

Press Release From: **The Contemporary Art Modern Project**

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Art from An Experience Based Identity

A Group OVR Exhibition: **Milton Bowens, Idris Habib, Dave Mc Clinton, Lisa Whittington, Evita Tezeno
Laetitia Adam-Rabel and Keysha Rivera**



This year has been burdened with a multitude of issues, in America we have dealt with: the election, civil unrest, the centennial of the woman's vote, and a pandemic, likening the times very much to one hundred years ago - but it was also 100 years ago that saw The Harlem Renaissance, evidence that through strife art can bring us out. By inviting both emerging and established African American artists and artists of the African diaspora, we are responding to the present by showing that artists, their voices and visions matter to the art world. Presenting a unified voice of experience we reveal how experience infects identity, but through art we bring attention to the beauty of expression through each individual and unique artist. Being though that this is 2020, and we are in a pandemic where galleries are not always open, art fairs are online, the best way to serve the artist, the collector, we believe, is through the launching of The Contemporary Art Modern Project's first ever OVR gallery, from Emperia, UK. Our new OVR gallery will allow many to visit, to return to the exhibition online, and really experience the works installed and surround themselves in this new avenue of exhibition.

The focus for this exhibition is one of looking back to the Harlem Renaissance as a reference, but through the work exhibited the viewer will be able to look at the now, and envision the forward. Continuing from the foundation set by The Harlem Renaissance, we also strive to highlight and expose the insidious continuation of what Du Bois refers to as a sense of double consciousness, of the African American, the tension between his awareness of his/[her] African roots and aspirations as an American. George M. Fredrickson, in his *The Double Life of W.E.B. Du Bois*, explains this dilemma as that which "hinders and burdens the artist as they

'need' to conform and present art that does not threaten the establishment (34). Calling on tenants of The Harlem Renaissance and through that artistic voice we will be able to look and see how far as a nation we have moved forward, backwards or remained stagnant. The Harlem Renaissance strove not only to allow and stimulate an expression distinctly African American but also focused on building images more complimentary than previously posited by White America. Interestingly one can argue that the definition of the African American and the ownership of identity is still burdened with social expectations, which rarely are complimentary. We continually witness situations where expectation overrides identity; this is no new phenomenon, but remains a blight on equality.

Milton Bowens with confidence, looks to what the individual has historically experienced and how the past still lingers in this present. His voice, reminiscent of August Wilson's Gabriel in *Fences*, is the prophet spreading both awareness and sympathy for past generations, often unknown, unclaimed (by no fault of the decedents), taking the position that a past unknown is destined to repeat - and we must never forget. Idris Habib presents the viewer with the beauty found in all his subjects, he firmly believes that we too often ignore the beauty of each other; that we do not really see one another, instead expectations override the ability to really see. There is a certain fluidity in his works as well that remind one of Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published in 1920, where through the poem Hughes traces rivers in Africa and the Mississippi showing that his people have been here, there, everywhere and they belong - you get the same feeling when looking at Habib's portraits - they are portraits of the experiences lived, learned and unknown that lay behind all the portraits. Dave McClinton through his digital collage works, comprised of found and photographed objects, mementos and more often culminating sometimes in a silencing due to history, but also in an intense pride in what has been accomplished even with 'land mines' lurking set to go off at any given moment. His subjects defiantly stare out at the viewer, heralding a power reminiscent of Frank Horne's last lines in his poem: "Harlem" where the poet insists: "...Say it brother/ Say it" (16-17). McClinton keeps that conversation going, the conversation being the experience of being African American.

Turning now to the women in the exhibition, it is interesting to see the evidence of the women who came before them. In Evita Tezeno's works one could easily assume these are the "grey Shadows" that McKay speaks of, but in truth these women are more the women following Hurston's journey begun by Janie, through the color of purple of Walker to the plane of both sisterhood and womanhood. Lisa Whittington pays tribute to Harlem and the people; her work bursts with the vibrant energy instilled during the days of the Renaissance, through the years after to present the history still found in the architecture and, but she also shows how history has left its mark on the residents. Keysha Rivera, through her textile pieces weaves together vignettes of women in moments of labor and solitude, and how these moments accentuate the sense of aloneness of the immigrant, or migrant in their perpetual uprooting for life to reward what society professes. Lastly, Laetitia Adams -Rabel takes on the power of the woman as she travels from an odalisque to the modern day woman burning with confidence and assurance in who she is and what has brought her to discard Josephine Baker's banana skirt, to be the powerful leaping woman of today and the guide for tomorrow.

All the artists in the exhibition through their differing voices show the viewer that many of the conversations happening in 1920 are still current. The artists of the exhibition show that resolution has not happened and there needs to be an abundant reliance on the retelling of both history and how that history, whether lived or learned - marks identity. The works also resonate with what Claude McKay expresses in his poem: "America" that although life has fed the African American with "...bread of bitterness" (1.) there is also a love for this a poignant love for what the stars and stripes stand for.