

BROOKLYN RAIL

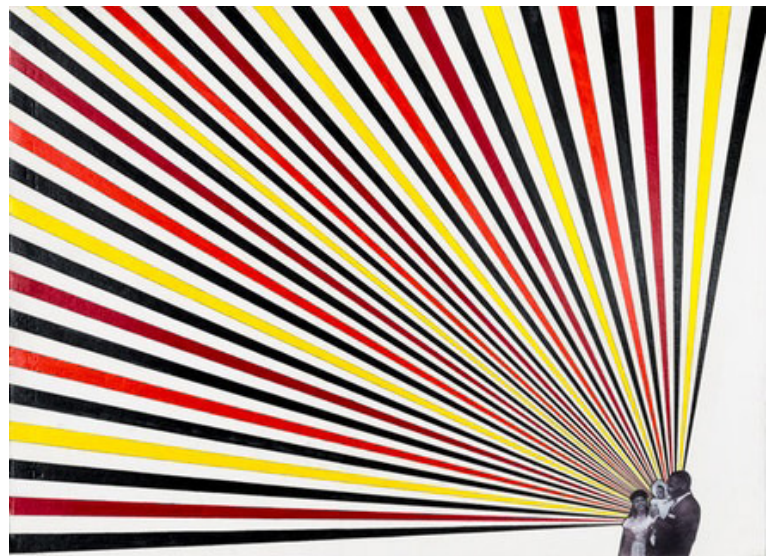
Art Seen

RICO GATSON: *Icons* 2007-2017

By William Corwin

When elevating a human subject to sainthood or, at least making them an object of veneration, an artist needs to consider practically how it is that light or beams of pure energy will emanate from their being. Rico Gatson's exhibition *Icons 2007–2017* is just such an exercise in catapulting the human into the supernatural realm. We are watching an artist doing what artists do best: rendering the unimaginable into the visual and the unspeakable into human terms. Selecting a group of historically and culturally influential African Americans—Muhammad Ali, Lena Horne, Thelonious Monk, and Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King among many others—Gatson painstakingly draws multi-colored beams of light or striated energy fields around collaged photographs. While his inspiration seems to come from the Bauhaus lessons of Josef Albers and Johannes Itten, crossed with a color palette redolent of pan-Africanism, his approach to these drawings exhibit the sentiment of a true believer like Andrei Rublev, the great 14th-century Russian icon painter. Gatson tackles the confounding problem of creating a halo for the 21st century, how a monk might stress over whether the gilt background in an icon will butt up against the subject's chin or skip a patch and resume at the shoulder; these things may seem silly, but they end up defining our vision of the sacred and supernatural.

Gatson's drawings utilize some of the visual tropes of



Rico Gatson, *Martin with Family*, 2016. Colored pencil, marker, photocollage on paper, 22 x 30 1/4 in. Private collection; courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

Constructivism, the Bauhaus and overt revolutionaries like Emory Douglas, the Black Panthers's Minister of Culture. Thus, they have an aura of the political poster as well as the devotional image, but they are far more than mere propaganda for a worthy cause. Several of the images, such as *Double Stokley* (2016) and *Double Miles* (2009), are doubled and mirrored so they engage in a dialogue with themselves. While the beams of light, power or sound that emanate from the small figures generally situated at the bottom corners of the page recall the loud, vivacious graphics of Rodchenko, the doubling adds a level of futility to the figures' actions. These are voices crying in the wilderness as much as power figures, prophets whose words were not heeded or heard too late. Other images are more playful. In *Cassius* (2007), the Greatest rises on his own rays of black, brown, and orange, like the self-propelling Iron Man or Silver Surfer, with his look of undefeatable self-confidence.

Unlike the thick opaque pigments of illuminated manuscripts, icons, or even Gatson's own hard-edged sculpture, the Icons

are drafted in colored pencil and, on closer investigation, have a fuzzy and colored-in quality that reveals the hand and method of the artist. They seem like something of a private and personal crusade; a visual hagiography in which the artist's voice is his line, through which he consistently describes his method of adoring each figure. Created over the past ten years, they appear to be an artistic oasis beyond Gatson's rigorous sculpture practice, a confluence between the artist and his spiritual mentors. These drawings represent a beautiful, repeated, meticulous chore, like counting the rosary or prayer beads, or chanting a mantra: a means of quietly reaching out and thanking those who are tacitly responsible for one's creative output.

The black-and-white cut-out photos are heavily contrasted and grainy, but they take up relatively little real estate on the sheet of paper, while the outsize beams they produce cannot fail to convey the immense stature—cultural, symbolic, and political—that these individuals hold. It is fun to discern the individual nuances and differences within this catalog of haloes. *RA* (2014) simply expands unstoppably upward. Some of the two and three colored rainbow patterns seem to weigh heavily on the subjects such as *Nina* (2007) or *Trane #2* (2014), while others, as in *Martin w/ Family* (2016), seem to expand the aura of the family rather than fence them in. *Sam [Sam Cooke]* (2010) chases down the aesthetic possibilities of these mystical beams as the various colors burst out of his chair, head, toes, and thighs; indicating a boundless energy that can't be controlled. The most sentimental of all the images is the portrait of Basquiat, *Samo #1* (2011), who radiates this colored-pencil plasma from the crown of his head and forehead—but more poignantly—a beam bursts from his heart.

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