Focus On: Ambrose Rhapsody Murray

Knoxville Girl

Exhibition Duration
November 5 - December 5, 2026

Opening Hours
Tue - Fr 11am - 6pm
Sa 11 am - 4 pm

For her upcoming exhibition "Knoxville Girl" at Galerie Kandlhofer in Vienna, Ambrose Rhapsody Murray turns to the early folk music traditions of Western North Carolina, where she grew up.

"Knoxville Girl" is a traditional Appalachian murder ballad with roots in 17th-century British broadsides. It tells the story of a young woman who steps outside the boundaries of respectability and becomes a victim to her murderous lover. The murder ballads act as a form of cultural instruction, reminding young men and women of the boundaries of their behavior in polite society. Through a cheerful, almost sing-songy melody, the song tells a story of tragedy and romance, revealing the hidden expectations that shape gender roles and romantic love. "Murder ballads interested me because they are often told from the perspective of a man, revealing the normalized nature of gender-based violence and femicide," the artist explains.

In 1968, Dolly Parton wrote the song, "The Bridge," turning the Appalachian murder ballad tradition on its head by telling the story from a young woman's perspective. Daring for its time, it was often banned from the radio in the 60s and 70s. With this exhibition, Murray borrows from the tradition set forth by Dolly Parton, turning the attention to the girls and women at the heart of these songs. Who are they? What are they dreaming of, thinking about or longing for? What does their world look like? Mirroring the upbeat rhythms and colourful nature of the murder ballads, Murray's works are warm and inviting, with deeper stories beneath the surface. Although each painting depicts a different figure, they are connected through shared themes of love, tragedy, loneliness, beauty, desire, yearning and self-making.

Using found photographs as reference imagery, Murray paints each work on silk, applying a wax resist and several layers of silk dye. The vibrant colours and soft, watercolour-like qualities of the medium create a romantic, dreamlike atmosphere. Borrowing from craft traditions of silk dye and silk paintings for folkloric storytelling, the artist seeks, just like the ballad songwriters, to create a symbolic message for viewers. Murray describes her work as a letter to all lovers and an homage to the stories, lives and voices of women, femmes and girls. The works offer a space in which vulnerability may be met with tenderness, ultimately, creating a sense of belonging, protection and holiness for anyone who finds themselves in need of it.

About the artist:

Ambrose Rhapsody Murray (b. 1996) is a multidisciplinary artist with roots in Florida and North Carolina in the American South.Through sewing, painting, installation, material experimentation, film and collaborative projects, her work investigates the colonial undercurrents of our lives, the charged symbology of black feminine bodies, and the ephemeral and layered qualities of memory and remembering. Ambrose earned her Bachelor's in Black Studies from Yale in 2018 and her MFA in Painting/Printmaking from Yale School of Art in 2026. Her work has been featured in Cultured Magazine, Artsy, SEEN and Galerie Magazine. She is a US Presidential Scholar in the Arts, Black Rock Senegal alum, and Forbes 30 under 30 honoree. Her work has exhibited across the US and abroad, and lives in the permanent collection of The Studio Museum in Harlem, The Montclair Art Museum, and Theaster Gates Rebuild Foundation.

Selected Solo Exhibitions: 2025: "My Memory Is a Machine", University of Tennessee, Ewing Gallery, Knoxville, TN, US; 2024: "My Memory Is a Machine", Alma Lewis Gallery, Pittsburgh, PA, US; 2022: "Oceans and Stars and Tulips", BODE Projects, Berlin, Germany; 2021: "Within Listening Distance of the Sea…", Fridman Gallery, New York, NY, US; 2021: "They looked at us like violet", N'Namdi Contemporary, Miami, FL, US.

Selected Group Exhibitions: 2026: "Entangled", Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria; 2026: "The Dance", Abigail Ogilvy Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US; 2026: "S-Curve", FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY, US; 2026: "Somehow Desire", Yale MFA Thesis Exhibition (Group 1), New Haven, CT, US; 2025: Miami Art Basel, Southern Guild Gallery, Miami, FL, US; 2025: "In Us Is Heaven", Southern Guild Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US; 2025: "A Friend Named Cousin", Cierra Britton Gallery x Joe Freshgoods, New York, NY, US; 2024: "Century: 100 Years of Black Art" at MAM, curated by nico w. okoro and Adrienne L. Childs, Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, NJ, US; 2024: "Go Tell it On the Mountain:

Black Folx and Their Church", curated by Alyssa Alexander, Swivel Gallery, New York, NY, US; 2023: "The Threads We Follow", curated by Maya Brooks, Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC, US; 2023: 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Superposition Gallery, Marrakech, Morocco; 2022: "Between the deep blue", Gasworks, London, England; 2022: Frieze LA, Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US; 2022: "A question of vibrancy/earthly sight", curated by Essence Harden, Eduardo Secci Gallery, Florence, Italy; 2022: Woman to Woman, BODE Projects, Berlin, Germany; 2021: Miami Art Basel, Jeffrey Deitch Gallery, Miami, FL, US; 2021: FETICHE, curated by Ebony Haynes, Morán Morán Gallery, Mexico City, Mexico; 2021: Armory Art Fair, Fridman Gallery, New York, NY; US; 2021: "Amplify, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach, VA, US.

Artist Residencies: 2025: Artist-in-Residence, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, US; 2023: Large-scale textile commission & installation for stage performance, Communion, Common Ground Performance Festival, Fisher Center, Bard College, NY, US; 2023: Black Rock Residency, Dakar, Senegal; 2023: Atlantic Center for the Arts, Residency #190, New Smyrna Beach, FL, US; 2020: Long Road Projects, Jacksonville, FL, US; 2020: Fountainhead Residency, Miami, FL, US.