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HYPERALLERGIC

Reviews | Art

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#BlackGirlMagic Takes Form In Vanessa German's Sculptures

German's commitment to dynamic and sometimes riotous formal strategies expresses an amalgamation of Black femme iconography, including shrines to Serena and Venus Williams with butterflies.



Vanessa German, "More than one thing is happening at the same time" (2019), wood with plaster figures, 35 x 59 x 13 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

If there is anyone in the contemporary art world whose oeuvre expresses the aesthetics of #BlackGirlMagic, then that would undoubtedly be Vanessa German. Her sculptural assemblages and collages — currently on view at Fort Gansevoort— express her unabashed commitment to honoring, representing, and stewarding the beautiful and frightening chaos of Black life. The vibrancy of German's sculptures features formal qualities such as shine,

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glitter, and a wide range of colors. In their energetic production, these works are indicative of German's commitment to dynamic and sometimes riotous formal strategies that express an amalgamation of Black femme iconography, including shrines to Serena and Venus Williams with butterflies, and flowers adorning Black women's hair.



Vanessa German, "Venus Madonna Of Tenderness To Tender the Touch and the Sight and the Knowing Upon This Earth" (2019), mixed media collage on New York Times magazine, 42.5 x 24 x 9 inches

I knew upon entering *TRAMPOLINE* that German considers her sculptures to be *power figures*, therefore, I approached them as such, reckoning with their magic, power, and associations with African spirituality and Black kinship networks. It is rather uncanny — the same Western art markets that once removed the raffia and nails from so-called African "fetishes" now have a taste for the African diasporic aesthetics of power objects. German is not the first Black woman artist to grapple with African power objects: in 1988, Renee Stout

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appropriated the form of Central African *Minkisi* figures in her self-portrait, “Fetish #2.” In African art history, power figures are generally vessels through which higher powers can influence everyday life: power figures protect, punish, and heal. Whether it is a Nkisi figure from the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, or a Fon Bocio figure from modern-day Benin, African power figures are assemblages of various materials and are often used within ritual contexts. Popular traditional accoutrements, such as textiles and cowrie shells, are also present in German’s sculptures. Other materials in German’s sculptures include: butterflies, neon letters, black hair, and sneakers. Like traditional African power figures, German’s sculptures have textile pouches and containers that remind me of traditional medicine packs that hold materials intended to fill the object with power. Thus, German draws on African spirituality in order to turn everyday materials into ones that exude #BlackGirlMagic through ancestral modes.



Vanessa German, “Venus Madonna Healer of Even The Future Blues (That the Healing come complete; That we no longer have to drag the trauma from body to body)” (2019), mixed media collage on New York Times magazine, 29 x 16 x 5 inches

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While *TRAMPOLINE* is a solo exhibition, German's sculptures resist individualism and univocality through her political and aesthetic commitment to mutability, assemblage, ancestral memory, and collective being. For example, "More than one thing is happening at the same time" (2019) comprises an oceanic scene with three Black figures among waves energetically painted in several blue hues. I read this sculptural installation as German's exploration of collectivity, or what the late Black studies scholar Cedric Robinson would call "ontological totality." The work evokes the gruesome history of Africans who were thrown overboard during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as those who jumped overboard in rebellion against their enslavement. This work's monumentality honors the collective ancestral trauma of racial slavery and the Middle Passage while also assembling a Black collective — Black kinship networks — born from trans-oceanic migration. German's sculptures reckon with violence and trauma inflicted on racialized and gendered people while simultaneously marking their resilience.



Vanessa German, "Hyper Sensitive Feeling Machine Body.Soul.Emotion. Volume Control" (2019), mixed media assemblage, 55 x 30 x 17 inches (courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

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“You Will Have to do Your Best to Fly Away From Them Hands That Come to Take You Outta Your Own Soul” (2019) is another sculpture that functions as an altar, enshrining Black girlhood and resistance into its formal and political qualities. It is grandiose, consisting of a baroque chandelier, butterflies, intricately beaded lizard, and flowers. The neon “JUMP” narrates the action of the figure, presumably a Black girl, who has leaped from the grasp of white hands attempting to grab her, amid the street sign which warns, “DANGER UNSAFE AREA.” German’s work illustrates Black women’s and girls’ insistence upon freedom despite their compounded vulnerability as they navigate interlocked systems of oppression.

A true alchemist, German’s mixed media sculptures and collages combine both mundane and eccentric materials, yielding portrayals of figures that honor, protect, and empower black girls, women, and their communities. To navigate *TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul* is to wander into three floors of #BlackGirlMagic, accompanied by a vast range of material, narratives, and experiments with the aesthetics of Black diasporic collectivity and spirituality. German’s persistent reckoning with empowerment and adoration offers a welcome counter in the face of racism and sexism.



Vanessa German, “You Will Have to do Your Best to Fly Away From Them Hands That Come to Take You Outta Your Own Soul” (2019), mixed media assemblage, 96 x 48 x 14.5 inches (courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

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Vanessa German, TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul *continues at Fort Gansevoort*
(5 Ninth Avenue, Meatpacking District) through December 21.