

ARTFORUM

Critic's Pick: Conrad Egyir

By Glen Helfand

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Conrad Egyir, *The last brother in America*, 2019, oil, acrylic, Plexiglas, glitter, synthetic flowers, and wood on canvas, 90 x 72".

The tone is springlike, with crisp whites and bold graphic patterns rendered in sunny colors strategically punctuated with bright fake flowers. Conrad Egyir's mixed-media paintings gathered in the exhibition "Ameliorations" serve as emblems, portraits, and quasi-religious narratives that honor black bodies and allude to iconographies of the African diaspora. Some works take the form of giant postcards or sheets of dot matrix paper. Within the compositions, bodies are arranged and iterated in geometric ensembles with shifts in scale that position some as deities and others as civilians embodying certain moral imperatives or illustrating a route to spiritual ascension.

The Ghana-born, Detroit-based artist merges a Pop-inflected dialogue with the flattened perspective and family subjects common among works by artists such as Kerry James Marshall and Njideka Akunyili Crosby. In a direct quotation of Mickalene Thomas, Egyir uses black glitter to give a twinkling, halo-like glow to the hair of certain subjects. What distinguishes Egyir's work is his more minimal backdrops—solid swaths of pastels, whites, and light grays—along with his employment of graphic-design strategies. Four portraits of figures from the Detroit arts scene feature dimensional laser-cut text down the sides—words that imagine grandiose roles for the sitters, such as "the faithful country spirit"—while oversize stamps depicting Ashanti artifacts frame these objects as missives between two worlds. There's an official air to these pieces; they borrow the language of approved, canonized types of pictures, those that appear in municipal buildings and houses of worship. Commanding and colorful, regal and playful, Egyir's paintings are difficult to resist.