

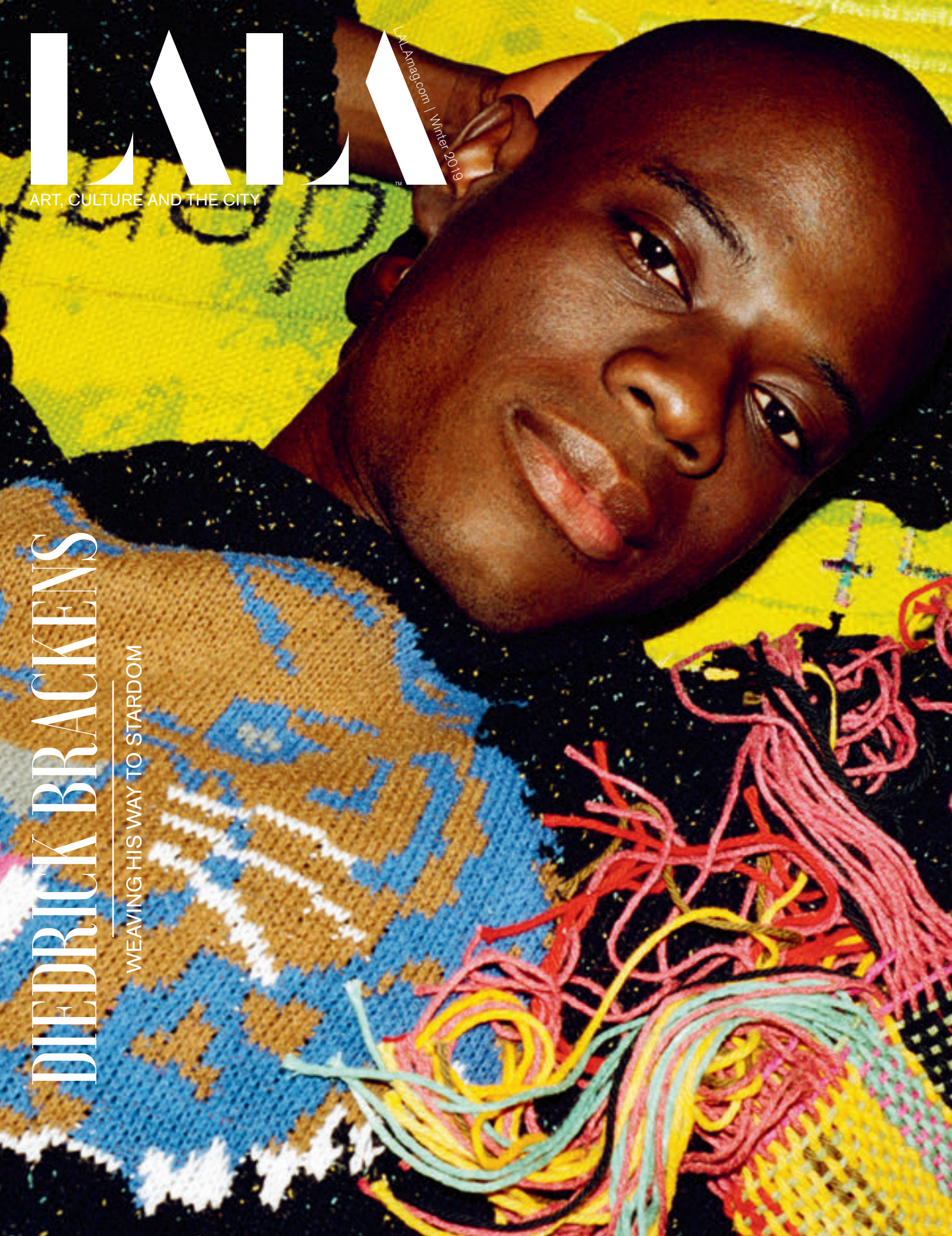
LALAM

ART, CULTURE AND THE CITY

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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defeated by a new communications technology—as analog media has been displaced by digital—an artist puts the seemingly outdated medium into play in a new and persuasive manner.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 Braxkens 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.



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.



Diedrick Brackens

[View Slideshow](#) 5 Images



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 steeped 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](#).

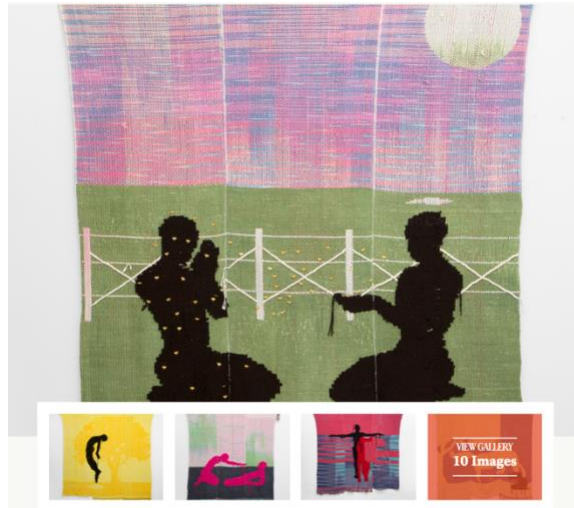
While physicality and tactility are integral to Brackens's practice, his approach also values voice and communication: He discusses his looms as though they are close friends and has named one "Sprechen," which means "speech" in German.

"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 cotton 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.

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.

2

“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 *Out100*]” — 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.”

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 You Feed 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 Gagnard—“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."

DIEDRICK BRACKENS DEALS IN THE COMPOSITE OF PAST AND PRESENT

WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER



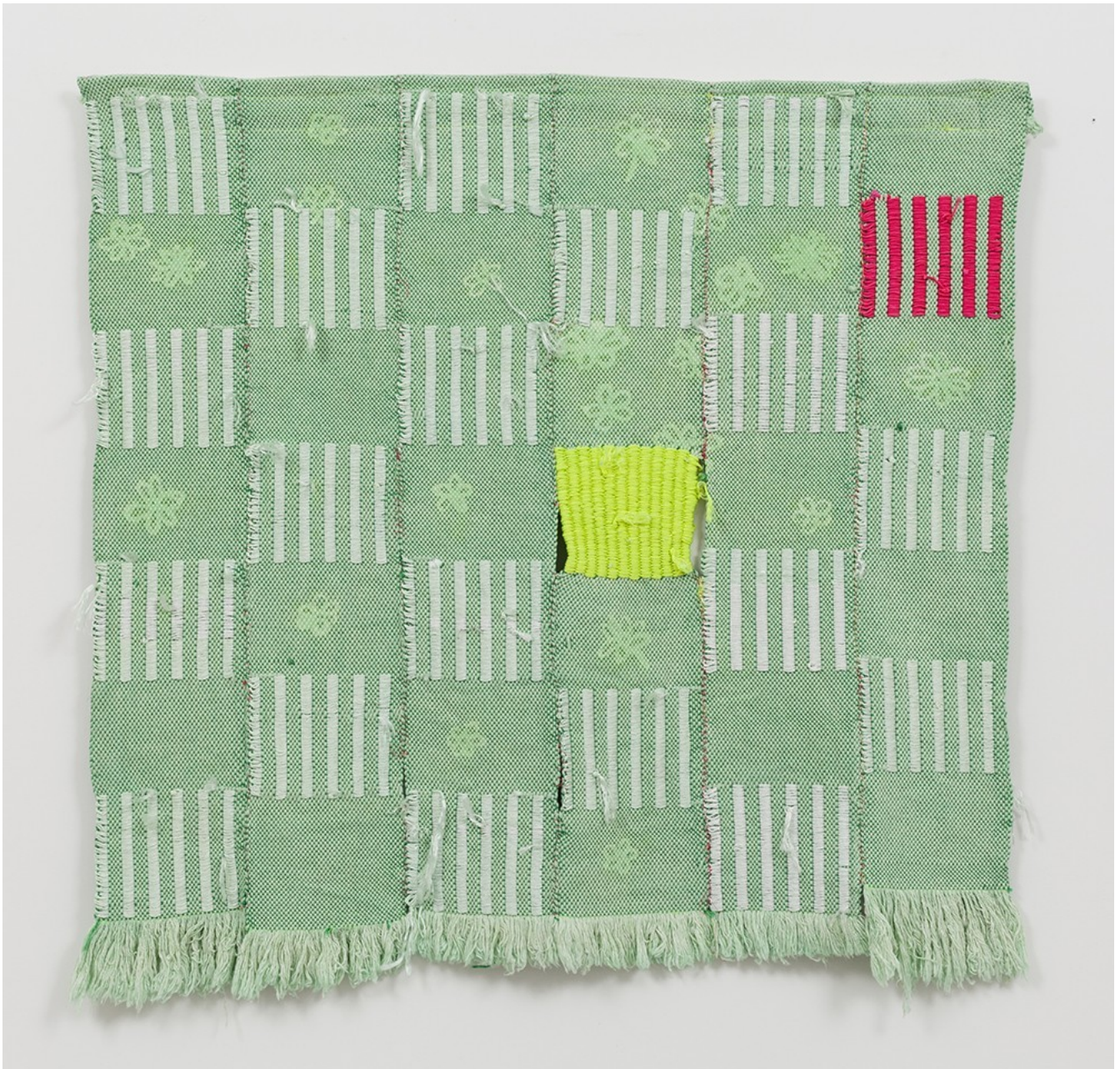
DIEDRICK BRACKENS IN HIS LOS ANGELES
STUDIO.

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.

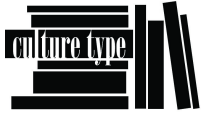


DETAIL FROM *IN THE DECADENCE OF
SILENCE*, 2018.

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 x 78 inches / 188 x 198.1 cm). I © 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-dyeing 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. I 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 Pasternak, 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.

"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

3 / 14 / 19

“Ron Athey, Carmen Argote and Diedrick Brackens win Artadia awards”
by Makeda Easter



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

Los Angeles Times

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).

10 / 19 / 18

“STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM AWARDS
\$50,000 WEIN PRIZE TO DIEDRICK
BRACKENS”



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

ARTFORUM

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.

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.



Diedrick Brackens, *how to return*, 2017, woven indigo-dyed cotton and acrylic yarn. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEVE TURNER GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

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 artificiality. 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 presence and 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.