



**Project  
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Leone McComas

**Black & Reflective**

February 26th - March 27th, 2021

*Black and Reflective* by Leone McComas is an immersive exhibition which threads together portraiture and mural art to capture the impact of a single conversation, and reflects upon the ontological experiences of self-identity and Blackness. The exhibition includes a series of paired paintings: first an intimate portrait, then a landscape to highlight the subject's navigation of self-identity and their environment. The conversations that animate this series of paintings span two and a half years and draw on individual experiences throughout the Black Diaspora.

When asked about her process, McComas expresses that the guiding meditation of each painting is the impression her subject leaves behind. Each person has their distinct approach to questions of identity along with their stories to match, and McComas' attention to what separately defines her subjects, and reverence for what connects them can be seen throughout her painting style.

In *Nyenyeye: A Portrait Study*, the subject looks askance lost in thought, and is shrouded in swirls of colour. When your eyes look to *Nyenyeye: Like Oil & Water*, you will find that there is no face to settle on but rather a landscape that is steadily shifting and repeating. It is as though the internal landscape has manifested externally. Look closer at the central figure to find that she is in motion as much as her surroundings. Keeping

in mind that Nyenye and McComas met in 2016, later reflecting on their shared conversation a theme emerges: the desire to be understood and the practice of listening to understand. To be othered, even within the very life one inhabits is an alienating experience.

Yet the subjects of these paintings are not abstracted by alienation. Take the landscape painting of *Framing James: Cherry Blossom* for example. The figure of James is intact, and the essence of himself is projected around him, standing in stark contrast to his surroundings. When asked, McComas describes James as a man determined to be unboxed. His plans and dreams are the things that grip his mind. It's not about the past; he refuses to be framed by struggle. This assertion claims for James a flexibility and dimension that McComas captures both in her portrait and landscape painting of the subject.

Every time McComas met someone for this series she found herself simultaneously unpacking her story as much as theirs. The questions that began to guide her practice were:

*What is missing from the conversation on identity and race today?*

*Who am I trying to have the conversation with and who am I unpacking this conversation for?*

McComas' reflections on these questions become apparent not only in her treatment of the subjects in each painting, but also in the recurring motifs in her painting practice. There are no hard lines or boundaries, rather it is as though the self of each subject is constantly emerging from its surroundings. The refracted images of her main subjects combined with her layered flat strokes to create depth and play with color all add up to create the sense of light passing through to illuminate the painting.

Traditionally, oil paints are layered from dark to light in order to mimic light, but McComas flips this technique and uses the canvas itself as light, saying “no mixed color comes out as bright as the canvas itself”. McComas attributes this style to her desire to capture honesty and truth and allowing the internal to shine through—just one example of how often the spirituality of the painter as a witness is made apparent in her process. McComas describes the streams of colour as seen in the background of the portraits of Raquel and Timothy capture the “things that can’t be known” about a person’s identity.

Let your eyes rest on these paintings and take note of the open wonder captured in Raquel’s portrait, and the pensiveness reflected in Timothy, and what you might find is an invitation to be hospitable with the stories and essence of each subject therein captured. At times, the viewing of a group of Black folks lined together can often be flattening, “instructive”, and even extractive. But here you have four separate opportunities to remember the love and curiosity that started this conversation and to discover that *Black* is not always a prefix to struggle.

- Oyin Olalekan