

Patrick Eugène: Where Do We Go From Here?

“When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows.” - Rev.Dr.Martin Luther King Jr, Where Do We Go From Here? 1969

Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana presents the art of Patrick Eugène in his first international solo exhibition, *Where Do We Go From Here?*. Borrowing its title from the final text of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s seminal text, the exhibition consists of still and quiet, nuanced, and pensive vignettes, figuratively representing Black artists as they conceptualize creativity. While in a metaphysically meditative state, Eugène creates an ongoing body of work that departs from acutely rendered facial features, and deploys loose, layered strokes of pigment that depict the energetic auras of his subjects. The work honors the rigorous mental, and emotional labor that artists are tasked to selflessly encounter and endure, in order to create work that might inspire, heal, spur thought and social change.

In 1967, Rev.Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., isolated himself from the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, rented a house in Jamaica with no telephone, and labored over his final manuscript. One of the most powerful literary sequences of the text leads with a lyrical refrain evoking a call to action when King refers to his “divine satisfaction”, followed by a litany of phrases such as the following quote: “Let us be dissatisfied until men and women, however black they may be, will be judged on the basis of the content of their character, not on the basis of the color of their skin. Let us be dissatisfied.”

As the unprecedented pandemic impacted world, causing a universal lock down, Patrick Eugène locked himself in his Atlanta, GA. studio, and critically labored over a new body of figurative work, a bold departure from the full-blown abstraction he was primarily known for. Perhaps it was Eugène’s own sense of “divine dissatisfaction” that informed his course of action in early 2020, as the world began to grapple with the effects of Covid 19. Not entirely a stranger to rendering figures, Eugène began engaging with an early mode of his art practice. The new work, meditative, and cathartic, included figurative and representational elements within the vibrating color palette and expressive mark making of the artist’s large scaled abstract work.

A son of Haitian immigrants to the United States, born and raised in New York, and identifying with both Caribbean heritage and African American culture, Eugène’s

pandemic/quarantine experience was bound up in insurmountable fears connected to underlying and deep seeded conditions, conditions that existed- in some form or another- for centuries. In 2020 the viral deployment of videos highlighting devastating deaths of Black people brought on by police violence, most notably George Floyd, added an additional layer of angst and confusion to Black communities. Racial tensions had reached a fever pitch in the United States, reigniting the fervor of the Black Lives Matter movement domestically, and activating anti racism protests abroad. The question that came to mind for many was, “where do we go from here?”

The pathos of King’s 50 plus years old rhetorical interrogation, reverberated deeply within the creative mind of Eugène, leading him to investigate the past in an effort, remain positively inspired, and garner the energy to move. This dive into the past originally focused on historic masters of the Black arts canon, that though they informed Modern Art, are often undermentioned in, and at worst, erased from the conversations of contemporary art history. In the process of critically examining art objects created during African Diasporic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, and The Black Arts Movement of Chicago, Eugène leaned into the personal lives of these artists. Leading with his own thoughts of King’s resounding question, and the theme of divine dissatisfaction, he turned to vintage photography that captured Black artists in quotidian situations, a study that led Eugene to create imagery based in the radical Black tradition, deeply rooted in the communities he grew up in.

Artists of these eras brought about a heightened awareness of ancient African cultural practices. Early 20th century investigations of diasporic African retentions, and the search for Nonwestern idealism, spurred a new modality of Black image making couched in concepts of The Harlem Renaissance of the United States, and The Négritude Movements of Europe (France), and the Caribbean (Haiti). Visual artists of both movements looked towards abstracted forms, nonwestern color pallets, and themes representative of an African worldview, and visual expression. The liberation of African countries from colonial regimes during the 1960s brought an influx of African peoples to American cities like Eugène’s native home of New York. The loose, floating, and enigmatic cultural shards of the African Diaspora ignited with the didactically affirming presence of the new Ghanaian, Congolese, Ivorian, Senegalese and Nigerian transplants, and demystified historic tethers. This spiritual, ancestral, and intellectual exchange aided in unlearning the cross- pollinations of indoctrinated stereotyping.

In the isolation and solitude enabled by the pandemic, Eugène spent countless hours praying and painting alone, as a spiritual practice of self-care. The daily routine led him to consider how Black artists who experienced traumatic times of the past, while creating profound work, also practiced selfcare. For *Where Do We Go From Here? Eugène* transposes vintage photography depicting Black artists both candidly and formally posed,

into composite portraits that deviate from naturalism, and evoke the expressionism indicative of West African masks, composed in the vibrant hues of Haitian carnival. Though strongly referencing the past, Eugene's current body of work facilitates an existential and intersectional dialogue centered in contemporary concepts of Blackness, Pan-Africanism, while in dialogue with the styles of historic Black artists like Beauford Delaney, Horace Pippin, and Boscoe Holder. While conceptually traversing through a lens of the past, Eugène deploys his own emotions, and narratives deriving from introspection and his personal search for the creative self. With a robust painterly technique, displaying broad strokes, layered hues, and impressionistic lighting, Eugène reimagines present day contemporary dancers, poets, painters and sculptors, and voids that subtly represent domestic space.

Where Do We Go From Here explores how canonical Western art movements, such as Mannerism, Primitivism, and Abstract Expressionism were deeply dependent on Black cultural production of Africa and this contemporary moment are inextricably linked to the past and present artistic production of the Diaspora. Eugène's elegant, sumptuous, expressive, and mannerist style, poetically documents the human condition, while focusing on a community that continues to face grave societal challenges. Eugène leverages the beauty, bravery, brilliance, and boldness of Black artists of the past, presenting a compelling reminder of their living legacy. It is clear that for this artist, the answer to Dr. King's haunting question of "where do we go from here" is found in imagining where his ancestors have already been.