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At the Rubell Museum, Reginald O’Neal Pictures Miami’s Overtown Neighborhood

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Reginald O’Neal, *My Father, Lil Pat, and Our Ancestors*, 2021.

COURTESY RUBELL MUSEUM

Over the past decade, Miami-based painter Reginald O’Neal has kept a keen eye on the world around him. The 29-year-old artist’s central subjects have been the people he knows from Overtown, the neighborhood, northwest of Downtown Miami, where he grew up. The neighborhood has a rich and fraught history. It was once a hub for Black musicians like

Sam Cooke, Billie Holiday and Jerry Butler, as Jim Crow era's ruthless segregationist policies barred them from Miami's entertainment district. Eventually, a government project would decimate the cultural mecca, displacing many of its residents—a history from which the neighborhood has still not fully recovered. In his art, O'Neal's lays bares this past as well as addresses urgent issues, from the effects of policing Black neighborhoods to death of family members.

At the age of 19, O'Neal got his start in art-making when he joined a cohort of mural artists, traveling with them while they made public art commissions. He befriended Axel Void, a Spanish-born graffiti artist based in Miami, who became O'Neal's mentor, teaching him to paint using classical techniques. The relationship would lead him to a full time studio practice.

All of this has led O'Neal to be selected for a coveted residency program at the **Rubell Museum** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/rubell-museum/>), the institution founded by *ARTnews* Top 200 collectors **Mera and Don Rubell** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-collectors/top-200-profiles/rubell-family/>) and located in the nearby Allapattah neighborhood. Over the past year, O'Neal has been at work on several new paintings, which will go on view, alongside four other that the Rubells acquired last year, as part of an exhibition, titled "AS I AM," that opens this week at the Rubell Museum, timed to Art Basel Miami Beach.

The works on view include street scenes capturing O'Neal's friends and portraits that memorialize relatives. They have a mostly neutral palette, invoking silhouettes of figures from European Old Master paintings, that are then placed against black and white scenes painted, taken from archival photographs. These dimly lit tableaus have a sense of something familiar but at the same time a bit distant.

"You have to look very carefully to understand what's going on in these paintings," Mera said in an interview. "They don't reveal themselves so easily."



Reginald O'Neal, *At the Feet of Mountains*, 2020

During his residency, O'Neal returned to a previously painted image of his father, who has been incarcerated for two decades. Created from a family photo, *My Father, Lil Pat, and Our Ancestors* (2021) is a striking image showing his father in a blue jumpsuit during an inmate visitation as he holds his young nephew. Behind the two figures, appearing almost like a vignette, is a black-and-white scene of enslaved people in a cotton field, which O'Neal sourced from an archival stock photo.

Another work, *At the Feet of the Mountain* (2020), directly pictures O'Neal's community in Overtown. A crowd of men, painted after O'Neal's own friends, huddle together deliberating on plays and penalties during a neighborhood football game. They are barely lit under a dim streetlight, against an almost fully black horizon. From O'Neal's vantage point watching the game, he recalled the scene, "looking at it from the outside, but not being so distant from the actual situation. For this moment. It is my friends being themselves and me just being present for that, not trying to be in control of anything."

That experience has become a turning point for him. By creating that distance and "just letting them be," it has allowed O'Neal to "appreciate my community for what it is—letting it grow by itself," he said. "I got into a mode of feeling like I needed to teach, to put them up on different cultures. I grew out of that."

In another painting produced this year, which lends the exhibition its title, O'Neal has painted an image of the back of his friend's head in the center of the canvas. The figure stands facing a colorless scene from centuries past: an archival image from the late 19th century depicting Bahamian Black families posed together for a group photo in Miami's Coconut Grove.

But the exhibition's most emotive work might just be a still life, *Minnie's Glasses* (2021), in which O'Neal has rendered his grandmother's retro eyewear. Invoking similar scenes from

Dutch artists in the 16th century, a major influence on O’Neal, he made the small-scale work around the time of his grandmother’s death last April. The glasses were among the personal effects inherited by O’Neal’s mother. For the artist, they have become a stand-in of sorts for the woman to whom they once belonged, a marker of her passing.

“Having an ornament that belongs to her, to still be present, it has her spirit,” he said. Raised Baptist, O’Neal recounted the religion’s belief that when people go to heaven they become “perfect,” no longer suffering from ailments like waning eyesight. “I’m not a very religious person,” he added. “It’s a gesture, when you’re not using your glasses you put them aside. She doesn’t need the glasses where she is at now.”

Looking to Spanish painters like the Impressionist Joaquín Sorolla, alongside Diego Velasquez and Francisco Goya, O’Neal said he found a roadmap to his latest works. “They would take time to paint regular people, to paint people in the street. That was a way of them being rebellious. Knowing the history, it gave me this sense of what I could talk about through painting.”

