

Gallery Guide
Contemporary Art
Museum St. Louis

September 8, 2023–
February 11, 2024



Dominic Chambers

Birthplace



Dominic Chambers, *Fairground Park (the shadowy place)*, 2022. Oil on linen, 84 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London. Photo courtesy Daniel Kukla.

The writer Marcel Proust said that “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Separation from a place we call home can sweeten our return, stoke the power of memory, and focus our connections to spaces and places that have

nurtured our imaginations. These notions are particularly poignant in *Dominic Chambers: Birthplace*, an exhibition of new paintings and a sculpture created by Chambers especially for this solo exhibition at CAM in his home city of St. Louis.



Dominic Chambers, *Gabriel's Resting Place*, 2021. Oil and spray paint on linen, 72 × 60 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London.

Chambers' talents and dedication to portraiture brought him significant early attention from the art world as an emerging artist. Given the work he initially became known for—primarily figurative portraiture—the lack of figures in these paintings could come as a surprise to some viewers. In previous canvases like *Gabriel's Resting Place* (2021) and *Self-Summoning (shadow work)* (2022), Chambers depicted figures in moments of reverie and repose—napping, or reading a book—in colors that are rich and deep and tinged with the otherworldly. Depicting Black figures in moments of rest was Chambers' way to challenge an art world that often wants Black artists to offer up visions of their communities that can be easily consumed. Chambers counters: "I'd rather have my subjects be okay just chilling on their own, recognizing that they don't need the approval of another." In his conversation with Dr. Tiffany Barber—included in the catalog that accompanies this exhibition—Chambers points out, "When we think about the political life of the Black subject, that subject is most politically free when the body and intellectual mind [are] also free." In *Birthplace*, the lack of figuration is decisive and notable, taking Chambers' work into new territory. Freeing figural representation from outside (and outsized) expectations, Chambers offers up spaces ripe for projection. These are places in which we might imagine ourselves.

At CAM, visitors will encounter four new paintings and a sculpture recalling spaces that nurtured Chambers' personal growth and coming-to-imagination: the classroom, the library, the basketball court, the playground, and the museum. And while these sites hold

specific significance for Chambers, they are likewise familiar places where many of us begin our own personal journeys; places where we learn, play, get challenged, socialize, and imagine.

Birthplace (Red Classroom) (2023) demonstrates the richness of associations Chambers' paintings make available to viewers. In it, we see a typical classroom with regimented rows of desks facing a chalkboard, with a window off to one side. As a self-proclaimed "quirky kid" who loved learning, classrooms were a place where Chambers discovered the power of imagination and a love for study and learning. Raised by a mother who worked within the school system, classrooms were also a place where a young Dominic rested until school started as his mother began her work each morning. On outings to museums in his youth, Chambers found color field paintings—typically abstract paintings composed of more-or-less flat fields of color—as challenging, even laughable, to interpret. Through personal studies and investments, he came to understand the emotional, affective power of color. Here, a limited palette made primarily of reds and yellows nods to color field painting, and updates it with narrative possibility.



Dominic Chambers, *Self-Summoning (shadow work)*, 2022. Oil on linen, 84 × 72 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, Seoul, and London. Photo courtesy Daniel Kukla.

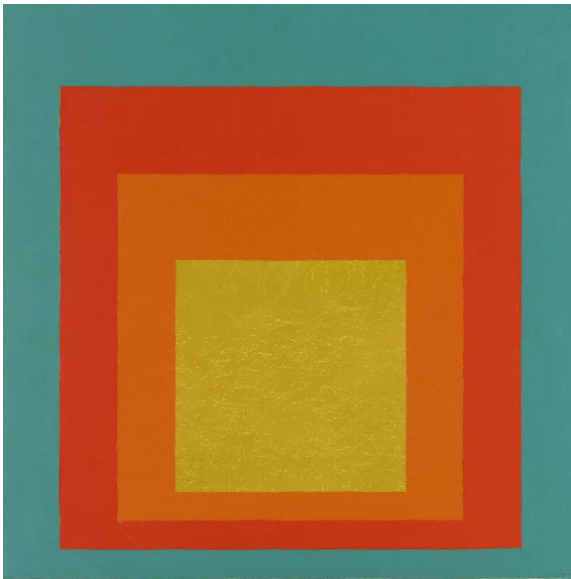
With its warm reds and toned-down chromatics, *Birthplace (Red Classroom)* evokes a hazy memory. There are other layers to this artwork that may be less apparent or obvious, but that enrich the viewing experience: Chambers' deep interest in color interactions demonstrate his appreciation for the foundational work of artist Josef Albers. Albers' *Homage to the Square* series (1950-1976), explored what the earlier artist



Dominic Chambers, *Birthplace (Red Classroom)*, 2023. Oil on linen, 86 x 121 inches. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York. Photo courtesy Elisabeth Bernstein.

referred to as “color climates” or juxtapositions of pure, undiluted colors. Chambers’ own color climates are presented in rooms and across outdoor spaces.

unexpected. It worked, and successfully so. Interestingly, his color choice bears an even more personal resonance: red and gold are team colors for the Hazelwood East Spartans, which happens to be Chambers’ high school alma mater.



Josef Albers, *Study for Homage to the Square: Persistent*, 1954–60. Oil on masonite, 24 x 24 inches. Photo courtesy Artsy.

Folks familiar with color theory may remember that red and green are complementary colors, appearing opposite each other on a color wheel. While Chambers initially imagined that he would depict a green chalkboard up front, *Birthplace (Red Classroom)* took an unexpected turn when he introduced an ochre yellow into the mix instead. Using yellow instead of green was a challenge Chambers presented himself as a way to try something

Ghost Kingdom is Chambers’ sprawling sculpture of a miniaturized playground fabricated in clear acrylic. What would it be like to stand in these towers, floating in the air? Or to sail down its sliding boards? Chambers shares that in his youth, he encountered a playground that in the day was rather ordinary; at night though, “something magical occurred—the shadowy contours of the playground produced a grand silhouette, transforming the playset into a castle.” He and his siblings “scaled its walls and stormed its bridges every chance we got.” *Ghost Kingdom* invites all of us to imagine these possibilities, engaging imagination and wonder.

Looking back at Proust’s comment, what becomes clear is that Chambers’ return to St. Louis resonates on many levels. It allows the artist to celebrate the place of his birth, and by extension the people who nurtured his creativity, including his family and members of the faculties at Hazelwood East and Florissant Valley Community College. This exhibition also marks a significant shift in subject matter for the artist’s paintings, and the introduction of sculpture to his oeuvre. Given all of this, it becomes clear that Chambers has indeed brought new eyes to bear in these compelling paintings inspired by his birthplace. Doing so, he generously offers us, his viewers, the opportunity to attune our vision, and to take in the sights from a new and vibrant perspective.

Artist's Suggested Reading List

- Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. 1963.
- Cain, Susan. *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. 2012.
- Diaz, Junot. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. 2007.
- Douglas, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas*. 1845.
- Grootenboer, Hanneke. *The Pensive Image: Art as a Form of Thinking*. 2021.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. 2015.
- Lewis, Sarah. *The Rise: The Gift of Failure and the Pursuit of Mastery*. 2015.
- Oliver, Mary. *Devotions*. 2017.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and The Sea of Stories*. 1990.
- Seneca, Lucius. *On the Shortness of Life*. Originally written in 49 AD.

Dominic Chambers: Birthplace is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Wassan Al-Khudhairi, former Ferring Foundation Chief Curator.

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WHITAKER FOUNDATION

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Artist Talk

Thursday, January 18, 6:00–7:00 pm

Birthplace of Creativity

Friday, February 2, 5:00–9:00 pm



Audio Tour

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Digital Guide

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Dominic Chambers. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin. Photo courtesy Daniel Kukla.

Dominic Chambers (b. 1993, St. Louis, MO; lives and works in New Haven, CT) received his BFA from Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, Milwaukee, WI in 2016, and his MFA from Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT in 2019. Solo exhibitions of his work have been organized at Tephra Institute of Contemporary Art, Reston, VA (2022); Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY (2022); Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy (2021, 2020); the August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA (2020); The Millitzer Studio and Gallery, St. Louis, MO (2017); and the Residential Gallery, Des Moines, IA (2017). Chambers' work is in a number of private and public collections, including the Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (promised gift); Green Family Foundation, Dallas, TX; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, FL; Long Museum, Shanghai, China; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA (promised gift); Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; and Xiao Museum of Contemporary Art, Rizhao, China. Chambers is the recipient of the Robert Reed Drawing Scholarship, Yale University (2018); Ellen Battell Stoeckel Fellowship, Yale Norfolk School of Art (2015); and the Varsity Art XVIII Award, St. Louis Community College – Florissant Valley, St. Louis, MO (2014). He has completed residencies at the New York Studio Residency Program, Brooklyn, NY (2015), and the Yale Norfolk School of Art, Norfolk Historic District, CT (2015).



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