

## ARTFORUM



Esteban Jefferson, *Tarifs Réduits*, 2020, oil on linen, 72 × 108".

### Esteban Jefferson

TANYA LEIGHTON

If you encountered Esteban Jefferson's paintings in Paris, in the Petit Palais, whose rotunda provides the setting for the scenes depicted in the five canvases in the New York-based artist's recent show "Petit Palais"—you'd likely think them uncompleted, and to some extent you'd be right. In *Entrée*, 2020, for example, we can discern the museum's ticket desk, employees behind it, and guests ascending a short staircase into the halls. But all of this appears only in the form of ghostly penciled outlines on brown-stained linen, the only element fully and attentively painted being a marble bust, positioned behind the counter, of an African woman. Reanimated, she gazes searchingly past us while, in turn, virtually everyone ignores her. Jefferson obviously did not. Nor did he overlook a bust of an African man at the information station, who, in *Label QualiParis*, 2020, appears in similarly respectful detail while a faded greeter zones out at her desk. In other works, the hierarchy of presence was reversed: The ironically titled *Flâneuse*, 2020, shows a bulky, middle-aged white woman peering intently at her phone, head and hands fully rendered, while her floral dress dissolves into a background in which the bust of the African woman is, in turn, made phantasmal, unseen, less interesting

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than an SMS. In such paintings, set in the junkspace of a lobby, there's no moment of encounter, recognition, or real space sharing between the Black and white figures who appear equally alive and present in Jefferson's schema.

The busts are not titled in the paragraph above because the Palais did not provide their names. This oversight, indeed, was the artist's starting point. In a letter to the institution, pinned up at the back of the gallery, he takes issue with its slipshod attributing. Each statue receives a generic title ("*Buste d'Africain*," "*Buste d'Africaine*") and is dated to the nineteenth century, yet Jefferson's research on the museum's own website suggests that—denoting a redoubled lack of care—they're from the seventeenth century and are specifically Venetian. Beyond that, nothing, so the artist asks for more info on their subjects, authorship, or provenance. In *Petit Palais*, 2019—a short, scrabbly, two-channel video on a stacked pair of old-fashioned monitors—we see Jefferson turning the pages of the museum's information booklet below footage of the statues, once again blithely ignored except by the artist filming.

Jefferson's concern here is clearly racial erasure, and he performs it on white figures, too. But it's how he staged this show—billed as a successor to his 2019 exhibition at White Columns in New York and featuring similar paintings (plus the letter) and a matching fake-marble linoleum floor—as a repeated "What next?" that made it pack a punch. Hanging adjacent to his letter with its unanswered questions was another painting featuring the phone-loving lady. The only visitor to seem bodied, she's seen from behind, framing the African woman—a tiny but full rendering—in her screen as she photographs, isolating her from the surrounding visual noise. Is she truly seeing her, with technology as an aid? Maybe not—that photographing is not always seeing is clearly part of Jefferson's multilayered rhetorical play—but maybe yes, though she won't find out who she was. In this painting, *Flâneuse (After Richter)*, 2020, blonde hairdo and flowered outfit converse not only with the German artist's iconic 1988 canvas *Betty*, but also, in the pantheon of women painted from behind, with Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, ca. 1665. Jefferson uses this chain of images as a shorthand for the notion of who within the art-historical continuum gets to be seen, preserved, named.

— Martin Herbert