

**DEBORAH ROBERTS**

American, born Austin, TX, 1962

*She's Mighty, Mighty*, 2017

Collage, 30 x 22 inches

Purchased with funds donated by Diane and Craig Solomon, 2017.11

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She is many and she is one. Through her method of collage, Deborah Roberts creates a kind of every girl. Composed of found images from magazines and online sources, *She's Mighty, Mighty*'s complexity of form accentuates the individuality that is denied to Black girls beginning at a young age. Aggressive forces that reduce Black women's identities are ever present in society and popular culture. By creating a singular representation that centers the diversity of Black girls, Roberts leans into and pushes against monolithic narratives of Black girlhood. Cultural markers like her twisted hairstyle and a small yellow barrette place the girl at around five to eight years old, an age when prejudices and stereotypes begin to establish concrete bearings in interpersonal relationships and in one's sense of self. Conversely, her facial features, each from a different source image, are reminders of how reductive notions of identity located in the body create painful commonalities that extend to Black womanhood.

The unfair burden of such prejudices are a much larger fight than any one girl can combat on her own. *She's Mighty, Mighty* references an instance from the artist's own childhood in which her non-Black teacher grabbed Roberts's chin to lift her face.<sup>1</sup> In the work, the girl's uncomfortable smile and stoic gaze starkly contrast with the screaming monkey coming out of her head as a white arm extends down to force her chin up. She is unable to exert agency over her own disposition because of this teacher's racist and gendered ideations, thus leaving her to grapple with how to navigate external expectations within her own identity. Interactions like the one Roberts had with her teacher are representative of broader obstacles Black girls begin to encounter before they understand their gravity. The petite figure's struggle to hold up a pair of deep red boxing gloves nearly the size of her torso is a reminder of the overwhelming weight racism places on Black girls. These gloves are the protection that society should have given her but she must now provide for herself.

—Brianna Heath '21, Art History  
Block Curatorial Summer Intern, 2018  
Block Student Docent, 2018–21

1 Deborah Roberts, in conversation with Janet Dees, December 6, 2017.