ANDY ROBERT

SELECT PRESS 2017-2024

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ANDY ROBERT
"Andy Robert" by Barry Schwabsky,
Artforum, January 30, 2024

ANDY ROBERT

BARRY SCHWABSKY

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN CHARMED by the brag attributed to Picasso: "I don't seek, I find." It feels true, in his case, but also reminds me of those fellow students who used to say, "Oh, I never study for the exam": Probably they were secretly cramming after convincing everyone else there was no need to do so.

Still, ever since I met Andy Robert a couple of years ago, I've seen him as an artist who probably finds more than he seeks. What that means: using a kind of free-floating, omnidirectional attentiveness rather than a goal-oriented intensity of focus. I got a clue as to how this spidey-sense works recently when I went to Robert's studio—not when I was *in* his studio, mind you, but as I was on my way. The studio is in Red Hook in Brooklyn, a long walk from the nearest subway station, so of course I was running late to meet Robert on what he'd just informed me was his birthday. "Just off subway, be there in ~10," I texted him, a little after I was already supposed to have been there.

I shouldn't have been too worried about it. Hurrying up Hamilton Avenue next to the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, I saw a familiar-looking figure strolling ahead. Catching up, I confirmed my hunch: "Hey, Andy!" Like me, he was on his own schedule. As we walked together, our conversation flitted from this to that, mercurial. I noticed that his reference points were poets and musicians more than artists: Amiri Baraka, Bob Dylan, and Kendrick Lamar were names that came up repeatedly. Periodically along the way, he would pause to pick something up from the scuzzy sidewalk: bottle caps. He explained to me that he was collecting these for use in a sculpture. Strangely, he seemed to know the location of the bottle caps without seeming to look for them—without, in fact, seeming to be keeping an eye out for anything (and certainly without appearing to notice any of them until they were in his hand), but just going where he was going and chatting all the while. That's what gave me the idea that he could see things, find things, without having to seek them out. And another thing: It made me realize that Robert's work is concerned, at least in part, with what the musician Joseph Jarman described in a 1966 poem as "non-cognitive aspects of the city," and a concomitant sense that the urban fabric "could have spirits among stones uppity the force of becoming what art was made to return."

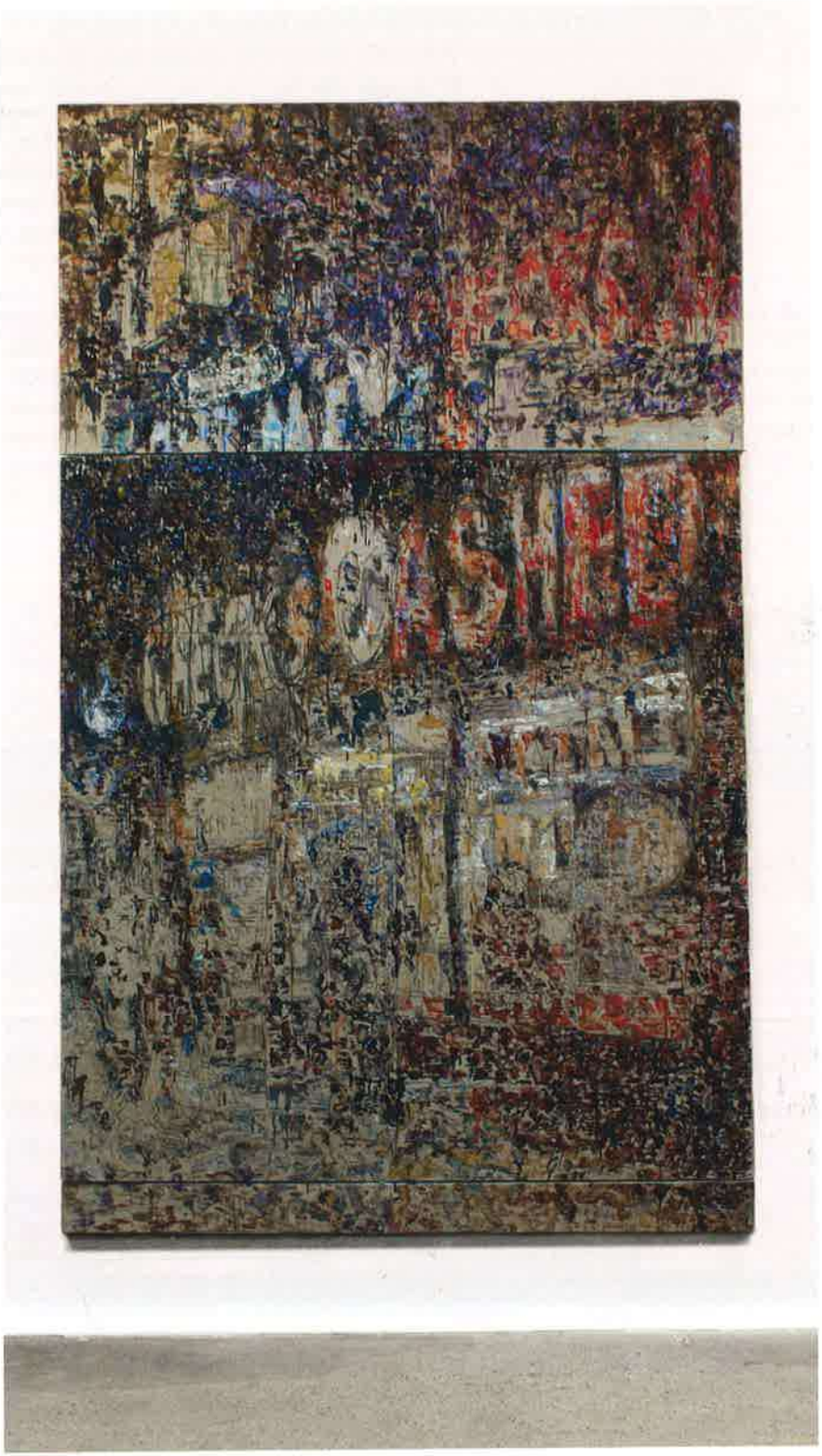
We continued making our way to the studio, but when we got there, we didn't go in, not right away. Robert explained to me that it was kind of crowded, that there wasn't really much space to stand or get a perspective on things, and I began to realize that what was in there would not be the mysteriously humming paintings that I was anticipating, caught between abstract form-building (and form-deconstructing) and an embrace of imagery at its most elusive. These would not be paintings like those I had seen on a previous studio visit, or in 2022 at the Fifty-Eighth Carnegie International in Pittsburgh, or the year before that at the most recent iteration of "Greater New York" at New York's MoMA PS1, or in the catalogue for his 2022 exhibition at Michael Werner Gallery in London, or for that matter at Hannah Hoffman's booth at

Opposite page: Andy Robert, *Favorite Perch*, 2023, taxidermied crow, hair, bottle caps, iron nails, iron ax, 81 × 12 × 12".

Below: View of the 58th Carnegie International, 2022–23, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. From left: Andy Robert, *Cargo (1)*, 2022; Andy Robert, *Cargo (2)*, 2022; Andy Robert, *Cargo (3)*, 2022.

the Frieze New York in 2019, where I first saw Robert's work, prompting me to get in touch with him. In fact, I wouldn't see any paintings at all. In preparation for his then-upcoming exhibition at New York's Artists Space, "PAPALOKO" (on view through February 17), he'd been making sculpture assemblages of found materials he'd been gathering. And even though the show was set to open in less than two weeks, it was still in flux. (No wonder all those bottle caps could come in handy.)

When we finally stepped inside the studio, I understood why Robert had felt it would be more comfortable to talk outside: It was so packed with material there hardly seemed room for us. Some of what I saw was self-evidently sculpture; other things still seemed to be on their way. The most common elements were shovels, tree stumps and logs, and taxidermied birds. Everything, except maybe the birds, looked old, battered, imbued with a sense of age; those shovels had done a lot of digging in their day. Here, standing upright with their blades aloft, they appeared as totemic figures with blank, (mostly) eyeless faces. Some had chunks of metal affixed near the center—Robert referred to these as "noses." That struck me as a funny detail, a kind of marker for the arbitrary nature not even of representation but of reference or even just evocation. And that wasn't the only humorous element in an ensemble that nonetheless felt distinctly eerie and haunted: Also comical to me was the way one bird, an African sacred ibis, seemed to be trying to hide behind the head of a shovel—handle cut off—that was mounted by its collar on a paint-splattered, child-size wooden chair. But such touches were secondary to the spectral atmosphere of conjuration, made all the more so by being at such close quarters with things in a narrow space. All those birds had more eyes on me than I could ever have on them.



Left: Andy Robert, *Check II Check*, 2017, oil on linen, 11' 6" × 6' 3".

Opposite page: Andy Robert, *Tu Ca! Koté Ou Pralé, Ti Ca?*, 2016–22, oil on canvas mounted on acrylic, 34¼ × 28".

Robert's mode of painting is one that resists arriving at anything like definite shape, a closed outline, a figure posited against a ground.

None of this was what I'd been expecting. Robert's mode of painting is one that resists arriving at anything like definite shape, a closed outline, a figure posited against a ground. In his paintings, all seems fluid, each little mark or gesture occurring as a modulation of the vibrant overall space; everything shifts into something else, or is layered into something else, or is half-effaced, before it can impose itself in some magisterial way on the whole. Robert, a "slipping glimpser," as Willem de Kooning called himself, once spoke of his work as being "somewhere between Kurt Schwitters and Norman Lewis," though I'd have to add that Robert's "between" has as much in common with the eternally unresolved (but never irresolute) polyvocal chromatic murmur of Pierre Bonnard. How could such an art ever be resolved into an object—into a sculpture? Had Robert become a different artist?

Later it dawned on me that all those birds harked back to the title of Robert's London show, "Ti Zwazo Clarendon: You Can Go Home Again; You Just Can't Stay"—*ti zwazo* being Haitian Creole for "little bird." (Robert was born in Les Cayes, Haiti, which also happens to be the birthplace of the ornithologist John James Audubon, a remarkable artist who also bought and sold human beings.) The catalogue for that show includes a long text, ostensibly a conversation with Thelma Golden, which Robert has "revised" into an extraordinary form of poetry. (A publication/poster for the show at Artists Space also features an extended poetic text that is very much in the spirit of Guillaume Apollinaire's weaving together of overheard phrases and fragments of perception—another form of immersion in noncognitive aspects of the city.) In it, the bird, the feather, and the nest form a key system of metaphors. And we read of Robert's ambivalence about nesting his art in painting: "If I truly believe in . . . how I arrived at a painting, at freedom, why would I abandon that? There is a desire to find home in painting but if I embrace the salt that is in my blood, like in a Glissant way, then why would, then why wouldn't I just stay homeless?"

I felt I understood Robert's point better after seeing his sculpture. But I should probably add that I could see the sculpture better after rereading his ruminations on painting. Besides, at Artists Space, where the assemblages no longer formed the encompassing environment I'd experienced in the studio, each one appeared with greater clarity. In the exhibition, the assemblages stand separate as discrete inflections of a common idea that remains elusive yet forceful: a message that is never spelled out. Seen in this way, the sculptures disclose their affinity with the oblique, totemic constructions of Cy Twombly—another one of those painters you'd never have imagined as also an object-maker until you found out he was, come to think of it—and the blunt poetry of David Hammons's object-icons (Hammons, contrariwise, being an object-maker whose approach to painting might have seemed unlikely until you saw it). They are implacable yet just as resistant to resolution as the paintings. As a critic, I may feel called upon to offer a key that unlocks their meaning, their connection to his project in painting. But for the time being, it seems more honest to side with the artist, who, in that text for his London show, said of himself in the third person, "There is no real answer to the question what is his thing? What is he doing?" □

BARRY SCHWABSKY IS EDITOR OF INTERNATIONAL REVIEWS FOR *ARTFORUM*. HE HAS RECENTLY PUBLISHED TWO BOOKS OF POETRY, *FEELINGS OF AND* (BLACK SQUARE EDITIONS, 2022) AND *WATER FROM ANOTHER SOURCE* (SPUYTEN DUYVIL, 2023). (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

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ANDY ROBERT
Andy Robert talks to Thelma Golden
Blau International, Issue No. 7, October 2022

Virtually unknown to the usual big-time collectors, but supported by the most eminent curators, ANDY ROBERT has become a slow-burning painting sensation. In this conversation with Studio Museum director and long-time admirer *Thelma Golden*, he places his words as if building up his marks

ANDY ROBERT photographed in his studio in New york by PHILIP-DANIEL DUCASSE for BLAU INTERNATIONAL

On a September afternoon at the Michael Werner Gallery in Mayfair, London, the main room downstairs had been turned into an impromptu studio for Andy Robert. His suitcases wide open, the floor scattered with preparatory drawings, printouts, and notes, the New York painter hailing from Haiti was in the process of finishing his last works for what would become only his second ever solo show. There was just one tiny problem: the opening was scheduled for that night and it didn't look like he would finish more than one of the bigger canvases leaning against the walls. Nevertheless, his gallerist Gordon VeneKlassen seemed utterly at ease, knowing that the two rooms already installed would still add up to one of the strongest painting shows he had ever worked on.

THELMA GOLDEN: Andy, I really want to start at the beginning. Tell me about the title of your exhibition *Ti Zwazo Clarendon: You Can Go Home Again; You Just Can't Stay*.

—ANDY ROBERT: In starting with, or commenting on, building upon, and unpacking a key aspect within the title, within the phrasing, "You can go home again but you just can't stay," the title pulls from several reflections on, and conversations around, diaspora, and migration, and home, and return, and the impossibility of return.

In thinking with the word "again," I find it interesting to think about or alongside the idea of home within the context of modernity. There's an idea of home that is understood as tradition, and with the twist of "again," that doubling, that repetition—in that is an idea of trying again, of rehearsal, and that's where the practice of modernity is for me when it comes to tradition, or when it comes to dealing with the stuff of the past.

Yes. Yes.

—Or our origins.

Yes. Plural, right?! But what do you consider your physical home?

—That's the question. Which comes out of much longing and desire and a looking to a distant horizon. That's why the title, *Ti Zwazo*, embodies the bird. As in, where does a bird find a home? Or make a nest? It's complicated. And a being of a feather—a social body; that's what I'm wrestling with.

One thing I know for sure: home for me is not a cage, but a place of freedom and laughter.

In a way, we might have come into being naked, without feather or flight, but we carry our memories with us, and brought what little we could with us—both in memory and in a backpack and carry-on and checked luggage. We brought some things here, made something here—and even though it may seem we might have forgotten the rest, we have nonetheless made do. We have made culture something else.

Artistically, do you feel like you have a home? Can we talk about your practice and where it emerges from?

—In asking to unpack and articulate one's work, there's the idea that you can't change your mind, but if I truly believe in experimentation and how I arrived at a painting, at freedom, why would I abandon that?

There's a desire to find home in painting, but if I embrace the salt that is in my blood in a Glissant way, then why wouldn't I just stay homeless, embracing concepts such as creolity and migrancy. Like, why wouldn't I just stay in the zone of orality and fluidity and questioning and roaming. Why would I stop at just this, the first answer? Why not keep going and see where it all takes me? Where I find myself?

I am driven to think simultaneously about home from within and without—from my practice; from displacement to migrancy. Like the displacement of Seneca Village here in New

"Where does a bird find a home? Or make a nest? It's complicated. A being of a feather—a social body; that's what I'm wrestling with"

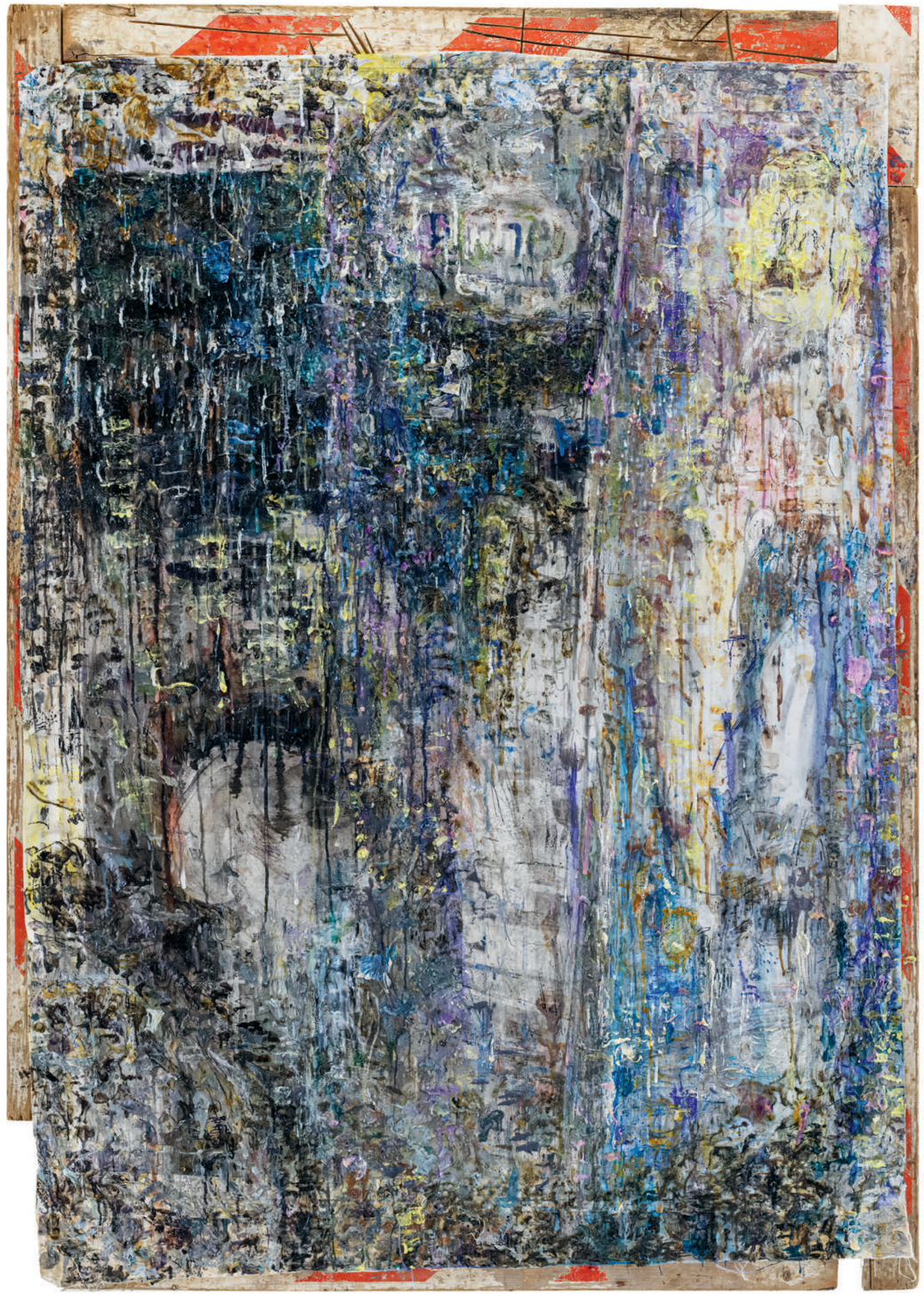
York City to gentrification today, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans—displacement is recurring and seasonal.

From slave burial grounds to flood lands and sacred lands, there is something I find sacred about those spaces; akin to elephants pausing to honor, pay respects, and just be in communion with ancestral bones. But in the lack of physical bones, of fossil archeology, there are sites of mourning and loss.

Thelma, we might be moving, I might be moving, but that doesn't mean I don't remember. It is mind-altering to think of your being within notions of asylum and refuge. Within my work and study I come across bones, sites of ruin—of memory and forgetting, and as with flood land and eyelids, basins at times flow over, drenched in waves of salt.

Why be pinned down?

SHOWTIME, 2022
Mixed media on canvas, wood, 255 × 219 cm



Where do these new paintings fit on that path?

—The home that I found in these paintings is in the abstract. I feel like I'm now just getting to it, just awoken to myself, to embracing what I had conceptually found and/or arrived at five years ago, and I'm fully now in the process of doubling down on color and line, and exploding all that, trying to deeply understand and embody in my being, in my hand, in this, in what was an intuitive articulation of my hand, and what I was saying and making, in trying to articulate and speak to shinnying a light which captures the rhythm in what I was putting down during my Studio Museum in Harlem residency in 2016–2017 that was based in contemplation, in the fold and repetition of memory and place—as a starting point of an abstraction—that comes from looking out; that comes from reflection and spirals inwards.

For the 58th Carnegie International show, which I'm also in the process of, I'm somewhere in between Kurt Schwitters and Norman Lewis—there is now the conscious embracing of freedom, just let me be, open the doors, let me out of these damn boxes, open the locks and the chains and leave me be. I'll come by now and again to say "Hi, I promise. I'll call more often and visit more often."

It seems what you're saying is that this path really informed your vocabulary.

—Right.

And that visual vocabulary has come to a place now that feels to you completely intelligible, right? You now can see and understand your marks for the sort of broad ways in which they're representing the pictorial plane for you. Did you enter into this body of work knowing where you wanted to go?

—I didn't know that I would be here, none of us did. So much possibility today was so unimaginable yesterday. But in trying to educate myself and looking back and seeing a plethora of expressions within the abstract, I felt understood. I also felt seen. I felt humbled that something I articulated as a sense of self was just an echo of the past. It felt like listening to your heartbeat with a stethoscope, but you're just in the library or in a book, listening to what sounds like your own heartbeat and then you're like, "Wow, there I go. That's what I sound like."

But then it's not the same. You realize it isn't you; the beat is but a bit off. Being not the same allows you to embrace the past but also be more playful, and that's kind of where I'm trying to be now, being more playful and understanding that the things I say are not me. They have been said before, and I have to just believe in them, believe in myself and then go searching for them. Embracing the self I find, embracing my voice, honors the past. We enter into dialogue with history, and what a painting might be doing for me may bring up something unforeseen to me but totally relevant, and it can totally start a dialogue between us, between places, distances. I paint for the conversation. I am sorry, but I love discourse, it's what I'm here for. I love visiting galleries and museums and exhibitions.

The exhibition, museum, the studio are all pieces of a whole; then there is the library, there are multiple conversations and encounters which shape and reshape, which guide and redirect and frame.

But there are also artifacts and just things which speak to me and inspire me—like the design of things like bottles and tattoos. And textiles and tapestries. There is a being or listening that is more polyrhythmic—that is my heartbeat, that is my pulse. That is what I hear when I put the stethoscope to my body in search of painting.

"We enter into dialogue with history. I paint for the conversation. I am sorry, but I love discourse, it's what I'm here for"

It seems to me that memory forms an important way to understand you and your practice.

—I've started to find that the language of abstraction is the building up of a discourse. One painting leads to another painting, one expression of self finds another. It's an understanding of, like, a Paul Cézanne moves into an Alma Thomas, an Alma Thomas moves into a Beauford Delaney. Texture turns into light, turns into shapes and forms. That's where I'm at, but what's really exciting me right now is color turning into line; and breaking free from all that. Finding itself in a built-up accumulative mess. That is what I'm up to for both the Carnegie in Pittsburgh and this exhibition *Ti Zwazo* in London. It has shifted from *impasto*, from the textural palette that I had at the Studio Museum, into me going fully crazy and obsessed over markers, trying to figure out the difference between ink markers, oil and markers that are water-based, markers that are alcohol-based and their tips. And there is me trying to thin and pull the paint out and drag it, drag the line, the ink, the wash, as if it all were pencil. Thinning it all out as if left out in the rain.

BELL ATLANTIC, 2022
Oil on canvas, wood, 211 × 150 cm

WINTER, 2022
Mixed media on paper, 42 × 32 cm

Trying to find out what is it about this thing, why can I not seem to let it go? It's the move for me right now. It's where my hand is at the moment. But there are limitations, and in confronting them over time, things reveal themselves, it slowly begins to all add up. It's the thickness and thinness, the size and weight and width of a line of color that caught my eye, that's what I was looking for, that's the interest. That's what my heart desired!

You know what, Thelma, home is a place where you have the keys.

There's this experimentation with markers in addition to paint on the surface.

—Either pencil, color pencil, etc. There is also finding things—it's about the thickness of the line, it's texture—in the run of a line into a wash, a line into an *impasto*, but with the layering—in the layers of colored line. It's new for me. I couldn't see it at the time, I could not see or make it all out, I couldn't see myself, I did not know what was ahead of me. It wasn't until a couple of works, a few paintings, and drawings in production that I saw what was happening. Stepping back to view, to view the building up and breaking down of it all. To understand and find what self I was beginning to assemble, to construct. It was all so scary and yet so exciting to watch yourself dissolve, to shed old skin. To be so vulnerable and without armor. And yet embracing accuracy, speed, and stealth—I am the archer in these new works. I don't bring much but my sticks and a bow. I aim and fire. I visualize, then I realize the shot. Very clean. I'm embracing the confidence to be found in archery in painting with a point.

It's about finding things which work. And about foresight and trust.

Well, feels like you found new ways of working.

—Yeah, but I do want to combine it.

So the former process with this sort of new process. The combination of the two.

—Right. Kind of building a form, or building a sky, building a tree out of line, out of wire, out of scribbling; out of gestural marks. I'm trying to have drawing and painting dance together, not on different surfaces, like paper or canvases or board, but in one picture. Kind of like a fisherman's stew, where you have fish and muscles in a gumbo, yellow corn, clams, crabs, snow crabs…

Andy, what led you to painting, as an emerging artist? What led you to painting as your medium?

—…and okra. I do paint, but everything takes a lot of time. The time that you spend thinking about your work. The time that you spend knowing that you have to figure out this thing that might have nothing to do with painting but has everything to do with you. There's something here that you have to do for yourself, because you're not gonna get it in school, you're not gonna get it at the coffee shop, you're not gonna get it on the street. No one is gonna give it to you. You gotta find a place in your life where you have to figure out what opacity means to you. You have to find a way that makes space for serendipity as well as epiphany.

You read it, you spent some time with it, thinking deeply about it, but you just never really put it together, until it actually clicks, and you're walking down the street, like, "Oh, so red and blue makes purple, and that's like two different things that are separate coming together to do something else." And then you're like: "OK, I'm here. I'm not there, but I am there, and I am two separate things." And then another day passes, and you're like: "Oh, I'm alive today, so I can

complicate all those things, and those things really cannot encompass all of it, all of me. I cannot be blue. I cannot be purple."

I have to figure out what that thing is, and what it is for one person might not be for another person. But it might work perfectly for a philosopher, your professor. It might work for a mathematician. It might work perfectly for a dancer.

And then you're like, "How does that work in painting?" That's the part that takes time. How do those contemporary ideas—how does math, architecture, how does conceptualism, how does tradition, how does dance, how do martial arts, how does self-defense, how does wit—how do you translate all that into the painting?

How does one find alterity, and how does it function within oneself, within one's practice?

How to make painting do what it do; and yet do what the best experimental films do?

It's really those questions that made you a painter.

—I've taken a lot of time trying to understand and process art theory, philosophy, and politics, but in being all those things it's never going be any one of those things but possibly martial arts. It's always going to be a break dance. It's always going to be vandalism. In study and in practice it's never going to be OK, because you're not asking for permission in the cultural breaking down of things society holds—of property both private and public.

It's the aspects of the form that take the form, that use it in its own way, without permission, or even sometimes without respect for what those traditions might uphold themselves. In these new forms, it's sort of opening them up into new ways of seeing, new ways of being.

I can remember thinking about, and listening to you thinking about, your work in those days you were in the Studio Museum residency, and hearing you now, you've always been in a constant state of beautiful interrogation that then results in these works. But there's so much around that interrogation.

Can you talk a bit about some of the artistic references? You've named a few, Alma Thomas, Beauford Delaney. Can you expand a bit on what art inspires you and has fed you in ways that led to the works that we see now?

—OK, OK. It's a thing where, if it's just about gridding and painting squares, and completing a task, if it's about process only and I just have to finish a painting—I knew that I was not that kind of an artist.

There's nothing about painting that I find natural. It doesn't come easy for me. It's not something where I wake up in the morning and I'm like, "I love the smell of this." I'm not that kind of person. But I am that kind of person, I do like painting and the smell of it, but in saying that, you know what I mean. I am over that aspect of it.

People who know me know that I can think about one thing for a month. I will wake up and it will be right on the top of my mind; I'll just be like, "Blah blah blah blah blah." At first it comes off as annoying. Like, "Oh my god, he's talking about the same thing over and over again." But there is much emotion and accumulation in that repetition, and over time something happens; movement occurs, one's mind gets made up, and a position has formed. It is very emotional, very much me. There is a trying to get it right.

In repetition, something happens, something moves, something changes, and shifts occur. I look at a lot, but in thinking about and expanding on where I am and draw inspiration from within this artistic journey, I have to say, I'll never forget that day I walked into the Studio Museum's bookstore and picked up the catalogue *Challenge of the Modern* (2003). It would introduce me to the scholarship of Lowery Stokes

WITH A GRAIN OF SALT, 2022
Mixed media on paper, 43 × 33 cm

Sims, discourses and debates within the Harlem Renaissance, and deepen my understanding of Wifredo Lam's work—to complicate the picturesque. I think I immediately wrote to you that following morning.

That is very much where I still am; every now and then I revisit and think through the conversations of Alain LeRoy Locke in debates about representation, politics, and experimentation. Debates about abstraction, tradition, social responsibility, and stereotypes within American and overall Black popular cultural discourse.

I digress—to answer your question—a few art works and artists that feed and inspire me recently? I have to say Henry Taylor. He loves Bob Thompson, so we look at and talk about Bob a lot together; Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Hurvin Anderson, Chris Ofili too; Kurt Schwitters and Frank Bowling and Clementine Hunter.

I've been thinking about and looking at a lot, Thelma, looking at different textiles—from Gee's Bend quilts to African textiles and body paintings and scarifications—all from all over the world, for the way that space, that the body, is abstracted and sectioned, further broken up into color and shape and decorated. Looking at tattoos and tattooing from numerous cultures for much the same reason but also for line and patterning and color.

Clearly, there is this incredible, beautiful new space that you found for yourself as a way to continue and explore in your work. As you say in the title, "You can go home again; You just can't stay." To me, the "You just can't stay" beautifully describes the way you move artistically from place to place, each time going deeper and making the work richer and more profound, because of that commitment to movement that you have in your practice.

—Yes! Thank you. I feel like I also need to acknowledge that in my research and thinking the title comes from a little essay by Grant Farred on Stuart Hall. In it, Farred unpacks the role that diaspora and migration played in Hall's autobiographical writing and thinking. This obsessiveness to think about diaspora, to think about the Caribbean, to think about Jamaica from London.

The show is not illustrative of—there's no portrait of. It's not about that. It's more like a sampling—thinking about Stuart Hall unpacks a lot for me, and thinking about my life, questioning life, thinking about my practice, life, identity, and becoming, I am thinking conceptually about things, thinking about painting.

People who know me know this: every year I make plans to go to Haiti—then what follows is it's not this year, not next year. One year it's an earthquake, next year it's a flood, next year it's Covid, the following year it's political unrest. But then

TU CA! KOTÉ OU PRALÉ, TI CA?
Oil on canvas mounted on acrylic, 87 × 71 cm

"I aim and fire.
I visualize, then I realize
the shot. Very clean.
I'm embracing the
confidence to be found
in archery in painting
with a point"

you realize from afar—you see yourself over time—that from one year after the next, you're glued not to escape but to return, even though you know your life is here. You long to return.

That's the song, it's tragic. The show also draws inspiration from Haitian folk songs; I was interested in the history of our folk songs by artists like Althiery Dorival and in the melancholy which characterizes Beken. I find the history behind the Haitian Twoubadou players and the migrant labor history in which the music developed thought-provoking. To think that a new form can derive from being in motion, emerge out of longing between two distant places—Cuba and Haiti; and from the sweat, blood, and sugar of cutting cane, of labor and longing for home, for love's return. It recalls to me the story of Orpheus, love fraught between the distances of earth and hell—or love translated into seasons, summer and winter for Persephone.

Well, in some ways it's still home. So that tie of return, the pull, remains there.

—Yeah, that says it. I've known where and how and who I've been in art and painting. I know what I can do. I know how to make a painting. I know. I'm more like: "Why don't I want to make the same painting? Why don't I make life easy for myself?!"

Ti Zwazo Clarendon: You Can Go Home Again; You Just Can't Stay at Michael Werner, London, runs until November 4. Robert is also included in the 58th Carnegie International, ending April 2, 2023

ANDY ROBERT
"On Abstraction, Mourning, and Time: A conversation between Carolyn Lazard, Raha Raissnia, Andy Robert, and Lachell Workman" by Ruba Katrib & Jody Graf
Greater New York, MoMA PS1, 2021

ON ABSTRACTION, MOURNING, AND TIME:

A conversation between Carolyn Lazard, Raha Raissnia, Andy Robert, and Lachell Workman

Lachell Workman:
One of the ways I think about abstraction is through how I've experienced audiences, or people who've entered my studio, relating to the ways in which the body shows up in my work. My work explores memorials—specifically memorials that are born out of inner-city communities in which there often aren't larger official, communal monuments or memorials present. I'm thinking about things like the street sign memorial and the cultural iconography of the memorial T-shirt—how people use their bodies as an extension of the memorial and how that relates to what we often see as the emptiness of many inner-city landscapes. These ideas are born out of specific landscapes—such as sites in Bridgeport, Connecticut—that are either empty, underserved, or have just sat for multiple generations without any specific human interaction.

I'm also thinking about a way of deconstructing the memorial T-shirt, freeing up the body from having to be the wearer of the memorial. Abstraction gives greater agency to people who are in mourning by breaking down the formula of text, photography, and garment. I'm interested in abstracting the formula of the monument, and in the particular way that most state-sanctioned monuments are erected. Through this exploration of abstraction, I'm considering ways that people living in particular communities can retake ownership and agency over these landscapes and extend mourning from objects into real space. It's also a way of accessing some sort of freedom from tropes of how one represents the body, specifically the Black body, and addressing the limitations of representing the body within contemporary art more broadly. Abstraction is a way to think through what my dear friend, art historian Genevieve Hyacinthe, describes as the "ineffable Black body"—something that cannot be represented specifically within the context of loss, especially public loss. I found myself having many of these conversations starting around 2014, when people were trying to make a connection between the work and public acts of violence that circulate on the internet.

I'm often thinking about the street-side memorial, where people just leave objects. These moments seem to supersede public and private space, and there seems to be a kind of communal reverence around these moments of loss, in which people are using not only their bodies but everyday objects to mark a particular place and hold space to memorialize someone. Throughout my practice, I've continued to observe and be in conversation with these materials—such as asphalt and T-shirts—and abstracting and deconstructing them highlights for me the ways that abstraction is really active in many quotidian spaces. People are regularly accessing abstraction. It connects to the vernacular languages used in these sites of mourning and to whether something is perceived as coded language—whether one chooses to actually display the image of a person who has passed, or whether there are moments in which we want to conceal those things.

Carolyn Lazard:
I really love what you were saying about abstraction in quotidian spaces. As artists, our relationship to abstraction is framed in this incredibly formalized art history, and yet we engage with abstraction all the time. I think about this a lot, particularly about the ways that Black people communicate with each other and the ways that we've stretched language to the peripheries of intelligibility, like in Black American vernaculars, but also patois and Creole. We sequester abstraction as this specific mode of perception, when in fact it's just a way of thinking and engaging with the world around us. It's mundane in some ways. A lot of my work is made from appropriated materials, media, and objects.

It is mostly about care—care practices and care labor. I also make work about how we relate to different kinds of institutions—museums, hospitals, prisons, and universities. In relation to museums, I think a lot about how people move through museums and who can occupy space in museums, and how art is or is not intelligible to different kinds of people. My work is also about consent and accessibility; I like to think through the radical possibilities of incapacity and debility. Incapacity itself is a really generative and beautiful force in the world and something that is endemic to being alive. For *Greater New York*, I'm presenting a new work from this year called *Red* (2021). It's a two-channel video installation. One of the channels is a "flicker film" made by pressing the pad of my thumb on the camera of my iPhone and lifting it up and down. The second channel is a synced video in a separate room that you see before you walk into the larger installation, and on this second channel is a video that lets viewers know when the film in the larger room is stroboscopic and when it's not, so that people who are sensitive to strobe can navigate the work on their own terms.

Raha Raissnia:

The way I think of abstraction relates to what you were saying in the sense that it allows more content in; it expands the area in which the viewer can interpret or experience the work in very personal, subjective ways. I relate to abstraction in the way I feel an affinity with music. We experience the works rather than understand the works. It's very open to evocation and perception, rather than limited to one specific subject. Also, ironically, I might say that there is no such thing as abstraction, even in painting. You're still experiencing line, color, movement—and these are very real things. With music, there's actual vibrations. So, in a way, there is no such thing as abstraction. But it does inspire the mind to go beyond the apparent reality of facts—to go beyond what we can see and tap into very deep areas within the psyche.

I've been a painter for a very long time, since I was ten or eleven. But I also work with film, and the film work I do is very connected to my painting and drawing. When I moved to New York in 1995, I became involved with Anthology Film Archives, a space for avant-garde cinema. I moved here to go to school, but I couldn't afford school and Anthology became a kind of education for me. For the exhibition, I am presenting a film installation which uses a 16-millimeter film print in black and white that is projected onto two layered panels, making up a kind of a box that creates an optical illusion of three-dimensional imagery. The material for this film came by chance, from a series of 35-millimeter slides that were found in the trash at the media center at Brooklyn College and given to me by a friend. The slides document a fourteenth-century mosque in India in ruins. I rephotographed them in my studio using various analog and digital techniques, and combined them with new imagery. I make film through a very layered process of superimposition. As a result, there's a lot of abstract imagery in it, but there are also recognizable architectural elements.

Andy Robert:

For me, abstraction is a deeply contemplative and interior space where you're wrestling with the lyrical and the concrete. I've also thought about how a painting comes into being, how a subject finds form over time through the process of painting. For me, that's where ideas of abstraction are parallel to or entangled with representation. I ended up in a place that was very dialectical when thinking about abstraction: abstraction is found in detail, in its oscillation, and in how it comes apart—how it all unravels. The process and the subject and the painting are interwoven. For me, there is no real, true way of starting a painting; I try to just get into the painting, but then there are moments of doubt and loss. There are questions of how to treat the subject, and of legibility.

In the painting *Mid Atlantic* (2020), I was circulating around several thinkers and conversations that ruminate on and look to the idea of the horizon. It reflects on Long Beach, California, and the traffic jam at the port there at the moment, but it's also me thinking about my late professor and mentor Allan Sekula's work and his writing on Claude Lévi-Strauss, as well as working through my thoughts on Édouard Glissant. In the painting, there is the question of whether it is day or night, sunrise or sunset—but there are also questions around the horizon as a site of becoming or deep forgetting, a space that is both internal and recurring, different and unpredictable every time, that looks to both here and the heavens. For Sekula, the Atlantic is an elusive site—a site of oblivion, deep forgetting, and extraction of material and labor, whose sea routes birthed global capital. For Glissant, it is a site of mourning and bereavement of a massive, irretrievable loss that is unrepresentable. The loss of a kind of humanity, of solidarity. It's where we became something else, something *para-*. There is no going back, I don't think? And it is the site of an event we hold collectively in memory—the transatlantic slave trade.

In response to the question of abstraction and the vernacular, I do think that painting's very specific history of abstraction isn't going away. From Georgia O'Keeffe to Piet Mondrian, Hans Hofmann to [Paul] Cézanne, and definitely when thinking about the works of Alma Thomas, Norman Lewis, and Beauford Delaney, the city can be distilled, but that back-and-forth between what happens to the subject of the painting, its process, and its representation on canvas is negotiable. With [Wassily] Kandinsky there is composition; in Eugène Leroy's magnificent paintings, an abstract and layered density of light; in Sol LeWitt, you find systems and instructions that share a conceptual and geometric sensibility with François Morellet, whose work has a thought process akin to that of a game or puzzle. There is also the question of function and design that arises out of the concrete, as well as questions of cannibalism, savagery, and Indigeneity within the lineage of avant-garde abstraction. For me, artists like Wilfredo Lam, Lygia Pape, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Carmen Herrera speak to the global networks that sprung from the emancipatory and revolutionary consciousness of the avant-garde and Surrealists, in the "digesting" and abstraction of Cubism into a kind of anthropomorphic consciousness—of being simultaneously human, plant, earth, and animal.

I've been thinking about the geometric and abstract concerns of memory and nature, too, as found in works by artists like Thomas Nozkowski, Etel Adnan, Howard Hodgkin, Jack Whitten, and Frank Bowling. Equally, I have been looking at a lot of masks—specifically Bolo masks—textiles, reliquary figures, and documentation of ceremonial practices like scarification, tattooing, and body painting, which decorate and abstract the body. I likewise found these ideas in Glissant: *créolité* in painting is deeply complicated because there isn't a single marker of the origin, but as a space of orality it functions as a sign or pictograph of a community. Or call it a sample; there is a transformation in displacement, as in the crossing over. A kind of doublespeak—call it shorthand, code, or slang—it is an utterance meant for a specific ear, and it hits and sounds different depending on the listener. It becomes a voice or marker divorced from text or the written laws and grammar that

once defined it; it is now moving and at play, a mark that sounds a call of alarm, insightful and yet piercingly deafening and disorienting. The other question this raises for me is around modernity and how we deal with our past. This conversation around abstraction, mourning, the audience, and legibility and illegibility, for me, is really a question of modernity.

RR:
Do you think that the subject of abstraction has evolved and means something else? Do we use abstraction more now as a language, as a tool for language, than before? Does it have more meaning in contemporary life than before?

CL:
It is hard for me to think of abstraction as something that's historically progressive. I'll give two examples: My work in the show is a flicker film—a hyper-specific genre of filmmaking from the 1960s and '70s that emerges from structural filmmaking, where people really focused on the materials of film production and completely abstracted the idea of the image in cinema. Concurrently, there were landmark representational works being made. If you think about Tony Conrad's work *The Flicker* (1966), the film itself is a psychedelic assault on the eyes. Yet before it starts, there's a trigger warning that basically says, "This is stroboscopic, it causes photosensitive epilepsy. You can have a stroke every time this film is screened, there must be a doctor on hand in the cinema." It seems funny to pair this super abstracted work with a text that is so grounded in the material repercussions of this very abstraction.

For me, abstraction and representation are in constant interplay. To give another example: as structural film got more and more severe in the '70s and '80s—and it was primarily a bunch of white men who were making this work—Black and brown people were gaining access to the tools of production to make movies at the same time. There's avant-garde film, and then there's an actual radical democratization of the media that happens after this formal extremism. What I'm trying to say is that the idea of abstraction as a formal progression feels a little bit simplistic. Things are constantly happening at the same time, responding to each other, and antagonizing each other.

RR:
Do you think abstraction has always existed?

CL:
Yes. My feeling is that it has always existed. Maybe, for example in painting, it has crystallized in periodic breaks, but I'm interested in thinking of it as something that's continuous rather than something that happened and now we are living in the period after it.

LW:
There also seems to be a continued effort toward revision, toward looking critically at this history of abstraction and thinking about the other participants. I'm always interested in writers who interrogate the canon of abstraction and talk about the ways that we have perhaps missed some key moments. To me, it seems the most subversive dialogue arises in this idea of where abstraction becomes more democratic—where it has always been more democratic, both within and outside of the art world. What does it look like for enough people to develop a democratic relationship with abstraction, so they can participate in that writing of that language, that contextualizing, for themselves?

RR:
Yeah, I think it's interesting. I'm familiar with Tony Conrad and the structural filmmakers that Carolyn was mentioning, and I associate my work with them. I'm not sure if I would necessarily call the process, the manipulation and expansion of structural elements, an abstract thing. It's a physical process: a matter of using a certain screen, maybe doing away with the traditional cinematic screen, manipulating the mechanical parts of the projector, or taking it out of its conventional use, let's say, and expanding on its various elements. For me, it's very concrete, it's not abstract in any way.

CL:
I agree with you. I think all of this work comes out of materialism and thinking about a material relationship to the medium, but fundamentally, what it is—and what I think Lachell really picked up on—is this way in which the reduction of cinema to its material means is also something that has to do with light and sound and all of these things that are actually elements of perception. So, for me, what happens in the materialist breakdown of the medium is that we start to understand that cinema can actually exist in a lot of different forms. If it's just light and projection and a surface, then it can become a lot of other things: we can start to see cinema all around us, so that when we think about Lachell's work, which involves projections onto T-shirts, we understand that the T-shirts themselves are screens and the projection a form of cinema.

It is radical to think through one's medium from a materialist perspective, and I'm interested in how that can lead to abstraction. And this has other repercussions—for thinking about embodiment, for example. I'm thinking about what Andy was saying earlier about interiority. I'm interested in interiority and I'm also interested in systems. What I'm less interested in is representing the bodies that seem to experience the interiority and are entangled in the systems, because I think that's already implicit. I love representational work, I feel like it's critically important; it's just that I'm interested in the far edges of what bodies imply. It has to do with stretching the capacity of what we think embodiment means. Embodiment is interior experience and it's also the ways in which we're interpolated by the world around us—it's not just this physicality right here.

AR:
I think of abstraction as contemplation, and about how memory comes with its bends and folds. When I brought up tradition, it wasn't necessarily in regards to tradition in painting. I'm thinking about tradition in the broader sense, too. I don't think we should talk about the past purely with nostalgia—you can't talk about things purely as great, or only focus on that which you want to remember—but we can ponder or mourn what is lost and irretrievable. The site of ruin—this barren, salty floodland that, at any moment, can flood or break—it's like a basin; its levees, which some call eyelids, heavy at times, flow over. Our psyche makes references to these images and sites—almost metaphors—of the mind. And they have an effect on our lives today, on modernity. These are questions of memory, and memory is alive today. You see what I mean? It's our modernity that is in question when wrestling with the past.

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ANDY ROBERT
Andrianna Campbell review of LAKOU: One, Two, Fifth at Hannah Hoffman Gallery
Artforum, December 2017

ARTFORUM

Andy Robert

HANNAH HOFFMAN
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December 15–February 17

Andy Robert, *Higher Ground: Soon, Higher Ground: Past Present, Higher Ground: Here*, 2017, oil and pencil on linen, 88" x 18 1/2'. Installation view.

Andy Robert's *Smoking Gun* (all works 2017) is a mass of speckled paint. The broken brushstrokes on the substrate dissolve and then corrugate in the manner of late Impressionism, Arte Povera, or even tachism. At times, pure, nonlocalized color abuts less welcoming mixtures that approach the hues of mud. From a distance, silvery tones, deeper beiges, and warm ivories read as only slight deviations from the canvas. Up close, at center, a body emerges, a black body. One wearing cutoff blue jeans, a hat, and carrying a firearm slung over one shoulder. The figure is based on a mass-produced image of a Maroon in the Caribbean. Thus is our ingress into Robert's geography, as the show's title cryptically hints: "Lakou: One Two Five."

The titular Haitian Creole word denotes not only a space of habitation but also the shared environs of ancestry. It is an inheritance that cannot be sold. "One Two Five," or 125th Street in Harlem, is where most of these paintings were made. Harlem, which has been the heart of so many overlapping diasporic black communities, even appears in the seated portrait *Thelma Golden*. The iconic Studio Museum director's face is obscured in a jumble of sienna browns while vivacious purple lines pattern her dress. The museum building behind her, a bedrock for African American artistic praxis, looms larger. In more nonobjective paintings, such as *Cross Country D*, specific loci go adrift in a work constituted by many small canvases all swarming with blue marks indicative of water.

Although it is easy to think of the water as some one-to-one stand-in for the slave trade and escape, Robert acknowledges the complexities of these issues as he untangles them in paint. The Maroons were neither freed people nor slaves; not even fugitives, they were resistance fighters who occupied mountainous areas in the West Indies and Guiana, among other places. In the triptych *Higher Ground: Soon, Higher Ground: Past Present, Higher Ground: Here*, the black body is in a modern city. In these paintings they, the warriors and their descendants, exist in the now.

— Andrianna Campbell