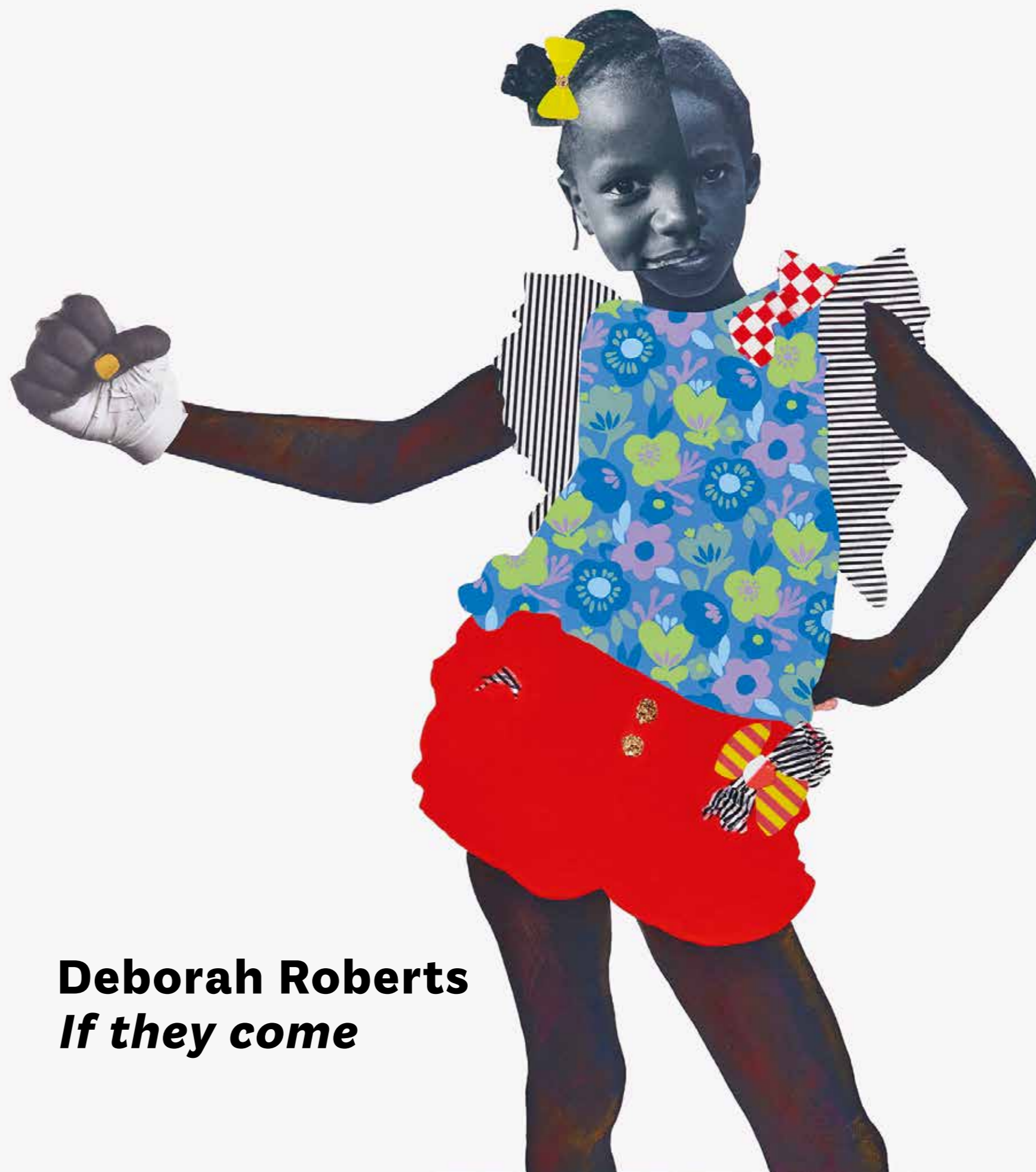




Stephen Friedman Gallery

Deborah Roberts *If they come*

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If they come

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Daniella Rose King

In November 1970, as Angela Davis was incarcerated while awaiting trial for politically motivated charges, James Baldwin published an open letter addressed to her. Its final sentence read: “For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.”¹ This has been abbreviated by artist Deborah Roberts to *If they come* for the title of her exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, which runs from 7 June until 20 July 2019. In Roberts’s first solo presentation in Europe, she highlights affinities between herself and Baldwin, who penned the letter upon his own return from a European tour to the US, as well as socio-political parallels between 1970 and 2019. Baldwin’s letter was written at a time of societal upheaval, on both sides of the Atlantic, as anti-war, feminist, black power and international Pan-African solidarity movements took the world stage, and nascent culture wars backlashed against the civil rights movements of the previous decades. Almost fifty years later, the world is again facing increased turbulence and uncertainty; it seems that our historical continuum has reached a peak where Baldwin’s words and Davis’s persecution are again all too prescient and pertinent.

Born in Austin, Texas, in 1962, where she is still based, Deborah Roberts works across media, primarily painting and collage, to deconstruct mainstream, insidious and tightly held images of beauty, black femininity and childhood. Creating her subjects as composites of found images, imagined patterns, constructed postures and poetic titles, Roberts portrays a direct refutation and complication of the depictions of black bodies that have been circulating within the media since the dawn of the photographic era. Her project is one that simultaneously highlights, disavows and recreates the hierarchies, standards and narratives created and disseminated by institutions that have served the interests and sustainment of white supremacy. Throughout the new works shown in *If they come*, Roberts constructs new archetypes – images of fictional black boys and girls of ages

9 to 12 – who take on poses of strength and power at the same time as showing vulnerability and ambiguity. Challenging the criminalisation of black children, particularly boys, that is rampant globally, but nowhere more so than in the US, Roberts has her subjects stare defiantly at the viewer, elevated on metaphorical pedestals, clad in the regalia of pop culture’s superheroes. Her visual counterpoints seek to subvert and challenge our dominant visual cultures. Yet, her subjects inhabit multiplicity and hybridity as various other subjects constitute them – including the faces of adults, and of individuals from different ethnicities – to suggest the constant, unfixed process of subject formation, particularly at this pivotal time in a person’s development from child to adult.

If they come explores Baldwin’s message of solidarity and togetherness in the face of division, nationalism and tribalism. Itself riffing off Pastor Martin Niemöller’s poem ‘First they came...’ it speaks to the contingency and interconnectedness of persecution. What does the representation of childhood throughout popular culture, advertising, world events and the media have to do with the re-emergent nationalism, tribalism and white supremacy that is fuelling the breakdown of society and rise of xenophobia, racism, and structural inequality in not only the United States and United Kingdom, but globally? Elsewhere in his letter Baldwin writes, “When I was little I despised myself, I did not know any better.”² This heartbreaking sentiment gets at the core of Roberts’s project, and what is really at stake in terms of representation, the public imagination and the aesthetics of speculative worldbuilding.

This exhibition consists of a number of works in which the artist creates an incredibly flat surface and plane, of paint and collage in equal measure, that serves to propel the image into space. In *Red, White and Blue* (2018), colours shared by the flags of both the US and UK, two black girls stand back to back, sharing a pair of boxing

gloves, with fists raised in a defensive, yet playful stance. One is wearing a hijab and looks out of the frame, the other stares out directly, engaging the viewer and pulling them into the work, or perhaps making them feel like a voyeur caught peering at and complicit in the scene. This image alone provides an almost mundane vision of blackness; that is, of black Muslim subjectivity, a representation that is rarely offered in mainstream media without the attachment of Islamophobic tropes.

Either by the hawk or by the dove (2018) shows a tiny girl midstride with one fist casually raised, a universal symbol of solidarity and resistance, and with strong allusions to the black power movement. In *Man[ly]* (2019) a young boy stands facing the viewer with his fists clenched and raised up to his ears. Appearing to mimic a ‘manly’ gesture, his small size, questioning stare and closed legs belie his intentions. It is a poignant and sweet image that may be indicative of innocent play and role play, or a more nefarious portal into the toxic masculinity that society continues to uphold and reward. Roberts displays her subjects in a variety of poses that occupy the spectrum of power and vulnerability, reminding us of the potentiality of childhood, and arguing for the suspension of judgement of her fictional black subjects. She recasts little girls as powerful figures, who hold onto each other to save themselves from caving under the weight of standards of white beauty and femininity. These children do not exist outside the mainstream, but find ways to inhabit, occupy and see themselves in the icons our popular culture creates, including super heroes and Disney princesses.

A bow-legged girl stands facing the viewer in *I am the seed and the bloom* (2018), her two white, adult-sized hands clutching clumsily and carelessly at a number of sunflowers. Her stare is solemn and resolute, hand to head,

with her posture and stance speaking to the possibility of the title. *Sewed together* (2018) shows a very young girl standing sideways, with arms constricted by her shirt. Have her arms been tied down as a childhood prank, or a more sinister punishment? Or maybe she is playfully hiding them? Like in many works in the series, this figure depicts a sense of corporeal and psychological alienation – capturing the rapid changes and resulting detachment caused by the onset of puberty, and the criminalisation, pathologisation and policing of blackness that begins in childhood and progresses with age – visually exacerbated by the fragmenting, cut-and-paste process of the collage’s construction.

Working with found materials – whether images of faces she culls from online searches or the names of black girls sourced from her friends and family – and with a foundation in painting, Roberts explores the slippages between text and image, as well as topics of family, beauty and global understandings of blackness and belonging. As such, her work is in dialogue with a range of divergent artists, including Kurt Schwitters, Kerry James Marshall, Hannah Höch, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Carrie Mae Weems, Romare Bearden and Glenn Ligon, to name just a few constellations. The political potential of collage is utilised in the manner of Höch, Schwitters and Bearden, who each deployed it to address notions of cultural identity, propaganda, politics, exile and difference. Collage was not only accessible as a medium, but it also made use of culturally loaded source material that already carried meaning and transmitted information, and therefore offered a way to subvert many of the socio-political and aesthetic rigours and rules of the contemporary moment. Much like the upheaval that spurred collage as an artistic movement at the end of World War I, today we see a renewed necessity for a visual language to describe and deconstruct the inequities and violence of our era.

In 1994 the Jamaican-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall wrote about cultural identity as “constituted, not outside but within representation”³ under “constant transformation”⁴ through external forces of history, power and culture. Identity was not a fixed position, but a multiplicity of differences. Through her collages that deconstruct, fracture and assemble, Roberts suggests a visual paradigm to Hall’s theory. Her subjects are constituted within the systems of representation, but remain engaged in a process of endless transformation. Similarly, they are specific as well as universal, as Roberts herself remarks, “one of the gifts of the work – to see people differently, and not just as one being. Blackness is global.”

1 James Baldwin, ‘An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis’ in *The New York Review of Books*, 7 January 1971.

2 Ibid.

3 Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’ in *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: a reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 236.

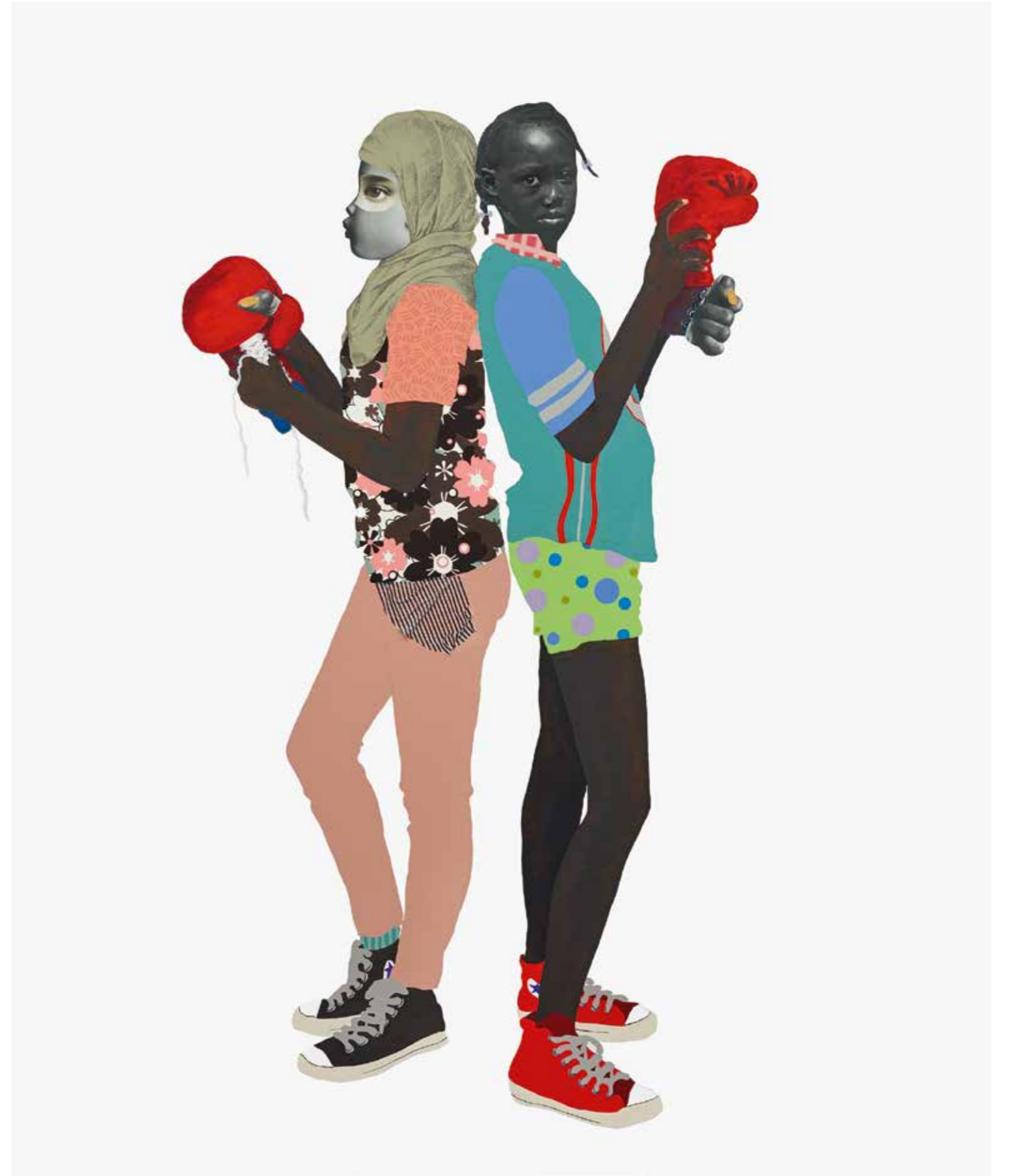
3 Ibid., p. 225.

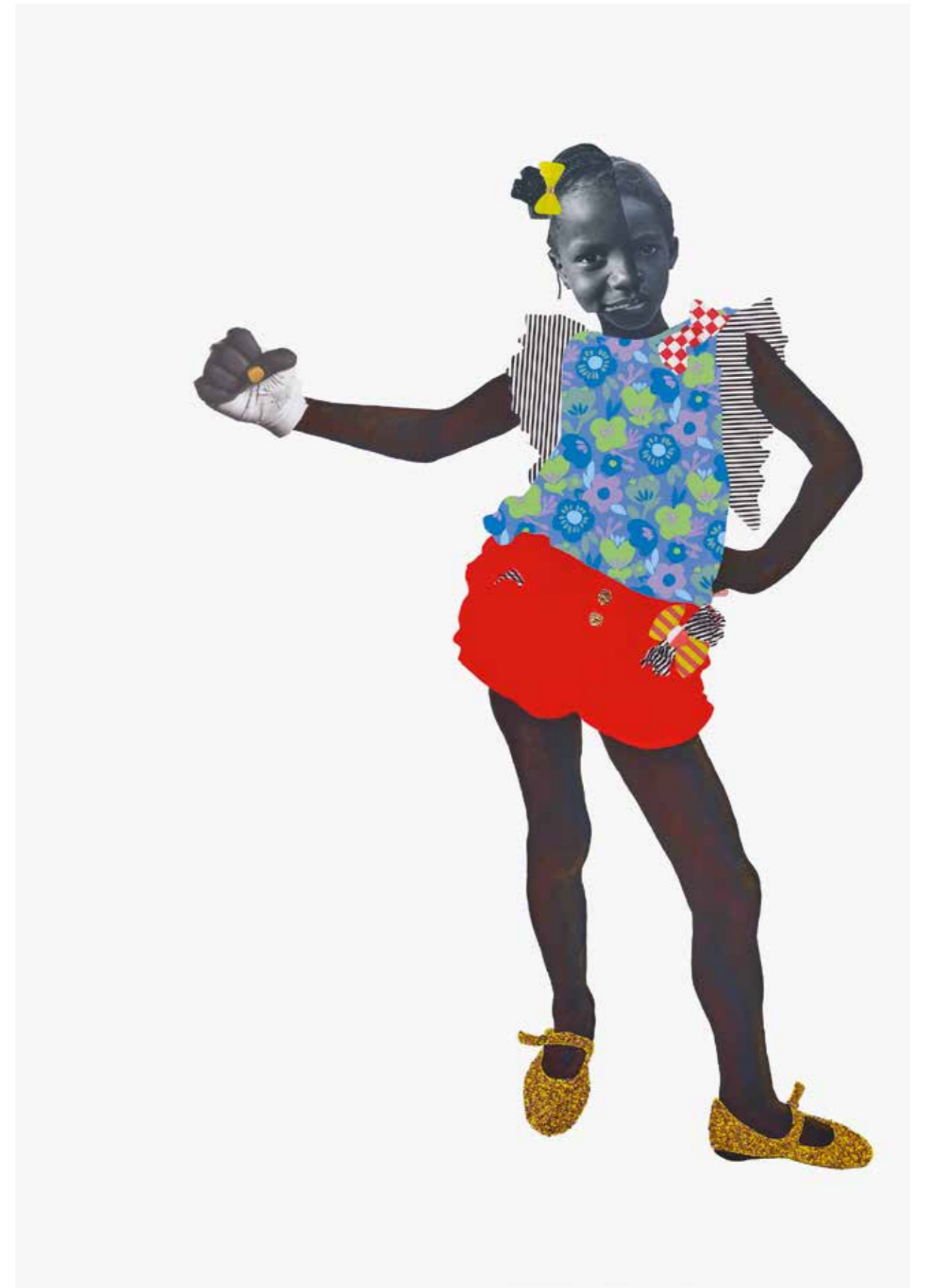
Daniella Rose King is a curator and writer based in Philadelphia.

She is the Whitney-Lauder Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

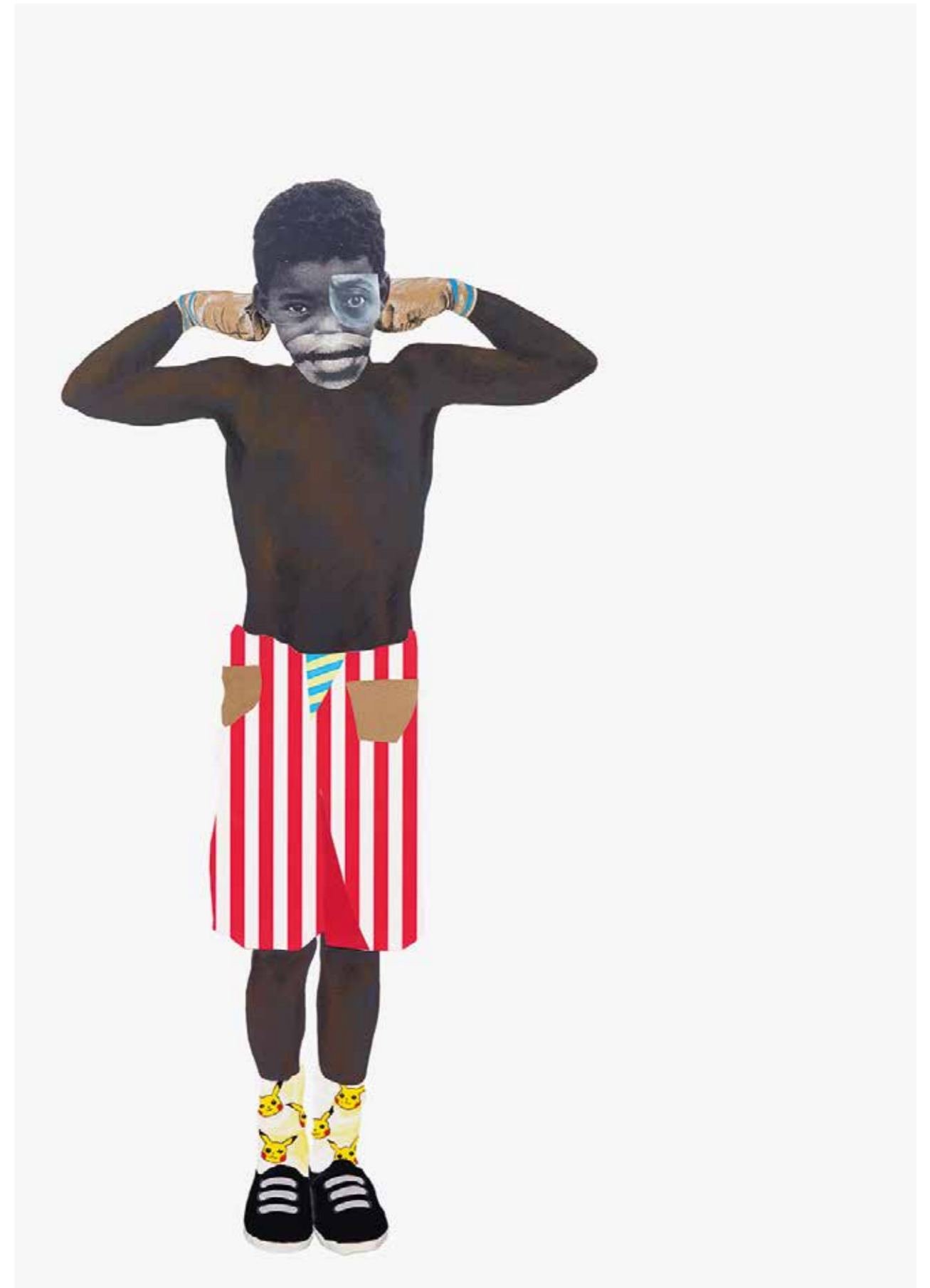




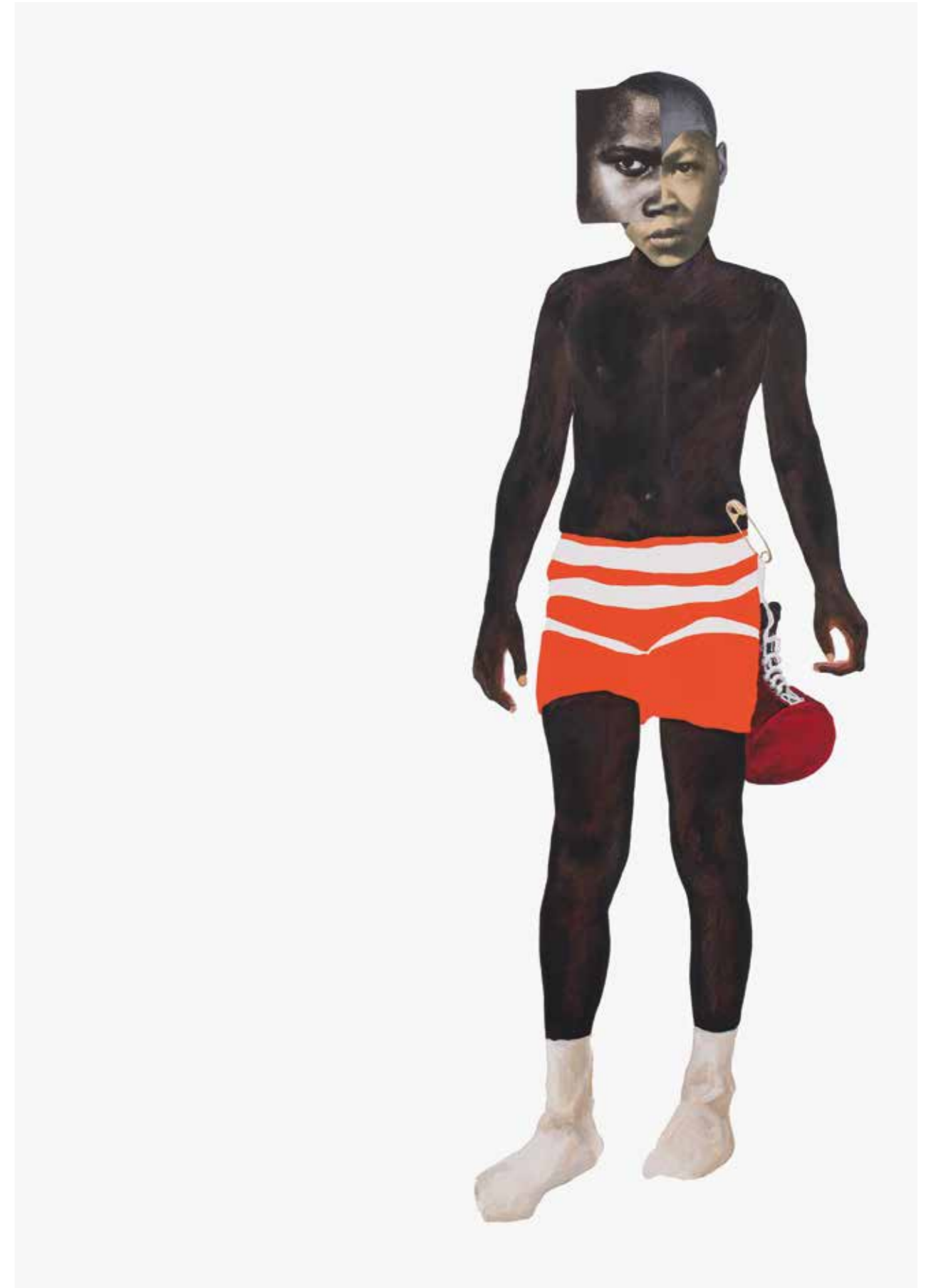




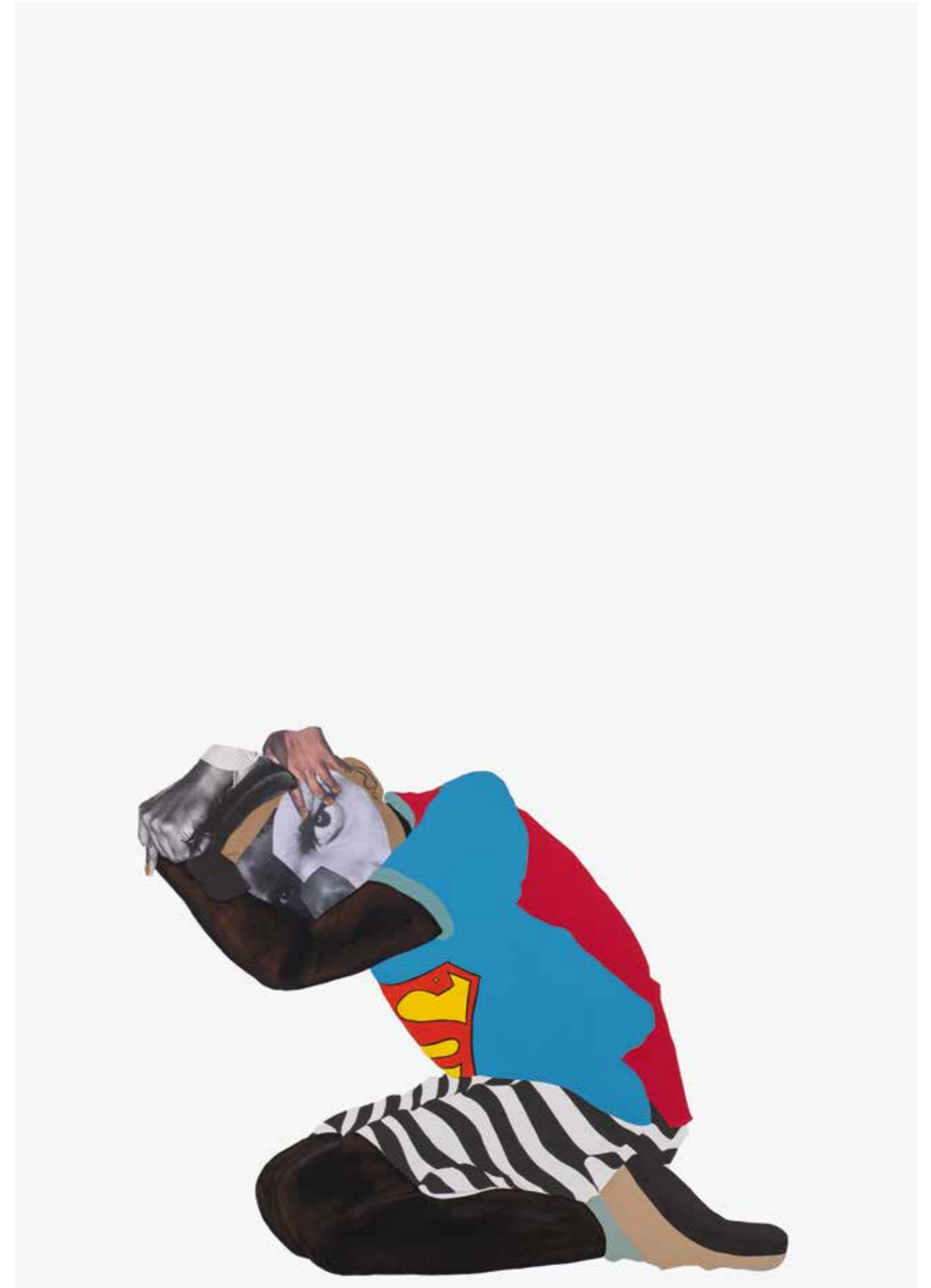


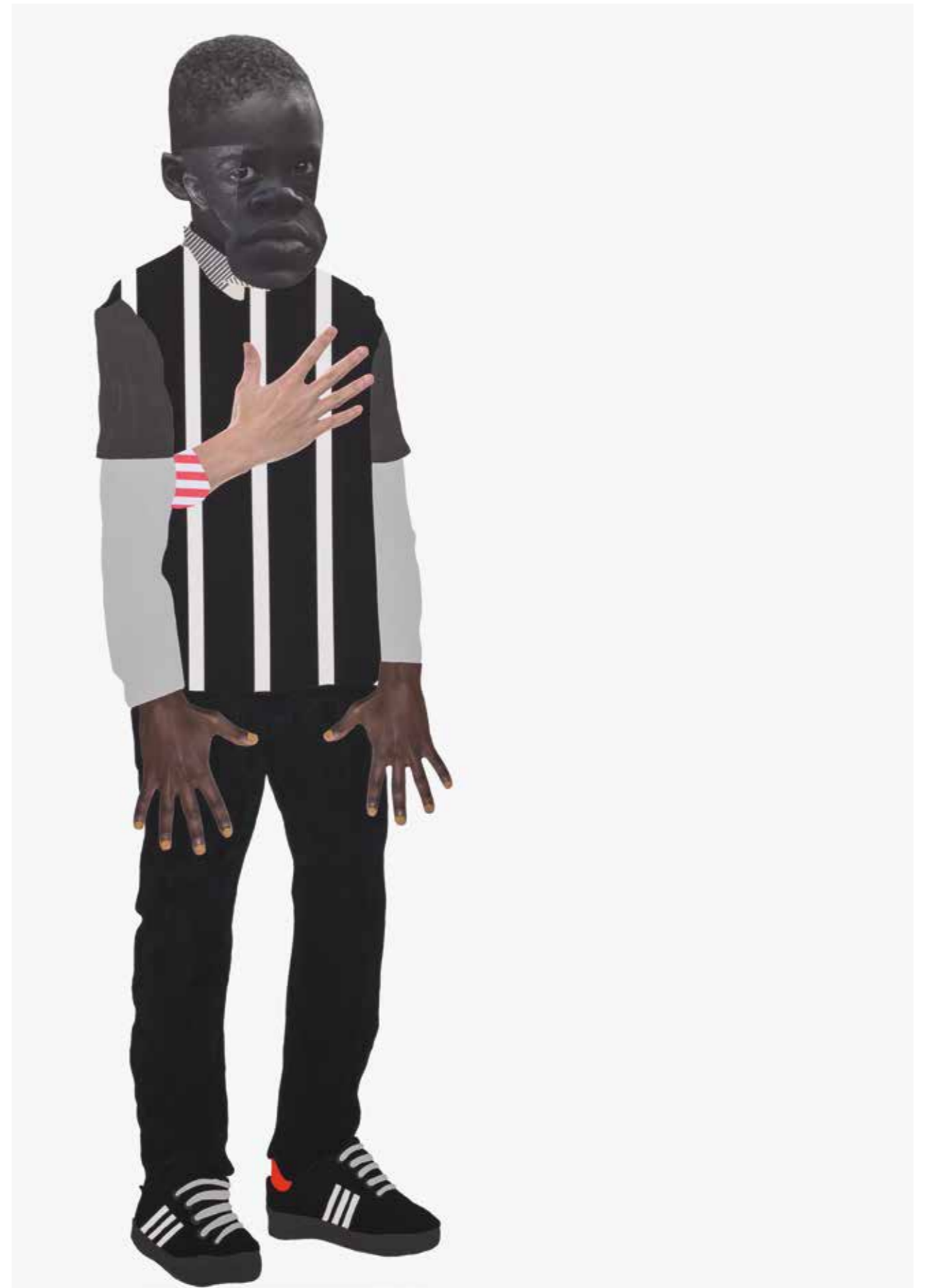
















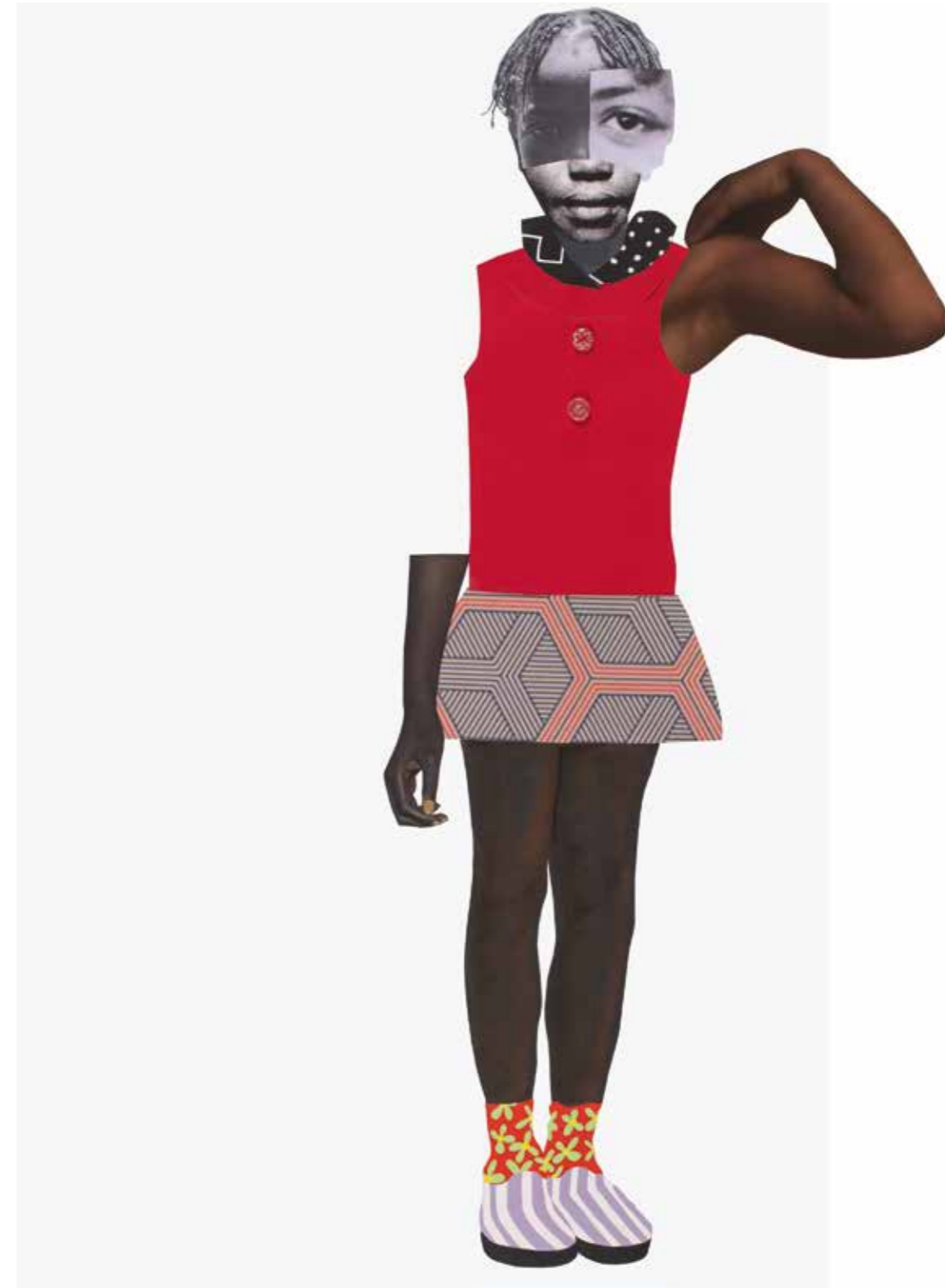
32 *Don't let go (RR)*, 2019, mixed media and collage on panel, 114.3 × 89 cm (45 × 35 in)



The hands of time (RR), 2019, mixed media and collage on panel, 114.3 × 89 cm (45 × 35 in)



34 *The inbetween*, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



At any cost, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



36 *Give it a try (RR)*, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



After Stephen, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



After the thunder (RR), 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



40 *From the beginning*, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



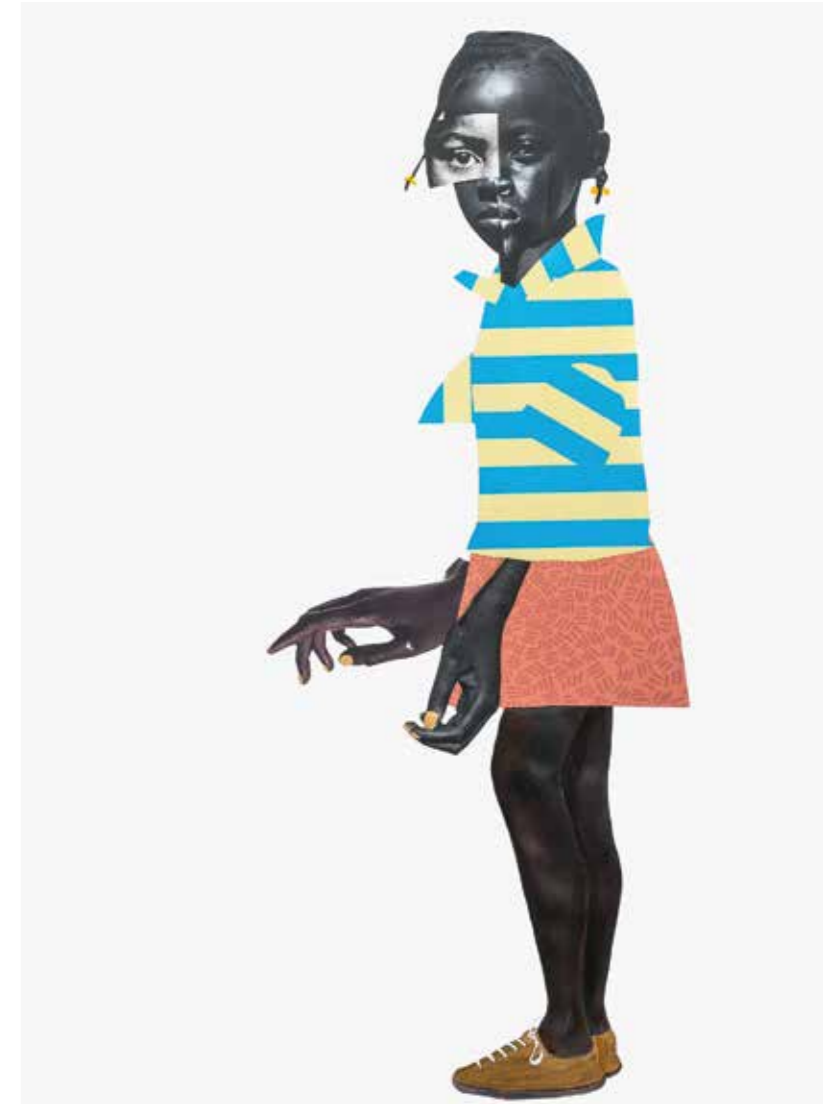
We wear the masks, 2019, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)

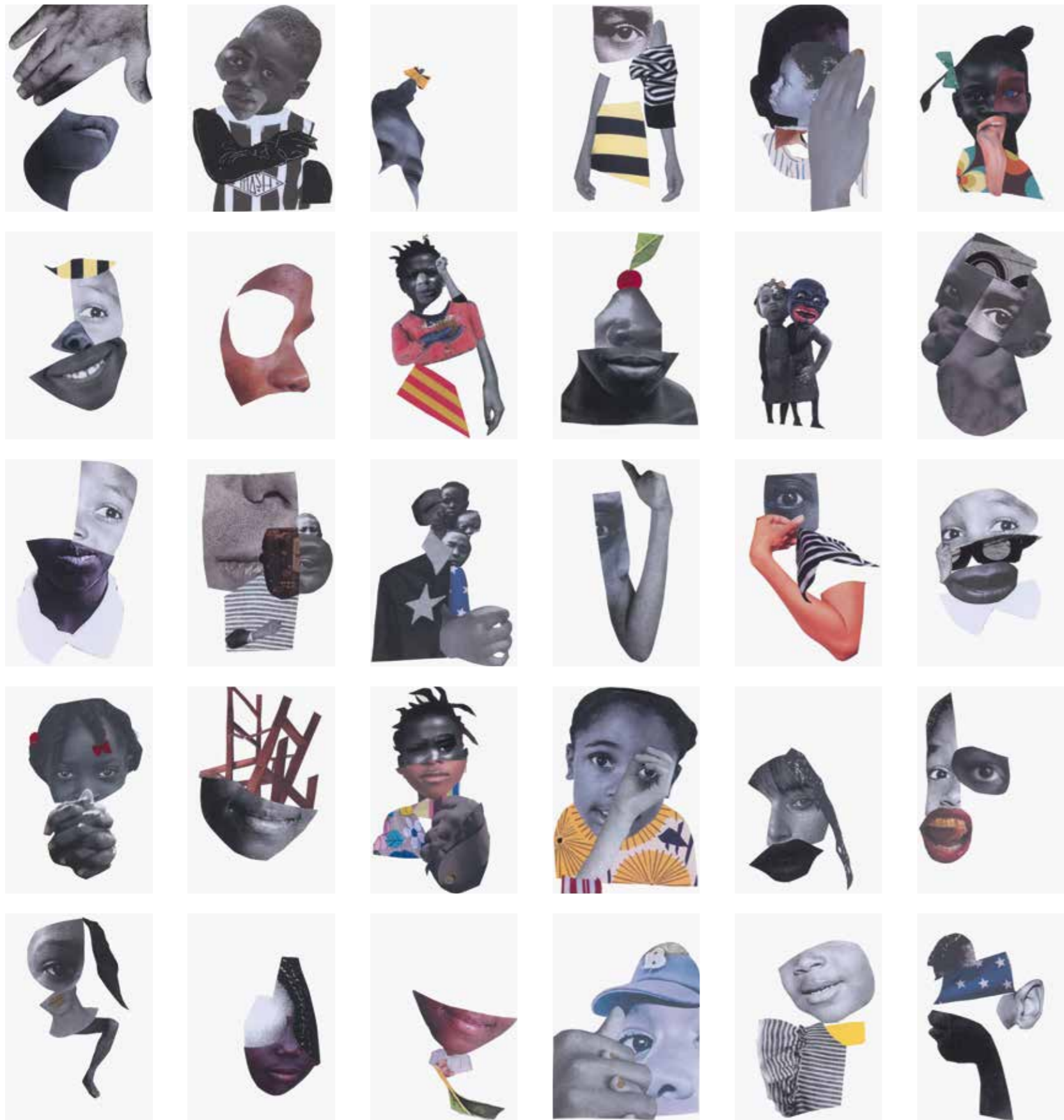


42 *You can't pimp a butterfly*, 2018, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)



Not the face, 2018, mixed media and collage on paper, 111.8 x 81.3 cm (44 x 32 in)





Catalogue list



When you see me, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 304.8 cm (65 × 120 in)



Armor, 2018
Mixed media and collage on canvas
183 × 152.4 cm (72 × 60 in)



Red, White and Blue, 2018
Mixed media and collage on canvas
183 × 152.4 cm (72 × 60 in)



Hip bone, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (64 × 45 in)



The inbetween, 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



At any cost, 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



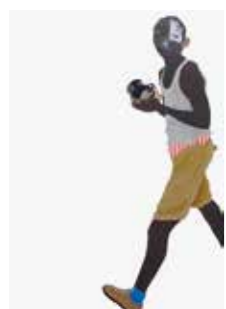
Give it a try (RR), 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



After Stephen, 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



After the thunder (RR), 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



Mixed hues, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



Man[ly], 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



The burden, 2019
Mixed media and collage on linen
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



I am not a man, I'm dynamite, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



King me, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



From the beginning, 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



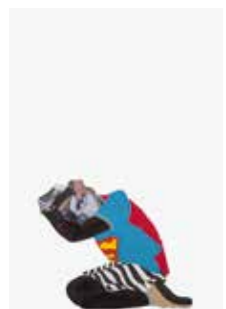
We wear the masks, 2019
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



You can't pimp a butterfly, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



Not the face, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



The soil, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



Ulysses, 2019
Mixed media and collage on linen
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



Rebels, 2019
Mixed media and collage on canvas
165 × 114.3 cm (65 × 45 in)



Don't let go (RR), 2019
Mixed media and collage on panel
114.3 × 89 cm (45 × 35 in)



The hands of time (RR), 2019
Mixed media and collage on panel
114.3 × 89 cm (45 × 35 in)



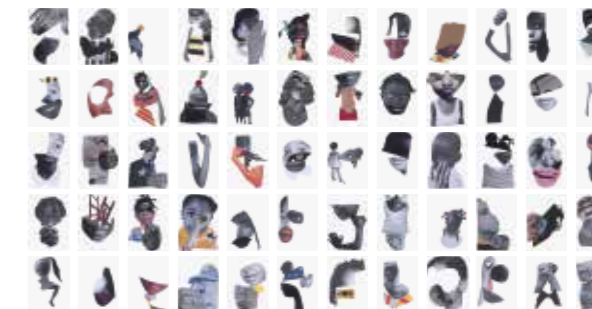
Either by the hawk or by the dove; I am the seed and the bloom; Sewed together, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
Triptych, each 111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



Either by the hawk or by the dove; I am the seed and the bloom; Sewed together, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
Triptych, each 111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



Either by the hawk or by the dove; I am the seed and the bloom; Sewed together, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
Triptych, each 111.8 × 81.3 cm (44 × 32 in)



Future Tense, 2018
Mixed media and collage on paper
60 parts, each 19.7 × 14 cm (7¾ × 5½ in)

Deborah Roberts

Born in Austin, Texas, 1962
Lives and works in Austin, Texas

Education

MFA, Syracuse University Research Fellow,
Syracuse, New York, USA

San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco,
California, USA

Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art,
(Summer Session) Pont Aven, France

University of North Texas, Denton,
Texas, USA

Awards and Prizes

2018
Anonymous Was a Woman, New York,
USA

2017
Artist of the Year, Austin, Texas, USA

2016
Grantee, Pollock Krasner Foundation

2014
'Best in Show', SU MFA Exhibition

2011–2014
Creative Opportunity Grant, Syracuse
University, New York, USA

2010
San Francisco African American
Legacy Scholarship

2008
Artist of the Year, Austin, Texas, USA

1991
President Point of Light Recipient,
President George H. Bush

Solo Exhibitions

2019
If they come, Stephen Friedman Gallery,
London, UK
Native Sons: Many Thousands Gone,
Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects,
Los Angeles, USA

2018
Fragile but Fixable, Luis De Jesus Los
Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA
Uninterrupted, Jenkins Johnson Gallery,
San Francisco, California, USA
Deborah Roberts: The Evolution of Mimi,
Spelman College Museum of Fine Art,
Atlanta, Georgia, USA

2017
Ingenue, Fort Gansevoort, New York,
New York, USA
*Nobody's Darling: New Works by
Deborah Roberts*, Christian-Green Gallery,
Austin, Texas, USA

2016
Coil, Coarse, Twist, Re-twist, Art Palace,
Houston, Texas, USA

2014

One and Many, Art Palace, Houston, Texas, USA
Domestic Disturbance, Diverse Art Gallery, Austin, Texas, USA
Consensual Marks, SDCC, Dallas, Texas, USA

2013

When We Just Existed, Community Folk Art Center, Syracuse, New York, USA

2011

Resistance Begins at Home: Rethinking Otherness, Dallas, Texas, USA

2008

Forks and Spoons, South Dallas Culture Center, Dallas, Texas, USA

2006

Bearing Witness, Stone Metal Press, San Antonio, Texas, USA
Reconstructing, Rethinking, Reacting, O’Kane Gallery, Houston, Texas, USA

2004

Chicago Culture Center (South Shore), Chicago, Illinois, USA
 Center for African & African American Studies, Austin, Texas, USA

Group Exhibitions**2019**

Cut and Paste: 400 Years of Collage, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Get Up, Stand Up Now – Generations of Black Creative Pioneers, Somerset House, London, UK

Plumb Line: Charles White and the Contemporary, Californian African American Museum (CAAM), Los Angeles, USA
Still I Rise, MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, USA

2018

Talisman In The Age Of Difference, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, UK
In the Eye of the Beholder, Tarble Arts Center, Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, South Carolina, USA
Go Figure, Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, Ohio, USA
Soul Recordings, Luis De Jesus Los Angeles, Los Angeles, California, USA
Legacy of the Cool: A Tribute to Barkley L. Hendricks, Mass Art, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
Constructing Identity in America (1766–2017), Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey, USA

2017

Fictions, The Studio Museum of Harlem, New York, New York, USA
Your Body is Your Battleground, Volta Art Fair, New York, New York, USA
March Madness, Fort Gansevoort, New York, New York, USA

2016

I know why the caged bird sings, Carver Museum, Austin, Texas, USA

2015

Gently Fried, MACC, Austin, Texas, USA
The House on Mango Street, National Mexican American Museum, Chicago, Illinois, USA

2014

The Way Out – MFA, Rogue Space, New York, New York, USA

2013

Gender Is A Kind of Doing, MCCLA Gallery, San Francisco, California, USA

2011

The Drawing Center, Viewing Program, New York, USA
Miráme: 21st century portraits for Latino/a America, La Raza Galería Posada, Sacramento, California, USA

2009

Women of Color, Joyce Gordon Gallery, Oakland, California, USA
Her Stories, Park School, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

2007

Taking Possession, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Arkansas, USA
Counter Intuitive, Chicago State University, Chicago, Illinois, USA

2006

Uncle Tom to Peeping Tom, University of Milwaukee UGA, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA
Boundless, Perceptions from Within, DAC, Austin, Texas, USA

2005

Juried Exhibition, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, Illinois, USA
 Juried Exhibition, Woman Made Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, USA
Subjective Visions, UTSA, San Antonio, Texas, USA
Figure It Out, Art Palace, Austin, Texas, USA

2004

Susan Woodson Gallery, Chicago, Illinois, USA
Unmasked: A Collective Statement on Beauty, Buttrick Gallery, Austin, Texas, USA

2003

Bird, Juried Exhibition, Concordia University, Austin, Texas, USA
Our Heritage—Creating New Legacies, Juried Exhibition, Buttrick Gallery, Austin, Texas, USA
 Juried Exhibition, Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, Austin, Texas, USA

2002

Center for African American Studies, University of Texas, Austin, Texas, USA

Publications

Deborah Roberts: The Evolution of Mimi, edited by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, PhD, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
If they come, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, UK

Residencies

2019
 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Florida, USA

2018

The Fountainhead, Florida, USA

Public Collections

Block Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois, USA
 Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas, USA
 Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York, USA
 LACMA, Los Angeles, California, USA
 Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey, USA
 Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, Florida, USA
 Pizzuti Collection, Columbus, Ohio, USA
 The Studio Museum in Harlem, Harlem, New York, USA
 The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, Saratoga Springs, New York, USA
 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia, USA
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York, USA
 21c Museum Hotels, Louisville, Kentucky, USA

Deborah Roberts would like to
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everyone at Stephen Friedman Gallery,
and her friends and family.

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