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VOGUE

The Atomic, Cosmic Art of Alteronce Gumby

BY IAN MALONE



Alteronce Gumby in front of his work Photo: Daniel Greer

Color is a preoccupation for most painters. For Bronx-based artist Alteronce Gumby, it's an obsession. In "Somewhere Under the Rainbow/ The Sky Is Blue and What Am I," a dual-site exhibition that opens today at New York galleries Charles Moffett and False Flag, Gumby interrogates the subjectivity

of light. The large monochromatic works, 15 in total, are constructed from acrylic paint, glass, and uncut gemstones.

The show's poetic title—at once searching, declarative, and ambivalent—is fitting for an artist who wrestles with questions of race, time, identity, and the universe. “Colors take on meaning,” Gumby says. “It’s psychological warfare, reinforced from pop culture to fine art. As a person of color and as an abstract painter, this was a conversation I wanted to be part of.”

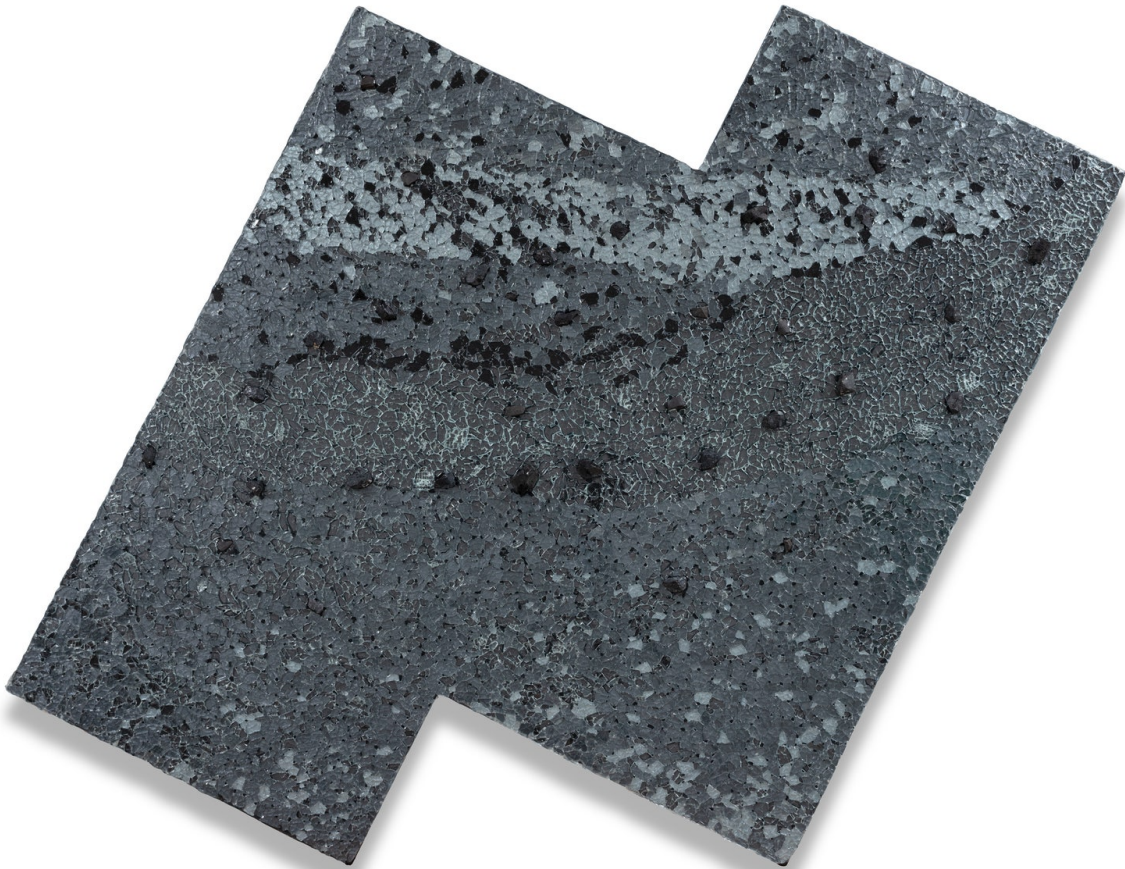


Alteronce Gumby's "Somewhere Under the Rainbow/ The Sky Is Blue and What Am I" Photo: Daniel Greer

Gumby's work resembles that of the color-field movement that emerged in midcentury New York as well as 20th-century abstraction more generally. “Rothko, Newman, Pollock,” Gumby rattles off his idols. “These were heroes to me.” While he maintains a reverence for his predecessors, the artist is conscious of his foray into a broadly white canon. Racism is quite literally embedded in the history of monochrome painting. Gumby recalls that a few years ago, X-ray imaging revealed a racist joke beneath the paint of Kazimir Malevich's famed *Black Square* (1915).

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“Color codes were presented to me as a child,” Gumby explains. His boyhood love of superheroes instilled an early understanding of how color can signal morality or mission. “The color of each Power Ranger symbolized their identity [just as] people identified me, being an African American, as ‘Black’ before I even understood what that meant.”



Alteronce Gumby, *Moses and the Polaris*, 2021 Photo: Daniel Greer

Reading the experiments of Sir Isaac Newton prompted Gumby to incorporate glass into his work. The 18th-century scientist discovered that natural light filtered through a prism created a rainbow. “That spectrum of color,” the artist explains, “is what we’ve broken apart, segregated, and radicalized to mean these different things.”

In *Moses and the Polaris*, the artist creates a nocturnal tapestry of blacks and grays. The highly faceted surface erupts with chunks of onyx. The

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shimmering glass gives a sense of movement to the work. “Moses” references Harriet Tubman’s alias, while “Polaris” denotes the North Star, a guiding light in the underground railroad. The work was inspired by Dawoud Bey, whose photographs of stops on the underground railroad “seem to have passageways, ways to move about the space, and paths to freedom.”



A work in progress Photo: Daniel Greer

“I look at these paintings as spaceships to take me to another planet, another solar system, another galaxy, to somewhere away from planet Earth,” Gumby explains. “I want to go to a place to live without the baggage of cultural identity. It is trying to use color and abstraction—and the history of light and space—to take me there.”

“Alteronce Gumby: Somewhere Under the Rainbow/ The Sky Is Blue and What Am I” (a dual-site exhibition) runs from March 18 through April 25, 2021, at Charles Moffett gallery (511 Canal Street in Manhattan) and False Flag gallery (11-22 44th Road in Queens).

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Alteronce Gumby, Colour Is a Beautiful Thing (2021) Courtesy of the artist

Please could you introduce us to this new book, your first monograph?

Alteronce Gumby: This monograph is truly a dream come true. I'm a huge fan of artists' monographs so I'm ecstatic to have one of my own. I'm very thankful to Charles Moffett Gallery & False Flag for producing it.

This monograph covers six years of my artistic practice, from my first semester in graduate school at Yale to the development of my glass paintings. It's a good span of time for me and the readers to observe how my practice has evolved materially and conceptually from clay to glass and gemstones. It also features written contributions by curators Ashley James and Antwaun Sargent, two people whom I respect and admire in the art world. They're doing the work.

Could you elaborate on your own use of colour and the culturally produced meanings and symbolism with which colours are entrenched?

Alteronce Gumby: Colour is such a beautifully complex thing. Culturally, colour has carried so many meanings, interpretations, and associations. I first realised this when I was a kid. In class, I told everyone that my favourite colour was black and another student responded, 'That's because you're Black.' But the real reason was that my favourite superhero was Batman.

Colours, like certain words in the dictionary, are homonyms. We see the colour red and think of Valentine's day, the republican party, or Matisse's 'The Red Studio'. A colour can carry many associations and symbols though, for me, the number of interpretations is infinite. As Toni Morrison puts it: 'Definitions belong to the definer – not the defined.'

Every time I make a painting, I'm defining colour for myself. I'm not putting colour in a box, similar to the way I don't like to put myself in a box or compartmentalise my practise as a painter. My work with colour is focused on expanding our mindset around colour and liberating our perspective from the associations we make with it.

“My work with colour is focused on expanding our mindset around colour and liberating our perspective from the associations we make with it” – Alteronce Gumby

Scale seems to be a really important aspect of your practice. How did you experience creating the book and working within the spatial confines of the page?

Alteronce Gumby: I wanted the monograph to feel like a work of art. My book designer, Laura Coombs, helped me bring this book to life. We thought about every aspect of the book and how the reader would interact with it, from the texture of the cover to using different inked pages in the interior. I wanted the book to carry some of the attributes the paintings displayed – iridescent colours, earthy textures, and kinship to light.

What do astrology and the cosmos mean to you, spiritually, intellectually, and creatively?

Alteronce Gumby: The cosmos is the great enigma. I'm fascinated with what we know about it and enthralled with what we don't know. My imagination can run wild thinking of all the different possibilities of life, places, and energies that exist.

Throughout humanity, we've looked to the stars for guidance, whether it is figuring out which way is north to navigating across a landscape or to better understand who we are as individuals and what planets are affecting our current behaviours. I think all these practices

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and theories are valid for helping us figure out who we are and what our purpose is with the time we have here.

I want my paintings to have the same sense of wonder and vastness as the cosmos. Compositionally, I'm referencing cosmic landscapes. These are places I believe exist outside of our solar system – like exoplanets – but I can only visit them through my imagination and paintings. This allows me to paint with faith and liberation.

In my work, the addition of gemstones is evidence of raw material and organic pigments which connects to nature. Some of these gemstones, like lapis lazuli and red jasper, have a long history with painting as they can be ground up and turned into pigments, and an even longer history with the planet and the cosmos. For me, colour connects it all.

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Alteronce Gumby, Colour Is a Beautiful Thing (2021) Courtesy of the artist

From Isaac Newton to the Power Rangers and space travel, your inspiration seems to be drawn from such a vast cross-disciplinary matrix. Could you elaborate on any overarching elements that might connect your diverse sources of stimulation?

Alteronce Gumby: When rationalising my paintings, I need to consider all the makings of life – everything that allows all of us to exist and do the things we do. In my mind, it's all tethered materially and energetically. Colour is the best medium to link all that we can physically see and touch as well as what we can't see yet still feel. It's like gravity – we can't see this force of energy but we know it's there.

Colour also takes many forms of energy, from light to gemstones. I want to display the spectrum of colour visually and materially within each of my paintings. Overall, the equation is always revolving around light, material, and energy. Every painting is emphasising these three elements about a certain colour. With the power of abstraction, I can shift the conversation from talking about Sir Issac Newton's prism experiments to the colour codes surrounding race and gender with the Power Rangers in the same painting.

I find the titles of your work are often really exquisite and I think they add an extra dimension and meaning to your artworks. You have a beautiful way with words! How do you come up with the titles? And do you ever write poetry or prose?

Alteronce Gumby: I used to be a singer-songwriter before becoming a painter. I've always loved wordplay from growing up and listening to rap music. I used to love reading the lyrics in the CD jackets. Often, I'll title paintings after songs, books I've read, poetry I admire, or an interesting stringing of words that I heard a stranger say on the street. I keep a list of phrases and while I'm working on a painting I'll start to think about what words could amplify what's happening in the painting. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and I believe a painting is worth a million. The title is another gesture towards the overall experience of the painting.

“I want my paintings to have the same sense of wonder and vastness as the cosmos” – Alteronce Gumby

You've spoken about the inspiration you've drawn from the colour field movement. Who are the artists whose artwork most speaks to you from these movements? And in what ways is your work developing and expanding the visual language of this notoriously white-dominated canon of 20th-century abstraction?

Alteronce Gumby: Rothko was probably the first colour field artist that stopped me in my tracks. I took so much from him. Looking back, I probably borrowed a little from all the abstract expressionists across generations, from Willem de Kooning to Jack Whitten and Stanley Whitney, to contemporaries like Tomashi Jackson. I think colour field painters have a unique way of looking at the world and thinking about colour.

My practice is about expanding my perception of colour and the world around me through abstract painting. There are a lot of artists who have engaged in this conversation. It seems as though most of them have left identity, empathy, or the natural world out of the dialogue. I try to view the equation from as many angles as possible. This makes the paintings accessible to a broader audience.

I also put a lot of emphasis on material and process. I want the viewer to have a phenomenological experience standing in front of my work. The gemstones are pulsing at their own frequencies, the glass is refracting light, and the colours are dancing.

Do you have any daily rituals that help put you in a creative mindset?

Alteronce Gumby: I have two rituals that I believe help me get into a creative mindset. The first is meditating every morning. That may not sound like the most creative ritual but I believe that if you want your imagination to roam free you have to make space for it. The second ritual is to see as much art as possible. Whether it's in galleries or museums, public art, or old gothic churches, I try to see it all and add them to my lexicon.

What excites you at the moment, in terms of other artists, musicians, films, and television?

Alteronce Gumby: I get excited just waking up and going to the studio every day. I'm what some would call a workaholic, but I'm passionate about my work and I feel blessed to be in the position I'm in. I'm excited about the new work I have in my studio and can't wait to share it with the world.

I think Julie Mehretu's show at the Whitney got every artist excited about scale and possibilities. Musically, I'm looking forward to playing Drake's Certified Lover Boy and Kanye's Donda albums in the studio.

What's next? Are you working on new, upcoming projects?

I have a solo presentation at Armory with False Flag. I'll be showing some stellar large works. Following that, I'm opening my solo exhibition with Bode Projects in Berlin titled *Cross Colours*. I had the pleasure of spending time in Berlin during the pandemic to make these works. In these paintings, I consider simultaneous contrasting colours through light and material. I also have a public installation with Art-in-Buildings that will be opening in early October and I'll finish the year off by sharing a booth with Fred Eversley at Basel Miami with Nicola Vassell Gallery.

Alteronce Gumby's Colour Is a Beautiful Thing is published by Charles Moffett and is available now