

Never Done Object Tour

Co-curator Rachel Seligman reflects on Vanessa German's *I Will Not Suffer For You*, 2017.

Transcript

Rachel: It's been really rewarding and revealing to meet with Skidmore students in *Never Done* and to hear what concerns and issues they are most tuned into and what they find compelling and why. Our conversations often begin by asking students to look around the gallery and share which works resonate most with them before we offer them any contextual information. In every class, students are drawn to Vanessa German's, "I Will Not Suffer For You." They invariably say that they sense something spiritual in the work. They liken it to an altarpiece, shrine, or retablo. They are drawn to its sparkle, and they feel power radiating from the figure. It is a dazzling, captivating sculpture, and the closer we look, the more we see. While the figure of the black woman may be evident, we need more time to see the multitude of details. Nestled throughout the glittery surface of the work and embedded in and around her body are many images and objects, including butterflies and birds, spoons, dolls, watches and knives, a watermelon, a tiny altarpiece, a framed photograph, a gun, a cowry shell, and much, much more. Each of these carries historic and contemporary associations and meanings to be unpacked. There's also a gold and purple halo around the figure's head, and everywhere, we see eyes large and small floating around the figure's body embedded in her chest with rays of light emanating from it and dominating the top of the piece. The idea of this work as a shrine or a diasporic *Nkisi* figure is reinforced by these talismanic objects and images, which are incorporated in the work.

And our students have many questions about "I Will Not Suffer For You" that have engendered robust conversations. Are the eyes meant to ward off the evil eye? Is the figure a saint or a martyr? Her hand is on her heart, is she pledging something? And if so, what? How do we interpret the words "I Will Not Suffer For You" along the sides, the word, "Safety" above her head, and the word, "Holy" on her arm? Here in this work is a meditation on growing up Black and female in the United States and a vision of empowered Black women and girls in the face of unrelenting violence. Here is a reclamation of symbols of oppression and an argument for the power of creativity in transformation and healing. Here is strength and resolve, knowledge, and majesty. And here also is a challenge to which all of us must rise.