

Artsy Vaughn Spann on 9 Black Artists He's Excited about Now

By Vaughn Spann and Allyssia Alleyne, January 31, 2022



Bob Thompson
Adoration (Pink and Blue Figures), 1962
Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

At only 20, Vaughn Spann has found the type of success most contemporary artists would be lucky to see within a lifetime. Since completing his MFA at the Yale School of Art in 2018, he's become renowned for formally rigorous mixed-media abstractions and surreal portraits that have sold for hundreds of thousands at auction, and been scooped up for the collections of the Rubell Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Hirshhorn, among others.

In honor of Black History Month, Spann curated "Under the Same Sun," a sale featuring works by Black artists from across the diaspora that have sparked his interest. Here, he shares what he admires about each artist, and makes the case for why they should be on your radar, too.

"I think I first encountered Khari's work through [gallerist] Destinee Ross-Sutton—I know she has a gallery now, so shout out to her gallery. She just has a finger on the pulse and is definitely working with some of the most significant young, emerging painters.

"I like Khari's work in terms of its materiality and how he's abstracting the form. It feels fresh; it feels fun. There's a serious undertone, clearly, but there's just something aesthetically pleasing about looking at the paintings.

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"He has a strong relationship to surface. He's able to build up material, but at times leave [the] surface area very open and flat. That creates a nice duality that allows [for different] interpretations and explorations of his figures and environments."

"Melvin is important to me. He's clearly a genius; he's a gem in terms of the art historical context. Seeing one of Melvin's sculptures in person, you can just feel the tension and feel the brilliance in it because of how he's able to abstract these recognizable objects with deep roots to the South that have so much history to them. His sculptures formally render themes related to trauma, slavery, and migration, and are both illegible yet utterly legible at the same time. There is just brute power and strength to his works that haunt you and ask for deep reflection.

"A lot of people aren't familiar with what he does on paper, and that's actually where I think he has so much strength. His other works can be very heavy, both literally and conceptually, but what he does on paper really opens up and then gives a lightness to some of the deeper meanings of the sculptures."

"Sam Gilliam has always been profound to me. The artists I most admire are artists [whose works] have different levels of movement and different levels of intensity to them, and he's a prime example in terms of all the work he's contributed over his lifetime. He's just able to find his way through so many different media: He's fantastic on paper, or canvas, or anything else he gets his hands on.

"I actually met Sam Gilliam at Yale—he wouldn't remember, of course, because I was like a blip on the wall. He had just given a lecture, and I was so fanboy-ish just to even see him at the School of Art at the time. I was like, 'Yo, this is crazy. Sam Gilliam's giving a lecture tonight!' It just made that time at Yale all the more magical."

"I've known Brenna's work for a long time. I think as a young Black painter working within abstraction, you try to find people who are doing that same thing, but the abstract side is always a little bit more limited. Like, you've really gotta seek it out. And I just remember finding Brenna's work and just feeling blown away by the way that she incorporates collage and assemblage into her painting, or just the trompe l'oeil of it all. It's amazing to see Brenna's longevity and the arc of her career because I've always been inspired by the work."

"Bob Thompson was like this folk legend and a rock star. He was very prominent in his time, and he gives me this Basquiat aura of intrigue. You just want to know more about him.

"I like that he allowed his paintings to be about color, or about painterly qualities or atmospheric qualities. But he also just found the most rambunctious things to paint about. I've always enjoyed the significance of allegory in the works—at times the figures feel like people or spirits, other times animals, and sometimes all of those. You can't decipher what exactly is going on, but you know something strange is occurring in a place unknown.

"When I think about Black painters in focus, I feel like we sometimes have so much weight on us to discuss things that are heavy. So if I can actually look at a work of art by another Black person and see something that just makes my day a little bit more light and airy, that's great. And Bob is someone that has always done that for me."

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“Hana is a younger, L.A.-based artist working with Ochi Projects. I saw the work a while back, and there’s this sense that the works are coming from her neighborhood or her community, or people she’s known. That’s great to me because those are things I think about as a painter. I like artists who are investigating their sense of space, their place and time. Some of the figures have these little, small heads and these big bodies; or the proportion and scale of things is a little bit wonky. I think the way she’s thinking about form is really fun, and I like the way she’s exploring.”

“Shikeith and I have known each other for five or six years now—since grad school. He’s a multidisciplinary artist working within photography, sculpture, installation, and film. When you know someone brilliant, it’s amazing to watch the trajectory or that arc of their career, and for me, Shikeith is that person. The works are just getting better and better.

“I actually own a work of Shikeith’s that I haven’t had a chance to hang on the wall yet. I bought it from a show he did at ltd los angeles. [In the photograph,] this guy is butt naked on a porch or something like that. He’s covered in soil, and he’s kneeling a little bit while holding his genitals, looking at the camera. It’s really a bizarre image, but there was something really compelling about it.

“I think that’s what makes Shikeith a great artist: He just really captures the soul of his subjects and creates these internal narratives that make you ponder what the hell’s going on. He has a sharpness to him, but there’s also a real vigor and soul to his works.”

“I am completely energized for Charlie. His overall sensibilities for abstraction and color are fantastic, and the paintings are really animated.

“I just think there’s really something about the way in which there’s a play to the work and there’s a seriousness to the work, but it’s also an exploration in terms of his forms, which are so articulate. The work is partially abstract, partially representational, but he’s really thinking about the way in which shape, color, and geometry invoke a narrative.

“He’s got a show at Deli Gallery coming up soon. I saw a preview for some of those works, and I was just blown away. I think he’s definitely an artist to look out for in 2022.”

“Virginia is another artist playing between abstraction and representation, but in a really fun way. A lot of her work has a printmaking element, and I respect anyone who has a printmaking background because I cannot printmake to save my life. I’ve always thought it was so cool when artists have been able to think about physicality and printmaking, and learn from that process to create the actual works.

“I was looking at a lot of Virginia’s large-scale paintings and there’s something about the materiality to them that I think is really refreshing. But there’s a scarceness, or a void throughout all of her paintings. I like how there’s a psychology in terms of the way she’s using the figures and compositions to evoke a plethora of different feelings.”