

# ARTFORUM

MARCH 2022

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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Created in memory of Saar's mother, *Wings of Morning*, 1987–92, is made of branches and a strip of candy-colored neon tubing, an element that evokes the lights of a '70s jukebox. Visitors are encouraged to leave behind an offering, and one encountered a range of gifts here, including dollar bills, doodles, and other bits of ephemera, such as a pin that reads INTELLIGENT MISCHIEF. This is no participatory gimmick, of course—the installation is a viscerally moving space for remembrance, an homage to the artist's kin and the spiritual realm as intrinsic to the material world. According to Saar, such works “[reveal] the many layers of reality and [involve] the viewer beyond the physical domain.”

*Oasis*, 1984, the earliest work on view, features bulbous blown-glass orbs that look like giant marbles: pieces for a game of chance that are strewn across a sandy stage set. The installation features a sleek glowing neon graphic, one of several in the show. The sign decorates the wall behind a pink child's chair placed on this large-scale diorama. Crowned in tiny birthday candles and dusted with dried blossoms, the chair emphasizes absence while rendering the beachy setting a narrative non-site. This memorial to childhood asks us to question whether what we're looking at is a mirage, a place of escape, a spiritual sanctuary, or all of the above.

Saar's *Brides of Bondage*, 1998, the show's centerpiece, explicitly references the horrors of the Middle Passage. It is made up of a suspended ivory wedding gown with a long train trailed by model ships bound by twine; each vessel sits atop a Brookes slave-ship diagram. The schematic documents feature illustrations of anonymous bodies being transported against their will. As emphasized by the sculpture's positioning in the space (the phantom bride's arms are outstretched toward the gallery windows), this work memorializes a gruesome past with a powerful symbolic lexicon.

Ghosts fill this nuanced, sensitively conceived show, which asks viewers to physically confront shadows of so many forms, systems, and selves. And Saar really does seem to work as a medium: as both a person who can commune with the dead and one who, above all else, is the most essential component—the life force, the animating spirit—of every work she makes. Her house is her studio, her studio is a home, and her art is a portal: to Saar herself, to healing, to the past, and to understanding how the past exists in the present.

—Margaret Kross

## LOS ANGELES

### Sylvia Snowden

PARRASCH HEIJNEN

“Sylvia Snowden: Select Works, 1966–2020” was the eighty-year-old artist's first show at Parrasch Heijnen gallery in Los Angeles. Making up for lost time, this historical (but not chronological) survey of expressively rendered canvases with thickly encrusted surfaces—the paint troweled and visibly mixed in the act of conjuring bodies from the obdurate material—was a contrast to the more focused “Sylvia Snowden: The M Street Series, 1982–1988,” which was concurrently on display for her debut presentation at New York's Franklin Parrasch Gallery. The latter's tight grouping featured portrayals of Snowden's neighbors in Washington, DC, some intimates and others strangers, many of whom were unemployed and unhoused. The artist documents their plight in mostly abstract pictures of irradiating pain that frame splayed, long-armed figures staring at the viewer with palpable urgency. A piece from the “Men on M Street” series, 2001–2004, *Men on M Street—George Brown II*, 2001, a massive vertical canvas cleaved by the namesake figure, was included in the West Coast exhibition. In this painting,

a black arm extends from the model's torso in a continuous hardened puddle of acrylic, similar in style to the right leg propping him up from beneath, in a warping of bilateral symmetry. Snowden articulates his left arm as so many gashes against a field of signal orange; the effect is something like a Futurist disarticulation of subjectivity into the penetrating light of sick industrial ambience.

This violent commingling of form and space is a Snowden hallmark. The artist sometimes rims the threshold where skin meets air with opaque passages of white, as if to articulate the edges of erasure, as we see in *Alice Shannon*, 1985. Also included here were *Shell 12*, *19*, and *72*, all 2010—nominal portraits of the artist's daughter that she considers a single piece—in which head and limbs cohere by virtue of their uniform color. These primarily red-silhouetted figures reveal emerald or cobalt at their outer limits, moments that are subsumed by the churning strokes that run across all three compositions. Taken together, they admit an observational intensity redoubled as rawness posing as, or perhaps even shielded by, pictorial irresolution. Exemplary in this effort is the astounding and elephantine *Shell aged 13*, 2012. In this roughly six-and-a-half-by-five-foot canvas, Snowden's daughter appears to be dancing exuberantly. We can find no single viewing distance at which these densely wrought images cohere without simultaneously falling apart. As the more abstract *Green III*, 2020, makes clear, these are paintings thick as sculptural reliefs, and their assertion of physicality, of presence, seems very much the point. (A 2016 show at the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center in Washington, DC, was appropriately titled “The Feel of Paint.”)

Relationality is quite differently modeled in *Betty*, 1974, the first work visible in the opening room at the LA space. Made with oils (Snowden shifted to acrylic after having children), it is a picture of bruised flesh, all muddled cream, brown, and salmon. It is also a none-too-subtle depiction of a white woman sexually abusing two Black men. They crouch under the toothy rictus of a vagina dentata amid roving peace signs and a swastika. Besides its brutal depiction of racism and rape, the work forms an allegory that addresses the exclusionary practices of American institutions witnessed by the artist. One major show in 2000 at Washington, DC's Corcoran Gallery of Art involved a series made after her son was murdered near their home (a monoprint, the verdant *Malik, Farewell III*, 1995–98, was included at Parrasch Heijnen); Snowden's insistence that the work was more a joyous remembrance of her son's life than a grueling meditation on his death was met with near mocking disregard in critic Michael O'Sullivan's review of the exhibition, published in the September 1, 2000, edition of the *Washington Post*. In recounting his disbelieving exchange with the artist, O'Sullivan writes: “So it's Eurocentric morbidity and Western art-historical baggage that makes parts of [your] art feel mournful or angry or funereal when it's really just a celebration of being alive?” “Yes,” said Snowden. “I do believe it is.”



Sylvia Snowden, *Betty*, 1974, oil on canvas, 80 × 60¼".

In 2019, the artist received a Lifetime Achievement Award from her alma mater, Howard University in Washington, DC, recognizing her work for more than half a century. The rest of us need to catch up.

—Suzanne Hudson

## Blondell Cummings

ART + PRACTICE

“It’s the beauty in things that we sometimes lose track of,” wrote choreographer, dancer, and video artist Blondell Cummings (1944–2015) almost thirty years ago. “When I’m at my worst, I don’t see it. When I’m at my best I see it all around me.” Enchanted with the rituals, spaces, and stuff of everyday life, Cummings took an empathic and (auto)ethnographic approach to her craft that suffused every part of this welcome retrospective of her work, jointly produced by Art + Practice and the Getty Research Institute—the first of what, one hopes, will be many exhibitions to come out of the latter institution’s African American Art History Initiative. (Although the Getty’s participation is laudable here, Art + Practice has been highlighting Black artistic innovation for years—and often without the benefit of J. Paul’s bucks and personnel.)

As anyone who has watched a poorly filmed performance can attest, dancing for the camera is a challenge; a dancer must be as attuned to their body as to the device framing it. (And the camera operator, likewise, must invest in their own movements, responding to the subject’s physical fluctuations and dynamism.) In early works such as *1st Tape*, ca. 1975, Cummings can be seen massaging this relationship, testing the limits and possibilities of the body and its videographic representation across nine takes. The piece was one of the few in the exhibition that ran in its entirety, and thus gave viewers extended insight into Cummings’s process. Because of her early experiences with photography, she understood dance primarily as “moving pictures,” a kinetic aesthetic event that has the capacity to shift both the performer’s and the spectator’s interior and social worlds.

Sustenance (*Food for Thought*, 1983), menstruation (*Cycle*, 1978), and aging (*Just a Coupla Boomers Sittin Around Chillin*, 2001) are all topics that Cummings approached with gusto, developing mutating phrases of quotidian actions. She consistently understood and exploited the emotional stakes of a life well lived—many times throughout the exhibition one could see Cummings’s face melt, mid-dance, into an expression of all-consuming grief, for instance, or infectious joy.



Blondell Cummings, *Chicken Soup*, 1981. Performance view, Bessie Schönberg Theatre, New York, 1983. Blondell Cummings. Video: Jefferson Bogursky. From the six-part suite *Food for Thought*, 1983.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in *The Ladies and Me*, 1980, a performance that responds to the sonic testimony of Black female vocalists with sensitivity and ferocity. Here and elsewhere in the exhibition, one could witness what dancer and historian Brenda Dixon-Stowell terms “stop-watch gestures”—jagged passages of broken motions that render “the way normal movement appears when it is fragmented by strobe lights.”

Although much of the exhibition focuses on Cummings’s solo pieces, she was a consistent participant in overlapping avant-garde dance circles—working with Meredith Monk’s *The House*, Bill T. Jones’s *EverybodyWorks*, *Nimbus Dance*, and Jacob’s *Pillow*, to name a few. Collaborations with other dancers, such as her 1995 duet with Junko Kikuchi for a feminist translation of the Kobo Abe novel *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962), reveal the manner in which Blondell drew from and expanded upon the energies of those she shared the stage with. Notably, Cummings and Kikuchi revise Abe’s title to reflect the very fact of their togetherness, recasting it as *Women in the Dunes*. Most spectacular, in this reviewer’s opinion, was *Commitment: Two Portraits*, 1988 (directed by Montrealer Bernar Hébert), in which Cummings moves through a 1950s-style kitchen, scrubbing the floor and eventually picking up a heavy cast-iron pan that she guides through the air as though it were made of candy floss. Expanding on *Chicken Soup* (part of the *Food for Thought* suite, 1983), arguably Cummings’s best-known work, *Commitment: Two Portraits* is a standout example of the dancer/choreographer’s narrative sophistication, wherein the activities of everyday life are occasions for accessing memory, grief, and joy.

—Andy Campbell

## Jonny Negron

CHÂTEAU SHATTO

In Jonny Negron’s acrylic-on-linen painting *Untitled* (all works 2021), a muscle-bound man, facing the viewer, luxuriates in a soapy bath. His large cartoonish eyes are turned down as a pout curves his ample lips, accentuating the picture’s moody, contemplative atmosphere. Both his body and the pillowy drifts of bubbles that cling to his sculpted physique are awash in sensuous shades of red as he sits before a humming monochromatic field of luminous crimson. This piece, one of six new canvases in “Spirits,” the artist’s second solo show at Château Shatto, represents Negron’s move from modestly scaled works on paper to much larger canvases following his 2018 exhibition at the gallery. Pivoting from his experiences in making comics, wherein one hypothetically has as many frames as needed to tell a story, Negron has turned to Renaissance painting conventions, which provide plenty of tricks for conveying complex, emotionally laden narratives in a single image. In this presentation, many of Negron’s subjects are often oriented toward the viewer as they elaborately pose and gesture in tableaux rife with symbolic objects. Take the aforementioned work, in which a conch shell and a bar of *jabon esoterica ogun* (a soap sold in botanicas) rest on the edge of the tub while a lily and a hibiscus with carefully rendered pistils, imbued with a quiet but unabashed eroticism, stand delicately in the foreground.

*Cosmic Dancer*, a fifty-four-by-seventy-four-inch painting, invokes Botticelli’s *Primavera*, ca. 1480, with its lineup of curvy female revelers who theatrically show off their bodies. Negron’s beauties are Gen Z partygoers in Y2K-inspired outfits and chunky heels. A DJ in a bucket hat and a Guess sweatshirt spins in the background. Like Botticelli’s nymphal spring dancers, each woman intricately gestures with her hands: Taloned fingers point, fan out, or press against the bodies of their owners. The selfie-taking figure at the far-left side of the canvas