

What to See in N.Y.C. Galleries in April

This week in *Newly Reviewed*, Blake Gopnik covers Richmond Barthé's celebrated sculptures, Claude Viallat's paintings on fabric and Maarten Baas's one-of-a-kind "Sweeper's Clock."

Richmond Barthé

by Blake Gopnik

Richmond Barthé, the great African American sculptor, gets kudos for his realism, but that's faint praise that damns him: In the 1930s, when his career took off, there were hundreds of artists who had as fine a technique; there are still lots in Times Square, sculpting tourists' faces in clay.

Looking at the 16 busts and figures in the Barthé survey at Rosenfeld — it's curated by the British artist Isaac Julien, who has a stunning video in the Whitney Biennial — I realized that it's best to ignore technique and to think of them as three-dimensional photographs, or as much as you possibly could before the age of 3-D scanners. The sculptures look forward to our technology, not backward at traditional realism.

The best of Barthé's figures make his Black sitters as directly available as possible to our eyes, the way a photo seems to. There's no interfering dose of modernist style, which was imbued with stereotypes about Blackness and "primitive" African art that invoked ideas of the "savage" and the "primeval," or, calling on an opposite set of clichés, of the "Edenic" and "authentic." Those were applied to African Americans in Barthé's era, forcing them into cultural pigeonholes.

He gives his subjects more room to breathe.

"African Woman," from 1935, shows someone whose hairdo may distance her from 1930s America, but she's not exotic or ancestral. She's another person of today who happens to come from far away.

The male head in "The Negro Looks Ahead" enacts its title by just being there and looking out onto the world.

Three portraits of Black boys are just three children waiting to grow up, into a world they still imagine might treat them fairly.

Through May 31. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 100 11th Avenue, Manhattan; 212-247-0082, MichaelRosenfeld.com.



Richmond Barthé (1901–1989), *African Woman*, 1935, painted plaster on wood base, 8 1/4 x 4 7/8 x 5 1/2 inches / 21 x 12.4 x 14 cm, 13 1/2 x 5 x 5 1/2 inches / 34.3 x 12.7 x 14 cm including base, signed



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