

History Is Rarely Black or White

Transcript: Gordon Shadrach

My name is Gordon Shadrach, and I'm a portrait artist from Toronto. My work speaks mostly about representation of Black males and confronting the stereotypes around how they're presented, and also the semiotics of clothing. The series of portraits that are in this exhibit are reflective of the thread that runs through most of my work. In that it shows Black men in both contemporary and historical dress. It's something that I've been fascinated with, by placing Black figures in a historical context where we were rarely seen. Both in historical art and in contemporary art. It was revolutionary to show Black people just existing in a piece of artwork without dealing with a political subject matter. However, Black bodies, in any context, whether they're in a painting, or how their bodies are being used in sports, in work, or in labour, it's always a political issue. And so one of the connecting factors that I think is really important to recognize, is that without Black bodies in North America, we wouldn't have the structures that we have now. The structures that have now been designed to keep Black people out. So, essentially, we're fighting to get our way back into something that we've worked for, and that's something that we've earned.

When we look at a portrait like this one, where I've placed a contemporary Black man in historic dress, I've been confronted with viewers who feel that he looks like he's wearing a costume. Despite the fact that Black people have existed for centuries and in North America for hundreds of years. There are people in the art world or in the audience that don't recognize that we existed in certain historical eras. And so when confronted with issues -- or, sorry, with pictures or images of Black people in historic dress, it confronts and it conflicts with their understanding of what North American or Western history is supposed to look like. So by inserting these Black bodies in these images, it really is quite challenging for a lot of people. And despite the fact that there are existing documentation, whether through painting or through tintypes and photographs, historical photographs, people are unaware of the existence of Black people in certain times in North America.