



Jennifer Mack-Watkins: *Children of the Sun*
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 Brattleboro Museum & Art Center
 Downtown Brattleboro, Vermont

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Inspired by a first-of-its-kind, 1920s periodical for Black children, a new museum solo show examines complex histories of positive cultural representation of African Americans

*Southern-raised, New York-based printmaker Jennifer Mack-Watkins mounts her first museum solo show, comprising 14 varied-size works on paper that thematically respond to the short-lived, W.E.B. Du Bois-edited *The Brownies' Book: A Monthly Magazine for the Children of the Sun**

Additional influences include the legacy of African-American poet and oral historian Daisy Turner (who was born in 1883 Vermont to formerly enslaved parents, and whose life spanned 104 years) and Mack-Watkins' own constant search—previously as a child, and now as a parent to young kids—for toys and books that offer positive Black representation

Brattleboro, VT — Spring 2021 — The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center is pleased to present the first museum solo show of New York-based artist Jennifer Mack-Watkins (b. 1979, South Carolina; MFA Pratt 2009). The exhibition, *Children of the Sun*, takes its name and inspiration from a 1920-1921 monthly children's periodical, *The Brownies' Book: A Monthly Magazine for the Children of the Sun*, which is widely regarded in children's literature as the pioneering effort to feature positive, contemporary content and imagery of African-American culture. The exhibition will be accessible to international audiences by way of an interactive, virtual walk-through interface hosted on the Museum's website.



Artist portrait by Elizabeth Brooks. Artwork clockwise from top left: **Carter** (2020), silkscreen, 9 x 12" • **Faith** (2020), silkscreen, 17.5 x 20" • **Black Boy Hope I** (2021), color lithograph, 21.5 x 29" • **Black Boy Hope II** (2021), color lithograph, 21.5 x 29" • **Katherine** (2020), silkscreen, 9 x 12" • **Guion** (2020), silkscreen, 17.5 x 20"

Edited by NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Brownies' Book's* stated intention was to "dispel the grotesque stereotypes" of Africa, which Black children of the era were being fed to the same extent as

their white counterparts simply because no other media perspective was available. Other proclaimed goals of the 1920 periodical included “to make colored children realize that being ‘colored’ is a normal, beautiful thing” and “to inspire them to prepare for the definite occupations and duties with a broad spirit of sacrifice.” Reflecting on these layered constructs in her new exhibition, Mack-Watkins aims to further her ongoing investigation of “the beauty, importance, and complexity of positive representation of African-American children in literature, media, and pop culture.” She adds: “I am interested in using aesthetics as a form of resistance against the erasure and invisibility of African-American culture.”

A particular editorial focus of *The Brownies’ Book* was jovial documentation of the ongoing Harlem Renaissance, but Mack-Watkins was most struck by the inaugural January 1920 issue’s photographic inclusion of the NAACP-organized “Negro Silent Protest Parade” of 1917. Mack-Watkins describes this image as the catalyst for the exhibition due to the layers it held; when she first saw the photo of 10,000 African Americans of all ages marching down Fifth Avenue in New York, she thought it looked like a celebratory parade. “The children in the image were so beautifully dressed,” she remarks. Upon reading further, she learned that it was “the total opposite of a celebratory parade;” that they were protesting and mourning the loss of the innocent men, women, and children who fell victim to the East St. Louis race riot three weeks prior, among other race-based atrocities across the nation.

In addition to encapsulating the broad ethos and aesthetic of *The Brownies’ Book*, many of Mack-Watkins’ works (in this show and beyond) allude to specific historical events. For instance, the formal depiction of doll-like figures in silkscreens such as *Harriet* and *Langston* comes from an incident involving Daisy Turner (1883 – 1988). As an African-American child living in 1890s Vermont, Turner was instructed as part of a pageant to recite a poem, written by her white teacher, while holding a caricatured Black doll. She rebelled on stage at the last minute, asserting her self-worth with a spontaneous poem of her own. (A looped audio recording of Turner’s later-life recital of her 1891 on-stage poem will play in the exhibition gallery, interwoven with poetry written specifically for the show by feminist interdisciplinary artist Fayemi Shakur.)

Referencing the Daisy Turner story, Mack-Watkins accordingly uses the doll form as a narrative framework to celebrate Black voices, titling the works after the first names of various African Americans who have made notable contributions to society. Formally, in framing the doll figure below an arch, Mack-Watkins references the historical utilization of arches as signifiers of divine status. The silkscreen dolls float among cosmic backdrops in a symbolic gesture used to highlight the simultaneous vulnerability and perseverance of Black children in America.

“The exhibition is also about how a child’s innocence can be seen as an act of hope and resiliency. I hope to encourage children to enjoy childhood but also be aware of the injustices that lie ahead of them. I feel that it is important to preserve the act of play and imagination in order to get children through difficult times.”

Children of the Sun features two formally distinct bodies of work: a grouping of 12 varied-dimension silkscreens featuring the doll-like figures, and a pair of color lithographs. The color lithographs – *Black Boy Hope I* and *II* – respond to the wrongful execution of an innocent 14-year-old African-American boy, George Stinney, who was falsely accused of murder with very little evidence (his conviction was overturned in 2014, 70 years after he was killed).

“Historically, the Black body has continued to be mutilated, warranted, violated, attacked, targeted, protested, kidnapped, abused, and mocked in the media. The *Black Boy Hope* lithographs depict a bright future that we hope to secure for all African American children. Floating and visually unanchored to tangible realities, the subject has the freedom to be joyful, great, and can determine his own future without biases or stereotypes. The prints are made up of various visible layers that represent the everyday experiences of African Americans as victims but also as resilient survivors.”

On a personal level, Mack-Watkins cites her experience as a mother to two young children (at the time of the pandemic onset, her daughter was four years and her son was two months) as a foundational influence

on her recent work as a whole.

“I am always searching for positive ways that I can encourage my children to play and use their imaginations. Growing up in South Carolina, the available children’s stories and toys either failed to represent my community or represented it as ‘other’ or ‘less than.’ So, in present day, I see the value in finding toys that look like my daughter in order to build her self-confidence. I am always on a constant hunt to find books, coloring books, reading books, and dolls that have a positive representation of African-American children. *The Brownies’ Book* resonates with me so strongly because it was the first content of its kind to uplift, promote self-esteem, and educate about the contributions of African Americans. In preparation for this exhibition, I wanted to do the same, so I focused my research on the African-American experience as it pertains to oral history, memory, literature, childhood, and period fashion.”

Mack-Watkins, who holds a Master’s in Printmaking from Pratt, favors the printmaking medium to explore this subject matter because it allows her to engage with layered complexities in a way not afforded by other mediums; also uniquely to printmaking, “prints exist as multiples which enables them to become part of a larger dialogue,” explains the artist.

“For these works on paper, I chose the medium of printmaking because of my fascination with the process of layering elements, textures, and colors upon one another to create a uniform image through sequential stages. I believe in the beauty of printmaking and its history of being a source of communication. In my prints, I combine hand-drawn elements with digital methods to create narratives based on particular ideas. I use photographic imagery from vintage magazines, advertisements, newspapers, and literature as a way to counteract how media and popular culture flood society with harmful stereotypical perceptions of my culture.”

Children of the Sun is guest-curated by David Rios Ferreira (visual artist, independent curator, and Director of Public Programs and Curator of Contemporary Art at the Children’s Museum of Manhattan).

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ABOUT THE BRATTLEBORO MUSEUM & ART CENTER

The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center (BMAC) was founded in 1972 in the town’s historic train station, which remains intact today with its historical architectural features and original signage. BMAC is a non-collecting contemporary art museum focused on the work of living artists. An anchor of Southern Vermont’s vibrant cultural life, BMAC aims to bring internationally notable art, artists, and curators to Brattleboro, and to provide a prestigious showcase for the region’s own artistic riches.

The Museum contains six galleries. It rotates exhibitions roughly every 3–4 months, resulting in a total of 15–20 exhibitions per year. BMAC borrows the work it exhibits from collectors, galleries, other institutions, and often directly from the artists themselves.

In addition to presenting contemporary art exhibitions, BMAC offers 50–60 cultural and educational events each year. These include artist talks, workshops, performances, film screenings, studio tours, and an eclectic assortment of events aimed at serving families who do not necessarily see themselves as contemporary art museum-goers.

Rounding out BMAC’s activities is a rich array of education programs serving thousands of children of all ages from Windham County, Vermont, and the surrounding area. In collaboration with Brattleboro’s Early Education Services, BMAC sends professional artists into local Head Start classrooms to work with at-risk infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. For students in grades K-6, BMAC offers numerous opportunities to engage with art both at the Museum and at school. And for middle and high school students, BMAC administers the prestigious Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for the state of Vermont.