The New York Times

Local Artists Speak to Baltimore's Long and Complex History

Across three fall shows, the Baltimore Museum of Art showcases the multifaceted region through photography, paintings, poetry and weavings.

By Alina Tugend
Reporting from Baltimore

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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how the world of art and museums is pushing boundaries.

The artists Jerrell Gibbs and Devin Allen sat together in the same middle school in Baltimore more than two decades ago, and their lives occasionally overlapped as they remained in their native city.

This fall, works by both of them will appear in exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, a coincidence that underscores one of the main themes of the museum's fall shows — the breadth and depth of both Baltimore artists and art about the city itself.

Many museums are increasingly looking for ways to display the work of local artists in solo shows and by integrating them within exhibitions of other national and international artists; that's certainly the case with three of the Baltimore museum's fall shows.

"It has been my strategic focus ever since I took the helm to have a drumbeat of the artistic excellence that you find here in Baltimore and the region," said Asma Naeem, who, in 2023, became the museum's first director in its 112-year history to be raised in Baltimore.



“Sprinklers” (2026) by Jerrell Gibbs via of the artist and Galerie Myrtis

In the three exhibitions, the museum offers visitors very different ways to think about the city of Baltimore and state of Maryland: “Flashback: Two Centuries of Baltimore Photography” (through Feb. 21, 2027); “Jerrell Gibbs: Come home with me” (through May 2, 2027); and “Diedrick Brackens: lights at the end of the world,” which includes the poetry of the Baltimore writer Jöel Díaz (Nov. 8-Feb. 28, 2027).

The vast majority of the 210 works that appear in “Flashback” were shot by Baltimore photographers, including Allen’s images of the 2015 protests following the arrest and injury of Freddie Gray. Gray’s death from a spinal trauma after being chased and restrained by police was ruled a homicide.

Allen, 38, had just bought a camera two years before — financed with a loan from his grandmother — and ran to both join and cover the protests. He and Gray had mutual friends, having both grown up in West Baltimore.

He posted the photos on his social media accounts where they quickly went viral, reposted by celebrities like Usher and Beyoncé. They also caught the eye of a Time magazine editor, who was surprised to find out that Allen was a self-taught amateur photographer.

On May 11, 2015, Allen’s photo of a man racing to join protesters with a phalanx of police behind him ran on the cover of Time with several others inside. The cover and three other images he shot of the protests are displayed in the gallery.



Devin Allen's photo of protests in Baltimore, which was featured as the cover of Time in 2015. Time Inc./ Devin Allen, Time Vol. 185, No. 17, 2015. Baltimore Museum of Art, E. Kirkbride Miller Research Library.

Allen — who arrived for a recent interview with a newly purchased Hasselblad camera around his neck — said he was deeply inspired by the work of the renowned photographer Gordon Parks, who "said he could have chosen a knife or a gun, but he chose a camera as his weapon," Allen said.

"I wasn't trying to get a Time cover. I just wanted to tell the honest truth," he added. "Nobody was going to tell that truth better than someone who is actually from West Baltimore." Like many others who grew up there, Allen and Gibbs have

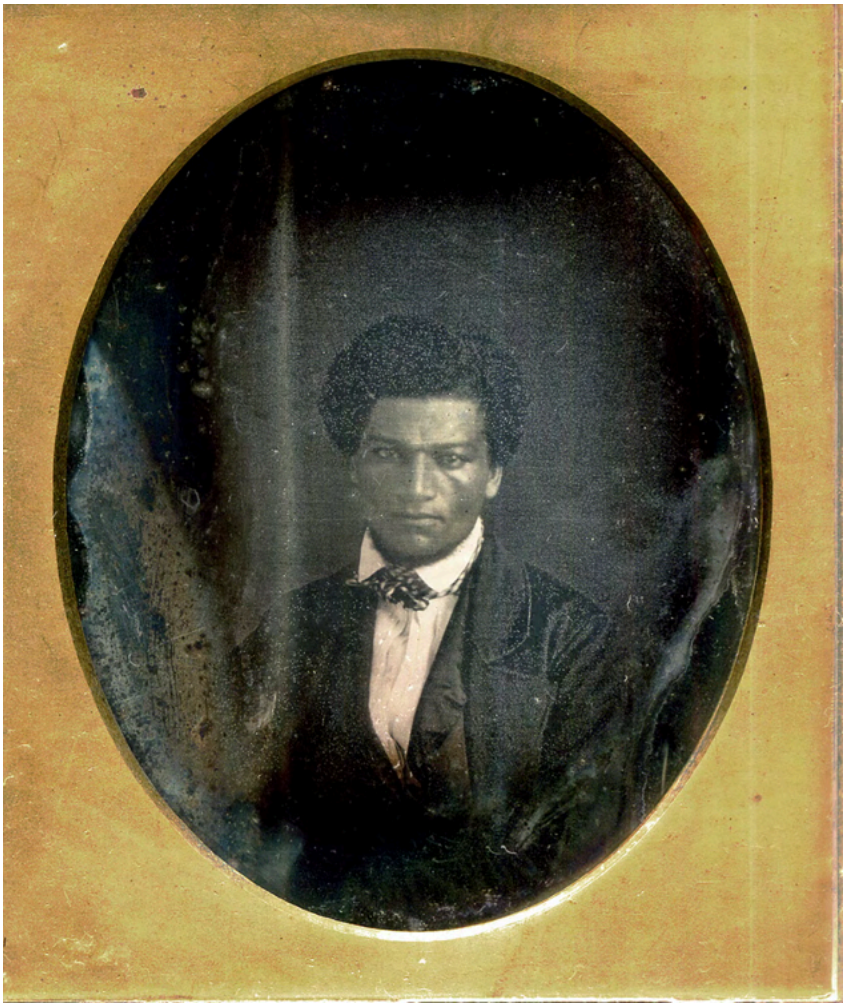
strong ties to the area with its long history of disinvestment and poverty, deep tradition of civil rights activism and generations of celebrated musicians, poets and entertainers.

Allen's career took off after the photos appeared in Time. He was hired by Under Armour, which is based in Maryland, to shoot photos worldwide and has started and supported nonprofits to bring photography to young people all over Baltimore, many, who like him, might be changed by picking up a camera.

His greatest joy is still wandering the streets of his beloved city, shooting anything that grabs his eye; he is well known around town.

"They call me the picture man," he said.

Other highlights of "Flashback" include the first known photo — taken in 1841 — of the famed abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass several years after he escaped from slavery. He is rarely seen as a young man; he was around 23 in the photo. Although it is one of the few images in the show not taken by a Baltimore artist, Douglass was born in Maryland and spent his formative years in Baltimore.



The first known photo of Frederick Douglass taken in 1841.
Greg French Collection

Douglass would become a strong proponent of photography as a way to foster democracy and counter the buffoonish caricatures of Black people popular in the 19th century, said Leslie Cozzi, co-curator of the exhibition.

“Photography is a way to achieve self representation for people who are otherwise excluded from the democratic process,” she added.

The photos have a beauty, not just a history — for example, the delightful symmetry of a 1954 photograph “Druid Hill YMCA Swim Class,” of a group of obedient pupils standing in a row in the water and each stretching out one arm, mimicking their swim teacher’s motion on the sideline.



"Druid Hill YMCA Swim Class" (1954) by Irving Henry Phillips Sr. The Baltimore Museum of Art

It is by Irving Henry Phillips Sr., an acclaimed photographer for the newspaper The Baltimore African-American, known as the Afro, which was founded in 1892 and still publishes today. Ten of Phillips's photos hang in the show.

While "Flashback" provides a kaleidoscope of the city, Gibbs, 38, zooms in to give viewers a look at a particular Baltimore way of life and community.

In an interview, he talked about how he was inspired by family photos he found in the basement of his Aunt Ella's — his grandmother's sister — whom he lived with growing up, also in West Baltimore. His grandmother resided two doors down. Visitors can see those photos in a small room off the exhibition.

The oil paintings are not replicas of the photos; rather he used them to inspire scenes or portraits that he hopes will resonate with visitors.

“To-go plates,” a painting of a backyard gathering of folks eating and packing up food is a tribute to his grandmother’s generosity. “For as long as I can remember, my grandmother lived in her house by herself, and she would literally cook as if she had 20 people living in her house. Whenever she was cooking on Sundays,” she invited the neighbors over, Gibbs said.

While many of the scenes portray joy and connection, the fear that haunted Gibbs’ family and friends is also present; “The Sounds of the Vic,” shows the back of a woman’s head as she looks over her shoulder outside. She’s hearing the motor of a Crown Victoria, the cars that police officers drove, and which often boded no good in the neighborhood.

The Diedrick Brackens exhibition has a completely different feel. Brackens was born in Texas, but his work includes 14 large-scale weavings loosely incorporating the landscape and history of the Chesapeake Bay region, which includes Baltimore.

The weavings highlight the area’s role as a major hub in the Underground Railroad and the famed wild horses that run on the eastern shore of Maryland.



A large-scale weaving entitled “east of east point seven beaks” (2026) by the artist Diedrick Brackens. Diedrick Brackens via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Both Brackens' work and Díaz’s poems were commissioned by the museum for this exhibition.

Brackens, who lives in San Francisco, combines the ideas of flight, migration and liberation in a number of works. Díaz who lives in Baltimore, is executive director of the Clifton House, which was the home of former Maryland Poet Laureate Lucille Clifton and is now a nonprofit literary and arts center.



Brackens combines the ideas of flight, migration and liberation in much of his art.
Ian Byers-Gamber

One of his poems was particularly inspired by Brackens' work "east of east point seven beaks," which shows a silhouette of a person being carried — or perhaps flying with — trumpeter swans, that were once extinct but have been brought back and now migrate from Canada to the Maryland seashore.

Another weaving, "to be loved more and ridden less (the gate)," portrays a gate again opened by a figure as horses — some lavender and rose colored — run out and seem to fly.

The origin of the wild horses is a mystery. But as Brackens imagines it, "a gate was left open and they walked out, and now they're free. They negotiate the human and the wild world every day, and there's something inspiring about that to me," Brackens said. "Maybe they offer us a way to think about how we could be in the world."

Corrected on Oct. 29, 2026: An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the American abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass. It is Douglass, not Douglas. An earlier version also misspelled the given name of the artist Diedrick Brackens and misidentified where he lives. It is Diedrick, not Deidrick, and he lives in San Francisco, not Los Angeles. An earlier version also misstated when Asma Naeem started as director of the Baltimore Museum of Art. It was 2023, not 2024.

We acknowledge mistakes in our reporting with corrections. If you spot an error, please let us know at corrections@nytimes.com. Learn more.

KQED

THE DO LIST

Diedrick Brackens' Monumental Textiles Hang in Splendor at YBCA

By Sarah Hotchkiss Mar 24, 2026

Updated Mar 25, 2026

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Live Radio Morning Edition

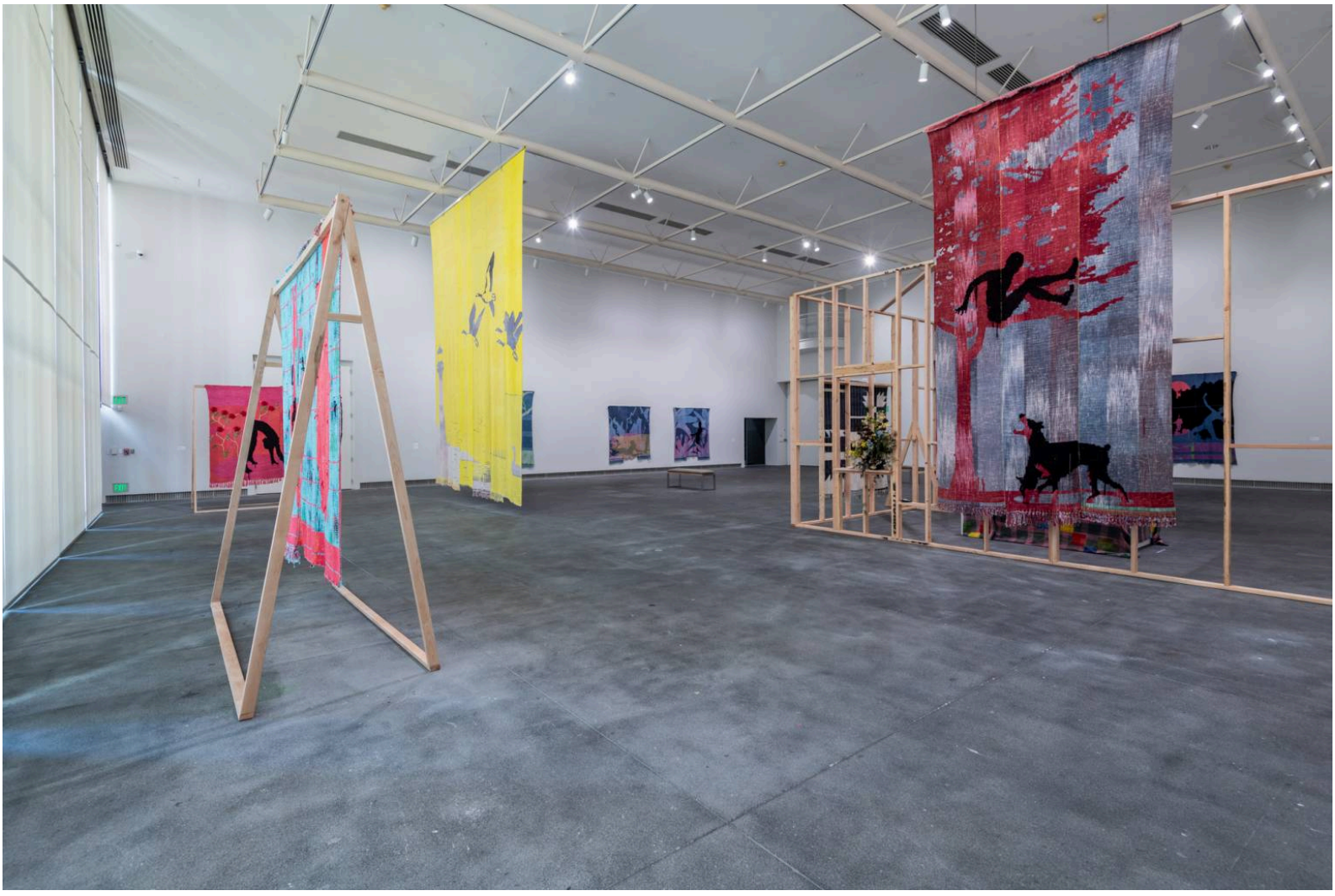


Diedrick Brackens, 'a garden protects the dreamer' (detail), 2026; Woven cotton and acrylic yarn. *(Charlie Villyard/YBCA)*

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is, let's admit, a tough space to fill with art. Its largest gallery is hangar-like, with impossibly high ceilings, one wall of windows and no interior divisions to speak of. Much of the artwork made at a human scale has a tendency to disappear in there, dwarfed by the spaciousness of its surroundings.

This is decidedly not the case with *gather tender night*, an exhibition of recent textile work by Bay Area artist (and California College of the Arts faculty member) Diedrick Brackens. His 15 large-scale textiles, hand-dyed and woven on floor looms, stretch to over 20 feet in length, softly hanging from walls, frames and ceiling throughout the well-arranged show.

I wish I could write this review without mentioning the upcoming closure of CCA, which is also Brackens' alma mater. After graduating from the school's MFA program in 2014, Brackens returned to CCA a decade later as faculty, with international museum exhibitions and a New York gallery under his belt. I cannot think of a better example of how an art school draws talented people to a region — and gives local audiences access to work they'd otherwise have to travel elsewhere to see. (This is Brackens' first solo exhibition in the Bay Area.)



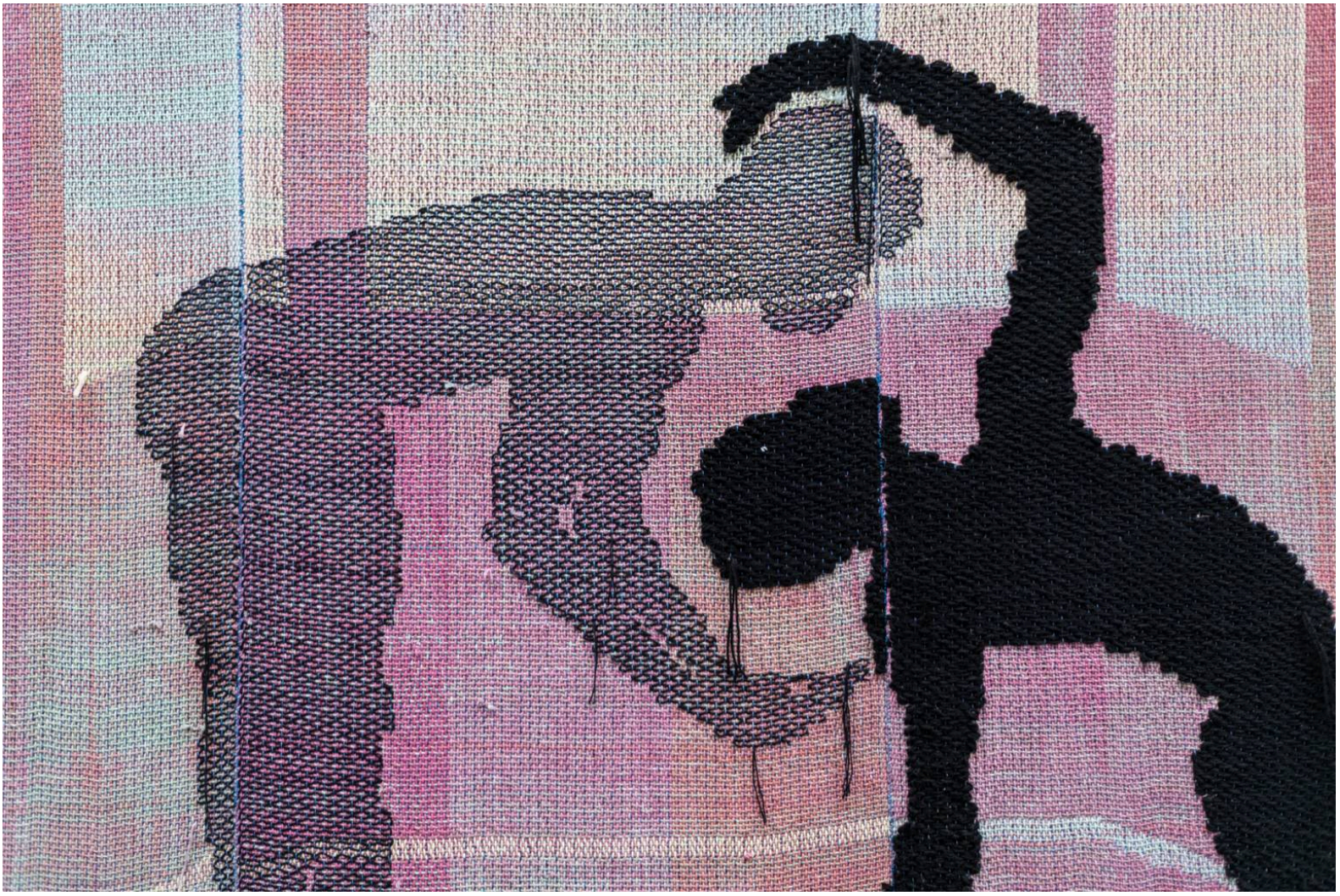
Installation view of Diedrick Brackens' 'gather tender night' at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. *(Charlie Villyard/YBCA)*

peaceful landscapes and populate fairytale scenarios (*to soothe a myth* features a rearing unicorn). There is something elemental about these figures, which bend in half, raise their arms to the sky and gaze up, seemingly in awe of their surroundings.

Part of the dreaminess of Brackens' work comes from his color choices. The oldest work in the show, dating back to 2020, is made with a scintillating combination of bright vermillion and turquoise. Then, a shift to yellows and muted purples; next, desaturated jewel tones; and finally, in his most recent pieces, mauve, oceanic greens and blues.

After dying lengths of cotton fiber in his studio, the weaving process causes sections of color to shift and misregister slightly, blurring the edges of shapes. Brackens plays off that painterly effect by leaving tails of black yarn dangling, like drips, from his silhouettes.

The best part of seeing *gather tender night* at YBCA — and all the space that venue allows — is that visitors get to walk around many of the works. Two pieces hang from handsome wooden racks that nod to Brackens' floor looms. Others hang from the two walls of a framed-out domestic space, which includes an installation of a bed (covered with a woven textile, of course), an overturned basket and a pile of pungent yellow soap.



Diedrick Brackens, 'you'll never get to heaven if you break my heart' (detail), 2026; Woven cotton and acrylic yarn. *(Charlie Villyard/YBCA)*

On an "interior" wall hangs Brackens' sole work that places his figures indoors, one bending backward to kiss another. The pair's arms bracket each other's heads in arcs of mutual protection.

Even visitors with minimal knowledge of what it means to make a double weave textile can intuit the construction of Brackens' works, thanks to these airy hanging arrangements. On the versos, color-inverted landscapes become devoid of figures, which Brackens embroiders onto a textile's surface.

Some of the most poetic moments in *gather tender night* come from the juxtaposition of front and back. On *blood compass*, the show's largest piece, two figures look up at a flock of geese, a lighthouse in the background. But on the other side of the textile, the geese, water and lighthouse are alone. A few glimpses of black thread signal the figures' ghostly presence.



Diedrick Brackens, 'commitments' and 'help is available,' 2025; both woven cotton and acrylic yarn. *(Charlie Villyard/YBCA)*

In other works, figures blend into foliage, appearing on a textile's surface only in bits and pieces. *commitments* and *help is available*, both from 2025, show figures sitting cross-legged, arms raised above their heads. In the former, branches of angel's trumpet occlude the heads and arms. In the latter, a bush of devil's trumpet surrounds a torso and legs. Here, the repeated pose looks like a call for salvation.

Brackens' dusky hues, especially in the more recent pieces, speak to night as a period of possibility, of slippery identity and greater freedom. But just as there is a flip side to each textile, so night gives way to day, and its potential for both visibility and accompanying violence. Brackens' great skill is holding these realities together, embedding danger within softness, and giving his figures the freedom to stretch their arms, legs and eyes to a beautiful sherbet sky.

'gather tender night' is on view at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (701 Mission St., San Francisco) through Aug. 23, 2026.

CONSIDERATIONS | GOSPEL IN THE GLOAMING

VIA ISSUE 199, FLEETING TWILIGHT

Written by **Elizabeth Burch-Hudson**



Diedrick Brackens. “Blood Compass” (2023). Cotton And Acrylic Yarn 245” x 202 ½”. From *GENERAL CONDITIONS*, on view at Jack Shainman Gallery’s The School through November 29th.

He told me I was a good kisser and that he looked like Dog The Bounty Hunter. I believed the former but needed visual aid for the latter. He was telling the truth, but it wasn’t a quality that suited him. I knew because of the comfort with which he sat, as if he was eternally at ease. How he could smile and look sad all at the same time and be unashamed of both.

I met the man in crisis at an eastside bar on a noisy couch, amongst the din of a May Tuesday night, where he told me he hated suburbia and felt betrayed by Grimes. The only thing that kept me nursing my single tequila soda was I could tell he knew he wasn’t saying anything. I think he even apologized for it. Either out loud or with his eyes.

He stroked my hair as we melted together into the red leather couch. He asked me if I’d always been hot. I said no, which was half of the truth. He found me charming and enigmatic, like standing on the edge of a cliff and wanting to jump just to feel yourself fly for a second. I could tell he was a man attracted because of—not despite—the darkness I’ve worn since birth—that ninth circle of Hell, prickly, black tar that hurts like a thousand needles and the sound of your mother’s voice. Folks in LA are used to people like me, people who feel bad and make a living off it. In fact, I moved here to wear this darkness in peace. Objectification had become a peaceful state for me. A state of survival.

We walked from the bar back to my apartment, up the steep hills of cracked pavement, casually scaling mountains made from fault lines. He asked me questions about the moon, which shone down on us like a well kempt lighthouse eye, and I lied in response. I knew I seemed like I’d know, and he wouldn’t question my answers. It seemed like he needed the ones I gave.

“I’m into kinky things like making the bed,” he japed when I realized my bed was bare and in need of fresh sheets. I was having a carefully carefree summer, rotating dating apps, partners, and bed linens as frequently as a bisexual with OCD might. My roommate came home and suddenly I felt claustrophobic, so my date and I hiked back down towards the bar and his enormous rattling vehicle.

His car was as boisterous as he could’ve been if he hadn’t become one of those quiet, brooding men who likes documentaries, Alice Coltrane’s Ecstatic Musicality, and a single earring to declare a delicate, *On The Road* kind of difference hanging from his left ear. He ferried us to his apartment, where we made noises louder than his record collection.

In bed with him, we lay beneath a blanket of summer air, still cool and light, not yet sticky with the promise of June. I got six mosquito bites before smacking the bug to death against his hairy thigh. He kept the doors and windows to his downstairs Echo Park studio wide open while he slept. I can’t imagine living life without such fear. I suppose I shouldn’t mistake carelessness for bravery. Maybe he just didn’t want to feel alone. Or maybe he just wanted to feel like he was in Texas.

He was tender with my body, and I wondered what he was afraid of. He was really into old school country, old school everything. He had a cowboy hat hanging from his rearview mirror, a few in his house, and even had found a cowboy painting discarded on the sidewalk that he was planning on framing. White men always want to be cowboys. They’re nostalgic for land without laws, endings, or any kind of limitations. He wanted to be in the great wide open. “So you want to be close to God?” I asked.

“Don’t we all?” he replied.

He donned a Stetson to drive me home, barely fitting inside his low-ceilinged apartment until we reached the stillness of the porch. We emerged to a swollen sky. It had swallowed the full moon completely. I told him it was probably the most full right now, when we couldn’t see it. I hoped I was right. I didn’t think he deserved both me and the moon.

He was going to Texas soon and I hoped he’d find what he was looking for, God or otherwise, that he wouldn’t be disappointed like he’d been with Grimes. I don’t want to be close to God. I don’t know where that would get me, besides stranded in a barren plain. I like the stars as much as everyone and I find the moon religious, but I’m skeptical of men who love Texas and hate California when they’re essentially the same state, just different shapes. I’d rather be close to

myself—God has never given me a reason to trust or seek intimacy. Maybe someday I'll match with God on a dating app. Maybe then I'll get my reason.

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Elizabeth Burch-Hudson, Issue 199, Fleeting Twilight, Art

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PANEL

For Artist Diedrick Brackens, Weaving Is An Act of Religion

By Essence Harden

May 10, 2024



Essence Harden and Diedrick Brackens, photographed by Deonte Lee / BFA.

Last week, Diedrick Brackens got together with curator and friend Essence Harden at The Standard Hotel in the East Village to talk about his new exhibition at Jack Shainman, blood compass. Spread across two of the gallery's locations in Tribeca and Chelsea, the show includes a series of large-scale textiles that map out a fictional place, drawn from the artists own biography, and broader diasporic movements throughout American history. In conversation, Brackens explains why his weaving practice is an act of religion and ritual and the growing proliferation of textiles within the contemporary art world.

ESSENCE HARDEN: Hi, everyone. I am really excited to be here today in conversation with Diedrick Brackens

on the occasion of his opening at Jack Shainman. It's a single exhibition across two different locations. To begin, can you talk to us about that decision, and the types of work included in *blood compass?*

DIEDRICK BRACKENS: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you for agreeing to talk to me. And thank y'all for being here. In part, the show is in two places because it's been a prolific few years and I've been very resistant to having gallery shows back to back. I had my show here almost three years ago, so I had a lot of time to think about where the work was and where I wanted it to go. In that time I had a lot of museum exhibitions, and that opened me up to new ideas and being okay with going deeper. I started to think a lot about how it's always the same; the place that I'm from, the things that I've seen, and I'm taking these historical threads that my own biography touches on and trying to expound that. One of those things for me is the way that black folks have moved through and around this country at various points in time, and then using that journey on this interpersonal level with one or two characters that appear in the weavings. Then thinking about myth, ritual, sacrifice, interiority, joy, all of these things that are sitting in the same box.

HARDEN: Thank you, this is a great introduction to the work. With the Tribeca part of the exhibition, it's the largest work I've seen you make and show publicly. We have *blood compass*, which is the title of the exhibition and the title piece, which is 22-feet tall. The space is gigantic, and you can see the backs of multiple pieces. So there's two decisions happening there: One is scaling up by quite a bit, and then looking at the back parts, and I noticed this kind of ghost image happening within the textiles. Can you talk more about those things?



Installation view, Diedrick Brackens, *blood compass*, 2024. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio.

BRACKENS: Well, I think everyone here knows, but I make textiles. I feel like the loom, the practice of weaving brings me into contact with a lot of metaphors that we hear every day. It touches everything. It's about language, it's about magic, it's about time travel, it's about narrative and storytelling in a particular way. But it's something that most people do not have a direct relationship to. Everyone who approaches the practice of weaving is always sort of enchanted, and I think about it literally. I think about these weavings as accessing some sort of spiritual technology in the same way that someone who drums thinks of it as medicine, or DJs, et cetera. I didn't make these weavings knowing that they were going to go into the container at Tribeca. But I feel like they work on the space and the space works on them. They don't seem like they're fighting each other. They sit so gracefully in there and it stuns me. But I'm still reckoning with how the two shows relate to each other, because one was birthed at the last minute. I was thinking about this work for an exhibition that was delayed, and then also the dimensions of that space were such that I had the verticality to play with, but now that exhibition's not happening in that format. I don't tend to necessarily respond to architecture while practicing. I like living for the work, not living for an assignment. So it seems fortuitous to me.

HARDEN: Absolutely. Part of what you're moving through is this idea of storytelling and narrative, and drawing upon diasporic movement and your own personal histories. You're often thinking through prose and other types of writing. I'm thinking about histories that are particular to places in which you or your family's from, and these broader narratives finding their way into the work.

BRACKENS: I feel like a lot of my instruction in life that was not formal education has been through storytelling and the ways in which I came to understand who my parents were, who my grandparents were, what the place that we were from meant. It was always through story, never a direct transmission of information. I was always presented with the fabulous or the fantastical, even if it was about a mundane life. So through that piecemeal relationship to

the people in the place that I was from, I continued with my own questions and finding other things that resonated with that way of living, like Essex Hemphill or Octavia Butler, as you mentioned. Those things started to fill in the gaps where it was like, "This seems very similar to the thing that my family member told me," or, "This horrific event in this tiny Texas town sounds like something that happened in my tiny Texas town." So I started being like, "Oh, these things aren't dissimilar, I'm not disconnected from this. These aren't isolated events. It's a larger systemic thing." I even came to think about the big questions of our country in this very small way and remembered, "Oh, I've experienced this. I know what that's like." This is a way I can point people to my set of interests or open up a portal for someone to think about what's happening right now.



flames and familiars, 2023. Cotton and acrylic yarn. 98 x 296 inches (overall). © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

HARDEN: There's also this romantic aspect within the work that comes through. I was reading this review from Hilton Als, and he references the Black Romantic Exhibition at the Studio Museum of Harlem. It was like 20 years ago, and it referenced your work. I was like, "Oh yeah, this long tradition of seeing sensuality and desire between black men." It might feel like a little bit of an aside, but I think it's part of the storytelling narrative that happens within the visual field for your work. Does this resonate with you, this idea of romanticism happening within the work?

BRACKENS: It makes sense. That's a good question. There are several things

in the practice that are right on the surface for people to see and unpack, but not everyone does. And sometimes I can't tell if that is because they don't see it or they would rather talk about it.

HARDEN: Like what?

BRACKENS: Like what you're asking about the romantic or sensual possibilities. Sometimes they're right there. There was a series of works at Frieze LA two years ago at my shared booth at Various Small Fires [VSF] with Dyani White Hawk, and it's a storybook of images where there's two figures sitting on a bed, and one's about to touch the other, and it sort of culminates where there is a figure laying on a table and the other figure is eating butt, basically. And everyone's just like, "Oh, oh, these are so beautiful, they're just so mournful. There's something so sorrowful about them." And I'm like, " What's sad here?!" There are these moments where I'm like, "Are people intentionally ignoring the thing? Do they not see it? What are they not experiencing?" Then I have moments where I'm like, "Oh God, this person who I adore is here with their child and they want to take a picture in front of the weird one." Romanticism is something that I'm always interested in putting in the work, as well as having these bodies in nature, having these bodies outside, because it's the space that often we imagine black folks as being divorced or dispossessed from. And for me, I'm like, "Oh, I am from a rural context." I did not really know the idea of what a city really was until I was an adult. And the outdoors, writ large, is a space where a lot of queer folks find themselves, or can be themselves, or participate in spaces for desire or sensuality and all of these things that you described. So trying to couple those things feels important.



untitled flag, 2022. cotton yarn. 142 x 18 1/2 inches. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio.

HARDEN: That makes a lot of sense, in part because you're from Texas but you went to college in California. Black folks in the West have a different relationship to the outside, and it's really present in the work. There's this other thing about back of the work being shown. This is not something that's generally done by you or other people who work in textile, and I wonder why you made that decision, and also the kind of formality behind creating a weaving around what is viewable space, what is acknowledged space within the weaving itself. You already fight back against various techniques and you don't trim the work.

BRACKENS: Yeah. Some of it is in tandem with the space, that there are a few walls to mount work to, and a lot of it was from very exciting conversation. Hanging a show with Jack is hanging a show with Jack, meaning the man himself is there in the space making decisions, talking through the work. That has been really exciting, to have someone who cares and thinks about how the things interrelate. I like for people to see the backs of the works because even if they don't weave or have any sense of it, seeing both sides allows people to understand the construction a little bit more. Oftentimes the figures don't show up on the back, they don't register at all. So it's almost like seeing the landscapes without the people in them and then seeing the landscapes with the people. So there's this interesting flip to me. There's some technical stuff that happens that people who do weave know. It's like a moment to brag or to be like, "The

back of this is clean as the front. Y'all need to see that I know what I'm doing." For me it's almost a moment to be like, "I know how to do it. I am technically accomplished." Even based on the figures disappearing, there's things that happen on the back that wildly surprise me. There are these sort of ghosts or fugitive images that aren't what is woven into the front. You can sort of Rorschach them, a little bit. So there's this emotional register to being able to see the back, as well as giving the viewer even more information, more access.

HARDEN: The first time I saw the back of your work was years ago, but I was like, "Why?" And you were like, "Why *don't* we do that?" And here we are now. We were talking earlier about the landscape of textile and the education that's happening or not happening with that. What does the next 10 or 20 years look like for people going to school for weaving or not, if there aren't people leading the next generation and cohorts of students? What does it look like to create a vision for folks to follow in those footsteps?



towards the greenest place on earth, 2023. cotton and acrylic yarn. 83 x 83 inches. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio.

BRACKENS: That's another great question. For a long time I've had a lot of anxiety about what it *should* look like. I think a lot of the textile/fiber folks that I know are very interested in gatekeeping. Like, "This is our thing. We don't want anyone else to do it. Who taught them to weave? How good are they at it? They don't know this and this and this." I'm less interested in that, because I was educated right in the middle of a contemporary art craft world where those boundaries are now starting to fall apart. But I do worry about the

people who want to learn, but they don't have a person or a place to do so or to sharpen their ideas around the discourse. I love that textile ideas and languages and materials are infecting contemporary art right now. You cannot walk into a gallery in any major city and not see a show that has some sort of textile-inspired work, which is really wonderful for the medium.

But as someone who weaves, I have a stake. I am dedicated to the idea that people can learn, will learn, and will continue to weave in whatever spaces, whether it's academic or not. I'm going back into the classroom in the fall to teach people how to weave, which I'm really excited about. I've had a lot of conversations where people are like, "Oh my God, you're going to teach? It's going to take you out of the studio." But the studio is everywhere. Weaving with 30 other people who want to learn that discipline keeps it growing, and it keeps me sharp and excited. I can vividly remember the moment where I was like, "This is what I'm going to do." And when you see someone else have that moment, you're like, "Oh my God." To be that model for people is really exciting. I feel like you can count on one hand the times you've had that moment with someone who was showing you how to live. That's magical.

HARDEN: It's really magical. You spoke earlier about ritual, and I think with this body of work itself, there's this kind of investment in the hours which are kept around ritual. It comes up in the hues that you use in the textile. And this is the idea of silhouettes and how that then operates within sort of narrative overall of *blood compass*. And it has a African diasporic lens into your work that it is this investment in the acts of ritual as well. I wanted you to talk more specifically about that.

BRACKENS: Damn. I feel like weaving is the only ritual I keep. Even if I'm like, "I should meditate. I should do this," I'm like, "I'll do it at the loom." Ritual in some sense is about repetition, and repetition is a holy act. To repeat something over and over is to manifest it, to make it real. Every inch of weaving that I do materializes this magical, mythic, fantastic space that I'm building. While I don't imagine most of those images can be made real, hopefully I'm manifesting some sort of

real version of that space, whether it be about the community that I'm building, or the traumatic stories that I'm telling that are being transformed. I can't get too deep into the Southern Baptist bag, but I feel like I am the Bible made flesh. Every time I say something, I'm like, "Oh God, I sound like my grandma." Even in the studio, I'll have meetings with the team and they will pare it back to me, and the things that I say always have something to do with church or the Bible. So it is a space where I can let out the lapsed Baptist a little bit and re-engage with those rituals and try to rehab them to something that looks more like my reality.

HARDEN: That's great. Thank you.



the forks of the creek, 2023. cotton and acrylic yarn. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica Studio.

VAULT

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Diedrick Brackens, Isabella Ducrot, Jackson Farley, Martin Grant, Julia Gutman, Klára Hosnedlová, Patrick & Tamsin Johnson, Marie-Claire Messouma Manlanbien, Maria Madeira, Edwina McLennan, Mirka Mora, Liliana Pasalic, Jahnne Pasco-White, The Pacific Sisters, Margaret Rarru Garrawurra & more

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DIEDRICK BRACKENS
it goes like this, 2025
cotton and acrylic yarn
213 x 203 cm

Courtesy the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery,
New York

DIEDRICK BRACKENS

The tapestries of American artist Diedrick Brackens intertwine myth and history with the artist's own image, creating artworks that showcase his unique vision to an expanding global audience.

FEATURE *by* BRADLEY VINCENT

LOOMING FIGURES

Diedrick Brackens's grandmother introduced the artist to sewing at a young age. Today, the California-based artist creates tapestries that physically function across the boundaries of photography, painting and sculpture while thematically traversing intersections of race, identity and history through textile art. Brackens uses his craft not only as a medium for artistic expression but also as a means to explore the legacy of African-American history, personal identity and the enduring power of cultural traditions. His art is deeply engaged with the figure, both as a formal element and a conceptual tool, filtering self-portraiture through the loom and the overlapping prisms of history and mythology.

While Brackens began his studies in photography, his pathway to textiles as a medium was an intuitive one – a reach for a certain type of material and process of making – but in their figurative tableaus, their captured moments of movement, or stillness, the influence of photography and its place within the artist's process

Bottom
DIEDRICK BRACKENS
***evergold and green*, 2024**
cotton and acrylic yarn
213 x 208 cm

Opposite
DIEDRICK BRACKENS
***marrow becomes breath*, 2022**
woven cotton and acrylic yarn, fabric trim
250 x 270 cm

Previous page
Installation view
DIEDRICK BRACKENS
***blood compass*, 2024**
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
© Diedrick Brackens



of making can still be felt. Photographic images, often images of himself, serve as source material for his woven compositions, which he translates into textile form through a labour-intensive process of hand-weaving. The artist's body acts as both a stage in the artwork's composition and creation, and as a sight of personal and collective experience subsequently transferred and embedded into the fabric of the pieces. By abstracting these photographic self-portraits along with other archival imagery, Brackens blurs the boundary between documentation and imagination, grounding his work again in personal and collective narratives – specifically those of Black and queer communities. This weaving journey through photography allows Brackens to create richly layered works that honour lived experience while transforming it into allegorical expressions.

In their clear historical and political resonance, Brackens's works possess the authority and power of a social document. Yet, through their merging of various narrative sources, they also transcend any singular didactic or polemic role. Drawing from history, along with myth and legend, the works place the self-subject – the artist – within a timeless past-present-future. These tapestries complicate familiar stories, weaving a documentary-myth-biography hybrid and threading historical notes through the imagery. Brackens's body of work serves as a space where the myth of Icarus can be reimagined as a narrative of liberation or transcendence, where Southern catfish swim in the muddy baptismal waters of birth and rebirth, or where the biblical tale of Jonah and the Whale becomes a means to re-explore trauma, resurrection and transformation. Brackens uses these myths for storytelling and to elevate contemporary Black experience into a sacred, timeless register.

Beyond the figures – both human and otherwise – in Brackens's works lie the expanses, colours, shades and details of his evocative landscapes. The richness of surfaces can be described as painterly, but they are absolutely an expression of their material and creation. For Brackens, that material is primarily cotton – not only for its ability to take and hold colour, but also for its historical significance and its association with the history of enslavement and violence. Brackens discussed working with this material as "a small way to pay tribute to those who came before me and worked with it under very different circumstances." This work is now the labour of making, the time spent at the loom and the submission to a material that yields a lucid, dreamlike quality to the landscapes Brackens creates. Here are stretches of undulating colour, perfect restrictions of palette and minimal – essentialist – renderings of foliage or architecture. The resulting language conveys timelessness and otherworldliness while simultaneously







Installation view
DIEDRICK BRACKENS
blood compass, 2024
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
Photo: Genevieve Hanson

Opposite
DIEDRICK BRACKENS
matter into spirit, 2024
cotton and acrylic yarn
208 x 208 cm

Courtesy the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
© Diedrick Brackens

triggering recognition in worlds contemporary to us, stemming from the here and now.

Though photographic in origin, literary in sensibility and painterly in execution, Brackens's works are ultimately sculptural in form. The artist speaks of his process as one that is about making decisions like a sculptor to create works that are viewed in their roundness. On display, they are objects that can be hung against a wall, or hover, looming larger than the rooms that contain them, commanding space and contemplation. The artist has exhibited widely, and Australian audiences may be familiar with his work through the most recent NGV Triennial that featured his piece *marrow becomes breath* (2022). The work evokes a metamorphosis from the physical to the spiritual, suggesting a mythic journey of the soul. The work is now held in the gallery's permanent collection. Since then, the artist has continued to exhibit internationally, most recently including a suite of works in the 2025 Mercosul Biennial in Brazil. Works including *matter into spirit* (2024) and *evergold and green* (2024) continue to bring his figurative textile tableaus to global audiences, their universal resonance only aided by their singular perspective on humanity.

All of his time at the loom has ensured that Brackens is, by his own admission, a better weaver today than he was three or four years ago. As his investigations continue, the assuredness with which he weaves together the personal and the universal, the historical and the mythic, the literary and the visual, only grows. When pushed on what is next for his work, he identifies an interest in further abstraction – on the figure merging into the environment around it, evolving and transforming. As we navigate the 21st century and the alarmingly shifting political and ecological times in which we find ourselves, one can understand the impulse and can only imagine a growing resonance of such work. However, his body of work also transcends our times, collapsing history and the present into one woven plane, hung large and high for us to gaze upon. **V**

Diedrick Brackens is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles
jackshainman.com
diedrickbrackens.com

CULTURED

At the End of the Day, Artist Diedrick Brackens's Textiles Are About Trying to Love—And Asking to Be Loved

The textile artist’s silhouetted figures act out scenes both heartwarming and aching in this cross-gallery presentation.



Portrait of Diedrick Brackens. All images courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Across Jack Shainman Gallery's two New York locations, a series of woven tapestries depict an uncertain place, in an uncertain time. This hazy realm is a creation of Los Angeles-based artist, Diedrick Brackens, who has assembled its mythology over the course of his career, punctuating it with the sigils and characters that dance throughout his oeuvre.

This new exhibition, "blood compass (https://jackshainman.com/exhibitions/diedrick_brackens8)," encounters the imagined space at dusk, twilight, and nighttime. Human silhouettes act out scenes that make reference to the Bible or works by authors like Octavia E. Butler and poet Wendy Videlock. Even cast in shadow, the characters' awe-struck navigation of Brackens (https://www.instagram.com/deedsweaves/)'s universe and their relationships, to each other and power, is clear.

It reflects the Texas (https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2024/05/10/haas-brothers-nasher-sculpture-center) native's ongoing exploration of Black and queer experiences in the real world's often fraught landscape. The work—crafted from hand-dyed cotton using a combination of West African (https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2023/02/10/nifemi-marcus-bello-design-marta-los-angeles-exhibition), European, and American techniques—is meant to spur the viewer to action. Here, Brackens reveals his hope for the show's impact, and where he hopes to transport his audience next.



Diedrick Brackens, *survival is a shrine, not the small space near the limit of life*, 2021.

CULTURED: What do you hope visitors take away from the exhibition?

Diedrick Brackens: I cannot teach visitors how to dream, but I hope that I can reorient them in the same way I try to reorient myself through these objects. I hope the viewers are animated by the visions in my world-making to seek joy and to interrogate power. These two practices must be undertaken together: we strive not to reproduce violence, and work to expose those systems that do while dreaming of a better planet (https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2023/06/01/tomas-saraceno-hans-ulrich-obrist-serpentine) and asserting a right to joy.

CULTURED: How does the history of tapestry-making inform your own practice?

Brackens: Tapestry (https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2022/12/01/eric-paul-riege-young-artists-2023-weaver-jewler) and many other textile traditions seek to communicate through a visuality that can be interpreted by the initiate. I am inspired by not just this one tradition but others like Asafo flags, Kente weaving, and North American quilting (https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2022/03/10/from-crayons-to-quilting-bisa-butler-adds-her-color-to-black-portraiture). Tapestries are invested in telling the stories of war, conquest, and subjugation of peoples and land, and in my practice, I am rooted in creating counter-narratives as a way to contribute to the discipline.



Diedrick Brackens, *flames and familiars*, 2023.

CULTURED: What keeps you returning to influences like Octavia E. Butler or Wendy Videlock?

Brackens: Wendy Videlock's poem [*How you might approach a foal* (https://newcriterion.com/article/how-you-might-approach-a-foal/)] resonates deeply with me; it illuminates the work of tenderness. This lesson, I find, is most often applied personally on a romantic register but also extends to my work and my life at large. It has been one of my greatest works in progress: tenderness, trying to love, and asking to be loved, like a lagoon, like a pearl...

CULTURED: How would you describe the world or space in which these characters exist?

Brackens: This "world" asserts itself everywhere and is so manifold and unpredictable. It's in the eye of the needle, in my heart, a shared breath in the woods at night, at the bottom of a lake, in the message from an ex, in two sheep mannequins in Los Feliz, in a Bed-Stuy brownstone. I have found it at the following coordinates: 34.3077, -118.069.

CULTURED: Given the amount of recurring motifs in your work, how important is it to you that the audience understands your visual language, as opposed to understanding the overall emotional impact?

Brackens: I hope viewers can unpack the archetypes I present and find the ways my images may or may not align with the ideal. I hope to open space for reinterpreting what we think we know.

"blood compass (https://jackshainman.com/exhibitions/diedrick_brackens8)" by Diedrick Brackens is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery's West 20th St location through June 1, 2024.

WORDS **Sophie Lee (/@/sophie-lee)** May 15, 2024

On View: 'Diedrick Brackens: Blood Compass' at Jack Shainman Gallery Presents Poetic, Painterly Weavings Made Over Past 6 Years

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* May 24, 2024 • 9:58 am No Comments

On View presents images from noteworthy exhibitions



Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, "forks of the creek," 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 86 x 156 inches), "Diedrick Brackens: blood compass," Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

THE WOVEN TAPESTRIES of **Diedrick Brackens** (b. 1989) evince painted canvases. He foregrounds his subjects against dynamic backdrops unifying narrative images with painterly techniques and rigorous attention to detail. Blending figuration, abstraction, and storytelling, he has developed a visual language all his own employing a recurring series of shapes, symbols, natural elements, and human and animal forms. His poetic scenes explore a variety of themes, including African American and queer identity, American history, and the artist's personal experience.

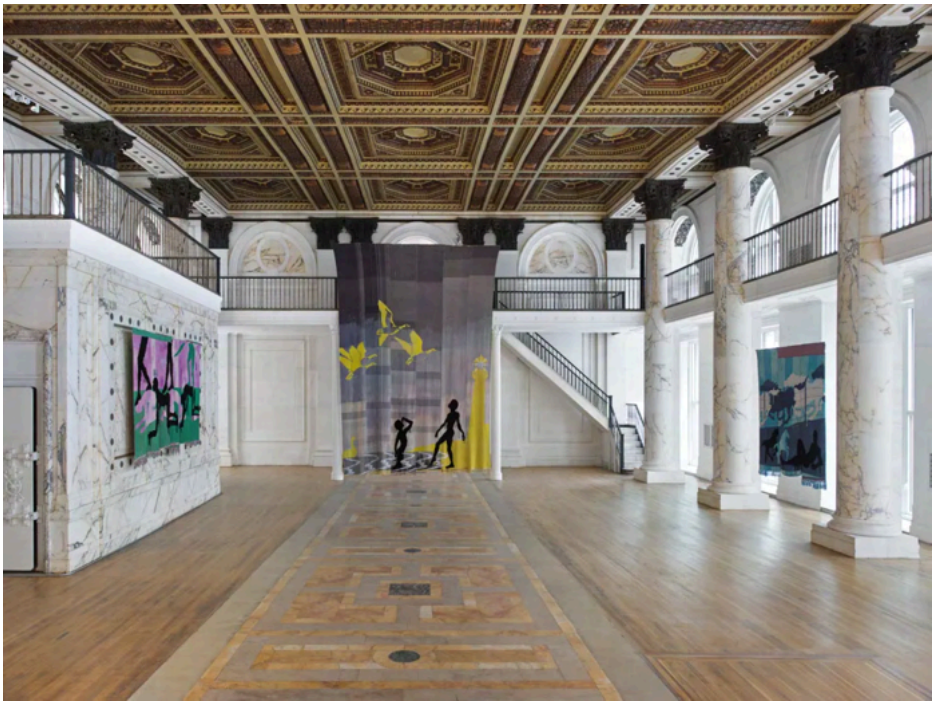
Los Angeles-based Brackens was born in Mexia, Texas. "Diedrick Brackens: blood compass," his latest exhibition at Jack Shainman is spread across two spaces, on view at the gallery's Chelsea and Tribeca locations.

Eighteen works made between 2019 and 2024 are presented. Brackens is often inspired by literature. Some of the featured weavings reference Octavia E. Butler's "Mind of My Mind" (1977), a science fiction novel in which "a

daughter fights her immortal father for control of the world"; "How you might approach a foal," a poem by Wendy Videlock; and the Parable of the Prodigal Son from the Bible, a tale of unconditional love, a lesson about redemption. **CT**

"Diedrick Brackens: blood compass" is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea (513 West 20th Street), from April 25-June 1, 2024, and Tribeca (46 Lafayette Street), from April 26-May 24, 2024

TRIBECA



Installation view of "Diedrick Brackens: blood compass," Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. Shown, "forks of the creek," 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 86 x 156 inches). | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “how to approach a foal,” 2024 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 105 x 105 inches (approximately), “Diedrick Brackens: blood compass,” Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

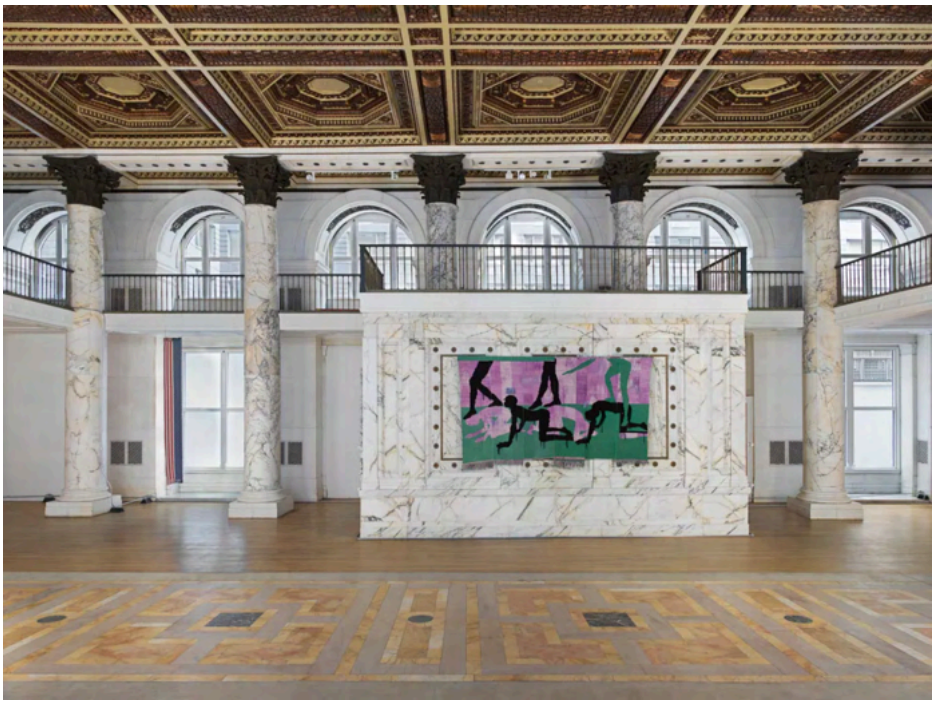


Installation view of “Diedrick Brackens: blood compass,” Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. Shown, “forks of the creek,” 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 86 x 156 inches). | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “summer somewhere (for Danez),” 2020 (woven cotton and acrylic



yarn, 100 x 105 inches), “Diedrick Brackens: blood compass,” Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Installation view of “Diedrick Brackens: blood compass,” Jack Shainman Gallery, 46 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y., 2024. Shown, “forks of the creek,” 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 86 x 156 inches). | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

CHELSEA

Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “flames and familiars,” 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 98 x 296 inches (overall), “Diedrick Brackens, blood compass,” 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York





Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “towards the greenest place on earth,” 2023 (cotton and acrylic year, 83 x 83 inches), “Diedrick Brackens, blood compass,” 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view of “Diedrick Brackens, blood compass,” 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica Studio





Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, "favorable conditions," 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 105 x 105 inches), "Diedrick Brackens, blood compass," 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view of "Diedrick Brackens, blood compass," 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica Studio





Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “mind of my mind,” 2024 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 87 x 87 inches), “Diedrick Brackens, blood compass,” 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y.| © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Installation view of “Diedrick Brackens, blood compass,” 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo by Dan Bradica Studio

Installation view of DIEDRICK BRACKENS, “prodigal,” 2023 (cotton and acrylic yarn, 101 x 99 inches), “Diedrick





Brackens, blood compass," 2024, Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 W. 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

FIND MORE about Diedrick Brackens on his website and Instagram

BOOKSHELF

"Diedrick Brackens: darling divined" documents the artist's 2019 exhibition at the New Museum, his first solo museum show in New York. "Mind of My Mind," a science fiction novel published by Octavia E. Butler in 1977, is among the literary works that have inspired the work of Brackens. "Made in L.A. 2018" documents the Hammer Museum biennial in Los Angeles and features contributions by co-curators Erin Christovale and Anne Ellegood. The exhibition featured 33 artists, including Brackens.

Intimacy and Divination

—

Diedrick Brackens in conversation with Margot Norton and Francesca Altamura

Margot Norton: When was the first time that you started working in weaving?

Diedrick Brackens: I remember making little frame looms in elementary school as a part of the art curriculum. I then figured out how to make my own loom at home and did that for years when I was small, but completely dumped that out of my mind by the time I made it to undergrad at the University of North Texas.

When I came to undergrad, I had a pretty good sense that I was going to study art but did not know that fiber and textiles was something that you could pursue until I had an instructor who encouraged me to take a fiber class and explained to me what it was. I took my first weaving class my freshman year.

MN: Did you know from that class that textiles and weaving in particular was the medium that you wanted to work in?

DB: Yes, immediately. I remember walking into this sunlit room with thirty looms in perfect rows and a cabinet in the back of the room filled with yarn that was color coded and organized by texture. The visual experience of that was enough to wow me. It was a summer course, so we spent four days a week, six hours at a time, just working with the looms in this room. I was immediately hooked on the process, and the meditativeness of it all was overwhelmingly romantic and beautiful. I was sold.

MN: It's interesting that, as someone who grew up in the digital age, you gravitated toward an older methodology, and one that is often overlooked in a fine-arts context.

DB: I've always been interested in the process and how things work and move. As a child I was always tinkering with things and tearing them up just to understand how they functioned. The loom, with all its machinery exposed, incited that curiosity.

Francesca Altamura: I know that you also go through laborious hand-dyeing techniques and incorporate traditional methods within the history of weaving in the United States, as well as in Europe and West Africa. How do you go about researching these techniques and making the decision to incorporate these hand-heavy practices in your work?

DB: A large component of my textile education was looking at historical textiles in textile study rooms and basements of museums and handling the objects and looking at them closely. At a certain point, probably towards grad school, I started to question what it meant to be in this discipline, spending so much time looking at these objects made in places and by people that I had no connection with and going back to the studio to make things.

For example, doing a textile technique that came from Japan in a room full of white women would make me ask questions like: Are we really practicing it? Do we understand the conditions under which it was made? I started to think about what to do with the inheritance of these practices that felt like they belonged to me, but then again didn't. I started to try to understand what my position was, and the ways that folks who look like me or come from places like me interact with textiles.

This was also a moment where I started having more of a conversation with painting and sculpture. I started thinking about how dyeing and weaving yarn might echo the way that a person would approach a canvas and how I could dye yarn in a way that allowed for chance and intuition, as opposed to following a traditional historical map to making textiles.

MN: I know that oftentimes you use unconventional materials for the dyes like tea or wine. Does that kind of experimentation also come from that mode of questioning? I know that there is symbolism too, that's inherent in all the materials that you use.

DB: Yes, for a while I was dyeing yarn with tea, bleach, and wine, not because they were eco-friendly, but knowing that they would impart color to the textile, they carried a symbolism that I was interested in teasing out. For example, wine activates this idea of blood and the Christian idea of communion; tea invokes the sweet tea of the South, where I am from, as well as being a sign for gossip; bleach makes me think about chemical cleansing and purity as well as violence in the removal of color. I think about how the textile could carry language within it by using these materials to invoke ideas.

MN: I was struck by what you were saying earlier about culturally specific weaving styles. I know that one of the techniques that you often incorporate is a type of weaving where the color that's on the front side is the opposite color on the back side. I think it's an older tradition from the US. Is that right?

DB: One of the things I think I've found really interesting about weaving is that everyone lays claim to the same techniques. So while it is an early North American way to weave, such as with two-sided cloths that were used for bed coverlets, there were other places and times when the same technique can be found.

I've always been interested in how within educational spaces we take care to index things to the right group of folks. For me, it is always difficult and exciting to teach this to an increasingly diverse group of students. For example, a student might say to me that they want to weave a 'really cool tribal or ethnic blanket' that they saw online, and use all kinds of problematic words. I will then point them to the specific tradition that they are referencing and ask them to dig into it and talk about how they might complicate a set of techniques with whatever identity and issues they bring to the work. I like this idea that everything can then be stripped down to the process of interlacing threads (over and under) and directed toward where you want to take it, as opposed to appropriating something from somewhere else.

FA: I am curious about the relationship between figuration and abstraction in your work. Were your works first abstract?

DB: Yes. I would say that my earliest mature work was abstract, specifically because I wanted to be able to invoke the body without showing it. When I was starting to make work and have real conversations about it, I found that if there were figures and representations depicted in the work, people would inject their own readings, which could be racist, sexist, or any other terrible thing that you could read onto a body. At that time, I didn't want to have that conversation. I started making abstractions as a way to sneak in the content that I wanted to talk about and perhaps make people work harder to decipher the work. I think I also had what I might now call a painter's sensibility, and thought that abstraction could say everything or save the world. I would often include things that would make these abstractions feel more bodily or more like clothing in that they would have holes in them, or bits and pieces that came from textiles. Sometimes they would have yarn spilling out of them to reference bodily fluid.

MN: When did figuration come back in the work?

DB: The first figurative work I made was *unicorn kente* (2014). It was the last weaving I made during grad school. I was just beginning to use more symbols and be more explicit in telling a story. I had spent a lot of time studying *The Unicorn Tapestries* (1495–1505) at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and I wanted to make a work that referenced these tapestries but incorporated the weaving techniques I was using, which were not tapestry techniques but were at the fore in many weaving traditions I was interested in that came from Africa and the United States. I was interested in seeing if I could break apart this European, Western tradition through the incorporation of these weaving techniques.

FA: Just to clarify, which techniques do you mean exactly?

DB: I'm using this technique that switches between being warp-faced and weft-faced. This means that the cloth is able to be woven so that the threads that travel horizontally (weft) can conceal the vertical threads (warp), completely covering them or the warp threads

can be woven to be more prominent in the cloth. Kente cloth, a tradition practiced in present day Ghana is known for using a technique like this. It is structurally different from a tapestry as you can switch easily between one and the other, whereas a traditional tapestry would only show you the threads that go across, the weft.

For *unicorn kente* there are about six-inch-wide strips that were sewn together to make a larger image, whereas a tapestry is just one big block of fabric. I was interested in using the unicorn figure, to stand in for the human form. I was still trying to stay away from depicting people, but I was at the point where I began making representational works.

The first work I made with a human figure was *blue under midnight* (2017). I think I had come to a place where I was seeing a lot of positive images of folks of color, in particular Black folks, and it was this moment where a lot of articles were being written about a new golden age for film and television. I was seeing images of bodies that I've wanted to see that weren't the images of Black and brown bodies on the news and dead in the streets I'd been seeing in years prior. I felt this was wonderful and I wanted to participate in it. I had also just seen the film *Moonlight* (2016) for the fifth time.

I made *blue under midnight* with this figure at a shoreline, looking out onto a deep, dark nightscape. The nightscape itself was very abstract, and I was still trying to balance my need for abstraction with figuration. After *blue under midnight* I made the works that were in our exhibition, *darling divined*, at the New Museum: *in the valley* (2017), *the flame foes* (2017), and *how to return* (2017).

I was interested in showing bodies that were at rest. With these works I started asking a lot of questions of myself, such as why I was making them, what they could do, and what I needed them to, and this is when couples and pairings of things started to erupt, as opposed to the singular figure.

MN: As we're talking about this, I'm thinking about the specific way that you use figuration and how bodies are often treated as shapes and silhouetted figures. In a way, they echo what you were saying earlier about abstraction, for they evoke a figure without recalling a specific person. Because they are silhouettes, they allow for viewers to enter, and have a little room in terms of interpretation.

FA: Echoing Margot's point there, we've talked about how you don't necessarily see them as gendered figures. You allow viewers to read for themselves.

DB: Yes. They're all based on my silhouette, but even in the dyeing and the weaving there are certain things I'll alter or add in. I've noticed that folks will read into them and insert themselves in the space, and stories that they know relative to the familiarity of the image. For me, it is important that there are vehicles for people to, if not see themselves in the works, to be able to read a story into them. I hope that the things presented in the image allow them to feel their way into the narrative that I'm weaving. To be clear though, I see these figures as as much skin as shadow. The figures are irrevocably black. I think about them as Black (race), not just black (chroma).

MN: It seems that that's where allegory plays a role, too. I know that there are certain works of yours that have been more fleshed out with narratives, like *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* (2018), which is based on an actual, tragic event in 1981 when three young Black men drowned in a lake near your hometown in Mexia, Texas. They were arrested for possession of marijuana during a Juneteenth celebration and taken on a police boat that capsized, and because the young men were handcuffed, they drowned. The police were later acquitted in trial, but the devastating event has had a lasting effect on the community. In your weaving, the three young men are represented as catfish swimming around the legs of one figure and being embraced by another, while a pair of handcuffs is depicted at the bottom. I know that other works are also based on specific stories and real-life events, but I wonder how you feel about making

that information available? Do you incorporate allegory to leave that space open? And is that important for you?

DB: I'd love to give a quarter of a story and then allow the viewer to have space to run with that nugget of information, as opposed to giving all or nothing. I like that people come with curiosity and try to figure it out, as opposed to it being spelled out. I expect that the viewer is curious and has enough internal information to find out more about the things that are driving me to make the work.

Thinking about *bitter attendance, drown jubilee*, which is chained to a very specific event, time, and place, I still don't think that there's enough there for the viewer to get the whole story. I would hope that the curious person might take the nugget of information given and go find out more.

MN: Speaking about this relationship between figuration and abstraction, I wanted to ask about the space in between these two classifications. On your website I noticed that there is a section for figuration and a section for abstraction, but I think that there is more in between them than that distinction allows. In our show, for example, we decided to hang three of the works on wooden structures in the middle of the space, as opposed to on the wall, so that the back sides of the works would be on view. I found that seeing these back sides adds a layer of abstraction to the work, and I was curious about how you view that relationship between figuration and abstraction, and how that distinction might be complicated by the gesture of showing the back side, which also highlights the work as an object in space.

DB: Many of these words used to describe the work, such as figuration or abstraction feel unstable or underwhelming. I don't think that these words adequately describe what is going on. I do think that the object-ness you mentioned can become lost both in person and in photos when the textural qualities become lost, or people don't realize how thick the work is.

The move to put the works in the middle of the space was important in terms of people being able to understand how they are constructed and made, even if they can't interact with them. In the middle of the space, you can see the ways that the colors flip or how often the figures are only on the front and not on the back when both sides are exposed. I think about weaving as sculptural as opposed to two-dimensional. The process involves your whole body as well as the way that the threads interact. There's a rhythm and motion, an up and a down, an open and a closed. I think that this gets lost in the viewing of the work when it's not in the process of being created. Bringing the work into the space is a way to try to get back to that three-dimensional quality.

MN: I also love what you were saying about the difference between experiencing the work in person or through an image. There's a slowness to viewing your works that echo the time that it takes for you to make them, especially when taking into account the time that goes into the process and the many colors and textures dyed into each strand of yarn. I am curious about your titles—why did you choose "darling divined" as the title for our show?

DB: I wanted to invoke some of the things that I see as undercurrents in the work, which can sometimes be suspect in contemporary art, which are spirituality and love, which I think about in terms of the relationships between figures. I was looking for language that addresses both of those ideas.

FA: Why did you use the past tense of the verb: "darling divined"?

DB: I think about divined as in divinity, but also in terms of divination and the idea that the works might be some sort of prophetic tool. Perhaps they are signaling the potential darling to come, or the darling of the past. I think they're like woven tarot cards.

MN: The term divining also makes me think of elevating or transforming, or your giving a certain spiritual weight to them. Could you elaborate on the topic of spirituality, which as you mentioned earlier

is not typically embraced in a contemporary art context? There are works that we included in the show, such as *demigod* (2019) that certainly do not shy away from spiritual themes. Do you think that you have embraced this undercurrent of spirituality in your work now more than you have previously? I think it is a radical and beautiful gesture to center ideas like love and spirituality in art.

DB: Yes. What I was finding was that nods to spirituality and to my Southern Baptist upbringing seeped into the work again and again almost unconsciously. All of these things that I didn't think I was thinking about would be there when I finished making a work, and I thought, 'Oh, there it is again!' At a certain point I decided to lean into it, instead of letting it find me or trying to back away from it.

Another one of the works where I lean towards it that was in the show was *the cup is a cloud* (2018), where I started using animals that in the Christian Bible have a relationship with the devil or are seen as tricksters such as goats, snakes, and rabbits. I was thinking about these animals as vehicles of self-transformation as opposed to the way they had been previously maligned.

Then I made the horse weavings thinking about this apocalyptic imagery present in the Bible as well as the landscape of Texas and the rural places in the South where my family is from. For our show I also decided to pull together past works that had been engaging with these ideas as well, whether or not I was paying attention to them.

MN: I find the relationship between care and violence in these works to be particularly interesting and how things that were once demonized might be cared for or even elevated. How do you see this quality of care or love, as you mentioned earlier, in these works, and perhaps relating to the title of the show?

DB: Yes, I think of these weavings also like conjuring devices. I hope they encompass messages that will always resonate with viewers about the potential of tenderness.

With the *unicorn kente* (2014), for example, I thought of that work as a self-portrait with the unicorn representing myself. I think about the animals as stand-ins for people—they hold the space of an emotional state. Rather than simply being a dog on a tapestry, for example, I think of it as violence embodied. Rather than put a gun or a car onto a weaving, I try to find a poetic way to capture that energy, that violence, that emotion. This both makes me work harder, and hopefully, makes the viewer work harder as well, to get to what the weavings are trying to say, as opposed to being explicit. Rather than talking about a specific moment, I want them to carry an emotional weight, yet also leave space for the work to travel through time.

FA: I like what you said about holding space for things that are deserving of that space, such as reformulating identity or spirituality, love, and intimacy. Can you speak about the newest work for our show, *american wedding* (2019)? You literally finished this work on site, which was fun to watch.

DB: Yes. *american wedding* is one of a suite of four weavings that were meant to focus in on the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. At that time, I was thinking about the forgotten history of the Black cowboy and the symbolism of the horse rider. I was also thinking about what it means to carry someone, hold someone, and so intentionally left the two horses without riders, and the two figures embracing one another, with one carrying the other. This felt like a sweet gesture, both in allowing the beasts not to be burdened, and in carrying and holding one another. The title of the work is taken from a poem by poet and activist Essex Hemphill, who I've had this ongoing conversation with over the last decade through his text. I was thinking about both the loss of Hemphill who died in 1995 of AIDS-related complications, and the loss of each other. I think it was, for me, the most love-letter-y of all of my works.

FA: Where does your kinship with Essex Hemphill stem from? How did you first become engaged with his writing?

DB: One of my dear friends introduced it to me. We used to get together to make art and exchange ideas, and one day he said I had to read Essex Hemphill's book, *Ceremonies.* I then bought it and carried it around everywhere since. So many of the ideas I was exploring seemed to be embedded in this bible of a book.

MN: I also wanted to ask about the body of work that you made prior to our show that was also inspired by Essex Hemphill, *unholy ghosts* (2019). We also showed some of these works, which speak to ideas we have been referring to related to care and violence, as well as paternal relationships.

DB: With *unholy ghosts* I was thinking particularly about men being in community, and how these relationships can be purposefully hidden or obscured. There is so much about them that feels charged and difficult, often pointlessly. I think my father is one of the best people in the world. He is the person who has cheered me on, encouraged me to do things and to take care of myself—things that might seem silly and small, but are actually significant. That's novel. I feel like a lot of my male friends do not think of their dads that way. There's also so much about my father that I don't know or understand, which is not the same with my other relationships. The name of the poem by Essex Hemphill that inspired this body of work and the show *unholy ghosts* at Various Small Fires gallery (2019), is called *The Father, Son, and Unholy Ghosts*, which was published in 1996 after Hemphill passed away.

Around this time I found out that my biological father and the father who raised me were not the same person. When I was making the work, I was thinking both about this doubling, about birth and fatherhood, and trying to understand the role of fathers in birth and rearing. I think that fathers can do a lot that mothers often do that is not typically prescribed. Also as a queer man, I was thinking about birth and rebirth, and the radical gesture of birthing oneself such as creating your chosen family, giving yourself a different name, and the possibility of how one could father themselves.

Reading Hemphill's poem, there were notes that he hit that spoke to me from beyond the grave.

FA: You are attending a poetry class at the moment, right? What is the relationship for you between your practice and poetry, and pedagogy as well? It seems to be important for you to continuously learn and teach what you've learned.

DB: Yes. I quit my full-time teaching job a year ago. I felt I needed to focus more in the studio, and then realized how important it was for me to be in the classroom or in a space of teaching and learning. I'm now back in school, and I feel that the reading and writing of poetry adds so much to my practice. There is something about the way that a poem is packaged that for me feels similar to how I think about image making.

The etymological framework for the word "poem" is "to create." Textile and text also come from a shared root word. I'm interested in the ways that these things are already sharing space and want to tease that out further in my own practice. I've always thought about writing and weaving being interrelated, even in the way that they are made is similar—going from one end to the other and back again. If I'm not doing one, I would like to be doing the other. They feed into each other, back and forth.

FA: Stemming from this discussion about Essex Hemphill, who are other figures whose work and words you look towards?

DB: Belkis Ayón is someone who I love. Wilfredo Lam, Simone Leigh, Ed Rossbach, Sheila Hicks, Allison Saar, Aaron Douglas, the incomparable works of Martin Puryear. I'm also interested in artists who write, both in their actual objects as well as those who have a writing practice that goes alongside their artistic production, such as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Glenn Ligon, and Donald Moffett. Moffett wrote this piece called "Sex with Sheila Hicks" (2012), where he talks about how sex shows up in many of her works, yet it is not something that has been written about academically. It was

an eye-opening text for me—the way he wrote about her work and the ways that his own objects come into being, and the relationship between textiles and his own paintings. He's also often working in abstraction to the end of evoking the body. For me, his work was one of the first kernels that made me think about how to manipulate textiles in a way that would evoke the body, and give folks the healing their bodies need.

MN: I know that since that time of our show, you've been making work concurrently with also studying poetry, and created a new body of work, *blessed are the mosquitos* (2020). What have you been working on currently, and since the time of our show?

DB: This feels so bleak considering what has been going on with COVID-19, but the new body of work *blessed are the mosquitos*, speaks about plague and how people deal with illnesses. I have been particularly interested in trying to capture this feeling of uncertainty when being sick and not knowing what is wrong. I'm interested in what people turn to in these moments, such as ritual, faith, or finding meditative space. The works in this series depict figures in pairs or configurations that evoke dance or ritual. What drew me to making this work was that there was a CDC statistic released in 2016 that said that if current HIV diagnoses rates persist, about one in two Black men who have sex with men (MSM) will be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetime compared to one in eleven white MSM. It is staggering to think that fifty percent of a population will have a disease that most people might think is over. Now we're going into another plague. I'm certainly stressed out by it all. In the show *blessed are the mosquitos*, half of the figures will have markings all over their bodies—little spots.

I'm also writing a script for a short film at the moment about a basket that is also a boat, in which two figures are going to sail up the Mississippi River. I'm going to make the boat as well. I've also written a poem titled "heaven is a muddy riverbed," which is also the name of a work I made years ago and I would love to expand

into a series of works for a show. I'm trying to bring together all of the works I've made with catfish in them and to use this poem as a vehicle to give them context. I'm trying to see if they can live in the same space, the writing and the work.

MN: I feel like they do already. Even just in the titles of your works coming from poems, and this might be a way of teasing that out a little bit further. Is this the first time you've made a basket?

DB: No. I have made baskets, but never one that has to hold body weight. I'm a little concerned about what I'm getting myself into, but I've been doing a lot of research about how to make one.

MN: It is so crazy to think about your work for *blessed are the mosquitos*, and the fact that you were thinking about disease and contagion prior to the situation we're in now with COVID-19.

DB: Very. And it's not as if I was riding a wave. I've been working on this body of work for months quietly, minding my business.

Art Reviews

What Does It Mean for Heaven to Be a Muddy Riverbed?

Diedrick Brackens deftly combines his weavings with his original poetry to create an atmosphere of reverence for the people, animals and ideas that society demeans.



by Nereya Otieno
May 2, 2022



Diedrick Brackens, "a deep and abiding dance" (2021), cotton and acrylic yarn, polyester sewing thread, 41 x 66 inches (photo by Josh Schaedel, image courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Dallas/Seoul; and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

LOS ANGELES — Walking through Diedrick Brackens's solo exhibition, *heaven is a muddy riverbed*, the phrase "ain't I a man?" kept repeating in my head. It's an adaptation of the famous "Ain't I a woman?" speech Sojourner Truth made at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention. Truth's words were in defiance of the paltry perception of Black women in the United States, the deliberate denial of her femininity and overall personhood. In Brackens's exhibition, the textile artist deftly combines his weavings with his original poetry to create an atmosphere of reverence for the people, animals, and ideas that society demeans. Like Truth's words, Brackens's works challenge visitors

to the exhibition: *When you encounter me, do you see all that I am? All that I do? All that I contain?*



Diedrick Brackens, "there is a leak" (2020), woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 72 x 72 inches (photo by Josh Schaedel, collection of Elliot Perry)

The exhibition focuses on the artist's use of catfish as a motif. It begins with his reimagining of three Black men — Steven Booker, Carl Baker, and Anthony Freeman — who drowned in 1981 when a police boat capsized in Texas. Arrested during a Juneteenth celebration, they were in handcuffs when it went down and subsequently met their deaths in Lake Mexia — eternal rest in a muddied lakebed. Brackens grew up near that lake and often represents these men as catfish, an inexpensive bottom-feeder fish that is a staple in Southern cooking but otherwise has many negative connotations. But in Brackens's textiles, these fish become regal, peaceful, spiritual, powerful, embodying the marvel that is any living being on Earth. He asks us to see all that the fish are, all that they do, all that they can contain.



Installation view of *Diedrick Brackens: heaven is a muddy riverbed* at Craft Contemporary, 2022 (photo by Josh Schaedel, image courtesy the artist and Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles)

All nine weavings in the exhibition include at least one fish, making the motif potent. Upon entering the gallery viewers are greeted with the exhibition's eponymous work, whose three fish and body of water are an ode to the drowned men. The purple and blue hues that compose the water are woven in such a manner that it appears pixelated, an optical illusion that transforms yarn into ripples. One fish is shown mid-jump in a graceful arc; its two counterparts below repeat the same shape. The piece sets the exhibition's tone. More than a mere portrayal, it is a meditation on catfish. They seem to swim through the gallery, swirl around the viewer. Occasionally they interact with silhouetted men, circling their feet or being raised in the air in exaltation. Each work could be a concurrent scene from a single moment on a river, or different points in the lives of the three fish as they navigate their own turbid waters.

Then there are the words. Four poems by Brackens provide surreal anchors throughout the show. Each adds dimension and depth to the concepts of life and sacrifice, the burden of the catfish as they carry the souls of the lost. "They won't kick out into uncertain waters/ with the things we kept for ourselves," reads part of "fathers guard the nursery." Near the exit is a small shelf of books that inspired Brackens, their pages highlighted. The use of these poems and placement of the texts reinforces Brackens's weaving skills, tying the exhibition together — yarns and threads as evident in the constitution of his work as in the conceptual presentation of it.

Standing in the center of the gallery, taking it all in, I think about the exhibition title. What does it mean for heaven to be a muddy riverbed? Murky but flowing. Earthen, not celestial. Nutritious and plentiful but not bright or clear. Mysterious and cloudy from the stir trailing activity. Driven more by belief in a presence beneath the surface than any visible proof. I'm encircled by woven pieces, making another type of net. I'm in the middle, caught along with the catfish swimming in every sightline. My own shadow occasionally blends with the silhouettes in the works. I recall the defiance in Truth's phrase and I wonder, *well, ain't this a heaven?*

life + culture

CAN ART MARRY THE MAGICAL AND THE MUNDANE? YES, SAYS DIEDRICK BRACKENS

The textile artist pushes the limits of the loom.

BY CAMILLE OKHIO PUBLISHED: FEB 28, 2022



Justin Chung; Artwork © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy Of The Artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, And Various Small Fires, Los Angeles

Above left: *Diedrick Brackens in his Los Angeles studio. Above right: Brackens's tapestry called marshling, 2021.*

High above a busy street in downtown Los Angeles, the artist Diedrick Brackens balances over a simple wooden floor loom, a modern-day Briar Rose.

His tapestries, the first of which he made in 2008, evolved from a sculptural practice that incorporated fiber. Each piece is woven primarily from cotton, a material that carries geographic, cultural, and social weight for the Texas-born artist, tethering him to his ancestors as well as future generations.



Justin Chung

Brackens at his loom.

The most salient forebear to Brackens's work could be Yoruba *aso oke*, handwoven from long strands of silk or cotton. Other references include the quilt codes of the Underground Railroad, in which the quilts of abolitionist travelers were embedded with directions to the North; Flemish medieval tapestries; kente cloth; and the textile tradition of Gee's Bend, Alabama.



Justin Chung; Artwork © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy Of The Artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, And Various Small Fires, Los Angeles

Brackens's tapestry called *soft, dark, demigod,* 2021

Much of Brackens's work is figurative, depicting Black bodies in scenes that center intimacy and connection. Each textile is hand-dyed, then spun and woven in an intuitive process that combines methods of weaving not generally taught together. "The art historian Kobena Mercer notes that when Black people reach for magical realism, it is an attempt to describe the world we live in," says Brackens. "We experience the magical in the mundane."

It is in this marriage of supposed opposites that Brackens finds the space to expand both his ideas and his technique: "Weaving is so plastic and malleable. There's always

FT FINANCIAL TIMES

How To Spend It Visual Arts

The textile artists taking needlework to the next level

Meet the artists pulling together new narratives about gender, identity and race

Victoria Woodcock YESTERDAY

The effect of colour is instantaneous in the work of 32-year-old Diedrick Brackens, the Texan-born, LA-based artist whose textiles play with a palette of hand-dyed hues – rich purple, dusky ochre, shocking pink. At once graphic and painterly, they are inspired by west African kente weavings, 15th-century European tapestries and quilts of the American South, with the mystical and folkloric threaded into scenes that tend to centre on silhouetted male figures.

“I definitely want people to find them beautiful, but they’re also redefining what skill is,” says Brackens, who has recently modelled a Gucci poncho in the pages of *VMan* magazine and welcomed Rihanna into his studio. He happily straddles the realms of fine art and craft, having been awarded The Studio Museum in Harlem’s Wein Prize and also voted the American Craft Council Emerging Voices Artist; next January he will be exhibited at the Craft Contemporary museum in Los Angeles. “I feel like I belong in both camps,” he says.



Flying Geese, 2020, by Diedrick Brackens © Courtesy Diedrick Brackens/Jack Shainman Gallery



Taste Honey for Nerves, 2021, by Diedrick Brackens © Courtesy Diedrick Brackens/Jack Shainman Gallery

Using craft mediums can be a successful way to ask people to consider a deeper story. "I think that by the time people are overwhelmed by the sentimentality, it's too late for them to escape the messages that are present in the work," he says. "That push and pull is one of textile's most successful aspects. I think that there is sugar and then a trap…" In his series *blessed are the mosquitoes*, the "trap" is to talk about the disproportionate rate of HIV infection in black and Latino men; in *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* (2018), it's the story of three black boys who drowned in police custody.



Texan-born, LA-based artist Diedrick Brackens © Alex Fodor-Lee

“Diedrick’s nuanced pieces explore the complexity of identity, all while engaging allegorically with American history,” says gallerist Jack Shainman, who recently showed (and swiftly sold) eight new weavings in his New York space. “You can feel his intention and hand across his entire artistic process – from the spinning, dying, and weaving of cotton, to the way he inserts himself into some of the work.”

In a conversation with writer Danez Smith, Brackens said he is interested in “creating a mood”, giving the viewer works without “a wall label that tells them where I’m from and what these symbols might all mean”. When he posted about his New York show online, he accompanied an image of his work *a season without gravity* with lines of his own poetry. It is a reminder that while there may be a linguistic link between “text” and “textile”, the stories interlaced in contemporary textiles are rarely linear.

“It’s about one individual being a sum of many parts,” says Self. “Through honestly investigating your own life, your own fears and desires, you are able to find something that everyone can identify with. It’s about finding something unifying.”

Culture

A new exhibit at the Mint Museum Randolph pays homage to various forms of Black art

The pieces are comprised of basket weavings, quilts and photography.



Photo: Dajia Peeler



By Amanda Harry
August 2, 2022

Diedrick Brackens' art blends various styles such as West-African weaving, American quilting and European tapestry-making to examine the experiences of queerness, Blackness and masculinity in America.

His latest exhibition "Diedrick Brackens: ark of bulrushes" combines past stories of liberation from the Bible to the Underground Railroad with current stories of freedom and remediation.

The pieces are comprised of basket weavings, quilts and photography. The basket weavings are meant to represent self-deliverance.

The process behind the art

The exhibit is curated by Lauren O'Connell, a longtime friend of Brackens'. The two met during grad school in 2012 and began to discuss the possibilities of a solo exhibition for him in 2017.

Around this time, Brackens began to transition away from more abstract work and toward including the human form in his work.

"Curating a solo exhibition often begins with a conversation about what is next for the artist and how the exhibition can be a platform for experimentation or expansion of one's practice," O'Connell said.

Brackens researched the history of basket boats and quilts and their roles in stories of liberation.

Brackens works with a team of three that helps him with processing materials, sewing, dyeing, and administrative duties. The timeline for Bracken's weavings ranges from three weeks to three months whereas the baskets took two months.

Though there are occasions where one part of the weaving influences the other, Bracken's tends to create the background and the figure simultaneously.



Photo credit: Daija Peeler

The meaning behind the art
The freedom quilts hearken back to the patterns enslaved Americans used to communicate with each other when traveling on the Underground Railroad.

Brackens told QCity Metro that he hopes his work prompts people to examine their own creative pursuits and ignites an interest in art and storytelling.

Another aspect of Bracken's work that is important to him is the materials used, specifically cotton and indigo. Both materials are strongly tied to African-Americans' enslavement in the United States.

According to NPR, enslaved Africans brought their knowledge of indigo cultivation to the United States in the 1700s. The profits went on to exceed those of cotton and sugar.

With his basketry, Brackens began to think about how he could use baskets as a symbol of self-liberation in his art.

This led him to craft a basket big enough for him to fit into and float down a river, similar to the biblical story of baby Moses.



Photo credit: Daija Peeler

THE NEW YORKER

August 9, 2021

Diedrick Brackens

This Los Angeles-based artist's splendid, emotionally lush show, at the Shainman gallery, is a celebration of a subject that hasn't been championed much in American art—namely, Black men, seen joyfully alone and together. Brackens's handwoven tapestries bring to mind the traditions of both West African textiles and American quilting; his elongated figures occupy colorful spaces that enhance their implied movement and propulsive energy. Looking at these unabashedly romantic works, one is reminded of their obvious influences —the cutout silhouettes in Henri Matisse's "Jazz" series, the lives commemorated in the ongoing AIDS Memorial Quilt project. Nearly twenty years ago, Thelma Golden, now the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, curated the landmark exhibition "Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary African-American Art," and it's wonderful to see how the ideas it identified—about dreams as they relate to Black lives —are still being explored, and so fully.

— Hilton Als

Shainman
513 W. 20th St., Chelsea
212-645-1701

CULTURED

August 12, 2021
By Amy Armstrong

THIS SUMMER, NEW YORK ART IS MAGIC, MYSTIC AND UNCANNY

New York is a lodestar for art, as densely populated with galleries as it is delicatessens. Where to begin? Immerse yourself in the animal kingdom at Fortnight Institute or take a trip to the movies at Bridget Donahue. Start here, with five New York summer shows you need to visit, from the Bowery to Bushwick.

“Diedrick Brackens: Rhyming Positions” at Jack Shainman

Through August 20

The human silhouettes of Diedrick Brackens‘s woven tapestries have become a signature part of the artist’s visual language. At his current show at Jack Shainman, only one tapestry bares a human image that isn’t woven with black cotton yarn—a man sitting with legs crossed, holding a chair above his head effortlessly with one hand as a white rabbit perches atop it. These works come from time Brackens spent in lockdown, where his imagination started to run totally free, and his world became magical realist. The one with the rabbits, titled *each their own* (2020), suggests that the creatures may be a function of his own dreamworld, and not really there. Brackens decided on rabbits due to their symbolic use in African American folklore, where they’re typically seen as impish couriers: there to deliver a message and then disappear without any explanation. Other tableaus present moments of domesticity, such as a couple in the bathroom together, then bending over against a yellow backdrop as if practicing yoga.



INSTALLATION VIEW, DIEDRICK BRACKENS: RHYMING POSITIONS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY.

HARVARD
MAGAZINE

HARVARD SQUARED | STAFF PICK

Reflections of Pandemic Intimacy

by NELL PORTER BROWN

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2021



Mother's Lap, by Katherine Bradford
Image courtesy of the artists and the Harvard Carpenter Center

KATHERINE BRADFORD'S color-saturated works often feature bold, fluid forms: swimmers and superheroes, or human bodies lodged within an amorphous frame of time and space. One recent painting, *Mother's Lap,* offers softened geometric figures; one is flat-out horizontal, perpendicular to another dressed in tangerine orange with a block of canary yellow across her bosom. The New York-based Bradford made it during the 2020 pandemic summer, "when there was high anxiety about the future and our health and politics and protests and elections and our president," she said during a talk hosted by the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, "and I thought maybe being on your mother's lap was a good place to be during all this."



Diedrick Bracken's *nuclear lovers*

Image courtesy of the artists and the Harvard Carpenter Center

Mother's Lap is part of the Carpenter Center's first post-COVID-19 exhibit: "Diedrick Brackens and Katherine Bradford" (September 24-December 23). Like Bradford, Brackens borrows from figurative, abstract, and representational styles, but his medium is textiles. Using West African, South American, and European techniques, he weaves large-scale tapestries, combining personal and historic themes. "Both artists create dreamlike scenes that snap back and forth between the symbolic and the specific," noted Carpenter Center Robinson Family director Dan Byers, who curated the show. "Their scenes seem to exist both outside and deeply embedded within this uncertain time, evoking cautions, questions, and desires about our bodies in relation to each other."

Stuck in their respective abodes, the artists naturally reflected on the pandemic's impact on their isolation, intimacy, and the capacity for human attachment. Brackens missed tactile connections. He scanned what he had on hand in his Los Angeles home, and used bed linens, curtains, and rugs as a palette. He was also immersed in poetry. The resulting *nuclear lovers* (woven cotton and acrylic yarn in tones of grays and pinks, at left)reflects the eponymous work by Assotto Saint, a prominent figure in the New York City LGBT and African American art scene of the 1980s and 1990s. Brackens's tapestry extends Saint's notion of unearthing post-apocalyptic bodies in repose. "When the world ends, we will sort of bury ourselves together in each other's arms, embrace," Brackens explained during the talk, "and when it regenerates, it will be because of the love that we have for one another."

HYPERALLERGIC

August 10, 2021
By Cassie Packard

Your Concise New York Art Guide for August 2021

Your list of must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this month.

The New York art world is bringing the heat this Leo season. From Wu Tsang and Beverly Glenn-Copeland's healing sonic cocoon at the Guggenheim to Martine Gutierrez's iconic photographs at bus shelters across the city, there's a lot of strong work to see and celebrate. Check out our selection below, and don't forget your mask!

Diedrick Brackens: Rhyming Positions



Diedrick Brackens, "nine patch momento" (2021), woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 84 1/2 x 79 1/2 inches (image courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

When: through August 20
Where: Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)

Elegant, silhouetted figures lyrically bend, curve, dance, and sway in eight new narrative and allegorical tapestries by Los Angeles-based artist Diedrick Brackens. The intricate jewel-tone textiles situate their subjects in front of the moon or amid beds of roses, alluding to the healing that can happen when queer and femme folk commune with nature and with one another. An animistic iconography of catfish and rabbits draws upon the imagery of the American South as well as African and African-American folklore.

FINANCIAL TIMES
how to spend it

September 23, 2021

THE FIX

TREND

TO BOLDLY SEW

Victoria Woodcock meets the artists using textiles to thread together new narratives about body positivity, gender, identity and race



In Tate Modern's current collection display – positioned next to a wall of Guerrilla Girls' posters and a bold Barbara Kruger – is a depiction of a bathroom. A woman's legs stretch to the end of the bath; children's toys are dotted around; there's a glass of red wine to one side and an iPad propped up on the other, showing an episode of *Game of Thrones*. The scene feels at once intimate and ephemeral. Its edges slightly frayed, the work is a personal story of motherhood – mundane and magical.

Date Night is a "silk painting" by 48-year-old, Malawi-born Billie Zangewa. Described as "One of Africa's Most Closely Watched Artists", she joined Lehmann Maupin gallery in May 2020 with a solo show in New York that saw her prices jump by 25 per cent. This autumn, she will open further shows in London and Seoul – where prices for her work will range from $75,000 to $150,000 – as well as at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco.

"When I first started out, people were like, 'Oh, she's handy with a needle' and I was just put in the area of craft, of a woman's pastime," she says from her home in Johannesburg. The space doubles as her studio, and is where works such as 2018's *Vision of Love* and 2020's *Heart of the Home* were created. Although it was suggested she switch to cotton as a stronger fabric, she prefers to work with silk: "I like delicate and sensitive, that's who I am. I don't think I'll ever be cotton. And I don't want to be." Re-establishing the power of textiles is fundamental: "I'm in charge of my own narrative and that's a very powerful statement, to say that I'm a black woman and I'm in charge of my stories and how I tell them."

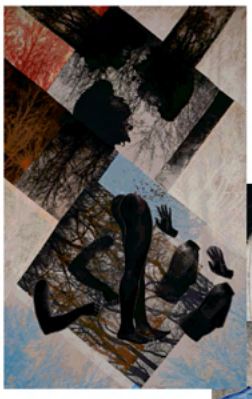
"I'M IN CHARGE OF MY STORIES AND HOW I TELL THEM"

Zangewa's rise has dovetailed with a growing recognition for fabric-based pieces as fine art. At Artsy, purchases of textile works rose 48 per cent from 2019 to 2020, while a broad spectrum of fabric-based endeavours – from the modernist weavings of Anni Albers and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, to the fibre sculptures of 87-year-old Sheila Hicks and the quilts of Alabama's Gee's Bend Quilters Collective – have been the subject of high-profile shows. Hicks also features in the Whitney's current survey show, *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019*, which positions 1960s textile art alongside the work of contemporary artists.

"Using textiles is not just about an aesthetic, it's something that furthers my conceptual concerns in regard to how identities are constructed, about how a body is just a patchwork of experiences, a patchwork of projected ideas," says 31-year-old, New York- and New Haven-based Tschabalala Self. "What's exciting for me about textiles is that they are of the world." Her figurative, mixed-media images – using fabrics and stitching as well as painting and print-making – first made waves in 2016, when influential art dealer and curator Jeffrey Deitch featured three of her artworks at Art Basel Miami.

Since that show, Self has enjoyed a residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem, solo shows from London to Shanghai and gallery representation by Pilar Corrias and Eva Presenhuber. *Out of Body* (2015), depicting two female figures, was sold by Christie's in 2019 for £371,250 – over five times its high estimate – while *Princess* (2017) fetched £435,000 at Phillips last year.

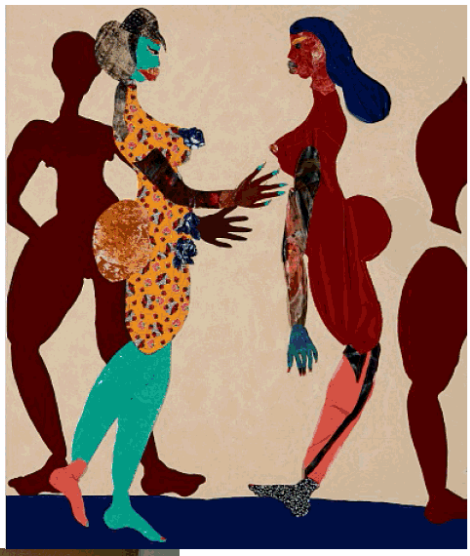
"I initially thought to use sewing because my mother sewed. It's a way to elevate her memory," says Self of her inspiration. "My favourite pieces usually begin with me just pulling from my scrap piles, sewing pieces of fabric together with no direction in mind until something starts to form. Part of a face, the neck, and then from there I grow the figure more and more, bit by bit."





Top: *Soldier of Love*, 2020, by Billie Zangewa. Above: *I Have Power Over My Heart*, 2020, by German-Ghanaian textile artist Zohra Opoku (right)

PHOTOGRAPHS, COURTESY OF BILLIE ZANGEWA AND LEHMANN MAUPIN, NEW YORK, HONG KONG, SEOUL AND LONDON; NII ODZENMA, COURTESY OF MARIANNE BOESKY





Top: *Out of Body*, 2015, by Tschabalala Self. Above: Self in her studio

Her striking, predominantly female figures often have abstracted or exaggerated features – much has been written about the big bottoms. "My work is deeply connected to concerns around my identity politics and my love for the black body," she continues.

Another textile artist of the African diaspora, 45-year-old Zohra Opoku has had works acquired by London's Tate Modern and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Working with textiles is quite a feminine space," says the Accra-based, German-Ghanaian artist, who started sewing clothes for her dolls at age five, created whole wardrobes for herself as a teenager and studied fashion design before falling in love with screen-printing. "I was doing a residency at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht when I started printing a series of photographic portraits. I printed one onto fabric and I was like, 'That's it.'"

The images of people, sometimes herself, are often stitched into, sometimes hanging in ephemeral installations. "They are also a little bit layered," she says. "And large, so that people get soaked emotionally into the work." Textiles recur as the subject matter too, often looking at Ghanaian dress codes. "I look at how clothes define culture,at how different materials have language and history – whether it is the veil of a woman or a kente wrap of a man." Her mostly monochrome aesthetic has recently given way to a more colourful body of work, which is currently included in Mariane Ibrahim's group show at her new Paris gallery space.



TASTE HONEY FOR NERVES, 2021, BY DIEDRICK BRACKENS

THE EFFECT OF COLOUR IS instantaneous in the work of 32-year-old Diedrick Brackens, the Texan-born, LA-based artist whose textiles play with a palette of hand-dyed hues – rich purple, dusky ochre, shocking pink. At once graphic and painterly, they are inspired by west African kente weavings, 15th-century European tapestries and quilts of the American South, with the mystical and folkloric threaded into scenes that tend to centre on silhouetted male figures.

"I definitely want people to find them beautiful, but they're also redefining what skill is," says Brackens, who has recently modelled a Gucci poncho in the pages of *VMan* magazine and welcomed Rihanna into his studio. He happily straddles the realms of fine art and craft, having been awarded The Studio Museum in Harlem's Wein Prize and also voted the American Craft Council Emerging Voices Artist; next January he will be exhibited at the Craft Contemporary museum in Los Angeles. "I feel like I belong in both camps," he says.

Using craft mediums can be a successful way to ask people to consider a deeper story. "I think that by the time people are overwhelmed by the sentimentality, it's too late for them to escape the messages that are present in the work," he says. "That push and pull is one of textile's most successful aspects. I think that there is sugar and then a trap..." In his series *blessed are the mosquitoes*, the "trap" is to talk about the disproportionate rate of HIV infection in black and Latino men; in *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* (2018), it's the story of three black boys who drowned in police custody.

THE STORIES INTERLACED IN TEXTILES ARE RARELY LINEAR

"Diedrick's nuanced pieces explore the complexity of identity, all while engaging allegorically with American history," says gallerist Jack Shainman, who recently showed (and swiftly sold) eight new weavings in his New York space. "You can feel his intention and hand across his entire artistic process – from the spinning, dying, and weaving of cotton, to the way he inserts himself into some of the work."

In a conversation with writer Danez Smith, Brackens said he is interested in "creating a mood", giving the viewer works without "a wall label that tells them where I'm from and what these symbols might all mean". When he posted about his New York show online, he accompanied an image of his work *a season without gravity* with lines of his own poetry. It is a reminder that while there may be a linguistic link between "text" and "textile", the stories interlaced in contemporary textiles are rarely linear.

"It's about one individual being a sum of many parts," says Self. "Through honestly investigating your own life, your own fears and desires, you are able to find something that everyone can identify with. It's about finding something unifying." ■HTSI



STYLE

Picasso to go

From masterpiece to minaudière.
By *Victoria Woodcock*

Sixty-nine-year-old auctioneer, art dealer and curator Simon de Pury is showing no signs of slowing down. Last year, the Swiss polymath was appointed artistic director of Newlands House gallery, in Petworth, Sussex. He also made a cameo appearance in Netflix drama *Emily in Paris*. In 2019, he conducted 36 charity auctions around the world, including one in Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, in aid of the Snow Leopard Foundation – an event that paved the way for his latest project.

A standout lot was an Olympia Le-Tan clutch bag "that went for $90,000", recalls de Pury of the signature embroidered minaudière. This sought-after version was based on a Jean-Michel Basquiat painting, and the sale sparked a friendship and collaboration between de Pury and OLT co-founder and owner, Gregory Bernard. "I thought it would be a fun project to curate a collection of clutch bags – and that using images from Picasso would be the dream," says de Pury. "Every time I see an exhibition of his work I come out of it charged up and struck by his genius."

That dream is to become 10 wearable art-objects, each available in a limited edition of 77 (from €3,200). The first three to be released, on 7 October, are based upon a 1962 lino-cut, *Tête de femme avec un chapeau à pompons*, and two paintings: *Le Rêve* (1932) and *Portrait de Dora Maar* (1937).

"I have always loved *Le Rêve*; it is one of the most extraordinary, most sensuous works Picasso ever did," says de Pury of the artist's portrayal of his then mistress Marie-Thérèse Walter – and grandmother of Diana Widmaier Picasso. "It's not just a portrait of my grandmother, it's a portrait of desire," she says. "It's a portrait of the two of them. It's a portrait of love. That's what makes it so special."

Dora Maar was another of Picasso's lovers, and for Bernard, this portrait highlights not only the painter's love of women, but also an interest in fashion. "There are a number of details in the clothes that I think were not random for him," Bernard says. De Pury concurs: "To see beautiful women wearing these bags, I'm sure that Picasso would have loved that."

Diana Widmaier Picasso – herself an Olympia Le-Tan fan who owns several of its book clutch bags – wonders if her grandfather might have sported one. "I've been looking at a lot of photographs of him from the '50s and I was surprised to see him on a few occasions wearing little bags," she says. "If this bag could be seen on both men and women, that would be the ultimate." ■HTSI



Top: *Portrait de Dora Maar* clutch. Right: *Tête de femme avec un chapeau à pompons* clutch. Both €3,200

ILLUSTRATION: WILLIAM LUZ. PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTIAN DEPONTE. COURTESY OF DIEDRICK BRACKENS AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY; COURTESY OF TSCHABALALA SELF/PILAR CORRIAS, LONDON; MUSEE NATIONAL PICASSO, PARIS

FRIEZE

JO MALONE
LONDON

In Collaboration with
Jo Malone London

Dr. V. Joy Simmons' Los Angeles is 'a place of possibility'

The radiologist and collector welcomes you to 'Joy's House', in the second video on how creative individuals find a home in their cities

IN **COLLABORATIONS**, **VIDEOS** | 23 JUL 21



Jo Malone London's line-up of Home products is inspired by the British home as a place of memory and meaning, with a character that has settled layer upon layer. Four new videos made in collaboration with Jo Malone London chart the relationship between personality and place through the stories of four creative individuals and the global cities they call home.

Dr. V. Joy Simmons, a radiologist and art collector, describes her home city of Los Angeles as a place 'where people come with dreams to be who they want to be'. A physician at Kaiser Permanente, Dr. Simmons had artist and gallerist Alonzo Davis for an art teacher in High School, and began her collection when she was in medical school. Today, her home in Ladera Heights includes works by artists ranging from Mark Bradford and Mickalene Thomas to Diedrick Brackens, Calida Rawles and Deborah Roberts. These works, Dr. Simmons says, are intended to tell a story about 'life in Los Angeles for a Black woman raising two children.' Beyond living with them, by lending artworks out to be shown in museums like London's Tate Modern or the California African-American Museum, Simmons says, she can help inspire a younger generation. With this commitment to promoting the idea that 'not only do Black people make art, but Black people collect art' she reveals herself, like her home city, committed to a sense of possibility.

Each Jo Malone London Home product is designed to tell its own inspiring story: how will you tell yours? Discover more at www.jomalone.co.uk

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Previews

Your Concise New York Art Guide for August 2021

Your list of must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this month.



by Cassie Packard
August 10, 2021

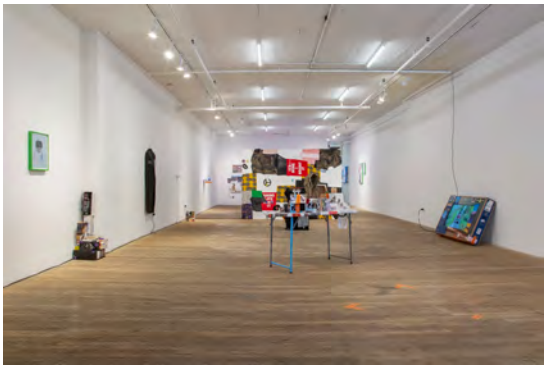


Robert Kushner, "Fairies" (1980), acrylic on cotton, 99 × 135 inches (Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, image courtesy CCS Bard, photo by Chris Kendal)

The New York art world is bringing the heat this Leo season. From Wu Tsang and Beverly Glenn-Copeland's healing sonic cocoon at the Guggenheim to Martine Gutierrez's iconic photographs at bus shelters across the city, there's a lot of strong work to see and celebrate. Check out our selection below, and don't forget your mask!

—*Cassie Packard*

Martine Syms: Loot Sweets



Installation view, *Martine Syms: Loot Sweets*, Bridget Donahue (image courtesy the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC, photo by Gregory Carideo)

When: through September 25
Where: Bridget Donahue (99 Bowery, Chinatown, Manhattan)

Drawing inspiration from a sale of Janet Jackson's personal belongings, *Loot Sweets* expands upon transdisciplinary artist Martine Syms' explorations of the ways in which Black identities are articulated online and off. The works on view are characterized by a chaotic, dense, multilayered appearance that reflects a contemporary internet aesthetic and frame of mind. A video in which an animated avatar based on the artist continually dies and springs back to life, and a "merch table" topped with a bronze cast hair weave, suggest ambivalence around late-stage capitalism and highlight the demands that it places upon certain bodies.

Diedrick Brackens: Rhyming Positions



Diedrick Brackens, "nine patch momento" (2021), woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 84 1/2 x 79 1/2 inches (image courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery)

When: through August 20
Where: Jack Shainman Gallery (513 West 20th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)

Elegant, silhouetted figures lyrically bend, curve, dance, and sway in eight new narrative and allegorical tapestries by Los Angeles-based artist Diedrick Brackens. The intricate jewel-tone textiles situate their subjects in front of the moon or amid beds of roses, alluding to the healing that can happen when queer and femme folk commune with nature and with one another. An animistic iconography of catfish and rabbits draws upon the imagery of the American South as well as African and African-American folklore.

Lizania Cruz: Gathering Evidence: Santo Domingo & New York City

CULTURED

ART

THIS SUMMER, NEW YORK ART IS MAGIC, MYSTIC AND UNCANNY

NEW YORK IS A LODESTAR FOR ART, AS DENSELY POPULATED WITH GALLERIES AS IT IS DELICATESSENS. WHERE TO BEGIN? IMMERSE YOURSELF IN THE ANIMAL KINGDOM AT FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE OR TAKE A TRIP TO THE MOVIES AT BRIDGET DONAHUE. START HERE, WITH FIVE NEW YORK SUMMER SHOWS YOU NEED TO VISIT, FROM THE BOWERY TO BUSHWICK.

ANNIE ARMSTRONG

08.12.2021

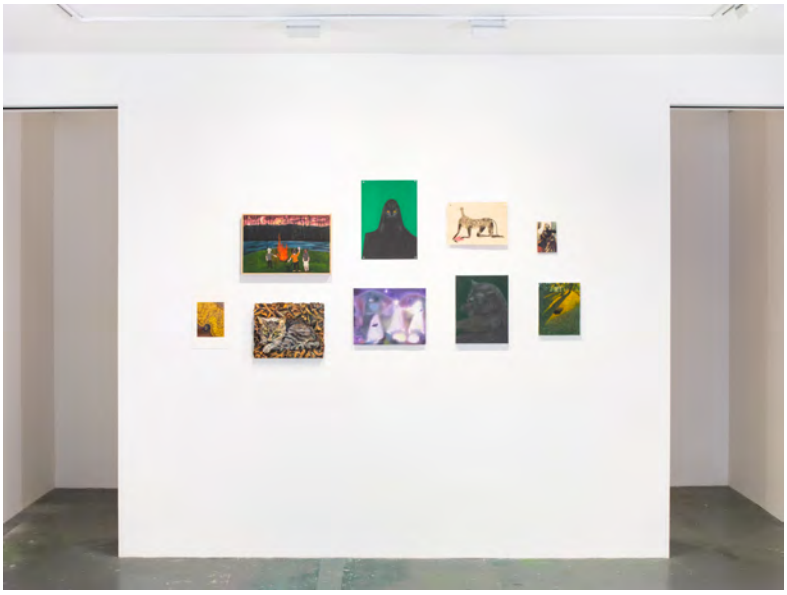


HUGH HAYDEN: HUEY, EXHIBITION VIEW. 504 WEST 24TH STREET, NEW YORK. JUNE 30 – AUGUST 13, 2021. © HUGH HAYDEN. COURTESY OF LISSON GALLERY.

“Nine Lives” at Fortnight Institute

Through August 21

Whether you identify as a dog or cat person, this summer has had something for you. Earlier in the season, Jack Hanley Gallery hosted “Best in Show,” a group exhibition centered around man’s best friend. Last week, Fortnight Institute piped up for our feline friends with “Nine Lives.” At first blush, the smattering of cat-related paintings feels charming and lighthearted. Taking a closer look, however, the viewer is reminded that cats are used as symbols of mysticism, domesticity, regality and femininity. Standout works include Sean-Kierre Lyons’s vibrant and lurid 2021 piece, *Can I Helppp you !?* (the artist, coincidentally, also had a dog painting on view at Jack Hanley); Minyoung Kim’s eerie and irreverent canvas-noir *Cat Apartment* (2021); Thaleia Karpouzi’s Alex Katz-esque self-portrait cum selfie *Devilish...* (2020), and Tao Siqi’s winsome and occult *Strange Night* (2021), depicting a black cat-bat hybrid creature sticking its tongue out under a crescent moon. Viewing these depictions of cats as harbingers of both good and evil reminds viewers of the poignant expression, “Every time God creates a cat, he flips a coin.”



INSTALLATION VIEW, NINE LIVES.
COURTESY FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON MANDELLA.

“Diedrick Brackens: Rhyming Positions” at Jack Shainman

Through August 20

The human silhouettes of Diedrick Brackens‘s woven tapestries have become a signature part of the artist’s visual language. At his current show at Jack Shainman, only one tapestry bares a human image that isn’t woven with black cotton yarn—a man sitting with legs crossed, holding a chair above his head effortlessly with one hand as a white rabbit perches atop it. These works come from time Brackens spent in lockdown, where his imagination started to run totally free, and his world became magical realist. The one with the rabbits, titled *each their own* (2020), suggests that the creatures may be a function of his own dreamworld, and not really there. Brackens decided on rabbits due to their symbolic use in African American folklore, where they’re typically seen as impish couriers: there to deliver a message and then disappear without any explanation. Other tableaus present moments of domesticity, such as a couple in the bathroom together, then bending over against a yellow backdrop as if practicing yoga.



INSTALLATION VIEW, DIEDRICK BRACKENS: RHYMING POSITIONS. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY.

“Hugh Hayden: Huey” at Lisson Gallery

Through August 13

Suspended in fervid tension in the back room of Lisson Gallery are two school desks, one in raw wood and another painted black. The gallery is teeming with this feeling of tensity at Hugh Hayden’s solo show, “Huey.” Just inside the door, the viewer is confronted by imposing rows of church pews, their seats cut out and replaced by sharp red bristles, rendering them unusable and therefore meaningless, stripped of their utility. Most of the objects in “Huey” are commonly used and references to the cultural experiences of the artist’s upbringing yet recreated in a material that makes them nonfunctional: a comb with a knife as its handle; a Lindt chocolate bar, that, upon closer inspection, is made of dark wood, and four basketball hoops cheekily redesigned to be completely impractical, whether it be from an amusingly long net (aptly titled *Rapunzel*, 2021), or because it’s made of spidery, fragile hair and Gatorade-soaked rattan. In symphony, these objects all point to the futility of the American Dream, especially for Black Americans.



INSTALLATION VIEW, HUGH HAYDEN: HUEY. 504 WEST 24TH STREET, NEW YORK. JUNE 30 – AUGUST 13, 2021. © HUGH HAYDEN. COURTESY LISSON GALLERY.

“Martine Syms: Loot Sweets” at Bridget Donahue

Through September 25

The meat of Martine Syms’s new show at Bridget Donahue comprises four video works, which only play one at a time, so the viewer is forced to watch them in a narrative. The longest one clocks in at 15 minutes, a portrait of a woman in white Air Force 1s and a T-shirt that reads “TO HELL WITH MY SUFFERING.” A song plays over the video, as you watch the woman killed in a variety of ways: stabbing, beheading and suicide. When she draws a gun to her own head, the song sings, “The only God is change,” a nod to Octavia E. Butler’s dystopic *Parable of the Sower*, which was set in the year 2020. The other videos include a meditation, a soliloquy and a short film projected onto a dry cleaning bag, the eponymous “Loot Sweets.”

Aside from the video works, there are treasures to behold. A pastel portrait of Lil Nas X in his orange cowboy suit pays homage to one of the great boundary-pushing pop stars, *We luh da kids. Please! Not the Baby!* (2021) juxtaposes a photo of a Girl Scout with the banner image from a film reading “BASED ON THE UNTOLD TRUE STORY” and a large-scale collage of textiles blends fashion brands like Telfar and Eckhaus Latta with *kente* cloth, deconstructed pants and Egyptian hieroglyphs.



INSTALLATION VIEW, MARTINE SYMS: LOOT SWEETS, BRIDGET DONAHUE, NYC, JULY 15 – SEPTEMBER 25, 2021. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BRIDGET DONAHUE, NYC. PHOTOGRAPHY BY GREGORY CARIDEO.

“Often Vary Never Change” at Clearing

Through August 27

Not all the fun is to be had in Manhattan, though. In Bushwick, Brooklyn, Clearing hosts 16 different artists for a group show where the underlying theme is far less clear than those previously mentioned over the East River. Perhaps it’s in the works’ cheekiness, though, as Meriem Bennani’s viral sensation from the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, *2 Lizards* (2020) can be viewed in its entirety, spanning eight chapters that chronicle the tumult of the year 2020 through the anthropomorphic, magical realist perspective of a group of animals living in New York and watching their city rapidly change before their eyes. Calvin Marcus, who is currently having a solo show at the gallery’s Los Angeles location, foisted a ceramic chicken carcass smack-dab in the middle of an electric green canvas for his absurdist self-portrait *Green Calvin* (2015). Another desk work by Hugh Hayden is also featured, as well as work by Korakrit Arunanondchai.



INSTALLATION VIEW, "OFTEN VARY NEVER CHANGE." COURTESY CLEARING.

Craving more culture? Sign up to receive the Cultured newsletter, a biweekly guide to what's new and what's next in art, architecture, design and more.

culture type

August in New York: 8 Gallery Exhibitions to See Now Feature Texas Isaiah, Arcmanoro Niles, Julie Mehretu, Cal Bocicault, and Fascinating Landscapes

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* Aug 27, 2021 • 2:58 pm

THE CHURN OF THE NEW YORK ART WORLD slows down in August with many art galleries on hiatus until after Labor Day. Nonetheless, in the waning days of August, there is still plenty to see in New York, this week and next, before the transition to fall shows in September.

Terrific solo exhibitions and group shows are on view in the city's galleries. At her newly opened, eponymous gallery, Nicola Vassell is presenting a group exhibition focused on landscapes. Jenkins Johnson has gathered a variety of artists working in abstraction. Solo shows of Julie Mehretu, Arcmanoro Niles, February James, and Texas Isaiah are also on view. Here are 8 gallery shows to see now, plus a few more for the record:



Installation view of "diedrick brackens: rhyming positions," Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. (July 15-Aug. 20, 2021). Shown, from left, "summer syllables" (2021) and "a season without gravity" (2021). | Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

"diedrick brackens: rhyming positions," Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, New York, N.Y. | July 15-Aug. 20, 2021

Textile artist **Diedrick Brackens** lives and works in Los Angeles. Exploring "narrative, allegory, and memory," his weavings read as paintings. For his second show with Jack Shainman Gallery, Brackens presented eight new gem-colored works. Invoking nature as a place of sanctuary, several draw on the "history of queer and femme folks who have gathered in nature, creating safe spaces for ritual and communion."

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Diedrick Brackens Explores the Warps and Wefts of Black and Queer Histories

In *darling divined*, Brackens teases out the symbolism, allegory, and parable long associated with global cosmologies of tapestry weaving.

Lydia Pyne October 21, 2020



Installation view of *Diedrick Brackens: darling divined,* New Museum, 2019 (image courtesy the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Dario Lasagni)

AUSTIN, Texas — Metaphor looms large in the art and craft of textiles and has for millennia.

In *darling divined*, artist Diedrick Brackens's evocative tapestries rely on the symbolism, allegory, and parable long associated with global cosmologies of weaving. The exhibition's nine pieces all explore the intricacies and complexities of identity, woven along the warps and wefts of Black and queer histories.



Diedrick Brackens, "break and tremble" (2019), woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 89 x 93 inches (image courtesy New Museum, New York; photo by Dario Lasagni)

Brackens is pointed in his decision to work with cotton, as "it is tied up in the history of this country, Texas, and my family." He offers his art as "something beautiful," a small tribute to his enslaved ancestors. "I choose to sit at my loom and weave my stories," he explains in the exhibition's introductory text.

At the Blanton, "break and tremble" (2019), hangs so that audiences can see its intricate double weave — where one side is the inverse of the other — but the black figure under the horse's hooves only appears only on one side. The selective presence of the figure, reminds viewers that which stories are told and why depends on the larger context that they're woven into.

Drawing inspiration from poet Essex Hemphill's work, *darling divined* offers a richly dimensioned exploration of history and identity.

Diedrick Brackens: darling divined *continues through May 16, 2021 at the Blanton Museum of Art (200 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Austin, TX). Organized by the New Museum, New York, the exhibition is curated by Margot Norton and Francesca Altamura. The Blanton's presentation is organized by Veronica Roberts.*



Diedrick Brackens, “the cup is a cloud” (2018), cotton and acrylic yarn and mirrors, 74 x 78 inches (image courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul; and Jack Shainman, New York © Diedrick Brackens)

FLAUNT

JUNE 17, 2021

DIEDRICK BRACKENS AND CHRISTINA FORRER | 'FEEDBACK' AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

BY CONSTANZA FALCO RAEZ



Diedrick Brackens. "In Lieu of Lockas and Dreams" (2021). Woven cotton and acrylic yarn. 15' x 7'. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Jack Shainman Gallery presents *Feedback* at The School | Jack Shainman Gallery in Kinderhook, NY, curated by Helen Molesworth, on view now through October 30, 2021. Initiated as a response to Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's sound installation, *Feedback*, which created an explosion inside Molesworth, her *Feedback* is filled with her favorite artists, who she asked to gather together to form an assembly, a class, a chorus.

From the twisted history of America, and the persistence of everyday pleasures, to daydreams, and nightmares, each artist plays with color, light, shape, texture, material, and form, to find a place in the feedback loop that is culture. *Feedback* focuses on what happens when the same is also the difference, when the past, the present, and the future are in the same feedback loop called America.



Christina Forrer. "Yellow/Red" (2019). Cotton and wool. 91 1/2" x 65". © Christina Forrer. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

"To make tapestries in the 21st century, to weave textiles in the digital age, is to reach back into traditions that are centuries long and span almost every human civilization," said curator Helen Molesworth on Diedrick Brackens and Christina Forrer's practices. "In doing so Brackens and Forrer avail themselves of a form that permits them material complexity and opportunities for narratives (nightmares, magical realism, dream space) that reside outside the corporate logic of the internet."



Diedrick Brackens. “Beacon” (2021). Woven cotton and acrylic yarn. 15’ x 7’. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“Weaving is a synaptic practice. My ability to make shapes and gestures is directly tied to the matrix of warp and weft. Any prowess or lack I may possess as a craftsperson is bound to the threads and by extension to the loom. The intrinsic grid of the loom imposes its limitations on me as I attempt to push for a departure from this rigidity, to push towards depth, dimension, and organic form. I mold into the space the loom allows as much as it folds into me, each of us changing the final outcome,” examines Diedrick Brackens of the art. “In this rhythmic exchange between weaver and machine there is already much to make of the ideas of feedback and circuitry; I become enmeshed and changed in the process of weaving and at times undermine traditions associated with the form in order to arrive at new possibilities.”



Christina Forrer. “Regula” (2021). Cotton and wool. 76” x 40”. © Christina Forrer. Photo courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

“Christina's work is a dense union of image and technique and I have a great admiration for the work because it engages directly with the European tradition of pictorial tapestry weaving. The monstrous bodies, psychological battles, and interpersonal tension depicted in the weavings represents a through line to the heroism of medieval tapestry without shouldering the burdens of the form and grasping at many points of departure. There is a quality of irreverence in her chaotic color-filled works I never grow tired of parsing. Among the palpable threads of divergence in her work is the lack of political or religious propaganda. Christina favors an exploration of dynamics of interpersonal relationships as they relate to anger, speech, and communion. Her weavings are filled with screaming open mouths and creatures borne from those mouths ripping each other apart. I am also enamored with her skill and the tension between hewing to tradition and wild invention.” said Diedrick Brackens on Christina Forrer.

The School at Jack Shainman Gallery is open on Saturdays from 11AM to 6PM. *Feedback* is on view until October 30th.

June 8, 2021
By Charlotte Jansen

6 Rising Contemporary Artists Using Traditional Craft Techniques

The popular practice of reviving ancient and traditional crafts in contemporary art is nothing new; age-old techniques have become ubiquitous across the art market and in museums and galleries alike. The reemergence of such methods has been described as a gesture towards something more certain and tangible in a troubled time, or a means of rejecting the digital in favor of the handmade. The popularity of crafting also signals the shifting away from rigid perceptions of "high" and "low" art forms and of the gender, sex, and race of people who make them. Crafts represent a genuine intersection that resonates with the present moment.

And yet, amid the clamor for craft in the art world, some of the details of these traditional techniques have been lost. While artists like Anni Albers were forced into their craft "unenthusiastically," artists working today are choosing to engage with craft with intent and purpose, and to represent the specific origins in time and place of their chosen technique. There are many more stories to be discovered in the ways artists are adopting and adapting their ancestors' traditions, and much to be learned by understanding the roots of these processes, as well as the social and political circumstances that have conditioned them. Here, six contemporary artists recount how and why they work with traditional crafts and what the techniques they use—often inherited through their families—mean to them.

Diedrick Brackens
B. 1989, Mexia, Texas. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Diedrick Brackens, *through the eye unburnt and blameless*, 2020, Various Small Fires.

Diedrick Brackens creates beguiling figurative tapestries that depict both real-life events and allegories—but the artist's chosen materials and techniques hold histories, too. Brackens always works with cotton, which he describes as "reliable, versatile, and affordable," though it's also "tethered to the foundations of empire and enterprise, and it is forever burdened in its raw and natural state in the minds and live experiences of Black Americans."

For Brackens, handweaving, his predominant technique, has its own distinctive pace that connects him with a rich past. He first fell in love with weaving after taking a summer class at the University of North Texas and was immediately hooked. "Working with a loom feels like time travel," Brackens said. "For me, the transportive quality is not only about engaging with the ancient technology of cloth making; I also get caught up in the spell of the rhythmic movements, the way the minutes bend to hours, or when things are tough and minutes feel impossibly strained."



L: Diedrick Brackens, *nuclear lovers,* 2020, Various Small Fires. R: Diedrick Brackens, *when no softness came,* 2020, Various Small Fires.

Brackens—who will open a solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery this July—also enjoys the way handweaving connects to the domestic and the intimate in day-to-day life, in a way other media cannot. It's weaving's particular relationship to time, too, that he is interested in evoking. "As a craftsperson I am beholden to time, to keeping track, to endless counting, to an accrual of line after line of threads interlacing to form fabric," he said. "I do know that a viewer can sense this labor in the resulting object. Beyond that I want there to be a sensation that returns a viewer to old memories, to their personal histories with the quilter, seamstress, mender, knitter kin: I want everyone reacquainted with their storytellers."

FRIEZE

Diedrick Brackens Weaves a Rich Tapestry of Queer Black Life

At Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square in Ontario, the artist combines threads of illness, vulnerability, healing and love in textiles centered on the queer Black body

BY **CHARLENE K. LAU** IN **REVIEWS** | 05 APR 21



For his first solo exhibition in Canada, 'shape of a fever believer', US artist Diedrick Brackens distils the co-existence of illness, vulnerability, healing and love into a series of tapestries (all 2020) centred on silhouetted Black bodies. The various fabrics are hand-stitched together like quilts, with contrasting – and occasionally fringed – thread. Brackens wrote three poems ('a storm of bees, wind, affairs between us', 'sixty million and more', and 'blessed are the mosquitoes'), printed in the exhibition handout, to accompany the weavings, which meditate in verse what the textiles convey materially.



Diedrick Brackens, 'shape of a fever believer', 2021, exhibition view, Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario. Courtesy: the artist and Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario; photography: Laura Findlay

The sole tapestry in the gallery that is devoid of figuration, lifesavers, conceptually frames the exhibition's contemplations on infection and disease, presenting a stark abstraction in sage green, dusty blue, mauve and rose hues. The weaving in lifesavers leans on pattern and repetition, resembling the tessellation of honeycomb cells or the hexagonal patterns of chemical-structure diagrams. These sections contrast with segments of checks and stripes: patterns that give way to the days of the week at the bottom – compartmentalized like a pill case – aligning the ring-shaped candy to which the title alludes with the daily popping of HIV medication. On the other side of the wall, fire makes some dragons combines vibrant yellows, oranges and reds with a thin, barely detectable vermillion warp thread. A shadowy black form engulfed in flames foists a prostrate body above their head, as if it were an offering to the sky. Fiery strands of yarn loosely spurt forth from the former, their wild heat licking at the silhouette outlined in red, orange and a yellow braided stitch; horizontally threaded teal strands mark the latter. Behind them, rusty brown brick arches remain obstinate, backed by a solid ground of bright citron.

Across the room, in blessed are the mosquitoes, two figures sit on their heels facing one another in front of a low white fence. A full moon with a greenish undershadow punctuates the dusky sky, expressed as a mottled, ikat-like field of pink and blue. The figure on the right, hands palms up, releases a swarm of mosquitos – gold charms sewn onto the woven surface – while the one on the left raises their hands to their face as if to draw the bugs closer. While portraying a metaphor for 'bug chasing' – the pursuit of sex with HIV-positive persons – Brackens emphasizes the complexity and intimacy of his figures over the taboo nature of bareback sex. His empathetic treatment blurs the line between erotic liberation and bodily harm.



Diedrick Brackens, blessed are the mosquitoes, 2020, woven cotton and acrylic yarn. Courtesy: the artist and Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario; photography: Laura Findlay

Offsetting the comfort and warmth implied by the softness and pliability of textiles, Brackens's iconographies embody the harsh realities of queer Blackness. The ritualistic compositions grapple with the untold everyday violence committed against Black people, including the unequal impact of HIV/AIDS on Black and marginalized populations; by extension, they also inadvertently speak to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these very same communities. In the face of such injustices, Brackens upholds love and kinship as threads of connectedness that repair and sustain. Tensions between warp and weft provide crucial support not only for the physical tapestry, but also for the bodies they depict. Dripping with loose strands of yarn, the silhouettes vibrate with quiet intensity as they claim their rightful space, displaying an incandescent resolve in the face of both their trauma and pleasure. Diedrick Brackens's 'shape of a fever believer' at Oakville Galleries at at Centennial Square, Oakville, Ontario, through 10 April 2021. As of 3 April 2021, the Oakville Galleries will be close in accordance with government restrictions. The galleries will reopen as soon as these restrictions are lifted.

The New York Times Style Magazine

THE ARTISTS

Beneath a Full Moon, a Healing Ritual

A recent textile work by Diedrick Brackens responds to a startling statistic about the ongoing AIDS epidemic.

Dec. 11, 2020

In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-shown work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work into context. This week, we're looking at a recent piece by Diedrick Brackens, who is known for his woven textiles, which are the subject of a solo exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, on view through May 16, 2021.



Diedrick Brackens's "Flying Geese" (2020). Courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul; and Jack Shainman, New York © Diedrick Brackens

Name: Diedrick Brackens

Age: 31

Based in: Los Angeles

Originally from: Mexia, Texas

When and where did you make this work? This work was made in February, in my studio in L.A.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? The weaving is a scene of an imagined ritual between three people in a barren landscape, under a full moon.

What inspired you to make this work? It was inspired by the ongoing AIDS epidemic. There is a C.D.C. statistic from 2016 that reads, "If current H.I.V. diagnoses rates persist, about 1 in 2 Black men who have sex with men (M.S.M.) and 1 in 4 Latino M.S.M. in the United States will be diagnosed with H.I.V. during their lifetime." It was startling. I made a series of pieces inspired by the statistic. The work is a meditation on healing, ritual and disease.

What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life? A woodcut by Alison Saar titled "Cotton Eater II" (2014).

Interview

Code-Switching in Art and Craft: Sanford Biggers in Conversation with Diedrick Brackens

By Diedrick Brackens

Published October 27, 2020



"I don't think these are going to be really, totally understood until someone unearths them decades down the line," the artist Sanford Biggers says, discussing his quilt-based tapestries, paintings, and sculptures, currently on view as part of his exhibition, Codeswitch, at the Bronx Museum. History is important to Biggers; to grasp the meaning of his art, he explains, it's necessary for viewers to recognize the network of individuals that have formed his materials and method.

Biggers began incorporating antique quilts into his practice ten years ago, inspired, in part, by the alleged importance of quilts in the Underground Railroad. Some historians believe that nineteenth-century abolitionists would stitch coded messages into quilts and hang them from laundry lines, guiding escaping slaves to safety in the North. Quilts, Biggers reminds us, function as metaphors, too; by virtue of their patchwork, they build upon the generations before them, as all cultural forms do. Works throughout Codeswitch make reference to hip-hop, funk, and jazz music, in particular—passions of the artist, who heads the "multimedia concept band" Moon Medecin. A QR code linking to a Moon Medicin performance appears on one quilt, a sequin disco ball glitters on another, and, as with all three musical genres, they are rife with sampling and improvisation. The works on view also pay homage to the myriad of Black American artists whose practices have engaged the history and mythology surrounding the African Diaspora. The art historian Kellie Jones, whose book South of Pico examines the community of Black artists that rose to prominence in L.A. in the 1960s and '70s, situates Biggers as an "heir" to those practitioners, building upon their work to expand their discourse.

Before traveling back to L.A. for the first time since the pandemic, Biggers sat down (virtually) with the emerging textile artist Diedrick Brackens, who knows a thing or two about the art of craft. Since the artist's first institutional solo show at the New Museum last year, Brackens has gained considerable recognition for his vibrant allegorical weavings investigating Black and queer identity in America. Below, the two artists reflect on the significance of "code-switching" in their respective practices, the legacy of South of Pico in present-day L.A., and the indelible influence of Missy Elliot. —ELLA HUZENIS



SANFORD BIGGERS: I am trying to figure out travel from the East Coast to the West Coast, which I haven't done yet. Have you traveled yet?

DIEDRICK BRACKENS: I'm in Texas. I live in Los Angeles, but I drove out. Everyone's like, "It's fine to fly," and I just was like, I want the space, the time, the assurance that I can take my own precautions and stuff.

BIGGERS: My parents are actually from Texas, so I used to spend a lot of time there as a kid. My dad was from Galveston, and my mom was from Houston. They met in junior high school. I'm sure are aware of John T. Biggers.

BRACKENS: I did some research and found out that you're maybe tangentially related.

BIGGERS: You know how it is. We cousins and brothers. My parents were friends with him and Hazel [Biggers]. I grew up knowing him and met him several times, even showed him my art once when I was in high school. We kept in conversation and would check in for many years.

BRACKENS: How did you find your way into art?

BIGGERS: I actually think John might have had something to do with that, in addition to growing up with prints and artworks that are now considered Black Romantic work, like images of Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, of course. Beyond that was Barbara Wesson and Varnette Honeywood and Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White. I grew up with that around my house, and all my parents' friends' homes had that too.

I actually was going more towards music at a younger age. I took lessons for a little bit but got bored with it and then started playing by ear. My older brother had garage bands, so I would play along with the band and had a little garage band of my own in junior high school and high school. Then I got to a point where I started listening to jazz, and I couldn't play what I was hearing by ear, so I started painting and drawing the musicians. Then that led to drawing civil rights [leaders] and some more obscure historical figures at that time. When I would show them and share them with my friends, they'd often ask, "Who were these people?" It was a good source of information exchange and education. How about yourself?

BRACKENS: I think I was always drawing and writing and had a good deal of support. Not necessarily that people were like, "We get it and we're pushing you this way or that," but they gave me the freedom to figure it out. So when I hear this idea of being enmeshed in this world of art, I'm like, "Oh, wow, that sounds amazing to think of people around who get it and can pivot you."

BIGGERS: Well, I don't know if they necessarily got it, but they did appreciate the idea that art was something that was supposed to be part of your existence. That was big, because a lot of people don't have that. When I was locking myself in my room and drawing and painting, my mom was really skeptical, but my father actually was supportive. I was all over the place as a kid and having problems in school, and art was one thing that I would calm down and really focus on. I started getting some recognition as a high schooler. The teachers would ask me to put my works through the hallways and stuff like that. So they were like, "Just see where this goes. He's going to apply to college. He'll figure his stuff out. Let's see where this goes in the meantime." Did you have to stake your claim as an artist to become the Artist?

BRACKENS: There was some claim-staking, for sure. I didn't really start seriously making art until high school. And then, when I went to undergrad here in Texas, I decided to study art there. It's weird to be home talking about this because my mom's standing in the kitchen.

BIGGERS: I love it. Hey Mom, what's happening?

BRACKENS: My recollection of it was that my parents were nervous. I had decided I was going to study English and biology, and then the first day of classes I dropped all of the bio and signed up for whatever art classes were being offered. My dad was like, "Okay, yes, I'm supporting it." But behind the scenes apparently, he was freaking out, and my mom was the one who was like, "It's going to be fine." But I never witnessed any of this. As I started to have shows and things, they were always there.

BIGGERS: I think that's one thing that's great about where we are now. There's enough of us out there in the world where it doesn't seem crazy to think of becoming an artist. When I was growing up, no peers were doing it.

BRACKENS: Yes. I remember in the beginning, thinking, "I have to do this because there's not a road map." It's exciting to think that maybe I get to be one of the last generations of this idea that there's no one to look at for how to achieve this, because there's so many folks in the ecosystem right now. I don't have to be a "possibility" model, or the next person doesn't have to be one. So the show [Codeswitch] is up? I'm assuming you've been?

BIGGERS: I went, and I was very active in the installation. On some level, I think it's the ideal viewing experience, because people who go in are going there because they want to go. And once they're there, they've got the whole run of the place with very little competition, very little outside distraction. On a pure viewing level as an artist, and as an artist wanting to really get into the work, I think it's great. I do miss the fact that we couldn't do the whole vanity project of big openings and the visibility-type of thing. But I guess everything has a time and place, right?

BRACKENS: Absolutely. It's interesting. I get something out of watching people engage, and getting to talk to them about the work. That, I think right now, is the thing that is most sought after. But when you were talking about the "vanity" part of it—I don't think I really committed to what that meant until now, when there's only five people there and you're like, "I mean, does it exist? Did it happen? Am I important?"

BIGGERS: Of course, that's the thing. It's a tangibility that you can't cross-reference by the reaction of the people. How are you dealing with exhibiting?

BRACKENS: I had a show up in L.A., and we had a small opening timed throughout the day. It was really amazing, both to be able to talk to everyone who wanted to engage and be able to not feel "ping-pongy." It was surreal to see the emotional impact of folks getting to see art after months and months. A lot of people seemed really overwhelmed in a positive way from the experience. And I think, to some degree, the materiality of the work, this thing that you think about touching, brought people to life a little bit.

BIGGERS: I was in a conversation earlier today about how to figure out a schedule be able to enjoy the show with some other people in person. Because the few times I've gone to the show after it's opened, that exact same thing has happened. People are just looking at your work, and they don't know you're the artist. I love watching that. But because it's so small, somehow they figure it out, and you end up having these really interesting exchanges with people. How long does it take you to make your work? I know you get asked this all the time, but I have to know, because you have a lot of work, and it's all varied, and I can just imagine the hours…

BRACKENS: I would say roughly about a month from conception to all the processing—dying the material, weaving it, sewing it. What about you?

BIGGERS: They range. After working on them for the last ten years or so… I go through different periods where I try different approaches to making them. Sometimes it's thought out, and I'm going to plan this imagery or try to make this imagery occur within this pattern or within these parameters. Then, I might go through a phase where I'm like, "I'm going to go in there cold. I'm going to grab a brush or spray paint or a handful of tar. I'm going to throw it on there and just respond." The most recent phase has been actually cutting and pulling away fabric and creating a void. It takes a long time because there's only so much room for a mistake. Fabric has a mind of its own, so you have to do various preparations to make it respond to your cuts and to affect the way it's going to hang. It's process-oriented, for sure.

BRACKENS: What is the reception to you as a Black man who's making this work?

BIGGERS: I definitely expected a pushback because there's a perception of working with this type of material as a gendered thing. I'm using those materials and paying deference to that, but at the same time, I'm an interloper, in a way. I ended up getting another pushback from quilters, hardcore quilters. But over the years, a lot of quilters have come over because they're pushing boundaries in that genre. I've become friends with a lot of young quilters. We reach out. We're in each other's DMs. They come to lectures and shows. I point people in their direction. These are people who are not even claiming to be part of the contemporary art world, but just straight-up-and-down quilters. It's gratifying. Weird relationships happen because of the material, because of the nostalgia and Americana and community aspect of some of these quilts and how they're made.

I did a lecture in North Carolina once. This older white woman drove in two hours. She waited until after the lecture, came up to me with a bag full of quilt materials from her neighbor who was deceased and was like, "She gave them to me and I didn't know what to do with them. I'm a quilter, but I'm not going to use this stuff. I know what you're doing, and I think she would want you to have it, and I'm giving these to you." I was so touched. Those strange things happen. That gives me more energy to go through the work. How about yourself?

BRACKENS: I think it's a similar tightrope. I think a lot of my most productive conversations have been in these places and spaces where I know that I'm speaking this old white woman's language, but I'm embedding this other thing that she would not otherwise have a way to consider. Or I'm using the material or the techniques to introduce her to my world or give her a through-line in ways that I've been like, "Oh, this is working. They hear me."

The pushback has been minimal, but I came to craft before I came to art in some ways. I decided to leave behind parts of craft because I knew I was breaking rules and was fully going to continue to do so. I think textile folks are just arriving at this place where they have decided that they can part with some of the historical ideas that are embedded in the medium, which I'm so excited about.

BIGGERS: I totally agree with you. Even in the other bodies of work that I do that are not quilt-based, I've always been very interested and engaged in that notion of "craft" and "fine art," and the high-low read. That to me is very, very fertile ground for expression, but also social evolution. I do feel like some of the craft community is looking outside of that realm. The "fine art" realm is also having to reinvestigate their notions and their biases as to what's called "craft." We're dealing with vernacular culture. It only makes sense that we are translating things that were communicated to us materially and then putting it back out transformed, but also for other people to be informed by it.

BRACKENS: That makes me think about the title of the show, Codeswitch. I'm wondering if you could talk about code-switching and where you're positioning the title of the show relative to the cultural things that I know are under there.

BIGGERS: Either I have ten answers for that, or I have no answer for that. I only say that because I like the fact that Codeswitch can embody so many different interpretations. I like the idea of the materials code-switching. I like the temporal nature. Some of these materials are antique, but then you have me working on them. I don't really think these are going to be really totally understood until someone unearths them decades down the line and they're seeing the through-line from the multiple people who've intervened on these materials. I think there's that code-switch between craft and fine art that we spoke about. The power in softness, I think that's a code-switch. The high-low. There's just so many. You're dealing with a lot of code-switching in your work thematically. How do you see that idea of code-switching?

BRACKENS: For sure. I do think that things get flipped and reversed.

BIGGERS: Did you just quote Missy Elliott?

BRACKENS: See? I knew you would get it. I like the idea of not being on stable ground. I know that there are certain associations that people are going to find immediately. I like finding this way to get them to reconsider, or feel this other tug. Speaking of Missy—I watched the clip where you're talking about the ways that music rides in the work. I think about improv and the ways the materials move, just responding to what it's doing. Even if I had a plan, letting these impulses lead me to these new discoveries.

BIGGERS: There's a sense of improvisation in your work that I really respond to. There's so much improvisation in quilting and textiles in general; there's patterns, but you riff on the pattern. When you start looking at traditional patterns, and then you look at Gee's Bend, you see there's a whole evolution of visual language that's happening between those groups and those timeframes. I think you're encapsulating that. Plus, there's the international aspect of what you're doing, how it's tapping into so many ancient cultures. It's really rich. How is L.A. right now? You're there artistically at a very good time. How long have you been living there?

BRACKENS: I've been in L.A. for five years. In the last two years versus the first three, it is a different place. The amount of energy that is in L.A. in the art world… it feels like it's changed ten-fold. When I first got here, I felt the disconnect. I felt the sleepiness of it all. But now, minus COVID, there's so much happening here at any given time. I feel like I've found my people. I'm getting to watch them all rise in the ranks, which feels so great. I remember when I first moved here, I was reading South of Pico, and I was like, "This is this mythical place where all of this stuff is happening." I feel like the clock has started over, and I'm like, "We are these people. We're in the same terrain sharing the same experiences of some folks over 50 years of time."

BIGGERS: South of Pico encapsulated all the history that had already gone through L.A. I grew up knowing a lot of those people. Those were early mentors of mine. I interacted with so many of them. Like you said, L.A. had its sleepy moment. It was always burgeoning. Then all of a sudden, boom! It just started hitting so hard. It's nice to think that that energy is back in L.A., reinvigorated and re-envisioned by a younger group of people who are probably much better networked and have a lot more eyes on them. It's an exciting time to be there. I've considered coming back there many times.

BRACKENS: Come back.

BIGGERS: I'll see how it goes after this flight. What's coming up next for you?

BRACKENS: I'm opening a show at Oakville Galleries alongside a Senga Nengudi show, which I'm excited about, as we talk about South of Pico—getting to touch those nodes of thinking about migration, the underground railroad, and textiles' mythic connection to that. It was really exciting to read some of the things you were saying about the importance of holding that mythology in our consciousness.

BIGGERS: I see it in your work too. You have anecdotes. You have narrative. You have references, whether it be biblical, poetic, personal. I like that it's prevalent in your work, but it doesn't overpower the work. It's just one of the rich elements. It feels good to know that you're putting that kind of depth in the work.

BRACKENS: Thank you.

BIGGERS: I want to hear you do the rest of the song. You were slick with that.

BRACKENS: There's also a really good theoretical craft essay that references that song too, so it was both to Missy and to L.J. Roberts.

BIGGERS: Hey, there we go.

BRACKENS: Missy didn't know she was informing me.

Forbes

427 views | Oct 14, 2020, 10:29am EDT

Diedrick Brackens, The Prodigal Son, Returns To Texas



Brienne Walsh Contributor ⓘ
Arts



Diedrick Brackens, the cup is a cloud, 2018. Cotton and acrylic yarn and mirrors, 74 x 78 in. ... [+] IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST; VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES / SEOUL; AND JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK © DIEDRICK BRACKENS

Born and raised in Texas, Diedrick Brackens says that he has the Bible in his blood. “I am the Bible incarnate at this point, whether I want to be or not,” he laughs.

Brackens, who creates gorgeous woven tapestries in myriad shades including ochre, violet and raspberry, draws on stories from the Bible and mythology to create deeply symbolic tableaus. Central to each work is the figure of a man, rendered entirely in black. That man is Brackens. “I want to know what happens when I insert myself in these stories,” he says. “If I can tease out the strangeness and queerness and blackness that are already kind of inherent to them.”

This upcoming Saturday, October 17, “darling divined,” an exhibition of nine of Brackens’ tapestries, will open at the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin. The exhibition, which traveled from the New Museum in New York, will stay open until May 16, 2021.



Diedrick Brackens: darling divined, 2019. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. PHOTO BY DARIO LASAGNI

In many ways, the show is a homecoming for Brackens. After receiving his BFA at the University of North Texas in Denton in 2011, he moved to California to receive his MFA the California College of the Arts in San Francisco. He has stayed in California ever since graduating in 2014, and currently resides in Los Angeles.

When he left Texas as a young adult, he never thought he would return. With distance, the place where he is from has taken on new dimensions, and encompasses, for him, feelings of tenderness, community and family that are missing from his life in California. “I left behind Texas, but it calls back to me regularly,” he says.

Each of Brackens’ tapestries begin as a sketch or collage, created from self-portraits and photographs culled from the Internet. Brackens works with cotton, a material that he says takes color beautifully. It also embodies his personal history as the descendent of slaves who picked cotton in the fields of Southern plantations. “I remember seeing the cotton on the landscape, driving down the highways, and hearing stories from both sides of my family about picking it,” he says. “It is my great joy and duty to use this material to be able to make beautiful things, to honor this brutality by simply just engaging with it.”

Brackens hand dyes strands of cotton in his studio using formulas he develops by experimenting with materials including wine, tea and bleach. “I love the alchemy of making color,” he says. “I never use a recipe; I see myself as more of a chef than a chemist or scientist.”

The colors he develops are vibrant and deep; a kind of poetry. “I am obsessed with color,” Brackens says. He draws on color field theory, but also, seasons and his own wardrobe, to come up with color combinations. “If I know I have a show in springtime, that will be reflected in the textiles,” he

says. From start to finish, one of Brackens's tapestries, which are larger than a human body, takes about a month to weave.

Viewers of the work with any familiarity of the Bible will immediately recognize many of the stories Brackens is referencing in his compositions. The manger, arrayed beneath the starry night, is there; Jesus feeding the masses with a single fish. Jesus as the shepherd, the son of God. Jesus in the desert; in the promised land. The titles give clues to deeper meanings.



Diedrick Brackens, bitter attendance, drown jubilee, 2018. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn and silk ...

[+] IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST; VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES / SEOUL; AND JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK © DIEDRICK BRACKENS

In *bitter attendance, drown jubilee* (2018), one man dips his hands into water to catch a fish that weaves through his legs. Another man holds up, triumphant, a fish that is as large as his own body. As a starting point, the title references the jubilee of Exodus, which came every 50 years, and released all slaves from their owners. But it also looks to nearer history, and one can presume, to the three black teenagers who drowned in Mexia, Brackens' hometown, in June of 1982. The teenagers were arrested at a festival commemorating the freeing of slaves. They were handcuffed, and unable to save themselves when the boat taking them into custody capsized.



Diedrick Brackens, demigod, 2019. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 96 x 96 in. Collection of Yasmine ...

[+] IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST; VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES / SEOUL; AND JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK © DIEDRICK BRACKENS

In *demigod* (2019), a man stands, his hands outstretched like Jesus on the cross. The title suggests proximity to divinity, but the man stands behind a horse, partially obscured. One of the many justifications for slavery in the United States were that black people were equal not to white humans, but instead, to livestock.

“I’m conscious that my work calls up a world past and present, and possibly future,” says Brackens. He started making the tapestries in the exhibition in 2014, the year Michael Brown was shot dead by police in Ferguson, Missouri. “Works that I made five years ago still seem relevant today,” he says. “It chills me, and it lets me know that these works can have resonate throughout my lifetime.”



Diedrick Brackens, in the decadence of silence, 2018. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 72 x 72 in. ... [+]

IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST; VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES / SEOUL; AND JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK © DIEDRICK BRACKENS

Of particular interest to Brackens is the story of the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son is there in *in the decadence of silence* (2018), crouched before a row of palms as braying dogs confront him.



Diedrick Brackens, break and tremble, 2019. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 89 x 93 in. Museum of ...

[+] IMAGE COURTESY NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK. PHOTO BY DARIO LASAGNI

He is there is there in *break and tremble* (2019) kneeling, his head bowed, beneath a raging stallion. The son, returned home to the land that both spites him, and is him.

“I have my people, and my space, in Texas,” he says. “That’s the beautiful part of me.”

To learn more about the exhibition, visit the Blanton Museum of Art’s website.

And to learn more about Diedrick Bracken’s work, visit his website, or follow him on Instagram.

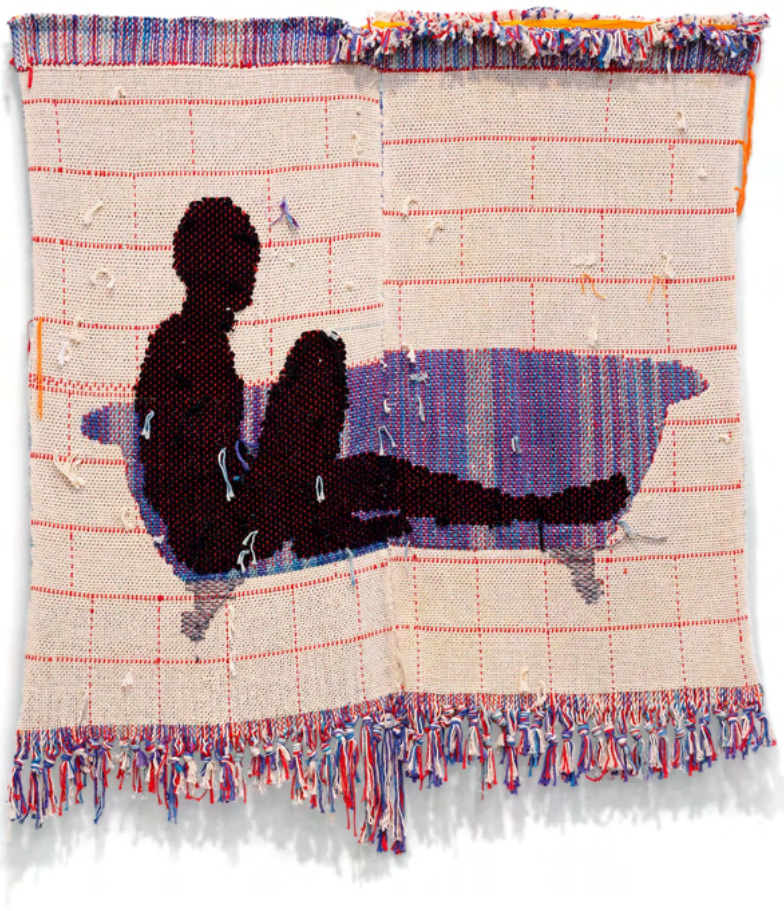
VOGUE

MAGAZINE

With "Darling Divined," Textile Artist Diedrick Brackens Plumbs His Southern Roots

BY MARLEY MARIUS

October 13, 2020



Diedrick Brackens, *how to return*, 2017. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 58 x 50 in. Collection of Erin Elizabeth Adams. Image courtesy of New Museum, New York. Photo by Dario Lasagni.

"IT FEELS LIKE A HOMECOMING," Diedrick Brackens says. After a successful showing last summer at the New Museum, the Texas-born, Los Angeles-based artist's first solo New York museum exhibition, *Darling Divined*, comes to the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin this month—opened at reduced capacity and with timed slots for patrons. "I'm excited to be able to take my family to see my work," he continues. "I mean, I think there's some family who still don't quite know what I do."

In all fairness, Brackens's work is quite complex; his graphic, handwoven textiles—the biggest, around eight by eight feet—consider folklore, mythology, Christianity, and history through the lens of his own Blackness and queerness. "Diedrick's work is singular in its form, mindful in its every thread, and generative in its message," says Margot Norton, a curator at the New Museum. The cotton yarn that Brackens dyes by hand, sometimes using tea or bleach, is a nod to the crop's weighted history in the South; his own grandmother picked cotton as a girl. And when he works with human figures, his slim, dark silhouettes are mostly modeled on himself. The approach, Brackens explains, presents "a vehicle to talk about people who live lives like mine." Adds Veronica Roberts, the Blanton's curator of modern and contemporary art, the works "herald the complexity of Black bodies and experiences."



Diedrick Brackens, *the flame goes*, 2017. Woven cotton, 62 x 32 in. Collection of Lyndon and Janine Sherman Barrois. Image courtesy of the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul; and Jack Shainman, New York © Diedrick Brackens.

They also insert Brackens into a rich tradition. Early in his practice, West African kente cloth and medieval European Unicorn tapestries were important points of reference. Later, his discovery of figures like Hannah Ryggen—a Scandinavian textile artist most popular between the 1930s and 1960s—clued him in to the medium's potential to speak to now. When he started, 12 years ago, "it was unusual to be weaving"—there was and still is a quaintness to the medium—"but I think the computer just was not in our lives the way that it is now," he says. To live in the coronavirus era, when many of us are forced to be even more plugged-in than usual, "heightens the experience of doing things by hand."

Increasingly, his inspiration comes from life—"like, going out into the world and seeing things and then getting curious," he says—and it leads him right back to Texas. (The region's catfish in particular are a frequent motif.) "It loves its children," Brackens says of his home state. Returning there, he reflects, "I will feel all the love that I think comes with having a connection to that place."

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Diedrick Brackens Explores the Warps and Wefts of Black and Queer Histories

In *darling divined*, Brackens teases out the symbolism, allegory, and parable long associated with global cosmologies of tapestry weaving.

Lydia Pyne October 21, 2020



Installation view of *Diedrick Brackens: darling divined,* New Museum, 2019 (image courtesy the Blanton Museum of Art; photo by Dario Lasagni)

AUSTIN, Texas — Metaphor looms large in the art and craft of textiles and has for millennia.

In *darling divined*, artist Diedrick Brackens's evocative tapestries rely on the symbolism, allegory, and parable long associated with global cosmologies of weaving. The exhibition's nine pieces all explore the intricacies and complexities of identity, woven along the warps and wefts of Black and queer histories.



Diedrick Brackens, "break and tremble" (2019), woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 89 x 93 inches (image courtesy New Museum, New York; photo by Dario Lasagni)

Brackens is pointed in his decision to work with cotton, as "it is tied up in the history of this country, Texas, and my family." He offers his art as "something beautiful," a small tribute to his enslaved ancestors. "I choose to sit at my loom and weave my stories," he explains in the exhibition's introductory text.

At the Blanton, "break and tremble" (2019), hangs so that audiences can see its intricate double weave — where one side is the inverse of the other — but the black figure under the horse's hooves only appears only on one side. The selective presence of the figure, reminds viewers that which stories are told and why depends on the larger context that they're woven into.

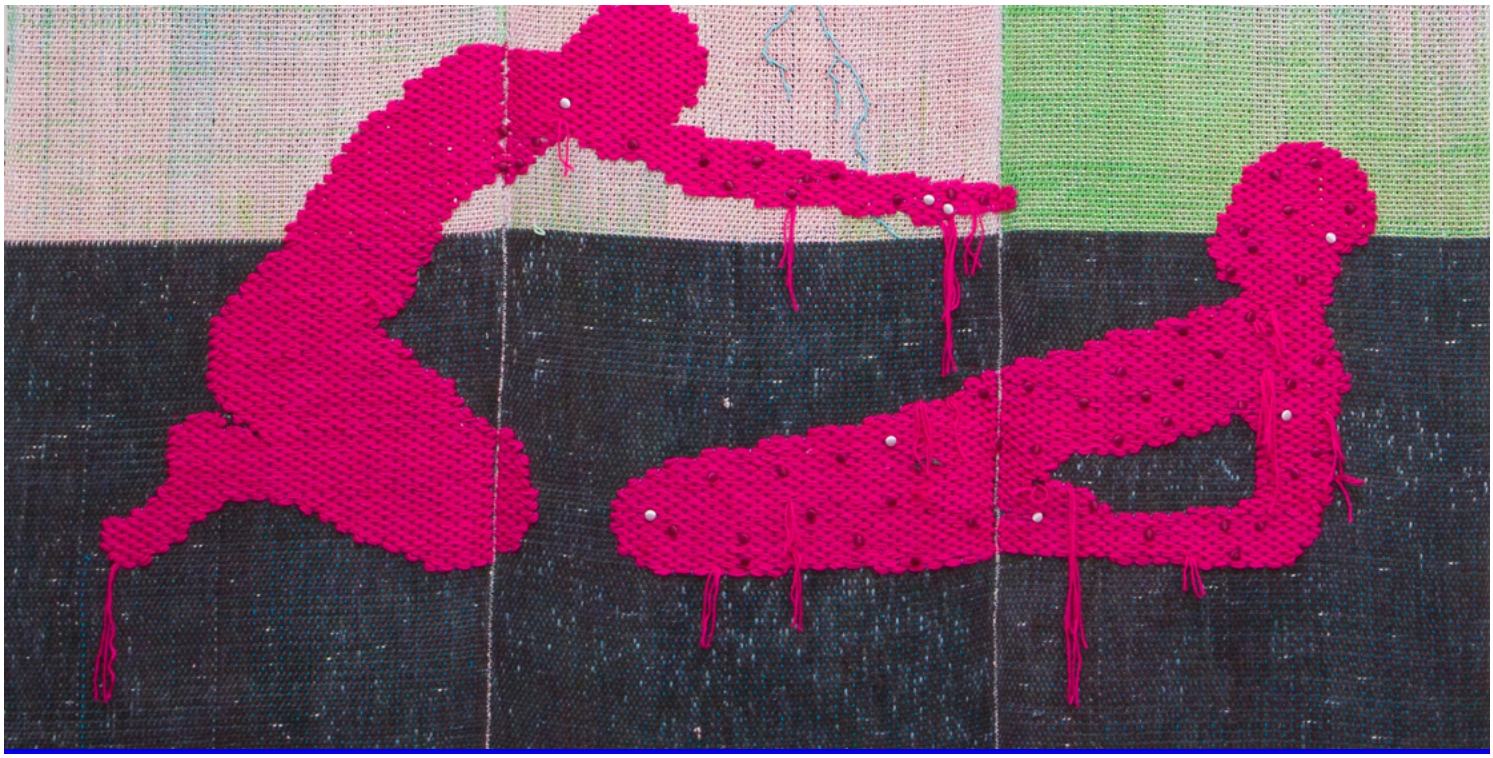
Drawing inspiration from poet Essex Hemphill's work, *darling divined* offers a richly dimensioned exploration of history and identity.

Diedrick Brackens: darling divined *continues through May 16, 2021 at the Blanton Museum of Art (200 E. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, Austin, TX). Organized by the New Museum, New York, the exhibition is curated by Margot Norton and Francesca Altamura. The Blanton's presentation is organized by Veronica Roberts.*



Diedrick Brackens, “the cup is a cloud” (2018), cotton and acrylic yarn and mirrors, 74 x 78 inches (image courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul; and Jack Shainman, New York © Diedrick Brackens)

GARAGE



GARAGE MAGAZINE ISSUE 19

Diedrick Brackens' String Theory

In conversation with Legacy Russell, the artist untangles his identity as a weaver.

By LEGACY RUSSELL | Oct 23 2020, 5:30am

The 31-year-old artist Diedrick Brackens is a weaver, an identity he carries proudly. His works, oversized, complex tapestries that often incorporate color-blocked human silhouettes against intricately woven backgrounds, center the legacies of Black American folklore, literature, movement, generational history, and diaspora. To consider textiles—quilting, weaving, tapestry-making—as a forerunner to the modern history of computing, a form of information and communications technology feels exciting when exploring Brackens' work. Considering that textile looms were a forerunner of today's computers—processing complex information to create elaborate patterns—it's exciting to explore Brackens's work as a form of information and communications technology. Textiles, after all, are grids filled with signs and symbols, "zeros and ones" containing dense histories. They are a craft of encryption, in which information is stored and encoded, its messages decipherable or signifiable for certain "readers" but strategically kept hidden from others.

What does it mean to view weaving as algorithmic and coded, a medium with multiple languages that offers up a different mode of readership? I sat down with Brackens to explore the data embedded in his textiles, and to discuss the medium as a queer and Black software with radical ancestral roots.



SUMMER SOMEWHERE, 2020, OIL ON CANVAS, WOVEN COTTON AND ACRYLIC YARN

What brought you to textiles as a creative medium?

I learned to sew from my grandmother. I was always cobbling together these little stitched creations and making clothes for toys. When I went to undergrad I was floating around, taking the required courses. I had a professor who was like, “Oh, you gravitate to making these things [with] string and fabric. Are you a fiber major?” I took a fiber class to understand what that was and immediately fell in love: the rigidity of the tool, the matrix being embedded in it, the meditative qualities of it, the color or the materiality. Long before I understood what to make, I was really just in love with the process.

What is the relationship between abstraction and figuration across the broader arc of your work?

In school I was shown so much abstraction. How I was taught heavily leaned on what happened in the 1940s through the 1970s [and] data abstraction and minimalism; the early work was affected by that. I wanted to take a certain kind of figuration and social context [and] reinject it, [to make] abstraction turn around and say all of these things that these white men were trying to empty it of. I used abstraction as this tool to say exactly what I wanted and make the viewer work harder to find that meaning. I [now] have this way of thinking about abstraction through textile traditions that talk about place, that talk about people. I use those things to think about a more nuanced understanding of figuration. I'm blessed to be coming up with a cohort of folks who are now returning to the figure.

How do you reconcile the entanglement between art and craft? Why is it important to you to claim your identity as a “weaver”?

It's important to claim the craft roots of my practice. [It] is the tradition that I inherited; that is what I was taught. That was how the people around me were identifying. Institutions drop “craft” all the time, because it doesn’t feel sexy or new. The universities where I've gone have dropped “craft” out of their name. My undergraduate fiber program closed; the idea that no one else is going to come from that space having learned the things that I learned, it feels important to call that into the room. To hold space for tradition and think about what sets [weaving] apart from painting or sculpture is crucial. It also calls women into the room; it calls folks of color into the room. I can’t let that go.



BLESSED ARE THE MOSQUITOES, 2020, OIL ON CANVAS, WOVEN COTTON AND ACRYLIC YARN SHAPE OF A FEVER BELIEVER, 2020, OIL ON CANVAS, WOVEN COTTON AND ACRYLIC YARN

In your recent exhibition "Blessed Are the Mosquitoes**," you created a body of work responsive to the CDC's reporting that one in two gay Black men and one in four gay Latino men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime. In a moment where conversations about viral diagnoses and their disproportionate impact on Black and Latinx communities are in resurgence—and where many people who lived through the dawning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic are seeing right here, right now, echoes of the same state-sanctioned violence of the 1980s —what does it mean to address these histories?**

When I read that, it was the first time for me that it was made concrete: *This other pandemic is not over*. Black and Brown folks are the people who bear the brunt of any crisis. We live in a country that is—in a *world* that is—okay with those numbers. How do I make sense of this through the medium that I work in? Knowing that textiles are encoded with meaning, I started looking at historical patterns. I started thinking a lot about when folks are dealing with their mortality, they turn to ritual, which really informed a lot of the gestures and position of the figures in those weavings. I was [also] thinking about what it means to be "marked." The weavings [had], on the surface, buttons and charms that indicate the virus. I started to weave patterns that were a field of dots, to blow up these charms and buttons [and] push them into the weaving so that it was as much about the structure of the cloth, but then allowing that to become stand-ins for the bodies.

One could argue that these works have a sonic capacity, that there is a rhythm to the act of weaving, and a rhythmic nature to how your works come together that renders them lyrically as compositions. Who—or what—should we listen for when we encounter your work?

I've inherited so many ghosts. There are all these people that I will never meet because of the virus, but I'm always communing with them, trying to allow their voices to be made material. I think about these ancestors that I will never know. These folks are trying to reach back to offer something up. How can I keep these things alive or reanimate them—or dream about what they might have been? In constructing an image, I say often, "Oh, I'm waiting for it to hum." [In the] composition of the images, I need this tension between what is *taut* and what is *slack*. There are these moments where [the work is] pulsing. [In] the space between the drawings and what I weave, improvisation is really important. There's something about the haptics that creates meaning and knowledge as I work that I've learned to trust. Then the image will come to me. It will arrive at that final place, even if I haven't figured it all out at the top of the piece.



SHAPE OF A FEVER BELIEVER, 2020, OIL ON CANVAS, WOVEN COTTON AND ACRYLIC YARN. ALL WORKS © DIEDRICK BRACKENS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK AND VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES.

Poet Danez Smith, with whom you've been in ongoing conversation, writes in his poem "summer, somewhere," "We say our own names when we pray." What

does a collective prayer look like to you?

Félix González-Torres inspired a whole generation of artists. My “artistic grandmother” would be the Gee’s Bend quilters. Aaron Douglas moves me. Barbara Chase-Riboud excites me. Alexis Pauline Gumbs really animates me. There were moments where I would consider an “abstraction” a portrait, or a dedication; there are times where I will call out a lover or a friend in a title. D'Angelo Lovell Williams or Devin Morris or Jonathan Lyndon Chase, these people who I'm like—*yes!*—this is the very thing I've been thinking about in my own making. It's so exciting to just sometimes think, “You and I are completing each other's sentences in these objects that we're making.”

JUXTAPOZ
Art & Culture

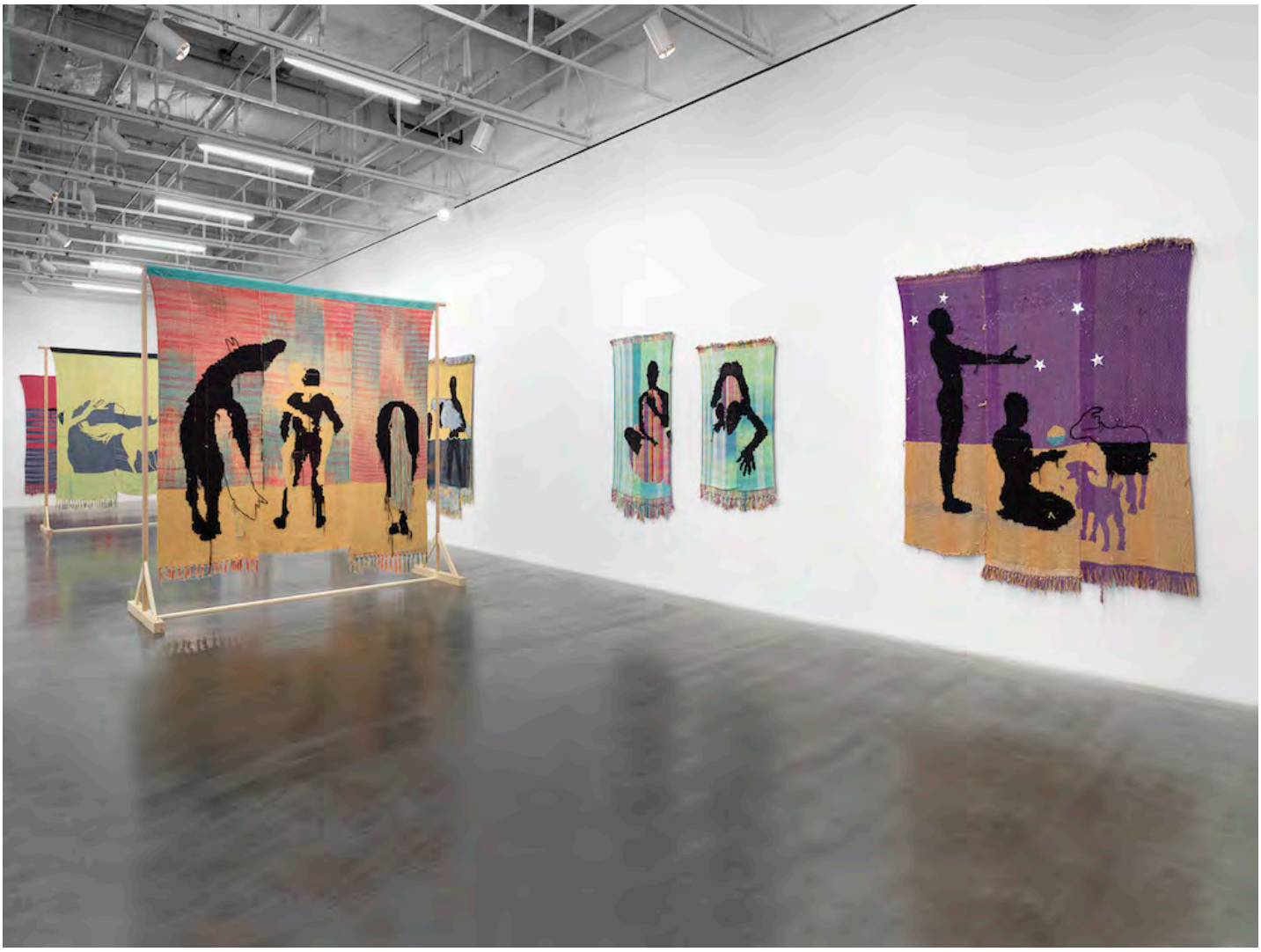


Diedrick Brackens

Dress for Adventure

Interview by Kristin Farr and portrait by David Broach

Never use a textile metaphor with Diedrick Brackens. He's heard enough. The tropes of his medium are woven into the fabric of our lives, and once you're aware of this constant thread, you'll notice it twofold. Apologies to the artist, who was born in Texas and is now based in LA, a leader in the contemporary fiber renaissance. He unravels traditional approaches, mending the ties that bind personal perspectives to universal material. And maybe one day he will forgive me for this introduction.



“Diedrick Brackens: darling divined,” 2019. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

Kristin Farr: **I first saw your work in person at Frieze London. It looks like it’s been around forever, an heirloom.**
Diedrick Brackens: I love that. I think they surprise people in person. They might think the yarns would be finer... I’m not sure exactly what it is.

Who are your subjects?
Mostly me. Sometimes I’m inspired by history paintings, or other outside sources, but then it’s normally filtered through photographs of myself, or drawings of myself, so the subject is me. I’m thinking about folks like me so often, looking at what’s happening in the media, pop culture, and using myself as an instrument to get at some of those things.

Do you pose for source photos?
Yes, and besides the materiality, the oldness of it is kind of about the poses. I find myself attracted to poses that are more classical and show all the limbs that can be read when they’re abstracted down to the silhouette, so it makes me really think about it. Something might look weird with a leg a certain way, even though it would be fine for a photograph, so I spend a lot of time figuring out the posing.

You have excellent posture. Are you a dancer? Weaving is a very hunched-over practice.
I never danced, but I get a lot of comments about my posture. It is something I’m hyper-aware of, so I’m always thinking about sitting up or standing straight, especially after I became a weaver.



“the cup is a cloud,” 2018. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, and mirrored acrylic, 74” x 78”.

I studied weaving in school but never took it further because the setup is so complex. Can you summarize the process? People need to know. I often reiterate how hardcore fiber art is. Even a sewing machine can mess you up.

I’ve spent the better part of a decade trying to master sewing. I feel confident doing most things I need to, but, for years, I would struggle and fight against the machine. There is so much in weaving and textiles about tension, and holding the right amount of tension, and keeping that going until the thing is finished. People tend to think about the limpness and flexibility of fabric, but in construction, there’s so much rigidity, strength, and organization, and all these moving parts to account for.

I dye all the yarns before I work with them, and then there’s warping, measuring all the lengths and number of yarns, and then transferring it from the warping board to the loom, and putting each thread through each hole...

Right! You also have to thread hundreds of needles.

It’s crazy. And then there is tying everything on, rolling onto the loom, and then weaving, which, for me, is all about the precision of line and everything falling where I intend. At the point of weaving, I try to allow myself not to be married to the sketch, so there are times when I’ll deviate or change things in the process.

It used to be so comforting to me that weaving was so rigid and constructed, and there’s a plan, and you execute it before you even start. You kind of know what it’s going to end up looking like. That frustrated me the more I wove, so now I really love introducing moments where there’s an unintentional variable that I can work into the weaving, which keeps it exciting.

What are the more traditional or non-traditional ways you approach weaving?
A lot of techniques I use are pretty traditional. The thing that makes them more complex is that I combine different techniques together. The double weave is something I'm really married to, but I don't often see that paired with some of the other techniques I use at the same time.

I like to think that the way I use color is not typical to textiles; it's more in line with the way a painter might work. And in terms of finishing a piece, I don't do it the way I was taught. I've been thinking about how fiber, textiles and weaving are having this moment where we can decide to throw out the rules, and we don't have to do everything the way we were trained. These objects that were once about being a utility—when they enter the fine art discourse, then what is a textile? How does it have to be constructed or not constructed?

How do you finish the ends? I remember that being an essential consideration.
In some cases, once I've cut the piece off the loom, I don't really treat the ends. I might make knots to keep it from unraveling, or sew a line. Other times, I keep the fringe or cut it at angles, and really play around with it to draw attention, or move folks' eyes around the composition. I love having staggered lengths of stripes, keeping it a little unexpected, and heightening ideas around unraveling or tangledness—all these qualities we see in textiles that indicate conceptual ideas.

You've mentioned Americana and that nostalgic aesthetic. Which elements stand out to you?
My interest in Americana is the idea that it's nebulous. It's hard to describe what Americana is, but everyone knows it when they see it. Beyond the red, white and blue stuff, there's this small-town feeling. This longing for the pastoral, or things that a lot of us have never actually experienced. In terms of aesthetic things, places, and ideas that Americana represents, for better or worse, it feels like what we want.

Or not.
Right. Or not. So it feels like there's this moving target. There are so many contradictions in the idea. In terms of the way that I make things, I love that I can use techniques and references from different parts of the world right next to each other and think about what it means to grapple with that idea, especially thinking about American identity and how this space has been formed and informed by different things. It seems like a lovely metaphor for what textiles have the ability to do to speak all these languages at the same time.

There's an exhaustive amount of cliches that we use in our everyday lives to talk about our identities, borrowing textile language. I always roll my eyes at them, as somebody working in textiles, when people talk about weaving a web or something.

So many metaphors!
And people are sincere. They don't see it that way. But, as a maker, I'm like, "Jesus, this is so much." I also love it because it's so ingrained in us to think about this material as a part of our lives, even if we don't recognize it.

I really get into these nostalgic ideas around Americana because I know they seduce us. Even those of us who are critical can still find nuggets of inspiration as Americans, and we do hope and aspire to have these ideal things and make them true for everyone. It just seems like a nice tool to bring in a viewer, and then deliver whatever other messaging I want someone to walk away with.

At the very bottom of it, I lean into the side of being hopeful. I think about tenderness and beauty, but I also want people to look at what are sometimes brutal images that appear in the tapestries. These are things we live with every day, and we often have the luxury to look away. Even in the way a lot of the systems in our lives are organized, it is made easy to look away.

Did you sew toys as a kid?
I remember wanting to make something, and I needed to sew it. It was probably a shirt for a Beanie Baby, to be honest. My grandmother basically showed me how to thread a needle, and that was it. I started to figure it out, taught myself how to braid, all these different things with string, because it was so around and available, like cloth.

I was sewing all these things that made up a little universe for my own entertainment. I still have this Beanie Baby squirrel who was the captain of my adventure land. Everything that needed to be made was probably in service of a bed, house, or the clothes needed for the adventure of the day.

This squirrel needs to be in a vitrine at your retrospective.
Ah, Simon.

That's fun to know about. You grew up moving around a lot, right?
Always in the states, and usually my father would get stationed one place outside of Texas, and then he would try to make our next place to be *in* Texas. We would be away, then we would move back, even if was on the other side of the state.

There was always a compass pointed towards home. My parents were always interested in being as close as possible. We would spend the summers with our grandparents, and come home for holidays; we were always in the car headed towards family.

I went to high school about 90 minutes from my family's hometown, and the two hours north for undergrad. Even when we lived outside the state, we flew a Texas flag in front of the house. So *serious.*

Is there anything particularly Southern or Texan about you or your work?
I was very excited and happy to leave Texas. Part of that was from living this life where every three or four years, at the most, we would start over—pack everything up and go, so it was normal. By the time I finished school, I was ready for the next thing, the next adventure. For my parents, moving was a necessity, and later, they felt like it was finally over. We were close to home and everything was good.

Getting older, I want to see my family and be closer to them. My brother has kids now, so there's this other emotional component to me wanting to be there more. I find myself thinking about it, and I think that comes through in the work. I have this anxiety that the more time I spend away, the less I will remember it, or I will start to misremember it, or the things that animate me about it are things that would be of no consequence if I was there. It's curious.

The landscape, that kind of flatness of it all—it sounds so boring, but it's so beautiful to be able to to be under this huge sky, just to see great distances, huge clouds and rain. They all come back to me, and there's a particular kind of mood that's interesting for me to try to bring into the work.

With your color palette, it makes sense. Desert, low horizons. Moving around a lot makes you very adaptable.
Where my family is from is just a quiet, rural place, so my understanding of my blackness does not necessarily stem from this urban landscape that I think we often associate with African American folks—the city. Even our conceptions of ourselves are often formed around these ideas of being city dwellers, or at least being divorced from the outdoors and nature, and for me, I don't quite have that sense of the world. It's not something that came to me until I was much older. If anything, I grew up in a lot of suburban landscapes, but never understood city life. I'm interested in that dimension of the work, and what it means to be making and prioritizing this nature-y imagery. And to claim it as something that is part of an African American experience post-1900s.



“blue under night,” 2017. Woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 31” x 78”. All artwork images courtesy the artist.

Tell me more about how using cotton and other materials supports the content.
Materially, it is mostly cotton that does that, and I'm intentional about using it because of its realtionship to Texas, to this country, to slavery. Even beyond slavery, I have family members who are still alive who grew up picking cotton, so it feels important to use those materials if those histories are embedded within, and if it can be any kind of homage to them—to elect to use it, versus it just being this thing that is impressed upon you. It's idyllic, of course, but it feels important to have that small tribute embedded in the work.

It's a big tribute! Do conversations about your work bring up moving moments?
Beyond weaving, one of my favorite things is interacting with folks around the work. I love being able to share particular stories or images, or point things out about the work, and hear people talk. It gives me a lot of joy and a chance to really dialogue with people.

A lot of moments that stand out are around spiritual things, which is somewhat embedded, but it's often not something people want to talk about in a fine arts context, so I typically don't.

Some people have asked about a very specific story from the Bible, or said the work feels biblical, and the first few times it happened, I didn't feel good or bad about it, but it was interesting. It wasn't surprising that someone would say such a thing. Growing up Southern Baptist, there were so many of these stories just baked into my mind, even though they're not things that I'm anywhere near thinking about at this point in my life. I would start to see it, and have more conversations about that, to the point where I decided to intentionally mine some of the imagery. Instead of it being this thing that came up, I could take control of it and embed my own content on top, as opposed to using my content, and then finding out that it invokes something else.

A lot of the later images, like the horses, the snake and the hare, were moments where I was deciding to take these animals with particular biblical symbolism, and think about what I actually want them to say and do. I was using these animals that, in the Bible, were either representing evil, or weren't things you were supposed to eat because they were unclean, and thinking about how to extrapolate and change those ideas, making them into things that talk about my own experience as a queer person.

And then how does it complicate the situation if I'm thinking about this animal as a means of self transformation, or as a stand-in for any kind of celebration of myself? What starts to happen if people read into these biblical storylines, and the horses were fueled by these ideas of the apocalypse, and the fact that, on any given day, it feels like the world is coming to an end because of how crazy it is?



“Diedrick Brackens: darling divined,” 2019. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

It really does. You've said that abstraction and queerness can save the world. Can you expand on that?
After undergrad, I made this pivot towards abstraction because I felt like any figuration in my work, and a lot of work by folks of color, was reduced or flattened out to a very simple reading that included things that I wasn't explicitly trying to talk about, and it just shocked me. I started making abstractions in response because I didn't want to have these traumatizing conversations with people, and I wanted to make them think more. I thought if I started working in abstraction, with no figures, they wouldn't start to make these stories that aren't happening, happen.

In any art history class, you look at a lot of abstraction and minimalism as the beginning of contemporary art. I wanted to have a conversation with **Donald Judd** but add my content, not just make things that are autonomous. I felt the abstractions worked best in context, with a certain material, or a block next to something that makes people think about the content—that's powerful, with no language or figuration, no body, when you can still evoke the body. I started playing with that, wanting to be able to have these pieces that had conversations. That allowed me to be slippery and keep some of the secrets, and make people have to work harder.

I probably didn't make another figurative thing until 2017. That's when the figures came back into the work, and it was in part a celebration of how much art and media were telling more nuanced stories about black and queer folks. I think about the show *Insecure*, and **Issa Rae**, and any number of other things, like the film *Moonlight*—all these things coming into the moment that weren't just about police murdering black folks. They were telling stories that I'm living and actually thinking about; they weren't reductive, and that was super exciting. Not that those other things weren't happening, but that was all you could find if you were looking at newspapers or television, and it was exhausting. So the first figures since undergrad that were serious came from that moment. I felt like, oh, I want to show bodies that aren't in peril as well.

I felt so seen. And in a way, that was affirming. In terms of abstraction, it's an important part of my work, but I also feel that I can have both. I still believe in the power that abstraction offers.

In terms of queerness saving the world, I remember saying this, and now... it seems as though they both lend to these ideas of expansion. Like there's more room to say who you are under the umbrella of queerness, specifically that the language continues to expand to describe our experiences, and I think it makes more room to advocate for oneself and for those that you love if you have the ability to name something.

How have you and the work evolved since you started making figures again?
I am the person who has a three-month plan, a five-year plan, then maybe beyond. I get so caught up in seeing the future, and in a very particular way. I'm not very compromising with myself.

In my work, I'm now looser in approaching my materials and process. I also feel like I have a thousand ideas at any given time. I remember having moments where I didn't know what to make, and now that happens much more rarely. I need to finish one thing so I can do another thing I feel excited about, and I'm so much more open.

What's the five-year plan?
To buy land in Texas, and hopefully land that is arable, because I want to have my own cotton farm, with a long-term goal to have all the means of production for my work. The idea is not fully baked, but I know that I have to listen to that impulse, and I want to have a footing in Texas that means more than just talking about it and visiting my family. I want to invest in it, and I also want to buy a piece of property in Los Angeles.

Texas has big art fairs.
Let me give you a little of that Texas obnoxiousness. We Texans are always doing great things.

Art Market

Galleries Are Urging Collectors to Support Social Justice and Police Reform

Alina Cohen Jun 9, 2020 4:50pm



Early last week, unusual emails flooded collectors' inboxes. Galleries across the United States were speaking out against the systemic racism and police brutality that became impossible to ignore in the wake of George Floyd's death while in Minneapolis Police Department custody and the ensuing protests across the country and around the world. Some galleries promised to match donations to specific organizations or organized benefit sales, while others simply sent out statements in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and lists of organizations recipients could support.

The swiftness of this response was at first surprising: Galleries' clients are collectors whose political beliefs aren't necessarily radical, liberal, or even inclined toward social justice endeavors. On the other hand, galleries are also loyal to their artists, whose positions, broadly speaking, tend to be firmly on the left side of the political spectrum. A number of galleries shared their motivations for making explicit statements about their own allegiances, and discussed the feedback they've received. While a few faced minor backlash, their responses indicate a larger shift in the way the industry, and many Americans, are thinking about the current crisis—opting to speak out rather than remain quiet for fear of causing offense.



Diedrick Brackens *in the decadence of silence*, 2018
VARIOUS SMALL FIRES

In a few instances, artists themselves spurred their galleries to action. New York gallery Magenta Plains announced that it would be selling prints by Ebecho Muslimova with all proceeds disbursed among the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Bail Project, and the Emergency Release Fund, while Various Small Fires, which operates spaces in Los Angeles and Seoul, is hosting a sale of posters by Calida Rawles and Diedrick Brackens to benefit four organizations (bail funds, Black Lives Matter, Black Visions Collective, and Equal Justice Initiative). "The print edition fundraiser was Ebecho's idea and everyone at the gallery was immediately behind it," said Magenta Plains co-founder and director Olivia Smith. Muslimova selected the beneficiaries and the gallery "entirely focused on the urgency to support community bail and legal defense funds," getting the sale running as swiftly as possible.

Rawles and Brackens similarly approached Various Small Fires with their own idea for a sale. "I think any conscious business has a responsibility to leverage their privilege and share their public platform to help spread awareness and redistribute resources," said Various Small Fires senior director Sara Hantman. She noted that the gallery has "access to a deep-pocketed and philanthropic audience—and funding is a crucial component to truly supporting the organizations we believe in." The gallery is still combing through donations, though it has raised nearly $50,000 so far. Magenta Plains has raised $29,100, with more prints to be sold.

art21



In the Studio

Diedrick Brackens weaves love, labor, and African American legacy into his textiles.

by Essence Harden



Essence Harden—**I wanted you to begin with walking us through the earlier stages of your decision to come to weaving and textile works.**

Diedrick Brackens—I found weaving by accident. I was making work intuitively in undergrad in an intro to sculpture class, using a lot of fabric and string. I had a professor, Mary Becker, who said, "Oh, you need to take a weaving class."

That summer I enrolled in the only class they were offering in fiber was weaving, and went every day for four or five hours, and immediately thought, "Oh. This is my thing." I fell in love with the process of it all, how meditative it was, and thought the materials and the machines were so beautiful.

I was so in love with how rigid it was, and how, if you followed the rules, you'd end up with a piece of fabric.

Rules, hard work, pays off.

Yes. It's so satisfying. I think the challenge that I did not realize until later was yes, you can make a piece of fabric if you invest this much time, but turning the fabric into an object—that I wrestled with for years.

Take us through the process of building a piece. Where do you begin on the loom? How is each piece layered and structured?

I would say it's two tracks. There's the research, writing, and ultimately a drawing, but then there's also the math. Once I decide what I'm making I have to figure out the dimensions of it and what that means for the overall length of the warp, the amount of weft material. So, the vertical and horizontal threads that need to be dyed. That comes up with these numbers that get interpreted into thread. Sometimes, the concreteness of what I have to do to get the yarns will dictate the imagery, because I know it has to fit within these bounds, then I will make a decision to do a certain gesture.

Cotton is key and/or king to your work. Can you take us through the decision and the import of cotton to you? Buried in that question is my interest in cotton's relationship to American, new world history and geography, and, how the material can form the practice itself?

The material I learned to weave with is cotton, and it's primarily based on the fact that cotton is a cheap material and it takes dye really well. It doesn't shrink as much as other materials do, so it's predictable. When you're learning, it's so versatile. Those were some of the original things that I loved about it.

Take us through a little of your own family history. You're from Texas.

My family is from Central Texas. Where my grandmother and my family on both sides live, there's a lot of cotton production that still happens there to this day. Driving home, you go through cottonfields. As a child I remember stories of relatives my grandmother's age and older talking about actually picking cotton growing up, which was at the time just a story.

As I got older, I was just like, "What? You picked cotton as a child?" And talking about the process, very matter of fact. Being an undergrad in academia, and hearing conversations around race in America and debating it, it was shattering to think about knowing something from a historical perspective, but then having to face somebody who's telling you this story, was another thing altogether.

Yeah, it's not so far away.

There was this thing for me, like, "Oh. This is *my* material." I have ownership of it. I get to use it to tell stories. I get to try, in some small psychic way, to offer this up as a way to think about laboring over this material in a completely different way for a different end. There's something great about being so close to this material in this less charged way. That's the complicated math, emotional math.

There's a lot of bold, bright colors, really deep hues and this play between synthetic and organic materials. What role does color and place play in your work?

I love color. Before I start anything, I think about what ways I can use color to strike the mood that I want works to have. If I'm operating in a practice that is so much about the material, then can the water be also considered as materially important? Does it impart something that could not otherwise be achieved without the Mississippi, or water from the lake in my hometown or these things?

I've been using those waters as carriers for the synthetic dyes that I'm working with, but only using black dye because it theoretically has the full spectrum of color. The ways black shows up when it's altered even slightly by the temperature and salt content present in that

body of water feels important to think about relative to other ways that water shapes most folks' experiences. I would argue, historically and in contemporary life, Black folks' experiences are shaped by water. Thinking about access to water and clean water, climate change I feel is affecting Black folks in major ways, and on, and on.

Synthetic materials, the dye you're using, and in tandem with cotton, all these little gestures and suggestions pop up.

Sometimes that synthetic thing is just the right color. I think there's something about using a strict palette, for instance, of materials that feels that it could trade in some level of elitism, that then the material becomes precious. It's all cotton, it's 100% cotton.

I think folks from a craft background can be very guilty of fetishizing—it's pine, it's mahogany, it's silk—that I'm like, "It's acrylic yarn. I got it for $5." I want to elevate all of these material languages because I think, again, it folds back into thinking about the history of quilting for African Americans. You take the scraps and all the things, and then it becomes precious through your labor and love of it. I feel like this is the underlying ethos that I try to keep up in the works.



Diedrick Brackens in his Los Angeles studio, 2020. Photo: Alonso Tal.

them.

ART

Diedrick Brackens Is Making Space for Black Queerness in the Art World

The textile artist's work reflects the many different intersections of his identity — Southern storytelling traditions, what it means to be a Black queer man in America, and more — to moving effect.

BY ISIAH MAGSINO

July 24, 2020



Deidrick Brackens **© Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.**

On a regular day in quarantine, Diedrick Brackens finds himself enjoying the pleasures of life's mundanities, all within his Los Angeles apartment. "I've never cooked so much in my entire

life," the artist says as reflects on his time during COVID-19. "Swept the floors, you know, all the things on like an actual schedule? Like, I don't know her!" Writing, he notes, also offers a bit of solace during these interesting, painful, and necessary times.

But before COVID-19 took over the world, the Los Angeles-based textile weaver was expanding his footprint in the fine art world and preparing for his first solo exhibition at the Jack Shainman gallery, meant to take place early April in New York city.

The exhibition, "Blessed Are The Mosquitos," was conceived after the artist came across research from the Centers for Disease Control stating that Black gay men are more likely than the general population to be living with HIV. According to the CDC, the lifetime risk of contracting the virus for Black gay men is 1 in 2 — essentially meaning that half of this population may be diagnosed with HIV over the course of their lives.

The exhibition was to include several woven tapestries, in which half of 12 woven figures would be adorned with buttons and charms to stand in for the deadly virus. Brackens was ultimately inspired by creating scenes of ritual and embrace while depicting what life may have looked like during the AIDS Pandemic.

Though the exhibition is postponed indefinitely, the artist hopes to exhibit the works in a place where people are still able to experience it.

While he's taken a more "domestic" route during quarantine, one tapestry by Brackens conceived during the pandemic has found a new home in a group show at Various Files in L.A. "Nuclear Lovers," a 6-foot-by-6-foot woven piece portraying two human figures laying side-by-side, draws inspiration from a poem by Assotto Saint. The poem was written during the height of the AIDS crisis as a love note to a post-apocalyptic time. The piece illustrates how the remnants of the poet's lovers will be unearthed and able to regenerate love in the universe, a message newly relevant during our current pandemic.

"It's been important to carry forward their legacy in a really intentional way and bring them into the room and their names forward in time as much as it is about my own thoughts and voice," Brackens said. He hopes "to lift their names, my community, and my people along with them."



"Bitter Attendance, Drown Jubilee" **© Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.**

such a unicorn.” The term “unicorn” would later be used by several others who had come in to view his work.

Brackens was confused, at least at first. “I was like: Huh, I guess I am?” he recalls. “But it made me realize that I have a specific worldview. It was definitely validating and it allowed me to bring this practice of weaving in front of more eyes and share not only my work but my community.”

This exchange hinted at the impact Brackens’ artistry would soon have in the fine art world. His work's technical blueprint begins with hand-dyeing cotton in various colors — a deliberate nod to the material’s brutal history. Brackens follows up by employing techniques from West African weaving, South American quilting, and European tapestry-making, which birth colorful shapes, human-figures, animals, and earthy elements.

His designs consist of various motifs: the role of water in a community, the gruesome history of the catfish, Biblical tales, and finding his place in the world being a queer Black man. Brackens says that he envisions many of the characters within his work as Black or queer.

“I want to be able to take these stories that are maybe familiar to a lot of folks and make them queer on some level, but also show how they might already have the capacity to be read in that way,” Brackens says.



"Demigod" **© Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.**

A unicorn in flight

The 31-year-old wields a power unique to the art world, one that has crowned him a master of storytelling and a god of his own mythological galaxy. Through large woven tapestries, Brackens continues to push past the fine art world's predominantly white and aristocratic power structures by creating a space for the complexities of Black and queer Americana.

"Being from the South equips you to be a magnificent storyteller," Brackens says. It's a nod to the traditional storylines and myths often found within his work, in which he pays homage to his army-brat Southern Baptist upbringing. Growing up in a small town in Texas continues to influence his heavily coded and layered art. As a child, Brackens relied on creativity as a means of survival, keeping his nose in books and offering his artistic skills to his church community to help cope with his surroundings.

"I don't know what the world is like now for young queer people in the South, but I think that there was so much encoding in navigating space and trying to communicate with other queer folks and being sort of a person who is already marginalized through race," Brackens says. "There were a lot of these codes and ways that I learned to move in the world and to stay safe, to find other folks to be in community with. That guided me to make work that then also became layered and symbolic."

> ***"I want to be able to take these stories that are maybe familiar to a lot of folks and make them queer on some level, but also show how they might already have the capacity to be read in that way."***

In college, Brackens would abruptly switch between being a Biology and English major to studying fine art, finally becoming convinced a career was feasible after taking his first art class. With the support of his parents, Brackens quickly developed a mastery of the woven tapestry.

While in grad school, an art professor unintentionally set the stakes for his career by remarking on one of his projects: "I can't imagine there are other people in the world that would be able to tack on all these same sorts of qualifiers, modifiers, or identities. You are

A promise predestined

But the power of his monumental work and place in the art industry reaches further than his techniques and methods. Brackens' success is a beacon of hope for the generation of Black and queer creatives that followed height of the AIDS crisis in 1980, an era when those who were coming of age were left without many mentors to look up to. Brackens' growing presence in the art world, which has included exhibitions at the New Museum in New York City and the Hammer Museum in L.A., is a significant symbol of hope for the coming generation of Black queer artists.

"I think that we are the first to sort of come of age in the wake of not having been of age at that time, and we are grappling with what our stories are — how we contribute to a larger picture," Bracken says.

Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, was first introduced to Brackens' work back in 2014, after her longtime friend and patron of the museum, the late Peggy Cooper Cafritz, gifted the museum two works made by Brackens in 2014. Later in 2018, Golden came across more of his work at the Hammer Museum, which heightened her appreciation of Brackens' sense of form.

"I saw an artist with a deeply personal relationship to the practice and history of weaving," Golden says. "His was an expansive, thoughtful, cross-genre approach, one that explored his identity as a queer black man who grew up in Texas and extended to the broader cultural histories of African, American and European textiles."



"If you feed a River Crop" **© Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles.**

In 2018, the Studio Museum awarded the Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, which Golden says honored “his achievements to date and future promise.”

But while Brackens’ potential remains boundless, he will continue to face the unbearable whiteness of an art scene that has long erased voices like his. According to a 2019 study conducted by researchers at Williams College, white artists comprise 84 percent of all works

housed in collections of major U.S. museums. Black artists make up just 1.2 percent of that total, the lowest among all ethnic groups.

But despite the statistics, Brackens remains hopeful for a diversified art world. The artist notes that he is uncertain why certain art becomes in vogue in the particular moment, but he says it is affirming to see new and diverse voices slowly emerging.

“I think people want something new and different and interesting — there is some sort of reckoning that is happening,” he says. “I hope that it is something to be maintained, not something that is following some sort of trend or fad. But I feel like it is a groundswell of something that was predestined.”

HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

How Black Artists in Texas Demonstrate the Spirit of Juneteenth

For better or worse, words like “proud,” “unapologetic,” and “resilient” have come to define Texans, and these words and this attitude also define a spectrum of Black artists who are from, or have lived in, Texas.

Lise Ragbir June 21, 2020



Tammie Rubin, “Always and forever (forever, ever, ever) No. 2” (2016) 12 x 47 x 16 inches, pigmented porcelain, underglaze (image courtesy of the artist)

This article is part of Sunday Edition: “Juneteenth.”

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The range of Black creative expression hailing from Texas should come as no surprise. After all, those who were enslaved in this state learned that slavery had been abolished more than two years *after* the nation’s 1863’s emancipation proclamation. This tragic truth might be what connects the range of Black artists with ties to the Lone Star State — a testament to the ways in which art knits people together. This combination, of creativity and the need to heal, might have also driven a segregated enclave in Austin, Texas, to become the

only Black cultural district in the Lone Star State. This neighborhood is home to the city's annual Juneteenth parade. It is also the neighborhood I have called home for the last 12 years.

The fact that Black people in Texas endured the horrors of slavery longer than those who were enslaved in any other part of the country speaks to the state's reputation of independence (it was in fact its own country from 1836–1845.) For better or worse, a we'll-do-things-our-way ethos pervades this state — and words like "proud," "unapologetic," and "resilient" have come to define Texans. These words, and this attitude, also define a spectrum of Black artists who are from, or have lived in, Texas. In a recent phone call, artist Diedrick Brackens said, "Texas is the most quintessentially American place. It represents all the values that this country is built on, but turnt up."

As someone born to Trinidadian immigrants in Canada, and a transplant to Texas, this might be the most accurate description I've ever heard of the second largest state in the union.

I was born and raised in Montreal, Quebec. As such, I came to understand the full complexity, and painful history of the US later in life. And while I often believe that I have much catching up to do, I equally believe that coming to understand the unbearable weight of this country's foundation of discrimination as an adult, has given me some breathing room. Canada is by no means a utopia, and there are strange similarities between the province of Quebec and the state of Texas.



Austin artists BlackAdonis and Jeff Miles work on a painting in Kenny Dorham's Backyard, a community gathering space on 11th street, in historic East Austin (image courtesy of the author).

They have both battled with secession debates, they are both home to the second largest populations in their respective countries, both have seen an uptick in hate crimes since 2016. And yet, my Canadian friends and family act as if I've moved to Mars when they learn that I live in Texas. The "How's that working out for you?" or the "So, when are you coming back to Canada?" are common reactions. It's a sentiment Brackens, who is from Mexia, Texas, knows well. He admits looking forward

to leaving the state to attend college in California. And yet, when people offered versions of *Oh, you're from Texas,* as if it were a condolence, he found a renewed sense of Texas-pride.

"Texas has this reputation of being racist and homophobic. But other places are all those things too. It's just coded differently. In Texas you always know where you stand, which allows you to carve out your specific community." Brackens laughed, "If a Black queer kid can survive in Texas, I can survive anywhere.'

Knowing-where-you-stand is a sentiment echoed by artist Deborah Roberts. "In Texas, 'no' doesn't mean stop. 'No' simply means figure out the detour so that you can get where you want to go. The road blocks are clear." Over the course of her long and noteworthy career, the celebrated artist is no stranger to overcoming hurdles. "There will always be people who try to define you before you even know who you are. Yet in Texas, you're taught pride at a young age — singing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" as a child in school, pledging allegiance to the state before pledging allegiance to the country at the beginning of the school day. This sense of pride has always reminded me who I am. Even when people tried to tell me I was something else.'

In truth, my West Indian parents did not ascribe significant value to pride when I was growing up. Instead, they encouraged my sister and me to keep our heads down to avoid attention — their way of imagining how we'd stay safe, I suppose. But we were also regularly reminded that we would not be seen as equal to our white peers. As such, they told us we needed to be better. "You are Black, and you are women which means you will have to work twice as hard," my mother said (twice, that I can remember). Their emphasis not on pride, but on the need for us to push harder — a need which might have drawn me out of Montreal, to Boston, DC, New York, and Philly, before coming to land in Texas — with hesitation.

In a recent phone call, Austin-based artist Tammie Rubin shared her own mixed feelings about moving to Texas from Chicago. "I was apprehensive [about the move]. I had to consider all the events that had to take place for me to feel comfortable moving south." Rubin's family were part of the wave of African Americans who made their way north during the Great Migration. Her work *Always & Forever (forever ever ever)* — a series of ceramic sculptures whose surfaces are treated with marks reminiscent of maps, while the forms themselves are reminiscent of Ku Klux Klan hoods — was in fact precipitated by her move

from Chicago, to Texas. “Of course, the promise of the North was just an illusion. Maybe the oppression seemed subtler, but it was certainly strategic; maybe just less violent; probably not even that.”

Brackens’s work also considers the ways in which Black people have moved around this country — from the Underground Railroad to the Great Migration. In a recent conversation, we talked about those who left the South not only for the northeast, but also for the West Coast. And we talked about those who’ve left Texas. “Even if we leave, were always orienting ourselves to Texas.” He went on to say, “In many ways the South is as close as we [African Americans] can get to the homeland.”

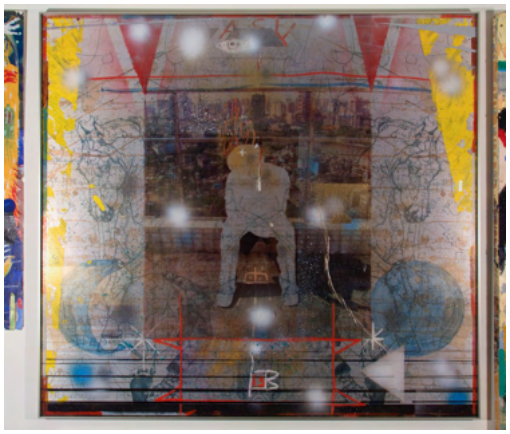


Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Atlantic” (2017)
thread, ink and graphite on tracing paper,
text by playwright Ricardo Bracho
from the play The Sweetest Hangover and
other STDS

Nigerian-American artist and Guggenheim Fellow Wura-Natasha Ogunji, did in fact leave Texas, for the homeland. Ogunji split her time between Austin and Lagos before re-locating to Nigeria permanently. Yet she considers her time in Texas as critical. “Texas was so far off the map for me, so unlike anything I thought it would be. It is a place full of unexpected beauty and interactions — a place for exploring. My time there nourished my work.”

Angelbert Metoyer is another Texan artist who splits time between Texas and overseas, in the Netherlands. When we last spoke, he was in Rotterdam. I asked if he would return to the States amidst the current uprising and he replied, “I have to come back. Strands of my new world are embedded in this fire, this time.” He’s since landed in Texas, in time for Juneteenth.

At a time of the year when the BBQ pits get rolled out and parade routes are cordoned off for Juneteenth celebrations, three Texas GOP



Angelbert Metoyer, "I'm cut out Life (M-Window)" (2014) mixed media on paper (photo by Mark Dorba and courtesy the artist)

leaders shared a post suggesting that George Floyd's death was staged, while The University of Texas (my employer) athletes call on the administrators to confront the institution's racist history. Needless to say, in the state's only Black cultural district, which is also home to the city's annual Juneteenth parade, which also is the neighborhood in which I live, the nation's current climate has changed the tone of this year's celebration.

The significance of Juneteenth carries additional weight for Brackens: His own family, on both paternal and maternal sides, have been part of the initial community who established a fairground at the edge of the lake in Mexia, Texas, to celebrate Juneteenth in the late 1800s. In its heyday, Mexia's celebration drew crowds near 30,000. This was THE Juneteenth party, with people coming from all over the country. But in 1981, at the annual event, three Black boys drowned while in police custody, changing Mexia's celebration for years to come. These days, Mexia's Juneteenth event sees crowds in the hundreds, not thousands. The highs and lows of this event have had a profound effect on Brackens's work. "To me, Black liberation in the US started in the space I'm from. So for me, Juneteenth will always be super-important."



Diedrick Brackens, "a star is a seed" (2019) woven cotton, acrylic and bucket, 13 x 64 1/2 x 48 inches (image courtesy Various Small Fires Gallery, Los Angeles and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York)

There aren't many first-generation Montrealers of Trinidadian descent in Texas. (I know two. I'm one of them.) And while there are similarities between Texas and Quebec, it turns out there are similarities between Texas and Trinidad, too. What began as church gatherings in Texas in celebration of emancipation, has grown to become a widely recognized holiday known as Juneteenth. And in 1985, Trinidad and Tobago made history becoming the first country in the world to recognize

emancipation as national holiday — a celebration marked with processions and costumes and dancing. This truth makes me proud. And as Texans say, “It ain’t bragging if it’s true.”

I think of returning to Montreal every day — to a set of conditions that I understand. To a place that isn’t *turnt up*. And yet — I may not be from here, but I am Texas-sized proud to be a part of the only Black cultural district in the state, and equally proud to bear witness to change being fueled by Black artists who have called Texas home. Artists such as John Biggers, Diedrick Brackens, Michael Ray Charles, Christina Coleman, Trevor Doyle Hancock, Melvin ‘Mel’ Edwards, Ja’Tovia Gary, Robert Hodge, Bert Long, Delita Martin, Betelhem Makonnen, Angelbert Metoyer, Wura Natasha Ogunji, Robert Pruitt, and Deborah Roberts constitute a cohort that draws attention to the complexity of Black identities and to the racial disparities which continue to plague this country.



“Black Artists Matter” street-mural on 11th Street, in front of the historic Victory Grill, in Austin’s Black Cultural District, which is an initiative of the Austin Justice Coalition (image courtesy of the author)

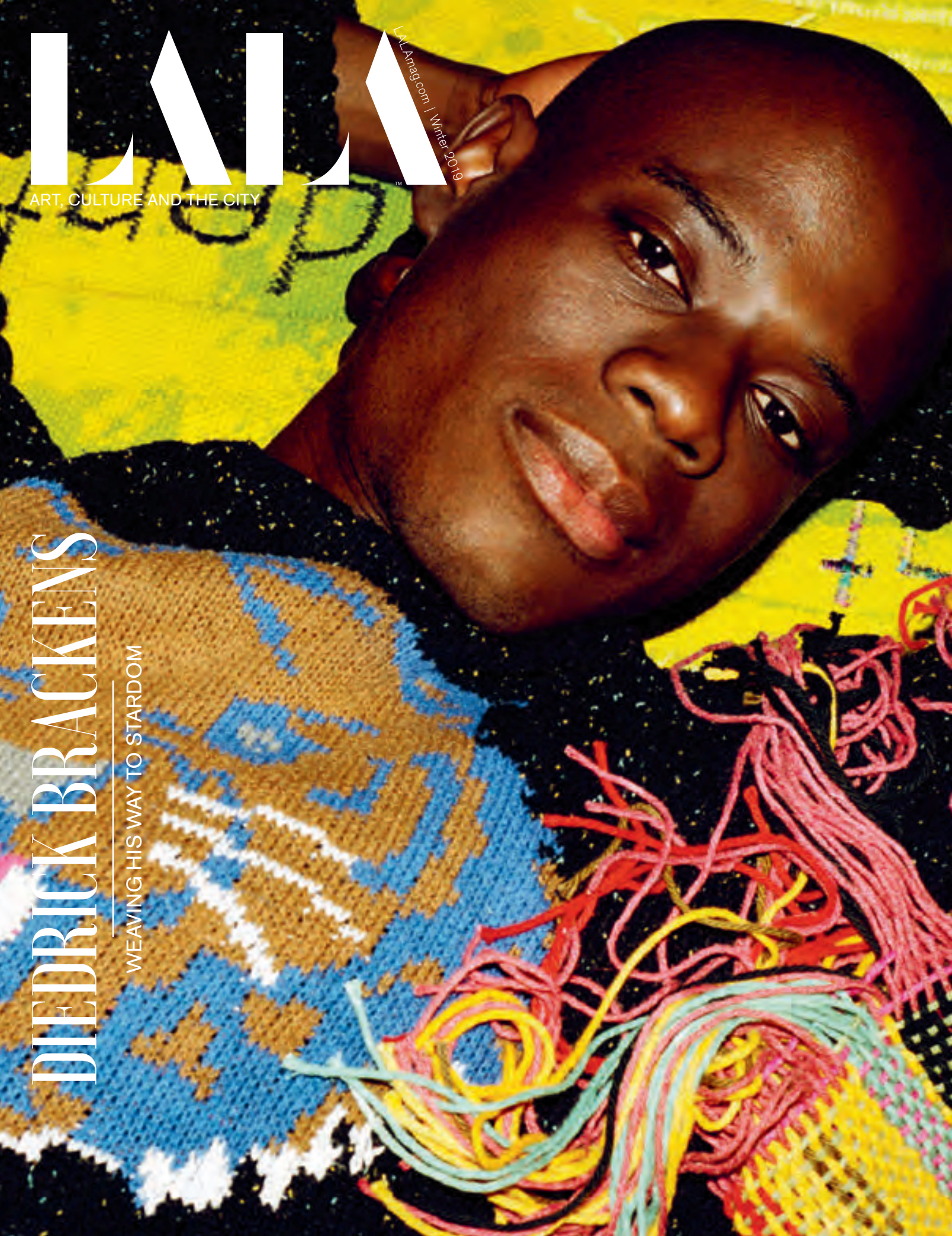
This year, in the weeks leading up to Juneteenth, as protests hear the chop of helicopter blades that interrupt a Sunday afternoon and police in these helicopters circling above bark, “We will deploy tear gas” (and your daughter asks “What is tear gas?”), while protestors park cars and vans on our streets before donning masks to join the fray, the celebration reminds us how far we’ve come. And it reminds us how far we have to go.

When I first moved to Texas, I couldn’t understand how finding out two years after everyone else that slavery had been abolished was cause for celebration. Yet after more than a decade I’ve come to understand that in Texas, “fixin” doesn’t mean repairing. It means preparing.

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DIEDRICK BRACKENS

WEAVING HIS WAY TO STARDOM

LAYERS OF THE LOOM

Diedrick Brackens is peeling back historical notions of identity and material with his poetically powerful woven textiles.

BY **BRUCE W. FERGUSON**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MATTHIAS VRIENS-MCGRATH**
PRODUCED BY **MICHAEL REYNOLDS**



"Diedrick Brackens intelligently integrates a multiplicity of historical European and African methods and images as well as his own subjective responses to being a young, black, gay man in today's America."

—Bruce W. Ferguson

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH JUST AS A MEDIUM has been defeated by a new communications technology—as analog media has been displaced by digital—an artist puts the seemingly outdated medium into play in a new and persuasive manner. For instance, just as 16 mm film appeared to be "over" due to the advent of new technologies and a lack of film supply, the great South African artist William Kentridge began to make the most memorable of all 16 mm films perhaps in history. Or Grayson Perry, a British ceramicist and well-known cross-dresser, won the Turner Prize in 2003 for using classical forms of ceramics to depict contemporary social and personal issues. And, of course, there are hundreds of other traditional skills used by artists and artisans alike continuing older, even antique, practices. These artists defy the conventional understandings of these traditions while utilizing them.

One such artist is Diedrick Brackens, now an LA local, whose work—intricately woven tapestries that comment on social and political ideologies—has earned him the 2018 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize from The Studio Museum in Harlem and was most recently shown in the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A. 2018" biennial. Brackens has quietly, but determinedly elevated the skill of weaving, which in the art world, was always assumed to be lesser, even marginal, and considered traditional rather than innovative. But, just as those prejudices and biases are widely employed, artists like Brackens find new practices to make "peripheral" mediums relevant, central and urgent. In one of the most definitive exhibitions to support this argument, "Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting" at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City in 2007, the curators rightly identified that "Woodturners and carvers, potters and sculptors, knitters, lacemakers and crochet virtuosi are in the forefront of creativity." Clearly, such an eruption into a traditional, artistic process is at the heart of what Brackens manifests in his calm, but enduring studio practice. Born in Mexia, Texas and growing up in the state, he was always aware of social and political issues and their implications for himself. One doesn't need much imagination to think about how those experiences might have played out for an experimental artist in the reddest of states.

Brackens went to the University of North Texas in Denton for his undergraduate degree. It is a school, which, like weaving itself, is perhaps underestimated. It has powerful faculty members and a series of strong graduates, and Brackens' emerging work was encouraged there. He then went to San Francisco to do graduate work at California College of the Arts. Both the school and being in San Francisco—a hotbed of social and political change—clearly influenced his visual productivity. Some of his earlier weavings made direct political references (such as the "hands up, don't shoot" image spotlighting the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by a white police officer) and some referred to village communal production with Brackens' use of the strip-woven kente cloth of Ghana.

Brackens intelligently integrates a multiplicity of historical European and African methods and images as well as his own subjective responses to being a young, black, gay man in today's America. Using everything from commercial dyes to traditional colorings and both natural and chemical invasions, Brackens works on a small floor handloom. The visual and textual results always seem to be as intimate as his working procedures even when the subject is a large one, like a map of a river system. Some of the work is seemingly abstract, but closer examination usually yields meaning via the material, if not a recognizable image. The familiar handmade textiles reflect the artist's care



Diedrick Brackens is leading a cohort of young artists who are pushing traditional crafts to the forefront of the contemporary art world. For the Texas-born, LA-based artist, working with cotton is an opportunity to explore the historical implications of the material.



Brackens' woven textiles and tapestries have an assemblage-like quality with disruptions and disjunctions that complicate the potential for a singular narrative. Opposite page: the bravest sons, 2018.

and empathetic attitude, evident in each committed work.

One of the subversions in this subtle process that Brackens employs is his purposeful transition of a domestic activity into the public sphere. A bit like the "personal is political," with its gender overtones, his woven textures have within them breaks, interruptions, discontinuities and other material and visual disruptions, using fine materials joined with commercial cheap fabrics and incompletions of wefts and warps. All these material disturbances are themselves allegories of the disjunctions of identity, whether personal or largely cultural in nature. His narrow strips, determined by the width of the small loom, are sewn together side by side, which prevents a smooth narrative of unity.

The repetitiveness of Brackens' working methods is echoed in the motifs and symbols he uses—flags, bandages and mythical animals, for instance—which are all relatively pervasive in his woven pieces and embedded in visual cultures. Like Jasper Johns' re-use and re-rendering of the American flag, many of Brackens' works lightly, but potently, question the usual straight and conformist uses of the symbols and materials they incorporate. Cotton in American history is immediately tied to slavery and to its significance as a driving economic force in the post-revolutionary period. "Primarily I work with cotton. I am attracted to the material," Brackens has said. "It's got a long history that is both beautiful and violent, particularly in the U.S. So for me it is particularly important to employ that material."

It has been said that Brackens' textiles reference his own biographical past. Actually the works are, like all art, fictional to the viewer. But they are fictional in the same way that all images are, more forceful and effective than reality and its anecdotal status. I liken what Brackens is doing to a kind of poetry. It is not declarative or analytical or even critical on the surface. Yet, by using the handmade imagery, disturbed surfaces and unexpected interruptions as a political gesture, he is creating an unfamiliar vocabulary of dissent and resistance—gentle, but capable of heated and ferocious readings. These works have a deep life as they deepen ours in response.







Experimenting with different processes and natural and chemical dyes, Brackens creates fibers and textiles that often carry vibrant hues.





Brackens uses a small floor handloom to weave his pieces, which creates an intimacy of scale and size in all of his works, such as with ventriloquist, 2018, opposite.

THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

T PRESENTS

An Artist Whose Intricate Weavings Explore the Meaning of Home

Diedrick Brackens's vibrant textiles tell stories about being black and queer in the South.



The artist Diedrick Brackens at his loom in his studio in Leimert Park, Los Angeles. Chantal Anderson

By Melissa Smith

Aug. 7, 2019

On the first day of weaving class as an undergraduate at the University of North Texas, in Denton, the artist Diedrick Brackens

walked into his classroom to find 30 looms lined up in perfect rows in front of a cabinet filled with color-coordinated yarn, like a "rainbow in the back," he remembers. He was instantly hooked. Now 30, Brackens works from a studio in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, where he makes intricate weavings mainly from cotton, a material he uses for its versatility, he says, but also "to pay tribute to those who came before me." His grandmother picked cotton as a child in Limestone County, Tex., where she and much of the rest of Brackens's family later settled. "She had to do this thing that comes along with this awful history," he says. "And if that is part of my story, I have to make very beautiful things."

Brackens does think that the work he makes is beautiful. "There is something undeniably pleasing about looking at fabric," he says. He also considers cloth the ideal medium in which to tell his stories, which are so woven through with symbolism that they're rarely as straightforward as they may at first seem. Brackens's work is not only shaped by his identity as a queer black man but also strongly influenced by his relationship to his family, and their relationship to the South. As an army kid, he moved around a lot, but he'd always return to Limestone County to spend the summers with his grandmother and extended family.

In the years since he left Texas, in 2012, to earn his M.F.A. at California College of the Arts in San Francisco, Brackens has quickly found recognition within the art world. Last summer, four of his works were included in the Hammer Museum's biennial "Made in L.A. 2018" exhibition, and in October the Studio Museum in Harlem awarded him its annual Wein Prize, whose previous recipients include Simone Leigh, Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson. This summer, his first institutional solo show in New York, "Darling Divined." is on view at the New Museum.

Brackens's work still has its roots in his childhood traveling to and from Texas. The centerpiece of his "Made in L.A." presentation, for example, "Bitter Attendance, Drown Jubilee," (2018), which is also on display in "Darling Divined," represents an incident his mother and grandmother talked about often when he was a child: the day, in 1981, when three black boys died at a local Juneteenth celebration, around eight years before Brackens was born. Only after he looked into it as an adult did he learn the full story. The teenagers drowned while in police custody — with some alleging they were handcuffed — after the boat they were in capsized. (All three officers were acquitted in 1982.) In Brackens's piece, two young men wade in a lake, a set of open handcuffs resting below the main scene (as if suggesting an alternate ending to this real-life story); one boy reaches down for a catfish while the other holds a much larger one. Brackens sees the catfish as representations of himself, of Southernness or, more abstractly, of "ancestors or spirits," he says. "If this was the boys' resting place," he continues, "how do we commune with them? How do we continue to love them?" The work reflects on not only that event but also the complexity of love, loss and memory.

“The history of that event forever affected some of the dynamics in his hometown, in thinking about how police related to the black community,” says Erin Christovale, a co-curator of “Made in L.A. 2018.” “But I think overall the allegorical nature of his work holds its own as well.” Indeed, a mysterious, spiritual quality characterizes much of Brackens’s work, in which each element has meanings both literal and metaphorical. Speaking about the 10 textile pieces in his current show — vivid weavings in which black figures and animals are silhouetted against vibrant bands of color (dusty yellows, mineral greens, sumptuous purples) — Brackens explains how the works’ many encounters between humans and animals represent relationships between “friends and lovers and family members” and serve as vehicles for his intricate narratives.



Brackens carefully hangs an abstract work on the wall of his studio. Chantal Anderson



A weaving on a wooden drying rack. Chantal Anderson



Brackens's "The Cup Is a Cloud" (2018). Courtesy of the New Museum



Brackens's "Bitter Attendance, Drown Jubilee" (2018). Courtesy of the New Museum

Brackens also frequently looks to the work of Essex Hemphill — the Philadelphia-based poet whose writing, produced from the '80s until his death in 1995, was firmly rooted in race and sexuality — to unpack the dynamics of male intimacy. "There's often this doubling in Hemphill's poetry between lover, between mentor, between father, between friend," Brackens says. "And there is always this distance that's hard to penetrate in regard to masculinity. That's something that I'm very interested in with my father, and with father figures." In his work "Opening Tombs Beneath the Heart" (2018), Brackens depicts an intimate moment, in hues of pink and brown, between two men who are just barely touching. Each figure is framed by an arched window, a visual reference to the church and a nod to Brackens's Southern Baptist upbringing that complicates the viewer's understanding of their relationship. In the background, a bleeding dead pig serves as a stand-in for the fatted calf, a biblical symbol suggesting a celebration to mark the return of the prodigal son.

These days, when Brackens is not teaching at California State University, Long Beach, he is studying historical migrations, and "all the ways black folks moved through and around the country," he says. In particular, he is researching the Underground Railroad, charting a course of black migration that will, within his practice, play into the theme that has guided all of his work so far: a search for the true meaning of home.

"Diedrick Brackens: Darling Divined" is on view now through Sept. 8, 2019, at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, newmuseum.org.

THE ARTISTS TO KNOW RIGHT NOW

Artsy Editors Sep 16, 2019 2:42pm

Videos by Alex John Beck
Video Editing by Nate DeYoung
Interaction Design by Wax Studios

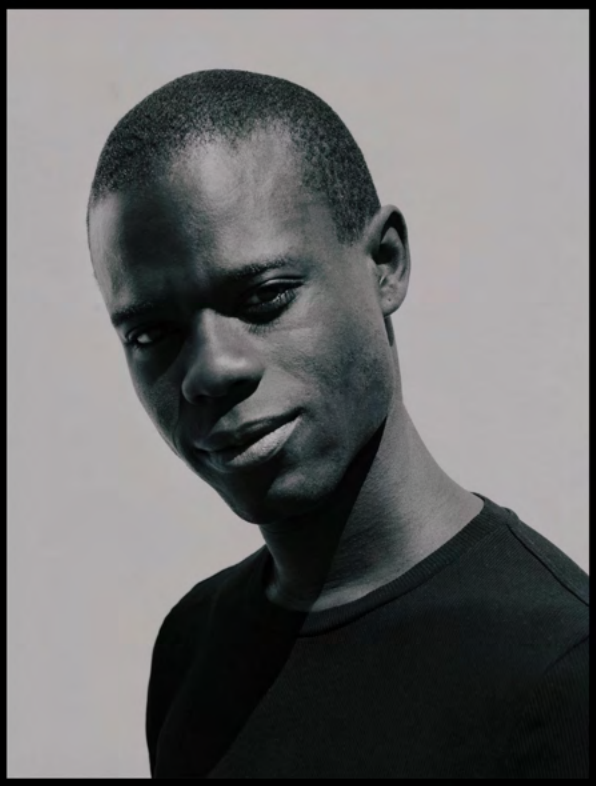
The landscape of contemporary art is ever-changing. It shifts according to countless factors, from artists' principles and the political climate to auction records and collectors' tastes. Nevertheless, each year, a new crop of ambitious artists stands out. They catapult from obscurity to ubiquity, earn representation from top galleries, garner interest from prominent collectors, and pack their schedules with exhibitions. Most importantly, they make work that expands our understanding of what art can be.

The Artsy Vanguard 2019 features 50 artists, hailing from 27 countries and working in 27 cities around the world. Ranging in age from 28 to 93, they pursue painting, sculpture, photography, filmmaking, and performance, as well as investigative research and virtual reality. They delve into topics from human rights violations to youth culture, and capture the attention of powerhouse collectors and celebrity royalty, like Beyoncé.

Artsy editors developed this list from a pool of 600 artists who were nominated by more than 100 curators, collectors, and art-world professionals. These artists represent three distinct career stages, which we've arranged into the following categories: Emerging, which introduces artists who recently started showing at leading institutions and galleries; Newly Established, which presents the artists making noise at major art events and gaining representation with influential galleries; and Getting Their Due, which recognizes artists who have worked persistently for decades, yet have only recently received the spotlight they deserve. The Artsy Vanguard highlights the artists paving the future of art *right now*.

Diedrick Brackens

B. 1989, Mexia, Texas. Lives and works in Los Angeles.



Diedrick Brackens by Alex Hodor-Lee. Courtesy of VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, Los Angeles.



Diedrick Brackens *the cup is a cloud*, 2018 VARIOUS SMALL FIRES

Diedrick Brackens's woven textiles feature depictions of people and animals, embedded with expressions of black and queer identity. Last summer, he was featured in the Hammer Museum's "Made in L.A." biennial, and then won the Studio Museum in Harlem's $50,000 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize in the fall. This past spring, his work filled both a gallery show and a Frieze New York booth with L.A.'s Various Small Fires; his work entered the collection of the Brooklyn Museum; he joined the roster of New York's Jack Shainman Gallery; and he opened a solo show at the New Museum.



Hammer Museum curator Erin Christovale, who co-curated “Made in L.A.,” remarked that the artist’s works are “rich in texture, personal narratives, and various weaving traditions.” Indeed, Brackens’s works are seeped in symbolism. They meld together “a spectrum of influences from the Gee’s Bend quilters of Alabama to the Unicorn Tapestries that were produced during the turn of the 16th century in Paris,” Christovale noted, while also invoking America’s history of slavery through his use of cotton. “Both his technique and context work together to highlight a black and queer experience in today’s society,” she added.

February 19, 2020
By Alina Cohen

Diedrick Brackens Weaves 21st-Century Concerns into Moving Tapestries





Portrait of Diedrick Brackens by Alex Hodor-Lee. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Diedrick Brackens, *summer somewhere*, 2020. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul.

In order to enhance his thread-based practice, the artist Diedrick Brackens recently enrolled in a poetry course at UCLA. The first class, taught by Rick Bursky, focused on imagery—how a poem exerts power as it generates a striking picture in the reader's mind. Brackens recently told me that he enjoys the opportunity to discuss language with a small cohort. The words "text" and "textile," he pointed out, share the same root: A story weaves together words, just as a tapestry interlaces threads.

The 31-year-old Brackens, who opens his first New York gallery show at Jack Shainman Gallery this April, has enjoyed a rapid rise in critical attention for tapestries that elicit complex and moving narratives. Uneven surfaces, dangling strings, and fringed edges give strong character to his works, which often feature silhouettes of black bodies. As the weavings privilege texture and imperfection over traditional craft principles—and riff on 21st-century concerns—they give Brackens's age-old medium a contemporary update.





Diedrick Brackens, *the bravest sons*, 2018. VARIOUS SMALL FIRES. Diedrick Brackens, *stud double*, 2019. VARIOUS SMALL FIRES.

“I became enamored of his ability to tell profound stories—personal, historical, even mythical—within the surface of his weavings,” said Anne Ellegood, executive director of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Ellegood included Brackens in the 2018 edition of “Made in L.A.,” the influential biennial mounted by the Hammer Museum (where Ellegood formerly served as senior curator).

Brackens’s star has only risen since then. Last year, both the New Museum and the Los Angeles gallery Various Small Fires (VSF) gave him solo presentations. With all this success, Brackens is particularly thrilled about being represented by Jack Shainman. “I’m going to sound like a fangirl,” Brackens laughed as we sat together in a small back office at the gallery’s space on West 20th Street. He said this was the first New York gallery he ever visited, back when he was an undergraduate in 2009. “So many artists I love, like Nick Cave, El Anatsui, all these folks were working with them,” he said. Jack Shainman’s artists also have a strong presence at Brackens’s alma mater, the California College of the Arts; Hank Willis Thomas and Toyin Ojih Odutola, who are also represented by the gallery, are fellow alumni.



Installation view of Various Small Fire’s booth at Frieze New York, 2019. Photo by Renato Ghiazza. Courtesy of the artist and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul.

I first saw Brackens's work at Frieze New York last May, when VSF devoted its booth to his work; *when no softness came* (2019) caught my eye with its delicious mint and watermelon hues. Vertical bars of alternately faded and bright colors recalled a wonky television screen; at the center of the work, a giant white horse pranced. All three tapestries in the booth took inspiration from the Black cowboys who labored on ranches throughout the 19th century. Brackens's motif captured the mid-2019 zeitgeist, as the "Yeehaw Agenda"—which overhauled Old West lore—pervaded pop culture.

Yet Brackens's interests range far beyond Black cowboys. For his first outing at Jack Shainman, Brackens mentioned that he's thinking about picnics ("I find the form attractive and romantic," he said), the AIDS crisis, catfish, and faith healers. Altogether, the artist hopes the works provoke ideas of leisure and labor, illness and belief, and Southern identity.





Diedrick Brackens, *look spit out*, 2019. VARIOUS SMALL FIRES. Diedrick Brackens, *bitter attendance, drown jubilee,* 2018. Jack Shainman Gallery.

Catfish—a long-time symbol of Brackens's—will appear in a new tapestry, *There is a Leak* (2020) (the title references the gospel song "There is a Leak in this Old Building"). It features a black figure seated in front of a giant yellow picnic basket and holding a long, forest-green fish. Brackens told me that Texas, his home state, has historically been the largest consumer of catfish. "It feels like the perfect spirit animal or mascot," he said. The sea creatures are scavengers and survivors, he explained.

Brackens will also bring his work off the walls as he creates three baskets to complement nine new tapestries. He'll fill the baskets with what he calls a "jelly resin" material molded to look like water. "When I was teaching, I'd tell my students that basketry was the next big thing in textile," Brackens said. (He began teaching at California State University Long Beach in 2015.)



Diedrick Brackens, *shape of a fever believer*, 2020. © Diedrick Brackens. Courtesy of the artist; Jack Shainman Gallery, New York; and Various Small Fires, Los Angeles / Seoul.

Traditional craft media, including ceramics and tapestry, have recently undergone a kind of renaissance; Brackens thinks it's just a matter of time before artists and historians turn their attention to woven vessels. The medium appeals to the artist because it allows him to move his hands in a different way—weaving a basket requires a very different process than using a loom. Brackens names three friends already pushing the form forward: Analise Minjarez, Sarita Westrup, and Sarah Zapata.

While physicality and tactility are integral to Brackens's practice, his approach also values voice and communication: He discusses his looms as though they are close friends and has named one "Sprechen," which means "speech" in German.

"To experience his works in person is often quite moving, as if you can feel Diedrick working out his life experiences through the laborious act of weaving," Ellegood said. With heavily textured and lovingly wrought objects, Brackens tells layered stories that escape verbal expression and traditional narrative chronologies.

Art in America

May 15, 2020
By Glenn Adamson

Diedrick Brackens Interweaves Black History, Myth, and Self-Portraiture



“I cry so much sometimes, I feel like I’ma turn to drops.” That’s Chiron talking, the central character of Barry Jenkins’s 2016 film, *Moonlight*. The line came to me while I was looking at images of **Diedrick Brackens**’s new weavings, which, like the movie, offer an exploration of queer black experience that is at once heartbreaking and uplifting. These recent works were meant to be shown at **Jack Shainman** Gallery in New York, in a solo exhibition called “blessed are the mosquitoes.” It’s now on indefinite hold, the artworks in lockdown in a Los Angeles warehouse. Which is a damn shame, because like certain other exhibitions that are currently languishing behind closed doors—the Met Breuer’s Gerhard Richter retrospective, for one—Brackens’s show is exactly the kind we all need to see right now. Intended as an exploration of one pandemic, it has come to seem emblematic of another.

When I interviewed Brackens via Zoom in April, he said that he originally thought of the works for the Shainman show as an exploration of the long-term impact of the AIDS crisis on the black community. The works center on figures rendered in black or hot-pink silhouettes, some pockmarked by dots—which could represent germs, bugs, pills, wounds, sarcomas, or even teardrops. (He took inspiration for the motif from the Nigerian-British artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode’s 1987 photograph *Sonponnoi*, which shows a seated black man cropped at neck and knee, his skin painted with polka dots, clutching a trio of lit candles at his crotch.) The figures are placed in simple but evocative settings, seated before a fence or floating with head thrown back near a tree, in postures that suggest some occult significance: “we all grapple with mortality through ritual,” Brackens observes, “even the least spiritual of us.” Most of his characters could be read as stand-ins for the artist himself—they have his slim build—but they are also blanks, onto which viewers may project their own narratives.

In a strange twist of fate, these works arrived in the world at about the same time as COVID-19, a disease that, like AIDS, disproportionately affects black Americans—black men most of all. Brackens could not have foreseen this crisis, of course, but it has lent even greater urgency to his central theme: in his words, “all the ways the male body fails, and also what it is capable of.” This is an investigation in the vein opened up by Thelma Golden’s influential exhibition “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art,” which was organized at the Whitney Museum in New York—it’s hard to believe—twenty-five years ago, in 1994. Brackens was all of five years old then. He is part of the new wave of artists of color whose work has been met with at least some active encouragement, rather than a wall of obstruction. The results of this historic shift have been awesome to behold, particularly when it comes to figurative painting: consider the reverence accorded to such well-established figures as Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley, and Amy Sherald, as well as to artists of Brackens’s own generation, like Tschabalala Self and Njideka Akunyili Crosby.



Diedrick Brackens: *the cup is a cloud*, 2018, cotton and acrylic yarn with mirrors, 78 inches square. COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES.

Brackens’s work certainly fits within this context, as a multivalent expression of black identity. It also draws on formal precedents such as Kara Walker’s cut-paper works, the prints of the Cuban artist Belkis Ayón, and Simone Leigh’s eloquent ceramic sculptures—all of which employ silhouettes or highly stylized forms. There are a few things that set Brackens apart, though, first and most obviously, his chosen medium. While his works are certainly painterly, they are not actually painted, but rather slowly built up, weft by weft, on the loom. He first gravitated to the discipline as an undergraduate at the University of North Texas. “I walked into the **weaving** room and saw the machines and color-coded cabinets of yarn,” he recalls, “and thought: I have no idea what this is, but it’s amazing.” He was hooked straightaway. He loved the slow analog action of the machines, the sense that he was traveling through time, his hands and body echoing the shuttling motions of past weavers beyond counting.

Brackens then pursued an MFA degree at the California College of the Arts, studying under textile artist Josh Faught, whose works offer a candid and heartfelt exploration of queer identity. Among other things, Brackens’s period of study with Faught encouraged him simply to loosen up his process. “Out in the world,” he says, “people always flipped the weaving over to look at the back,” evaluating it primarily on the basis of rigorous technique. Now he leaned into improvisation. It helped that many of his peers at CCA were painters, who knew nothing about the materiality of textile and responded purely on the basis of imagery, palette, and composition. To this day Brackens’s embroidered lines feel like they were drawn by hand, his stray hanging threads like drips.



Diedrick Brackens: *break and tremble*, 2019, woven cotten and acrylic yarn, 96 inches square. COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES.

In the short time since Brackens graduated, in 2014, textiles have seen a tremendous upswing in ways of making and in attention paid—both to honored elders such as Anni Albers, Lenore Tawney, and Sheila Hicks, and to contemporary figures like Julia Bland, Sheila Pepe, and Faught himself. “It’s the same kind of freak-out that ceramics had a decade ago, or painting had a hundred years ago,” Brackens observes. Even amid this eruption, he has established an unusual method for his work by fusing together multiple textile idioms: figural tapestry, which is largely a European tradition; kente cloth from West Africa; and quilt making, particularly as practiced by African Americans (most famously the women of Gee’s Bend, Alabama). His primary material is hand-dyed cotton, a fiber that comes freighted with history; manipulating the threads, for him, is another way to get in touch with past generations.

Brackens’s relationship to these various medium-specific trajectories has undergone a gradual shift. In his early work, he says, “the big thing was accessing African traditions. They were the pinnacle for me: a way to tie myself to something old. I thought, if I can get close to this root, something will happen.” After his first figurative works were misconstrued by some viewers, who saw them as manifesting African American stereotypes, he turned for a while to abstraction, sometimes adding stray, suggestive text fragments that seem to have wandered off a smartphone screen. He also began to look more seriously at Southern black quilting, feeling that it was perhaps a more authentic resource for him than African textiles—he’s from Texas, after all. He added to his work passages of over-stitching and other embellishments (among them buttons, silk organza, and baskets), allowing him to break out of the matrix imposed by the loom. Even as he has returned to figuration, beginning in 2017, his compositions have retained a dynamic, asymmetrical quality.

As Brackens’s technical repertoire has deepened, so too has the resonance of his work. His repeated use of bare silhouettes, along with certain recurring motifs—catfish, horses—lend his creations an aspect of private **mythology**. This is redolent, once again, of Southern folk art (the celebrated quilts of Harriet Powers, for example, or the drawings of Bill Traylor) but also ancient legends. Brackens says he has been thinking recently about mythic protagonists like Orpheus and Hercules: “all-purpose heroes” whose narratives rise above the level of mere storytelling, becoming foundational to the cultural imagination.



Diedrick Brackens: *demigod*, 2019, woven cotton and acrylic yarn, 72 inches square.COURTESY JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND VARIOUS SMALL FIRES, LOS ANGELES.

Any artist would want to achieve that, perhaps, but Brackens has set his sights on this goal with particular focus, and this has brought a newly allegorical and portentous quality to his more recent works. Continuing his extended act of self-**portraiture**, *demigod* and *break and tremble* (both 2019) show a lone naked man and a mythic horse on a quest: for human connection in the face of isolation, meaning in the face of potential erasure. Even before the arrival of COVID-19, Brackens's work seemed almost unbearably relevant to what was going on in the world. Now, viewed through the overhanging veil of plague times—at a moment when all-purpose heroism is so much in demand—it has become essential.

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2019

LYNNE COOKE

Lynne Cooke is Senior Curator for Special Projects at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. "Maneuver," an exhibition she curated that explores aspects of Anni Albers's diverse legacy, is on view at the Artist's Institute, New York, through mid-December.



View of "Diedrick Brackens: darling divined," 2019, New Museum, New York. From left: *demigod,* 2019; *opening tombs beneath the heart,* 2018. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

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"DIEDRICK BRACKENS: DARLING DIVINED" (NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK; CURATED BY MARGOT NORTON AND FRANCESCA ALTAMURA)

Relations between people and animals were the primary subject of the wall hangings in Brackens's haunting show. Silhouetted within delicately hued abstract grounds, their textures visceral and sensuous, his human protagonists were imbued with an allegorical gravitas, while the dogs, fish, slaughtered pig, and rearing horse became ciphers for loss and death, conflict and alienation. For many weavers, the countless hours required to produce large-scale tapestries on a handloom become occasions for meditative reflection. In Brackens's work, these musings manifest in an uncommonly tender regard for an imperfect world.

Out

The Out100 Artists of the Year

By Phillip Picardi



Diedrick Brackens

If there is one to watch in the art world, rest assured it's Diedrick Brackens. The weaver — who makes "large-scale wall and floor works" — recently celebrated his first institutional solo exhibition in New York at the New Museum. There, in the museum's expansive lobby, guests experienced his colorful tapestries, which typically depict scenes from his life growing up as a queer Black man in the South.

"The weavings I make often ask questions about violence and seek to answer my own questions about what tenderness looks like," Brackens says. But, while many art critics and reviewers have noted the personal or biographical nature of his work, Brackens intends for his art to stretch beyond the self. "I hope [it] is read in multiple ways, and speaks to folks who identify in a multitude of ways. Ultimately, I see the world through this Black queer lens, and that is the space from which I create and the set of experiences I hope to amplify."

While Brackens gears up for what's sure to be an even bigger set of accomplishments next year— he tells us he's hoping to make a "return to [the *Out*100]" — he also has some simpler goals: "Buy real estate, learn more about the history of fashion, work out...and meet the man of my dreams."

VOLUME 7

Texan Artist Diedrick Brackens Weaves Black History Into His Tapestries

by Jori Finkel

November 12, 2019 10:00 am



Diedrick Brackens, in his studio in Los Angeles, in front of a preparatory drawing for a work (left) and To Remember This (Waco), 2017. Brackens wears a Salvatore Ferragamo sweater; Bode pants; Church's shoes.
Photograph by Max Farago; Styled by Nadia Beeman.

Lake Mexia is a short, hot drive from the small town of Mexia, Texas, where the artist Diedrick Brackens was born. In 1981, three black teenagers drowned there while in police custody. Apprehended for marijuana possession, they were being rowed across the lake when the boat capsized. All three teenagers died, but the police officers survived and were later acquitted of any wrongdoing.

The deaths occurred eight years before Brackens was born, but he heard different versions of the event "from every adult in town," he says, and ultimately made an elliptical but powerful artwork out of the trauma: a golden tapestry that shows a pair of silhouetted black figures fishing with their hands, with three feisty catfish evoking the boys' spirits living on in some fantastic way. Featured in the Hammer Museum's Made in L.A. biennial in 2018 and at the New Museum, in New York, this past summer, it has become his most acclaimed work. It captures his feeling for textiles and textures, his fragmented and fantastic narratives, and his interest in the legacy of racial injustice. It also has an emotional current not often seen in contemporary art—a tenderness and vulnerability that leaves people feeling uneasy, reaching for clichés about his work being "poetic."

Now Brackens, who is 30, has a new weaving hanging in his studio that touches on this narrative, while also evoking Barry Jenkins's film *Moonlight*. The scene in *If ou eed a River*, which the New Orleans Museum of Art has acquired, has great tension: Two dark figures appear entangled with white ones in what could be a romantic or a violent interaction. The palette is darker: a slate black sky set



Heaven Is a Muddy Riverbed, 2018.
Courtesy of Diedrick Brackens.

"I've been thinking about catfish for a while, relative to Southern identity and heritage—how much they're in the landscape and food. They are seen as scavengers or bottom-feeders, the lowest form of fish you might eat, but I like the idea of elevating them to the level of tapestry. They're my spirit animal," says Brackens, from his small studio in the Leimert Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, where two looms take up most of the floor space and piles of weavings take up the rest. (He shares the studio building and house in front with the fiercely talented and also fast-track artist Genevieve Gaignard—"my best friend, my roommate, my everything," he says of her.)

Brackens's catfish offer a way of updating motifs from Renaissance tapestries, which generally feature more stately animals like horses or unicorns. But that's far from his only historical reference, as he works to combine different cultural traditions, including the stripes associated with African weavings, especially kente cloth, and the improvised patterning of American crazy quilts. As the Hammer curator Erin Christovale puts it, "He's speaking through this formal perspective about his identity as a black American."

Brackens uses both commercial and natural dyes for his tapestries—Lipton black tea is a favorite. "It's connected for me to being black, queer, and Southern. In Southern slang, 'tea' is another way to talk about gossip. 'Come over, what's the tea?' 'Spill the tea.' " His choice of cotton, too, is loaded, because of "its relationship to slavery—it being a king crop in the South and in Texas." He remembers hearing older relatives talking about picking cotton: "They described the weight of sacks and the backbreaking work, or wrapping their hands so they're not eaten up by the thorns of the boll. Now I get to do these beautiful things because I want to, not because I have to. It's a way to honor that history," he says.



Bittersweet Attendance, Drown Jubilee,
2018. Photography by Max Farago.

Brackens began weaving in college at the University of North Texas in Denton, when a professor suggested he take a textile course. He got his MFA in textiles in 2014 from the California College of the Arts, in San Francisco, then landed a job the following year running the fiber program at California State University, Long Beach, which brought him to Southern California. He stopped teaching this spring, after winning several cash awards, including one from the Studio Museum in Harlem. Jack Shainman Gallery, in New York, is giving him a show next spring.

Fiber artists tend not to get a lot of attention from the contemporary art cartel, but Brackens is proving an exception: He's one of the few working today who makes the age-old craft seem relevant, even urgent. He draws, too, as preparation for his tapestries, but the loom is his tool and instrument for improvisation. "Weaving is where the invention is for me, where I do things on the fly," he says. "As much as you're acting on this machine, it's acting on you too. But there's so much room to coax out these emotive qualities and lines and gestures from these simple yarns."

CULTURED

30 UNDER 35 2019

DIEDRICK BRACKENS DEALS IN THE COMPOSITE OF PAST AND PRESENT

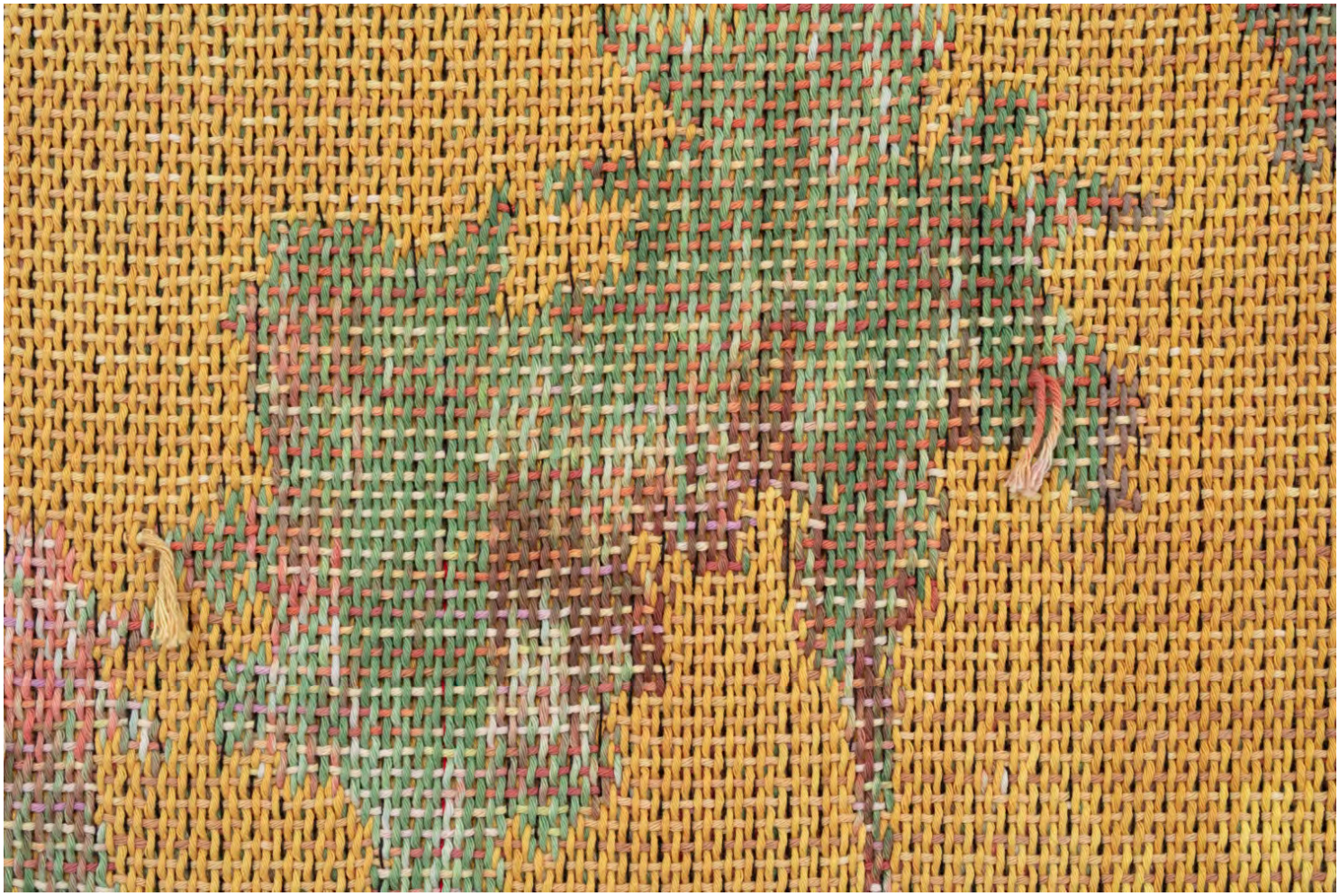
WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER



DIEDRICK BRACKENS IN HIS LOS ANGELES STUDIO.

While many artists and critics have rejected allegory and narrative, Diedrick Brackens uses those exact strategies in order to meld questions of identity and history. His materials are the starting point for this relationship: “Cotton is the primary material because it is a very easy material to manipulate, it takes color beautifully and its historical significance in the U.S. relative to enslavement, violence and subjugation has had lasting effects on black bodies,” he says. “I think of the process of handweaving cotton as a small way to pay tribute to those who came before me and worked with the material under very different circumstances.” Each of Brackens’ works is thereby a literal piecing together of histories that remain present today, collapsing time upon itself within layers of fabric.



DETAIL FROM *IN THE DECADENCE OF SILENCE*, 2018.

Like history itself, his work is always a composite creation—an assemblage of sorts. “The figurative images are constructed in a manner much like collage. I build an image by photographing models, sourcing images found on the internet and social media, scanning family photos, et cetera. Once the images are decided I make a composite drawing, which is then used to create a weaving.” The narratives Brackens employs, therefore, are not seamless, but rather self-conscious constructions that carry the debris of history and desire with them in each step. We thus understand narrativity to be something in process—filtered through lived experience and never unilateral.



BEYOND THE YARD, 2018.

Los Angeles-based Textile Artist Diedrick Brackens is Now Represented by Jack Shainman Gallery

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE *on* Jun 23, 2019 • 3:58 pm

NEW GALLERY REPRESENTATION for up-and-coming artists often follows a succession of critical recognition—high-profile awards, acquisitions, and exhibitions. **Diedrick Brackens** has achieved all of that and then some over the past year.

The Los Angeles-based textile artist was invited to participate in the Made in L.A. biennial at the Hammer Museum last summer, won the Studio Museum in Harlem's annual Wein Artist Prize last fall, and earlier this month, "Diedrick Brackens: Darling Divined" opened at the New Museum. The installation is his first solo museum exhibition in New York.



DIEDRICK BRACKEN, "the cup is a cloud," 2018 (cotton yarn, acrylic yarn, and mirrors, 74 × 78 inches / 188 × 198.1 cm). | © Diedrick Brackens, Courtesy the artist, Jack Shainman Gallery, and Various Small Fires

The accolades and opportunities have culminated with Brackens joining Jack Shainman Gallery. The New York gallery made the announcement June 21. Jack Shainman is representing Brackens in collaboration with Various Small Fires (VSF), his existing gallery with locations in Los Angeles and Seoul, South Korea.

Traditional weaving techniques form the foundation of Brackens's practice. He has mastered and innovated the craft making wall hangings, sculptures, and installations that interrogate contemporary issues and personal narratives. His abstract and figurative images explore complex political, social, and identity issues. Brackens uses

his own body as a template for his silhouetted figures. Cotton in his choice material, a fiber loaded with historic symbolism.

Here is how Jack Shainman Gallery introduced his work:

> Diedrick Brackens (b. 1989, Mexia, TX) creates woven tapestries that explore allegory and narrative through the artist's autobiography, broader themes of African American and queer identity, as well as American history. Brackens employs techniques from West African weaving, quilting from the American South, and European tapestry-making to create both abstract and figurative works. Often depicting moments of male tenderness, Brackens culls from African and African American literature, poetry, and folklore as source. Beginning his process through the hand-dying of cotton, a material he deliberately uses in acknowledgement of its brutal history, Brackens' oeuvre presents rich, nuanced visions of African American life and identity, while also alluding to the complicated histories of labor and migration.



May 2-5, 2019: Installation view of Various Small Fires booth at Frieze New York, featuring three works by Diedrick Brackens. The Brooklyn Museum acquired one of the artist's works from the art fair, "when no softness came" (2019), shown at center. | via Various Small Fires

IN MAY, Various Small Fires dedicated its booth in the Frame section of Frieze New York to Brackens. He presented a trio of new works inspired by black cowboys in 19th century.

VSF described the meaning behind the works: "Brackens focuses on the relationship between man and horse, continuing his exploration of animals as social archetypes. Wrestling with tropes of masculinity and using horses to conjure stereotypes associated with black bodies, Brackens investigates the unheard history of black cowboys in three new woven works. By the late 19th Century, one in four American cattle ranchers were Black, pejoratively described as "cowboys," a term which today is ironically associated with bootstrapping, gun-toting, white males."

The Brooklyn Museum acquired one of the works displayed at the art fair through the LIFEWTR Fund. Anne Pasternak, director of the Brooklyn Museum, called Brackens's "when no softness came" (2019) "exceptional." She said: "He's weaving these beautiful images in a painterly way. I love how the threads are just hanging in some places, as if they're drips of painting."

> *"He's weaving these beautiful images in a painterly way. I love how the threads are just hanging in some places, as if they're drips of painting." — Anne Pasternack, Director of Brooklyn Museum*



“Diedrick Brackens: darling divined,” 2019. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. Shown, “bitter attendance, drown jubilee” (2018). | *Photo by Dario Lasagni, Courtesy New Museum*

ANOTHER WORK BY BRACKENS demonstrates the gravity of some of his themes. “Bitter attendance, drown jubilee” (2018), shown above, was presented in Made in L.A., and is currently featured in his New Museum exhibition. The work documents a drowning incident in Mexia, Texas, from nearly four decades ago.

“I was trying to take a story that I am familiar with from my hometown: Three young men who were drowned in a lake in the town that I am from in police custody,” Brackens has said.

The artist said he wanted “to sort of tell that story in this newly imagined language. It’s been important for me to use these techniques, in particular, because I think they have such a relationship to a different period of time and I think using this medium that historicizes things has been important for me to think about how to give these contemporary moments context, through this sort of storytelling.”

> *“It’s been important for me to use these techniques, in particular, because I think they have such a relationship to a different period of time and I think using this medium that historicizes things has been important for me to think about how to give these contemporary moments context, through this sort of storytelling.” — Diedrick Brackens*

TEXAS-BORN BRACKENS lives and works in Los Angeles. He received his BFA from the University of North Texas, Denton (2011) and earned an MFA from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco (2014). He is a professor at California State University, Long Beach, where he is head of the fiber program.

In September, Brackens was recognized with the 2018 Brandford/Elliott Award for Excellence in Fiber Art, which is administered by the Textile Society of America.

Shortly before Brackens received the Studio Museum’s 2018 Wein Artist Prize, the museum announced a bequest of hundreds of works from the late arts patron Peggy Cooper Cafritz. The gift included two tapestries by Brackens. His work has also been acquired by three Los Angeles museums—the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Museum of Contemporary Art—and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston.

THIS FALL, Brackens has a solo exhibition at University Art Gallery at Sewanee University, The University of the South. “Diedrick Brackens: Allegiance” opens Oct. 25 in Sewanee, Tenn. His first show at Jack Shainman Gallery is slated for spring 2020. **CT**

WATCH Diedrick Brackens talk about his work in a video for Made in L.A. 2018

FIND MORE about the 1981 Mexia, Texas, drownings that inspired one of the artist's works here and here

FIND MORE about Diedrick Brackens winning the 2018 Wein Artist Prize on Culture Type

FIND MORE about Diedrick Brackens on his website

BOOKSHELF
"Made in L.A. 2018" documents the Hammer Museum biennial in Los Angeles and features contributions by co-curators Erin Christovale and Anne Ellegood. The exhibition featured 33 artists, including Diedrick Brackens.



"Diedrick Brackens: darling divined," 2019. Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. | Photo by Dario Lasagni, Courtesy New Museum

"Diedrick Brackens: darling divined," 2019. Exhibition views (2): New Museum, New York. | Photo by Dario Lasagni, Courtesy New Museum



These Artists Are Changing our Expectations of What Tapestry Can Be

Julia Wolkoff **Jun 13, 2019**



Diedrick Brackens, *unicorn kente* , 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

“Along with cave paintings, threads were among the earliest transmitters of meaning,” Anni Albers wrote in her canonical 1965 tome *On Weaving*. Considered by many to be the godmother of textile arts, Albers dedicated her book to her “great teachers”—the weavers of ancient Peru. The basic principles of tapestry—typically wall hangings defined by complicated pictorial designs formed by warp-and-weft weaving or embroidery—has not changed for millennia, despite the introduction of power machinery in the late 18th century.

Contemporary artists who have dared to take up the painstaking labor of weaving in the digital age similarly find themselves in dialogue with newly minted historical figures like Albers—who was instrumental in elevating the status of weaving as a fine art—as well as ancient traditions that span the globe.

These days, fiber artists have found increasingly receptive audiences, as well as institutions willing to show their work. They employ tapestry to explore politics and the harsh realities of modern conflict, or to tease out questions of identity and sexuality. Many bemoan tapestry’s glacially slow pace and the way it hampers their abilities to be prolific, yet none would trade the hand-made, unique approach. Below, we share insights from seven artists who are continuing to push the boundaries of this traditional medium.

Diedrick Brackens



The diverse traditions of West African Strip weaving, Flemish tapestry, and early American story quilts combine in Diedrick Brackens's viscerally personal textiles. His works frequently comment on his identity as a queer, Black American.

The Los Angeles–based artist, originally from Texas, takes advantage of weaving's great cultural capacity for storytelling and material symbolism.The threads of his figurative narratives derive from folklore, religion, mythical creatures, cosmology, and the artist's own lived experience. Brackens's choice of materials adds further gravity to his imagery: Besides commercial dyes, the artist employs colorants such as wine, tea, and bleach to stain textiles like cotton, a loaded material that points to the transatlantic slave trade.

Brackens has a thoughtful way of entwining social, political, and personal issues through a medium that has become at once contemporary and traditional. “Textile work is exciting audiences again because the field of makers has expanded,” the artist told me. “It is an expansive space where women, queer people, and Black and brown folks have made huge contributions historically and presently.”

The artist’s tapestries are certainly getting attention: Brackens won the 2018 Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize presented by the Studio Museum in Harlem, and his latest works are currently on view in “Diedrick Brackens: Darling Divined” in the New Museum’s lobby galleries.

Diedrick Brackens Weaves History for First Solo Show at New Museum

WWD By Kristen Tauer June 11, 2019



By his own admission, Diedrick Brackens is obsessed with Americana. His large-scale handmade weavings, on display in the New Museum's Lobby Gallery for the artist's first solo museum show in New York, "Darling Divined," reflect an idea of the pastoral rendered through the lens of being black and queer in America. The striking works use abstracted imagery, unique color, and material to construct a thematic collage of American history.

"I grew up Southern Baptist, so I think there are certain things that never leave that are coming out in the work in certain ways," says the young artist, who lives and works in Los Angeles but is originally from Limestone County in Texas. "There's some sort of biblical thing that I discovered with that work where I'm like 'oh God, this feels so church-y.'" The landscape of his hometown has carried over, too; many of the subjects are set over a big open sky — in shades of purple, cloud pink and sienna — over a flat landscape.

He describes his work as composites of American history, contemporary and personal events, which are transformed into allegorical, mythic fiber art. He pulls inspiration from many sources, but is particularly inspired by the patchwork quality of early American quilts and flags.

“I’m attracted to flags as maybe one of the most important textiles that I can think of that’s not useful, in the way that we think about textiles as having a function,” he says. “I think a flag has a very specific function, but not physical. “

One of his newer works features a black figure with arms outstretched across an abstraction of the American flag, which Brackens rendered using a different balance of red. A horse grazes at the figure’s side, while a lightning bolt beams toward the ground.



“Demi God” Lexie Moreland/WWD

“I look a lot at mythology and folk tales,” he says. “It just felt like a good time to think about the Apocalypse, so I was taking that as my initial jumping-off point, as well as I was thinking about black cowboys, thinking about the American South.”

The titles for all the work are pulled from literature, including Essex Hemphill whose work dealt with the queer African-American experience. The use of black figures in all of his work is a reflection on race, but also a way for viewers to approach the subject as a shadow or silhouette and project themselves into the scene.

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“This piece is called ‘Demi God,’ so I was thinking about this figure not just being in this landscape, but someone influencing what was happening,” he says. “I’ve been really interested in these surreal images, these things that maybe let people access myth, or think about stories that they might know already and how they kind of jibe — or don’t — with those things.”

Material places a central role in Brackens’ work. Cotton and slavery are intertwined in American history; this thread underscores all his work. “The process is so enmeshed in the process and vice versa that to me material becomes super important,” he says. He dyes his own yarn, allowing him to access exactly the colors he imagines, and views “mistakes” in the work as a record of process and a way of communicating that the piece is handmade.

Brackens started weaving in 2008 while an art student at the University of North Texas. During his freshman year, a professor encouraged him, then a photography major, to take a weaving class after he began making sculptures using string. That summer, he enrolled in a weaving class.

“I walked into the room, like 30 looms, color-coded yarn in the back across this wall, light streaming in on these wooden machines — that I had no real understanding what they would do and I was like, ‘This is it, this is amazing,'” he recalls. “It’s so amazing to think about the ways that people see something that you have no sense of and completely change your life — and probably for her it was like an in-passing comment.”

Brackens has an upcoming solo show at a university gallery in Tennessee, centered around an exploration of flags and the idea of allegiance; this fall he’ll be in residency at the University of San Diego, followed by Art Basel Miami Beach at the end of the year. He’s been working on more large-scale weavings, as well as more sculptural works such as hand-woven baskets.

Last fall, Brackens was awarded the Wein Prize from the Studio Museum Harlem, which awards $50,000 to an emerging African-American artist; past winners include Lorna Simpson, Derrick Adams, and Simone Leigh.

“On some levels, it’s allowed me to really invest in my studio, like buy new equipment; on a very practical level those things, but it also has changed how I can think about the next five years, the next 10 years,” he says. “I don’t feel a lot of the same pressures around reaching for things, or dreaming about new projects. I have been able to stop teaching full-time, really get into the studio. Teaching will always be a part of my life, but it’s really amazing to think that I can really focus on my own work.”

"



Details of the work. Lexie Moreland/WWD

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3 / 14 / 19
"Ron Athey, Carmen Argote and Diedrick Brackens win Artadia awards"
by Makeda Easter

Los Angeles Times



An artist exploring the concept of home and the immigrant experience, a performance artist who made his name exploring the AIDS epidemic and a textile artist who tackles the complexities of being black and queer in the U.S. — these three have been selected for Artadia's 2019 Los Angeles Awards.

Artists Carmen Argote and Ron Athey each will receive $10,000 in unrestricted funds, the national nonprofit announced Thursday. And as the inaugural Marciano Artadia Award winner, Diedrick Brackens will receive $25,000 in unrestricted funding.

The annual prize is open to visual artists at any stage of their career who have lived in Los Angeles County for more than two years. A panel of jurors including Erin Christovale, assistant curator at the Hammer Museum, and Anna Katz, associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, selected this year's awardees. The other finalists for the prizes were artists Eddie Aparicio, Gelare Khoshgozaran and Jennifer Moon.

Christovale noted in a statement that the three awardees exemplified creativity in Los Angeles. "I appreciate how thoughtful and incredibly dedicated they are to their crafts," she said, "and how labor-intensive their respective practices are."

Philanthropists and art collectors founded Artadia in 1997 as a response to the National Endowment for the Arts' elimination of grants to individual artists. Since 1999, the nonprofit has awarded over $5 million to more than 325 artists in Atlanta, Chicago, New York and other cities.

Past L.A. winners include performance artist EJ Hill (2018), video artist Kahlil Joseph (2017) and mixed-media artist Kerry Tribe (2013).

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10 / 19 / 18

“STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM AWARDS $50,000 WEIN PRIZE TO DIEDRICK BRACKENS”

ARTFORUM



Diedrick Brackens has been named the winner of the Studio Museum in Harlem’s 2018 Joyce Alexander Wein Prize, a $50,000 award that honors the artistic achievements of African American artists who demonstrate “great innovation, promise, and creativity.” The institution made the announcement at its fall gala at the Park Avenue Armory on Thursday evening.

Born in Mexia, Texas, in 1989, Brackens is a Los Angeles–based artist who employs African, American, and European textile techniques to create tapestries conveying abstract and figurative scenes that often deal with issues of identity, sexuality, and race. A storyteller who draws on his memories as a child raised in the South and on his experiences as a queer black man in America, Brackens told Artland in a recent interview: “I embody a lot of identities that happen to be under threat in society and sometimes this means making work about things that happen to deal with death, pain, and danger, but I am simply telling stories that resonate with my experience like so many other artists, there is also joy and beauty— weaving is not created with a singular thread.”

Brackens’s work has been featured in group exhibitions at a number of institutions such as the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, and the Berkeley Art Museum in California. His most recent solo shows include “a slow reckoning” (2017) at the Ulrich Museum of Art in Wichita; “No More Trauma” (2016) at the Steve Turner Gallery in Los Angeles; and “This is Real Life” (2015) at Johansson Projects in Oakland, California.

The Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize was established in 2006 by jazz impresario, musician, and philanthropist George Wein as a way to honor his late wife, Joyce Alexander, a longtime trustee of the Studio Museum who died in 2005. Previous winners of the award include Simone Leigh—who was awarded the 2018 Hugo Boss Prize in a ceremony at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York last night—Derrick Adams, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and Samuel Levi Jones.

Studio Museum in Harlem's $50,000 Wein Prize Goes to Diedrick Brackens

BY ***Maximiliano Durón*** POSTED **10/18/18**

The Studio Museum in Harlem announced at its fall gala this evening that the Joyce Alexandar Wein Artist Prize has been awarded to Los Angeles–based artist Diedrick Brackens. The award comes with $50,000 in unrestricted funds.

Brackens is best known for his tapestries and textile sculptures that range from pieces with abstracted images to narrative scenes that depict black figures in silhouettes, all accompanied with lyrical titles, such as *not every passage/position is comfortable* and *wading still (bend, bow, pull)*. Many of the tapestries, including those in his ongoing "bandage" series, are constructed in multiple pieces that are stitched together, adding a sense of fracture to the overall tone of the works.

Brackens's art explores the intersections of cultural histories and traumas in the U.S., particularly as they relate to various weaving traditions and his own position as a queer man of color taking up a craft traditionally regarded as "women's work." His work was included in the recent "Made in LA: 2018" biennial at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and two of his pieces are part of the recent bequest (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/10/arts/design/peggy-cooper-cafritz-gifts.html) by Peggy Cooper Cafritz to the Studio Museum.



Diedrick Brackens, *how to return*, 2017, woven indigo-dyed cotton and acrylic yarn. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVE TURNER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

Established by George Wein in memory of his wife Joyce Alexandar Wein, a longtime trustee of the Studio Museum who passed away in 2005, the Wein Prize is awarded annually to an African-American artist who "demonstrates great innovation, promise, and creativity." Previous winners include Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Leslie Hewitt, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, and Simone Leigh.

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3 / 31 / 15
"Diedrick Brackens: This is Real Life"
by Anton Stuebner

Diedrick Brackens' show at Johansson Projects, *This Is Real Life*, opens arrestingly: with two woven wall hangings resembling elongated BandAids, their frayed white "gauze" "stained" with rainbowhued "blood." Initially, blat (2015) and blatent (2015) seem almost playful, as their exaggerated scale (nearly three feet long) and materials (teadyed cotton, acrylic, nylon) make apparent their obvious artificialit . No one would mistake this for trompe l'oeil. But the artist makes clear in the accompanying text that they are far from cheerful exaggerations, and indeed deliberate references to wounded bodies. But whose bodies? Are they queer bodies, as the rainbowcolored blood may suggest? Or bodies that have been queered through violence—made strange and unfamiliar by larger cultures and systems of oppression?

Consisting largely of textile-based works, *This Is Real Life* traces both the presenceand the absence of bodies. The brightly colored pieces may seem, on the surface, to bear little resemblance to familiar human forms. Traces of the body, however, are everywhere. By utilizing a medium known for the intense manual work it requires, Brackens fills his weavings with indexical markers of his own hand. He takes it a step further by actually describing the works as "portraits," eliding familiar limits between abstraction and figuration, and subverting conventional understandings of how individuals are represented. And in doing so, he deliberately raises troubling questions about how bodies are made absent, specifically through violence. What happens when the subject of portraiture has been violently erased? How to represent a person of whom all that is left are traces?



Diedrick Brackens. 10-79, 2015; hand-woven fabric, nylon, chenille, hand-dyed cotton, bleach; 66 x 14 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Johansson Projects, Oakland.

The wall hanging *10-79* (2015) bears all sorts of bodily traces. At first glance, the piece seems rather cozy—just what one imagines "homespun" might look like: a mélange of green, orange, and cerulean yarns woven into thick stripes, blocked by horizontal bands of orange, spotted with red fringed dots. Its brightly hued pattern and decorative fringe echo long traditions of domestic textiles: table runners, woolen scarves, beach towels. But Brackens draws out these warm,

homey associations only to erase them, literally, with wild splashes of bleach. The stains function as visual interruptions, decisive breaks in an otherwise ordered field. The juxtaposition of order and disorder—of patterns and stains, geometric shapes and abstract forms—raises questions of vulnerability, the assumed limits of integrity and wholeness, and the ways in which wholeness can be ruptured and destroyed through violent intervention. These bleach stains weren't all flung from a "safe" distance, either; on closer examination, one stain toward the top bears the distinctively figurative form of a handprint

Named after the standard police radio code for "call the coroner," *10-79* was conceptualized by Brackens in the immediate aftermath of Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Missouri. In the accompanying gallery notes, he describes the piece as a double portrait of Brown and Eric Garner, the African American man killed in Staten Island while being held in a police chokehold. Viewed in response to the political conditions surrounding these deaths, the (white) handprint gains a disquietingly deeper significance involving historical and contemporary narratives of violence against nonwhite bodies. It is about the continued stain of racism. But if it represents, on the one hand, a horrific, violent intervention, it also functions as a marker of an inverse presence. The bleach may have removed pigment, but in doing so, it left a new mark—not the same as what was there before, but something that can serve as a continuous reminder, an imperative to never forget.

Even more moving are the bleeding wounds rendered in red chenille. By using a yarn known for its softness, Brackens seemingly invites viewers to touch the wounds of the fallen bodies the work commemorates—almost. Just as assumed limits of proper viewership restrict our touch, the fallen bodies are rendered just out of reach. *10-79* taunts us with its untouchable tactility.



Diedrick Brackens. tired of talking, 2015; wood, hardware, handwoven fabric, commercially dyed cotton; 37 x 42 x 25 in. Courtesy of the Artist and Johansson Projects, Oakland.

Vulnerable bodies are invoked again in the sculptural work *tired of talking* (2015). Like *10-79*, this piece considers how nonwhite persons are forcibly absented through violent interventions. But whereas the other work records the physical traces left behind by bodies under attack, *tired of talking* examines how bodies are restricted through humanmade instruments. The installation is formally simple: a single strip of woven yellow fabric, embellished with black acrylic yarn, wrapped in a zigzag pattern around a wooden sawhorse. Figurative traces of the body seem all but absent, until we remember that sawhorses are a direct reference to policing bodies through physical restraint. However innocent their origins as carpenters' aids, they have come to be inextricably associated with the riotcontrol barriers employed by urban police. Suddenly, the yellow strip of fabric comes to evoke caution tape,

a material with its own troubling relationship to confinement and crime scenes

By invoking these histories and their associations, Brackens acknowledges that seemingly innocuous devices can produce real and violent effects. Yet in juxtaposing the “hardness” of such objects with the softness of fabric, he also shows how they—and their violent associations—might effectively be deactivated. Things don’t have to be this way, he seems to be urging us. What in one scenario serves as a forceful instrument of restraint can also be a harmless wrapping, a simple ribbon of material. Brackens’ work can’t bring back Michael Brown or Eric Garner, but it offers the possibility of imagining a future in which weapons and barriers can be kept “under wraps” and vulnerable bodies can be protected from harm.

Histories of oppression cannot be erased, and their traces, Brackens suggests in This Is Real Life, need to be remembered. But in order to build a better future—a less violent future—we also need to face these histories head-on and turn them upside down. Wrapped up like a present, the sawhorse becomes a powerless artifact, a curiosity. It may still bear a historical burden, but wrapped up in a bow, it can’t harm us anymore.

This Is Real Life: Diedrick Brackens is on view at Johansson Projects, in Oakland, through April 23, 2015.

The New York Times Style Magazine

THE ARTISTS

Beneath a Full Moon, a Healing Ritual

A recent textile work by Diedrick Brackens responds to a startling statistic about the ongoing AIDS epidemic.

Dec. 11, 2020

In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-shown work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work into context. This week, we're looking at a recent piece by Diedrick Brackens, who is known for his woven textiles, which are the subject of a solo exhibition at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, on view through May 16, 2021.



Diedrick Brackens's "Flying Geese" (2020). Courtesy the artist; Various Small Fires, Los Angeles/Seoul; and Jack Shainman, New York © Diedrick Brackens

Name: Diedrick Brackens

Age: 31

Based in: Los Angeles

Originally from: Mexia, Texas

When and where did you make this work? This work was made in February, in my studio in L.A.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? The weaving is a scene of an imagined ritual between three people in a barren landscape, under a full moon.

What inspired you to make this work? It was inspired by the ongoing AIDS epidemic. There is a C.D.C. statistic from 2016 that reads, "If current H.I.V. diagnoses rates persist, about 1 in 2 Black men who have sex with men (M.S.M.) and 1 in 4 Latino M.S.M. in the United States will be diagnosed with H.I.V. during their lifetime." It was startling. I made a series of pieces inspired by the statistic. The work is a meditation on healing, ritual and disease.

What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life? A woodcut by Alison Saar titled "Cotton Eater II" (2014).