

RONCHINI
RUNAWAY
SHARA MAYS
ARTIST STATEMENT

Less than two hundred years ago, I could have been a runaway. I've always wanted to live my life with intention, with movement, and with freedom.

I got interested in this idea of a runaway when I started reading the digitized archive of runaway notices from old Southern newspapers in the United States. Between 1730 and 1865, an estimated 200,000 fugitive slave ads appeared in U.S. newspapers — classified notices that reduced human beings to physical descriptions, skills, and the inconvenience of their absence. Ads would describe someone as having “a small scar at one side of his nostrils” or someone who “may endeavor to get back to his old neighborhood again.”

Maybe I am a runaway today.

I wonder where these runaways wanted to go. What heavens of emancipation, of gold-paved roads, were they hoping for? What did safe surroundings look like to them? What did they see during their sojourns of freedom?

My visual work in this series attempts, in an abstract way, through color, texture, and subtle references to flora and fauna, to understand what freedom could look like when one has the full use of one's senses and one's own time.

And I ask the viewers of my work, are you running away from anything? If so, what do you want to see on your journey? My research into freedom led me to grapple with the question of belonging. This inquiry into myself led me to consider the profound work of W.E.B. Du Bois. He described life as an African-American as having a double consciousness — the sense of never being fully African, never fully American. I felt this in the archive.

What's also phenomenal about this research is that, after the United States Civil War ended, newspaper ads were placed by newly freed people searching for mothers, fathers, and children who had been sold away

I want to know: how do we hold this history? How do we reinvent ourselves despite this history?

We look to the land that holds so much possibility. We look to the sunsets we see every day. We look to the coral just beyond the island in the Caribbean Sea. We look towards the thicket of brush, where we catch traces of the water's blueness. We look to the color of the earth, the color of the water, the color of the clouds at sunset.

My paintings have always moved between figuration and abstraction, using color as both a record and as subject matter. I have consistently used painting to transform research into something that reaches toward transcendence. My compositions capture fragments of narrative without fixing them into a single meaning, where color is never static but always on the precipice of something new.

This series extends my art practice and uses the work to render ancestors as interior lives, as dreamers, as people moving toward a new life rather than simply away from something they could no longer bear.

— Shara Mays

OPENING HOURS: Tuesday–Friday 10am–6pm, Saturday 11am–6pm, Monday by appointment
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