

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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George Nelson Preston

Afro Atlantica: The Aqueous Continent

October 29 – November 26, 2022

Opening reception: Saturday, October 29, 2022, 6:00-8:00 pm

RYAN LEE Gallery is pleased to present *Afro Atlantica: The Aqueous Continent*, a presentation of works by George Nelson Preston. The five paintings and one work on paper on view are reflections on the Middle Passage. These recent works, made between 2016 and 2022, continue to explore Preston's longstanding interest in the power of memory, the emotional context of historical trauma, and the complicated inheritance of the African diaspora and "our double consciousness" throughout the Americas as well as Preston's own family legacy.

In his manipulation of horizon lines and space, Preston imagines the Atlantic Ocean as a continent unto itself, with its shores along the Caribbean, Brazil, Africa, and Europe as its borders. It is the dual reality of this aqueous continent as a site of great beauty and great pain that Preston captures in meditative tableaux that toy with abstraction and figuration. Though the initial viewing of these paintings reveals abstracted landscapes, careful looking unveils a multi-layered composition alluding to multiple times, spaces, landscapes and spiritualities within the realm of the living and the dead, air and water. Nothing, in Preston's paintings, is literal—all is suggestive and interpretive.

Central to the paintings in the exhibition is the concept of the "Kalunga" line, a watery boundary between the world of the living and the dead in religious traditions originating from the Congo region. Within this religious framework, it was believed that the souls of the dead traveled the path of the sun as it set in the west. Thus, the Kalunga line became known as a line beneath the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean where the living became the dead and the only way back to life was to recross the line. During the Middle Passage, those enslaved and transported across the Atlantic believed they were being taken to the land of the dead, never to return. These people are symbolized in Preston's work by crouching figures contemplating the Kalunga line. The artist refers to these as "Kalunga figures."

Throughout his gestural, abstracted compositions, Preston implies destruction. Couched in clouds resembling human figures that have exploded into puffs, Kalunga figures, abstractly drawn human figures hurtling across the canvas, and falling leaves dotted with tufts of human hair, the paintings on view at RYAN LEE Gallery are graphic while simultaneously expressing a sense of beauty and calm often connotated to seascapes. Some works, such as *The Nightmare of Captains Montez and Ruiz. The Caravel Amistad Adrift Between Havana and Montauk Point / La pesadilla de los capitanes Montez y Ruiz. La Carabela Amistad a la deriva entre Habana y Montauk* are more explicit in their depictions of violence: this painting is marred with red paint echoing the blood shed during the Amistad incident of 1839.

Multiple of Preston's paintings feature falling bodies and human hair. In his tribute to the souls lost during the Middle Passage, he hopes to recapture something of their existence. Preston's use of human hair in his compositions began in 2019, and with this material, Preston makes reference to human resilience: left alone, human hair is indestructible. The addition of hair to Preston's canvases lends a multi-media dimension to his wide, contemplative compositions, which are titled in different languages according to the geographic locations they are set in. Each work on view is also dedicated to the memory of people in Preston's life. In this way, he doubly pays homage to ancestors.

Preston is a lifelong New Yorker, born in 1938. This is his first presentation with RYAN LEE; the gallery is showing his work in conjunction with Nina Johnson Gallery in Miami.

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George Nelson Preston (b. 1938, New York, NY) is an artist whose mixed-media, abstracted paintings are anchored by his profound scholarship in African art, years in Lower Manhattan's avant-garde art scene, and extensive travels across the Atlantic world as an art historian, essayist, and curator.

Preston's art practice is built upon a foundation of artistic and intellectual mentors and spaces, starting with his parents and his birthplace of Harlem, NY. Having grown up next door to the modernist history painter Charles Alston and meeting social realist painter Robert Gwathmey and expressionist sculptor Chaim Gross in high school, Preston's early work probed racial themes. In the 1950s, Preston moved to the Lower East Side where he co-founded the Artist's Studio at his storefront loft on 48 E 3rd Street. The space became a nucleus for New York's Beat subculture and groundbreaking poets such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones. The liberal brushwork and overlapping forms of Preston's work at this time evoke free-verse, layered Beat poetry, reflecting Preston's immersion in the Downtown Manhattan art scene of the midcentury.

In the 1960s, Preston's work became influenced by his extensive travels on either coast of the Atlantic Ocean. His travels in the Caribbean introduced him to cultural monoliths such as Celia Cruz, Alicia Alonso, and Pablo Neruda. In the late 1960s, he conducted art historical and archaeological fieldwork across the Eastern Mediterranean and West Africa. Starting in 1987, Preston began collaborating with Brazilian institutions such as Museu de Arte de São Paulo and Museu Nacional das Belas Artes on curation, programming, and writing. His involvement in the Brazilian art scene led him to collaborate with Dr. Emanuel Alves Araújo in the planning of the *I Encontro Afro Atlântico* at the Museu AfroBrasil in São Paulo in 2012, a seminal institution for the preservation and dissemination of Afro-Atlantic art and culture. In 2016, he was elected the Pierre Verger Chair of Rio de Janeiro Academia Brasileira de Belas Artes.

Preston's recent output has focused on capturing the common spirit of the cultures he has encountered in his circumnavigation of the Atlantic. His recent series, which began in 2015, builds on the sweeping, expressionistic linework and daring paint drips of his earlier work to record the spectrum of topographies he has absorbed in his travels around the aqueous continent Afro Atlantica. Furthermore, Preston's simultaneous use of paper cut-outs, spliced and pasted quotations of European portraits, and African mask imagery reflects his comprehensive, holistic scholarship and extensive travels.

Preston received a liberal arts B.A. in 1962 from the City College of New York, before earning an M.A. and Ph.D. in art history from Columbia University in 1968 and 1973. In 1973, Preston designed and curated the African Hall of the Brooklyn Museum in 1973, an exhibition which remained on view for ten years. In 2006, Preston co-founded the bi-local Museum of Art and Origins / Museu de Arte e Origins in Upper Manhattan and Santa Teresa, Rio de Janeiro with Dr. Dinah Guimaerens which makes public the artist's own expansive, private collection of Classical African art, East Asian works on paper, Amerindian First Nation art, 18th and 19th century European prints, and modern and contemporary art.

Preston's first solo exhibition was mounted in 1959 at Phoenix Gallery in New York. He has since been featured in solo and group exhibitions at Nina Johnson Gallery, FL (2022); Burger Gallery at Kean University, NJ (2019); Gray Gallery at New York University, NY (2017); Wilmer Jennings Gallery at Kenkeleba House, NY (2016); Merton D. Simpson Gallery, NY (2015); Leroy Neiman Gallery, NY (2012); and Gallery 128, NY (2002); as well as the Museu AfroBrasil and the Pinacoteca de São Paulo, among others.