

Alexander James

Words from the Curator

At the heart of Alexander James' work is reconfiguring blackness through the creation of enigmatic figures and the use of contrast. "*Through the abstract, you can see yourself palpably and viscerally,*"¹ he voices. James champions human understanding and resonance, depicting people in motion and distinct facial expressions.

Much of his practice is born from everyday life. Growing up in Birmingham, James understood blackness through daily habits and cultural traditions, from grits and bacon for breakfast to church on Sunday mornings.

Being on the move complicated James' understanding of blackness, from polarized to a complex spectrum. In a basement in Boston, he took to art to begin making sense of these ideas. His canvases are reflexive, liminal spaces² of reimagination for him to reflect on the past and give color and shape to new futures.

As for his art, "*It's imperfect. It's not a pretty process.*"³ James enters his studio always in a splattered sweater and Basquiat sweats, blasting music. Before, it was Kendrick Lamar for his storytelling and lyricism, but now, Steve Reich's steady rhythms get him into flow. "*When I'm in a flow state, I'm unstoppable.*"⁴

James describes himself as a conduit for the art that speaks through him, and his movement and techniques, free-flowing reflections of his emotional headspace. "*I know what I want to do; I know what the end goal is; as for how I want to get there, I have no idea.*"⁵ As for when he puts down his brush, "*Not when there's nothing else to add, but when there's nothing else to subtract.*"⁶

His making of *Brazen Bloom* (2023) echoes this process. Needing reconnection and release, James desired to paint with orange, "*When you close your eyes and look at the sun, that's my favorite color.*"⁷ He carefully balanced a personal distance, juxtaposing non-human, caricatured elements onto a human body.

The Flower That Can't Be Picked (2024) is a site of tension. Using two pointer fingers, James brought the man's face and body into being in one go. Feeling the piece didn't tell a complete story, he allowed the two parts to diverge. The man's body frolics performatively in a field while his head, filled with spirals and sure only of the present, looks onward.

In a way, the work counters Walter Benjamin's angel of history⁸—propelled towards the future by change, unable to look away from the rubble of the past. James holds accountable the past, portrays presence, and plants futures.

John L. Jackson Jr's quote comes to mind: "*We are the folks who are responsible for the version of the culture that we pass on.*"⁹ Simultaneously creating and confronting portraits of blackness, James aims to speak to the African American experience through constructing human, visual ethnographies of sincerity.¹⁰

James demonstrates how art can live as narratives of becoming and testimonies of being. Each of his works is a palpable addition to African American history that cannot be subtracted.

¹ Alexander James, in conversation with ModA Curations, Mar 7, 2024.

² Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

³ Alexander James, in conversation with ModA Curations, Mar 7, 2024.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History (Excerpt)*, accessed March 1, 2024, <https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>.

⁹ John L. Jackson, "Dr. John L. Jackson, 'Impolite Conversations About Race,'" YouTube, October 16, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7BbJeoX08E>.

¹⁰ John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

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