

# MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

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**MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG PRESENTS DEBUT SOLO MUSEUM EXHIBITION *GIO SWABY: FRESH UP* FEATURING MORE THAN 40 WORKS CREATED AS “LOVE LETTERS TO BLACK WOMEN”**

*Bahamian artist Swaby’s portraits range from life-size threaded line works to intimate patterned textile pieces*



**ST. PETERSBURG, FL (April 19, 2022)** — The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg is proud to present the first solo museum exhibition of multidisciplinary artist Gio Swaby (b. 1991, Nassau, Bahamas) whose work explores the intersections of Blackness and womanhood. The exhibition features more than 40 works ranging from intimate

portraits to life-size textile panels fabricated from sewn line drawing and quilting techniques. Creating unique portraits through a range of textile-based techniques, Swaby's work is anchored in a desire to celebrate the imperfect and complex humanity of Black women. The exhibition was co-organized by the MFA, St. Petersburg and the Art Institute of Chicago, and will open in St. Petersburg on May 28, 2022.

In her interview with Nikole Hannah-Jones for the exhibition catalogue *Gio Swaby: Fresh Up* published by Rizzoli Electa, Swaby states, "I would describe my work first and foremost as an act of love." She continues, "For me, these physical pieces are not necessarily the work itself. The work is more making connections and growing love. Those portraits are like a dedication to that work, or a residue of that work."

Swaby's art is grounded in the personal connections forged between subject and artist, and conversation is key to achieving these portraits of beauty and power that she calls "love letters to Black women." The portraits begin with a photo shoot, where the artist and subjects collaborate on a cohesive story told via clothing and poses and result in a snapshot of empowerment and self-awareness. Swaby foregrounds their personal style—seen in the detailed renderings of jewelry, hair, and clothing—creating space for self-definition and unapologetic self-expression.



Growing up surrounded by the threads and fabrics of her mother, a seamstress, Swaby chooses to work in mediums traditionally associated with domesticity as a means to imbue her works with familiarity, labor, and care. Swaby upends tradition, however, and gives the sewing medium a sense of monumentality with the life-size series *Pretty Pretty*. The subjects are intricately rendered in sewn thread lines and shown on the reverse side of the canvas so that the stitching process—its knots and loose threads, so often hidden—is visible. There's a vulnerability to "showing the back," but Swaby embraces and elevates the imperfections.

Her work particularly showcases the beauty of these imperfections and individuality as a counterpoint to the often-politicized Black body, so frequently depicted in states of

anger or trauma. The works span 2017 through 2021, presenting aspects of Black womanhood which include joy, softness, and vulnerability in addition to the strength that is so often the focus of less multidimensional representations.



Co-curator Katherine Pill states, “Swaby’s portraits, wherein Black female subjects are defined through the lens of reciprocal love and caring, are a form of resistance to one-dimensional presentations of Black womanhood. Her works are commanding, but nuanced in their representations of strength and vulnerability, and seem to ask viewers to consider the interiority of the subjects and the depth of their inner complexities.”

Swaby’s work has garnered significant attention and acclaim in the art world, following lauded exhibitions at Claire Oliver Gallery in New York City and at other international venues. Her work is included in the permanent collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, as well as other major public institutions throughout the United States, such as the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Art Institute of Chicago, Weisman Art Museum, and the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Swaby earned her BFA in Film, Video and Integrated Media from Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Vancouver, BC and is currently completing an MFA in Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design at OCAD University, Toronto, ON.

“We are so proud to share Gio’s work with our visitors – not only locally, but from around the country,” said MFA Executive Director and CEO Kristen A. Shepherd. “This show is strikingly meaningful and important for all audiences to see – but especially as a means of providing nuanced representation for Black women. Gio’s work is not only beautiful in its execution, but in its accessibility and message.”

This exhibition is co-organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg and the Art Institute of Chicago and co-curated by Katherine Pill, Curator of Contemporary Art at the MFA, St. Petersburg, and Melinda Watt, Chair and Christa C. Mayer Thurman Curator of the Textile Department at the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition will debut at the MFA, St. Petersburg from May 28 through October 9, 2022, before traveling to the Art Institute of Chicago where it will be on view from April 8 through July 3, 2023. The show will then travel to the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts from August through November 2023. A fully illustrated catalogue, published by Rizzoli Electa, accompanies the exhibition, and features an interview between Swaby and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Nikole Hannah-Jones, as well as series introductions by the artist and essays by co-curators Watt and Pill.



## RELATED PROGRAM

### **Virtual Cocktails and Collections with Katherine Pill, Curator of Contemporary Art** Thursday, June 16 | 6:30 pm – 7:30 pm | Free for MFA members; \$10 for not-yet-members

Join us for a live virtual event featuring the exhibiton *Gio Swaby: Fresh Up* with Katherine Pill, Curator of Contemporary Art. Make an art-inspired cocktail ahead of time (we'll provide the recipe), and enjoy a specially curated art tour via Zoom.

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### **ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG**

The MFA at 255 Beach Drive NE is St. Petersburg's first art museum, and houses the largest encyclopedic art collection in Florida. The collection includes works of art from ancient times to the present day and from around the world, including ancient Greek and Roman, Egyptian, Asian, African, pre-Columbian, European, American, and contemporary art. The photography collection is one of the largest and finest in the Southeast. Kristen A. Shepherd is the Executive Director and CEO. For more information, please visit [mfastpete.org](http://mfastpete.org) and follow @mfastpete on social.

#### **Image Credits (left to right, top to bottom):**

Gio Swaby, *Pretty Pretty 8*, 2021, Thread and fabric sewn on canvas, 83 x 36 inches, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Museum purchase in honor of James G. Sweeny

Gio Swaby, *Love Letter 1*, 2018, Thread and fabric sewn on canvas, 68 x 31 inches, Collection of Roxane Gay and Debbie Millman

Gio Swaby, *New Growth 2* (triptych), 2021, Thread and fabric sewn on canvas, Collection of Rasheed Newson and Jonathan Ruane

Photo of Gio Swaby courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery

Gio Swaby, *My Hands Are Clean 4*, 2017, Thread and fabric sewn on canvas, 20 x 16 inches, Collection of Claire Oliver and Ian Rubinstein