

Rudy Shepherd: Portraits
July 8–31, 2009
Location One
IRP Exhibition

In "Portraits," Rudy Shepherd will present a series of recent works that challenge and transcend traditional notions of who and what is a worthy subject of high-art portraiture, e.g., criminals, anonymous Taliban members, black heroes, or houses.

The painted portraits in Shepherd's "Criminal/Victim" series from 2009 depict both perpetrators and victims of the same crime side-by-side, visually blurring the line between innocence and guilt. By presenting the people first and the stories second a space is created for humanity to be re-instilled into the lives of people who have been reduced to mere headlines by the popular press (e.g. Timothy McVeigh).

In his "Taliban" series, also on view, Shepherd presents beautifully executed color drawings of anonymous Taliban members who, as the artist states "have lived and died for their cause and been completely forgotten." The portraits are based on a book from 2004 that reproduces images of Taliban soldiers taken in photographic studios in Afghanistan before these men departed on "missions" from where they did not return.

In "The Healers" series from 2009 Shepherd examines his black heroes in large-scale paintings in which he presents the extraordinary individuals against luscious gold backgrounds, hung above eye level, like sacred icons in front of which the spectator is meant to pause, as if in the presence of a diety. Yet, Shepherd's 'dieties'—Alice Coltrane (musician, wife of legendary John Coltrane), Sun Ra (American jazz musician), Frantz Fanon (revolutionary author from Martinique who was immensely influential in the field of post-colonial studies), Octavia Butler (American science fiction author), Chinua Achebe (a Nigerian novelist), and Fela Kuti (a Nigerian musician)—are a far cry from the (Caucasian) sitters generally encountered in such traditional portraiture: Christ, Virgin Mary, and various saints, for instance.

Lastly, "Portraits" also features several small-scale paintings, all dated 2006, that could be called "house-portraits" of significant writers, cultural thinkers or places of historical import: Frederick Douglass' House, Aerial View Neverland Ranch, Freud's Childhood Home, and the gate to the Auschwitz concentration camp with the haunting phrase emblazoned on it, Arbeit Macht Frei (Work will make you free).

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Based in Harlem, NY, Rudy Shepherd received a BS in Biology and Studio Art from Wake Forest University and an MFA in Sculpture from the School of Art Institute of Chicago. He has been in group exhibitions at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, NY, The Studio Museum of Harlem, NY, Bronx Museum of Art, NY, Art in General, NY, Triple Candie, NY, Socrates Sculpture Park, NY, Cheekwood Museum of Art, TN, Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, MD, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, CT, Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art, NC, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago, IL, Tart Gallery, San Francisco, CA,

Analix Forever Gallery, Geneva, Switzerland and solo exhibitions at Mixed Greens Gallery, NY, Regina Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA. He has been awarded Artist in Residence at Location One, New York, PSI National/ International Studio Program, PSI Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, NY, Artist in Residence Visual + Harlem, Jacob Lawrence Institute for the Visual Arts, New York, NY and Emerging Artist Fellowship, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, NY. He is currently represented by Mixed Greens Gallery, NY and has an upcoming two-person exhibition at Paperwork Gallery, Baltimore, MD.