



SALON 94

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Lisa Brice, Peter Doig, and Chris Ofili Bring Trinidad to New York

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Lisa Brice, *No Bare Back, after Embah*, 2017
Photo: Courtesy of Lisa Brice / Salon 94, New York

A rare and beautiful Trinidad moment is happening in three New York City galleries. It started on Wednesday night when [Chris Ofili](#) opened with his brave and profound new work at [David Zwirner](#) on 19th Street. The next night brought [Peter Doig's](#) tour de force new paintings and drawings uptown at Michael Werner Gallery—whose rooms were once home to Leo Castelli's iconic stable of artists. And Saturday night, Cape Town-born [Lisa Brice](#) made her Manhattan debut (and her first show in the United States in nearly 30 years) at

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confident paint strokes. When the shows opened, Ofili, Doig, and Brice were surprised to find they had all made work in homage to the charismatic Trinidadian poet-cum-artist Embah, who passed away two years ago.

Brice met Ofili and Doig (who had lived in Trinidad for five years as a child) back in 2000, when all three were on a residency program located in a former Port of Spain rum factory. Since then, they've all ended up making Trinidad home in one way or another. The island enchanted them with its racial tolerance, fabulous music, ebulliently independent people, and world-renowned carnival. On that first residency, they also met Embah, who, like Trinidad itself, was a big presence that continues to occupy their hearts and minds. Born in 1937, his idiosyncratic work includes carved wooden sculptures of imaginary creatures and carnival figures, one of them a man dressed as a bat, and vividly colored paintings in a variety of media. His work, coupled with his highly original conversation, mesmerized the three residents.



Peter Doig, *I do not sing because I am happy. I sing the song because it is about happiness. Embah, 2017*

Photo: Courtesy of Michael Werner, New York / London

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Each artist told me the timing of the shows was not planned, and none had any idea the others were making work about Embah. “His work has shaman-like qualities, as if it has evolved from a spirit world,” Doig, who worked in the same studio as Embah for 14 years, told me. “He often joked that he would teach me these [qualities], and on occasion he would cast an aside saying that I was getting closer.” The first image you see as you enter Doig’s show is a vivid, dreamlike but also wise: I do not sing because I am happy. I sing the song because it is about happiness. Embah. Doig’s other portrait of him is Embah in Paris, based on a photograph Doig took of him on his first trip there. He’s still playing his cuatro, but there’s nothing Parisian about it: The background features a tree typical of the Trinidadian landscape.



Embah, *Untitled*, 2006

Photo: Marc Tatti / Courtesy of White Columns

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Everyone called him Embah—an Indonesian word that means grandpa. His real name, Emheyo Bahabba, was somehow lost in translation. “He loved conversation, and he had wisdom,” Brice told me as she was rushing to her opening. “One piece of advice he gave me was, ‘Invade your own privacy.’ He infectious laughter with me and everyone who knew him.” Brice’s *No Bare Back, After Embah*, an eight-foot-tall oil painting laced with Trinidadian imagery, comes directly from Brice and Embah’s many conversations in a bar across the street from their studios, though the barebacked female comes from a photograph of Nicki Minaj. This painting evolved from two large drawings, *Midday Drinking Den* and *After Embah I and II*, both also in the show.



Chris Ofili, *Embah*, 2017

Photo: Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York / London



And what did Chris Ofili do? Four very tall, enigmatic black-and-white paintings trapped inside a vast wire-fenced room the viewer can't enter, surrounded by a mural full of mystical and mysterious viewers peering through a painted wire-fenced wall. The effect is compellingly strange. The letters E M B A H travel down both sides of one canvas, but not in order. The name of Ofili's show is *Paradise Lost*. A sculpture of a caged bird is in the preceding room, a prelude to the caged paintings room, posing "the question of the sweetness of the song: Is the sweeter song the song of the uncaged bird or the song of the caged bird?" Ofili told me. "Embah was an Oracle. He was the key maker to doors beyond which are intricate, infinite, and sublime pathways to creativity. He held my hand and took me on extraordinary journeys of the soul."

Doig and Ofili organized Embah's first New York show in 2006, at White Columns, and there was another show at the same place, a couple of months ago. Brice was there for both occasions. Yet, Brice said, "it was somehow special not to know we were all making work about Embah." She then added, "but it would be so great if Embah were here."