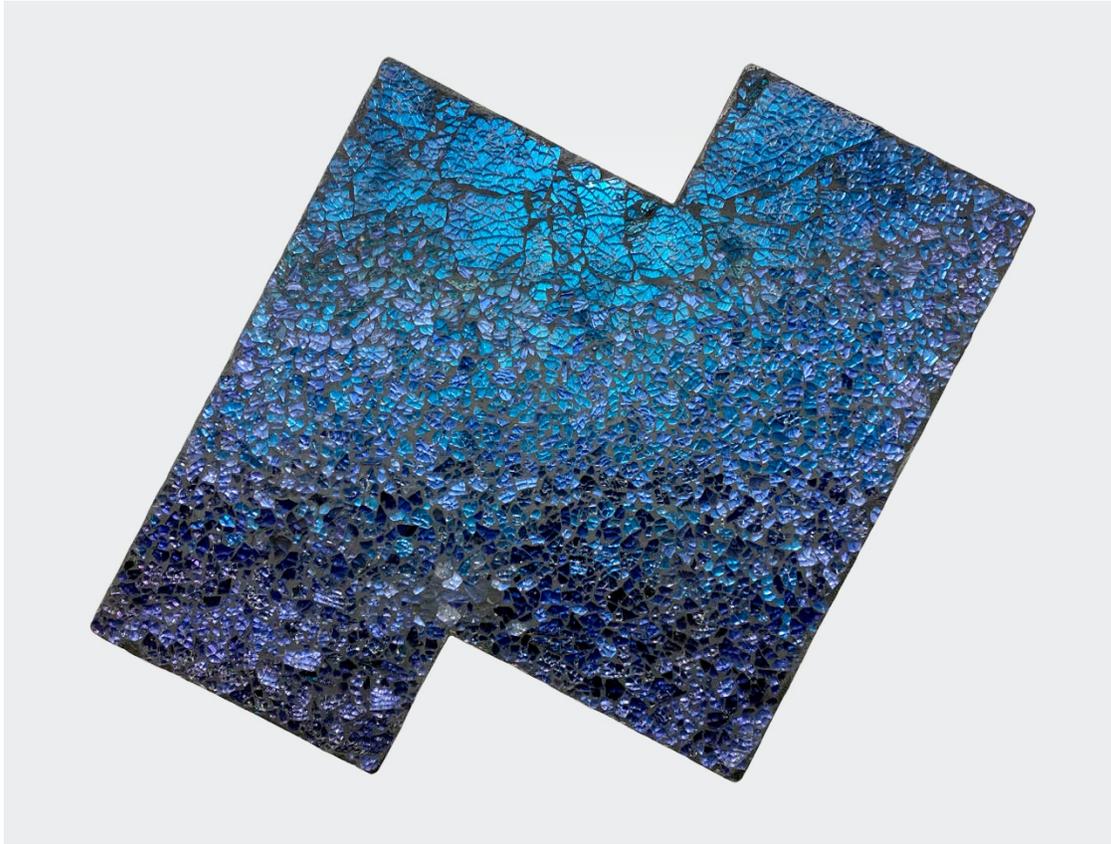


# Sight Unseen



11.06.20

Q+A

## Alteronce Gumby's Shatteringly Optimistic Glass and Acrylic Paintings

by Jennifer S. Li

New York–based Alteronce Gumby works within a rich tradition of artistic precedents whose primary concern was color. The wide fields of stained pigment in Mark Rothko's meditative canvases were meant to evoke powerful emotion. John McCracken's volumetric, monochromed planks suggested that color itself could be a stand-alone subject. But, as demonstrated by Kazemir Malevich's *Black Square* — a once hallowed work that was discovered in 2015 to bear a racist joke — color can rarely be divorced from politicization.

With society's focus on color, and especially the ways it has historically been used to label, oppress, or divide — Black and white, red and blue — Gumby's glass and acrylic paintings are multifaceted, glimmering beacons that propose a more nuanced perception of hue. Using foraged

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clear glass which the artist paints and shatters into jigsaw puzzle-sized pieces, Gumby's latest body of work captures a hopefulness for the future — that what is broken can be put back together, for a result perhaps even more brilliant than before.





**You received your MFA from Yale and you've shown your work in the U.S. and in Europe, but you actually started out as an architect major. How and when did you decide to become an artist?**

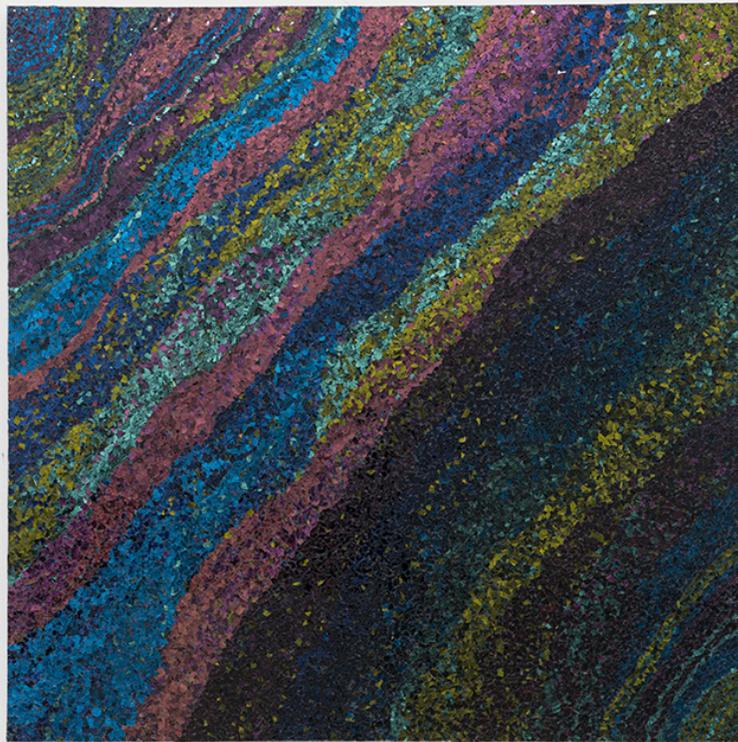
I decided I wanted to become an artist in a foreign land. I was in Barcelona while studying abroad on a walking tour of Antoni Gaudí when our tour guide mentioned that we could go see the Picasso museum. That was actually the first time I had ever been inside an art museum — I was 18 years old, a freshman in college. The Picasso museum showed his early childhood to his late style. I was mesmerized by the journey he took, from a traditional academic style to Cubism to assemblage to his own personal visual language and an abstraction that he conjured. I realized that was something I wanted in my life.

I dropped out of college and saved my money over the summer to move to New York. I was working as a sound engineer at a nightclub, but I still had thoughts of Picasso. He was an inventive artist: He doesn't mimic the world, he created his own vision of it. I really admire that inventiveness, the re-contextualization, and sense of originality and play. The world is a treacherous and tormented place. To be an artist is to go into your studio and find bliss; a practice that allows you to expand as a human being and thrive.

**You have your own personal ideas about color. Can you talk more about what color means to you, and how you use it in your work, both materially and conceptually?**

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As an artist of color working with color as a primary vehicle, I want to break open and expand ideas of color, identity, and humanity — to achieve a sense of universality through color. Even the science behind color is a universal one. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Isaac Newton held a prism to the sky and discovered that the refraction of light created a rainbow of colors, but it's all coming from one source, one light. I wanted to reinstate this sense of universality back to color, instead of a separatist idea of color. And I hope this universality can liberate color from entrenched, harmful associations to help us see others as complex dynamic individuals.



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**The titles of the paintings included in your latest show, “My Favorite Color is a Rainbow,” at Parrasch Heijnen in Los Angeles are all very lyrical. Can you tell us more about how you name your paintings and the associations behind them?**

For the yellow-toned painting *I call you Son ‘cause you shine like one*, the title is from the movie “ATL” (2006) starring T.I. In Black culture, we have to remind each other of our worth, because society is constantly trying to shift our viewpoint and denigrate how we are supposed to see ourselves. The wordplay between “son” and “sun” takes a diminutive term and transforms it into an uplifting one. My practice is also very influenced by the sun, our star. The painting includes citrine and quartz raw natural stones. *Birth of the Cool* is named after a Miles Davis album, but it’s also in some ways a self-portrait. The raw lapis lazuli stones are arranged to form my sun and moon astrological signs.

**This is the first time you’ve included stones in your work. Tell us more about the stones and why you included them.**

I really wanted raw stones because that rawness is part of everyone’s life. No one’s perfect—everyone has a rough edge or two. We’ve all been in love, fallen out of love, had our heart broken. We put ourselves back together and keep moving through life. When the pandemic

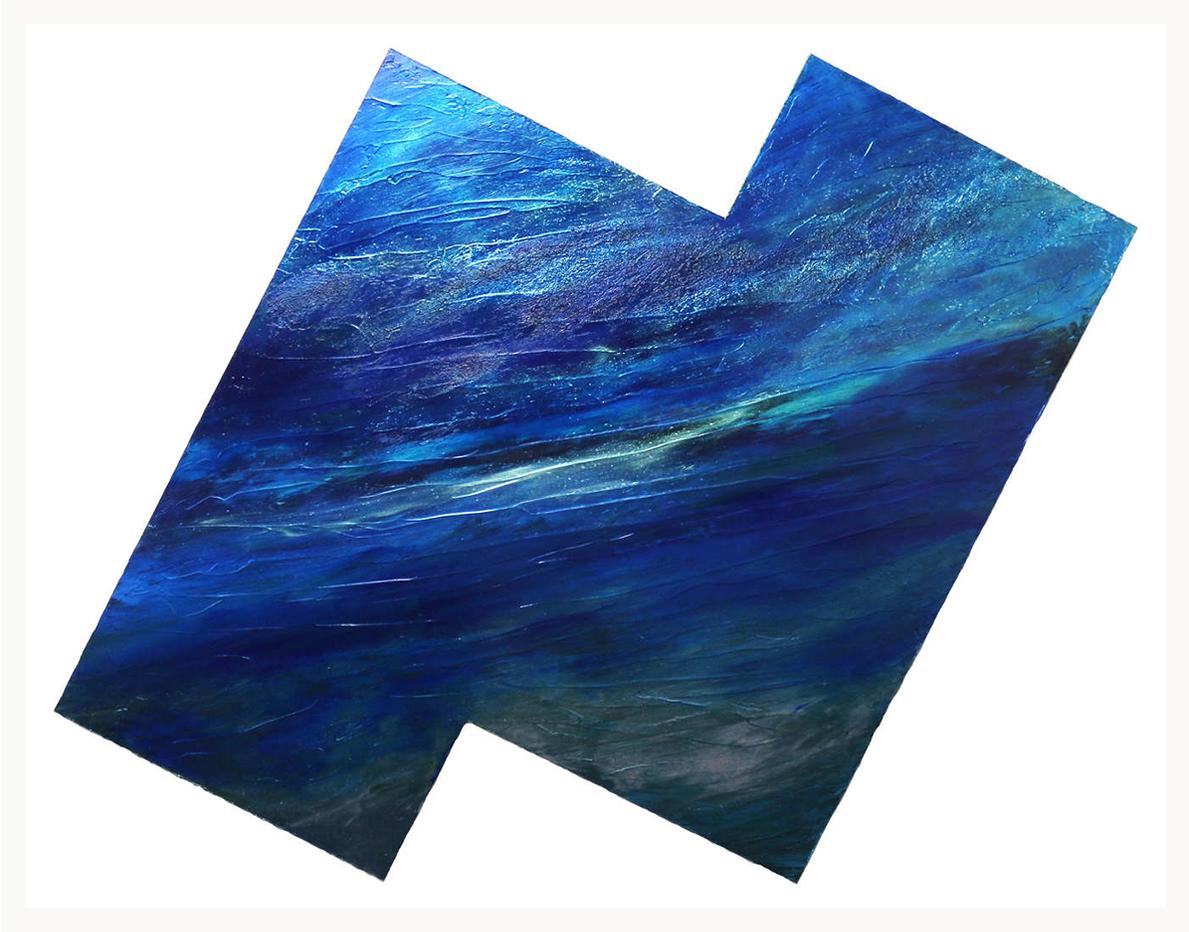
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**You’ve mentioned the green Claymation Gumby character in previous interviews and in 2014, you created an all black painting featuring the character entitled “Gumby Nation.” Can you elaborate on the significance of Gumby as a pop cultural reference in relation to your work?**

When I was in graduate school, I used the cartoon Claymation character Gumby as an avatar for myself. Like Gumby, I wanted to travel through time and engage with certain characters or events from the past. Gumby had this unique sense of otherness about him. I wanted that in my work—for the viewer to see something familiar, and at the same time something new and foreign. I think another iconic example of the Claymation character in pop culture is when Eddie Murphy played Gumby on SNL—a Black male comic playing a fictional green cartoon character. The layering of meaning and perspectives is astounding. I believe that every human being has that same level of complexity. We’re all unique in our own way, yet the uniqueness of Black people and other people of color at times seems to be a disadvantage. Color and abstraction allows me to play with ideas about social politics and identity.

**You talk a lot about space and the cosmos. Both embody the ancient and the futuristic at the same time. What are your thoughts about the past and the future in relation to your work and the concept of time in general?**

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The concept of time is a heavy question. I know enough to know that I know very little about time. The concept of time is manmade just like the names of colors. In my paintings I'd like time to exist in an omnidirectional manner. My paintings can reference the past, live in the present, and have an effect on the future all at the same time.



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