

FORT GANSEVOORT

MICHELANGELO LOVELACE: CLEVELAND BY NIGHT

Fort Gansevoort, New York

February 1 – March 30, 2024



Color Count, 2001



Late Night Rendezvous, 2019



Starry Night Over the City, 2019



Mamba Mentality, 2020



Social Distancing, 2020

As Michelangelo Lovelace once said, “We tend to be different people at night.” His paintings show that transformation amidst the harsh contrasts of light and dark in a city wide awake in the nocturnal hours, with people passing through the luminous lines cast by street lamps, flowing between bars, clubs and corner stores. The brick walls of buildings are punctuated with signs, such as “God’s Love”, “Let’s Party”, and “Dollar Bill”, vying for the attention of people deciding who they will be after sunset. Lovelace, who died from pancreatic cancer in 2021, aged 60, had received growing critical acclaim for his work that colourfully depicts the lives and struggles of Cleveland’s Black community. The frequent presence of police cars patrolling his long, one-point-perspective streets reflects the disproportionate impact of law

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enforcement on their day-to-day existence. The self-taught painter was inspired by his mentor, the Reverend Albert Wagner, a well-known Cleveland outsider artist who created vibrant work focused on religion and redemption. While faith was not the central theme in Lovelace's work, he was influenced by Wagner to respond to the environment around him and what he himself perceived, rather than just painting what he thought other people wanted to see. "Cleveland by Night" at Fort Gansevoort preceded a retrospective in May 2024 at Akron Art Museum in his home state of Ohio, and focused mostly on the artist's night scenes rather than the more intimate drawings he created over his three decades of working as a nursing home aide. The earliest work in the show dated back to 1998 and – though more muted in colour than his later acrylics – it still took viewers into an after-hours underworld in which a crowd of figures wanders a seedy district of adult entertainment. One of Lovelace's last paintings included in the Fort Gansevoort exhibition – Social Distancing (2020) – has masked figures standing in front of a shuttered-up city. Foreboding clouds close in on the night sky, and "Closed" signs are draped like sashes over the doors of "Happy Hour" and "Let's Party", as well as "Houses of Worship" and "Public Schools". Although haunted by drugs and violence, Lovelace's city scenes are vividly alive, with each figure given their own character so that the viewer can imagine their path through the labyrinth of diversion and danger of their setting. The artist did not live to see his city revive after the pandemic, but his artwork allows us to experience his enduring passion and fascination with those nights when anything can happen.