

# COLLAGE and the BLACK AMERICAN AESTHETIC

## An Interview with Adolphus Washington



If we look at the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, the group with probably the least African cultural retention will be Black Americans.... The eradication of African culture and the muting of it produced this kind of unique product. What I'm trying to do is produce work in that vein. I'm trying to produce work that is almost blues oriented—something that's part and parcel of Blackness.

—*Adolphus Washington*

**A**dolphus Washington is a Black contemporary collage artist whose work boldly confronts the conditions of the Black American lived experience. His design sensibilities are on full display in his work as he tackles complex issues through the use of dynamic compositions and a mix of visual textures. In my conversation with Adolphus he discussed his influences, intended audience, and the rooted messages behind his work.

### **Purpose**

I'm still interrogating the Black aesthetic, and not the Black, African diasporic aesthetic, but the Black American aesthetic. In doing so, what I look at is art as a sort of propaganda tool and a teaching tool. In that way, I think my artistic lineage is rooted within the AfriCOBRA movement, along with the Black Arts Movement.

AfriCOBRA, the Chicago-based Black artist collective founded during the Civil Rights Movement, is known for creating vibrant, colorful work that illuminated the

lives of Black people. Through the use of lively lettering, dynamic shapes, and visual rhythm, the group of artists developed an aesthetic style that bolstered the Black Arts Movement.<sup>1</sup>

In considering his work's purpose, his interrogation of materials, and how those materials are articulated into a piece, Adolphus remembered a quote by the cinematographer Arthur Jafa. Jafa states, "I have a very simple mantra and it's this: I want to make Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music. That's my big goal."<sup>2</sup> To that point, it became clear that it is the alienation of the Black American experience that Adolphus finds particularly consequential in the cultivation of its culture.

### **African Cultural Retention**

Adolphus is careful with his word choice, deliberately using the term *Black* instead of *African* in most cases. "I use Black instead of African because it is important and more precise. When enslaved Africans were brought over on those slave ships, at a certain point, they ceased being Igbo, Mandinka, Wolof, or Yoruba.... They ceased being those groups, and they became Black." This distinction also points to the ways in which culture is developed and cultivated over time. "If we look at the African diaspora in the Western Hemisphere, the group with probably the least African cultural retentions will be Black Americans. And that's not an insult." Adolphus gave an example of the differences between the slave institutions in the United States compared with Brazil's and their residual impact on the

descendants: "In Brazil you had slaves being brought in well after the dismantling of slavery in the United States. They were still coming in as an illegal trade." Adolphus explained that Brazil's longer-lasting influx of enslaved people created a large community able to sustain a greater amount of African culture: "You had these numbers, therefore creating like what we find with the folks in South Carolina and Georgia sea islands, the Gullah-Geechee people with a certain amount of retention that they managed to preserve due to the isolation." Referring to the descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the coastal areas of the Carolinas, Florida, and Georgia, the National Park Service writes, "Because their enslavement was on isolated coastal plantations, sea and barrier islands, they were able to retain many of their indigenous African traditions."<sup>3</sup>

For those of us who may or may not be descendants of the Gullah-Geechee—the rest of us American negroes were operating from a culture created in free fall, as Arthur Jafa puts it. Black American culture is one of assemblage through improvisation as a form of survival. The core principles within Black American culture are the oscillation between restriction and freedom; we express this through our music, art, and politics.

Because of this, Adolphus does not attempt to employ an Afrocentric aesthetic:



*SXNDXY Service at Abyssinian*, 2022, acrylic paint and collage, 16.5 x 23.5 in (42 x 60 cm). In 1808, several Ethiopian traders searching for a place to worship found themselves at the First Baptist Church in New York City only to then be segregated and ushered to the church's slave loft. This discriminatory practice was met with resistance in the form of protests by the Ethiopian traders and other Black members of the First Baptist Church, who went on to form the Abyssinian Baptist Church in 1809. Since then, the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem has become an institution rooted in advocacy, social justice, and political activism, particularly under the Reverends Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and DeWitt Proctor.



*Settler Colonial Revolt*, 2022, acrylic paint and collage, 16.5 x 23.5 in (42 x 60 cm). The Revolutionary War for Independence, which witnessed thirteen colonies throw off the yoke of British colonization from the shores of North America by the American Continental Army, is a noble and romantic story. However, the quest for independence, led by General George Washington (center, above) wasn't a revolt to free all people from the instrument of imperial control but, rather, a settler colonial revolt of self-interest. Meanwhile, the enslaved, depicted bearing stars underneath General Washington, had their own ideas of freedom and independence and would later use Polaris (the North Star) as their guide to the free territories of northern American states.

Racially and culturally we're descendants of West and Central Africans, western Europeans, and Amerindians throughout the western hemisphere. Despite this commonality, the diffusion of slavery and oppression differed widely. There's a reason why the blues was developed in the United States and not calypso or capoeira, which explicitly demonstrate African cultural retentions. Within American chattel slavery, the process of eradicating and muting African cultural expression among the enslaved produced a unique hybrid culture accompanied by its own aesthetic....What I am trying to do is produce work in that vein; I'm trying to produce work that is a tone parallel to the aesthetic which produced the blues, jazz, and all forms of Black American cultural expression.

### **Artistic Influences**

Regarding his influences, Adolphus explains that Jafa's ability to articulate the notion of a Black aesthetic provided a map for his own understanding. He goes on to say that he would be remiss not to mention Romare Bearden:

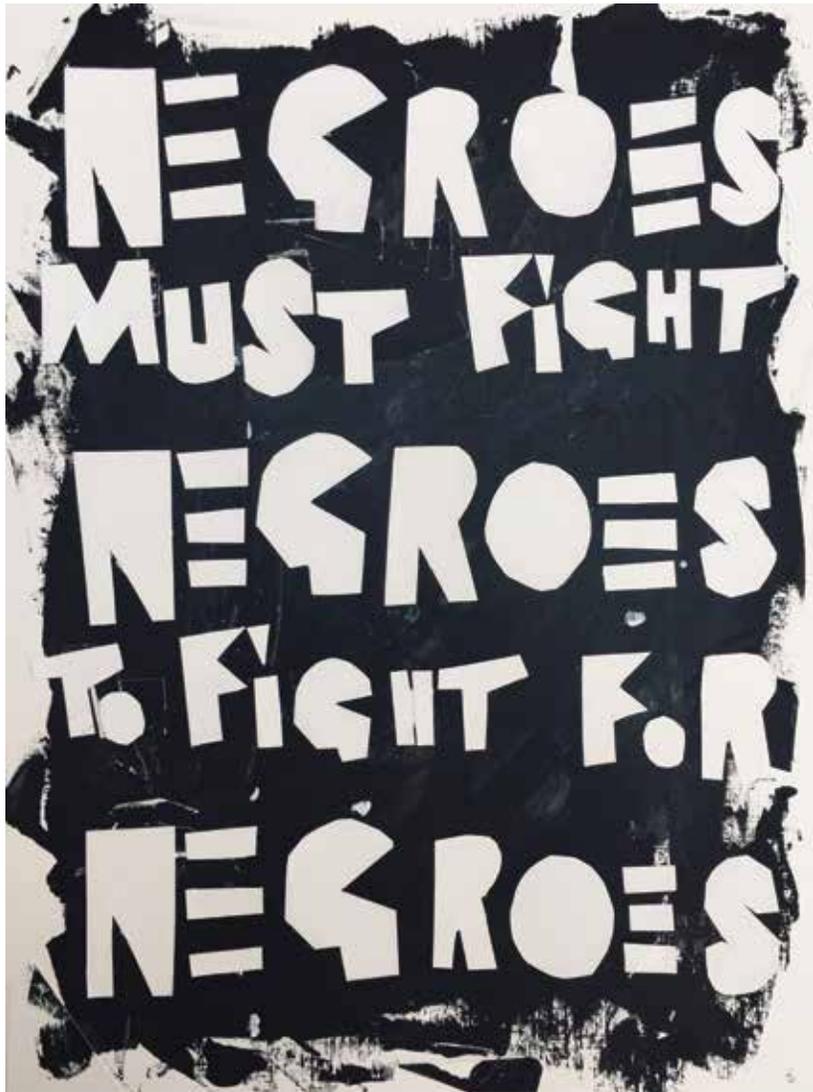
I stand on his shoulders, that's just what it is. Growing up I wasn't aware of who Romare Bearden was, let alone his significance, but his work was always in the background. I even don't recall the first time I saw Bearden's work, but it was those shapes, hues, and overall style which stuck with me.

The Black American painter Jacob Lawrence is another source of inspiration. Adolphus mentioned the movement and sharp edges that defined Lawrence's style before going on to add, "There's all this intensity in terms of his work. There's a visual sound that encapsulates his work that is almost akin to...remember the show, *Good Times*? That painting with the people like this, and like that." (With his arms raised at an angle, Adolphus mimics the figures in Ernie Barnes's painting *The Sugar Shack*, which appeared in the closing credits of the 1970s TV show *Good Times*.)

There's a certain fluidity and yet intensity. It's almost like the way a sculptor achieves fluidity from materials such as marble, wood, or bronze. This effect is reminiscent of Jacob Lawrence's work, evidenced particularly through the *History of the American People* panels. It is this spirit which I try to achieve for the faces of my subjects.

Although he grew up in the South Bronx, Adolphus recalls a time when most of his childhood cartoon drawings had very Eurocentric features.

Yeah, I watched *The Jackson 5* and *Fat Albert* cartoons. I loved [Fat Albert] as a kid, but in most of our cartoons, the aesthetic was a Eurocentric phenotype and manner....So, it was easy for me to draw an aquiline nose and lips and features that were closely associated with so-called white people. Even cartoons which featured animals or non-humans, instinctively



*Public Service Announcement for Colored (Not POC), 2021, acrylic paint and collage, 16 x 12 in (40.5 x 30.5 cm). The Black American political landscape has been fraught with Black political actors who have proved to be functionaries (of the dominant power) rather than leaders. A Black person who sets out to fight (for transformative politics) on behalf of Black Americans will be met with challenges from Black functionaries who aid and abet the arrested development of the Black community.*

you knew they were either white or Black. Think about Panthero from the *Thundercats* and Jazz from the *Transformers*, who used Black American vernacular with the associated vocal inflection and tone. Any other cartoon character outside of these characteristics was basically White. You must shift yourself to looking at all the different phenotypes....of our Black American family and the diaspora....These are some of the influences.

Before moving on, Adolphus noted that he finds inspiration from musicians as well. After mentioning the saxophonist Kamasi Washington, he said that he is influenced by Nina Simone's artistic sensibility:

That's the thing. I'm trying to capture what sound looks like visually. If you're looking at this Black American aesthetic in terms of sound, there's also a visual aesthetic associated with it. What comes to mind automatically is graffiti being the visual expression of hip-hop or any number of Black American social dances like the Charleston or Lindy Hop, which correspond to jazz....This is what I'm trying to translate through my work.

### **Collage**

Artists have employed the technique of collage for centuries, perhaps drawn to its mixed-media application and playful distortions of scale. While Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso are credited with bringing the practice to a mainstream audience and popularizing the use



***Democrac(E)y*, 2022, acrylic paint and collage, 16.5 x 23.5 in (42 x 60 cm).** *Democrac(E)y* depicts the historical and systemic failure to include Black Americans in full US-style democracy. This is because the benefits of democracy for Black Americans have been mitigated by the social construct of race and its built-in consequences. The collage depicts Reverend Jones delivering the eulogy for democracy, which has died (again) when received by the very people who strengthened and expanded the boundaries through blood, sacrifice, material, and spiritual notions of freedom.

of abstracted geometric shapes within their approach, it was Black American artists like Bearden who infused the art form with jazz-inspired cultural stylings. Like jazz, the blues, and hip-hop, the soulful expressions of Black people often reflect their joy and their struggle. Adolphus Washington continues in the legacy of this work, as his collages provide the perfect visual device to express the layers and complexities that define the Black American experience.

### Hard Truths

Adolphus’s work isn’t for the faint of heart or those unwilling to face reality. When I asked him if he is intentional in his messaging or if he creates work for open interpretation, he responded by saying, “There is absolutely a message in my work. In some instances, I can be considered a propagandist in that I’m looking to bring attention to the cliff that Black Americans are headed to—socially and economically.” Though he is a self-proclaimed propagandist, Adolphus’s work is factually based, even as it contains hard truths.

I don’t want to be an alarmist. But we are struggling and just surviving. Many are teetering on a knife’s edge....There was a *Forbes* report that stated by 2053, Black American wealth would fall to zero.<sup>4</sup> If you look at our annual HUD (Housing and Urban Development) report, I think it’s 40-something percent of American families who are homeless are Black.”<sup>5</sup>

With Black Americans making up only 13.6 percent of the US population, the numbers are alarmingly disproportionate.<sup>6</sup>

There's also a very good study called *The Color of Wealth* published by economists from Duke University [and elsewhere].<sup>7</sup> This study focused on wealth stratification of various groups within the Black community in cities like Boston, Miami, and Los Angeles. They disaggregated the Black community into Afro-Latinos, Caribbean, African Americans, and Black American descendants of American slavery to focus on the median wealth of these groups respectively. What it revealed was each group's asset liquidity, and the results were startling. Black American families in Boston are worth like \$8 liquid in comparison to Black Caribbean families' \$12,000. In Miami it's \$11 for Black American families compared to Cubans' \$3,200. Lastly, in Los Angeles the total liquid assets for Black American households was \$200; meanwhile, the African Black households' was \$60,000. What I'm highlighting here is if you look at all economic indicators beyond this study... we're being plundered. I always tell people, just because you don't see tanks rolling through Harlem or any other so-called predominantly Black community, that doesn't mean that we're not under fire.

It's nearly impossible to ignore the topic of wealth when discussing the conditions of Black Americans

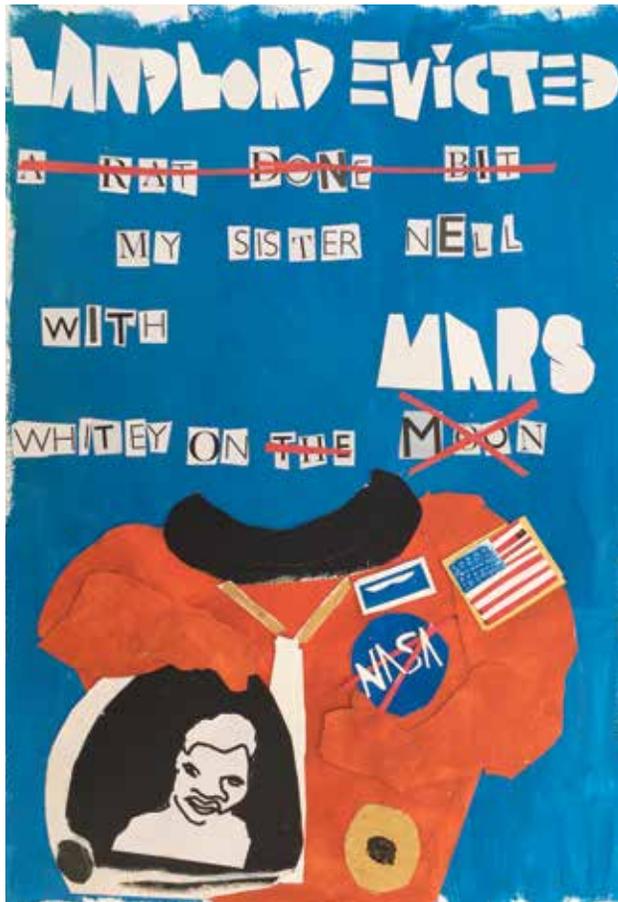
and its impact on their cultural experiences. The 2019 *Survey of Consumer Finances* reported that “the typical white family has eight times the wealth of the typical Black family and five times the wealth of the typical Hispanic family.”<sup>8</sup> Adolphus says that the United States has

profited off Black American wealth, which is bound up in our labor. In a Marxist way, we were by and large alienated from the means of production due to slavery and segregation—because *we* were the technology. As a result, this alienation has continued in many ways, which has mitigated our ability to accumulate wealth on a leveled playing field for generations.

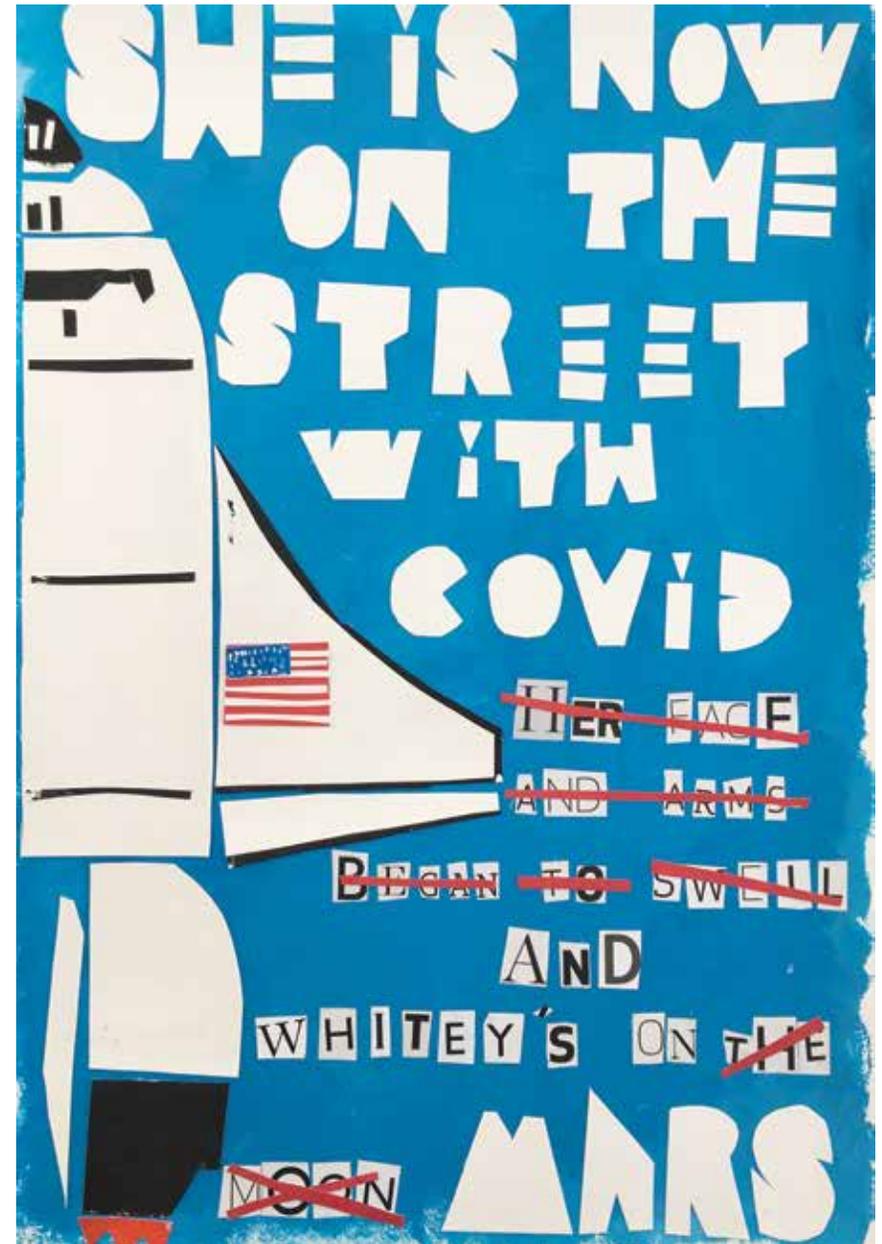
### **Audience**

Considering the messaging within his work, I asked Adolphus about his target audience. He quickly responded, “Black Americans. Everybody else can listen in.... I'm not saying that every Black person likes my work. Essentially, as an artist I'm doing it for myself if I feel like there's something I need to say or that a conversation needs to be had.” Regarding white and other audiences, he says that he loves the fact that other people can appreciate his work, but that he hopes it moves people to action.

When I talk about statistical data in terms of where we are as a country and how we failed a significant demographic of our population....it's not meant



*Priorities (Whitey on Mars PT 1)*, 2021, acrylic paint and collage, 16.5 x 23.5 in (42 x 60 cm). This piece is inspired by the late spoken-word poet Gil Scott-Heron's 1970 poem "Whitey on the Moon." The poem critiques the resources spent on the Apollo moon landings space program during a time when Black Americans were experiencing social and economic upheaval at home. Speed ahead to 2021, when we see history repeating itself: NASA successfully lands its Perseverance rover on Mars while Black renters experience the highest average rates of eviction in the country, during a global pandemic, with Black women disproportionately affected. I edited Scott-Heron's poem to fit today's Black American upheaval and historical benign neglect policy by utilizing my personal font (a nod to New York City graffiti) and centering the piece on the text as a message rather than the visual image.



*Priorities (Whitey on Mars PT 2)*, 2022, acrylic paint and collage, 16.5 x 23.5 in (42 x 60 cm).

to shame them. If it is shameful, I want you to be like, “Yo, where can I sign up? Who is the local representative on the ground?” Like, for example, there’s the American descendants of slavery movement, or ADOS movement. Founded by Yvette Carnell and Antonio Moore, ADOS reinvigorated the reparations movement. It was these guys who, on a real grassroots level, held a mirror up to Black America in particular, saying, “Look, you’re decaying, we have to address this.” You know, I would love for my work to do the same thing.

### **Addressing a Black Political Crisis**

“I have a piece titled *Priority* and it’s inspired by Gil Scott-Heron’s poem ‘Whitey on the Moon.’” Adolphus recalls the pride and excitement of Americans in 2021 when the NASA Rover landed on Mars:

During the Covid outbreak—when people were told to stay home while Black American women were most at risk for eviction, while Black male incarceration rate continued to be the highest among any ethnic group in the United States—I wanted to show fifty years of static social decay, from Scott-Heron’s poem, published in 1970, to my collage bearing the same message in 2022. Currently, our Black political elite has forgone the reins of leadership and advocacy for a transformative Black agenda in favor of a reactionary status where the priority is party over people.

He says that at the moment, we’re in a Black political crisis, citing Harlem as an example, with the dismantling of political and housing protections.<sup>9</sup> Adolphus described the way in which companies have moved in and increased the cost of living. He called it a “decaying” of Black communities. “And so, it’s those kinds of issues that I’m bringing attention to, and not just for the sake of being able to recite or regurgitate some facts, but as a call to action.”

**ADOLPHUS WASHINGTON** is a Black American and native New Yorker who currently resides in London. As a lover of history and politics, his work seeks to capture the sojourn, culture, and sensibility of the Black American experience with a view to sensitizing his audience to the four-hundred-plus years of protracted struggle to be considered human, as well as American. Adolphus works primarily with collage, believing it to be the most democratic medium that best embodies the improvisatory nature of Black American culture.