FORM

A Space for Ideas, Culture, and Aesthetics

For Gianna

Editors' Letter

For us, the process of producing a magazine is a chance to come together not just as creators, but also as people. We have always started from a blank white page, allowing our vision to color FORM's spreads with words and visuals.

For issue XXII, we wanted to expand from the typical exercise of selecting a theme and developing visuals to the exploration of issues that speak to each of us. As every contributor brings their own perspective, we seize on the opportunity for discourse about topics that usually divide people; we aim to depart from the echo chamber that so often confines us.

Our challenge was to move away from the binary that arises in conversations about divisive topics like gender, climate change, identity, and gentrification through the single experience that lies at the root of all our encounters, actions, and abilities: art.

FORM XXII is charged with stories that matter to us, narrated without the expectation of choosing sides. Whether the discussion surrounds fashion, nature, design, or something entirely transcendental, we have found that the complexities of any issue are best represented through an equally complex conglomeration of media, techniques, and voices. We hope that our readers find themselves sinking into the pages of this issue and in doing so, leave behind their own conceptions of duality.

In our Art and Design section, *El Otro* addresses the complexity of Black masculinity. The repetition of the subject's presence represents the double consciousness of black men and the dissonance in how black Americans see themselves and are viewed by outsiders. The poses of the subject force a redefinition of black masculinity.

In our Style section, *Mx.* refuses to stick to the binary which limits personal expression. Rather, it moves forward, departing from general conceptions of clothing and creating an idealized space where the gender of the wearer does not limit their freedom of expression.

In the Travel and Culture section, we see a familiar city through a new lens, and curiosity pushes us to discover new sites around the world. *Torii* departs from the modern identity of Tokyo and traditional outlook of Kyoto to unite Japan in one visual essay. The orange color transforms an element from traditional Japanese Shinto culture into a symbol of the cultural transformation of the country.

The other stories among these pieces symbolize how we depart from duality in Issue XXII to embrace a new way of representing reality through art.

Best,
Tommaso Babucci & Gianna Miller

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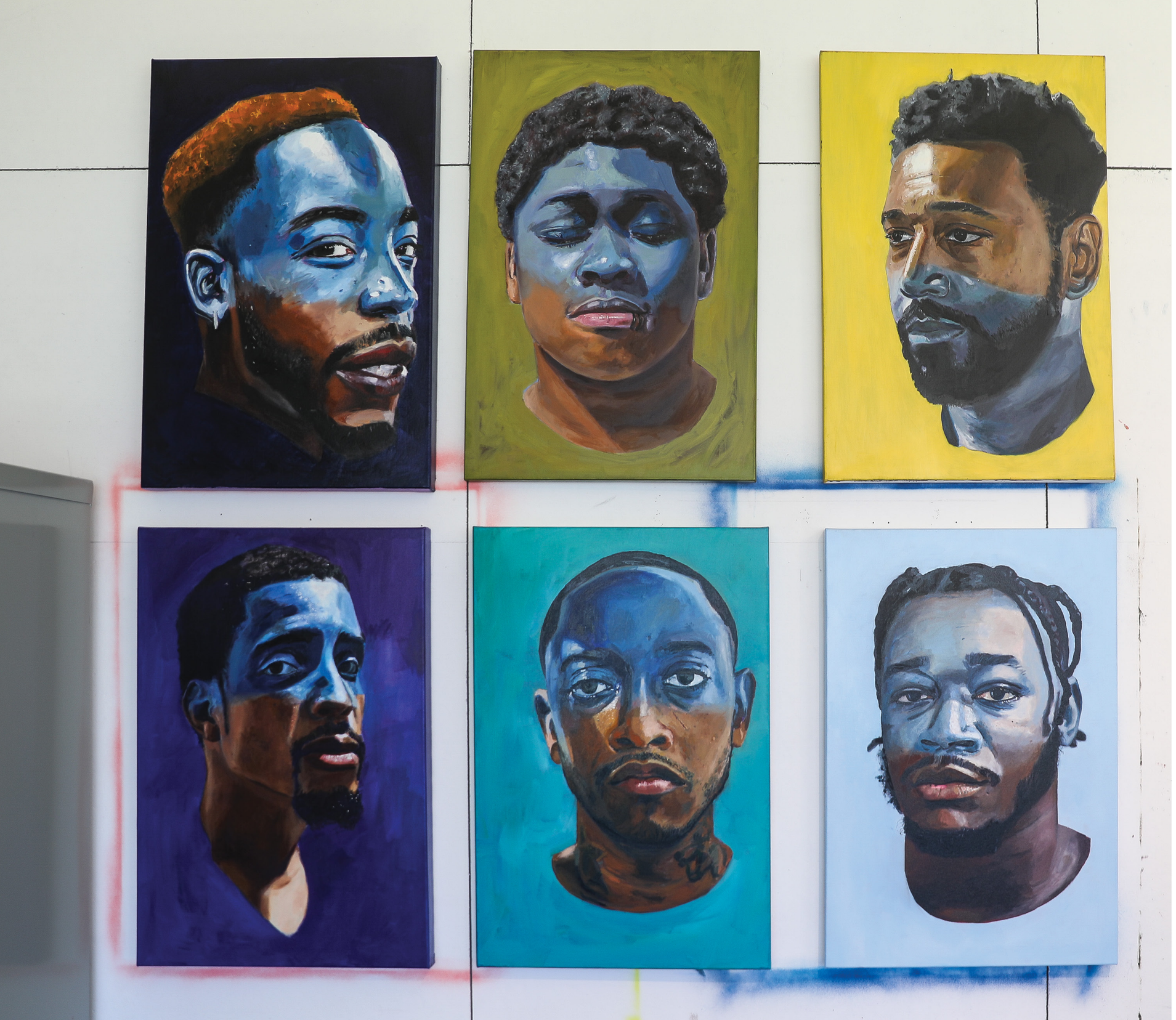
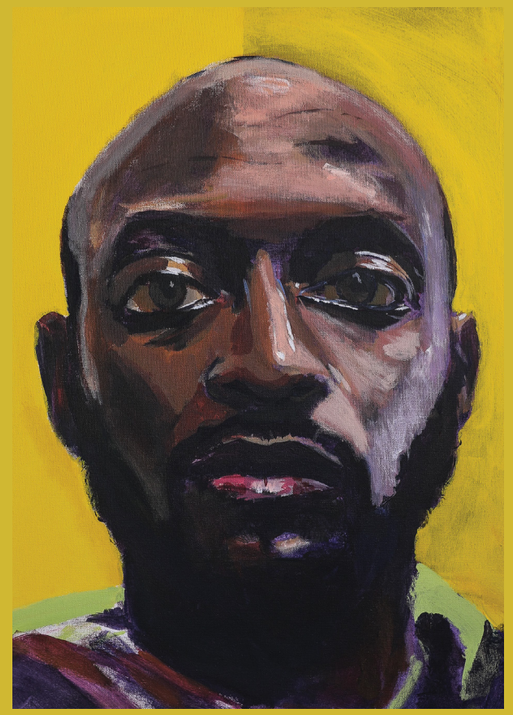
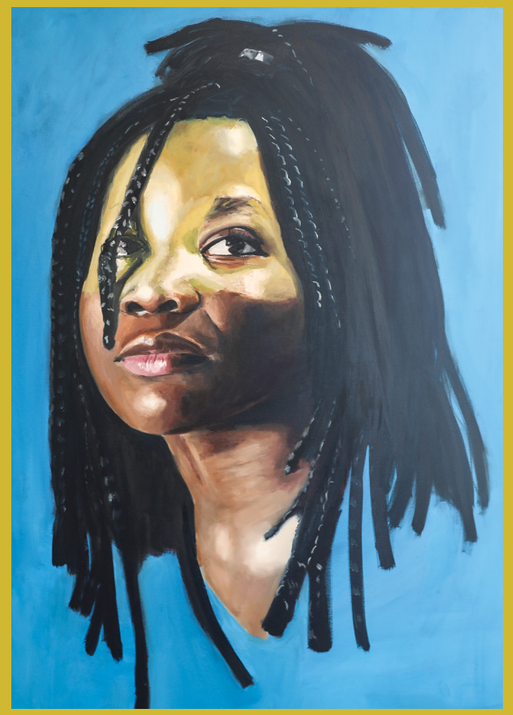


Cyanosis

While strolling around the Rubenstein Arts Center on a lazy Sunday afternoon, I caught a glimpse of Will's studio, an airy, brightly-lit space with high windows covering every wall. I found myself peeking through the door, drawn by the irresistible pull of a window into an artist's creative process, and inevitably became absorbed by every detail of the space: tables stacked with tubes of paint and rough sketches, canvases still wet with oil paint, books and magazines left half-read on a page where inspiration struck. - "Come in, it's open" - a cordial voice grounded me back to reality, and invited me to step into this world of color.

That's how I first met William Paul Thomas, the artist behind the Cyanosis portrait series. Perhaps this same openness and instant familiarity that Will constantly exudes are what enabled him to paint the intimate portraits of the series, capturing emotions and conveying characteristics with a unique sensibility, rendering his paintings so captivating. After a brief conversation and tour of his space, I revisited Will's studio. We talked about his current project, the goal behind his work and steps moving forward both for himself and for aspiring creatives.





S: What is Cyanosis and what brought about this project?

W: The definition of cyanosis is a blueness of the skin that develops from improperly oxygenated blood. I came across that term when I was about three paintings into a series that I was making, which was initially going to be of family members. The first painting was one of my nephew, the second painting was one of my brother, and the third painting was actually not of a family member, but of a man that looked a lot like my father-in-law, so that was my justification for it.

This is partly why I invited Paul, Paul Magee, who is in that third painting, because I'm pretty distant from my family. Most of my family is in the Midwest, either from Chicago or a little town called Beloit in Wisconsin, and so with them being 800 miles away, I started thinking about how I needed to expand my subjects to be more than just family. So three paintings in, I looked up that term cyanosis as a way of labeling or putting under an umbrella what these paintings were about. Rather than being a literal deprivation of oxygen, it is a metaphor for some other kind of deprivation, whether that's emotional or psychological or social, and I think it varies depending on who the person is and how they might be experiencing any one of those deprivations.

S: Was the painting of your nephew just an experiment, or did you already have this goal in mind?

W: I think the painting of my nephew was preceded by an experiment, a digital edit that I had been making to alter the subject's skin color. By the time I made it to the painting of him, I think I wanted it to be a thorough project that didn't have an endpoint. I wanted to include as many men as possible, first those of my family, and then I expanded it to other community members. It's still an experiment in the sense that I still play with many of the design elements. The color combinations that you see often come from me trying to see the temperature contrast in the flesh and the background contrast with the subjects represented. I still get to play around, even when I've set the parameters for the project.

S: You mentioned how you create digital photographs of the subject before you paint them. What is your process behind taking the photos to finished painting?

W: Early on, the process involved me making a digital edit in which I changed half of the subject's face into a bluish color—sometimes it was a dull blue color, and other times it was a little bit more saturated.

But I'd get to Photoshop it, and Photoshop is flexible enough that I would get to play with a wide variety of colors. It's forgiving that way. I spent some time in the program editing, and by the time I arrived to something I thought was interesting, I would go straight to a 2 foot by 3 foot canvas and draw a loose contour, a loose outline of all the major shapes of the subject, and then start to block in color from that point on. Initially, since I had been using those digital edits to alter the color, I was referring to the edit I made to determine what the color would look like in the paintings. But as the series grew, I stopped altering the color to blue in Photoshop, and just started intuitively doing that. As long as the values from my digital reference corresponded to my painting, then I didn't always need to alter the color digitally; it was just a matter of turning this shade of brown to a shade of blue. As long as the values I used matched, the effect that I wanted to achieve was there. Usually, before I even get to an edit, I invite the people to sit for me, for at least an hour if they can, both having a conversation with them and taking as many pictures as I can, then sifting through those and finding the one or two that I think will work in my painting.

S: What made you chose to title your paintings the way you do, like "Monica's Son" and "Lindsay's Friend?"

W: Most of them are titled after a woman or child who's connected to the man in the painting. My rationale for that is multifaceted. Even though the series includes only men, I thought it was interesting to consider the relationship these men have with women and girls in their lives. I also consider that to be a parallel to the unfortunate and terrible phenomenon that we see of black men being killed by police officers or vigilantes or whoever, and then we get to know those men because they've been victimized. And not only do we get to know those men's names, like Trayvon Martin or Mike Brown, all those people, but we also get to know their families too, and we get to know who their loved ones are: their mothers, their sisters, their daughters. I thought that if I named these paintings after a woman or a child connected to the subjects in the paintings, then it would reinforce that these men are loved by someone, especially before they'd been victimized. Because it seems so unfortunate to me that these men that become hashtags—we don't get to know who they are. I guess the general population doesn't have to know them until they are murdered, so I thought that for these men who are still alive and well, it's necessary to consider the love of a woman or a daughter as a reason to sustain our lives, as a reason for our lives to be protected. I was always thinking about how significant the loving relationship that I have with the woman in my life, and that the love of a woman is continually important with all these men that I'm representing.

S: All these paintings are all of black men. Do you ever see yourself mirrored in any of them? Do ever see them as a self-portrait?

W: I don't see them as complete self portraits, but there are similarities between each one of the men that I end up photographing, something that we share in common. My brother is a part of the series, my nephew is a part of the series, but the men that aren't related to me by blood, they're artists, they're men that are also kind of introverted, so I think there are personality traits that we share. Sometimes I don't realize until I engage with them in the process of photographing them, and just having casual conversation. Throughout all of them there are things that we have in common. Sometimes I wonder if that's why I'm drawn to paint, or invite someone in to sit for me—if we've established that connection based on those similarities, and that something intuitive has drawn me to them rather than just a broad, "If you're a black man I'm gonna paint you." It's finding some common bond beyond that.

S: I remember the last time I was in your studio, a random man walked in and introduced himself to you and, after a brief conversation, asked if you would be willing to paint his portrait for your series. Is that how you usually find your subjects, or do you already know them beforehand?

W: That was unique in that, the man that came in here, we had met before. I think he worked in security at the Nasher. But sometimes it happens like that; we happen to be in the same place at the same time, and I might share what I've been working on, they might be familiar with it, and I'll invite them once they're familiar with the work or have an interest. But it's still a matter of having a rapport with them. Like, I like that guy, I didn't know him well, but as he came in, I liked his energy and his demeanor. That's not necessarily the case with every person; it's not like I'm super connected or find an immediate bond to each person, but when I do, I usually at least present the request. So he didn't volunteer, but I did ask him if he had some time and if he would be interested in coming back to sit for me.

I usually do try to set it up so that there's a more intimate conversation that happens in tandem with the photographs being taken, so it's not just a quick exchange. There have been a few instances that this has happened. This one guy I met as we were hopping off the bus asked about my camera, and so we started having a conversation about that, and then that segued into him talking about having to go take care of his mother in another county outside of Durham—he was legally not supposed to be doing that, but he insisted, because somebody needed to take care of his mother. I don't even know how we got to that point, but that was the last time that I saw him, and I made a painting of him the next day.

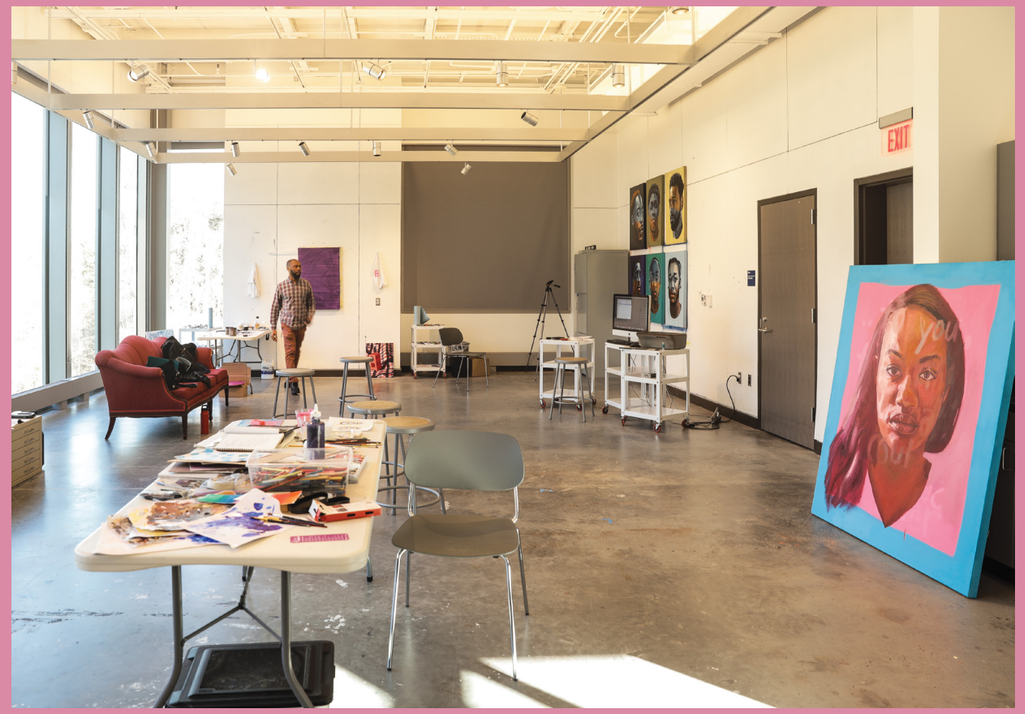
It's not ideal to only have a few minutes with the model, but in that case I did, and I wanted to remember the exchange that I had with him, so I thought that it was important to make a painting because it was something that I wanted to register in my memory. So the ideal scenario for me is that I get to sit with my subjects for a while and then, even after the painting is made, I stay in touch with and continue to build a connection with them.

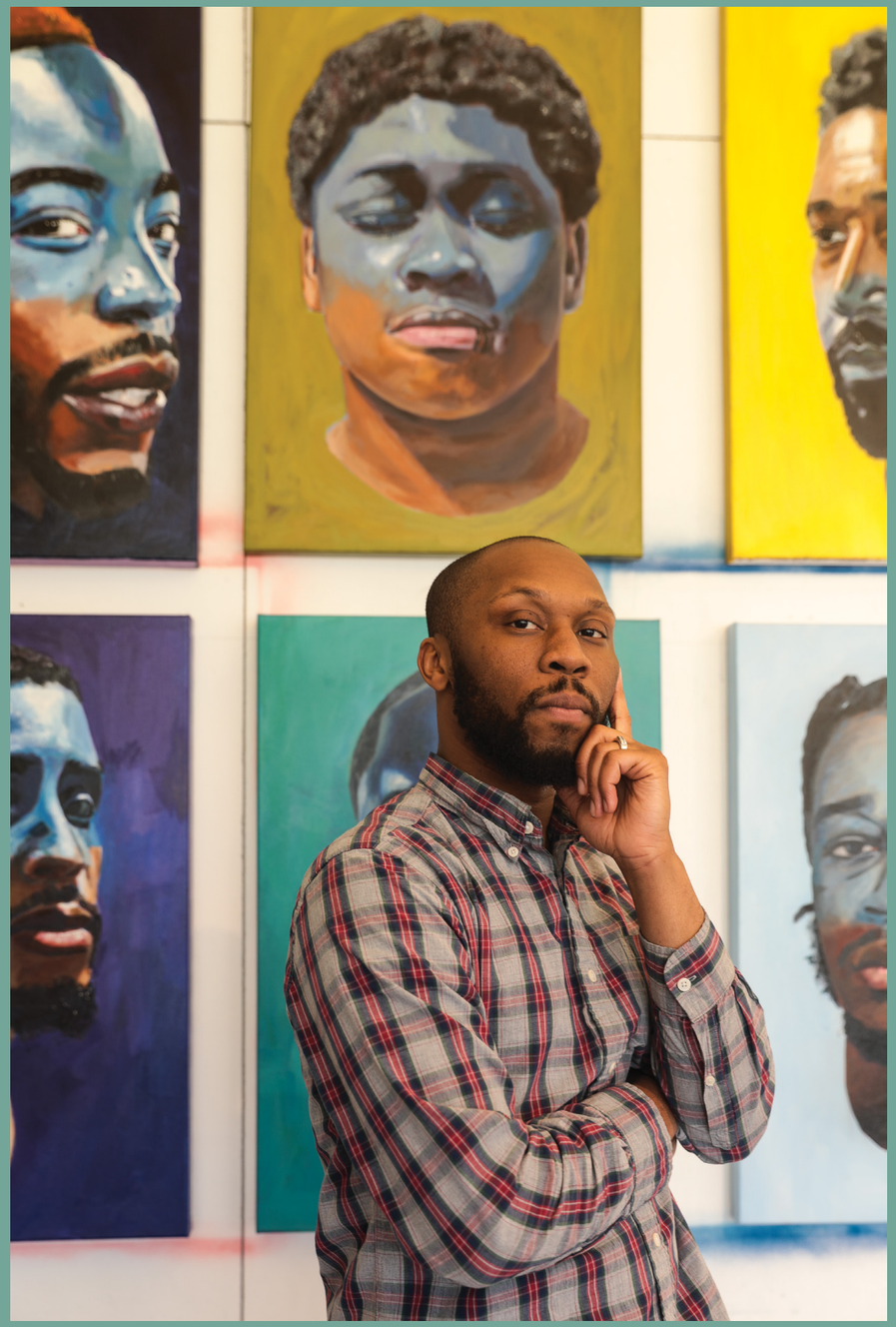
S: Do you try to include the local community where you are painting at the moment in your portraits?

W: I do. So being here at Duke for this residency, my goal was to include students, faculty, and staff, whoever was interested, black men that were here on this campus. It always is of interest to me to include people that are local. Part of it is that I like the phenomenon of exhibiting works of local people, so that people that might be strangers to me attending the exhibition might know the person in the painting, and that is someone that we have in common.

S: You mentioned that you get a lot of different interpretations of your work, and I get the feeling that you like hearing about them before explaining your goal. When we met you did the same: you asked me what I thought about it, and then you told me what you actually intended. So, have you been surprised by any way people have interpreted your work?

W: When I had shown some of these paintings down in Concord, a woman asked me if I was familiar with haint blue. Do you know about that? Haint blue? So, from what I remember, she was describing haint blue as the hue of blue that is used in some homes in the South, and especially in southeastern parts of the United States where they paint either the porch ceiling or the interior front room ceilings a sky blue, and it's meant to help guide spirits out. The fact that she saw some of my paintings having men with blue painted at the top of their faces associated with that use of that blue in a kind of spiritual ritual, a kind of way of interacting or aiding spirits in going on to the next phase was really fascinating to me. I wasn't familiar with haint blue, and it was something that I thought that I needed to hear, that I imagine other people might have a similar association with. Just the fact that she had this kind of association with blue, and it being painted on the faces, was something that I would have never thought of just because I was unfamiliar with that practice. It made me want to embrace the idea that, even though I started with this kind of metaphor about these men being deprived of something, that people could read into the symbolism of the blue based on their own experiences and histories. I felt that was a strength in the work, that it didn't have to be narrow in my own perspective and experiences, because I think that would be boring. It's much more fascinating when folks get to bring their stuff too.





S: I think I mentioned this before to you, but this semester, the theme of our magazine is multiplicity and moving away from the binary. You mentioned that you wanted to exhibit your work in a way that shows the spectrum of experience. Do you think your work conveys a multiplicity of experience in some way?

W: I think it does. I think it embodies multiplicity in that, although I have a narrow focus on black men, there's such a variety, such a range of types and roles that all those men play in comparison to one another, but even for individuals— consideration of the various roles that we play in the lives of our loved ones. So whether you're a child or a parent or a friend or a student, all the different things that you can name, all the labels that you give yourself—the potential of you having to perform differently in those roles to be effective is pretty high for all the people in this series.

Something that I really haven't had an opportunity to see manifest through the exhibition of these works yet is bringing the actual subjects to an exhibition where you get to see some of that variety. People coming from different backgrounds, educational backgrounds or economic backgrounds—that's something I've been always fascinated with. Again, there's a kind of variety represented in the series to overturn the idea of black men being monolithic. Whatever stereotypes we might place on them, it would be easy to break that apart once you meet any one of them, to defy whatever stereotype one might have for black men. The series does that, but I think the thing that conveys it even more is when the men who participate in the series actually show up in person, and the people that are interested in seeing them get to engage with them. That's what I look forward to and appreciate in the process, photographing and having conversations where I get to gather information about how they do represent the breadth of blackness or maleness. All of that is, I think, embedded in this work.

S: Ultimately how many paintings are you planning to make, and how are you planning to exhibit them?

W: When I first started the series, I thought of fifty, which was an arbitrary number. I feel like it can go beyond that. I almost see it as a series that I'll keep chipping away at even as I develop other projects, but at a minimum I have to make the goal of fifty. I'd like to be in a space that can accommodate fifty or more of them, and then show them so that you see a color spectrum, a gradient from one color to the next. If you think about a twelve-step color wheel and being able to fill in the gaps in between the progression of colors, that's my ultimate goal. I'm just filling in the blanks along the way.

S: Other than Cyanosis, what other projects have you worked on recently?

W: I am working on a video collaboration with my friend Antoine Williams, who is a professor at Guilford College. We've been recording footage for the last couple of years, sporadically, based on African American food culture, which is not really African American food culture—it's using food as a metaphor for these other social realities. We were looking at MF Doom's album Mm..Food as a jumping off point. We will continue to make videos together, which will be fun, because it will take me away from the independent practice, and coming together to make some interesting stuff. I've done another video project called *TEEF*. Just like the Cyanosis project, it's one that I add on to without the prospect of having it designed for an exhibition, but I just wanted to build this database. So the *TEEF* project is black men smiling on camera for an extended period of time until it becomes unbearable, paired with narratives of men talking about moments of happiness. So that is again an ongoing video project that I tend to work on my own, and it's similar to the Cyanosis. Just inviting men, some strangers, some family, to include in the series.

S: In your talk you mentioned that part of your focus on black men is to showcase how they have been historically underrepresented in the arts. Is that why you chose them as your subject in both projects?

W: Absolutely. That's one reason, for sure. Wanting to see more black men represented in spaces where they are underrepresented is important. And even though we see a lot of artists doing that, and maybe we can name a bunch of them between us, it doesn't mean that the work is done. I feel like I'm contributing to a much-needed new tradition, new as in twentieth, twenty-first century, to reverse the narrative of black folks not being included.

S: Do you generally find your inspiration from your local communities, and what have their reactions to your works of them been?

W: I am definitely compelled to make work inspired by local communities, because I like for there to be a conversation with an audience that has been included in the process somehow, and is connected to the folks that have been included. Usually the responses I get are pretty affirmative. I should be careful with what I wish for, but sometimes I wish I got more critical feedback. In grad school, that was where you received criticism. You'd show your work and it would be torn apart by people who feel like they know better. But I think that critical feedback is useful in being able to grow as an artist. So sometimes I wonder, outside of that context where I show work, if people are being honest in their reception of the work. But usually if I'm having a formal exhibition in a gallery, especially around here, people seem very supportive.

My own insecurity makes me want to strive for something that's even more complicated, to receive even more complicated responses. Usually I feel like the responses get reduced to "Nice job," and I think I want more generative feedback, more in-depth conversations about what I'm doing, so I can dig deeper if I want to elicit more involved responses to what I'm doing.

S: In a few weeks your residency at Duke ends, so what are your plans for the future?

W: Short term, I'm preparing for an exhibition at Barden College for the fall semester, so I'll be making more of these Cyanosis paintings. Long term, I would like to branch out beyond North Carolina. Over the last few years, a lot of what I've been doing has been concentrated in-state, moving around the state in Charlotte and on the coast and around a little bit. But I think I need to make an effort to show around the country, potentially internationally. It's just a matter of figuring out the best way forward in a way that's still true to what we talked about in terms of wanting to represent the local communities. Ideally I would be travelling to different places and replicating what I've been able to do here in Durham or in Chapel Hill or anywhere I've been, to maybe have a space on the West Coast or abroad and be able to do a similar kind of project with people that live in the vicinity.

S: As a final question, for the creatives and aspiring artists that will read this interview, do you have any advice for moving forward in the field?

W: I don't know how to not make this cliche, but I think you should trust your own intuition and follow through on ideas, even when you think they might be silly or frivolous. That might be some of the best stuff. I think you make things more challenging for yourself if you are always comparing yourself to some external standard. But I think trusting your own perspective and desires is the best place to start to make something that will last and be relevant to you for a long time.

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