



Installation view, "Mary Lovelace O'Neal: New Work" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Photo: Don Ross

MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL IS CREATING STUNNING NEW WORK AT 82

BY TONY BRAVO

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For the past six decades, Mary Lovelace O'Neal has been creating art that challenges the relationship between abstraction and figuration.

Now, at 82 years old, with bold new paintings set against stunning dark backgrounds that call back to her pivotal "Lampblack" series from the 1960s and '70s, the artist continues to push the boundaries. The select works are part of the exhibition "New Work: Mary Lovelace O'Neal," now on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and featured as part of the city's first-ever Nexus SF/Bay Area Black Art Week that runs through Sunday, Oct. 6. It marks the first time she has been the subject of a show at SFMOMA since 1979.

"I'm just pleased that I'm able to present new work all of these many, many years later," Lovelace O'Neal told the Chronicle by phone from her home in Mérida, Mexico.

Recent years have seen a rediscovery of both Lovelace O'Neal's art and her place in art history.

In 2022, [she was honored](#) at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco's On the Edge gala. As part of that recognition, the organization — which oversees the Legion of Honor and de Young Museum — purchased her 1990 painting "Driskell's Red Dogs aka I Live in a Black Marble Palace with Black Panthers and White Doves #8" from San Francisco's Jenkins Johnson Gallery. It is currently on view at the de Young.

Earlier this year, Lovelace O'Neal was included in the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial and is now included in the exhibition "Edges of Ailey," now on view through Feb. 9. She was also the subject of a solo exhibition at the Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York.

Starting Oct. 26, a painting by Lovelace O’Neal, “Kurban, a Sweeter Day to Come,” from the series “The Panthers in My Father’s Palace,” [will be on view](#) at the Berkeley Art Museum Pacific Film Archive in the exhibition “Making Their Mark: Works from the Shah Garg Collection.”



Mary Lovelace O’Neal at the On the Edge gala and after-party for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco at the de Young Museum in 2022. Photo: Aaron Wojack Special to The Chronicle

“For me, showing the work has not been my objective in life, because I knew years ago, right after I got out of graduate school, that it was going to be a rough road for me and so many people like me,” she said, referring to fellow Black artists — especially women — who often struggle for visibility in a white male-dominated art sector. But “I’m thrilled about the fact that it’s all happening and that so much of it is happening at the same time.”

A longtime Oakland resident, she now lives mostly in Mérida since her husband, Chilean painter Patricio Moreno Toro, “bribed” her to move to the country, she quipped, by building her a custom studio that could adapt to her changing needs as a painter in her 80s.

“She never had that kind of perfect, big studio space before. She said it was pretty intimidating at first,” noted Eungie Joo, SFMOMA’s head of contemporary art who curated the exhibition, which consists of paintings that use materials such as acrylic paints, pastels, charcoal and masking tape. “She found that so much of her past work and gestures and ideas were there inside, and that they just started coming out on the canvas.”

Lovelace O’Neal confirmed that her bespoke space in Mexico prompted her “to change how I work, and that keeps the work with a fresh edge to it.”

“I’m seeking new things simply because I can’t do it the old way,” she continued, adding that as an octogenarian, “I can’t jump up and down on my ladders and chairs and dance to the paint.”

Lovelace O’Neal and Joo spoke to the Chronicle for a deeper look at three of the new works on view at SFMOMA through Oct. 20.



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, "Dr. Alcocer's Corsets for Horses," 2021-2023.
Photo: Don Ross

'Dr. Alcocer's Corsets for Horses,' 2021-2023

This first work completed for the SFMOMA show contains large, white forms punctuated by turquoise. Striped equine limbs and heads appear to emerge from clouds of dust in parts of the painting. It's an image that calls to mind the artist's 1980s series "Whales F—ing," with its abstract blasts of ocean spray.

For Lovelace O'Neal, her different painting series "morph into each other, they come and they go, but they're all a part of one glorious thing. That's the beauty of it."

But Joo warns against trying to interpret the works too literally.

"I wouldn't call these works exactly representational," Joo said. "They're using these kinds of forms and these ideas of movement or displacement as a signal, or gesture. Then, under that, you see also the repetition of those rectangles that is almost a filmic-looking gesture that she did many years ago."



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, "Francis," 2021-2023.
Photo: © Mary Lovelace O'Neal

'Francis,' 2021-2023

One of the more clearly figurative paintings in the exhibition is this horse-like figure surrounded by pink. "There's no horses here, but Toro had promised me that I could have horses," said Lovelace O'Neal about her life in Mérida with her husband. "I love zebras, too. I love how they look, they're part of the horsey thing."

For viewers, Joo wants to call attention to the gesture of the paint in the horse's hindquarters. She notes that there's "something really visceral in the connection that we make to the shape of the legs," which have a muscular, almost human quality.

The title, Joo added, is a reference to painter Francis Bacon.



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, "Raining in Milano," 2021-2023.
Photo: Don Ross

'Raining in Milano,' 2021-2023

The four-panel work feels like an explosion of color and line as chalky blue, purple and turquoise pop against the blackboard-like background.

"There are these moments in these sharp strips of color that are hidden under other colors where you see what feels like a reference to the 'Lampblack' paintings," said Joo, noting that "some of the pastel and chalk work on the surfaces hearken back to a different period of painting.

"And then, these horse figures throughout are really reminders of the kind of panther figures that appeared in a much more painterly period," she explained, referring to Lovelace O'Neal's 1980s series "Panthers In My Father's Palace."

That said, Lovelace O'Neal emphasized, "I really don't like to try to tell you what the painting is about. It's there for you to see and to feel your fantasy."