Afrovisualism: Aesthetic theory advances Black creative, artists’ spaces

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

The term “Afrovisualism,” coined by the Black Aesthetic Continental Theory, according to founder of Afrovisualism, graphic designer and writer Justin Smith, is the combination 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 said, 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 “core digging,” a term used for what music producers do when they go to create music 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 knew I didn’t just know who the producer, but who the song director or graphic designer.”

Many examples of the influence of music and artists can be found on Smith’s Instagram page — see include Hank Willis Thomas “All Power to All People” and Zaza’s “Blue Flowers,” and by John’s “Black Appetit.”

“A real album comes like a real art work,” 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 in all of the arts’ spaces.”

Smith has hosted free live talks and discussions in Richmond ranging from lectures such as the Institute for Contemporary Art and Black Lives Matter Coffee, he said. Smith was also a part of the Afrikam Film Festival last year, where he was chosen to virtually present his theory of the Black continuum with others, he said. He was personally chosen by Afrovisualism Film Festival organiser Rachel Madsen.

Moore chose Smith to be a part of the festival because he is very “innovated” in regards to Afrofuturism content creation, he said. This content ranges from chronological photography and typography to other visual arts, according to Moore.

“I know that his aesthetic and approach to Black cinema was something that was in alignment with Africkam,” Moore said. “It was a natural collaboration.”

Moore 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 merely appreciate it.

“Everywhere we seem to impact, pull it apart, and find these spaces of continuance,” Moore said. “The way in which one thing has inspired and led to another.”

“Every impact of these theories is a “broadening” of perspectives,” Moore said. He’s able to draw in-depth insights from the past, present and future in a way that is easy to understand, according to Moore.

“I think the impact is not in accessibility, and being able to offer ways to look at the work in a different perspective,” Moore said.

Moore said Smith has had a “beautiful impact” on the Richmond community, according to local artist and Virginia Commonwealth University student Gaysen. He graduated from the sculpture graduate program at VCU in 2019. Gaysen’s work has been a “beautifully helpful influence,” Gaysen said.

“It’s nice to see Justin and other artists discussing where they pull ideas from in the diaspora,” Gaysen said. “The way he [Smith] pulls everyone together — it’s beautiful to see and hear. He’s a curator.”

Reynolds Gallery group exhibition explores negative space across mediums

The background, which becomes the negative space, becomes an object. In that sense, it’s just as much of an element of the work as the lines themselves.

“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 piece held a physical art production through folds in the paper, according to the press release. Her work draws on a long history of miniature, 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 themselves.”

The imagery used in “Two-Store” draws from Snyder’s study of the Mediterranean Sea, while in a matter of residency outside of Barcelona. The piece employs many layers to create a moire effect, which scools when different parallel lines are overlapped and disrupt the surface of the image, Smith said.

“Every work I’ve ever done is made of the materials of the past 50 years,” Snyder said. “It’s the result of the media in use. When it comes to our sense of the past, our language is different and different, and our sense of the past is different and different.”

The exhibition is currently on display at Reynolds at 504 W. Main St, and will continue to receive the exhibition until March 3.

The show runs from Jan. 20, 2023, to March 3.