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Post-World Politics: Rushern Baker IV's Bold Abstractions are Fraught with Urgency and Anxiety

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Apr 27, 2019 • 8:58 am

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FOR HIS FIRST EXHIBITION at Hemphill Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., **Rushern Baker IV** is presenting new paintings made between 2017 and 2019. Drawing on the current political climate, the works are fraught with urgency and anxiety. The unease is unrelenting. Baker's energetic and frenetic abstractions invoke a range of concerns, from the perils of living while black and the widening income gap to the proliferation of alternative facts and weaponized technology.

"I started off drawing action figures and comics as a kid, and graduated to making Black Panther-inspired propaganda posters in undergrad against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those evolved over the years into paintings with similarly overt themes," Baker says. "The work has evolved a bit, as has my worldview. I no longer see the world in black and white, but more in a bright grey, nuanced, and complex."

"**Rushern Baker: Post-World**" features paintings that blend layered materiality with content referencing comics, collapsed structures, and eroding democratic norms. The artist produced the work when he returned to the studio after chairing his father's campaign for Maryland governor in 2016.

Baker, who earned a BFA from The Cooper Union (2009) and an MFA from Yale (2012), responded to several questions from Culture Type via email. He was incredibly forthcoming and provided insights about his practice, the exhibition, almost missing the application deadline for art school, and his influences, including Felrath Hines, Jack Whitten, and Sam Gilliam, his forefathers in Black abstraction, and pioneering science fiction author Octavia Butler.

CULTURE TYPE: How would you describe your artistic practice?

RUSHERN BAKER: To be clear, I'm first and foremost a painter and by employing various mediums I attempt to create an effect that simulates depth and perspective, creating, in a sense, a window into another delineated

space. It is an objective form of abstraction that aims to blur the line between the real and the digital, the concrete and the ephemeral.

In "Post-World," I've been utilizing repetitive motifs including the predator drone, crumbling columns, and collapsing structural elements. The works start off as collages in my sketchbook and then scanned and re-worked in Photoshop. Those images are then printed in grids and wheat-pasted onto the surface of the canvas. From that point, it's a process of building up the surface of the image with ceramic tile adhesive and plaster, concrete, paint and resin. I sand down and repeat until the image reveals itself, making it a push-and-pull compositional effect.

Tell me about the name of the exhibition: "Post-World."

The title "Post-World" is a play on post-modernity or post-modernism. I've always viewed the difference between post-modernism and the modernism of the mid-20th century, as the difference between utopian visions of the future and something else. That something else is where my work lies. It's the ambiguously specific sensation we get from our current state that is the most unnerving for me. Are we on the cusp of that promised utopian future, or on the verge of running off a cliff as a more interconnected world? I think a lot of people are wrestling with this question—especially considering our current socio-political climate.

Are we on the cusp of that promised utopian future, or on the verge of running off a cliff as a more interconnected world? I think a lot of people are wrestling with this question—especially considering our current socio-political climate.



Installation view of "Rushern Baker IV: Post-World," Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. (March 16-April 27, 2019). | Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts

There is a sense of urgency, energy, and chaos in the work. What is it about?

There is a sense urgency, energy, and chaos, but also anxiety. There is so much to be anxious about. So many threats on both a macro and micro level. From navigating the world as a Black man and the micro-level threats of racial animus, to the macro-level threats of a revived Red Scare, Manchurian politics, environmental destruction, alternative facts, weaponized technology, and unbridled income inequality. It's that sense of anxiety that imbues the surface of the paintings, and refers back to what [Charline von Heyl](#) would call the "mind-space" of my studio.

I'm seeking the art that emerges out of spontaneous combustion, shards of exploding geometric forms and debris interwoven into clouds of smoke create fragments that cast instability as an opportunity to expand our perceptions of our current condition. It's a hybridity that attempts to describe the indescribable with visions drawn from the everyday world, the urban and suburban environment.

In terms of titles, some works channel super-human personas such as "Fireman" and "Puppet Master." Others reference physical destruction including crashing drones, dissolving flags, and collapsed columns. Describe the significance of these two categories. Do your titles drive the creative process or reflect the outcome?

The outcome definitely drives the titles of the works. I surround myself with specific reference points and, formally, various artists play outsized roles as influencers. Whether its Jack Whitten and his use of the built surface or Sam Gilliam and his early use of the stain, or even Felrath Hines and his use of geometric forms, these people live with me as much as the sounds of MSNBC or NPR blaring in the background. I'm an avid sketcher and make studies, but the paintings usually reveal themselves when scaled up to a larger, more human scale. Often I'll step back after the painting is done and say to myself, "Oh that's what this painting is really about."

Two colors are particularly prominent in your paintings—a kind of salmon pink and a bright electric blue. Do you associate any particular meaning or symbolism with those colors?

The use of color is specific in a few senses. I always think about the use of synthetic fluorescent colors as being otherworldly, giving the viewer pause, or implying caution. They can also be beautiful—not to dissimilar from the

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smog induced sunsets we all get to experience. The warmer colors, whether a fluorescent pinkish-red, orange, or yellow, tend to imply a moment of action—often an explosion. The cooler blue color has two threads. Either the moment after the dust settles, or a more specific atmospheric reference. In “Space Force,” I was looking at a lot of concept art from the 1980s depicting Ronald Reagan’s “Star Wars” program and began thinking about the parallels to today and Trump’s insistence on weaponizing space again.



RUSHERN BAKER IV, *Untitled (Puppet Master)*, 2019 (acrylic, spray paint, resin, aluminum, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas). | Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts

It's been four years since your last solo show, which was at Honfleur Gallery, also in Washington, D.C.. How has your work evolved or changed since then?

I think it goes back to that sense of urgency. The show at Honfleur was a bit of a transitional moment for me. While I was studying at Yale, I felt that the process I had employed prior, the system I had developed for image and object making, had been blown-up. I had retreated into purely formal exercises when it came to my process and I feel like that show was maybe too ambiguous and too focused on those material and compositional themes as opposed to solidifying a clearer narrative.

The Honfleur show was titled “Under Pressure” and in hindsight, it was aptly named. In a sense, that exhibition was me still trying to put everything back together, while simultaneously, attempting to command the entire space. There were successful paintings—and not so successful paintings. This show, on the other hand, was perfectly timed.

The space between the solo shows gave me a sense of agency to revisit themes that continue to haunt me. I had recently re-read “*Parable of the Sower*” by Octavia Butler, and my good friend Tomashi Jackson asked me to guest lecture for her class at the Cooper Union last year and it reinvigorated some consistent themes from my past, more objective works.

We worked on an assignment with her students to respond to passages from the novel visualizing displacement using found materials on their commute to and from school. We then discussed their work not only within the context of “Parable” but also a recent New York Times article on displacement, and the drastic increase in vacant commercial properties due to soaring rents and localized hyperinflation. Butler’s novel, set in the near future, tells the story of a world slowly spiraling out of control due to unregulated capitalism, environmental degradation, and the breakdown of the U.S. political system. The main protagonist, plagued by a “hyper-empathy” disease, fears mankind’s future.

It is both empathy and fear that also permeate the “mind-space” of my studio, as a black man in a world filled with threats, attempting to depict the free-floating abstraction that is our post-modern era. Perhaps living in the shadow of our nation’s capital, it’s natural for me to be tuned into this crisis as well.

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AUCTION RECORD: POOL PAINTING BY
BRITISH ARTIST HURVIN ANDERSON
SELLS FOR MORE THAN \$10 MILLION IN
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ARTWORK BY LIVING BLACK ARTIST



NATIONAL CATHEDRAL COMMISSIONS
KERRY JAMES MARSHALL TO DESIGN
NEW STAINED-GLASS WINDOWS,
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RINGGOLD AND ALMA THOMAS

the shadow of our nation's capital, it's natural for me to be tuned into this crisis as well.



From left, RUSHERN BAKER IV, *Untitled (cave) 2017* (acrylic, paper, resin, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas) RB-003; and *Untitled (cave) 2017* (acrylic, paper, resin, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas) RB-004. | Both Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts

Over the years, how has your background and experience in politics influenced your work?

I didn't inherit my father's gift for oratory and will never be as smart as my mother. But as a kid, I could draw and I had something to say. Art was then, and will always be, a platform to say something—whether it be overt or subtle, ambiguous or clear.

My parents were both military brats, and they were born to parents who escaped the Jim Crow South through military service, and truly believed in the promise of this country. My father was an Army JAG and Maryland State Legislator when I was growing up. My mother worked as an anti death-penalty advocate at the ACLU before working on Capitol Hill and later heading the Government Affairs office for the United Negro College Fund, fighting for historically black colleges and universities. They were both lawyers and activists. They had and have a tremendous impact on my worldview.

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Both my parents were pretty adamant about their children going to Howard University where they were both alums. I remember telling my mom that I was applying to art school, she told me I could apply anywhere I wanted but I better get a full scholarship.

Art school isn't cheap and luckily I went to Suitland High School which is a majority African American visual and performing arts school in Prince George's County, Md. My good friends and classmates, artists Eric Nathaniel Mack and Sam Vernon—the two stars of the program—were applying to this school little school called the Cooper Union. Once Eric told me that the school, at the time, offered free tuition scholarships to everyone who got in, I knew I had to apply.

I wasn't always the most organized kid in the world, and the night before my Cooper Union application was due, I had failed to mail it in on time. I was pretty disappointed and had resigned myself to the fact that it was too late. I wasn't going to my dream school. My mom asked me if it really was my dream school, did I really want to pursue art? I said yes, and without hesitation, she grabbed her keys and told me we were going to drive my application up to New York City. It was 3:00 a.m., and we drove all morning, but we got it in.

I believe it's really my upbringing, but also the support of my politically involved parents and insight from close friends and peers, that has shaped my practice in many ways.

What's next?

I currently have a few group exhibitions in the works. I've been doing some writing. I am also working on building a new studio structure on my property just outside of D.C., in Prince George's County, Md. Hopefully something nice, with some natural light and a change of pace from my current basement, cave-like studio. When I'm not engaged with the practice, I've been working with my godbrother, Kevin Ford, Jr. and our organization [Uplift Maryland](#). We're fighting for more diversity and inclusion in the medical cannabis market, especially in areas disproportionately affected by the war on drugs. I am spending more time in the studio—but never too far from politics—despite my wife Annie's insistence to just focus on my work. **CT**

TOP IMAGE: RUSHERN BAKER IV, *"Fireman 2," 2019* (acrylic, paper, resin, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas). | Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts



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"Rushern Baker IV: Post-World" is on view at Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C., March 16-April 27, 2019

FIND MORE [about Rushern Baker IV](#) on his website



Installation view of "Rushern Baker IV: Post-World," Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. (March 16-April 27, 2019). | Courtesy of HEMPHILL Fine Arts

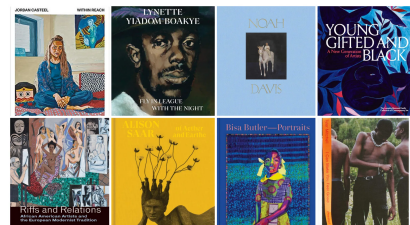


RUSHERN BAKER IV, "Dissolving Flags," 2019 (acrylic, paper, resin, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas). | Courtesy of HEMPHILL Fine Arts

Installation view of "Rushern Baker IV: Post-World," Hemphill Fine Arts, Washington, D.C. (March 16-April 27, 2019). | Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts



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RUSHERN BAKER IV, *Untitled (Landscape 1-16)*, 2019 (acrylic, resin, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas). |
Courtesy HEMPHILL Fine Arts

RUSHERN BAKER IV, *"Space Force,"* 2019 (acrylic, paper, resin, aluminum, and ceramic tile adhesive on canvas).
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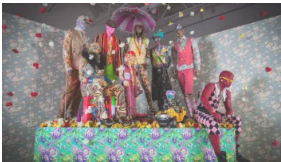
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Tags: Hemphill Fine Arts, Rushern Baker IV

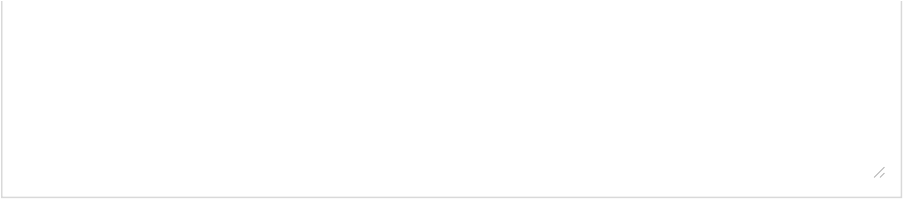
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