



# DIEDRICK BRACKENS

everything I have ever touched

(...) Thanks for alleviating the pressure I was feeling Adam. This is the title I'd like to use for the exhibition. After further thought I believe this fits the direction the work is moving and addresses some of my concerns. I am taken with the sensual possibilities and the oblique reference to the process (touching all the threads).

Also, I am pleased with the impossible notion that the objects could depict/describe everything I have ever touched. So hopefully you find this as nonsensical, wild, liberating, sensual, intimately critical as I do.

Diedrick Brackens' *everything I have ever touched* at the Kestner Gesellschaft is the artist's first solo show in a European art institution. Composed of an existing body of work as well as of an extensive number of newly produced works, this exhibition is Brackens' self-reflexive endeavour where radical tenderness, accompanied by a critical intimacy, contributes to the ethics of storytelling and a lyrical representation of masculinity.



DIEDRICK BRACKENS, *american wedding*, 2019

Exploring the intersections of identity and sociopolitical issues, Diedrick Brackens (born 1989 in Mexia, Texas) creates intricate, handwoven tapestries and textile sculptures that reexamine allegory and narrative through material, autobiography, the broader themes of African American and queer identity, as well as American history and memory.

The material indicates a sensation of tactility as well as it connotes the political dimension: "Cotton is the primary material because it is a very easy material to manipulate, it takes color beautifully and its historical significance in the U.S. relative to enslavement, violence and subjugation has had lasting effects on black bodies," the artist explains. "I think of the process of hand-weaving cotton as a small way to pay tribute to those who came before me and worked with the material under very different circumstances." To create his vibrant, intricately-woven tapestries that investigate historical gaps, interlacing the present with his singular magical realist worldview, Brackens utilises both commercial dyes and atypical pigments such as wine, tea and bleach. Lipton black tea is the artist's favourite. "It's connected for me to being black, queer, and Southern. In Southern slang, 'tea' is another way to talk about gossip. 'Come over, what's the tea?' 'Spill the tea.'"

Brackens' is a highly intertextual and performative practice which incorporates various traditions and employs techniques from West African weaving (such as kente cloth), quilting from the American South and European tapestry-making (in-

cluding medieval European Unicorn tapestries) to create both abstract and figurative works. Recently, Brackens' discovery of figures like Hannah Ryggen—a Scandinavian textile artist most popular between the 1930s and 1960s—clued him in to the medium's potential to speak to now. Moreover, often depicting moments of male tenderness, Brackens culls from African and African American literature, poetry and folklore as source.

Some of the works on view in *everything I have ever touched* (such as *we inherit the labyrinth*, 2021 or *survival is a shrine, not the small space near the limit of life*, 2021) pull imagery from 19th-century Freedom Quilts — used as a communication tool by enslaved people traveling along the Underground Railroad. According to legend, a safe house along the Underground Road was often indicated by a quilt hanging from a clothesline or window sill. These quilts were embedded with a kind of code, so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next.

In Brackens' work, the nuanced visions of African American life and identity are reflected in the complicated histories of labor and migration. His collective mythology combines timeless narratives about emancipation and remediation through pattern, body, and the power of craft. Participating in rituals and fantasies of desire and kinship, Brackens' protagonists perform choreography of vulnerability and care; here the beauty and brutality are intertwined in the allegorical dance of cosmic proportions; here the intergenerational trauma is re-enacted in an almost shamanistic seance of empowerment and resilience, imbued with a fantastical spirit, and poignantly bridging past and present.

Diedrick Brackens recalls the art historian Kobena Mercer's understanding of magical realism which when applied by the Black people, it is an attempt to describe the world we live in. "We experience the magical in the modern", the artist comments. Hence his work - often times phantasmatical, highly poetic and melancholic tableaux of woven matter, featuring black silhouetted figures, inhabiting geometric color fields of an abstract background and engaged in moments of intense intimacy with themselves or often with an animal world, remain powerfully relevant and vivid, as well as historically significant. (ADAM BUDAK)

## everything I have ever touched

So many creative practitioners' works are conflated with their biographies; the work IS the artist and vice versa. Of course, in some cases, work and life go hand in hand; but this kind of reading leaves little room for deviation or a nuanced understanding of artmaking. What has given my artist-self permission to make a mess of this coupling is Audre Lorde's term *biomythography*. Coined to categorize her 1982

fictive biography wherein she combines history, biography, and myth. In my work, I become the needle, threading myth through my eye while passing my point through the fabric of multiple histories.

## black silhouette

The silhouette in my work is shadow and skin. To prick one's subconscious, to dance into a magical realist realm so that interiority is primary, is prized, I distill my figures down to form and shape. I am also making into a black arts tradition of artists like Aaron Douglas, Belkis Ayon, Kerry James Marshall, and Kara Walker, where black figuration drives the narrative, landscapes where Blackness is the center (...).

I want to know what happens when I insert myself in these stories. If I can tease out the strangeness and queerness and blackness that are already kind of inherent to them. (This approach is) a vehicle to talk about people who live lives like mine.

## poetry

Poetry and poets have helped me articulate a visual language I could not otherwise. The lyric form propels my imagination and aids in my formulation of the description of my objects, the worlds I create, and gestures like titles. It has been essential for me to dialogue with poetry as a form of resistance to a



DIEDRICK BRACKENS, *survival is a shrine, not the small space near the limit of life*, 2021

didactic mode of meaning making and as means to encourage intimate and open encounters with the work.

## queer subjectivity and storytelling

I embody a lot of identities that happen to be under threat in society and sometimes this means making work about things that happen to deal with death, pain, and danger, but I am simply telling stories that resonate with my experience like so many other artists, there is also joy and beauty—weaving is not created with a singular thread (...). I don't know what the world is like now for young queer people in the South, but I think that there was so much encoding in navigating space and trying to communicate with other queer folks and being sort of a person who is already marginalized through race (...). There were a lot of these codes and ways that I learned to move in the world and to stay safe, to find other folks to be in community with. That guided me to make work that then also became layered and symbolic (...). I want to be able to take these stories that are maybe familiar to a lot of folks and make them queer on some level, but also show how they might already have the capacity to be read in that way (...). I choose to sit at my loom and weave my stories.

Something that often returns in my work are these vestiges of Christianity. A lot of the work mines folklore and religious themes. As a queer person, these narratives that totally left me out, or [that] work actively to suppress or oppress the things I want to do or experience in life, made life complicated [for me] as a child and [as] an adult. Now that I am able to look at those things again through this new lens, I'm able to think about where to insert queerness, [to ask] where

Diedrick Brackens lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. He received a BFA from University of North Texas, Denton, TX and an MFA in textiles from California College of the Arts, San Francisco, CA. His recent solo shows include the Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, Craft Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, Oakville Galleries, Ontario, Canada, New Museum, New York, NY. He participated in numerous group exhibition, amongst them, "The Slips-tream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time", Brooklyn Museum, NY, 2021-2 "Made in the L.A., 2018", Hammer Museum, L.A., "Ear to the Ground: Earth and Element in Contemporary Art", New Orleans Museum of Art, 2019. He is the recipient of the Textile Society of America's Brandford/Elliott Award For Excellence in Fiber Art, 2018, the Studio Museum in Harlem's Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize, 2018 and the Marciano Artadia Award, 2019, Louis Tiffany Comfort Grant, 2019, US Artist Fellowship, 2021.



DIEDRICK BRACKENS, *the crawling stars' signal*, 2021

is queerness centered in these stories, and how can I then represent some version that people understand is complicated? [I'm] trying to transform those narratives all at the same time.

## weaving

The figurative images are constructed in a manner much like collage. I build an image by photographing models, sourcing images found on the internet and social media, scanning family photos, et cetera. Once the images are decided I make a composite drawing, which is then used to create a weaving (...). Weaving is where the invention is for me, where I do things on the fly. As much as you're acting on this machine, it's acting on you too. But there's so much room to coax out these emotive qualities and lines and gestures from these simple yarns (...). The weavings I make often ask questions about violence and seek to answer my own questions about what tenderness looks like. (...) Textile work is exciting audiences again because the field of makers has expanded. It is an expansive space where women, queer people, and Black and Brown folks have made huge contributions historically and presently. (...) I think if I had a personal license plate it would say dreamweaver...

## color

I love the alchemy of making color. I never use a recipe; I see myself as more of a chef than a chemist or scientist.

## cotton

I remember seeing the cotton on the landscape, driving down the highways, and hearing stories from both sides of my family about picking it. It is my great joy and duty to use this material to be able to make beautiful things, to honour this brutality by simply just engaging with it.

## towards the future

I am interested in taking away the possibility [of] or potential [for] violence. We can always exist in the moment before and after the good or bad thing. This idea of always looking towards the future, even in these moments of trying to recycle present-day and past stuff. I'm always crafting things that are hopeful, looking towards that ideal, but I don't even know what it looks like. (DIEDRICK BRACKENS)



DIEDRICK BRACKENS, *heavy lover*, 2022

Front side:  
DIEDRICK BRACKENS,  
*marrow becomes breath*, 2022  
cotton and acrylic yarn,  
fabric trim

Curator:  
ADAM BUDAK

Curatorial Assistant:  
ROBERT KNOKE

Back side:  
DIEDRICK BRACKENS,  
*american wedding*, 2019  
Cotton and acrylic yarn

Works cited:  
*Essex Hemphill, American Wedding in: Diedrick Brackens, darling divined*, ed. by Margot Norton, New Museum & Blanton 2021

DIEDRICK BRACKENS,  
*heavy lover*, 2022  
Cotton, acrylic, oak  
Courtesy Nerman Family Collection

Texts:  
ADAM BUDAK,  
DIEDRICK BRACKENS

DIEDRICK BRACKENS,  
*the crawling stars' signal*, 2021  
Cotton and acrylic yarn

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Jack Shainman Gallery

DIEDRICK BRACKENS,  
*survival is a shrine, not the small space near the limit of life*, 2021  
Cotton and acrylic yarn