

Artspace

MEET THE ARTIST

INTERVIEW: Genesis Tramaine on Her New Artspace and NYFA Limited Edition Print, Black Woman University

By Artspace Editors

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Genesis Tramaine photographed in her studio with *Black Woman University* by Lance Brewer July 2020

When Genesis Tramaine discovered drawing she discovered life. Raised in the projects and on the back benches of Brooklyn churches, she drew on anything - and everything - around her.

"I didn't have much paper, so I would draw on magazines, on newspapers on Bibles," she says. "I was being trained to be who I am from a very young age. But my family didn't necessarily call it art. It was just Genesis, drawing as usual."

Encouragement for those early drawings of monsters and funny faces led her to art school, where Tramaine began creating abstract portraits of men and women who transcend gender, color, and social structures, while affirming her love for the Church.

Yet while she still draws on the Bible – albeit very differently these days - it's her disagreements as well as her agreements with that book that feed into, and fire her work. She paints by fully surrendering herself. She may not always land at a finished painting but that moment of praise – essentially her act of painting - feeds and sustains her.

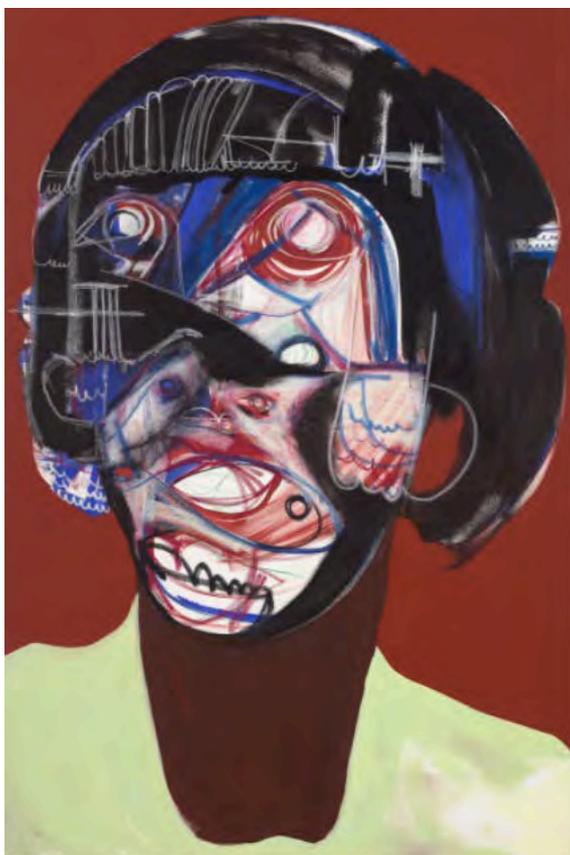
ALMINE RECH

It's also seen her become one of the hottest emerging artists of the moment. A show of her work at Almine Rech in London, just before lockdown, saw all 12 paintings sell out.

Meanwhile, the vulnerability and intensity of her artistic vision and its capacity to transfer from the canvas and directly connect with people - even if they don't have a direct connection with her form of spirituality - has provoked comparisons with Klimt, Basquiat and even Bacon. She describes that last comparison as, "a high honor. I love that dude's work. It's so beautiful, morbid, sharp."

Her Artspace edition, Black Woman University debuts at UNTITLED, ART online this week. An edition of 50 signed prints priced at \$1,000, with proceeds from the sale supporting programming, fellowships and grants at the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA). You can buy it here.

We sat her down and asked this daughter, grand-daughter, sister, cousin, friend, auntie, black woman, Queer wife and spiritual being all about it.



Genesis Tramaine - Black Woman University, 2020. Courtesy of the Richard Beavers Gallery.

Can you tell us a little about the title of the work? Black Woman University is very much the academic title that I've given the space around how I've been educated as a black woman. I keep hearing the term and title, 'self-taught' or that I haven't been formally trained as a painter; so it's my way of paying homage to the brilliance of a black woman. As to adding the university part to it: I am an academic at heart. I was raised in academia. I come from a family of women who were teachers, and I have never met a black woman who hasn't taught me something. Black Woman University that's where I'm from. That's what's ingrained in me. That's paying homage. So I think it is a very important to honor that.

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When does the work date from? I painted that work when I had just got back from my Parables of Nana show in London (at Almine Rech, in March) and I was very excited. It was one of the pieces I painted during a very tough time for our world - that first week of lockdown. It was so quick but there was so much grace involved. I don't really have any complaints about that time but the painting of course helped me. So I'm very grateful for that piece. You never know when you're in prayer, where it's going to go. I'm grateful for being the vessel.

How do you get into the zone to paint? I can't wait for a specific call. Sometimes it feels like hunger. Sometimes I can't get a certain gospel song out of my head, sometimes I'm talking to my wife and something springs up in my spirit. I don't go with any sense of thought to the canvas, it's very much a surrender, and I'm very grateful when a painting is produced from that space (and I'm grateful when a painting is not produced). I'm not quite sure where the angels will take me but I know I'm safe. I'm not present for most of it. I'm grateful for that sense of mystery. I hope that that never goes away. It's an uplifting process.



Genesis Tramine photographed in her studio by Lance Brewer July 2020

You've spoken about being visited by angels when you work on the canvas, can you elaborate? They're my friends, my people. I really don't have words for it. If you pray to God you kind of look weird. None of it is a physical existence, so once I accept that I don't care how crazy I look. . . I am a 'Jesus freak' I am 'mad about God' that's true. So the best expression I have for the visions is you might see a cloud, I see something else. If you're watching CNN, Tramine might be seeing something else.

Your paintings feel like we could almost be swallowed by them, and this edition is bigger than most, why do you paint big? That's a good question. Two things. I'm a little lady. God created me small in stature but I'm mighty in spirit, so I have also learned to connect to myself. Spiritually I feel very large. Also the angels take up a lot of space - they're huge and they stand over me, so I paint on the floor on my hands and knees. Sometimes now I stand because the paintings are getting bigger now. God is calling for me to do more, and to stretch more.

I've asked that my territory be increased. That doesn't mean I get more sneakers, or drink more coffee - (I love coffee, I'm a real coffee head!) but that means I get to paint larger for the Lord. I get to exist in galleries and I get to connect with people like Artspace and Phaidon. I paint large because I feel large inside. I pray that God continues to increase my territory.

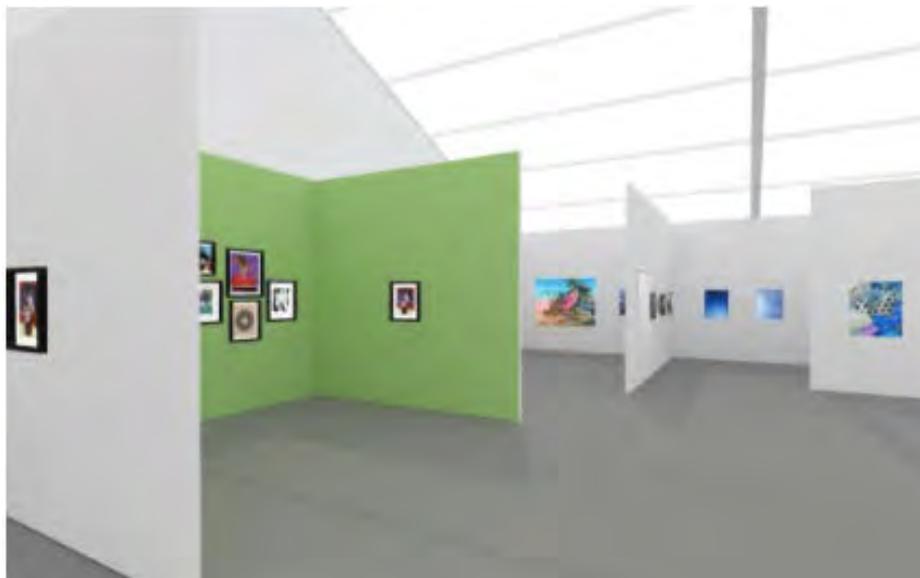
ALMINE RECH



Genesis Tramaine - Detail from Black Woman University, 2020. Courtesy of the Richard Beavers Gallery.

You have never created an edition before. Why this one now? I was thinking about this a lot. Giving is something that is necessary; it's like drinking water. You can't claim to love Jesus if you don't give to other people. I realised that the access around my work is shifting. And I want to make sure that there is clear access not to just the work, - the visual - but to the title; to what I'm saying, who I am as a black woman painter. I want to be sure that I am accessible.

But this is a painting that I will never sell. It's in my private collection. I know that this is an important piece to my career, to who I am; to Genesis Tramaine in this lifetime. But I don't necessarily know why yet. I don't know why this is important to the legacy of my family but I trust that it is, so I have to hold on to the work. I don't really ask too many questions when God gives direction. And the good Lord said hold it. But then I got a call from Phaidon! Oh, my goodness! So I'm grateful that this is how we get to do it. My prayers have directed me to hold on to the work but to make it accessible. So I'm really excited to try something new, and expand in this new way. It's such an important piece that I wanted to make sure that I created access to it.



The Artspace and Phaidon booth at UNTITLED, ART Online featuring the Genesis Tramaine edition