

ARTnews

Genesis Tramaine is Creating Paintings to Reclaim ‘Access to God’ for Black, Queer People like Her

By Angelica Villa, April 8, 2022.



Genesis Tramaine, *Feast of Annunciation*, 2022.
CHARLES ROUSSEL

Genesis Tramaine and Brooklyn are inseparable. She still maintains a studio at her grandmother’s apartment in the borough’s Bed-Stuy neighborhood, where she grew up. And her first major attention came from a show held nearby in 2018, at Richard Beavers Gallery, where she staged “God Is Trans,” in which her sanctified subjects defy gender boundaries. It was in that show that Tramaine started to form her own universe composed of saints and Biblical prophets rendered in gestural scrawls reminiscent of 1980s Neo-Expressionist painting.

In an interview with ARTnews, Tramaine attributed her becoming a “devotional” artist to two “giants” at home—her mother and grandmother—and attending a Black church on Gates Avenue. This spiritual sensibility is evident in her latest show, a solo outing at Almine Rech gallery in New York. On view through April 23, it features 12 large-scale portraits of Christian figures.

Tramaine created these paintings after scouring the Bible. In *Feast of the Holy Spouses* (2022), a stand-in for Mary dons a blue veil and has six sets of eyes. There is religious significance to all this — according to Christian theology, high-ranking angels are sometimes portrayed with their bodies covered in eyes; some have said it represents God seeing all things. For Tramaine, the eyes also implicate the viewer, encouraging you to lock your gaze with the figures she paints.

“In painting, I think that we often try to capture the attention of those who are staring at us,” she said. “I also want to capture the story behind those eyes. I want to include the entire narrative in the gospel.”

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Tramaine's figures' faces sometimes appear as monsters. Twisted features emerge on Black figures posed like school portraits, while others are simply nebulous, taking shape across delicate inner anatomies. In *Feast of the Annunciation* Tramaine renders another version of a biblical couple whose heads are obscured with broad markings. A haloed and blonde-haired figure appears to Mary's face—a reference to archangel Gabriel's first appearance to her.

Tramaine's own narrative is rooted in her family and her spiritual practice. She speaks with an ease about making these paintings, as if it is all seamless. She's guided by a self-assuredness she says comes from growing up seeking affirmation from two colossal Black mother figures.

"Much of what I still do are things that I was taught very young," she said, though she now has carved out her own methods in seeking God. "It's not always the silent whisper on my knees. I've grown differently and asked different questions of God than I know that my grandmother did."

She begins a painting by "asking God to be present." Whereas most painters plot out their works in advance, in many cases, painstakingly, Tramaine lets visions guide her. She doesn't agonize over minute details, and she does not get in her own way by planning every inch of the canvas.

"It's not important to see the end," Tramaine said. "If I put too much in front of the enjoyment of devotion, I feel like I've missed it. I don't allow any pressures into that space. It's just important to maintain those sanctuaries."

"Some people might see it as, you know, like cockiness," she continued. "No, I just really expect to win here."

Tramaine is letting the gospel speak through her

More recently, Tramaine has become increasingly preoccupied with "blood memories" — a concept invoked by the choreographer Alvin Ailey in his 1960 opus *Revelations*. The term refers to ancestral ties that live on in the body. It's an idea she cites, along with Ailey's work dealing with his own Christian upbringing, as a forerunner in these works.

When speaking with ARTnews, Tramaine considered how flashbacks that came to her in dreams or prayers — birds flying, fish swimming, Lawry's salt her grandmother used — may have informed her paintings.

"If we have blood memories," Tramaine said, "then certainly we can have a way of communicating with our future."

The paintings in the Almine Rech show are vehicles allowing the gospel to speak through her. They each draw on episodes she's studied, from the Book of Genesis to the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, from mining connections between Biblical family members, to the fifth day of earth's creation, to comparisons about salt and light to the human body.

Objects with spiritual value have aided in the process. Household salt and rainwater collected in trash barrels at the home Tramaine just bought with her partner were enlisted in the creation of these paintings. The materials add to her spiritual quest.

"The impulse is to please God, the impulse is to answer the call," she remarked.

Her images are anything but shrines. Tramaine has long resisted Eurocentric renderings of Biblical idols present in Old Masters paintings and the religious kitsch that decorates Baptist households. She said she aims to "dismantle false images" that have left Black and queer people like her "out of the story."

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"I don't think that the gospel has a specific color," she explained. "I'd rather use color to express devotion in that space, rather than painting a race over a portrait. God is bigger than white Jesus. We all deserve access to God."

Tramaine believes she's building a "future language," one that sees the Trinity in abstract forms and pigmentations that have yet to be fully reckoned with in faith-based spaces. Despite her ascent through the secular ranks of the art world, the artist remains fixated on making works for audiences on the margins of it.

"I want them to pray to a God of their understanding," she said.