

ALMINE RECH

Forbes

Genesis Tramaine Is Praying For You

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July 11, 2021



Genesis Tramaine in her studio. IMAGE © ASHLEY DENNIS.

Genesis Tramaine first started drawing in church when she was a child. She liked to sit in the back of the pews, gossiping and clowning with her friends, which of course got her in trouble. “I was very much raised in the tradition that children are seen, but not heard,” says Tramaine, who was raised in Brooklyn, and currently is based in Newark, New Jersey. She found that if she opened a notebook, or even a Bible, and sketched inside what she wanted to say, she didn’t get scolded.

She kept the practice of making art as a form of worship as she became an adult. When Tramaine goes to church now, she brings her painting materials with her. First, she spreads them out on the pew beside her. Then, she closes her eyes, and begins to pray through her hands, onto the paper. “I think there is a way to trace the energy of God,” she says.

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The works she makes while under the spell of the deity she loves with all her soul will be on view at “Worship Works,” an exhibition of ten paintings open at Almine Rech from July 16 through August 1. All ten of the paintings are portraits, but not of real people. Instead, they are the result of Tramaine communicating the Gospels in paint. “I prayed to the Holy Ghost to lead me, and I allowed myself to be led,” she says.

Tramaine is grateful that the Holy Ghost leads her hand to paint portraits, because she believes they provide an entry point for the viewer. “A portrait is something we all recognize,” she says. “A portrait makes for a conversation without words.”

Tramaine’s portraits are studies in motion. Facial expressions shift and move many times over a single face. Mouths open and close. Hairlines shrink and expand. Chins drop. The colors are primary; the strokes are bold. Despite the abstraction within the faces, their outlines are clear. There is an obvious comparison between Tramaine’s portraits, and the portraits of Pablo Picasso and Jean-Michel Basquiat. But also, the work of outsider artist Hawkins Bolden, a blind man who created anthropomorphic statues that themselves are imbued with something beyond the tangible.

Tramaine says that she meditates on saints, and stories from the Bible, as she paints. That of Jacob and Esau, two brothers who fought for the inheritance of Isaac, their father, in the Old Testament. That of Rebecca, their mother, who prayed to God for a child. There’s lots to gossip about on the page, in their stories. There are judgments to be made about behavior, and who was most deserving. If only we all could understand the mysterious workings of God in the contours of a nose, two eyes, a mouth, a fade. “Jesus loves women,” a title of one of the paintings reads. If only we could all close our eyes and ignore the Catholic Church. Tramaine knows that her Christianity will make other people uncomfortable. The contemporary art world, after all, is not known for its sacred devotion. Added to that, the fact that Tramaine identifies as both queer and Christian, even despite the seeming contradiction between the two. “I get to put people’s misunderstanding in me, and I get to turn it into a love spell,” Tramaine says. “My queerness is beautiful. All the colors do live within me. God is greater.”

Most of the paintings in the exhibition at Almine Rech were made during the pandemic. Tramaine’s church—Unity Fellowship NewArk Church—was not open for service, but the church leaders allowed her access to the sanctuary to sketch and paint alone. She listened to jazz and gospel music while she worked. Tramaine knew people were suffering, so she increased the fervency of her prayers. “I can be a silent saint when I need to be,” she says. “I flourished.”