



Installation view, *Mary Lovelace O'Neal at Marianne Boesky.*

PAINT IT BLACK: MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL AT MARIANNE BOESKY

BY WM STAFF
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“Within the common tendency towards the more personal, intimate and free, painting has had a special role because of a unique revolutionary change in its character” —Meyer Schapiro (1957)

Now on view at Marianne Boesky Gallery, the storied painter Mary Lovelace O’Neal presents a new body of work executed over the past three years in her studio in Mérida, Mexico. Organized under the exhibition title of *Hencho en Mexico-a Mano*, the show coincides with a major retrospective at SFMoMA. The work featured at Marianne Boesky draws on forms and techniques from MLO’s multi-decade career, including her signature use of lampblack pigment and her swirling, oneiric figures hovering over the inky darkness. The effect is a softer, less frightening style reminiscent of some of Francis Bacon’s iconic portraits. Late period Matisse is another apt comparison, but the spatial depth is more complex and enigmatic. Like self-illuminated fauna in the Stygian blackness of the deep ocean, the darkness seems to breathe through Lovelace O’Neal’s characters.

The effect is singular when viewing the works in person: the black expanse is both a void and a saturated fullness. Darkness can be read as emptiness, plenitude, or simply ground zero. On top of these impossibly lightless surfaces float gestural figures—an evanescence challenging to convey not only over the powdered background but also at the mural-sized scale of the picture. Vivid magenta, scarlet and seafoam pop out of the void, registering the swirl of fabric or the shape of muscle. These colored zones drape across, or over-flatten, delicate contour drawings of elemental figures. One of the most successful, and best-titled, works in the show is *Rooftops Where Women and Cats Rule* (2021-2023), a large-format diptych in which the lithe movements of the former on the left counterpoise the omnidirectional frenzy of the latter on the right. Or maybe the viewers are watching a time-smeared, interspecies duet from multiple perspective at once. It almost doesn't matter—there is no wrong vantage from which to enjoy the laminar flow of color in the deep sea. Unformed desire and the ocean is a theme to which we will return.

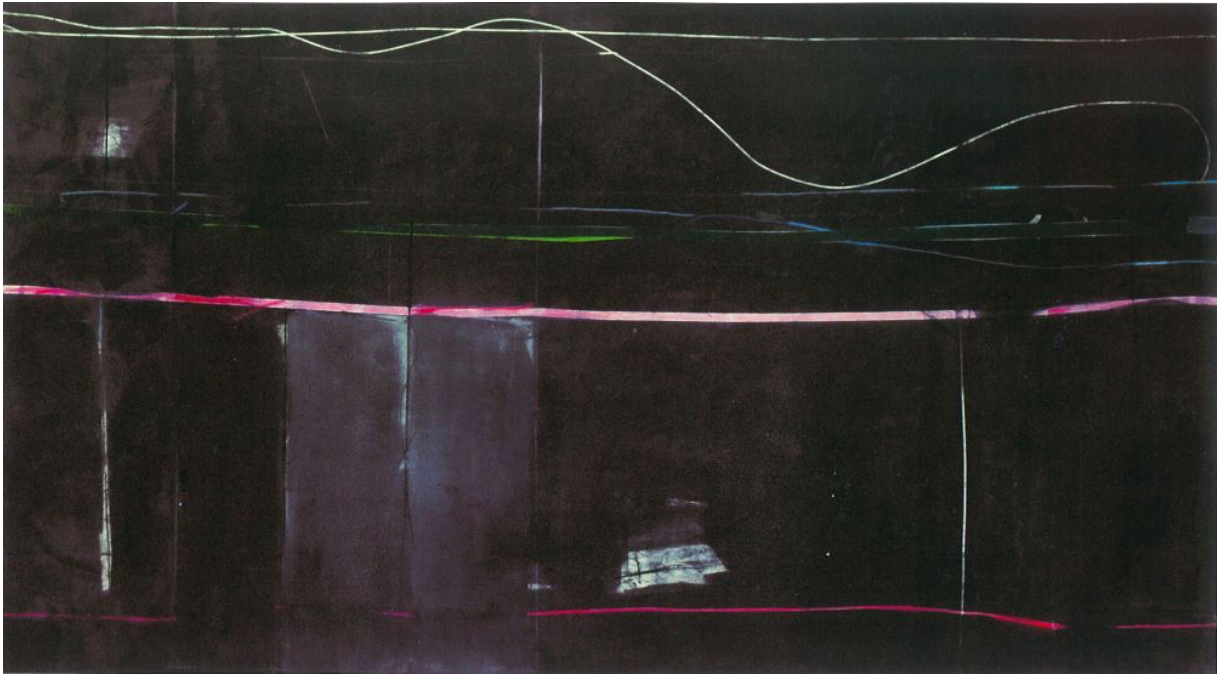


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But first, any discussion of Lovelace O'Neal's work is incomplete with attending to *blackness* itself. She has become iconic for her use of lampblack pigment, a kind of ground up soot that is almost certainly mankind's first mark-making substance. In the 1970s, MLO invented a technique in which the loose powder could be rubbed into the canvas with chalk erasers, resulting in a powdery smooth plane distinctive to her *œuvre*. Maybe only Yves Klein has a closer identification with a specific colored powder. And appropriately, the lampblack carries a huge formal and conceptual load. In the artist's work, her matted canvases entail “surface flatness, black as a color, and blackness as

an existential, racial experience.” Lovelace O’Neal’s career has indeed been braided into the aesthetic and political worlds of Black liberation and civil rights. Born in 1942 in Jackson, Mississippi and raised between the segregated South and the Great Migration Midwest, she intersected with a striking number of important figures. She studied painting under David Driskell at Howard University, and helped to manage the Free Southern Theater, a pioneering dramaturgical group founded by Gilbert Moses and her first husband John O’Neal. She volunteered with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and dated Black Panthers founder Stokely Carmichael. She eventually accepted an academic position at UC Berkeley in 1978, and went on to become the first African American artist to be given tenure in that august department.

Often, she was fighting a two or even three front war. As she recounted to Suzanne Jackson in [a 2021 interview](#), “We had to fight those white boys that were making all the money and getting all the recognition, taking charge of all the theory...And then you had these Black men who were also treating us like second- and third-class citizens.” While the Black Arts movement with which Lovelace O’Neal was associated had an uncomfortable relationship with pictorial abstraction (discomfort shared by numerous 20th century political/ *avant-gardes*), it must have been an enormous challenge to pursue a style of lyrical abstraction as a Black female painter in the 1970s. Her signature lampblack work emerged out of this conundrum—a search for a visual vocabulary that was expressively painterly, acceptably “minimal” and tacitly identity-driven. The first foray into this vocabulary laid loose black pigment over washes of color, resulting in a more chromatic, handmade idiom reminiscent of Barnett Newman’s zips as well as childhood crayon drawings in which a black topcoat is scratched back to reveal color-fields underneath. Black is *almost* all that meets the eye.



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As her career advanced, MLO rode the current of a broader return to figuration. Her off-color characters (pun intended), such as those in the *Whales Fucking* series of the 1980s, are of a consonant spirit with the works of Philip Guston and Rainer Fetting, but less burdened by a fraught relationship with history. Arguably, the best-fitting interpretative frame is what curator Ekow Eshun has articulated as the **Black Fantastic**—an aesthetic mode that sidesteps the teleological utopian impulse of Afrofuturism as well as the escapism of Magical Realism. Pace Eshun, works in the Black Fantastic reach for the heights of dreamlike absurdity as a means of highlighting the already-absurd contradictions of quotidian Black life. Notably, Eshun and Lovelace O'Neal both reserve special places for the sea in their work—Eshun for example points to **Ellen Gallagher's work** reimagining the horror of slave ships and intentional drownings through a novel neo-Atlantis mythological program.

For Lovelace O'Neal, the upshot is more libidinal and aesthetic. As the artist explains, the condition of gleeful abandon is one to which she aspires for her work itself—good paintings, are “like the whales fucking and moving all of that water around, rollicking and getting drunk.” Lurking within this kind of animism is its own form of identity affirmation. As she explains “We as Black folks—and I’m from the South—are deep into things having their own mind. Like this spoon has its own mind...and it’s the same way with paint. Paint can lie...it can say, “I’m being very, very quiet,” but then you pull a little zipper back and see all this activity in there.” This sense of joyful overflowing

runs through much of her career, albeit in a slightly more subdued, reflective mode in the present exhibition. Like Warhol's *Shadows* or the somber underpainting of Gauguin and his apples, the canvases vibrate with energy, power and somber darkness.

The show is not to be missed. **WM**