

Painting Black Warriors, With Michael K. Williams as His Model

Chaz Guest, a favorite of Oprah, the Obamas and Angelina Jolie, has a gallery show featuring the actor, who posed just before he died.



Chaz Guest, artist and Japanophile, at the Vito Schnabel Gallery on Clarkson Street in Manhattan. Based in Los Angeles, he is a former New Yorker who taught himself to paint just a few blocks away. Kendall Bessent for The New York Times



By **Ted Loos**

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The figurative painter Chaz Guest has fans in high places. Collectors of his work include the Obamas — who displayed his portrait of Thurgood Marshall, the first Black Supreme Court justice, in the White House — and Oprah Winfrey.

Angelina Jolie, a friend who also owns his work, was eager to share her thoughts on Guest. “His work conveys such depth of emotion,” she said in an email. “It is masculine and soulful, and all the more inspiring for being entirely self-taught.”

But the artist, who is based in Los Angeles, hasn’t had a solo exhibition in New York in more than 25 years, a streak broken by the current show at Vito Schnabel Gallery, “Memories of Warriors,” on view through March 19.

The return to downtown Manhattan — as a young man he lived in SoHo, not too far from Schnabel’s gallery, and taught himself to paint — is a personal milestone.



Chaz Guest's "The Planning" (2021), in oil and Japanese Sumi ink on linen, is part of his series depicting the all-Black U.S. Army regiments known as the Buffalo Soldiers, which served on the frontier after the Civil War. Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery

“It feels like this is where I can take a deep breath and start my life at 60,” said Guest, seated in the gallery and surrounded by the works, the first time he was seeing them hung together. A Japanophile who has traveled extensively in that country, he was clad in a kimono as usual — he paints in one, too.

The eight works, mostly battle scenes and portraits animated by thickly painted areas, rely on a palette of black, a gray-blue and a dirty orange, colors that Guest devises and mixes himself, generally eschewing assistants. They depict the Buffalo Soldiers, the all-Black U.S. Army regiments that served on the Western frontier after the Civil War, and who got their nickname from the Indigenous tribes they frequently fought against. That two marginalized groups were pitted against each other, Guest said, was a painful irony for him.

For some prestige TV fans, part of the show's poignancy may be that the model for the figures in the works was the much-mourned, Emmy-nominated actor Michael K. Williams, most famous for his role as Omar on "The Wire," who sat for Guest in late August and died some two weeks later of an overdose. (On Wednesday, authorities in Manhattan announced the arrests of four men who are accused of selling fentanyl-laced heroin to Williams.)



Installation view, Chaz Guest's "Memories of Warriors," through March 19 at Vito Schnabel Gallery. Argenis Apolinario, via Vito Schnabel Gallery

Guest's interest in the Buffalo Soldiers also led him to create a graphic novel about a superhero called the Buffalo Warrior; the rights to the character were acquired by Meridian Pictures and a film is in development.

The seed of the series was planted eight years ago, when one of his two sons was 10 years old and was frustrated that a store was out of his favored action figures. Guest recalled, “He asked me, ‘Why don’t you create a superhero, Dad?’”

Guest added, “Now I have a mission not only for young African American boys but for all Americans to really understand a race of people, African Americans.” Despite enslavement, Jim Crow laws and the wide scope of U.S. history, Black people “not only survived but did well,” he said.

Big, from-the-heart statements come naturally to Guest. “I’m a very intense person,” he said.

As his fellow Los Angeles painter Henry Taylor put it, “He goes all in.” Taylor recently painted a portrait of a bespectacled Guest, and he added that Guest’s early stints doing illustrations gave him a crucial base in draftsmanship. “When you do that, you get chops,” Taylor said.



“The Lonely Night” (2021), with Michael K. Williams modeling as a Buffalo Soldier.
Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery

The popularity of Guest’s works, priced in the gallery show from \$50,000 to \$120,000, reflects some of the currents in the contemporary art scene. Beth Rudin DeWoody, an avid collector who created The Bunker Artspace in West Palm Beach, Fla., to display some of her trove, owns four works by Guest.

“Things are going back to figurative art after everyone was doing abstract work,” DeWoody said. “You see a lot of great storytelling right now, especially from African and African American artists.”

Ksenya Gurshtein, a curator of modern and contemporary art at the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University, said that the museum’s board was considering the approval of a gift of a Guest painting, which she thought would enrich the institution.

“There’s a big demand now for figurative work telling underrepresented stories,” she said.

In Gurshtein’s view, the nakedly emotional character of the works — a far cry from the cool, Conceptual strain of some contemporary art — is a plus. “He unabashedly tries to bring out these big feelings,” she said.



Chaz Guest's "Vision" (2017) shows the soldier depicted in the series as a boy in a cotton field. Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery

Franklin Sirmans, the director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, agreed. “There’s a heroism and romanticism to his expressionism that a lot of us in the art world like to shun at times,” said Sirmans, who has known Guest for more than a decade.

He added that given his starry collector base, Guest “didn’t need the art world to tell him that he’s a celebrity.”

Born in Niagara Falls, N.Y., and raised there until the family moved to Philadelphia when he was 10, Guest was a gymnast in college, at Southern Connecticut State University.

“I really didn’t know how to find my life after gymnastics,” he said. “But I knew it was going to be in the arts. And I fancied being a fashion designer.” Guest tried the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York but said he “didn’t have what it took.”



Chaz Guest at Vito Schnabel Gallery with “The Planning.” (He paints in a kimono, too.) Kendall Bessent for The New York Times

A chance meeting with the fashion illustrator Antonio Lopez led him to try his hand at that field, eventually moving to Paris and illustrating the cover of *Joyce* magazine. He had a meeting with the designer Christian Lacroix, who admired his covers. “We just connected,” Guest said. “He thought I had some talent, but he suggested that I start painting.”

By 1988 Guest was back in New York and taking Lacroix’s advice, shopping at Pearl Paint for materials like many aspiring painters before him. Doing illustrations to make money when necessary was Guest’s preferred way to survive.

“I had one job in my life, for one day, as a busboy,” he recalled, admitting that he did not know exactly what the job entailed at first. “They fired me. They asked me to clean the table and I said, ‘Hell no.’”



Chaz Guest, “Michael K. Soldier” (2021). The actor sat for the series two weeks before he died. Guest was amazed at “the innocence, the pain, the beauty” of Williams’s face.
Chaz Guest and Vito Schnabel Gallery

By the mid-90s Guest was selling his art and showing it, but he moved to Los Angeles after his first son was born. The connections he developed over the years eventually led him to meet Williams, who visited the studio and saw Guest's works depicting the Buffalo Warrior character.

Guest recalled, "He said, 'Man, can I be in this movie somehow?' And so I said, 'Well, maybe I can paint you and see where it all falls.'"

When Williams came back to sit for Guest, the session had its rocky moments. "He started using the N-word," Guest said. "And I said, 'Michael, you can't use this word in my studio. You can look around and see how much I love our ancestors. It's insulting to me.'"

It brought tears to Williams and he offered apologies. The two bonded, later having a video call with Williams's elderly mother. Guest was amazed at "the innocence, the pain, the beauty" of Williams's face, which he tried to get across particularly in the close-up portrait "Michael K. Soldier" (2021).

The loss of Williams added a layer of sorrow to Guest's works, and gave the show's title a double meaning. Guest said he did not know that Williams struggled with addiction: "I was shocked to learn that. That's the other reason the name of this exhibition is 'Memories of Warriors,' because he had a war with drugs."

Memories of Warriors

Through March 19, Vito Schnabel Gallery, 43 Clarkson Street, Manhattan; 646-386-2246; vitoschnabel.com.