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David Shrobe @ Jenkins Johnson

By David M. Roth



Shrobe, *Night Vision*, 2018, oil, acrylic, graphite, paper, canvas, vinyl and fabric, 61 x 46 x 4 inches

Hybrid identity —in particular African-American identity — is the subject of David Shrobe's aptly named debut exhibition, *Somewhere in Between*, at Jenkins Johnson to October 27. It consists of collages and wall-mounted assemblages made from swatches of painted canvas, strips of veneer and vinyl, clothing, stitched fabric, photo transfers and in one notable instance, a chunk of architectural molding, cut to resemble an enormous Victorian-era women's hat. It crowns one of the show's signature pieces, *Spoon Fed*, making the elegant construction so top heavy, it looks as if it could bowl over its female subject. She's seated on a faux rocker made of scrap furniture and embossed tin — the kind that covers the ceilings of many New York lofts.

Shrobe uses these materials to define, embellish and obscure figures and faces. Eyes, one of the few body parts in this modular oeuvre that he doesn't create through abstract means, provide the show's only solid link to concrete corporeality. Nevertheless, his pictures read as formal portraits. His subjects strike regal poses and oftentimes appear in round frames, indicating an attempt on the artist's part to confer dignity on people who in real life may have had little. Cloaked in layers that literally seal their lips and render them mute, they are, to borrow a line from Jimi Hendrix's *Voodoo Chile*, "a million miles away, and at the same time right here in your picture frame."

the Americas as slaves 400 years ago. It was (and still is) a survival strategy, arguably more necessary now than at anytime since the Civil Rights era. Shrobe, whose family has occupied the same Harlem building since 1925, is well versed in such strategies, and the virtuosity he displays when fashioning found materials into pictures reflects that background. He gathers them from his immediate neighborhood and from relatives like his 99-year-old great aunt Lucille from whom he gleans quilt blocks, made with a technique that, he says "has been handed down through generations in my family." But, unlike his forbearers who most likely made quilts out of economic necessity, Shrobe's employment of their methods constitutes a distinct aesthetic and conceptual choice informed by education: he earned an MFA in painting at Hunter College and was awarded a fellowship at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture.

Speaking in codes — visually, verbally, musically, sartorially — has been a consistent hallmark of African-American life since Africans were forcibly brought to

His pictures posit a kind of Antebellum Postmodernism, one in which men and women, swathed in mismatched, makeshift “garments,” appear as tangible apparitions, sending out veiled messages about their psychological makeup and their place in a fictive social hierarchy. In it, high and low mix seamlessly, sometimes to otherworldly effect. As a result, decoding his pictures can be something of an anthropological exercise, one in which art-historical arrows point backwards and forwards: to contemporaries like Michelene Thomas, Titus Kaphar and Wangechi Mutu; to Robert Rauschenberg and Romare Beardon; and, most insistently, to painting and to Picasso, who pulled liberally from African tribal art in his early cubist paintings and sculptures.

Shrobe’s works also exhibit strong links to Dada. Some, like *Cross-Over*, a stunning juxtaposition of dissimilar elements, would look right at home in the *Cabaret Voltaire* (circa 1916) or equally comfortable standing next to Kurt Schwitters’ or Hannah Höch’s collages. In this, bits of red, purple and black fabric conjoin to form an elegant robe, atop which rests a face half-hidden by a carnival mask made of dotted triangles. The head is enclosed at the top by lighter stains that coalesce to form a helmet, reminiscent of the one worn by the self-proclaimed extraterrestrial jazz musician Sun Ra and those fashioned more recently by Ellen Gallagher.

Stranger still is the Cyclops-like visage seen in *Side Eye*, one of several a riveting small works on paper. Another is Adams



Shrobe, *Spoon Fed*, 2018, oil, acrylic, charcoal, fabric, wood, metal and mixed media, 71 x 50 x 3 inches



Shrobe, *Cross-Over*, 2018, acrylic, ink and fabric on canvas, 34 x 27 inches

Express, named for the shipping company that transported a Virginia slave, Henry “Box” Brown, in a coffin-like container to Philadelphia, a freedom journey that lasted 27 hours and threatened his life. In Shrobe’s portrait, Brown wears a voluminous red-and-silver tinged Afro; it covers his head like a penumbral cloud with colors bleeding down into the face. Beneath it hovers a suit jacket. It’s a bare snippet, probably derived from the same photo on which the portrait is based, but the transfer of it to paper gives off the vaporous look of a fossil imprint. Shrobe is a painter of exceptional skill, and that ability informs everything he does.

Many artists attempt to summon ghosts. Few manage it as effectively as Shrobe. The drape of a Hawaiian shirt in *Knelt*, for example — a mere piece of crumpled rayon — wondrously evokes a man’s arm. It bursts from the shoulder of a vest, the latter conjured from spare strokes of white paint on black fabric.

Here it’s worth recalling something James Baldwin once said about the topic Shrobe’s art so adroitly addresses. “Identity,” the author wrote, “would seem to be the garment with which one covers

the nakedness of the self: in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which one's nakedness can always be felt, and, sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes."

David Shrobe demonstrates exactly that kind of power.

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David Shrobe: "Somewhere in Between" @ Jenkins Johnson Gallery through October 27, 2018.



Shrobe, *Adams Express*, 2018, oil, charcoal, ink and mixed media on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches