

BROOKLYN RAIL**ArtSeen**

Yashua Klos: *Our Labour*

By **Jillian Russo**

Yashua Klos, *OUR LABOUR*, 2020–21. Woodblock print on muslin and oil-based, relief block ink on dropcloth, mounted on canvas 186 x 456 inches. © Yashua Klos. Photo: John Bentham.

The centerpiece of *Our Labour* at the Wellin Museum of Art is a black and white mural-sized collage that shares the exhibition's title and reimagines Diego Rivera's historic mural *Detroit Industry* (1932–33) for the twenty-first century. Recovering the importance of Black labor to the building of Ford Motor Company and Detroit, Yashua Klos replaces Rivera's white assembly-line laborers with portraits of his own family members, many of whom worked in the Ford factory. The print-based collage was inspired by Klos's unexpected reconnection with the paternal side of his family after a cousin discovered a genetic relationship through a DNA test. Klos viewed the Rivera mural for the first time in person during a trip to reunite with these newfound relatives. After returning to his Brooklyn studio, he began to envision the mural as a blueprint for creating a family tree. Using a technique—informed by the monumental prints of Wolfbat Studios and Cannonball Press—which he has honed for over a decade, Klos created large-scale woodblock portraits on muslin.

Using an art historical icon such as *Detroit Industry* as source material sets up a tension between the new work and the original which is always lurking in the viewer's mind. Throughout his practice, Klos embraces these types of dualities: industry versus nature, heavy versus weightless forms, overlapping figures versus empty space. *Our Labour* retains some of the towering machinery in Rivera's mural, including a huge wheel that is turned by Klos's father, who appears in the upper left of the composition wearing a fedora. At the center of the collage is a portrait of Klos's grandmother holding an engine, presenting it almost as an offering. Klos has discussed his intention to subvert the image of the laboring Black body, and the mechanical elements of the factory consequently appear more as symbolic props than working machines. Rather than integrating figures and machines, as Rivera does, Klos's figures resist regimentation. They turn toward the viewer and are often shown in poses taken directly from the photographs his relatives shared with him.



Yashua Klos, *Yonna and Towana*, 2021. Woodblock print on muslin, acrylic, archival paper, colored pencil, Japanese rice paper, spray paint, and wood, mounted on canvas, 97 x 95 1/2 inches. © Yashua Klos. Photo: John Bentham.

Eliminating many of Rivera's intricate details, Klos leaves empty space in which the figures float. As a result, the composition doesn't read as entirely resolved. This is possibly suggestive of the bonds still forming between Klos and his family, but it also gives the collage a Dadaist quality. The interspersed cut-out figures, industrial wheel imagery, and presiding female protagonist all bring to mind Hannah Hoch's photomontage *Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada Through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (1919–20). A Dadaist lineage places *Our Labour* in a context of rebellion, reclamation, and the building of a new social order.

While *Our Labour* is an impressive and ambitious project, Klos's poetic imagery and celebration of materials comes through more powerfully outside of Rivera's shadow. *Yonna and Towana* (2021) is a sensitive and textured portrait of Klos's second cousin Yonna as she appeared on the day of their mutual cousin Towana's funeral. The woodblock print on muslin is embellished with acrylic, colored pencil, spray paint, and Japanese rice paper embossed with Art Deco patterning that extends across Yonna's face like a tattoo. Vines of blooming flowers disrupt and soften the geometric design, framing Yonna's face with soft petals. Klos incorporates Art Deco motifs as a reference to Detroit's architectural landmarks, which he sees as both reflections of the city's commercial power and sites of exclusivity and segregation. Organic imagery, such as the outstretched vine-wrapped hand in *Vein Vine* (2021) and the oversized feather cradling bricks in *The Bridge Between Heaven and Earth* (2021) are symbols of humanity, nurturing, and spirituality that counterbalance industrial forces.



Yashua Klos, *Dan Protection Power Welding Mask*, 2021. Stained and charred maple 13 1/4 x 10 3/4 x 11 1/8 inches. Courtesy the artist. © Yashua Klos. Photo: John Bentham.

The tension between mechanical and natural systems is the explicit subject of *When the Parts Untangle* (2022), a collaborative work Klos created with Hamilton College students. In this piece several colossal flowers and their tendrils break apart a dilapidated car into weightless abstract shards. This reclaiming of the car by the flower can be seen as a metaphor for the effects of deindustrialization on Detroit's urban communities. The imagery acknowledges, but does not celebrate, the cycles of decay and revitalization that have shaped the city.

Klos has recently begun to work in three dimensions, and perhaps the most powerful pieces in the exhibition are a series of wooden masks, including *Mbolo Ancestor Portrait Welding Mask* (2021), that fuse African tribal sculpture with a welding helmet. These hybrid creations play with the dual and opposing purposes of the mask. The welding mask protects and conceals identity, while the tribal mask conjures and performs it through ceremonial dance. To activate his masks, in lieu of dancing Klos chars them with his welding torch in a ceremonial act. Fusing industrial and spiritual functions, he recuperates the African mask from its position in the Western canon as a vehicle for modernist abstraction. By bringing together familial, ancestral, and social histories throughout the Wellin Museum's exhibition, Klos's sculptures and collages consistently challenge our fixed interpretations of iconic objects.

Contributor

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Jillian Russo is a Brooklyn-based curator and art historian.