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David Shrobe in his studio | image © [Jean Andre Antoine](#)

interview: artist david shrobe turns discarded materials into empowering portraits

kat barandy | feb 22, 2024

'NATURAL SOVEREIGNTY' OPENS AT MONIQUEMELOCHE GALLERY

At moniquemeloche gallery in Chicago, artist David Shrobe reinvents classical **portraiture** with *Natural Sovereignty*, an exhibition of textural, collage-style artworks. The show is a celebration of family life and heritage within Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. This theme is especially poignant as the works will be the last to have been created in the artist's longtime home and studio in Harlem, **New York** — next month Shrobe will vacate the apartment in which his family had lived for nearly a century. Within this bittersweet context, the artist weaves together spoken histories and family portraits, drawing from past generations to present a narrative that resonates with both the past and future.

CELEBRATING HERITAGE AND COMMUNITY

Natural Sovereignty is set against the backdrop of [David Shrobe](#)'s soon-to-be-vacated Harlem studio, and is displayed at [moniquemeloche](#)'s Chicago gallery. It is a culmination of David Shrobe's lifelong engagement with his surroundings. Through a careful process of collecting found objects from his neighborhood, he breathes new life into disused materials — tabletops, doors, molding, mirror frames, wood flooring, and textiles — by infusing them with layers of meaning and memory. Shrobe further emphasizes the backyard and garden as an extension of the home. These natural community spaces are described as being imbued with sustenance, survival, and resistance. Turn-of-the-century photographs of Black and Indigenous Americans are reinterpreted through a contemporary twist on the classical portrait. This way, David Shrobe's work represents a declaration of autonomy and empowerment for people of color.

Natural Sovereignty is on view at moniquemeloche gallery in Chicago from February 3rd to March 23rd, 2024.

Following the exhibition's opening, designboom [spoke](#) with artist David Shrobe to learn about his process and inspirations.

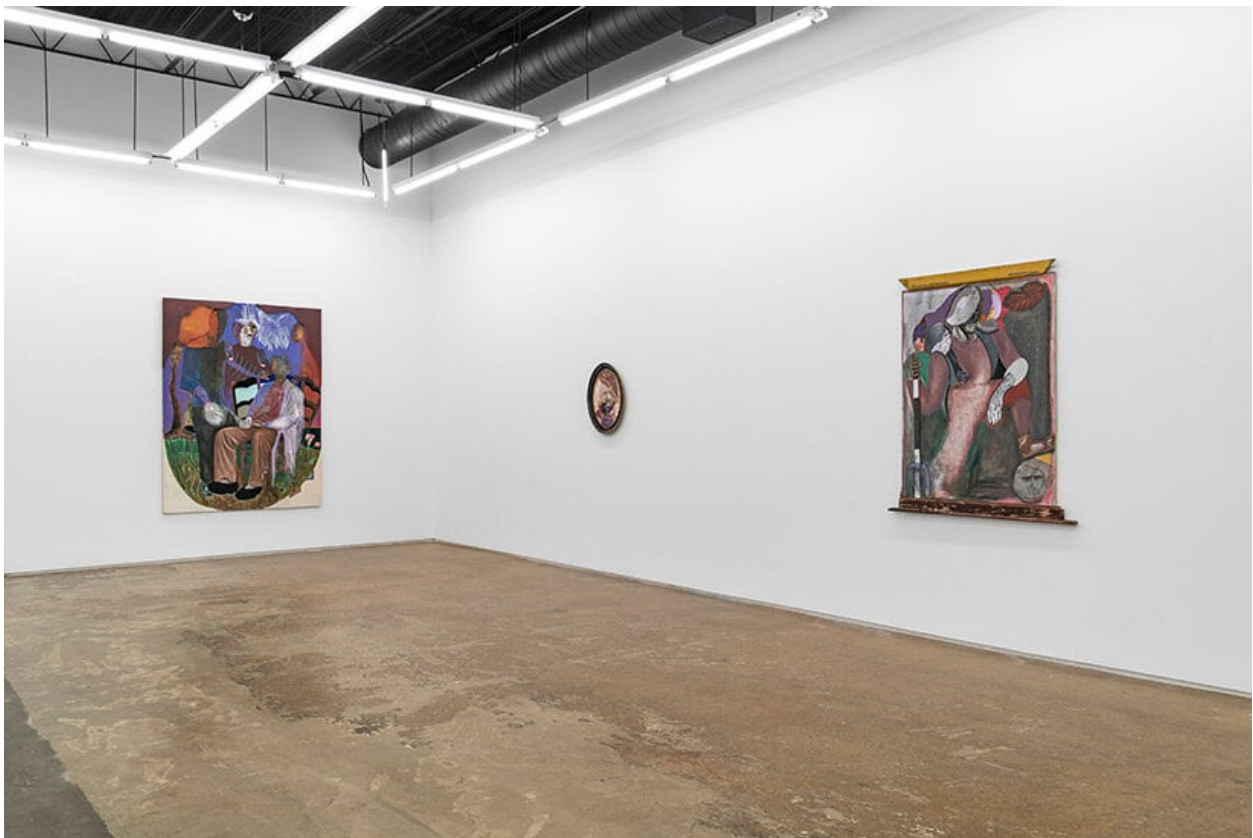


David Shrobe, *Gathering* (detail), 2023. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | images by Bob.

IN DIALOGUE WITH ARTIST DAVID SHROBE

designboom (DB): This body of work was created in your Harlem studio, in the apartment that has housed your family for nearly a century. Can you expand on the significance of this space and how it influenced your creative process?

David Shrobe (DS): Using an apartment that has been in my family for 99 years as my studio has been truly inspiring. I think of it as my creative sanctuary and a historic site. I find so much beauty and inspiration from the neighborhood, people (past & present), and the leftover artifacts I find nearby. It was such a culturally rich experience living here as a young adult and later transforming this home into my art studio. I use the architecture, neighborhood, found objects, and lived experience as a contemporary archive. These continue to inform and direct my creative material process, which is really grounded in experimentation and discovery.



David Shrobe, *Natural Sovereignty*. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | images by Bob.

DB: Your materials seem deeply personal, often sourced from your neighborhood. How do you navigate the emotional shift of leaving a place with such a deep personal history?

DS: There is a deep history in the apartment and neighborhood that I've been fortunate to tap into all these years. It's hard for me to process the idea of leaving but I find solace in the thought that I take with me all the moments and experiences had in this sacred space. I definitely don't want to leave but the move is unavoidable. However,

I'm staying optimistic heading into this new chapter. I'm currently packing up years of items I've collected, along with family memorabilia, and other items I've inherited. Over the years I've learned to let go of a lot, like when I finish a painting, I have to let it go out into the world. The work I make is a part of me, but I feel good about getting it out into the world to be seen and experienced by more people than just me.



David Shrobe, *Natural Sovereignty*. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | images by Bob.

DB: How do you balance your personal history and memories with viewers' broader interpretations?

DS: When my work leaves the studio and goes out into the world, it almost always gets interpreted in new ways outside of my original vision or intent. I think it has to do with my abstract sensibility and ways of merging figuration with abstraction that leaves the work somewhat open-ended. I love to hear about the different reads and interpretations people have of my work; it often brings about new ideas and other ways to experience the work, even for myself.

DB: *Natural Sovereignty* explores family life among BIPOC communities — what is the significance of assemblage and collage in expressing these themes?

DS: *Natural Sovereignty* is about the vitality of family life and communing with nature. The backyard and garden are extensions of the home, so it made sense for me to use domestic items such as flooring, doors, and tabletops to create assemblages that

allude to both the interior layers of the home and to their exterior spaces. These different items become collage elements with their own histories and stories to tell. They extend the narrative of the work and push the physicality of the painting surface. I assemble the construction first and then collage layers to build the exterior and interior space where the narrative emerges from, and the gesture of figures creates a familial bond. These characters exist in otherworldly realities, where they govern over themselves and have total autonomy.



David Shrobe, *Transition Mode*, 2023. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image by Bob.

DB: How do you translate intangible concepts like ancestral connections and cultural layering into visual art?

DS: Working in my family's former home at times felt like tapping into a kind of ancestral lineage. For me painting is equal parts physical, spiritual, and visual. Before my maternal side of the family arrived in Harlem, they possessed a lot of land and a large farm in Alabama. Having an ancestral knowledge of the land, nature, and of cosmology, which was passed down through the generations, is how they survived. These inherited histories became both the impetus for the work as well as the conceptual underpinnings that shape and drive my initial vision of these ideas. The work manifests through building layers over time and using materials drawn from the community and neighborhood, which for me is both beautifully and culturally rich.



David Shrobe, *Skinny-dip* (detail), 2024. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image byBoB.



David Shrobe, *Repot* (detail), 2023. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image by Bob.

DB: It was noted that you view the backyard and garden as ‘a site of sustenance, survival, and resistance.’ Can you elaborate on this?

DS: I think of the backyard and garden as anchors for the soul, sanctuaries for leisure, wellness, and joy. These are spaces to commune with nature, grow food, and experience community with others — all needed for humans to thrive. Using traditional healing practices to sustain life by embracing the medicinal properties in plants and herbs rather than modern medicine, and growing our own food to provide for nutrition and longevity, are all survival tactics and forms of resistance given our society’s current standard of nutrition and lack of connection to nature and each other.



David Shrobe, *Repot* (detail), 2023. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image by Bob.

DB: You mentioned drawing inspiration from turn-of-the-century photographs. How do you re-contextualize these images to speak to contemporary audiences?

DS: The inspiration for this series was a bell hooks’ quote from 1995 detailing her perspective on photography, inviting us to consider the camera as a political tool that has created an ‘immediate intervention’ to combat degrading and stereotyping representations of people of color, as well as various photographs of BIPOC from different generations in their garden or backyard. The ideas raised by hooks are still very

relevant and by addressing them within the context of sustenance, survival, and resistance I'm speaking to contemporary issues around race and equality that unfortunately continue to confront us today.



David Shrobe, *Mother* (detail), 2023. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image by Bob.

(continued): Through cutting up, remixing, and manipulating these photographs, I re-contextualize them, reimagining them in future realities where the figures merge with my own personal history and family photos. I use these photographs as a starting point for my constructed assemblages, merging both the imagined and real to form the narrative of a work. For me, it's all about revising and transforming these images to undergo a kind of evolution and metamorphosis that I need to follow for the work's completion. It's both in and out of my control, I need the work to surprise me and go in a direction that is satisfying.



David Shrobe, *Hotstepper* (detail), 2024. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | image by



David Shrobe, *Natural Sovereignty*. image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery | images by Bob.

DB: What do you ultimately hope viewers experience and take away from 'Natural Sovereignty,' especially those from both within and outside BIPOC communities?

DS: There's a lot I want people to take away from this work. I want BIPOC communities to see themselves in the work, feel a connection both to the materiality and imagery and see new possibilities of freedom. This is essentially a universal story I want to communicate. I'm interested in how depictions of figures in nature, are not merely people in landscapes, but can also be images with political, historical, and cultural significance. Through my layering of found domestic items, merged with painting, drawing, collage, and patterned textiles, I want to provoke our sense of touch and connection to things that feel simultaneously familiar and strange.

I want the work to provide a visual, conceptual, physical, and textural experience that will keep the viewer engaged in looking and discovering new things. I want to transport the viewer to worlds that connect us to nature and return us to the natural sovereignty of the human being; to self-govern. Inevitably, through my intermingling of bodies, color, and narrative, I want this body of work to communicate that we are all woven together, we are all connected on this life journey.

project info:

exhibition title: Natural Sovereignty

artist: [David Shrobe](#) | [@daveshrobe](#)

gallery: [moniquemeloche](#) | [@moniquemeloche](#)

location: 451 N Paulina St, Chicago, Illinois

on view: February 3rd — March 23rd, 2024

photography: © [Jean Andre Antoine](#), Bob.

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