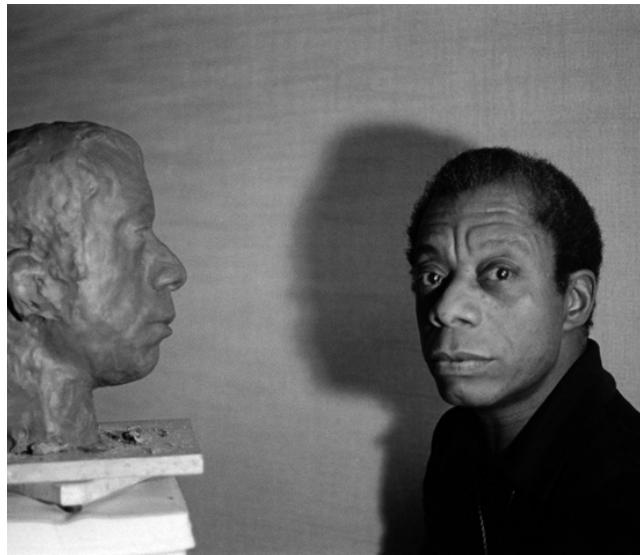


God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin

Curated by Hilton Als

January 10–February 16, 2019
525 & 533 West 19th Street, New York

Opening reception: Thursday, January 10, 6–8 PM
Press preview with Hilton Als: Thursday, January 10, 5 PM



Jane Evelyn Atwood, *James Baldwin with bust of himself sculpted by Larry Wolhandler, Paris, France, 1975 (detail)*. Gelatin silver print, 7 x 9 3/8 inches (17.8 x 23.8 cm)

David Zwirner will present a group exhibition curated by Hilton Als, which will feature works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, Alvin Baltrop, Beauford Delaney, Marlene Dumas, Ja'Tovia Gary, Glenn Ligon, Alice Neel, Cameron Rowland, Kara Walker, and James Welling, among other artists.

Troubled times get the tyrants and prophets they deserve. During our current epoch, the revival of interest in author James Baldwin (1924–1987), the subject of God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin, has been particularly intense. This is in part due, of course, to his ability to analyze and articulate how power abuses through cunning and force and why, in the end, it's up to the people to topple kingdoms. As a galvanizing humanitarian force, Baldwin is now being claimed as a kind of oracle. But by claiming him as such, much gets erased about the great artist in the process, specifically his sexuality and aestheticism, both of which informed his politics.

In "A Walker in the City," the first part of the exhibition, we see the young Baldwin, a Harlem-born flaneur, traversing two great cities: Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, and New York, undisputed ruler of the twentieth. In this section, which includes the first public exhibition of a number of letters and books by Baldwin, we also see work the writer inspired by the legendary painter Beauford Delaney, and photographer Richard Avedon, among other artists. In "A Walker in the City," we not only get to view the author as a body, but also as an object of fascination and love—perspectives that are quite different from his stepfather's view that Baldwin was "the ugliest boy he had ever seen." Oppression and tyranny began at home. As a teenager, Baldwin sought life's freedoms elsewhere. When he was fifteen he headed downtown to SoHo from his native Harlem, where he met and eventually sat for Delaney. In the meantime, Baldwin was also collaborating with Avedon on their high school magazine, The Magpie. (Avedon was the editor.) These associations did not end with Baldwin's youth. In 1964, he collaborated with Avedon on the seminal book Nothing Personal. And the writer not only helped care for Delaney throughout the latter part of the painter's life, Baldwin would also contribute an essay to the catalogue for Delaney's 1978 retrospective at The Studio Museum in Harlem. (Delaney died in 1979.)

Throughout his life, Baldwin, an inveterate doodler (an example of his drawing is also on view in the exhibition), had an interest in visual culture—specifically film. In a sense, the second part of God Made My Face, titled "Colonialism," shows how Baldwin was gradually colonized by his post-Fire Next Time (1963) fame, while it celebrates the kind of work he would be doing if he had been given permission to be the complete artist he longed to be. In "Colonialism," Kara Walker contributes a film that in many ways anticipates the kind of work Baldwin would have made had he been a filmmaker—ideas he shared in his 1960 profile of Ingmar Bergman. In addition to Walker, there are a number of pieces by Glenn Ligon that challenge the view that black masculinity is one thing. How was Baldwin colonized by his fame, representing the race, and why? In speaking for and about blackness, did he forsake himself—that walker in the city? Or was speaking about all those others—the victims of colonization—a way of describing himself and the ghetto he had grown up in?

David Zwirner

The works displayed in "Colonialism" more often than not exist in platonic conversation with Baldwin and the themes that became more and more urgent in his post-Fire Next Time writing—themes he realized on the page, the complicated legacy of civil rights; the psychological and economic effects of colonialism; miscegenation; black men loving one another. But Baldwin did not address his own sexuality directly and not fictively for a long time. Criticized by black nationalists such as Eldridge Cleaver, the artist remained relatively silent on the subject in order to best serve the Movement, a distinctly heteronormative world. But in 1985, Baldwin published one of his last long essays, "Here Be Dragons," an exploration of his country's relationship to masculinity. (He does not discuss AIDS.) In it, the author describes his early life in Manhattan—a sexual hall of mirrors. Baldwin writes: "I knew that I was in the hall ... but the mirrors threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself." Here, those fragments are not necessarily made whole but further explored and seen for the power that Baldwin, flaneur and political philosopher, walker and explorer, emitted in the wholeness of his work and the complications inherent in being a myriad self.

—Hilton Als

Hilton Als became a staff writer at *The New Yorker* in 1994, a theater critic in 2002, and chief theater critic in 2013. He began contributing to the magazine in 1989, writing pieces for *The Talk of the Town*. Als was previously a staff writer for the *Village Voice* and an editor-at-large at *Vibe*. He has also written articles for *The Nation*, *The Believer*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *4Columns*, among other publications. His first book, *The Women*, a meditation on gender, race, and personal identity, was published in 1996 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). His most recent book, *White Girls* (McSweeney's), discusses various narratives around race and gender and was nominated for a 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism.

In 1997, the New York Association of Black Journalists awarded Als first prize in both Magazine Critique/Review and Magazine Arts and Entertainment. He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing in 2000, the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism for 2002 to 2003, and a Windham-Campbell Prize for Nonfiction in 2016. In 2017, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. The same year, he was the recipient of the Langston Hughes Medal. The honor celebrates writers from the African diaspora for their distinguished work. Previous honorees include James Baldwin and Toni Morrison.

In 2010, he published *Justin Bond/Jackie Curtis* (After Dark Publishing), his second book. In 2015, Als cocurated, with Anthony Elms, a retrospective of Christopher Knowles's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. He is also the coauthor of *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, the catalogue published on the occasion of Gober's retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2014. In 2016, he produced a six-month survey of art and text at The Artist's Institute, New York, and organized *Desdemona for Celia* by Hilton, an exhibition of work by Celia Paul, at The Metropolitan Opera's Gallery Met in New York. His work was included in the group exhibition *Looking Back: The Eleventh White Columns Annual* in New York in 2017. The same year, Als curated the critically lauded exhibition *Alice Neel, Uptown*, which traveled from David Zwirner, New York, to Victoria Miro, London and Venice. He is also curating a series of three successive exhibitions for the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, of the work of Celia Paul (2018), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (2019), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2020).

Als is an associate professor at Columbia University School of the Arts and has taught at Wesleyan University, Wellesley College, Smith College, and the Yale School of Drama. He lives in New York City.

In conjunction with *God Made My Face*, Als will present a selection of films and visual excerpts of Baldwin on screen at Metrograph in New York. Additional programming will be announced shortly.

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