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Fullness

Jamaal Barber

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by

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Under the Direction of Anthony Craig Drennen, MFA

ABSTRACT

Fullness is an exhibition of paintings that manifests self-affirming Blackness separate from a world that is unwilling to engage with it. Blackness refers to the Black racial identity that embodies the collective consciousness of all melanated people. Removed from the confines of enslavement and systemic oppression, Black people become free to edify themselves visually and spiritually. In this body of work, I reimagine and rebuild Black identity with unexpected forms through mixed media paintings. The works employ layers of color and abstracted shapes to represent the Black body not only as an ethnic identity but as a psychological state of being. *Fullness* establishes a visual framework for Black life by picturing how our world could hold Blackness as sacred and worthy without conditions and limitations.

INDEX WORDS: Blackness, Identity, African American, Black life

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DEDICATION

To my whole world, Sydney and Avery. Daddy loves you.

To the woman that made me whole, Dr. Jennifer Barber.

Black Love is Black Wealth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all the professors at Georgia State University Ernest G. Welch School of Art & Design who have helped me grow over three years. Special thanks to my committee, Craig Dongoski, Dr. Kimberly Cleveland, Serena Perrone, and Craig Drennen for lending me their wisdom and kind words during this complicated, unexpected final year.

Congrats to all my grad cohorts who made this journey so much fun.

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your mother

all to yourself

"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[1]

I understood at an early age the role of race in America. After moving to Littleton, North Carolina in the fourth grade, every school I attended was 90-95% African American. I spent all my formative years surrounded by Black people of every shade, size, attitude, and persuasion. My parents, my family, my friends, and my neighbors were all melanated people. My entire world consisted of Black people conducting their daily lives and engaging in routine activities. This immersion in Black life expanded my understanding of what it means to be Black and to experience the full breadth of life.

Aside from a few white teachers I occasionally bumped into while out shopping with my parents, I never had meaningful encounters with white people. There were about ten white students in my school, and they kept to themselves, both by choice and by circumstance. They understood the general rules of race just as we all did. There seemed to be an air of regret among

[1] Nikki Giovanni, *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni* (New York: William Morrow, 2003), 53.

them; perhaps they felt sorry for themselves for having the misfortune of attending the Black school.

Racial segregation was an accepted fact of life. We lived here, went to this school, and did Black things. It wasn't a stated rule, but the separation between the white and Black communities was as real as the border of trees along US 158 between Littleton and Roanoke Rapids. The events we learned about in social studies class represented our history: the civil rights marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who wanted us to be judged by our character, not by the color of our skin; Black people boycotting, peacefully demonstrating, and engaging in political activism, fighting against America's long history of oppression; police dogs being unleashed against Black men and women who simply wanted to exercise their right to vote; the National Guard protecting a little girl from an angry racist mob as she made her way to a newly desegregated school.

Littleton's broader racial dynamics never came up in daily conversations. My parents and my family did what all parents strive to do: they protected my precious childhood from such serious concerns. They worked hard to keep me as safe as possible, for as long as possible, in my Black world full of basketball and bike riding. Despite their best, most loving intentions, we children intuitively understood the racial dynamics of our community and how we were expected to conform.

We knew that they, the people that didn't look like us, were white. They were privileged and they assumed authority. They had areas that belonged to them, which ended up being most places, except the places we had managed to claim. When we entered their spaces, we had to navigate through their gaze and fight against indulging their biases. Black people walked straighter and talked louder when white people were around; we knew they were not better than

us, so every encounter was a demonstration of our equality. Despite our efforts, they were unwilling to acknowledge the truths we were broadcasting; to acknowledge our equality would mean having to rectify all the wrongs, cruelties, and injustices.

Racism is foundational to life in America. Everything, from where you live, to the job you have, to the opportunities you're given, is determined by race. Cities build places where Black people don't belong, and then pass laws to codify and reinforce racial disparities, giving advantages to whiteness over Blackness. The Jim Crow laws that enforced racial segregation existed from the 1880s into the 1960s. One Louisiana law made it a misdemeanor to rent an apartment to a Black person or family if there was even a single white person living in the same building. People who dared to violate this law risked a fine of up to $100 and could even be forced to serve up to sixty days in prison.[2] Laws like this one established a binary value system: white people belong, Black people don't. One group is accepted, one group is not. Positive/negative; white/black. The immensity of these truths dramatically affects our psychological well-being.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning book by Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, speaks brilliantly about the effects of racial oppression on African Americans' lives. Wilkerson crafts the Great Migration narrative, a period from 1915 to 1970 that saw massive numbers of Black people flee the South—and the racial terror associated with it—in search of a better life. The book follows different families over multiple generations and describes the trauma each family experiences. Wilkerson's prose makes it clear: there is no place untouched by the cruel hand of white supremacy because racial bias is woven into America's fabric. The people who left the South in search of a more peaceful existence were no longer openly lynched, perhaps, but their

[2] "Jim Crow Laws," National Parks Service online, last modified April 17, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/malu/learn/education/jim_crow_laws.htm.

new environments in cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles turned out to be equally unwelcoming, albeit in less obvious ways.

My past work wrestled with history; it reacted to it. I felt a responsibility to say something, but even more than simply reacting to the past, I wanted to exalt the image of Black people and visualize the stories I've heard and felt in my life. I wanted to propagate stereotypes of Black people's beauty, about our struggle, about our history and our survival. The art was a vessel that carried the thoughts and humanity of Black people out into the broader culture, the way art can disseminate messages across all spectrums. The body of work I created during my second year of graduate school focused on exploring our history.

Figure 1. Jamaal Barber, The Council. *woodcut, 36" x 48", 2018, Private Collection*

I made pieces like *The Council* (fig 1) which features five men's faces rendered alternately in abstract linear patterns and solid black outlines. The figures overlap and split, alluding to the various ways life has changed and connected across generations. The most realistically rendered man's face represents all of the collected knowledge and wisdom embedded in the man's African American heritage.

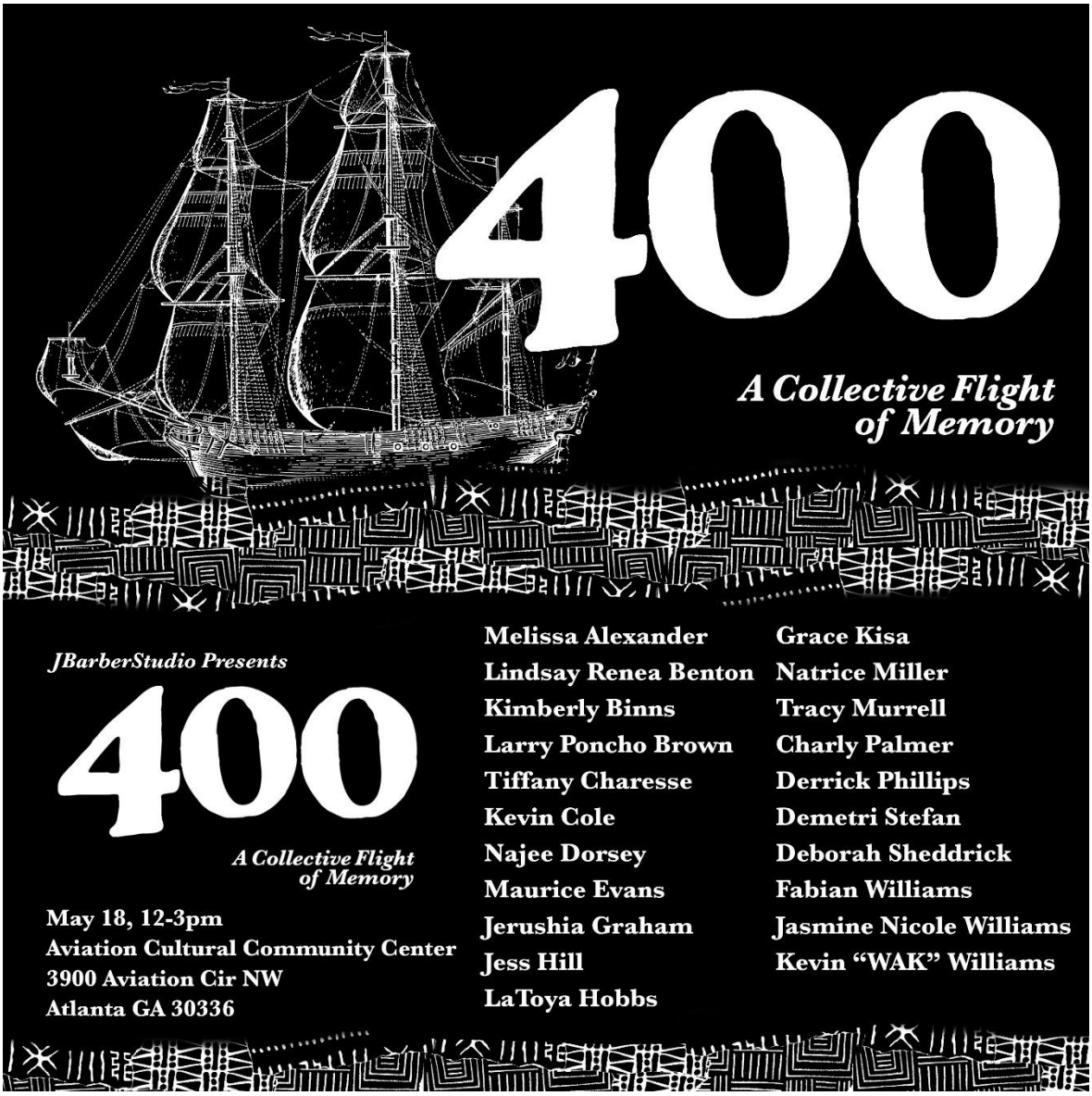

Figure 2. Jamaal Barber, 400: A Collective Flight of Memory postcard*. 2019. Digital*

In 2019, I developed a show called *400: A Collective Flight of Memory* (fig. 2), which debuted at the Aviation Community Cultural Center in the summer. 2019 marked the 400th anniversary of the first recorded slave ships arriving in Virginia carrying "20 and odd negroes."[3]

[3] John Thornton, "The African Experience of the '20 And Odd Negroes' Arriving in Virginia in 1619," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (July 1998), 421, JSTOR.

The idea behind the show was to create a body of work in collaboration with other Black artists to understand the collective memory of enslaved Africans in America. I was on a mission to expand my singular understanding of Blackness by interacting with people of many different backgrounds, many different generations. The conversations with the other artists during the process of making the work gave me a window into their experiences, which I added to my own. For the entire second year of graduate school, I worked collaboratively with 22 artists of various ages, backgrounds, genders, and artistic practices. The variety of family histories and stories gave me a more comprehensive view of Black people's lives.

There is a collaborative tradition inherent in the medium of printmaking. Master printers—experts in the various forms of printmaking like Curlee Holton and Robert Blackburn—often work with artists who lack technical printmaking expertise to produce editions of works. In other words, the printer works in concert with the artist to fulfill an artistic vision. For the *400* show, I worked with the other artists in the role of a master printer, producing the work they had envisioned. I also worked on several pieces that guided painters and photographers by making monoprints and mixed media artworks; these works usually included some print processes.

Figure 3. Jamaal Barber, A Place for Me. *mixed media, 47" x 72", 2019, private collection*

I also produced a few pieces of my own for the show, like *A Place for Me (After Bearden)* (fig. 3). This mixed media work depicts an old Black farmer and was made with acrylic paint, woodcut printing, roofing paper, and found objects. *A Place for Me* achieved two things that were important and furthered my artistic process. First, it fundamentally illustrated the struggle I wanted to express. The farmer, an older Black man, has been worn down and weathered by the lands he has worked. Using the figure of a farmer highlights the historical plight of Black farmers as described by Waymon R Hinson and Edward Robertson in their article "'We Didn't Get Nothing:' The Plight of Black Farmers," published in *Journal of African American Studies*:

> Yet such activities scarcely touched the majority of black agrarians who remained ensnared in the virtual peonage of sharecropping. This iniquitous system bound southern blacks to the white landowners almost as effectively as had slavery. Borne down by ever-increasing debts, trapped by a legal system which severely restricted their every movement, weakened by malnutrition and disease, and violently denied access to legal relief, black tenant farmers labored under a weight of oppression which offered virtually no escape.[4]

Since the days of sharecropping, throughout Reconstruction, and currently with class action lawsuits targeting discrimination in USDA policy, Black farmers have a long history of fighting to survive.

I achieved this weathered and worn effect by mixing textures: the woodcut texture of the farmer's face is distinct yet harmonizes with the patchy collage of the roofing paper, paint, and other materials that make up his overalls. We look at this piece and see someone who has struggled, yet survived; he stands there full of dignity, unflinchingly returning our gaze. Life has not broken him, but rather has molded and shaped him into the commanding presence we see

[4] Waymon R. Hinson and Edward Robinson, "'We Didn't Get Nothing' The Plight of Black Farmers," *Journal of African American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2008): 288.

before us. As we look, we can almost imagine all he lived through: protest marches on Washington DC, the Jim Crow years, legalized segregation.

Figure 4. Romare Bearden, The Lantern. *color lithograph, 22" x 30", 1981*

The second thing *A Place for Me* did was directly reference work from the art historical canon, in this case, Romare Bearden's *The Lantern* (fig. 4). Referencing is a form of paying homage; it helps me examine my connection to all the other Black artists who came before me. Bearden was the first artist who inspired me to make art. I always liked to draw as a child and made pictures all the time, but I never considered art as a career; it was more like a thing that I did as a child. When I saw Bearden's work, I began to consider art-making in a new way, as no longer a childhood pass-time but a means to a career. I felt its power and how masterfully he expressed the Black experience of his time. His work was a visual representation of Blackness. It showed a picture of the world I knew. By using a similar palette of colors, repeating some of the shapes, and following the general concept of *The Lantern*, I restructured, reformatted, and remade it into a piece of my own. I consider this process another form of collaboration, only with an artist of the past instead of a living artist. *A Place for Me* resonates with the *400* show's overall themes: connecting with our ancestors and tapping into memories of previous generations of Black people.

2 MOTIVATION

how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home

it never gets across how much you

understood their feelings

as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale

"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[5]

In 2020, when the pandemic hit, we found ourselves in an unprecedented situation. The world stopped as the COVID-19 virus, highly contagious and deadly, spread worldwide. Life completely shifted to confront the new emergency overtaking the world. There was anxiety in March as the virus made its way into the United States; no one was quite sure what was happening, and no one knew how deadly COVID-19 would be. We were all forced into lockdown. Lockdown had a few major effects on my life: first, it cut off my access to Atlanta Printmakers Studio (APS). This community printing workshop is where I have printed the majority of my work over the last six years. APS's closure all but eliminated the potential for me to have art shows, the primary source of my income. Being cut off from the resource that helps my family survive created a cloud of uncertainty: would the art world ever reopen? Could we last that long? When galleries and museums did reopen, what would the art world post-COVID be like?

These anxieties extended into my artistic practice. For the foreseeable future, there would be no outlet for my large-scale woodcuts and editions of prints, which begged the question: is it practical—or even relevant—to spend hours carving, inking, and hand printing a 4-foot woodblock? After my wife's grandfather lost his wife and her sister to COVID, I obsessed over doing everything I could to prevent losing more relatives and loved ones. I spent hours refreshing

[5] Giovanni, 53.

news websites and searching the internet daily, if not hourly, for updates on hot spot locations as the virus drew closer and closer to home. As a father, I feared for the lives and safety of my children. These worries formed an inescapable thought loop in my mind. I awkwardly drifted through time, hopelessly fighting an invisible enemy. I felt myself being pulled into an abyss of depression. Almost a month passed before I attempted to create anything. Once I picked up my tools again, I returned to what always made me happy as a child. I began to draw.

I resumed my sketchbook practice. Every morning before the latest pandemic news washed over me, I filled a page in my sketchbook. In the beginning, I merely made abstract marks and doodles. The time spent on these simple drawings was a brief moment of respite from the tremendously dangerous circumstances around me; daily sketching helped me maintain a feeling of normalcy. I also focused more on my family and limited the time I spent on the internet. I went on bike rides and watched movies with my children. I put on my mask and ventured out to the grocery store. I even received opportunities to sell some of my artwork online.

As I did all these things, I slowly pulled myself out of the abyss. The sketchbook pages also evolved, becoming drawings on 18" x 24" sheets of paper. My marks became more fluid and less representational as I released my need for the pages to depict anything. The action of making the drawings became the point. The daily commitment to creating a thing, whatever it was, became a personal triumph against the virus. For everything and everyone COVID had taken away from me, it could not take my art.

I leaned further into abstraction and introduced colored India ink. I stopped myself from planning two color compositions, which had been my usual approach with screen printing, as that method now felt too serious and time-consuming. I was adjusting to the observably

abnormal moment; returning to my usual creative print practice felt wrong. With so many people getting sick and possibly dying, how could I, in good conscience, indulge in printmaking? Instead, I engaged in these simple acts of creation: quickly and intuitively crafting gestures and lines, building up layers of color.

3 ANOTHER ONE

and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[6]

Around this same time, the name George Floyd started to pop up in my social media timeline. Without warning, video clips of Floyd's murder appeared on my phone, along with the usual, depressing reaction: "Another Black man killed by the police." To this day, I have never watched (and will never watch) the entire eight-minute and forty-six-second murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police. The video documentation of another Black man's death inevitably cranked up the outrage machine. Activists quickly organized protests around the

[6] Giovanni, 53.

country with pre-branded signage. Lawyers and pundits fought for airtime with competing soundbites, breaking down the story like a sportscaster reviewing the highlights of a game-winning touchdown. Police departments rolled out massive PR campaigns designed to make you think was nothing wrong with what you had witnessed: *A man died but let's not make a big deal out of it*. I didn't need to watch the video of Floyd's murder because I had seen it dozens of times before. I know all the names. I begin to tear up just imagining Philando Castile with his child in the car's back seat, watching him die; and Tamir Rice, the same age my daughter is now, being gunned down while sitting on a swing, his sister tackled and arrested with a gun to her head just for trying to hold her brother as he died; and Freddy Gray, who police callously threw into the back of a police van, paralyzing and ultimately killing him; and Sean Bell; and Michael Brown; and Laquan McDonald; and Eric Garner; and Sandra Bland. And, and, and… The names of the victims have become too long to even remember.

Floyd's murder put me into a perpetual cycle of rage. Just as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, another death seemed to loom on the horizon. The unceasing succession of tragedies, one after another, makes it impossible to acknowledge and come to terms with what you are witnessing: the cruel, unjustifiable murdering of Black people. Crimes that are somehow always rationalized and left unpunished. American racial politics has taught me that no matter what I accomplish in my life, I can never be seen as anything but a Black person. And if they would kill any Black person with impunity and disregard for their basic humanity, then they would kill me too. The severity of that statement depends on your proximity to the tragedy. What is the difference between George Floyd and Jamaal? Philando Castile and Jamaal?

Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012 is the tragedy that sits heaviest in my mind. I was so much like Trayvon. His pictures, school records, and friends' testimonies all show that he was a

regular Black boy, just like me, living in his neighborhood, going to get Skittles and an iced tea during a game break. For simply existing, he was hunted down and killed by a wannabe cop. People actually supported the monster who had killed me (Trayvon) and went out of their way to depict me (Trayvon) as a criminal—as if this somehow justified murder. The cops let the murderer go; the state only brought charges after public outcry. The aftermath of Trayvon's senseless death radicalized me.

I used art as a way to channel my emotions. I directed my anger into showing the travesty of these events. I wanted my art to scream, "THIS IS WHAT IS HAPPENING! THIS IS WHAT I FEEL! LOOK AT WHAT YOU HAVE DONE TO THESE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE! LOOK AT HOW AWESOME WE ARE!" I wanted to show the experience and resilience of Black people as they navigated this dangerous world. I targeted this system of injustice that devalued everything associated with Blackness and denied my people's basic humanity. I wanted to fight and make my presence known.

Yet in the spring of 2020, sitting with the news of Floyd's death—yet another dead Black man or person —as well as the pandemic, I found I had nothing left to give. I was barely holding on as it was. I had slowly built myself up to survive the endless pandemic days, and now had to confront (again) the ongoing spectacle of Black death. I didn't have the energy or the resolve to scream anything. Floyd sat in my heart all the same, and I cried for his daughter all the same. I cried for the world my children will inherit all the same. I couldn't give myself and my art over to the world's troubles this time.

4 PEACE BEYOND UNDERSTANDING

and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[7]

Congressman John Robert Lewis passed away on July 17, 2020. He had been a fixture in the civil rights struggle for over 60 years. He, along with many other protesters, was attacked on the Edmund Pettus Bridge while marching from Selma to Montgomery in 1965, when he was just 25 years old. When Lewis died, he had been a member of Congress since 1987. He had dedicated his whole life to fighting for justice and equality for African Americans. He died in his 80s, still fighting.

The fight is honorable. The battle is righteous and it is necessary. But it is also tiring. This war against white supremacy requires relentless commitment and a boundless reserve of hope. As "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice,"[8] we must turn the system toward respecting each citizen's humanity. The fight requires you to have faith that this outcome is possible. Whether you call it the audacity of hope, as Barack Obama did in his book,

[7] Giovanni, 53.
[8] Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Out of the Long Night," *Gospel Messenger*, February 8, 1958, 14. https://archive.org/stream/gospelmessengerv107mors#page/n177/mode/2up.

or the youthful energy of a young man determined to make change, my art had all that. It proudly asserted Blackness.

George Floyd's murder shattered my illusion that change was possible. I sat in my studio and wondered what all my screaming had accomplished. It didn't help George Floyd. I know that is too lofty a responsibility to assign to a woodcut, but, closer to home, could my art even help save my son? He is a replica of me at that age, and if I see myself in Trayvon, could my boy be the next Trayvon? With a hole in his chest, paying for the "sin" of going to buy a drink and a snack in his American neighborhood? My art up until this point had been a cathartic release of anxiety and pain. It directed my anger. It could be loud and represent my voice in that fight. But ultimately, art can't do what it cannot do. What art could not give me was peace, and at this moment, the thing I wanted above all else was to be at peace.

Figure 5. Jamaal Barber, To Be Free. *woodcut, 22" x 30", 2017, Private Collection*

I hesitated to return to printmaking. I had developed a language and way of working in relief printing. I used my graphic design background to bring clean simplicity to my work. I approached my designs as brand logos, which must communicate concepts quickly and efficiently. *To Be Free* (fig. 5) is an example of this mode of work. The piece contains a minimal amount of carving, just enough to illuminate a Black man being pulled at and down by numerous white hands. I only used black ink to represent Blackness. These works were intense, bold compositions without additional background elements that would interfere with the work's intended message.

My usual methods of working felt limiting. I was asking myself different questions, and these new questions demanded new solutions. What if the conditions that led to slavery, to Jim Crow, to the current system, are permanent? What if there is no evidence white people will believe as proof of Black people's humanity? What if you fight your whole life and still never win the freedom and justice you seek? Moving beyond these issues of struggle and historical oppression, I asked myself how I wanted to visually represent the fullness of Black life.

My first step toward resolution was permitting myself not to engage with this latest assault on Blackness. The tragedy of George Floyd was followed closely by those of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor. I did not allow these fresh wounds to occupy my artistic time. I don't want to focus on tragedy after tragedy. My past work is still valid and doesn't require my new work to continue in the same vein. That work answered the questions of its time, and changing my mindset meant entering a new path of inquiry. Political commentary and propagating Black identity were so integral to my artistic practice that I had mentally tied these things together. Now, I said to myself: I am an artist and I have the right to create as I see fit.

The second step involved opening myself to new ways of thinking. In this new work, nothing is sacred or necessary and I don't have to stick to one medium. Although I consider myself a printmaker, all media are available to me. All my previous solutions were not universal truths to which I had to stubbornly adhere. Where I once saw black ink as a metaphor for Blackness' collective expression, I could use color and shape to represent some of the same concepts in paint.

Figure 6. Jamaal Barber, We Made It I & II*. screenprint, 20" x 26"(each), 2016, Private Collection*

The third step was exploring different reference points through research. Until now, my work was a historical witness of Black people. In the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and James Baldwin's *Fire Next Time*, both authors analyzed the world around them. These works presented

a historical context for the world I witnessed for myself and provided a framework for me to understand current events. I produced prints like *We Made It 1 & 2* (fig 6) as I thought about the different lenses through which we experience cultural events and how these various interpretations and experiences affect a community. Books like *The Color of Law* laid out a clear timeline of the laws and tactics used to segregate housing practices over the last 50 years. *Operation Bread Basket: An Untold Story of Civil Rights in Chicago, 1966-1971*, gave insight into the happenings inside and around the economic justice program Operations Push. Both of those books inspired my piece *Redlining* (fig. 7), which highlights the injustices created when artificial barriers change habits and behaviors of society.

Figure 7. Jamaal Barber, Redlining. *Woodblock, wood, rope metal, fencing, 34" x 68", 2018, Private Collection*

These books deal with significant facets of Black history in America, but from very specific parts of a whole picture. Reading these books, I see that there is so much more that we have experienced than just violence and death. There are more stories to tell, and only telling the story of the civil rights struggle, important though it is, eclipses these other narratives that can bring us a richer, more nuanced understanding of the wholeness, the fullness, of Blackness. Ignoring these other stories oversimplifies Blackness, defining it merely as not-whiteness. I had to change my input to adjust the output.

5 POETRY

"Poetry for me has been, just a wonderful space, of you know, trying to succinctly speak to things that I wouldn't normally say."

Yrsa Daley-Ward[9]

Poetry has the unique ability to weave different ideas together—a phenomenon that I find illuminating. The poem "Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni is the catalyst for my newest exploration. It presents multiple emotions as one brief experience, similar to how you can experience a multitude of feelings in one moment. She voices the realities of growing up in economic poverty ("with no inside toilet," getting "your bath from one of those big tubs that folk in chicago barbecue in") but refuses to feel shame over her socioeconomic background. Instead,

[9] "Yrsa Daley-Ward: Bone." Filmed Oct 11, 2017 in New York, NY. Strand Books. https://youtu.be/ZwD9MqreOH8.

she uses childhood memories to celebrate what non-Black eyes could never understand: the happiness that can co-exist with hard times in the space of Blackness. “Black love is Black wealth,” she tells us. Despite her parents’ fights and her father’s struggles, the poem emphasizes the comforts of Blackness by depicting the closeness of Giovanni’s family and their strong familial love. The hypothetical white biographer trying to capture the poet’s story could never understand or even see the specialness of Giovanni’s personal history. There is something about being Black that makes an unquantifiable difference between people.

In my past work, I was failing to communicate this expansive conception of Blackness as an ineffable thing full of all things. I discovered that poetry, with its rhythms, sparseness, and creative juxtapositions of words, modeled what I wanted to do with my art. Poetry can transform a concept, it can change a moment in time into a thing we observe and examine. That thing is described, changed, and given life; it becomes something we can dissect intellectually and understand intuitively. And just when we think we know this new thing, poetry flips it upside-down by placing the thing right next to its exact opposite. The jarring difference reveals even more new meaning. I want to lull viewers into a sense of comfort and then inject a dart of pure emotion that changes all that came before. I want to achieve this by showing what "is" and what is "not", all at once. In a few words, like poetry I can hold parallel disparate moments in time, whether separated by minutes or years, to illuminate hidden links. That is the freedom I want.

Bone by Yrsa Daley-Ward is another revelatory book of poetry. In only a few words, Daley-Ward can unveil a story that captivates my imagination. In the poem “when it is but it ain’t” she writes:

Some of us love badly. Sometimes the love is

the type of love that implodes. Folds in on itself. Eats
its insides. Turns wine in to poison. Behaves poorly
in restaurants. Drinks. Kisses other people. Comes
back to your bed at four a.m. smelling like everything
outside. Asks about your ex. Is jealous of your ex.
Thinks everyone a rival. Some of us love horrid,
love beastly, love sick, love anti light. Sometimes the
love can't go home at night, can't sleep with itself,
cannot contain itself, catches fire, destroys the belly,
strips buildings, goes missing. Punches. Smashes
heirlooms. Tells lies. The best lies. Fucks around.
Writes poems, impresses people. Chases lovers into
corners. Leaves them longing. Seasick. Says yes.
Means anything but. Tricks the body. Kills the body.
Dances wild
And walks away, smiling.[10]

These words resonate with me. I have felt the same longing, the same regret, the same love. Throughout *Bone*, I shared the same anger and hopelessness as Daley-Ward expresses in her poems. Reading her words pushes me to think about the emotions I rarely communicate in my work. While the civil rights struggle is so critically important, I live life *between* the moments of public outrage more than *in* them. I define myself as a husband and a father before

[10] Yrsa Daley-Ward, *Bone* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 13.

anything else. My family, friendships, and connections with my neighborhood and my network of Black people are the basis for my sense of self. I rarely mention these human bonds in my work, but I cherish them more than anything. They are the reason why all the injustices rip at the depths of my heart so much. I don't want tragedy to strike the people I love like it has struck so many other people.

Art, for me, had always been a reactive process. I asserted Black identity to combat the injustices I saw all around me. I was continually arguing against what I perceived as attacks on me and all the people who look like me. In that sense, my art was a performance tailored for the white gaze. I was engaged with an enemy that was as amorphous as a fog that occludes the horizon and shrouds life in a haze. As sure as one day follows the next, there would be another haze of injustice to keep me stuck in that position. This is not freedom. This is not peace.

6 COLOR

Thank Goodness I have nearly
unlearned
folding my desire into itself
being afraid to claim it.

"Relief" by Yrsa Daley-Ward[11]

[11] Daley-Ward, 23

In this new body of work, I'm unlearning, as Daley-Ward prescribes, in order to forge a new understanding of Blackness. These pieces consist of layered strokes of color applied onto gesso-covered roofing paper and paper recycled from an edition of prints ruined by registration issues. I'm not concerned with the outcome of these pieces. They feature sweeping strokes of color that enter and leave the picture plane. I play with transparency, overlapping organic forms that appear between the strokes. I avoid the color black entirely and work on several "sheets" at the same time. This phase of exploration has led me to artists like Alma Thomas.

Figure 8. Alma Thomas, Spring- Delightful Flowerbed. *1967, oil on canvas, Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of William J. and Brenda L. Galloway and Family, https://www.si.edu/object/spring-delightful-flower*

Alma Thomas (1891-1978) was a prolific, well-recognized abstract painter. Originally a schoolteacher, Thomas started experimenting with abstract painting after retirement and became the first African American woman artist featured in the White House's permanent collection.

Thomas' signature painting style consisted of bright, bold strokes of color. She said of her painting *Spring-Delightful Flowerbed* (fig. 8), "My strokes are free and irregular, some close together, others far apart, thus creating interesting patterns of canvas peeping around the strokes."[12] Thomas created art inspired by the colors in the world around her; most of her work focused on natural subjects. In her discussion of Thomas, historian, and scholar Nikki A. Greene states, "In her art, Thomas pointedly rejected painting about struggle and crisis. She believed instead that the beauty she generated offset the world's horror and inhumanities."[13]

Thomas' signature stroke was about reimagining the world she observed. She interpreted her flowerbed in the springtime or her studio's window view as the painting's starting point. In my initial phase, I layer and build up a surface composition with color, shape, and lines. I mix small batches of paint and indiscriminately apply them to multiple surfaces at once. Each layer is a different color or shape. Circles and other organic shapes build and undulate as the layers build, becoming their own distinct environments. I started to use roofing paper as a substrate. The roofing paper is a heavy-duty construction material and when gessoed, it handled the acrylic paint as well as a wood panel. The paper can be easily manipulated by cutting, tearing or carving allowing me more freedom to make large organic shapes. The organic edges become part of the universes created by this ritual. This paint application is the first step toward separating my artistic practice from my pessimistic view of reality. The paintings became a diverse environment to support my idea of Blackness.

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[12] Warren Marr II, "Alma Thomas: May Crisis Cover Artist," *Crisis 77*, no. 5 (May 1970), 193.
[13] Nikki A. Greene, "Wind , Sunshine and Flowers: The Visual Cadences of Alma Thomas's Washington, DC" in *Alma Thomas* (New York: Prestel, 2016), 61.

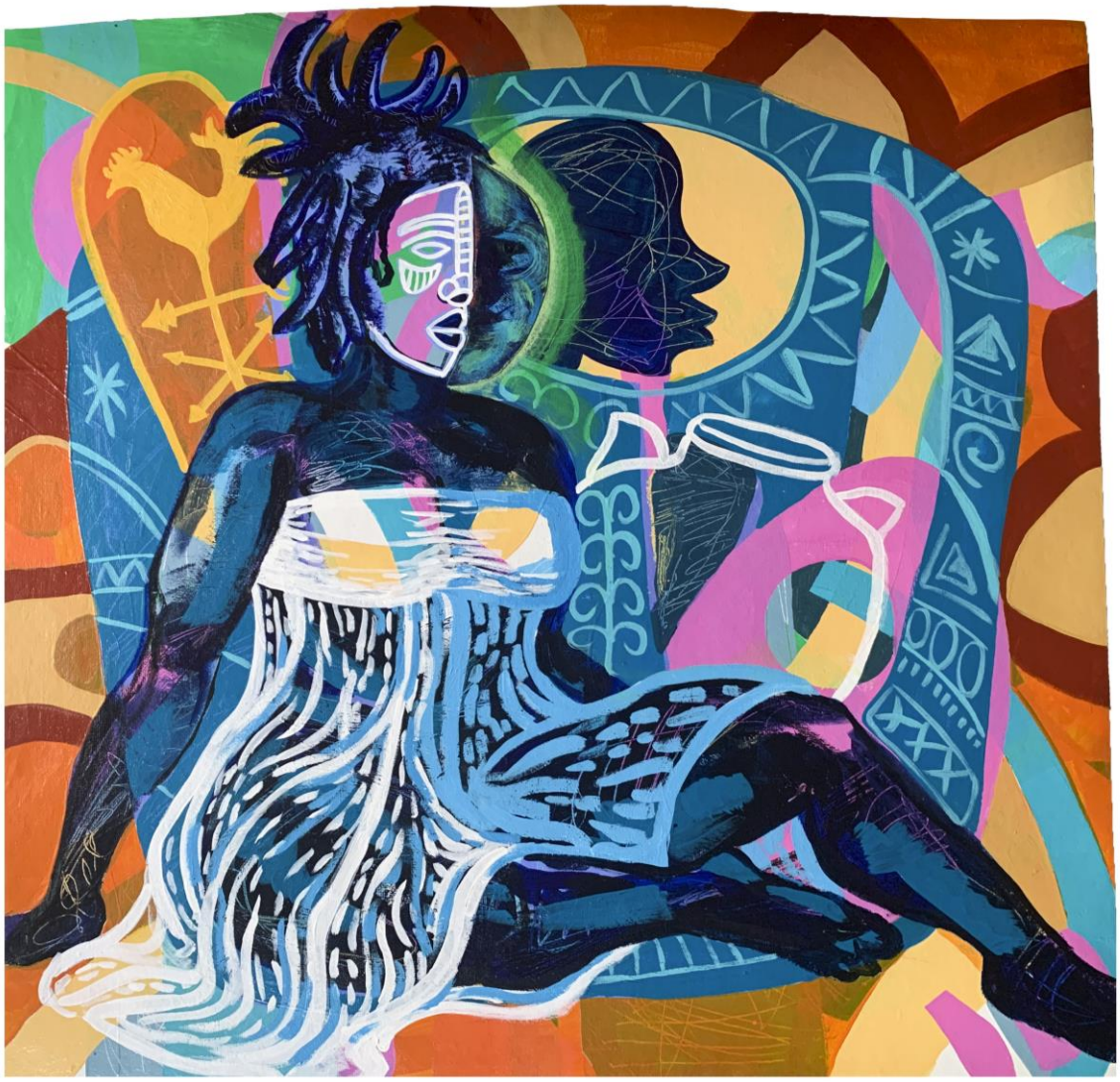

Figure 9. Jamaal Barber, Carolina Woman. *acrylic on roofing paper, 36" x 35", 2020, Private Collection*

Carolina Woman (fig. 9) emerged from one of the abstract compositions. In this piece, a woman sits relaxed in a white dress, surrounded by swirls of shape and color. The blue lines are reminiscent of my woodcut images, harkening back to the carving techniques I used in works like *The Council*. The dotted and solid lines swirl, lending a sense of movement to the entire composition. The figure's dress does not entirely cover the initial color and shape, hinting at the idea that she exists in some other, new place. In this new world, she is free and lives in harmony

with the universe in a way that this world does not allow. The bright pink lines that move across the work also weave through her legs, arms, dress, and face.

Her face is two parts, an approach I've used in my woodcuts. In *Carolina Woman*, the left side of the figure's face functions as a window revealing the woman's colorful background. Her features, created by white lines, are similar to the decorative markings seen on African masks. On the other side of her face, a solid half-moon shape with an ethereal texture glows with a mysterious green aura, hinting at the woman's spiritual energy. Another celestial orb in the sky shaped like a man's face represents the woman's ancestors that have guided her to this place of wholeness and peace.

Other areas of the composition establish the woman's identity. Although I frequently incorporate African masks and sculpture in my work, I didn't want this piece to function as an homage to African roots. Rather, I wanted this piece to celebrate our history and culture within the American South, specifically North Carolina where I grew up. The weathervane, topped with a rooster and painted bright orange, peeks from behind the woman's left shoulder. This object was a common sight in my neighborhood; I saw it all the time as a child, riding my bike. The marks to the right of the figure visually reference the fields of corn and plots of land—also images drawn from my childhood memories. The large pot, rendered in a white outline, is an homage to Dave the Potter, a slave born in South Carolina who was known for signing his ceramic works with Bible quotes and his name. The pot symbolizes slavery as well as the undeniable creativity that shone forth even in those dark times.

This piece unifies my personal history and my African influences, showing how both can exist and inform this world simultaneously. The female figure represents the women I knew from my time in North Carolina. The woman in my piece is not engaged in a never-ending battle

against white supremacy, but she exists in her own space, in harmony with the universe. I had a similar feeling while on vacation with my family at Myrtle Beach. This trip was the last time all my brothers and sisters and our kids had gotten together before the pandemic. As we made our way to the beach and started our various activities, I stood still and stared at the ocean for a moment. I was both overwhelmed and awed by the sensory experience: the sound of waves crashing, the smell of the salt air, the percussive, unceasing rhythm of waves churning. Moments like these bring one's existence in the natural world into perspective. Witnessing nature's immense power and beauty inspired the piece *The Center of the Universe* (fig. 11).

Figure 11. Jamaal Barber, The Center of the Universe. *acrylic paint and collage on roofing paper mounted to wood panel, 54" x 72" , 2021, collection of the artist*

The Center of the Universe shows a figure sitting on the edge of a blue vastness gazing out into the world. I divided his face in two, similar to *Carolina Woman* but more abstracted. He is resting in place with exaggerated bare feet, but he seems poised to move, as if he's about to spring into the blue expanse. His body undulates to the rhythm of the world around him. His shirt's solid and dotted lines reveal blue and green skin beneath, but loosely indicate his torso. Overall, the composition represents a moment of contemplation. Humans count the number revolutions we have made around the sun, but these moments only hint at our existence as pieces of the larger whole; for the man in the painting, there is a grand design and he has accepted his part in it.

This painting also features a leaf shape, signifying this abstracted world's connection to the natural world. My desire for a place of freedom is not a flight of fantasy. It is this Earth in this time. I'm not proposing an escape or suggesting a mass planetary exodus, but rather urging us to see ourselves as human beings in rhythm with this planet in ways that we don't yet acknowledge or comprehend. In a perfect scenario, we would be in balance with the Earth and unhindered by a racist society's biases. These figures are glimpses into that world of natural synergy, where Black people can live with a real sense of freedom. That connection to the natural order is an essential part of this series.

7 FATHERS AND SONS

and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand

"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[14]

Figure 12. Jamaal Barber, Pieces of a Man. *acrylic on roofing paper, 36" x 64", 2021, collection of the artist*

[14] Giovanni, 53.

Pieces of a Man (fig. 12) started with thinking about fatherhood. When my son was born, I was flooded with intense emotions. This emotional wave grew with the birth of my daughter, who I delivered myself, at home in our powder room at 5:30 in the morning. The entire birth experience was so adrenaline-laced that when I finally looked upon her screaming little face, my emotions were incredibly intense. Thankfully, my son was born in much more normal circumstances: a water birth in a hospital with a midwife. But the feelings were the same: waves of emotion flowed through my body, washing over me and filling in voids I didn't know existed. I have never loved anything or anyone as instantly and intensely as my children. The feelings border on desperation: I yearn to give them, my girl and my boy, all the love they will ever need. Years later, as we played a Battleship game during a global pandemic, my feelings are just as strong. Only now, I wondered: is this how my father felt about me?

I believe my father felt the same as I do now, but he never talked about his feelings towards us, perhaps because that is not the type of man he is. He doesn't show emotion in that way, and probably doesn't want to. He's more of an old-school type of man who shows his feelings through actions. He will help fix your car or move furniture. He will watch movies with you or take off work to get you something. He demonstrates his love. Looking at my boy now, I wonder how I could describe who I think I am as a 40-year-old Black man to my eight-year-old boy, but know he could never understand his father in that way. He would rely on his own impressions and experiences to understand me. My jokes, my voice, the way I make pancakes, and how I move will form his understanding of me, just as I built my image of my father on observing and learning from him over the last 40 years.

Pieces of a Man represents my impression of my father. The bottom half of the composition shows an incomplete version of a family crest. The abstracted figure is my

grandfather, who I met only once, sometime after I graduated high school. This part of my father's history is complicated and hard to explain, but complications are pretty standard where families are concerned. Although I can't fully comprehend the ways his history shaped him, I know his strained relationship with my grandfather had a profound effect on my father's life. Layered over my grandfather's figure, I rendered my father abstractly, using a series of colored lines. They suggest the form of the man I have known and loved my entire life. My image of him continually adjusts and shifts as we talk now as adults; it will forever be colored by my awe and appreciation for him. There can never be a portrait that clearly captures every aspect of a man.

Figure 13. Jamaal Barber, Growing, Growing… *2021, acrylic painting on roofing paper mounted on wood panel, 44" x 78", 2021, collection of the artist*

Growing, Growing… (fig. 13) is another piece of the father-son puzzle. I realize sometimes that I don't really know my son. He seems to grow exponentially; every conversation we have, I'm dealing with a completely different person. He was the boy who couldn't ride his bike without training wheels and couldn't reach the hot dog buns in the upper cabinet, but those days are long gone. He is so much more complex than the small things I observe about him from day to day. I don't know how to represent him fully, in a way that would satisfy my paternal pride, so I have abstracted his form in this piece more than the figures in my other pieces. Only his big feet are somewhat realistically rendered, painted similar to the feet in *The Center of the Universe*. My son looks like I did at the age of 8, so the genetics are clear. The rest of him, however, is in flux. His head and body are still changing and taking shape. Over the years, he will continue to grow and become a man.

Identity is important to my work and the dynamics of the father-son relationships in my life are essential to my personal sense of self. I see myself in the shadow of the man that raised me and in the boy that I am raising.

8 NEW VISIONS

Figure 14. Jamaal Barber, For All My Brothers Lost and Found. *acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48", 2021, collection of the artist*

For All My Brothers Lost and Found (fig. 14) is a spiritual exultation. Raising one's hands to the sky is common practice in southern Christian religious services, but the gesture took on a different meaning in the Black Lives Matter protests over Mike Brown's murder. Brown was said to be raising his hands skyward at the time he was shot.[15] Uncertainty about the story's accuracy only adds to the feeling of hopelessness. Because we do not trust the truth being presented, we don't feel in control of our own fates. Whether your hands are up or not does not mater. In other words, your life is meaningless, worthless. You are disposable. *For All My Brothers Lost and Found* rejects this way of thinking. I honor your life by raising my hands and shouting your name to the skies. In response, the world carries your name heavenward on vibrantly colorful lines. The universe shouts in unison with us, replenishing the spirits of all who need it.

The process of making *For All My Brothers Lost and Found* was cathartic. Working on this piece forced me to release some of the concerns I had been putting into the work. It unlocked the possibility of a spiritual answer to my problems. This world could not give me peace. This world would stand on my neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds during a global pandemic. My peace could only come by envisioning and creating a new place where we would finally attain freedom.

[15] Cheryl Corley, "Whether Histrory or Hype, 'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' Endures," NPR.org, August 8, 2015, https://www.npr.org/2015/08/08/430411141/whether-history-or-hype-hands-up-dont-shoot-endures.

Figure 15. Jamaal Barber, Your Mother or Any Other Hunted Woman. *acrylic on gessoed paper, 30" x 44", 2021, collection of the artist*

Fullness presents a new vision of what we could be. In the abstract fields of color and shape, I create the visage of freedom. *Your Mother or Any Other Hunted Woman* (fig. 15) and *You Are One of Those People* (fig. 16) represent this other realm. The environment's saturated colors blend with the colored patterns that define the faces. There is constant movement in line, shape, and color. The history of race does not burden these people. They are beyond the confines of this world. They are free in a way we can only imagine.

Figure 16. Jamaal Barber, You Are One of Those People. *acrylic on gessoed paper, 30" x 44", 2021, collection of the artist*

9 CONCLUSIONS

Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy
"Nikki Rosa" by Nikki Giovanni[16]

The pandemic taught me a lot about my art practice and my life. My art practice had grown into a call-and-response between trauma and me. I was completely engaged in a struggle against societal forces, the spectacle around Black death. I felt it was my duty to constantly answer the call to defend Black people against dehumanizing narratives. Now, I find that I am focusing my gaze on a better representation of Blackness. As important as the messages in my previous work were, I had neglected to show the true beauty of Black people. I rewrote my own rules for how to represent the people I love. Where I once only rendered figures in black, the bodies and faces in *Fullness* burst with color and movement, reshaping the world around them. They live in a universe made for them.

The lesson *Fullness* has taught me is that my art doesn't have to be just one way. It, like me, is complex, multivalent, and has an ever-changing identity. My art can speak out about equal voting rights, but it can also celebrate the love between fathers and sons. My art can demand racial justice *and* be a vibrant depiction of Black joy. Blackness encompasses all things, and to express it properly, I must show its totality. *Fullness* is just the beginning.

[16] Giovanni, 53

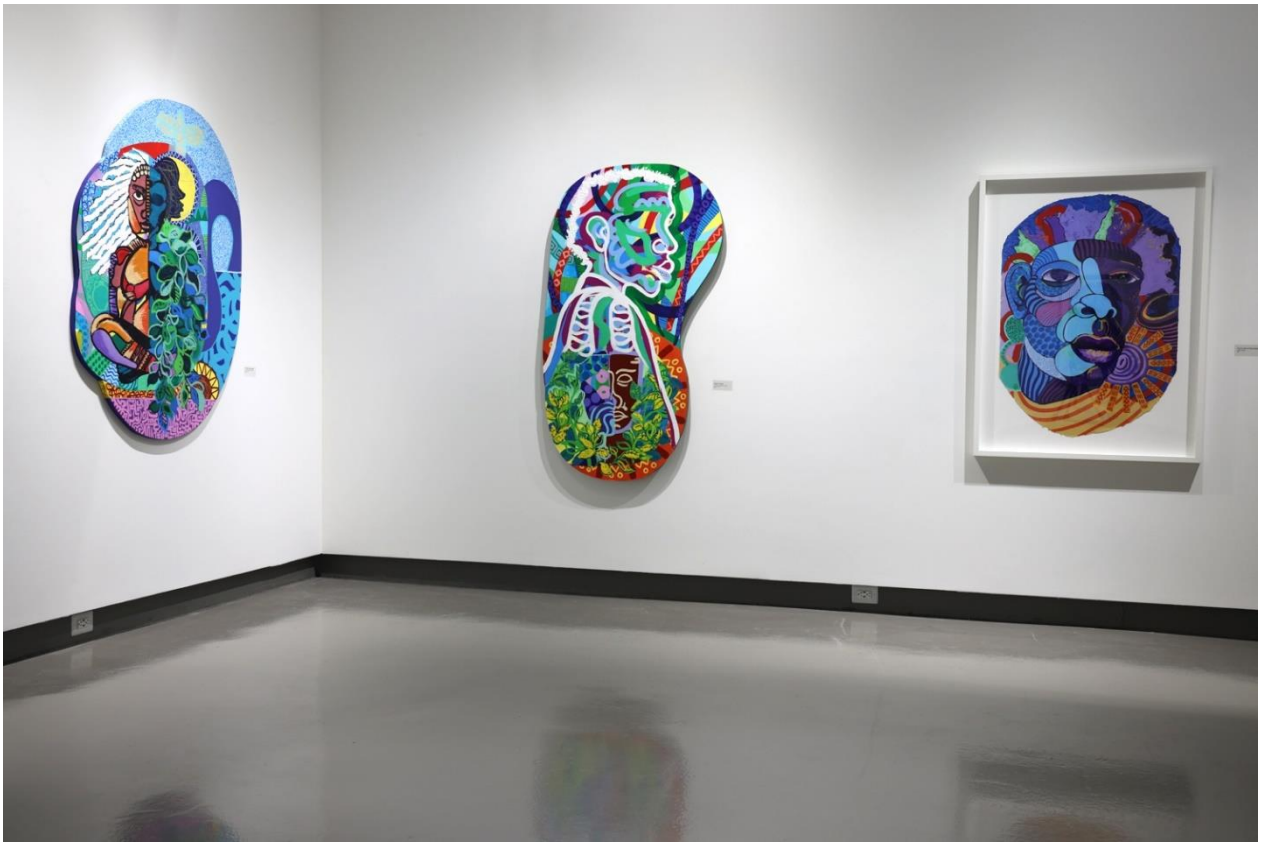

Figure 17. Jamaal Barber, Fullness (Installation view), 2021.

Figure 18. Fullness (Installation view), 2021

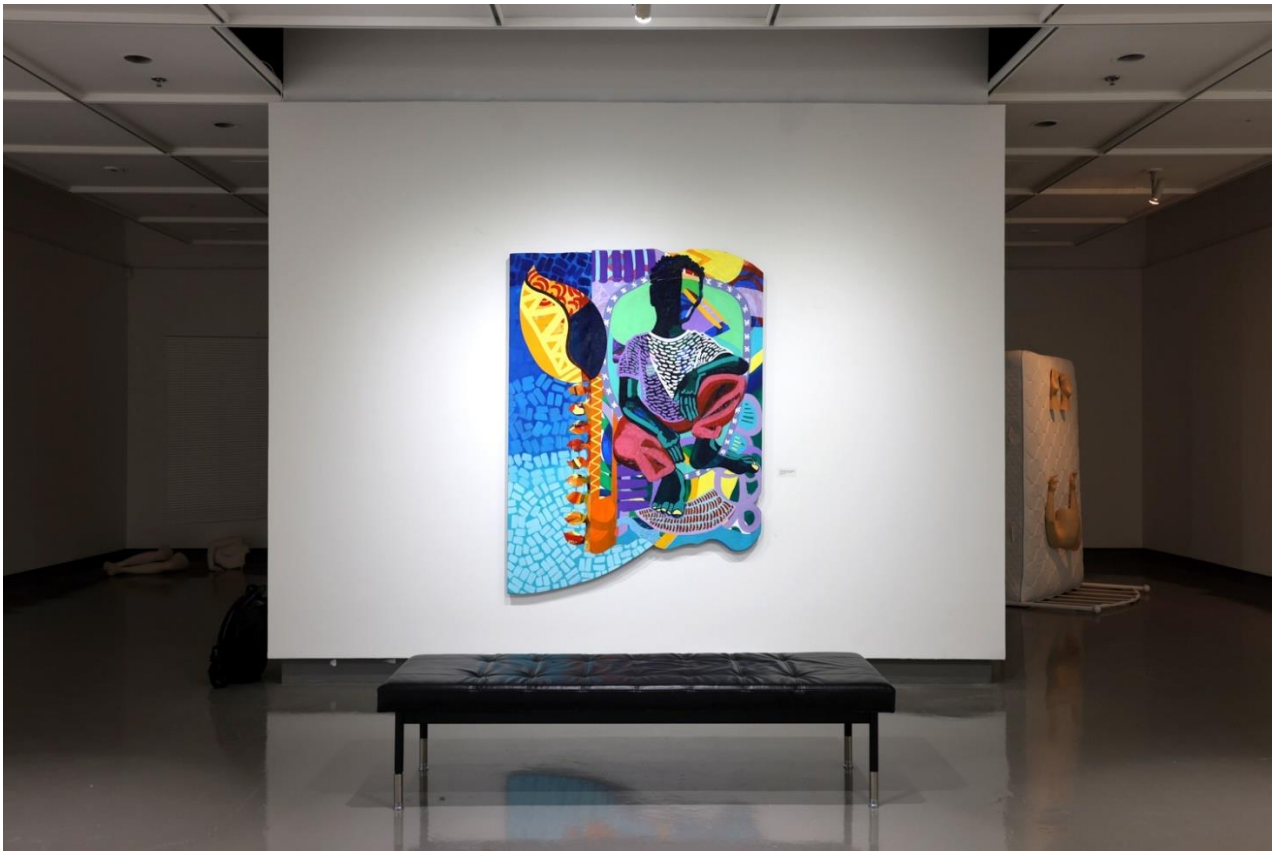

Figure 19. Jamaal Barber, The Center of the Universe (installation view), 2021

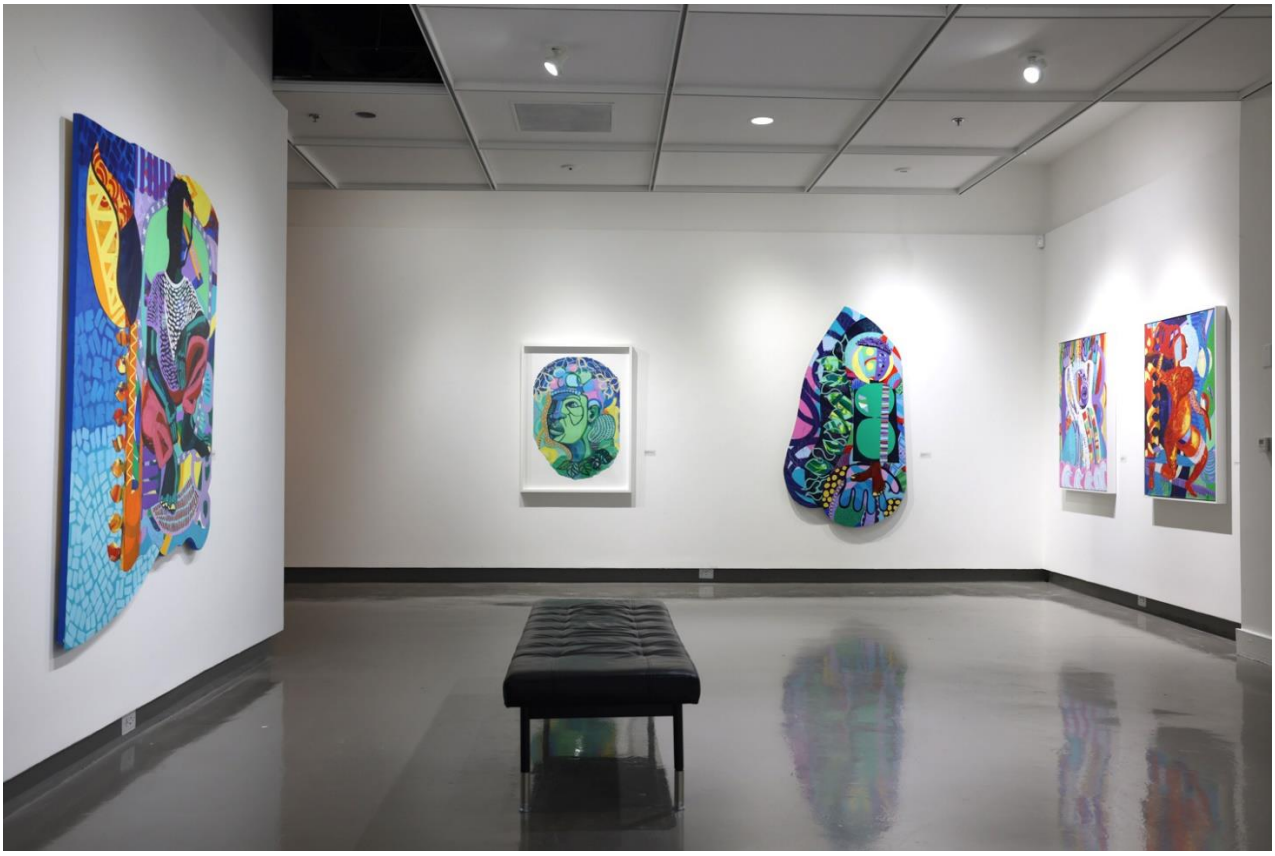

Figure 20. Jamaal Barber, Fullness (installation view), 2021

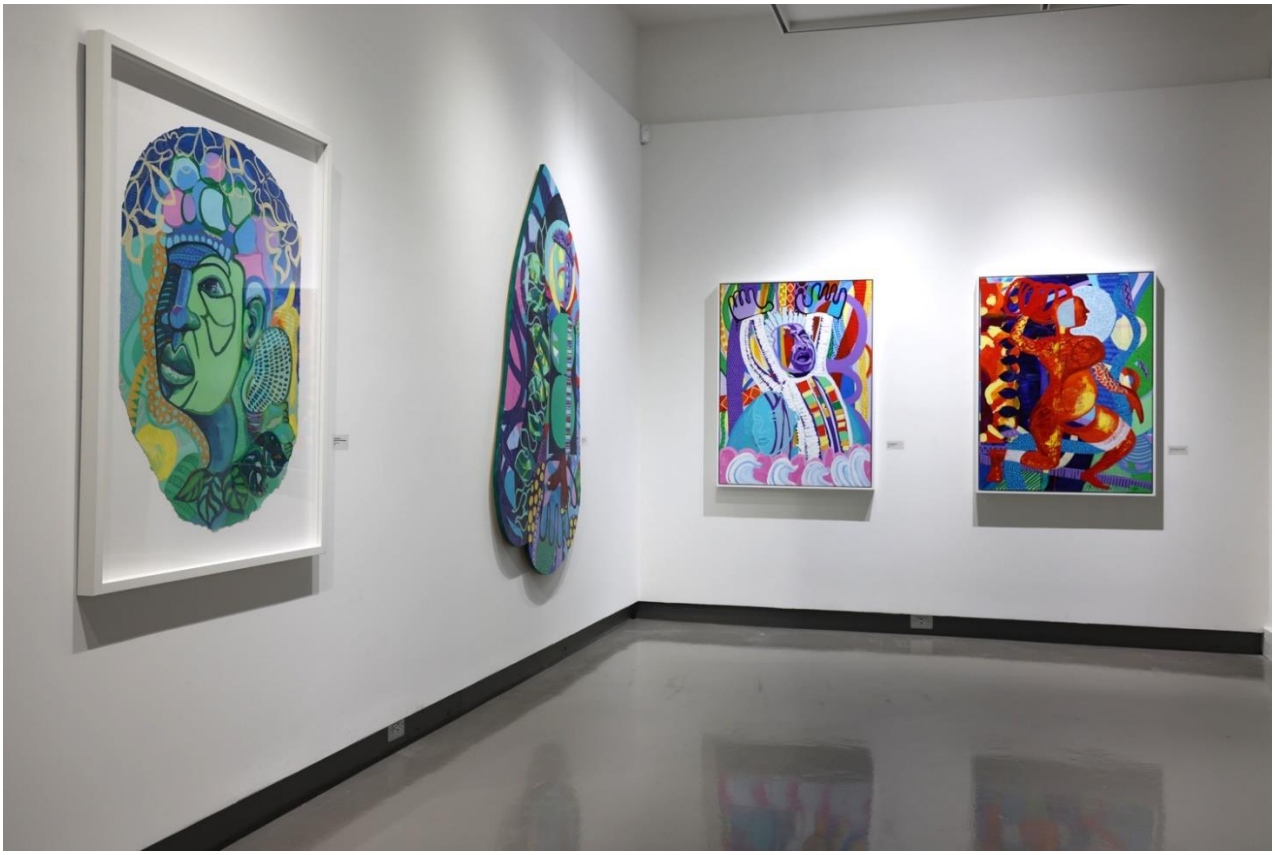

Figure 21. Jamaal Barber, Fullness (installation view), 2021

Figure 22. Jamaal Barber, A Little More of Myself. *acrylic on gessoed roofing paper, 36" x 40", 2021, collection of the artist*

Figure 23. Jamaal Barber, Because This Is A Dream. *acrylic and collage on wood panel, 21" x 28", 2021, collection of the artist*

Figure 24. Jamaal Barber, Boys Become Men*. Ink on paper, 20" x 26", 2020, collection of the artist*

Figure 25. Jamaal Barber, Boys Become Men. *woodcut, 22" x 30", 2020, collection of the artist*

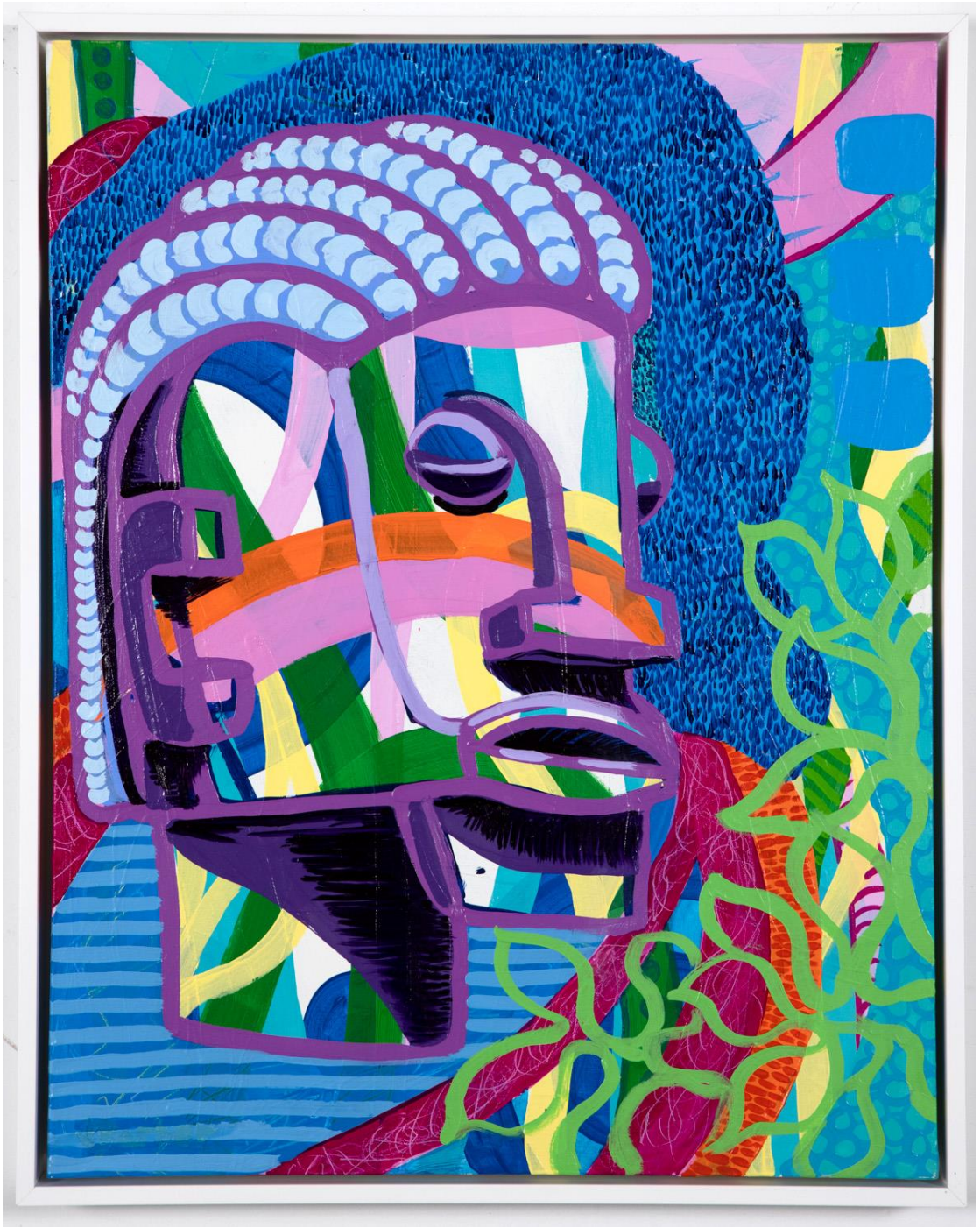

Figure 26. Jamaal Barber, New Visions No. 1. *acrylic on canvas, 22" x 28", 2021, collection of the artist*

Figure 27. Jamaal Barber, New Visions No.2. *acrylic on canvas, 20" x 30", 2021, collection of the artist*

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