

YOSSI MILO

KEVIN CLAIBORNE



Kevin Claiborne (American, b. 1989) creates images and installations focusing on the intersections of identity, social environment, and mental health within the Black American experience. By utilizing history as a lens to comprehend the present, he seeks to bridge the gaps within his own family history and explore the missing information that separates his ancestral roots from his current existence.

Included in the show is *Throne* (2022), a sculpture crafted by Claiborne involving the unconventional use of stolen NYPD barricades, transformed into a BDSM torture device. The artist recognizes BDSM as a political act, emphasizing the significance of Black individuals who reclaim their agency over their bodies. By covering the barricades in a thin layer of Shea butter, a centuries-old African ingredient, Claiborne juxtaposes elements of power, control, and tenderness. This juxtaposition serves as a catalyst for the viewer to confront preconceived notions surrounding

authority, pain, pleasure, and the ways in which marginalized communities assert agency over their experiences and identities.

Kevin Claiborne has mounted solo exhibitions at Public Service, Stockholm, Sweden; Sean Horton, New York, NY; OSMOS, New York, NY; and Sobering Galerie, Paris, France, among others. Claiborne has participated in group exhibitions, including at Phillips, New York, NY; the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY; the UCLA New Wight Biennial, Los Angeles, CA; and Cultural D.C., Washington, D.C. Works by Claiborne are in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum, Philadelphia, PA. The artist was the 2022 artist in residence at OSMOS Station, Stamford, NY; and a finalist for the 2020 Next Step Award from the Aperture Foundation as well as for Not a Monolith by Meta Open Arts in 2021. Claiborne holds a BS in Mathematics from North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC, an MS in Higher Education Administration from Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, and an MFA from Columbia University in New York, NY. The artist was born in Camp Springs, MD, and lives and works in New York, NY.

Conversations with Artists in Art Getting Art: Kevin Claiborne II '21

By Audrey Deng
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Upon first glance, [Kevin Claiborne II](#) 's '21 visual work feels finite. Part of this feeling is due to the fact that most of his work is in black and white: his photography, his sculptures, his portraits—black and white is an easy contrast. But much can be done when color is removed. For one, in Claiborne's work, the removal of conventional colors magnifies the absence. How does absence function as a tool in art? For example, in two games where colors matter—in a Rubik's Cube, in chess—Claiborne's removal of colors by painting over the cube and chess set in black does not simplify the game. Rather it complicates it, and infuriatingly so. The two objects ([Sculpture?](#)) transform into useless objects capable only of empty gestures. This is a metaphor, says Claiborne, for the futility of a racially "color-blind" perspective.

Kevin Claiborne II is a first-year graduate student at Columbia University's School of the Arts. In this conversation, we talk about math, art backgrounds, and voids.

Could you just state your name and concentration for me?

Kevin Claiborne II: I am Kevin Claiborne, I'm a first-year master's student at Columbia University, and I came in under photography.

I see. You say "came in." Does this imply you're doing something else now? Do most students "come in" under some concentration and then move on to something new?

KC: I was accepted by the photo concentration. There are four of us, total. And the portfolio I submitted was my photography portfolio. But I also use painting, poetry, and recently I've been getting into sculpture. Or rather, just working with objects.

Are you veering away from photography? Are you working with photography in a different way now?

KC: I'm still working with photography, but while I'm in this program I'm trying to experiment with other mediums, to challenge myself and find other ways of communicating.

What are you trying to communicate? What values do you have in your art?

KC: I think a lot of the art I create, one: I'm creating it for myself, and I view it both as a weapon and as armor. I'm trying to communicate things I'm concerned about regarding race, mental health, identity, and how those things intersect with one's environment and social conditioning. So, that's the project.

So initially you felt that photography was the best way to communicate these concerns?

KC: I think photography is an interesting medium to use to share information. Images can say a lot more than words, but they can also be interpreted in many ways based on context and whatever the viewer has in mind and whatever is going on in society while the images are being viewed. I think photography is an interesting tool that plays with perspective and time. It's a time-based medium and I'm interested in not only social issues but how social issues are talked about and how they shift and manifest over time. Photography is a play on that. Film photography in particular, because it slows me down, physically, and it's a very hands-on process.

Not like iPhones and stuff.

KC: iPhones are nice, but sometimes, being able to shoot higher quantities in a less amount of time affects my quality. That's not true for everyone, but for me, I end up shooting differently when I use my digital cameras. So sometimes I'll have experiments where I'll shoot something only with a phone, or I'll see what I come up with using a digital camera, or on film, and it's usually a different perspective each time, because I'm using a different medium, using a different tool. I think every tool has a use. Like a best use.

What you said earlier about photography as a weapon and as armor—that reminds me of something Susan Sontag wrote. She wrote On Photography—and I believe she likened cameras to guns in the way both are tools used to immortalize—take life away—from people.

KC: I've heard of that, yeah. I think some people look at photography as a way of capturing moments, capturing people. It reminds them of death because of the sort of—taking a photograph is essentially taking a moment out of a moment, and it brings to mind sort of the temporary nature of everything, including people's lives. That's probably what they think about it.

What do you think about it?

KC: Well, some of the work I've been doing recently is about death, and I think I see why people can think that. This picture, for example.

**Who's that in the photos lying on the ground?
(Image right)**

KC: That's me. So recently I did a series on this—I've been thinking about my own inevitable death, and what it would look like, where it would happen, how it would occur. And if it happened in a public setting, in a city. What would the situation be? How would the body be positioned and perceived and avoided? That's a self-portrait series. It also leaves out a lot of information, so my skin color, hair—they're not shown. The narrative isn't immediately identifiable, but people can put their own stories onto the image. Some of them are half cropped away to give this "looking away" feel. There's also a performative aspect to me doing this sort of rehearsal or reenactment of my own death.



Was this easy to shoot?

KC: Trick question. Technically it's easy. Mentally, maybe not.

What's the name of this series?

KC: It's untitled, but it has a subtitle I'm working with. And it's [A Void](#). It's a play on the phonetics between the word "avoid" and "void." And there are many definitions for what a void is. A hollow space, something missing, or some type of absence. Or even in cards, a void is when the cards you are dealt are missing a certain suit. For instance, if you're dealt a pack of cards and you don't have spades. That is called a void.

Void. A void. It's also the title of a French novel by George Perec in which he doesn't use the letter "e."

KC: And it's been translated into so many other languages, and other people try to continue to not use a letter.

So now you're working on a series of photographs in which you are dead. That's quite sad.

KC: It is kind of sad. I mean, it can bring up discussions about police brutality, the way the Black body has been treated in society, particularly in urban settings. Themes of depression and loneliness and abandonment. Those were all things I was thinking about when I shot this.

Who you are? Who are you?

KC: What a curious question.

And it will be curious to me how you answer.

KC: I think I'm a helper. I like to consider myself a helper, and a thinker, and a doer. Who am I? Such a deep question.

I've thought about it a lot though, especially when I'm doing work related to death, and thinking about legacy. Who is anyone? How are people remembered? You remember impact. You remember what they did. Usually those two things are the measurements of who people are. So with me, I don't know.

Because you described yourself as a helper when I asked you who you were—now I'm going to ask you a question about yourself where I thought you would answer first: where were you born?

KC: Andrews Air Force Base. It's in Maryland, near D.C.

How did you like that place?

KC: Maryland is nice. D.C. is nice. That's where home is.

Is it still home?

KC: No. My mom lives in Maryland, my dad lives in D.C. I went to a HBCU in North Carolina, North Carolina Central State University, for undergrad, and I studied math. And I worked at college as a diversity coordinator for a while. I went to graduate school at Syracuse University and got a master's in higher education administration. I also worked in California for a bit as well at UC Santa Barbara as an adviser for student leadership programs.

It seems you were pretty involved with student life.

KC: Yeah, I like working with college students a lot. After working as a diversity coordinator, it got me interested in working more with students about identity development and professional development. I'm still interested in that. Working with college students of all ages and all backgrounds was something I found fascinating because no two days of work were the same. I liked the unpredictability of working with people who are studying and also learning themselves.

Are you good at math?

KC: Sometimes. It's hard. But I find it interesting. This book is also interesting, *The Mathematics of Art*. I'm interested in patterns, particularly in people and in nature. And when you are able to identify patterns you can understand things a little bit easier. I'm also interested in sociology as

well, and how people sort of discover themselves and change over time. A lot of the work I do is related to time and also narrative and how historical narratives are changed over time depending on when it's being told, and who's listening. Some of the -isms, particularly racism, I think about how they manifest differently over time, and the ideologies people have over time. Like this chess set I have painted, I was thinking whether white has an advantage by going first in chess. And it does. And at higher levels of chess play, the advantage increases. But then I started to think that a colorblind ideology in regards to race is something that makes sense. Like people who say "I don't see color" think that absolves them of any racism. How foolish that is.

I made this chess set [image to the right] to visualize that the colorblind sort of thought process doesn't make sense. Particularly in a game as complex as chess, how confusing it gets when it's all black. You forget whose side you're on, and sides, duality, disappears completely. And mathematically, chess is one of those few games that is yet to be solved. Like you can solve a Rubik's Cube. You can solve checkers by forcing a draw. But the number of combinations in a potential chess match is half the number of atoms in the universe. So to play this out with computers, to play out all the possibilities, would take so long. I think about how some of our most complex issues in society, the factors involved in solving them are people and time. So like, if you wanted to get rid of racism, how much time would that require? And would it be possible to get rid of racism if people are the problem?



Nothing frustrates me more than a person who insists they don't see color.

KC: It's frustrating. But it's also well-intended, usually. But it has negative impacts.

I really liked the way you described the chess set. It is a great metaphor for showing the harm of racial colorblindness. How did you first begin taking these kinds of photographs?

KC: I don't know. People ask me this question and I can't really pinpoint a moment when I first had an interest in photography. I just remember seeing other people taking pictures and picked up a camera one day. I don't really know when I got serious. Maybe in the last five or six years. It was a hobby at first, and I taught myself how to do it. Then I started to have more fun with it, and ended up shooting on film rather than digital.

What would you photograph initially?

KC: Maybe people, travels, random things I observed. Street photography. Broadly that's the name of the category. I enjoyed doing it the most in New York City. I feel the people and the scenery is interesting. New York is so diverse. People look like they're going somewhere all the time. People don't smile, don't make eye contact. Sometimes I'll challenge myself and try to photograph the first person I see smiling. Or I'll count how many people are smiling.

That might be the pattern-noticing habit from math kicking in.

KC: Maybe. I think everybody does that.

Which now reminds me of something David Foster Wallace said about the creepy novelist or artist who always stares at people.

KC: Yeah. We do.

What are you working on now?

KC: I'm not sure. I think I want to make a bigger version of this chess set and bring it to a public space. Also more of these painting-drawings, putting more of my poetry in paintings. Working at a larger scale with my drawings.

How do you incorporate your poetry into your art? Am I wrong? I don't see any text.

KC: It's upside down. Usually under layers of paint. I like to experiment with legibility and using material that has this sort of iridescent quality, where different angles render different levels of legibility. This one says "we have been dying all our lives." It also says "all our lives matter." That's a sort of politically charged two sentences merging into one.

Can you talk to me about your classes so far?

KC: I'm taking art history with artists from the African diaspora with Kellie Jones. And I'm taking a course on methodologies with [Tyler Coburn](#). Those are the only two electives I'm taking, in addition to the two MFA courses.

What's methodologies about?

KC: We talk about different methods of making and defining art. It's a great class. A lot of reading. And a lot of good conversations, at the least. The other requirements are the visual art lecture series, the studio visits. I TA for Photography II with [Alex Strada](#).

You get to work with students again.

KC: I like being a TA. Tomorrow I have a studio visit with [Susanna Coffey](#).

How do you like the program so far?

KC: I like the program. I feel they send out a lot of information at the last minute. But there's a ton of resources. Good people. Good classmates. They're super talented, it's scary. My cohort

mates are awesome. The conversations I've had with people are really awesome. I really appreciate group critiques, because sitting down with people who work very, very differently than I do and hearing their input is helpful. Just to have different perspectives, and see things in your work. It's also helpful to hear from people who just have more of an art background too, because I don't have that.

What would you say an art background is?

KC: People who have been in and around the Art world, capital A. Just those who have a different sort of vocabulary around work, and strategy, and methods. So group critiques have been helpful in articulating ideas. I'm not the best when it comes to art words, how a thing feels or sounds. That's why I take pictures.

Kevin Claiborne: Before I Died I Was Invisible

In the works included in *Before I Died I Was Invisible*, Kevin Claiborne uses photographic and printmaking processes to address the Black experience in America today. It takes its title from a poem written by the artist. His keen interests in poetry and the hidden as well as multiple meanings in language permeate his work. Claiborne's exhibition comprises two ongoing series: "BLACKNESS IS," 2019, landscape photographs layered with screenprinted text, and "Great Unconformity," 2020, a further exploration of word and photographic imagery through digital collage.



A seminal series for the artist, "BLACKNESS IS" began with black-and-white photographs shot on film in the Mojave Desert near Joshua Tree, California, onto which he screenprinted excerpts from his poems. In a bold sans serif font, the works bluntly ask the viewer: What is Black? What is Blackness? Are all Blacks Black? Where does Blackness exist? The juxtaposition of the landscape and the texts critically examine the experience of Black people in the United States today. Reflecting on the origin of this work, Claiborne has said that he "started thinking about the relationship between the environment and Black people's identity development in beautiful yet potentially harmful places."

Claiborne's technique plays with legibility – what can be seen or not seen in the photographs, what can be understood or misunderstood from the texts. The works' formatting and lack of punctuation purposefully interrupt the reading process, arresting the viewer in a Brechtian state of hyperawareness. Claiborne deliberately fragments both parts of the whole, leaving the viewer to contemplate the multiplicity of their meanings.



The texts and images in the series "Great Unconformity" are culled from another ^{many black children} kind of source: *The Black Male in America: Perspectives on His Status in Contemporary Society*, a book published in 1977 by sociologists Drs. Doris Y. Wilkinson and Ronald L. Taylor. The book presents a series of case studies on ^{many black chi} Black men – from Black men as fathers, husbands and providers to the societal barriers faced by Black men in education, the workforce and at home. Claiborne cuts texts from this book and pastes them onto images of African tribal masks. The results are digital collages that acerbically question, yet again, the presence, ^{ve up"} expectations and aspirations of Black people both historically and today. ^{psychologically "give up"} ^{psych}

YOSSI MILO

KEVIN CLAIBORNE

b. 1989, Washington, D.C., Lives and works in New York City

EDUCATION

- 2021 MFA Visual Arts, School of Visual Arts, Columbia University, New York, NY
- 2016 MS Higher Education Administration, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- 2012 BS Mathematics, North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Landscape of Lost Histories, Public Service, Stockholm, Sweden
Family Business, Sean Horton (Presents), New York, NY
- 2022 understand me, OSMOS, New York, NY
Fragmentation, Sobering Galerie, Paris, France
Artist in Residence Exhibition, OSMOS Station, Stamford, NY
- 2021 Before I Died I Was Invisible, The Print Center, Philadelphia, PA
- 2020 BLACK ENOUGH, Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York, NY
- 2019 Double Consciousness 2, UCSB Multicultural Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA
- 2018 A Prescription for Double Consciousness, SB CAST, Santa Barbara, CA
Walking on Water While Black, Sirena Gallery, Santa Barbara, CA

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 Crusading The Specter, Yossi Milo, New York, NY
- 2022 TORRENTS: Roots of a Future, Cultural DC, Washington, D.C.
SAVIGNANO IMMAGINI, SI Fest, Forli-Cesena, Italy
Arrangements in Black, Phillips, New York, NY
To Knead a Knot, Lower East Side Printshop, New York, NY
PRESENT POWER/ FUTURE HOPES, The Clemente Center, New York, NY
Tempus Fugit, Latchkey Gallery, New York, NY
back & write, OSMOS Gallery, New York, NY
- 2021 Hereditary, Swivel Gallery, New York, NY
Vocoder, The Macy Art Gallery, New York, NY
Time Won't Tell, Project Gallery V, New York, NY
The Meeting Point, Regular Normal Gallery, New York, NY
Mrs. Robinson, The Fireplace Project, East Hampton, NY
Varsity Blues, Allouche Gallery, New York, NY
MONOCHROME, Bull Farm 1856, Rock Tavern, NY
Let Freedom Ring Vol. 2, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), New York, NY
- 2020 Nature Technology II, The Canvas, New York, NY
BLACKNESS IS, Photoville, New York, NY
Once More, With Feeling, UCLA New Wight Biennial, Los Angeles, CA
Ways & Means, Skelf, United Kingdom
In.Oscillations, SITE.Projects London
How We Hear Now: Sound, Language, & Environment, California College of the Arts
Architectural Ecologies Lab, San Francisco, CA
The Brightest Midnight, The Pandemic Archive, New York, NY
BABY MOMA, At Peace Gallery, New York, NY
- 2019 Sisyphean Justice, The Arts Fund, Santa Barbara, CA

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- 2021 Finalist, Not a Monolith, ArtBridge & Facebook Open Arts
- 2020 Finalist, Aperture Foundation & Baxter St. Camera Club Next Step Award
Grant Recipient, ArtNoir Jar of Love Grant
Finalist, Photolucida Critical Mass Awards, Portland, OR

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Photography Fellowship, Columbia University School of the Arts, New York, NY
2019-21 Visual Arts Scholarship, Columbia University School of the Arts, New York, NY

COLLECTIONS

Whitney Museum of American Art Special Collections, New York, NY
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Museum, Philadelphia, PA

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- 2021 Carroll, Angela N. "GLYPHS: The Image + Text Issue." [foam Magazine](#) November, 2021
Glasgow, Abigail. "ArtNoir Reclaims the Black History of New York's Meatpacking District" [Cultured Mag](#) 27 August 2021
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Claiborne, Kevin. "Reckoning with a Reckoning: One Year Since George Floyd's Murder." [New York Magazine](#) 24 May 2021 [Cover and Interior Art]
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Sharif, Najma. "5 Photographers On Documenting Protests Through Their Own Lens." [Atmos](#) 9 July 2020
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- 2019 Donelan, Charles. "'Sisyphian Justice' at the Arts Fund." [Santa Barbara Independent](#) 12 February 2019