

Dancing with whiteness

Walter Price is unconventional. These days, Instagram is a place to catch a glimpse of artists and their work, but this American artist's page doesn't exist. Speaking to Price by Zoom in his New York studio, I discovered he had left social media in 2017. "Too much looking and not enough thinking," he says. And one thing Price wants viewers to do is to think about his paintings and drawings.

With his first major solo exhibition in the UK, *Pearl Lines*, to open at Camden Art Centre in London, Price talks about the juxtaposition of styles and ideas in his work. He chose the title of his show because of its ambiguity but also to reference the value he places on drawing. It's the same title as previous shows, because, he says: "There's an effective magic to repetition. Like with a favourite song, I'd like to exhaust this title like a radio DJ does with a summer hit."

It's a natural tendency for Price to go against the grain in his work. "I'm always thinking about how to make people more comfortable with being uncomfortable. I use visual contradictions to symbolise ideas for myself but also [to allow] viewers to have their own story with these objects." Blending elements of abstraction and figuration, he paints familiar motifs like couches, trees, fire, water, cars and bathtubs in unfamiliar contexts. Often reflecting on black identity, he wrestles in his work with traditional conventions of the "right" way to make art.



Main image: 'To accelerate the mayhem' (2020). Below: Walter Price
Albrecht Fuchs

For Price, "abstraction is king", as it allows him to rely heavily on colour, line and shape to communicate ideas that are open to viewers' individual interpretations. "When you see an abstract painting, it can be yours. You can look at it and frame it in your mind, and for that moment it's yours because of what the colours can say [and the effect they have on you] based on your own experiences and childhood, even."

Born in 1989 in Macon, Georgia, Price talks of how his late mother always called him a dreamer. He knew as early as the second grade in elementary school that he wanted to be an artist.

"I grew up mostly around working-class people who didn't really understand what it meant to be an artist, and I myself was trying to understand what it meant. But, thankfully, no one at that time ever discouraged me. They just let me be me and figure it out."

Jacob Lawrence was the first artist whose work Price was genuinely drawn to. "With the black people [in Lawrence's work] it wasn't so much about their faces in particular. It was more about shape, colour and the formal qualities of art. So even though you see figures, you can shift out and just focus on the shape and the composition of the work. I fell in love with that."

His new exhibition, born out of his 2020 studio residency at Camden Art Centre, consists of 17 paintings and 50 drawings. The paintings, which Price has housed in the smaller of two exhibition rooms to highlight his view that drawing is primary and foundational, are fluid and dreamlike as well as angular and sharp. All reflect on his experiences of being a black man in predominantly white spaces, in an exhibition he describes as "political, but not overtly".

“During the residency in London, I was thinking about how growing up in Macon, that’s more than 50 per cent black, I didn’t really think about my blackness – until I started travelling. In London, I was so aware of it. Besides being really cold, it’s also really white,” Price says. “When it came to my work, I thought about what I bring to the table as an artist, which is colour, life and coded images of blackness. I decided, why don’t I dance with whiteness?”

It was an intentional conceptual challenge to much of his earlier work. Several of Price’s new paintings, though begun in London, were finished in lockdown in New York. In response to that London experience, several feature a white square, like a blank canvas.

“I thought, why don’t I make use of different temperatures and textures to make these white squares move with the rhythm of that very white space? I sort of see that body of work as me in a ballroom trying to dance with all this whiteness.”

He was also thinking about his exhaustion from all that was happening in the world. So the use of white represented how he was both physically and metaphorically running out of colour and energy himself.

“I’ve been in a white box for a while. I went right into the navy from high school, and went from knowing I’m black to knowing that I’m black every day. That’s just my reality.”

During our conversation, I can’t ignore the number of times he brings up the military. His four years of service in the US navy clearly left an indelible mark on his life and art. When I point this out to him, Price gives a quiet laugh. He joined up at 18 because it would give him access to the GI Bill, which pays for



‘Learning to love’ (2020)



‘So much in answer, yet I prefer to stir’ (2020)

the education of enlisted men after they serve. It was the only way Price could imagine affording art school. It took him on to study at Middle Georgia College – but he lowers his head as he speaks of all the aggression he remembers from the navy years. But, he says, being forced to learn how to deal with all types of people and situations, as well as the

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discipline, trained him well in life skills.

“I only went to the military in the first place so I could do art. It was a way of getting from point A to point B. The reason I talk about it a lot is because I learnt so much about myself because of it, and I can only be grateful for that because I think it helped me dodge a lot of bad decisions. It taught me to be prepared and how to value practice and repetition, until it’s ingrained and second nature. That . . . has really helped me in my art practice.”

Price is excited about his new exhibition, but he’s staying busy working in his New York studio. “I’m still producing a lot . . . the themes of my overall work are contradiction, play, dark humour, poetry, joy and ‘whatchoo know about blackness?’ I want my work to function in a way where all these colours are giving you so much happiness and life, but still, some of the same things you can’t decipher in the work [are] very dark. It’s like play. Play welcomes you to the painting and then the realness kind of situates you in the painting.”