

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 Medecin 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.

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 tableaux. 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](#).

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.”

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 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.”



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 relationship 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.



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.”

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.](#)”

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 turned 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.”

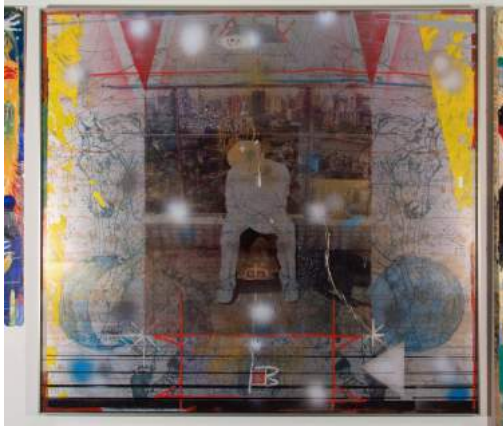


Wura-Natasha Ogunji, “Atlantic” (2017)
thread, ink and graphite on tracing paper,
text by playwright Ricardo Bracho
from the play *The Sweetest Hangover* and
other STDS

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.

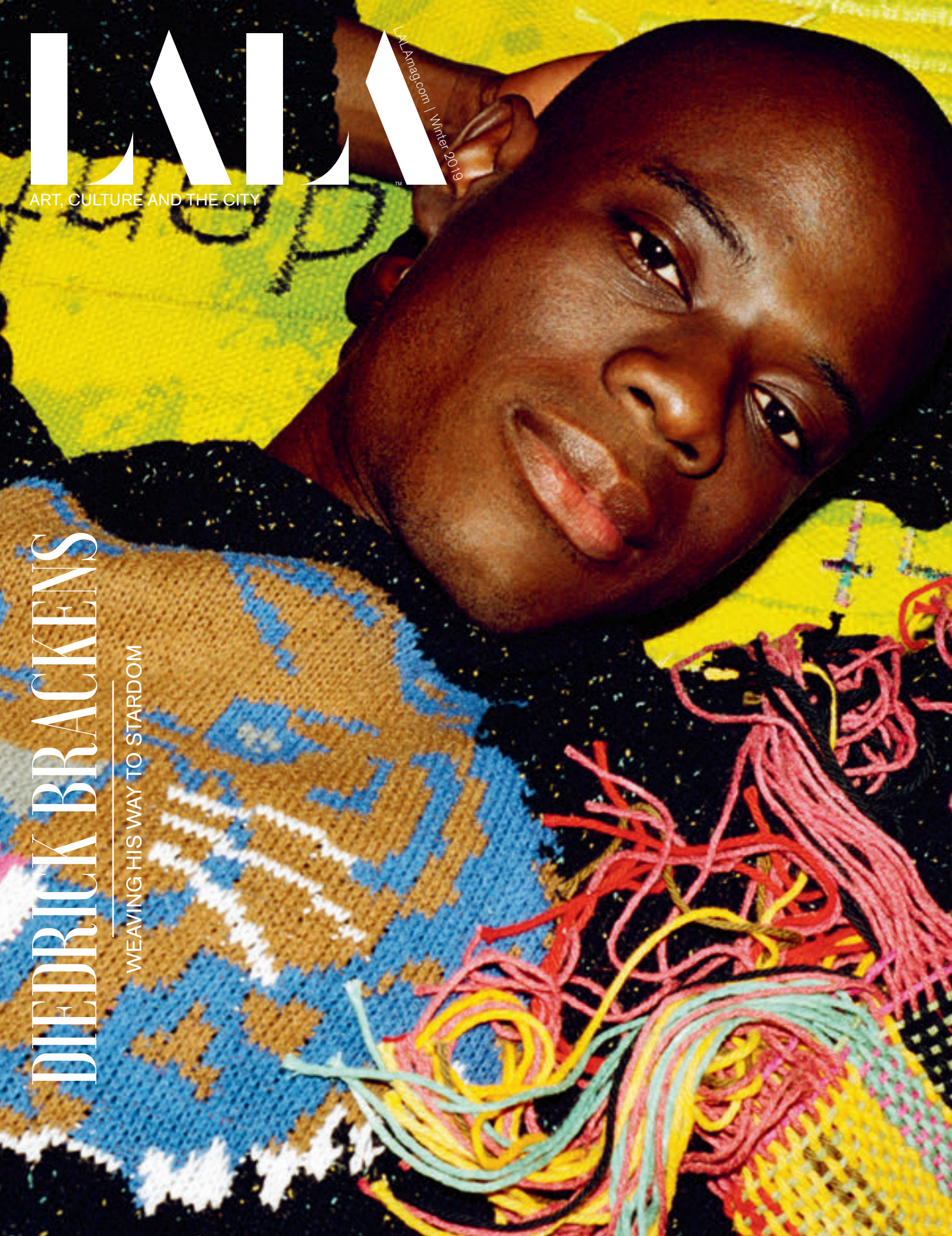
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DIEDRICK BRACKENS

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 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
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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 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](#).

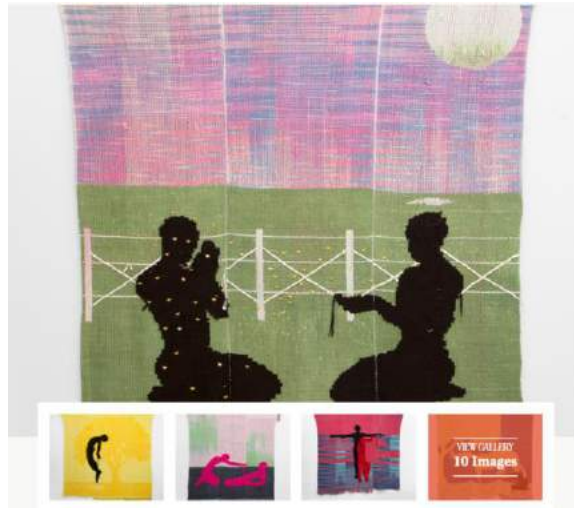
While physicality and tactility are integral to Brackens's practice, his approach also values voice and communication: He discusses his looms as though they are close friends and has named one "Sprechen," which means "speech" in German.

"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

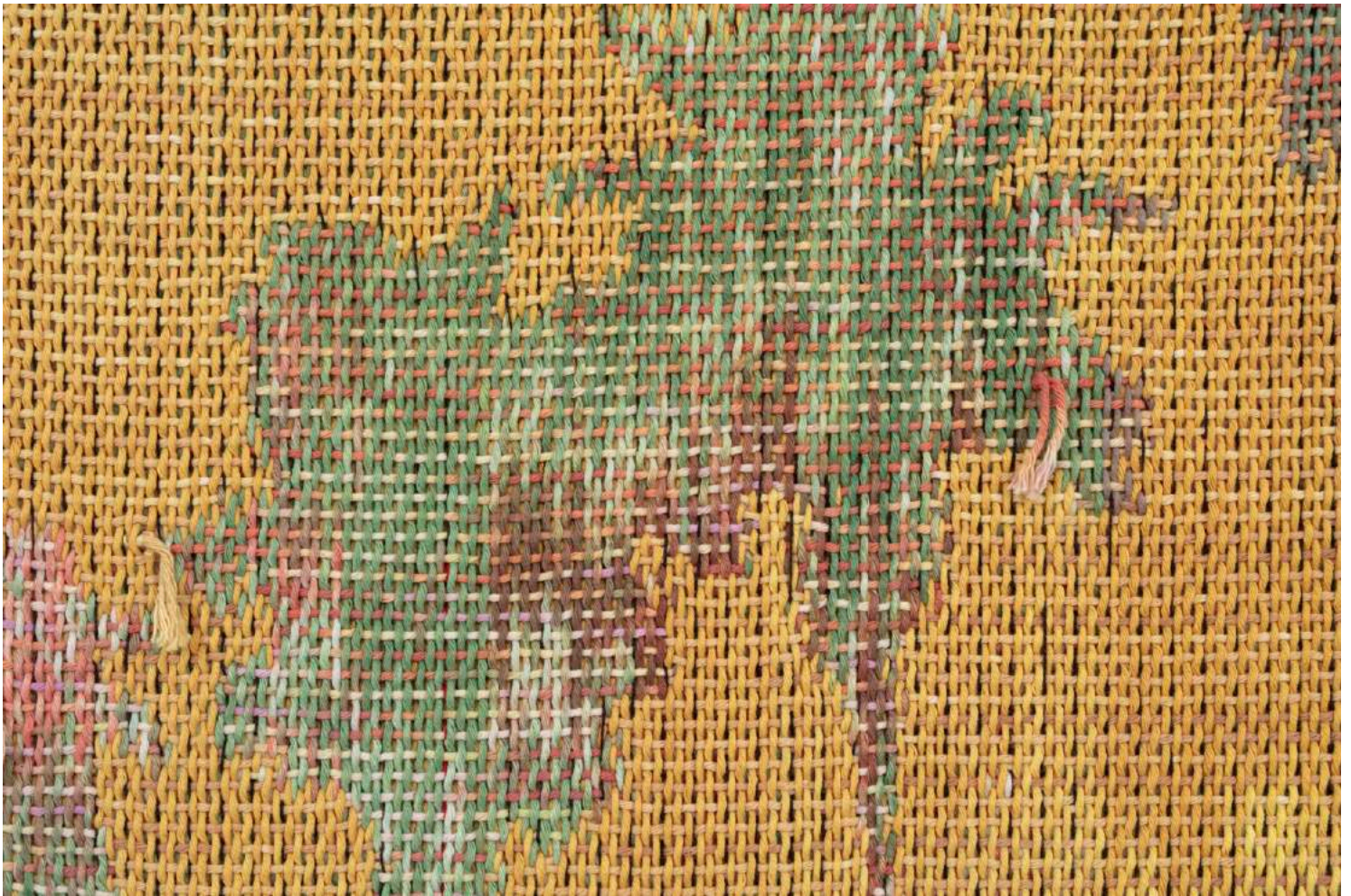
WILLIAM J. SIMMONS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUBREY MAYER



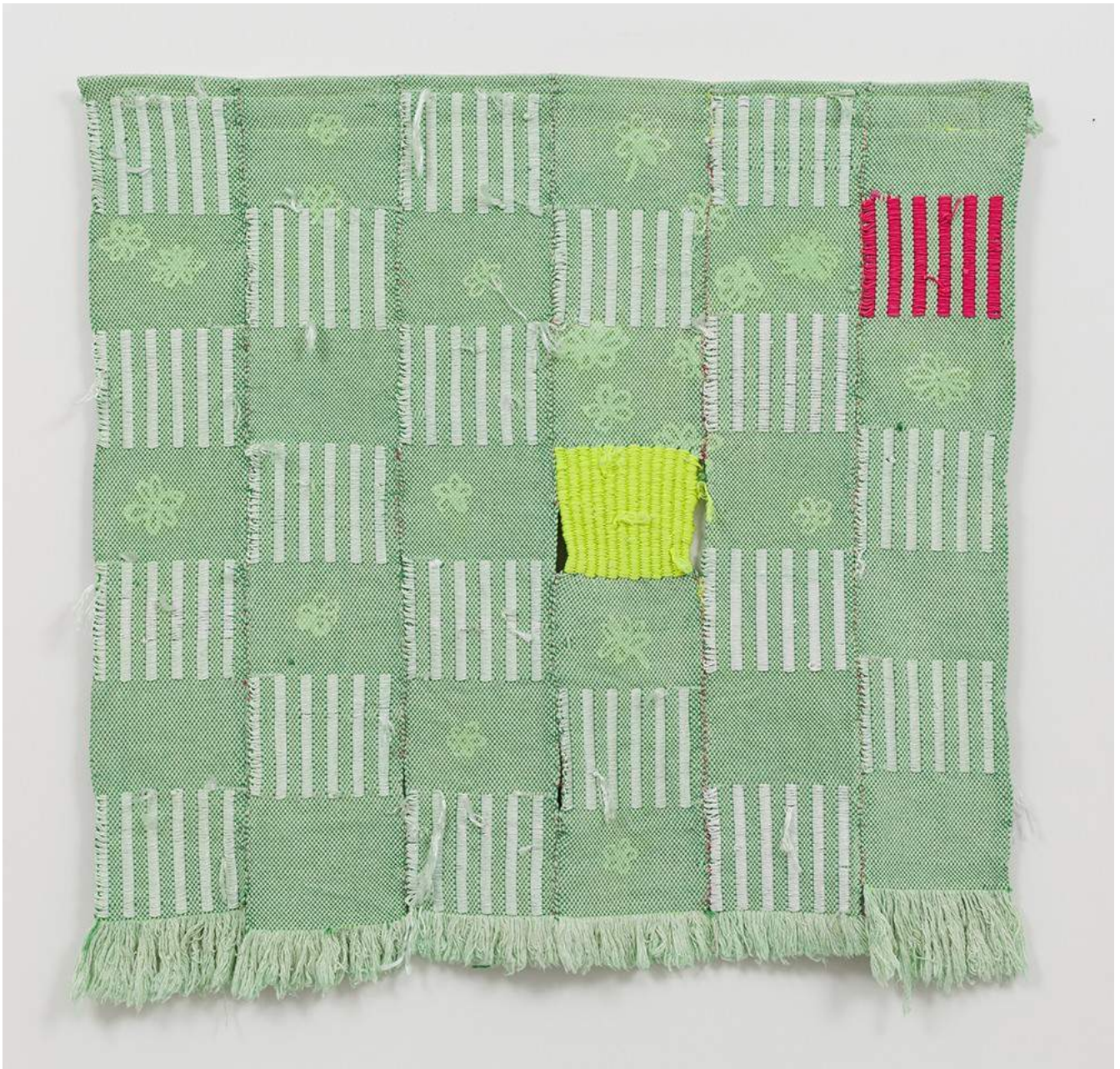
DIEDRICK BRACKENS IN HIS LOS ANGELES
STUDIO.

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

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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.

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).