

A: What responsibility does Tate have – amongst other globally renowned institutions – to show emerging artists or to broaden the horizons of representation on the walls? How can we balance blockbuster shows with opportunities for showcase? How does your role look at this?

SA: Large group exhibitions have been one of the opportunities to exhibit younger generation artists – for example I had the pleasure to work with Maya Rochat, Daisuke Yakota and Antony Cairns on 2018's *Shape of Light: 100 Years of Photography and Abstract Art* (the first major exhibition to explore the relationship between the two genres.) I would love to see a space at Tate Modern open for smaller shows that could spotlight emerging artists. This kind of strand could be more reactive, allowing curators and artists to comment on the hyper-current political moment, and could act as a great complement the blockbuster model.

A: What's the focus for the next few years in International Art and for Tate in general? Is there a particular goal you're looking to achieve (beyond regaining physical footfall as museums re-open?)

SA: Hopefully there will be a renewed focus on the collection. Personally, I would love to see exhibitions given the same spotlight and resource as larger temporary exhibitions. In terms of acquisitions and programming in general – transnational narratives, indigenous histories and a continued focus on broadening representation will be important going forward. In terms of my personal projects, I am excited to be overseeing the Zanele Muholi European tour, it will travel to Paris, Berlin, Valencia and Umea as well as delivering the large-scale commission for The Turbine Hall in 2022. I think the next year is also crucial in terms of how we deliver on the promises of race equality that were put forward in the wake of Black Lives Matter.

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Painting the Strangest Year: New Directions on Canvas

Greg Thomas

2020: a year of introspection and rage, of solitary routines and spontaneous mass gatherings, when movements for progress and reaction were thrown into violent relief against each other. What kind of art could capture the feeling of this most surreal and disconcerting period in global history? The painters involved in this year's Aesthetica Art Prize and Future Now Symposium propose three inventive, highly contrasting approaches to our current social and cultural realities. Andrew Leventis and Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard (shortlisted for the 2021 award) refresh the strategies of photo-realism and process-based conceptualism, whilst Fahamu Pecou (a Future Now speaker delivering a session on *Fine Art, Hip-Hop, Pop Culture*) revamps portraiture to offer fresh images of black masculinity.

The lockdown regulations imposed across the world since spring 2020 have thrown us back on our own emotional and mental hinterlands. We have begun to think more about our habitual actions and activities with the clarity of outsiders. In the most energy-consumptive and waste-producing cultures, this has precipitated for some a newfound scepticism regarding travel and consumption rosters which previously seemed inevitable aspects of our world. It is this sense of estrangement from consumption that Andrew Leventis' remarkable *Vanitas* paintings speaks to – and does so in innovative, skillful and surprising ways.

The *vanitas* tradition has its roots in the Dutch Golden Age of the 16th and 17th centuries – when symbols of death, and the brevity of human life, found their way into portraits and still-life compositions. Skulls are the most obvious object on the *vanitas* scene, though other elements – flowers and musical instruments – invoke extinction indirectly by alluding to the time-bound pleasures of life: flowers decay, songs die on the breeze. Cutlasses and guns sometimes serve as markers of military and economic conquest – a striking feature of a genre which emerged in the early days of the first modern trade-based empire.

Leventis plays on the genre's origins in oil painting with life-like freezer box cross-sections, including *Freezer Box (Vanitas)* (2020), a striking spin on the early-modern *memento mori*. A more recent point of reference for Leventis' work is in the post-Pop Art tradition of photo-realism. A hyperreal clarity is brought to images of mundane domestic routine and, particularly, pop culture and consumerist detritus. The contents of the freezer box in Leventis' paintings are, in this sense, depicted in the spirit of Ralph Goings or even Warhol's soup cans, with their legible logos and bright advertising iconography. But Leventis' title nudges viewers towards thinking about his raspberry turnovers and readymade teriyakis as symbols of mortality.

It's an interesting ploy: certainly, the stacked goods evoke the apocalypse-lite paranoia of the early pandemic, with its panicked supermarket runs. Moreover, the freezer is suggestive of artificial preservation, an unwillingness to accept the inevitability of death (or mouldering fruit.) The freezer box is a *vanitas* for the age of climate crisis, then, when endless energy consumption preserves food for months whilst we sit out a quarantine necessitated by a human-made virus, and wait for the far greater crises to come as a result of all this waste. The huge quantity of plastic packaging depicted in Leventis' paintings is another symbol of the delayed catastrophes developing around us – based on our desire for convenience.

If Leventis works in a realist style rejuvenated by the 1960s Pop movement, Niels Lyhne Løkkegaard's practice finds analogies in the process and event-oriented painting of the same era, perhaps especially the Auto-Destructive Art of Gustav Metzger, who famously dissolved canvases by daubing them with acid. During the first Covid lockdown, Lyhne Løkkegaard created a series of chemical reaction-based pieces on a humbler scale, by placing hand sanitiser bottles on thermal paper (a material familiar to us in the form of receipts). As the spray pumps were triggered, a haze of sanitiser reacted with chemically treated paper surfaces, creating eerie shadows around the inverted eclipse shapes of the bottle bases.

Lyhne Løkkegaard follows in the footsteps of Metzger, with the conceptualisation of painting as a document of a chance-based process rather than an end-product, and the use of unconventional "painting" materials. However, the artist reproduces these effects in miniature, in a kind of meditative auto-destructive art for an age of isolation. So too, the solar connotations of the circular compositions have strong environmental resonances, alluding – again on a reduced scale – to the twilight-soaked environments and artificial suns of Olafur Eliasson or the circular skyspaces of renowned light artist James Turrell.

So much for isolation – but the last year has also, ironically, been one in which large groups of people have come together in public, filling city streets and squares across the world with all the colours of the political spectrum: from the fascist mob attack on Washington to Black Lives Matter demonstrations and vigils against police violence. At the centre of many of these protests were contrasting views of black identities, particularly in the cases of black masculinity, from those of global citizens outraged at the murder of George Floyd to those which fuel a culture of weaponised white grievance.

African American art is, in the midst of all this, experiencing a period of overdue recognition, as evidenced by group exhibitions such as Okwui Enwezor's posthumously-realised *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, New Museum of New York (17 February - 6 June 2021). Enwezor's show is oriented around three historical works which serve as pillars for a new generation of artists. The first, Jack Whitten's *Birmingham* (1964), builds on the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. Whitten tears back a painted surface to expose the phenomenon of police brutality in the civil rights era, using aluminium foil, newsprint and oil on plywood. Meanwhile, Daniel LaRue Johnson's *Freedom Now* (1964), comprising a racial equality badge deluged in black pitch, brings political impetus to the Neo-Dada readymade. Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Procession* (1986), painted with typical savant crudeness on a set of off-white wooden slats, evokes a plethora of wider-ranging themes, from slavery and subjugation to jazz music, dance and representations of voodoo.

LaRue Johnson, Whitten and Basquiat's works indicate some of the politically and formally radical strategies being realised by the current generation of African American artists, one of whom is New York-born painter Dr. Fahamu Pecou. Pecou is an artist and scholar, whose pieces splice the imagery of hip-hop and western portraiture to offer neon-filled visions of black masculine pride, tempered by ironic allusions to European tradition, and suffused with the iconography of West-African spirituality. A native of New York, Pecou has since spent the majority of his life in Atlanta, where he has imbibed the aesthetics of a Southern US hip-hop responsible for producing politically engaged and innovative artists and musicians such as Outkast. Pecou's work mines hip-hop culture as a bank of archetypes and motifs depicting black North American masculinity, often including an alter-ego version of himself in the work.

The *Pursuit of Happiness* series, which began in 2013, is an early gesture of intent. It comprises a set of works in oil stick, graphite and spray point, with some pieces – like that mimicking a *Dazed* cover, showing the artist in classic hip-hop posture – embossed with gold leaf. One piece, in particular, features a text-based element, reminiscent of the post-graffiti Pop style of Basquiat or Keith Haring. It reads: "Pursuit of Happiness/ Per Suit of Happiness/ Per Pseudo Happiness/ Pursue Dough X Happiness?" Using the phonetic invention

of rap, Pecou playfully deconstructs a money-centred culture which, as a bravura body language implies, is a necessary response to institutional racism and the economic disenfranchisement of black youth. These works examine an obsession with "looking to be seen", through the lens of hip-hop and Black masculinity.

Importantly, however, Pecou's work connects hip-hop with deeper currents animating the African American body politic: from the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the Négritude movement to the pantheons of Ifa – an indigenous spiritual cosmology originating in West Africa. Pecou's 2013 *NEGUS* in Paris sequence indicates the artist's capacity to splice the imagery and terminology of high art, literature, philosophy and pop culture with a sense of mischievous wit. Inspired by Jay-Z and Kanye West's similarly titled song, *NEGUS* juxtaposes stereotypical images of hip-hop braggadocio with talismanic images gleaned from the French literary movement of Négritude associated with Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. In *Imagined Worlds*, from the same year, these concerns are infused with the symbolism of Ifa, through the addition of graphite-sketched headdresses and graphic elements to acrylic portraits of rap performers.

Pecou has drilled deeper into many of these pre-existing concerns with the ongoing, multi-part *Trapademia* series, its title alluding to the southern-born hip-hop style of Trap. In Pecou's own words, the series engages with "liminal spaces of cultural knowledge and understanding ... often overlooked or misinterpreted by the mainstream. I approach the series inquisitively, linking Trap to broader understandings of the collective hustle mentality and survival strategies performed in these marginalised spaces."

Song lyrics, fashion and the symbolism of body language inform the series, along with literary and philosophical histories of black America. *Trapademia II: Lit* (2020) depicts Trap performers and fans reading Harlem Renaissance texts and Black critical theory by writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Frantz Fanon, whilst in *Trapademia III: 7 African Powers* (2020), models are dressed and arranged with reference to the seven primary Orishas (deities) in the pantheon of Ifa. Threading golden lines of communication and metaphor between North America, West Africa and Europe, the *Trapademia* sequence, and Pecou's oeuvre more generally, works backwards to build a lexicon and image bank for the contemporary painter.

At a time when national cultures across the world seem to be on a knife-edge, more vulnerable than ever to forces of bigotry and destruction, painting has a new role to play: it can offer us images of ourselves which reveal hidden narratives and subtexts, suggesting uncomfortable or empowering truths; prompting us to create, or just to live, in new ways. By painting the strangest year, the artists celebrated at the 2021 Future Now Symposium and Aesthetica Art Prize show us not only an imperfect present, but also the possibility of different futures, painting the world with a myriad of brushes.

Greg Thomas is a writer and critic based in Glasgow. He writes for *Aesthetica*, *Art Monthly*, *Burlington*, *Scottish Art News*, and *PN Review*, and is a senior editor at *The Art Story*, a website dedicated to demystifying modern art. Greg has a particular interest in intermedia avant-gardes of the 1950s-70s and is author of *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* (Liverpool University Press, 2019).