

Artsy

February 10, 2022

10 Emerging Black Artists Show That Blackness Is Not a Monolith

By Folasade Ologundudu

[artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-emerging-black-artists-blackness-monolith](https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-10-emerging-black-artists-blackness-monolith)



This Frieze Week in Los Angeles, artist and gallerist Knowledge Bennett and author and art historian Charles Moore will present “BLACK,” an exhibition with 10 emerging artists exploring the color black and the myriad ways it’s interpreted and understood. Featured at Bennett’s L.A.-based gallery The Know Contemporary from February 16th through 20th, the exhibition surmises that Blackness—broadly defined as the quality of being black in color, or a state of belonging to any human group having dark-colored skin—is not a monolith.

The featured artists—Patrick Alston, **Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola**, Knowledge Bennett, Lindsey Brittain Collins, Ryan Cosbert, Kim Dacres, Muna Malik, Ashante Kindle, Ronnie Robinson, and Paul Anthony Smith—show through their work that Blackness is composed of many modes of thought, social experiences, and cultural references. And while “BLACK” celebrates each artist’s practice, the presentation also shows us the ways the color can tie divergent artworks together and express kinship and community.

“I’ve always been interested in analyzing how different artists employ the color black within their artwork to denote different things, whether spirituality or politics,” Bennett said in a recent interview. The show came to life through his ongoing collaborative relationship with Moore, who curated a pair of solo shows at The Know Contemporary last year featuring Bennett (“Less Is More”) and YoYo Lander

(“Onto Something”). With “BLACK,” the two curators continue their respective efforts to support the careers of emerging Black artists, while acknowledging Blackness as a multifaceted experience and giving artists an opportunity to interpret the word on their own terms. This safe space creates agency whereby the artists share their ideologies with the viewer outside and irrespective of the white gaze.

“For me, it’s this idea of multiplicity of the color black,” Moore explained. “We are in this period where we can really amplify the fact that Black people are not a monolith.”

The show acknowledges that while the color black has long been associated with societal beliefs and elements of culture, over time, the narratives that have come to define it have, at different points in history, been racially motivated, violent, and highly problematic. Moore proposes that black can be a symbol of knowledge and understanding. “There seems to be this connection between darkness and lightness,” he explained. “Given that black is absorbent of all light, should that not imply it absorbs all comprehension?”

“BLACK” explores a range of the ideologies surrounding Blackness, from the elegant and spiritual, to the powerful and mysterious. The talented young artists featured are known for work that is consistently provocative, challenging, and ethereal in nature. “We chose these artists because we have a profound respect for them,” Bennett said. “What I’ve always found most interesting about artists is not what is on their canvas, but some of the things that took place within their personal lives.” In their distinct practices, the artists contend with issues from historical narratives and gentrification to collective cultural associations and social justice.

The featured cohort of artists ranges from recent graduates just entering the art world, like Ryan Cosbert—who received her BFA in fine arts from the School of Visual Arts in 2021—to those gaining international attention, such as **Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola**—whose current solo show “MULTILATERAL” at Galerie Krinzinger in Vienna presents some of his most ambitious work to date.

Beyond the use of the color black, the featured artists’ use of material is rich and wide-ranging—from cement, circuit boards, photography, and text, to cultural totems such as du-rags and cowrie shells. Cosbert presents one of her signature abstractions, *See Shells, Sea Shells* (2022), made of acrylic paint, enamel, glitter, cowrie shells, bullet casings, and broken glass on canvas. And Patrick Alston’s *His-story (History)* (2022) sees the artist incorporate chains, sewn textile fabric, and oil sticks on canvas.

While the show itself does not take a stance on cultural or social issues, it creates room for the artists to present their own points of view and several works offer opportunities to view society through a rigorous, critical lens.

In *Smart City Urbanism (Hudson Yards)* (2022), Lindsey Brittain Collins focuses on the destructive reality of Hudson Yards: the real estate development project that funneled millions of dollars out of Harlem—a predominately Black and Brown neighborhood in Manhattan—to fund the building of a newly created shopping mecca. Collins hones in on the inequities and injustices of such projects that take money from low-income communities and thwart social and economic progress for BIPOC neighborhoods. A Columbia MBA graduate, Collins went back to school to pursue a career in the arts. Her work is deeply informed by a course she took in social impact real estate where she discovered the ways in which businesses and organizations reduce entire families and communities to data points and numbers. “I’m particularly interested in the relationship between architecture and race and exploring the ways in which equity can be built,” Collins explained.

In “BLACK,” the diversity and scale of works represents an approach to color theory that enables each artist to take agency over the encompassing social narratives of our time. Whether ideas of Blackness are rendered meaningless or have a critical place in our society, each work reflects the original thoughts and visions of the artists. The curatorial premise gives rise to agency and accountability over one’s ideas and beliefs, while simultaneously offering viewers an opportunity to rediscover the brilliance of the color black.