



# “A Time and A Place - The Layers of Black History” Presents Unique Voices in Contemporary Realism at RJD Gallery

February 13, 2020

by Pat Rogers

RJD Gallery opens its 2020 season with an annual tradition: a group show of contemporary African American painters. One quality that sets this annual show apart is the gallery's commitment to revealing the experience of Black Americans that drives the art on view. Through a thoughtful selection of Black artists with differing perspectives, each exhibition presents an intimate and nuanced look at the African American experience while celebrating Black artists and their contribution to American art. For 2020, the exhibition “A Time and A Place - The Layers of Black History” features the art and perspectives of painters Dean Mitchell, Phillip Thomas, Stefanie Jackson and Jules R. Arthur.

The exhibition is on February 22 to March 16, 2020 with an Opening Reception on Saturday, February 22, 2020 from 6 to 8 p.m. at RJD Gallery, located at 2385 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. In addition to the featured artists, the group show includes curated selections of portraits by Jorge Santos, figurative paintings by Charlotta Janseen and sculpture by Alfred Conteh.

The heart of “A Time and A Place - The Layers of Black History” are paintings by Mitchell, Jackson, Arthur and Thomas. Curated in a series of mini solo shows, the works find easy conversation with each other and create a powerful show where figuration and landscapes tell engaging tales. The quartet of artists have distinct visual voices with narration a strong element, providing different windows into the black experience.

## Dean Mitchell

Dean Mitchell has his New York gallery debut at RJD Gallery with a series of haunting narrative landscapes, compelling portraiture and a series of intimate portraits of Buffalo Soldiers from the Civil War. Striking in their beauty, Mitchell is clearly a master artist and his work is frequently compared to Andrew Wyeth and Edward Hopper. Mitchell makes use of light to enhance the implied narrative and infuses each work with an effortless attention to detail. A contemporary realism artist, Mitchell also infuses his art with qualities of impressionism and abstract art.



“Ball Farm” by Dean Mitchell. Watercolor on paper, 30 x 22 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

His subject matter include scenes that are commonplace in rural Florida and the West as well as in scenes from Indian Reservations located in the middle of America. Taking a matter-of-fact stance to his compositions, there is power in each landscape and portrait made by Mitchell.

This may spring, in part, from his commitment to reflect the humanity he finds in his subject whether it's a person or an abandoned structure. His selection process is a personal one and contains an element of spiritual that links us all together, he said. It also may arise from Mitchell's commitment to have each painting stand on its own while he—the artist—recedes into near anonymity.

Taking this tack is Mitchell's way of taking race out of the equation when people look at his art. His philosophy of artist anonymity rose as a way of leveling the playing field as he fought for recognition for his art and his talent into an art world that didn't have a place or collector base for work by African Americans, he said. Mitchell said it was never his intention to hide his identity but to take race out of the equation to see if the work was good enough to stand on its own, he explained.



"Mrs. Robinson" by Dean Mitchell. Watercolor on paper, 22 x 30 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

Born in Pittsburgh and raised in Quincy, Florida by his grandmother, Mitchell's belief in himself (and his ability to figure a way forward) stemmed from his grandmother's belief in him and her staunch support as he strove to become a professional self-supporting artist, Mitchell said.

A graduate of the Columbus College of Art & Design in Columbus, Ohio, his art is now collected by corporate and museum collections across the United States. They include the Library of Congress (Washington, DC.); The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (Kansas City, Missouri), The Autry National Center (Los Angeles), the Canton Museum of Art (Canton, OH) and many others.

Mitchell was also a contender as the portrait artist for then-President Barack Obama. The appointment went to Kehinde Wiley (both men had exhibited together in the group show "BLACK ROMANTIC" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which also included Jules R. Arthur, who is also in the RJD show).

"My grandmother had a fourth grade education and there I was in the front of the President of the United States," Mitchell said. "It was miraculous. I just let the work speak for itself and there I was. I didn't get the appointment, but it was something to be considered."



“Buffalo Soldier” by Dean Mitchell. Acrylic on panel, 30 x 22 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

## Phillip Thomas

Phillip Thomas has a different experience and philosophy on the black experience. Interested in the impact of colonialism on Jamaica’s natives and the Caribbean and issues of classism in general, Thomas’s narrative realism portraits depict upper class and military officers who hold power set in elaborate settings or dress. For the RJD exhibition, Thomas made two new paintings *Dem Ova Deh Suh, Wih Ova Yah Suh* and *The Other Side of Now is The Same Side as then*.

“My work has centered around the theme of power and its dynamic for some time now,” Thomas wrote in an email. “I have been creating works that deal primarily with these forces and how we go about using them. One aspect of power is militarism used in force and my painting *Dem Ova Deh Suh, Wih Ova Yah Suh* (they are in their corner and we are in ours) is a part of a series of paintings I have made about the military history of Jamaica.

“It’s sort of a self-portrait, reflecting a representation of a certain kind of political separation that occurred in Jamaica during the 60s through to the 80s,” Thomas explained. “These kinds of separation didn’t only occur between political parties, but the tribalism went through the very fabric of Jamaican life.

“As for the use of materials, these are aesthetic decisions that complement the notion of a kind of “camouflage” as the very image is so embedded in the fabric to the point that the fabric’s texture becomes part of the form of the figure. I enjoy exploring history through these themes and examining the background and culture of Jamaica which of course is my own history and culture as well.”



“Dem Ova Deh Suh, Wih Ova Yah Suh” by Phillip Thomas. Mixed Media on canvas, 81.5 by 50 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

The work *The Other Side of Now is The Same Side as then* is a kind of criticism of a recently concluded exhibition titled “The Other Side of Now,” Thomas explained. “In essence, that exhibition was a futuristic take on what would constitute black subject matter in a post-colonial world. My presentation...suggests that the very notion of post-colonial thought in the Caribbean carries within its perimeters some notions of a denial of current issues facing the diaspora.

“The use of the “idyllic” wallpaper that carries images of the colonial picturesque is juxtaposed with a figure in opposition to its inheritance. These are the kinds of tensions that I have worked with in many of my works over the years,” Thomas said.



“The Other Side of Now is the Same Side as Then” by Phillip Thomas. Oil and Mixed Media on canvas, 84 x 28 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

Phillip Thomas’s art has been exhibited extensively in Jamaica and across the United States. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, Thomas graduated with a Bachelors of Fine Arts from the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts (Kingston, Jamaica) and received his Masters from New York Academy of Art (New York).

His work is held in private, corporate and museum collections. They include the World Bank (Washington DC); The Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture (Charlotte, NC), the New York Academy of Art (New York) and others.

## **Stefanie Jackson**

Stefanie Jackson’s art explores the intersection of African American history and U.S. politics. Drawing upon her own life experiences as well as the broader issues of social justice, her paintings are bright, colorful and surreal.

References to Southern blues music is evident in some paintings and specific incidents can be found in others. Events making the news that inspired her art include the Atlanta Race Riots, Hurricane Katrina’s decimation of New Orleans, the French colonial history in New Orleans and more. Rather than taking a harsh compositional tact, Jackson’s paintings are brimming with life, exotic moments and wonder.

Jackson’s art had been exhibited nationally in museums and galleries and she is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the prestigious Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Award. She received her BFA from Parsons The New School for Design and her MFA from Cornell University.



“Love’s In Need of Love Today” by Stefanie Jackson, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.



“Chocolat Plantation, Sapelo Island” by Stefanie Jackson. Oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

## **Jules R. Arthur**

Jules R. Arthur’s art focuses on portraits of individuals that relay a part of the human condition. His paintings may reveal a moment of pride and introspection or a struggle and triumph. Each painting is a story onto itself that reveal the beauty, dignity and hope that can be found in the midst of struggle.

A skillful artisan and technician, his draftsmanship has been long admired by critics. He infuses his paintings with a realism tied tight to reality.



“Roots of New Orleans” by Jules Arthur. Oil and Mixed Media on panel, 66 x 43 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

Born in St. Louis, MO, Arthur received his BFA at the School of Visual Arts in New York after studying at the Atlanta College of Art in Atlanta. Additionally, Arthur has studied at the Art Students League in New York. His work has been exhibited in solo and group shows nationally and is held in museum and public collections that include the African American Museum (Dallas), the Schomburg Cultural Center for Research in Black Culture (New York) and the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA). His work is held in private collectors that include celebrities, scholars, film directors and business leaders.



“Ali and Young Cassius Clay” by Jules Arthur. Oil and Mixed Media on canvas, 72 x 47 inches. Courtesy RJD Gallery.

## **Artist Connections**

The range of experience and artwork expression in “A Time and a Place” connect to the gallery’s year-round focus on magical realism, narrative portraiture, figurative realism, RJD Gallery Curator Mago pointed out. In addition, Arthur and Thomas are regular exhibitors in the gallery’s slate of shows. Newcomer Dean Mitchell’s art connects with Gallery Director Richard J. Demato’s interest in

Andrew and Jaime Wythe and other masters of realism, Mago said. Jackson's surrealistic paintings are a match for the gallery's interest in magical realism.

While RJD Gallery sets aside each February to celebrate and honor contemporary African American artists, this commitment doesn't end when February does. Black artists and female artists are a part of a vibrant artist stable and exhibition schedule.

All of the artists in "A Time and a Place" are masterful artists who would be well-placed in many kinds of artist collections. "You can feel every story and a world of their own in each painting," Mago said. "They all do a magnificent job in the particular type of realism they are working in. This is a great show and we're pleased to be able to honor African American artists and their contribution to art each year at the gallery."

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To preview the art online, visit RJD Gallery's Artsy Page by [clicking here](#).

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