

Nikko Washington

For the Old Gods and the New



Nikko Washington, *How the Cheetah Got His Spots*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 40 x 60 in.

October 28, 2023

Opening Reception October 28, 2023, 4 - 7 pm

Kavi Gupta presents a solo exhibition of new paintings by Chicago-based artist Nikko Washington, whose work was recently featured in the gallery's critically acclaimed, philanthropic exhibition *Skin + Masks*, curated by award-winning rapper and social activist Vic Mensa.

Washington's emotive portraits of Black athletes make space for new perspectives on the roles of myth, folklore, and heroism in contemporary American culture.

Washington's position is informed by the ways stories that enslaved Africans brought to this country have formed the basis of American value systems. One example among many is the Uncle Remus stories. Published by Joel Chandler Harris, a white, Southern journalist and fiction author, these morality tales were all based on stories Harris heard from enslaved Black people he had met while visiting Southern plantations.

The fictionalized Uncle Remus, portrayed by Harris as a kindly, wise, elder freedman, narrates the stories,

which often feature characters who outwit and overcome stronger and more powerful enemies through brains and skill. The stories transmit ethical life lessons that were subsequently adopted by American culture at large. As such, the characters and tales from Uncle Remus, as well as numerous other African folkloric collections, have been repeatedly rewritten into children's books, cartoons, novels, and movies, partly shaping what is commonly considered the American storytelling tradition.

"These stories were passed down by people who were beginning again in a hostile environment," Washington says. "They're Genesis stories, about the beginning of a world."

Washington invites us to contemplate this phenomenon through the allure of sports heroes. His paintings center athletes like Jesse Owens, who defeated Nazi athletes at the Berlin Olympics of 1936 and won gold, only to be dejected and diminished upon his return to America by a culture dominated by racism and white supremacy; Sammy Sosa, the Dominican baseball star who ultimately fell from grace due to scandals involving doping, cheating, and skin bleaching; and boxer Jack Johnson, who defeated James J. Jeffries, a.k.a. the Great White Hope, to become the first Black heavy-weight boxing champion of the world during the height of the Jim Crow era.

Like Br'er Rabbit and the other protagonists of the Uncle Remus stories, these are people who overcame stronger and more powerful forces, often only to be foiled or frustrated by the pitfalls of their own oversimplified persona.

"We look for empowerment in commemorations of the heroes of these stories," Washington says. "It represents collective memory, but also collective amnesia."

The heroes of folklore are rarely portrayed as complete human beings. They are reduced to symbols; embodiments of idealized attributes such as bravery, strength, quickness, or wit; carriers for whatever value systems the storyteller wishes to encourage.

When a living person is lionized as a hero, it is not because they have proven themselves to be complicated, flawed, or mutable. On the contrary, it is because for a brief time, perhaps only an instant, they accomplished something extraordinary. They are simultaneously aggrandized by the public imagination, and simplified into an icon of whatever trait they exemplified during their supposedly greatest moment.

Athletes are among the most common American cultural heroes, perhaps because they seem to embody so many so-called American values: God-given talent; hard work; perseverance; dominance. They symbolize everything ordinary Americans are supposed to want to be.

The problem of the star athlete is one of autonomy—of maintaining the right to be their authentic self, and to decide what that means and how it will evolve over time. Once reduced to a symbol, a hero loses the freedom to show their humanity. There is no them separate from their part in a story. They are, in a sense, owned by their audience.

Not just an artist but an avid boxer, Washington has thought a lot about this predicament.

"Sports heroes are larger than life," he says. "The players become idols; they represent qualities, like characters in a myth."

Like star athletes and mythological heroes alike, it has often seemed to Washington that Black Americans don't have a cultural identity free from the gaze of the majoritarian audience. Though awareness of its true origins may have been lost, Washington relocates deeper and more subjective visions of the legacy of Black America amid the hazy backgrounds, abstract colorfields, and frozen actions in his paintings.

"Painting is about emotional communication," Washington says. "The looseness of how I paint is like a memory."