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At Peabody Essex Museum, Gio Swaby's virtuosic portraits of Black women in thread and fabric

Displaying stunning fluency in an original medium, the 31-year-old Bahamian artist draws freehand on canvas — with a sewing machine.

By Murray Whyte Globe Staff



"New Growth 2" by Gio Swaby, 2021. Collection of Rasheed Newson.GIO SWABY

SALEM — Loose black thread dangles from bare canvas in Gio Swaby's "Another Side to Me" series, all of them self-portraits, or portraits of women close to her. The artist's skill with needle and thread, on ample display at "Fresh Up," her just-opened solo exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum, makes error or oversight near impossible. The unfinished quality is full of intent: As long as we live, we are works in progress; there's always more becoming to do.

Swaby, 31, has done a lot of becoming herself recently. She was one of those rare artists working on her master's thesis (at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto), curator Lydia Peabody told me, and her first solo gallery show, at the Claire Oliver Gallery in New York, at the same time. "Fresh Up," a selection of 40 works from 2017 to 2021 that traveled from the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg to the Art Institute of Chicago to Salem, plots her swift rise and baffling fluency with her fussy medium.

It also conveys an ebullience and self-possession that only the hand-made can achieve (painting, or good painting, does this intrinsically; to labor over an image, coaxing form and expression from the slippery proclivities of oil or gouache, is to imbue it with deep care). Each piece brims with affection and respect, for her subjects and the materials she uses to capture them.

“Another Side to Me,” a portrait series she began in 2020, is remarkably unique, a form, from what I know, almost entirely her own. I can think only to call it expressionistic quiltmaking. Swaby figured her subjects by moving the canvas underneath the mechanical stabbings of a sewing machine — drawing with thread (Peabody told me she created the works essentially freehand, adding to the legend of her particular virtuosity).

Good work can make you look past how it’s made. Swaby offers a reminder. The first chapter of the series shows the nominally unfinished backs of her canvases, where thread runs across and through eyes, face, and neck, to create seamless connections on the finished flipside.



“Another Side to Me 4,” by Gio Swaby, 2020, is on display as part of “Fresh Up,” at the the Peabody Essex Museum. Collection of Jason Reynolds.

These are not confessional gestures, or a pulling back of the curtain; here, the artist embraces imperfection — in her work, herself, and us all. But even en verso, the flaws are awfully minor; the way her black sewn thread captures expression, perspective, and the drape of fabric as well as any expert line drawing, left me a little dumbfounded.

Too perfect to be imperfect? Maybe. When flaws need to be pointed out, not covered up, I wonder if skill overtakes vision. But that's a small quibble. Swaby's overarching motive is empowerment, honoring and valorizing the Black women in her immediate circle. She lovingly depicts them through committed toil, her investment an expression of her conviction that they deserve to be seen.

To be sure, they hold your eye. "Another Side to Me 4," 2020, captures the stern gaze of a woman with close-shorn hair and giant, dangling hoop earrings; that right eyebrow, raised ever so slightly, made me wonder what I'd done wrong. "Another Side to Me 1," 2020, is softer, but the subject's head is cocked just so; her open expression appears dubious, like she's sizing you up. Significantly, Swaby doesn't tell us her subjects' names. That you can look, but not know, underscores a very literal declaration of self-possession. Swaby keeps her circle tight, and you on the outside.



"Another Side to Me Second Chapter 3," by Gio Swaby, 2021. Private Collection Israel.

The second chapter of the series adds swatches of patterned fabric to the picture, lining arms, shoulders, hips (the works are also flipped, finished-side out). Swaby, essentially, is a quiltmaker, and in the trans-Atlantic world of colonial exchange, fabric can be charged with its imprint. In "Gyalavantin'," a

large 2021 triptych, the artist pauses her practice of meticulous thread drawing for oblique silhouettes blocked out in bright patterns. The central figure's shoes feature the distinct pastel patterns of Androsia batik, a fabric hybrid unique to Swaby's native country, the Bahamas, brought about by British import of South Asian patterns during its brisk colonial churn. Its embrace and adaptation by the local population says something about self-possession too.

Swaby's choice of subject carries with it implicit complaint and an urge for correction. In art history, Black women were rarely the subject of dignified portraiture. If anything, their images were taken without their consent and used for purposes both misleading and cruel. The artist Simone Leigh's recent project for the 2022 Venice Biennale, "Sovereignty," explores just that, in wrenching detail.



"My Hands Are Clean 4," by Gio Swaby, 2017. Courtesy of Claire Oliver & Ian Rubinstein.

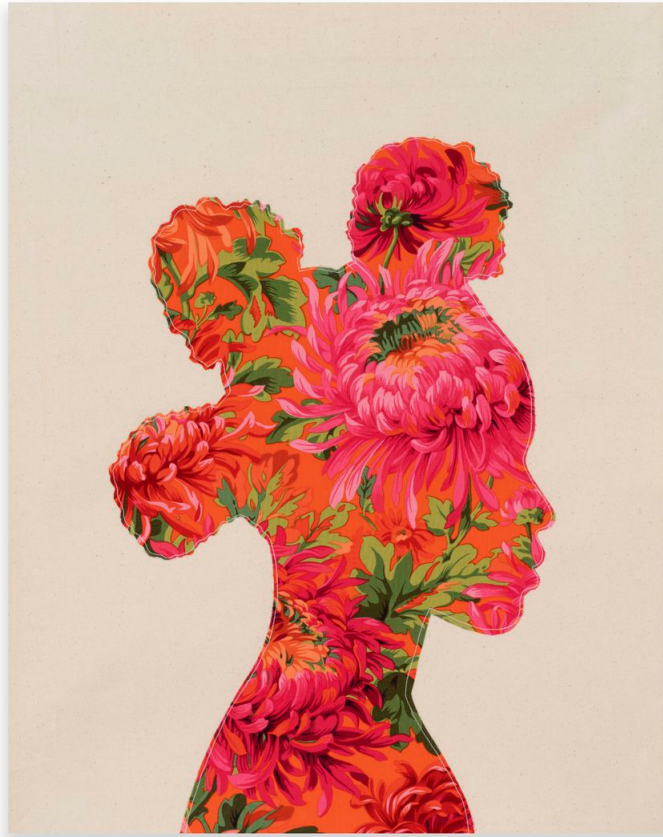
Sovereignty over one's own image, or even body, has been an issue for Black women for centuries. I can't help but look of Swaby's silhouettes and not think of Kara Walker's brutal appropriation of the quaint Victorian convention of shadow portraits to portray the savagery of enslavement. Swaby explores no such horrors, though modern microaggressions play in. "My Hands Are Clean," 2017, is a series of self-portraits close-up, of the artist in a defensive stance; its title, an excuse often made by strangers to touch her hair or skin, imbues them with flinty reproach.



"Pretty Pretty 8," 2021. Collection of Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

Disdain can be powerful; "My Hands Are Clean 4," of the artist, chin raised, glowering, her face framed in stitched dreadlocks, is one of the strongest works here. But Swaby intends honor and uplift as the most potent message-bearers. "Love Letter," 2021, a series of bright-patterned full body silhouette portraits of

women in finery sporting confident poses, makes that much clear, if a little on the nose. “Pretty Pretty,” 2021, another series of fantastically detailed thread drawings, share the vibe.



“New Growth Second Chapter 7,” by Gio Swaby, 2021. Collection of Jarrett and Miriam Annenberg.

But Swaby can do mystery, too, and another 2021 series (does she sleep?), “New Growth,” left me hungry for more. Using precise snippets of fabric, Swaby creates featureless, shoulders-up silhouette headshots that brim with personality, ambiguity, beauty, and, sometimes, even menace. The raised chin of the figure on the left of the triptych “New Growth 2,” neck and shoulder swathed in sharp patches of blue and pink, to me looked braced or trapped; beside it, a bolt of black split the silhouetted portrait, with yellow and red on either side somewhere around the nose.

Even when the works soften, as in “New Growth Second Chapter 9,” 2021, there’s an obliqueness in the body language that leaves you adrift; a soft profile implies motion, even pleasure, with pink flowers afloat in a field of cosmic turquoise. Swaby is so good at showing her hand, she’s right to keep something more to herself.

GIO SWABY: FRESH UP

Through Nov. 26. Peabody Essex Museum, 161 Essex St., Salem. 978-745-9500, www.pem.org.