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 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Alteronce Gumby with Carrie Moyer

By [Carrie Moyer](#)  
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Alteronce Gumby, *My Sweet Chariot*, 2021. Acrylic, Glass and Gemstones on panel. 107 x 140 inches. Courtesy False Flag. Photo: Mark Waldhauser.

Alteronce Gumby is a painter of (be)dazzling abstractions. Painstakingly constructed from glass tesserae, his shaped paintings evoke drifts of cosmic dust. Imagine a confab between Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten and Howardina Pindell deep in the Hall of Gems. I first met Alteronce when he was an undergrad painter at Hunter College. His devotion to the monochrome and a kind of “pure” abstraction was striking even then. Gumby has spent the past decade developing a body of work that mines both the sensation and symbolism of color.

**Carrie Moyer (Rail):** So maybe we'll just start off with some softball questions. I thought it would be interesting to talk to another abstract painter, who is younger than me, who's also thinking about how we insert ourselves into this history of abstraction that seems so rock solid.

**Gumby:** Right. But there's some cracks there.

**Rail:** Yes, there are cracks, but it's a short history that hangs over us. I certainly feel it hanging over me, probably because I'm an older generation.

**Gumby:** I feel like every time I make a painting, I'm interacting with history on multiple levels. The more I make paintings, the deeper I'm trying to engage with history. Thinking about the history of abstraction, history of color, history of painting, a lot of things come to mind. I try to recognize and understand all these things, and my own sensibility towards that history, at the same time.

**Rail:** Alteronce, how would you even quantify a history of color? The blurb for your new catalog mentions that, and it made me very curious about what you mean. Because it could mean so many different things.

**Gumby:** And it does! But I'm thinking about the vastness, because I don't want to have these limitations on my imagination when it comes to thinking about color or the process of painting in my studio. When it comes to the history of color, I relate it to the history of light, and the history of minerals and matter, organic matter. And it tethers into the history of sight, and color codes we use to recognize things that give us information on where we are and what to eat, or how we feel. All these histories are congealed together and bounded through color. In my work, I'm using raw gemstones, which I source from various mines in Asia, Africa, South America and the US. I'm interested in specific gemstones like lapis lazuli and red jasper that have a specific correlation to the history of art. Red jasper was used in the Lascaux cave for making cave paintings. The history of lapis lazuli lies within Persian cultures, and it is seen as a stone of enlightenment. But both of these minerals have also been transformed by humans into pigments to be used in oil paints or to dye garments. Other gemstones that have the same correlation have actually just been brewing in Earth's crust for millions of years.

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**Rail:** By the way, have you been to the new Hall of Gems at the American Museum of Natural History?

**Gumby:** I have. It's amazing!

**Rail:** It is amazing.



Alteronce Gumby, *Amazing Grace*, 2021. 72 x 72 inches, Acrylic, Glass and Gemstones on panel, 2021. Courtesy of False Flag. Photo: Daniel Gree

**Gumby:** I was so mesmerized. I felt like a little kid. I wanted to touch everything.

**Rail:** The reason I'm being a little provocative here is because abstract painters often hang all sorts of textual baggage on our work. I'm not saying it's not important, but it's almost like we need language to make sure that skeptical viewers have a way in, you know what I mean? If you don't see that, I'm going to show you this. I'm curious about encrusting a painting with gems, when paintings function as the Krugerrand, the dirty gold coin of the art world. They're already some of the most valuable objects in the art economy. Have you thought about it that way?

**Gumby:** You know. It's funny because I grew up in the hood. Everyone around me, especially my brothers and cousins, were really into the bling, bling. You know what I mean? Diamonds and Jesus pieces, it's a big part of hip-hop culture, which I love. But I never really took to jewelry like that. I was more into tattoos! But there is something alluring and mesmerizing about precious stones. And it's interesting how one precious stone is more valuable than the other. For me as an artist, thinking about color taking another form, adds another value to these objects.

**Rail:** [*Laughs*] Can you expound upon that a little bit? Like, what do you mean by value?

**Gumby:** I come from a very religious household, and I've always had a spiritual sensibility. Learning the attributes of certain gemstones used in holistic medicine also added another sense of value to the material. Learning that gemstones give off a frequency, and that frequency is attuned to the color of the gemstone, adds value for me. That's something that people don't talk about often or don't recognize, but it's there, and it's felt. It's a source of energy that is also being activated on the viewer when they come in close proximity to the paintings that adds to the experience. For me, the value in art lies in the experience I have when I'm in front of an object, interacting with it. If I look at a painting or a photograph or sculpture, and I don't feel anything in my consciousness, in my core, then I don't really care what the price tag is. There's not much of a value there for me. I almost feel like putting the gemstones in my paintings is a very funny gesture. [*laughs*]

**Rail:** Moving from the rocks to the tesserae, I have a two-part question about how you're working right now. Part one is about the influence of Jack Whitten. I remember some works being very gestural earlier. So, the second part would be when did you abandon the brush?

**Gumby:** Well, I abandoned the brush to find another tool to make a mark. At Hunter College, I loved big brush abstraction, loved it! It still stops me dead in my tracks when I see the work by de Kooning or Ed Clark. But I was also in love with the materiality of painting, the surface tension of materials coming together and activating each other. I studied the work of Rauschenberg, Kurt Schwitters, Picasso's assemblages, and Howardina Pindell. People who were taking things in their immediate vicinity and using them as a mark in the painting. And the people like Jack Whitten, who made their own tools to make marks really fascinated me. Ed Clark with the broom, Jack with his developer...

**Rail:** Well to me, the tesserae is the obvious connection to you.



Alteronce Gumby, *Horizon Convergence*, 2021. 156 x 96 inches, Acrylic, Glass and Gemstones on panel, Courtesy of False Flag. Photo: Daniel Greer.

**Gumby:** With Jack?

**Rail:** Yeah, with Jack.

**Gumby:** Oh yes, definitely. I dedicated one of my first glass paintings to him. When I first came in contact with glass, I had no idea what to do with it. Looking at Jack's work, of course, seemed like a way in. I also considered 1st-century Roman mosaics, but then I had to figure out how to get color into the glass. I experimented with stained-glass which had limitations too, in color palette. Then I started buying sheets of glass and painting them. I developed this technique of breaking the glass and reassembling it. So that idea—deconstruction to reconstruction—is something I was interested in since undergrad. You take a material, and you do something to it, then do something else to it. And you try to build a language from that in the work and make it your own.

**Rail:** I feel like there's a big leap from Whitten, who is basically pouring—he's using acrylic paint to make the tesserae, right? So, he's doing a big Lynda Benglis-type pour, cutting it up and then reassembling it. So, once you move to this different material (glass), you've entered

another world. It's still two-dimensional, but it's not. It's got a whole different relationship to painting.

**Gumby:** Yes, and light and color. Adding in the gemstones makes things a little more three-dimensional. The paintings have a low relief to them. This collage element makes the paintings feel very tactile when you're looking at them. But then they also have a very luminous and optical effect as well. For me, it's trying to bring all of the things that I love about painting together. That's what I'm chasing. I want it all in my paintings. Sometimes I feel like I fail at that, and sometimes I get really close. And there's certain paintings that I feel like I hit right on the head, but it's really just trying to chase that feeling of everything I've seen or loved in a painting. Trying to get it all in there.

**Rail:** In a very reduced yet sumptuous way. They talk to a lot of different histories at once. Tell me about the shape of these canvases. Actually they're not canvases ... they must be on panel.

**Gumby:** They're panels. The first ones were canvas. I mended four square canvases together on the floor to make Tetris-like motifs.

**Rail:** Oh, so that's a shape from Tetris?

**Gumby:** It started that way, yeah. But I skewed it. I took these four stretched canvases and mended them together on the floor of my studio because I wanted to make a really large Tetris-like-shape painting. When I lifted it off the ground, there was no way the seam lines were gonna sit horizontally, perpendicularly on a wall. My studio wall was only nine feet and when the painting sat up the way I wanted it to—it was about ten and a half feet. So, it kind of sat on the floor of my studio on these two points. I was really mesmerized by it. I saw another aspect of the painting or another potential. And I started working on the painting with an off kilter composition and was really just amazed by it. I just kept working on it. I felt like I was seeing landscapes. At the time, I was watching a shit-ton of Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* I was already having these cosmic or intergalactic thoughts and decided that if Neil had his “spaceship of the imagination,” this one would be mine. So, I started calling it my moonwalker because it felt like it was defying gravity in some way, which reminded me of the first time I saw Michael Jackson do the moonwalk.

**Rail:** [Laughs] That's a great story. Another thing I would be interested to talk more about is language. The older I get, the less language I have for my paintings. Not sure if it's because I don't want to explain them anymore ... I just want people to come and look at them. I hope they provide an experience that cannot be captured through language. Which is why we make paintings. Right?

**Gumby:** Exactly.

**Rail:** It's interesting hearing you using all these different analogies. I'm also really interested in space. But natural phenomena are never going to be captured in paint. So, it's a sort of specious analogy we're making, you know what I mean? I want to show the feeling of a certain kind of light in the morning, or the vastness of the cosmos. And here's an abstract painting, in which I'm attempting to do that. I hope that you, the viewer, can see that.

**Gumby:** Yeah. Well, don't you think that as an abstract painter, you're really having more of a conversation with someone's imagination than the actual world around them? And I think within that space, there's so much to play with. Honestly, it's really a privilege, and it's something special about going into your studio and into your imagination. As we get older, we're troubled with so many other concerns like our taxes, the bills, the kids...

**Rail:** Right. Right.



Installation shot of *Somewhere Under the Rainbow*, *The Sky is Blue* and *What am I*, 2021 at Charles Moffett, NYC. Courtesy of Charles Moffett. Photo: Daniel Greer

**Gumby:** And, you know, if the A train isn't running, how am I going to get to Manhattan? You know what I mean? I think that to be an artist and “the man behind the curtain,” who can have that control or command to play with people's interpretations or perceptions of reality via their own imagination? I think it's something very special. It's almost like you're a magician.

**Rail:** Yes. As I'm listening to you talk, I was thinking about how I try to present a kind of tactile situation that evokes things that the viewer might know, but actually is kind of a new experience. Right?

**Gumby:** Mm.

**Rail:** I think what I'm saying is that the deeper you get into your painting practice, you almost lose the guideposts that you set up for yourself. I'm busy working with all these young artists right now in graduate school; teaching them to articulate their ideas in conversation or writing. *This* is how you provide an entry to the world that you're creating in your studio. And so, it's an interesting experience, to find myself less and less concerned with explaining my own work. In a related vein, do you think of abstraction as a vehicle for political voice? It's always been a big question for me, but it feels relevant again.

**Gumby:** Yes, I think everything is inherently political. That was one of the things I had to grapple with when I was in grad school, when I wanted to maintain a kind of purity of abstraction and a purity of color. But the more I thought about it, the more I tried to put words to it, or the more I tried to separate the words from the thing, the more they always seemed to come back around. It was like the boogeyman. And so, I had to just lean in at a certain point and accept the political associations that come along with color. Especially me being a Black man and the way color has its associations to race. And, you know, color's associations to politics ... in an election year, you're either red or you're blue. I just had to acknowledge that in my work, I often use political associations to alter people's perspectives. So maybe I'll use certain political references within my work via the title to talk about certain issues, or to bring certain issues to light. But then, through the experience of looking at the painting, perhaps the viewer thinks about this issue more deeply. Or they see something else within the work that allows their consciousness to see that issue in a different perspective.

**Rail:** [*Laughs*] I can't imagine any of the faculty at Yale allowing you to think about color as this pure thing.

**Gumby:** Exactly. [*Laughs*]

**Rail:** I would ask conversely: Do you think you have to have a political backstory for your work right now because you are a Black artist?

**Gumby:** I think, for me, it's good therapy.

**Rail:** [*Laughs*] What do you mean?

**Gumby:** The world won't let me forget that I'm a Black man. Especially in these days and times.

**Rail:** Right.



**Gumby:** I just want to be Alteronce Gumby in the world. And I feel like my work is a safe space for me to talk about anything and everything I want, like being a Black man in America, or falling in love, or traveling through space to distant galaxies and just being a human. I'm trying to take that idea of being a Black man in America and, like Sun Ra, consider what it would feel like to be a man on another planet, in another solar system. Would they see me as a Black man or would they just see me as a human being? Playing with the ways in which I perceive my own identity gives me some sense of relief. I don't have to walk out the door tense or cautious every time I see a police officer, or every time I walk into a room full of white people.

**Rail:** You know, I've spent my entire career talking about how my experience as a lesbian has affected my relationship to abstraction. A couple of years ago both Sheila [Pepe] and I were both curated into this show called "Queer Abstraction" at the Des Moines Art Center. It was like one of the first shows focusing on this. I was delighted to be in the show. There are things in my work read as inherently queer because I am the maker. For me that's one of the tensions inside abstraction. When I was coming up, abstraction was treated like this neutral zone. It wasn't read as "personal;" it wasn't about the maker's biography. That construct depended on the assumption that everyone who made abstraction shared a demographic and history. Happily, that idea has since lost credibility. But now thinking has swung far in the other direction, and I'm suspicious of that too. I am interested in multiple reads.

**Gumby:** It's so funny because I was going to ask you if when you go into your studio and you're working on a painting, you're thinking about making queer abstract painting, which you're not.

**Rail:** Never, never.

**Gumby:** And neither am I. I'm not thinking about making paintings specifically about a Black experience. I didn't fall in love with art or abstract painting knowing that these artists were from Europe, or that Jack (Whitten) was from Bessemer, Alabama, I just fell in love with the work. I didn't really care that Picasso was from Spain or lived in Paris. I think it's another thing that we do, as human beings, where we need to anchor it. When I walk into a gallery, I'm just looking at the work. I don't really care about the person's background or where they're from. Maybe later, if I'm just so intrigued by the art that I want to know about the artist's biography, but at first glance, I'm just about the journey. And I kind of carry that same energy into my work when I'm in the studio. You know, I'm just in the paint, just living in my own world.

**Rail:** Did you see *The De Luxe Show* at Karma yet?

**Gumby:** No! Oh my God, I didn't make it!

**Rail:** I think it's still up.

**Gumby:** I went there on a holiday, a Monday or something. And they were closed. But I do want to see *The De Luxe Show*. I think that's what the show is all about. Right?

**Rail:** Yes, from what I read about it. It was a response to what was expected of Black artists at the time (i.e. representational work, or work that seemingly reflected their day-to-day experience). It was an integrated show of abstract artists. I'm excited to see it. I'm very familiar with a lot of work in the show, but I'm very interested in that period of history. The identity and person of the artist becomes a kind of motor behind the huge revival of figuration and representational art that we're experiencing. This makes its way into categories such as Black abstraction, or queer abstraction or whatever.

**Gumby:** Honestly, I go back and forth. I'm not sure if it's for historical purposes or it's all just for marketing strategy. Which, I guess, helps some people understand things a little better. Maybe it's both. You know what I mean?

**Rail:** [Laughs]

**Gumby:** It's a really interesting slippery slope that I think the art market is doing when they index artists in certain categories. Sometimes I think it's good for historical context. Like, this is the New York school. This is the German school. I think those historical indexes are good. Part of me sees this with queer abstraction, Black abstraction, you know ... but no one's saying white abstraction yet.

**Rail:** Yeah. That's the joke I always used to make with my students—Abstract Expressionism is white identity art, basically. It was never named that way, but all of the practitioners were having their feelings on canvas. Expressing their identities, as vets of World War II, and feeling that the world's about to end. Just going back to politics, somebody like Barnett Newman always talked about his work as being extremely political. There's a quote where he says, if you understood what he was making, you'd realize that it's anti-totalitarian. So, we're back to the discussion around language, context, and abstraction. Creating the context for seeing these objects or pictures as a kind of expression of the moment, right?

**Gumby:** For sure. And I think the Gutai artists also were talking about that as political. They were purely reacting to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Think of them burning or bursting through the canvases as a form of expression where they were telling you: this is how it felt; this is what you did to us. Right? But yeah, it's funny, because as much as I love reading and language, I feel like sometimes in my work, words fail me. And that's okay. Because you can't sum up everything we're experiencing in this world purely through written text or spoken words. That's where art comes in. If someone thinks that they are just going to read the artist's statement, or the press release, and walk away with a full understanding of what the work is about, they're short-sighted. To experience an artwork is one interpretation of the work, maybe the gallery text is another, and then maybe your memory of it later is another. And all of that gives you a more well-rounded experience of

not only the artwork, but the world around it. One of the best compliments I've ever received about my paintings is when someone said, "Hey, I was walking down the street, and I saw a puddle of broken glass in the middle of the sidewalk, and it reminded me of your work." Because that means my painting is actually causing a ripple effect, and it sticks with them after they leave the gallery.

**Rail:** I mean, it's so rare for paintings to make impressions at all. You know what I mean? Sorry if I sound super bleak, but I feel like there's so much stuff to look at out in the world. So it's like, part of our job as artists, for me, and I'm gonna guess for you too, is to make something that people take with them, a kind of image that is chewy and almost tactile. Even if they don't remember everything about the work. It's this kind of sensation.

**Gumby:** Exactly. Yeah. It's not only like a visual nerve, it's like a bodily memory, you know? I was gonna ask you how that is as an instructor because we are so visually overloaded, like the world is so visually saturated, even for mobile devices, like you go through so many images in a span of 10 minutes. Are you finding that current students are struggling with trying to make images that are not referencing the digital age? Or do you think that people are leaning more into that?

**Rail:** I think it depends on the person. I don't think we ever worked together when you were at Hunter, but my mantra is always to make things more complex. And for something to live on Instagram, it's got to be simple. You know? So it's like, it's got to be graphic. And it's got to be simple.

**Gumby:** Easily digestible?

**Rail:** Yeah. I think it takes a really long time to figure out what you want to say. When I'm working with students, I'm thinking, how many ideas does this person have? How do I instill the importance of creating the kind of studio practice that is self generating? So that you're not always painting towards the screen or towards the second glance or whatever. I think of abstraction as a kind of weapon against that. Even things that appear to be simple on a screen. When you're seeing them in person, they're actually not simple. You know what I mean?

**Gumby:** I totally know what you mean.

**Rail:** A lot of work just falls flat on something like Instagram. So you're like, Well, okay, it's a zip, whatever. Yeah.

**Gumby:** *[Laughs]* Yeah, exactly. I think that's one of the things that I learned early and trying to figure out how to make a good painting. There's a moment when I'm walking through a museum or gallery, and I see a painting that actually makes me shuffle my feet. It's the opposite of scrolling on social media. When you see something that actually makes you drag your foot you have to be very keen to that moment in trying to understand what's going

on in this painting, and in that moment that's actually making you slow down. What's causing that feeling? Because it's possibly something that you haven't seen before. And it's enough to make me curious, to make me go up close to it, and actually sniff the painting. Now, I want to try and solve the puzzle. That's something that usually only happens when I'm interacting with art in real life. And maybe that's just me, and I'm sure you probably have the same experience. But there's something about maybe that unknown, or what happens within a painting, it's a synergy of materials, the visual composition, the lighting. Maybe it's how I'm feeling or what I just ate, I don't know. But there's something that's coming together in a really interesting way. I want all my paintings to have that. It's funny because I never studied with you at Hunter but your presence was felt in painting studios, the things you were teaching your students came up during open studio sessions, we were talking about all these things and sharing ideas. And actually, you gave me one critique, at Hunter, it was during a Kossak Visiting Painter Session, when you were a visiting artist, and I was terrified.

**Rail:** *[Laughs]*

**Gumby:** All the students were saying how great of a painter you are and how tough you were as a critic. I had seen your work and I was really impressed by it. I was so eager to hear what you had to say about my work. And I remember you looking at the painting and asking me questions about my desires for the work. And you told me that you weren't going to remember this painting when you left the room. That there wasn't enough there to hold it. And that cut me deep because I wanted you to remember it. And I looked at the painting and I was like, yeah, it was just a gimmick. There wasn't really much there. The idea was paper thin. After that critique I went out, got a cup of coffee, came back and later that day was back in the studio working on the painting. Just worked on that one painting for a week straight until it got to a place where it was beyond me. Man, I remember working on it and the painting studio monitor was like, "Wow, that's done".

**Rail:** *[Laughs]* Oh no.

**Gumby:** And I was like, you can't make that call!

**Rail:** Right. That's not up to you.

**Gumby:** Yeah, I was like, the painting has to tell me when it's done!

**Rail:** Exactly.

**Gumby:** That was when I figured out that I needed to go through this emotional roller coaster with my paintings before they actually arrived at a place that was outside of myself.

**Rail:** Right.

**Gumby:** But I think I have you to thank for that. Because you gave me that push.

**Rail:** Well, you were always somebody who was going to do it for real.

**Gumby:** [*Laughs*]

**Rail:** You know what I mean? Ask anyone who's taught a long time, you know pretty much right away, even if the person is not convincing yet, when the energy around the practice demands to be taken really seriously. Here's a person who will keep going no matter what. I think we should probably sign off because this is only supposed to be like 800 words. Amazing. So, I'm just so grateful that we got to do this. Thank you.

**Gumby:** Thank you, Carrie! This is an honor. I feel so blessed and just full of gratitude that you have thought of me and invited me to engage in this conversation. You know, you're someone I feel like I'm constantly going to be looking at and studying. And, seriously, I—you—if you only knew how close I get to your paintings.

**Rail:** That's great. That's great. That's what we want! Thank you. Good luck over the fairs and all that stuff. I look forward to seeing your catalogue.