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FINE ART
G L O B E

William Villalongo's Black Menagerie at Susan Inglett Gallery
Artist creates a powerful portrait of diaspora's experience

By Elizabeth Hazard
October 11, 2023



William Villalongo, *Black Menagerie (Testa di Moro)*, 2023. Acrylic, velvet flocking and paper collage on wood panel, 47 3/4 in. dia. x 2 3/4 in. (Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery).

Susan Inglett Gallery is pleased to present artist William Villalongo's latest exhibition entitled *Black Menagerie*. This marks the artist's seventh solo exhibition with the gallery. *Black Menagerie* is inspired by Villalongo's research that he worked on during his recent residency at the American Academy in Rome. The work on view expands upon the artist's work that strives to create a comprehensive representation of the Black identity.

Villalongo's art centers on [painting](#), [printmaking](#), [sculpture](#), and [installation art](#). He typically focuses on the historical politics of erasure, most specifically the artistic reassessment of African-American artistic histories. His work engages with the black body, examining the influence of socialization and history. In speaking of this representation, he says, "The relationship is problematic and interesting, and I wanted to think about how to use it and tell a story." His artwork generally represents the Black subject against the backdrop of race in America. The artist is known for his use of black velvet cut paper. The results of his approach are dynamic portraits that reference cultural histories, emphasizing diaspora, deep time, freedom, beauty, and metamorphosis.

In this latest scope of work, the mythological dimensions of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea are seen as containers of trauma and forced displacement, as a gravesite that is still growing. As a precise collector of material artifacts, the artist creates collages that simultaneously disassemble and reconstruct perceptions of the Black past. He represents this ideal as bisected by the aspirational nature of the range of found objects. With a very strategic use of imagery and material, this work is created with a collection of ancient slipware from North Africa and pottery from the American South, geological forms, seashells, butterflies, and Etruscan vases. The individual pieces connect the shared histories of the Black Mediterranean and Black Atlantic.

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William Villalongo, *Black Menagerie (Khepri & Janus)*, 2023. Acrylic, velvet flocking and paper collage on wood panel, 47 3/4 in. dia. x 2 3/4 in. (Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery).

Villalongo returns to his characteristic motifs, such as the drinking gourd, which he uses as symbolism for the Big Dipper and was once used as a navigational device on the Underground Railroad. He adds imagery that harkens back to the Mediterranean and North African mythologies. *Black Menagerie* calls for the viewer to try to understand the Black identity that delves back years in time and across many oceans and continents, establishing a deeply rooted history that has been well recorded.

Villalongo says, "When you visit the pyramids in Giza, you see building techniques that are five thousand years older than the Roman Empire. This extends the trajectory and narratives of how Black people find themselves throughout history and in positions of power." During his research in Rome, Villalongo was inspired by what he found in the parallel histories and objects unearthed during his studies. The artist's signature use of black velvet is coupled with the interplay of artifacts and motifs ranging from Ancient Mediterranean to Contemporary culture. Together, they tell the story of Black culture, history, and presence today. Villalongo resurfaces histories of migration and forced labor for his culture. Through the work, he retraces migratory passages to explore deep time and pieces together a reimagined representation of the Black figure. He says, "Once you peel back the surface, you realize the body is layered. We see only each other's exterior in our everyday lives, but there is an interiority with imagination and a psyche. There is a level of our presence that is elusive and abstract."



William Villalongo, *A Dance for Dave*, 2023. Acrylic, velvet flocking and paper collage on wood panel, 36 x 76 1/4 x 2 3/4 in. (Courtesy: Susan Inglett Gallery).

Villalongo creates a portrait that powerfully presents the experience of the diaspora. "I am always thinking about how someone like me would come to be here at this moment. I love this idea of colliding timelines that overlap and create reality," he says. When he speaks of

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Black people and their experience, he says, "When we talk about a longer trajectory of people, we're talking about temporary situations. I look at symbols that speak to that history. For example, the Dung Beetle in Ancient Egyptian lore is a God that symbolizes revolution and renewal."

Based in [Brooklyn, New York](#), Villalongo is an assistant professor at the [Cooper Union School of Art](#) in New York. In 2016, he co-curated *Black Pulp!*, a traveling exhibition of a collection of Black image production by Black publishers, Black artists, and non-Black artists, with fellow artist [Mark Thomas Gibson](#). Villalongo is a 2021 recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Denver Art Museum; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; the Princeton University Art Museum; Bryn Mawr College Art and Artifacts Collection, Bryn Mawr, PA; the Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC; the Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC; and the Yale University Art Gallery, among others. *Black Menagerie* will be on view at Susan Inglett Gallery until October 14, 2023.