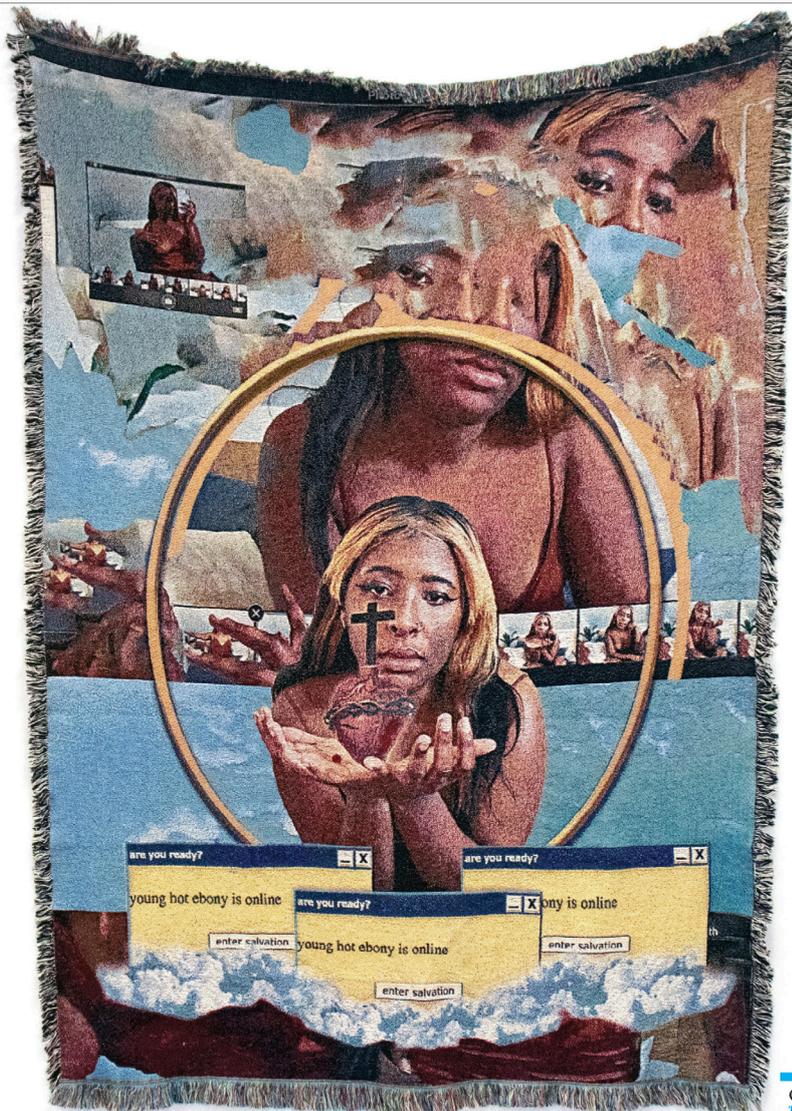


Tanya Leighton

International Review Since 1913

# Art in America

New Talent Issue with Guest Editor Antwaun Sargent

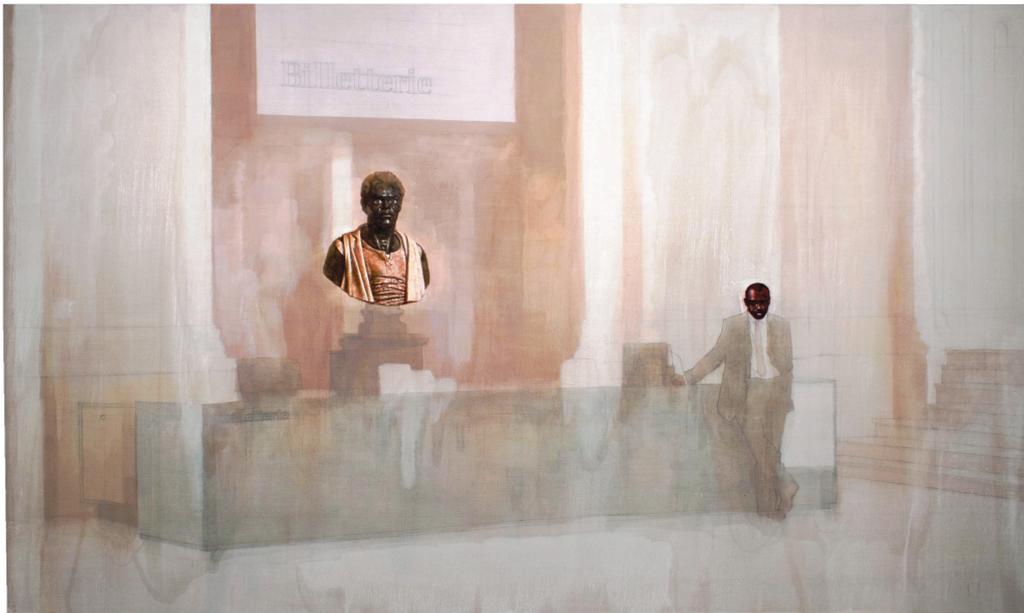


Qualeasha Wood  
*The (Black) Madonna-Whore Complex*

Art in America, May / June 2021

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin  
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, [info@tanyaleighton.com](mailto:info@tanyaleighton.com), [www.tanyaleighton.com](http://www.tanyaleighton.com)

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Courtesy Tanya Leighton, Berlin

**COVER:** Qualeasha Wood, *The (Black) Madonna-Whore Complex*, 2021, Jacquard woven fabric and glass seed beads, 4 by 6 feet.

introductions



## ESTEBAN JEFFERSON

Calling attention to neglected artworks, the painter explores how museums have represented Black figures.

By **Precious Adesina**

### WHEN NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST ESTEBAN

Jefferson first visited the Petit Palais in Paris, in 2014, it was neither the nineteenth-century French paintings nor the Etruscan vases that caught his eye, but two mysterious portrait busts of anonymous Black figures placed behind the information and ticket desk. While most of the other artworks on display at the museum were accompanied by extensively researched wall texts, these sculptures, carved from polychrome marble, had no attribution and were simply labeled "Buste d'Africain." "I shot a photo of one of them, came back to America, and thought about the image for a long time," Jefferson tells me. This photograph, along with others he took during subsequent visits to the museum in 2018 and 2019, serves as the basis for his ongoing body of work, "Petit Palais." Comprising paintings and a video installation, the series, which Jefferson began while pursuing his MFA at Columbia University, was the focus of recent exhibitions at New York's White Columns, in late 2019,

Above right, *Café*, 2020,  
oil on linen,  
42 by 60 inches.



and at Tanya Leighton in Berlin in 2020.

For Jefferson, the "Petit Palais" paintings marked a turning point in his practice. "In all the paintings I made before going back to school and when I was working as an artist's assistant, I painted every square inch of the canvas," he says. "It got to a point where it was so laborious that it felt pointless." In these works, by contrast, he is more selective and considered, typically rendering the busts in exacting detail while leaving the rest of the scenes almost unfinished. In *Gratuité* (2019), for instance, Jefferson's treatment of the dark marble bust—a woman with piercing white eyes and a pale peach headwrap—is precise and unambiguous, contrasting with the sketch-like depiction of the sculpture's surroundings, including a disengaged worker at the ticket desk, vaguely outlined in light washes of color. "It has a punk-ness to it," Jefferson says of his series. "I like the idea of refusing to paint in everything and only focusing on the part that deserves labor."

The "Petit Palais" series questions the representation of Black people in Western museums. Works like these sculptures "are put in this position where they're half art, but half not-art," Jefferson says, on display in the museum but not given space in the galleries or contextualized in wall labels or catalogues. Passersby show little interest in the busts, and the museum has

Illustration by Kyle Alan from a photo by Dean Majid

# Tanya Leighton



**Below, *Gratuité*, 2019,**  
oil on linen, 42 by 60  
inches.

**Bottom, *Flâneuse*, 2020,**  
oil on linen, 66 by 84  
inches.

footage of Jefferson turning the pages of the museum's information booklet against footage of the sculptures being ignored by other visitors, displayed on two stacked monitors. "It would be shocking to me if someone saw the entire 'Petit Palais' series and didn't understand what the issue is," he says, though he believes it's important to leave the paintings open to interpretation. "I don't want the work to come off as overtly political. I think there's a lot of nuance to it."

For an upcoming project commissioned by The Shed in New York, scheduled to open this summer, Jefferson is planning to create a group of new large-scale paintings dedicated to his friend Devra Freeland, a Brooklyn-based artist who died in a 2019 traffic accident while bicycling; the works will depict the makeshift street memorial created and maintained by Freeland's family and friends at the site of the accident as the tribute evolves over the course of a year. As with the busts at the Petit Palais, he is determined not to let it fade into the background. ●

put little effort into identifying them. Though the institution treats them with indifference, Jefferson considers the busts, thought to have been made in seventeenth-century Venice and donated by a collector in the 1940s, the most noteworthy works of art in the Petit Palais. "They stand out from everything in the museum and that's what made the treatment of them seem so strange to me," he says.

Jefferson sees himself as a documentarian rather than a commentator. "I obviously have my own position on how I feel about the work but I've also tried to approach it in a journalistic way," he says. "I always have a camera with me. I shoot a lot of film, and then get the rolls back and go through everything. It's nice to look through them and find things I hadn't noticed before." He treats these photographs as studies for the paintings, altering them in Photoshop to work out the ideal composition. Several paintings from the series depict visitors engaging in mundane tasks around the busts, based on scenes Jefferson witnessed at the museum. In *Tarifs Réduits* (2020), for example, we see attendees gathering around the ticket desk to pay, while *Flâneuse* (2020) shows a woman staring at her phone, ignoring the adjacent sculpture. The video installation *Petit Palais* (2019), which accompanied the paintings in the White Columns and Tanya Leighton exhibitions, juxtaposes

All artwork courtesy Tanya Leighton, Berlin

