

Art Critter

Visible Time at USFCAM
June 2023 | By Tom Winchester

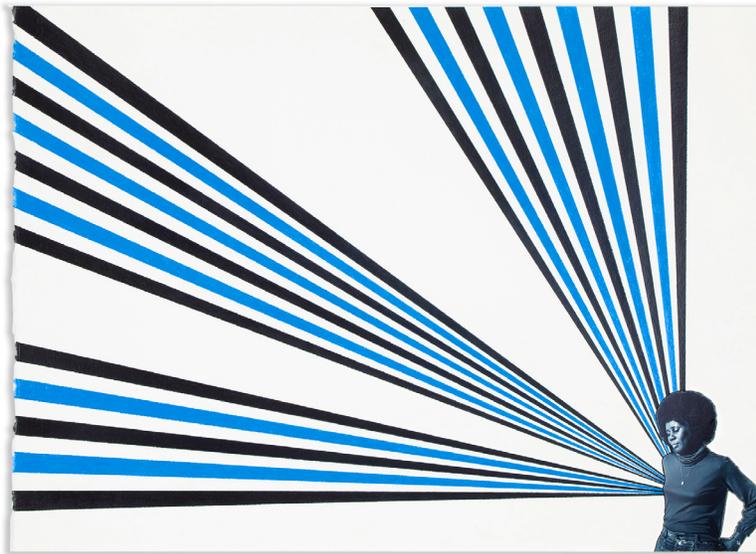


Zora III (2023) at USF Contemporary Art Museum

Rico Gatson's *Visible Time* at University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum is an exhibition of collages, abstract paintings, kaleidoscopic videos, and a monumental mural. Energetic portraits depict influential advocates of racial justice, musicians who've changed the cultural landscape, and actors that have paved the way for equal representation. The exhibition is curated by USFCAM's curator-art-large, Christian Viveros-Fauné, who specializes in political art, and has known Gatson for decades. With a common theme of political advocacy from both curator and artist, *Visible Time* gives hope to a hopeless era.

Zora III (2023) is a gigantic mural that completely covers the main gallery's largest wall. At its bottom-center is a larger-than-life sized, black-and-white photographic reproduction of the author Zora Neale Hurston. She is surrounded by a sunburst of thick lines radiating outward from her body that extends to each end of the giant wall. Between each painted black ray is a ray of magenta, violet, blue, orange, or yellow. The colorful array of lines is distributed in densely concentrated spokes at its center and incrementally spreads into widely sprawling blades in the corners. At first glance, the mural looks like Hurston is an angel with iridescent wings.

Christian Viveros-Fauné: It's genuinely monumental. It's the biggest mural that Rico's made to-date, and he's done a number of them. There's a subway in the Bronx, at 167th Street, with about 8 of these done as mosaics, and this one's made with paint. It's a massive mural on our biggest wall. It's of Zora Neale Hurston, who is an important novelist who was buried in history until Alice Walker unearthed her. She was part of the Harlem Renaissance, a pioneering feminist as a writer, as an anthropologist, and also a child of Alabama. But her family moved to Florida when she was three and lived in the first incorporated black city in the state, possibly in the country. Her novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, takes place in central and southern Florida.



Alice #2 (2021)

Gatson used a similar artistic approach as Zora for collages on view that depict influential icons like Sidney Poitier, Fela Kuti, and bell hooks. Each collage consists of an appropriated black-and-white photograph adhered to watercolor paper with an array of lines made using colored pencils. With minimal color palettes, oftentimes pairing just one or two shades of a color with a complimentary hue, the collages appear as sincere homages to people who've leveraged their talents and fame to advocate for racial equality.

Tom Winchester: The artworks lead the viewer to discover the stories of the people they represent.

CVF: That's exactly what you want. You don't have to walk in here with a Master's Degree in history or literature to engage with some of these characters. You know some of them, and that gives you the *Hansel-and-Gretel* trail of crumbs to the next place where you can magically deploy your little black rectangle and ask it, 'Who am I looking at? Who is this person?'

Leaning against the main gallery's rear wall are seven evenly spaced, plank-like paintings covered in elaborately composed, multichromatic geometric shapes and lines. Their color palettes seem to be improvised, but some combine to obliquely represent cultural signifiers like the Pride flag, the Transgender flag, and Pan-Africanism. Variations in shape and pattern include pyramidal chevrons, amorphous trapezoids, parallel lines, and stepped equilaterals. In the vein of Wassily Kandinsky, variations of color and shape are so abundant that the piece takes on a rhythm that transcends the medium of painting toward music.

Gatson concentrates all of these elements in a similar way for the painting titled, *Untitled (Malcolm in the Spirit)* (2022). Four clusters of large, concentric circles appear on the flag-sized painting in a formation that resembles the iconic division sign from mathematics. Creating triangular quadrants, a large X divides the composition from corner to corner. The piece obliquely resembles the flags of Britain and the Confederacy, both of whom implemented and advocated for slavery in the United States, particularly in the south. *Untitled (Malcolm in the Spirit)* takes on an element of activism, possibly protest, being exhibited just miles from where a billboard-sized Confederate flag flies over the intersection of I-4 and I-75.



Untitled (Seven Panels) (2022) at USF Contemporary Art Museum

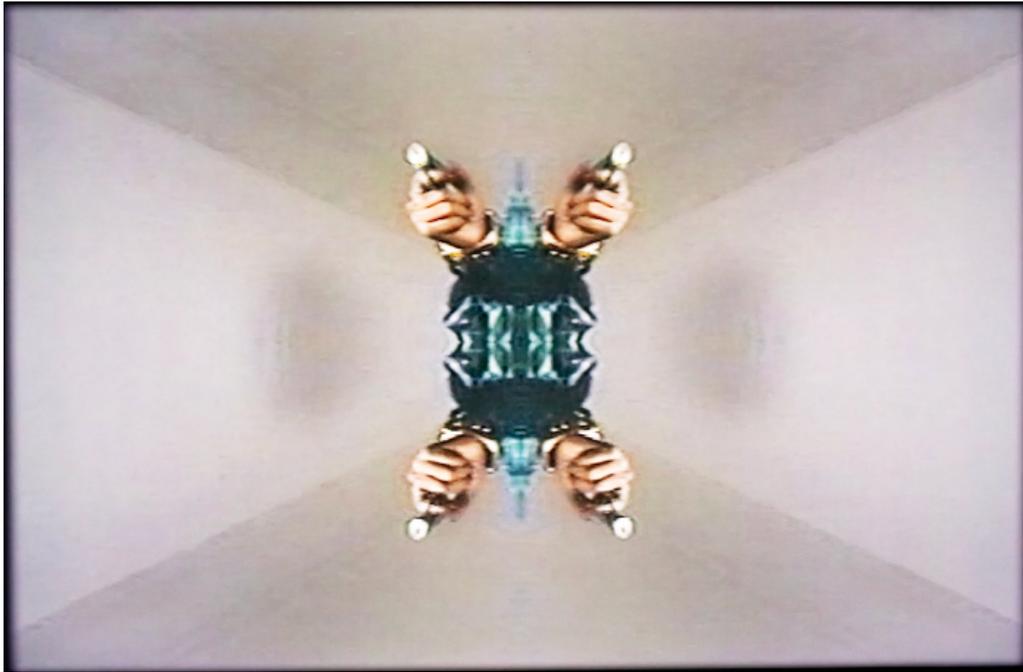
TW: Gatson's talent seems to be how he is so in tune with what he wants to express that he can do so with succinct efficiency.

CVF: All of Rico's work is a three-chord ditty. He makes very complex things, very complex visual experiences, very complex ideas about politics and culture seem simple. That, I think, is largely the work of the artist; it's making the invisible visible. You turn this thing which seems so muddled and so difficult to understand into a piece of pure clarity.

Really challenging concepts and really beautiful visuals can exist not only in the same sentence but in the same painting. That's basically what Rico's work is about. In his practice, he's gotten so good at essentially making this gorgeous cocktail for us so that every time we take a virtual sip we're knocked out—but he's got the recipe. He's concocted it. I'm happy to work with an artist who can take really complex visuals and ideas and recombine them to give us eye candy with content.

His connection to music is what, I think, steers him in that direction. In the exhibition catalog, Mark Fredericks wrote a great piece on the connections between Rico's work and music. He suggested that *Untitled (Seven Panels) (2022)* is a seven piece band. His work reminds me of Picasso's piece *Three Musicians*, but also the quote by Walter Pater, 'All art constantly aspires to the condition of music.' That runs through Rico's work all the time. The music is a source of inspiration that manifests itself in the work.

The dark, narrow hallway connecting the museum's two galleries is where three colorful abstract videos play clips from familiar movies. They're clips depicting various acts of violence that have been appropriated and doctored by Gatson. Because their visuals are nearly completely abstracted by effects like mirroring and repetition, creating a look that's similar to peering through a kaleidoscope, their audio becomes the primary indicator of the violence taking place on-screen. *Gun Play (2001)*, for example, emphasizes the sound of gunshots in a way that sneaks up on the viewer like a shooter in a grocery store. Its unexpected, where-is-that-sound-coming-from quality resensitizes the contemporary viewer to celluloid glorifications of the past.



In the side gallery, presented as a black-box theater, is Gatson's video interpretation of the story of Emmett Till's murder, titled *Four Stations* (2017). A large projection of the several-minutes-long narrative traces the locations in Money, Mississippi, where the boy was targeted and murdered, and ends with scenes of the courtroom where his murderers were acquitted. Slow transitions move from luscious greenery of the subtropics to attractions seen on county roads to humid swamps. Even if you come into the gallery at a part that's late in the story you'll be inclined to let it start again from the beginning and watch it until you've seen it all.

CVF: Not only is America not good at remembering its historical milestones, it often tends to want to obscure them. The Emmett Till video, for example, walks through the sites—his four stations, if you think of stations of the cross—there's the place where he supposedly whistled at a white woman, the place of his kidnapping, the location of his torture and murder, the place where they dumped his body, and finally the courthouse where justice was not done, because his killers were acquitted.

It was the kind of racist murder that, even in America, in the 1950s, made it starkly clear that something like that could happen and go unpunished. What Emmett Till's mother did made the story leap from local news into the national consciousness, and then into history: she insisted that her child's body be viewed with an open casket so you could see how badly mutilated he was.

TW: To me, that video being shown here, in Tampa, just a few counties away from Sanford, where Trayvon Martin was murdered, accentuates today's racial injustices in Florida.

CVF: The connection to Trayvon, I think it's clear, but I don't think it's up to the curator to give a definitive reading. I never want to over-determine an artist's work. I think someone like Rico wouldn't shy away from those comparisons, but I do believe he wants the art to speak for itself. The work acts as a vehicle for activating conversation around a historical event, and visualizing the story in a more personal and experiential way.

I also think we can also see poor Ukrainian kids in that piece. Ones that are being mutilated by indiscriminate bombing, or those who've been kidnapped and taken to Russia. It's a universal story but in other ways it is about a very American problem. That problem is race, but also class.

Visible Time occurs during a period when educational institutions, particularly those controlled by Florida's Department of Education have been given the direction to reduce efforts with regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The result has been a statewide diminishment, a near exclusion, of even the most basic lessons on race, gender, and sexuality. Simple acknowledgement of this country's history of slavery, for example, in a State classroom can lead to a backlash from parents, and the possible expulsion of such information from the curriculum. The act of exhibiting *Visible Time* in galleries run by the University of South Florida can be understood as advocating for the inclusion of lessons acknowledging this country's diverse history. Several of the people and cultures represented in Gatson's artworks wouldn't be allowed to be taught in certain classrooms in some counties in Florida.

TW: How would Gatson fit into your history of political art? Would his use of Pop make him unique in the genre, or maybe similar to how you characterize the work of Banksy and Shepard Fairey, in your 2018 book *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art*?

CVF: I think geometric abstraction means more to him than it does those two. I think Rico's work has always had content, but I think he also has an obsession about line, pattern, fractals, geometry, and the history of abstraction. He's playing abstraction's art historical legacy against his content. In terms of *Social Forms*, I think he would occupy a unique place. He's constantly referencing *Pop*, or Kente cloth, and other stuff that's in the world. There's that Raushcenberg line, 'I think a picture is more like the real world when it's made out of the real world.' I think that applied to Rico's work.