

## HYPERALLERGIC

Art

### Blackness, Portraiture, and the Weight of Identity

Jeff Sonhouse's portraits provide a vision beyond the old identity models, making Blackness constitute a set of keys that let us onto an entirely different playground.

by [Soph Rodney](#)  
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Oil paint and matches on panel board mounted in wood artist's frame (all images courtesy of the artist and Menique Malone Gallery Chicago and by Useful Art Services, unless otherwise noted)

Across the country in Los Angeles, [Samantha Rosenwald](#) was struck by a similar call-to-action as she watched the wildfires ravage her home state. On top of the sense of loss and destruction felt by everyone this year, Rosenwald also had gone through a painful breakup when she created the works on view on East 3rd Street in Los Angeles.

“The flame encapsulates a bursting feeling, like an internal rage, blood boiling, an ineffable searing disquietude,” said Rosenwald. The colored pencil-on-canvas works show a hand clutching grapes while submerged in flame, a darkly comic look at passion. “By essentializing the notion of fire to this one bold and flat symbol on canvas, I was hoping to let my works encapsulate this range of raging extremes.”

Rosenwald continued, “I wanted the fire to simply be fire—to be this thing with many identities: some evil and some hopeful. I wanted to present the flame as something very personal to me, but something so universal that it could mean something special and unique to whomever looked at it.”

When I encountered Jeff Sonhouse's portraits a couple years ago, at Tilton Gallery in New York, at the exhibition opening I looked around open-mouthed at the work thinking, "Who is this person?" The other artists there told me they knew him, and they had been familiar with his work for many years. They all conveyed a version of, "Oh yeah, Jeff is the real deal — has been for a while." I then wandered about that gallery making a mental inventory of the elements of his paintings that I wanted to take with me and mull over.



Installation view of *Entrapment* 2018 at Monique Meloche Gallery Chicago

I similarly wandered about the Monique Meloche gallery a few weeks ago to see his new exhibition *Entrapment*, pinging from piece to piece, marveling at the use of disparate materials: oil paint, matches, copper and steel wool, watercolor, paper. I've written before about how Sonhouse has used built-up acrylic paint to mirror the sheen and dense curlicues of a real, live afro. Here he does that, but primarily uses matches raked at an angle and formed into a globe around the characters' heads. Only after the painting is complete, Sonhouse lights the matches and controls the ensuing blaze to render hair that is starless black, with a sweep of soot flowing heavenward. The figures in the paintings (all 2018), including "Selfie," "Repeat Offender," and "Return to Sender" all feature that wash of vertical ash, and thus look like they are moving, that they have either just landed or might soon vanish upwards.



Installation view of *Entrapment* 2018 at Monique Meloche Gallery Chicago

Viewers can lose themselves in the other deft manipulation of materials in his work. For example there is the copper wool that becomes a thicket of red hair in “Conductor” (2018), with wire bent into large hoops and pyramids hanging from the figure’s ears to remind me of the “[door knocker](#)” earrings worn by women around the way where I grew up in the Bronx. In Sonhouse’s “Resuscitation of a Golden Era Blues” (2018) the two boards replete with burnt matches radiate out from the figure’s head-like wings — thus although that head is impaled on a spike, it seems like it’s flying, perhaps through his own historical narrative, a trail of smoke behind him.



Jeff Sonhouse, “Resuscitation of a Golden Era Blues” (2018)

There's beauty and material innovation, yes, and here's the insight: he makes his figures, who are all figures of color mythic without leaning on typical mythology. They are not kings and queens of some bygone Egyptian dynasty, corporate executives, preachers, or athletes. Instead they are inscrutable. They might be harlequins, jesters, tricksters, oracles, seers, or shamans. Their faces are most often hidden behind masks; their expressions are enigmatically opaque; they are rendered in magpie color schemes; they breathe in buckshot, and they gaze elsewhere forever. These characters escape the identity trap of our current politics that ends in Blackness being a set of commodifiable types as easily used to sell outraged Fox News polemics, as to sell [Bossip videos](#). The figures in Jeff Sonhouse's paintings show us what African Americans, Caribbean people, and others from the African diaspora might be when our imagination is not so yoked to the oppression-degradation/heroic transcendence dialectic.

Sonhouse's imaginative use of his figures makes me think of the poem "[The Juggler](#)" by Richard Wilbur because the painter handles identity not as a precious object to be venerated or protected, but as an object for play. Wilbur writes:

A ball will bounce; but less and less. It's not

A light-hearted thing, resents its own resilience

...

It takes a sky-blue juggler with five red balls

To shake our gravity up. Whee, in the air

The balls roll around, wheel on his wheeling hands,

Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres



Jeff Sonhouse "Conductor" (2018) (photo by the author)

The poem further describes how this juggler keeps these balls aloft, contradicting gravity, and keeps his audience on the edge of their seats as he makes that which should not be true, exist for them — for a little while. Sonhouse's version of Blackness is this feat of denial of what can at times seem like universal axioms: black people are defined by being hounded, victimized, and plagued. His figures come to race from an oblique angle, not as demons (as Darren Wilson, who shot and killed Michael Brown, described Brown) nor angels, but something else. Their teeth are gold; their hair is steel; their souls are fireproof. They provide a vision beyond the old identity models of Blackness as the progenitor of the world's offspring, as more real than other people, as an anchor for authenticity. In these portraits being Black constitutes a set of keys that let us onto an entirely different playground.

Another thing I sometimes do as an art critic is celebrate an artist's work. I do that here with the paintings of Jeff Sonhouse. His work is not just visually stunning and lyrical, but revelatory. As the poet Wilbur again says: "For him we batter our hands / Who has won for once over the world's weight."

*Entrapment continues at [Monique Meloche gallery](#) (451 N Paulina Street, Chicago) through August 18.*