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Michelangelo Lovelace Finds Dignity and Grace in These Fraught Times

Fort Gansevoort presents a new virtual exhibition of the Cleveland artist's work

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Michelangelo Lovelace, *Untitled*, 2008. Ink on paper. (Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

One of the most shocking things the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed is the cavalier attitude that some people have expressed toward the elderly — one of the social groups at the highest risk of suffering severe symptoms of the disease, even dying from it — in a desire to return to normal. Some unfortunate statements from officials — such as one from Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who suggested in late March that many elderly folk would be willing to die in order to save the economy for their grandchildren; or from our president, casting the

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American people as “warriors” risking their lives to restart the economy — imply that not even people in charge in America right now care about those most in danger of being fatally affected by the novel coronavirus.

In such an environment, then, it’s a tonic to come across the portraits of the elderly that make up *Nightshift*, an exhibition of drawings by Michelangelo Lovelace, curated by John Ahearn and presented online at Fort Gansevoort gallery. Working in ink, marker, and color, Lovelace gives his subjects — inhabitants of nursing homes in Cleveland, Ohio, where the artist was born and raised, and where he has worked as a nurse’s aide for more than 30 years while creating art on the side — the dignity they deserve.

These portraits are something of a departure for Lovelace, whose previous exhibition at Fort Gansevoort, *The Land* in 2018, showcased his fiery political engagement, with panoramas that weren’t shy about using images and texts to directly articulate a sense of righteous anger at the racial, social, and economic inequities he witnessed in inner-city Cleveland. (You can see a sampling of Lovelace’s work at his website, with his Rodney King series particularly thrilling in its no-holds-barred fury.) The portraits that make up *Nightshift* are quieter and much more intimate in effect, befitting the subjects and the circumstances of their creation. Whatever social commentary that might be encoded in these images is subtle at best, buried underneath the affection and honesty they outwardly express.

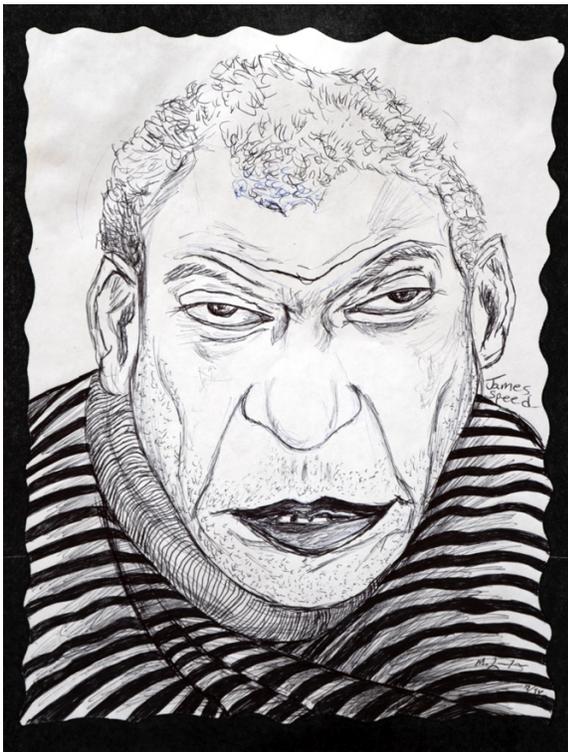


Michelangelo Lovelace, *Ms I. Clark*, 1993. Marker on paper.
(Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

FORT GANSEVOORT

Lovelace's portraits span from 1993 to 2008, and even within these 22 drawings, the stylistic contrasts are striking. Color animates most of the 1993 works, with deep blacks and light blues popping out of the canvases alongside bright yellows, pinks, and purples. It's certainly as far from the miserabilist perception of nursing homes that are *de rigueur* in media, with Lovelace's scribbled-in ink and marker strokes instilling an unexpected feeling of whimsy to the subjects and backdrops. Even when the subjects themselves don't always look happy — like the tired-looking *Ms I. Clark* — Lovelace refuses to cloak her in despair, choosing the lightest shades of blue and purple to surround her. And note the choice of a dark purplish-blue to demarcate the shadow just behind *Mr. Walker* instead of the expected pitch black.

Later portraits generally eschew color, with a series of 1996 portraits coming off as relatively spare in manner, with postage stamp-like black borders their only idiosyncratic feature. A series of portraits from 2008, though, split the difference: generally shorn of color but still featuring scribbled-in strokes to give the images of elderly patients sleeping or being attended to in hospital beds a faintly surreal air. There's an honesty to these particular portraits that, if anything, strengthens their humanism, even allowing for bits of colorful whimsy, like the orange strokes on the coat of one elderly lady sitting in a wheelchair.



Michelangelo Lovelace, *James Speed*, 1996. Ink and marker on paper. (Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

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It's that glowing humanism that animates Lovelace's drawings in *Nightshift*, lending a dignified air to a group of people that tend to be forgotten by much of the rest of society. If anything, that belief in highlighting the plight of an underrepresented group of people makes these 22 works wholly of a piece with Lovelace's more directly political art after all. It's refreshing to see such warmth in a time when, it seems, genuine concern and humane feeling for one's fellow man seems in dismayingly short supply, especially among the people that hold the most power.