



January 12, 2021

Artists

# For Frederick

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It seems fitting and right that my first review for the year 2021 is on *Frederick Weston*, on view at [Ortuzar Projects](#) through January 30, 2021; as my first interview of 2020 was with the late Frederick Weston on his solo exhibition [Blue Bedroom Blues](#) at Ace Hotel New York (Jan-Feb, 2020)[1]. The stories Frederick tells in his work are personal to the time, his time. His materials have been tenderly organized over time, each image just waiting for the right work for it to be added to, its purpose divine. Throughout his life, Frederick found, accumulated, and collected images and words. Pulling together what at first seems unrelated even nonsensical images and words, arranging them, accessorizing them, into truth, a story, an understanding.



Installation view of *Frederick Weston* at Ortuzar Projects, New York  
Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects

After running to the space during my lunch break, the first person I saw was Esther McGowan, the executive director of [Visual AIDS](#). An organization where I first met Frederick and discovered his work. After our brief pleasantries, I walked into the exhibition. Installed and presented posthumously, the solo exhibition is the most extensive survey of his work to date[2] and his unique flair and warmth, eye for detail, is immediately seen in all of the works on view.



*Sambo Schema 1 and 2, 2006*  
Mixed media on foamcore board  
40 x 32 in. (101.6 x 81.3 cm) each  
Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects

The first work that struck me was *Sambo Schema 1 and 2, 2006*. A dark diptych, showing racist depiction and images of Africans, African Americans, and Indians collaged together with advertisements, images, and phrases relating to the word 'Sambo'. Naive as I am at times, I had never heard of this word. But seen depicted by Frederick the meaning was obviously clear[3]. This was a word, a character, an old origin story [a very racist, colonial one], that until very recently, only had negative connotations, slur.

I didn't need to have heard the word said or had read it somewhere else to know that it was something I never wanted to associate with. I felt disgusted and perplexed, at first confused, until I read the story, "The Story of Little Black Sambo", the story by Helen Bannerman[4] printed in black and white small print on a square of white, the size of an index card, collaged into *Sambo Schema 1 and 2, 2006*.

Frederick's ability to have me going back to one of his works, even when it makes me uncomfortable, (which this work succeeded in), has become rare to find in an artist. I found myself looking for clues of other references, other lives, other people. I ended up taking details of the work on my phone resulting in going home researching and unpacking what I had seen. I needed to learn more. That's the beauty of it.

While reminiscing Frederick's love for beauty and fashion, I encounter the flamboyant Tabboo![5], whose work and persona has become emblematic of the 1980s club scene, holding court in front of the largest work in the show while greeting visitors and friends. After striking a few poses together (because of course, and for prosperity), I turned around to examine the work we were in front of.

The standout piece of the show is Frederick's last known work *Boxers (for Emile Griffith), 2020*, which "pays tribute to the legendary fighter, a regular at the gay hustler bar near Times Square — Stella's — where Weston worked the coat check for many years"[6].



*Boxers (for Emile Griffith)*, 2020  
 Mixed media collage on paper  
 53 x 132 in. (134.6 x 335.3 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects

It's massive and you get lost while looking at it. Where to begin with your eyes? Where *does* it begin? Images of men fighting, boxing, prancing with victory, pummeled with defeat, a last portrait for the obituary. The story of this work can be seen in many ways, but knowing the history it's hard not to think of Emile Griffith's (1938–2013) infamous 1962 boxing match with Benny Paret<sup>[7]</sup>, where during the weigh-in Paret called Griffith a gay slur, leading to a heated match resulting in Paret being knocked out and dying in a coma.

The title of the work, the images, the theme, the man. It's impossible not to think of the long tumultuous history of African Americans and boxing, such as with legendary fighter Muhammad Ali (1942-2016). I can't help but also reflect on how this work, in particular, emphasizes the struggles that every gay black man has historically had to face. A struggle that I have no way of fully comprehending because of my age, race, and gender. But that doesn't mean I cannot recognize and acknowledge it when I see it and ask myself what can I do to make this kind of thinking change?



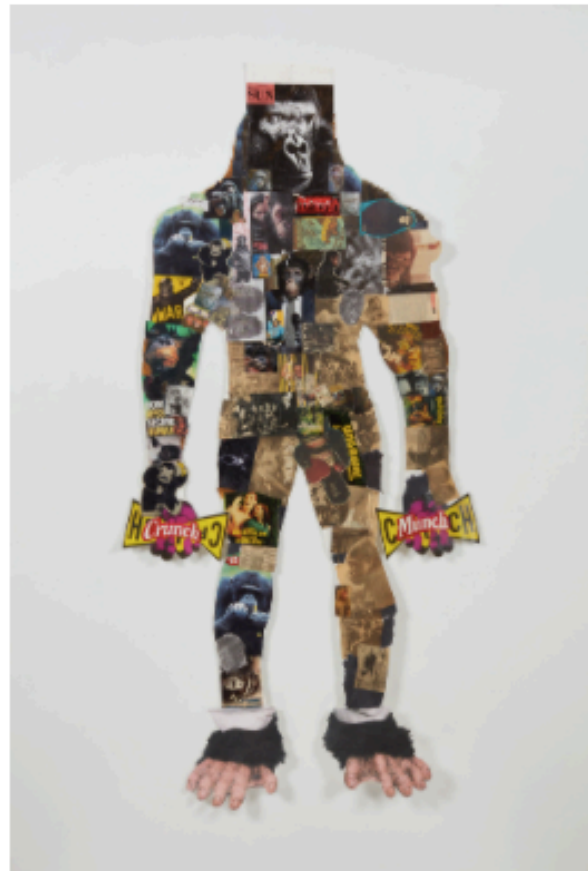
*Nobly Nude (The Slave Master and the Master Slave)*, c. 2000  
 Photocopy and mixed media collage on foamcore board  
 32 x 40 in. (81.3 x 101.6 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects

The work I kept going back to was *Nobly Nude (The Slave Master and the Master Slave)*. It is one of the most overtly 'in your face' political works in the exhibition. It stands out against the colorful collages and portraits. The work is of a nude African American male staring directly at the viewer, his arms in chains. After discussing the work with a very kind gallerist, I discovered that the image was taken from a porn magazine and that Frederick had saved the image for the right moment, the right work before finally creating *Nobly Nude* in the early 2000s. As a porn aficionado myself, I knew why the image stuck out to him. For many years in the sex industry, or more specifically porn, representations of people of color are rare to come by [look at any *Physique Pictorial* or *Playboy* to see the rarity yourself]. And seeing this man, this *black* man, as sexually desirable in a porno magazine, struck out at Frederick not only because of the rarity of the representation. But because of how this man was displayed, as an object with no subjecthood, bound naked in chains for the pleasure of an unknown audience, an object.

The image of this man is repeated over and over into two rows, each original altered in some way. A KKK Hood painted on, a decapitated head. For a penis: an upside-down hooded bound body, long sharp knife, completed blacked out. The black male figure reduced to its most fetishized roles and fears, but with the ability to fight back. The first figure however on the top left, his face and torso are covered by a 2001 cartoon by Henri Arnold depicting a king on his throne, with a jester in front of him on his head exclaiming "The Slave who neither fears not wants us as good as the grandest king". A statement most likely uttered with relish by the *kindest* slave owner, and today's racist bigot. Another stark reminder of the not-so-distant past, and the ever-so-horrifying present.



*Money Man*, 2017  
Mixed media collage on paper  
81 1/2 x 21 3/4 in. (207 x 55.2 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects



*Ape Man Savage*, 2019  
Mixed media collage on paper  
71 1/2 x 28 in. (181.6 x 71.1 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects

On the wall are multiple works from his series of *Body Maps*, completed between 1979–2020. It was one of the works from this series that I saw a couple of years ago. Seeing so many together, it felt like seeing a complete cast of characters. I wondered what the story would say if every work from this series were all installed together? In *Money Man*, a body composed of different printed and collaged USA currency, it is the details that spoke out. The center of the chest is a large cow, one can't help but be reminded of the 'golden calf' in the Bible, made as an idol, leading to a community's ruin[8]. In the upper right armpit, pills can be seen spilling out of bills. Money and health have become the hot topic in this COVID-19 world, but Frederick as a long-term survivor of HIV/AIDS was all too aware of the never-ending relationship between the two.

Leaving and entering the show I was met with a few of the people that touched Frederick's art and life. On exiting the gallery, I was met by LJ Roberts[9] and their always faithful companion Ziggy[10], a close friend of Frederick and a fellow artist. It all seemed so right that while even in these strange times when a gallery opening is as scandalous as a rave, all of us in the queer art world made sure to pay-our-respects to this soon-to-be-anointed queer Saint.

*"My whole practice really is about the way that men look, men comport themselves and the way that men pose. What people wear are really where people's heads are."*

#### Frederick Weston (1946–2020)

Weston was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1946, and raised in Detroit. He studied merchandising and marketing as an undergraduate and was afterward active on the club scene in Detroit, where he grew up. In the early 1970s, he moved to Manhattan with a small group of friends, and by night frequented the Tenth Floor, Paradise Garage, Studio 54, and other venues. The "doll children," as they were known, gained a reputation with their exaggerated style, fresh manner, and committed looks. Weston's exhibition practice, which began as precarious street assemblage—including the distribution project *Homeless Shopping Network* (1990s)—later infiltrated the clubs and day treatment facilities he attended and has long been supported by Visual AIDS.

Frederick Weston performed lectures and readings for Visual AIDS as well as at Gordon Robichaux, New York (2019); Artists Space, New York (2018); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016). His solo installations and projects have been exhibited at La Galleria, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, New York (2018); Gordon Robichaux, New York (2019); and the Ace Hotel, New York (2020). His mid-career retrospective, *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When All You Ever Needed Was the Blues*, was organized by the Rankin Art Gallery, Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Michigan (2011). His work also featured in the survey exhibition *Tag: Proposals on Queer Play and the Ways Forward*, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (2018), curated by Nayland Blake. A book-length conversation between the artist and acclaimed author Samuel R. Delany will be published by Visual AIDS in early 2021, as the seventh volume in the DUETS series.

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[1] Deters, Alexandria. "The Comfort in Being Blue: A Conversation with Frederick Weston", *Eazel Magazine*, March 2, 2020.

[2] "This exhibition is the most extensive survey of his work to date..." - Press Release. "Frederick Weston", *Ortuzar Projects*, December 2020.

[3] "But with growing racial consciousness in America and Great Britain in the mid 20th century, public outcry grew, as Bannerman's caricatures were cited as patronizing and demeaning towards Blacks, and her use of the name, "Sambo," a blatant racial slur. Though there was never any court order actually banning the book, many libraries removed it from their shelves. Others defended the book as an important artefact from a bygone era, emphasizing that the author never intended to insult or offend anyone. In America, harsh criticism reached its peak during the Civil Rights Movement of the '60s. The book never totally disappeared, however; in some libraries, it was stored behind the counter." - Jama, "The Story of Little Black Sambo: a book with a checkered past", *Jama's Alphabet Soup*, September 30, 2008.

[4] Pilgrim, David. "Little Black Sambo and the JCM - *Jim Crow Museum*, Ferris State University, January 2008.

[5] Press Release. "Tabboo! 1982–1988", *Gordon Robichaux*, November 2020.

[6] Press Release. "Frederick Weston", *Ortuzar Projects*, December 2020.

[7] McRae, Donald. "The night boxer Emile Griffith answered gay taunts with a deadly cortege of punches", *The Guardian*, September 10, 2015.

[8] Kesselman, Shlomo Chaim. "What Was the Golden Calf?"

[9] Crawford, Stephanie, LJ Roberts, Pamela Sneed, Cliff Boone, Esther McGowan, Svetlana Kitto, Alex Fialho, TRET Tierney, and Tyler Matthew Oyer. "A Tribute to Frederick Weston, on the occasion of his birthday and the opening of his exhibition at Ortuzar Projects", *Visual AIDS*, December 8, 2020.

[10] Duan, Noël. "LJ Roberts, Artist & Lecturer at Parsons, and Sparky & Ziggy", *Argos & Artemis*, July 5, 2020.