

FORT GANSEVOORT ARTFORUM



Michelangelo Lovelace, *Residents in the Day Room on the Fifth Floor*, 1993, Marker on paper, 18 x 23.75 inches.

Michelangelo Lovelace

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The vulnerable are vital across twenty-two drawings by Cleveland-based artist Michelangelo Lovelace, who has worked as a nursing-home aide for more than three decades while maintaining a dedicated studio practice. The works in this online presentation for Fort Gansevoort, made between 1993 and 2008, felt especially resonant when viewed during the pandemic, which has disproportionately affected people of color and the elderly. The artist reminds us that our responsibility to one another has never been more urgent.

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Lovelace's portraits, mostly done in either ink or marker on paper, bring warmth and humanity to the fore. Everything is readable in the faces of his subjects, and many of the works are titled after them, such as *Eddie Ragland*, 1996; *Mr. William Angel*, 1993; and *Gladys Smith*, 1993. The artist's hand is multivalent, capturing a range of personalities and features. Because of this, each picture seems as though it's speaking several languages at once. The artist creates a visual vernacular of caring, a silent form of storytelling that begs to be heard. *Residents in the Day Room on the Fifth Floor*, 1993, features eight scribbly figures gathered in a rec room, facing different directions. A television is on but it feels like an afterthought, the person on-screen merely a faceless blur. The casual and somewhat sleepy dynamic of the group is striking, recalling the convivial boredom of being with family for too long. Nonetheless, Lovelace uses a cheery palette and jaunty lines to enliven the moment.

Several of Lovelace's senescent models are in repose—in recliners, on couches, or in hospital beds. But the artist captures his subjects' personalities and moods through tender scrutiny. He is able to reveal much about a sitter by the way he renders an expression in the eyes or the lines on someone's face. One exception to the full-frontal portraits was *Untitled*, 2008, a drawing of a man in a wheelchair from behind. He gazes into a dense cityscape from a window through which big-box stores, such as Best Buy and Home Depot, are visible in the distance. This melancholy work is a contrast to Lovelace's more colorful and buoyant paintings, which often capture the fervor of life in a metropolis. From this subject's vantage point, the momentum of the city seems far removed, quiet.

Earlier this year Lovelace fell ill and was hospitalized, eventually undergoing surgery for pancreatic cancer. It is now the artist's turn to accept care—after all, we must heal ourselves so that we may heal others. As Audre Lorde writes of her own reckoning with illness in her 1980 memoir, *The Cancer Journals*, “I do live. The bee flies. There must be some way to integrate death into living, neither ignoring it nor giving in to it.” Lovelace once stated that art saved his life. Yet it's clear that his art has also saved the lives of others by preserving the memories of those who have passed. We need this kind of solicitude in order to contend with infirmity, our own and that of the collective body. Lovelace's work in our precarious present is a “balm in Gilead,” as the old spiritual goes, “to make the wounded whole.” It is for everyone's sake that he continues to thrive.

— Charity Coleman