

Behind 3 Champions' Smithsonian Portraits

Serena and Venus Williams and Ava DuVernay, and the artists who portrayed them, talk about their choices, which will be on view at the National Portrait Gallery.



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Three strikingly personal and introspective new portraits of three famous women — the tennis champions Serena and Venus Williams and the filmmaker Ava DuVernay — go on view at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington on Nov. 10 as part of the institution's biannual Portrait of a Nation Award.

The award, recognizing individuals who have made extraordinary contributions to the United States, includes the gallery's acquisition of the new portraits of these groundbreaking Black women and the other honorees this year — the chef José Andrés, the music executive Clive Davis, the president's chief medical adviser, Anthony S. Fauci, and the children's rights activist Marian Wright Edelman. (For Edelman, the gallery's curators acquired a photograph by Ruven Afanador from 2013.) Each of the other honorees worked with the curators to select the artist to represent them, and the works will remain on view in the exhibition "Portrait of a Nation" until Oct. 22, 2023.

This award program, begun in 2015, is an effort "to grow our collection in a way that truly recognizes the diversity of the country," said the director, Kim Sajet, "working with dynamic contemporary artists who are pushing the boundaries of what portraiture can be."

The Williams sisters and DuVernay each chose to collaborate with a rising Black artist on the new commissions (as did Andrés, selecting Kadir Nelson; Davis worked with David

Hockney and Fauci with Hugo Crosthwaite). DuVernay took the opportunity to support Kenturah Davis, an artist she knows and collects. Serena Williams had followed the career of Toyin Ojih Odutola and selected her from a shortlist under consideration. Venus Williams was more exploratory, meeting with multiple artists culled by the gallery's curatorial team and her own research and picking Robert Pruitt from some two dozen possibilities.

Here is how those three portraits came together.

Venus Williams and Robert Pruitt

The idea of Venus Williams dropping by for a visit was surreal to Pruitt, born in Houston and based in the Bronx. He typically hires models for his large-scale figurative portraits, informed by comic book graphics and symbolic objects, which explore Black experiences and mythologies. "She came to my studio and was so down to earth," Pruitt said. They immediately bonded over his huge comic book collection on display.

After being selected, Pruitt visited Williams in Florida armed with a massive photo download. "I wanted to get a sense of what kind of images of herself she likes and she was very clear, picking a photo she had taken of herself in the mirror," Pruitt said.

He used that as the compositional reference to build out his double-figured portrait of her — with Williams in one instance facing the viewer and encircled by a celestial halo of kinetic white beads (referencing her beaded hair in motion on the court

as a young girl). A mirrored Williams, shown from behind and in profile, wears a tennis skirt made of raffia and the Wimbledon trophy dish refashioned as a collared chestplate apropos for a warrior superhero.

Williams gave Pruitt information about her family and her relationship to tennis history that he has embedded, such as studding the swirling beads with the birthstones of her siblings. “It was really interesting to work with another voice involved in the process,” he said, a first for him.

Pruitt sees “a fertile space of reflection” between his two Venuses. “My hope,” he said, “is that the duality of the portrait gives us this sense of a person looking back at themselves, considering where they came from and where they’re going.”

Ava DuVernay and Kenturah Davis

Kenturah Davis takes language as a departure point, using rubber stamps of letters spelling out personal texts meaningful to her portrait subjects to draw their images. This process mesmerized DuVernay when she first met Davis several years ago.

When the two women, based in Los Angeles, met up to discuss the portrait, Davis suggested using a blur technique she has recently introduced. “I was really interested in making a figure in motion and thought it paired well given Ava’s relationship with motion pictures,” Davis said. DuVernay was hesitant initially, she said, but “I wanted Kenturah to feel free.” And, she added, “I wanted to push myself in a different direction than I’m used to seeing myself.”

They collaborated on a photo shoot, where Davis used a long exposure to capture the turning of DuVernay’s face from front to side view in a single elongated image. Then, Davis translated the photographic information onto a larger-than-life-size drawing, rendering DuVernay’s double-faced image pixel by pixel using rubber stamps dipped in ink spelling out a message of encouragement that DuVernay received from her father shortly before he died.

“It’s a kind of embodiment, that she’s made up of these words,” said Davis. DuVernay likes that the message is only legible in pieces up close, like “a secret inside of the work.”

DuVernay described being startled, in a good way, when she saw the result. “I’ve never seen anything like that of myself — that large, that personal,” she said. “There’s a spirit moving between the two countenances that feels revelatory.”

Serena Williams and Toyin Ojih Odutola

“What I am interested in as an artist is what is often overlooked, what people might not notice about a subject,” said Toyin Ojih Odutola, the Nigerian-born, New York-based artist known for her life-size figurative drawings exploring identity and rendered in charcoal, pastel, ballpoint pen and pencil. With Serena Williams, among the most photographed people in the world and often framed as fierce or glamorous, what was missing in representations was her sense of joy, Odutola felt.

“I thought about her being a mother, a sister, a daughter, and how funny she is,” Odutola said. In a first exploratory Zoom conversation, the artist asked about depicting her laughing, Odutola said. “Serena loved that.”

Odutola traveled to Williams’s home in Florida to take reference photos, from which she would construct a composite. “Serena looked at them on the day and liked it, but kind of left it to me,” Odutola said.

Ultimately, the artist decided to go with her gut, presenting Williams with a wide rapturous smile and resting her head on her hand, almost becoming enveloped by vibrant green foliage encroaching from behind.

“I wanted to show her physique but also show her relaxed,” Odutola said. “I wanted to show her as a beautiful Black woman.” She finished the portrait before Williams announced she would step away from tennis after the recent U.S. Open, giving the image another layer of meaning.

“This year had been a season of change and evolution for me,” Williams said in an email. “Toyin’s perspective as an artist is unparalleled and to be able to say Toyin Ojih Odutola painted my portrait feels surreal.”