

Art | Basel

Matthew Angelo Harrison: "Cocoa butter poems and splashing colors: Discover five young artists of 'OVR: Pioneers'"

By Sky Goodden

March, 2021



Rachel Eulena Williams, *Watching From the Window* (detail), 2019. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow.

'They are unmasking preconceptions in identity and art,' says author Sky Goodden

Of the broad generational array of artists featuring in Art Basel's 'OVR: Pioneers', it is, surprisingly, the practices of the youngest that stretch across historical epochs, unsettling our disturbed present even further. Here, we spotlight five of these visionaries, who are pushing boundaries both material and temporal.

Blessing Ngobeni (b. 1985) has been asking himself, 'What have we learned from the errors of history?' Observing the halting democratization of post-apartheid South Africa, the Johannesburg-based artist concerns himself with 'the constant repetition of mistakes' across mixed-media canvases that jostle with narrative contravention. But his project is also more global. He identifies his governing desire to leave behind 'those who think Blackness is cursed. A process to change how history paints us.' Appearing in **Jenkins Johnson Gallery's** (New York City and San Francisco) viewing room, Ngobeni was named in Phaidon's *Vitamin P3* (2016) as one of the leading African painters working today, with his work being described as 'characterized by obsessive mark making [and] suggestive of the corrupting nature of power.'

Allana Clarke (b. 1987) positions her practice among the constraints and freedoms of our corporeal and perceived selves. Presented by **Galerie Thomas Zander** (Cologne), Clarke sculpts with hair glue, writes 'text-based cocoa butter poems,' as she describes them, and takes terrain-like photographs of her body. Speaking about the identity gap she experiences as a first-generation Trinidadian-American artist often mistaken as African American, she says, 'I wasn't raised by the burdens or concept of Blackness. But the burden was placed on my public self. [...] Is it possible to un-align signs from their signifiers?' Clarke works texturally, abstracting her experience of the skin she's in – and her mother's alternately soothing, prodding, and pinching fingers on her body. She 'draws' with bonding glue and rubber latex until she has created something volumetric and sculptural, evocative and defamiliarizing.

A standout at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989) creates 3D machine technologies that mold African sculptures, bones, and totems. These original artifacts, presented by **Jessica Silverman** (San Francisco) betray provenances that are intentionally defective, deleterious, and open to mistranslation. For his exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel this summer – his first solo show at a European institution – the self-described 'Black

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Midwesterner' audits anthropology and interweaves history with science fiction, labor rights, Minimalism, and auto manufacturing (he is based in Detroit, where he spent years working in the industry, prototyping clay models for cars). As his gallerist notes, Harrison is engaged in a form of 'sampling.' As he says, 'I am always interested in the way that the hyper-specific becomes universal.'

Presented by **Pilar Corrias** (London), the Los Angeles-based artist **Hayv Kahraman** (b. 1981), an Iraqi painter who fled the first Gulf War, also underscores what she calls the 'non-fixity' of diasporic cultures – their fluidity and ability to adapt, code switch, and perform. Connected through a common protagonist who bends her way across Kahraman's canvases and shimmers with Japanese features, an O'Keeffian brow, and a Durga-like reach, her paintings are compared to Persian miniatures and Renaissance portraiture, but signal a steely self-possession. In her practice, which has expanded to include a more sculptural painting process in recent years, Kahraman summons a collective spirit (many-limbed and all-seeing) that the artist herself embodies. Her iconic subject is forever recurring and each time renewed.

Brooklyn-based Rachel Eulena Williams (b. 1991) similarly inhabits the space between painting and sculpture, though in her case she is testing a center that cannot hold. Discussing her painting in terms of 'unbinding' the canvas from the stretcher, Williams materially reimagines the support systems that we levy on art. She also lets color rip, splashing cranberry reds against sun-soaked yellows and pooling them in broad azures. Separating shapes by space or colliding them together, Williams's paintings, presented by **The Modern Institute** (Glasgow), can appear like stained-glass windows with all the lead pulled out. She says her interest in establishing color in the foreground – announcing it – flows from a criticism of Western art history's categorizing of color as 'unruly, foreign, and vulgar.' Similar to Harrison, Williams looks to science fiction as a channel for imagining the future of Black expression. 'The work has many parts that are already connected, making its right- or wrongness exist only in relation to itself,' she reflected in a recent interview.

These young artists are challenging and unmasking preconceptions in identity and art, and fostering transcultural connections that speak across generations. But they are also pointing to the limits of their strategies. Challenging time, site, and material ingenuity, they are insisting on more than comment, they are probing for invention.

Sky Goodden is the founding publisher and editor of the international art publication and podcast Momus.

**JESSICA  
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108  
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508