

ON THE COVER

Children With No Name by Idris Habib

Portions of the following are based on an interview with the artist on April 28, 2022.

The journal's cover image for July–August was created by a Ghanaian American painter who was born in Accra and emigrated to the United States as a teenager with his family. He has been working as an artist for the last 15 years, exhibiting in the New York City area as well as in California and Florida. Idris Habib recently relocated to a small town near Amsterdam in the Netherlands where he cherishes the peace and quiet and continues to develop his art.

Children With No Name is the kind of title that suggests alienation and anonymity. But the picture has a very specific and geographic origin. Habib was visiting Ghana, the land of his birth and childhood years. Like many African countries, it has a young population and cities filled with children. Habib, who describes himself as a “people watcher,” noticed a row of boys waiting at a barbershop for their obligatory haircuts. He also noticed how photogenic they were as people came and took their pictures, apparently a common practice. The photos would be blown up into posters for sale locally and abroad. Habib wondered if consent had been given and whether anyone ever asked the boys' names. Probably not. No one knew or bothered to learn, who they were, these children with no names. He was moved to create an image, combining features of their faces into a trilogy to represent them all. The boys were painted looking directly out at us to provoke a response and, perhaps, a connection. To Habib, they were not just attractive pictures to be reproduced and commercialized. They were young people who wanted to be acknowledged and engaged. He superimposed their faces over a flower because he hoped that they too would blossom and add their beauty to the world.

Habib was pulled to drawing and painting early in life, but attitudes in Ghana were not conducive to choosing an artistic career. Art was regarded as a hobby at best, not a serious occupational option, certainly not suitable for the eldest son in a traditional family. He chafed against expectations to pursue a profession like medicine, law, or pharmacy. Nor did this pressure remit following emigration to the United States.

He attended Long Island University and City College but felt constrained to study business-related subjects. Nonetheless, he stayed true to art-making as his life passion. At the same time, he decided to hide his artistic activity from family members, especially his parents. Even today, at the age of 45, Habib has not disclosed his successful career as an artist.

Habib is completely self-taught. He once enrolled in an art course at Long Island University but dropped it because he “was not good at taking direction.” Accordingly, he learned different media and techniques on his own, beginning with pastels and moving on to acrylics. He enjoys experimentation and dislikes being “boxed in” artistically or in other ways. For example, instead of applying pigments to canvas or a panel, he has painted on vinyl records and mixes different materials including fabric into his pictures.

Coming of age in the Bronx during the late 1990s, Habib was strongly influenced by the work of another New Yorker, Jean Michel Basquiat, tragically dead at 27 due to a drug overdose. He also admired greatly the work of Barkley Hendricks. The motivation to place Black people and Black experience front and center in his painterly vision grew and was reinforced by these artists but also by personal experience. Habib recalls a preference for dating light-skinned women in his own peer group and the relative scarcity of attractive images of Black people in the arts. One day his very dark-skinned cousin challenged him to paint her and those who looked like her because they “needed love too.”

All along, Habib has been fascinated by the human face, its form and structure, seen from different perspectives, and with the expressive possibilities of the eyes as a particular focus. Walking the streets of New York, he observed that people kept their gaze directed to the ground and away from each other. He felt it was a way of avoiding connection, something he seeks to promote in his painting. All of these intentions, values, and experiences are manifest in this month's cover selection.

 R. Walter Heinrichs
Art Co-Editor