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Pick of the Week: Cosmo Whyte

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Cosmo Whyte Wading in the Wake Beaded Curtains, Paint

Nothing is just one thing. This is a sentiment that many of us here in the United States, particularly those of us with privilege, are coming to terms with in an entirely new way. From recognizing that many workers who previously went unseen are in fact essential, to understanding that police officers do not always serve and protect, 2020 has taught us that multiplicities abound in this life. This lesson is reinforced in Cosmo Whyte's show "When They Aren't Looking We Gather by the River," on view at Anat Ebgi.

Cosmo Whyte's work is primarily focused on Black experience, centered on the ongoing Black Lives Matter and related civil rights' movements happening across the United States. As a Jamaican artist, Whyte is particularly interested in the complexities of Black identity and the Black diaspora.

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The first work you encounter hangs in the entrance to the viewing room as a beaded curtain. Entitled *Wading in the Wake*, a monochromatic image of men running into water and collapsing into its surf is printed upon the beads. At first glance, the image appears playful, but the reality is far from that initial impression. The image was lifted from a 1964 civil rights protest, in which Black activists swam illegally in white-only beaches and were subsequently attacked by violent segregationists.

The works beyond the beaded curtain again contain multitudes. Mixing images of Jamaican Carnival and riotous protests, Whyte conflates celebration and struggle, indicating that despite pain and oppression, joy persists.

The work which conflates the two most subtly is entitled *Breadfruit*, which shows a Black woman standing and smiling on a busy street, her face and body partially obscured by tropical branches – those of a Breadfruit tree. The breadfruit is an incredibly popular fruit in Jamaica, though it is not indigenous. Like 92% of Jamaica today, the ancestors of the contemporary breadfruit trees were brought over by European colonialists, uprooted from native soil and deposited into a foreign land. Nevertheless, these trees survived and thrived, created a rich cultural and culinary heritage, and serve as a powerful allegory in Whyte's talented hands.