

## Genesis Tramaine

One of the most highly acclaimed artists of recent years, Genesis Tramaine (b. 1983) was invited to join FSA's residency program on the strengths—visual and spiritual—of her portraiture practice. She is a self-taught artist whose passions and skills evolved from a childhood practice of sketching in hymn books and bibles while attending church services. Tramaine is outspoken about her faith, often describing herself as a “devotional painter.” In her expressionistic portraits, she employs color, line, repetition, exaggeration, and multiple perspectives to depict subjects that inspire, and are inspired by, her Christian beliefs. Prayer and gospel hymns are an integral part of Tramaine's studio practice. Through them, she finds she is able to receive the images and instruction that guide her large-scale portraits. These depict Black faces in myriad ways that are intended to transcend race, gender, and class. When referencing biblical characters, Tramaine—by visually translating emotions such as fear, love, or judgment—elevates her portraits into models of perseverance, inspiration, fortitude, and encouragement. They become forms of praise that can uplift viewers and intensify spiritual connections.

Tramaine's FSA residency came on the heels of a recent exhibition in Dijon, France. The artist considered her work in Charleston as constituting something of a “ripple effect,” reflecting her aspirations both for her art's outward impact and continuing evolution. Tramaine pushed the boundaries of her practice, experimenting with media, substrates, techniques, forms, subjects, scale, and words. For the first time, she produced full portrait figures, as opposed to heads and busts. In a departure from the large canvases—up to eight feet in length—on which she typically paints, she worked on paper and small canvas boards. She explored the use of textiles and introduced local materials, such as indigo and Carolina Gold rice into her painting media, which has always specified special admixtures of substances—salt, rainwater, coffee, for instance—in addition to ineffable “materials” such as the Holy Spirit or Yeshua (Jesus). The selection on view in her studio, a fraction of the work she produced at FSA, indicates some of these new directions. They also reflect Tramaine's specific experiences in and of Charleston and the Lowcountry.

Prominent in her studio is the text across its walls, a bold extension into three-dimensional space of Tramaine's journaling as well as of the phrases that she usually paints upon the sides of her canvases. Here, the words convey prayers that sustained her studio efforts. They also contain statements relevant to Tramaine's ongoing reflection upon her Christian faith and identity. In writing “Jesus will be reborn as a little black girl” or “Jesus has already been reborn as a little black girl,” for instance, Tramaine asks pointed questions; Would racism blind those professing Christian values from recognizing Jesus if he appeared in his humility today? Amplifying the effects of the wall is the appearance of text on various artworks—on the verso of a painting stretcher, on textiles, and upon clothing. On the walls, Tramaine has also sketched places of worship, including Mother Emanuel AME Church, where she attended services.

The wall text is interspersed with several objects, either of personal significance or reflective of Tramaine’s experiences in Charleston. These include crosses fashioned of found twigs; a wooden grid that echoes forms within Tramaine’s visual vocabulary; a skirt that Tramaine wore to, and drew upon, while attending church in Charleston; vintage textiles, collected from friends and family-members, embroidered with the artist’s handwriting; sneakers that the artist wore during her residency, displayed as a testament to its completion; indigo-dyed textiles, including an American flag with white stripes appearing blue. Indigo has, in fact, been a steady feature of Tramaine’s residency experience. Both the color and the dye substance were deeply symbolic in African belief systems. Descendants of enslaved Africans who labored on indigo plantations in South Carolina continue to preserve these memories and the knowledge surrounding indigo production. For Tramaine, indigo brings forth memories of long-ago conversations and experiences with her elders. Indigo also inhabits her dreams.

Of the paintings on view, *Nana’s Brothers*, though unfinished, is significant. A nearly full-length double portrait of Tramaine’s uncles, it was inspired by Tramaine’s very presence in South Carolina, where her family has ancestral ties. A rare self-portrait of Tramaine depicts her as a child, while *King Tide* and *Boiled Peanuts* honor people who offered Genesis knowledge and a link to her distant past. These portraits are layered—through the deployment of line, color, and form—with a spiritual symbolism that references fathers, mothers, heaven, and earth.

### **About the artist:**

Genesis Tramaine was born in New York City in 1983 and currently lives and works in New Jersey. She earned her M.S from Pace University and B.S from Utica College of Syracuse University. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently in a solo exhibition, *Facing Giants*, at Le Consortium, Dijon, France. In 2023, Tramaine was the subject of the solo exhibition *Everything is Now* at the Center for Contemporary Art Vancouver (CICA), and was included in *The Echo of Picasso* at the Museo Picasso Malaga, Spain. In 2020 Tramaine was the featured Artist-in-Residence at the Rubell Museum, Miami, where she also exhibited in a solo show. Her work resides in prominent museum collections, including the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC; the Rubell Museum, Miami; the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC; and the Buffalo AKG Art Museum, NY.