Photographs

Backdrop features the many studies, photographs, and collages that provide the foundation for Anderson’s painting. The artist's diaristic large-format photographs document his experiences in Trinidad and offer the viewer an opportunity to shuttle between objective documentary photography and the subjective nature of painting.

Marval Side Street (2005) depicts an isolated house notably absent of any inhabitants. With no path connecting the lot to the main road, viewers are made eminently aware of their status as outsiders. Yet, traces of human narrative are perceptible—piles of rubble and debris suggest ongoing labor, while a utility pole and cables allude to communication.

Anderson often takes multiple photographs of the same scene, merging them to form one composite image. Taken at different times at alternate angles, the individual photographs lack tonal and spatial continuity, producing a feeling of unease that reinforces the viewer’s estrangement. Seen together with the paintings they inspired, these works drift into the subjective, recalling the present of an individual scene, merging them to form one composite image. Taken together with the paintings, they inspire a sense of deep connection to a place, evoking memories and emotions.

Hurvin Anderson's sculptures, many on view for the first time, recall the artist’s process. Featuring the many studies, photographs, and works on paper. The photographs suggest the many physical and emotional distinctions between a space and its beholder. No matter how familiar the subject of these works may become, the viewer must contend with visual obstacles in order to contemplate the lush scenes, seeking access to a complex reality that is ultimately the domain of the artist alone.


This exhibition is generously supported by Iris and Adam Singer; Anonymous; Alexandra and Guy Halalish; Jimmy Jamieson; Larry Mathews and Brian Salamon; Thomas Dane Gallery, London; Michael Werner Gallery, New York; and the British Council.

Hurvin Anderson: Backdrop is organized for the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis by Jeffrey Usip, Chief Curator.

Related Events

Artist Talk: Hurvin Anderson
Saturday, September 12, 11:30 am
Preeminent British artist Hurvin Anderson is joined by Chief Curator Jeffrey Usip for a discussion about the artist’s practice and his work on view.

Sunday Studio: Beyond the Brush
Sunday, October 5, 1:00 pm
$10; free for members. Register at camstl.org/studio. Inspired by Hurvin Anderson and Wyatt Kahn, St. Louis-based artist Amy Reidel leads participants in a workshop on contemporary modes of painting, including masking, spraying, and pouring.

RE: The Barbershop
Sunday, November 8, 2:00 pm
CAM’s new program series RE (“Regarding”) features in-depth conversations on a variety of cultural topics. Responding to Hurvin Anderson’s barbershop paintings, this season’s RE explores the role of community barbershops and beauty salons in contemporary culture.

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The melancholy of not belonging.
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Barbershops

The acclaimed Peter’s Series (2007–09) situates viewers inside local Afro-Caribbean barbershops in Birmingham. These salons were created by the post-war generation of Caribbean migrants who encountered various forms of racism upon arriving to the UK in 1948, including the unwillingness of white barbers to cut their hair. In response, Afro-Caribbean communities fashioned their own improvisational barbershops by repurposing areas of private, domestic spaces. Born out of exclusion, these salons doubled as both a place for cutting hair and a site of communal discourse.

The Peter’s Series recalls the artist’s childhood memories of his father in the attic barbershop of Peter Brown. Each painting from this series uses photography as a point of departure, but ultimately imagines this history through the lens of personal memory. Interior spaces are reduced to geometric forms in a saturated palette and are delineated by precise perspectival lines. Sitters are positioned before opaque cobalt-blue mirrors that fail to reflect their surroundings, suggesting the disorienting experience of negotiating an Afro-Caribbean heritage with a British identity.

Peter’s: Sitters II (2009) depicts a man seated in a barber’s chair with his back to the viewer. A patterned red smock is draped over his shoulders as he stares into a blank blue abyss that is both mirror and wall, foreign and familiar. The subject’s downcast head is at once anticipatory and vulnerable. For Anderson, the space of the barbershop functions on multiple levels: it resonates as both “a personal space and someone else’s private space.”

In Attic (2013) the barbershop’s rectangular walls become the subject. Migrating from background to foreground, the compositional space becomes shallow and threatening. Devoid of people, the attic barbershop is, according to Anderson, “not only a personal space loaded with imagery, but also bears the stamp of political, economic, and social history.”

Sculptures

The process of mass production and the construction of racial stereotypes. Unlike the familiar Brillo Boxes of 1964, in which Andy Warhol famously eliminated the artist’s hand in favor of the seriality of factory production, Anderson’s boxes celebrate the individuality of the handmade. The chicken legs, beef patties, and logos that decorate the exterior of these sculptures emphasize the subjectivity of the brush to reveal the personal, imperfect marks of the artist.

Transforming mass-produced, disposable food containers into unique permanent works of sculpture, Anderson shifts the objects’ form and meaning. Through this body of work, Anderson mines an archive of racial stereotypes to foster critical dialogue about cultural heritage.

Landscapes

Anderson’s landscapes are often rendered in fields of subtle tonal variations, alternately employing wide swaths of evenly applied paint and rapid brushstrokes to suggest lush, inviting backdrops. In the foreground of these works, Anderson frequently constructs geometric veils or barriers—exclusionary objects to be pierced through, but never fully accessed. Planes composed of incomplete circles, intersecting lines, and repetitive dots symbolize metal grilles, fences, and beaded curtains that appear to hover above the composition, unanchored and drifting.

The impenetrability of the thickly painted surface, compounded by fence-like obstacles, restricts the viewer’s experience of the works. Vibrant colors become muted, as though viewed through the haze of another’s memory. Each painting suggests human narrative and emotion, exuding a poignant sadness, and ultimately instilling curiosity and longing.

Anderson’s expressive and evocative canvases invoke contemporary issues of dislocation and disillusion. As the artist states: “When you paint grilles, you feel like you’re cutting into the landscape, a sacred thing. They’re anti-landscape.”

For Anderson, the trope of the painted grille is “a means of distancing the viewer” from an image’s—or a memory’s—full potential. In some paintings, the landscape itself functions as a physical obstacle: the solid, color-blocked leaves on the surface of Diego (2013) transform the seemingly invisible fourth wall into a physical space. The painting’s green foliage is forced forward of the viewer’s experience of negotiating an Afro-Caribbean heritage with a British identity.

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Sculptures

Less well-known than his paintings, Anderson’s sculptures explore how consumer products are integral to the construction of personal identity. Juici and Mother’s Chicken (both 2006), for example, reference restaurant chains in Jamaica that serve “authentic” Afro-Caribbean cuisine and an important symbol of the artist’s youth. Anderson replicates food containers by hand-painting wooden boxes, creating a trompe l’oeil effect that challenges both the process of mass production and the construction of racial stereotypes. Unlike the familiar Brillo Boxes of 1964, in which Andy Warhol famously eliminated the artist’s hand in favor of the seriality of factory production, Anderson’s boxes celebrate the individuality of the handmade. The chicken legs, beef patties, and logos that decorate the exterior of these sculptures emphasize the subjectivity of the brush to reveal the personal, imperfect marks of the artist.

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