ALMINE RECH

Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Vaughn Spann, Genesis Tramaine

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To convey what it means to live in a body is to find a way to elucidate feelings, emotions, and those difficult-to-articulate interactions and incidents. Experience often evades the language available and of course, while individual, is indicative of culture and shared beliefs. At their best, these elucidations manifest in ways that are constitutive, adding texture and nuance to the larger whole while demanding attention to and establishing the importance of their particulars. Working in this mode are artists Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Genesis Tramaine, and Vaughn Spann. All three rigorously explore what it means to live in a Black body in America, plumbing their own lives and those of others to help define that experience. They work in distinct and complementary manners, each showing how such clarification is a complicated and urgent pursuit, especially in a nation fighting to establish a singular narrative. The three are now presented together as part of a group exhibition at Rubell Museum, where each has participated as an artist-in-residence.

A Ghanaian living in Portland, Quaicoe approaches the untold histories of Black American cowboys in a monumental trio of portraits that tower over the space. He twists their tropes in an act of retelling, rendering their skin in his signature shades of gray and their brimmed hats and dust-shielding garments in vibrant hues. Nearby are his striking portraits of twins who stand side-by-side against lush backdrops, their facial features familiar to each other and yet distinct in expression. Their slight variations, whether in the sly smirk of one figure or slight hunch of another, are tied to the artist's unrelenting need to depict a person's essence, an impulse he defers to by deftly painting the subtleties of a persona through a singular glance or impeccably styled outfit.

Both Quaicoe and Tramaine use color and texture to translate their subjects' cores, although while Quaicoe adds clarity through contrast, Tramaine obscures through graffiti-style markings reminiscent of Jean Michel Basquiat. Inspired by Biblical figures and devotionals, the Brooklyn-born artist uses faith to guide her process and adeptly alchemize each contour in acrylic, oil, spray paint, and as she writes, "the Holy Spirit." Tramaine's portraits congregate in a single space and present subjects who are at once anonymous and yet pulsing with spirit and vitality. Her brushstrokes sweep across the canvas in a rich, expressionistic display, melding spirals with concentric circles and entangled lines that distort would-be identity markers. Despite their abstraction, though, each figure is held within a sharp outline, as if cradling their souls and helping to define the parameters of their bodily existence. It's a recurring motif made more impactful considering Tramaine completed most of the works on view in 2020, a year heavy with self-interrogation and re-characterization.

Veering from the figurative are Spann's *Canyon Run (My Big Black Rainbow)*, and *Dark days bring new hope (never forget)*, a small sampling of the Orlandoborn artist's varied body of work that ranges from polycephalic subjects to evocative, abstract paintings. The latter of the works is a mixed-media rendition of the American flag complete with terrycloth and acrylic, while the former features a chromatic arc with similar materials. "*Canyon Run,*" though, is part of Spann's larger Rainbow series, which he created following Trayvon Martin's murder, and the bright pigments guarded by a thick black line reflect the Skittles the teenager held in his hand when he was fatally shot. Displayed diagonally from Quaicoe's cowboys, the piece is a poignant and critical indictment of the always-present dangers and injustices of moving through the world, particularly the United States, in a Black body. As we collectively revise and attempt to step forward, it's works like these that can right misrepresentations through their breadth and insight and incarnate wider, more expansive ways of being.

These artists all channel the experience of embodiment, although through different and equally deserving approaches: Quaicoe by defying tropes with idiosyncrasy, Spann by precisely pinpointing an enduring ache, and Tramaine through her unparalleled pursuit to nurture the ineffable. Together, they successfully reiterate the necessity of introspection in order to find any semblance of clarity. The beautiful, mournful, and complex questions garnered by such intense soul-searching, as Tramaine might describe it, are an essential part of the process.

- Grace Ebert