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Art

The Artsy Vanguard 2021: Reginald O'Neal

• Isis Davis-Marks Dec 1, 2021 8:00am   



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The Miami-based artist [Reginald O'Neal](#) is known for his deft figurative paintings, rendered through soft brushstrokes that create an undeniable tenderness. His loving portrayals of friends, family, and personal objects range from cropped depictions of a person's clasped hands to complex tableaux featuring multiple subjects, mingling at a party or riding dirt bikes. Often, O'Neal conveys experiences of violence, memory, and loss. Looking at these paintings, with their dark, muted color palettes and deep shadows, feels like stepping into a hazy flashback. And they're garnering O'Neal increasing recognition: This month, the artist is having a moment in his hometown with solo shows at the Rubell Museum and Spinello Projects, and works on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami and The Artsy Vanguard 2021 exhibition.

“Even though I’m talking about my experience, I think my experience is similar to a lot of experiences within African American history or culture,” O’Neal said in a recent interview with Artsy. “So I feel like I could go anywhere and draw inspiration as long as I’m around something that is very familiar.”





Though O’Neal’s paintings depict a diverse spectrum of experiences, a unifying thread ties the 29-year-old artist’s oeuvre together—many of his works illustrate stories from his childhood in Overtown, a historically Black neighborhood in Miami. O’Neal’s roots in Overtown run deep: His grandmother moved there from Georgia when she was three years old; his mother lived there; and he grew up there, in a public housing project where he formed deep bonds with his community.

“I want people to see themselves being amongst these people,” O’Neal said in an interview with ICA Miami earlier this year. “And in that way, I try to paint it as detailed as possible. It’s like I channeled something.”

O’Neal still lives in Overtown, and its streets inform his current painting practice. And it was on those streets that O’Neal learned his craft. After graduating from high school, he began to experiment with making murals and spray-painting with graffiti artists in his community. Eventually, O’Neal met [Axel Void](#), a street artist and teacher. “I would go to his house almost every day,” O’Neal recalled, “and he became my mentor and taught me figurative painting.”





Spinello Projects
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Void encouraged O’Neal to dive into his practice and focus on subjects that were personal to him. Under Void’s tutelage, the young artist began to develop his technical skills in oil painting and studied artists like the Spanish Impressionist Joaquín Sorolla y Bastida. At the time, O’Neal also began to shift the content of his works from broader political subjects to more intimate topics, like family and friends, and crafted complex pictorial narratives about his own life.

Now, the young painter continues to paint his own vision of the world, and major galleries and institutions are increasingly taking notice. Recently, Pérez Art Museum Miami and ICA Miami acquired several of O’Neal’s works, and the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami commissioned the artist to create a mural in its plaza.



Reginald O'Neal
Zipper, 2018
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Reginald O'Neal
Brawl I, 2018
Spinello Projects
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And last year, Spinello Projects—the Miami-based art gallery that represents O’Neal—debuted the artist’s first solo exhibition. Titled “At the Feet of Mountains,” the show featured a series of oil paintings that O’Neal made between 2018 and 2020.



persons torso. The painting leaves a lot left unsaid, the subject's face is cropped out, preventing us from giving them a fixed identity. However, what we can see is telling: The subject leans on a pair of metal crutches and wears a navy-blue shirt that is pulled up to reveal a long, dark scar from abdomen to navel. It's clear that this person experienced some physical trauma, but we don't know exactly what; we're left to fill in the gaps.

In a conversation with Pérez Art Museum Miami's chief curator René Morales, O'Neal said that *Zipper* is "kind of using a person's body [to talk about] something that happened to them. [It focuses on] their body language and things that they have attached to their hair or their demeanor or their skin color.... This is not talking about a particular person, but it's talking about a lineage of people."



Reginald O'Neal
My Little Brothers Casket, 2018
Spinello Projects
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Other works, such as *My Little Brothers Casket* (2018), similarly raise questions about trauma and memory. The haunting painting depicts a black



“Between Miami and Overtown, there were a lot of murders happening from a generation younger than me, so in my community, in project housing, I watched kids grow up and get into different things,” O’Neal said of the piece. “And I watched that. I watched kids go from being 12 to being 17, 18, 19. [This piece] was a message to them—not only kids who I watched grow up, but kids who are around my community. ‘Little brothers’ is plural. It’s not my particular brother, but it’s the younger generation. The fact that the casket is open is symbolic for them rushing to the grave.”

Some of O’Neal’s pieces are tied to more specific individuals and more subtly allude to themes of death. For example, *Minnie’s Glasses* (2020) shows a pair of wire-rimmed frames resting against a dark backdrop. O’Neal made the piece after his grandmother died last year. Even though he could no longer be with her physically, the artist could still connect with her spirit through his art.



Reginald O'Neal

Minnie's Glasses, 2020

Spinello Projects

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“She didn’t need her glasses anymore,” O’Neal said. “I thought that the glasses represented her by not necessarily being a portrait of her, but by being something that she lived, something that was very particular to her.”



Museum. The latter, which opened on November 29th and is titled “As I Am,” is a compilation of the artist’s pieces from “At the Feet of Mountains,” alongside two new large commissioned paintings.

“People can feel my intention and things of that nature,” O’Neal said of his work. “My origins are very, very dear to me, and I hope that people can understand that it takes some time to experience that.”

The Artsy Vanguard 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature recognizing the most promising artists working today. This fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard is a triumphant new chapter, as we present an in-person exhibition in Miami featuring the 20 artists’ works, including many available to collect on Artsy. Curated by Erin Jenoa Gilbert, sponsored by MNTN, and generously supported by Mana Public Arts, the show is located at 555 NW 24th Street, Miami, and is open to the public from December 2nd through 5th, 12–6 p.m.

Explore more of The Artsy Vanguard 2021 and [collect works by the artists](#).

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Isis Davis-Marks

Header and thumbnail image: Portrait of Reginald O’Neal by Anthony Spinello. Courtesy of Spinello Projects.

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