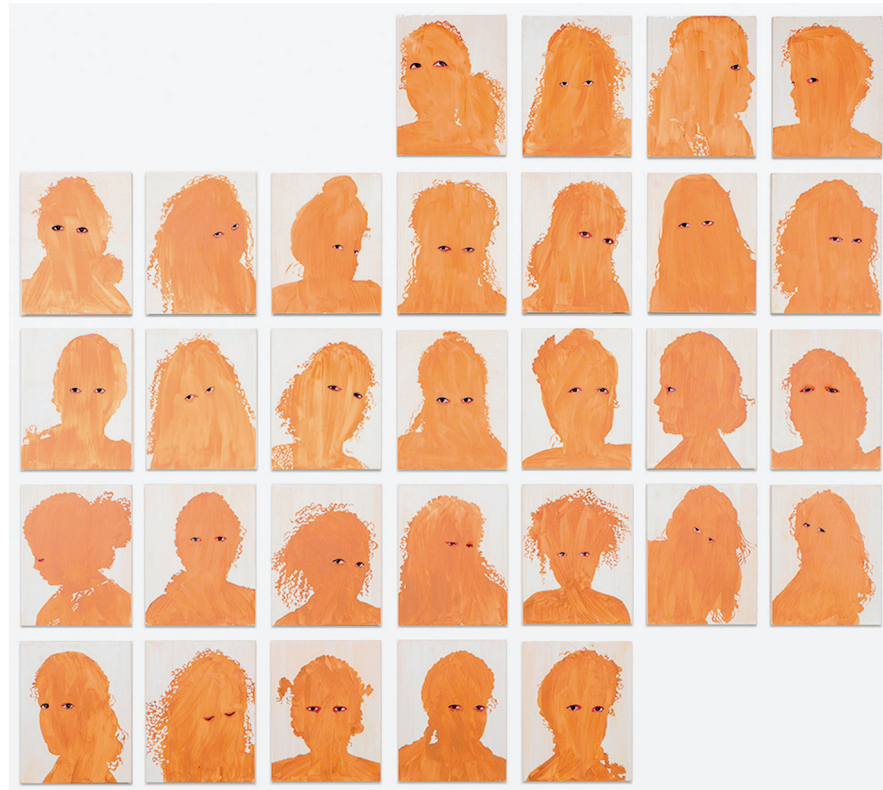


FIRST LOOK



Firelei Báez:
Can I Pass?
Introducing the
Paper Bag to
the Fan Test
for the Month
of June, 2011,
gouache, graphite
and ink on
panel, 96 by 128
inches overall.
Courtesy Richard
Heller Gallery,
Los Angeles.
Photo STUDIO
LHOOQ

Firelei Báez

By Wendy Vogel

NEW YORK-BASED ARTIST Firelei Báez imagines how bodies (especially of women and people of color), landscapes and ornaments bear traces of colonial migration. Her dense, painterly compositions utilize figuration and patterning to evoke the hybrid foundations of identity, including her own. Born in 1981 near the Dominican Republic's Haitian border, Báez as a child witnessed racial tensions play out between citizens of the two countries of Hispaniola (one predominantly Hispanic, one mostly black). Her family later moved to Miami, where she grappled with both the internecine identity struggles of the Caribbean diaspora and U.S. racism.

The series "Can I Pass? Introducing the Paper Bag to the Fan Test" (2010-12) hints at Báez's navigation of social stratification based on phenotype. The title references two unscientific tests used to determine African heritage: measuring the lightness of an individual's skin tone against a brown paper bag and the coarseness of one's hair based on whether it flows straight back from a fan's breeze. Báez produced daily drawings of her own silhouetted head, systematically illustrating the different ways she styled her kinky hair and the variations in her skin tone. In each portrait, her eyes—unexpectedly peering out as if through a mask—gaze confrontationally at the viewer, while the rest of her head and shoulders are filled in with quick strokes of gouache. The work combines Conceptual seriality with the expressiveness of self-portraiture.

Báez addresses the subversive potential of style and portraiture in various ways. A painting series called "Geographic Delay"

(2010-ongoing) depicts ornately costumed women she scouted at Brooklyn's West Indian American Day parade. Báez renders their skin tattooed with abstract decorative motifs as well as landscapes of Latin America, Asia and other homelands, suggesting how cultural identity is both performed and concealed. A recent group of paintings illustrate *tignons*, head coverings that 18th-century free women of African descent in Spanish-ruled Louisiana were mandated to wear over their hair. Meant to denote the women's relationship to slaves and to deter lust, *tignons* became an element of high fashion as their wearers decorated them with luxurious imported fabrics, stylish knotting techniques, ribbons and baubles. In Báez's Neoclassical-inspired portrait *Sans-Souci (this threshold between a dematerialized and a historicized body)*, 2015, a woman is depicted with yellow, red and green patterns over her face and neck, evoking a streaky topography, while her fantastic *tignon*-like headdress, painted in neutral tones, contains patterned fabrics, twinned snakes (a global symbol of knowledge) and feathers.

The 2015 painting series "Bloodlines" reclaims the aesthetic and emancipatory potential of feminized, decorative elements. Báez has created indigo fabrics elaborating a cosmology of original symbols, which she then renders on large canvases. She juxtaposes resistance icons, such as a black panther and a socialist fist, with hair picks and the Latin American *azabache* fist, an emblem meant to ward off the evil eye. ○

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
Firelei Báez's solo
exhibition "Blood-
lines," at the Pérez
Art Museum Miami,
through Mar. 6.