

# Identity, Race, and Baltimore

(Tribute to Freddie Gray)

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Host: **Elia Alba**

**Jaishri Abichandani**

**Derrick Adams**

**Rehan Ansari\***

**Michael Paul Britto**

**Nicole Caruth\***

**Zachary Fabri**

**Shaun Leonardo**

**Saul Ostrow\***

**Clifford Owens**

**Sara Reisman\***

**Dread Scott**

**Elisabeth Smolarz\***

**Jaret Vadera**

**Juana Valdes**

**Cheryl Wing-Zi Wong\***

\* Guests that Elia did not photograph.

**Sara:** Tonight's conversation, as you know, will focus on identity, race, and Baltimore. The conversation might rest on the specifics of Baltimore or other incidents around the country, but it also might extend to broader discourse about race and identity politics, which is not really separable. Elia circulated an article beforehand, Jay Caspian Kang's *New York Times* article "Our Demand is Simple: Stop Killing Us." In that article, he reported one of DeRay Mckesson's tweets which is ... this is hard for me to read, so just bear with me, "Justice is not an abstract concept. Justice is a living Mike Brown. Justice is Tamir playing outside again. Justice is Darren Wilson in jail."

**Elia:** Police brutality has been happening for a long time. We know that. It's just coming out now because people are recording it. With the *Supper Club*, I know we have our differences, but I like to define our commonalities. We all, as artists of color—those of us that are—we're racialized.

**Derrick:** The attention on Baltimore is the combination of different things. It has to do with a sense of hopelessness from the younger generation. There's not really a lot of opportunity in the city. The city is not really about black opportunity at all. Growing up in Baltimore, I couldn't get a job until I got one through a family member. It's not a place where you can just get one based on your qualifications. Similar to a small town, jobs are based on who you know. And the people who usually

have jobs are normally not the black people. One of the things that sparked the protest is that the people of Baltimore are not scared. The mentality of the younger people, the spirit of Baltimore, is that even though they don't have a lot, they have an understanding of what they should have. That's what fueled the outrage. They realized that they weren't getting anything and also realized, once the cameras were on them, that they had this platform to talk about those things. It's crazy that New York is the place where I would get perspective; at the time I was growing up I felt more comfortable walking the streets of New York than in Baltimore. With the whole political structure and police in Baltimore, it's just understood that people were getting stopped on the corner, more so than in New York. New York has more integration, we have many types of people living in the same community. In Baltimore it's commonplace to stop random people on the street and take down their pants, go through their private area, strip search them on the street. As a teenager, you come to expect this; it's understood that this might happen to you for no reason at all. With New York's notorious stop-and-frisk policy, it turns out this is not uncommon. But growing up, they would do it to you while you were sitting on your front porch.

**Clifford:** It happened to me in Baltimore when I was thirteen, at Division and North Avenue. I was stopped and frisked before we called it stop-and-frisk. What's interesting in Baltimore is you're not supposed to become an artist. It's not the expectation. I think there is certainly a sense of, let me borrow a bit from Cornel West, a sense of hopelessness and lovelessness, a sense of nihilism. But growing up in the '70s ...

**Derrick:** ... It was beautiful.

**Clifford:** Everything seemed possible then; it's really quite amazing. It's phenomenal what the young people in Baltimore are doing because they don't give a fuck about white people. They're not afraid of white people, and I think that that terrifies white people. When black people are not afraid and they say, "Fuck you, you don't give a shit about me," I think it makes people very afraid.

**Saul:** It was interesting to me that the topic tonight included identity, race, and Baltimore, but it didn't include class. The issue of class in Baltimore, I know Baltimore a little bit, and I spent nine years in Cleveland, Ohio, where I experienced class and racism, and the racial divide. Can we talk about it in terms of class? At the very moment when class was going to be an issue, race was raised as the issue. When we were about to talk about income inequity and class inequity, all of a sudden it shifted back to race. We've seen that time after time, from the '20s, '30s, '50s, and so on.

**Derrick:** This idea of self-worth is problematic in a country based on a culture of who's more valid to earn, or significant enough to get a certain amount of money.

**Saul:** No. But I'm actually more interested in terms of identity.

**Derrick:** The idea of self-worth is important. Some people are OK with getting paid a certain amount of money because they are surviving on a day-to-day basis, versus other people who have been reared to think about buying a home. It has to start with the educational structure of society; that makes people desire a certain economic structure. If you're raised to be a trade worker, places like Baltimore and Detroit have schools where you can learn how to drive a bus. Then you can live perfectly fine in a neighborhood with a \$50,000 house. To me, that is not really a high achievement, but in a segregated place like Baltimore or Detroit, that's a big deal. When you start seeing what other people are making in those communities, then you start to think about race and the economy.

**Jaishri:** Class cannot be dissected from race because there are no people of color rich enough to have the types of systems that white supremacy does. There is no black upper class that can influence American society in the way that the white upper class does.

**Saul:** No, well, actually there is.

**Jaishri:** In terms of entertainment, we can talk about hip-hop, and we can talk about how black culture is consumed as opposed to blackness.

**Derrick:** To even get to that place where you would have a microphone to speak, you have to go through a bunch of different channels. You are not just getting there based on your own experience. Getting to speak from a place of authority is not done independently.

**Dread:** It's not just entertainment. Particularly in Baltimore, the DA and the mayor are black. The president of the United States is black. The reason Freddie Gray is dead is because he was black. But the particular section of the ruling class that is actually clamping down and saying, "These are the thugs," in response to the rebellion, were also black. This is a capitalist-imperialist society that is desperately worried about all of this upheaval. They don't have any solutions for poor people in general, particularly for black folk. The only reason we are having half of this conversation is because people rose up in Ferguson, and then they rose up in Baltimore. It's very inspiring, and that needs to be learned from, strengthened. You're talking about not fearing white people—there were young teenage kids throwing bricks at cops holding machine guns.

**Elisabeth:** You said the black people will stop being afraid of white people, and then that the kids were throwing stones at the cops. I apologize for asking so many questions, I'm a foreigner, and yes, I only know Baltimore from *The Wire*. So just to understand, what does it mean when you say, "They stopped being afraid of white people?"

**Rehan:** Can I just add a question? Because that's exactly what I wanted to say. I'm interested in this—to find out, as artists, what you're doing with fear. I'm an immigrant, I've been here twenty-five years, legally, but they've put me in deportation proceedings when crossing the border because I travel too much. That made me afraid. So, as artists, I would like to know how you deal with ...

**Clifford:** ... fear.

**Elisabeth:** What does that mean? For me, it's like the fear of white people. Is that what's happening?

**Sara:** Is it a broad response to white people or cops?

**Elisabeth:** Yeah, because my understanding was always that the system here varies. It's not always black people; sometimes it's Muslims or some other group—it shifts. When it's designed at a specific point in time, there's a group of people who are afraid of the police. But does that mean if they're afraid of white people in Baltimore, that's what's happening?

**Clifford:** I think a lot of young people equivocates whiteness with ...

**Derrick:** ... with oppression.

**Clifford:** With the cops.

**Elia:** But the officers in Baltimore were not ...

**Derrick:** The issue happening with black people and white people in Baltimore is based on the structure of the law, and it creates animosity between the black and white communities. If you go to Baltimore and just cross a couple of blocks, you'll see a farm-to-table café, and then you'll see this very secure police structure, and then you'll see other people living in a completely opposite way. What happens is that this structure, this police structure, creates tension.

**Saul:** The powers that be, whatever they may be, have us in a hamster cage in which we are on a regular cycle—historically every twenty-five or thirty years. We advance this much, then they take it away from us, so we have to fight for the same territory all over again.

**Zachary:** Race has always been the Frankenstein of this nation, and also the art world.

**Derrick:** We're talking about a psychology that is so ingrained in this country. When we talk about fear of white people, it's not fear, it's a terror—and a respect—of white people, which is sad.

**Shaun:** It's much easier to have the conversation, or it's easier to not have the conversation when you isolate the issue as a black problem. That is what we're seeing in the media, across the board, and in white communities present in Baltimore. The complacency, negligence, and refusal to be aware of your contribution to the issue is exactly

why you're getting the fucking chair thrown through your window.

**Michael:** Knowledge is power? Was that an after-school special, *Schoolhouse Rock!*?

**Derrick:** It stems from a structure that's put in place that automatically triggers a response from a person who doesn't have the same privilege feeling animosity toward a person who has the same credentials that they have, living the way they want to live. Knowing that, regardless of how much you obtain in life, you still have to worry about being arrested.

**Michael:** It's about people's perception of who you are. Once, I was in Chelsea going to galleries, and I was followed up and down the street by undercover cops for about five blocks. I didn't even know they were following me, and at one point they finally stopped me, and I said, "Why are you stopping me?" He said, "Because you fit the description." I said, "What's the description?" They got mad that I asked that question. He said, "You were going in and out of the galleries too fast." I said, "Are you kidding me? I didn't like what was in the gallery, so I'm being held accountable because I didn't like what I saw?" Then he said, "So what are you doing down here?" I said, "Looking at art, I'm an artist." He said, "Yeah, right." And, get this, he dumped my bag on the floor and dropped my camera. I couldn't shake that feeling of being upset for months. I kept thinking, "How dare they do this to me?" The crazy thing is, I still want to know what the description is. What were you following me for?

**Juana:** The problem is class and race, so why does race dominate? It's because you're confronted with this situation systematically the moment you get up in the morning. When you go anywhere, when you do anything, you are being pushed back, you are being denied, you are being classified. It's not just being afraid of the white men, it's being afraid of the system of white power that controls everything.

**Elia:** Sometimes Latinos don't want to see that they're being racialized.

**Juana:** Down in Miami, they're not even Latino. This divide between class and race and money, having and not having, is getting worse. I think that's what's happening in Ferguson.

**Saul:** Every division that can be raised ...

**Elia:** The division that you're not black enough. I've been told, "You're not black enough," but if I don't own my blackness, then, "You're denying your race," and that's weird. It is schizophrenic. It's all part of a system that is trying to keep people separated. It's done on purpose.

**Derrick:** We are, now more than ever, at the height of visual culture. There's less reading and more visual symbols, icons, and iconography that relate to representation. So, the messenger is as relevant as the message.

**Jaret:** Everything seems to be about race here.

**Derrick:** Every art object made by every artist—whether they are black or not—is about identity.

**Jaishri:** Let's talk about the Guerrilla Girls doing their shit for thirty years, how they've been completely co-opted by those systems that they critique, and no change has been made. We're talking about the future, so let's talk about strategy. There are a few that we all employ, and some of those punch holes in problematic systems to make space for us. Other strategies build systems that counteract white supremacy. The problem is, when we punch holes into those larger systems, we ourselves are co-opted into those systems. When we work to build structures that are parallel, they are made irrelevant, or the individuals within those structures are made irrelevant.

**Jaret:** Or they are ghettoized.

**Saul:** If they are made relevant, then the structure disappears.

**Zachary:** We have to hold true to our relevance.

**Jaishri:** Where do we build a space of alliance, where all of us "others" can come together and impact public policy? Forget about the institutions that we work within. Sure, we have a certain amount of institutional

power, but how do we leverage more than just institutional power? How do we leverage equality on the level of public policy? Because we're not going to get anywhere until we can make those types of interventions.

**Dread:** People have been trying to get a place at this rotten table for too fucking long. It was founded on slavery and genocide and is based on exploitation and oppression. I don't want a spot at that table; I want to overthrow that table. I want people to be free of that dynamic. Too many of us are locked within the framework of trying to figure out how to make this system work more effectively, not be so brutal, and work for us. What we need to come to grips with is that this is a horror. There are kids being blown to bits in Pakistan by drones flown by kids in Colorado. I could go down the list of black and Latino kids shot by cops. It is a horrible thing that I can sit here and rattle off thirty or forty names without looking at a fucking book. This is a horror. Why are we trying to figure out how to make this shit work? We need to actually figure out how we make a revolution. How can we actually get rid of this?

**Jaret:** I don't think there has to be a complete overthrow for there to be a revolution.

**Shaun:** It's no accident that an institution like the New Museum is now hiring a social justice community [outreach person]. It is no accident that numerous institutions now have community engagement as a position.

**Clifford:** The Friends of Education at MoMA are really concerned with black middle-class values, and when we think about black art, black art is driven by, and an extension of, black middle-class values. So, the Friends of Education, as important as they are, disrupt the kind of critical intellectual engagement that you look for. They are there to satiate and satisfy.

**Derrick:** We're in conflict right now, as academic people of color, because we feel—like most people who go through the academic system—that we fill a slot. My work is about race like a white artist's work is about race. Race is an ingredient of my work; my work is not just about being black. I'm already black, so I don't think that

I have to say, from a black perspective, "I'm black." There are a lot of things that are being stifled because of that structure of looking at the work.

**Saul:** What we're doing here is dangerous.

**Elia:** I know it is.

**Sara:** Why is it dangerous?

**Saul:** The exchange of ideas, the building of community, the exchange of experience is always dangerous because it means people are not isolated, people are not on their own, they're not out there by themselves. The problem is going back to Baltimore and the riots. If we can call them riots ...

**Juana:** They are riots.

**Saul:** They're not organized. They're not cohesive. They're not a collective. They're just an act of frustration, and what happens at this table is not an act of frustration.

**Clifford:** I don't think what happened in Baltimore was an act of frustration.

**Saul:** The question is, what are the organizations to come out of that, and where do those organizations take the community? If there's no organization, and no leadership develops, it's just an act of frustration. It's exactly as it's portrayed on TV.

**Clifford:** Actually, what happened in Baltimore during the riots is volunteerism went through the roof. Particularly for young people, for groups like the Boys & Girls Clubs. Positive things have happened. Don't be so cynical. Black people love each other. We want them to change. Volunteerism always turns up. The question is where's the leadership?

**Dread:** Coming back to the article that was circulated, our demands are simple, "Stop killing us." It's actually simple. They were saying, "We want more black cops, we want body cameras. We need to create a movement that stops the police from killing us. We don't want to bury any more children." Rebellions are powerful in and of themselves. The organization coming out of this is important because we actually don't want to be having this conversation thirty or fifty years from now, saying, "I remember when

there was an Eric Garner or Kimani Gray," you know? Organization is important, organization works.

**Derrick:** There are artists who don't consider themselves political. Everything that deals with representation, even the conceptual representation of the political endeavor of artists of color, can be a way to bring those things to the conversation. You can take every opportunity possible to talk about the injustice that is happening. You have a floor. You can set the tone for any conversation you want to have. You need every opportunity to make people aware of what's going on. It doesn't have to be a hard sell. It has to do with letting them know it's what you're thinking, where you are, that you're not just a person making stuff in your studio.

**Shaun:** Going back to the other question, in regards to my self-defense piece. That was a tangible skill that I could impart to people, but there is also a very real impact with white people having to engage in that performance, because you can't understand that experience from a repeat video. You have to experience it in real time. If you choose to participate and feel what it's like to be put in a choke hold—and that's not part of your daily experience—for a moment I can make it part of your experience. All of sudden, just maybe, the next time you watch that video, you internalize it. It complicates the conversation. That's the one thing that we can do: complicate the conversation.

**Jaret:** One thing we haven't talked about is pain. Earlier, Shaun and I were talking about what has been happening over the last few months—watching clips on YouTube, doing research, digging deeper, trying to figure out what is going on. It is painful. It is traumatizing. But we can also turn our pain into empathy and use it as our power of being an artist to bridge the gaps, to build solidarity. Giving people the tools to protect themselves, like Shaun does, or the space to express their pain so they can heal is important work. Especially coming from a man of color engaging with younger men of color. Those are things that we can do. When people are killing, basically killing people who look like you, and you don't see justice anywhere because you can feel like your voice means nothing. I'm sure many people at this table have experienced racism. You can't always escape somebody else's perception. When they see

you in a certain way, they lock you in, and anything you do is gonna fuck you even further. Racism is entrenched in their power structures. My heart is breaking. The pain can calcify, and it makes it hard for us to connect in this country but also with other people in similar situations around the world. It can be destructive, but it can also be generative.

**Jaishri:** We keep talking about the problematics of the culture in which we live, but we also know we have all read works by thinkers like Cornel West and bell hooks. What I keep coming back to is "Loving Blackness as Political Resistance." It's not just the title of a message. Investing in them, investing in institutions and groups, so that we're building a more equitable society together.

**Clifford:** There has been, I think, a noticeable shift from the community to the individual within the black community. Certainly, we see this in the art world, where ...

**Elia:** It's not just the black community.

**Clifford:** In the art world in 1990, we had groups like Pomo Afro Homos—they were working in San Francisco with Marlon Riggs. Those political black art collectives from the '80s and '90s are no longer present. It's really about the culture of the individual artist. All these people become industries of one and presume to speak for our community, but in fact are speaking on their own behalf. It's about a choice. How will people choose to sacrifice? What people choose as a career in life is enormous. I really think of us more as intellectuals than artists. We make choices.

**Jaishri:** If you want to confront capitalism, then you can't stake your happiness on how well you do.

**Elia:** The truth is we're artists. We went to school, we want to do our work, we want our work to sell. We want people to acknowledge us. And the truth is, as art, our work is on the high end of the commodity scale.

**Saul:** No. Actually, as artists we're really petit bourgeois. Artist industry.

**Shaun:** I'm thinking about the people around this room and what the topic was. We're alive. OK? This is a

document that will potentially survive for many, many years. And I would like to propose that as a contribution to that document, we each say the name of a young brother or sister who has died.

**Clifford:** Oh, yes.

**Shaun:** I would like to start, and because he's the first thing that rattled my world, Sean Bell.

**Elia:** Amadou Diallo.

**Derrick:** Tamir Rice.

**Clifford:** My cousin, Patrick Johnson.

**Zachary:** Samuel Cobbs from a neighborhood of mine.

**Jaishri:** I'm going to say Jyoti Singh Pandey, who was killed in Delhi, 2012

**Michael:** Emmett Till.

**Jaishri:** That triggered the hell out of millions of people around the world.

**Dread:** Nicholas Heyward Jr.

**Juana:** I'm going to go back to Florida, Trayvon Martin.

**Rehan:** A friend of mine, a journalist in Karachi, Sunny [Sami Razvi].

**Jaret:** My cousin, Peter.

**Shaun:** My cousin, Junior.

**Elia:** My childhood friend, Miguel, and I'm going to say Eric Garner and Mike Brown.

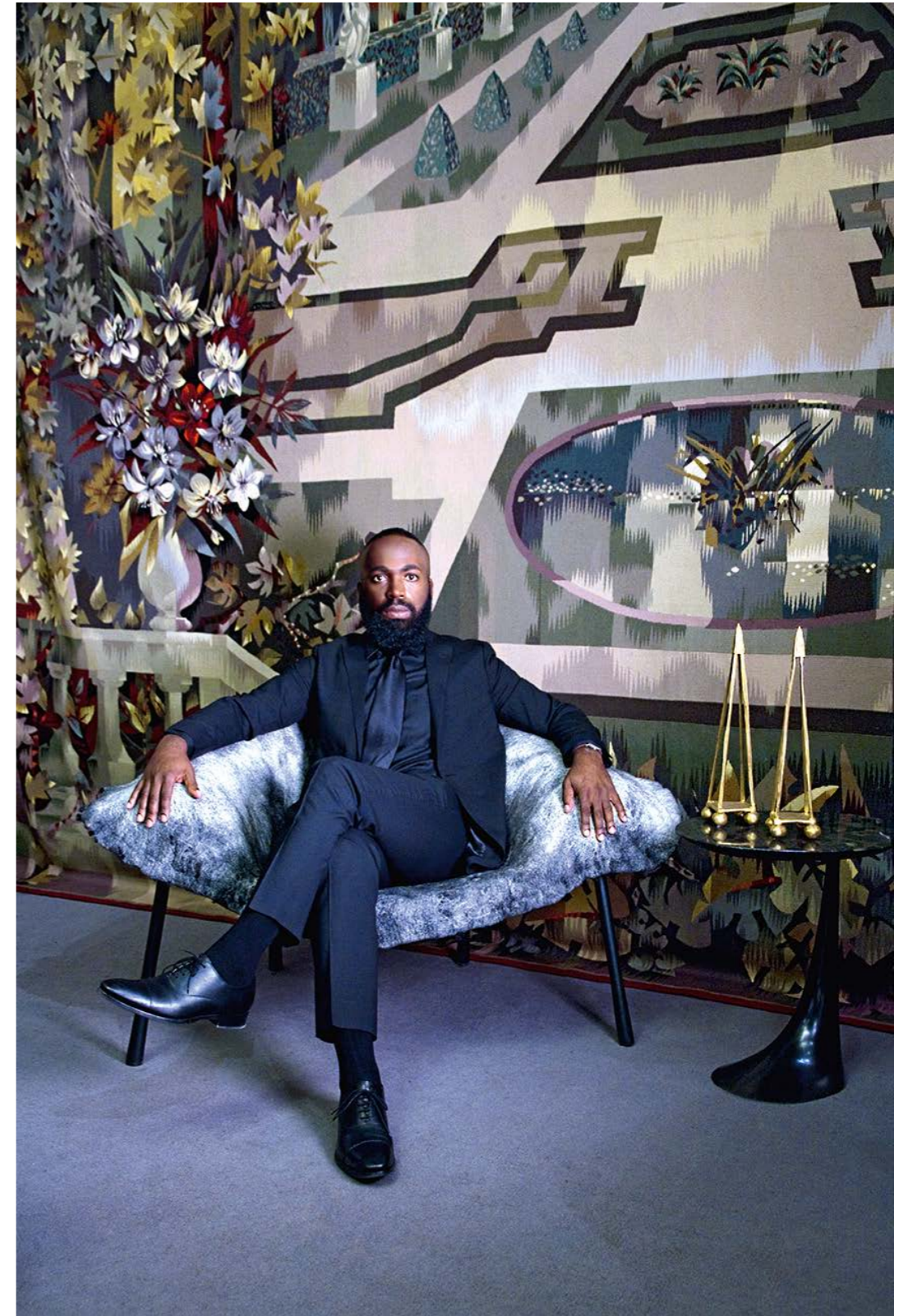
**Clifford:** My cousin Gerald who's in prison right now. My nephew.

**Saul:** I'm talking about an old friend of mine, Jimmy Hall. Heroin death. Just as bad.

**Clifford:** Absolutely.

**Elia:** Thank you, everybody.

**Dread:** As much as we can remember the dead, I actually want to focus on the living. I think it's vitally important to remember those who have died. A very popular poster in Baltimore has been "Stop Murder by Police." It has the faces and names of many people killed, and one of the youths who were throwing bricks actually had one of these posters, and knelt down in front of the cops, almost like he was holding a cross to a vampire. People were not just throwing bricks. We should recognize that there are people all over the country and all over the world, including a lot of young people, who are struggling mightily, not just in the art world but elsewhere, really trying to radically transform this world. We should look for change. We at this table are not isolated from each other, and we are also not isolated from the broader community. It's like my kid, he's been arrested. It only made him stronger in his determination that he was fighting for justice. I will leave it at that.



*The Chairman of the Board (Derrick Adams), 2015*

Archival pigment print. Photographed at Maison Gerard, French Art Deco antique dealers, West Village, NY.