

RENA BRANSTEN GALLERY

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John Bankston: 20 Years in the Rainbow Forest

February 17 – April 20, 2024

Reception for the Artist | Saturday March 2 | 5-7PM



Rena Bransten Gallery is pleased to present a selection of paintings from the last two decades by San Francisco based artist John Bankston. Deeply committed to expanding access to the Black imaginary, Bankston’s work provokes and entices as he suggests abstracted narratives through queer fantasy characters on their quests through the personified landscape of the Rainbow Forest.

Bankston’s paintings are influenced by the visual language of coloring books, replete with recurring protagonists and locations. In his work, deep psychological and social issues are brought forth through eccentric characters often seen in costume – masks and animal suits – perhaps referencing group dynamics, personal identity, and the challenge of belonging both in nature and in society. Inspired by the many people and mini dramas encountered on his daily bus trips from home to studio, its own form of theater, Bankston’s unique sense of storytelling through art continues to be at the center of his practice. Paramount to this practice is the desire to create an inclusive version of the ubiquitous coloring book experience and allow all viewers an entry point to his stories.

“When I was growing up, I saw very few African Americans of any sort in coloring books. Using a coloring book is something we all have in common. It's our first experience as visual creators. Coloring books reinforce accepted notions about how individuals are to be in society when they're adults. I hope my work sparks viewers to interrogate seemingly benign elements of our culture.”

-From an interview with Sura Woods for the Bay Area Reporter (2012)

“Cloaked in the nostalgia of childhood, Bankston’s work defers to some imaginary time when race and sexuality were free of sociopolitical angst. For all the black children (myself included) who had trouble deciding how characters in coloring books ought to be colored, Bankston’s images dispel the anxiety associated with race-based identification as it was enforced in preschool and later internalized.” -Hamza Walker for Artforum (2002)

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Born in Benton Harbor, MI John Bankston received his BA from the University of Chicago and his MFA in painting from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. In 2021, he was invited to teach at Stanford University as a Holt Visiting Artist where taught a course on narrative painting. He maintained a studio on campus where he completed a monumental public commission for technology giant Meta. His work was featured in the solo exhibition, *John Bankston: Painting as Storytelling* at Stanford University's Coulter Art Gallery. Bankston's work has been included in several important museum shows such as *On the Edge: Art of California*, artwork from the permanent collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; *Dream to Dream: The Art of John Bankston* at the Krasl Art Center in St. Joseph, MI (catalog); California-Pacific Triennial at the Orange County Museum of Art in Newport Beach; *Figure Studies: Recent Representational Works on Paper* at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis and *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. His work continues to travel in the exhibition *30 Americans* organized by the Rubell Collection in Miami which has been on display at several American and European museums since 2008. Bankston's work is in the collections of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA; de Young Museum, San Francisco, CA; Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL; Miami Art Museum, FL; Orange County Museum of Art, CA; Berkeley Art Museum, CA; Birmingham Museum of Art, AL; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; and Smith College Museum of Art, North Hampton, MA. Bankston is the recipient of many prestigious awards including a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant and a Fleishhacker Foundation Eureka Fellowship.

Above image: John Bankston, *Forest Music*, 2023, oil on panel, 72 x 76 inches

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