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The Artsy Vanguard 2021: Alteronce Gumby



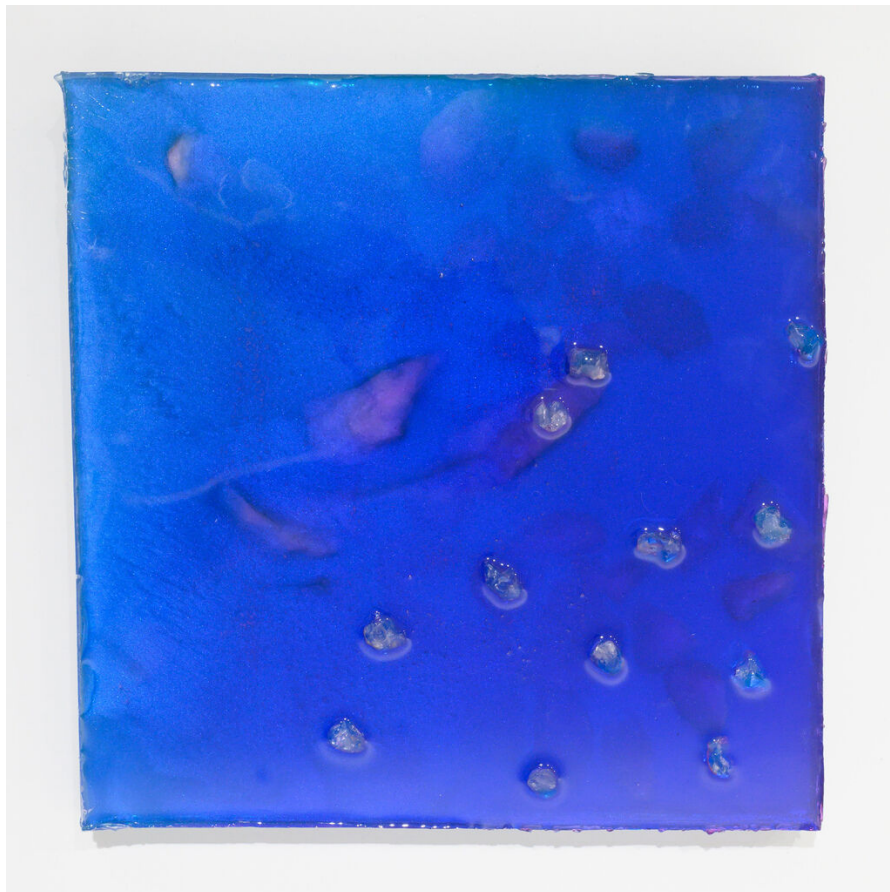
Jewels Dodson
Dec 1, 2021 8:00am

Standing in front of Alteronce Gumby's painting *Black Star* (2019) is what it must feel like to be enveloped in the Milky Way. A whipped palette of dark metallics filled with mystery and mysticism cascade across a lightning-bolt shaped canvas.

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The shades are both indeterminate and intoxicating. With each velveteen brushstroke, the artist unearths the nuanced tones that live deep within colors. Through his abstract paintings, Gumby takes viewers on an odyssey beyond the provincial politics of the present, nudging open the door to worlds both within ourselves and well beyond this one.

Gumby's work dives deep into color not just visually, but symbolically and politically. "I felt like these color codes towards Black people have been reinforced throughout pop culture and throughout society," Gumby explained. "I feel like that's why when Martin Luther King said, 'I'm Black, I'm proud of it. I'm Black and beautiful,' he was trying to push against these color codes that have been reinforced through color, race, and culture."



Alteronce Gumby
Keep looking up, 2021
Bode Projects
US\$6,500



Alteronce Gumby

Worlds in a small room, 2021

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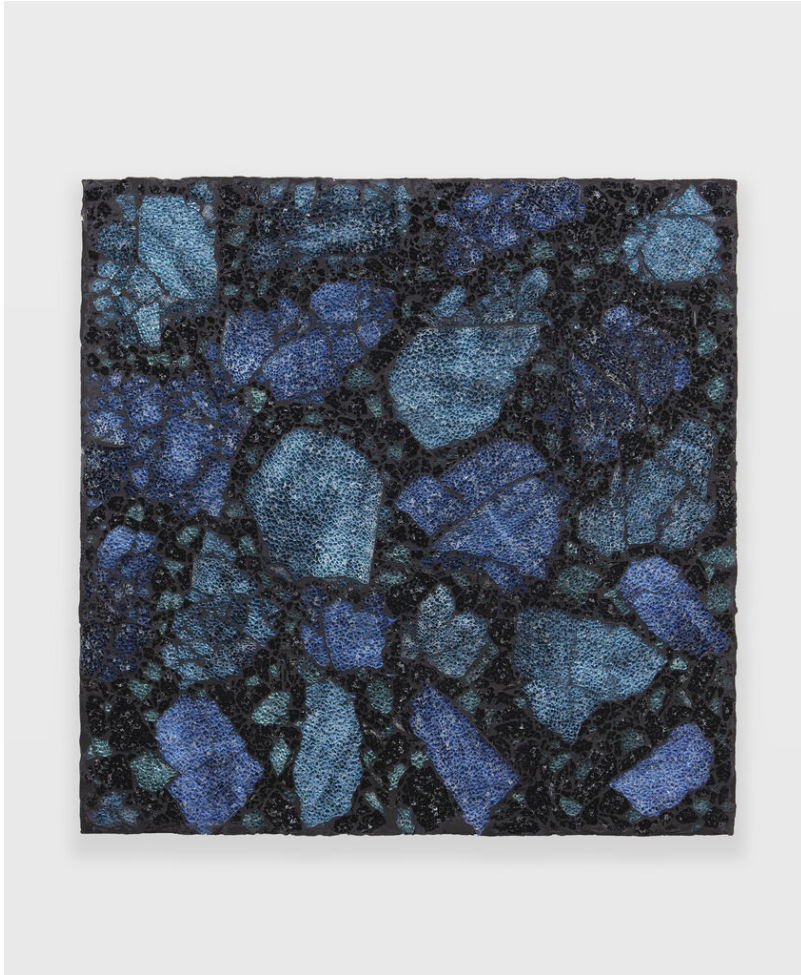
US\$5,000–US\$7,500

What's most beguiling is Gumby's versions of black are a conduit for a deeper connection with a color, culture, and people that have long been condemned.

Gumby's 2017 solo show "Black(ness) is Beautiful" at Paris's Fondation des Etats-Unis featured *Heavy is the Crown (for Jack Whitten, 2018)*, in which he reconstituted the dark hue by creating intense texture, eradicating the rudimentary notion of black being an empty void.

"I think he's committed to abstraction, in a moment when Black artists who are working in figuration are getting more attention," said the artist advocate and collector Bernard Lumpkin, who featured Gumby in his acclaimed book and exhibition, "Young, Gifted and Black: A New Generation of Artists." "I underscore to people that it's really important that he's committing to this mode of composition and it's not divorced from the political, it's not divorced from telling people's stories, he's just using a different language."

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Alteronce Gumby

Their Eyes Were Watching God, 2019

False Flag

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Alteronce Gumby

Bifröst, 2021

Bode Projects

Contact for price

Gumby, who is now based in Brooklyn, New York, grew up the youngest of five children in a working-class family in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Although a few years after the artist left Harrisburg, the state capital was deemed the second-best place in the U.S. to raise a family by *Forbes*, Gumby remembers a city that struggled to recoup from the crack epidemic and became a layover stop for drug trafficking. “I lost my best friend when I was 16 to a drive-by,” Gumby said. “The future wasn’t too bright for me there.”

Enamored by the grand colonial architecture of downtown Harrisburg, Gumby enrolled at the local community college as an architecture major—a detour from his family’s expectation that he would get a good government job working for the state, like many in Harrisburg. At 19 years old, he left the country for the first time on a study abroad trip to Spain. A walking tour of maximalist architect

Antoni Gaudí

opened Gumby's eyes to vast possibilities of design, but it was a trip to the Museu Picasso that opened his heart to the endless possibilities of life. "This is something other than what I've been taught my entire life. This way of viewing the world, interacting with it, commentating on it, is something I had never seen before," he said of Picasso's work. Gumby likens that excursion to the moment where Jim Carrey's character in the movie "The Truman Show" decides to leave the only contained and contrived existence he's ever known. "I felt like the curtain had been drawn back. It was a whole new world," he said.



Alteronce Gumby

Europa, 2019

Bode Projects

Sold

Gumby left community college and moved to New York City, working as a sound engineer in a Greenwich Village nightclub for five years before eventually enrolling in Hunter College's BFA program. His early visual cues were informed by artists including
Jean-Michel Basquiat

and

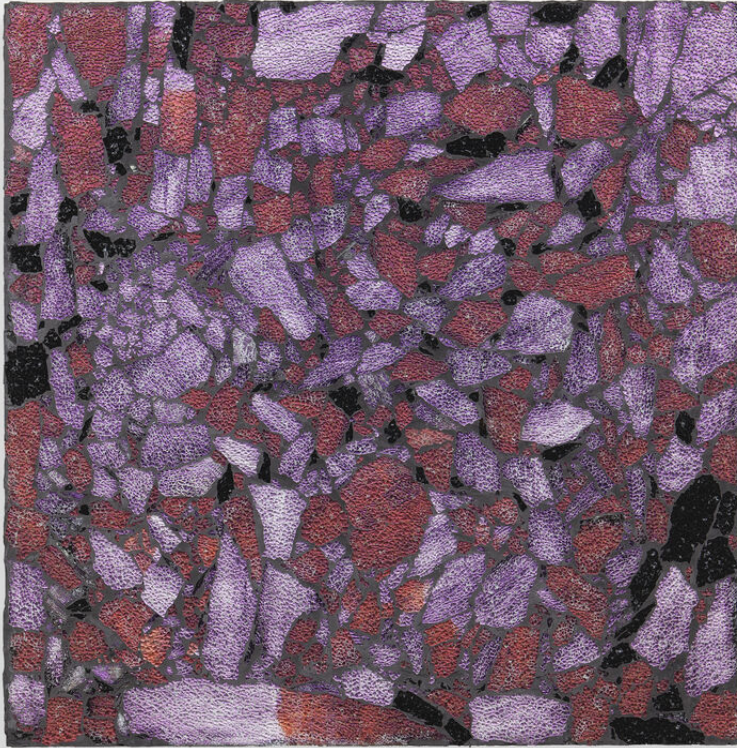
Robert Rauschenberg

, and he sometimes removed subway ads from the platform's walls, taking them back to the studio to be eviscerated and collaged into his work.

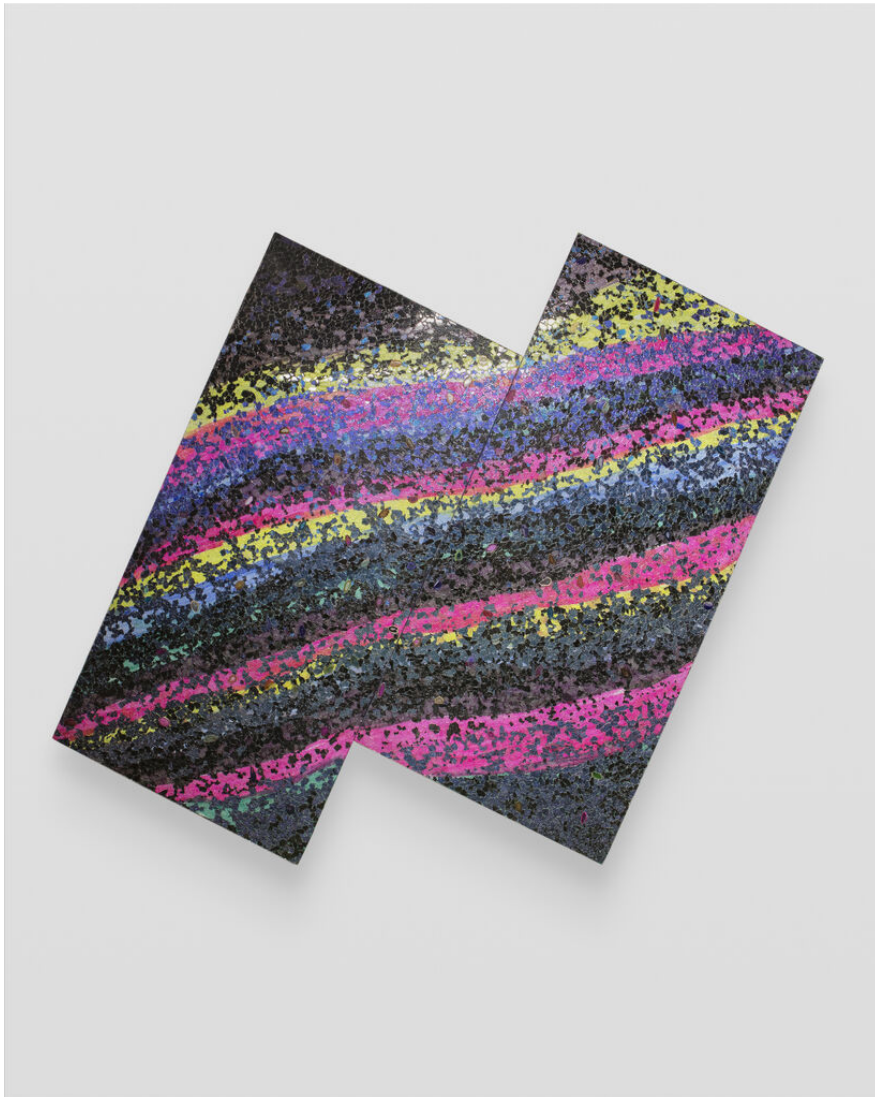
But it was at Yale University's MFA program where Gumby discovered a new language of mark-making and a new awareness around materials. He began working with plasticine clay by melting it down to liquid and smearing it like paint across the canvas; he found that having intimate contact with the matter allowed for a more expressive experience. In some works, he playfully etched a version of the clay animation humanoid Gumby—as a child he found resonance in the character's freedom to go anywhere, including outer space.

It was at Yale where Gumby and Lumpkin were first introduced, when the collector was on campus for studio visits. "I was struck by the way he was using non-paint in a painterly way," Lumpkin said of Gumby's work. "Materially speaking, I thought his work was interesting."

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Alteronce Gumby
A Love Supreme, 2019
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Alteronce Gumby

My Sweet Chariot, 2021

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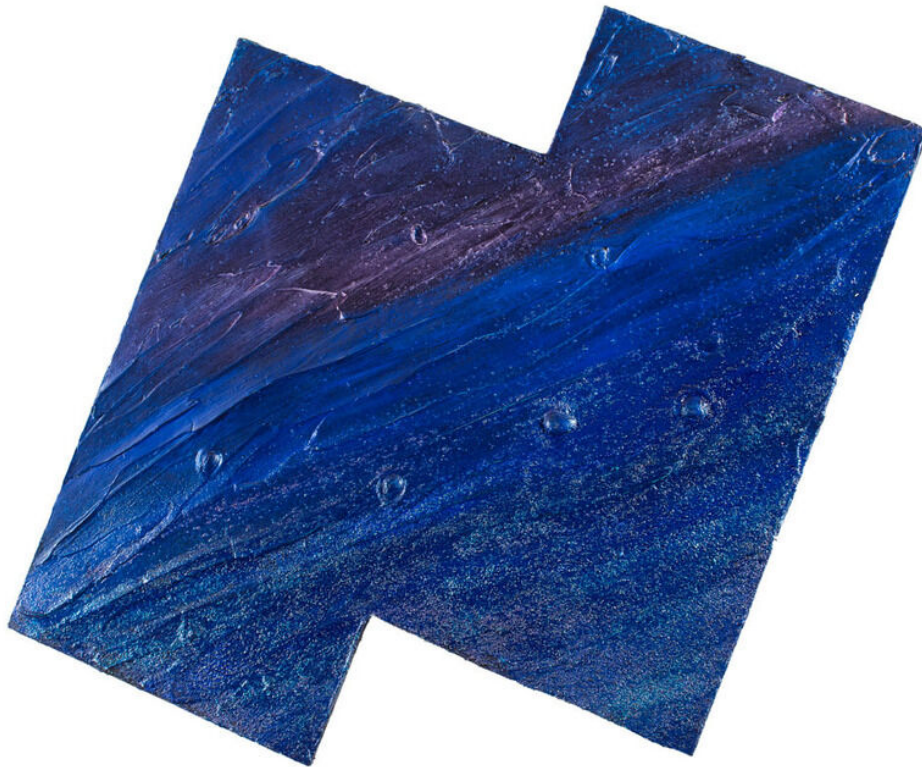
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Besides experimenting with mediums, Gumby was also beginning to blur the line between figuration and abstraction. In the painting *Gumby Nation* (2014), which appears in “Young, Gifted and Black,” Lumpkin points out that the work appears to have a black surface, but the figure Gumby is actually repeated across it in a faint green. “Depending on how closely you look at it, how long you look at it, and what the lighting is like, the painting can be perceived as figurative or abstract,” Lumpkin explained.

Between semesters at Yale, Gumby attended the Venice Biennale and was struck by a group exhibition of artists working in the Korean monochromatic painting style,

Dansaekhwa

. “They had this spirituality towards color and material. It wasn’t just about the color, it was the way the color felt or made people feel,” he said. “The paintings all had this texture to them, there was like a rhythm in the mark-making.” Gumby, whose mother is a pastor, grew up in the church; it was this sense of spirituality that spoke to him. He also realized there were codes, symbols, and deeper messages woven through color that he wanted to explore.



Alteronce Gumby

I Bluet, 2019

Bode Projects

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While researching the history of monochromatic painting, Gumby stumbled upon a work of art made by the French playwright Paul Bilhaud titled *Combat de nègres dans un tunnel* (*Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel*). Made in 1882, the all-black tableaux is considered one of the earliest monochrome paintings (and one of the

most cuttngly racist). Through his color studies, Gumby learned the color black is often characterized as a vacuum. But for Gumby, black in all its forms is so vast. “It’s culture, it’s my family, it’s music,” he said. “So now I have beef with Paul Bilhaud, I started really thinking about how these artists have portrayed the color black and how art history has been dealing with the color, especially in a monochromatic sense.” And just like the abstract masters Edward Clark

,
Frank Bowling

, and

Stanley Whitney

before him, Gumby set out on a mission to rewrite the narrative on color in general, and the color black specifically.

Gumby’s crusade to recalibrate the color black beyond its narrow, white-centered definition challenges the belief that abstract art isn’t effective in the plight against racism because it does little to course-correct the stereotypical imagery of Black figures in art. The tension between figurative and abstract art by Black artists was born during the 1960s Black Arts Movement, when figurative and sculptural works depicting Black people as heroes and historical icons became pertinent to proliferating larger political ideas around Black power and liberation. All the while abstractionists Jack Whitten, Norman Lewis, and Howardena Pindell received harsh criticism for championing Black power in their work in more inconspicuous ways.

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Alteronce Gumby

12:1, 2019

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Alteronce Gumby

The Makings of You, 2021

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But artworks like Gumby's *Horizon Convergence* (2021), a large, double-paneled composition laden with black glass, are a testament to just how surreptitiously subversive abstraction can be. For the work, Gumby created a pigment and painted the side of one glass panel. Once dried, he broke the glass into miniscule pieces, opening up a broader range of black tones through luminosity. Black tourmaline, crushed coral reef, and quartz, all of which have various spiritual and energetic representations, are also embedded into the work.

In this seminal piece, Gumby makes black glimmer. It is brilliant—literally. He creates a cosmic composition meant to draw viewers in close, challenging all of the

times black and Blackness has been used as a barrier. The viewer, unbeknownst to even themselves, becomes entranced with the work; through abstraction Gumby makes black irresistible.



Alteronce Gumby

Child of the Sun: The Saga Continues, 2019

Bode Projects

Sold

Gumby's ability to make otherworldly work that addresses contemporary issues is what will make him a contender to be in the pantheon of great abstractionists. In Gumby's compositions, it is the abandonment of the figure that creates space for discourse of universalities. "Abstraction has this openness to it, there's no box," he said. "I am trying to open that box even further by saying paint can be whatever I want."

And for Black artists, abstraction offers conversations beyond the beaten horse of race; "artist" becomes the primary identifier and not the secondary. Gumby resists being a foregone conclusion. "Don't put me in a box. I feel like I've been trying to say that my entire life, but throughout my artistic career definitely," Gumby said.

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“I feel like I’ve been nudged to make these figurative paintings. But I love abstraction so much.”

The Artsy Vanguard 2021

The Artsy Vanguard is our annual feature recognizing the most promising artists working today. This fourth edition of The Artsy Vanguard is a triumphant new chapter, as we present an in-person exhibition in Miami featuring the 20 artists’ works, including many available to collect on Artsy. Curated by Erin Jenoa Gilbert, sponsored by MNTN, and generously supported by Mana Public Arts, the show is located at 555 NW 24th Street, Miami, and is open to the public from December 2nd through 5th, 12–6 p.m.

Explore more of The Artsy Vanguard 2021 and collect works by the artists

.

Jewels Dodson

Header and thumbnail image: Portrait of Alteronce Gumby by A’ja Dotson. Courtesy of Alteronce Gumby.