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Mark Steven Greenfield  
*Black Madonna*  
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by Jody Zellen



Mark Steven Greenfield's latest paintings are expansive fields of gold leaf inset with depictions of Black Madonnas and other religious figures. They shimmer and radiate. Though some are adaptations of iconic Madonnas from art history and as the artist states, "blackified," their context has been updated so they speak to and about the present, often incorporating background scenes of racial conflict and social injustice. The works are deftly crafted. Greenfield pays acute attention to details and has an innate ability to render beautifully and realistically. Adding to these remarkable skills is his wherewithal to incorporate scenarios illustrating historic abuses of power and instances of racial discrimination. While the majority of works feature his Madonnas, Greenfield also includes a stunning representation of the Zong Massacre in 1781, when more than 130 enslaved Africans were thrown overboard on their passage because there was not enough food on the ship. A portrait depicts St. Escrava Anastacia, an enslaved woman with healing abilities who was cruelly treated by her masters and forced to wear a muzzle-like face mask and metal collar.

Combining the historical and the contemporary, Greenfield's paintings are well-researched representations of Byzantine religious icons. While he hunted for Black Madonnas, there are few documented, so he adapted what he found that resonated personally. Traditionally, the Virgin Mary is presented with the baby Jesus in her lap surrounded by a golden halo. In Greenfield's renditions, not only has the background been modernized, but objects like a marijuana leaf or a liquor bottle appear within the frame. In *Distress* (2019), the smiling Madonna has a bushy afro and large gold loop earrings. Her haloed baby appears to have taken a green marijuana leaf from her hands. In the mid ground of the tondo is a table or shelf covered with a brightly colored, geometrically patterned cloth. In the distance, outside the window, hangs an upside-down American flag, a symbol of distress. In *Mississippi*

*Cookout* (2018), baby Jesus wears yellow-rimmed sunglasses and regards a small red-covered book held in both his and his mother's hands. In the background, Greenfield paints a Klansman being burned at the stake, the billowing gray smoke extending horizontally and spreading its embers to the farmland and blue sky surrounding the figures.

*Toppling* (2020) draws from current events, as behind the Madonna and child is a statue of a Confederate soldier on horseback, surrounded by ropes as if in the process of being dragged off its pedestal. The finely dressed Madonna looks lovingly at her child who holds a ripe green apple in both hands. Greenfield infuses his Black Madonnas with stoicism and regality, re-asserting their presence in art and in history. He challenges preconceived ideas about race and the absence of Black figures through the juxtaposition of innocence and terror. The Madonna and child stand in contrast to his background scenarios depicting racial violence and white supremacy. Within each golden rectangle, Greenfield also includes small round discs filled with abstract lines radiating from the center that appear like halos, but are in fact representations of mantras. These insertions are moments of pause and reflection meant to balance and bridge past and present. While they punctuate the individual paintings, they simultaneously unify the body of work and give it a transcendence beyond mere replication or reinterpretation.

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