

# HARMONIA ROSALES: MASTER NARRATIVE

## *Now at Spelman College*

by Rohan Zhou-Lee

Upon stepping into Harmonia Rosales' *Master Narrative* exhibition at Spelman College, one enters the Afro-Elysian. Grandiose portraits of Black people in fine fabrics standing on oceans greet attendees from the far end of the hall, inviting people into a world where Black people are the centerpiece to storytelling. Rosales captures and reworks classic stories in the Black image, introduces viewers to classic Yoruba folklore, and weaves the Black experience into a rich story.

Rosales often depicts Eve as a Black woman. In *Forbidden Fruit*, she sits haloed with watermelon. While many find the association stereotypical, Rosales references how several enslaved Black people sold them to buy their freedom. It possibly reflects how modern society forbids Black liberation. Eve returns in other paintings, surrounded by flowers and nature as a child in *Among The Peonies* and again in *Garden of Eve*. Rosales not only challenges Eurocentric narratives around the first woman, but also probes patriarchal punishment of a woman who questioned authority.

Throughout the exhibition, Rosales thematically ties colored robes to the orisha, or Yoruba spirits that remain prevalent in the Black Diaspora: Yemaya wears blue; Oshun yellow; and Shango red. The colors accompany enslaved people into Turtle Island in her *Still We Rise*, which gives all Black people halos and shows them ascending to heaven, and *Migration of The Gods*, which depicts the orisha rescuing people from water. Divinity accompanies Black people everywhere.

Perhaps the most compelling is *Master Narrative*, the exhibition's namesake. Prints of her work are embossed on the innards of a wooden ship, reminiscent of those that trafficked people from Africa. Hung upside down, this reimagined Sistine Chapel potentially affirms that Black people carry these beautiful stories with us always.

Marblesque gray and other undertones also adorn Black skin. In *Oshun Osugbo*, the orisha Oshun sits reclined and with gold patches in her skin. This appears again in *The Birth of Oshun*, a reimagining of *Birth of Venus*, where she stands on a shell. Yemaya stands to the right, holding the golden fabric, with blue undertones.

Shango, with red undertones, and Obatala, the eldest orisha in white who descended from the heavens to foster creation, float over the sea with peacock feathers. Rosales gifts Black bodies with the otherworldly, and affiliates them with a term not often granted Black people: celestial.

Rosales' *Master Narrative* runs through December 2 at the Spelman College of Museum of Fine Art.