

# An Artist Who Creates Joyful, Shimmering Images of West Indian Culture

Ahead of a new solo show, Paul Anthony Smith discusses his intricate, time-intensive process — and his favorite forms of procrastination.

By Antwaun Sargent



For his latest body of work, the artist Paul Anthony Smith, photographed here in his Brooklyn studio, created textured photographic collages, which he calls "picotages," that evoke both pointillism and the West African coming-of-age ritual of scarification. Jacob Pritchard

On an unseasonably warm March afternoon in Brooklyn, the artist Paul Anthony Smith, wearing his usual denim workwear, stands in his studio in front of “Untitled (Duppy Dream in Color too),” a nearly finished, closely cropped, black-and-white photo portrait of a woman wearing a bejeweled crown. Her eyes, emotional and direct, are staring through a geometric pattern that recalls a midcentury breeze-block fence of the kind found in his native Jamaica. Smith, 31, made the barrier by picking for hours at the image with a retrofitted wooden needle tool that he often uses to puncture the surface of his pictures, a technique which evokes both the coming-of-age ritual of scarification once common in West Africa and the luminous pointillism of Georges Seurat. “It sometimes takes a week for me to finish one,” Smith says of his images, as he walks toward the sole window in the work space, located on the fourth floor of an unassuming former factory in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Smith has rented the smallish boxlike space since he moved to New York in 2014 from Kansas City, Missouri, where he studied ceramics at the Kansas City Art Institute. Pinned to the white walls, and still in progress, are four of his signature “picotages” — his word for inkjet pigment prints layered with ornate architectural elements and mounted on museum board — which will go on display on April 4 as part of “Junction,” his first solo exhibition with the Jack Shainman Gallery in Manhattan.





The artist inspects a photograph he took at the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn. Jacob Pritchard

“The show is inspired by the history of me being a pedestrian at a crossroads where people meet,” he says. “‘Junction’ is about an amazing celebration of people, culture, histories and hardships.” His work, which often depicts joyful everyday scenes from across the African diaspora, abounds with questions of historical memory, the dislocation of colonialism and the tension and ecstasy of making a home in a foreign land. And although the artist is not physically seen in the images, the new layered pictographs speak directly to Smith’s own biography, as an immigrant who left his hometown, St. Ann’s Bay in Jamaica, when he was nine years old and moved with his family to Miami. The Smiths, in search of opportunity in a new country, are reflected in the mostly Caribbean subjects, hustling and hanging out, who populate the artist’s collages.

Tacked to the wall near the studio’s entrance is “Slightly Pivoted to the Sun’s Rhythm,” a work that depicts a beautifully costumed black woman wearing a traditional Carnival outfit. Behind a breeze-block enclosure, she is peacocking her heritage in a procession along Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn during the borough’s annual West Indian Day Parade. The fencing suggests a sly sense of displacement: “Walls are meant to exclude but also protect, and in this case they are used as veils and disguises,” Smith says, examining the image. “It’s like when you come to a new country, do you become a hybrid of your surroundings? Or do you stay who you are within your culture?”



When I use these images from the West Indian Day Parade, they're more so about the rhythm, the vibe, the culture and retaining those spirits." Sitting at a makeshift wooden drafting table in his studio, Smith answered T's Artist's Questionnaire.

**What is your day like? How much do you sleep and what's your work schedule?**

Recently I became this person that can't leave the studio. I'm here all different hours of the day. I just try to sleep while the sun is down. I usually come here at ten and leave anywhere from nine at night to one or two in the morning. I'll be in here, and sometimes I get frustrated, like I need to go and get a shot of whisky real quick and come back, or I try to keep liquor in here.

**How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?**

It takes a while to get into a rhythm, because I'm doing this repetitive motion and my mind changes so frequently. I wear a watch because I count how much I work on each section. And if I'm here from like 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., I probably get six hours of consecutive work done. Some of these works take a week of working on them straight, because I work on one at a time.



Smith's work often references his own biography as an American immigrant who left Jamaica when he was a child. Here "Ackee Lane" (2019). Jacob Pritchard



### **What's the first piece of art you ever made?**

I have sketchbooks in a box over there from second and third grade. But I think the first piece of art that I ever made was when I found a clay deposit in the river in the third grade in Jamaica and I made some ceramic figures. Those stuck with me for a long time, and it kind of continues to propel this creative process in me. I think that's also probably why I studied ceramics.

### **What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?**

The first work I sold was from when I was 14 or 15. I made this painting that I accidentally left on the bus in Miami when I was in high school and I never recovered the painting, but I recreated it and it was sort of reminiscent of an Edward Hopper painting. I sold it at the Coconut Grove Art Festival for \$100 and I got \$50.

### **When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?**

I start with a buffet of images that I print and mount, and then I usually naturally gravitate toward one, and look at it for a while before I begin to work. I don't really plan ahead.

### **How do you know when you're done?**

It's like eating. Once you finish, you're like, that's it. You don't need to overwork it.

### **How many assistants do you have?**

Ten fingers.



The artist picks away at the surface of his works with a wooden ceramics tool he adapted for the purpose. Jacob Pritchard

**What music do you play when you're making art?**

I listen to jazz, a lot of hip-hop, rap. I still love Nas' "Illmatic." J. Cole's "Forest Hills Drive" and "Born Sinner" are such great albums. Lately, I find myself listening to "The Pizza Show" on YouTube, or just various things about food.

**Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?**

Fried chicken. Or jerk chicken.

**When did you first feel comfortable saying you were a professional artist?**

After undergrad, where I majored in ceramics. I felt like there was hope, and I knew it's a journey that can only continue to get stronger, and so I felt comfortable in that moment to say: I'm a professional artist.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

I think the plaster-cast chicken foot wall elements that I made a couple years ago, and then there's a cast cake. I was crazy — I went to Costco, bought a cake, went to the butcher in Bushwick where I was living at the time, bought a chicken foot, pig feet, cow tongue and fish head and chopped them all up. I wanted to make this cake that celebrated the fucked-up nature of the British Empire, the structures. And so I made that cake, chopped it up, froze it, then cast it in alginate and epoxy plastic in my living room. And it's strange. Even though I eat those things, I still think it's strange.

**How often do you talk to other artists?**

I speak to a few artists on a regular basis: Yashua Klos, Kambui Olujimi, Cheryl Pope and Roberto Visani.





Smith's new exhibition "Junction," at Jack Shainman gallery, is a celebration of the immigrant experience and the importance of memory within the African diaspora. Pictured here is "Untitled" (2018-19).

Jacob Pritchard

**How do you get your news?**

Yahoo.

**What do you do when you're procrastinating?**

I watch YouTube, I look at flights, I think about leaving.

**What are you reading right now?**

I just picked up two books: David Scott's "Stuart Hall's Voice" and Paul Gilroy's "There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation." I'm also listening to an audiobook called "Rich Dad, Poor Dad" by Robert T. Kiyosaki.

**What do you usually wear when you work?**

I have a bunch of denim shirts and jeans, and some basic shoes. This shirt I wear the hell out of. I left it in London once and I had to go back to London to get it. It's from H&M, my jeans are either from Levi's or the Gap. And my hat is from American Apparel.

**What does your studio's window look out on?**

I have one window. I took the studio with the least amount of windows. It looks out on a back street, the Family Dollar and a granite foundry.

**What do you pay for rent?**

Too much.

**What do you buy in bulk?**

Arugula and spinach. I just love greens. Honest truth is I love food and so I buy things in bulk.

**What's your worst habit?**

Sucking my teeth.

**What embarrasses you?**

A lot of things — I can't get into specifics. I embarrass myself, too.

**Do you exercise?**

I go to the gym twice a week, and it's mainly to sweat. I just get cranky in the cold.

**What's your favorite artwork by somebody else?**

One of my favorite artworks is a painting in the Whitney's collection, it's called "Early Sunday Morning" by Edward Hopper.

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