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INTERVIEW: Genesis Tramaine on Her New Artspace and NYFA Limited Edition Print, Black Woman University

By Artspace Editors

JULY 30, 2020

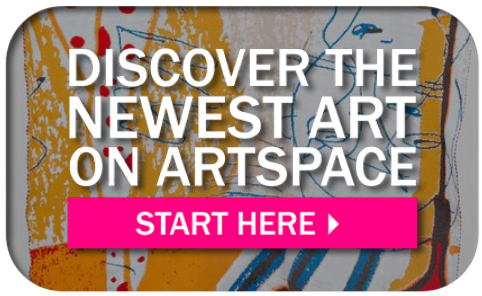
Genesis Tramaine photographed in her studio with Black Woman University by Lance Brewer July 2020

When Genesis Tramaine discovered drawing she discovered life. Raised in the projects and on the back benches of Brooklyn churches, she drew on anything - and everything - around her.

“I didn’t have much paper, so I would draw on magazines, on newspapers on Bibles," she says. "I was being trained to be who I am from a very young age. But my family didn’t necessarily call it art. It was just Genesis, drawing as usual.”

Encouragement for those early drawings of monsters and funny faces led her to art school, where Tramaine began creating abstract portraits of men and women who transcend gender, color, and social structures, while affirming her love for the Church.

Yet while she still draws on the Bible – albeit very differently these days - it’s her disagreements as well as her agreements with that book that feed into, and fire her work. She paints by fully surrendering herself. She may not always land at a finished painting but that moment of praise – essentially her act of



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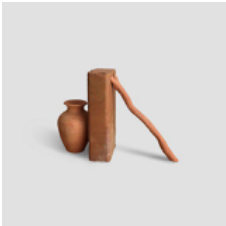
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painting - feeds and sustains her.

It's also seen her become one of the hottest emerging artists of the moment. A show of her work at Almine Rech in London, just before lockdown, saw all 12 paintings sell out.

Meanwhile, the vulnerability and intenstity of her artistic vision and its capacity to transfer from the canvas and directly connect with people - even if they don't have a direct connection with her form of spirituality - has provoked comparisons with Klimt, Basquiat and even Bacon. She describes that last comparison as, "a high honor. I love that dude's work. It's so beautiful, morbid, sharp."

Her Artspace edition, Black Woman University debuts at UNTITLED, ART online this week. An edition of 50 signed prints priced at $1,000, with proceeds from the sale supporting programming, fellowships and grants at the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA). You can buy it here.

We sat her down and asked this daughter, grand-daughter, sister, cousin, friend, auntie, black woman, Queer wife and spiritual being all about it.

GENESIS TRAMAINE - Black Woman University, 2020

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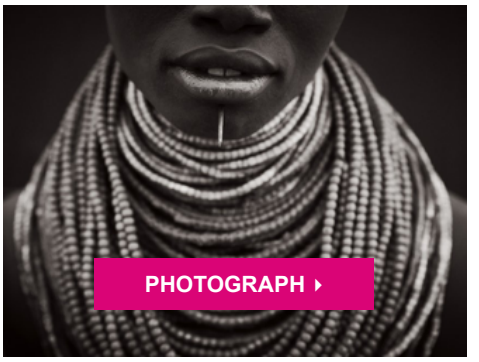

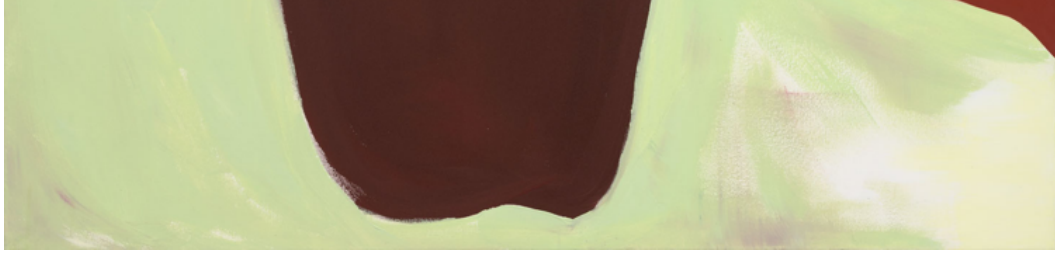

Genesis Tramaine - Black Woman University, 2020. Courtesy of the Richard Beavers Gallery.

Can you tell us a little about the title of the work? Black Woman University is very much the academic title that I've given the space around how I've been educated as a black woman. I keep hearing the term and title, 'self-taught' or that I haven't been formally trained as a painter; so it's my way of paying homage to the brilliance of a black woman. As to adding the university part to it: I am an academic at heart. I was raised in academia. I come from a family of women who were teachers, and I have never met a black woman who hasn't taught me something. Black Woman University that's where I'm from. That's what's ingrained in me. That's paying homage. So I think it is a very important to honor that.

When does the work date from? I painted that work when I had just got back from my Parables of Nana show in London (at Almine Rech, in March) and I was very excited. It was one of the pieces I painted during a very tough time for our world - that first week of lockdown. It was so quick but there was so much grace involved. I don't really have any complaints about that time but the painting of course helped me. So I'm very grateful for that piece. You never know when you're in prayer, where it's going to go. I'm grateful for being the vessel.

How do you get into the zone to paint? I can't wait for a specific call. Sometimes it feels like hunger. Sometimes I can't get a certain gospel song out of my head, sometimes I'm talking to my wife and something springs up in my spirit. I don't go with any sense of thought to the canvas, it's very much a surrender, and I'm very grateful when a painting is produced from that space (and I'm grateful when a painting is not produced). I'm not quite sure where the angels will take me but I know I'm safe. I'm not present for most of it. I'm grateful for that sense of mystery. I hope that that never goes away. It's an uplifting process.

Genesis Tramaine photographed in her studio by Lance Brewer July 2020

You've spoken about being visited by angels when you work on the canvas, can you elaborate? They're my friends, my people. I really don't have words for it. If you pray to God you kind of look weird. None of it is a physical existence, so once I accept that I don't care how crazy I look. . . I am a 'Jesus freak' I am 'mad about God' that's true. So the best expression I have for the visions is you might see a cloud, I see something else. If you're watching CNN, Tramaine might be seeing something else.

Your paintings feel like we could almost be swallowed by them, and this edition is bigger than most, why do you paint big? That's a good question. Two things. I'm a little lady. God created me small in stature but I'm mighty in spirit, so I have also learned to connect to myself. Spiritually I feel very large. Also the angels take up a lot of space – they're huge and they stand over me, so I paint on the floor on my hands and knees. Sometimes now I stand because the paintings are getting bigger now. God is calling for me to do more, and to stretch more.

I've asked that my territory be increased. That doesn't mean I get more sneakers, or drink more coffee – (I love coffee, I'm a real coffee head!) but that means I get to paint larger for the Lord. I get to exist in galleries and I get to connect with people like Artspace and Phaidon. I paint large because I feel large inside. I pray that God continues to increase my territory.

Genesis Tramaine - Detail from Black Woman University, 2020. Courtesy of the Richard Beavers Gallery.

You have never created an edition before. Why this one now? I was thinking about this a lot. Giving is something that is necessary; it's like drinking water. You can't claim to love Jesus if you don't give to other people. I realised that the access around my work is shifting. And I want to make sure that there is clear access not to just the work, - the visual - but to the title; to what I'm saying, who I am as a black woman painter. I want to be sure that I am accessible.

But this is a painting that I will never sell. It's in my private collection. I know that this is an important piece to my career, to who I am; to Genesis Tramaine in this lifetime. But I don't necessarily know why yet. I don't know why this is important to the legacy of my family but I trust that it is, so I have to hold on to the work. I don't really ask too many questions when God gives direction. And the good Lord said hold it. But then I got a call from Phaidon! Oh, my goodness! So I'm grateful that this is how we get to do it. My prayers have directed me to hold on to the work but to make it accessible. So I'm really excited to try something new, and expand in this new way. It's such an important piece that I wanted to make sure that I created access to it.

The Artspace and Phaidon booth at UNTITLED, ART Online featuring the Genesis Tramaine edition

Can you remember the first time you drew painted or colored something in? Yes, when I was little girl I was always drawing – on everything. On my notebooks in school… I would get in trouble for it. The teachers would say I wasn't paying attention, and I would try to tell them that the drawing and sketching helped me to pay attention.

My grandmother and I would sit at the table and I would draw on magazines, on newspapers. I didn't have much paper. I was being trained to be who I am from a very young age. But we didn't necessarily call it art. It was just Genesis, drawing as usual. I even drew in the back of the Bibles in the church.

The first thing I drew that I thought was good was a portrait of a rap artist named Heavy D. I thought it was amazing. The shading was right, my contour was on the scale, it was good! I showed it to my mum and she said: it's OK. But you can do better. And it's the first time with art that I wanted to perfect it, It's the first time I connected to the fact that I wanted it to be better.

Genesis Tramaine - Detail from Black Woman University, 2020. Courtesy of the Richard Beavers Gallery.

I was always a good student. I always got the grades. I was often called the teacher's pet for sure, which meant I got to spend time with the teachers and show my skill. But I was always a bit of a rebel when it came to the art. I always took it seriously, so I always wanted to do something a little bit out of the assignment. My teachers always reminded me that I had something special, and that I was special, and that it was worth putting my attention and focus into. In middle school Miss Patton - God bless her - touched my shoulder one day and said: if you stay after school and give up your lunch breaks I can help you get into LaGuardia High School (of music and art) as an art student. And I thought, I can draw every day in school? Wow! I went and blew it out of the water; and that gave me the confidence to step outside of the box. It introduced me to the fine art world.

Was there a moment when you became aware of the fact that there was a wider art world? Not until I got into high school and that became part of my studies. I didn't grow up going to galleries or museums. I hated going to museums. I would go to museums to sketch, but I thought the work was whack. I thought it was boring. I never connected with any of the art that I saw, I could barely pronounce the names on the walls and there was always the section in the back that was called African art. It was OK, but I always left museums wanting more. I connected greatly as a child with gospel artists, with ministers, because they're so boisterous. Baptist ministers tend to own an entire room, it's like a theatrical performance in a church, that's what I grew up being magnified by. Those were the artists, that turned on my pencil, if you would.

Genesis Tramaine photographed in her studio by Lance Brewer July 2020

What would you like people to get from this edition, and your wider work? I hope that people look at my paintings and feel a greater connection to themselves spiritually. I hope that my paintings create access for anyone who has had any type of doubt as to what spirituality can do in your life. And in particular, I hope that I can help people become more comfortable with how much Jesus loves them.

I hope that we just accept the fact that God's love is past our understanding and that we may never be able to get to a place where we trace every color of the rainbow, so we may as well use the ones we have access to create spaces of excellence. If I can be a part of creating something that's beautiful, that uplifts someone – wow! That's magic. I hope that my work disrupts the art world that it makes people question, and I hope that it pushes the envelope on what is a good show, what is a good piece of art. I hope I continue to be asked questions about my relationship with Christ, and that I continue to grow as an artist and a black woman. I'm still at the university!

To purchase the Genesis Tramaine edition go here. To register to attend UNTITLED, ART Online go here.

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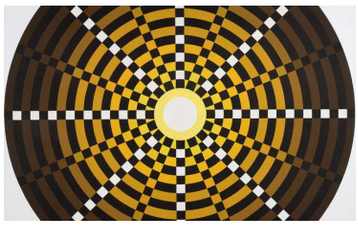

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