

September 4-October 16, 2025

I See Myself IN YOU

PAINTINGS BY WILLIAM COLLIN



Notes from the Director

At the Grimshaw-Gudewicz Art Gallery, we sometimes talk about art as a space to witness—a place where we gather not only to observe, but to recognize, to reckon, and sometimes, to repair. In **I See Myself in You**, William Collin brings us into such a space, one rich with feeling and sharpened by memory. His portraits of Black men and boys ask us to slow down, to look again, and to listen more carefully to the stories we think we already know.

Collin is a painter of emotional truths. His power lies in nuance—in the droop of a boy's shoulder or the quiet assertion of softness in a world that insists on armor. His figures are complex, rooted, particular. They carry the weight of expectation, stereotype, and grief, but also of love, tenderness, and ancestral memory.

Born in Washington, DC, and now living in Fall River, Collin's own story informs his work. It's a narrative marked by resilience and disruption, creativity and loss. His return to painting after years away—sparked by the tragic death of his cousin—has given rise to a body of work that is not only technically skillful but spiritually grounded. These are paintings born from lived experience. They function as testaments to the rich interior lives of Black men that are too often denied space in public discourse and representation.

The exhibition's title speaks to Collin's vision; one of shared vulnerability, of reflection, of inherited burdens, and unspoken grace. It suggests the possibility of recognition—the kind that honors difference while reaching toward understanding. Each painting invites the viewer to consider not just what is shown, but what is preserved, what is hidden, and what is held sacred.

Collin paints without pretense, without apology, and with a profound reverence for the interior lives of his subjects. His work refuses caricature. Instead, it asks us to bear witness to the full humanity of Black men and boys—their sorrows, joys, silences, and strength. This fall, we are honored to present **I See Myself in You**. May it move us, challenge us, and remind us of what it means to truly see one another.

William Collin



As a contemporary figurative painter, I aim to explore and express the emotional depth and complexity of Black male figures. Through my work, I challenge the often one-dimensional perceptions of Black men by portraying their vulnerabilities alongside their strengths. My paintings are a reflection of my own experiences as a 37-year-old Black man, and they seek to provoke thought, inviting viewers to engage with the unseen emotions that lie beneath the surface. Each piece delves into their inner worlds, capturing both the softness and resilience that define their existence.

I work primarily with acrylic paint, applying it to both canvas and wood panels, where I find the texture and depth of these materials allow for greater emotional resonance in my work.

Ultimately, my art is an introspective journey, not only for me but for those who view it. I want my audience to see that Black men are more than the stereotypes and societal expectations placed upon them. They are multifaceted individuals with rich inner lives, and through my art, I seek to tell their stories.

None of Them Wearing the Mask of a Smile

An Essay by Don Wilkinson

William Collin did his first painting when he was in his early 30s in January of 2022. Six months later, he was flying to London to participate in an eight-person exhibition at the Brick Lane Gallery. He has had his artwork displayed at various SouthCoast art venues and on Martha's Vineyard, as well as in Virginia, Detroit, and Montreal, an astonishing feat marrying art and entrepreneurship, and no doubt garnering a little envy from painters twice his age.

I first met Collin by happenstance when he was bringing a number of paintings into the Co-Creative Center in New Bedford, hoping to be given the opportunity to display his artwork in the city where he had spent much of his life. For Dena Haden, the director of the Co-Creative Center's gallery space, it was a done deal.

There was an erotically charged painting called "Comfort Zone" in which a man and a woman lie on a couch, their heads out of the picture plane. The strategic placement of the man's foot is the source of the charge. That was the only painting by Collin that I've seen a woman in, and she is anonymous by design. The artwork was all over the place thematically at that moment and included a rather straightforward portrait or two and a series called "The Box They Tried to Put Me In," featuring portraits of young Black boys with corrugated cardboard boxes over their heads.

Already, Collin was laying down the thematic foundation of his work. Much of it is deeply introspective, socially aware, and quietly subversive, as he refuses to bow to the stereotypical narrow-minded expectations of what a Black man is supposed to be to succeed as defined by pop culture: athlete, comedian, rapper, or thug. Among the paintings that Collin brought to the Co-Creative Center that day was "The Death of Adonis, Reinterpreted," his version of Paul Peter Rubens' 1614 masterpiece. The god Adonis was slain by the jealous and vengeful

goddess Artemis. He is on the ground, mourned by four mythical women: Venus, the goddess of love, and the Three Graces, Euphrosyne, Aglaia, and Thalia. Nearby are a weeping Cupid and two indifferent hounds.

In Collin's reinterpretation, Cupid, the dogs, and the background are edited out. And more significantly, Adonis and all the women have been painted Black. His version is moving and a true homage to the original. I asked him, during that first conversation, why arbitrarily change the skin color if the goal was to simply copy Rubens, as many aspiring artists do.

And he schooled me. He took inspiration from Rubens, but it wasn't a Black version of Adonis, Venus, and the Graces. No, the mourners are the mother and aunts of a dead young man, killed in a seemingly random drive-by shooting in Washington, DC. That man was Collin's cousin, Corey. His death and the anger and the grief that followed became a formative and defining moment in Collin's life.

Collin is a self-taught artist, gaining proficiency without formal training. Soon he was doing illustrations, logos, layouts, and commissioned portraits. He collaborated with creators in the music and fashion world. But perhaps, after his cousin's death, he needed to go deeper.

Painting, like poetry, meditation, or screaming into the void, can provide a form of deep catharsis. He was not just mourning his cousin. He was—and still is—thinking deeply about the often unspoken pain and hurt that is still part of being a young Black man in America: having to put hands on the dashboard if pulled over, being closely watched in a department store, and enduring the occasional ugly racist slur.

In "I See Myself in You," the paintings are of anonymous Black boys and young men, none of them wearing the mask of a smile. Almost all stare directly back at the viewer. There is a young man leaning forward in a chair, his eyes askance and his hands pressed together as if in prayer or perhaps, just a measured moment in which to retain his patience and composure.

A very young boy in a skullcap and sleeveless tee, maybe seven or eight, appears as both curious and hopeful, even filled with wonder, as if he has not yet experienced rejection or profound disappointment. As it should be.

An adolescent sits in a floral patterned chair, with arms resting on his knees, with a look upon his face that reveals a sense of world-weariness for which no child so young should need to endure.

In another, a boy rests his chin, exhibiting a palpable sense of disappointment or youthful ennui, maybe for something as simple as “why can’t I go to my friend’s house” or “why can’t I get pizza...” On the verge of manhood, another youth has on an American flag bandana, with a look of something simmering within, sadness, anger, or disbelief, or all three.

There is a floral patterned chair that appears in a few of the paintings. In others, a version of that pattern is utilized as wallpaper, background behind the figures. That chair is in Collin’s studio. It was his grandmother’s. One of the paintings is called “Don’t Sell Grandma’s House.” The house was sold. But he salvaged the iconic chair. And reclaimed himself, even after that. And he honors his cousin, by acknowledging the kid that he’d set aside. And although his story is seen through the filter of Black experience, for those with their eyes and hearts wide open enough the emotions are universal.



Painter | Storyteller | Cultural Witness

William Collin was born in 1987, in Washington, DC, during the Reagan era, a period marked by racialized policy, economic neglect, and the crack epidemic. Raised in Southeast DC, a predominantly Black and underserved part of the city, Collin's early life was shaped by both chaos and contradiction. His parents separated when he was very young, and he grew up between two worlds: his father's side of the family, rooted in stability and government careers, and his mother's side, navigating poverty and survival.

By the age of eight, after experiencing violence, housing instability, and deep emotional strain, Collin moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts to live with his father. Though the shift provided some material security, emotional challenges persisted. A quiet, observant child, Collin had been drawing since his earliest memories, copying shoes, faces, and the world around him. In high school, he was a standout athlete in basketball and track, but tension at home led him to leave his father's house during his senior year. He briefly attended UMass Dartmouth to play basketball but left after one semester to pursue life on his own terms.

During that transitional period, Collin stayed with friends, slept on dorm floors, and worked retail and service jobs while navigating young adulthood. Not long after, he became a young father. In the years that followed, he paused his drawing practice and focused on providing for his child. Driven by the desire to do something more fulfilling, he launched a clothing line and built a graphic design and illustration business that spanned a decade. His work was featured in Vogue, shown during New York Fashion Week, and commissioned by both major brands and small businesses. Yet despite the professional success and creative acclaim, he felt something was missing.

Everything changed after the death of his younger cousin, who was killed in a drive-by shooting. The grief cracked something open in him. He returned to art, not as a business, but as a way to process, to mourn, and to speak from the soul. That's when he began to paint.

Today, William Collin is known for his intimate, emotionally layered, acrylic portraits, primarily of Black men, that explore themes of memory, vulnerability, identity, and reclamation. He honors the unspoken emotional lives of Black boys and men, rejecting stereotype in favor of truth, complexity, and care. His paintings have been exhibited in cities like London, Detroit, and Washington, DC, and in museums and colleges across the country. Through painting, Collin creates emotional documents, works that are as much about healing as they are about being seen.

Acknowledgments

We wish to extend our sincere thanks to Don Wilkinson, whose enduring support of William Collin and his work has been both generous and deeply perceptive. Don has followed William's artistic evolution since the beginning, and his essay, "None of Them Wearing the Mask of a Smile," written for this exhibition, offers a thoughtful and moving exploration of the artist's life, vision, and emergence as a painter. His words provide vital context and insight, enriching our understanding of the emotional landscape that shapes this body of work.

Exhibition Calendar 2025-2026

I SEE MYSELF IN YOU

Pantings by William Collin

September 4-October 16, 2025

Reception: Thursday, September 4, 6-8 pm

FULL CIRCLE

Works By Brienne Brown, Robin Crocker, and Allison Paschke

October 30-December 12, 2025

Reception: Thursday, October 30, 6-8 pm

25TH ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION

Celebrating A Quarter Century Of Programming

February 12-March 26, 2026

Reception: Thursday, February 12, 2026

2026 ANNUAL JURIED STUDENT ART AND DESIGN PROGRAMS EXHIBITION

April 23-May 16, 2026

Reception: Thursday, April 23, 6-8 pm