

Art

Painter Genesis Tramaïne Is Transforming What It Means to Make Religious Art

● Daria Harper Jun 19, 2020 2:58pm



Portrait of Genesis Tramaïne by Nick JS Thompson. Courtesy of the artist.



Genesis Tramaïne

Don't be Shy, 2020

Almine Rech

Genesis Tramaïne's paintings invite viewers on a journey far beyond the walls of a gallery. Tramaïne, best known for her complex depictions of Black people's faces, describes her intricate portraits as portals. Each painting is imbued with undeniable spirit, reflected in the intricate dance of her brushstrokes.

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One painting, *Joy Comes In The Morning* (2020), shows an oval-shaped face layered with various expressions against an ominous blue background that mimics the night sky. The word “amen” is etched along the bottom corner of the canvas. In a recent interview, Tramaine said that it took her a while to confidently and openly discuss how her faith shows up in her artwork. But now, after much reflection, prayer, and praise, she has no problem claiming the divinity that is so integral to her practice. In fact, she celebrates it.



Genesis Tramaine *Parable of Nana, 2020*
Almine Rech



Genesis Tramaine *Joy Comes In The Morning, 2020*
Almine Rech

The work in Tramaine’s recent exhibition “Parables of Nana,” at Almine Rech’s London gallery, reflects the artist’s long-standing relationship with God. Tramaine’s vividly colored paintings, explorations of the distinctness and emotions of Black faces, hung in stark contrast to the gallery’s white walls. The paintings were born out of a vision she had while praying, as well as a culmination of lessons learned from her grandmother.

A Brooklyn native with deep roots in the American South, Tramaine said that her family has always encouraged her “love affair with art.” She received her bachelor’s degree from Utica College at Syracuse University and her master’s from Pace University in New York. Some of her earliest works were drawings of characters from popular cartoons. Tramaine was included in a group show at Almine Rech last fall in Paris and has previously exhibited in numerous solo and group shows, including a 2017 solo presentation, “Pointing Fingers,” at Gallery Aferro in Newark. Her grandmother, the matriarch of her family, who inspired the name of the latest exhibition, was especially supportive of her art.

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Genesis Tramine *First Offense*, 2018
Richard Beavers Gallery



Genesis Tramine *Birth of a Nation*, 2018
Richard Beavers Gallery

Tramine warmly recalled sitting with her grandmother around the kitchen table and listening to her sage teachings. “It’s a state of love that has been ingrained in me,” she said. Tramine felt it was crucial to highlight and celebrate her grandmother, whose commanding presence and knowledge-sharing fuels much of her artistic practice.

Tramine’s relationship with her grandmother allowed her to take the role of faith in her paintings very seriously. The artist recalled that if her grandmother wasn’t blasting her gospel hymns, she was reciting scriptures from the Bible.

Alongside expected materials like acrylic and oil paints, Tramine paints with Yeshua—the Hebrew word used to refer to Jesus, which is listed as a material for each of the works in the show. “Yeshua is the source!” Tramine said. “The sauce! The magic! Without Yeshua, it ain’t nothing. It’s not my hand alone that delivers the work, I’m just a vessel. Without Yeshua, it’s just paint.” Tramine makes use of other unconventional materials, too, like Lawry’s seasoning salt in her rust-hued painting *Salt, Light, & Grits* (2020).



Genesis Tramine *Salt, Light & Grits*, 2020
Almine Rech

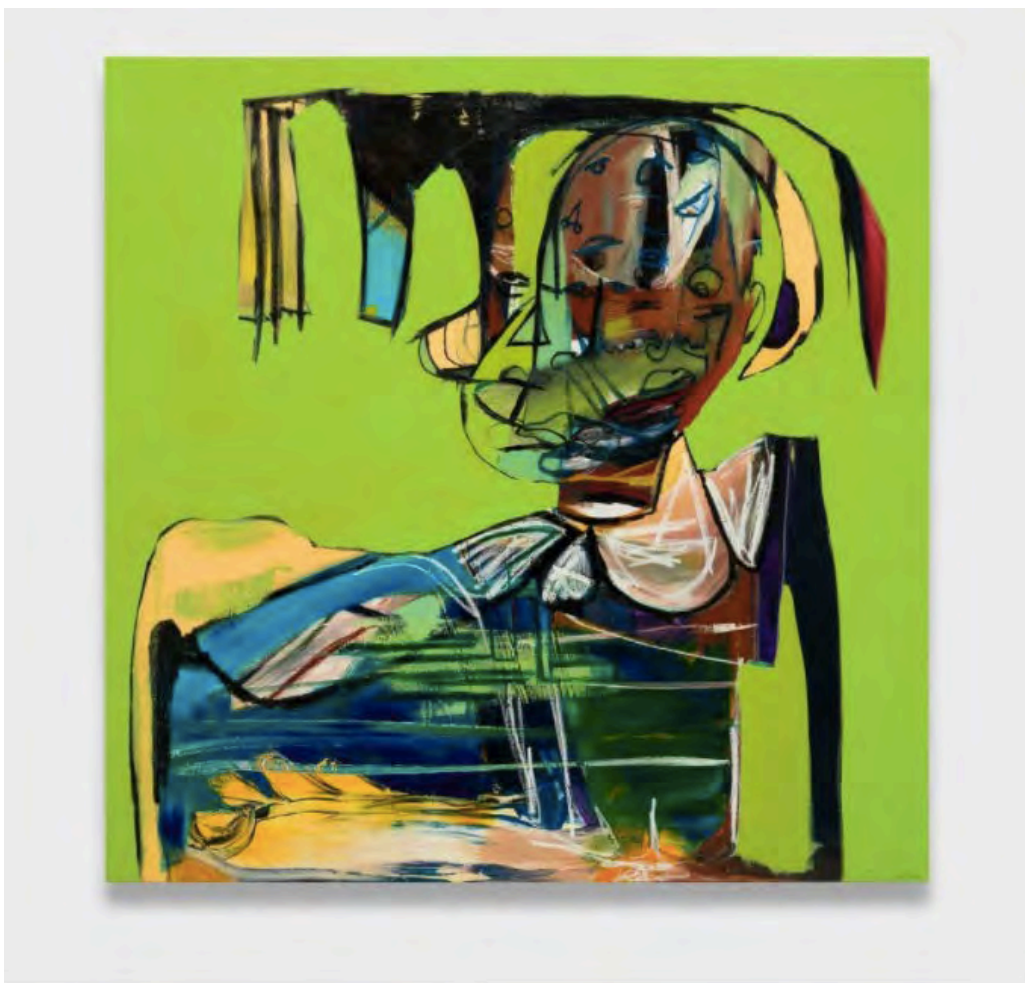


Genesis Tramine *Mother is that You*, 2019
Richard Beavers Gallery

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Tramaine is particularly interested in shifting the conversation around religious or spiritual art. “I really hope that I’m able to dismantle the patriarchal gaze around religious art,” she said. “The messages that I’ve been chosen to birth in this lifetime are relevant past what we consider religious. There is a humanness within the experience of the stories that I’m painting. They’re for all of us.” While religious or spiritual paintings have historically centered on traditional depictions of white Western Christianity, Tramaine’s work highlights her own distinct, joyful experience with religion. Sometimes that looks like playing her gospel music early in the morning as she prays and prepares to paint.

In *Bearer of Good News* (2020), a figure sits in the middle of a large square canvas, taking up nearly all of the space within the frame. The playful central character, made up of sharp strokes of yellow, black, and blue, rests against a jolting green background. Tramaine said that this piece is a kind of ode to Black girlhood and their powerful energy. “I have never met a Black girl that wasn’t a bearer of good news,” she said, noting that society tries to silence or control Black girls’ expressions during their adolescent years, and that oppression often continues into adulthood. This painting is a rejection of that treatment, and honors the authority of Black girls’ voices.



Genesis Tramaine *Bearer of Good News*, 2020
Almine Rech

The theme for that particular artwork came to Tramaine in a moment of prayer; she became fixated on the fluidity and ingenuity of Black children. “I call myself a devotional painter,” she said. “All of [my work] is derived from the presence that I feel when in prayer. I’m only in prayer aiming to gain a closer understanding of what I’m supposed to do in my walk as a human, by way of God.”

Tramaine’s commitment to creating artwork from a radically honest place translates to a unique viewing experience that evokes deep spiritual reflection. Rooted in faith, her paintings carefully depict the depth and multiplicity of Black people’s experiences. Tramaine’s portraits are an attempt to give the rest of the world a glimpse into the splendor of her spiritual artistic practice.