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70 John Street /Brooklyn, NY 11201

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RYAN COSBERT // *Am What I Am*

03.12 - 04.18 /2021

Opening Reception: March 12, 4-8 pm

Gallery Hours: Thur /Fri /Sat /Sun, 1-7 pm

Undercurrent is pleased to present Ryan Cosbert's New York solo debut, *I Am What I Am*, on view from March 12 – April 18. *I Am What I Am* features paintings that scaffold experience, symbolism, and the African diaspora to confront trauma, under-/misrepresented histories, and the subjugation of Black communities, forging a socio-political consciousness within abstract painting.

Cosbert's color choices, gestures, materials, and her integration of chance become supreme signifiers within her work. A child of Black migrants from Guyana and Haiti, she pays homage to her parents' homelands with two modest circular paintings, *Georgetown* and *Port-au-Prince*. Each uses the color palette of the nation's respective flags—yellow, red, and green for Guyana and blue and red for Haiti—to honor the birthplaces of her mother and father, respectively. As circles, the works both highlight the global scope of the African diaspora while also affirming how each descendant's story remains unique, impacted by an amalgamation of time, geography, and experience. Tiling, a signature of Cosbert's work, is seen in these round paintings; a practice of gridding the painting's surface prior to building up a haptic material surface using a variety of sand, gesso, pigment, enamel, dye, and acrylic. While a checkered pattern has ubiquitous associations, Cosbert connects it to her childhood and her mother's kitchen floor, referencing domestic patterns of repetition and habit, creating order and balance where chaos easily coexists. Often, the works are embedded with objects or artifacts, retired from utility and redefined within the tiling of her paintings. Examples include old newspaper clippings, emptied bullet casings, and cowrie seashells, which have been used within West African cultures as adornment, dice, and currency.

Currency of the Ocean, a large work at 120 x 52 inches, shares the historical trajectory of cowrie shells. They float, in groups of three, delicately implanted upon a tumultuous surface of tiling, smudging, and frenetic gestural marks in a horizontal line that sharply cuts across the middle of the painting, a buoyancy of perseverance. Echoed in these shells is a culture and the enslaved Africans that were traded across the Atlantic. On the other spectrum of Cosbert's paintings is an observance of lesser known histories of civil rights leaders and the dissemination of African culture. This is seen in works such as *Ode to Claudette Colvin*, one of the many antecessors to Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat nine months prior to Parks.

Murder Mayhem no 1, 2, 3, is a single work in three 46 x 46 inch pieces. From left to right, each block is tiled and pigmented in red, white, and blue with physical bullets lodged within the tactile surfaces. Cosbert appropriates the same action of throwing cowrie shells, used as dice in games, to the bullet casings strewn across the surface of the paintings, leaving chance to decide where the bullet shells land. Visible in *Murder Mayhem no. 1, 2, 3* is the immanent violence in America's cultural identity of red, white and blue. The trauma marginalized people experience within the U.S. raises alternative meanings to these three colors; where many Americans identify the Stars and Stripes, today many see police sirens. Stuck to the surface, objects atypical to painting now share the same history. Although Cosbert does not regard this piece as a triptych (art historically, triptychs are traditionally seen in altarpieces) there is an innate homage to the victims of police brutality. These three color-field blocks become an overwhelming graphic representation. Engaging all of our senses, we become deaf to the sirens heard time over time, leaving us with an alternative consciousness of the colors, red, white, and blue.

Lastly, Cosbert's painting entitled, *Only difference between you and me* is that you were brought here by force grabs the viewer from just the title alone. Cosbert indicates that, despite centuries of whiggish fantasies of progress toward equality and justice, the exploitation, subjugation, violence, and inequality Americans have inflicted upon the African Diaspora in the U.S. remain as central to the Black experience as they have ever been. The work in *I Am What I Am* draws candid connections from different times and different places compounding them into the same continuum of the narratives of the African diaspora. Ryan Cosbert takes the seemingly minimal and empowers our collective unconscious to bring new sight to our old-world vision.

Daina Mattis
/Co-director



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