

## deborah roberts and niki de saint phalle

American artist Deborah Roberts presented her first exhibition in France at Galerie Mitterrand in Paris. Entitled *Deborah Roberts and Niki de Saint Phalle: The Conversation Continues*, the exhibition presents a new series of paintings by the artist in dialogue with sculptures and works on paper by Niki de Saint Phalle. Deborah Roberts was born in Austin in 1962. As an African-American, she places racial identity and inequality at the heart of her work. In her richly layered and detailed collages, the artist includes references to the lack of representation of Black people in art history, as well as a deconstruction of the conventional ideal of beauty, which has often failed to include Black women in the past. The artist is also directly associated with current social protest movements such as *Black Lives Matter*. The social background of Saint Phalle's work has always focused on taking a firm stand against a gendered society and the omnipresent patriarchy. As it interweaves social causes and personal histories, the exhibition presents this unique conversation between Roberts and Saint Phalle in an original light.

interview armelle leturcq photography manuel obadia-wills

# a dialogue



Deborah Roberts, *Let Your Root Feed Your Crown*,  
2023, Mixed media on canvas,  
H 177.8 x 177.8cm, H 70 x 70in, Unique.  
© Deborah Roberts.  
Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand.



ARMELLE LETURCO Is this the first time you have exhibited in Paris?

DEBORAH ROBERTS Yes, I'm so excited. I came in 2009 after I finished six weeks at the Pont-Aven School of Contemporary Art and spent two weeks in Paris, but I ran out of money! I loved just walking around the streets. It was so great: the food, everything! But then I had to change my ticket because I couldn't go two weeks without a full meal! (*laughs*) So I came home in the end, but I loved it. It was wonderful.

AL Where did the idea come from to pair your pieces, created in dialogue with the work of Picasso, with works by Niki de Saint Phalle?

DR When the idea to pair us for the show came about, I was already in "conversation" with Picasso, so to speak, with it being the fiftieth anniversary of his death. I had been thinking about the colors and images from around 1900 to 1910, which we now refer to as "Picasso's Negro Period", and I started creating works based on that. I still have people tell me that it's a strange period of

his work and an odd pairing for me. But when you're feminist and you have feminist ideas of being seen as equal, it's a conversation that naturally ventures into race as well.

AL Did you already know which works by Niki de Saint Phalle would be exhibited when you started working on the show?

DR No, it was strictly up to the gallery to pair the works. And I think they have paired a lot of work perfectly. I love the whole thing.

AL It's interesting to see how the colors and patterns of the clothes work together. Maybe that's why the gallery had the idea to pair you with her in the first place?

DR Yes, and I have an inkling that Niki was working at the time with a lot of masculine men, and she had to really get in there and fight for her own identity and who she was and let her work speak for itself. I think there's something in that which is reminiscent of Blackness and Black women: sometimes we have to fight for our own identity and to have our place in society.

AL It's great because the gallery chose to exhibit the smaller

versions of the *Nanas*. You always see the *Nanas* in their larger formats, but it's nice to see them smaller here...

DR Yes, also it's a very small show. I didn't want to show more than ten works. I did eight in the end because I didn't want it to be overpowering. I wanted each work to breathe, to have that conversation with Niki's works, to have the space in between. So the fact that there are only three works in one of the rooms, for example, is perfect. It doesn't seem like it doesn't have enough. There can be a center, there can be conversation, there can be all of that. If you allow yourself to come in here and experience the art without just image after image, then I think it works well. There are only a few works per room, but it feels full.

AL It's full, but you can breathe. Are they all new pieces?

DR Yes, this is the first time I ever showed these works.

AL Can you tell us about your process? Do you begin with painting and then add other elements?

DR Sometimes I do the face first. I come up with the idea of the face and then I create the body to go with it. Other times I start working with the white space. For me the white space is just as important as the filled space. Some things are missing – her head, her ear or the side of her face – but they're also present.

AL Where do you get the original images?

DR The internet. I don't know what I will do now that there has been a new copyright ruling by the Supreme Court. It's going to be a little bit harder, so I may have to find models. But generally, I source a lot of faces on the internet and I merge them all together to make one face.

AL So the children are not recognizable?

DR Right. Sometimes I use celebrities, people from history. I use James Baldwin a lot. I love James Baldwin. I just use different faces that I feel will create the messages that I need to get across.

AL Collage is your main medium, but how did you discover it?

DR I'm a painter by nature. But I could not explain trauma in the way that I felt Black people were experiencing it just by painting and using one face. So when I went to graduate school at Syracuse, I started adding layers to that one face and suddenly that helped, because it wasn't this monolithic idea of one person. We have multiple experiences, multiple ways of being Black, multiple ways of living in the world. Every experience is a Black experience. So how could I express that just by painting? Collage opened the door for me. So did literature. Once literature became a part of the work, I realized that it was the missing element all along. Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Bell Hooks... All those writers became very important within the work. It was also the way they were talking about the body that allowed my work to be born.

AL The connection between literature and photomontage or collage is very interesting...

DR I love Kurt Schwitters, he had text coming out all over the place. When I would put text in my work people would often say, "That was a nice picture until you added the text." And I would smile because I know it belongs there. But I didn't have the tools, and literature opened the box so that I could create the tools to make it work and make sense. A great thing about working through Dadaism is that you can gain political agency through collage, its ways of expression and its ways of challenging things. It opened the door to challenge the status quo and to challenge ideas. That's what makes it so important.

AL There is something radical in collage. Painting is more personal or more classic in a certain way. But if you mix it with collage, it opens new doors and it's more political...

DR Right! And you can do so much with collage. I remember reading about an artist whose family was very wealthy, but he saw the underclass struggling. So how could he talk about that as a wealthy person? He used his collages as editorials to talk about things like that. That's what I use my work for.

AL Do you always feature children in your work?

DR Only children, yes, in all my work. But sometimes I use parts of adult faces in the collage, because I think people often treat Black children like adults, instead of children. They want them to make proper, wise decisions that they're incapable of making because they're children! And sometimes I put male faces with female faces for that very same reason. They want them to be more than they are capable of being. And so I try to make the argument that they are kids. If you see them as children, you allow them to exist as children. There have been plenty of studies, but we don't know why they treat Black children differently than their peers. I think it has to do with this idea that somehow, and I hate to use this word, they are seen as inferior and incapable of existing normally. That's how I feel it is in America anyway. I don't know why I live here sometimes. The freest I've ever felt was when I was in Paris. I had dreadlocks and I went to Pont-Aven in France, and I truly felt like a human there. The people in the town were so friendly. When I walked into places, they were smiling. I didn't have the impression of being followed around, or that people were thinking that

1. Deborah Roberts, *Numéro six*, 2023, Mixed media on paper, H 76.2 x 55.9cm, H 30 x 22in, Unique. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand.

2. Deborah Roberts, *Let Your Root Feed Your Crown*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, H 177.8 x 177.8cm, H 70 x 70in, Unique. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand. Niki de Saint Phalle, *Nana Blanche Dansante (Fontaine Type)*, 1971. Painted polyester resin on iron base, H 100 x 147 x 56cm, H 39 3/8 x 57 7/8 x 22in, Unique.

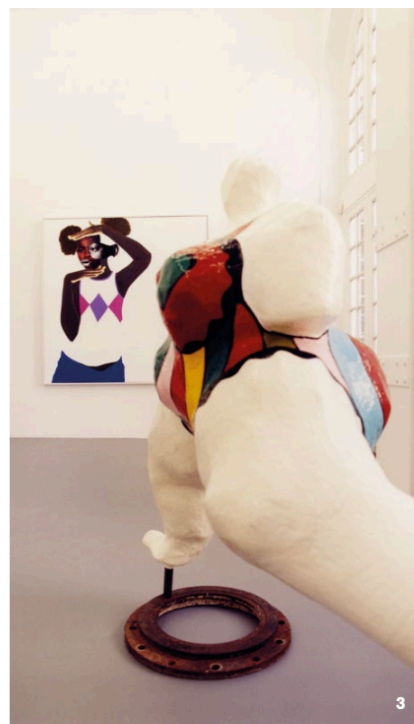
3. Deborah Roberts, *Holding Complexity*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, H 165.1 x 137.2cm, H 65 x 54in, Unique. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand.





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I was different. I had never felt that and it was so freeing. I mean, I was free! My hair suggested rebellion and defiance. But when I didn't feel that anymore, the hair didn't make sense, so I chopped it off. I like that my art is in a space where people can experience that kind of thing. Maybe they can see the love or friendliness within it. I hope they see that automatically and don't see anything negative in it. That's my goal for this show.

AL Your work is very connected with childhood, in fact. Does it come from your own experience?

DR Some of it. I come from a family of seven siblings, and sometimes it felt like no one really saw you unless you were sick. I was an artist, and so I was different. We were three sisters and my mom would make us all wear the same dress, just a different color. I started to hate it around the age of eight. I think that's why you see across all my work multiple patterns and multiple ways of dressing, more independence than you would see in real life. If you look at little girls everywhere around the world, they start to insert their own independence around that age. They want to wear tights with a ballerina dress or a T shirt. It's weird clothing. And I think that has to do with my childhood because I didn't understand why we all had to wear the same clothes.

AL Black children have typically always been very well dressed, which you can see in old photographs. It's interesting that Black people typically have better style than their White counterparts. Do you think this pressure to present such a perfect image comes from the pressure on the Black community to be perfect and to excel?

DR I don't know where it came from, but it's true! I want to promote the elements of that, but also the freedom to do it. I'm coming from an American history rooted in slavery, so in trying to explain some of the things that the work presents I wanted to have a worldview. Some of the things that I talk about in the work are from everyday life, like how you are treated in a store. But how can the work create not only a conversation, but also an understanding of where the anger comes from?

AL Do you think that society has changed in the way it looks at Black children in comparison to your generation?

DR Yes, in some parts it has. It's great and I love that. Some of the things that I couldn't do, they do. I always talk about Will Smith and his two children, Willow and Jaden. They are the freest Black children in the world. They are so free and it's so beautiful to experience that and something that you wish and hope for other children to experience. A world where you can walk into a room with your own presence. Not Black, just your presence. And that's what I hope to do with the works that I create. There is an underlying strength within the works and the children within them. I've been thinking about what draws people to the work and I think it's this sense of presence, even within a society that sometimes fails to see us.

AL Niki de Saint Phalle had a very traumatic childhood, as she was raped by her father at age eleven. There is a connection with childhood in the show, and there is also something very childlike in the *Nanas*...





Deborah Roberts, *Numéro trois*, 2023.  
Mixed media on paper,  
H 76.2 x 55.9cm, H 30 x 22in.  
Unique. © Deborah Roberts.  
Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand.

DR She had physical trauma, which is horrible and something I didn't experience. But the connection is the emotional trauma, which Black people experience every day. Trauma is trauma. You can't say that one is better or one is lesser. How you rise from that trauma and grow into someone who is able to do these beautiful works like her, it's amazing. That's the power of art.

AL She truly reinvented herself because her work was very tough at first. And then afterwards her work became softer and more poetic. How did you feel about sharing the exhibition with her?

DR I am so proud of it. I think it was a great pairing. When they proposed it, I wasn't sure at first because my work is so radically different in some senses. But then the more I started reading, I understood why it's important for two artists from different generations to talk and to support each other, even in life and death. The message that she was bringing forth in her work is similar to the message that I'm bringing forth in mine. So now the conversation has to continue.

AL It's true that when I received the invitation, I initially thought it was a strange concept. But when you see the show, it all makes sense...

DR Yes, if you do the work and do the research, then you can understand why the pieces work together. Just imagine if I had used other works. If I wasn't working through the Picasso stuff that I put in the show, it would have been just one tone. It would have been really cold.

AL The great thing about it is that it's not so obvious...

DR Sometimes art doesn't have to be. I think when you go to shows that are easily read, then you don't have to do any work, you just go in and enjoy it. But if you have to do a little work, you can enjoy it more. You have that moment where you say, oh I see! That's what I'm hoping this show does for people and I hope they come to see it because I think they'll be pleasantly surprised.

AL It changes the way we see the *Namas*. Personally, I was not a big fan of them before. I prefer her earlier works with the shooting paintings. But I really like them when I see them in this way...

DR Sometimes it's all about context. When you see work in a specific context, it enables you to see it in a different light. My pieces wouldn't work in a show full of flowers or butterflies. But if you take them into a different type of context, they do. That's why I think this show works really well, because it's in a place where the works can speak to each other and engage differently. Her life was radically different from mine. Mine was nothing like hers.

AL Yes, she was an aristocrat from England...

DR Right! *(laughs)* My father was not supportive, but he wasn't violent. So it was something totally different that made us both want to do the work that we want to do and to share that work. I'm just really happy that we put it together.

AL Do you come from an artistic family?

DR No, I'm an outlier. Nobody in my family is interested in art. I think for many people, if you have an inkling to do art and it isn't fed, then it goes away. But if it is something that is God-given, it doesn't go away. That's what happened to me. It didn't go away. And every time I thought it might go away, something happened to encourage it more.

AL So how did you decide to go into art if you weren't getting encouragement at home?

DR I was a shy kid. I was quiet, and I liked to draw. And I used to think that I just didn't belong in that family. I started drawing in the third grade and I just kept going. It just made me feel good, and so I continued. Then I used it for currency, by drawing things for other kids. Anytime teachers would want something drawn in class, they would always say, "Deborah, you get up and go draw it." So it made me feel special in that way and I think that helped.

AL Do you see a connection between your work and the work of Mike Kelley? He was always very interested in the topic of childhood and he also created a few collages. I see a connection with some of your work...

DR I tend to couch my argument when I talk about children in my work, because where does it begin? Normally, when we talk about art and artists, especially Black women, we start at 25, and we've already got all the tools and everything to move forward in the world. But where did it start? In my personal life, I started looking back at when I was a teenager, and I was too much.

AL Like many teenagers! *(laughs)*

DR My mom always used to say, "I wish I could get you your own apartment!" That sounds pretty bad. *(laughs)* But I wasn't rebellious, I was just different. I have to tell you something, I'm a Texan, so Texans love telling stories. But I realized that it was around eight years old that I started trying to figure out my superpower. And I think that's important in art, when you start to define who you are and what you want to do. Your idea of self starts to become clearer. There's still lots of years to come, but you get an inkling of it.

AL The title of your work relates to Picasso's "Negro Period". Why did you choose this title?

DR Picasso did eventually acknowledge African labor, but when he was doing the work, he never acknowledged it. He would talk about how he went over and took some of the textures and patterns and stuff that the people were painting instinctively. He didn't give them the credit of having the understanding of what they were doing. They knew what they were doing, pattern-wise. He was looking from a Western idea of creation, so the work looked and felt different. He went into that Blackness and took away from it. For me to put it back in, in the same sense of conversation is very important. It's like, "Ok, you appropriated this, so I'm appropriating back from you! I'm not only taking this, but I'm taking this, and this, and this! And then I'm going to cloak it in a Black body!" That's what I love. I have a complex relationship with Picasso, like most women.

AL Yes, like most women. He had a complex relationship with his wives also. All the stories are coming out now...

DR It's tough when you talk about it. You can get some hate,

but I still like it. I'm always very impressed by his work. You have to separate the artist from the person. But can you? It's tough. Luckily for you, I'm a good person and my art is good art. So you don't have to worry about that! There are no skeletons in my closet! *(laughs)*

AL There's no exploitation in your work. With Picasso it was all exploitation, his wives, his muses...

DR He blamed it on the fact that his sister died when he was ten years old. She drowned and he couldn't save her. When I went to London, they had a big show at the Tate Modern and they have that explanation of it, kind of saying that that was why he was that way. I don't think so. Maybe he was troubled, maybe he needed therapy, but I don't know if childhood trauma makes you inflict trauma on someone else.

AL I would have liked to meet Françoise Gilot, his last wife, because she was astonishing. She is the only one to have left him. Sadly, she just passed away on June 6, at the age of 101. I would have loved to interview her... ■

Deborah Roberts, *Holding Complexity*, 2023, Mixed media on canvas, H 165.1 x 137.2cm, H 65 x 54in, Unique. © Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of Galerie Mitterrand.

