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In artist Cosmo Whyte's hands, metal beaded curtains become sites of 'archival explorations'

Written by: Leigh-Anne Jackson

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Jamaican-born artist Cosmo Whyte is photographed with his piece "4/4 Timing (Curtains)," 2023, aluminum frame, beaded curtains, currently on display at Anat Ebgi gallery, in Los Angeles.

On one of the first truly hot days of the summer, Cosmo Whyte stood near an open window in his sun-soaked Fashion District studio space, his mellow voice nearly drowned out by the constant racket coming from a neighboring construction site and I-10 traffic congestion.

"As hectic as this area is, there are moments that I absolutely love it. There's some of these side streets that remind me of Jamaica," he said, reminiscing about his home country.

Whyte ran his fingers along the strands of a metal beaded curtain hanging against the wall, a work in progress that would ultimately become a focal point in "Hush Now, Don't Explain," his solo show that opened at the Anat Ebgi Fountain gallery on July 27.

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Jamaican-born artist Cosmo Whyte is photographed with his piece, "Agitation 3- Catching Hands, 2023," charcoal and gouache on paper at Anat Ebgi gallery. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

He moved to Los Angeles last year, having left a teaching position at Florida State University to take on an assistant professor role teaching Beginning and Advanced Drawing to undergraduate and graduate students at UCLA's School of the Arts and Architecture. He began working on pieces for the exhibit having barely settled into his new home, and with only two weeks before the fall 2022 semester started.

The curtain, entitled "4/4 Timing," was the final thing Whyte needed to complete before the exhibition's premiere. It's one of five that will cascade from a 10-foot-tall metal structure installed in the center of the gallery, through which visitors are encouraged to pass. The beads had already been primed. Next, he had to meticulously coat each strand with several gradated shades of gray spray paint to create an image that would only be clearly visible when viewed at a distance. Once done, the work would join a collection of the interdisciplinary artist's works, including charcoal drawings and a neon installation.

"I'm thinking of the show as different forms of archival explorations," Whyte said.

As part of his practice, he routinely scours photographic archives — from Getty's massive digital holdings to the pages of Jamaican periodicals — in search of enthralling images to reinterpret as the otherworldly drawings and topical sculptures that are his signature. For this show, he's also presenting elements pulled from his own personal archives.

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Cosmo Whyte is photographed blurring between two of his works, “Agitation 2- Wailer and the Griot,” 2023, charcoal and gouache on paper, left, and “Agitation 7- Trade Winds or Just a Blowout,” 2023, charcoal on paper, framed. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

The show’s title is, in part, an homage to his late father — it’s a refrain from a Nina Simone song, one of the elder Whyte’s favorite singers. The interactive metal structure marks the start of a posthumous collaboration with his father, who worked as an architect in Jamaica before his passing in 2005. Its design layout was inspired by a blueprint drawing pulled from his father’s office files. The beaded curtain entrance is also a nostalgic nod to Whyte’s childhood — the throwback home décor element was a frequent fixture in the homes he visited while growing up.

“A lot of the work points back to domestic spaces and I’m realizing more and more as I progress in my practice, it comes from that experience of growing up with an architect,” the artist said. “He’d always been interested in how space functions at different times of the day. His engagement with the history of landscapes was always fascinating to me too. And he was my first art teacher; he taught me how to draw.”

Whyte regards this show as being in conversation with his previous exhibitions, which have centered on themes of immigration, colonialism and civil disobedience, with Black figures depicted in scenes of protest, pageantry and solemnity. “Hush Now” features works in which he employs “a redaction of information” — subjects’ faces are pixelated, blurred or obscured, at once protecting their privacy and thwarting surveillance.



Cosmo Whyte is photographed with his piece, "4/4 Timing (Curtains)," 2023, aluminum frame, beaded curtains. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

For the indistinct image painted on the beads of "4/4 Timing," he referenced a 2015 Getty-sourced photograph of a group of young protesters using their bodies to block a Ferguson, Mo. highway in commemoration of the murder of Michael Brown.

"It's this beautiful moment where they're lying in the street and it's raining," he explained. "The expressions on their faces are so beautiful, but it's also such a charged moment. Then, when you walk through the beads, it sort of activates the movement of the rain and the prone bodies start to move."

He returns to the subject of Black protest because "the conditions are such that we constantly have to take to the streets to demand more." Without knowing the details of the source image, the viewer could just as easily imagine the scene of injustice and social unrest being captured in the Jim Crow South, during the Brixton riots that swept London in 1981, or even in present-day Paris.

"He's unearthing histories and he's able to bring these histories into our current moment," said Anat Ebgi, whose galleries have exhibited Whyte's work since 2019, including a previous solo show in November 2020. "He's looking at the world holistically. I feel like his practice is a way of creating a universal story of migration, immigration, transience, what is home and where is home."

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Cosmo Whyte is photographed with his piece, "An eyewitness account," 2023, charcoal on paper. (Jay L. Clendenin/Los Angeles Times)

Brett Steele, dean of UCLA Arts, praised Whyte's approach to drawing the human figure and commented: "Cosmo brilliantly speaks to a moment where art — particularly painting and drawing — is really focused on identity and how identity is represented, presented and exists in public and contested spaces. Cosmo's work is fantastic on that front, particularly in the way he brings it in contact with the migrant experience and connects it back to his own life experience."

Whyte is already devising future works to further his work's overarching "conversation." That includes building more structures based on his father's architectural drawings. He'll also maintain his focus on migration.

"Especially as we think about so much displacement coming down the pipeline with climate change, migration is an issue that needs to be tackled," he concluded. "And the more voices added to that issue, the better."