

Black Lives Shine in Rico Gatson's New Show

By Siddhartha Mitter

Rico Gatson's studio, in Bushwick, is awash in color and geometry. Tall rectangular panels painted in intricate patterns lean against a wall like abstract totems. Other planks lie across tables, works in progress involving ovals and circles. Large paintings on the wall alternate geometric sections in red, black, orange, yellow, and green with others in black and white. Nearby, silhouettes taken from vintage images of Black Panthers and civil rights protesters stand beneath strong colored vertical stripes or radiating lines.

Black history is in the room — in the African textile references of some of the painted panels, with colors and patterns reminiscent of kente cloth; in archival photographs of spectators at lynchings that Gatson is building into new work; on the bookshelf, with its tomes on African masks, Emmett Till, and New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians. But so is the pull of abstraction, the concern with lines, blocks, repetition, variance.

"History is important, and so is abstraction," Gatson tells me. "Nothing is ever literal in the work. There are specific things that I'm trying to address, but in a way that isn't about telling or retelling the history. My program is to move it in some other direction."

"Icons," Gatson's current exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, embodies this approach. It features



Rico Gatson *Nina*, 2007 colored pencil, marker, photocollage on paper 22 1/4 x 30 inches

collage-based drawings from a series that celebrates Black cultural heroes in an idiosyncratic, abstracted style, in which bold, precise lines radiate from small cut-out photographs. The mix of influences — minimalism, constructivism, propaganda art — and the earnest but oblique engagement with history are characteristic of the 51-year-old artist. But these works on paper, begun in 2007, are just one stream in his oeuvre, which spans sculpture, painting, and video, sometimes in combination.

Born in Georgia but raised in Riverside, California, Gatson grew up in the kind of modest, tract-homes setting where people like his parents — a nurse and a steelworker-turned-landscaping contractor who left the South at the tail end of the Great Migration — were forming a new Black middle class. His political awakening, however, happened as an undergraduate at Bethel College in Minnesota in the late Eighties. There, he says, the confluence of living in an overwhelmingly white milieu, hearing the militant music of Public Enemy and others, and being encouraged by a professor who guided him toward writers like bell hooks and Frantz Fanon sparked a lifelong interest in race and identity.

Gatson switched his major from graphic design to fine art and went on to the Yale School of Art, where he studied sculpture under the program's longtime director, minimalist sculptor David von Schlegell. He has pursued his career since the Nineties in New York City, including the past thirteen years in Bushwick, making him an elder of the neighborhood scene.

In early video works, Gatson remixed scenes from Black history in woozy, kaleidoscopic sequences; two of these montages appeared in "Freestyle," an influential 2001 exhibition at the Studio Museum that brought notice to a host of Black artists. For a solo show in 2006 — at his longtime gallery, Ronald Feldman, and the Cheekwood Museum in Nashville — he devised panels, sculptures, and videos that rendered racist symbols (Nazi eagle, Confederate flag) and artifacts of trauma (the whipping post, the auction block) in hypnotic linear patterns. The show took its title, "African Fractals," from Ron Eglash's study of geometric occurrence in African architecture and design, a book Gatson consults to this day.

"Icons" — oddly, this otherwise well-shown artist's first New York museum solo — samples thirty pieces from an ongoing series of at least seventy, by Gatson's estimate, which he says began somewhat by accident. "A friend down the hall who was making some drawings gave me some paper, and I happened to have a set of colored pencils," he says. His experiment became a method. Drawn from a familiar pantheon — Zora Neale Hurston to Michael Jackson by way of Muhammad Ali — each subject appears as a small figure appropriated from a vintage photograph, cut away from its context, and pasted onto a 22-by-30-inch sheet. Gatson then pencils in rays of color that beam from the subject across the expanse of the page. More than portraits, these are studies in energy.

"I was thinking early on about these figures as superheroes," Gatson says. "As the series progressed, they became literally icons — the halos and lines are a graphic representation of energy coming out of them. The most important part for me is feeling."

Gathered in the museum's mezzanine gallery, the works produce a striking effect, an array of force fields. Nina Simone's is black, brown, orange, red; it rises from her Afro — the classic source photo, in which she crouches, looking fierce, is from a 1969 shoot by Jack Robinson — to the firmament. A black-and-white beam flows from Charlie Parker's saxophone, and another, symmetrically, back across his body. Ali, arms aloft, darts narrow rays of color from his fists. Some figures appear in double, as if negotiating a dual identity across the page. Stokely Carmichael's rays intersect, forming a vortex; Amiri Baraka's meet but do not cross, as if an invisible wall bisected the page.

With its heroes and halos, the visual language evokes designs by Emory Douglas, the minister of culture in the Black Panther Party and the main illustrator of its newspaper. Gatson cites Douglas as a major influence; his own icons, however, turn the emphasis away from overt politics. In laying out the works and meticulously filling the beams in colored pencil, he engages his subjects on a meditative level. "It's a satisfying process, like anything that's slow and repetitive," he says. "The transfer of energy is important insofar as paying homage to these figures. They're not limited to activism; you get to a layer beyond the surface."

Gatson's experiments have forebears he's quick to acknowledge: Sol LeWitt's wall drawings, Carmen Herrera's vivid shapes, Agnes Martin's contemplative canvases. His painted planks are brash descendants of the stark polished slabs the minimalist artist John McCracken pioneered two generations ago. He mentions, too, a more mystical ancestry in early Swedish abstract artist Hilma af Klint and Swiss artist Emma Kunz, for the way their esoteric drawings "touched upon spirituality, philosophy, and restorative practices."

Gatson also credits Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam, elder Black abstractionists who, like other Black artists in that world, were long overlooked. Still, he demurs when it comes to claiming their legacy. "I never considered myself in the conversation of Black abstract art," he says. "I suppose that's because I have so much reverence for the practitioners

and their long journey to recognition. Plus my work is constantly switching between abstraction and representation.”

A parallel Gatson more gladly embraces is with jazz, which relies on geometries of rhythm yet progresses through their disruption via improvisation. “I think about visual time, visible time,” he says. “Music is very important to me. There’s a lot happening in this studio, a lot of shapes; it’s very busy. But playing with that — back to the notion of jazz — I’m thinking about improvisation, about how the eye moves and the potential for some sort of impact on the viewer.” Fully one-third of the subjects in the “Icons” show are jazz artists, among them John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Thelonious Monk, and a resplendent Sun Ra who beams red and black rays, this image built around the Egyptian pharaoh-meets-extraterrestrial cover art from the album *Space Is the Place*.

Gatson’s “Icons” are currently his most visible work; when his gallery devoted its booth at this year’s Armory Show to him, it was heavy on pieces in the series. The Studio Museum show amplifies this effect, but Hallie Ringle, the assistant curator who organized it, says she hopes it will prompt interest in a major retrospective. In the meantime, Gatson is preparing an outdoor installation of “totemic structures,” based on his leaning panels, at the Katonah Museum of Art in Westchester County next spring.

The icons carry on, he says. He only just got around to Malcolm X; a Sarah Vaughan piece is also new. “I never intended to do it for ten years,” Gatson notes, “but I remain inspired, which is the good news.” And the work still brings him fresh insight. Recently, someone asked if the lines beamed out from the characters, or rather in toward them — an alternative way of looking that he says he had not considered. “Sometimes these things have to be pointed out, even to the maker,” Gatson says. “That’s the best part for me: I don’t have control.”

from *The Village Voice*, July 2017