



Photo: Lance Brewer

## BRIGHT LIGHTS BLACK CITY

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Mary Lovelace O'Neal left her teaching job at Berkeley in 2006, for a studio in Mexico. It would not be my choice, but she can stand the heat. She can always retreat in her imagination to New York at midnight, when the sky is black and everything is cool.

Black for her is definitely a color, and it animates some lively figures darting across the night as well. Just to speak of it as her ground belies how light they are on their feet. It embodies her own blackness as well.

Her latest, at Marianne Boesky through May 4, includes *Round Midnight*, after Thelonius Monk in jazz, and *Bright Lights Big City*—and do not so much as think of the once fashionable novel of that name, about white hipsters in the 1980s taking big money to Tribeca nights. This is the big city of the blues and of rolling in my baby's arms. It is the city of *Manhattan* and of *Rooftops Where Women and Cats Rule*. Even in her eighties, that means her. Yet her show is "HECHO EN MEXICO—a mano," or made in Mexico by hand, and her hand has never been more visible. It helps that she starts with black and that her acrylic looks a lot like drawing.

Lovelace O'Neal started to apply lampblack as a student at Colombia, with a blackboard eraser. Even then, she was changing the rules. That kind of black is left over from burning, but now it became a place to begin, and an eraser was laying down rather than cleaning up. Echoes of the blackboard appear again with white curves that look like chalk. They can stand for anything from shoelaces to long hair, although they may look like graffiti or accidents. Like graffiti, too, they can produce text now and then, like a tag—this time out, for *Little Black Samba's Green Coat*.

She can be more consistently colorful and painterly, as with her whales, featured in the 2024 Whitney Biennial (and a concurrent show runs at SF MOMA). That and her mural scale make her an heir to postwar abstraction. Here, though, that leaves plenty of space for black. The show has just eight works, but they run up to four panels across. As with Raymond Saunders, black sets off layers of bright color, which then acquire more black as figures in action. They can be human, animal, or both at once, charming enough for cartoons, but do not dare call them cute.

She is as hard to pin down as her location. Born in the South, she refused to become a southern artist, and after Colombia she left for the West Coast. She had a residency in Morocco, a term with a print collective in Chile, and a stop back in New York for a print studio run by Robert Motherwell. Like Kara Walker, Lovelace O'Neal trades in African American stereotypes, only to take them apart. Little Black Sambo, now with a woman's braids or tresses, lies on her black, weighed down by that green vest. It might be the heavy kind used as protection from x-rays. She might be doing everything she can to remain on the margins, and she has shown only rarely in New York, or she may simply identify with black artists as outsiders.

How she keeps New York in mind is beyond me, but it helps that she also keeps her edge. The jagged edge of color brings an edge, too, to the black ground. If color becomes a figure or a layer of pure painting, fine. That cat-woman faces down a purple cat that could be anything at all. Her featureless black face could belong to anyone or any gender as well. She has her stylish clothing or body armor in bright red—and a wound of red on yellow across from her absent heart.