

A Spiel

Taj Matumbi

March 7th – May 2nd, 2025

The Paul R. Jones Museum

2308 Gary Fitts Street, Tuscaloosa, AL

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We are pleased to present this catalog for Taj Matumbi: A Spiel at the Paul R. Jones Museum. This exhibition presents a brand-new body of work by the artist and furthers our efforts to support contemporary artists by giving them the space and support needed to share their visions.

I was first introduced to Taj's work at Maus Contemporary in Birmingham, Alabama. I saw vibrant colors, references to skateboard and street culture, allusions to historical aristocratic structures, bicycles with wheels that reminded me of atomic energy symbols, and I could hear the music pulsing in each piece. Taj's work was a unique combination of opposing imagery, within a Modernist composition, presented in a playful manner. It was bold, and it was refreshing. I knew that this was an artist I wanted to bring here and present to our art & art history students, as well as to the broader arts community.

Since the original donation in 2008, the Paul R. Jones Collection of American Art at The University of Alabama has used this generous gift to educate and engage University students and the Tuscaloosa community. Since 2011, this mission is also carried out in part through exhibitions at the Paul R. Jones Museum in downtown Tuscaloosa. Often these exhibitions present an aspect of the Jones Collection, taking a close look at a particular subject or theme. The Jones Museum also brings in exhibitions - voices - from outside the Tuscaloosa community, so those experiences can be shared with our on- and off-campus audiences. With this exhibition, we are not only bringing in a visionary voice, but we are also highlighting an artist we are proud to feature in our permanent collection. In our selections of artwork and exhibitions at the Jones Museum, we continue to expand the chorus of voices we present here in Tuscaloosa.

We are deeply appreciative to Taj Matumbi for bringing this wonderful new body of work to Tuscaloosa, and to Guido Maus of Maus Contemporary for bringing this all together behind the scenes. We are indebted to The Alabama State Council on the Arts for their continued support that has helped us bring this exhibition and other exhibitions here as well.

Lastly, we would like to thank the College of Arts & Sciences and the Department of Art & Art History for their continued and unwavering support.

– Daniel White, MFA
Museum Director
Paul R. Jones Museum of American Art

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supportive family and the wonderful art teachers I've had over the years. A special acknowledgement goes to Professors Gyan Shrosbree and Jim Shrosbree from Maharishi International University. From their dedicated individual art practices to their exemplary teaching, they provided me with essential tools to develop and maintain a fulfilling studio practice, and I am immensely grateful for their guidance while completing my BFA program.

During my MFA at UW-Madison, I had the honor of working with renowned artists like Leslie Smith III, Faisal Abdu'Allah, Derrick Buisch, Fred Stonehouse, Nancy Mladenoff, and TL Solien. Each of them significantly contributed to my growth as a professional studio painter.

I'm deeply indebted to Leslie, the head of my graduate thesis committee, whose ongoing support as a mentor has profoundly impacted my artistic path. I am especially thankful for his insightful discussions during this interview about my painting practice for this project.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Guido H Maus of Maus Contemporary for his steadfast support as I've navigated my journey as an emerging artist. His belief in my work and enthusiastic advocacy has pushed both my creative and professional growth. Special thanks Daniel White, the director of the Paul R Jones Museum. His faith in my art was instrumental in bringing this publication to fruition. Many thanks to Jim Escalante, photographer and artist, for taking the time to document my work for publication.

Lastly, I want to express my love and appreciation for my partner, Simone. Having such a thoughtful and caring person by my side makes me feel incredibly fortunate.

-Taj Matumbi

My identity forces me to live in between place and space where the imaginary and the real collide. In the series Self Portrait within Parallel Planes, I paint interlocking and overlapping figures that draw into question the boundaries between individual and collective space. Over the last four years, I have developed a painting vernacular made up of iconography that falls between these two junctions.

In exploring *inbetweenness*, duality of self and the multiple emerged as conceptual parameters for this exhibition. The multiple is a constant change that affects us all, but on a more personal level as a biracial person, I subconsciously and consciously project a version of myself that is fitting to the context of a space. Some refer to this as code-switching or even "passing" which leaves the individual between a space of reality and fiction.

I delve into repetition, motif, and movement through the framework of the multiple to explore narratives surrounding my biography, shadows of myself, and inbetweenness. I grew up skateboarding from a young age in Northern California. Skateboarding was one of my first forms of selfexpression. It taught me skills and gave me tools that would later transfer to my painting process. As a skater, I learned the importance of commitment, style, and speed. I approach painting the same way I approached skateboarding, but instead of doing a

hundred kickflips, I make multiple versions of the same painting, striving for consistency while embracing variation, in the way each landed kickflip looks both different and the same.

I often feel *othered* in any given space due to my background and identity, which often contradict assumptions. While I've enjoyed many privileges like studying abroad in India or going to grad school for fine art, I also grew up on welfare, and would sometimes busk by doing skateboard tricks for people at my local farmers' market so my brothers and I could scrounge up enough money for burritos. These are a few biographical examples that highlight the paradoxical nature of my existence.

These contradictions often make me think about possible versions of myself that I am not aware of, and how feeling in between reality and fiction can give airtime to darker aspects of myself often manifesting in forms of self-doubt and sometimes masochism. Carl Jung speaks of shadows as being an unconscious aspect of yourself that can be harmful when left unchecked or ignored. I titled this series of paintings Self Portrait within Parallel Planes to acknowledge my fragmented self and to find healing.

- Taj Matumbi

A Conversation between Taj Matumbi and Leslie Smith III

Wednesday, December 4, 2024



Taj Matumbi is an emerging artist, who grew up in Northern California. A 2021 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he earned an MFA in painting and 2018 received his BFA in ceramics and painting from Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa. In 2023 Matumbi had a solo exhibition at Museum of Wisconsin Art's satellite gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Currently Matumbi has been selected for the Madison Museum of Contemporary's Triennial group exhibition in 2025, and has a solo museum exhibition A Spiel spring of 2025 at the Paul R. Jones Museum, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Matumbi has been represented with Maus Contemporary since 2022 which is based in Birmingham, Alabama where he held Rise and Shine a solo exhibition in the spring 2024. Matumbi has also participated in several national group exhibitions including New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Minneapolis. His paintings are also part of the permanent collections of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama, The Paul R. Jones Museum, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, The Wiregrass Museum of Art Dothan, Dothan Alabama, and the Louisiana State University Museum of Art in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.



Leslie Smith III's studio practice investigates the history of modern painting with reference to material specificity, application, and pictorial perception. He engages the prospect of uncoupling previous histories from the process of identifying unfamiliar forms. He re-imagines the pictorial possibilities of a two-dimensional surface and creates paintings that exhibit a distinctive space not dependent upon traditional three-dimensional perspectives. He fractures singular shaped canvases into multiple shapes that relate to each other tangentially.

Smith received his MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University School of Art (2009) and his BFA in Painting with a minor in Art History from Maryland Institute College of Art (2007). His recent solo exhibitions include The Depth of Thoughts at Galerie Isabelle Gounod, Paris, France (2022), Stranger Days at Maus Contemporary Gallery, Birmingham, Alabama (2022) and Reaching for Something High at Chart Gallery, New York, NY (2023). He was recently awarded a 2022 Joan Mitchell Fellowship and is a Full Professor of Art and Art Department Chair at the University Wisconsin-Madison.

Leslie Smith III

Taj, you've got a new body of work that's being exhibited at the Paul R. Jones Museum at The University of Alabama.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah.

Leslie Smith III

It's a new introduction of your work to a new audience in a way. So, for those who will discover your work for the first time, how did you arrive at painting?

Taj Matumbi

Wow, OK.

Leslie Smith II

So not art in general, but how did you arrive at painting specifically?

Taj Matumbi

I would say my interest and experimentation with graffiti around middle school led me to painting. However, it wasn't until my third year of college that I learned about studio art, I began to embrace painting. When I was in undergrad, I made a lot of ceramics initially, so I thought ceramics was going to be my focus. Then once I was accepted into my BFA program, my professors nudged me towards painting. I had taken a beginner painting class when I was at community college but I still wasn't fully sold on painting. It took a while, but over time I began to accept painting as something I could pursue. Due to preconceived notions of painting and art in general I had lots of imposter syndrome to overcome. I definitely felt like I was a sculptor, and a ceramicist before a painter for a while.

Leslie Smith III

Interesting. Can you elaborate a little bit between approaching painting as a dimensional artist or an artist that's interested in dimension in three-dimensionality and also entering into the space of painting from the place and experience with graffiti?

Taj Matumbi

Yes. Absolutely. Space, time, and architecture are modes that have always enticed me as an artist, relating to my background in graffiti and dimensional work. And so, with regard to graffiti, the first artists I was exposed to were graffiti writers. By proxy, through skateboarding, I met these graffiti guys who were real macho, tough guys who painted, and that was interesting to me as a kid.

Later, I took ceramics in high school but didn't begin taking it seriously until my professors in college showed me the elasticity and the plasticity of ceramics. I was exposed to ceramicists from the 20th century who made abstract work related to the formal art-making I was taught during my undergrad. Those early years were when I was introduced to painterly and abstract ceramists like Peter Voulkos, Betty Woodman, and Rudy Autio. Being introduced to these artists had a huge impact on my perception and the possibilities of clay and sculpture, which eventually led me to painting.

Coupling my time when I worked in clay quite seriously, I returned to drawing and painting with a new paradigm from learning about these great ceramicists from the mid-20th century.

So, with this newfound excitement and three-dimensional work, I transformed this energy into painting with a new invigoration, which made me feel both naive and confident.

Leslie Smith III

So it wasn't as if painting was something that you entered into, in some traditional sense that would have given you, you know, a sense of confidence based on knowing exactly how to use oil mediums and oil painting in specific ways. Still, your confidence was maybe gleaned from your experience of graffiti coupled with the kind of stick-with-it-ness that was part of your ceramics experience.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah.

Leslie Smith III

That's very interesting. So, does this nexus of painting, graffiti, and ceramics still relate to each other in this way today? Or was it merely an on-ramp to being expressive with paint?

Taj Matumbi

It's more of an on-ramp. There may be traces of it, but I don't think my audience would see that. You know? I don't think you'd look at my work and necessarily think of graffiti, maybe street art. And there's a distinction. Street art is more marketable, like murals and characters. Those early influences, more so for me as an artist, developed my confidence and understanding of the formal principles of ceramics and sculpture, which are very similar to painting, such as balance, line, and composition. All those things are sculptural, but you also have to consider the 360 degrees dimension of the object. And with painting, it's more interesting because you have that flat space that you wrestle with. So, I feel as if my experience with graffiti and ceramics served more as a springboard into painting and drawing.

Leslie Smith III

So you talk about that battle or confronting the flatness of painting. That's an interesting space for a painter. As a painter, I feel like it sits at the forefront of how I think about communicating an idea or a thought, depicting an object, a space, or whatever. It may be a bit tropic, but how do you start when you're confronted with that raw, blank canvas? How do you conceive of a composition relative to those sentiments that you spoke about earlier? Line, dimension, how an object fits in space, etc. How do those things coalesce in your approach to starting a painting? What do you value right now in the studio relative to those variables?

Taj Matumbi

In the early stages of my studio practice, I threw everything at the wall and I grappled with the dimensionality and this flat surface by using mixed media. Then I got to a point where I started drawing; I really developed a drawing practice during COVID. It was the spring semester of my second year in grad school at UW- Madison. So losing access to our studios I had new material restraints but I had to, you know, continue my practice. My third year of grad school I tried to reduce down to only utilizing pure paint, which has been difficult for me to navigate.

Over the years I have been leaning on my innate sensibility with color and composition. Similarly, I would employ sculptural and dimensional elements for textures and surfaces. In the last few years, I have been trying to focus on color in a way that isn't just a crutch; avoiding using color indulgently or without intentionality. When you're a new artist, at least for me, I had the desire to squeeze paint directly from the tube and had very little restraint or intentionality, which is great. But now I think I'm really grappling with how I can recreate my drawings into paintings but still make them interesting.

And each drawing doesn't necessarily, you know, as a painter, each drawing doesn't necessarily always scale up. And so negotiating with the work is always going to be a call and response. Since my relationship to painting is relatively new in terms of my practice and career. I still feel clumsy, as if I am falling around in the studio, and I love that because the not-knowing is where I still have discovery. And so when I recreate a drawing, and it just hits right away, I have a suspicion of the result. It is hard for me not to challenge the quickness perhaps due it feeling painlessly. And so it's a battle, and a lot of the time I grapple with that by working on a lot of pieces at once.

The origins of my studio practice began with process-based making, which focuses on the process of making instead of the result of a finished piece. And for beginning artists it's a great place to have unchecked exploration. So, as I further develop, I grapple with intuitive process-based making versus something that's more controlled and finding a balance between these two poles. This was another concept I was taught as an undergrad. So, my work is always anchored in parameters that I often break. It's nearly impossible for me to stay within the limitations I construct, but if I don't make boundaries, it's very easy for me to veer off into the weeds, and then painting, for example, becomes brown.

Leslie Smith III

It's funny that getting out of hand equates to the color becoming brown versus, you know, getting out of hand, meaning there are too many things in this composition or layering too much paint onto the surface that creates a lack of clarity or something.

Taj Matumbi

That can happen too. There are a million different ways it can go wrong, but I still have a color wheel in my studio.

Leslie Smith III

But it seems like color is relatively central to your painting and your process. Can you talk a little about its function? Does color need to function in a certain way or fill a particular role for you?

Taj Matumbi

It's a difficult question, but it's a fair question. There are different tricks that I've used to work in the studio, and one trick is thinking about a series, and a way to make a series is thinking about variations. Variations of a composition, line, and color. And a lot of the time, I would start those conversations with collage, and they would have very similar color palettes. I would select two complementary colors and primary color and then something from the grayscale for value to nail everything down. The way that I think about color is, firstly, I consider proportions and going back to the balance calling back to my ceramic sculptures. I would throw wonky cylinders and then construct these totem pieces that had this lovely off balance tension. And so a lot of my paintings, I'm thinking about how to create dissonance, and that is with color and proportion of color, natural versus synthetic. And so these are the ways that I can make a decision and I look at it, and I'm thinking about design principles.

So ask myself if I am operating in a way that considers tension and balance or imbalance. Or does it feel like there's too much red? Or am I just using yellow because I have a bunch of yellow in my container? And so there's all these different principles that I use to not get stuck. It's all these different tricks I use when I need to switch things up.

Leslie Smith III

It's tough because, you know, all of those reasons can be true and right at the same time. Sometimes it's hard

to decipher between what to mobilize and what variable in a painting's structure to activate to do the things that we want our paintings to do. I'm curious. When you talk about balance and trying to create dissonance or imbalance, what is that in reference to?

Taj Matumbi

It's a reference to my understanding of formal abstraction, and thinking about the basis of any painting as formally abstract before it's anything. The artist's role is to imbue the subject matter onto it. But as it becomes more rendered, it becomes more of a thing. Still, it's like it's all just lines and shapes and colors. So if you can find harmony or disharmony in a way that is working and that is completely subjective too. I think that's why I kind of steered away from formal abstraction to more figurative work because having that conversation with people that aren't painters could be challenging. And so that's something that has been a source of guilt for me. Like how can I make a painting? That is true to me. So I want to make work that caters to the viewer, but it doesn't just give them what they want.

Leslie Smith III

What is a painting that caters to you, what does that mean?

Taj Matumbi

I was rereading the essay you shared with me, by Romare Bearden "The Negro Artist Dilemma". because I had professors in undergrad who encouraged me to think of myself as an artist, not a black artist. At that point, I was obsessed with Basquiat, and I had a non-art friend who told me I should market my identity. I went through all that in grad school, where I discovered my identity by researching and understanding African American history better. Now, I am at this place where I want to make a

painting that stimulates me, which is really harkening back to what initially got me excited about painting.

Leslie Smith III

That's a beautiful realization.

Taj Matumbi

It's painful.

Leslie Smith III

Yeah, it takes time and a lot of sweat, disappointment, and excitement to get to a place of feeling content with just wanting to make a painting that excites you and the fact that that alone is enough. And while focusing on making paintings that excite you there are still numerous other concepts and ideas that orbit your process relative to what is happening within the contemporary world. Conversely, there's also another orbit of ideas and thoughts that reference retrospectively, being derivative of—or—in response to the past.

I'd argue that when you're really present in the studio making work that is truly exciting for you the work will inherently speak to a set of concerns that are yet to be discovered or yet to be truly understood, and we just won't know what they are until later. So there's more of a future thing happening too.

Your exhibition is a collection of works that are all happening and coming to fruition simultaneously. What are the pillars within these paintings that you're most excited about?

Taj Matumbi

The thing that I'm most excited about in this body of work, I would say, has been my ability to create a painting that has an essence of collage. It's not happening in every

piece because I am working on 15 paintings at once. This phenomenon is what initially got me really excited about painting when I first started taking advanced art classes. Moments in the work that relate or respond to artists I love like Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, and Jacob Lawrence. And you know, thinking about how there can be this kind of cut-out feeling and this illusionistic quality which is paint, and I think I didn't have the confidence to capture this quality with paint. Previously, I always had to add some dimensionality with collaged elements or found material from Goodwill or something.

You've seen my work in the past.

Leslie Smith III

Yeah, an additive approach.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah. So, to get to this point, again, I am not there with every painting, but there are moments in the work where it just hits. I wouldn't have arrived at these moments if I didn't make this body of work. And that's exciting.

Leslie Smith III

Is there a painting in particular that comes to mind when you're talking about that excitement occurring in the work.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah, I made this drawing of this figure. It has diagonal thick strips of blue and black. And there's a leg that's flailed one way, and it's really flat and abstract. To me, it feels very figurative. But then it also when I painted it, it hit similar to some of the first colleges that I made.

Leslie Smith III

And this is for the show.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah, for the show.

Leslie Smith III

So there's a drawing and a painting, or just a drawing.

Taj Matumbi

There's a drawing and a painting, but the painting feels closer to collage than the drawing. And the drawing is pure pen and ink. This is exciting because the quality of the collage is coming through. But if I were to criticize myself, I'd say I am still not at this altitude with every piece regarding surface quality that I want. Specifically, I feel a noticeable gap between tactility and texture which occurs in collage. So I definitely have some more experimenting with painting before I get to this sweet spot I am reaching for, which excites me too. I still have a lot of learning to do regarding surface quality. The more I paint and I learn about the rich history of painting, the more pressure I feel that I need to continue to push my practice. For me, it is a journey that I get to continue to discover.

Leslie Smith III

I'm curious and want to unpack the specifics of collage. What are the aspects of collage that are so central to how you want paint to function? Because in your description of the drawing and the subsequent painting, you spoke a lot about its tactility and the painting feeling like a collage. But this essence really chases after the tactility of a collage. It references the material that the collage was made out of and how it was built. This drawing was not collage, though. So the tactility in the painting, is it imagined?



Study for *Sir George*
8.5 x 5.5 in.
acrylic painter maker and ball-point pen on
Strathmore paper
2021



Sir George
60 x 48 in.
acrylic on canvas
2024

Taj Matumbi
Oh yeah, completely.

Leslie Smith III
That's really interesting.

Taj Matumbi
Completely, and the drawing is based on an imagined collage.

Leslie Smith III
That's super interesting to me because it suggests that there's an essence of collage that is both real and unreal that you extract from while painting.

Taj Matumbi
Oh yeah.

Leslie Smith III
Is that of greater value right now in these paintings? More than the illusion of collage, which has maybe a little less to do with tactility but more to do with the aesthetic illusion of how to illustrate one thing lying over another or two things being brought very close to each other.

Taj Matumbi
No, I think you kind of deciphered it quite well. Because a recreation of a collage or an illusionistic painting of ripped paper is not what my paintings are about. Moreover, compositional structure and the cutouts are how I put together composition in my mind and through drawing and painting. So imagining pieces placed together in my mind, which in turn, I illustrate through drawing on a piece of paper. It feels very similar to how I would physically create a paper collage. Which, in turn, is a reference to the body of work I made for my thesis show, *Parallel Planes*. Where the composition is

made up of framed cutout silhouetted figures on this flat plane, this is the area in which I am mining these drawings that exist in this imagined collage space that, in turn, I scale up into painting that actually relates to my early collages.

I feel I occupied this imagined space most successfully in the body of work *Parallel Planes*. So similar to Stuart Davis or Giorgio Morandi, I am mining the *Parallel Planes* composition but trying not to recreate the original drawing. My goal is to create a similar essence with a new drawing and then scale it up into a painting.

Leslie Smith III
So, you know clearly that these paintings are not about the illusion of collage. Rather, your process, your approach to painting as an action or a performance, is steeped in the history of what collage is or how you understand collage. As a group of paintings specific to this exhibition, can you share what these paintings are about?

Taj Matumbi
Yeah. Well, like subject matter or like formally.

Leslie Smith III
Both

Taj Matumbi
The title of the exhibit is, *A Spiel*. (*Spiel* is German for performing, to play, or commonly known as a lengthy speech.) This concept of performance, folly, and mischief are themes I have been thinking about for sometime now. I recently rewrote my artist's statement, so I was reflecting on my experience in graduate school, where this investigation of my identity felt dark and heavy.

Contradicting my sentiment, I mentioned after rereading, "The Negro Artist Dilemma", essay by Bearden. This group of paintings deals with America's racially coded term of folly historically and how I exist as a person of color. From living in the Midwest, you know, growing up in Northern California and occupying mostly white spaces.

This new body of work transitions into a positive symbolic nature where I try to create a world that celebrates my uniqueness. An imagined space where I am my own hero and where I can protect myself from injustice I see or experience. Trenton Doyle Hancock's work is where I found inspiration to create my own world of different characters that operate as almost imagined superheroes.

Viewers who are seeing this work for the first time might only see blocks of color that make up childlike figures. But the figures represent and symbolize internal protection, rituals, and rights of passage, which energizes me in the studio. I aim for the work to serve as a personal allegory which is a retelling of the hero's journey. Representing personal grit and perseverance, we all tap into during life's ups and downs. I am also examining historical stereotypes of black men in America. I hope these figures can act as conduits to historical concerns around identity and my own biographical experiences as a painter, skateboarder, non-white person, or waiter.

Leslie Smith III

So, is that where The idea of the spiel comes from?

Taj Matumbi

Yeah, 'cause. You know, I work in fine dining, and I have to give a spiel every night on the special. A lot of the job is entertainment and performing, and that's not something I was very comfortable with. I didn't enjoy

talking to people before I became a server, and I was honestly terrified of the customers. And every day, I have to go and face that fear and it's the same fear I have to face in the studio. Every day in the studio I have to confront that surface of the painting that's in the studio right now. And so that tension between facing your fears is exhilarating, which relates back to graffiti, skateboarding, and some of my early influences.

I want this body of work to be a part of the contemporary conversation of painting as a whole. Which, in my opinion, is hard to pinpoint right now because it feels as if everything is up for grabs.

Leslie Smith III

What do you mean by that?

Taj Matumbi

Everything is acceptable, and there are so many different styles. If the work is welcomed into an institution or validated by a certain gallery. I guess I mean there's no specific school of painters doing the same thing. There are a range of styles, and figuration is very popular, and I think it's one of the reasons why I want to change course. Maybe after this body of work, try to distill things further down to formal means again as a personal challenge. But yeah, I think the main goal was to create characters that celebrated these imagined childlike heroes that I could reflect on and think of when I was having a hard time.

Leslie Smith III

When I left your studio the last time. I felt it was a great visit. I was super excited to see the work and so much of it in different states of resolve. On my bike ride back to my studio, the one thing I kicked myself for not asking was. Do these paintings connect in a linear way for you? Are they sequential in that one painting follows

another, whether it's through its context or subject matter, perhaps its narrative, if there's narrative, or there's a formal linearity to how they progress?

Taj Matumbi

Yeah. No, that's a great question. I had a studio visit a couple weeks ago with a curator who asked If I always worked in a series. So for this body of work I've never made this many paintings all in one period. I think the last exhibit I had that's comparable was my thesis exhibition from graduate school but that wasn't as many paintings. There is some distance between some of the paintings and closer relationships to certain paintings. I drew the compositions directly onto the canvases with graphite in early July, and as the work developed more I arrived at a point where about half of the work felt formally sequential. I like to operate within a space where the work is a series and each piece feels like family members. Currently I am not reaching this mark with every painting which is difficult because I'm documenting the work on Dec. 19th. I would like all the work to be on this level of relating to one another. Early in the process where there's this kind of fear where it's like, ****, I showed myself up. You know, then I do another pass. And I think, well, this pass of the paintings are making the older moves look like ****. This summarizes the endless tug of war in the studio and being consumed by the process which is both thrilling and terrifying.

Leslie Smith III

We all feel that way about our art. However, the second you let those paintings leave the studio, they get hit with even light, and eyes are set upon them that don't see where they came from or how they arrived suddenly. There's a leveling that happens.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah. The through theme is my consideration of performance, folly, and mischief, which pours into this dichotomy of alter-egos; subconscious versus my conscious I am interested in.

Formally, I'd say my concerns around this concept of an imagined collage aesthetic that we were talking about earlier. All of the paintings share a certain rhythm that relates to one another, but some of the paintings exist in a different universe in terms of execution.

Leslie Smith III

It's funny, you say they exist at times in a different universe because there are moments when your figures just completely dissolve into what I think is ground, but I'm not sure.

Taj Matumbi

Me neither.

Leslie Smith III

It's like pareidolia, where you look at the clouds, and you find things that look like familiar forms and objects. At times when I engage with these new paintings, there isn't clear-cut foreground, middle-ground, and backgrounds, but I can create an image that affords me a clear figural understanding, and seconds later I can undo that image and reforge a new image where some of the structural parts that might be assigned as figurative still stay continuous from iteration to iteration within one painting.

So when you're making a painting where you clearly see the figure, and you know where the ground is, and you know how that painting is working, do you intentionally go after these dual figure ground relationships within

the kind of flatness you explore? Are you trying to blur imagery or trying to create an afterimage with multiple possibilities within an abstraction where you're aware of all of them, or is this a remnant of the color-field collage abstraction you engage in?

Taj Matumbi

Yeah, I think it goes back to the design principles of the formal abstraction that I was taught. Creating these tensions between the figure and the ground. For me this is one of the most exciting areas as a painter. Executing a painting that creates this receding and advancing, also known as figure-ground reversal is a classic formal principle. I remember learning this concept mechanically and then finally recreating it, which felt so otherworldly, similar to a magic trick. I feel the elasticity between this space between the figure and the ground is endlessly full of possibilities. These formal tricks keep me excited and sucked into painting, but at times, you know the drawing, as I was saying before, the drawing can come out, and when I scale it up into a painting, it can either feel too easy or off where I rework the image and risk messing it up. Usually, by then, I am at the third pass or fourth pass, where the paintings start to breathe. But to arrive at this place, I usually have to face my fear or attachment to parts of the piece because, at that point, I am throwing the dice. Which is why I work on a lot of work at once.

Leslie Smith III

So, how it ends up is more or less the result of the process.

Taj Matumbi

Yes. And I would like to close that gap for so many different reasons.

Leslie Smith III

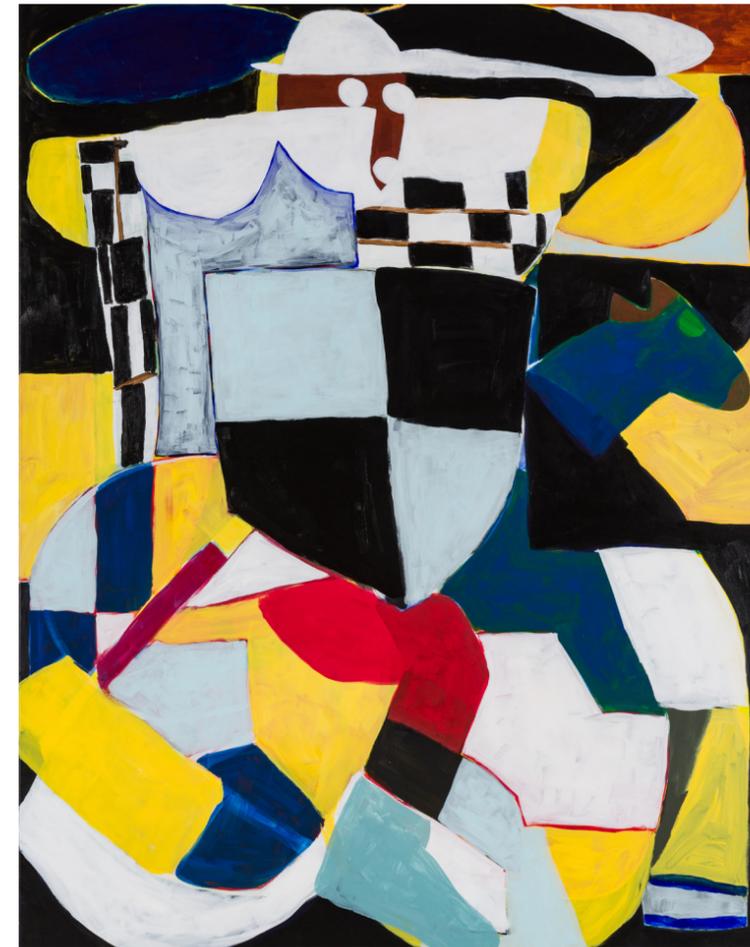
Really, why? it's uncertainty.

Taj Matumbi

Well, uncertainty is great, and I know it's contradictory to what I said earlier, but when you're thinking of material conditions. One, I don't have the money to waste on paint. And two, it chews into the time I could be spending on further developing other practical areas



Element
acrylic, graphite, and flashe on canvas
48 x 48 in.
2024



Knight
acrylic and flashe on canvas
60 x 48 in.
2024

of studio my practices. In an ideal world where I would just paint all the time, I would feel less angst about being consumed by the process. The other day I was watching an Amy Sillman lecture and she showed the progression of a painting over a year, and there were

100 iterations which she nailed. Before she eventually threw it in the dumpster, and she has the luxury to do that which I might get there someday.

Going back to process-based making, I enjoy working on a lot of paintings at once so I can stay in the process of making. Another painter I am influenced by is Chris Martin, and I was listening to a podcast where he was being interviewed by another painter. And Martin talked about starting 100 paintings at once. So like the 15 paintings that are painted over a million times or end up in the dumpster, it is okay.

Leslie Smith III

If you need to work on a painting and do 1000 of them 100 times, maybe don't throw it away. In either case, you'll be better for doing so many.

Taj Matumbi

Yeah. I am slowly warming up to this concept because initially, I didn't understand or appreciate my undergraduate teacher's point, when they told me not to worry about materials and said, "just do your thing."

Leslie Smith III

So, by the sounds of it, you're almost done with these works. I was at your studio maybe a month ago. From what I've seen, the new paintings were really comprehensive as a series and the energy was palpable. Are there any that predict what's going to happen next?

Taj Matumbi

Probably like, two at least.

Leslie Smith III

When I'm in the studio, there's often an outlier painting that predicts a new set of questions or challenges. In

this new collection, what two paintings are finished and keep you up at night? What are they doing that makes them an outlier?

Taj Matumbi

It's like I sent you a picture of a painting the other day. It was in process, and I texted the same painting to one of my professors from undergraduate, Gyan Shrosbree, and explained that I felt I was imitating her dad, Jim Shrosbree, Leslie Smith, and my friend Tony Duvall. I was like, I need to paint over this, or it's not leaving the studio. And she responded with, "ha." I thought to myself, oh, my god, what does that mean? So that is sitting in the studio waiting for my next move. In that same vein, I think we learn by looking to artists that inspire us, and many of my professors have inspired me. I do have some dead paintings that are just sitting there waiting for another pass. I can think of one specific piece that feels dead or feels derivative of Amy Sillman, who I adore as well.

It's funny, because the few pieces that cause me the most conflict or inner turmoil, are the same pieces that excite me to transition into a new body of work. I have a desire to implement digital processes in a way that I never used. Recently I have been taking photos with my phone and converting the image into black and white. Using the digital in a way where we're talking about saving money and material restraints. And if I can be a little smarter about that part of my process and embrace it, I could have my cake and eat it too. Where I can go through iterations of painting without having to waste and regret it in my wallet.

Leslie Smith III

Fair enough.

Taj Matumbi

But that will take discipline, you know, a new habit. I might just return to drawing, but we'll see.

Leslie Smith III

Art is a practice through and through. It is all about discipline because There are distractions out there. You lean into some. and others you have to create habits against in order to create a clear way forward to isolate the thing that you want to practice. You know, to see if it works.

Taj Matumbi

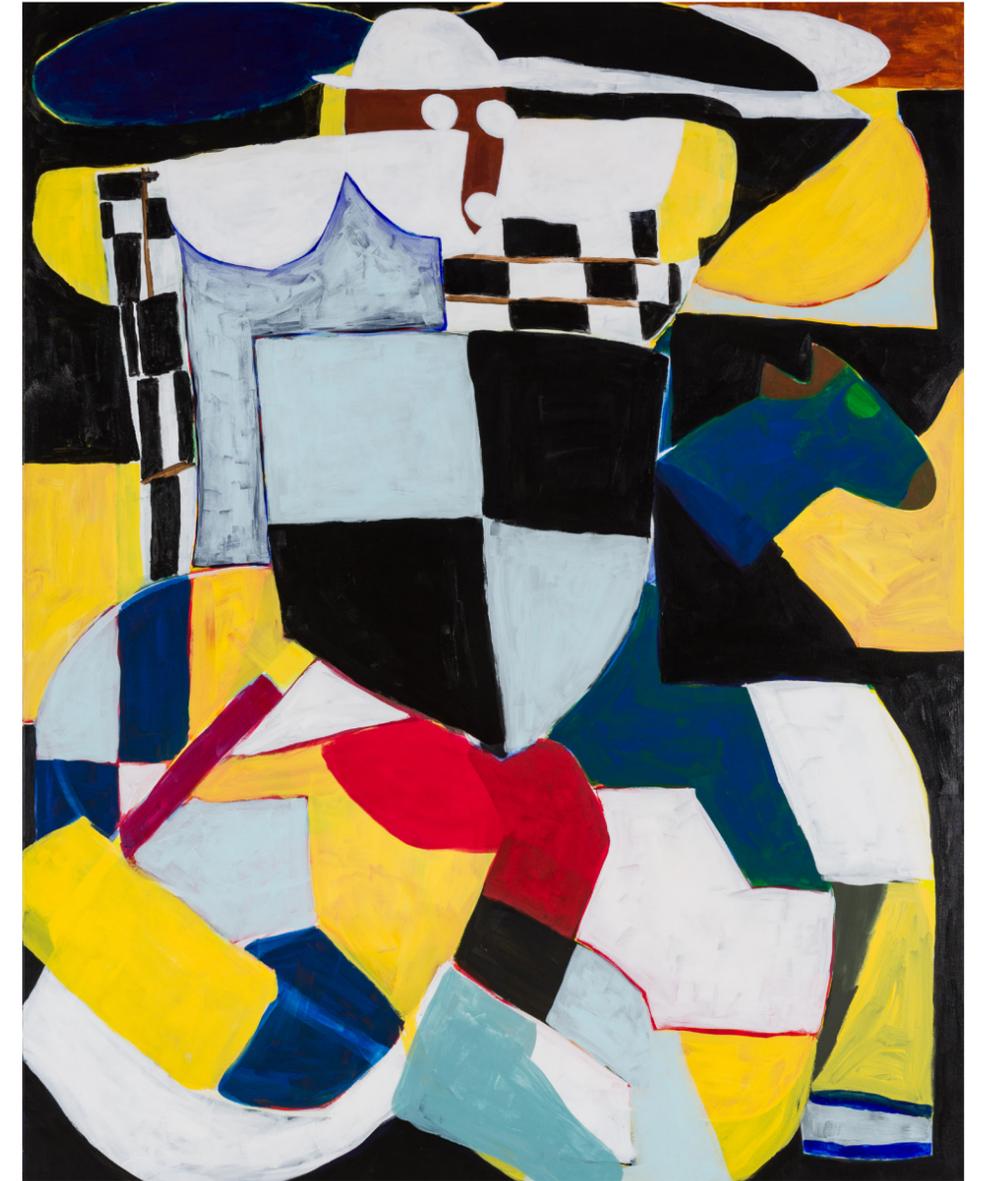
Absolutely.Yeah.

Leslie Smith III

Cool. Thank you for the pleasant conversation.



Midnight Marauders
2024
acrylic, graphite, and flashe on canvas
72 by 48 in.



Knight
2024
acrylic and flashe on canvas
60 by 48 in.



Dirt Rich Prince #3
2024
acrylic and flashe on canvas
60 by 48 in.



Sir George
2024
acrylic on canvas
60 by 48 in.



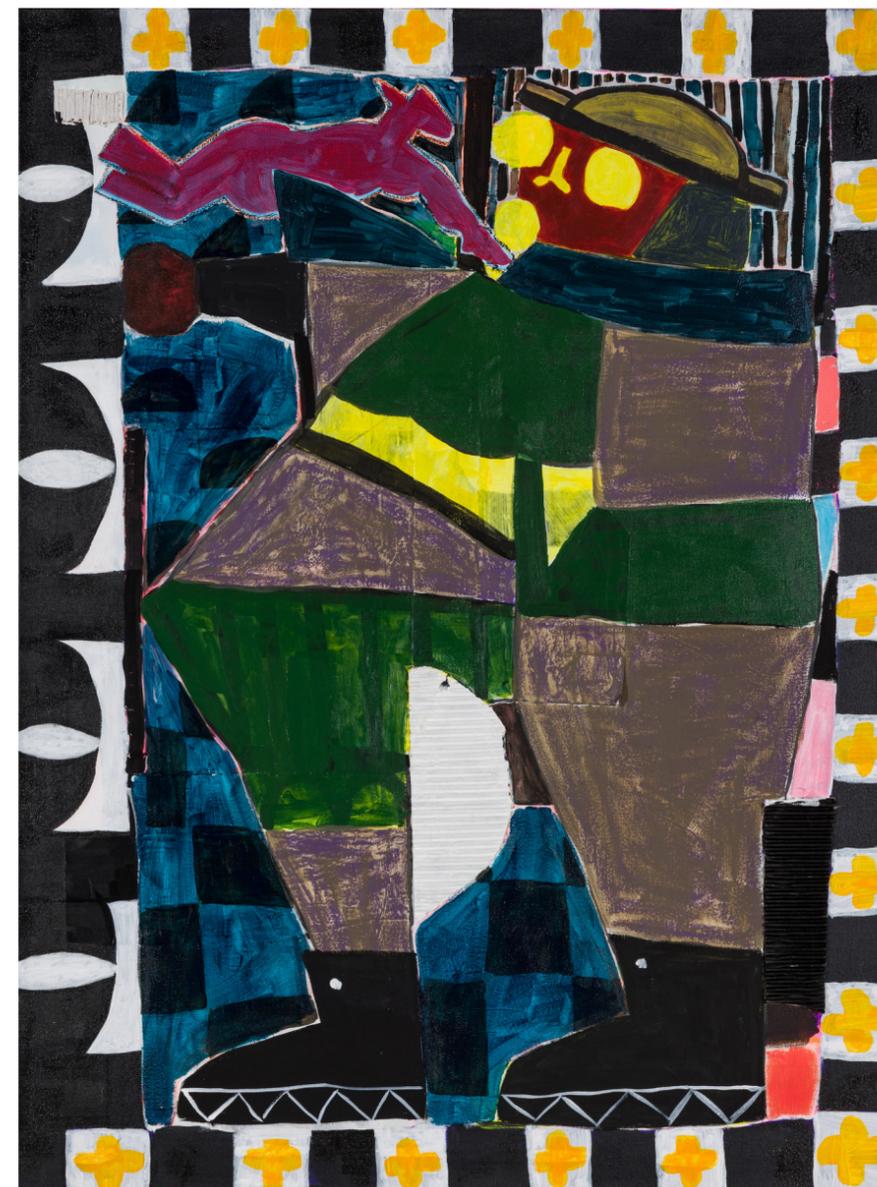
Saint Feeble
2024
acrylic on canvas
60 by 48 in.



Boomerang
2024
acrylic on canvas
60 by 48 in.



Element
2024
acrylic, graphite, and flashe on canvas
48 by 48 in.



Killing Time
2024
acrylic, flashe, and paper collage on canvas
48 by 36 in.



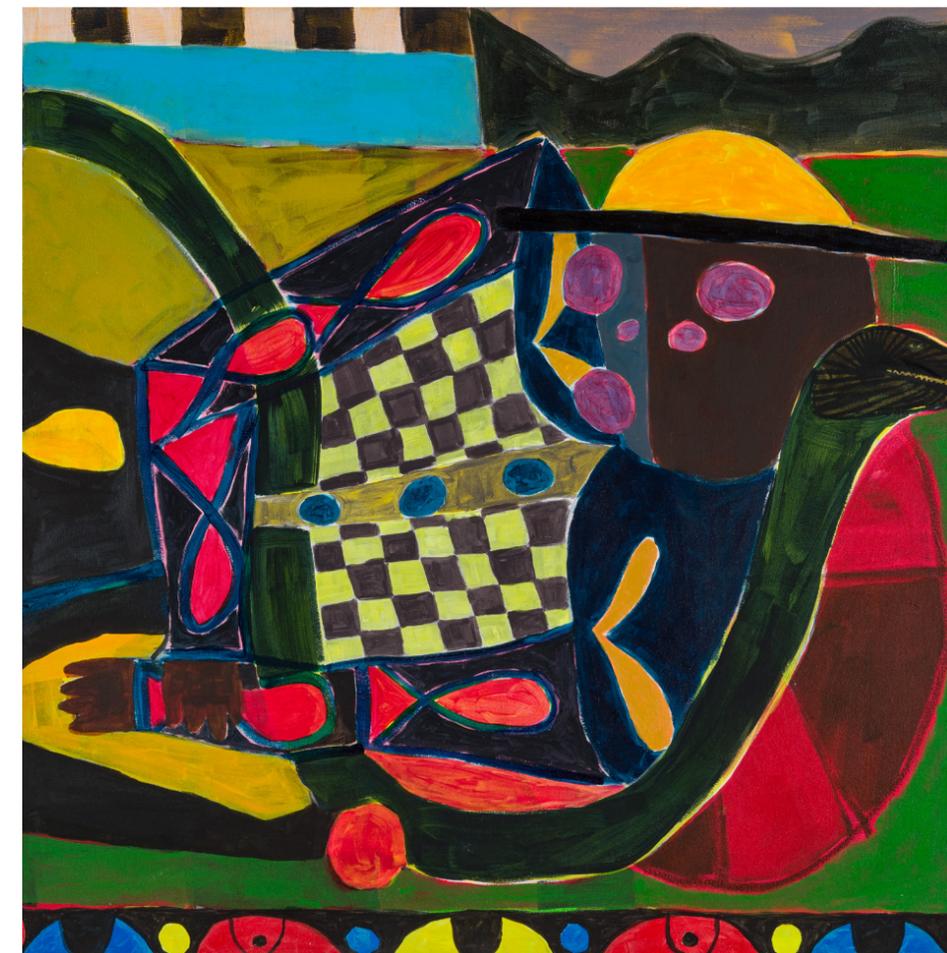
Four Horsemen
2025
acrylic on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Two-Faced
2024
acrylic on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Sages
2024
flashe and acrylic on canvas
40 by 40 in.



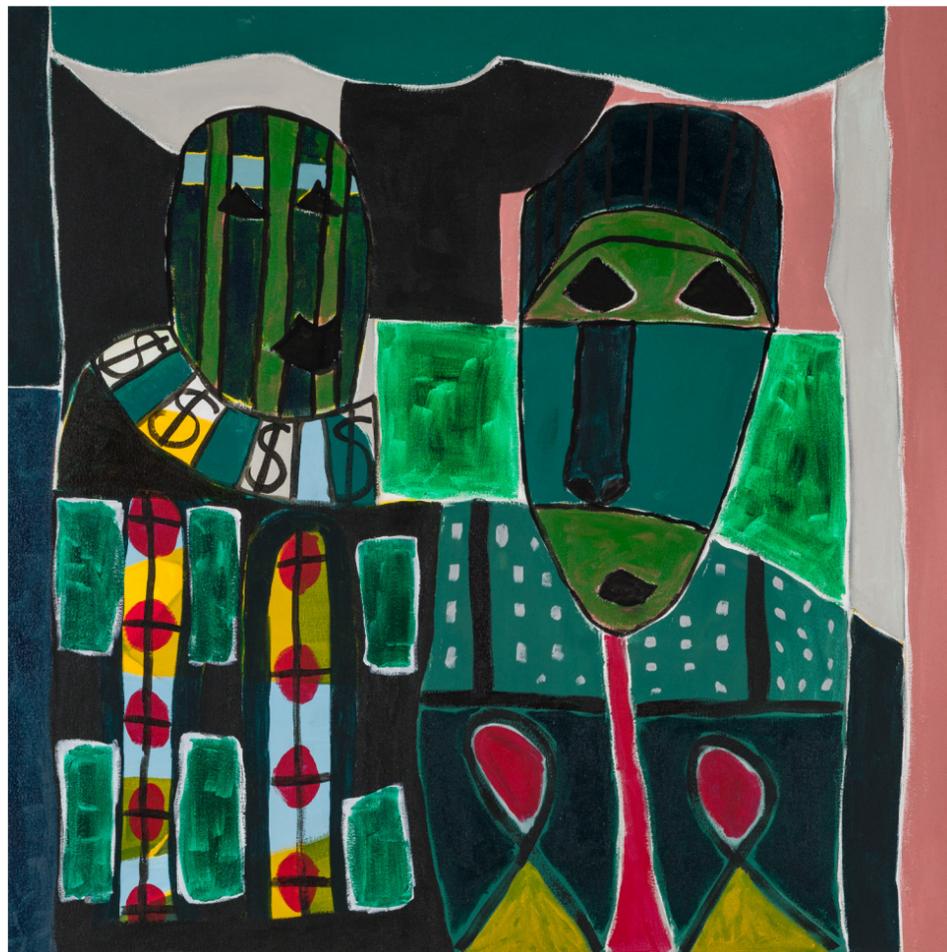
Snake Eyes
2025
flashe, oil stick, and acrylic on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Holiday Party
2025
acrylic on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Queen of Hearts
2024
acrylic and graphite on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Red Light, Green Light
2025
acrylic and flashe on canvas
40 by 40 in.



Ivy Street
2024
oil stick and acrylic on canvas
36 by 36 in.



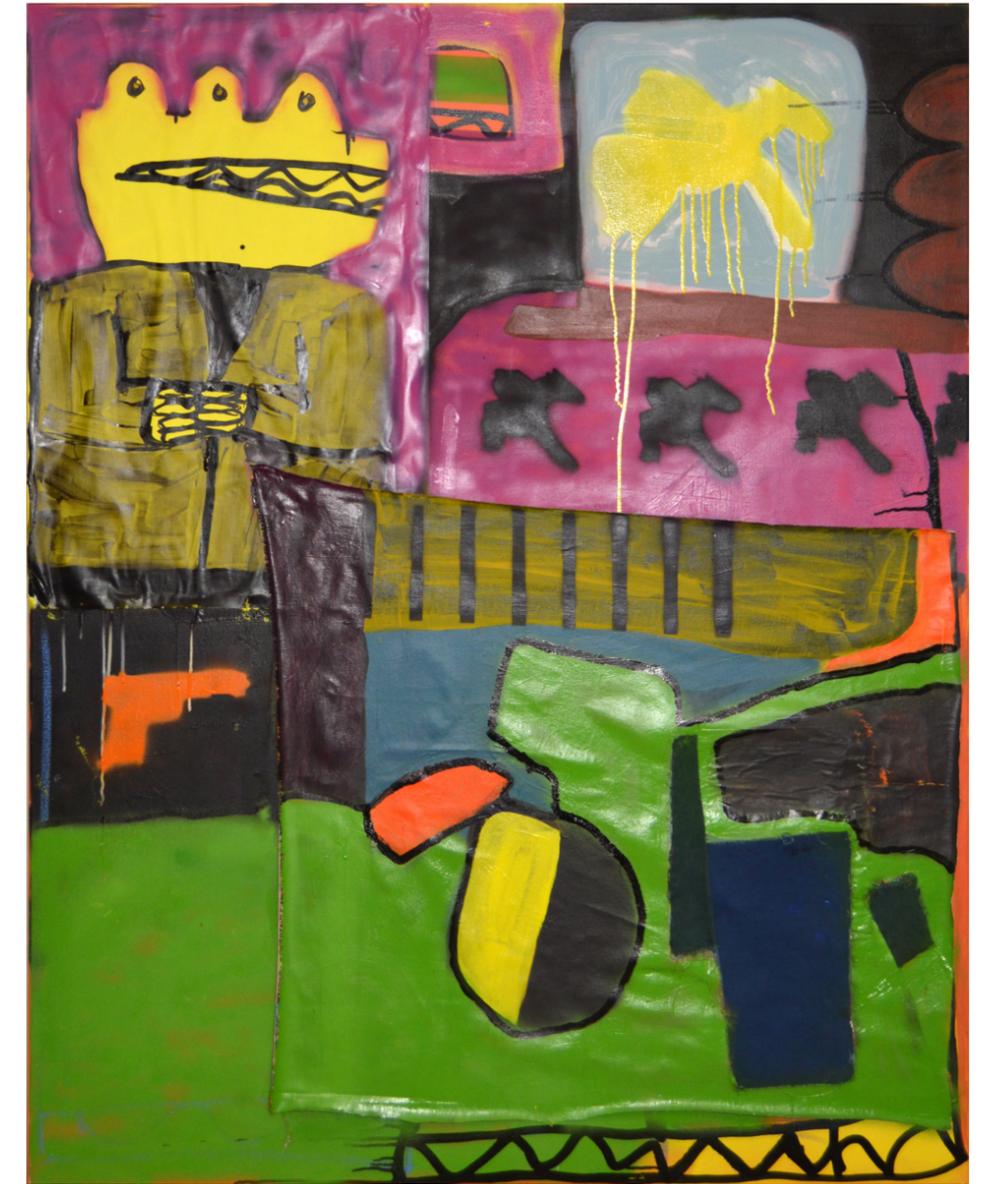
Alter-Ego
2023
acrylic, flashe, and graphite on canvas
72 by 48 in.



Construction Boot
2019
acrylic, ink, oil-base marker, and
graphite on canvas
60 by 48 in.



Florida Swamp
2019
acrylic, oil stick, spray paint, enamel,
collaged skirt fragment, and found
materials on canvas
60 by 48 in.



The Therapist
2019
acrylic, oil stick, spray paint, and
found materials on canvas
60 by 48 in.

Taj Matumbi

CV

Education

2021 MFA University of Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin

2018 Post Baccalaureate, Maharishi International University, Fairfield, Iowa

2015-17 BFA in Painting and Ceramics Maharishi International University, Fairfield, Iowa

Solo Exhibitions

2025 A Spiel, Paul R. Jones Museum, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

2024 Rise and Shine, Maus Contemporary, Birmingham, Alabama

2023 Thrown, Art Lit Lab, Bridge Work Program, Madison, Wisconsin.

2023 Hot House, Museum of Wisconsin Art, Saint Kate's, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

2022 Westword, Maus Contemporary, Birmingham, Alabama

2022 Camouflage and Cologne, UW - Madison School of Ed Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2021 Self Portrait Within Parallel Planes - MFA Thesis Exhibition, Madison, Wisconsin

2020 The Fire Next Time - MA Exhibition, Madison, Wisconsin

2018 Space Cowboy, Wedge Center of Art Fairfield, Iowa

Group Exhibitions

2025 Undecided, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Triennial, Madison, Wisconsin

2024 Ship of Fools, Freight and Volume, New York, New York

2024 Bride Work, Allen Priebe Gallery, UW - Oshkosh, Oshkosh, Wisconsin

2022 Change is God-Take Root Among the Stars, SooVAC, Minneapolis, Minnesota

2022 Fictive Realities, Overture Galleries, Madison, Wisconsin

2022 Black Expressions: 50 Years of Black Student Artists, 1925 Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2021 Shit Art Show #4, Shit Art Club, Los Angeles, California

2021 Are We There Yet? Levee Contemporary, Princeton, Wisconsin

2021 Moving Inland, 100state Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2021 New Space, Koplín Del Rio, Seattle, Washington

2021 Darker Than Blue, Maus Contemporary, Birmingham, Alabama

2021 A Space of One's Own, 100state Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2020 Steamy Art 4 A Cold Climate, Stateline Distillery, Madison, Wisconsin

2020 Sticks and Stones, Art Lofts Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2019 It's Time For Dinner, Art Lofts Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2019 What Now? Art Lofts Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2018 2-D Group Show, Art Lofts Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin

2017 BFA Thesis Show, Unity Gallery, Fairfield Iowa

Art Fairs

2022 Positions Berlin Stand A18 in Hangar 6, Maus Contemporary, Berlin, Germany

Collections

Permanent collection of the Paul R. Jones Museum, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Permanent collection of the LSU Museum of Art, Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Permanent collection of Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, Alabama

Permanent collection of the Wiregrass Museum, Dothan, Alabama

Academic Appointments

2018 Maharishi International University, Iowa

2016 Traditional Japanese Pottery Internship, Master Masaaki Nishimura, Awaji Shima, Japan

Honors & Awards

2020-21 Advanced Opportunity Fellow, School of Education, UW-Madison, Wisconsin

2019-20 Patterson Art Graduate Student Fellowship, Madison, Wisconsin

2018-19 Advanced Opportunity Fellow, School of Education, UW-Madison, Wisconsin

Bibliography

2023 Shane McAdams "Taj Matumbi's Hot House' At MOWA- DTN" Shepherd Express

2020 Mitchell, Everett D. High, Freida, Fabu, "Let's Talk About", published by American Family Mutual Insurance Institute for Corporate and Social Impact

2020 Art of State Street <https://vimeo.com/481714772>

Artist Lectures

2024 Artist Talk, UW-Oshkosh, Bridge Work, Oshkosh, Wisconsin

2023 Artist Talk, ALL, Bridge Work Program, Madison, Wisconsin

2023 Artist Talk, Saint Kate's, MOWA, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

2020 The Art of State Street: Politics, Policing & Protest, UW- Madison Center for Humanities
Madison Wisconsin

Public Art Projects/ Collaboration

2023 Madison Utility Box Program, Madison, Wisconsin

2023 Artists Talk Mediator, Romano Johnson, Artworking and Art Lit Lab, Madison, Wisconsin

2021 Limited print edition published and facilitated at Tandem Press, Madison, Wisconsin

2020 Boxcar Bust, Overture Center Public Mural Project, Madison, Wisconsin