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### Omnipresence and an Outlier

Cheyenne Monk

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Shiyeon Monk

Omnipresence and an Outlier

05/03/24

Studio Art

Washington University in St. Louis

## Chapters

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## 1. Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the possibility of existence outside the confines of labeled identity through the lens of art, drawing inspiration from personal experiences of racial alienation and the desire to transcend societal labels. Through figurations and world-building, I challenge the notion that one's identity must be defined by categories such as race and gender. By removing categorical physicalities and portraying violence as a means to confront bias-motivated aggression, I aim to provoke dialogue on prejudice without further alienation. Through a blend of surrealism, abstraction, and neo-expressionism, I create tense yet playful presentations of bodies to communicate themes of disturbance, alienation, and ambiguity. Drawing from the work of contemporary artists such as Christina Quarles, Kerry James Marshall, and Kara Walker, I explore the representation of identity in visual media and seek to develop a method for figuration that benefits the narrative of identifying bodies with no identity. By incorporating themes of familiarity, recognizable iconography, and a call for empathy, I strive to invite skepticism of propagandized misconceptions regarding marginalized bodies and push the boundaries of labeled identity to question its motive. Ultimately, my goal is to construct a world where individuals are liberated from the expectations of performing to satisfy societal norms, and where the category of "human" transcends the confines of identity.

## 2. Introduction

The materiality of skin and identifiers of gender are the two core elements of experimentation within my work. Fascinated by the absence of self that happens in search of identity, I conduct figurations and worldbuilding to question if existing outside the constraints of labeled identity is a possibility. As those experienced with contemporary social structure are familiar with the systems of patriarchy, racism, homophobia, ableism, and other prejudices that prohibit marginalized individuals from being considered the standard of humanity, I attempt to manifest a world that exists outside the constraints of how a body can exist in the modern world.

The overconsuming measures of race, gender, and sexuality require the ground of existence to depend on the categorization of the human body into various sectors. Unfortunately, these strict calculations of human experience can't fully encompass the fluid nature of one's being. Labeling the multiple overlapping and ever-changing definitions of a growing body with surface-level classification creates a pit for those who don't align with the anticipated semblance. This manufactured nihilism within intersectionality and the severance of belonging many mixed identity individuals experience bring the question of the efficiency in the markers that are so prevalent today. What function does this demarcation of bodies serve? How do they construct the understanding of modern bodies today? And what benefit does escaping these labels bring to an individual? These are the questions that guided the investigation of the representation of bodies with no identity through visual art.

Because these categories have no concrete standing, the perception and consideration of these categories vary depending on location and culture. As I was growing up in South Korea during the early 2000s, the misconception of the black race heavily affected the everyday interaction I had with my peers, neighbors, and strangers. The observatory stares, the assumption of my behaviors, and alienation from my surroundings all motivated me to remove myself from the body I inhabit. To exist outside of perceivable difference, and to have the freedom from expectation of behavior was an unachievable dream of mine. Once I moved to America, I was able to escape the constant surveillance I circumvented. Because of the normalization of variance in race, my time in Alabama was the first time I felt free from the perception of my skin by others. However, as I matured and learned more of the deeply ingrained systematic disadvantages, that feeling of freedom slowly escaped me. But I still yearn for it. The feeling of living as someone who belonged, as someone who is expected to take up space and exist, is something I try to replicate with my work. If there truly is a world where no one can be ostracized by who they are, what would they look like? What about the space they inhabit? Or the interaction they have with each other? With misinformed anatomy, and illogical time and space, I reflect on how a world, with a crumbled infrastructure of racism, sexism, and homophobia, functions.

### 3. Social Context

From the birth of the concept of race to now complicated interpersonal integration to social, political, and institutional infrastructure, identity has been a known topic for many individuals living in contemporary society. As a socially constructed measure of categorizing human behavior and physicalities, the standard of what identity someone belongs to has no accurate measure behind them. One of the oldest sectors of identity, race, was born in Europe during the 17th-century rise of the Enlightenment period. Separating truth and logic from the church, scientists and philosophers based their ideas on the “importance of secular reasoning, rationality, and scientific study, as opposed to faith-based religious undertakings of the world.”<sup>1</sup> This created a new business of categorizing and establishing new laws of human beings, inventing the concept of whiteness and others who fall underneath. Invented as a rationale for colonization the very concept of race persists today and imposes discrimination against many individuals. Like race, other labeled identities regarding gender, sexuality, disability, and many more have been employed deeply into numerous social structures that affect various demographics across the globe. Through the history of discrimination and prejudice, the ever-morphing status of these labels are the tools that uphold whiteness and its supremacy.

Within contemporary culture, identity has risen as the major trigger of geopolitical conflicts. Through the development of identity culture, the shift from ideology conflict to identity became apparent in the patterns of conflict seen in modern civilizations. These

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<sup>1</sup> “Historical Foundations of Race.” *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, 16 Dec. 2021, [nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race](https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race/topics/historical-foundations-race).

identities carry more than just labels. The weight of history, ancestry, and stereotype adds to the significance that labeled identity can have within a social structure designed to obstruct and discriminate against specific communities. Samuel Huntington, in his discussion of human conflict and its motivator, argued that the new patterns of conflict were now engineered “not for the reasons of ideology or power politics or economic interest but because of cultural kinship.”<sup>2</sup> With the invasive nature of the oppressive social structure, the system of discrimination sparks violent conflict once its hierarchy is questioned. As historical records show how ideologies were the forefront motivators of numerous devastating tragedies like war, the shift from ideology to identity in the trigger for conflict makes the most sense once understanding the intertwined relationship between the two. Identity, a socially constructed idea of an individual or a group, is always ideological. Ideologies, a system of ideas that can affect an individual’s perception of the political and social world, are always designed to appeal to certain identities.<sup>3</sup> Now with a stronger conception of what and where someone may belong due to their skin, gender, height, or even sexuality, the strength of these systems not only intensifies, but identity as a catalyst of conflict also intensifies in its potency.<sup>4</sup> As more and more people are comfortable with isolating themselves from others based on physicalities, the rationalization of violence against minorities becomes much more unchallenging. Thus stands my motivation to remove such reasoning from violence against marginalized communities. By removing the ability to recognize figures of a

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<sup>2</sup> Maynard, Jonathan Leader. “Identity and Ideology in Political Violence and Conflict.” *St Antony’s International Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 19

<sup>3</sup> Maynard, Jonathan Leader. “Identity and Ideology in Political Violence and Conflict.” *St Antony’s International Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 20

<sup>4</sup> Maynard, Jonathan Leader. “Identity and Ideology in Political Violence and Conflict.” *St Antony’s International Review*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 28



certain race or gender, I'm removing the justification for identity-based aggression that is prevalent in contemporary society. In doing so, I hope to highlight the absurdity of these motivators. Witnessing the violence or the physical acts the figures within my work engage in, I desire the audience to question the cause of these actions. Potentially realizing the dangers of fully immersing oneself within the system of labeled identity and the need to deconstruct the very tool of the oppressor.

According to the study of various countries' population studies, the rise of the population of people who consider themselves to have mixed identities has been consistent for the past twenty years.<sup>5</sup> Especially regarding multiracial individuals, their identity and how individuals identify themselves can differ by the environmental factors such as the demographic of the community they grew up in—proving how even universally accepted categories of race do not have a solidified measure. In numerous surveys conducted to understand the dysphoria of many multiracial individuals' self-identity, it is reported that having an understanding of oneself as being not confined to a single category proved to result in higher mental health and psyche. Transcending the category of skin frees a person from the expectation of their being. These findings do not confine within the range of multiracial individuals. It is mentioned that “similar to findings involving monoracial populations”, many sociological studies suggest that self-identification depends on the “explicit priming” or “racial diversity of a social context”.<sup>6</sup> The record of many multi and monoracial individuals experiencing alienation from racial categorization proves that this modular separation of individuals cannot

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<sup>5</sup> Gaither, Sarah E. “‘Mixed’ Results: Multiracial Research and Identity Explorations.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Gaither, Sarah E. “‘Mixed’ Results: Multiracial Research and Identity Explorations.” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2015, pp. 3.

serve the multifaceted, complex nature of human beings without failure. As ultimately a socially constructed system, there is a need to consider the successes and failures labeled identity brings to communities as a whole. As it was discussed, the transcendence from racial categories brings freedom to many marginalized individuals in viewing themselves as not only what they're identified as, but with consideration of everyone as human. The result of placing everyone on the base of their humanness will bring clarity to the perspective of true equality.

#### 4. References

Although a call for the removal of labeled identity may be viewed as advocacy for the removal of cultural and historical bonds many marginalized communities share, the very idea of creating work that outlines the identity-based experience comes from many contemporary artists who discuss their own identity and relationship with the community. The three artists of discussion within this paper are artists who create work relating to their identity, with either similar or different philosophies regarding identity or labels. Christina Quarles, Kerry James Marshall, and Kara Walker are all painters and sculptors who create large-scale paintings, objects, and installations, highlighting the topic of identity in America. Christina Quarles is a queer, mixed-race artist who creates large-scale paintings and drawings to confront the themes of ambiguity within race, gender, and queerness. Her figures have a sense of chromatic colors, with amalgamated body parts that create a new form of human existence within a planar, flat surface.



Figure 1. *To Where You Once Belong (Get Back)*, 2021, Christina Quarles, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 in

As displayed in Figure 1, Quarles defined the body through overlapping limbs, and posture, with no specificity to certain races through usage of flesh-like color. Like a drawing done with a marker, the goal of her work is to showcase “how the figure is fluid and changeable, or how the planes that hold those figures in impossible situations and support them also slice and fragment them”. Through fragmentation and the use of chromatic colors, Quarles provides a critique of the traditional categories of bodies. Kerry James Marshall is a prominent American painter who creates works with scenes from black culture in America. *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* especially is a piece

full of symbolism and references to art and cultural history, grounding the reflection of black culture deeply into the realm of fine arts in America. As displayed in Figure 2, the location of the scene is relevant to the bodies inhabiting the space. The bodies that exist within Kerry James Marshall's work don't require an explanation as to why and how they become. Through the mundane of the location, action, and dialogue, the work is not a discussion of the legitimacy of black culture but simply an argument for one to become monotonous.



Figure 2, *School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012, Kerry James Marshall, acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 x 158 in

Kara Walker is a contemporary maker who uses controversial portrayal of black stereotypes to highlight the exploitative, violent history of America. Working as a hyperbole of the dehumanization of black skin in the States, Walker's piece, *The*

*Katastwóf Karavan*, serves to shamelessly display the working narrative that maintains the oppressive system of racial categorization.<sup>7</sup> Through the usage of striking imagery and grand scale, Walker doesn't allow the audience to escape the very system the figures within her work and all members of contemporary society participate in. It is this blatant display of conversation regarding race and fantastical record of history that inspires the physical form of my work.



Figure 3. *The Katastwóf Karavan*, 2017, Kara Walker, Steel frame mounted to lumber running gear, aluminum, red oak and muslin wall panels, propane fired boiler, water tank, gas generator, brass and steel 38-note steam calliope, calliope controller panel with MIDI interface, iPad controller with QRS PNO software, 152 x 216 x 100 in

All three artists create fantastical work relating to identity and representation through visual media. Whether that is unrealistic figures, mundane but cultural settings, or shocking use of violence in imagery, the common thread between these artists' works are the consideration of representation based on the flaccid structure of race. As these artists showcase various methods of figuration in relation to the narrative of their work, I

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<sup>7</sup> Charlie Brinkhust-Cuff, "Turbine Hall artist Kara Walker: 'Apparently, the only thing I am is black'", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/sep/23/kara-walker-turbine-hall-tate-modern-racially-charged>

aim to participate in the development of a method for figuration that benefits the narrative of identifying bodies with no identity.

## 5. Final Statement

I conduct continual investigations to find a depiction of a truly neutral body detached from all contexts of marginalization. I'm constantly locating bodies made of unnatural colors, exaggerated facial expressions, and perverted limbs. The chromatic arrangement of skin color and its bulbous, sometimes metallic surface further exaggerate the bastardization of minorities' humanity. Tethering on the edge of dehumanization, I aim to objectify the body all while thoroughly considering its ability to feel, to suffer, and to exist. Fully engrossed in the idea of sustaining a fictional vacuum where displacement and estrangement are the norms, I use the unorthodox figures as a reflection of my own experience in gendered and racialized aggression. As a form of manifestation, I place the narrative of my work in reflection of the modern naturalistic landscape, with hints of domestic living in the forms of customary household items. For example, in my work "As Above, So Below", the architecture of the space utilizes symbols of road, language, and fences as a reference to contemporary life all while repositioning the figures in a flat, illogical, fictitious world. Knotting of the bodies and faces, inconsistent logic of space and light, I communicate with the language of illusion borrowing the letters from reality.





Figure 4. *As Above, So Below*, 2023, Shiyeon Monk, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 58 x 58 in

Through exploration of my fascination with the materiality of skin and the construction of gender identity. Motivated by personal experiences of racial alienation and the desire to exist beyond societal labels, I use figurations and worldbuilding to question the possibility of living outside prescribed identities. As I delved into the historical foundations of race as a socially constructed concept and its persistence in perpetuating discrimination, the stronger I am motivated to envision a world without

prejudice. By employing surrealism and abstractions to challenge social norms, I associate myself with the philosophy of neo-expressionism as I continue to create a tense, but playful presentation of bodies to communicate a sense of disturbance, alienation, and ambiguity. The approach to figuration is by first playing with the hue of skin that can be portrayed. The two portraits I created serve as an example of what a human being escaped from categories of race or gender may look like. By shifting the scale of value and color that incorporates all the primary colors as major sectors, I'm attempting to escape from the contemporary categorization of skin based on its color. Additionally, through the removal of hair and its socialized classification of gender, I hope to place the figures within my work in the realm of ambiguity.



Figure 5. *Head*, 2022, Shiyeon Monk, oil on linen, 9 x 9 in

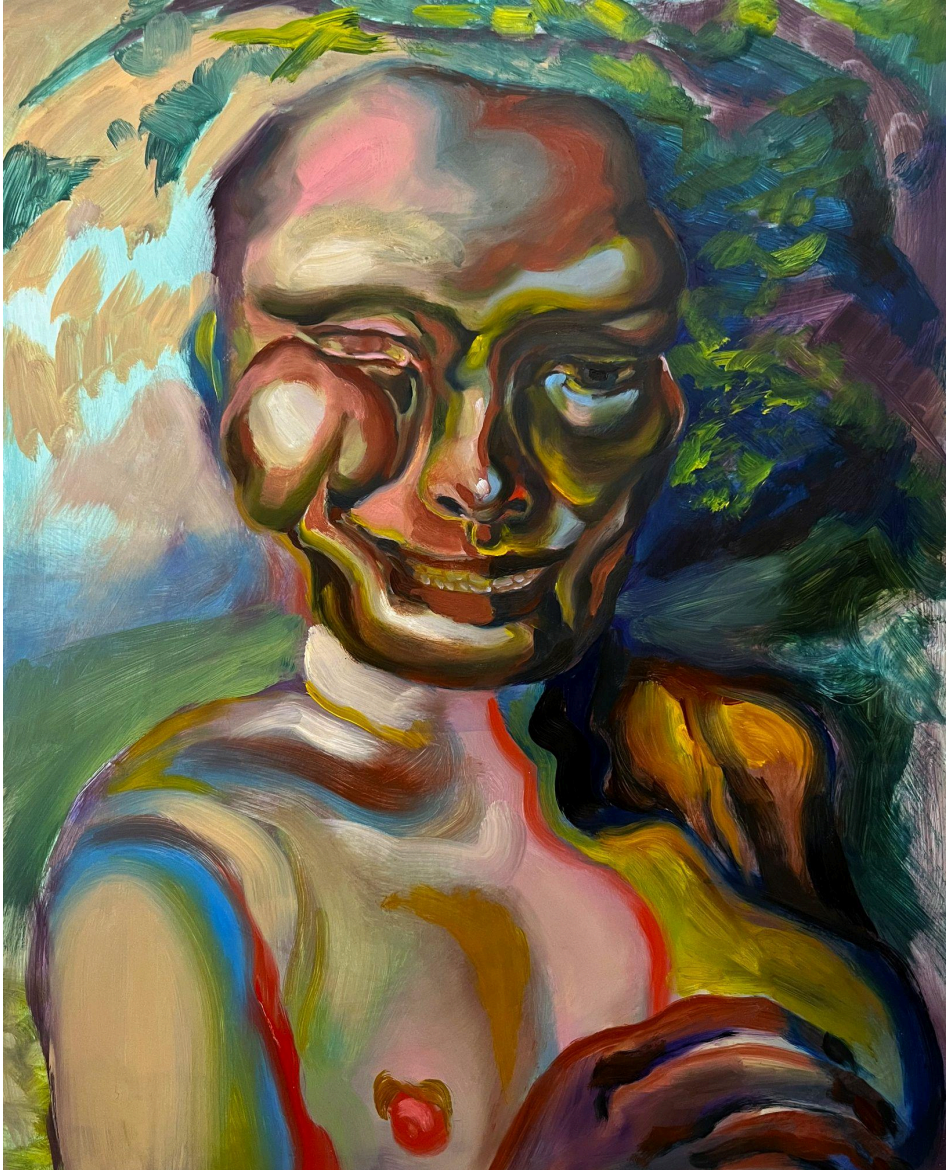


Figure 6. *The Portrait*, 2023, Shiyeon Monk, Oil on Wood, 24 x 16 in

Although removing figures from the classic categorization of race and gender, I still desire to consider the special relationship these figures have to their environments. With the reflection of items that can be found and related to certain cultures like China shown in *Nothing Like Mother's Love*, I am anonymously creating a link between the figures and existent location to narrate a scene with a tone of legitimacy. Yet consistent to create figures of ambiguous identity, the goal is to break the link between ethnicity and

racial identity. By relocating the space into an anonymous domestic space, I hope to emulate the dismemberment of logic and space Christina Quarles employs to further dramatize the ambiguity of the figures. Balancing between the realm of specificity and obscurity, the lack of demonstration of the role of space in relation to the figures serves as a tool to outline the demand to abandon the measures of labeled identity.



Figure 7. *Nothing Like Mother's Love*, 2022, Shiyeon Monk, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 in

The portrayal of violence present within my work is meant to represent the relatable aggression and violence that many minorities face today. Through social conditioning, the politics of violence against marginalized groups has evolved so cynically that a blatant display of killing doesn't question the existing system of prejudice and discrimination. Through the removal of categorical physicalities, I hope that the violence that I portray within my work comes across as much more aggressive. With desire to question why and how people are desensitized to the suffering of marginalized individuals fell into the domain of happenings rather than incidents to be outraged by. Through this new perspective of bias-motivated aggression as an unjustifiable, unreasonable act curated through the oppressive social structure, the absurdity of space and color work hand in hand with the narrative of my work, challenging viewers to confront their own bias embedded through societal norms and power dynamics.



Figure 8. *At The Jordan River*, 2023, Shiyeon Monk, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 in

My final piece, *Genesis*, is an amalgamation of all the work that I have developed through my investigation of identity and bodies. With research and a basic understanding of the four most recognized religions — Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, and Hinduism — I manufactured a creation myth for the creatures that populate my work. With the use of brighter colors and the incorporation of recognizable anatomy and animals, I hope to introduce an engaging visual experience as I communicate the complexities of bodies with no identity. The scale of the piece, meant to be somewhat intimidating at first glance, works in conjunction with the installation of the piece being

placed a bit higher than the conventional measures. I wanted the audience to participate in the act of raising their head to fully grasp the narrative being told. With the subconscious interpretation of this painting displaying its narrative in an authoritarian nature, I'm injecting a subtext of legitimacy into the obvious fiction being told with the work. Through the portrayed elements and specific display of this work, the goal of *Genesis* was to serve as a beginning chapter to the journey of identifying bodies with no identity that is persistent throughout the series of my work.



Figure 9. *Genesis*, 2024, Shiyeon Monk, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 156 x 108 in

Through exploration of my fascination with the materiality of skin and the construction of gender identity. Motivated by personal experiences of racial alienation and the desire to exist beyond societal labels, I use figurations and worldbuilding to

question the possibility of living outside prescribed identities. The subject of bias-motivated violence permeates the figuration within my work, but I desire to nurture the conversation of prejudice without alienation. I'm dedicated to inviting diverse perspectives to the conversation by incorporating themes of familiarity through color, recognizable iconography, and a call for empathy. With a low barrier to participation on the topic of labeled identities, I hope to invite skepticism of propagandized misconceptions regarding marginalized bodies. By delving deep into the intricate layers of societal constructs, the goal of my work is to push the boundaries of labeled identity to question its motive. With the demonstration of the destructiveness of categorization, I aim to dismantle the predefined norms of the kind of body that is upheld and sought after. As explored through various studies of multiracial, mixed-identity individuals, the experience of transcending the confined of one's identity can free an individual from the expectations of performing to satisfy the status quo. With the intention to incite an ideology of all individuals living within the category of "human", I construct a world with fragmented yet fluid figuration to demonstrate a kind of utopia where no confine based on identity may exert its power.



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## Works



*School of Beauty, School of Culture*, 2012,  
Kerry James Marshall, acrylic and glitter on  
unstretched canvas, 108 x 158 in



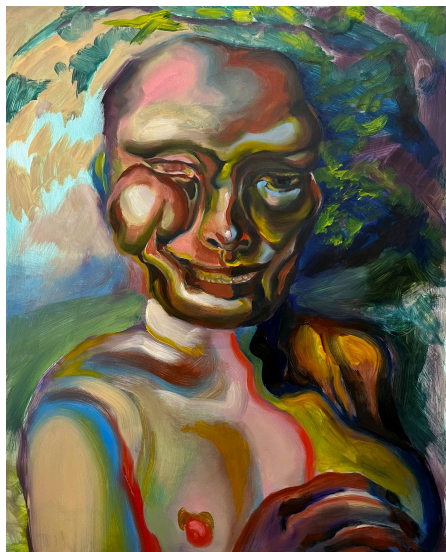
*To Where You Once Belong (Get Back)*,  
2021, Christina Quarles, acrylic on canvas,  
48 x 60 in



*The Katastwóf Karavan*, 2017, Kara Walker, Steel frame mounted to lumber running gear, aluminum, red oak and muslin wall panels, propane fired boiler, water tank, gas generator, brass and steel 38-note steam calliope, calliope controller panel with MIDI interface, iPad controller with QRS PNO software, 152 x 216 x 100 in



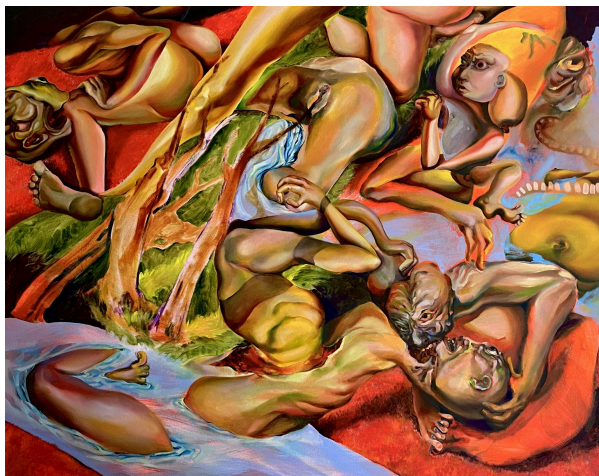
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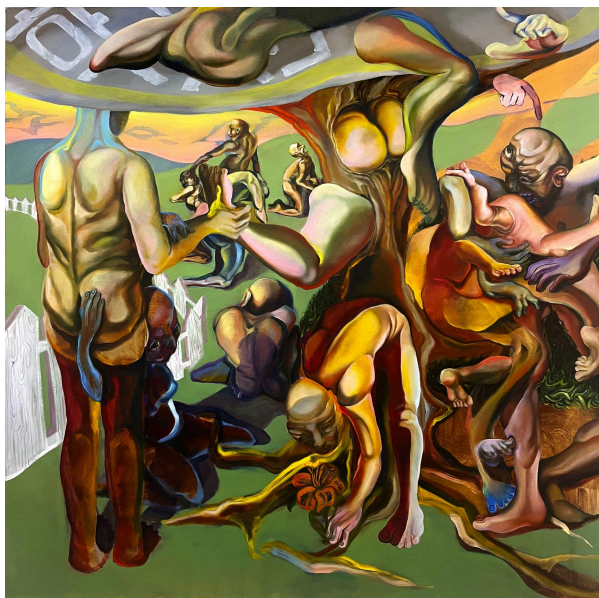
*The Portrait*, 2023, Shiyeon Monk, Oil on Wood, 24 x 16 in



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