

Sherman Beck

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Sherman Beck, *Immersed*, 2022, Acrylic on canvas, 32 x 42 inches

June 04 – July 30, 2022

Kavi Gupta | 835 West Washington Blvd. Floor 2

Kavi Gupta presents a solo retrospective of paintings by Sherman Beck, original member of the historic Black Arts collective AFRICOBRA. Following inclusions of Beck's work in pivotal group exhibitions such as *I Am Somebody* at the Peninsula Hotel, Chicago, *AFRICOBRA 50* at Kavi Gupta, and *AFRICOBRA: Messages to the People* at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami, Sherman Beck at Kavi Gupta offers a comprehensive introduction to Beck's practice.

Building on a central tenet of AFRICOBRA's philosophy, Beck's aesthetic vision is rooted in positive portrayals of Black family. Reveling in the mystery and mysticism of everyday life, Beck extends the definition of family

through space and time, including humanity's kinship with nature and the metaphysical world.

Wielding portraiture as an instrument of remembrance and nobility, Beck lovingly venerates historical African American ancestral heroes in a series of memorial portraits that includes luminaries such as President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama, depicted by Beck as Fourth Dynasty Egyptian prince Rahotep and his wife Nofret; Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress; Frederick Douglass, national abolitionist leader, orator, writer, and social reformer; Lewis Howard Latimer, an inventor who worked alongside both Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell; Biddu Mason, California real estate mogul,



Sherman Beck, Installation view, 2022, Kavi Gupta | Washington Blvd. Floor 2, Chicago, USA

nurse, and philanthropist born into slavery; and Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights activist known for her prescient declaration, “Righteousness exalts a nation. Hate just makes people miserable.”

In a body of paintings juxtaposing traditional African masks with images of contemporary Black faces, Beck examines how personal and cultural identities are both formed and concealed. Inspired in part by the poem “We Wear the Mask,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar, which begins, “We wear the mask that grins and lies,” Beck’s mask paintings oscillate between hyper-realistic visages and pareidolic abstractions, continually challenging perceptions of what is real, what is imagined, and what remains hidden behind the veils of our eyes.

Beck speculates about the astral roots of ancestry in a body of otherworldly paintings rooted in concepts like two-directional time, multi-dimensional space, and the interstellar origins of life. Within these uncanny painted worlds, electrified sunrises co-exist with ominous dusks; shadowy figures gaze awestruck into fiery, celestial voids; and the departed commingle with the living amid chimerical forests abundant with flora from across the globe.

Consistent throughout Sherman Beck at Kavi Gupta is a sense of aesthetic clarity, projected by an artist defined by both humility and erudition. Exalting the enduring power of the medium of painting to spark moments of magic and intrigue for viewers, Beck

perceives his paintings less as definitive statements about subject matter, and more as pliable visual examinations of the space where ideas and intuition meet.

“I try to suggest more than a moment in time,” Beck says. “Symbolically, the work is a statement about life—a metaphor. Let anyone seeing it make something of it.”

Beck (b. 1942, USA) is a graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago and was among the original ten members of AFRICOBRA, a foundational Black arts collective formed on the South Side of Chicago in 1968. His work was included in the authoritative early exhibitions *AFRICOBRA I & II* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and has been included in multiple other influential exhibitions of AFRICOBRA’s work, including *AFRICOBRA 50*, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL, USA; *Africobra and Beyond*, DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago, IL, USA; *AFRICOBRA: Messages to the People*, MOCA North Miami, Miami, FL, USA; and *I Am Somebody*, at the Peninsula Hotel, Chicago, IL, USA, as well as in the solo exhibition *Sherman Beck: Realms & Abstractions*, African American Cultural Center, University of Illinois, Chicago, IL, USA. Beck is the former owner and operator of the Art Directions art supply store in Chicago and taught commercial art for twenty-two years at his alma mater, Dunbar High School, in the Bronzeville neighborhood of south Chicago.