

TODAY'S
MASTERS

MARIO MOORE

ASKING POWERFUL QUESTIONS THROUGH ART

Mario Moore (b. 1987) credits one of his grandmothers, the education activist Helen Moore, with helping him shape his artistic vision. The Detroit native claims that her philosophy and politics, as well as her eagerness to bring her grandson along on marches throughout Michigan, laid the foundation for his solid education, interactive working process, and burgeoning career. Even a quick glance at Moore's 2015 oil painting *Queen Mother Helen Moore*, acquired three years ago for the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts, suggests the crucial role she has played in the lives of the three sons whose photographs she holds, and by extension in the artist's life.

I caught up with Moore by telephone during the COVID-19 lockdown this spring. "I'm still at Princeton University," he told me, "and it's much more work teaching online than in the classroom!" Moore had started the semester there teaching Introduction to Drawing courses, and he also held a guest critic post at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, for which he ultimately conducted graduate-level studio critiques via Zoom.

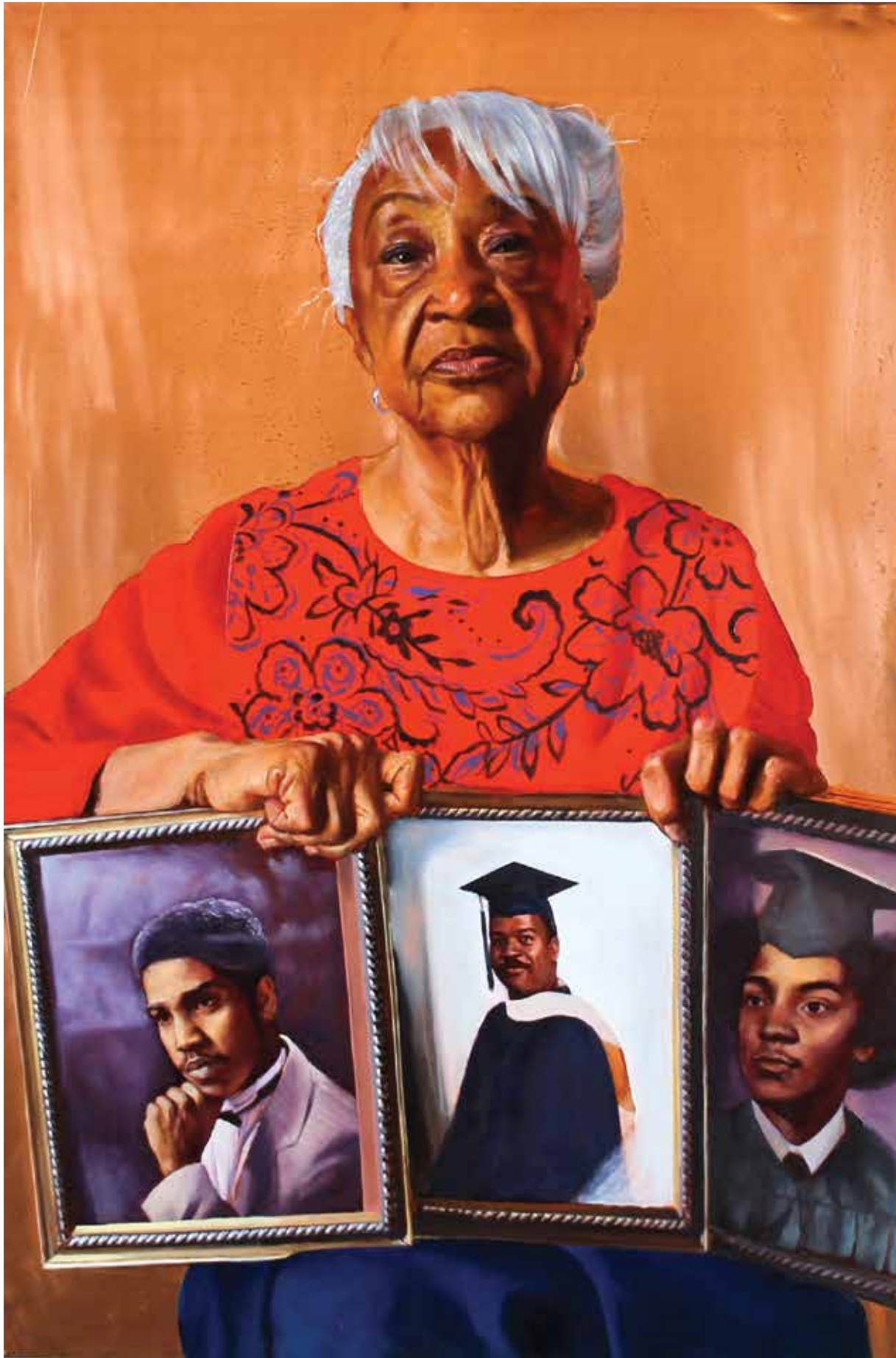
Moore believes that the art world, indeed the entire world, is on the brink of change. The economy is shifting rapidly, so artists must adapt. "Few people understand what's going to happen within the next year," Moore confesses. "It's going to be very different." Fortunately, Moore has long embraced change. He had a window on the visual arts from an early

age thanks to his artist mother, with whom he shares his undergraduate alma mater, Detroit's College for Creative Studies (CCS). "I got a lot of information and education from her," he explains. "I was about 3 years old while she was still an undergrad, so I would go into the classrooms and studios with her." There Moore met his mother's friends, and later it was Richard Lewis, who got his M.F.A. at Yale and then a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, who taught the high school student how to paint in oils. This summer experience between his sophomore and junior years was significant for Moore; Lewis's guidance allowed him to embark on a lifelong journey of trial, error, and experimentation.

Caravaggio has been another major influence on Moore. His mother kept a small library in their home that included books on



Marcus Garvey Knew, 2012, oil on canvas, 60 x 84 in., private collection, courtesy of the artist



Queen Mother Helen Moore, 2015, oil on copper, 36 x 24 in., Detroit Institute of Arts, Museum Purchase, Mary Moore Denison Fund, 2017.51

several Italian painters, the Harlem Renaissance, and the American artist William Merritt Chase. One of his teachers at Malcolm X Academy, Mr. Michaels, encouraged Moore to draw and gave him a copy of *The Art Book*, which showcases artists from different eras — and inside it was Caravaggio. As Moore grew older, he found himself fascinated by Michelangelo, especially his sculpture, followed closely by Rembrandt. “Rembrandt was powerful because I love the way he worked with lighting,” Moore explains. “It is something so three-dimensional, pulling you into the painting.” During his undergraduate studies at CCS (where he earned a B.F.A. in illustration), Moore traveled to Italy on a program that allowed him to experience Caravaggio’s art in person, and that really did it. Over Easter break the same year, he spent several days creating works inspired by Caravaggio.

In 2011 Moore enrolled in Yale University’s M.F.A. program in painting. He mounted his first solo show across the street from the art school at a boutique hotel called The Study at Yale. “That went really well,” he recalls. “The hotel owner



(LEFT) *Supreme Green Grass*, 2016, oil and gold leaf on linen, 72 x 48 in., courtesy of the artist ■ (BELOW) *A Student’s Dream*, 2017, oil on canvas, 68 x 80 in., private collection

bought a very small painting, and a couple of other people bought some work. It was really exciting, but even before grad school I had been showing a lot in Detroit.” Moore had been curating group shows in Michigan all along, including one that began at a community center and quickly morphed into a traveling exhibition titled *Great American Artists* — all of them black.

And so began Moore’s politically laced paintings that explore the nuances of people in everyday spaces. *Marcus Garvey Knew* (2012) — one of the paintings he showed at Yale — was inspired by observing homeless people on New Haven Green and “how we just step over those individuals.” Moore explains, “What I’m trying to convey is that American ideals — including the ideal of democracy — are something placed upon us, and that



The Center of Creation (Michael), 2019, oil on linen, 72 x 60 in., Princeton University Art Museum, New Jersey

we African-Americans have had no say in it.” In *Marcus Garvey Knew*, a shadow looms over the face of the sleeping man. The worker’s boots near his head are just one of many symbols visible here. Also meaningful are the books scattered around the figure — one about Garvey himself, another on ancient Greek history, and a third illustrating Raphael’s famous *School of Athens*.

More recently, Moore has been painting works on copper. “What’s interesting about the copper surface is that it creates a reflection,” he explains. “If you clean it well enough, you get a very small reflection of yourself.” The artist was inspired by the idea of double consciousness — of getting people to look at copper and view an ambiguous, or veiled, version of their reflection. “It’s almost putting the viewer’s body into the place of somebody else,” Moore adds. It’s fitting, then, that the first work he completed on copper was a self-portrait.

Moore’s paintings generally begin with an idea. Throughout his scenes we see references to blue-collar life, history, slogans, book titles, and other telling details from which viewers can draw meaning. “It’s usually content before image,” Moore says. “I’m not trying to answer a question.” Instead, he invites viewers to answer their own questions. This is facilitated by Moore’s realistic technique: “The painting is either coming out or you’re coming in, so anybody can approach the work.”

After Yale, Moore accepted a residency at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois (population 32,000). He wanted to involve the community in his process during a time when he could not help but reflect on the needless deaths of black people across the U.S. “Instead of [portraying] the media’s stock image of the mourning black



Light on Brother (Jalen), 2019, oil on linen, 33 x 62 1/2 in., David Klein Gallery, Detroit

mother, I was thinking about women in my family,” Moore recalls. “How protective they are, how powerful they are. I wanted to highlight the image of them protecting their living sons.” As he planned *Queen Mother Helen Moore*, he asked his mother and grandmother to pose. Then he put out a call for members of Galesburg’s black community to pose holding photographs of their own living sons, and subsequently he completed a series of photographs, drawings, and copper paintings focused on this profound theme.

Next Moore created works showcasing black women and touching on themes of power and gender in preparation for his 2016 solo exhibition at the Urban Institute of Contemporary Arts in Grand Rapids, Michigan. By connecting the Civil Rights Movement with female sexuality, Moore’s large paintings clearly convey the power of black women, epitomized by his girlfriend’s fearless stance in *Supreme Green Grass*. “All of my work has a level of emotion and closeness to it,” Moore notes. “Some images unravel slower, so the viewer doesn’t necessarily know what’s going on with me.” Whether he is tackling such issues as white supremacy, women’s rights, or being black in America, his voice and commentary are fully embedded in the imagery.

Created primarily during a residency at Connecticut’s Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, the works in Moore’s 2018 exhibition, *Recovery*, offer further evidence. In 2017, the artist had a seizure that required brain surgery. His recovery was long and arduous, but he came through. The following year, Detroit’s David Klein Gallery featured Moore’s silverpoint drawings, large oil paintings (on both canvas and copper), and a video exploring his experience as a black male in a medical setting. Inspired by a sketch he had completed one month before the seizure — depicting a black man lying on a table surrounded by doctors — Moore introduced this same sense of trauma and strain to his art. It posed questions such as: “What happens to your body — physically and emotionally — when



Clyde Sky High, 2018, oil on linen, 60 x 72 in., Princeton University, New Jersey

you’re not coping? Or when you’re not taking breaks in this capitalistic, workaholic society? What happens when you see black men and women dying on the news all the time?”

2018 and 2019 were significant, even instrumental, for Moore. He used his Hodder Fellowship from Princeton’s Lewis Center for the Arts to paint security guards, cooks, and cleaners on the university campus. Clyde, a facilities worker, was the first person Moore approached; he drew his subject in real time, on the spot, just after

asking him where to find a barber. These portraits are the product of chance encounters and meaningful conversations — and many have now found a home in Princeton’s permanent collections.

This spirit of diversity and interconnectivity is emblematic of our times, and we look forward to watching what Moore achieves next at Princeton and beyond. ●

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During and After the Battle, 2020, oil on linen, 68 x 80 in., Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans

