

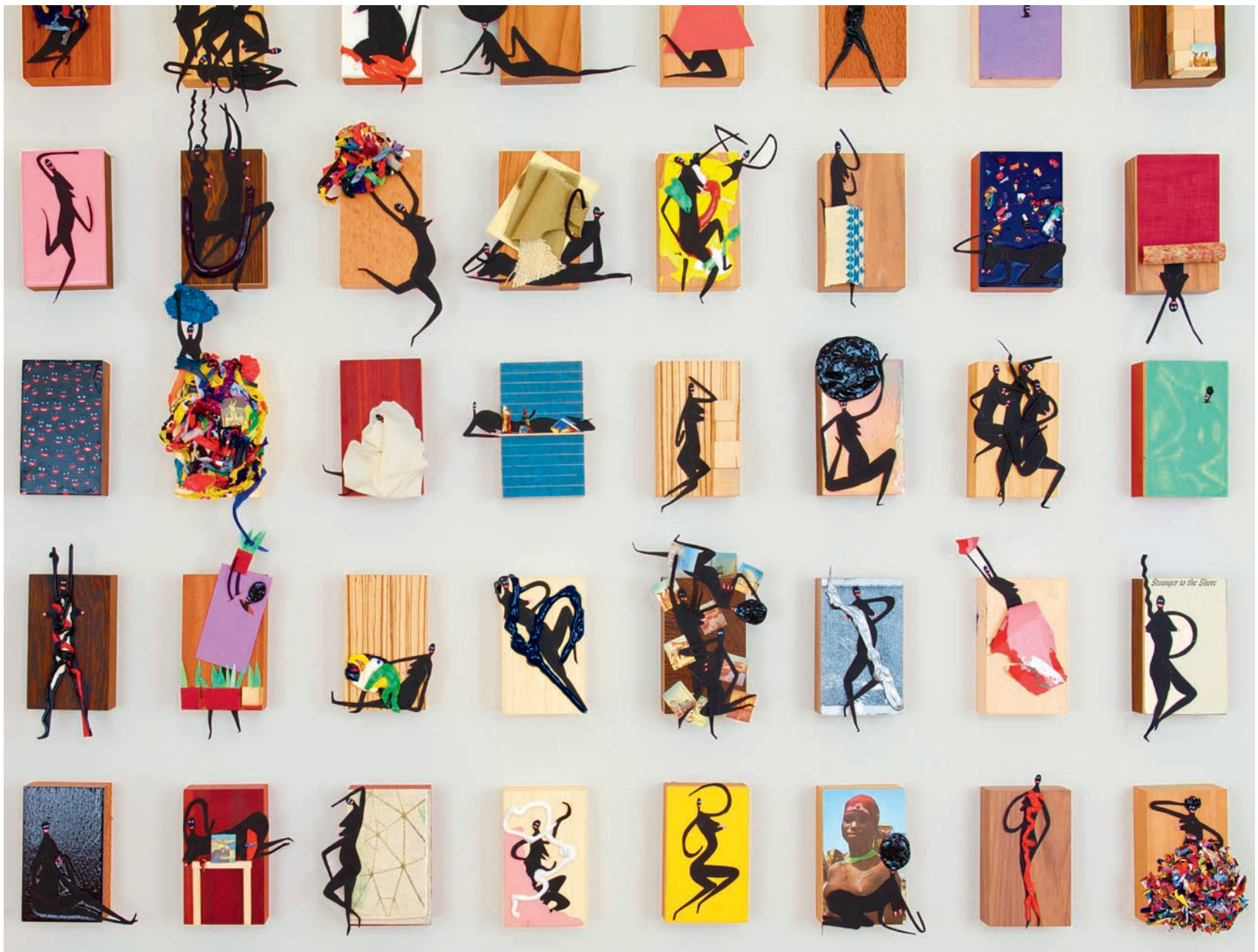
WEIRD READ

Devin Troy Strother's taboo-busting paint experiments

BY SCOTT INDRISEK

DEVIN TROY STROTHER'S WOMEN have a habit of getting away from him. One moment, they're spazzing out in a pile of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's candies; the next, they're reclining on shelves, sporting wicked gold Afros, shooting the shit. The Brooklyn-based artist, just 26, has skillfully mapped out a weird world populated by these playful African-American females conjured from construction paper and paint. "I wanted

to make paintings that are sculptural, that are very aware of what's going on with themselves," Strother says. The work exists in a hybrid state—sculpture, collage, paper dolls, diorama, painting—and thrives on an in-your-face humor that's not afraid to tickle racial taboos. (A typical Strother title, inspired by a snippet of conversation overheard on the subway: *The Coloureds Series Part 3: "Gurrrl I'm just talking about that composition,*



Gurrrrl what'chu know about that post modernism?") This year will be a busy one for the artist, with a two-person exhibition with Jacoby Satterwhite at New York's Monya Rowe in June, as well as two solo shows—at Copenhagen's Bendixen this month, and Richard Heller Gallery, in Los Angeles, in September.

Strother's work is truly mixed media, integrating paper, bits of foil, curds of dried acrylic paint, wood, swatches of wallpaper, found images from magazines, and various other delicate items. His paintings—if we can agree to call them that, for the sake of simplicity—are almost always three-dimensional; in many cases, the limbs or heads of figures pop over the edges of the panels. (Pity the art handler who has to prepare one of these pieces for shipping.) Many recent works involve a system of shelving that juts from the surface, with objects, miniature artworks-within-the-artwork, and female bodies displayed on the shelves. "That system came from an interview with Jonathan Lasker," Strother explains. "He talks about how his paintings are basically arrangements of all the different elements that you'd make in an abstract painting—just trying to catalog them, to make a composition with those elements, arranged as if they were objects." Strother adopted a similar approach, resulting in intricate works like *The Hey Sister Soul Sister Slow Sister Woah Sister Painting*, 2011, in which black women swim through paint and pose as sculptures on a series of neatly stocked shelves. The artist talks about his female characters as if they had an agency of their own. "They're helping me arrange the displays of objects," he says. "They're aware that they're in the painting."

For Strother, there's no escaping race, in some capacity, even if he wanted to. In school, he painted white people until a professor asked him why exactly he was doing that. He had no philosophical explanation: "Black people are a little more difficult to paint," he admits. The shortcuts he took to deal with that issue accidentally brushed up against taboos of representation. Strother came to his cut-paper black women—with their solid block of ebony skin, bright eyes, and red lips—as a no-frills way to depict African-Americans. It's an approach he



came to while making drawings of white scientists; he wanted to make their black counterparts. "How am I going to render his facial features? How am I going to make him look, technically?" Strother wondered. "Then I thought, I should just do drawings of black people, *all* black. I won't have to render! I gave him pink or red lips, white teeth, white for his blue eyes. That's basically how I came to making them look like blackface. But my thinking at the time was, and still is, that the reason they have that face has nothing to do with race."

Strother recalls growing up in the "quintessential California suburb of tract homes," where he was "often the only black kid in my class." It gave him a unique perspective. "When I was in school, I was cool for being the black kid. I've never been called the n-word—whereas my dad has. A lot of artists that I really like, their work is, I like to say, heavy on the black. I could never make work about that, because I never experienced that. For me, the experience of being black was never anything negative, and my work tries to be about that kind of identity—a celebration."

Here then is the thrill of Strother's paintings—how playful and irreverent they can be in navigating those codes and conventions, while the artist himself is both enamored of and amused by what he's allowed to say as an African-American artist making art with black people in it. It seems that Strother entered into this body of work with a desire to make a commentary on painting itself; the race and gender trappings provide sidelights that spark conversations, which are alternately burdensome and hilarious. >>



FROM TOP:
Reshaunda Reciting Her Monologue
The Kurt Schwitters And Colored Paper Untold Stories, 2011. Acrylic, paper, and wood on panel, 12 x 16 in.

Devin Troy Strother.

OPPOSITE:
Detail of "Shots 1-247," 2011. Mixed media on panel, each 3 x 5 in.

"The women are helping me arrange and construct the displays of objects. They're aware that they're in the painting."



The Coloureds Series Part 5 (Nigga on Ground Ambiguity), 2011. Mixed media on paper, 36 x 36 in.

“Black culture has been so adopted by everyone that it’s like American culture, it doesn’t belong to me anymore,” he says. “But the image does. I have authority, I’m allowed to use this. I’m just trying to make an image—and you have all this other stuff that you have to account for, and that’s the fun part about making images. With being black and using black people, you have to account for so much more, automatically, because it becomes a critique on other things, even if it isn’t necessarily so in the beginning.”

He relates, he says, to artists Kalup Linzy, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Kelley Walker, and hip-hop inflected critic Hennessy Youngman more than he does to Kara Walker, perhaps the most famous artist known for using cut-up paper to

represent African-American experience. “I feel like my work is approaching the opposite of what hers talks about, this heavy subject—plantations, slavery. It’s funny, I always feel that with black artists, you can pick and choose what fucked up time in history you go for.”

That said, Strother isn’t naive or coy, and he’s insinuated these potential racial and gender-based faux pas into the conversation. For his “Photos from Africa” series, he poses his paper women in front of scenes culled from the pages of *National Geographic*. When one gallerist balked at the potential misogyny in the way nude women were depicted—and the number of women in general—Strother countered that his intent was to pay homage to the “reclining nude” in paintings like

Manet’s *Olympia*. “Originally, I wanted to bring it back to painting, but the women turned into objects on the shelf,” he admits. “That’s kind of fucked up, but I’m going with it. I had so many emotions about it that I had to do it. There’s this weird read of what it means, and I like embracing that.” For his show this fall at Richard Heller Gallery, Strother is experimenting with works that feature his figures obscured by monochrome blocks of color —“It’s them trying to be abstract,” he says—as well as a series that revisits moments in performance-art history, substituting black figures for white. Tentative titles: *A Black Joseph Beuys in ‘Nigga in the Gallery with a Coyote,’* and *A Black Marina Abramović in ‘Nigga, I’m Lookin’ At You.’* MP