

Curator and gallery director Corrine Jennings guided me through The Wilmer Jennings Gallery's newest exhibit, *Sources of Light, Donovan Nelson: Portraits*. "You might catch Nelson here," she said. "He's always coming in and fussing with the paintings." I didn't meet Nelson, but I did get to know 30 of his friends, all of whom were or are artists in his Brooklyn community. The 30 portraits include his greatest inspirations: artists, sculptors, art collectors, and photographers such as Benny Andrews, Hugh Bell, Faith Ringgold, and Joe Overstreet, many of whom have had their own solo shows at The Wilmer Jennings Gallery.

"When Nelson was a kid, he liked to draw people who inspired him, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He wanted others to know about the people he drew or painted. These are his inspirations," Jennings told me. The tour was a history lesson through Nelson's brushstrokes and Jennings' familiarity with each "source of light" in Nelson's life.

I was drawn to a soft gray and white painting of the late Augusta Savage. In the portrait, Savage proudly gazes at a sculpture of a harp. Jennings told me the painting depicted Savage's *The Harp*, a sixteen-foot work commissioned by the World's Fair, and a symbol of Negro spirituals and hymns and their contribution to contemporary music. Although it received much acclaim, no funds were available to cast or store it and it was eventually destroyed. "But I tracked down someone who went to the 1936 World's Fair," Jennings smiled. "I have a floor model now."

Nelson's portraits provide a history lesson in African diaspora art and a history of his personal growth as an artist. The kid who drew Dr. King is a source of light himself, and the proof is in his luminous colors, intense light, and reverence and respect for his subjects. In a portrait of painter and sculptor Otto Neals, Nelson shines the spotlight directly on Neals' soul—his contributions to the world as an artist. The portrait depicts Neals standing with his sculpture

in a warm, golden light. His soft gaze falls just beyond the viewer and is both inviolate and intimate. Nelson also puts the spotlight on the bright futures of his students. The portraits of their youthful faces hang on the wall next to a piano, and their inclusion is as important to the collection as the portraits of the students' predecessors. Nelson learns from those around him.

Each painting suggests a sense of community. While looking at a portrait of the late photographer Hugh Bell holding his camera, Jennings recalled seeing him at the Charlie Parker Tompkins Square Park Jazz Festival, right around the corner from the gallery. "The bands were really hitting, you know, and then I see someone jump like a basketball player to watch. It was Hugh Bell! He jumped and saw the music just when it was really getting good." Of course, Bell's most famous photograph was a picture of Charlie Parker.

In the back of the gallery hangs a large portrait of painter of the late Joe Overstreet, who was one of the founders of Kenkeleba House, the gallery's archival studio across the street. In the portrait, Overstreet leans against one of Kenkeleba House's columns. "[Kenkeleba House] creates space for people," Jennings told me. "Space is often an obstacle for artists." The gallery has made room for them, and has exhibited the works of 7,000 artists, including the first solo show by a Black female artist, a painter named Rose Piper. Kenkeleba House remains committed to their mission—putting a spotlight on the works of Black, Latino, Asian, and Indigenous artists, and archiving, documenting, and displaying their works in a community sometimes overlooked by the cultural mainstream.

Nelson's portraits fill the gallery with stories of history, community, and civil rights activism. His intent to inspire others by preserving a cultural legacy is successful. The past looks as bright as the future.