



"Grapes" (Detail), Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022

"An Invitation to Love: Blair Saxon-Hill's Shrimp Head Momma"  
Nino Meier Gallery, Los Angeles"  
by Amy Bernstein

I walk into Blair Saxon Hill's exhibition, Shrimp Head Momma, to find an invitation placed at my feet. I am surrounded by an array of characters, Saxon-Hill's emblematic cast. They are floating on the walls around me, electric, expectant. Heavy and seductive, they're built with cut fabric segments that revel in Blair's bold colour choice and pattern juxtaposition, each piece a visual enjambment straddling risk and elation/indulgence. They are each a panoply of extraordinary inventiveness, of virtuosic execution of line and tuned-up combinations. The through line between all is a medley of classic themes, namely love.

I am stunned. I look up, enthralled by them. Each image in the gallery depicts not only a character, but a moment. Their various personae exude not only what I might describe as an aura, but definitely an era of Presence - as if they recall a time of communion when another's company held just so much magic, a bygone era whose images resound sharply after long bouts of separation be it due to wartime pandemic, work, fate, etc. Moments of longing, desire, dreaming and connection, they cultivate a timeless essence of relationally between us that trumps all difference—- images that strike a chord in the very essence of our humanity. These moments are sometimes visible between two characters and sometimes as a lone figure. In the instances of the lone figure, they operate on the palpable understanding of imminent communion.

In Saxon-Hill's piece titled Wishbone, a face, the fingers of two hands and a wishbone are depicted. These hands may belong to the body of the face we see. They may belong to someone who exists just outside the frame. Each possibility confers another iteration of the wish. The eyes of this face are closed, and the mouth is open, the wishbone almost pressed against the forehead of the face in the wishing. When Helen Cixous writes about Rembrandt's painting, Bathsheba at Her Bath (1654), she describes the way in which Rembrandt paints a voice:



"Wishbone", Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022

. . .He paints a woman struck by a letter, carried outside of herself and whom he calls –we call — Bathsheba.

He paints the bruised heart of Bathsheba. He paints the slight and uncertain intensity.

Rembrandt paints the secret: the trace of what escapes us: he always paints what escapes us: what has just happened, what is going to happen, and which traverses us suddenly, pierces us, turns us upside down, escapes — beyond the painting, beyond thought, and leaves us there panting, suspended, grazed, he paints the body that remains, maybe the skin, maybe the cadaver.

The painting is the place of passage.

. . .

‘Rembrandt penetrates so far into the mystery that he says things no language can express. It is just to say of

Rembrandt: the Magician. . .This is not an easy craft.

The craft of death isn’t easy. What does that mean?

For example this: it isn’t with the appetite of desire that Rembrandt paints Bathsheba. It is with attentive love for the creature, for the miracle of existing. The profound amazement, joyous with splendour, almost pious before this invention: the human being. Nothing royal. Nothing extraordinary. The sober splendor of the ordinary. What is marvelous: the ordinary metamorphosis: these people are subject to alteration, to time. Time is at work. And not just time. Everything that endlessly paints us from the inside. All the blows and messages that knock at the door to the heart, and paint from the inside the troubled nervous agitation we call soul. (The soul, our capacity to suffer, said Tsvetaeva.)

That which wells up in Bathsheba, that which the letter has poured into her body, into her organs, into her brain, and which is working on her body, her face, her brow, from the inside.

She’s listening to this: this transformation in herself. Which is still new, mobile, momentary. She doesn’t know who, shortly, she’ll be.

Traversed.

Traversed, St. Matthew too? Transfixed. Cocked. All ears.

He paints us listening to ourselves change.

On the one hand he paints.

The heavy

Silence

Of Bathsheba

On the other he paints the Voice that causes writing.

—The Voice —- how to paint the Voice?

—- We don’t see the voice.

Rembrandt paints the voice we do not see.

Paints what we do not see.

See?

Paints what speaks inside. . . .

The word The Angel

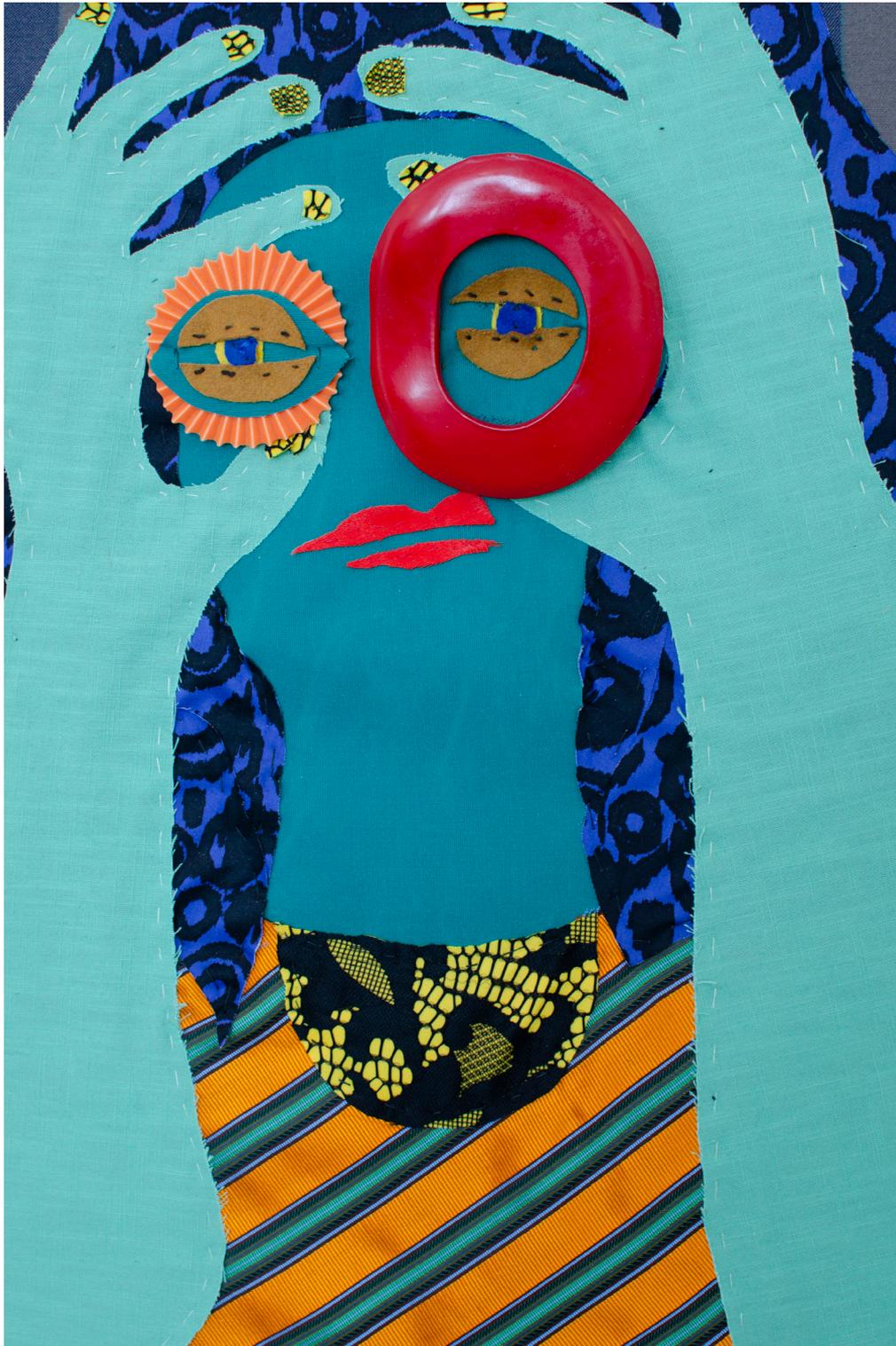
Cixous expounds upon the notion of the painter’s skill in adeptly illustrating Bathsheba’s inner voice as she reads a letter and the change that occurs as consequence. Bathsheba’s letter relays that her husband has been killed. As this knowledge ripples through her, grief transforms and ages her. Saxon-Hill’s fabric pieces also construct this inner voice. The wish in Wishbone is audible, palpable in its earnest intensity. She makes this inner voice visible in a look that is an entreaty of desire and of the i love you’s between lovers as they become lost in each other’s gaze.



“Praying Mantis”, Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022

The invitation at my feet asks me to partake. It’s about love, what we are meant to be and do. It was Blair who thrust love center stage. And we must commend her for it, because we, WE, forgot. Only Saxon-Hill’s deft hand could guide us through the minefield of contemporary life in all of its tumult to remind us of this.

Blair sets desire at the helm, at once relishing and celebrating its fire and its joy; her characters embody notions of what it means to both incite and submit to it. In the submission, she likens surrendering to a homecoming, a giving up and in, relinquishing any false stoicism or cultivated veneer of detachment. In all of Saxon-Hill’s work, there is a heroic honesty of wanting and needing — to be held, to be fucked, to eat. It is a welcome release, the dissipation of this supposed strength. In fact, it is the ultimate strength.



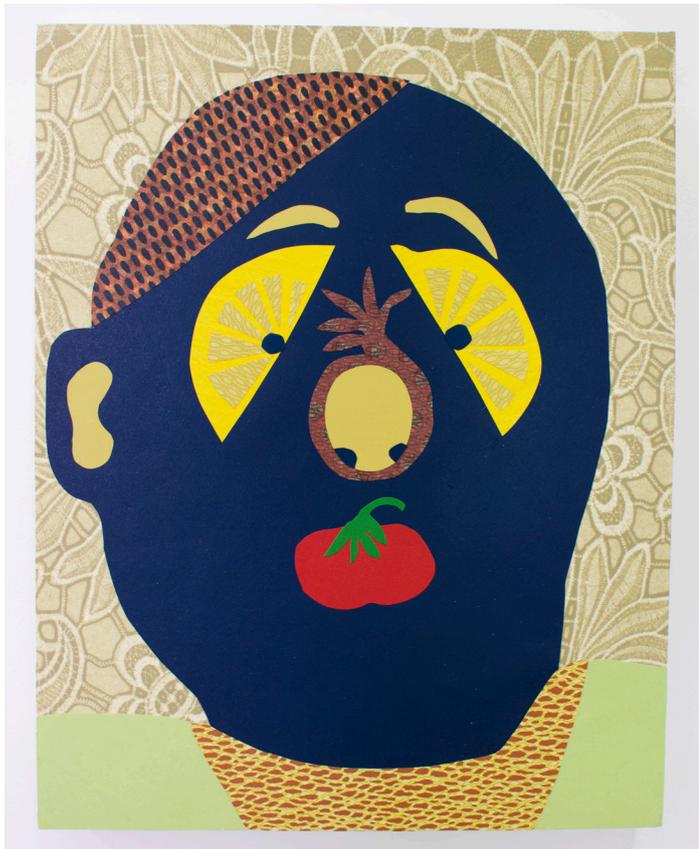
“Woman With a Chair”, Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022

Shrimp Head Momma reminds us that we are strongest in an embrace. She heralds the antics and intimacy of bowing one's head to bite into ripe, fragrant papaya in good company, as juices spill down the chin, unable to be checked or stopped. sFor it is a delight. Delight is who sits alongside desire in Saxon-Hill's sensuous celebration of material— a repetitive indulgence that is intentional. This is a sumptuous feast, a banquet Blair has laid for us. Can I eat your breasts, your sex, the salty delicacy of your brow from beneath which you gaze at me so hungrily? “I want to devour you”, Praying Mantis' look says to us. Can I delight in peeping at you — peekaboo — through this red rubber donut? My eyes suddenly alone and separate, detached jewels, little wet pools, unique and mystifying as layered veils, part of me and not, says “Woman With A Chair”. The casual drape of an arm over a shoulder, an orange in hand. To witness your sleep, the most vulnerable undersides of your bare feet — is a call to love you.

Saxon-Hill playfully manifests Eros in these exchanges, the deity's contemporary iteration born of the longing to share in the life force of another. The god trafficks only in the currency of energies that gleefully flow between us these days. He dances like a sprite around the gallery, egged on by this happily voracious crew. These human traits and yearnings, achingly delicate and mundane, which render riches greater than any sultan.

As I stand before the paper portraits, I am bowled over, once again, at the invitation to the feast that Blair lays at my feet. They hold more than they seem they should be capable. Here the immense skill of Blair's hand shines, her adept draughtswomanship displayed front and centre. Wielding scissors instead of brush, her executions become even more impressive. The paper, made from Blair's residency at PACE Prints, is stunning, as wonderfully sumptuous as any Italian textile. But the faces are what enchants. We are always drawn to a face, often finding them where there are none. And yet, this verdant symposium of individuals is a subversion to that commonplace occurrence. These faces are completely original, and yet, not. In an interview about his mother, the famous painter, Paula Rego, filmmaker Nick Willing talks about a time when he crossly asked his father, the painter Victor Willing, what an artist was good for. His father responded,

“An artist goes to a place that no one has ever been before and brings back a picture that no one has ever seen, but that everyone instantly recognises because it tells us something about ourselves. And this is important for understanding who we are.”



Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022



Blair Saxon-Hill, 2022

I think of this as I look over these faces which I have never seen and yet I somehow recognise. I think that this artist is going to the places inside ourselves that we have forgotten, bringing us back a feast in these works, making a banquet of each other, laying an invitation at our feet.