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CULTURE

Subversive and Grandiose, Kajahl's Vivid Portraits Supplant Historical Narratives

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GRACE EBERT



“Silent Incantation II” (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 38 x 33 inches. All images © Kajahl, shared with permission

Through his meticulously rendered portraits, Santa Cruz-born artist **Kajahl** subverts the tradition of **Blackamoor**—a highly stylized European aesthetic that visualized people of color, particularly African men, in exoticized forms and subservient roles—by instead depicting Black

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subjects in valorized positions. Part of a series titled *Royal Specter*, the vivid paintings center alchemists, scholars, astronomers, and various intellectual figures within grandiose and luxurious settings.

While the artist's works evoke the racist sculpture and decorative pieces of Blackamoor, they remove the historical context and alter the original narrative through anachronistic details. Each oil painting is layered with imagined elements, from the inaccuracies of the source material to Kajahl's portrayals of fictional characters. "My fantasy is gazing back at their fantasy. I am their fantasy and they are mine... I am the specter of their imagination," he says.

Kajahl's work currently is on view at Chicago's [Monique Meloche Gallery](#) through December 19. You can keep up with his historically subversive projects on [Instagram](#).



"Alchemist" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 36 x 48 inches

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Left: "Huntress Eclipse" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 60 x 48 inches. Right:
"Tigress Guardian In Palmtree Oasis" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 60 x 48 inches

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"Star Gazer In Solitude" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 72 x 54 inches

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“Huntress In Oasis (Astride A Crocodile)” (2020), oil on canvas, 66 x 84 inches

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Left: "Moment of Contemplation (Scholar)" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 48 x 36 inches. Right: "Oracle (Holding Mirror)" (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 48 x 36 inches

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“Silent Incantation I” (2020), oil on canvas over panel, 38 x 33 inches