

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Finding Darkness, Pain, and Jubilance Under the Rainbow

At one of the few black-owned galleries in Harlem, a new exhibition of works by Delano Dunn is challenging, surprising, troubling, and complex.

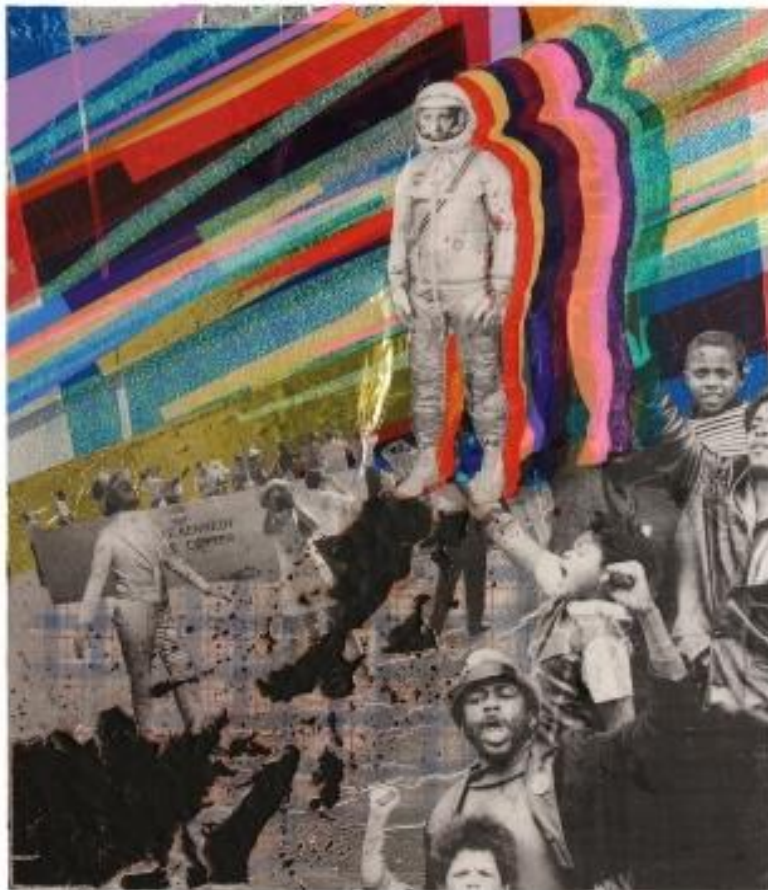


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Delano Dunn “I’m That Much More Sure” (2017), paper, Mylar, cellophane, vinyl, shoe polish, and resin on wood, 57 x 49 in (photo by Antoine Lyers)

The first time I walked into Long Gallery in Harlem, in May 2016, and saw the exhibition *The Moon is My Only Luxury*, I was disappointed enough that it took several months and conversations with colleagues to get me to return. I thought the works in that show — paintings by Elizabeth Colomba that proposed a fictional version of US

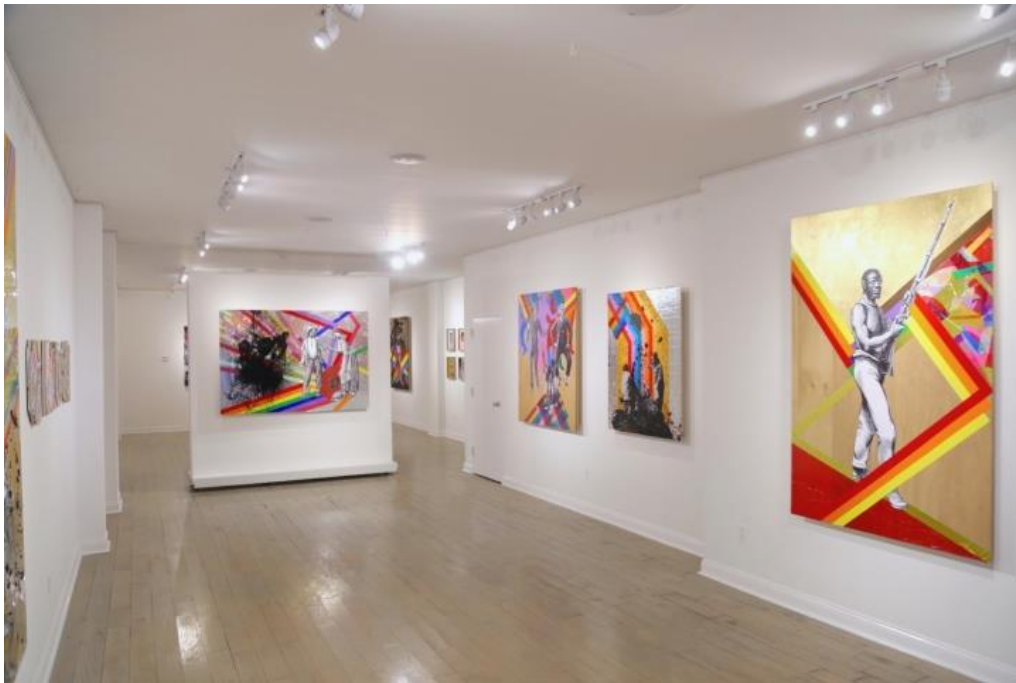
history by using portraiture to interpose real or imagined black women in contexts in which they did not originally exist — were earnestly simplistic attempts at black uplift. It was the kind of show I felt I was *expected* to like because it was revisionist and centered on restoring black women to the historical records out of which they are often excised, but in a way that was too one-dimensional. What’s more, the paintings, for me, didn’t hold up to sustained looking. On the other hand, the exhibition that opened at Long Gallery quite recently, *No One Can Be This Tomorrow*, a solo exhibition of work by Delano Dunn, which was curated by Jasmine Wahi of Gateway Project Spaces in Newark, convinced me that the gallery has found its legs, that it can run.



Delano Dunn “Wave” (2016), paper, wallpaper, Mylar, cellophane, vinyl, shoe polish, and resin on board, 57 x 49 in (photo by Antoine Lyers)

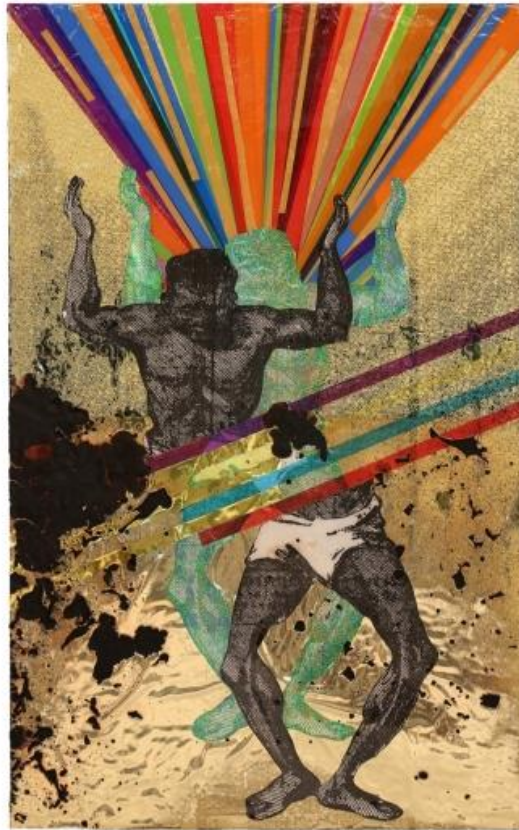
The work in the show uses some strategies I’m familiar with: historical figures culled from archives collaged with abstract motifs that bring the figures to great visual vitality.

Dunn adds to this strategy a smart combination of textures that quarrel with each other, like the sheen of clear lacquer against the corrosive and light-eating qualities of dark shoe polish. Dunn also has a few works here that combine copper plating with the lacquer and polish against a floral-patterned wallpaper to achieve the distinct effect of having the materials' respective lusters multiply when put together. The paintings impel my eyes to move but don't allow me to just rest in radiance. In most of these works, dark trouble is brewing and spilling over.



Installation views of *No One Can Be This Tomorrow* at Long Gallery (photo by Lewis Long)

In this show, the source of the work is significant. Dunn worked informally with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (also in Harlem), to find the images that range from 19th century drawings to photojournalistic images of the Civil Rights era. The work gives me literal rainbows; rigidly angular swaths of the color spectrum in clearly defined lines are paired with black and white images of the archival figures placed here and there. Sometimes the figures are framed by the rainbows, sometimes bisected by them, sometimes figures sit on them; in certain pieces the rainbows are just backdrops and in others they separate the figure from the ground.



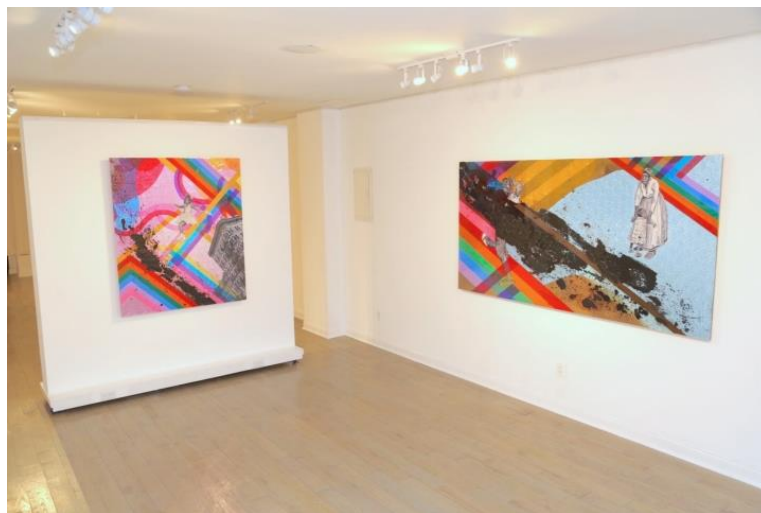
Delano Dunn “Jubilee!” (2016), paper, wallpaper, Mylar, cellophane, vinyl, shoe polish, and resin on wood, 65 x 45 in (photo by Antoine Lyers)

Dunn’s rainbow is no symbol for an idealized nirvana of racial presence and recognition. It is hard-edged abstraction that is unyielding, inorganic, and not necessarily placed to enable the (black) figure. Like the harsh, implacable God of the biblical Job, these lines of willful force might surround a character with light, or might cut him in half. Like that god, Dunn’s lines are ineffable, inexplicable, and unpredictable. This kind of work puts the viewer in the position of having to earn whatever joys you find and take away for yourself, because ultimately you have to reconcile the tension between the jubilation of the imagery and the violence and darkness that is also there. You have to move through foreboding to elation — if you can find it.

It was important to me to return to this gallery, which is one of the very few owned by a person of color in Harlem, to see that it can be like this exhibition: challenging, surprising, and complex, troubling the bright reflections we tend to see on the surface of things.



Installation views of *No One Can Be This Tomorrow* at Long Gallery (photo courtesy of Delano Dunn) Installation views of *No One Can Be This Tomorrow* in the back half of Long Gallery (photo by Lewis Long)



No One Can Be This Tomorrow, a solo exhibition of work by Delano Dunn, continues at the Long Gallery (2073 Seventh Avenue at 124th Street, Harlem, Manhattan) March 10.

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