

# PROOF

## BARBER | NEW EDITIONS 2021



*b and e*, 2021, collagraph and relief with chine collé on Hahnemühle Copperplate paper, 36 x 30 inches, edition of 12.

When presented in art and the media, our bodies—Black bodies, queer bodies—carry social, political, and cultural connotations that can obstruct our vision, preventing us from truly seeing that person. Believing that “the body represents the least of who we are,” interdisciplinary artist bARBER chooses to eliminate figural representation from his work. He instead breaks the body down to his own hieroglyph-like system of shapes, lines, and colors that rely on proximity to recall a personality and narrative without relying on the charged corporeal form of the people who inspire his art. His work invokes Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant’s demand for the right to opacity, which presupposes identity to be irreducibly singular and obscure, even to oneself. For bARBER creates abstracted portraits of Black people that work to both disentangle us from designated cultural categories and celebrate the divergent and intersectional elements of their identity, utilizing abstraction as a liberatory practice.

While form may be purposefully cryptic in appearance, colors are utilized to evoke emotion. Thus, in bARBER’s work feeling is knowledge. Bright greens denote new growth, while deep indigos and blues

signify melancholic introspection. Colors can also function as political tools. One of bARBER’s most transparent works made during his residency at Island Press is an untitled depiction of large, luscious lips printed in red, black, and green—his Black American Flag—inspired by David Hammons’ *African American Flag* (1990). The lips are overlaid with stars in red, white and blue—colors and shapes meant to recall Betsy Ross’s U.S. flag. This untitled print infuses socially significant colors with recognizable forms to create this blatant statement on nationhood, race, and sexuality. Meanwhile, bARBER’s other print, *b and e*, utilizes color to evoke emotions from which we can gather insight.

The print, *b and e*, can be read as a self-portrait though it is also a representation of a pivotal moment in a private relationship between the artist, “b”, and persons unknown, “e”. Here, bARBER has broken the body down into lines and shapes and added substance through texture and color. Limited to six colors—green, pink, Kermit, Chocolate, gray, Grapes—bARBER chose each deliberately. A bright, warm green swims



*Untitled (Black American Flag Lips)*, Screenprint, 11 x 15 ½ inches, edition of 10.

around a central figure made up of a rectangular and cruciform body with a large, round, multicolored head. The use of brown seems to connote skin tone, and thus identity, while negative space throughout the “body” perhaps signals an emptiness left in the wake of this event. Composed of two shades of yellow and crude, decisive lines, a sun shines down on the central figure potentially causing the brilliant greens and tiny bursts of eggplant and pink drawn in floral forms, which together seem to signify change, rebirth, and renewal. What is taking place is purposefully opaque, but how we’re supposed to feel is mapped onto the print through a composition and color scheme that signify transformation and growth coupled with loss.

*B and e* manages to focus our attention on the narrative at play instead of the gender, ethnicity, or sexuality of the people involved. Whether self-portrait or double-portrait, the work subverts traditional epistemologies of portraiture by utilizing abstraction as a tool for abolition by disregarding and reimagining the markers that define and ultimately confine us. Instead, bARBER has forced the viewer to contend with emotions that change and affect all our lives.

**Lucia Olubunmi R. Momoh, Constance E. Clayton Curatorial Fellow at the Philadelphia Museum of Art**

#### ABOUT bARBER:

bARBER, was awarded the 2020 Artist Research Fellowship at Island Press, serving in residence in June of 2021. His recent awards include a MAP Fund grant, a fellowship with The Union Contemporary in Omaha, NE, and the Alonzo Davis Award from Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Selected exhibitions include Fontenelle Forest (Omaha, NE), Englert Theatre (Iowa City, IA), Museum of Science (Chicago), C4 Atlanta (Atlanta, GA), Lexington Theatre (Kentucky), Mason Murer Gallery (Atlanta, GA), Gallery 4731 (Detroit, MI), Levitt Gallery, (Iowa City).



## IslandPress

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Island Press is a research-based printmaking workshop and publisher committed to education and innovation in contemporary print editions and artist projects. Visiting artists work side by side with the master printer and students in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. The result is high-quality print editions of technical complexity created in a unique setting where artists and students share skill sets and ideas.

Island Press is project-driven and collaborative, tapping into the place where the artist's creative research intersects with the all of the

possibilities of the print studio. Artist projects include editions with Radcliffe Bailey, Chakaia Booker, Nick Cave, Willie Cole, Tom Friedman, Ann Hamilton, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Nina Katchadourian, Hung Liu, Shaun O'Dell, Joyce Scott, Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith, Dario Robleto, Beverly Semmes, James Siena and many other great artists.

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