

# FORT GANSEVOORT

THE VILLAGE VOICE

Deborah Roberts Conjures Black Girl Magic

by Siddhartha Mitter

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Deborah Roberts, "We heard the thunder no. 4," (2017)

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

"There are several art worlds out there," says Deborah Roberts. For many years, the Austin, Texas-based artist made a living from her paintings of happy Black families in suburban settings that she sold to an aspirational clientele. "The Black Norman Rockwell, that's what they called me," she says. "I did little kids in flower gardens and in church, little brothers and sisters on a swing, this whole romantic idea of Blackness."

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Then, in the past decade, she veered off course. Her work grew jagged, surrealistic, using collage to incorporate found images. From depicting idyllic scenes, she shifted to works that wrestled with the portrayal of young Black girls in particular in the media and popular culture. She returned to art school to hone her new direction.



## Deborah Roberts at Fort Gansevoort

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Now, in the fullness of middle age, Roberts is suddenly on the national map. “In-gé-nue,” her first solo New York show, is at Fort Gansevoort in the Meatpacking District. She also has work in “Fictions,” the Studio Museum in Harlem’s current “emerging artists” showcase. “I wish I was at an emerging age!” says Roberts, who allows that she was born in the Sixties. “But in essence, I’m starting over. So why not be emerging?”

Much of Roberts’s new work explores an archetype: a young Black girl, eight to ten years old. Through a series of composite portraits, she renders this figure in a range of stances and moods — defiant, pugnacious, mischievous, kinetic. Each girl in the series combines features drawn from images Roberts finds in magazines or online, wearing clothes taken from photographs or cut from geometric patterning. Quirks abound: limbs jutting from odd places; duplicate facial features; hair that turns into a sheaf of arms with clenched fists; the lace-up boot that one girl carries from which emerge a thicket of men’s heads.

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**“We heard the thunder no. 1” (2017)**

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The pieces follow in the photomontage lineage pioneered by the Dadaist Hannah Höch. They resonate in particular with the collages of Wangechi Mutu, whom Roberts calls an inspiration. But where Mutu affixes eyes and other features onto wild, phantasmagorical figures that brim with adult female energy, Roberts uses the technique to offer alternate portraits of an Everygirl — specifically, every Black girl at the pivotal age when the insouciance of childhood meets the encroachment of expectation and stereotype.

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The first girl Roberts had in mind was her own younger self. “I was at my most happy when I was eight years old,” she says. But she thinks, too, of all Black girls and how quickly society pathologizes them. Some inspire specific works, through allusion — for instance, gold swim trunks in one collage honor the fifteen-year-old whom a cop, captured on a viral video, violently threw and pinned down while breaking up a pool party in 2015 in McKinney, Texas. “Just a sassy, normal teenager,” Roberts says. “As Black women, we start being strong and independent at an early age. And maybe that gets misconstrued as not being innocent. It’s something that divides us from other little girls.”



## Deborah Roberts at Fort Gansevoort

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The reawakening that produced Roberts’s new work was both political and artistic. “I started reading Cornel West,” she says. “I saw that society wasn’t seeing Black people who want to have a happy life, who go to church on Sundays, pay their bills, want their kids to go to college. They were seeing people shackled up, doing drugs. This was the image projected to the world. So if you make me a monster, and I am not that, how do I go forward? Some of my girls are grotesque, in a way — but they’re not, because there’s a beauty in that difference.”

Roberts went back to art school, earning an MFA from Syracuse University in 2014. Along the way, she says, she drew counsel from established Black artists and curators including Franklin Sirmans, Carrie Mae Weems, and LaToya Ruby Frazier. The change in her work left her old clientele confused. “They said I was doing work for white people now. That I was no longer speaking to them. But I was! I shouldn’t have to simplify beauty. It can be complex, conceptual. We can meet that challenge.”

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## **“Liberty stands with them” (2017)**

Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Roberts’s portraits — there are twenty at Fort Gansevoort, elegantly presented on three floors of the narrow building — repudiate stereotype using the humor of surrealism rather than didactics. The collages contain a hidden language, with elements taken from photos of famous people like Michelle Obama, Willow Smith, Marian Wright Edelman, even Gloria Steinem, but cut up and altered beyond recognition. Boxing gloves and other items recur, rebus-like, for the viewer to interpret. Roberts completes the works with painting, but the backgrounds are stark white. “I want you to have an intimate relation with these girls,” she says. “To see them, because there’s no place to look away.”

The exhibition also presents samples of a text-based series in which Roberts unpacks more assumptions: those around African American names that white culture frowns on (Wakiesha, Kwadi, Tiara are a few she lists) but that reflect imagination and a kind of freedom. In due course, Roberts plans to make collages about boys. But for now the girls are her calling card, reflected in the show’s title. “An ingenue is a young unsophisticated person, which these girls are,” Roberts says.



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“She is an actress, and there is a performance in Blackness. And it’s a French word, and I think about James Baldwin and others who had to leave this country to be treated as human.”

At first, Roberts’s transition came at a cost as her old customers fell away. She was toiling in a shoe store as late as last year. Now her work has found museums and collectors, and she’s not too shy to enjoy the moment. “I went the long way around,” Roberts says. “So you may think I’m emerging, but I really just went to the place I always wanted to go.”



*‘Deborah Roberts: in-gé-nue’  
Fort Gansevoort  
5 Ninth Avenue  
fortgansevoort.com  
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