

A Birthday Party Painted by Marcus Leslie Singleton

Alwa Cooper | May 27, 2022



Marcus Leslie Singleton at the Miami Beach gallery Jupiter in March. Alfonso Duran for The New York Times

A new show of Marcus Leslie Singleton's work opens at the Journal Gallery in Manhattan today.

I talked to the artist about one of the included paintings for T Magazine's On View series →



Singleton's "Azaliah's 8th Birthday" (2021). Courtesy of the artist and the Journal Gallery, New York

"This work shows my sister's 8th birthday party. She's front and center getting ready to blow out the candles, and next to her is my grandmother Helen, who passed away last year. My cousin Daniel and I are to my sister's right, and behind her is my cousin Zealand."

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Courtesy of the artist and the Journal Gallery, New York. Left: Singleton's "G Street" (2021).

"In general, I look at paintings like I read pages of a book, from left to right. That's how I paint, too, almost like I'm telling a story through a visual language of color and form."

"That garland in the background here, that actually was a mistake — 'happy' has three Ps in it — but I made an artistic choice to leave it. I was painting this when people were getting the P.P.P. loans for coronavirus relief, so I thought I'd keep it as a tongue-in-cheek joke."

"I've been doing paintings of my family members, in what I guess I'm calling my 'Family Portraits' series, as a way to record who was here and who was doing what."

"The most important thing for me is to see the people in the paintings enjoying them; it was so nice for my grandmother and grandfather to see their portraits before they died. And it's a way to record a very intimate view of my family history. That's kind of the thesis of the paintings, to bring joy and to show my heritage."



Singleton's "Man Playing Trumpet" (2020). Courtesy of the artist and the Journal Gallery, New York

"I've painted my dad playing his trumpet, and my mother tending to her garden."

"I was listening to Miles Davis's album 'Miles in the Sky' (1968) as a kid with my dad, and I asked him who it was and he replied, 'This is Miles Davis. This is the guy that made me pick up a trumpet.' I remember contextualizing it in my mind as, 'This guy that you don't know inspired you to do something that great?' I mentioned the language of painting, and it's similar to his music; there are no vocals on that album, but somehow you know exactly what he was saying."

[On View](#) highlights works by Black artists, who have traditionally faced a disproportionately uphill battle when it comes to having their work exhibited by mainstream institutions, in a modest attempt to push against that precedent. This interview has been edited and condensed.