

Jeffrey Meris

✨ be ever wonderful ✨

712 N La Brea Ave

Opening Saturday, May 28, 2022

Matthew Brown is pleased to present ✨ be ever wonderful ✨, a solo exhibition of recent works by Jeffrey Meris. Born in Haiti and raised in the Bahamas, New York-based Meris has described his work as “ecological,” deeply invested in both the circumstances surrounding its making and the social context of its reception. In the installations, kinetic sculptures, paintings, and drawings on view, Meris grapples with the trauma of colonial violence and explores ways of healing rooted in care, restoration, and regeneration.

In the installation *Now You See Me, Now You Don't* (2022), chalky-white plaster replicas of the artist's disjointed body are set against perforated sheet metal. Over the course of the exhibition, motorized elements chip away at deterritorialized surrogates of the artist's own body. In *Tét Chaje* (2022), “burdened head” in the Haitian Creole dialect, a cast of Meris's head grates against a sheet of galvanized steel as vintage light fixtures emanate from below. Laid supine, the sculpture bears resemblance to an autopsy table, and its slow cannibalization implies a second order death. Taking up the mantle of Ralph Ellison's seminal text *Invisible Man*, Meris's cannibalizing kinetic sculptures raise questions about visibility, purity, and the violent mechanisms by which ideas about race are developed, disseminated, and internalized within our society.

Whereas earlier works incarnate complex ideas about race and trauma into a visible, material form, over the course of 2020, Meris began to also ask what it might look like to heal this trauma. Meris has said of this period: “I had to shift the gaze that viewed Blackness as a state of constant loss, pain and subjugation; I needed to tell a story of care, healing and futurity.”

Like the living, breathing, aging bodies they represent, Meris's kinetic sculptures require constant maintenance. Meris uses acetic acid and white cotton tee-shirts to care for his metal sculptures—which become corroded and worn over time—in a gesture that mimics the psychological and somatic ways in which we care for ourselves. To produce his “care paintings” (2022), Meris stitches together the tee-shirts used in this restorative process: dyed blue from the patina produced by naturally oxidizing copper, they bear witness to both the damaged metal and the careful process of reparation. With their aqueous swirling patterns, the works evoke waves drifting across the Caribbean, conjuring associations with both the ships that transported enslaved Africans in the Middle Passage and the cruise ships of today's neo-colonial tourism complex. In *The Promise Land* (2022), this reference is more overt: Meris uses graphic tee-shirts purchased at tourist shops throughout the Bahamas and stitches them together in an inverted, reversed position, as if turning away from the colonial violence that saturates the Caribbean tourist industry.

The theme of regeneration recurs in the *I, Used to Be* series, which also metabolizes the byproducts of Meris's kinetic sculptures. In these works, plaster dust particles form nebulae against a ground of asphalt roofing paper. A common building material in the Bahamas, this roofing material can be found littered across the ground after tropical storms. Meris repositions it under the kinetic sculptures, where it collects the plaster remnants as the sculptures self-destruct. These works simultaneously index a violent end and present an opportunity for a new beginning: the plaster particles cling and coalesce on the black paper, evoking nebulae and a larger cosmic order of death and rebirth.

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In the large-scale installation *Catch A Stick of Fire (III-V)* (2022), live orchids rest in bullet shaped planters, suspended from the ceiling by a metal structure resembling a firework. Composed of fleshy, sensuous florals and aluminum, a pliable metal commonly found in personal care products like deodorant and sunscreen, *Catch A Stick of Fire* clings tightly to the body. Designed to evoke the fireworks set off across the nation in protest of police violence during the summer of 2020, the architecture of the sculpture also refers to the spread of the movement itself, whereby a single act of killing can spark demonstrations across the nation. The bullet shape planters also imply a violent, explosive event: when the trigger is pulled the casing bursts open and shatters. But, Meris asserts, where there is fissure, there can be repair.

An outgrowth of the artist's self-care gardening practice developed during the pandemic, the orchid plants will be watered and tended to over the course of the exhibition. As the flowers bloom and thrive in their planters, *Catch a Stick of Fire* suggests that with proper care, there is always an opportunity for rebirth and restoration.

Jeffrey Meris (b. 1991, Haiti) lives and works in New York. He received an AA in Arts and Crafts from the University of The Bahamas in 2012, a BFA in Sculpture from the Tyler School of Art in 2015, and an MFA in Visual Arts from Columbia University in 2019.

Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include *Still Standing*, White Columns, New York (2021); *Free Body*, Mestre Projects, Albany, Bahamas (2021); *This is Mine, That is Yours*, D'Aguilar Art Foundation, Nassau (2017).

Recent group exhibitions include *Sanctuary*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Astoria, NY (2021); *Un/Common Proximity*, James Cohan Gallery, New York (2021); *Seascape Poetics*, Concordia University, Montreal (2021); *overmydeadbody*, Luggage Store Gallery, San Francisco (2020); *Scenes from the Collection*, Jewish Museum, New York (2018).

Meris was included in the 2016 National Art Gallery of the Bahamas biennial, was a 2019 artist-in-residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and a 2020 NXTHVN Studio Fellow, and is currently a fellow at Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program in Brooklyn.