

People

‘Whatever Is Said Here, Stays Here’: New York Gallerist Courtney Willis Blair on Founding a Supper Club for Black Women in the Art World

A rising star in the New York art world, Blair is doing everything in her power to unite, support, and promote the work of women of color.

Rachel Gould, September 16, 2019



Courtney Willis Blair. Photographer: Darío Calmese.

It was around the time that Courtney Willis Blair assumed her position as a director at Chelsea gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash that she was struck by the idea to forge a network between women of color in the New York art industry.

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“I was beginning to see more and more young, capable black women dealers and directors in galleries,” Blair tells artnet News. So she decided to implement a dinner club, unfettered by formality, structure, or theme, through which black women in the local art world could “come together to share space, stories, and eat.”

In December 2016, Blair extended an invitation to eight women—including a few ladies whom she had heard of, but hadn’t yet crossed paths with—for the first of a now-quarterly series of dinner parties, which she would come to call *Entre Nous* (French for “between us”). *Entre Nous* was introduced with two conditions: “Whatever is said here, stays here” and “this is not about competition or sizing one another up.” Instead, *Entre Nous* was presented as a catalyst for kinship.

The inaugural group congregated at Miss Lily’s on Houston Street in Soho, where they savored Jamaican food over hours of conversation. Nearly three years on, *Entre Nous* has expanded into a collective of 14 curators, entrepreneurs, and gallery directors—including Lévy Gorvy’s Alexis Johnson, Gagosian director Ashley Stewart, and Kyla McMillan from Gavin Brown’s enterprise—who have since formed lasting relationships with one another.

“I think what’s made *Entre Nous* so successful is the fact that there’s never been a mission or an agenda,” Blair says. “You can get what you want to get out of it, whether it’s a professional relationship, mentorship, or simply friendship. One of the members [wound up] hiring another member at her gallery. A few members went on a personal trip to Berlin together. One woman exceeded her sales target because of a deal that she made within the group.”

Blair is adept at bringing impactful ventures to fruition. She joined the team at Mitchell-Innes & Nash some three-and-a-half years ago with a background in art history and journalism, which she calls upon to help realize a program of compelling exhibitions. “I want to tell stories,” she says, “and working with artists is the way [I] do it.”



Tschabalala Self, *Back Handed* (2019). Image courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

On September 12, Mitchell-Innes & Nash unveiled “Embodiment,” a new group exhibition of work by mixed media painter Tschabalala Self, intervention artist Pope.L, and painters Cheyenne Julien and Jonathan Lyndon Chase. An investigation into the unbounded potential of corporeal representation, “Embodiment” explores these four talents’ approaches to portraying the human form.

“‘Embodiment’ came together about a year ago, when I started thinking about the exaggerated body [in relation to] architecture and familiar public spaces in urban neighborhoods, like the bodega, for example, or the stoop,” Blair explains. “I’ve always been really interested in the expression of figuration, and I love language, having worked with it [as a writer].”

While Pope.L illustrates various colored bodies through cryptic texts, like “GREEN PEOPLE ARE THE SKY ABOVE THE CITY” and “BLUE PEOPLE ARE AN UNDERWATER AIRPORT,” Julien interrogates her own personal narrative to yield a sequence of exquisite self-portraits situated in domestic scenes. “[Julien] grew up in the Bronx, and she’s done a lot of research into local housing and urban planning—how certain highways split neighborhoods, and what effect that has,” Blair explains. “But then she turns it on its head and paints intimate spaces that are built with this in mind.”



Pope L., *Gold People Shit In Their Valet* (2014). Image courtesy Pope L. and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Self, a young artist who's catapulted into the public eye and garnered considerable attention for her sumptuous portraits of composite black bodies made from paint and bits of fabric, creates her subjects to embody maximum space on the canvas through sweeping gestures, while Chase, whose figures shop for shoes and watches, assesses how bodies interact with and subsequently power the consumerist arena.

"The show has a conceptual weight," Blair says, "but aesthetically, it's just really elegant." "Embodiment" will remain on view through October 26.

Following "Embodiment" is a solo show of textile paintings by the Nova Scotian artist Brent Wadden, whose oeuvre fuses the traditional craft of weaving with timeless abstract motifs. Waden's show will open on November 1 and run through December 21, 2019.

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Cheyenne Julien, *Can't Go Out, Can't Stay In* (2019). Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash.

Indeed, Blair has a busy season ahead of her. In reference to her vision for the future of Entre Nous, she is careful to note that “the women who [participate] are not the only black women who work at galleries in New York or otherwise,” though the initiative is admittedly presently intimate in scale to honor busy schedules and fundamental logistics.

“I would love to see Entre Nous chapters all over the world one day,” Blair muses. “I mean, why not? For now, though, it’s less about structure or mission and more like, ‘Hey, we’re here. Let’s know each other.’”