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Two Artists on Creating Outside of the Art World's White, Patriarchal Rules



Sarah Burke
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Painter Christina Quarles and experimental filmmaker Hasabie Kidanu discuss how to challenges the ways we are taught to see the world in order to open up new possibilities of Black, female existence.

"Broad Strokes" is a column celebrating creative community. We ask an artist we love to engage an artist they love in conversation about the ideas that inspire them.

Although artists Christina Quarles and Hasabie Kidanu use very different mediums—figurative painting and 16 mm film, respectively—they both make work that investigates

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how we are taught to read space, bodies, time, and history, challenging our cultural assumptions about the boundaries of those seemingly concrete concepts.

The two met while attending the same MFA program at Yale University a few years ago, and immediately recognized that they were similarly interested in breaking down the dominant straight-white-male-defined way of seeing and understanding the world.

Quarles, whose work was most recently included in the New Museum's *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, paints colorful, distorted figures that often appear to be self-awarely pushing up against the edge of the canvas that traps them, or moving through time and space—with each limb stretching past a singular iteration of itself. Bursting beyond the traditional mold for what constitutes a body, her figures teeter at the limits of containment and coherence.

Kidanu's recent work applies an analogical approach to thinking about cities and space. Inspired by the idea of a metropolis as a place that's constantly in flux and yet contains an embedded history, she films, splices, and overlaps scenes on 16 mm film to create collages that layer footage from various times and places—rejecting the assumptions that both time and the medium of film are inherently linear. Further distancing the viewer from a familiar, singular way of reading images, Kidanu also creates installations in which she bounces projections of her films off mirrors or refracts them through prisms.

After being in close dialogue throughout their time at school, the two artists have since diverged paths, with Quarles living in Los Angeles, California and Kidanu in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where she grew up. For *Broad Strokes*, Quarles reached out to Kidanu to reconnect and discuss legibility, nostalgia, and this exciting moment of increasing diversity in painting.



L: "Our Eyes Our Open/Are Eyes Are Open," by Christine Quarles, courtesy of David Castillo Gallery. R: "Missing What's Missing, Flowers for a Friend," by Christina Quarles, courtesy of David Castillo Gallery.

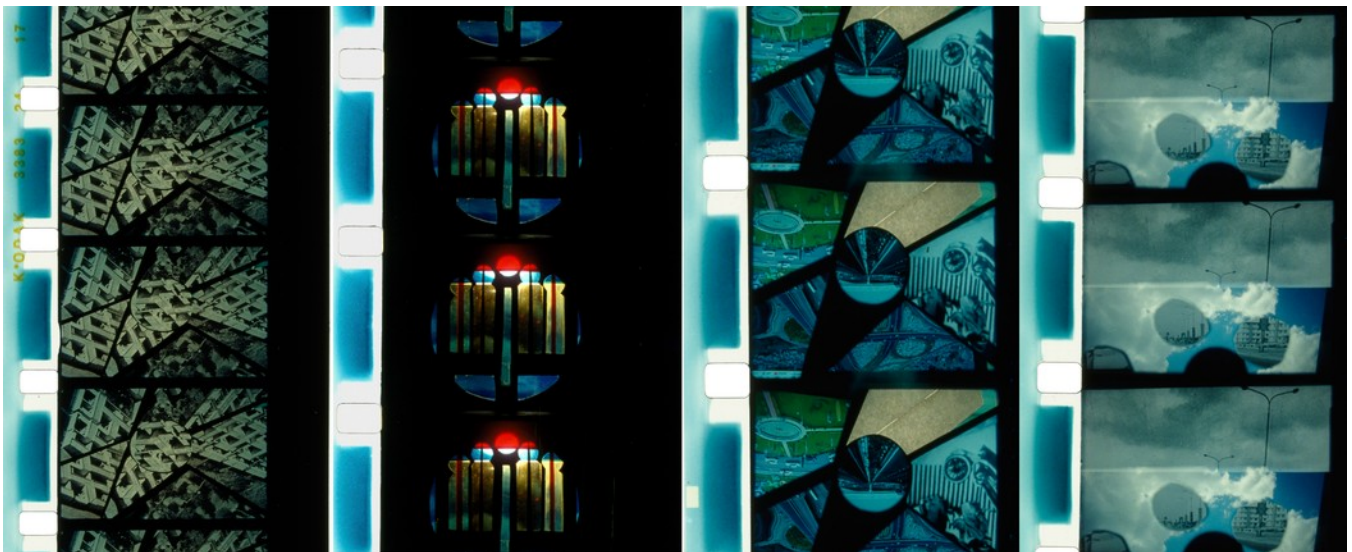
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This interview has been edited and condensed.

BROADLY: You both explore themes of multiplicity and legibility in your work. What draws each of you to that?

CHRISTINA QUARLES: I've always had an interest in this idea of legibility breaking down through an excess of information. For me, that comes from my own identity as a queer woman and as someone whose dad is Black and mom is white but legibly looks very white—especially to white people. I've often thought about what it means to have an identity such as mine and what it means to have the way that I'm seen not match up with peoples' expectations for what they're seeing. The potential in that is that it opens up a whole world of possibilities for what you can do to stretch your whole sense of self because you realize it's kind of all based on context and on other people. But the trouble with it is that I think there actually is a need to be in communities and to have solidarity and to have a sense of who you are based on how other people see you, and I if that is not in harmony, it can be very isolating. ... So yeah, just seeing the potential in that but then also being aware of the isolation and the desire to be seen as how you see yourself and how that can be in conflict with wanting to be in a truly queer or racially multiple identity position.

HASABIE KIDANU: For me, it serves to think about my ideas through fragmentation or refraction because I do believe that there isn't really one perspective of looking at something. Literature plays such an important part [in my work], especially fictional literature about places that are constantly in flux. So what layering does is give me the stage to put all these different ideas into one frame and allows for a certain kind of comparison or certain kind of acknowledging of different perspectives together. Putting this information together on one plane allows for different times and different places and different histories to collide.



Work by Hasabie Kidanu. Courtesy of the artist.

Quarles: I think that the filtering of information into an image-based medium is something that I always find really fascinating, just in general. For my work, I'll be mining

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from all sorts of visual or literary references and then they get filtered through painting, and I like to think about the idea of quoting and misquoting with visual language. But with painting, you kind of have that freedom because it exists in a world that's seen as interpretative, in a way. But with film, there's these expectations that it's actually a real thing that is a record of something that really exists. How do you play with the expectations that film and photography are factual rather than fictional?

Kidanu: Layering all this potentially really disparate information, I think, opens up the space for fiction. And I think it also opens up the space for play—like a very rigorous play. I'm kind of new to film, but my goal is to have the 24 frames per second be a real site of manipulation into how you can modify ideas of perception and reality.

Quarles: I think it's an interesting way, too, to play with the expectations of a linear narrative because of the ways that you go back and forth between how the film is actually constructed by collaging back on recorded material. It plays into this idea of memory or these iterations of facts or iterations of how we remember things to be true as opposed to how they actually were. ... I find that really interesting, that idea of manipulating the past and reforming a history.

Kidanu: Right, if you come look at my studio, it's a really bizarre thing. I have my camera and I have all these pieces of film on the wall. I manually cut and splice images so I don't really start a narrative, I go back and forth a lot—like I do really depend on memory.

It's a funny thing, when people think of film or 16 mm, they go straight to nostalgia—as if the medium is a reflection of earlier times or the “good old days” or something. But I'm interested in thinking about the unresolved material and visual problems of the past, so it's rather like going back through time in service of some sort inquiry rather than this kind of saving of something gone.

Do you think about nostalgia a lot in your work?

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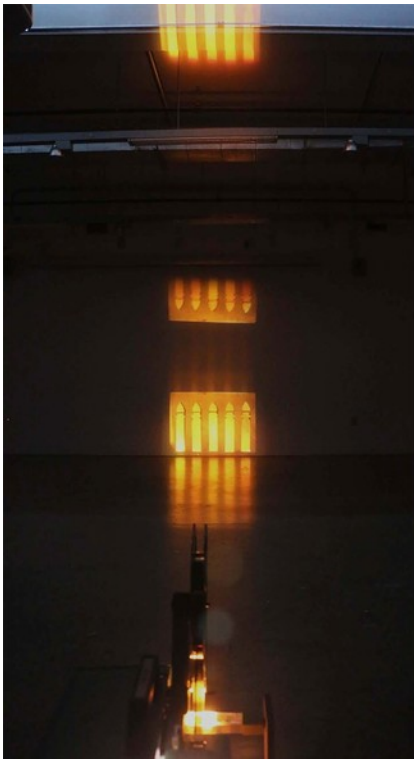
"Pull on Thru Tha Nite" by Christina Quarles. Courtesy David Castillo Gallery.

Quarles: Yeah, my work is interested in playing with the expectations of painting and the history of painting and pointing to the materiality of painting itself as a way to parallel the experience of living in a body. So, I'm really interested in how both painting and identity try so hard to exist without a history, or to exist as an essentialized given, but actually

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are very much formed by a social history and rules that we construct around how they're read.

And so I'm interested in playing with the invisibility of painting as a medium and the invisibility of who gets to make the rules of what is legible in painting history and really bringing that back to the surface or to the forefront. People will often be like, "Art is so subjective and it just exists in this world of genius and it's either good or it's bad ." But really, that's not the case at all. It's especially not the case if you go to some place like Yale. It's just a language like any other language: It has rules, and those rules are not based in any sort of higher power, they're actually based on human history, and usually that history has been dictated by largely straight, white, Western men. So, I'm interested in playing with that history and making the viewer aware of it by making clear: *This is a painting and it is flat and it exists in the confines of itself.*



Installations by Hasabie Kidanu. Courtesy of the artist.

Kidanu: I was just thinking about that. Like, this idea of saying a medium is outdated can be a very inaccurate claim, because it doesn't represent everywhere. There's parts of the world that use certain kinds of film technologies today that in the west would be considered outdated. Or when it comes to painting, in the last few years I've seen a huge reinvestment in figurative painting. It's not accurate to say that any medium has exhausted its full potential, because, obviously not every single person has been represented through it or has thought through it.

Quarles: Yeah, exactly. Recently, people are like: "Oh wow, figurative painting has become so interesting." But it's because there's people that have not really been as recognized by institutions or by galleries in the past that are suddenly being brought to

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the forefront. And I think that it's really kind of radical. If you're using a medium or a language that has existed before you without people that identify similarly to you being included in the conversation, I think by using that and changing the author of who's using the medium or who's playing with the language, that can totally change what it looks like and how it's received by people.

I think it's an exciting time to be exploring these things, because people and institutions are more responsive to having these conversations that I think a lot of people have been having their whole lives. But now, it's this moment where people are actually wanting to hear what other voices and other identities have to say about their own story.