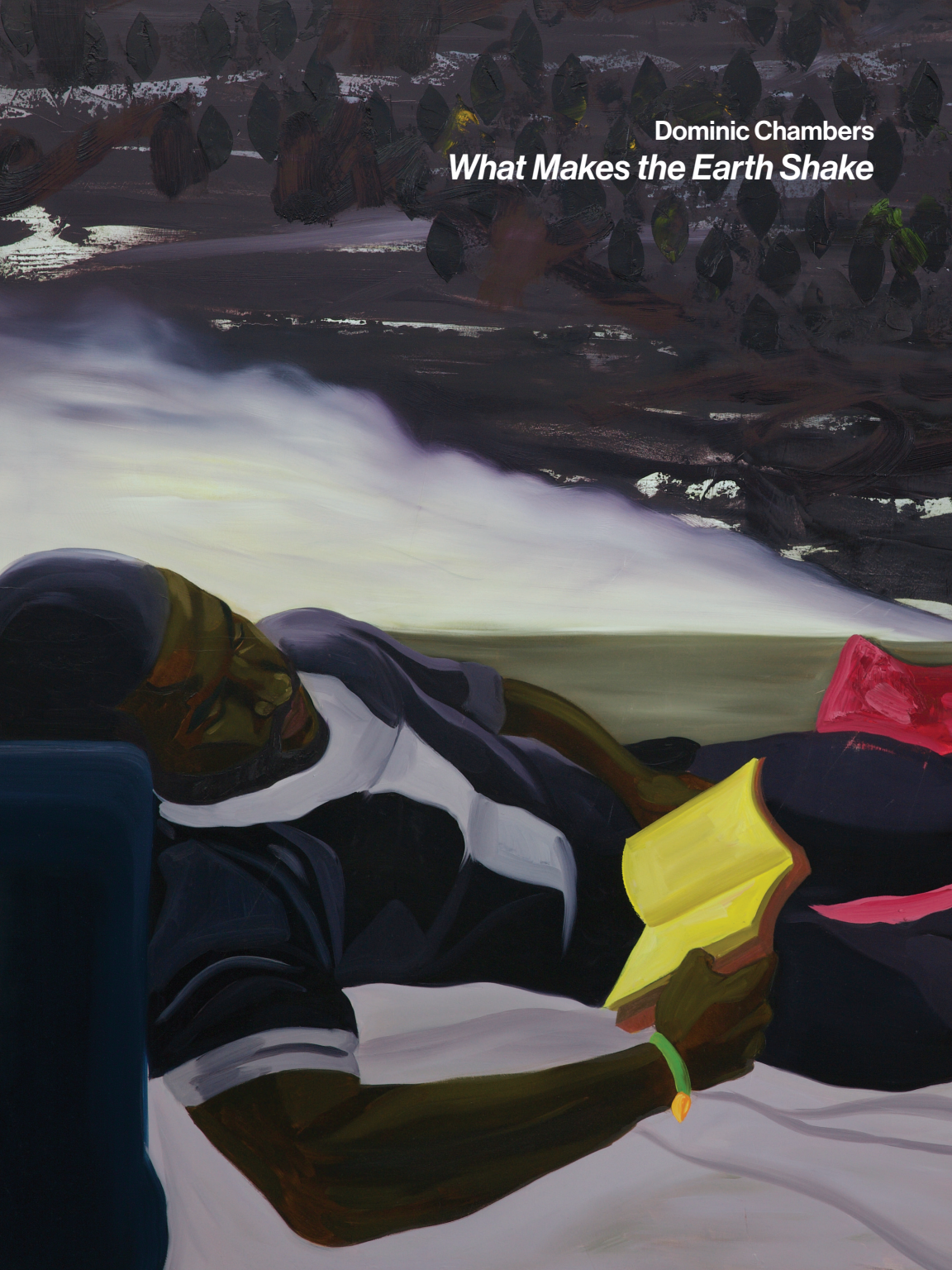


Dominic Chambers  
*What Makes the Earth Shake*





# Dominic Chambers

## *What Makes the Earth Shake*

On View September 10–November 20, 2022

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## Introduction

Tephra Institute of Contemporary Art (Tephra ICA) presents *What Makes the Earth Shake* featuring work by figurative painter Dominic Chambers.

Chambers (b. 1993 St. Louis, MO; lives and works in New Haven, CT) creates vibrant paintings that simultaneously engage art historical models, such as color field theory and gestural abstraction, along with contemporary concerns around race, identity, and the necessity for leisure. This is the first solo exhibition of the artist's work in the Washington, DC metropolitan region.

The exhibition takes its title from James Baldwin's 1962 *Letter to My Nephew*, where Baldwin describes black life as being a reality constructed and sustained by the white imagination. Consequently, black people have had to traverse a haunting social and psychological landscape in the pursuit of freedom, equality, and self-actualization. The works by Dominic Chambers in *What Makes the Earth Shake* highlight the surreal conditions pervading black life. Surrealism manifests on the periphery of a seemingly ordinary experience, where racial undertones are the shadows of conversation.

The paintings in this exhibition insist on destabilizing the laborer, rebel, and insurgent roles for black people and assert the importance of authorship over one's own reality. Forging images of the black body, undisturbed, in radiant fields of color, Chambers foregrounds the black subject and color-field painting as harmonious companions. He proposes crucial spaces for contemplation within which his subjects can forge and reforge relationships with their minds, bodies, and souls.

With literature being an important touchstone in his work, Chambers marries written with visual recontextualizing cultural narratives through the profound use of color, layers, and imagined space. By presenting the opportunity to witness a self-determined black body in a moment of leisure, Chambers work makes a profound declaration on the American consciousness and provides an important reminder – to make the earth shake.



Window Gaze (Ghost Hand) (detail), 2021







*Send It On (A Love Letter to Love)* (detail), 2019



## Guest Essay by Zoë Hopkins

Dominic Chambers' paintings are lush with quiet. They are thick with shades of blue, red, purple, and black that coat his scenes in the balm of stillness. The figures within luxuriate in hushed worlds of interiority, which come to us in that undefinable zone between fantasy and life. Black figures are cast in soft light and equally soft shadows, their bodies safely ensconced in the serenity of Chambers' brushwork. The works in *What Makes the Earth Shake* are a breath, a sigh of relief—for finally, Black life finds reprieve from the brutal state of emergency that so often describes it.

The quietude articulated in Chambers' painterly vocabulary delights in the many frequencies of Black interiority. It is alight with "interior aliveness [and] the reservoir of human complexity that is deep inside," to call upon Kevin Quashie's illumination of the Black interior as it appears in his seminal text *The Sovereignty of Quiet*. Yes, Chambers' scenes are quiet, achingly subtle, but they are not without life. In *Born at Night (Africanus in Black)* (2020), a reclining figure slips into the universe of their own thought, gazing off into a symphony of color which seems to dance with this aliveness, reflecting back at us the glimmering activity of the inner mind. In this moment, they exist in their own world and for their own world, not anyone else's.

Chambers' quiet is also a quiet of intimacy. In his scenes, we find his friends and loved ones wrapped up in the comfort of rest, leisure, and each other. The telic rush of time is seemingly suspended in these canvases, where Black people can soak up moments that are owned by themselves, a time beyond the beat of labor, violence, and resistance that too often pattern and regulate Black life. Books figure as a motif throughout Chambers' body of work. Figures appear lost in the glowing world of the pages, wholly immersed in narrative. Perhaps the books they read are even portals to the scenes that unfold on the canvas—as harbingers of imagination and fabulation, the books the figures hold are also perhaps their own landscapes.

It's no coincidence then that the title of the exhibition, *What Makes the Earth Shake*, is borrowed from literature, conjuring the rhapsodic musings of James Baldwin. In his prolific *Letter to My Nephew*, we hear the author plead with the young reader to see the monumental power of his own

personhood in a white culture, a culture which “spelled out with brutal clarity and in many ways as possible that you [the Black man] were a worthless human being.” In this world, even small efforts to contest white supremacy, even the naming of Black personhood itself, is enough to make “heaven and earth [shake] to their foundations.” The image Baldwin paints here describes nothing short of the end of the World. The end of the white World. The end of a social and psychic order based on domination and held together by the perpetual detention of Black personhood.

In the world that Baldwin describes—which is in many ways the very same world that we know today—Chambers’ paintings are explosions. The interior landscapes they crack open are earthquakes yielding another world. For to paint a Blackness that contains shades of the interior, a Blackness that is colorfully alive with quiet, is to paint outside of the otherizing gaze. When the psychic life of Blackness is almost always engaged through racializing discourse, flattened into readings that try to make sense of it against or in negation of whiteness, a Blackness that exists in and for its own world is an earthquake.

The title of this exhibition doesn’t just restate Baldwin’s words, but it also refigures them into the language of possibility. One could read *What Makes the Earth Shake* as an open statement, or one could take it up as a question. The worlds that Chambers builds around his figures are full of this openness, slippery with the magic of possibility. The glimmering yellow light in *Window Gazer (Ghost Hand)*. The blank but glowing pages in *Dark Skin of a Summer Shade*. They take us—to call upon another title by Chambers—*Some Other Place*. They invite us to inquire and to imagine: so, what emerges at the end of the world of Baldwin’s pages? It is from this point of departure that a new world spills out of Chambers’ scenes—colorful expanses of Black subjectivity that reach far beyond the space that the canvas delimits.

But this is not an easy openness. His paintings are filled with a very radical openness, but they are also coated in an inscrutable opacity. His visual language seems to float with ambiguity, yet simultaneously, Chambers’ work refuses to open completely to the viewer. The works are withholding in their quietness. We find figures enveloped in the blue-grey sanctuary of shadows, or partially obscured beneath layers of impasto. Some bear no features at all, and instead, take on the form of ghostly silhouettes. But this shadow world, beyond the supposedly all-knowing gaze of the viewer, is exactly where these figures find their freedom. Darkness here is kin with tender

possibility rather than impending evil. In *Step into the Shade*, which offers an invitation to secrecy in its very title, smiling figures occupy a landscape that is layered with blue-black and yellow abstractions. The people pictured here appear to be laughing about something, but we don't know what, and it's not up to us to know. The lightness is theirs to hold and be held in the sanctuary of blue paint.

"I am what time, circumstance, history have made of me, certainly, but I am, also, much more than that," wrote Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son*. And so, in the surreal dance of Chambers' colors and shadows, we encounter the effulgent aliveness of this and much more. We find the slow and hushed freedom of an immanent Blackness that can make its own world and expand into them. We find the earth shaken.

### **Zoë Hopkins**

Student at Harvard University, African American Studies and History of Art.  
Writer at *Artforum*, *Hyperallergic*, *the Brooklyn Rail*, and *Cultured Magazine*.

The earth was shaking.  
I didn't notice.  
Overgrown blades of grass  
flatten against my back  
brushes with yellow tips  
were there and something  
tickled my ear.

Leaves rustled in concert  
and shadows  
spotted the ground.  
My legs weren't as long  
As they are now  
but when they cross,  
I look taller.

For the first time  
My shadow hugged me back.  
The earth was shaking  
I still didn't notice.

Dominic Chambers, *What Makes the Earth Shake*



*Born at Night (Africanus in Black), 2020*



"Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations."

James Baldwin, *A Letter to My Nephew*









## Biography

Chambers received a BFA from Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, Milwaukee, WI in 2016, and an MFA from Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT in 2019.

Solo exhibitions of his work have been organized at The August Wilson African American Cultural Center, Pittsburgh, PA (2020); Luce Gallery, Turin, Italy (2020); The Millitzer Studio and Gallery, St. Louis, MO (2017); and the Residential Gallery, Des Moines, IA (2017). Select group exhibitions featuring his work include *Black Bodies, White Spaces: Invisibility & Hypervisibility*, Green Family Foundation, Dallas, TX (2021); *Realms of Refuge*, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL (2021); *Art Finds a Way*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL (2020); *Synchronicity*, Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA (2020); and *Abstractions of Black Citizenship: African American Art from Saint Louis*, Hedreen Gallery, Seattle University, Seattle, WA (2020).

Chambers' work can be found in a number of private and public collections, including the Green Family Foundation, Dallas, TX; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA; and Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL. Chambers is the recipient of the Robert Reed Drawing Scholarship, Yale University (2018); Ellen Battell Stoeckel Fellowship, Yale Norfolk School of Art (awarded through Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design) (2015); and the Varsity Art XVIII Award, St. Louis Community College – Florissant Valley, St. Louis, MO (2014). He has completed residences at the New York Studio Residency Program, Brooklyn, NY (2015), and the Yale Norfolk School of Art (2015).



*Born at Night (Africanus in Black)* (detail), 2020

## Exhibition Checklist

*Dark Skin of a Summer Shade*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
63.3 x 72 inches  
Collection of Pete and Michelle Scantland

*Send it On (A Love Letter to Love)*, 2019  
Oil on canvas  
72 x 60 inches  
Weissman Family Collection  
Westchester, New York

*Well, Well, Well (Chiffon in Green)*, 2019  
Oil and spray paint on linen  
72 x 60 inches  
Collection of Darryl Atwell

*Born at Night (Africanus in Black)*, 2020  
Oil and spray paint on canvas  
72 x 60 inches  
Collection of Yasmine and Matt Johnson

*Step into the Shade*, 2020  
Oil on Linen  
70 x 77 inches  
Dominic Chambers Private Collection

*Daydream (Window Sitter)*, 2021  
Oil on linen  
60 x 72 inches  
Dominic Chambers Private Collection

*Remembrance Veil*, 2021  
Oil on linen  
77 x 70 inches  
Rodney M Miller Collection

*Window Gaze (Ghost Hand)*, 2021  
Oil on linen  
72 x 60 inches  
Dominic Chambers Private Collection

*Window Sitter (Memory in Gray)*, 2022  
Oil on linen  
60 x 72 inches  
Dominic Chambers Private Collection

## Acknowledgements

Tephra Institute of Contemporary Art (Tephra ICA) is committed to promoting innovative contemporary art and thinking. Leading with curiosity and care, we are a catalyst, generator, and advocate for visual and interdisciplinary arts.

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