

David Shrobe: Pushing the Boundaries of Painting, Sculpture, and Collage

by Isha Tripathi



Sanctuary (2020), David Shrobe.

David Shrobe Lecture

Thursday, March 11, 2021

New York based [David Shrobe](#) creates multi-layered portraits and assemblage paintings made in part from everyday materials that he finds in multiple geographies, and especially from around his familial home. He disassembles furniture, separating wood from fabric and recombines them as supports for collage, painting, and drawing. Through these various modes of production his work brings notions of identity, history, and memory into question, while challenging conventions of classical portraiture. Shrobe produces new narratives, fragmented and nonlinear, that feel intimate and personal without being anchored to a specific time or place.

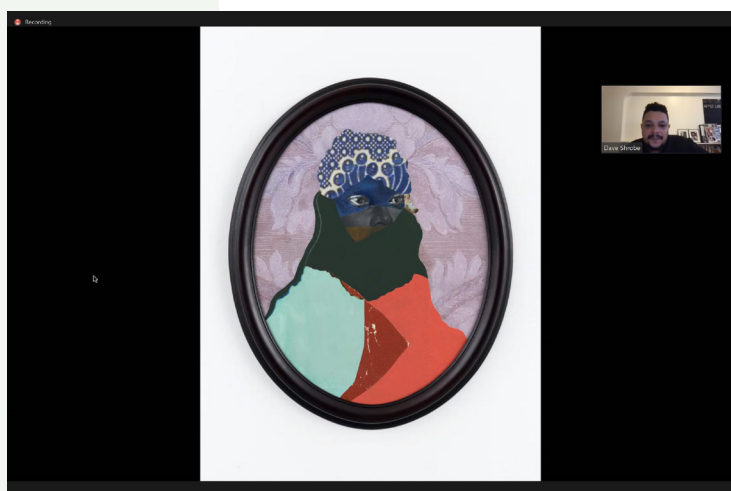
David Shrobe (b.1974, New York) lives and works in New York. He holds an MFA and a BFA in painting from Hunter College. He is an alumnus of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and was a Joan Mitchell Artist Teaching Fellow.

David Shrobe is a visual artist who lives and works in New York. He holds a BFA and MFA from Hunter College, is an alumnus of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and was a Joan Mitchell Artist Teaching Fellow in 2014. Shrobe's interest in deconstructing and reconstructing domestic and found objects creates multi-layered portraits that reassemble Black materiality and history. Shrobe gave an artist talk organized by CCA's Painting and Drawing program on March 11, 2021. During his artist talk, he presented several works spanning from his days in college to his most recent work, which primarily explores maintaining the familial bond during times of struggle and pain.

Art was very much ingrained into Shrobe's upbringing: his father was a social worker, moonlighting as a jazz pianist who studied with Miles Davis and Barry Harris, and his mother was a singer, bringing music into the house. Both encouraged all forms of artistic expression. During his undergraduate and graduate studies, Shrobe often incorporated imagery of cartoon characters with racial

undertones. "I was packing a lot into the work with hybridities," Shrobe told us, "recounting the historical narrative in ways to retell family heritage specifically from my mother's side." During his studies, he experimented with rubbing drawings, using charred wood to honor and pay respect to his grandfather—a charcoal laborer who heated people's furnaces in Arkansas. His exploration of materiality to convey stories of family history is both evocative and experimental.

The figures he creates in his assemblage paintings often evoke a sense of contemplation and suffering related to traumatic experiences. Still, his interdisciplinary approach of using various materials to obscure or amplify parts of the face, or merge faces together, creates these interesting



David Shrobe discussing his piece *Decelerate* (2019).

veiled messages about who they are and what their stories are. This is particularly clear in his piece titled *At a Crossroads* (2020, oil, acrylic, graphite on paper and canvas, steel, wood, flocking, wool tweed, faux tweed, vinyl, fabric, linen, and bookbinding cloth mounted on carved wood, 77 x 55 inches), portraying a mother, father, and baby finding comfort in one another. In this work, Shrobe pushes the boundaries of painting, drawing, collage, and sculpture all at once, forging something entirely new. None of the facial features on any of the figures are visible. Yet, the abstraction of the imagery moves the figures into tender poses, huddled together in an embrace, with the couple's heads merged together. The beautiful juxtaposition of all these different materials that ornament and enhance parts of their bodies protrude beyond the piece. Pattern and texture become a replacement for facial features. Shrobe often uses found materials from the streets of his neighborhood in Harlem. Through them, he has developed his own world. The materials form the foundation for his paintings, telling their own story about their respective material histories. After sourcing the materials, he pieces them together, turning them into supports ready for painting.



At A Crossroads (2020), David Shrobe.

Some of the materials he uses in his works include family heirlooms and antique frames. His upcycles are intrinsic to the artwork's meaning, referencing daguerreotype photographs, including the early photographs of Frederick Douglass. Historical movements of revolution and rebellion have also influenced themes addressed in his work, notably the Haitian Revolution and the U.S. antislavery and civil rights movements. Although there are many historical references in the imagery, there is a sense of timelessness when viewing the works—they feel both personal and intimate. He achieves this figuratively and conceptually by juxtaposing historical imagery and frames with contemporary patterns, creating new kinds of human forms that have an imaginary quality. He brings in elements of classical portraiture only to deconstruct it. Just as he disassembles and repurposes furniture and found objects, he also fragments parts of his subjects' faces, bringing in a surreal psychological element into the work. He uses these objects and his painting style to piece together, define and obscure parts of bodies and identities. A recurring pattern in his portraits are figures without noses but with haunting eyes and mouths—or with no mouths at all—using the textures and patterns in the materials to form the structure of the faces. The eyes are one of the few features that he doesn't manipulate into abstraction. The figures' gaze haunt these paintings, as some evoke a sense of pain and some contemplation, giving off the impression that these figures have seen and experienced a lot.



Known Solider (2019), David Shrobe.

This brings me to the last piece: *Known Soldier* (2019, oil, acrylic, ink wood on canvas in a handmade carved wood frame). The work depicts a figure in uniform with a bayonet rifle and field cap that Shrobe has painted on top of an intricately patterned piece of wood, placed inside an antique table top carved into a frame. He has allowed the wood grain to form the soldier's face, painting a pair of expressive eyes and cap onto it. Only fragments of his chin and mouth allow us to see that the wood grain has been used to reveal his interior state. It is based on the daguerreotypes of unidentified African-American soldiers of the Civil War, the title referring to the fact that these subjects were often named unknown soldiers. This title and elaborate frame provide the figure with historical significance, dignity, and recognition,

which, in reality, they may not have had. Concerning the spirituality emanating from the 18th-century figure, Shrobe said, "I think subjects in my work are connected to a spiritual side or identity, guided by intuitive senses." Shrobe amalgamates painting, drawing, collage, and sculpture, reusing found materials to reimagine and contemporize history. Together, these gestures bring the forgotten events crucial to storytelling in Black history to light. This amalgamation is not limited to materials, as the artist creates critical discourse while bringing in his own personal narratives to the artwork.

Shrobe acknowledged that there is a great advantage to having virtual artist talks during this time of continuous digital interaction and connection. They provide alternative platforms on which artists promote their work and create a dialogue, reaching larger audiences than they could otherwise have had access to. Viewing Shrobe's work and seeing his multifaceted approach has been particularly inspiring to my practice as a Painting and Drawing major, opening up many exciting doors for me to experiment with a variety of materials, especially during a time that seems so limiting for artists. During this past year of COVID-19, artists have been making do with what they have at hand. Shrobe exemplifies how limitations can lead to experimentation, integrating many different modes of making into his practice, and has still managed to maintain a distinctive style that is uniquely his.

For more information on the artist, visit: www.davidshrobe.com.

This lecture was organized by CCA's Painting and Drawing department.

Isha Tripathi is an interdisciplinary artist who primarily works with drawing, painting and photography. She is currently pursuing a BFA in Painting and Drawing at CCA.



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