

Wangari Methenge's *Aura of Quiet*

OCTOBER 25, 2019 BY EVE WOOD



Wangari Mathenge, *Sundials and Sonnets*. 2019

How do artists convey silence within two-dimensional space? I would argue that it is difficult to create an authentic connection between the subject and the viewer, and it is even more difficult to create a space of quietude and self-reflection even as the artist is in the active process of divining another person's inner life. Yet all great portraiture is as much about the artist as it is the subject. There are many great examples of artists who have successfully explored their own personal connections to their subjects and, by extension, their viewers. Alice Neel, for example, whose portraits of friends and family are extraordinary in that they encapsulate not only a specific character but the breadth and tempo of the artist's relationship with that specific person.

Wangari Methenge's luminous exhibition in the project space at Roberts Projects — simply and aptly titled *Aura of Quiet* — mines similar territories as Neel and other contemporary artists showing today, including Tala Madani and Kim Dingle, though both Madani's and Dingle's singular "brand of silence" tends more in the direction of the silent scream than the contemplative, moment-moving howl.

Methenge privileges introspection and a visceral cohabitation with her subjects. The exhibition has only three works in it, yet each one extends a very private conversation into a public sphere, all the while maintaining a deeply intimate connection. Methenge's silent dialogue is one of personal strength, humility

RIOT MATERIAL

ART. WORD. THOUGHT.

MONICA DE CARDENAS

and majesty. Each of her figures demonstrates within the scope of their body language and expression, their own strategies for living, indeed for thriving in a world that appears to have gone mad.

In the *Cacophony of Silence* (2019), for example, an African American woman wearing a bright red pant suite gazes down at us from her oversized chair, her fingers interlaced beneath her chin, her gaze both a reclamation of the past and a demand for a better, brighter future. The chair she sits on functions as a kind of floating stage, a seat of power and regeneration wherein the space the woman occupies is activated by the figure's fiercely emphatic stare. Yet her watch is not adversarial but one from a woman who has lived a long and rich life and who is asking that we meet her strength and resilience with our own.



The Ascendants

Considering what is happening politically in this country, this image feels more necessary than ever as hate crimes surge and our own government encourages bigotry and violence at every turn. Methenge is advocating for basic human rights and the way she does this again and again throughout this exhibition is by appealing to our humanity as viewers and by allowing these figures to “speak” using the gaze, which becomes a powerful tool for advocacy.

There are many similarities between Methenge's portraits and those of Alice Neel. The physicality of her figures, shown with arms up and often painted from a vantage point in which they appear larger than life, in addition to her palette of bright saturated colors, is reminiscent in the best possible way of Neel's visual succinctness, her powerful, libidinal portraits. Methenge also paints from the vantage point of inner strength and a deep and abiding sense of agency. These are women for whom the experience of being alive is a fabulous tapestry of possibility, yet the traces of struggle are evident on these faces as well.

MONICA DE CARDENAS



The Cacophony of Silence

In the one double portrait entitled *The Ascendants* (2019), a young man sits on a couch with the same woman who appears in the large image of the overstuffed chair. The woman pushes her body away from the man who stares directly at the viewer. Again, her gaze suggests a duality between strength and fragility as though she is the keeper of wisdom or a portent from which none of us might ever recover.

The fourth painting in the exhibition, entitled *Supplication in Alabaster* (2019), though significantly different from the other works in the show, is as much a portrait of an individual as any of the others. In this image, Methenge celebrates individuality, though very subtly. Four girls are shown wearing two-piece bathing suites, their hair tied atop their heads up in a traditional bun. Three are facing one direction and one is facing the other way, yet the positions of their bodies does not in and of it itself suggest a major shift in perception or change in the status quo. Three of the four women are seen hanging their heads, their eyes staring at the ground in front of them, while one girl holds her head up high. Methenge understands that a slight shift in perception can significantly alter the way we interact with the world around us, and thus proposes that any radical action begins with the gaze, with not being afraid to “see” and perceive. After all, if you cannot comprehend the injustices to see how deep into the earth their roots extend, how can you hope to ever change them?