

New Historiography for Black Excellence: Jamal Cyrus “The End of My Beginning” at the Blaffer Art Museum

by Caitlin Duerler Chávez

At the 1900 Paris Exposition, W.E.B. DuBois presented an award-winning display of “data portraits”—colorful depictions of demographics of African Americans post-slavery through the turn of the century. Information such as the large concentration of Black people in southern states and the total value of their financial assets were illustrated in a visual manner of geometric abstraction, presenting minimalist maps and bar graphs in blocks of color and geometric forms. DuBois strategically presents information in this visually arresting manner on a global platform at the World’s Fair to not only dazzle the European spectators but also highlight the accomplishments of African Americans in the nineteenth century, promising future excellence in the upcoming twentieth century.

The spirit of DuBois’s data portrait project of a new historiography of Black people in America lives in the work of Jamal Cyrus in his exhibition *The End of My Beginning* at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston in Houston, Texas. Cyrus even references DuBois in a mixed-media sculpture, *Book sleeve prototype for W.E.B. Du Bois’s Encyclopedia Africana* (2016)— the thick bundle of standing books is bound together with twine and a circle-shaped rawhide wrapped on the spine.

The body of work in this exhibition visually delivers data of Black excellence, eschewing the shortcomings of mainstream historical narratives, which often erase the African American perspective of twentieth century and contemporary events. Cyrus mines archives, physical and digital, using his artistic training in photography to present original documents in a unique language combining printmaking, photographic, painting, and found objects



Book sleeve prototype for W.E.B. Du Bois’s Encyclopedia Africana (2016) in foreground with *Misconstrued Rap Lyric #1* (2019) in background. Installation view of Jamal Cyrus: *The End of My Beginning* at Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. Courtesy of Blaffer Art Museum. Photo by Sean Fleming

from eBay and secondhand sales. Museum labels provide an additional layer of meaning by a thorough and specific explanation of the archival connections.



Jamal Cyrus, *M.S.Y.* (2018), Root system, canvas, earthenware, and cast bronze, image by the author

In addition to Cyrus's archival subject matter, his use of materials trace trajectories of Black movement throughout the African Diaspora. Names of significant twentieth-century African Americans entertainers, like stage performer and actor Paul Robeson, are referenced in framed works on paper made from laser-cut papyrus—a material with origins in Ancient

Egypt. Other materials, like coral, sargassum, and shells, tie in Black experiences in America to Atlantic slave trade voyages of centuries past. *M.S.Y.* (2018) is a sterile, white pedestal encased in a plastic bonnet, austere presenting a small root system of a tree, an earthenware vessel, and a cast bronze conch shell. The title references the acronym for the Louis Armstrong airport in New Orleans, while the collection of three objects proposes a new way of understanding twentieth-century popular music through the literal roots of musical expressions in Africa before the diaspora.

The mixed-media artist gleans other materials from more recent history. Record store entryways, record displays, book displays, and sign painting in the entrance of the exhibition function as mise-en-scènes reimagining Black popular culture of the 1960s. *Pride Frieze—Jerry White's Record Shop, Central Avenue, Los Angeles (2005 – 2017)* includes two display windows with “Black History Music Sale” painted in all capital letters, in front of painted signs behind the glass that enumerate music genres and “Top 10 Singles.” A “frieze” of fictional record covers with designs mirroring images found on funk, soul, and disco albums from the sixties and seventies crowns the post-and-lintel construction of the storefront. However, titles of tracks and names of bands depart from hedonistic popular music played in discotheques and clubs to enumerate radical ideas and historical Black figures, such as in the record “Shaniq Hamed sings the A.B.C.s of Revolution” and “Dmfd Three Tears for Fred.”

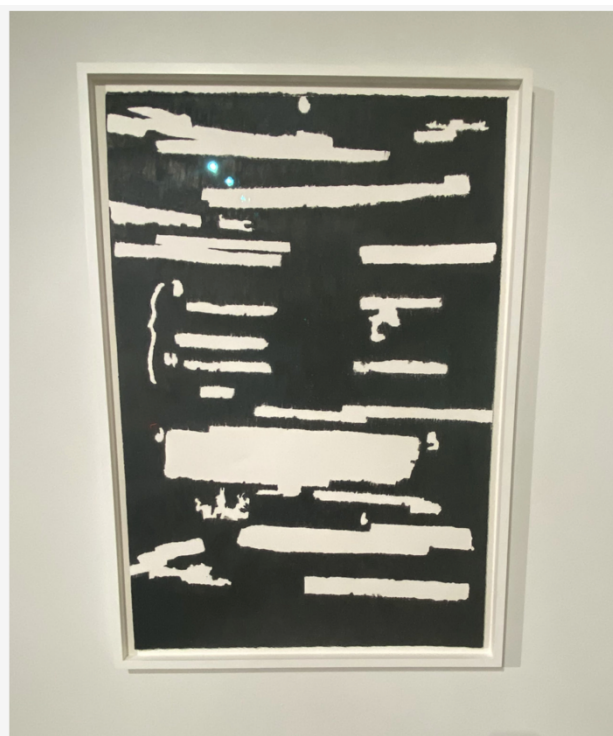


Jamal Cyrus, *Pride Frieze—Jerry White's Record Shop, Central Avenue, Los Angeles, 2005-2017*, Collage on album cover, acrylic paint, plywood, wax, and Plexiglas, image by the author

Weaving the accomplishments of significant Black Americans from archival findings, Cyrus's use of authentic documents varies from popular Black publications like *Jet Magazine* to facsimiles of blacked-out transmissions from F.B.I. files collected on members of the Black Panther Party. *Cultr-Ops on Wax* (2015) and *Cultr_Ops in Blue* (2020) use melted black crayons and denim— materials inspired by vinyl records and blue jeans of African American popular culture of the 1950s through 1970s. The black wax and darkest strips of indigo in these works depict the heavy redaction of documents both related to and from the hands of Civil Rights leaders, Black Panther Party members, and others suspected by the U.S. government of participating in activities threatening white supremacy in America.



Jamal Cyrus, *Cultr_Ops in Blue*, 2020, Denim, cotton thread, bleach, zippers, image by the author



Jamal Cyrus, *Cultr-Ops on Wax*, 2015, Black wax crayon on paper, image by Caitlin Duerler Chávez

Other materials in Cyrus's works borrow from culinary legacies, with signature ingredients appearing in sculptures and works on paper. Soul food saxophonist Maceo Parker would approve of the artist's *Texas Fried Tenor*— encapsulating both the instrument's significance in decades of jazz, funk, and soul music and comparing the pleasure of music pioneered by Black musicians to the joy found in a home-cooked meal. Food continues to be an essential material in the series of overlapping prints *Lightnin' Field (Fulgurite sample)*, with pigmented blue grits creating texture on a poster advertising Houston blues musician Lightnin' Hopkins playing at the historic Liberty Hall in Houston, Texas.



Jamal Cyrus, *Misconstrued Rap Lyric #1* (2019), Metal and plastic triple beam balance, plaster bust, paint, and fiberboard shelf, image by the author

Cyrus's love for music in his work matches his passion for African American history. In *Misconstrued Rap Lyric #1* (2019), a plaster bust of Martin Luther King, Jr. balances on the scale of a triple beam under a halo of light. The juxtaposition of M.L.K. and the scale suggest the weight of Black history taught in public schools resting on the singular figure of the nonviolent protest activist in lesson plans belonging to Black History Month curricula.

Jamal Cyrus's exhibition celebrating Black excellence arrives at a moment in Texas current affairs where a recently passed bill in the state legislature bans critical race theory and the

teaching of historical racism and elevation of the accomplishments of marginalized peoples. While public education fails to teach its students historical events and achievements of people of color in the development of the contemporary United States, Cyrus's art uplifts Black history, proposing a new means of historical storytelling through a chopped and screwed technique of rearranging symbolically charged materials and archival documents.



Gallery view of Jamal Cyrus *The End of My Beginning*, with *Lightnin' Field* (Fulgurite sample) (2021) Pigment, grits, and acrylic on laser cut canvas and *Texas Fried Tenor* (2012), Saxophone, flour, image by the author

Jamal Cyrus, *The End of My Beginning* is on view through September 26th at the Blaffer Art Museum, University Houston, Houston, TX.

The exhibition will travel to the Institute for Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 2022.

<https://www.artstudio.org/new-historiography-for-black-excellence-jamal-cyrus-the-end-of-my-beginning-at-the-blaffer-art-museum/>