

Art **Reviews**

As Galleries Return to Normal, One Group Show Thinks Big

For *Open on K*, Hemphill in Washington D.C. asked artists to bring their biggest ideas.



by Kriston Capps
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Installation view of *Open on K* at Hemphill, Washington D.C. Works by Rush Baker IV (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

WASHINGTON D.C. — Rush Baker IV's latest paintings draw from sweeping scenes in history. Both "Angels Descending II" (2020) and "Fort Wagner" (2021) capture a pivotal moment in the Civil War. In July 1863, the Union Army's Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment, an all-Black battalion, led a heroic assault on the Confederate stronghold of Fort Wagner, near Charleston, South Carolina.

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Carolina. The battle was massively influential in boosting the public's assessment of African American troops.

The Second Battle of Fort Wagner is one of the more mythologized clashes in American history. It serves as the stage for a Louisa May Alcott short story and the climax of the 1989 film *Glory*. For his source, Baker turned to a visual account contemporaneous with the battle, a **dramatic 1863 print** by the firm Currier and Ives that shows Black soldiers scaling the fort's ramparts. Baker has abstracted the features of the white Confederate soldiers in the scene, but preserved the heroic Black troops; gone, too, is the regiment's white abolitionist commander, Robert Gould Shaw, who laid down his life in the battle beside dozens of his men.



Installation view of *Open on K* at Hemphill, Washington D.C.

Baker is going for a broader picture that transcends history in **Open on K**, a group exhibition at Hemphill. (The title refers to the gallery's new-ish location on K Street, where it relocated last year, just before the pandemic.) Minus the pale Rebel troops from the original 1863 print, and with many more Union flags, Baker's paintings show Black freedom fighters pushing back against a fiery miasma of abstract paint, producing an account that feels timeless and contemporary, but also anxious and uncertain.

Other artists in *Open on K* are working on a scale just as large. "No 2 (from the Book of Miracles)" (2021) by Tanya Marcuse is a pigment print of a meticulous garden-bed diorama that the artist built by hand and then photographed from a



scaffold. In fact, all of the gallery’s photographers swung big for the show. For “Up at Night” (2016–18/2021), Franz Jantzen stitched together 305 digital images of the sky-scape overhead, capturing and then carefully assembling a canopy of trees, stars, and moon in the darkness. The effect is stark and gorgeous. Colby Caldwell hauled a flatbed scanner into a forest to analyze a tree, resulting in “otff_(3/21)” (2021), a glitchy, painterly inkjet print.



Installation view of *Open on K* at Hemphill, Washington D.C. Works by Mark Kelner

Then there’s painter and sculptor Renée Stout, who gives viewers just a glimpse of the sprawling, fantastical cosmos that she’s been building with “My Parallel Universe” (2016–20), a brooding image of swirling atmosphere and mysterious math. Three paintings from Mark Kelner’s *Strip Mall Landscape* series (2021) revisit more familiar geographies with fresh eyes. Kelner’s Pop-inspired paintings of strip mall signs showcase America’s growing and increasingly diverse suburbs without the typically dismissive stereotypes about suburbia.

For *Open on K*, Hemphill asked artists to bring their biggest ideas. That’s a promising gallery provocation for this moment of return to not-quite-normalcy. Baker appears to have found urgent inspiration in the Black Lives Matter protests for racial justice in the summer of 2020, but his paintings also point indirectly to the inchoate rage of the January 6 insurrection, with which the United States has yet to reckon. Many other artists — and many of the rest of us — spent months looking inward. Stepping back into the gallery after so many months of not

or showing or socializing marks an important moment, one in which we may see what's changed.

Open on K continues at Hemphill (434 K Street NW, Washington D.C.) through November 24.

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