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CITY PAPER

"About Face" at the Creative Alliance carves out room for a new kind of canonical portraiture

Courtesy/Rob Clatterbuck

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While I was observing a T-shaped portrait of an afroed woman who stares off into the distance, I overheard a conversation a man was having with his friend about the artist, Tim Okamura. "I was just surprised..." the man gasped, "I just assumed that Okamura was, you know, black. Because, just look at the work." Several others shared similar confusion about Okamura's racial identity—for clarification, Okamura is bi-racial; half-Japanese and half-white. The presumptions posed in these conversations should give you pause: Every artist featured in "About Face," at Creative Alliance through Jan. 28, has made a conscious decision to break from the exclusive traditions of portraiture, which center European subjects, and instead affirm marginalized populations in regal, empowered, and humanizing ways.

I have followed Okamura, who's based in Brooklyn, on Instagram for years, but the posts of his oil paintings do not do justice to their detail and life-like tangibility. When you stand close to his work you can better appreciate the dimension his textural approach creates and the inescapable emotion his skill elicits. Okamura's subjects are typically sourced from the urban environments where he lives and works. Because his racial identity is not Black, some critics suggest that his persistent centering of people of color, particularly Black and Latina women, is potentially exploitative. I do not place Okamura in the Columbus-Mapplethorpe-Elvis category; his work

doesn't blindly eroticize or demean or caricaturize people, nor does he appropriate the style of another artist of color. Rather, his works try to portray all subjects in bold, nonconforming ways; the women and men in his paintings all have agency and poise.

Okamura addresses the paradox of being lost in translation or caught in the mire of others' interpretations in 'Walkie Talkie,' a piece from his "Begin Transmission" series. In 'Walkie Talkie' the head shots of two women of different races are installed at eye level within a small wooden frame. An International Morse code walkie talkie is positioned next to each portrait. The small installation evokes big questions: What gets lost in translation between differing cultures, races, genders, and philosophies? What assumptions are made about one's identity based solely on the color of their skin?

In contrast to Okamura's photorealistic renderings, Chicago-based artist Ebony G. Patterson's mixed media portraits are object-oriented abstractions that soften hardline gender binaries. Her drawings and elaborate wall tapestries investigate the performance of masculinity within the working-class dancehall culture of Kingston, Jamaica.

Betye Saar meets Vybz Kartel in Patterson's "Russian-From the Out and Bad Series," in which a well-dressed character emerges from heavily textured floral print. The subject's body is a gaudy culmination of safety pins, glitter and bling; their presence is impossible to ignore, the embellishments literally make them visible. A collection of shoes on pedestals that match the wardrobe of the subject and flowers enshrines them within the textile, and as real objects installed on the gallery floor. The work is opulent. Viewers are aware they are in the presence of greatness—in these pieces, wicked rude boys shine diamond bright.

Patterson has described the work as kitsch, camp, colorful, and steeped in artifice. The androgynous fashion and hyper-stylized, stunning intricacies of each portrait mark gender identity as a fluid fluctuation or performance. In the past, men who participated in dancehall did not wear tight-fitting apparel for fear they would be deemed "suspect," their sexuality questioned and respect lost. Patterson highlights a shift in this perception: Now masculinity appropriates trends from women's fashion, and thus broadens acceptable performances of masculinity, a slight evolution in sensibility to a music genre with a reputation for being aggressively homophobic. Patterson also examines the practice of skin bleaching by women and men in dancehall culture, representing this pigment loss by attaching clusters of glitter and jewels across the bodies and faces of the subjects. Mapping the flamboyance of dancehall culture onto tapestry, Patterson also acts as historian, looking closely at these working class bodies and the cultures they create.

The performed masculinity in dancehall that Patterson investigates parallels the gender-bending onnagata (men who play women's roles) in Japanese Kabuki theater, which have inspired New York-based artist Rozeal, whose mixed media panels critique the theater of cultural appropriation. Both 'Song of Solomon...' and 'Listen + Listen = Silence of Oneness' recall Japanese ukiyo-e prints from the late Edo period to address the globalization of hip-hop, and the appropriation and commodification of Black American culture. Deeply influenced by

intersections between performative traditions like kabuki theater, buraku theater, West African dance, and hip-hop, Rozeal draws from these archetypes to create what she calls "Afro-Asiatic allegories." The paintings that emerge are huge graffiti-esque throw-ups that visualize the allure and oddity of cultural appropriation, specifically ganguro. Ganguro was a short-lived movement that arose in Japan in the 90's where young Japanese men and women darkened their skin, wore hip-hop-inspired attire, and used a performative body language that they attributed to Black Americans.

'Song of Solomon Be BeeWorld be B Boy B Girl' is a honey gold drenched mixed media portrait of a ganguro man and woman embracing each other as they listen to headphones. Cloud-like honeycomb speaker shapes float above them. The couple's light skin tone is visible beneath a blocky brown makeup that covers their faces. The figures rock gold chains and bling like Bodhisattva statues, dreadlocks and tightly coiled napped hair like the Buddha Tathagata. The cultural nuance of these attributes is significant: Rozeal's figures blend elements of Japanese religious iconography with emblems from hip-hop culture to create new supernatural and satirical mythologies. Rozeal's work should also counter some of the glib cultural confusion from those at the gallery wondering about Tim Okamura's ethnicity.

Baltimore-based artist Amy Sherald's portraits exist in a dimension all their own. Inspired by American realists, her subjects are actively affirmed by their own brazen individuality. Each figure stands suspended in a highly textured ethereality, an undefined space that breaks linear assessments of time and place. The fashions worn by each figure further obscures specification; they could exist in myriad realities—'The Bathers' could be a throwback picture of my grandmother and auntie at Virginia Beach in the '50s. 'Freeing Herself Was One Thing, Taking Ownership of That Freed Self Was Another' could be a Facebook post from my sister at Afropunk Paris. The resultant freedom that the figures experience with the omission of stern geographical identifiers is palpable and empowering.

At the opening, I spent more time than I can recall staring into the grinning face of 'The Boy With No Past.' The boy's body is long; his back is straight and his arms are positioned directly at his sides. His body becomes a structure, or a vessel like a rocket, a mothership readying himself to transcend into the next now. His pressed button-up shirt is sky blue, his slacks are the color of noonday sun. Standing with his arms at his sides against a splotchy rust-colored backdrop, he cocks his goggled grinning face to the sky and waits. The boy is the personification of a new day, new possibilities, a safe future. I think I sat with the boy for a long time because the image made me feel a deep hope. America has never been a safe place for black boys. Their freedom may be confused for violent intent, their smile mistaken for malice. The murder of black boys is rarely justified, rarer still is the receipt of just retribution. 'The Boy With No Past' holds none of this angst because his body is free from the cellular memory of those traumas. I could not help but smile, too, for the possibilities this portrait projects and the profound hope it may give black boys and their mothers.