



Lina Iris Viktor

Dark Mark Has Substance

It cannot be reiterated often enough—there is not one singular way to look at a piece of art. Typically, I've found that if an artist's intention is to lock you inside a box of their thinking, they'll tell you that directly. The obvious is not only noticeable. It is apparent not solely in the ethos, but in the substance. And if you are standing before a Lina Iris Viktor piece, there is one substance that her work forces you to understand.

And I don't mean the definition of "force" that coerces a viewer into believing in a substance against their will. It is beyond constraint. It is beyond pressure. And while you can, and you should, take away a galaxy of truths from Viktor's work, the one that is the most evident is the power she breathes into Blackness. Upon looking at her work, you should understand that Blackness is not monolithic.

It is said that before a God created the Earth, there was only darkness. Before the Big Bang, tiny particles the size of mere millimeters sat densely together amongst this same vastness. Whatever account of human ideation you believe, and even the ones you don't, start here: Before the you. Before the me. There was Black.

When Viktor talks about her work, she often acknowledges her pointed decision to make Blackness her focus. Stealing particles from the universe, Blackness becomes her nucleus.

The world that we walk through never seems to respect the stamina of Blackness, though. Instead, we live in a galaxy, on a planet, where its beings devise languages that prescribe meanings that could not be more disparate from what it actually is. What is the essence of our existence without the eternal transformation of Blackness? What is the substance of our history without its infinite expansion?

When I look at Viktor's work, it is hard for me to decide what to do next. I debate between throwing my hands up in the air and dancing wildly, or



falling to my knees and humming quietly. Part of this experience is primal. It is vibrations of energy flowing to me, and I must excise them through movement. It is a heartbeat in which I share its rhythm, and that of my ancestors in the lifetimes when all the joy they knew was in dance. Part of this experience is divine. It is a warm wind washing over my skin. It is a song that I know from long ago, meant to soothe and comfort. It is understood that I must sing it with reverence. And yet this duality remains far from a contradiction.

I am writing this two months after George Floyd was lynched in Minneapolis. And it is hard to not compare all experiences and art forms to the attention that has been cast on Blackness right now—especially its gravity in comparison to that which is whiteness. This feels silly to note to you, reader, because as a Black woman, my lifetime, and those of my ancestors for hundreds of years, have been set around this paradox. When do I ever not have an experience in which Blackness and whiteness aren't the centerpiece? When am I allowed to not think of their interrelation?

Isn't it interesting that a word aligned with "clarity" and "light" has blinded us? A word meant to define

"purity" and "transparency" is the impetus for the muddy waters through which we trudge.

I do wish that one day, Viktor would install her work on the ceiling so that I may lay down and look in the same way I marvel at the night sky. Through her symbols and patterns, you are able to perceive the future and past at the exact same time, with the freedom to visit the constellations that flow through her mind, forcing you to question the nature of science. Of course, I don't propose that you question the validity of science. But I so wonder, when the universe shifted to allow the powerful properties that are attributed to Blackness elsewhere in the cosmos, to be transferred to that which is white—isn't it the *Black* hole that tears stars apart as they pull inward?

Maybe that's the magic of Viktor's time traveling works. Somehow, Blackness still breathes life. And I admit, I cannot tell you the difference between that which is the center of the universe and that which is the composition of a Black woman.
—Shaquille Heath

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Above: *Constellations VIII SE*, Pure 24K Gold, acrylic and resin on cotton rag paper, 2019



Above: *XLV—A Black World. Black & Sacrosanct*, from *The Dark Continent* series, Pure 24 Karat Gold, acrylic, copolymer resin, print on cotton rag paper, 2019