

# Afrovisualism: Aesthetic theory advances Black creatives, artists' spaces

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Justin Smith poses for a headshot. Photo courtesy of Justin Smith

Local artists find inspiration and cultural importance in obscure spaces with the help of Afrovisualism.

The term "Afrovisualism" coins the Black Aesthetic Continual Theory, according to founder of Afrovisualism, graphic designer and writer Justin Smith. It is the combining of Black historical frameworks to compare and identify the parallels in these different "aesthetics," according to Smith.

The idea for the term came about in 2018 with inspiration from "Afrofuturism" and "Black visual culture," Smith said. When he came up with this term, Smith chose to own his creative perspective, he said.

"This is my definition of what Black visual culture is," Smith said. "The idea of the continuum — the work that Black artists create is continuous, always changing and evolving."

Smith goes through a process in his research similar to "crate digging," a term used for what music producers do when they go to record stores to find samples for their songs, he said.

Smith said much of his inspiration comes from music.

"I really started my deep dive into research because I love music," Smith said. "I like knowing not just who's the producer, but who the art director or graphic

designer are."

Many examples of the influence of music videos, and album covers can be found on Smith's Instagram page — some include Hank Willis Thomas' "All Power to all People," Jenn Nkiru's "Hub Tones" and Arthur Jafa's "Black Apparel."

"I read album covers like I read artwork," Smith said.

Smith said he loves to see that his theories are resonating with people, especially in the Black community. He never expected to impact so many people, and also help others make connections, Smith said.

"All of the artists I've spoken with have felt so free, open, seen and heard," Smith said. "This is what I feel like should be happening more in artists' spaces."

Smith has hosted five live talks and discussions in Richmond ranging from locations such as the Institute for Contemporary Art and Blanchard's Coffee, he said. Smith was also a part of the Afrikana Film Festival last year, where he was chosen to virtually discuss his theory of the Black continuum with other artists, he said. He was personally chosen by Afrikana Film Festival organizer Enjoli Moon.

Moon chose Smith to be a part of the festival because he is very "learned" in regards to Afrofuturistic content creation, she said. This content ranges from cinematography and photography to other visual arts, according to Moon.

"I knew that his aesthetic and his approach to Black cinema was something

that was in alignment with Afrikana," Moon said. "It was a natural collaboration."

Moon said the work that Smith is doing through these lectures is a reflection of the term Afrovisualism by asking what it means to see Blackness in these spaces and truly appreciate it.

"What does it mean to inspect, pull it apart, and find those spaces of continuum?" Moon said. "The way in which one thing has inspired and led to another."

The impact of these theories is a "broadening of perspective," Moon said. He's able to draw accessible lines between the past, present and future in a way that is easy to understand, according to Moon.

"I think the impact is rooted in accessibility, and being able to offer ways to look at Black art in a different perspective," Moon said.

Smith has had a "beautiful impact" on the Richmond community, according to Local artist and Virginia Commonwealth University alumni Deya Guy-Vasson. He graduated from the sculpting graduate program at VCU in 2019, Guy-Vasson said.

Guy-Vasson immersed himself into the Richmond art community afterwards, and now works in Ashland as an arts fabricator, he said. It's interesting to see the community of people that have flourished in the art scene, but are not inside of the "VCU

bubble," Guy-Vasson said.

"It's also interesting to see the artists that VCU has been bringing in from the outside community," Guy-Vasson said. "It's been amazing to be witness to these discourses."

Guy-Vasson attended Smith's talk on the Black continual theory. It's refreshing to see "Black art made by Black people," he said. Smith has also been able to give feedback on Guy-Vasson's work and has been a "really helpful influence," Guy-Vasson said.

"It's nice to see Justin and other artists discussing where they pull ideas from in the diaspora," Guy-Vasson said. "The way he [Smith] pulls everyone together — It's beautiful to see and hear. He's a curator."



Justin Smith hosts a talk at the ICA. Photo courtesy of Justin Smith

# Reynolds Gallery group exhibition explores negative space across mediums

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Negative space: the empty space in art surrounding the subject of a composition. A piece may utilize negative space to define forms, communicate certain concepts or to emphasize focal points, according to a press release from Reynolds Gallery.



Reynolds Gallery's current exhibition, "Deep Parts," features a number of works employing negative space in a variety of ways, in multiple mediums from print to glass. Gallery Associate CM Turner curated the exhibition, consisting of 25 works.

"It's an exhibition that serves as a window into the breadth and depth of artists we work with at the Reynolds Gallery," Turner said. "The works on view offer multiple access points for viewers and collectors to engage with the exhibition."



The exhibition is dominated by works in black and white and saturated with reds and yellows, creating a unique visual rhythm, Turner said.

"That allows you to get into the works and then have that rhythm punctuated and break you out of the routine a little bit," Turner said. "It was very much in consideration of not only the works going on the wall, but how a viewer would navigate the exhibition."

Paloma Wall's "Urn" is an example of a work that both physically and conceptually addresses the idea of negative space, Turner



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left in our lives when people depart," Turner said.

Paloma Wall, one of 16 artists featured in the show and a VCU alumna, creates works aiming to explore the human figure while simultaneously examining ancient pottery vessels, according to the press release.

"For me, my sculptures symbolize how you can grow around loss," Wall said. "In my work, those negative spaces are almost just as important as the form itself."

Wall said incorporating cremated ash into an urn-like vessel felt natural to her, as some of the language used to describe ceramic works is similar to that used to describe a human body.

"Urn," a stone pot with cremated remains baked into the work, features a hollow center through the base.

"Not only are we talking about the physicality of the work and how that matches, but then what kind of spaces are

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themselves." The imagery used in "Two Stones" draws from Snyder's study of the Mediterranean Sea while at an artist residency outside of Barcelona. The piece employs many lines to create a moiré effect, which occurs when different parallel lines are overlapped and disrupt the surface of the image, Snyder said.

"In my work I am very aware of the materials, and over the past years I've been only using the essential marks in order to create the image that's coming out of the surface."

Jack Wax, professor of glass and head of the glass program at VCU arts, has one work in the exhibition titled

"(& Ugly)," a black and white cylindrical form of glass reading "beautiful" on one side and "ugly" on the other. Wax said the range of featured artists is one of the key points of the exhibition.

"Through the range of artists, you end up not addressing the same issues but using some of the same language to address different issues," Wax said.

Reynolds Gallery, located at 1514 W. Main St., will hold an opening reception for the exhibition Friday, Jan. 20 at 5 p.m. The show runs through March 3.

"Maya Blue" on a folded cotton paper.

The work is part of a series Snyder works on as she travels the world, with the final works holding a physical history of their production through folds in the paper, according to the press release. Her work draws from a long history of minimalism, Snyder said.

"The background, which becomes the negative space, becomes an object," Snyder said. "In that sense, it's just as much

of an element of the work as the lines

Art from "Deep Space" exhibition on display at Reynolds Gallery. Photos by Emily Richardson

