

Studio Visit

Houston Artist Jamal Cyrus Tells Us About Finding Inspiration in the City's Under-Researched Art History and His Studio Rituals

To mark his new exhibition at the Blaffer Art Museum, we checked in with the Houston-based artist about life in the studio.

Artnet News, June 15, 2021



Artist Jamal Cyrus. Image courtesy PATRON Gallery, Chicago and Inman Gallery, Houston.

Album covers from an imaginary record label, textiles made from redacted FBI files on Black activists, a sculpture bisected with metal rods that map the flight of imagined bullets during Malcolm X's assassination—these are just some works by the Houston-based artist Jamal Cyrus. The artist, whose work aims to fill gaps in the official histories of the United States and Black American culture, won the prestigious 2020 David C. Driskell Prize. If you aren't familiar with his work already, you likely will be by the end of this year.

On the heels of a [solo show](#) at Patron Gallery in Chicago, Cyrus is currently the subject of a survey exhibition (his first) at the Blaffer Art Museum. Organized in partnership with Texas Southern University (TSU), "[The End of My Beginning](#)" (through September 19) presents around 50 works created over the past 15 years. It will travel to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles in 2022. We checked in with Cyrus about life in the studio, the joy that is jalapeño-flavored Cheetos, and the importance of keeping a journal.



Scenes from inside Jamal Cyrus's studio. Courtesy the artist and PATRON, Chicago.

What are the most indispensable items in your studio and why?

A Sunbeam iron and Golden GAC 200. Right now, I'm working on a set of denim works and those two items are essential to completing them. The GAC 200 I use as a kind of fast-setting glue, and then the iron works to really integrate the glue with the fabric.

What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?

Finishing whatever I'm working on. I kind of need a small break. I need a small vacation, like a week, and I'll be fine after that and ready to move forward.

What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?

The studio is a place of production, in which I tweak the conditions according to my mood or needs at the moment.

I prefer silence when I'm in a zone; minimal/ambient sounds when I need to focus; podcasts or lectures when doing something repetitive and my brain wants stimulation; and upbeat music when I need a boost.

What trait do you most admire in a work of art? What trait do you most despise?

The artworks I admire have a natural presence and soulfulness, either due to hand or mind. This quality can be achieved quickly or through long durations of time.

Artworks I don't like usually suffer from a lack of presence or blandness.

What snack food could your studio not function without?

Hmm, I don't snack that much while in the studio, but some of my favorites lately are raw mixed nuts, jalapeño-flavored Cheetos (you folks in the Northeast know nothing about these), and licorice.



Works in progress in the studio. Courtesy of Jamal Cyrus and PATRON, Chicago.



Jamal Cyrus, *Book of Hours* (2021). Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago.

Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?

I'm not on social media right now, but I liked the videos on [Simone Leigh's IG page](#). I would also be down to see David Hammons run his own IG page. (If there's an alleged one out there please let me know!)

When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?

I usually have ideas stored inside my brain or journals, but sometimes get stuck when I'm stressed and am up against a deadline. To get out of that I try to ease up a bit and be more playful, so something new can present itself.

What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?

It's been a long time, but I think I'd say "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Was really nice to see the range of work that was being made by Black artists during that era [1963–83]. That iteration of the show also connected what was going on in Houston with Dr. John Biggers and the TSU [Texas Southern University] school to what was happening nationally, which I feel was long overdue.



Jamal Cyrus, "Manna and Braised Greens" at PATRON Gallery, Chicago. Courtesy of the artist and PATRON Gallery.

If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?

Anything that clarifies "How to do more with less."



Works in progress. Courtesy of Jamal Cyrus and PATRON, Chicago.

"Jamal Cyrus: The End of My Beginning" is on view at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston, Texas, through September 19.