

**SYDNEY VERNON**

Press book

# 6 Emerging Black American Artists to Keep On Your Radar

Covering a wide range of practices, these rising artists are making a name for themselves while also honoring the influences of Black art pioneers.

While the debate about the qualifications of “emerging” artist continues—especially given the complication of social media—the simplest way to approach the ambiguous classification is by looking at artists in the early stages of their careers: those that are just starting their journey and already gaining the attention of curators and collectors. In other words, artists who know how to drive and have their foot on the pedal. In the midst of Black History Month, *CULTURED* looked across geography and disciplines for this group of interesting, committed, and dynamic emerging Black American artists primed to change the world.



Photography by Daniel Diasgranados.

## Sydney Vernon

Sydney Vernon, 28, is another artist hailing from Prince George's County, Maryland, and she currently lives and works in New York. Vernon superimposes personal family photographs and folklore with both real and imagined histories, quietly critiquing the global depiction of Black life and bodies. Combining elements of painting, drawing, and collage, her multilayered works blend memory and history into new forms, at once imagining a poetic contextualization and a demand for recontextualization, coalescing symbols and ornaments with the spirit of her figures. Vernon earned a BFA from The Cooper Union and recent exhibitions include “Black Femme: Sovereign of WAP and the Virtual Realm,” curated by Christiana Ine-Kimba Boyle at Canada Gallery, New York in 2021 and a solo exhibition “When We See Us” at Thierry Goldberg Gallery, New York. Vernon will be included in a few upcoming shows, including Sargent's Daughters inaugural show in its new LA Gallery opening during Frieze week as well as an upcoming group exhibition with Luce Gallery in Italy. Last month, Kapp Kapp gallery announced its representation of the artist and Vernon will have a debut solo exhibition with the gallery this fall.



## C-Print (2021)

### Future Watch: Sydney Vernon

Sydney Vernon's beautiful and contemplative work as a painter lends its inspiration in part from her family's own photographs and caught our eye last year when she emerged with her first solo exhibition *When We See Us* at Thierry Goldberg Gallery in New York. A great feat the exhibition, considering as well that she is still yet pursuing her BFA from the Cooper Union in New York and timed at the height of an ongoing pandemic. "The pandemic is life changing", says the artist, adding that her practice has become much more dialogue-driven.

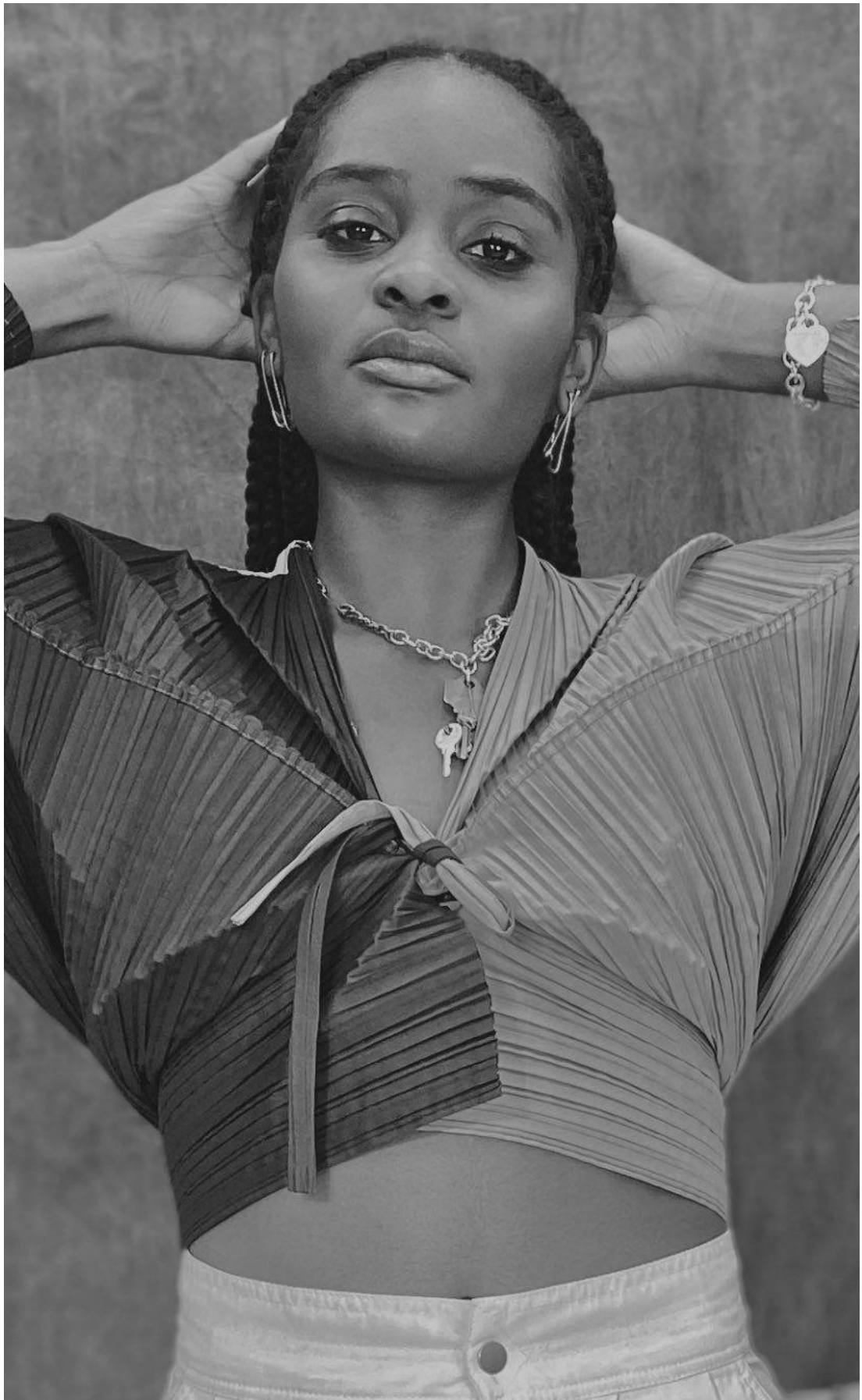


Sydney Vernon, *My Fair Lady*, 2020

**C-P:** You are in the midst of completing your BFA at the Cooper Union in New York and emerged in the art world with your first solo exhibition during a year, which due COVID-19 rendered the world in a state of inertia, or apathy if you will. As a young artist, what sort of considerations did experiencing this tumultuous reality prompt forth in your practice for the time to come?

**SV:** I consider a lot of the same things I did pre-pandemic but they have a very different frame now with all that's gone down. Those considerations being: black beauty, familial history/ancestry, appropriation, motion, colour, the commodification of black art, the importance of learning from black art history, pattern recognition, visual literacy, philosophies of liberation, and how all of this is tied to my own praxis. For me this question of emerging is also tied to my identity as a student. As you mentioned I'm completing my BFA in New York, so in a way I'm really fortunate because in this time when a lot of artists have been isolated, I've been in classes continuing my education. My instructors have been offering support, and I've been figuring out how to make art with my cohort. I think about the way art is made as a community a lot, even if we are quarantined in our studios alone. I appreciate the support during irl/url virtual studio visits, where dialogue and venting all goes into the work.

The pandemic is life changing. I consumed a lot of content before COVID hit. During COVID, I started consuming way more content because I was at home; television, movies, magazine, blogs, social media, books, music, art, lectures, all of it. I've considered how I could approach new media and video. I made one video during covid and was really happy with how it turned out. I've considered performance and have made a few online through Instagram live and in person. I started paying for a lot by myself this year. Seeing how unsupportive the American government has been of its people made me consider how much my work is worth, and how it was a blessing to be able to support myself and others during this time. My practice has become much more dialogue-driven. I'm really considering how the collective *we* can support each other when something like this (e.g. a global health pandemic or global uprising in defense of black life) inevitably happens again, and what artifacts I can make now to provide evidence that I survived and tried to keep making.



Sydney Vernon

**C-P:** The works presented in the exhibition at Thierry Goldberg Gallery consisted of scenes and images from your family's photographs. Furthermore, as you state in your Instagram account you also have "an archival impulse". As regards using family photographs as a source material, how do you go about the selection of which photographs to depict? Is the painted image a means of archiving the past or rather redefining it?

**SV:** My Instagram bio is taken from the title of a text written by Hal Foster. It's a very dense thirty-page piece; so putting it in my bio reminds me to return to it every so often. Your question actually prompted me to reread it, and it's still dense and I still like the underlying questions to Foster's inquiries. My personality is by design prone to impulsivity (or compulsivity), and that leaks into my lived experience.

I take lots of pictures and notes to remember things, and I think that's a major touchstone of existing in society. There is a black female subjectivity also entangled within these photos. The ones that my mother is not captured in, she has captured with her own camera, and is the reason they exist and that I can work from them today. I go for the clear and crisp images. The ones that I can digitally scan and see all of the details. I want to get as close to the moment as possible and see myself there. I think my work is a way to redefine my relationship to these scenes, so I can become an agent rather than a passive actor in my personal narratives. It's like a collaboration with the past –which I love the idea of– because history is something I have great reverence for. Also, I just like making my family happy. They love seeing these images and how they scale from family photographs into works of art.





Sydney Vernon, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 2019

**C-P:** Which reflections come into play when working or reworking the images from a point of place in the future in relation to when they were first taken? What does that elicit in you and how do you carry that over to the painting?

**S.V:** I think about how images are made and read – photos as text. I also think about my current limitations and capabilities. I don't privilege my hand in that way. If there is something I can't draw I won't spend time figuring out how to do it. Instead I'll reflect on how to create an image that addresses all of the things I feel are important. I reflect on my role as a practitioner, translator, sister, daughter, student, etc. I spend a lot of time thinking about connections and intersections and junctures and obstacles and what is better left unsaid and opaque when I begin to work/rework the images.



Sydney Vernon, *When We See Us*, 2019

**C-P:** One of your works is titled *The Warmth of Other Suns*. The title is, I gather, a nod to the seminal work by Isabel Wilkerson which bears the same title and which chronicles the Great Migration during the twentieth century. What considerations go into your choice of titles for your works and what significance does the choice have in framing in or contextualizing your works and how they are interpreted?

**S.V:** My piece *The Warmth of Other Suns* is directly related to that book. I often come across images and books that strike me in how I register them impulsively. Many pieces remain untitled until I understand what they mean to me. I named it that so I could remember to return to that book. I've actually only read parts of it but when I gave my piece that title I knew I could never forget it. Some of my titles are influenced by movies and poetry as well. I just hate forgetting things so I try to put as much value into my titles as possible.

**C-P:** Another significant event that has made its mark this past year is of course the BLM movement. How do you think a movement like BLM contributes to altering the gaze on figurative black painting?

**S.V:** It doesn't. I don't like this question. I'll pose some additional questions because I think of them as two sides of the same coin. How does BLM contribute to altering the gaze on figurative white painting? How is one of the most contemporarily collected genres of painting being affected? Altered by what? Market pressures? Art criticism? Whose gaze? This seemingly omnipresent gaze is still a very specific audience of gatekeepers. I think people right now are more intrigued by black art. Again back to the impulse. I'm not sure what drives America's obsession with Blackness but it has existed pre-BLM. I'm not interested in disingenuous gazes. I'm interested in prison bailouts, and funding for early arts education in black and brown neighborhoods and exposing voter suppression in the States, and finding the antidote to working within a white supremacist society that creates new horrors everyday and perpetuates anti-Blackness.

I think BLM makes black figurative painting even more political. I also think it makes white figurative painting more political. These genres should be assessed with the same critical and politicized eye because now we are paying more attention to the origins of painting and how rooted in supremacy it really is.





Sydney Vernon, *Untitled* (1996), 2018

**C-P:** On a final note, what are some artists who have inspired and are of significance to you as an artist?

**SV:** Adrian Piper, Carrie Mae Weems, Cauleen Smith, Lorna Simpson, and Toyin Ojih Odutola to name a few.

Images courtesy of the artist.

This feature was originally produced for C-print's The Future Watch Issue in print, a close collaboration with the BA3 Class in Graphic Design and Illustration at Konstfack, and released (May 2021) and sold at Index Foundation in Stockholm (our main distributor).



## She Curates (2021)

**SYDNEY VERNON**

**@SYDEVERNON**

Welcome to the first exclusive She Curates feature of 2021! I was lucky enough to speak to the talented Sydney Vernon!

I discovered Vernon after her solo show at Thierry Goldberg Gallery in New York, titled "When We See Us." Describing her work as "ambitious, sentimental and historical" I interviewed Vernon from England to New York. The full interview has been transcribed onto the website! Follow the link in the bio!

"I also throw a lot of like easter eggs into a lot of the work. References, like things outside of my personal family history, but also things that are impactful to like my version of understanding history. Some of the references are, are still, like deeply personal but a little bit more accessible than like, my personal family archive."

We discuss dream dinner parties, solo exhibitions, mediums and more!

What an incredible way to start the year off with a marvellous bang! Thank you Sydney.



### INTERVIEW

[Our conversation started in one room. Sydney showed me some of the incredible works behind her.]

S: I've collected so many prints and paintings over the years. It's crazy.

**M: WELL, IT LOOKS AMAZING! NOW I KNOW I'M BIASED BUT I DON'T THINK THERE IS IS ANYTHING, SUPERFLUOUS, THAT IS BETTER TO BUY, OR COLLECT, THAN ARTWORK.**

S: Yeah! Even during COVID I started buying paintings because I had my solo show in March. And I made money, but I couldn't do anything. Because it's COVID everything was closed. I was like, Okay, I can't take a trip. I can't like really go outside or anything. So I just invested in some paintings from really good friends. And I felt really good about that.

**M: WHAT ARE YOU UP TO AFTER OUR INTERVIEW?**

S: I'm sitting right here. And I don't know, maybe I'll go to the studio a little bit.

**M: HOW FAR AWAY IS YOUR STUDIO NOW, SINCE YOU'VE MOVED?**

S: It is kind of far. I'm in such a period of transition right now. It's wild. I have to get my morning routine and everything together. I just moved to Ridgewood, my studio was already far away. Now, it's a good like, 45-minute drive. I'm trying to get my routine sorted and be an organized adult.

**M: SO, LET'S GET INTO IT! SYDNEY, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR OWN WORK IN THREE WORDS?**

S: I think I would say ambitious, sentimental and historical.



**M: IT'S REALLY INTERESTING. AND THEY OBVIOUSLY INFORM EACH OTHER AND WHAT YOU'RE DOING. TELL ME ABOUT YOUR SOLO SHOW THIS YEAR? HOW DID THAT GO? IT WAS IN MARCH, AM I RIGHT?**

S: Yeah, I mean, I had an opening night. And that was really, really, really fun. So it opened on March 7, or something, and it was Armory Week in New York. COVID hadn't properly hit, everybody was like: oh, just wash your hands. So I did have the opening night and then the week after, it was done. New York was shut down.

[At this point, it is important to note that Sydney's roommate (Mosie Romney's) gorgeous dog walked into shot]

**M: CAN YOU GIVE AN EXAMPLE? LIKE WHAT KIND OF THINGS DO YOU MEAN? WHAT KIND OF THINGS MIGHT I'VE SEEN?**

S: For example, magazine clippings. I know, in one piece this, like, two, two pages from a New York Times article that came out like, the week I was making that piece. And then it like a more recent one piece I've used some archival images from the Library of Congress Collections. Also, I reference a lot of other artists. So in one piece, like, I redrew, a Kerry James Marshall image. And in another piece, I collaged in a Barkley Hendrix drawing. So I do a lot of referencing of other artists, like whether it's explicitly or not so much.

**M: WOULD YOU SAY THAT A LOT OF THE INFLUENCES FROM YOUR WORK DO COME FROM OTHER ARTISTS? OR DO YOU THINK IT COMES FROM AN INTERNAL SOURCE?**

S: A bit of both. Ever since I started, going to school for art, which, honestly, I've always been going to school for art. I started at the basics, you know. Perhaps the basic is Warhol, like everybody knows Warhol. Mainstream. Then I got older and began exploring pieces by different artists that I enjoyed, learning more about them as people and their processes. Going into wormholes, doing research and discovering lesser known artists. There's a lot of information in books, You really get into an artists mind... I steal from artists all the time because they know what they are doing!

**M: I'M GOING TO HAVE TO KEEP A BETTER EYE OUT! I'VE SEEN YOUR WORK, OBVIOUSLY, ONLINE AND OBVIOUSLY ON INSTAGRAM - SPEAKING OF CLASSIC WORMHOLES, INSTAGRAMS IS A MASSIVE ONE - BUT YOU CAN'T SEE THOSE SORT OF DETAILS. THAT'S FASCINATING.**

S: Yeah, I mean, that's the great thing about seeing work in person, you you get to see the textures and some of the little scribbly things that artists write.

**M: YEAH, INSTAGRAM OFTEN DOESN'T DO ARTISTS JUSTICE, IS IT? AND SO YOU'VE SPOKEN A LITTLE BIT ABOUT HOW YOU'VE ALWAYS GONE TO SCHOOL FOR ART. FOR THE PEOPLE THAT DON'T KNOW YOU, WHAT'S WHAT'S BEEN YOUR STORY? HOW DID YOU KNOW YOU WOULD BE AN ARTISTS? AND HOW HAS EVERYTHING CHANGED SINCE THEN?**

S: I mean, I think I always knew I was going to do something creative because my mom put me in a Magnet Arts School. So I started my education there and remained in the same school until eighth grade. Went on to make art in high school but when I was 17 I just like wasn't taking myself that seriously. I did get into Pratt. But it was so expensive. I had to drop out after one semester. Then I then I just started working. And I, I did retail for a little bit. And then I found my way to like, the most creative position in retail, which was visual merchandising. Yeah, did that for a little bit. My sister, who is an artist, told me to apply to Cooper.. so I applied to Cooper, and I got in. And I was, okay, it seems as if I'm moving to New York, to be a better artists and to take this seriously. So I think it was, it was always just about like, taking myself seriously. I think I always knew I was gonna do it. I just didn't invest in the path to actually do it until I was 21.

**M: SO WAS IT THAT THAT MOMENT WITH YOUR SISTER? IS THAT WHAT GAVE YOU LIKE THE PUSH TO BELIEVE IN YOURSELF AND BELIEVE IT WAS A VIABLE CAREER PATH FOR YOU AND WHAT YOU WANT TO DO?**

S: I mean, I knew it was possible. I definitely knew, I just didn't know what I wanted to do. You know, kids are like, I want to be an artist. But what kind of artist? Do you want to sell your own work? Do you want to like help somebody else? Do you want to be an illustrator? So I just didn't know what I wanted to do.

**M: SO YOUR WORK IS NOW HEAVILY PAINTING AND MIXED MEDIA ELEMENTS. HAVE YOU USED OTHER MEDIUM?**

S: Yeah, a lot of the work has elements of print, whether it's like silkscreen, or I make a lot of monotypes and Xerox transfers. One of my biggest, flaws as a human is I really don't like doing something if it's not gonna look the way I want it to look. I have severe masterpiece syndrome. So I have done sculpture. But sculpture is really, really hard. In terms of like, technicality. I'm terrible at measuring and math. So like, when we had to do sculpture in school, it was like working with wood and metal. I knew I was just going to do performance instead. So I turned all of my sculpture assignments into performances. I loved it. And I make videos sometimes.

**M: WHAT BREED IS SHE? SHE'S GORGEOUS!**

S: She's a pitbull Labrador mix

**M: SHE LOOKS LIKE SHE LOVES ATTENTION!**

S: She does! So for the show, I had been working with that gallery for like a year. I was in one other group show. And after that, the work got a good response. I sold both of the pieces that were in that group show. And the owner of the gallery was like, okay, we're gonna do a solo. And I was like: What?!

**M: STRAIGHT IN THE DEEP-END!**

S: It was cool. I made several more pieces, and did the solo. So I was really naive, like, I didn't really know anything. I'm a junior in undergrad. And that seems weird that I'm getting a solo. But you know, I'm not gonna block my blessings.

**M: AMAZING. AND IT WAS AN OBVIOUS SUCCESS, DESPITE EVERYTHING GOING ON IN THE WORLD?**

S: Yeah, it was up for so long. You know, the normal run of the shows is like three and a half weeks. My show was probably four months. It was definitely interesting. I'm just glad I had got to have the opening night I would have been really sad.

**M: YOU CAN'T BEAT THE ENERGY!**

S: Yeah, it's definitely an energy thing. And it all came from one piece I made during undergrad! I think it's just one of those things where you have to go through it and see the good and the bad. I really learned so much. And it was extremely anxiety inducing. I don't know, there's a thing about how stuff doesn't happen when you're ready for it? Yeah. Sometimes it just happens. And you have to go with it.

**M: LIKE ROLLING WITH THE PUNCHES. THIS IS QUITE A DIFFICULT QUESTION, BECAUSE I THINK IT'S HARD TO BOIL DOWN SUCH AN ECLECTIC BODY OF WORK TO ONE ELEMENT, BUT WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS ALMOST THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF YOUR WORK?**

S: Definitely the drawing. I don't I really don't consider myself to be a painter, but because there is paint in the work I'm not gonna say I don't paint. But at the end of the day most of what I do is based in drawing, and it's about immediacy and responding to marks. And I think that's some of the quality that people respond to is the mark making. Patterns are nice, you know, that's cool. And colours are great. But sometimes I just like put the work in grayscale. And I'm like, Okay, this makes sense because of the marks not because of like all the extra stuff. That's what is the most interesting to me.

**M: SO YOU PHOTOGRAPH IT. AND THEN USE GRayscale THROUGH THE CAMERA ON YOUR PHONE?**

S: Yeah, my phone has so much to do with my practice. It's like a catch 22.

**M: SO, SPEAKING OF PHONES, OBVIOUSLY WE MET ON OUR PHONES! BUT, YOUR INSTAGRAM, AND MEDIA ONLINE PRESENCE HAS JUST LIKE BLOWN UP. I SWEAR IN THE LAST LIKE, SIX MONTHS. WOULD YOU AGREE?**

S: Yeah, a little bit. I've been on Instagram since I was like, 13. So I've always liked social media, and have had some aspirations of being able to have a platform. I can consider myself a micro influencer. It's almost like there's a bubble and past a certain point, it might burst if the account grows too big.

**M: SO WHAT ARE THE SORT OF THEMES AND PRACTICES HE WOULD SAY THAT MOVE THROUGH YOUR BODIES OF WORK? WE'VE DISCUSSED A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND OBVIOUSLY OTHER THE EASTER EGGS YOU PUT IN AND THINGS LIKE THAT, BUT WHAT KIND OF QUESTIONS ARE YOU TRYING TO ANSWER EXPLORE?**

S: It's definitely about emotion. I don't want to sound like a maniac. But I really do love manipulating emotions. I recognise how insane it sounds. But I think there's also a lot of control and beauty in that. For example, your favourite movie could be the saddest movie in the world. And that's why you love it because it has this emotional tether. And I love that. I don't know what that is in my personality. Does that makes me an insane person? But I really do love when people have an emotional reaction to something. I don't like making images that don't mean anything. I'm not going to say that. I like making images in general and I just like drawing. But if I'm going to make something and I know a lot of people are going to see it. I would prefer to have an emotion in mind that they're gonna, like, respond to, like, whether it be like grief, or excitement or anger. I don't know, I think I just watched too many movies or something. And I'm just like always playing director.



**M: SO WHEN YOU START TO WORK, AND YOU'VE GOT THE INITIAL IDEA, DO YOU HAVE THAT KIND OF EMOTION IN MIND? AND THAT MINUTE PICKS EVERYTHING ELSE, LIKE THE COLOUR PALETTE? YOU KNOW? EVERYTHING?**

S: I mean, you improvise, and you roll with the punches or whatever. But, um, I think I always know, kind of like, because the work is so personal to me, I know how I feel about it. So in the in the point of transition, I have to decide how I want other people to feel about it. Or at least try to guide it because I can't tell people what to do. Like, I'm not I'm not a telepath or something. But I can make certain visual choices to, you know, influence the way people are going to view the image.

**M: KIND OF GUIDING IT TO THAT END POINT, ISN'T IT? RATHER THAN LIKE DICTATING?**

S: Exactly. Definitely emotion then as a theme. And then like, black art history is super important to me. And just black history in general. Whenever I come across some like amazing research, I figure out how to make a piece about it. Education is a part of it.

**M: SO, WE'VE GOT THESE THEMES, AND SOME OF THE PROCESS THROUGH THE USE OF YOUR PHONE... HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE REST OF YOUR PROCESS?**

S: I've been using either a light table or a projector since I was, 12. I'm so 'type A' about how I want my stuff to look, I always project and kind of just get like an underdrawings of the subject. And then once I see what's there I can decide, okay, there's way too much foreground going on, or this detail just isn't necessary for this image. So I'm not going to use it in the end or it'll get covered up or something. So, I definitely use the projector a lot. Then I just spend most of my time drawing like looking at my computer or my phone and just, going back and forth to get likenesses or details and then I get bored. So sometimes I'll just do something crazy. Like I'll just look around the studio and be like, what, can I glue on this? Yeah, so like, throw it off, and then maybe I can do some problem solving. And then I'll try to

find a way to put in a reference if, if it's necessary, which it usually is, I usually arrive at it at some point. And then what I do is cut the edges just gesso the back of the piece and sit with it and it's probably done.

**M: INCREDIBLE. AND WHAT IS THE SOURCE IMAGERY THAT YOU USE?**

S: I've been just working from this massive archive of photos that my mom and my dad have given me. But because I'm on the internet, so much like other stuff comes in just like images from Tumblr, images that I actually have taken. All over the place!

**M: INCREDIBLE. OKAY, I LOVE THIS QUESTION, BECAUSE EVERYONE HAS A DIFFERENT ANSWER EVERY DAY. BUT IF YOU COULD OWN ONE PIECE OF ARTWORK IN THE WORLD, AND NO MATTER COST, OR YOU KNOW, LIKELIHOOD, OR SIZE OR ANYTHING, WHAT WOULD THE ARTWORK BE?**

S: It's a great question. It would have to be another black woman painter. Probably Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

**M: PERFECT CHOICE. IN A SIMILAR VEIN, IF YOU COULD HAVE A MEAL WITH ANY ARTISTS FROM ANY TIME, WHAT WOULD THE MEAL BE? AND ALSO, WHO WOULD THE ARTISTS BE?**

S: I know the food because it just has to be this. It's such a southern like comfort food. And hopefully whoever I pick isn't vegetarian... like neck bones and kidney beans and rice in gravy with collard greens. It's not anything fancy. People would bring their guards down. And it's got to be Kerry James Marshall at the table. He's everyone's dad. Then also Tamara de Lempicka. The conversation would be wild. Then also, Noah Davis. Then, Njideka Akunyili Crosby. I think they're really nice. Intimate small.

**M: INTIMATE, COMFORT AND NOURISHING. AND FINALLY, WHO ARE YOUR FAVOURITE CONTEMPORARY FEMALE ARTISTS?**

S: Eden Seifu @edenbseifu

Culture Type (2020)

# For Her First Solo Exhibition, Sydney Vernon Brings New Life and Meaning to Moments Captured in Treasured Family Photographs

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jun 4, 2020 • 4:58 pm

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PATTERNED BLUE WALLPAPER defines the room. Standing in profile in front of a mirrored vanity table, an expectant mother turns her head toward the viewer. She smiles and proudly rests her hand on her growing belly. Documenting the moment, the mirror reflects her image.

Other works depict a little girl standing mischievously in a bathroom sink; a father and daughter crouched down posing on a wood dock; a little girl combing the hair of a white Cabbage Patch doll; and a woman in a loose red top and plum skirt laying elegantly on a bed.

On view at Thierry Goldberg Gallery in New York, the works on paper are featured in "Sydney Vernon: When We See Us," the first solo exhibition of **Sydney Vernon** (b. 1995). Blending painting, drawing, and printing techniques, Vernon creates layered images based on family photographs.

Fully aware of the camera, each of her relatives is looking directly at the viewer, except a woman playing the violin in the kitchen in a work titled "Kitchen Lessons" (2019). Her eyes are cast down toward the instrument. She's transported.

*“Exploring identity and family history, Vernon approaches familiar terrain with an entirely unique visual style.”*





SYDNEY VERNON, "All the things you could be by now," 2018 (ink, charcoal, oil paint, oil pastel, and screenprint on paper, 80 x 52 inches). | © Sydney Vernon, Courtesy Thierry Goldberg Gallery

The sentimental portraits are by turns moving, precious, joyous, and alluring. The photographs that inspired them span 40 years, dating back to more than a decade before the artist was born. Exploring identity and family history, Vernon approaches familiar terrain with an entirely unique visual style.

She casts her protagonists in spaces rendered in a fashion that evokes interior design schematics. The use of black-and-white for some elements and color for others, adds to the perspective and dimensionality of the scenes. They also benefit from a layered effect achieved with screen printing, which she collages into the works, introducing prints and patterns in the form of wallpaper and other elements.

Born in Prince George's County Maryland, a suburb of Washington, D.C., Vernon lives and works in New York City, where she is pursuing a BFA at The Cooper Union. In May, Vernon was one of five student artists selected by the Brooklyn Museum for its [#YourPortrait2020](#) online art show, a collaboration with Instagram.

Speaking about her work last November, Vernon told [Art of Choice](#): "I'm really interested in sharing histories through a personal lens rather than reinforcing 'textbook histories' that generalize and skip over the specifics of everyday life. I often sift through my family photos, and consider the larger climate of the world in those moments. The photos have the ability to directly capture a specific moment as it relates to my family and indirectly reference the a world condition that surrounded it's making." **CT**

TOP IMAGE: SYDNEY VERNON, "My Fair Lady," 2020 (gouache, pastel, and silkscreen on paper , 48 x 73 inches). | © Sydney Vernon, Courtesy Thierry Goldberg Gallery

Originally slated to be on view March 8-May 22, 2020, "[Sydney Vernon: When They See Us](#)" at Thierry Goldberg Gallery in New York City, will remain on display through July 2. Currently open by appointment only, the gallery plans to open to the public June 10.

EXPLORE [the exhibition in 3-D](#)

## Art of Choice (2019)

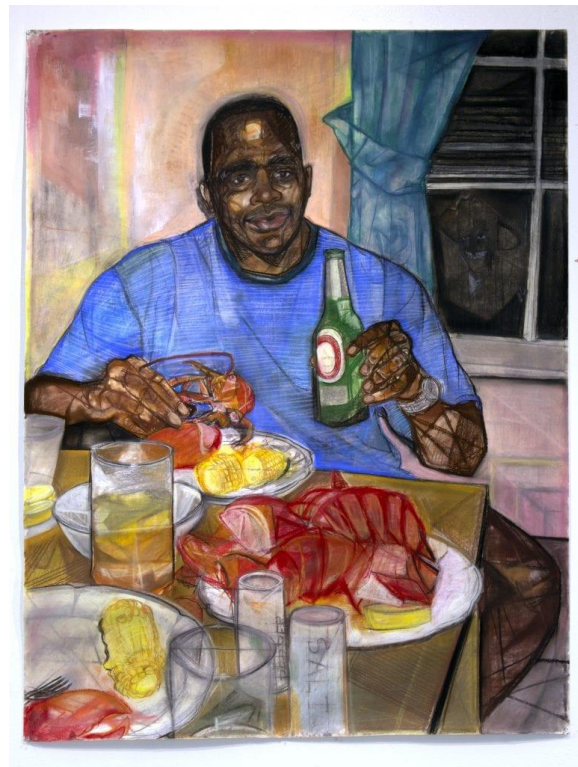
### SYDNEY VERNON MOVINGLY REIMAGINES PERSONAL FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS

NOVEMBER 13, 2019 | INTERVIEWS | MARIA VOGEL

SYDNEY VERNON exudes an artistic maturity far beyond her years. While still completing her BFA at the Cooper Union, Vernon has fallen into stride with work. Based on personal photographs — some from when she was a child and some more recent — Vernon recreates the people most meaningful in her life. Her work contains a raw sense of honesty and compassion, with so much heart one can't help but be attracted to the scenes before them.

**Tell us a little bit about yourself. Where are you from originally and when did art first enter your life?**

I spent my early childhood and teen years in Prince Georges County Maryland. My mom and dad are from New York, so I like to think that I'm a suburban girl with traces of city sensibilities. My mom had benefitted from a specialized high school arts education, having graduated from the High School of Art and Design(Manhattan) in 1974. When our family migrated to Maryland she sought out educational models that focused on artistic development for my sister and I. There was one public school for creative and performing arts in the area, so when I was old enough to start kindergarten at 4 years old, I went. Even before kindergarten, I remember my mother drawing with me, giving me lots of books with illustrations, and showing me how to trace over images that I liked and color them in with her prismacolor markers.



### From where do you draw inspiration for your works?

Most of the inspiration for my works comes from looking at photographs of my immediate family that span over 40 years. I'm really interested in sharing histories through a personal lens rather than reinforcing "textbook histories" that generalize and skip over the specifics of everyday life. I often sift through my family photos, and consider the larger climate of the world in those moments. The photos have the ability to directly capture a specific moment as it relates to my family and indirectly reference the a world condition that surrounded it's making. I'll draw inspiration from reflecting on stories I've heard directly from the mouths of my mom, dad and sister, and sometimes these stories will merge with a text I've recently read, a song I'm thinking about, or another piece of artwork that has had an impact on me.



### Are the figures in your works based on real people?

The figures in my work are based on real people. They are all drawn from photographic representations of mostly my mother, father, and sister. There are some people I have used as subjects of work that don't directly fit into my family bloodline, but have spent a lot of time with and around my family as a unit.





### What's a day in the studio like for you?

There isn't really a typical day in the studio for me. Most days I'll head to the studio after class. A lot of my classes end at 10pm so I find myself working at night until the building closes at 2am. Time is kind of precious so I'll usually pull up my reference image and get straight to work on drawing. Sometimes I'll be really invested in drawing for several hours or however long it takes to get a face rendered just right. Sometimes the urge to screen-print strikes me very intensely and I'll run to the print shop across the street to ink up my screen and collage elements of print in work. Sometimes I'll invite peers and professors in and have discussions about what works and what doesn't. I also use studio time to listen to a lot of artist talks (I'm currently obsessed with Ja'Tovia Gary and Arthur Jafa in conversation at SAAM in Washington D.C.) I guess one thing is always certain, somehow there will be charcoal and pastel dust on my hands, face and clothes before I leave.



### What other artists working today most inspire you?

In no particular order: Kevin Beasley, Daniel Diasgranados, Gerald Lovell, Jennie C. Jones, Ja'Tovia Gary, Kenturah Davis, Caitlyn Cherry, Kerry James Marshall, Tschabalala Self, Sam Vernon, Jeff Sonhouse, Arthur Jafa, Leslie Hewitt, Will Villalongo, Jennifer Packer, Jordan Casteel, Greg Brada, Lynette Yaidom Boakye, Njedeka Akunyili Crosby, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Deana Lawson, Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Genevieve Gaignard, Robert Pruitt, Meleko Mokgosi, Henry Taylor, Eric N. Mack, Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Titus Kaphar, Amy Sherald, Liz Johnson Artur, Tajh Rust, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Yinka Shonibare. I'm sure I'm missing dozens more.





When we met, we discussed how I came across your work on Instagram. How do you feel about Instagram's current role in the art world?

I think Instagram is deeply tethered to the art world right now and it gives me mixed feelings. It feels like there has been a much-needed democratization of accessibility. The possibility of encountering new work and artists feels endless, and just as easily as the artwork is seen it can be shared. However, I'm skeptical about this ease of access and the effects of Instagram on collective mental health, which doesn't have much to do with the art world directly but feels kind of linked. Additionally, the art world notoriously has many gatekeepers and I think Instagram can be a space where those privileged positions can be publicly challenged. Ultimately, Instagram has the potential to be a good tool for artists and the art world but there are problems of the larger internet culture and larger art-world culture that need to be addressed first before I can maintain a position of their connection.



What's next for you?

In 2021 I'm scheduled to graduate (maybe I'll feel motivated to change my Instagram name) and I'll have my BFA from the Cooper Union. It's going to be really nice to not have to go to class 4 days out of the week. In the nearer future though I'll be curating an exhibition and showing work in February 2020 at Cooper Union in the annual Black Student Union exhibition, which is also super exciting. The opportunity to travel has also come up because I've been nominated to study abroad for the Spring 2020 semester. So yea, just general movement forward and making a lot of art.





At the end of every interview, we like to ask the artist to recommend a friend whose work you love for us to interview next. Who would you suggest?

Appropriately enough Edén Seifu ([@EDENBSEIFU](#)) is an artist I encountered on Instagram. I think her work is elegant and imaginative and rich with historical metaphor. I would love to hear her talk more about the work and process.