

eric firestone gallery

ARTFORUM



Judy Bowman, *Proud Papa*, 2022, mixed media collage on canvas, 48 × 36".

DETROIT

Judy Bowman

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DETROIT (MOCAD)

4454 Woodward Avenue

October 29, 2022–March 26, 2023

In her debut solo museum exhibition, “Gratiot Griot,” seventy-year-old mixed-media collage artist Judy Bowman pays tribute to the community that raised her. A child of Detroit’s historic Black Bottom neighborhood—which was bounded on one end by Gratiot Avenue, but was demolished during the late 1950s to make way for the Chrysler Freeway—Bowman draws inspiration from surroundings that are now a relic of the past.

The former kindergarten teacher identifies as a griot, a storyteller in the West African oral

tradition. The artist documents Black life, preserving memories and legacies for generations to come. Driven by reverence and a recuperative impulse, Bowman has said that her art is a “way of reclaiming the narrative of the Black community, who too often are depicted in ‘negative, marginalized’ ways.”

Bowman’s canvases are vivid and layered—each one possesses a distinct warmth and dimensionality. Her larger-than-life subjects fully occupy the works and sometimes exceed the boundaries of the frame, as if they’re too grand to be properly contained by any one picture. *Mom On Seneca*, 2020, inspired by the work of Kerry James Marshall, foregrounds the house she grew up in on Detroit’s east side in the early 1960s and depicts a leisurely family gathering. *Proud Papa*, 2022, renders a beaming father carrying his baby son (who trains his gaze on the viewer), while *Mom On Belle Isle* 2022, hearkens back to the artist’s memories of impromptu beach trips. In her iconic portrait *Detroit Swagger*, 2022, several gentlemen, dressed to the nines, are lined up alongside one another, as if posing for the cameras (perhaps a flash is causing the glint from one man’s pinky ring). In this rich, vibrant, and textured exhibit, Bowman magnifies the intimate spaces of Black culture. Each image is a testament and a celebration of the lives and settings of her family and community.

— Suzana Vuljevic

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