

CRITIC'S PICK: REGGIE BURROWS HODGES AT  
KARMA, NEW YORK

by David Everitt Howe



Reggie Burrows Hodges, *Big We'll*, 2020, acrylic and pastel on linen, 54 × 50".

There's something radical about the way the painter Reggie Burrows Hodges primes his blank white canvases with an inky, monochromatic black. He practically carves his figures out of this surface, layering different forms and colors around them in order to build out compelling scenes of everyday Black life. His subjects' faces, bereft of distinguishing features such as eyes, noses, or mouths, are spectral presences—mirrors through which we see ourselves or project some kind of "other." These are spaces of charged self-reflection, where notions regarding race, context, and identity come to the fore.

Hodges does a lot with a deft economy of means. Take the woman in *Playing Dub Records in Berlin*, 2020: Her garments—a navy top with an elegant V-neck and what could be a floral headwrap—are simple, unfussy. She appears to be doing exactly as the painting's title describes while sitting at a table that seems poised at the edge of some impenetrable darkness. Other canvases are just as suggestive, such as *Big We'll*, 2020, in which a child rides a bike in a leafy suburb. Behind this figure two adults stand guard—ostensibly Mom and Dad. In the background are a few haunted-looking houses rendered in a smudgy white pastel. The family of three is set into a patch of green and yellowed grass under a sky of fathomless black. Hodges takes this scene, like something out of a Milton Avery picture, and turns it into something nostalgic and strange.

In perhaps the most jaw-dropping work here, *Swimming in Compton: Auntie B*, 2019, we see a woman—who almost disappears into the picture's roiling charcoal-colored

backdrop—standing near a vibrant pool of water that swells like an uncontrollable mass, painted in vivid blues and greens. In a catalogue essay for the show, the writer Hilton Als says that Hodges’s “characters are pushing up past . . . the idea that blackness is ‘heavy,’ politically, artistically, and otherwise.” Indeed, the artist captures a number of playful or celebratory moments in his paintings: a hurdler triumphantly leaping over an obstacle, for instance, or people riding unicycles. But to my eyes, the works are still extraordinarily dense—history, heart, and meaning imbue every mark he makes.