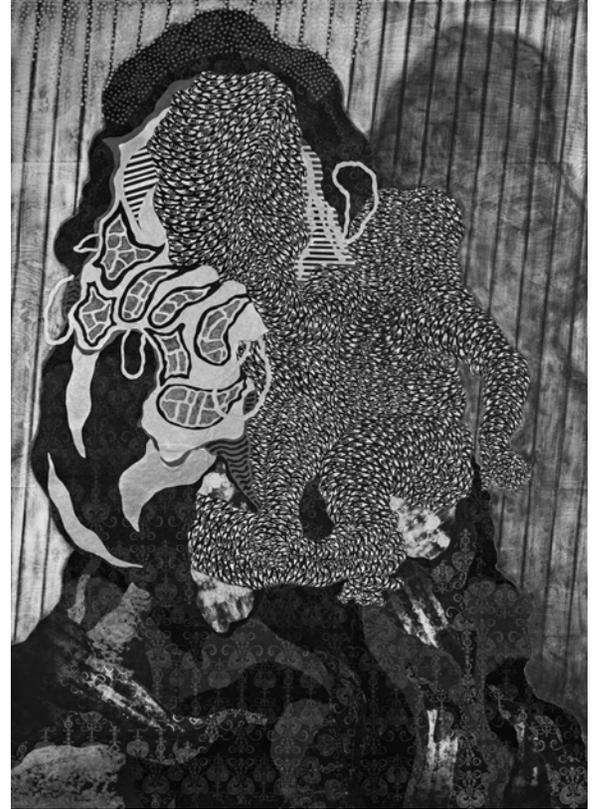


we have instead beautiful allegories pregnant with memories long forgotten and stories never spoken—or afraid to be spoken. Look closely at the imprecise shadows projected on the stage and the kaleidoscope-patterned curtains, and you will see their refusal to be hidden, a desire to proclaim their existence and offer an aesthetic resistance to silences and absences.

In the abstracted organic shapes and forms that compose *Dantor a Anais* (2018) [fig. 3], the presence of the Haitian-Vodou *lwa* and fiery mother-protector Ezili Dantor is illustrated by her heart-shaped *vèvè* drawn on the green, yellow, purple, and blue of her veil and cloak, while the arm of her daughter, Anais, juts out against the wood-stain patterned background. Dantor's halo is evidenced by the bright orange dots that form a luminous arch above her head. Such works, in their chaotic vibrancy, resonate with a sense of familiarity of image, language, and culture. As with all his layered and methodically composed paintings, William's work constitutes an artistic language filled with imaginative networks. Building on and around his familiar cut-through eye-shaped forms, he creates compositions of voluminous bodies and imagery that suggest a rhythmic interplay between the energetic forces that reside in the human body and the *lwa*, effectively exploring color, texture, spirituality, materiality, and what it means to live within and among spiritual dynamisms.

The otherworldliness so effortlessly evoked

- 3 *Dantor a Anais*, 2018  
Collage, acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel  
90 × 64 × 2 inches



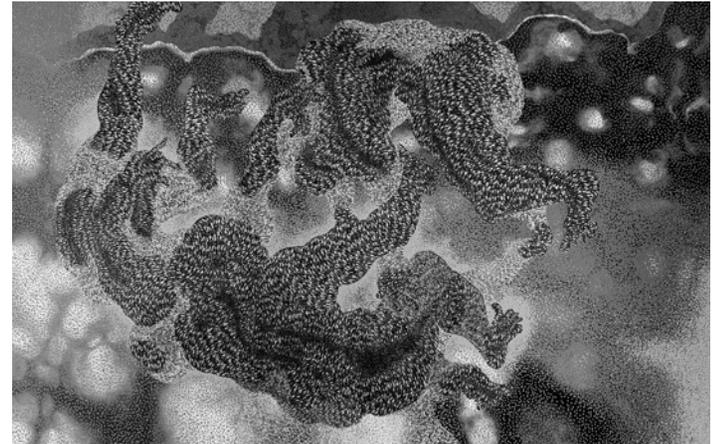
in William's work is once again brilliantly captured in *N'ap naje ansamn, n'ap vole ansamn* (2019) [fig. 4], a painting from his series *Broken Skies: Vertières*. Three bodies descend from the clouds, tumbling through the iridescent sky. Among the vaporous clouds, limbs intertwined, they cascade among tiny, dot-shaped "stars," "completely irreverential to gravity."<sup>6</sup> Continuing the rich ornamentation of *Èzili toujours konnen*, from 2015, *N'ap naje ansamn, n'ap vole ansamn* is a more densely complex composition replete with a hypnotic lushness. Possessing an atmospheric quality, it is in this mixed-media piece that we can truly garner the affective nature of his work, a deft visual articulation of the vulnerability of the body as it is surrounded by an "atmosphere of certain uncertainty."<sup>7</sup> One that creates, according to Martinican psychiatrist and theorist Frantz Fanon, "a definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between the body and the world."<sup>8</sup> It is through this uncertainty and vulnerability that William introduces complex abstraction in the works from the *Broken Skies: Vertières* series. The subtitle given

6 Interview with the artist, December 14, 2019.

7 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110–11.

8 Ibid.

- 4 *N'ap naje ansamn, n'ap vole ansamn*, 2019  
Collage, acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel  
65 × 102 × 2 inches



to this series references the final battle, fought under Jean-Jacques Dessalines, between the Haitian revolutionaries and the French troops during the Haitian Revolution—a revolution fought to attain Black freedom and occurring under the same turbulent skies that nurtured the Age of Enlightenment. Clearly, *Broken Skies: Vertières* expounds upon a passionate determination for humanity intertwined with a legacy of resistance.

Born through creative processes and interpretations of histories and memories that reside in a *knowing* of Haiti that is both imaginative and realistic, William's paintings provide new avenues for thinking about the temporality of racialization, the imprecision of gendered expressions, and the effective tensions between established artistic genres and unconventional modes of artistic practice. His work is imbued with a prescient "placelessness." By "placelessness," I mean two things: firstly, a timeless and inescapable discourse about what it means to be a human located (or dislocated) in this world, and, secondly, a spatial condition that captures the inventive strategies of modernism, while being astutely present to the instability that comes with modernity and, in William's words, the "beautiful condition of diaspora." From among their layered, scratched, and well-manipulated surfaces, William's works weave together social and cultural elements to allude to a placelessness of freedom and possibility. These works highlight the meditative nature

of creative practices to tell us about the livability of the human condition and ask us to consider how one might live otherwise in a social world. They suggest a futurity that imagines the world in a different way and, in that imaginative impulse, reflect the centrality of Haiti's spiritual traditions and symbolisms to Black visual and cultural aesthetics.

Often, and perhaps strategically, artists of color find themselves at moments when they must create alternative histories, emboldened by impulses to claim and rework certain imagery, or assert their relevance. Those moments can be described as *moments of time* or as *moments in time* that symbolically and literally evoke or represent contemporary life. These visually temporal inquiries can no longer simply be about what an artwork means or represents; perhaps it might be more effective if we think about *if* and *how* an artwork might slow us down and "draw us beyond ourselves and throw us back upon our own subjectivity and agency."<sup>9</sup> Perhaps that is the function of writing and visualizing these memories as concepts that are bedeviled by fits and breaks, erasures and gaps, discontinuities, crooked mappings, and the eventual creation of a broader, active *present/presence* radiating with futurity. A future that is not conceived

9 Stephen Melville and Bill Readings, eds. *Vision and Textuality* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995), 14.

through an *alternative* history of Haiti, but through new interpretations that capture the critical and creative potentialities of its cultural history and allow for what it means to be human.

An earlier version of this essay was originally included in *Didier William: Lakou*, published by the Figge Art Museum on the occasion of William's exhibition *Lakou*, February 8–August 23, 2020. We thank the Figge for extending permission to reprint this essay in its updated and expanded form.

## Didier William: The Rule of Perfect Certainty

In Opa-Locka, Florida, an enclave of Miami, Haitians have gathered for years at *Ti Maché*. Sleepy for much of the week, this vast open-air market with massive minarets at its entrance comes alive each weekend like a subtropical Brigadoon, bustling with commerce and the smells, sounds, and energy of people, food, goods, and music. Here, one can obtain goods imported directly from Haiti that still hold the smell, soil, taste, air, and spirit of the place. It is where families can reconnect with friends and encounter those recently arrived—where the sounds of *Kreyòl* and laughter find emphasis in the movement of gesturing bodies.

For Didier William, *Ti Maché* was like a road in a Prêfète Duffaut *villè imajinèr* painting, capable of transporting him for a few hours back to Haiti

while his feet remained firmly planted in America. Suturing the wounds of displacement and disconnection, *Ti Mache* was a place where a migrant boy-child in America need not explain his accent or fend off questions regarding his being. Here, he was not viewed as a suspect, menace, or threat; he could be the curious and observant child that he was, without consequence. The eyes that gazed upon him here sought recognition and connection, rather than affirmation of presumed deviance. And when necessary, those eyes were willing to throw out beams of protection around him, clearing a space for him to breathe, feel, and be—safely.

As Beth Fowkes Tobin and Mia L. Bagneris have shown through their examination of eighteenth-century artist Agostino Brunias, representations of marketplaces in Caribbean art and visual culture of the time disrupt historical assumptions of clean divisions along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and power in places like San Domingue, Martinique, St. Vincent, and Dominica. In these provision markets, managed by the enslaved, specularisation (a Lacanian term describing the process by which the gaze is deployed to identify or come to a subjective understanding of others) played prismatic games, unsettling coded frames of race and freedom. Free from the slavers' eyes, these markets became islands of commerce and respite where, for a few hours each week, the enslaved and subdued were safe from violence and

able to taste freedom. But things are different now.

William's oeuvre asks us to contemplate the power of the gaze in our present moment, and disrupt its capacity to erase Black subjectivity and claim Black life. The demands of his work encourage one to map a brief history of Black agency inside the white gaze, from the direct stares of Africans enslaved in South Carolina, captured in daguerreotypes by photographer J.T. Zealy commissioned by Louis Agassiz in 1850, to Carrie Mae Weems's act of redress in relation to these same images in the seminal work *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995–96). William's paintings encourage a reassessment of photographs such as Zealy's, not unlike that engendered by the timeless, self-assured gazes of the people memorialized in Richard S. Roberts's photographs. Roberts, a former post office janitor turned self-taught photographer, documented the lives of Black people living in and around Columbia, South Carolina in the 1920s and '30s. In these images, Black people look up and out at us across time, affirming the humanity Jim Crow America sought to deny them. One is also reminded of Dawoud Bey's consideration of the historic *cost of looking* for Black people in his work and the ways in which diasporic artists from Belkis Ayón to Barkley L. Hendricks have urged audiences to reflect on the manner in which Black people can deploy the discursive power of the Black body to consciously cultivate and reject the gaze, enabling their work to, as

William suggests, catalyze more “expansive notions of agency and autonomy.”<sup>1</sup>

For the 1974 Broadway production of *The Wiz*, director and costume designer Geoffrey Holder conceived a series of costumes for the wicked witch Evillene. The role had been awarded to the very buxom actor Mabel King, and Holder, whose willingness to openly celebrate the beauty of Black bodies while letting an audience know that its gaze could be directed and captured, chose to create costumes where King’s body reigned supreme. In places where our eyes might be drawn (in this case Evillene’s ample bosom) Holder placed giant eyes over each breast—eyes capable of capturing and countering each objectifying gaze. It was a simple act that not only interrupted the process of fetishization through which circuits of power are concretized by the gaze, but created a space of regard for the viewer to recognize and acknowledge their own desire. As one observes in William’s paintings, too, here the “eye forms work to make physical the otherwise unseen circuitry of looking and being looked at.”<sup>2</sup> William’s work redeploys this power to maximal effect. In his paintings the entire skin of his

1 “Didier William on Painting a Revolution,” *Hyperallergic/Art Movements*, Season 2, Episode 17, November 29, 2018, <https://recast.simplecast.com/e1eeda12-b5f2-4aa3-a944-beadfd-c77956?t=4m57s>.

genderless forms consists of thousands of undulating eyes. The surface of the eye is the only part of the body that must remain untouched, and which the body itself protects. To touch the eye has immediate consequences, a truth that gives these figures a layer of protection against anyone putting their hands on them.

Jamicia Lackey has noted the similarity of William’s eye-skin to the cellular design of the epidermis, the underlayer of skin that ensures our survival, even as the skin’s surface records encounters with violence through shadows and scars.<sup>3</sup> The darting eye-skin-archive that encases the swirling figures in these paintings also recalls the orgiastic energy of Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgment* (1536–1541). Reviewing William’s 2018 show, Faye Hirsch noted that, as a result of this, the paintings teem with “interior life” while at the same time “toying with stereotypes of menace,” their strength lying in their “vivid and at times unnerving presence.”<sup>4</sup> Moving away from formal significations of the gaze,

2 Seph Rodney, “How to Envision the Revolution,” *Hyperallergic*, November 14, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/470969/didier-william-curtains-stages-and-shadows-act-1-james-fuentes-gallery/>.

3 Jamicia Lackey, unpublished essay, courtesy of Didier William.

critic Laurel Graeber wrote that William's work posits that "the gaze of the viewer takes in partial information."<sup>5</sup> For Graeber, what the bodies in William's oeuvre, and by extension *any (Black) bodies*, come to mean or signify is based on "preconceived notions of who that imagined being appears to be rather than who they are." She continues, "These eyes suggest that these bodies remain unknown and they bring attention to the manner in which we are responsible for our perception of others."<sup>6</sup> While the mechanism described is universal, William's work is concerned with thinking through the ways in which this process objectifies, reduces, and destroys Black people. Black bodies. Black life.

William's work demands acknowledgement and accountability for the impact of this objectifying process, making us all bear the cost of looking. At

4 Faye Hirsch, "Didier William," *Art in America*, December 1, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/didier-william-62587/>.

5 Laurel Graeber, "In Didier William's Art, There Is More Than Meets the Eye," *The New York Times*, December 3, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/arts/didier-williams-art-basel-miami-beach.html>.

6 Ibid.

the same time, the fluidity of its forms and compositional approach asserts illegibility. The work disavows the manner in which Blackness and intersectional dimensions of personhood—such as gender, sexuality, nationality, and class—are coded and mapped onto people. In deploying the epidermal eye-shield form, William claims a Glissantian right to opacity for Black intersectional lives.<sup>7</sup> He claims the right to reject indexicality and see identity within a non-linear, non-binary continuum where overdetermined markers fold into each other. The right to cultivate an interior life. The right to remain a mystery. The right to privacy. The right to humanity and individuality. The right to personhood. The right to silence. The right to refuse. The right to be enigmatic. The right to limit access and touch. The right to occupy space in this world. The right to protection. The right to live, to picnic, to grill, to bird-watch, to shop, to sleep peacefully in one's bed and expect to live to see morning.

Opacity describes a condition of refusal in which over-specularised and overdetermined Black people might create a guarded space—where, in William's mind, they are able to "rehearse the pictorial moves of revolution."<sup>8</sup> But why is this even necessary? How did we get here? Why do the inside of

7 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–94.

Evillene's bosom and the shaded space of Barkley L. Hendricks's *Steve* (1976) signal arbors from violence, much like William's *Ti Mache*? As the artist makes clear, these places and conditions are necessary because "the gaze formulates people"<sup>9</sup> in ways that come with profound risk—especially for Black people: William reminds us that George Zimmerman's gaze cost Trayvon Martin his life. When faced with this possibility, how does one plan one's escape?

Michel Foucault warned us of this world. We live in an America where the commitment to maintaining order and preventing atrocities has been interpreted as "the right to punish ... a punishment coextensive with the function of the social body and with each of its elements."<sup>10</sup> The right to punish becomes weaponized when an endemically racist country cedes its desire to punish to the justice

8 "Didier William on Painting a Revolution," *Hyperallergic/Art Movements*, Season 2, Episode 17, November 29, 2018, <https://recast.simplecast.com/e1eeda12-b5f2-4aa3-a944-beadfd-c77956?t=4m57s>.

9 Ibid.

10 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 90.

system and its first responders—the police. If to be Black intersects with being mentally ill, being transgender, being a woman, being a man, being gay, etc., and if those identifiers are seen as the offense or the crime or atrocity that must be punished or eliminated, a series of events unfold that Foucault notes inevitably follow the rule of perfect certainty. He observes: "With the idea of each crime (blackness and all identities that imbricate it) ... the advantages to be expected of it must be associated with the idea of a particular punishment with the precise inconveniences that result from it; the link from one to the other must be regarded as necessary and unbreakable."<sup>11</sup> For Black and brown people in America the particular punishment for the crime of Blackness has emerged as death.

The certainty of this can be seen in the unparalleled success of what one might describe as the grand dangerous nigger defense,<sup>12</sup> where perpetrators invariably claim to have acted in an extreme manner because they were fearful for their lives. This defense works even when arms of the state enter

11 Ibid., 95.

12 This term and its meaning were introduced to me by Black, gay, Chicago-based activist Richard Gray.

13 Foucault, 96.

the wrong house, guns blazing; when the unarmed suspect is mentally ill, seeking cover from bullets directed at them, or out for a run. This defense works because in Foucauldian terms *the rule of common truth* has taken effect: logic is upended, and the fact of the dead Black body becomes proof of the perpetrator's claims of unbridled fear. Despite the third eye of smartphones, which have thankfully brought much of what would have been buried into the light, I can't help but think that the Black body is no longer enough to provide evidence of its destruction in this world.

In a carceral state that “naturalizes the legal power to punish, as it ‘legalizes’ the technical power to discipline,”<sup>14</sup> killing the Black body becomes another step in naturalizing the state's control of this body and death becomes a form of state-sanctioned discipline. It is the ultimate act intended to completely “dissociate power from the (black) body.”<sup>15</sup> The carceral state swallows Black and brown people in its gaze. William embeds the weight of this knowledge in his paintings. He has determined that the revolution must begin by destroying the point of mobilization: the gaze. One feels it and knows and yet, as I draw into works like *Ki kote m fet* (2020) [fig. 1] and *Batèm* (2020), where the body begins to

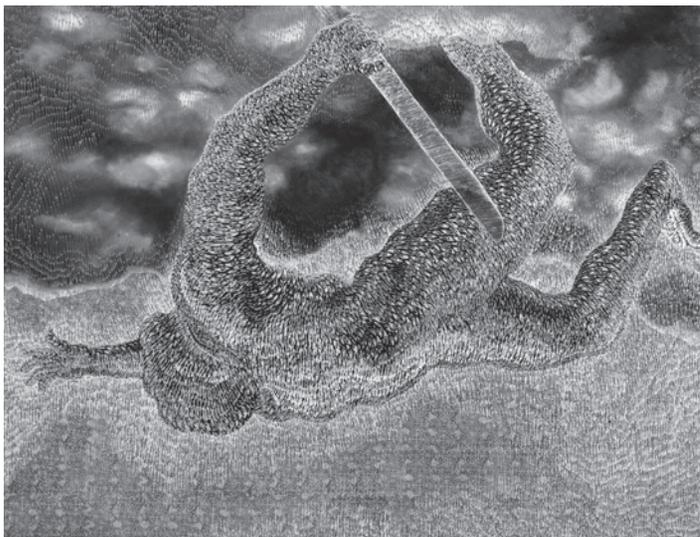
14 Ibid., 303.

15 Ibid., 138.

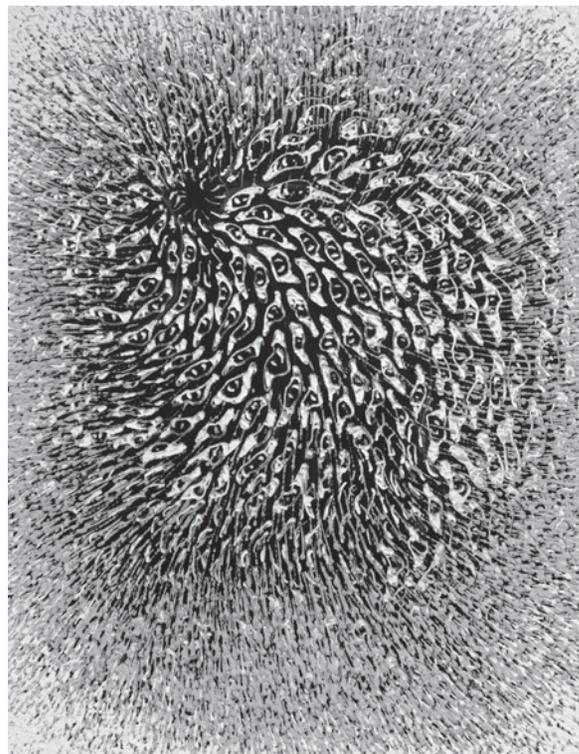
1 *Ki kote m fet*, 2020  
Acrylic, ink, oil, and wood carving on panel  
52 × 40 × 2 inches



2 **Plonje, 2020**  
Acrylic, oil, ink, and wood carving on panel  
52 × 68 × 2 inches



3 **Odalisque, 2020**  
Acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel  
18 × 14 × 2 inches



disappear; when I travel into *Dezabique*, which collapses the gaze through its conversation with earlier diasporic works like Richmond Barthes' *Stevedore* (1932); when I think through the affective possibilities of *Plonje* (2020) [fig. 2], in which William seems to redraw the story of Icarus for these times of certainty, and *Nou jwenn llo* (2020), where Yemaya and the ancestors in the earth and at the bottom of the ocean are called upon; or when I absorb the sublime beauty of *Odalisque* (2020) [fig. 3], one is able to touch a kind of knowledge that affirms. We will get to the other side of this to a *ville imaginaire* where the annihilating gaze has been neutered and Black life matters.

## Coloneobaroque, Act II

I first encountered the work of Didier William three years ago, at the opening of his solo show, titled *We Will Win*, at Tiger Strikes Asteroid in Bushwick in 2017.<sup>1</sup> The combination of impressive physicality, delicate craftsmanship, and deep historical and cultural resonance at play in his work made an immediate impression on me. The stage sets in

- 1 I wrote a review of *We Will Win* for *Arctcritical*, titled "Coloneobaroque," in which I looked at William's show from a baroque viewpoint. On the occasion of this monograph, I'm revisiting my review to include William's more recent work along with perspectives on the baroque that I've encountered since the review's original publication.

the paintings and the emotive gestures of the figures that populate them made me recall the theatrical aesthetics of the baroque era. At the same time, there were aspects of the work—the paintings' complex spaces, composite figures, and William's carvings on their surfaces—that resisted being read through the narrow lens of European art history. Upon further reflection, I realized that this resistance is itself baroque—an expansive and novel **Coloneobaroque**.

The term “baroque” can refer either to the European early modern era of the seventeenth century, or to a style of art, literature, music, and theater that developed around that time—or both. The highly ornamented, emotive, and theatrical baroque emerged from the more subdued, classically-influenced Renaissance. José Antonio Maravall, in his book *Culture of the Baroque*, considers the style as a means of social control that allowed powerful institutions like the Church and absolute monarchs to hold sway over the popular imagination, not dissimilar to today's corporate-controlled media environment.<sup>2</sup> From this point of view, the baroque was overwrought gilded propaganda that reinforced and empowered the status quo.

2 See José Antonio Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

There are other approaches, however, that view the baroque from different perspectives. In *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics*, William Egginton proposes a means of looking at the baroque that doesn't deny its authoritarian potential, but nonetheless opens up space for alternative readings.<sup>3</sup> To Egginton, the baroque is the expression of a problem of thought—an exploration of the difference between the way the world appears to the senses and the inaccessible truth of what it actually is. Egginton splits the baroque into two strands: a “major” strategy and a “minor” one. The major strategy is the baroque as Maravall described it: a means of controlling access to a truth hidden behind veils of appearances. Minor baroque works take the major strategy's conclusions as a starting point and rigorously follow them past the point of absurdity, using the baroque's own internal logic to undermine its premises.

This deconstructive strategy is part of what Egginton calls the **Coloneobaroque**: a global, post-colonial neo-baroque in which colonized cultures transform the classical forms imposed upon them by their colonizers into something new. The baroque, which stagnated in continental Europe after the seventeenth century, remained vibrant in the

3 See William Egginton, *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

Americas for significantly longer because Church and state needed to consolidate their power over a population that often resisted their imperialism. Churches of dazzling complexity were built, like the Chapel of the Virgen del Rosario in Puebla, Mexico, that far surpassed their European counterparts in sheer quantity of gilded ornamentation. In turn, Indigenous peoples appropriated this visual language for their own purposes, making, for example, elaborate homemade shrines to folk saints unrecognized by the Catholic Church.

Several aspects of William's paintings particularly resonate with the concept of the *Coloneobaroque*. First is the theatricality found in many of his paintings, which divide space into a stage and an audience, both pictorially within the paintings themselves and beyond the picture plane. Second, the figures that inhabit these theatrical spaces are themselves divided into eyeball-like cells that recall the optics of the baroque and the impossibility of disembodied vision. Finally, William's painting *Ma tante Toya* (2017) synthesizes these two aspects with a reading of art history that ripostes colonial visual language to empower the post-colonial subject, just as the minor baroque uses the major strategy against itself.

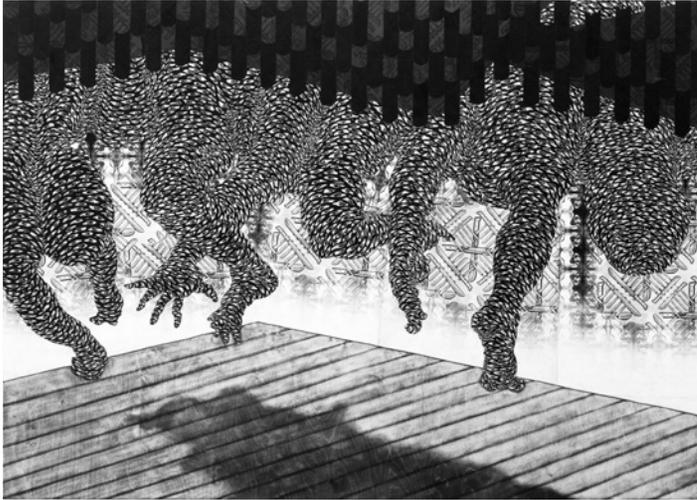
Theatricality is a hallmark of the baroque, and the European early modern era saw the birth of the theater and its expansion into major cultural form. Why was the theater so central to the baroque? If

the baroque is a problem of thought, then the theater becomes the perfect space in which to play this problem out. A theatrical space is constitutively divided in two: a stage and an audience kept separate by the "fourth wall."

*Two Dads* (2017), a painting first exhibited in *We Will Win*, features figures standing behind a wooden stage. In front of them, strands of blue paint form an animal-like shape. These would appear to be accidental splatters if not for the carefully rendered shadows they cast on the stage below, positioning them between the space occupied by the figures and that of the viewer. In a more recent painting titled *Nou tout ansanm* (2018) [fig. 1]—featured in William's show *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows, Act 1* at James Fuentes Gallery in 2018—figures float behind a curtain, casting a shadow on the stage beneath them. The mass of intertwined figures resembles the angels that float above the viewer in many baroque *quadratura* ceiling paintings, or those holding up the Virgin in any of Guido Reni's *Assumptions*.

The picture plane separating the illusionistic space inside a painting from the world outside of it may seem analogous to the theater's fourth wall, but William's work problematizes this comparison by compromising the boundary on a material level. The surfaces of William's paintings feature carvings that turn the picture plane into a permeable membrane, allowing our world to enter into the painting, and vice versa. While the shadows cast on the

- 1 **Nou tout ansanm, 2018**  
Ink, wood carving, and collage on panel  
64 × 90 × 2 inches



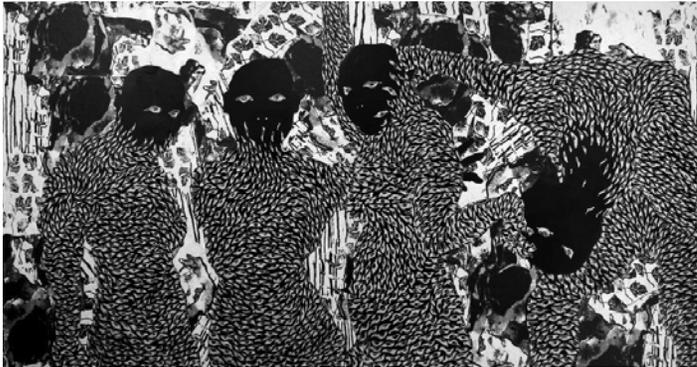
## Coloneobaroque, Act II

painted stages are illusions, the carved lines that constitute the figures are real, physical voids cut into the surface. The baroque division of space into spectacle and spectator becomes more complicated as the viewer's eye navigates real space and illusionistic space at the same time.

What precipitated the baroque anxiety over truth and illusion? While such questions have been pondered throughout history, advances in optical technology during Europe's early modern era may have contributed to the central position this question occupies in baroque thought. Until the early modern era, vision had been limited to the human eye. As lenses became more advanced, people could see what the unaided eye could not: telescopes gazed at distant stars and microscopes glimpsed individual cells. These advances destabilized European culture. Suddenly the Earth was not the center of the universe, but one of many planets spinning in the void; humans were not the image of God but fragmented masses of cells growing, splitting, and dying autonomously. If the tension between truth and illusion was the baroque problem of thought, then vision was a major source of that problem.

The figures that populate William's works consist of countless eyes carved into the painting's surface, clumped together like frog's eggs to form humanoid shapes. In *Rara* (2017) [fig. 2] the figures' faces each sport two eyes in addition to the eyes that constitute their bodies. This recalls a dictum by the

2 Rara, 2017  
Ink, wood carving, and collage on panel  
48 × 90 × 2 inches



## Coloneobaroque, Act II

baroque-era Spanish Jesuit Baltasar Gracián: “One requires eyes on the very eyes, eyes to see how they see.”<sup>4</sup> In a more recent painting, *Nou pòkò rive, men y ap tann nou* (2018), the eyes are not constrained to figurative forms, rather encompassing the entire space around an empty stage. This isn’t to say that there are no figures in the picture, but they cannot be differentiated within the sprawling cellular mass. Even when technologically augmented, or at its most spectacular and theatrical, baroque vision remains bound to the body. William’s bodies of eyes depict an extreme version of this: the body as an all-seeing panopticon.

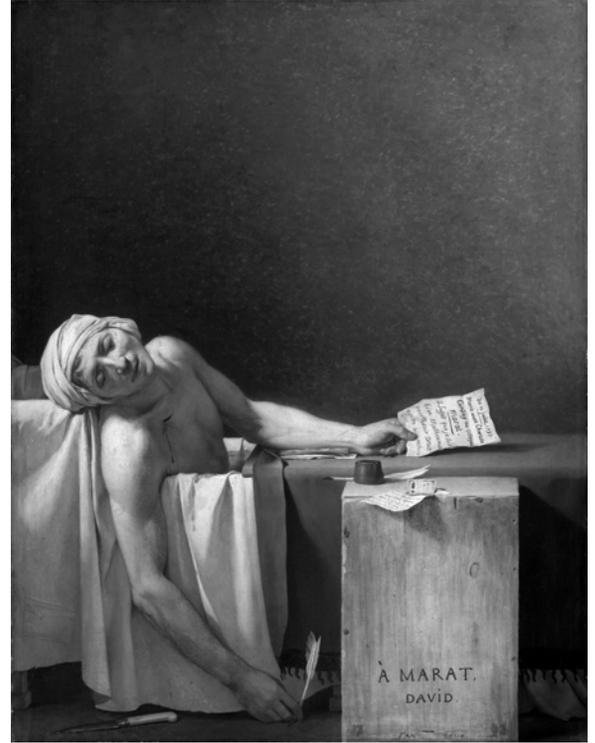
*Ma tante Toya* (2017) [fig. 3] was a centerpiece of *We Will Win*. Its composition directly references Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793) [fig. 4], a major painting of the French Revolution, but William changes the point of reference to another revolution that was going on at the same time. The title refers to Victoria Montou, a freedom fighter who fought alongside Jean-Jacques Dessalines in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804). As Montou was dying, Dessalines—by then Emperor of Haiti—demanded that his doctors treat her as well as they would him, calling her his “aunt” (*tante*). The figure in William’s painting is the opposite of David’s Marat: Black, not white; emerging from the bathtub

4 Baltasar Gracián, *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1960), 672.

- 3 **Ma tante Toya, 2017**  
Ink, wood carving, and collage on panel  
64 × 50 × 2 inches



- 4 **Jacques-Louis David**  
**The Death of Marat, 1743–1793**  
Oil on canvas  
65 × 50.4 × 2 inches



rather than submerging; alive instead of dead. Even her head is tilted in the opposite direction, moving forward, rather than sinking back into the bath. France's revolution may have been dead in the water by the time David's painting was completed, but the slave uprising in Haiti continued into the reign of Napoleon and ended with the French being driven off the island in a historically unique example of former slaves establishing an independent state. A work that usurps the colonizer's visual language, turns it around, and uses it as an act of resistance, *Ma tante Toya* exemplifies the *Coloneobaroque* strategy.

Why is the baroque relevant today? For decades scholars have theorized about a hypothetical neo-baroque, and now their time has finally come. Authoritarian despots have gained control across the world using mass campaigns of disinformation and social control. The baroque problem of thought never went away: we are as unsure of the boundary between truth and illusion as we were four centuries ago. If anything, the gap between them has grown wider, as illusions become more convincing and truth grows ever more remote. If those in power have seized it using the major strategy of the baroque, then it's up to those who use the minor strategy to turn these tools against them. Artists like Didier William, and others who have worked within the *Coloneobaroque*, are examples of the minor strategy having made a major impact.

# Plates







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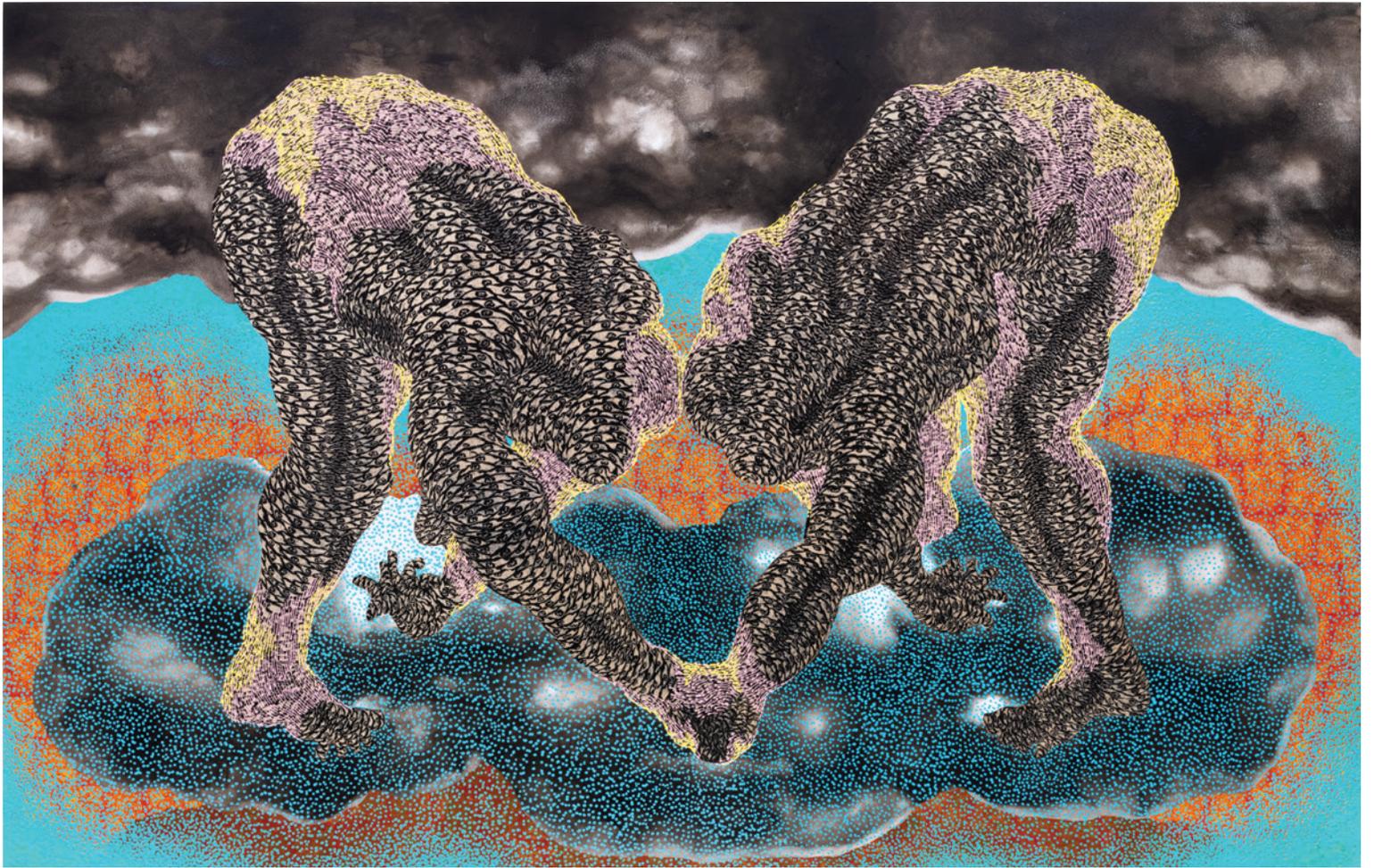


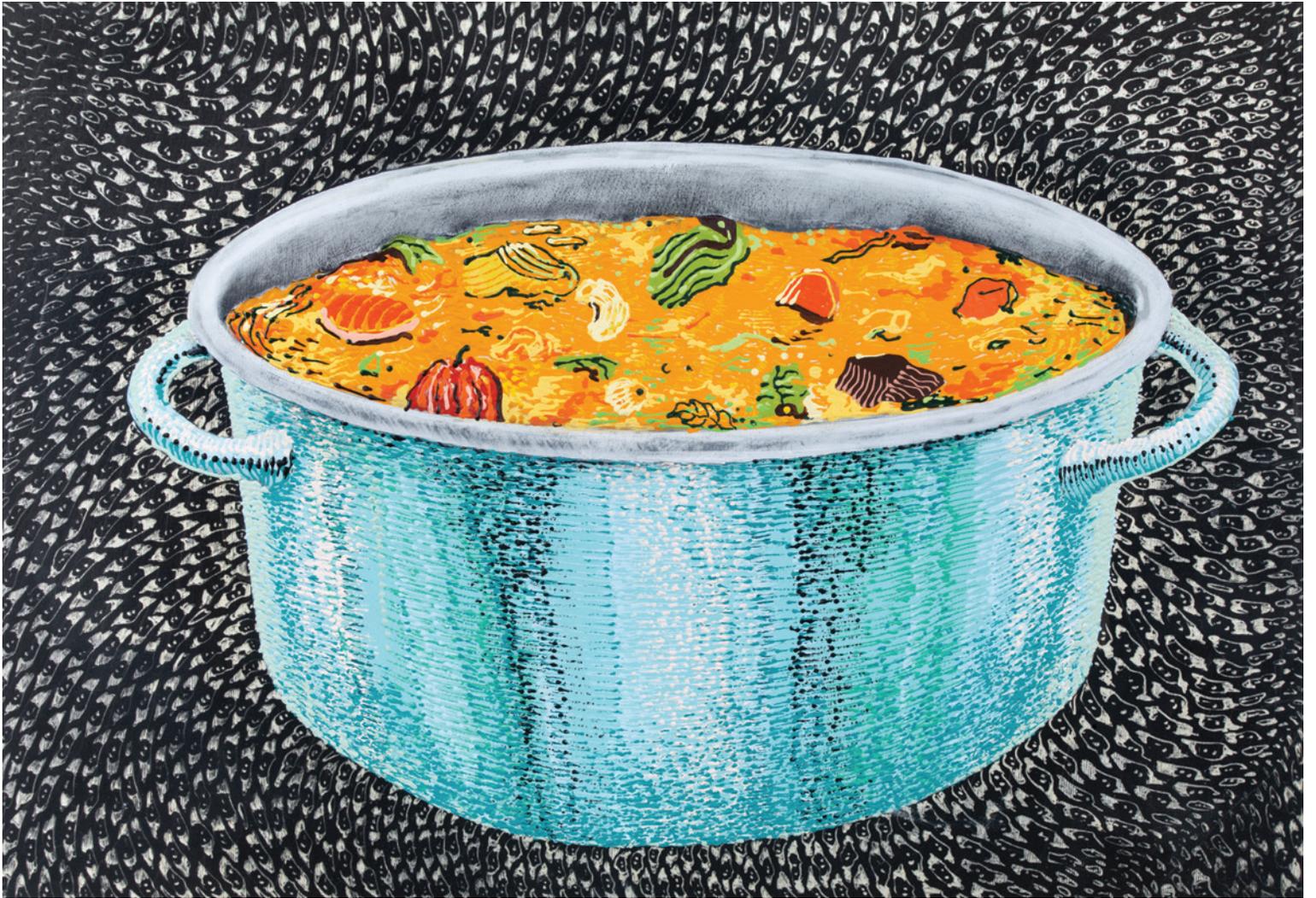






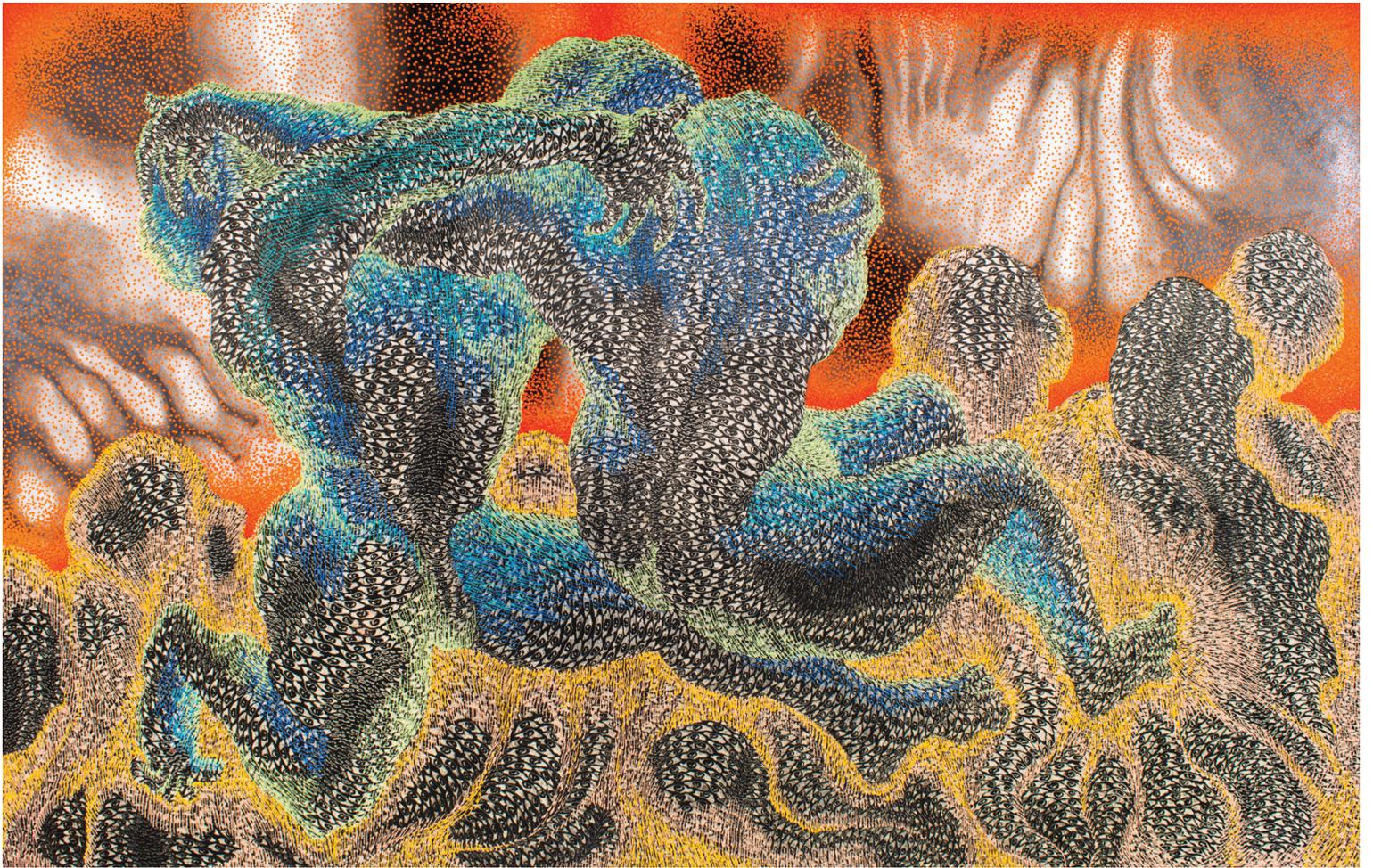


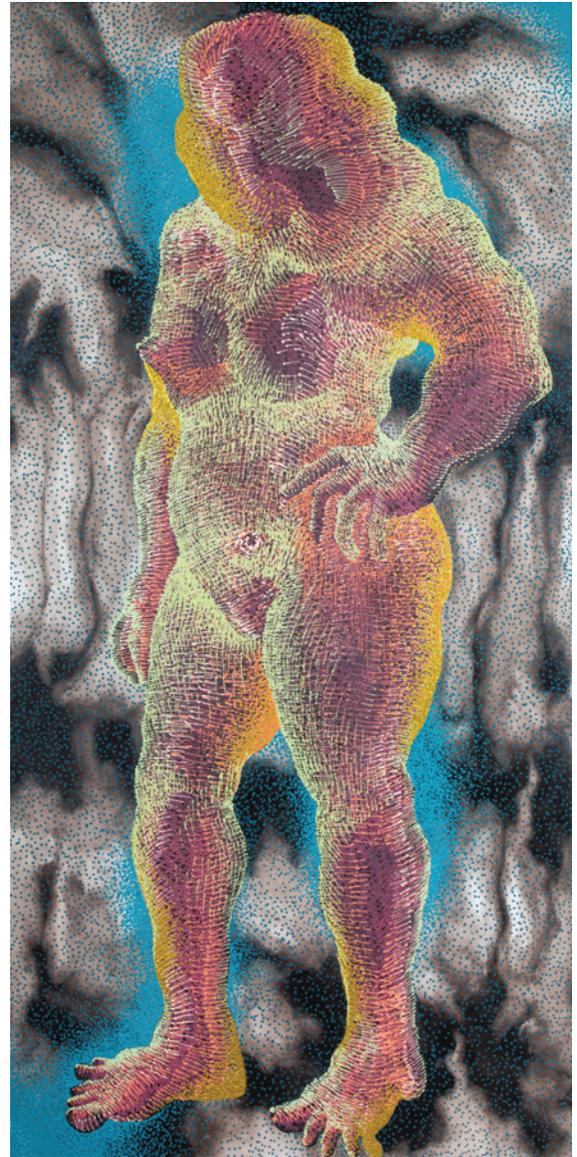
















**Didier William in  
conversation with Anna  
Arabindan-Kesson,  
Jessica Bell Brown, and  
Nell Irvin Painter**

**The following conversation took place on November 9, 2018, at James Fuentes Gallery, on the occasion of *Didier William: Curtains, Stages, and Shadows, Act 1*.**

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

It's such an honor and delight to be here with these wonderful women and of course with Didier, who I think I've known for ten years. We met in grad school where I had the pleasure of writing an essay for Didier's MFA thesis show. I was thinking a lot about what led us to get to know each other in grad school, and one of those things was a class we took with Professor Hazel Carby called *Transnational Imaginaries*. One of the connections that was forged in that class was this experience of being an immigrant, of being "transnational." It's a term we use a lot to describe the movement of things and networks. But I think one of the effects of that is that people who are mobile, who move as immigrants, become thought of as people who are caught in between places. And so the term transnational tends to be used to explain or make sense of this being caught or trapped between home and somewhere else. And I think what was interesting in our conversations then, and what is interesting to me now looking at your work, is how you're really challenging that idea of being caught between, or "in between-ness." And you do that with your surfaces, and by creating paintings that end up being a space where we can hold these different experiences—experiences of being in another place, experiences of having to negotiate expectations from families in one place, and expectations from families in another place.

The paintings become a space of imagination where you're thinking about where you come from and where you might be and where you might go. So there's a way in which your paintings are transnational, but without foreclosing a sense of movement. I think that's part of what adds to their surreality and maybe that is in fact what it means to be someone who's had to move between places and negotiate that. It's almost like reality is experienced in multiple ways simultaneously. And that's very hard to explain and articulate. But I wanted you to explain that a little more. How do you create space in your surfaces?

Didier William

*Transnational Imaginaries* was a pivotal course for me because the material we wrestled with did exactly what you just described: it talked about the necessary simultaneity of being an immigrant from another place. There's a painting at Anna Zorina Gallery called *Téléphon sa a pa janm pa p sonnen* (2018), which depicts two hands holding a telephone. Thinking about the earlier years, having just moved to Miami, the phone, phone cards, and various paraphernalia that we brought with us from Haiti materialized the kind of simultaneity of being here and channeling home at the same time. You could never separate the two from one another. And that's how I understood space. That's how I understood color.

**That's how I understood my body. That's how I understood absorbing and projecting the bodies of people I considered to be Americans.**

**There was always this way in which I was constantly negotiating a kind of implied American authenticity, as well as a fictive imaginary about Haiti that was culled from memories, stories, and from my parents, in these constant linkages that pointed back home. Whether it was a family member who called and needed money because they thought if you live in the States you had money; or my mom's beaded curtains in the kitchen, which she brought with her from Haiti and then hung up in our house in Miami. There were these things that materialized home, which I had very little knowledge of or relationship to, because we left for Miami when I was six years old. But I knew that those things came from home, wherever home was. And I wanted my work to do that work as well.**

**I think it's probably taken about fifteen years or so for my surfaces to come together in the way that they have in this body of work. In the beginning I felt very ambivalent about imaging things that had a stable or rational relationship to space. I didn't know what purpose that legibility served in the paintings because it felt disingenuous from my experience as someone who was negotiating two, and maybe more, multiple, realities. I wanted the materials to do that kind of work as well. Technically, one of the things that helped me do that was printmaking, because in**

**the printshop, everything was filtered through process. Process is always present. Color, composition, dimension, and atmosphere. It's always a negotiation with the actual tactile surface. And that made a lot of sense for me, especially in terms of color. I understood color in terms of material, not in terms of some cerebral, scientific approach. In the printshop color was toothy. It was gritty, supple, foldable. It was woven into every single part of the process.**

**When I found this space between painting and printmaking, it seemed like I could stack and layer realities in the paintings in a way that made much more sense than trying to image a resolved atmosphere. For me that's very much related to this idea of the transnational experience, because there is no resolution. It's a constant sequence of simultaneous layers that negotiate between the individual and the collective, between the public and the private, between the familial and the social, the historical and allegorical.**

**Jessica Bell Brown**

**This is one of the things that's fascinating to me about your work, and I think it ties into this metaphor of home and metaphor for thinking diasporically. Hybridity is also prominent in your process, thinking in terms of your approach to texture, to paint, collage, etching, and your attention to building surfaces. How did you arrive at this particular**

language that is so effective and efficient in thinking through such complex ideas?

Didier William

There's so many different ways I can answer this question, but my impulse is to go to my art historical predecessors: Belkis Ayón, Robert Colescott, and Helen Frankenthaler, three people who sit heavily in my studio and have for a very long time. The kind of deconstructing of space that Colescott did when he went and studied with Fernand Léger and then came back, and was able to image scenes that were both incredibly intimate but also piercing in their criticality. The kind of mythic allegories that Ayón uses, and how she destabilizes rational space through collograph, which is an incredibly graphic and physical technique that makes her works completely site-specific and almost architectural. Ayón was the first printmaker I ever found who could take something two-dimensional and make it spatial and bodily in that way.

The ways in which Helen Frankenthaler and many other Abstract Expressionists embedded a time-specific element in the process of making their works insisted on this idea that the image in front of us was concerned with physical space and not pictorial space—physical space being something that lives in real time. For me, that needed to happen in this work. I didn't want to let my viewers off

the hook by allowing safe, stable spectacle to take over, in which a totalizing scene could be explicated for a stable viewing experience. I wanted things to shift quite readily, rapidly, and continuously, and printmaking did that. But even more specifically, I think the way in which the carved surface plus its printed reference sit together does that for me even more. I wanted the materiality of the carved surface plus the graphic print to really antagonize each other and our eyes, and cause us to try to fill the spatial gap that sits between them. The first time that happened for me I stepped back and got really excited, because that's the kind of anxious tension that I think we sit in as people who occupy unconventional bodies. It's something that's wholly felt and corporeal and, though we know it is artificial, no less real. The first thing I made that went there for me was this painting five or six years ago called *His life depends on spotted lies* (2015). It was a small portrait that I was working on right around the time that George Zimmerman was acquitted.

It was the first time I used the carved eyes on the surface. I was working on a portrait and I carved two eyes on the facade that seemed regular, but for whatever reason I just decided to keep carving until I filled the whole body with eyes. It was startling. It was empathic. It was the first time I felt like the bodies were telling me something I didn't already know. And that to me indicated an intimacy that I didn't have before—a kind of material intimacy, but also

**Didier William in conversation with Anna Arabindan-**

a conceptual and emotional intimacy. It created the kind of spatial attention that I'm talking about. So as you talk about hybridity and these things that insist on multiple realities, that had to happen on a material level for me first, before I could even go to any other referential place with it.

**Jessica Bell Brown**

I first encountered your work when I saw *Two Dads* (2017). I did a double take; the painting summoned me closer to it and I immediately honed in on the eyes and thought about the kind of labor involved in realizing that picture. It was a surreal experience. Of course, you have this language that undeniably references bodies. But there is a way in which the rendering, too, creates this circuit of thinking about bodies and bodies at work, bodies on display, bodies being gazed at and gazed upon.

**Didier William**

I love the metaphor of the circuit. Because for me it destabilizes our ability to contain the figure in a stable or whole way; if the eye is an equivalent force, there is this kind of perpetual game that forces us to look deeper and insists on a kind of presence. I want the paintings to sit in that space, that circuit that you just described, for as long as possible. And it's the kind of opacity in a circuit that Édouard

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Glissant talks about when he talks about the opacity of the other. If you could strip away all the cultural references that make it easier for us to look at each other, and insist on this circuit, how would that circuit materialize? And for me that's the function of the eyes.

**Nell Irvin Painter**

I look at these works in two different ways. Well, in lots of different ways because part of the beauty is that you can look at these works for a long time. And for me that is the definition of really great art: that you can look, and you can see, and then you can see some more. And I'm not talking about meaning here. I'm talking about vision, about the surface, about the formal qualities. I'm looking at this as someone who has been a painter and is currently kind of a printmaker. James Fuentes mentioned a book I did some years ago called *Creating Black Americans: African American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, which is a narrative history book, but all the images are fine art by Black artists. I did that book before I went to graduate school. Before I went to Mason Gross and before I went to RISD, and I learned that there was a lot more fantastic art by Black artists than the world that I was encountering had room for.

But what I also learned as I read about the work of Black artists was that, over and over, it was as if the job of Black artists is to explain American

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history or explain race, as if the work itself had little or no visual meaning. As if there were no processes involved, as if the meaning of the work were its relationship to history and to race in America, or race in the world. The beauty of this work is that on first glance it doesn't do any of that. It doesn't tell you. I know that there are some figures here and, actually, the person who comes to my mind for some reason is William Blake. These figures are tortured in a kind of Blakeian way, but they're doing things. As images they are very active, which I also often find missing from American art. We're talking about the layering of your processes, which is one thing, but there's also layering of space as the figures and the grounds are stacked up and stacked through. So for me the one big importance of this work is it need not be commenting on American history. It probably is, but I don't have to know it's commenting on American history or Haitian history or Haitian legend. It's deeply satisfying on its surfaces, and I will make surfaces plural because there's so much going on here.

Some of you may know that I recently published a memoir called *Old in Art School*, because I was old in art school. Instead of an epigraph, it starts with eyes, because so much of the experience that I had, and maybe even the larger experience of being a Black person in this country, and of being a woman in this country, is the sense of being looked at and being judged. The eyes here are not even a metaphor;

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it's almost literal. These eyes are not being seen. They are *seeing*, which is a kind of liberatory vision.

Didier William

I think about legibility in terms of your comment, and it's something that I've thought about for a long time, because I was always the giant kid. So I knew a thing or two about being looked at and curiously scrutinized and having people try to make sense of your body. Growing up as an overgrown, closet queer kid in South Florida, who spoke a weird language, this idea of people constantly trying to make sense of you was always a part of daily life. And it was rendered in the most "polite" and "harmless" way through the eyes. And I knew, and still know, what curious scrutinizing eyes feel and look like, even when they're cloaked in cultural politeness. The eyes seemed to me like a logical motif to use for this way in which we try to make each other legible, and the ways in which that legibility is often used as a form of psychological and physical violence.

Nell Irvin Painter

Let me stop you for a second. These are thousands of eyes. How do you get from maybe a dozen eyes, to thousands?

Didier William

It's intergenerational. For me, they're the eyes of multiple figures. They're the ways in which the body attempts to extend itself beyond its physical boundary. They are the eyes of parents and grandparents. They are for me, again, a very logical way of trying to get the body to move beyond itself, and to find agency in this way of being present. Because that curious gaze oftentimes costs us our lives and we know this. We've always known it, and thankfully camera footage is bringing it to light a little bit more now than before. That curiosity has often been a form of quiet violence.

The eye motif for me does that work. The closer you look at the paintings, the harder you look at them, the harder they look back at you. Earlier you mentioned legibility and language, and the various languages in the work. If you look at the title sheet for the show, all the titles are in Kreyòl, and that's completely intentional on my part. I wanted paintings that had several different layers of legibility to them. If the title refutes your ability to condense meaning, where else can you find legibility? There are art historical references in the work. There are physical and material references in the work. I wanted to set up a condition where, depending on your level of privilege, you can access the paintings in various different ways. My parents could read these paintings in ways that those of you who don't

understand Kreyòl would not be able to. And for me that's an important facet of access that changes how the paintings are read and considered.

Jessica Bell Brown

I love that your titles are in Kreyòl. I just love that refusal. And even if I were to translate, there's still this refusal in the language and a denial of access that we have to understanding, or to making meaning, through the language inscribed on the work.

Didier William

I think that refusal is in some ways cultural, too. Haiti was and is the world's first free Black Republic because of the particular kind of refusal of a colonial gaze. It was able to actualize that process of Blackness and selfness that was refused by Napoleon and various world powers at the time. And so that refusal for me needs to be part of the material. It needs to be part of the language. It needs to be part of the narrative. I think about growing up in Miami, and my brothers and I going to the grocery store. When we wanted to talk about somebody, we'd speak Kreyòl because we knew they wouldn't understand. It was a moment of relatively harmless privilege that those of us who navigate multiple languages are aware of. I wanted to pay homage to that a little bit more. The show that came before this was

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shown in Miami first, and my parents came to see it. There were only two or three paintings that were in Kreyòl. I had given them slightly witty titles and I noticed that my parents gravitated to those three paintings right away and were having a little caucus in front of those paintings. I decided that for this show I wanted to flip the relationship and have the entire show be that moment. If you weren't part of that privileged group, then you would have to work a little bit.

**Nell Irvin Painter**

I am guessing that many of these figures come from Haitian culture and legend. Could you say something about depicting figures and stories that come out of a place that is really green and tropical, using an often desaturated palette?

**Didier William**

I try to make sure that I'm not attempting to image any kind of authentic experience. Even in the title of the show, *Curtains, Stages, and Shadows*, I wanted to call attention to the material ephemera around the figure that gives way to the things we consider to signal presence or realness, without actually naming the bodies themselves. I wanted to talk about the artifice of trying to find authenticity. It's a completely artificial condition that we build and expect

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of one another, particularly those of us who are trying to negotiate distant references at home. I left Haiti when I was six. Everything I know about Haiti is from faint memories, parents's stories, family photographs, history, and certainly mythology on some level.

For me, the only authenticity that matters is all of those things sitting together at the same time and never pretending like they're trying to analogize some real condition far away, because that distance seldom gets closed. I think that's very often the tragedy of the immigrant experience and the transnational experiences: we have this faint and fleeting memory of what home was. My parents have a whole closet dedicated to stuff they've accumulated that we are going to take with us back to Haiti, knowing very well we're never going back. I've gotten that before from people who say, well, where's Haiti in your work? And I say nowhere, nowhere and everywhere, really.

**Anna Arabindan-Kesson**

I'm glad you brought up printmaking, and William Blake particularly because he also created prints of the Caribbean. The way that printmaking works in terms of disseminating images of the Caribbean from the eighteenth century and before that, even, is an interesting layer to some of this work. You're refusing that history, but it's there when I look at

some of this. You're working with art historical references that are all about creating bodies on which people can project ideas or identities, and there's such a strong refusal in your work. I wonder how you think about that kind of movement alongside something that's as precise and even violent as printmaking, in which you are gouging the surface.

**Didier William**

It's violent, but I'd use the word severe, which has a precision about it that isn't attached to cultural values. And the severity of shifting from the printed graphic to the gouged wooden surface is important. On the one hand we have the negative, that is literally the residual of something taken away. And on the other hand, we have printed ephemera, jumping to the exact opposite spectrum of pictorial materiality. And you the viewer are expected to fill in the gap. And that's really where the material is: it's the viewer being expected to form this body into something, into a "her," or into a "him," or into an "it." I really love that space because not only does it allow the viewer an entrée into the work, but it also leaves some room for us to do the work that history hasn't done with the vast expanse of unknown information that is still left to be dealt with in regards to the Caribbean.

**Anna Arabindan-Kesson**

The backdrops are also really interesting to me because in your description of the exhibition's title you talk about the stage, and in many ways I feel like we are the people on the stage who are being looked at.

**Didier William**

The backdrops include decorative elements, some drawn from my parents's materials from back home, and additional bodies, Vudu symbolism that's printed on the surfaces, and drawing. Everything starts with drawing and some of those drawings turn into patterns, and some turn into compositions for paintings. They get drawn and printed on copper usually, or zinc. Then the copper and zinc are turned into serigraph screenprints, which are patterned and then collaged onto the surface. And so there are several steps removed from my hand, but my hand is always present. The references are coming from curtains, they're coming from patterns, they're coming from mythology. That particular one has a parsley leaf on it, which is a reference to the Parsley Massacre, where Trujillo sent troops to the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. The myth was that he asked his soldiers to kill all Haitians they found on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. And

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the way they would be able to discern is to ask them to say the word “parsley.” If they couldn’t roll the “r” then they must be Haitian; they should be killed on site. The artificiality of using this completely arbitrary symbol as some form of cultural authenticity became really interesting for me. There’s also the pig symbol, which comes in pretty often, referencing the 1981 pig eradication where USAID, an American organization doing work in Haiti, came into Haiti and the DR and said Kreyòl pigs were infected and had to be eradicated, and replaced the Kreyòl pigs with American pigs. They were more expensive to feed, required cement pens, and cost the peasants and farmers, who needed these pigs for currency and worship and food, a tremendous amount of money and effectively gutted the Haitian economy for many years to come.

**Nell Irvin Painter**

So we’ve talked about the figures and the staging, but what about the architecture? Got a lot of architecture going on here, particularly in *Nou tout ansanm* (2018). Part of me wants to imagine, maybe, castles, above the anatomy of the eyes.

**Didier William**

Usually I’ll pull just one element from the thing that I’m thinking about. In this one, for example, in

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Miami we have this place called *Ti Mache*, which is an outdoor market, and I remember the first time I went there and saw the most Haitians I had seen since leaving Haiti. It was just mobbed with people, everybody was speaking Kreyòl and all the women looked like my mom and all the men looked like my father. It was merchants who had gone to Haiti, bought a bunch of stuff, brought it back to Miami and were selling it to the Haitian community. It was a sort of Sunday ritual. You’d go to church and then go get beef patties on 62nd Street and then you go to *Ti Mache* and all the merchants had big blue awnings above, set up on poles.

Even though it was just tarps and poles, it did feel, as a seven- or eight-year-old, like I was going to a stately place that I knew was special and that the bodies in that space were always sort of conjoined together. You could never discern a person out of the crowd. But even in that scenario, I could tell that we were vulnerable, immensely vulnerable in this place in South Florida where Haitians were often treated like second class citizens. I wanted the architecture in this work to feel like one could enter into that space, but also to not be wholly resolved, and to have this sort of awning coming in like a sharp intrusion from the top.

**Jessica Bell Brown**

I want to pivot to thinking about desire and how you

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make space for desire, or thinking through desire, in your work.

Didier William

Good question. Now you mentioned earlier that there was a kind of tortured sensibility to the bodies and ...

Nell Irvin Painter

Well, a lot of things are happening to them.

Didier William

But I also frame them. For me there is something sexy about them. There's something exaggerated and heroic about them and for me, as the maker, I think I do have this sort classical relationship to my subjects. There's an art historical, classical relationship between author and subject; although these are all interactive bodies, they're all completely idealized, invented, desexualized.

Nell Irvin Painter

They are not desexualized, or they are not degenderized.

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Didier William

I think in many ways they are.

Jessica Bell Brown

I think this moment is the perfect example of material frictions. *Ki mou n ki re le Olympia* (2018) references an art historical trope, the odalisque, that is predicated on female bodies. And then you're queering that space, and adamantly so. I think it's another interesting circuit that you're disrupting.

Didier William

In that way I maybe would like to question whether we can desire something that isn't wholly known. Desire, in many ways, is still predicated on things we find familiar and satisfying. But what if we could construct an imaginary that we have an incredibly desirous relationship to. It goes back to Anna's introduction about this transnational space that is often framed as a kind of trauma, but I'd like to wonder about framing it as a kind of utopia, as a kind of agency, as a desirous space that I'm very much interested sitting in for as long as possible.

Anna Arabindan-Kesson

In that sense they're speculative, in being able to

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imagine beyond what we can see and, as you were saying, exceeding the categories that we have. There's a kind of excess. I think you used the word "baroque" to describe some of these, in the sense that there's more than we can actually describe or visually hold onto.

**Jessica Bell Brown**

You mentioned Colescott as one of your heroes. Colescott's figures always spill out towards you. There's a verticality to his work and I see that kind of activity in your work too. But I'm also thinking about Colescott because in this moment he's become someone that artists and thinkers are returning to. And there is also this championing of figurative painting. What are your thoughts on the capacity to be working with bodies or anti-bodies? Is there a kind of generosity in this kind of work for you, and what is it, and how is it manifested?

**Didier William**

I've sat with Colescott for a very long time and I think the big Colescott show at Blum & Poe last year was long overdue. He needs to be central as one of our old masters. I love how you described his figures always spilling out. You feel like everything is going to fall apart in this unstable terrain. And he does that even before you can sit with these

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bodies that are imaged through naturalism but also through abstraction and surreality and fantastical storytelling. He uses multiple visual languages, all happening concurrently, but even before you get to that, the space itself is undulating and twisting and contorting. This enmeshed relationship between unconventional bodies and the spaces they occupy—Colescott was doing that work long before many of us. The potentiality of figurative art for me has never waned. That should have always been part of the conversation. But also, because the current political moment makes us all aware of the ways in which the bodies that we occupy make us vulnerable in varying degrees, naturally an artist would of course be part of that interrogation. So for me, it makes sense that we're returning to the body, we're returning to this corporeal condition that all of us are subject to. And some of us are subject to it more than others.

**Didier William in  
conversation with  
Colleen Asper  
and Dinaw Mengestu,  
moderated by  
Jerry Philogene**

**The following conversation took place on October  
20, 2018, at Anna Zorina Gallery, on the occasion of  
*Didier William: Curtains, Stages, and Shadows, Act 2.***

Jerry Philogene

I want to share some of my thoughts and comments before we go to the main presentations. I became interested in the idea of the gaze, both the look and the *see*—the agent of presence of the gaze—and how its connotation when seeing necessitates the comprehension of a different linguistic space. A space we're not familiar with, a space that causes discomfort and is untethered from known linguistic comprehension. A seeing that makes us realize that our meaning-making capabilities might not be sufficient to understand or return the gaze, if we do not know the language in which it is given.

I'm fascinated by the eye-shaped forms that are carved into the wood. Fascinated for two reasons: One, the idea of the gaze and the return of the gaze. Who has the authority to return the gaze and who has the authority to give the gaze? In looking there is an acknowledgment of presence, there's an acknowledgment of an object. However, *seeing* is where meaning-making happens. It is in the gaze. It is the recognition of object to subject that seeing allows. I'm interested in the complexities of the seeing that we see in this body of work. I am also interested in the idea of language, and that Didier has chosen purposefully to title all the pieces in Kreyòl; not French or English, but Kreyòl—a language that has a fraught history, especially in the French Caribbean, Haiti to be specific.

I just returned from a research trip in Martinique, in Guadeloupe, and some of the conversations I had with the artists revolved around national and cultural identity and language: the use of Kreyòl, who could speak it, when it could be spoken, in what context, formal or informal. I see Didier's use of Kreyòl as well as these eye-shaped forms as moments of quiet, subtle transgressiveness, inserting a seeing, or *kout je*, a sharp side-eye look that at its boldest and most direct evokes the presence of bodies that were denied the right to look back or speak in Kreyòl. It inserts these bodies in spaces that were not made for those who do not belong and who are not supposed to look back—like the canon of art history. These quiet, subtle, transgressive moments ruminate loudly as moments of refusal to be dismissed. Perhaps later we can return to some of the comments that I've made right now, as well as some of the comments my fellow panel members will make.

Colleen Asper

I'm an artist who very much thinks through images and through the work of other artists. So, I'm going to start by talking about three different artists who use the gaze in different ways on the way to talking about how Didier is using the gaze in these particular works. The first artist I want to talk about is Carrie Mae Weems, and her *Kitchen Table* series

in particular, which the artist herself has spoken about in terms of the gaze. In an interview with bell hooks, Weems stated: "All the pieces in the *Kitchen Table* series highlight 'the gaze,' particularly the piece where the woman is sitting with a man leaning against her, his head buried in her neck, a mirror placed directly in front of her, but she looks beyond that to the subject."<sup>1</sup> Weems is primarily a photographer, but the *Kitchen Table* series came almost as a rejection of her training in documentary photography. I want to read another quote from that same interview about that episode:

*I think a part of documentary had a lot to do with the notion that you would go into somebody else's backyard and capture it and bring home the ethnic image, as trophy, but, hopefully, once you have captured the ethnic image, in the process of capturing it, you've gone through some harrowing, life-transforming experience... so that you can come back even bigger, with your prize, and be praised for that. Well, I started to really understand what documentary was, what it really was, and I understood it even more later. However, when I started to understand it, when I learned*

1 bell hooks and Carrie Mae Weems, "Talking Art With Carrie Mae Weems," in bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: visual politics* (New York: The New Press), 85.

*that the terrain that I wanted to walk on couldn't be carried forth by straight documentary, my attention shifted.*<sup>2</sup>

I think that's particularly interesting in relation to the *Kitchen Table* series because it's often misunderstood as an instance of documentary photography, when these images are in fact completely constructed. Weems is the woman that appears in the images, but the little girl was just this girl that one day was riding her bike by the artist's house. What I think is so fascinating about these photos is that they set off all these assumptions about the relationship between these three protagonists, and then, from image to image, break it down. So much of that waver, of setting out a certain idea about narrative and then destabilizing it, happens through how she mediates the gaze of those three figures. One last quote from that interview with hooks: she describes the *Kitchen Table* series as "creating a space in which black women are looking back."<sup>3</sup> I'd like to use her work to start to talk about the way that the gaze certainly is this kind of axis of power, and even objectification, but it's also something that could be turned around.

The next artist that I want to briefly touch on

2 Ibid., 80.

3 Ibid., 85.

is Unica Zürn. Of the three artists that I will speak about, she is probably the least well known, and she was also a writer. She was a Surrealist, and like a lot of the Surrealists, she was interested in automatic processes. A lot of her writing, for example, was based on anagrams. The process that she employed for making her drawings involved letting her hand hover over the page and then, without premeditating it, she would spontaneously draw an eye. She said when the drawing was looking at her, then it would tell her what to draw.

I hate introducing the work of a female artist like, “she’s the partner of a well-known male artist,” but unfortunately a lot of us actually know Zürn because for the last seventeen years of her life she was Hans Bellmer’s partner. She’s the woman that appears in all the photographs he took of a bound woman. Kind of ominously, when Bellmer first met her, he was quoted as saying “here’s the doll.” What I want to think about is this way that she describes her process as a kind of submission to the page. In a way, she’s giving over her agency to the page. That is a form of her becoming or identifying with the object, or giving over her power as subject. I want to posit that in her work, that is a really positive form of alienation. It allowed her to give image to these doll-like bodies in her drawings that have a kind of autonomy and agency and a visionary power that Bellmer himself always withheld from his depiction of bodies. We think about the gaze as so bound up

with ideas of objectification, and it is, but it’s also a way that we can think about the object looking back, and having power over the subject. I think that’s very much what her work was about.

The last of my trio of artists leading up to the work at hand is Joan Jonas’s *Mirror Piece I*. This was a piece that was originally staged in 1969, which she then restaged in 2010. In this performance, she and all the other performers are holding these body size mirrors that they use to reflect the audience back at themselves. And they also use them to multiply, breakdown, and fragment the bodies of the performers. *Mirror Piece I* begins with Joan Jonas reading every quote in Borges’ *Labyrinths* that has the word “mirror” in it. I’m just going to give us one of those: “Mirrors and copulation are abominable, because they increase the number of men.”<sup>4</sup> In this particular political moment, the first thing that comes to mind for me is all the rhetoric around a fear of the multiplication of the body, that bodies need to be partitioned and controlled and walls need to be built to hold them. Jonas’s *Mirror Piece I* is an absolute negation of any idea that the multiplication of bodies can be controlled. Specifically, she complicates any understanding that we might have of ourselves, as spectators, as passive. In her performance she

4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 2007), 3.

flashes these mirrors and it's really amazing to see the way different people react, when all of a sudden their bodies are included in the performance. She gives image to the way a spectacle can also look back at you and include you in ways that you didn't expect. So, those are the three different ways of thinking about the gaze, in which the gaze is almost hinged. We think it's coming from one direction and then, all of a sudden, it flips.

With that in mind and moving to Didier's work, part of what I've been trying to do in talking about those artists is have an argument with the idea that the gaze is mono-ocular, stable, and fixed. Didier's paintings, too, are having an argument with the idea that the gaze is mono-ocular. In thinking about this work and this conversation, I ended up thinking about something that I had written maybe five years ago. It certainly wasn't directly in response to the work, but retroactively seems to me that it was. In this quote I was trying to think through Lacan's idea of the gaze as a site of anxiety:

*"If beyond appearance there is nothing in itself, there is the gaze," Lacan writes.<sup>5</sup> The subject enters the symbolic order through understanding itself as an image, something that can be seen and*

5 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 103.

*inscribed in language, but this understanding has the quality of a finely woven fabric—its substance is built around many tiny holes. The subject desires to look and be looked at, but the gaze convokes the void. The fabric of the symbolic contains everything but the real, these holes, so the real remains as its radical absence, appearing only to negate the symbolic. The subject is thus split. The gaze becomes a source of anxiety as it carries with it the threat of all (nothing itself) that lies beyond sight.<sup>6</sup>*

My attempt to figure out a way to visualize Lacan's idea of the gaze was this idea of a cloth that covers the subject, or a subject that's made up of a cloth. And that cloth is the symbolic: it's all the names, and language, and image that we use to give ourselves identity. That cloth has a warp and weft, and through that warp and weft is everything that's not captured by the symbolic. Everything we can't give name to.

I was so struck in thinking about these paintings, how it feels like the bodies are draped in this cloth that is falling apart, and all these eyes are proliferating there. Jerry touched on this idea in her introduction, that these are bodies that slip

6 Colleen Asper, "Being of the Gaze," *Art Practical*, May 27, 2015, <https://www.artpractical.com/feature/being-of-the-gaze/>.

away from any known identifiers of race, gender, age, even single body mass. You can't say where the body begins or ends. And that's really another way of saying that they slide away from known symbolic structures. We've been talking a lot about the gaze and that clearly happens in the use of the eyes, but for me, it also happens in the stage, which feels very hinged to me: it's almost like a trap door, you think you're watching and all of the sudden you're being watched. It happens for me in the contours of the body, which refuse boundaries. It happens for me in the pattern, which is this place where all these other bodies appear. With all that in mind, I want to end with one last quote, by Fred Moten from the very beginning of *In the Break*, because I love the way it succinctly talks about the gaze not just as a possessive, but also a dispossessive, force: "While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed—infused, deformed—by the object it possesses."<sup>7</sup>

Dinaw Mengestu

There's something that you said that I think is very right and that is, I think, part of my challenge in

7 Fred Moten, *In the Break* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

trying to talk about these paintings. There's something elusive about them. They resist containment; they're figurative and at the same time they don't conform to normal contours of the body. As writers, part of what we're inclined to do is contain things into narrative form that we can pass off to the reader and say, here are some sentences and those sentences will help you understand what's going on.

The pleasure of looking at these images is that they don't necessarily collapse into such easy meanings. You look at them and you're implicated in them, but that implication is part of what makes them so compelling and also so problematic, and anything but didactic. At the same time, because I'm a writer, I couldn't help but think of how to frame these things into narrative forms. Exactly what you, Didier, are probably trying not to do. When I started looking at the images, fortunately or unfortunately, I tried to put this into a series of discrete categories in which I was experiencing and reacting to the idea of the body and the idea of the gaze, and also the way the body oftentimes is a source of concern, if not a problem, in writing and language.

The first thing I'm thinking about is the body *in migration*—the body as, oftentimes, the only thing that travels with us when we leave. When we leave homes and leave countries, we oftentimes leave everything else behind. Sometimes people remain. What crosses those borders with us is that physical entity that is our body. And that comes with all

these problems, right? Because we can enter into this new space, but in the process of migration—as contingent and dependent upon that physical movement across borders—the heart, memories, our soul, all the things we care about, can remain behind, and yet, somehow, we're not there. Somehow the body is the sole repository of that act. We know what it's like to be in a room and imagine our hearts, our thoughts, somewhere else. The body can become a problem in that regard, right? We don't want bodies to crossover into "our" terrain, we want to put up walls and borders to make sure those bodies don't enter that space. And that makes the body a repository of trauma. Often the process of migration is a source of trauma. It is both the way in which we navigate and cross the border, and the pain we take in doing so. When we end up on the other side of frontiers, all the wounds that it takes to do that are carried over, but the things that we love and perhaps shaped us are left behind. I don't want to limit the body to this idea of a traumatic space, but it is a complicated space in migration.

I was also thinking of the way in which the Black body specifically—and this is something that I think is very important right now to African American and Black writers and poets—has been represented historically, and the attempt to see if, through language, that can be reclaimed. If, somehow, through the act of writing or imagining, you could reclaim the way language has often distorted the Black

body into things that we don't understand or recognize it to be. I'll read a poem by Gwendolyn Brooks, which I think is one of the early attempts to do that. It's been something that writers have actively worked towards, and it's a process that never ends because, with every attempt to reclaim, to rewrite, to rephrase, to restate the way bodies are narrated, there's a larger cultural discourse that persists and maintains the linguistic tradition that defines the Black body as a problem, as a source of violence and danger, or as a threat. And the third point was what happens, then, once the body exists and continues to resist in those spaces.

I wanted to highlight those points by reading three excerpts, the first from my second novel, *How to Read the Air*, about the narrator's father and the journey that he makes from Sudan to America. In order to make that journey, he has to contain himself into a box on a boat that travels from Sudan to America. There's something about the physical transformation that his body is forced to make in order to endure that passage, which has echoes of the transatlantic passage that slaves made from Africa to America.

*For one week he walked west. He had never been in this part of the country before. Everything was flat, from the lands to the horizon, one uninterrupted view that not even a cloud dared to break. The fields were thick with wild green grass and*

bursts of yellow flowers. Eventually he found a ride on the back of a pickup truck already crowded with refugees heading toward the border. Every few hours, they passed a village, each one a cluster of thatched-roof huts with a dirt road carved down the middle, where children eagerly waved as the refugees passed, as if the simple fact that they were travelling in a truck meant they were off to someplace better.

When he finally arrived at the port town in Sudan, he had already lost a dozen pounds. His slightly bulbous nose stood in stark contrast to the sunken cheeks and wide eyes that seemed to have been buried deep above them. His clothes fit him poorly. His hands looked larger; the bones were more visible. He thought his fingers were growing.

Abraham came by almost every day to share a cup of tea shortly after evening prayers, when hundreds of individual trails of smoke from the campfires wound their way up into the sky. He would pinch and pull at my father's waist as if he were a goat or a sheep and then say, "What do you expect? I have to check on the health of my investment." Afterward, as he was leaving, he always offered the same simple piece of advice: "Stretch, Yosef!" he would yell out. "Stretch all the time, until your body becomes as loose as a monkey's." At least once or twice a week, Abraham would

pick my father up from his room in the evening and walk him down to the docks in order to explain to him how the port town really worked. The only lights they saw came from the scattered fires around which groups of men were huddled.

In the course of several evenings, Abraham worked his way steadily down the line of boats docked in the harbor. His favorite ones, he said, were those near the end.

"Those ships over there—all the way at the other end. Those are the ones you need to think about. Those are the ones that go to Europe. You know how you can tell? Look at the flags. You see that one there—with the black and gold? It goes all the way to Italy or Spain. Maybe even France. Some of the men who work on it are friends of mine. Business associates. You can trust them. They're not like the rest of the people here, who will disappear with your money."

After that night, my father began to take seriously Abraham's advice about stretching. He worked his body into various positions that he would hold for ten or fifteen minutes, and then for as long as an hour. At night before he went to bed he practiced sitting with his legs crossed, and then he stretched his back by curling himself into a ball. After four months he could hold that position for

hours, which was precisely what Abraham told him he would need to do.<sup>8</sup>

I want to see if I can narrate that other problem: the body as something that we're actively trying to read, to refigure, to see if we can also note the fallacy and problems that come with the external gaze. This is from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem called *A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon*. This is from the point of view of the white mother in Mississippi:

Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"  
Of the ballad. Pursued  
By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince.  
The Happiness-Ever-After.  
That was worth anything.  
It was good to be a "maid mild."  
That made the breath go fast.

Her bacon burned. She  
Hastened to hide it in the step-on can, and  
Drew more strips from the meat case. The eggs and  
sour-milk biscuits  
Did well. She set out a jar  
Of her new quince preserve.  
... But there was something about the matter of

8 Excerpts from Dinaw Mengestu, *How to Read the Air* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2011).

the Dark Villain.  
He should have been older, perhaps.  
The hacking down of a villain was more fun to  
think about  
When his menace possessed undisputed breath,  
undisputed height,  
And best of all, when history was cluttered  
With the bones of many eaten knights and prin-  
cesses.

The sun was disturbed, then all but nullified  
When the Dark Villain was a blackish child  
Of fourteen, with eyes still too young to be dirty,  
And a mouth too young to have lost every reminder  
Of its infant softness.

That boy must have been surprised! For  
These were grown-ups. Grown-ups were supposed  
to be wise.  
And the Fine Prince—and that other—so tall, so  
broad, so  
Grown! Perhaps the boy had never guessed  
That the trouble with grown-ups was that under  
the magnificent shell of adulthood, just under,  
Waited the baby full of tantrums.  
It occurred to her that there may have been some-  
thing  
Ridiculous to the picture of the Fine Prince  
Rushing (rich with the breadth and height and  
Mature solidness whose lack, in the Dark Villain,

was impressing her,  
Confronting her more and more as this first day  
after the trial  
And acquittal (wore on) rushing  
With his heavy companion to hack down (unhorsed)  
That little foe

...

I want to pair Brooks' poem with one last excerpt. This is a transcript of Darren Wilson's testimony following the shooting of Michael Brown:

**A:** I tried to hold his right arm and use my left hand to get out to have some type of control and not be trapped in my car anymore. And when I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.

**Q:** Holding onto a what?

**A:** Hulk Hogan, that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm. ... I felt that another one of those punches in my face could knock me out or worse. I mean it was, he's obviously bigger than I was and stronger... He turns, and when he looked at me he made like a grunting, like aggravated sound and he starts, he turns and he's coming back towards me. His first step is coming towards me, he kind of does like a stutter step to start running. When he does that, his left hand goes in a fist and goes to his side, his right one goes under his shirt in his waistband and he starts running

at me... At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him.<sup>9</sup>

I chose these three passages because I think there's something obviously problematic that persists in how we continue to imagine the Black body as a source of threat. Darren Wilson was six foot two, and he's imagining this seventeen-year-old child as Hulk Hogan. That Gwendolyn Brooks poem was being narrated from the point of view of the woman who was responsible for Emmett Till's death. Brooks is imagining what it must have taken this woman to picture this child as a threat to her. That child needed to be turned into a dark villain, something slightly monstrous and dangerous. One of the things I think that art tries to do is to resist these constructs, and if not challenge or alter them, then perhaps create realities and aesthetics that are not defined by what external gazes may say we are or what we look like, and see if something other than that can emerge. Looking at Didier's work, I find myself considering the implications of what it means to have the body represented with this kind of strength, and without allowing for easy containment

9 "State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson," Grand Jury Vol. V, September 16, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/11/25/us/darren-wilson-testimony-ferguson-shooting.html>.

or allowing the spectator to lay claim over it.

Didier William

I'm going to speak a little bit more personally, rather than trying to be cumulative. I selected three pieces, which I identify as touchstones in my practice. The first one is *I remember when I was a little girl* (2013), which came right after I had done material explorations in all sorts of media: large-scale site-specific drawing; unstretched burlaps; and more traditional, standalone pieces. All of that was fine, but there was a kind of rationale and logic about space and composition that made no sense with what I was trying to talk about. I grew up in Miami, Florida, with three older brothers and my parents. We moved to the States from Haiti. My life was composed of phone calls with INS, negotiating whether we would be able to stay in the country, going to school with kids who spoke perfect English, being at home with my parents who had their own relationship with the country that I was trying to negotiate. So, the idea of painting stable or resolved spaces that somehow represented parts of my life just felt completely disingenuous and dishonest.

I spent a period making paintings that were inverted, working on the ground à la Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis in a kind of a direct Abstract Expressionist tradition—pouring paint, responding to the material, collaborating with the

environment, with the weather. So much of the process depended on me leaving it alone. I could come in the next day and it would have shifted and slid and puckered. I had to figure out a way to build that impromptu language into my practice. *I remember when I was a little girl* happened during that time. It was the beginning of an attempt to talk about this space in between gender binaries.

The title comes from two sources. The first one, oddly enough, is a reference to *The Golden Girls*, which remains, I think, one of the best shows. For anybody who doesn't know, it's four women in their "golden years" who are developing their lives outside of their identities as wives and mothers. The kids are all grown up and their husbands have either passed or they are divorced. The four of them are now roommates in Miami—oddly enough, the exact same neighborhood that I grew up in. However, the show was written with a level of progressive social politics that was remarkable. They dealt with everything from intimacy and sex to Reagan's policies, from trying to find work in your elder years, to poverty, same-sex and interracial marriage. There's Sophia, who is the elder of the group. Rose, the lovable halfwit from St. Olaf. Blanche, the southern belle who they considered somewhat of a strumpet. And Dorothy, who is kind of prude, clumsy, never has a date, always has her head buried in a book. She was tall, with broad shoulders and a deep raspy voice; everything about her identity and body

refuted the other girls' constructions of femininity.

As a kid I had this voracious appetite to consume all things American. Bea Arthur, who played Dorothy, was the first American icon and quintessentially American body that I could identify as queer. I didn't have language for it at the time, but I knew that whatever she was, however she presented, this was a body that had its own opacity that deliberately refuted conventions of gender. When the girls would sit down at the kitchen table and chat, they would all tell stories about their lives. Dorothy would always start by saying, "I remember when I was a little girl," and there was something remarkable about this—a deeply confident, stoic character forcing you to collapse what you were experiencing of her body with this image of a little girl. I've found that severe discrepancy to be remarkable, and so, when I made this painting of a graphically hybridized body, I immediately thought about Dorothy's narrative.

I also, on some level, think about my relationship with my brothers. I grew up in a house with primarily men: my dad and my two older brothers. Masculine energy was never too far away and performing masculinity was very much how we related to one another. Acting like a little girl was a mortal sin. The painting became a kind of meditation on what it means to occupy that space and how the mind and body elastically bounce back and forth.

Around that time, a lot of my paintings were having conversations with the body, gender, and

materiality. I then moved to this painting: *His life depends on spotted lies* (2015). It happened simultaneously with the Trayvon Martin acquittal in the background. I can't say that I was thinking deliberately or directly about Trayvon, but at the time I remember this tension and anxiety about bringing the body back into my paintings. I was growing more and more tired of my work that preceded this, which kind of slipped away from the figure. I felt like it was a risk not to insist that my viewer engage with a body—a body that was present, forceful, active. And so, I started to bring the figure back into the paintings and thought broadly about what it would have meant for Trayvon to have some kind of camouflage that night.

His body was contained and solidified in a particular way by George Zimmerman and deemed a threat, as Dinaw just described. What would have been necessary for him to be cloaked with some kind of camouflage that refuted George's gaze at that moment when he felt like Trayvon needed to lose his life because his body was rendered so nefariously. I started to make this portrait that I worked on in my Brooklyn apartment. I carved it on my bed, I remember moving the shavings off the bed. There was an intimacy that I was having with the painting that almost necessitated repeating the eyes. Almost as if I felt like my agency was a bit too large and I had to give the figure back some of that agency. So, I filled the portrait with eyes. This is the first painting

that I carved anything into. It is the first time the shadow appears in this work too.

With the next painting, *Two Dads* (2017), the eyes proliferated in the work. I was thinking about the eyes as a symbol of the gaze, and as a way, to Colleen's point, to extend and expand the limits of the body and allow the body to be omnipresent. I was sort of swimming in it at this point. Personal biography was beginning to become more a part of my practice, and many of the paintings in the current show intentionally combine historical and personal narrative. There's some kind of symbolic moment that's tied to historicity, but there's also personal content that is antagonizing and weaving its way into that. *Two Dads* was one of the paintings that began that way of working and on a very base level, I was trying to make a painting that collapsed the way I thought about masculinity in the bodies of two of the most important people to me: my husband and my father. My husband being a queer man, and my father being this sort of emblem of a particular kind of Caribbean man, that is not at all queer. If I could take those two and conjoin them, what would that look like? What kind of hybridized body would it enable? I found an image of my father right after Hurricane Andrew, which was a massive storm that decimated South Florida. He was finally able to get propane and get the grill to work, and he did a little dance. I found it about five years ago and it was this picture of my dad demonstrating a kind

of flamboyant joy. I had never seen him looking like that before. My father was in the Haitian military. Literally doubling that space into this image called *Two Dads* simultaneously made space for my husband and his own subjectivity. It also brought back in this idea of multiplying the gaze and the body through a kind of ornamented physicality.

The last image is *Dantòr a Anais* (2018), a Madonna and child painting. Except in Haiti, when the Black Madonna and child show up, it's not as Madonna and Christ, it's as Èrzulie Dantòr and Anais, her daughter. It's a painting that I made immediately after seeing an image of my mom in this beautiful blue and gold dress. In thinking about this work and the role and position of the Haitian Revolution and Èrzulie as this feminine, but also queer, embodiment of everything that Haiti has been through, it made sense to collapse her and my mom in this space. Jerry, you mentioned in your introduction the way in which bodies collapse into one another in the work. When I first started carving eyes, I wrestled with trying to distinguish between the eyes, with making sure that the viewer could see the figure. And then I got interested in this really fine space between a traditional figure-ground relationship, and the conceptual space that allows a figure to slip back into, literally be camouflaged into, the multiplicity of the eye. That is what happens in this one where Anais and Èrzulie's bodies are enmeshed into one another.

Didier William in conversation with Colleen Asper

Jerry Philogene

So, there are a lot of intersecting conversations here. What I was hearing was a deep interest in the gaze and the body. I'd like to think a little bit about the gaze, and the agentic process of the gaze. Dinaw, when you were talking about the body I was thinking that I don't necessarily see a racialized body. I don't see a gendered body in these works. But that doesn't mean that it's not there. There's a way in which when we see any drop of "blackness," there is then this understanding that it is a Black body. Didier, I am interested in how you were talking about the kind of performative nature of the Black body, both historical and contemporary. I'm also interested in why you purposefully chose to title these in Kreyòl and not translate them for the viewing audience. I'd like to talk a little bit about this sense of discomfort I think you're actively going after.

Didier William

Yeah, it is a sense of discomfort on a personal level. I think it's not dissimilar from the ways in which, if you are from another place, the first few years of acculturating to a new space means doing a tremendous amount of work to catch up: finding the language, figuring out the jokes, cultural references, and euphemisms. There's always this way in which you are intentionally outside of those cultural

and Dinaw Mengestu, moderated by Jerry Philogene

conventions. How could I make a space in which the "conventional" viewer is outside?

Colleen Asper

In hearing you speak, I was thinking back to a moment in Dinaw's talk and the idea that there are so many ways these paintings refuse language, and yet invite language. I actually think that both ends are part of it—they refuse language, but they ask for language; they refuse the gaze, but they ask for the gaze. That seems like a way to talk about what you were saying earlier, Jerry, about this way that they deny certain markers of race and gender. Yet despite that denial, we will talk about race and gender. I was also thinking about all the ways in which any marked body is made to feel both invisible and also hyper-visible, and the strategies used to navigate that.

Dinaw Mengestu

In terms of the question of race, I don't want to suggest that they can solely be seen through the lens of race, because to racialize you need to have an other—a secondary perspective that then turns that into something outside of itself. I don't think the works are dependent on that; they seem to be able to exist completely within their own space. And that space is free of conventions of gender, of form,

## **Didier William in conversation with Colleen Asper**

of limits on what the body is. Within that expansive space the images allow for us to exist beyond the narrow confines of race. At the same time, I do think it's important that the images exist confidently in their reality. I don't think that's racializing so much as it is allowing the image to be exactly in the world that it belongs. Racialization is something that happens on the part of the viewer. I don't think it's something that's inherent within the work itself.

### **Didier William**

That's also how I would answer your question about the title of the exhibition, **Jerry—Curtains, Stages, and Shadows**. It was a deliberate attempt not to claim or name the bodies. I wanted to be direct in naming the stage, which is this repository for performativity and an analogy and substitute for gravity. I wanted to claim and name the curtain, which becomes a barrier that can allow or disallow narrative. I wanted to name the shadows, which evidence a present body but allow the actual or perceived bodies to be left up to the viewer. The culminating moment in the work is the moment when an attempt is made to racialize, gender, or sex the figures, and thereby fall prey to this curse of the gaze.

## Contributors

### Anna Arabindan-Kesson

Anna Arabindan-Kesson is an Assistant Professor of African American and Black Diasporic art with a joint appointment in the Departments of African American Studies and Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. Born in Sri Lanka, she completed undergraduate degrees in New Zealand and Australia, and worked as a Registered Nurse in the UK before completing her PhD in African American Studies and Art History at Yale University. Her book *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World* is being published by Duke University Press in Spring 2021.

### Colleen Asper

Colleen Asper is a painter, writer, and performer. She has had solo and two-person exhibitions at galleries including 17Essex, New York, NY; On Stellar Rays, New York, NY; P!, New York, NY; Art Production Fund Lab, New York, NY; and Steven Wolf Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at institutions such as The Drawing Center, New York, NY; The Queens Museum, Corona, NY; The Luminary, St. Louis, MO; New Galerie, Paris; Kunstverein Langenhagen, Hanover; and Lošinj Museum, Mali Lošinj, Croatia. Her work has been reviewed in *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *frieze*, *The New York Times*,

and the *New Yorker*. Additionally, she has contributed writing to publications such as *Art Practical*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Lacanian Ink*, and *Paper Monument*.

### Jessica Bell Brown

Jessica Bell Brown is a curator and writer based in Baltimore, where she is the Associate Curator for Contemporary Art at The Baltimore Museum of Art. Prior to joining the BMA, Brown held roles at Gracie Mansion Conservancy, New York, NY; Creative Time, New York, NY; Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, NY; and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. A PhD candidate in Modern and Contemporary Art at Princeton University, her writing has appeared in publications including *Flash Art*, *Artforum*, *Art Papers*, and *Brooklyn Rail*.

### Erica Moiah James

Erica Moiah James is an art historian, curator, and Assistant Professor at The University of Miami. Her research and writing centers on indigenous, modern, and contemporary art of the Caribbean and the African Diaspora. She has published essays in academic journals including *Archives of American Art Journal*, *Black Camera*, and *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, and written numerous curatorial essays, including "Purvis Young: Nothing Left Unsaid" (ICA Miami, 2019); "The Black Sublime: Rene Pena's Archangel, 2018" (Small Axe, 2019); "Ricardo Brey's 'Adrift'" (MER,

B&L, 2019); “Theriantropic Beasts: The Mystic Revelation of Tomás Esson” (ICA Miami, 2020); and “Edouard Duval Carrié: Historical Retelling and the Postmodern Baroque” (Bass Museum, 2020). Before arriving in Miami, she was the founding Director and Chief Curator of the National Gallery of The Bahamas (2003–2011) and an Assistant Professor at Yale University. James is a 2019–2022 Research Associate at the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Center, University of Johannesburg, and a 2020 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant and a Mellon Foundation Project Grant. Her forthcoming book is entitled *After Caliban: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary*.

#### Roman Kalinowski

Roman Kalinowski is an artist and critic living and working in Brooklyn, NY. Originally from Syracuse, NY, he received a BFA in painting from Syracuse University and an MFA from Pratt Institute. His paintings and digital media artworks have been shown at venues in New York and internationally. He is the senior editor of *Arcade Project*, and his writing on art also appears in *Artcritical* and *Hyperallergic*, among other publications. He has presented papers on art, technology, and media at international conferences including the annual Electronic Literature Organization conferences in Victoria, BC and Montreal, QC, as well as at multiple Posthuman Symposiums at New York University.

#### Dinaw Mengestu

Dinaw Mengestu, a recipient of the 2012 MacArthur Foundation Genius Award, was born in Ethiopia and raised in Illinois. His fiction and journalism have been published in the *New Yorker*, *Granta*, *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New York Times*. Mengestu was chosen for the “5 Under 35” Award by the National Book Foundation in 2007 and was named on the *New Yorker's* “20 under 40” list in 2010. He is also the recipient of a Lannan Fiction Fellowship, the Guardian First Book Award, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, among other awards. He is the author of three novels: *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2008), *How to Read the Air* (2010), and *All Our Names* (2014). His work has been translated into more than fifteen languages.

#### Nell Painter

The visual artist Nell Painter is also Nell Irvin Painter, Edwards Professor of American History, Emerita, Princeton University. Painter is the author of several books of history including *Sojourner Truth, A Life, A Symbol* (1997) and *The History of White People* (2011), as well as a memoir, *Old in Art School* (a 2019 National Book Critics Circle autobiography award finalist). Recent artist books *From Slavery to Freedom* (2020) and *American Whiteness Since Trump* (2020) were shown at Newark Arts/Newark Museum of Art and James Fuentes Gallery, New York, NY, respectively, in 2020.

## Jerry Philogene

Jerry Philogene is Associate Professor in the American Studies Department at Dickinson College. Her research interests include interdisciplinary American cultural and art history, Caribbean art history and visual arts, Black cultural politics, and theories of the African diaspora. Her articles have appeared in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, *BOMB Magazine*, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, *Radical History Review*, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, and the *Journal of Haitian Studies*, among others. She has published numerous exhibition catalogue essays. Her most recent essay on contemporary Haitian art appears in the catalogue for the exhibition *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*. She is a 2020 recipient of a Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant to complete her book *The Socially Dead and Improbable Citizen: Theorizing Visual Transformations of Haitian Citizenship*. She is currently co-curating *Painting with Beads: The Art of Myrlande Constant*, a traveling exhibition on contemporary Haitian artist Myrlande Constant, to open at the Fowler Museum, University of California, Los Angeles, in Fall 2022.

## Zoé Samudzi

Zoé Samudzi is a writer whose work has appeared in *Art in America*, *New Republic*, *New Inquiry*, *Verso*, and

*Hyperallergic*, among other spaces, and she is a contributing writer for *Jewish Currents*. She is also a doctoral candidate in Medical Sociology at the University of California, San Francisco, where she is researching German imperialism, the Herero and Nama genocide, race-making, eugenic science, and visibility.

## Didier William

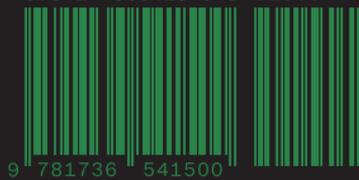
Didier William is originally from Port-au-Prince, Haiti. He earned a BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art and an MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University School of Art. His work has been exhibited at the Bronx Museum of Art, NY; the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA; the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR; and the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, IA. He is represented by James Fuentes Gallery in New York and M+B Gallery in Los Angeles. William was an artist-in-residence at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation in Brooklyn, NY, a 2018 recipient of the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a 2020 recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant. He has taught at institutions including Yale School of Art, Vassar College, Columbia University, UPenn, and SUNY Purchase. He is currently Assistant Professor of Expanded Print at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

## List of Plates

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| 2 | <b>Two Dads, 2017</b><br>Acrylic, collage, and wood carving on panel<br>64 × 50 inches                       | 7  | <b>Telefòn sa a pa janm pa p sonnen, 2018</b><br>Collage, acrylic, ink, and wood carving on paneling on panel<br>24 × 18 inches |
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18 × 14 × 2 inches

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