

SMMUSD begins limited in-person services, pushes back decision for broader re-opening

1 day ago

Quite possibly one of the most beautiful and daring art exhibitions of the year is on view at William Turner Gallery at Bergamot Art Station in Santa Monica through November 28th. Artist Mark Steven Greenfield's "Black Madonna" series of 17 paintings is powerful, profound and subtle, but above all else, gloriously gorgeous—and provocative.

As if you were entering a quiet cathedral, the spotlight gallery displays dramatic images of deeply black-skinned Madonnas and Sons, encircled and haloed, contrasting brilliantly against canvases covered in gold leaf, while other images barely beyond your perception arise in the background and later come into focus.

Mark Steven Greenfield is an L.A. native with an impressively wide-ranging background in art education, artmaking and art administration. He's an award-winning artist whose works have been exhibited in galleries and museums, locally, nationally and internationally.

His father was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the African-American pilots and bombers who served in World War II, and Mark lived on military bases from Taiwan to Germany before returning to L.A. at age 10.

Raised a Catholic, religious iconography comes naturally to him, but in this series, he also brings his meditation practice into play, examining the nature of victimhood and revenge, and the transformative power of love to inspire

empathy. He's not just an artist, he's an emotional alchemist.

BLACK MADONNA MYSTERY

There's still no definitive answer to why Black Madonnas began appearing in churches in the 13th and 14th centuries, but they were painted in the Byzantine style, which incorporates theology into two-dimensional imagery. Debate still rages about whether they were actually painted black or became darkened over centuries of candles burning beneath them. Others believe they were painted to extend the church's reach into Africa.

While in Germany especially, Mark would have seen these images, he's taken that Byzantine style and re-interpreted it to confront contemporary issues facing Black people, with a paradoxical twist. The Black Madonna and Child represent pure love; while in the background we see, in Mark's words, revenge fantasies of white supremacists cast in the role of victims, experiencing the kinds of atrocities that have been committed against Blacks over the ages.

PARADOXICAL KARMA

At the opening we spoke briefly and he explained: "I was raised Catholic so I will always have a certain veneration for these images of Madonna and Child. And in this instance, I've paired it with my meditative practice, which is based in the Science of Creative Intelligence. Those (circular disks) that you see going through the middle of (the images) are characterizations of my mantra.

"In the course of meditation, thoughts come into your head, and you're supposed to entertain them and let them go. I was always captivated by the idea of Madonna and Child as a symbol of universal love so those would come into the meditation. But there's a dark side that enters, too."

The revenge fantasy arises in response to centuries of injustice and manifests

in his images of white supremacists being electrocuted, exploded, Nazis being punched by a superhero Black man, white-robed men being lynched or burned on a cross or at the stake, and confederate monuments being torn down, to name a few.

"That's the darkest place they can go, this revenge. But when they're paired with symbol of universal love, it buffers them considerably and it makes you look at it in an entirely different way. At least that is my intention."

NOT JUST REVENGE

Not all the paintings feature revenge fantasies. Several honor lesser-known historical Black figures like Toussaint L'Overture, leader of one of the only successful slave revolutions in history, in Haiti. He's dressed in deep blue military garb, highly decorated with ribbons, medals and golden epaulets, set in a raspberry colored circle against the gold leaf canvas.

Escrava Anastasia, a beauty with blue eyes, was either African royalty or born in Brazil, where as a strong-willed slave she was punished with a muzzle-like facemask and a slave collar that eventually killed her. She's depicted in a frothy pink gown with muzzle and collar. It's striking and painful to look at.

Also pictured smoking a pipe is Saartjie Baartman, aka Sarah Bartman, Black Venus and the Hottentot Princess, who belonged to a tribe exploited by freak shows due to their large buttocks. Humiliated onstage, later sold to an animal trainer, she was sought after by a professor of anatomy as the missing link between humans and animals. After death she was dissected and a plaster cast of her body was put on display in the Museum of Man in Paris. In 2002, her remains were returned to South Africa where she was buried on their National Women's Day.

MEDITATIONS

There is another section dedicated to more meditational abstract paintings, a few featuring his mantra disks largely expanded. One of these paintings depicts the true story of the slave ship Zong, which threw 130 slaves overboard because there was not enough food to sustain them. A court case later determined that in some cases, killing slaves was legal.

Mark Steven Greenfield's Black Madonna is both beautiful and tragic, thought provoking and redemptive, and focuses our attention on the Black experience, in our time and the past, with injustice as the thread that binds it all. If there's a message, says Mark, "Put simply it's: How would you feel if you found yourself in someone else's shoes?"

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