



Delano Dunn: Novelties
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Brattleboro Museum & Art Center
Downtown Brattleboro, Vermont

PRESS CONTACT
Molly Krause, krause co.
molly@molly.nyc
High-res images: molly.nyc/novelties

Delano Dunn's first solo museum show will feature two mixed-media series, one of which reconfigures racist *Uncle Remus* cartoons into new storybook arrangements, and the other of which addresses the trauma of appropriation through the narrative device of Dunn protecting his family gumbo recipe

The ten-work exhibition will be accessible to international audiences through a 3D, interactive walk-through on the Museum's website.

Brattleboro, VT — Summer 2021 — The Brattleboro Museum & Art Center is pleased to present *Novelties*, the first museum solo show of mixed-media artist Delano Dunn (b. 1978, Los Angeles). The exhibition consists of two distinct series, each of which contains five works. One series, *Paradise*, places stereotype-imbued animal cartoons from the problematic *Uncle Remus* books in dialogue with idyllically posed white women and children from a generic French picture book from the 1800s. Another series is *Roux*, named for the foundational ingredient of Creole cuisine. As a metaphor for the intergenerational trauma of cultural appropriation, each work in *Roux* shows ferocious animals working to protect a specific ingredient of the artist's sacred family gumbo recipe.



Detail of *Paradise: Winter's Vignette*, 2020 • *Untitled (Lard)*, 2020 •
Detail of *Paradise: Seascape (Tranquil Scene)*, 2020

In his practice overall, Dunn explores questions of racial identity and perception through painting, mixed-media, and collage. He draws heavily from his upbringing in South Central Los Angeles, sourcing inspiration from his own life as well as pop culture he grew up around in the 1980s and 1990s. The show's *Paradise* series is exclusively collage, while *Roux* also incorporates mixed-media components such as industrial roof tar. The conceptual thrust of both series in *Novelties* rests in the narrative framework enabled by the specific source material of each series' respective collage elements.

The collage elements of *Paradise* derive from three sources: *Uncle Remus* books; an 1800s French picture book of promenading white women and children; and a landscapes-themed 'how to paint' book from

1985, whose bucolic country scenes are diametric to Dunn's own perception of 'landscapes;' "I didn't grow up thinking about farm houses and things like that; I grew up thinking about how to avoid getting shot," he remarks. Dunn extracts and reconfigures the source material into new visual stories, which he describes as such:

"You have these depictions of idyllic-looking white women and families, arranged in a way that plays into the running historical theme of how it's forbidden for Black men to be with white women. And so I'm taking the *Uncle Remus* characters out of their already-problematic context and I'm putting them in a space where it looks like they're explicitly doing something wrong or forbidden. And then it's all in this wonderful, beautiful, idyllic scene; you have to look closer to see that it's the offensively caricatured Br'er Fox jumping back in awe, as if the whole composition is saying 'we've got to keep these Black men away from these white women.'" He continues:

"Among the five works in *Paradise*, in addition to seeing images of a Black family interacting with or being wowed by this beautiful image of a white woman, you see these characters like Br'er Fox ogling or being shocked. You see the Magic Negro character walking off into the forest with these children. So there is this exaggerated narrative of the imagery or the depiction of African Americans within literature and popular entertainment that existed for so many years. That has marginalized African Americans and magnified the historically traumatic racial divide."

The collage elements of the other series, *Roux*, come from the New York Public Library historical image database, pertaining to three main search themes: ferocious animals; animal attacks; and gumbo ingredients. The characters are configured in a narrative wherein the animals are fighting off white men who are trying to steal and appropriate Dunn's beloved family gumbo recipe—a tangible and highly personal piece of Dunn's South Louisiana Creole heritage that's been passed down since before his great-grandparents moved to Southern California during the Great Migration.

"Every time someone asks for my gumbo recipe, it's a sensitive point because I always say 'no.' It's a part of me, I don't want it stolen. I want to keep it. And that's kind of how that body of work came about," said Dunn. "To explain the series a bit poetically, the ingredients of our family's gumbo recipe are emerging from clouds of silver tar, hovering amidst rays of color and mirrors. Sentry beasts protect the culinary figures as men reach for them, thwarting their attempts to claim and appropriate the family's culture and joy of being together."

In alignment with Dunn's key practice element of formal experimentation, *Roux* contains a new-to-the-artist medium of industrial roof tar (silver aluminum), which the artist was attracted to for its reflective quality and challenging workability. His works had previously used shoe polish for a similar compositional purpose, which he had chosen not only for its formal characteristics but also because of the imbued social history of African Americans shining white men's shoes, and white men using shoe polish for blackface. But *Roux* felt like an appropriate departure from shoe polish because Dunn felt it didn't thematically fit, and he relished the opportunity for material experimentation with the reflective tar. "Socioeconomically, people use it to keep their utility bills down, but in a larger and metaphorical sense, it's protective."

"More than anything, my work is a commentary on how the African American experience isn't monolithic," Dunn said. "*Novelties* touches on two areas of intergenerational trauma for me: appropriation and

segregation, or otherness. *Paradise* is about the historically traumatic divide in interracial relations, and problematic depictions of Black people in popular culture. *Roux* is about the struggle to preserve Black domestic histories, and mine specifically. Like with gumbo, everyone has their own version of it. I don't speak to the masses; I speak to the individual experience."

Novelties is curated by Sarah Freeman, Exhibitions Manager at the Brattleboro Museum & Art Center. The exhibition will be accessible to international audiences by way of an interactive, high-resolution, virtual walk-through interface hosted on the Museum's website.

Dunn—who is Los Angeles-raised, New York-trained (BFA Pratt 2001; MFA SVA 2016), and Chicago-based—currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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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.