

# Lyles & King

Shala Miller

*Obsidian*

January 13 - February 18, 2023

Opening Reception: Friday, January 13, 6-8pm

Lyles & King is pleased to present *Obsidian*, a solo exhibition of new photographs, sculptures, and film by artist Shala Miller.

## REFLECTION IN THREE PARTS

### I. The artist reflecting

*But what happens if I can't do it anymore? The thing that makes me feel most powerful. I'll always be able to love, right? Shouldn't my heart give me power? Not my mind? Can it be both? What should I be more concerned with; matters of the heart or matters of the mind?*

This is in response to my doctor's question: "What makes you feel most powerful?" to which I responded, "when I feel loved by somebody". Displeased with this response, they asked again but pushed me to think about a kind of power that I gain on my own, not involving anyone else. Perhaps something I do, "aren't you an artist?"

I had been repeating, "I wish I was stronger than this", like it was both a prayer and spell, hoping that the words would somehow materialize into a kind of wind or mist that would surround me for a moment and magically repair my brokenness and give me a cloak of resiliency. Because good God, I do not want to be led to ruins again. But somehow I keep finding myself taking up residence here and despite other's best efforts to convince me that the truth isn't truth, I know I haven't returned each time by my own volition. No. Actually the truth is here lately, the reason for my feelings of powerlessness is that I've been abused, harmed, hurt and when trying to heal or protect myself, the consistent reaction at its core has held this question: *who do you think you are?* And if you take this question and peel back its covering to see what's underneath, we'd actually find the answer for ourselves. Or maybe not an answer rather than the impetus to ask said question. The defensive inquiry suggests "you *can't* be a person". And I'm particularly focusing on the **can't**, which I believe in its utterance takes away any sort of chance at being something other than what that person is regarding you as— a thing! Because if I could be a person to them then I think it would somehow also affirm their personhood and positionality within the world too? And perhaps that would make them feel too small, or even powerless? And that's where I see this clash between striving for power vs. empowerment. The former is external and its success is contingent upon the oppression and exploitation of other people, places, systems etc. Whereas the latter is personal, generous in its nature and is self sufficient.

Perhaps when I said, "when I feel loved by somebody", I meant, "when I feel seen". But the problem still remains the same. How can I make empowerment break powerlessness?

### II. The subject, *Obsidian* as a spear

"It feels like I'm in this perpetual state of rage. And although I know this rage is mine, I don't want it. I-I- I want to expel it! Because I know who and what made me this way. And I can't help but want the sweetest revenge. To fight back! But what'll that do? Despite the righteousness that I feel my rage gives me... the energy... I feel so... and you know what if one more person calls me strong, I will break! How about that! God... I *am* broken. And lost. And scared. Scared of this pattern I've noticed. And you see, that's really the terrifying thing! *I've noticed a pattern!* What if I don't know the proper solution to break

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it? What if that's not for me to know? And I have to get "stronger" to keep fighting it? And what happens if I get tired? What if I end up joining forces in some way against myself? What if I give up? I am so Goddamn angry, I'm using the Lord's name in vain. Dear Lord, please forgive me, I just want my father back. Please make it summer of 2019 again. Tell me to go home because my father told the nurse he was waiting for me to come back to help him finish his breakfast. And plus, white bosses don't care about dying Black fathers, you know this. Father God, I want the body back that I had before rape and sexual assault and strangulation. Not the physical one, the spiritual one. Because there's no way I still have it... it's been squeezed out, and Lord, why didn't you tell me to get out of the shower when my first lover stood there in front of me, confessing to violating someone sexually, begging the water to wash it all away. Make it untrue. And Lord, why didn't you warn me they'd in fact try to make it untrue? Why didn't you warn me they'd turn my fresh wounds into a new population and leave me to be buried in its graveyard? Like the ones before me...

And Jesus... why'd you let me check myself into that hospital anyway? It did me no good, remember? I still have nightmares and scream myself out of my sleep and God, why'd you let that friend suggest I deserved it all? Why'd you let me turn my pointed tip onto myself and believe that I did? And oh goodness, here goes the fear of seeming solipsistic. And isn't that a shame? That someone could go through so much pain and horror and have it be true... and yet, there is still something within and outside of them questioning why the hell they should tell anyone at all. Father, how can I hold myself as a spear?"

### III. The space

In the show, *Obsidian*, Shala Miller focuses on rage, resistance and the desire for revenge as experienced by the Black femme person. Attempting to study it from a psychological standpoint, Miller has continued their years-long practice of combining fiction and auto-ethnography by creating *Obsidian*, a superhuman character discovered in the destroyed archive of an unknown and unnamed comic artist by an art historian, all of whom are fictional characters played by Miller. In the historian's research, they've been able to piece together that the central figure of the comic book is a Black femme person turned superhuman after being pushed into a volcano, turning them into obsidian. However, it's unclear to the art historian if this character is the superhero or supervillain. But what is clear is that the superhuman is full of rage and that's what fuels their power and also leads them to destruction. Here in this exhibition, we see the scholar try to decipher who exactly Obsidian is and if they are someone who should be adored or feared.

Shala Miller (b. 1993, Cleveland, OH) has exhibited at CCS Bard, Annandale-On-Hudson, NY; Lyles & King, New York, NY; CHART, New York, NY; Academy Art Museum, Easton, MD; Huxley-Parlour, London, UK; Dakar Biennale, Dakar, Senegal; and AC Institute, New York, NY; among others. She has performed at Swiss Institute, curated by Sable Elyse Smith, New York, NY; Artist's Space, New York, NY; and Green-Wood Cemetery, New York, NY; among others. Miller graduated with a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she studied photography, film, video and writing. Miller lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.