

# Welancora

Press Release

Seen and Unseen

Chris Watts and Helen Evans Ramsaran

Frieze Los Angeles 2023, Booth E04

February 16-19, 2023

Santa Monica Airport



Welancora Gallery is proud to present *Seen and Unseen*, an intergenerational pairing of new paintings by Chris Watts (b. 1984) and bronze sculpture created by Helen Evans Ramsaran (b.1943), at Frieze Los Angeles, 2023 booth E04.

*Seen and Unseen* is a presentation of work by Chris Watts and Helen Evans Ramsaran that builds on their interest in exploring the precarity of representation, of the Black body and indigenous cultures, through the formal engagement of abstract painting and bronze sculpture where absence forms the condition of visibility.

Thinking about historical categorizations of human-ness, and emancipating notions of Blackness and spirituality from the Western imagination, Watts employs soft and sheer textiles, resin, pigments sourced from Peru, and poly-chiffon silk, to capture the aura of the Black body. Monochromatic colors in the work, saturated into fleshy transparent surfaces bring forth an embodied vulnerability. Porous and breathable, light decelerates as it passes through the material allowing for a slow-looking or meditative experience. The act of disappearance, the non-locatable subject, and the quiet world created inside these paintings begs the question: how can we begin to define ourselves in a way that is both radical and responsive to lived experiences rather than a priori qualifications of the self?

Working in bronze, Ramsaran combines a subtle palette with abstract, angular lines and etched surfaces that investigate the idea of the shrine. Assimilating her experiences in Africa, China, and Mexico into these visions, the artist has rendered her own concept of a sanctuary or site of worship.

While the shrines are not intended to be specifically architectonic in nature, there is a sense of enclosure and shelter in each work.

Ramsaran suggests the external/physical and the internal/metaphysical function of the shrine, indicating an actual space in which one enters, and an area inside that is meant for reflection and refuge. Often, an abstract ornamentation functions together with the formal structure of the work to reiterate the artist's interest in the initiation ceremonies and the symbols found in the art that accompanies these events.

### **About the artists**

Chris Watts was born in High Point, North Carolina. He attended the MFA program at Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT, after graduating from the College of Arts and Architecture, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC, and the Academy of Fine Arts and Design, Wroclaw, PL. The artist has held various artist residencies, among them the Marek Maria Pienkowski Foundation, Chelm, PL; McColl Center for Art + Innovation, Charlotte, NC; the Art & Law Fellowship Program, at Cornell University Art Architecture Planning, New York, NY; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Workspace Program, New York, NY; and, the 2022-2023 Soros Justice Fellowship Program. His work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. He is a featured artist in the documentary film, *The Art of Making It*, directed by Kelcey Edwards, and from the Emmy-nominated producer Debi Wisch (*The Price of Everything*). The film had its world premiere at the 2021 Hamptons International Film Festival. Watts shares his time between New York and North Carolina.

Helen Evans Ramsaran was born in Bryan, Texas. Ramsaran moved to New York City in 1973. Shortly thereafter (1978), she created a series of bronze relief sculptures called *Visual Tales*. This is her only series that is autobiographical in its statement and assumes the form of a visual narrative. The images and forms are somewhat calligraphic, thus posing some very delicate and challenging casting problems. In executing this body of work at the Johnson Atelier Technical Institute of Sculpture in Princeton, New Jersey, Ramsaran was able to perfect the technique of casting very delicate bronze sculptures.

In the 1980s, Ramsaran's work took a major shift and developed into an exploration of ancient rituals, ancient African oral traditions, ancient myths, mysterious fossilized remains, supernatural power, and African inspired architecture. Although her sculpture during this period and beyond is inanimate, there is a lurking sense of humanity's presence. The subtle carvings on many of Ramsaran's bronze sculptures are meant to represent African scarification and elements in nature, such as lightning and rain that mark the change in planting seasons and, that speak of a lost reverence for nature and its life-sustaining power.

The research for Ramsaran's older works involved extensive travel, over a thirty-year period, throughout Africa, Europe, Mexico, China, and Japan. During the early 80s, she traveled to Pietrasanta in Italy where she set up a small studio and spent several months casting in bronze. A few of the most pivotal moments in her research came when she visited Mexico (1982) where she observed the ancient sculpture and architecture of the Toltecs, Mayans, Zapotes and Aztecs; Japan (1984) where she learned the delicate art of traditional Japanese papermaking or Washi while being apprenticed to the papermaker, Hiroyuki Fukurashi, and in Zimbabwe (1987-1988) where she created a group of twenty stone carvings and bronze sculptures called *Prehistoric Stamps* that suggest the prehistoric origins of seeds, fossils, animals and Shona, Karanga and Ndebele people of the region.

Over many decades, Ramsaran has exhibited nationally and internationally. In 1994, she had a solo exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem that traveled from the Chrysler Museum in Norfolk, Virginia. Public collections include the Sheldon Museum, and the Mead Art Museum among others. Ramsaran splits her time between New York and Europe.

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**Gallery Hours:** Tuesday-Saturday 11:00 am – 5:00 pm

**Caption and Courtesy Information:**

**Helen Evans Ramsaran**, *Soul of the House*, 1992, bronze, 10 x 13 inches ©\_Helen Evans Ramsaran Courtesy the artist and Welancora Gallery, Photo: Adam Reich