

Cite Unie Interview: Alteronce Gumby



Artist Interview

Artist: Alteronce Gumby

Alteronce Gumby is an abstract painter based in New York City. He recently graduated from the prestigious, Yale University with an MFA in Painting & Printmaking. Gumby will be debuting his first solo exhibition at the Fondation des Etats-Unis in April.

Fatima Cadet-Diaby: What is your favorite museum in Paris?

Alteronce Gumby: So far I think it's The Centre Pompidou. I remember the first time I came to Paris and I saw a retrospective exhibition of Simon Hantai. I never heard of him before and it was then, in 2013, that I was first introduced to him. I was really taken by his journey and his

process of making. It reminded me that there were still a lot of artists and a great deal of art history I didn't know.

FCD: Who are your top 5 artists?

AG: My top artists go beyond 5 depending on the day of the week. Lately, I've been thinking in terms of lineage when it comes to my work and who I want to be in conversation with throughout art history. There's a lot of artists I look to for inspiration, but right now it's Norman Lewis, Jack Whitten, Stanley Whitney, Mark Bradford, Rashid Johnson. #SquadGoals

FCD: How did you come into art?

AG: My first major in college was architecture. I wasn't really into architecture but

I'm glad I did it. During my freshmen year, I did a two week study abroad program in Spain, where we traveled through various cities during their Holy week. It was in Barcelona where I first saw the work of Pablo Picasso. We went to the Museu Picasso and that is where I had my artistic awakening. Just walking from room to room seeing someone's life unfold was very moving to me. I was able to relate more to that than anything I was studying at the moment. I realized that while I was looking at those paintings, ceramics, drawings, and sculptures, I was more attracted to that form of expression than architecture or music. But that happened when I was nineteen years old and becoming an artist was never really presented to me as a career choice growing up. At the time, I thought of painting as a Sunday hobby. I guess now everyday is Sunday.

FCD: Where do you find inspiration to create?

AG: I find inspiration to create from everyday life. I'm a narcissist and I believe all artists are as well to some degree. Nonetheless, my inspiration or motive to work starts with my everyday experience or life story. But I'm also consciously aware of what's happening in the world. I read the news, read literature, watch movies, listen to music, and even post on Instagram.

Usually my work is a prompt. It always starts off as a question and I, in some ways, am trying to present or create an answer through the making of an artwork. I never want to fully resolve the equation. I always want to brush up against some sort of resolution but never have it fully realized. In some ways, scientists and mathematicians work like that. In every academic field there are people trying to solve some sort of equation that fascinates them. At the same time they are also creating new equations for themselves. That's how innovation happens. That's how progression happens. We re-address history because we're going back and addressing the footnotes to see what was missing or what fell through the cracks. Then we re-present or re-contextualize that with what we know now.

For me, it's commentary. It gives it context. It gives it substance. It's not the equation. It not the bottom line by any means. To some circumstances it's not even the themes or the thesis statement. It's just an addition to the experience.



FCD: What does your sweater mean?

AG: It says “YELL” and I went to Yale University. For me, it was a protest shirt using a play on words. In the wake of Black Lives Matter there were a lot of things on the table that felt like an undercurrent, especially on college campuses across the nation. This is in regards to racial discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical abuse towards students of color. In addition to that, my newsfeed was flooded with Black men and women being murdered or brutalized by the police. During this time, confrontations at Yale specifically between the undergraduate women of color and white males were erupting.

So I wanted to make my own personal statement. There was a point when I was wearing my actual Yale sweater every day because I didn't want to get mistaken as some drug dealer because I was a Black male on campus walking around. Next thing you know, the police pull me over to ask me for ID and then shoot me for no reason. I felt that any day I could walk out the door and I could just die. I felt that by wearing my Yale sweater it gave me some sort of protection or security so I wouldn't be mistaken for a hoodlum. But I also felt at the same time that I was pushing my own people to the side and giving privilege to the institution. Then I realized that the same institution was not giving the same respect or protection to the people of color who were contributing to their community. I then made this “YELL” sweater as a reference to the school and the very definition of what it means to yell, which is to make something audible and to make something heard. For me, I just wanted to make those issues that were being put on the table heard.

FCD: I attended your last show here in Paris, part of the Art Hop-Polis at Cité Universitaire. When you were describing your work you said something that really stuck with me. "I'm interested in the color black because black is the most dynamic and complex color of them all. It is an amalgamation of many colors therefore rendering it intrinsically unique."

AG: Within that show my work was kind of like the other in the room. Black is an amalgamation of color which for me makes it the most dynamic color and gives it the most character. Growing up, it seemed that the association to the color black was grim. It's dark, dirty, and an untrusted color. Meanwhile, white is something pure and clean. Martin Luther King, Jr said the same in his 1967 "The Other America" speech at Stanford University. In the same mentality I wanted to redefine blackness for myself. I wanted to make it something that would negate all other presumptions about the color. I have always been fond of the color black. As a kid my favorite superhero was Batman, the "Dark Knight", and I loved the fashion of the Black Panthers with their all black attire. For me, it is a color of power and empowerment. As a result, I am trying to open up to the multiple possibilities of what black can be. That said, I am not necessarily making black paintings. A lot of the paintings I am making are by using the dark end of the spectrum of greens, blues, and reds. I rarely use black though I am aware that at a certain distance my paintings read off as black. However, when you get up close to them and familiarize yourself with it you can actually see it's something else. It has its own character about it. It has its own sense of individuality. I think that is the same way I view myself as an African American and even a black body. From a distance, it is easy to throw a stereotype or a social structure on to a person or a group of people to simplify it for yourself. I want this body of work to challenge that ideology.

FCD: How do you believe your duration in Paris will affect your work? How has it affected it so far?

AG: I love traveling and experiencing other cultures. I wanted to come to Paris because of its relationship to art history, jazz history, and rich aesthetics. I am a huge fan of James Baldwin and the more I look into

his career, it's hard to miss his time abroad as a significant moment in his life and his intent behind coming to France. When you look into that you notice that he was part of a longer history of African Americans trying to escape the oppression that they were feeling back in the states. We are still witnessing that today and it's not just African Americans. It's a global initiative that is old as the history of man. So I kind of wanted to experience that myself, especially given what has been happening in the States.

My understanding of Baldwin is that he is always criticizing what it means to be an American and the very essence of America. When I read his novels and his essays I feel as though he's really grappling with what it means to be a human being with the struggle of society. I feel that is what I am chasing in my work. I am chasing this sense of individuality outside of the context of being an African American, or being a New Yorker, or even being from Pennsylvania. I look out my window everyday into the city and I hope and believe that the luminosity comes through in my work. So now the work I am making is taking the essence of blackness and redefining it.