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What Does It Mean to Exhibit “Black Excellence”?

Two shows in New York City take profoundly different approaches to the idea, but are worth comparing for how they represent being Black and talented or accomplished.



Seph Rodney April 2, 2020



Installation view of *A Muffled Sound Underwater* at Latchkey gallery (image courtesy Latchkey gallery, photo by Meghan Schaeztle)

What do we mean when we say “Black excellence”? It is of the moment to talk about Black excellence, to talk about Black pain and Black resilience as well. But the conversation around how and in what ways Black people manifest virtuoso abilities, particularly in creative work and particularly under the structural constraints that thwart and hinder artists’ aspirations is distinctly pertinent now. There is a legacy of systematic disregard on one hand and exploitation on the other, which colors perceptions of distinction, among Black artists and broader audiences. “Black excellence” can be understood as a rallying cry, an objective, or merely a cliché slogan.

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Dominique Duroseau, "Settlement boundaries considered" Black on Black with Black series (2019 – 2020) faux fur coat, tarp, vinyl floor tiles, bubble wrap, cotton thread; 53 x 96 inches, in *A Muffled Sound Underwater* at Latchkey gallery (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic except where otherwise noted)

Two exhibitions currently on view in New York take profoundly different approaches to the idea of showcasing Black excellence and thus reveal something about the divergent meanings simultaneously held in this phrase. There is *Young, Gifted and Black* at the Lehman College Art Gallery and *A Muffled Sound Underwater* at Latchkey Gallery on the Lower East Side. The former is a curated selection from the collection of Bernard Lumpkin and his husband Carmine Boccuzzi, co-organized by curator Matt Wycoff and the writer and critic Antwaun Sargent. The latter is curated by two artists, Alteronce Gumby and Tariku Shiferaw, and features work by both Gumby and Shiferaw, along with Dominique Duroseau, Torkwase Dyson, Tsedaye Makonnen, and Marvin Touré.

It's crucial to acknowledge that these are very different kinds of exhibitions (and that three of the four curators are Black). The shows differ in scope: *Young, Gifted and Black* has approximately 47 artists represented in an exhibition slated to move on to galleries in Pennsylvania, Illinois, South Carolina, et al, whereas *A Muffled Sound Underwater*, a one-off show, features six artists' works installed in a scrappy Lower East Side gallery. More, they differ in intention, in composition, and in ambition. But they are worth comparing because they intersect at the idea of how to represent being Black and talented or accomplished. (The "young" is misleading, since several artists in the former show are actually in their 60s and 70s.)



Installation view of *Young, Gifted and Black* at the Lehman College Art Gallery

Young, Gifted and Black elaborates a kind of laundry list of luminaries who are well collected and well known in the contemporary art scene: Kevin Beasley, Jordan Casteel, David Hammons, Lonnie Holley, Kerry James Marshall, Wardell Milan, Deana Lawson, Nari Ward, Kara Walker, Tomashi Jackson, Henry Taylor. The names are a roll call of two generations of Black artists who are preeminent across a range of media. So far so good. But works are arranged on the walls and floor of the art gallery as if the curators handed out their names in a raffle. They generally don't speak to each other, and several of the works are not the best representatives of the artist's practice (for example the pieces by Derrick Adams, Glenn Ligon and Nari Ward). The show feels meant to impress the viewer by the weight of the artists' reputations, rather than by the insight of the curators' framing.

One gallery (to the right of the entrance) is more coherent than the other, which is hung salon-style and seems like all involved were more concerned with getting all the representative pieces onto the walls, rather than creating unique conversations. Curation is the conscientious development of a dialogue out of charged or strategic juxtapositions. It's like a dinner where guests are introduced to each other to fall into deep intellection. Here, many of the pieces seem to look glumly into the bottom of their drinks, shifting their weight from one foot to the other.



Installation view of *Young, Gifted and Black* at the Lehman College Art Gallery



Installation view of *Young, Gifted and Black* at the Lehman College Art Gallery, from left to right; Alteronce Gumby, "Gumby Nation" (2014); Sable Elyse Smith, "8032 Days" (2018); Kerry James Marshall, "Den Mother" (1996); and Bethany Collins "Too White To Be Black" (2014)

Ironically there is a moment in *Young, Gifted and Black* where the curation almost takes on a distinct point of view, and that is with the suite of paintings (three of which are dark compositions) including work by Alteronce Gumby, Sable Elyse Smith, Kerry James Marshall,

and Bethany Collins. Gumby's "Gumby Nation" (2014) features repeating silhouettes of the eponymous character. Next to that is Smith's "8032 Days" (2018), which features photographs of incarcerated men and their loved ones embedded in a large field of black suede. If Collins's work, "Too White To Be Black" (2014), which depicts barely visible jumbled letters and odd phrases partially obscured by pigment, were placed next to Gumby's (as opposed to after two intervening pieces) the visual suite might have suggested the emergence of the figure from an abstract field of darkness or literal incarceration. But then on the adjacent wall sits another laundry list of works, and the plot is lost again.



Installation view of *A Muffled Sound Underwater* at Latchkey gallery, from left: Torkwase Dyson, "The Terror of Black Indeterminacy" (nd) three drawings, ink and acrylic on vellum 12 x 9 in (each); Alteronce Gumby, "You think dark is just one color, but it ain't" (2020) acrylic & temper glass on wood 48 x 48 inches (image courtesy Latchkey gallery, photo by Meghan Schaeztle)

Alternatively, *A Muffled Sound Underwater* is thematically arranged around the idea of blackness as a metaphor — for failure, a void, a sense of loss, or, more positively, for beginning. The arrangement of the pieces sit tighter, gathered in a long hall where Makonnen's centrally placed "The Astral Sea" (2019) is surrounded by other works curled around the periphery. The show plays with the intersection of Blackness, as in the ethnic identity of all the artists, and elements that are darkly pigmented. It revolves around the theme of blackness (perhaps Blackness too?) as a needed, primary substrate on which or out of which objects of ceremonial and cultural significance, like Makonnen's long, elaborate hieratic robe can be fashioned.

Identity and material run on parallel tracks that are coerced into intersecting to yield the very textured, hybrid, abstract pieces by Duroseau which are made of distinct materials brought together under the cloak of night. Shiferaw makes his painted abstraction rigorously disciplined on the surface but uses his titles, for example “Simply Falling (Lyeoka)” (2019-2020), to refer to a network of Black cultural production. Marvin Touré’s partially melted toy pieces, such as “Super Sad” (2019-2020), evoke the abject nature of a masculinist power ideal that is often associated with Blackness. And Gumby’s acrylic and glass assemblage “You think dark is just one color, but it ain’t” (2020) makes black act as the launchpad for his continuing explorations of colors in combination. Here, excellence feels like an internalized ambition, a desire to investigate, which drives these artists to find out how materials might bridge the conceptual gap between Blackness and blackness — the notion of excellence as a guide rather than a hashtag. The show is superb in its intellectual curiosity, rather than in its advertising acumen.

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Marvin Touré, “Super Sad” (2019-2020) thermoplastic adhesive, acrylic, acrylic paint, plastic 12 × 5 × 2 inches, in *A Muffled Sound Underwater* at Latchkey gallery

There is a notion of excellence that imagines that it is bound up with a state of being and the reputational value that comes with status. There is another notion which is bound up with the doing, with the earnest exploration of what excellence can and might mean in practice. *Young, Gifted and Black* leans on the former, while *A Muffled Sound Underwater* exemplifies the latter. These exhibitions with their curatorial and thematic concerns, in comparison, provide a useful opportunity to ascertain how important these distinctions are.

Young, Gifted and Black at the Lehman College Art Gallery (250 Bedford Park Blvd West, the Bronx) was scheduled to continue through May 2. The exhibition was co-curated by Matt Wycoff and Antwaun Sargent. A Muffled Sound Underwater is open by appointment at Latchkey Gallery (361 Canal Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 28. The exhibition was co-curated by Alteronce Gumby and Tariku Shiferaw.

Editor's note: Please note that physical viewing hours for Young, Gifted and Black have been temporarily suspended in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Works in the show may be viewed via [the online catalogue](#). Cognizant of the importance of discussions around art and culture during this time, we encourage readers to explore both exhibitions virtually as many of us continue to self-isolate.