

Revise & Consent

For militant-musing Cyrus, embellishing history is a way to tell the truth. | By Charlie Bier |

Jamal Cyrus, 37, might be, on one hand, an easygoing, soft-spoken Prairie View A&M University art professor. But as an artist in his own right, he is anything but.

His work offers a bracing comment on race, noting topics such as hate crimes, civil rights struggles and the black power movement. And, for his passionate efforts, the African-American artist, schooled at the Ivy League's University of Pennsylvania, is earning an international audience, having exhibited in London, Belgium, New York's Whitney Biennial, and the hometown Menil.

But working from a studio in H-Town's Project Row Houses, all that matters to Cyrus is sharing a unique vision through "funky" mediums, from small, two-dimensional graphite-powder drawings to large-scale, digitally manipulated photos and three-dimensional assemblage sculpture, mostly tilting to crisply semi-abstract. "I work with both my hands and the computer," he says.

Much of the work involves blending visual elements of actual political and musical history with fictional ones, to send a pointed message—something the married father of four rues wasn't done during the Civil Rights era. "This was a turbulent point in American history, and I'm surprised it's not documented in records more," says Cyrus, who shows new work at CTRL Gallery (3907 Main St., 713.523.2875) April 15-May 14. "You see a lot of social consciousness—like in Marvin Gaye's music—but not anything militant."

Cyrus' style, sometimes characterized as "revisionist," often centers on his fascination with *historiography*—generally, the writing of history. But his primary focus is "not so much how history is written, but how it is told, and how it functions in societies." Cyrus, for instance, will mix depictions of actual events with fictionalized people or groups, to make a statement that "sort of goes against the politics of the dominant order."

In other words, Cyrus tells stories. In one of his pieces, a parody of Cream's actual 1967 *Disraeli Gears* album cover, a fictional black-militant musical group called the Dowling Street Martyr Brigade shows up carrying a coffin, their free hands clenched in fists, collaged along with Cream's original psychedelic imagery. The idea is to illuminate the era's racism rather than its free love.



AMERICAN HISTORY X Jamal Cyrus, whose work includes graphite-powder drawings such as those above, shows at Houston's CTRL Gallery this month.

"The places I pull from are important to me," says Cyrus, whose bent for incorporating music was influenced early by a gospel-singer uncle, and later by the hip-hop sounds that accompanied his adolescent skateboarding. "I've always ... had a close relationship with music."

Such narratives—another involves the FBI forcing a 1967 Detroit record label to make disco records rather than politically charged protest music—is woven through the work. But the raw energy of the work, not necessarily the complex back stories, is what many find initially most striking. "You sort of *feel* it before you get the context," says Bryan Miller of CTRL Gallery. "At its core, Jamal's work explores what it means to be young and black in America today, but also raises the questions we all ask. 'Why are we here? What is our place in the world?'"

The CTRL show will be a free-form installation housed in two spaces, including one that mixes Cyrus' work with sculpture by Lauren Kelley. "I want the pieces to be in conversation with each other, in a loose manner," says Cyrus, adding that a second space will showcase a large-scale digital element. "I'm going for a feeling." ■