



PROFILES

Patrick Eugène

Portraying
imagined
figures from his
diasporic
community

Words CASSIE PACKARD
Photography NOLIS ANDERSON

Patrick Eugène with his painting, *Reverie*, 2023.

Eschewing sitters or reference images, Haitian American artist Patrick Eugène paints portraits of people he's never seen. A quintet of ladies in their Sunday best—a riot of church crowns, pearl earrings, and lace collars—with their arms loosely draped around one another, one lifting a cigarette to her lips with studied elegance. A couple, her red gown seeping into his cream suit, moving like a single body through a russet expanse accented with potted plants. A woman with an impossibly long neck—a creator, we are told—wearing a dress the color of swimming pools, nestled in a safflower armchair's ample topography. These graceful, self-possessed subjects, all of whom are Black, exude a magnetic force. They may not exist in the flesh, but nonetheless elicit our investment in their interiority and curiosity about their stories, as if they were characters in a beautifully crafted novel whom we are prepared to follow to the very end.





“I want viewers to develop their own stories about these pieces,” Eugène tells me. “While my subjects aren’t people I know or have met, you could say we’re spiritually involved. Because they look related to one another and feel familiar to me, it’s almost as if I’m painting my relatives. I often have this experience of looking at the person who I’ve just painted and thinking, ‘You’re here! You made your way through the brush.’”

The closely watched artist, whose solo show *Solitude* opened at Mariane Ibrahim Gallery’s Paris location this February, came to painting later than most, at the age of 27. Born in New York to Haitian immigrant parents, Eugène grew up in Brooklyn and Long Island in a tight-knit community of Caribbean Americans, many of whom took pride in dressing impeccably and covered their walls with Caribbean art; these early aesthetic influences, he notes, inform

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In the studio, Eugène doesn’t make preparatory sketches or elaborate underdrawings. Instead, he focuses on accessing a headspace conducive to creative work, typically putting on music (his youngest child is tellingly named Miles) and meditating or praying for guidance. “I want to accept ancestral energies and try to keep that channel open,” he says. “It’s part of why I paint.” His fluid and intuitive process, an art of broad strokes, begins with putting a ground on the canvas. After limning the figures and their environs, he tries not to spend too much time reworking or revisiting what he’s done. He avoids making changes to the subjects’ faces in particular.

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his paintings today. During Occupy Wall Street, Eugène, then working as a financial planner, turned to drawing as a creative outlet. Encouraged by the positive feedback he received, he soon tried his hand at painting (first acrylic, then oil) and committed to an autodidact’s diet of museum visits, art books, and documentaries.

Eugène’s first Brooklyn solo show, held at BAF Gallery in 2016, featured spattered, mixed media abstractions that critiqued, and incorporated the material detritus of, gentrification in his East New York neighborhood, where slick new businesses were increasingly supplanting mom-and-pop shops. The pandemic lockdown prompted Eugène to relocate with his family to Atlanta, where he began to work in a figurative mode, branching out from (without ever really forsaking) the abstract paintings for which he was becoming known. “Abstraction set me free,” he says, recall-

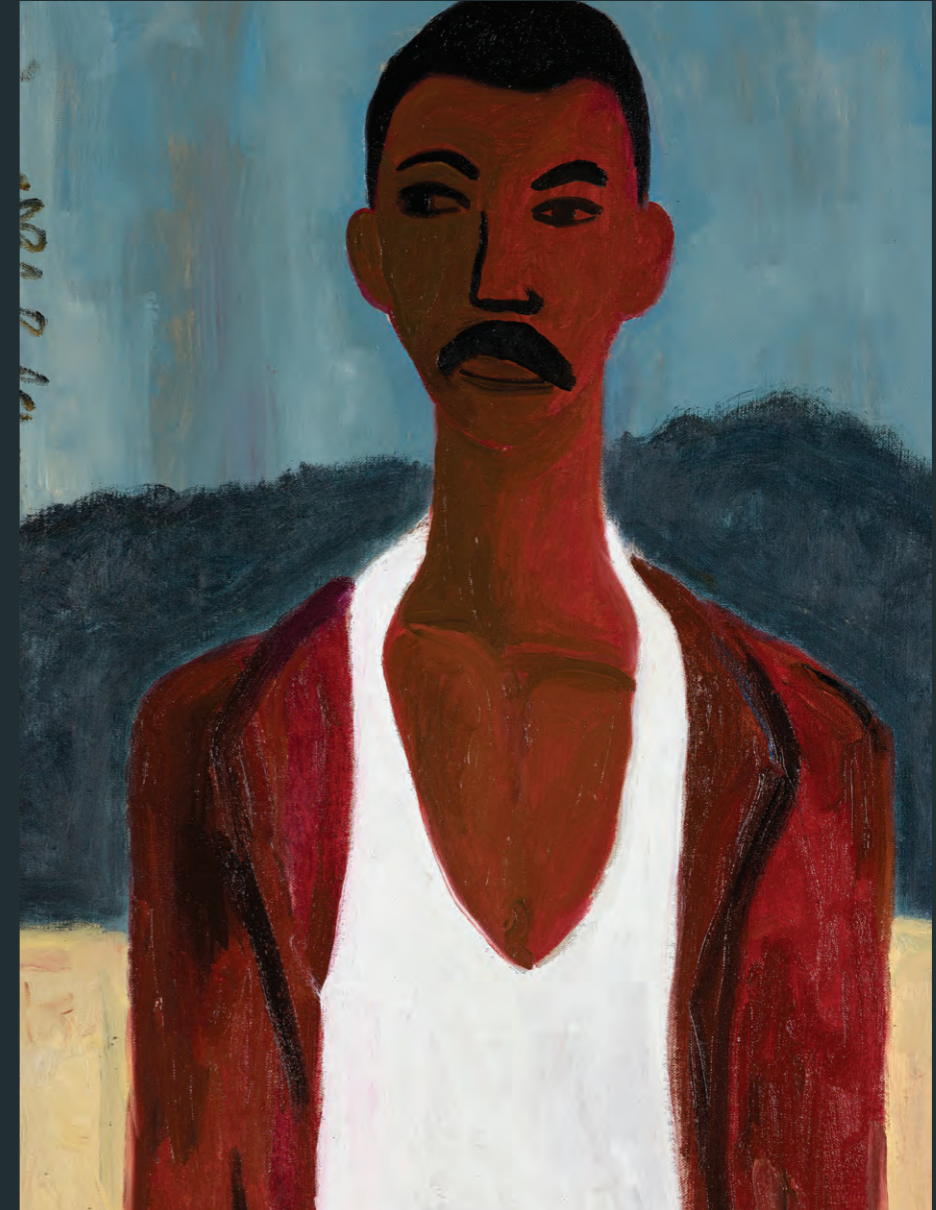
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Gallery 1957, a tastemaking gallery in Accra and London that focuses on art of the Global South and its diaspora, announced their representation of Eugène in 2021. For his first exhibition with the gallery that year—his figurative debut—the artist drew inspiration from the vibrant cultural milieus of the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude. The show comprised large-scale portraits of fictional Black artists, writers, and poets, depicted together in creative community or lost in solitary thought. The brush strokes were thick and loose; the facial features, simple and pared down, like gestures; the palette, a warm, inviting mix of deep reds, ochres, and velvety browns.

Last spring, Eugène also joined the buzzy roster of Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, which champions rising and established artists of the African diaspora. “There is something very special in the air,” the



Together on the Sofa, 2023 (Detail)



Antre, 2023 (Detail)



The family of characters inhabiting Eugène’s canvases entertain our readings but ultimately keep their own secrets.

artist remarked when the partnership was announced. While Eugène often looks to his art historical predecessors (he speaks glowingly of painters Norman Lewis, Alice Neel, and Horace Pippin), he is equally inspired by his contemporaries, including fellow gallery artists Amoako Boafo and Raphaël Barontini. Eugène’s inaugural show with the gallery, held at its Chicago location last year, addressed the experiences of migration that have shaped his family life (In addition to his parents, his wife also emigrated from Haiti). The exhibition’s title, *50 lbs*, alluded to common luggage weight limits on airlines as well as the figurative “weight” of migration, perhaps felt most keenly by those who have been forcibly displaced, are coming up against barriers to movement, or find themselves struggling to thrive in a new environment.

Eugène presented a shrine-like vitrine of familial ephemera; a pile of used suitcases, which doubled as a heap of stories; and a series of portraits of autofictional strangers clasping valises or settling into their new abodes. In one work titled *Antre* (2023), Haitian Creole for “Come inside,” a fellow wearing a low-cut shirt and a slim oxblood jacket stands in an open field with arboresque framing. In another piece, a group of men chat amid a multicolored jumble of baggage. “Despite being strangers in an unfamiliar place, they all experience a sense of belonging within each other’s company,” offered the artist’s explanatory text. From unofficial online forums where immigrants share knowledge and resources, to diasporic communities like the one Eugène grew up in, a sense of collectivity, shared struggle, and togetherness often arise from the otherwise alienating experience of being uprooted.

For his show with the gallery in Paris, the 15-painting *Solitude*, Eugène focused on the loneliness that he has witnessed in his family, in his community, and beyond. “When does a moment of solitude or introspection tip over into becoming unhealthy?” asks Eugène. “This question, which is at the heart of this show, has been on my mind and heart as we witness the ongoing effects of pandemic isolation, particularly among teenagers.”

He mentions that, among his family

and friends, individuals have sequestered themselves in their domestic sanctums, perhaps as a reprieve from the systemic and specific violence outside. “As a Black man in America, I am fed such negative, frightening news; for the men in my community, especially, perhaps it’s safer to just stay inside,” he remarks. “But just how much isolation is necessary? And what happens to your mind and spirit when you’re boxed into that safe haven, when you’re not out in the world with others? This isn’t a value judgment; I’m not saying that one way of living your life is better than another. But I do think it’s important to ask these questions.”

Eugène decamped to Chicago in order to make the paintings for the show in relative isolation. While his pieces are typically generously sized, for this suite of work he has adopted an intimate scale befitting domestic scenes. The vignettes—some of which are painted on oval canvases, peephole-style—portray people alone in the privacy of their bedrooms. A man in a bowler hat leans against a section of olive wall by a nightstand as the morning light from the window dismisses the night’s shadows; a woman, seated on a soft white expanse of duvet counterposed with hazy color, gazes beyond the frame at something we can’t see.

On one hand, the impassive expressions that characterize Eugène’s figures—in *Solitude* and elsewhere—invite and seem to accommodate a wealth of interpretations, allowing viewers to project pride, resilience, trepidation, hope, enervation, or other inner states onto them. On the other hand, such expressive inscrutability confers a degree of illegibility or impenetrability that calls to mind the “right to opacity,” championed by Caribbean writer and postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant, who argued for a politics of difference and alterity and against the dictates of transparency and assimilation. The family of characters inhabiting Eugène’s canvases entertain our readings but ultimately—crucially—keep their own secrets.

