

Frieze

“Diedrick Brackens Weaves a Rich Tapestry of Queer Black Life”

by Charlene K. Lau

April 5, 2021

Diedrick Brackens Weaves a Rich Tapestry of Queer Black Life

For his first solo exhibition in Canada, *‘shape of a fever believer’*, US artist Diedrick Brackens distils the co-existence of illness, vulnerability, healing and love into a series of tapestries (all 2020) centred on silhouetted Black bodies. The various fabrics are hand-stitched together like quilts, with contrasting – and occasionally fringed – thread. Brackens wrote three poems (*‘a storm of bees, wind, affairs between us’*, *‘sixty million and more’*, and *‘blessed are the mosquitoes’*), printed in the exhibition handout, to accompany the weavings, which meditate in verse what the textiles convey materially.

The sole tapestry in the gallery that is devoid of figuration, *lifesavers*, conceptually frames the exhibition’s contemplations on infection and disease, presenting a stark abstraction in sage green, dusty blue, mauve and rose hues. The weaving in *lifesavers* leans on pattern and repetition, resembling the tessellation of honeycomb cells or the hexagonal patterns of chemical-structure diagrams. These sections contrast with segments of checks and stripes: patterns that give way to the days of the week at the bottom – compartmentalized like a pill case – aligning the ring-shaped candy to which the title alludes with the daily popping of HIV medication. On the other side of the wall, fire makes some dragons combines vibrant yellows, oranges and reds with a thin, barely detectable vermillion warp thread. A shadowy black form engulfed in flames foists a prostrate body above their head, as if it were an offering to the sky. Fiery strands of yarn loosely spurt forth from the former, their wild heat licking at the silhouette outlined in red, orange and a yellow braided stitch; horizontally threaded teal strands mark the latter. Behind them, rusty brown brick arches remain obstinate, backed by a solid ground of bright citron.

Across the room, in *blessed are the mosquitoes*, two figures sit on their heels facing one another in front of a low white

FRIEZE



Diedrick Brackens, ‘shape of a fever believer’, 2021, exhibition view, Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario. Courtesy: the artist and Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario; photography: Laura Findlay

fence. A full moon with a greenish undershadow punctuates the dusky sky, expressed as a mottled, ikat-like field of pink and blue. The figure on the right, hands palms up, releases a swarm of mosquitoes – gold charms sewn onto the woven surface – while the one on the left raises their hands to their face as if to draw the bugs closer. While portraying a metaphor for ‘bug chasing’ – the pursuit of sex with HIV-positive persons – Brackens emphasizes the complexity and intimacy of his figures over the taboo nature of bareback sex. His empathetic treatment blurs the line between erotic liberation and bodily harm.

Offsetting the comfort and warmth implied by the softness and pliability of textiles, Brackens’s iconographies embody the harsh realities of queer Blackness. The ritualistic compositions grapple with the untold everyday violence committed against Black people, including the unequal impact of HIV/AIDS on Black and marginalized populations; by extension, they also inadvertently speak to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on these very same communities. In the face of such injustices, Brackens upholds love and kinship as threads of connectedness that repair and sustain. Tensions between warp and weft provide crucial support not only for the physical tapestry, but also for the bodies they depict. Dripping with loose strands of yarn, the silhouettes vibrate with quiet intensity as they claim their rightful space, displaying an incandescent resolve in the face of both their trauma and pleasure. Diedrick Brackens’s ‘shape of a fever believer’ at Oakville Galleries at Centennial Square, Oakville, Ontario, through 10 April 2021. As of 3 April 2021, the Oakville Galleries will be close in accordance with government restrictions. The galleries will reopen as soon as these restrictions are lifted.



Diedrick Brackens, blessed are the mosquitoes, 2020, woven cotton and acrylic yarn. Courtesy: the artist and Oakville Galleries, Oakville, Ontario; photography: Laura Findlay