

ART

# Four art shows spotlight Black portraiture

Exhibitions at Transformer, Stable Arts, Washington Project for the Arts and the National Portrait Gallery center Black artists

By Kriston Capps

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Hands down, the best spot to find go-go in D.C. is the Metro PCS outlet at the corner of Seventh Street and Florida Avenue NW. The cellphone store has been cranking the city's signature sound since 1995, doubling as a market for new releases to boot.

The penumbra of funk used to extend across Seventh Street — visually, not just sonically. In years gone by, photographers and promoters used the parking lot in front of the former CVS across Seventh to set up giant colorful paintings as backdrops for photos. For the club photographers who shot them, these paintings turned the block into a live portrait studio.

Artist Larry Cook was one of them: He worked as a club photographer from 2007 to 2013, setting up public photo booths just like the ones that held down the scene in the CVS parking lot. Since then, he's scouted the DMV to collect these vibrant backdrops, which he uses for his studio work.

For a new project, Cook linked up with Dartmouth ethnomusicologist Allie Martin, whose work on sonic culture is at the heart of the Don't Mute D.C. movement. Their resulting collaboration — on view in "Tradewinds" at Stable Arts, an artists' studio building and exhibition space in Eckington — is a portrait of the city, albeit one that viewers might not recognize at first glance as portraiture.

Along with shows at Transformer, Washington Project for the Arts and the National Portrait Gallery, it's one of several fall exhibitions in which Black artists engage the act of portraiture. These artists showcase new and challenging ways of capturing themselves or others, using text, performance and installation — and rarely hewing to old expectations of the genre.

“Tradewinds” captures the light and sounds on the periphery of the go-go experience in D.C. “The City Is the Club Is the City” (2022), Martin’s installation, includes a boombox and scattered CDs by the likes of Chuck Brown and Rare Essence. Glass tiles on the floor resemble a mirrored dance floor. Along with these reflective, prismatic surfaces, her piece also includes soundscapes: field recordings taken at the corner of Seventh and Florida that capture the patter of traffic and conversation along with go-go drums. She’s holding a mirror up to the city.

Cook uses the club backdrops he treasures in a couple of ways. Several portraits show people posing in front of these paintings of hot cars or urban skylines. But Cook has obliterated the individuals in the photos, bedazzling the surface of his photos with rhinestones until the figures disappear. Details of the subject sitting for “And Another One” (2022) threaten to emerge from beneath Cook’s sparkling cocoon — the stripe on his sweater, logo on his ball cap, brand of his trainers — without ever fully materializing.

In “Untitled” (2022), Cook couples checkered tiles on the floor (a recurring motif) with a vinyl wall print of a painted beach backdrop. Over this club scene, he’s tacked up snapshots from his personal archive: images on which he’s applied still more rhinestones, obscuring the faces in his portraits. The artist is diving deep into ideas about surface and re-photography, borrowing traditions from the city for his exploration of his medium.

“Commemorative Strands,” a solo exhibition by Artise Fletcher at Transformer, looks at Black culture by combining photography with sculpture. Fletcher works with hair — specifically, synthetic Kanekalon fiber used for hair extensions and weaves — and all the expectations that come with it. She braids this material into objects, among them “Status Symbol” (2022), a tiered, hanging mobile, and a series of tapestries with photographs attached.

Fletcher’s works tackle the social conventions associated with hair traditions for African American women: A model who experiences baldness associated with alopecia appears in her photos. Fletcher brings something else to these portraits. Her synthetic-hair tapestries borrow from textile traditions by female weavers in Peru, elevating art forms across cultural borders linked by the special status they share in craft and heritage.

“Commemorative Strands” finds Fletcher looking outward, for a Pan-American and Pan-African perspective; her works point to history and tradition. “Tradewinds” offers a portrait of a community of Black Washingtonians. Another Black portraiture exhibit, Washington Project for the Arts’ “Being/Becoming,” takes a third tack, drawing deep from the well of the self for radical forms of expression.

Curated by performance artist Yacine Tilala Fall, “Being/Becoming” gathers works by five Black women and nonbinary artists. The presentation is intimate, warm and dark, like a black box theater or library study nook, giving videos in particular the opportunity to shine.

“Mindset — Pura Vida” (2022) by Renee Cox is the most direct portrait, and maybe the most transfixing. This short loop of video looks like a hologram: a static image with a false sense of depth that appears to shift in its orientation with the viewer. The artist’s nude self-portrait occupies an eerie spatial realm, made all the more mystical for being not a simple optical illusion but a deliberate light-bending production. Marcelline Mandeng Nken’s “Floodgate” (2022) is another trippy video work, one that explodes with cascading sequences of found footage, anime clips, neon animation and original electronic dance music. These sequences wash over the viewer, building up to a hypnotic Afrofuturist portrait.

Works by Muse Dodd and Dominique Duroseau are, by contrast, restrained and searching. Dodd's video piece juxtaposes kaleidoscopic self-portraits with sequences of flowing water, a literal representation of gender fluidity. Over this, the artist intones a kind of spoken-word poem, describing the feeling of being "genderless and genderful." Duroseau's piece also features text: part poetry, part manifesto, inscribed in black letters on black paper covered with black ink and paint. Hefty, oversized, rough-edged pages feel almost like ecclesiastical passages, crossing the line from writing to sculpture.

For "Being/Becoming," Holly Bass contributes "Heavy" (2022), a video that captures the artist's weightlifting routine. A barbell and weight plates complete the installation. This piece is a personal, biographical sketch that makes sense in context with her performances, in which she often plays a kind of archetypal narrator. For Bass, dead-lifting 170 pounds isn't a boast but a professional obligation: Her taxing endurance performances require strict body training.

"Heavy" could be an accompaniment to "American Woman" (2021), a stressful and sardonic video that's on view at the National Portrait Gallery, part of the museum's triennial portrait competition. For this piece — which Bass performed live at the museum in September — she dances for seven hours straight to spoken word and songs by noted Black female writers, entertainers, poets and others. Bass goes for it, pushing her body as much for verse by Lucille Clifton ("Come celebrate with me that every day something has tried to kill me and has failed") as for a disco crossover hit by Donna Summer ("She Works Hard for the Money").

"American Woman" gives a fourth perspective on Black portraiture, alongside community, tradition and experimental form: a legacy of strength.

**If you go**

## **Artise Fletcher: Commemorative Strands**

Transformer, 1404 P St. NW. 202-483-1102. [transformerdc.org](http://transformerdc.org). Through Oct. 22.

## **Tradewinds**

Stable Arts, 336 Randolph Pl. NE. 202-953-9559. [stablearts.org](http://stablearts.org). Through Nov. 4.

## **Being/Becoming: The Act of Portraiture**

Washington Project for the Arts. 2124 Eighth St. NW. 202-234-7103. [wpadc.org](http://wpadc.org). Through Nov. 12.

## **The Outwin 2022: American Portraiture Today**

National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and G streets NW. [npg.si.edu](http://npg.si.edu). Through Feb. 26.

*Admission to all shows is free.*