



# Deborah Roberts: the artist changing perceptions of Black America

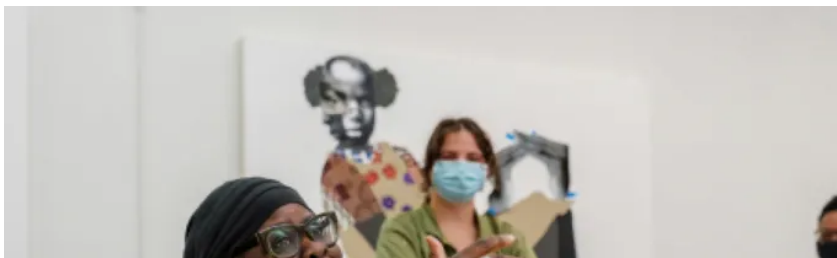


# The Soho House Austin member seeks to transform ideas of Black culture through authenticity and mixed media

By Lola Adesioye Photography by Moyo Oyelola

It's hard not to have a visceral reaction to Deborah Roberts' work. The Austin-based artist has become globally recognised for her mixed-media collages that primarily feature Black children as a way of challenging notions of beauty, identity, independence, and the development of self. There's a good reason why she's become one of the most in-demand and collected contemporary artists of our time.

'I didn't always use children as my voice, or to couch this argument on identity and racial politics,' she says, referring to how and why she came to centre her work around Black childhood. 'But I thought about it in grad school. When was the first time I thought I had independence as a person? It was when I was eight years old and I started wanting different things from my mother. I didn't want her to comb my hair. I didn't want two pigtails, I wanted three. I wanted to be different. And then we go into adulthood. As Black women, we have to fight for our identity all the time. So when do those ideas of protecting your own identity begin to manifest? I think that happens, especially for women of colour, very early.'







Her use of mixed media – Roberts works with paper, photographs, magazine clippings, as well as hand drawings and paint – is itself potently symbolic, emanating from her deep desire to ensure that Black people are free to be known and understood as fully rounded and complex individuals. ‘There’s this notion that Black people are monolithic and that we all have the same experiences; that we all think alike, we all dress alike... and it’s just not true,’ she says.

‘I was just talking to some women the other day,’ she continues, ‘and they were saying, “Well, your skin’s really dark; you shouldn’t wear

yellow, you shouldn't wear pink or light blues..." So, what I try to do in my work is to bring all those colours to the forefront, [to show] that you can be a vibrant human being.'

Creatively, Roberts has gone from working flat out in the studio to pacing herself in order to protect her own wellbeing in a high-demand space that has historically overlooked women in general and women of colour in particular. 'I've learnt to pace my time, because right now work is getting so much attention. If I don't step away from it, it will just consume me - and not in a good way.'



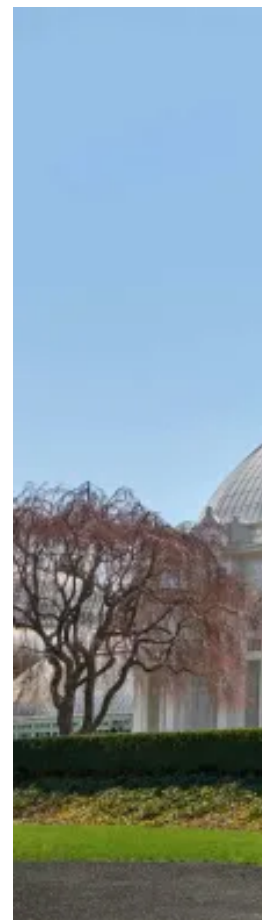
Roberts' work pushes the viewer to see a fullness of Black beingness, to give space for Black individuality, to allow Black children to be children rather than 'small adults' - and to look further into Black womanhood. Much of her work features children whose faces actually contain multiple faces, which she says is her 'questioning the audience to see me as an individual [and] me asking you to see my humanity.'

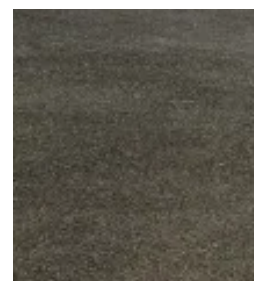


'I'm a humanist. I believe in human beings and I want us to live up to our potential, and beyond that,' she says. It's why freedom – the freedom of the human spirit to express itself fully – is such an important aspect of Roberts' work. It's clear that she's a profoundly thoughtful woman who has spent a lot of time thinking about her own personal and political philosophies and world view.

And in terms of Black America in real life, she asks, 'What is considered Black anymore? In Black America now, there are Trinidadians, there are Jamaicans... it can be anything and everything. There's no *one* way... and that's the thing I like about it. It's the idea of having your own experience. If you're a Black person, a person of darker hue, that is the Black experience, whatever that is. And it's ever-changing.'

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
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