

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

What It Means to Dream Avant-Garde

To Dream Avant-Garde acknowledges the artistic innovators of today — those who push the cultural status quo in their work.



Sarah Rose Sharp November 9, 2018



To Dream Avant-Garde at Hammond Harkins, installation view (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

COLUMBUS, Ohio — There are at least two schools of thought around notions of the *avant-garde*. One defines it narrowly as linked to the period of modernism in contemporary art, from the late 19th century into the mid-20th century, while another associates it more broadly by

the earmark of vanguardism — that is to say, a tendency to push the cultural status quo. Put another way: one version casts the *avant-garde* as a fixed canon, to which entry is permanently closed. The other considers it a kind of ongoing party, which any like-minded and counter-cultural artist may join.

As a number of the artists participating in *To Dream Avant-Garde*, curated by [Alteronce Gumby](#) at Hammond Harkins Galleries, are engaged in rather exciting and extremely current practices, we can assume the *avant-garde* in this case represents the latter view, rather than the former. The show includes work by young guns like [Aaron Fowler](#) and [Tariku Shiferaw](#), as well as that of long-established practitioners like [Faith Ringgold](#), who grew up in Harlem on the heels of the Harlem Renaissance — the centennial of which is being celebrated citywide in Columbus this year. *To Dream Avant-Garde* is Hammond Harkins's piece of dedicated programming within *I, Too Sing America: The Harlem Renaissance at 100*, and unsurprisingly, every featured artist and participant is reflective of the collective flourishing of artists of color in the mainstream, due in part to the influence of that movement.



Three works by Lucia Hierro, installation view



One in a series of four hanging works by Leslie Jimenez, detail view

“As an acknowledgment to those innovators, who were also dreamers of an American identity and country to call their own,” wrote Gumby in his curatorial statement, “the artists in this exhibition display a survey of ideas, intention and materials that invoke the legacy and culture of Harlem.”

Through a series of eclectic choices, Gumby extends his cohort beyond a sense of kinship — which is ultimately a compulsory kind of relationship — into an air of riffing and conversation more characteristic of friendship. From [Lucia Hierro's](#) digital print collages mounted on felt pillow-like canvases that were

expressly forbidden from being hung on walls, to a partition by [Eric N. Mack](#), comprised of pegboard panels embellished with rope and acrylic, to a series

of hanging blown-glass ornaments containing evocative hand-stitched iconography by [Leslie Jimenez](#), and [Tschabalala Self](#)'s loose, figurative study of cans of incense, there is a feel of abstraction on the edges of everyday objects. This kind of culture-bending is, arguably, owed its own chapter within the mapping of the *avant-garde*, a kind of remaking and customization of Duchampian readymades; a different approach to cultivating the stuff of life to the stuff of art.



Eric N. Mack, "Earliest Partition," installation view



Hugh Hayden, "23andMe," installation view

Other works tap and warp cultural history more directly, like [Hugh Hayden](#)'s carved wooden statuette in the style of vintage statuary of Burkina Faso and other African traditions; one of Fowler's eye-catching multimedia works that resizes and re-contextualizes hip-hop style bling as a giant hanging pendant; and of course, Ringgold's jazz and dancehall scenes, rendered quilt-like on canvas with pieced fabric borders. Perhaps here, the *avant-garde* does not coalesce around either style or subject as artifacts of culture, but in terms of their definition and placement within the field of fine art. One might argue that

the true vanguardism at work is the centralization of the art and curatorial practices of all these artists of color, without explicit emphasis on the role of race in their work. Race and identity is inevitably particulate of the ideas and process, but hearteningly, not the whole or unifying truth at hand in this exhibition.

Even among this group of *avant-garde* dreamers, there are a few who dared to dream a little more wildly. A pair of portraits offer the show some of its most indefinable moments — one by



Tschabalala Self, "Incense Study," detail view

David Shrobe, and the other by Shiferaw. Shrobe's choppy, conglomerate-material portraits literally graft fragments of art history to contemporary images and materials, carving a place for his subjects out of a canon from which they have been continually excluded. Shiferaw, with a new work, "Rose in Harlem (Teyana Taylor)," pushes the envelope a little more, presenting a kind of glossy-black, dimensional canvas, that reveals, within its fathomless depths, a series of horizontal line-blocks. It is Shiferaw's way to reference

recording artists and albums in his works, but the direct correlation between the piece and its titular inspiration is not overtly apparent. But then, the image is arresting, and so is the song, and the potential for them to inform each other in the life of the artist or the mind of the critic seems to be a small ask from a playing field as vast and open as the type of *avant-garde* that allows itself to continue to dream.



David Shrobe, "Double Jointed," installation view

To Dream Avant-Garde, *curated by Alteronce Gumby*, continues at Hammond Harkins Galleries through November 11.

