

LA WEEKLY



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Chelle Barbour

MEET AFRO-SURREALISM PHOTOCOLLAGIST CHELLE BARBOUR



SHANA NYS DAMBROT × MARCH 4, 2024



LA WEEKLY MEET AN ARTIST MONDAY

Photocollage is made by taking images apart and putting them back together in fresh, unexpected, even revelatory juxtapositions—especially the way Chelle Barbour does it. Quite literally examining the sum of America's parts, and giving visual expression to the multiple vectors of female archetypes speaking to strength, vulnerability, and survival, Barbour's carefully constructed work is both steeped in history and alive in this moment. Every element in the complex optical harmonics of her compositions carries a piece of a larger narrative about the power and beauty of Black women. Resonant with Surrealism's fascination with the subconscious and its dreaming states, and replete with

Afro-Futurism's boundless capacity to reimagine the world, Barbour's recombinant portraiture builds further on the sensation of fragmentation that characterizes not only the dissonance of life as a Black person in America, but also the spliced and diced quality of modern visual culture. Her latest exhibition, on view at The Granary—a radical rural arts center in Utah with its own salient story to tell—responds to historical forays into this rich terrain.



Chelle Barbour

L.A. WEEKLY: When did you first know you were an artist?

CHELLE BARBOUR: I knew I was an artist at 10 years old. When I was in the 5th grade, my lovely teacher, Ms. Meany, gave us excellent abstract and figurative class assignments, and she was always amazed by my color combinations (maybe I had an innate knowledge of Albert Munsell's color theory). I was also very deft with scissors, cutting paper shapes, coloring well, and staying neatly within lines. My Mom was a milliner (hat maker), so I had excellent home training in the art department.

What is your short answer to people who ask what your work is about?

My typical response is that I'm a photography and collage artist elevating black women through the lens of Afro-Surrealism and Afro-Futurism.



Chelle Barbour: Octavia Butler

What would you be doing if you weren't an artist?

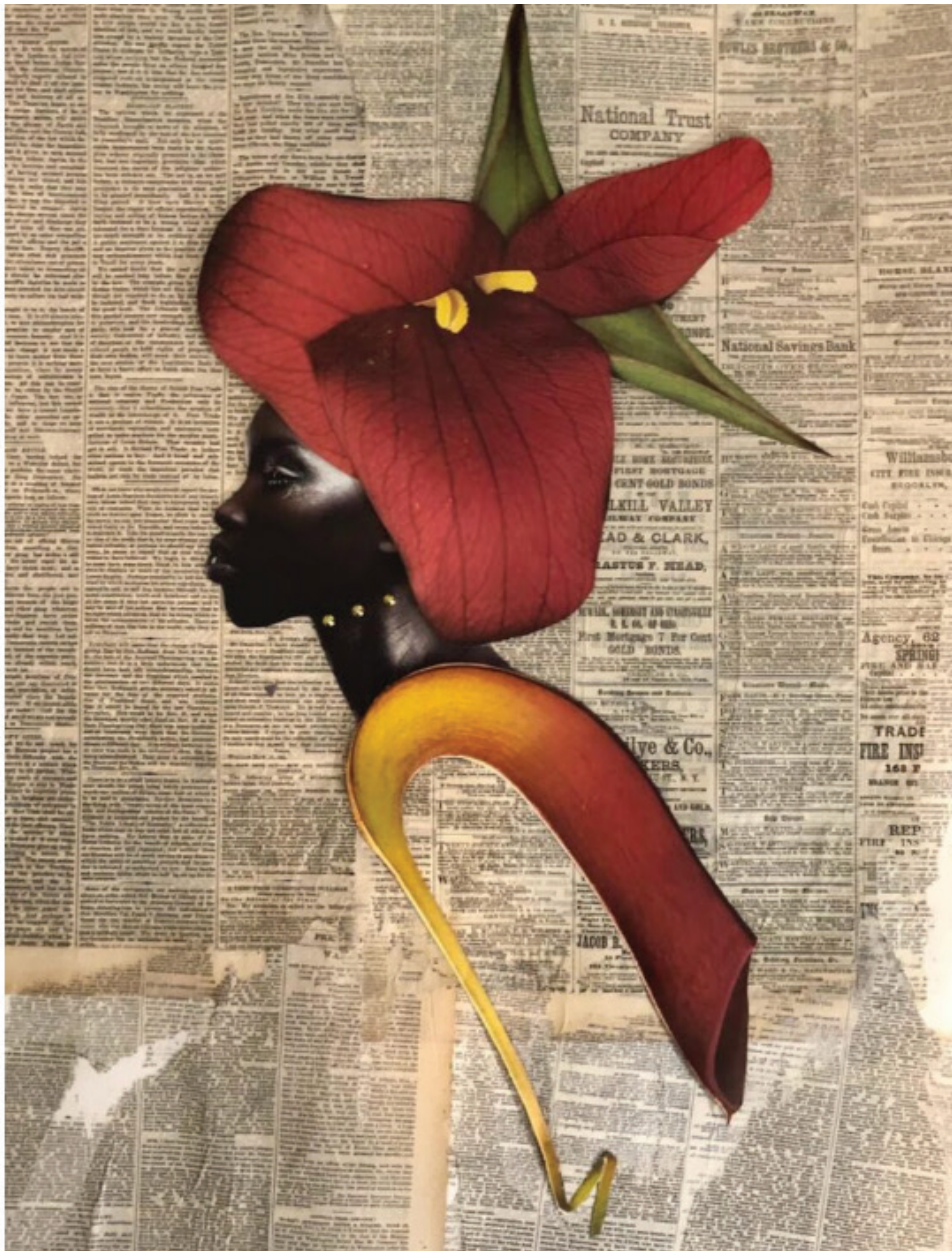
Stacking my cheese. I've had a long career in marketing, advertising, and business development. I worked for a Swedish retail design advertising agency that filed for bankruptcy. My clients demanded that I protect their projects, so after a heart-to-heart with my employer, they helped me establish relationships with our large format printing suppliers in Germany and Sweden. I had a successful visual communications business for 12 years. That said, I would most likely be an entrepreneur.



Chelle Barbour: Robin Coste Lewis

Did you go to art school? Why/Why not?

I was determined to go to art school. I dreamed of attending the Art Center College of Design. Still, my James B. Irvine scholarship was rescinded by the Advertising Department Chair, John Littlewood. (You always remember the names of people who impact your life.) He projected that I paid a professional portfolio artist to produce my significantly developed portfolio. Littlewood never imagined that “I” would have professional advertising experience. In the words of my grandad, “God had other plans.” A few years later while running my visual communications business, I enrolled in one or two art and design courses per semester at Santa Monica College and Glendale College until I had enough credits to transfer. I was accepted at several universities, but I chose USC. It offered an arduous art program, a great football team led by Reggie Bush, and delivered a scholarship. I graduated with a BFA and a Master’s degree.



Chelle Barbour: Red Turban

Why do you live and work in L.A., and not elsewhere?

I was born and bred in Oxnard/Ventura, CA. I moved to L.A. to attend college. I love being a native of a state where my ancestors owned land from Agoura to Oxnard. Like Dorothy said in *The Wizard of Oz*, "There's no place like home," but Dorothy also needs a respite outside of L.A.

When was your first show?

After graduating from USC Roski School of Art and Design, I participated in numerous shows on the west coast, but my first actual professional solo exhibition, *You is Pretty!* was in 2018 at Band of Vices in Los Angeles. It was pure joy to learn that Oscar-nominated actress Angela Bassett was serving as guest curator with Terrell Tilford. My body of work engenders questions about agency and beauty through layering visual metaphors across an iconography of unique women that evoke Afro-surrealism and all that is equally vulnerable and powerful in the black imaginary.



Chelle Barbour: I Am Roxane Gay

When is/was your current/most recent/next show or project?

My current show, *Juxtaposing Afro-Surrealism*, is at Granary Arts in Ephraim, UT. It is a great space to experience the powerful vibe of 100 woodblock collages wrapped in vintage newsprint from the 1800s among four unique volumes of reimagined “iconic” Black Women (1900-2023) who have made extraordinary contributions to the culture. What is so remarkable is that, “The Ephraim Relief Society Granary was built in the early 1870s. The Granary was autonomously owned by women, holding their wheat inventories collected as part of the historic grain saving program started in 1876 run by the women’s organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.” Pretty cool to have my work installed there. The exhibition is on view through May 4, 2024.

What artist living or dead would you most like to show or work with?

Wow, that is a fun question. I love the idea of showing work one day with one of my favorite photographers, [Zanele Muholi](#). The notion of the juxtaposition of Muholi’s rich high-contrast black and white portraits and my Afro-Surreal/Futurist collage portraiture would make for an interesting conversation.



Chelle Barbour: Face en Face

Do you listen to music while you work? If so, what?

Yes, music informs my day and is mood-driven. Sometimes, I continue listening to meditative soundscapes like Amazonian birds, windchimes, native American flute sounds, or whatever from the night before. By mid-morning, when I've hit my stride, I'm ready for a good podcast, audio book, The Moth, or music including, Joanie Mitchell, Wayne Shorter, Yo-Yo Ma, Dianne Reeves, Bill Evans, Miles, Rhianon Giddens, Tems, Jon Batiste, and others. I have a broad taste in music, including Bollywood.

Website and social media handles, please!

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chellebarbour.com



Chelle Barbour



Chelle Barbour: Auction Day (Studio view)