

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

July 3–August 7, 2020

For his first solo exhibition, *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, artist Emmanuel Louisnord Desir brings together sculpture and painting in an installation that reflects on the movement of Biblical gospel narratives through popular culture. The works navigate states of comfort, conflict, and the tensions in between. In sculptural assemblages that skirt between readymade interventions and expressive figuration, Desir represents vessels as homes, bodies as vessels for the spirit and the battle between spirit and flesh through a commingling of disparate mediums.

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” a spiritual composed by the Choctaw freedman Wallace Willis in ca. 1865, carries with it voices of the past, including those of the famous Fisk Jubilee Singers in and after the era of Reconstruction. The standard, which has been covered by Paul Robeson, Louis Armstrong, Etta James and other artists, lives within the pantheon of the songs of sorrows that W. E. B. Du Bois celebrates in the final essay in his 1903 collection *The Souls of Black Folk*. He writes: “They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart.”

The sole painting in the exhibition, also entitled *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, depicts a landscape divided by an enigmatic golden arch enveloped in vines. Below is a surrealistic white expanse in which two figures shelter. An outstretched hand can be seen in the lower-left of the canvas. In the opposite corner is a whirlwind. The composition provides a window into an apocalyptic world of vibrant and murky colors in which contradictory realms vie. The viewer is summoned into a mystical, searching scene that fuses reality and fiction.

Captivity of the Spirit and the Flesh evokes an uncanny mirroring of inner and outer selves. Positioned upon repurposed cast iron radiators, two figures speak through ideas of the interchange between mind, body and flesh, while their pedestals infer questions of energy, liquidity, comfort, and the lack thereof. On this exposed section of wooden flooring, a dramatic confrontation between mind and body is staged. The artwork addresses the social proliferation of carceral logics and frames captivity as a spiritual, physical and material condition.

Spaces of comfort are presented as vessels within the exhibition. Secret compartments and depressions are carved into bodily figures, in works such as *The Laborer*, in order to carry the burden of an imperfect heart or, as indicated in Ezekiel 36:26, to remove a heart of stone to give a heart of flesh. A cognitive dissonance exists here in the slippage between the transparent veneer of lamination and the cultural poetics of lamentation. Bodily transformations are not limited to transfiguration, but include the body’s weaponization, as seen in *Instrument of Perdition*, in which the body is a double-edged sword with a serpent’s tongue. Disfiguration is examined in *Mama U Tried*, in which a figure’s arms are raised skyward, yet one limb is cut. The pose brings to mind the scars of toil and labor, yet also signals dignity and defiance. The raised fist suggests a prayer to omnipotent power, the international symbol of worker’s solidarity, and the Statue of Liberty, the fiercely complex

monument to diasporic freedoms that poet Emma Lazarus described as a “mother of exiles.” The sculpture’s wooden surface is scorched, and it rests on a brick split by a fine crack. With minimal ornamentation, it relays a spirit that is, in the artist’s words, “more precious than gold, strengthened by the fire of adversity.”

The exhibition is a songbook of searing lyrics sung in the present tense. It conveys a commitment to the act of holding, and to affirming the ethereal life of ephemeral things.

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir (b. 1997, Brooklyn, NY) lives and works in New York City. He received his BFA from The Cooper Union in 2019. This solo exhibition at 47 Canal is his first.