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**Adrian Armstrong  
Dawn Okoro  
Jean Smith  
Laura Lit  
Ryan Sandison Montgomery  
Saul Jerome San Juan**

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## **LIKESNESS**

May 30–July 9, 2019

Six contemporary points-of-view on the human face and figure in painting, drawing, and sculpture: slow portraits for an age of instant images

curated by Phillip Niemeyer

viewing hours:  
Saturdays 3–6:30 pm

or schedule a visit, email:  
[hello@northern-southern.com](mailto:hello@northern-southern.com)

price list available

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**Northern–Southern**

1900-B East 12th Street, Austin, TX 78702

[northern-southern.com](http://northern-southern.com)

# Dawn Okoro

(b. Houston, Texas, 1980)

In many of Nigerian American artist Dawn Okoro's paintings the subject is perfectly rendered in oil, acrylic, and pencil only to be marked out by a bold, gestural brush strokes. Okoro's work has been featured in the Texas Biennial, New York University, Notre Dame University, Rice University Museum, George Washington Carver Museum, and MoCADA Museum in Brooklyn. She studied at the University of Texas and earned a law degree (never used) from Texas Southern University.



Coco  
2019  
copper leaf and acrylic on canvas  
36 × 48 inches

## ***Q. Why do you make art?***

Dawn Okoro: I make art because it is a medium that guides me through my emotions. My work is about self-reflexivity, which is the circular relationship between cause and effect. I am interested in how the world impacts us and how we can impact that world. Following that course, I cross paths with other people that can relate.

## ***Q. How do you paint?***

DO: My work starts with a reference image. I photograph the subject, then I paint them. The work is based on what the subject chose to show me during the photo session and what I know of them. The colors I choose are based on emotion.

## ***Q. Who are the women in your paintings?***

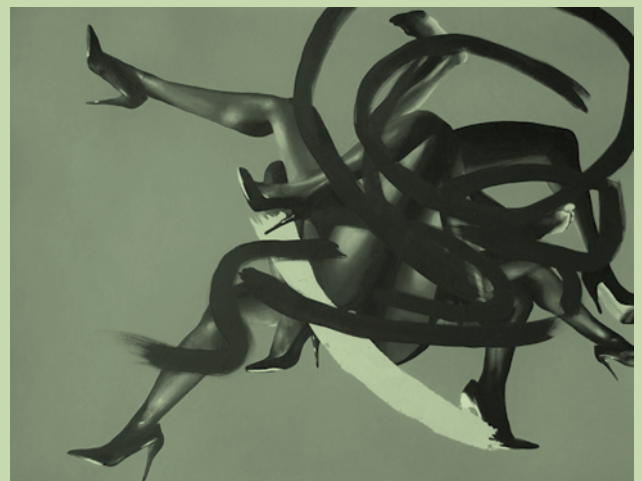
DO: The subjects that I paint are people who agreed to be an art model for the work. Sometimes the subject is myself:

The subject in *Coco* is a fellow Austin artist.

The subject in *Francine* is a Dallas musician.

*Free Birds* is a commissioned piece I created for Magna Carda's "Angels" song. The painting reflects the song's theme of a caged bird finding freedom. The subjects are dancers, including Austin-based choreographer Sade Jones.

The legs in *Ten Legs* are my own. It is a capture of a moment made up of smaller moments.

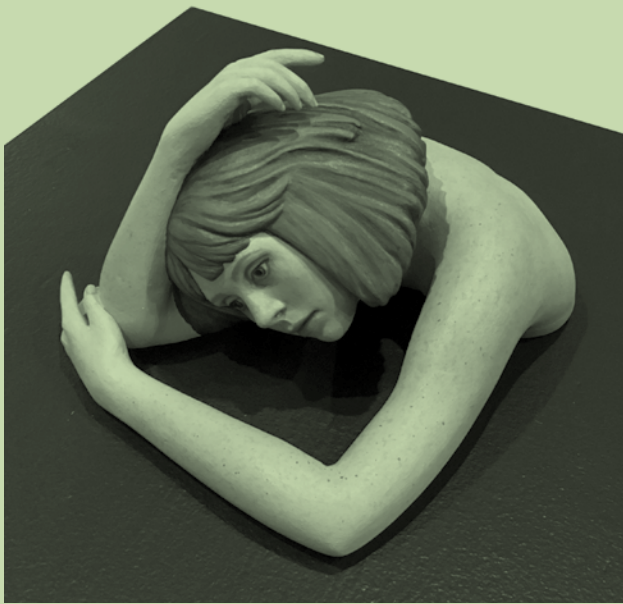


Ten Legs  
2019  
copper leaf and acrylic on canvas  
48 × 36 inches

# Laura Lit

(b. Dallas, Texas, 1979)

At her 2017 Women and Their Work show, Laura Lit presented a suite of sharply realistic oils based on photographs she took: erotic, terrifying, honest. In her 2018 show at Northern-Southern she painted a set of light but iconic abstracts, renderings of the lights she saw when she tightly closed her eyes. As of late, Lit has returned to the figure, but now with sculpture.



*Johanna*

2019

paperclay and acrylic

10 × 8 × 6 inches (approximate)

## ***Q. Why do you make art?***

I've just always been an artist and made art. It's something I can always turn to, always improve upon and challenge myself. There are always new skills to learn. It's a constant in my life.

## ***Q. Why sculpting now instead of painting? How is it different? How do you make these sculptures?***

The last time I sat down to begin a new painting, I just had this feeling of "I don't want to do this, I really just don't feel like it." I liked the image I had captured for the figure study, so I started thinking about how would I represent that image sculpturally? Which medium would I use? When I found paperclay it just all came together. I can use this material and it would give me all the flexibility, workable time vs dry time, and capacity for detail that I need.

The main difference I've learned now between sculpting and painting, particularly of a figure from a photograph, is that you have to shoot 360 degrees to get images of all angles to work from. I have to pay a lot more attention to the mathematics of anatomy for it to look right. I really get into this part.

First I take pictures of myself. I already usually have an idea for the pose and the wig. Then I start by making an armature. I continue bulking the forms up, then I'll start adding paperclay to this, paying careful attention to anatomy and proper placement, because it's much easier to add paperclay than to subtract it- I dries very hard. Sculpting into the paperclay happens after its fully dry. It's basically like carving into soft wood. Then sanding. Lots and lots of sanding. I've collected lots of little sanding tools to get the effect I need. After everything is smoothed out with a brush of water, I apply a thin layer of gesso. I'll then paint it with acrylic paint, and lately I've been adding a little oil paint to the hair and skin at the end to add luminosity and gentler gradations.

## ***Q. Who are the women in these works?***

They aren't representations of a specific person. Perhaps they are the other Laura's that exist in the multiverse? They may have similar features to myself, but I am not making self-portraits. I try to shut off the part of my brain that says it has to look like something or someone and just let the features occur naturally. The personalities and expressions come alive when I paint them, and it's always a surprise to see who they have become.

# Adrian Armstrong

(b. Omaha, Nebraska, 1990)

Through portrait and figurative work, Adrian Armstrong explores the black identity and experience. He is the co-founder of Brown State of Mind, an organization dedicated to the advancement of POC creatives and their ideas, and has a solo show this summer at Austin's Co-Lab gallery.



*untitled*

2019

ballpoint pen and acrylic on paper

48 × 47 inches

***Q. Why do you make art?***

I make art simply as self expression.

***Q. How do you go about making a piece like the one in this show?***

Self portraits are always a reset. It's a way to explore different mediums and techniques. Whenever I'm in a slump or want to try something new, I do a self portrait. With pieces like *(Untitled)* it starts with a selfie. I start with a layer of pen to flesh it out and then add layer after layer of acrylic washes.

***Q. Who is the man in this drawing/painting?***

The man in the portrait is me, but hopefully everyone can see themselves in it.

***Q. What is the value of painting slow, at a time when you can take a photo and share it instantly?***

There's beauty in the journey and there is beauty in the struggle. Instant gratification doesn't equate to the satisfaction of putting blood, sweat, and tears into something. Time is valuable and that value goes into your pieces.

# Ryan Sandison Montgomery

(b. Boston, Massachusetts, 1981)

After years of intentionally working with abstraction, painter and installation artist Montgomery has returned whole-heartedly to figurative, representational portraiture. Montgomery earned a BFA at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and is working toward an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for 2020.



*Brow Pen (Kathryn)*

2019

acrylic and oil on linen

18 × 18 inches

## ***Q. Why do you make art?***

Art making is more of an innate drive or even physical requirement than simply a joyful activity for me. I don't know how not to make things. Increasingly I am trying to embrace a practice that prioritizes process over short-term goals, which is easier said than done.

## ***Q. What prompted the shift to representational art from abstraction?***

I wrote an essay about the Canadian realist painter Mary Pratt right before taking a trip to West Texas for the holidays. Pratt was rather provincial and her work was about her domestic life. That study coupled with the relative quiet desolation of the desert found me wanting to communicate with a new kind of clarity, candor, and with a revitalized love for negative space.

## ***Q. How do you make these paintings?***

These pieces are painted from reference photos taken with an iPhone. The frames are square, as an intentional association with Instagram's format. The technologies' ghosts are meant to be present in the finished work. Plucking a digital portrait from the endless visual flow and slowing it down with paint is a means of honoring my subjects. These works are ultimately about time. The figures, while "realistic", live in a space between two different forms of biographical fiction: photography and painting.

## ***Q. Who are the people in these paintings?***

*Brow Pen (Kathryn)* is a portrait of my wife, the mother of my children, in the midst of a grooming ritual. It was inspired, in part, by Mary Pratt's painting *Cold Cream*. *Enid's Booth (Benjamin)* is a portrait of a close friend who I met years ago at Pratt Institute. This moment was captured a few days before the Greenpoint restaurant Enid's closed.

# Saul Jerome San Juan

(b. Quezon City, Philippines, 1983)

Queer and Filipino-American, Saul Jerome San Juan paints the other: blue eyed men with white skin sunburned-pink in Yeti hats and sleeveless tees. San Juan emigrated to the USA at age fourteen. He studied art at Loyola, and architecture at the University of Texas. San Juan curates the experimental art space, Atelier 1205.



*McAfee*

2019

graphite, alkyd, and oil on canvas panel

14 × 11 inches

## ***Q. Why do you paint?***

Constantly barraged by the fleeting images of our information age, I paint because painting prolongs the sensual experience of what I paint, both in the performance of painting and in the resulting artifact, unmoved in its accessibility despite the rapid evolution of technology rendering obsolete digital formats inaccessible.

## ***Q. How do you paint?***

I grid my source images digitally in order to replicate them precisely on canvas I grid with graphite. I then proceed to paint with thin glazes of earth pigments mixed with alkyd medium for transparency, red for the skin and yellow as needed for the hair. For the eyes, I use a mixture of white and carbon black, the coolest colors in my limited palette.

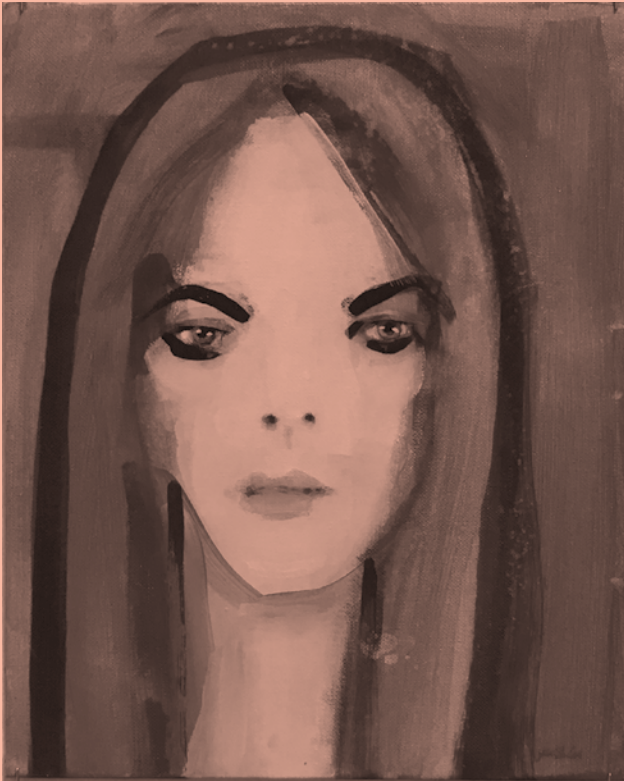
## ***Q. Who are the men in your paintings?***

The men in the my paintings are acquaintances or strangers I encounter in both virtual and physical public spheres I frequent, including Instagram, Barton Creek Greenbelt, art openings, and country music concerts. While they vary in manner of dress (many never wear tank tops or trucker hats), socioeconomic status, political leanings (most are progressives), body type, music preference, hair color (often red or blond, but not exclusively), age, and sexuality (most identify as heterosexual), they all have in common Anglo-Celtic faces, bluish eyes, and fair skin that easily burns in the tropical heat where I was born and raised. These are sociohistorically charged physical features that constitute the very limiting “type” I find sexually attractive, no doubt conditioned by the baggage of my upbringing as a postcolonial in the Philippines and my coming-of-age as a teen-aged, first-generation immigrant in the suburbs outside of Chicago and in Texas. These are white men on whom stereotypes have not have had the same negative impact that stereotypes have had on my sense of self and belonging as a visible minority in Anglo-America. The way I have them dress and perform for my camera do not suggest moral judgment on them as the complex human beings that they are; rather, my conscious aesthetic choices confess my own idiosyncratic fantasies, my own raw lust that I attempt to dignify, through sincere artistic effort in my craft, into loveliness that invites transcendent empathy.

# Jean Smith

(b. Vancouver, Canada, 1959)

Jean Smith studied painting at the Vancouver School of Art. She is a novelist, musician, and painter. For the last couple of years she attempted to paint one painting a day. Most of her subjects are women.



*Hoodie #11*

2018

oil and acrylic on canvas panel

14 × 11 inches

**ADRIAN ARMSTRONG**

**DAWN OKORO**

**JEAN SMITH**

**LAURA LIT**

**RYAN SANDISON**

**MONTGOMERY**

**SAUL JEROME SAN JUAN**

**MAY – JUL 2019**

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