



## conversation

SARAH LEWIS:

Deborah Roberts, the great Deborah Roberts, it is a thrill to be with you, truly an honor. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you about your work.

DEBORAH ROBERTS:

Well, thank you for agreeing to speak to me about this book and my practice in general.

SL: Of course. I'd like to begin with a question. I'm very mindful of your state of transformation. In an interview with Amy Sherald and Teka Selman, you spoke about how you could see your work fracturing.<sup>1</sup> You reflected on the change in your process when you moved from Austin to Syracuse. And I wonder, how would you describe the transformation in your work today?

DR: One of the things I've always done was let the work move itself. I don't try to hold onto it or feel some sort of loyalty to wherever the work was and that it had to stay there.

You're right, when I moved to Syracuse, it was a whole different atmosphere. There's a multitude of things that we could talk about when we talk about Blackness, Black sexuality, Black womanhood, and Black childhood. So, having the work fracturing the way that it did really lends itself to talking about being a child and what it's like to be treated as an adult—being a Black woman in America and around the world—and to be subject to disrespect.

So, when you're trying to get all of that, that's a big basket, and you're trying to tote it around, and sometimes you can't do it with just one image. And mine happened by accident, to be honest. I was working on my childhood face, and I had a series of other things on the table, you know how you push the paper down and it blows the wind up. So, the work looked that way, and I saw it and I said, "What if I put this here and put this there?" And literature—I always talk about that—literature was the missing component of my work—all this time, I didn't know that. When I was at Syracuse, I started taking graduate courses in African and African American studies, and it just blew my mind. It was the thing that I needed, and I didn't know it.

SL: We're going to speak a bit more about language and literature. It's really exciting to hear you say that. But first, let me jump to a question that will then get us to the heart of some of what you laid out. As I see it, at the moment, there is a profound convergence regarding your work, given the focus on Black girlhood studies, childhood studies, racial justice, and the embrace and energy of your extraordinary practice. One example was the timing of the opening of your show, *I'm*, at The Contemporary Austin and the media attention on an incident in Rochester, New York, when a girl, who was nine years old, ended up in handcuffs after her mother called the police for help in a domestic disturbance.

And there she was, at nine years old, being threatened with and then sprayed with pepper spray. She was told by the police officer that she was acting like a child when she is one. Claudine Gay, now the first Black woman to be president of Harvard University, made it plain at the start of Vision & Justice, the convening I organized, that "Black girls need less nurturing, less protection, less support, less comfort. The research shows that these beliefs are widely held by adults in the United States." The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and other places have documented this. Your work is animated by this, I would imagine. Does this convergence inspire your compositions and the energy of your practice, or does the lack of our discussion of it inspire your urgency with the work?

DR: I think, to some degree, both. Hearing about that Rochester story, I did work on that because I thought it was horrific. She was having a mental issue that day. She cried for her father. They would not let the father come and minister love and support to her to calm her down. That whole story is gruesome. They even said they could have done more, and no one stepped in to say, "Well, maybe this is a child having a mental issue," or "Maybe she's just having a meltdown that day." Children do that, but Black children are not given the benefit of the doubt. They don't see their children in Black children; they don't see their nieces and nephews and sons and daughters, so they tend to treat them just as the "other." I think it was in the *Washington Post* that they did a story about young Black girls being over sexualized, that they didn't need any care or attention, and that they entered puberty earlier than white girls. All these things were very negative in the way they were written. We know this to be true too—sometimes because of our diet, sometimes because there are more responsibilities put on young Black families and young Black children because both parents are working or it's a single-parent house. Just because I seem to be mature doesn't make me mature, and that is the problem that exists, I think, all over the world when you talk about Black children. Not to move the subject, but in England with Child Q and that little girl that seemingly smelled like weed. For them to take her out of the class, strip her on her menstrual cycle—she even told them she was on her menstrual cycle—they did not care.

Two male police officers, one female teacher, and either a principal or vice principal were in that room and made her go take off her clothes. How humiliating is that? First, I don't think that would ever happen in the United States. I think we would still be marching in the streets, calling for people's heads. But the humiliation of children—it seems so easy for them to do. There's also another story out of Rochester. A little kid stole some Doritos, and they chased him down in two squad cars, pulled him off his bicycle, and handcuffed him. He's nine years old, and he stole Doritos. That type of criminalization and sexualization of young kids, I think all those things are very important. We don't talk about it enough when things happen—for example, a thirteen-year-old boy was just killed five weeks ago. The neighbor shot him in the street and drove off, shot him several times in the back.

SL: Yes. As you say so clearly and rightly, we don't talk about it enough. Exactly. Your work can create and force a productive stillness and an arena for potential engagement around these fatal conditions.

DR: Yes.

SL: There are lots of ways we could go in this direction. I want to speak about your choice to go to collage to create those conversations. I also want to speak about your choice of figurative stance and imagery. But perhaps we could begin with the choice of collage.

Jarvis Givens, a colleague of mine who is engaged with your practice, an extraordinary scholar of education, has the same question I do. He asks—and I'm going to honor his voice because I'd like to honor many as we speak together—what does collage, as a particular art form, allow you to do with your renderings of Black youth, their stories and experiences that may not be possible, or are perhaps less effective with other forms?

DR: Right. Well, we could paint millions of pictures of innocent little Black kids, and people say, "Oh, he's cute. Oh, let me grab my purse." One of the things that I felt collage did for my practice and what I wanted to say is that it created pathways to talk about these issues. When I go to do research and am looking for faces, I look for the most innocent face I can find. That is the base of everything. It's the face that shows the most love. And then I destroy it because I think that society destroys that face. It changes the direction in some



of these children's lives, by the way they are treated or mistreated. One of the things that happens in the cutting, and the pasting, and the gluing is trying to make this person whole.

I try not to make really monstrous faces, and even when I do it, I have to pull back because I think that's what people see when they see Black children. I can't participate in that. So, there's hopefully still love and the blending of the faces, but also there's brutality in the cutting and the sticking and the piecing. Collage helps me deliver the message that I'm trying to deliver. It is the medicine that will cure us one day, hopefully. It's my way of saying *look for the faces*. Look for the one face that you can connect to in the multitude of faces. When you find that humanity, then you find your own humanity and maybe treat this person the same as you would like to be treated; don't other them. Collage has also been the key when I do big hands or feet or things like that; sometimes I mix up boys and girls because our bodies are different, more muscular at times, just for our general makeup—doesn't mean that I can carry the problems of the world at eight years old. Collage helped me to talk about the lack of fathers sometimes in girls' lives or that we must have a man's power to exist in this country and this world. In all those things, collage has been a doorway for me.

SL: Brilliant. Yes. To continue with this idea, I wanted to extend the conversation to thinking about what seems to resolve each image, and that is a figurative stance, a standing in which you have the individuals you create and conjure take up space. I'm thinking about this in connection to your response to the "power stance" in the *Black Dolls* commission at the New-York Historical Society. You noted in your conversation with Aruna D'Souza that they shared this posture with your work.<sup>2</sup> Can you describe the intention behind that compositional declaration?

DR: One of the things I noticed, as I think of all Black people, especially Black girls, is that if we don't plant ourselves early and if we're not rooted in our stance, then we're going to get bulldozed over. We're just going to get run over. And it starts so early. Sometimes you have to take those stances at eight, nine, ten. Other little children, they don't have to do that. You can have three little eight-year-old Black girls screaming, running, smiling with their mouths, talking loudly, and people say they're making trouble. They're trying to attract boys. All the stereotypes. Then we have to defend that. "No mom, I was just standing there playing with my friend." "No mom, we are just having fun. I don't know what they're talking about." "No, mom, my dress isn't short, or my

pants, or my earrings, or my hair, my braids..." All of the things that we have to talk about so early—we have to take on those stances.

So, when I make those power stances in my work, I'm talking about, "Okay, I'm planted." When I started to couch my argument and this little girl, Black girlhood, I kept saying, "Well, when do the gloves come on?" That was my first thing, and that's how the work evolved—putting on those red gloves, gold gloves, black gloves. I mean, when do those come on? And I kept saying, at maybe fifteen, maybe sixteen, we have to start defending ourselves. That's why I started to make girls—you can see them more with their legs open in the sense that they're standing, they're planted, and they're ready to take on. When do you get to be a child and grow up and just chase butterflies and no one cares, or put on a little hat and go and work in the garden and no one cares? They think that's so adorable. But a little Black girl going doing that, well, she's up to trouble. What is she doing? A little Black boy wants to run and chase butterflies. Well, he's stealing—the adjectives and the descriptions are so very different. One of the things I'm trying to do in the work is to show that, but we both know that if you punch people in the face, they tend not to listen to what you're saying. I mean, believe me, I want to, but what I decided to do with the colors in the work—the patterns, the stripes, the flowers—is to show the beauty that is there.

Sometimes people say, "Oh, I just love the clothing. I love this and that." Well, okay, that's the honey; the medicine's in the face, the medicine's in the gestures, the medicine you're going to unpack later when you get it home. "Well, I didn't see that." Yeah, you didn't see Baldwin's eye in there. He said, "I see you." You didn't see Rosa Park's hands in there, and her booking number, it's there. You didn't see Muhammad Ali; he was the greatest, but he also didn't want to go to war. You don't see all those things that exist in the work because you're so busy looking at the patterns and the dresses and the little shoes on their feet and how fun it is. It's not fun. It never was fun. So that's the work.

SL: One of the ways I think collage functions for your work is that it lets us see the creation of any Black individual as a body in the United States of America as a kind of ground. And I'm thinking about one image of yours, *The Front Lines* [P. 194] from 2018. I'd like to discuss it, if we may. I see multiple sets of hands invading one bodily space. It's as if we're presented with the world he has to contend with in order to maintain the crown you've placed on his head. Is that in part what you're asking the viewer to understand as we read this form?

DR: Right. Yeah, it's this idea that we are born on the front lines, especially Black men. And so, when I did that piece, I was really trying to abstract it a bit more. That's why his hands are looking up on the white hand. Until you're about six years old, everybody puts a hand on a little bald boy's head, then that hand becomes something other. They start to stop you. "You can't do this; you can't do that." And he's looking up. That's the fist that goes across, which means that I have my own sense of power, of who I want to be, but it's not a hand of violence. It is not an open hand. It's that it's there if I need it.

And then you have the crown that's been placed on his head; our children never have that crown placed on their heads. We're never put on a pedestal and told we're okay the way we are right now. Let us grow into something. Let's figure out who you want to be. When I talk about mass incarceration, all the stripes are talking about that, that privatized prisons hold a high percentage of Black and Brown people. And so, all these things added up together—this little boy is already on the front line. That's why I said the adultification of Black children comes so very early. All of those things are applied to him, and he's just looking up. I love that face; it's a beautiful face, a little boy.

SL: So much of your work, Deborah, as Kirsten Pai Buick and Robin Bernstein might term it, really counters many of the life scripts of Black childhood. I want to transition to talking about literature and text in your work and to continue this theme of the script. I wonder if we can unpack a work together?

DR: Okay.

SL: So, it'll be *La'Condrea is a Noun* (2020) [P. 227] if that's alright. There's a review that focuses on it and begins with a quote from you: "There's a lot here to unpack if you're willing to do the work."<sup>3</sup> So, I want us to do that work together with this piece. For the reader, we have the work floating, yet grounded, at the bottom of the page, and "is a Noun" is crossed out with a wavy red line, and that act accentuates the name itself. I'd love to hear more about what inspired the compositional focus and your spatial decisions with this piece.

DR: Right. Well, the idea, when you think of a person named La'Condrea, you don't think of a white person. The image that comes to your mind—and that's why text plays such a big role in my practice—is that it's visual, just by saying that name, you automatically see a Black person. It's just not me because I

talk to white people, and they see a Black person too. What they think is a “ghetto person.” Very loud, hoop earrings, tennis shoes, out there yelling and screaming, having three children. And I was really surprised when I asked people, “What do you think of that name?” I told them to be honest because our friendship is not going to be changed by it (even though it was). To hear their description—it was like, this is a person, and it is not anything that you described here. You don’t know that. That’s a stereotype.

One of the things when I started doing the text works was that I did want to talk about people’s biases and not the visual bias of—you could see a Black person—but what they have stored away. They have that stored-away unconscious or sometimes conscious bias, and how to draw that out because people can hide when they look at the picture, and they can describe it and say, “Oh, blah, blah, blah.” But when you look at text and have to read that text and to visualize what you think that is, that’s when you get to the core of what the problem is that we have to deal with every day. That was the purpose of doing the text work, especially that one. She’s floating around, and her name, by Webster’s idea of the dictionary, is incorrect. It’s something foreign. It has to be checked and rechecked. So, the red squiggly line is talking about that.

The white space is that whiteness, is living in a white society when you’re a minority, and she exists there, which is dark, bold, black letters in that space, and nothing else around it. It’s just there for you to absorb, to take in, and to figure out what’s happening in this work. I have a lot of people ask me about that work. Sometimes I don’t even want to talk about it. I said, “What do you think?” And they’re just lost, and then I have to break it down. And then they said, “Okay, yeah, yeah, I understand what you’re talking about.” That’s why I did an installation full of names and a mirror. I wanted people to read those names and see their face—it helped you to see what’s going on when some white person in the line, if you don’t do something, they’ll call you, Shamika. “Okay, Shamika, let’s go.” I mean, what is that about? I’m trying to have lots of conversations in my art. I hope not too many.

- SL: It’s critical work. You’re really extending the discourse and practice of a Sylvia Wynter who looked at the inhumanity of classification systems, the “grammarians” she would call society in her landmark piece, “No Humans Involved.” There it is, the lack of humanity accorded to life based upon the perception of a name indicating a world. All of this feels urgent and necessary, and it is such a critical part of why I think your text-based practice is important to understand.



DR: Right. Well, it's this idea of how, when you get to the text, especially the naming—the first act of freed people was naming. Naming your child what you wanted to name them. And then as it grew, out of American names came Black names, Black-sounding names, and that is so powerful. That is uniquely American.

It's like Rockefeller—those names, they don't carry the same classification, class structure, but those names are born from America, living in America, rooted, uprooted from your culture, planted here, and then “freed,” and that's in quotations, and then allowed to seemingly be free by naming. And then you give your child a wonderful name, a unique name, and they are discriminated against. They have to put their initials down to apply for a job. Or you say the name, and someone said, “Well, how do you say that?” But they can say any other foreign name. “But how do you say that? What does that mean?” It's awful.

SL: Mm-hmm. And so many of your works innovate with text as an artistic medium. One person I want to bring into the conversation here is one of my students, Kéla Jackson, a brilliant doctoral candidate at Harvard, studying history of art and architecture, an alum of Spelman, and one of my advisees. She's interested in the evolving role of language in your practice. So, her question for you, and I have it as well, is when considering text and literature in your practice, what possibilities does the incorporation of language offer for your representations of and interrogations of Black girlhood? Beyond what we've discussed, working within this complex lineage of collage, how do you negotiate these various histories? Are there other influences in terms of collage-based practices that you are pushing off of and incorporating into your own?

DR: Well, it's so weird being a Black woman and living in America, thinking about German Dadaism and how Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch, and all those people whose work talked about text. It was a way of finding agency to gain power. And so, when I look back on those practices and when people see the reference to Bearden in my work, I say *look further*.

SL: Look further. Exactly.

DR: Yeah. Go back a little bit more and see how the layering of names, the fraction of text, and having people sit there to figure out what's happening in the work, that's what I want from my work. Now flash forward to the idea of Colin

Kaepernick and taking a knee, the gesture of taking a knee. And no words, just an image of someone kneeling, and the power of that. So, when literature made its way into my work—because I honestly was trying to do text in the work—it just would fall apart. It didn't have any structure, any base. And I would get these types of comments: "That's a beautiful picture. I wish you wouldn't have put the text in it." So, I realized that they needed to be two separate things in order to work.

And then I had to realize that scholarship was so very important. I talk about Cornel West because he and his books were just so important in the beginning stages of my development as an adult artist. He's changed somewhat a little bit. When he did the Black sexualized body and the essay on Horace Pippin and the work, I finally saw, okay, this is what he's talking about in the work. This is what I'm trying to get to. And so, when I was doing the text-based work, I said, you know what? It has its own voice, and you can do something like *over, under, through, backwards, twist, turn, oil, gather*, and that could be you braiding hair. So, if I can do enough of that and repeat to start again, that's telling me, okay, she's doing braids. So, you can visualize braids without me actually having to show you a picture of somebody getting their hair braided.

That's the power of literature that I think exists in my work. I want to merge the two in a way that people can understand. The only thing about the literature with me and my practice is that my life has to be quiet in order for it to make sense. And in the last five years, it has not been quiet. So, I've only added a few text-based works in the last year. There's more to be done, but I need to find quiet spaces to do it because it takes more time. The visual part of it, I'm not saying it's easy, but it's more comfortable. Getting people to understand—and you know this as a writer—with a few words, and to have them draw a picture from that, you need them to draw the picture. You need them to come to the conclusion. I can collage a thousand words, but you could just do one word, and you can draw millions of faces on that one word.

SL: I'd like to keep with this idea of space, actually. The white space of the compositions, that's a critical space that Eddie Chambers has described as a space for the "restoring of childhood to Black children." I love this. Your decision to create this uniform template, does it approximate that, the creation of a potential arena for reading bodies anew, for restoring a sense of agency to Black childhood? Is there another intention there?

DR: I think that's important, but for me, when I did the white space, it was under the white gaze. I did not want anything other than whiteness showing in the back. It's different with the black paintings now. If we want to take over the narrative in our lives and our histories and also in our futures—which we want for Black children especially—then we have to break through the white space. And sometimes the white space is all encompassing. It just takes over.

When we were in the midst of COVID, I noticed that the works were getting bigger, and it felt like there no longer needed to be the white to take up all the space. The bodies became bigger, heroic, stronger, able to lift their own voice without the white gaze—not only without it, they didn't care if it existed. And so, I think early on, when I moved the images around, it was as if we were trying to find our space within the white space, and I think that doesn't happen as much anymore in the work. I think the white space is now chasing us because the works are so much bigger. And so, the white space was so very important, but I don't think it's as necessary as it was at the beginning.

SL: I see. Yes.

DR: It's just once you—and I'm talking about the work at this point—mature, just as a child when mom did everything and then you realize, "Hey, I can cut my own sandwich in half." Or you have your own independence and you can start choosing your clothes and you can walk to the store and back. I think that's what happened within the work. The white space was just the pressure of that all the time in our faces, and I think now I don't feel that anymore. I think the work is saying, "Yeah, it exists. It's always going to exist. We're minorities in America." But it's there. I know it's there, but it's not everything. I think that's what the work is doing now.

SL: Yeah. There was one question I was going to ask about, and this was also one that Jarvis Givens had. What about Black students themselves is pertinent in this work here? What do you hope young people might see in your representations of their collective experiences? And I think you just answered it, right?

DR: Yeah. I don't have any children. I hate the idea that somehow our children are running behind, always. Start off behind, can't catch up. And if you catch up, they still marginalize what you're doing. They marginalize your success because at the end of the day, you're still Black. And I try to humanize those faces as much as possible, to break through some barriers, and maybe someone won't treat someone negatively. That's what I hope. That's my goal for the work. It may not pan out for another 150 years, but I hope that's there.

I hope that's allowed to exist. When I hear stories of Black people being murdered or children being mistreated, it really hurts my heart about that. So, one of the things I hope—through representation and having their work at the museums—is having it where little Black children can come and see it. I remember at a show in LA, Scott Uzzell, the CEO of Converse, brought his family. He had a little girl, and I think she's about three or four, and they walk in there, and they're saying, "Don't touch it. Don't touch anything. Don't touch, don't touch, don't touch." And the little girl, she speeds off to this piece I have with the hands raised. And she said, "This is me. This is me." Man, it was so powerful. That's what I want.

She said, "That's me." And, of course, it wasn't, but she saw herself in that stance, that power stance with the hand raised with the peace sign. She did a little peace sign, and it was so great because that's what you want. You want them in spaces, white spaces—and I mean the box of the white space—you want them to see themselves, and they're in a power position, not in a subservient position, not as an afterthought but the prominent piece, the victorious piece, the strong piece in the work. And that's what our children need to see. They need to see more of that, not just from me—the figures that you see when you look at Kerry James Marshall and when we talk about Amy Sherald and the photos of Dawoud Bey. You could just be walking down the street in some badass clothes, and that's power, that's clean, especially in Harlem. It's just amazing.

SL: We're speaking about representational justice as I term it, and I'm also getting really full talking to you because I'm remembering a moment in which I had that exact experience in a museum as a very young girl out with my parents. We happened to be at the Museum of Modern on a day when Jacob Lawrence was in the galleries.

DR: Oh, wow. Beautiful.

SL: And somehow, I mean, bless my parents, they gave me a sense of who he was enough for me to really take in what happened next. He was in one gallery talking to a small group, but he saw us, probably one of the only Black families in the museum, the galleries, that day decades ago. And I'll never forget the way he looked just right at me and asked me what I thought of the works. In this moment, I understood that there was power in the way an image could shift your notion of what was possible.

DR: Exactly.

SL: Right. So here I am now talking to you in this lineage. It's powerful for me and a symbol of the baton that you carry, in addition to, of course, the work of many of your colleagues and everyone else who you're inspired by. The work of the arts and for justice.

DR: Yeah. People always ask me how it feels to be a successful artist. I say I was always a successful artist, maybe not monetarily, but in the sense of promoting Blackness and equal justice, and that we're beautiful people. I mean, most forgiving, the most forgiving.

SL: So gracious.

DR: Yes. And people don't give us credit for that. I'm telling you, they don't give us enough credit for forgiving.

SL: Grace, the grace.

DR: I know.

SL: The mercy.

DR: I know, I know.

SL: Yes. Oh, my dear. My goodness. Well, to close, if we must, I wonder what has you excited about the future direction of your practice?

DR: Well, the thing is, the work is shifting again, and I'm a little apprehensive because I've been poor, and so you don't really want the work to shift too much. But I think, like I said in the beginning, if you believe in the practice and what the practice is doing, it's taking you down a road. It might take you down a crazy road, but most likely it's taking you to a place where you need to move the work. And it's little, it's abstracting a little bit, and I decided to keep going with it, go down the road with it and see where it's going to take me. That's also exciting and terrifying at the same time because if you worry—and I shouldn't—about what people think of the work, and what way they view the work, then it could be that they're still not...seeing the idea.



People are going to be whoever they want to be, but I still don't think people see it. They don't see the unconscious bias of race. I write racism, and maybe I'll have to fracture it up. Maybe I have to make it more monstrous. I don't want to, but maybe that's the shock value that people need. I think we get too much of that. So, I'm going to, for now, just keep going through the abstract notion of the work and see where that takes me, and if it still is pushing me toward being more monstrous in my presentation of my faces, then I'm going to do that.

SL: Well, gratefully, the conditions of society, the way in which race has changed sight in the United States, means that you're forever going to have inspiration to create more work.

DR: Right. I know. That field is never empty. There is always room to plow that field. I know.

SL: Yes, and I think we are so fortunate to have you as this leading practitioner, offering new models, creating new ways forward.

#### NOTES

1. Amy Sherald, Deborah Roberts, and Teak Selman, "Now We Can Deal with the Nuances of Who We Are," *Southern Cultures*, 2020, <https://www.southerncultures.org/article/now-we-can-deal-with-the-nuances-of-who-we-are/>.

2. Aruna D'Souza, "Picturing Black Childhood: An Artist's Journey," *The New York Times*, Feb. 24, 2022, updated March 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/arts/design/black-childhood-deborah-roberts-art-dolls.html>.

3. Colony Little, "Deborah Roberts's Intricate and Thoughtful Depictions of Black Childhood," *Hyperallergic*, May 3, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/638448/deborah-roberts-interview-thoughtful-depictions-of-black-childhood/>.