

How Vaughn Spann Became the Art World's New Favorite Painter



If you knew Vaughn Spann nine years ago in Orange, New Jersey, you probably didn't expect this. Then in high school, Spann was a track star, a varsity basketball player, and a science whiz on his way to Rutgers to study biology. He was always appreciative of art, but before his senior year, the only things he'd really draw were anime characters, which he'd discuss at length with his dorkier friends.

"I loved *Pokémon*, *Digimon*, *Dragon Ball Z* — I was that kid growing up," says Spann. And he never really got over those interests. "If it's late nights, I go on Adult Swim while everyone is sleeping and try to watch *Dragon Ball GT* or some shit. My wife is like, 'You gotta do better.'"

Spann doesn't follow sports or anime as devoutly as he once did. He is now 26 and married, a father of one child, with another on the way, and looking for real estate in Newark. He's also one of the brightest new stars in the art world, with his work featured in publications including *The New York Times* and pieces selling for thousands of dollars.



Today he's wearing a Pyer Moss tee — a mock neck reading "Stop calling 911 on the culture" — with tattooed arms on show. We're eating fries in a Midtown bar and he's pointing out the size of the salt grains. He can't help but notice details. Although his path was an unlikely one, it somehow makes perfect sense that he's accomplished what he has in such a short time.

At Rutgers Newark, the then-biology major took art classes under Denyse Thomasos, a Yale graduate who built a reputation in the art world for her semi-abstract paintings of prison systems. Her presence as a black woman of Trinidadian descent was deeply influential, and her belief in Spann drove him to change his major and pursue art full-time.

"She was the person who really pushed me and said, 'Hey, you're talented. Why don't you work with me for a while? I went to Yale. I'll be your advocate as a mentor and an artist,'" Spann explains.

But after working with Spann for a year, Thomasos passed away without warning. She'd had an allergic reaction to a material used during a routine medical procedure. She was 47.

"It was a traumatic situation," says Spann. "You go from having this belief in what you're doing, and then you just fall on your ass."

Spann took some time to recover and then continued his journey. "The great thing I took from that situation was to live life in a positive manner, to be extremely ambitious, to feel confident in who you are," he says.

Meeting Thomasos, a successful black artist who believed in him, helped him to believe in himself. Spann notes how important her support was in a society where the dreams of black children are often quelled. "I feel like black folks in particular, we need to have a certain level of worldliness, too," he says. "We need to embody a type of confidence in what we wanna pursue, even if it's not traditional."

Spann's growing ambitions complemented his vast creativity. "I keep a journal of all the things I've put out into the world," he says. "At some point, when I declared myself an artist, I said, 'I wanna go to Yale.' I put a status on Facebook." And so it happened.

But it wasn't easy. His first interview with Yale was a mess. Before his second, he had his first child. Suddenly, the pressure was higher than ever. But Spann had by that point become good at turning unwanted situations into strengths. Fatherhood motivated him to get his MFA in painting and printmaking. His surroundings, the sights he'd see on commutes to New York, inspired his creations. Yale accepted him on try number two, seeing a blossoming young artist with a capacity for absorbing the world and turning it into compelling work.



His work contains hints at childhood influences, particularly his fascination with iconography (as in his series of rainbow paintings). But he paints from those places, not about them. "I don't think my work or who I am as an artist is about delivering a concept or a particular message," he says. He's more interested in tracing his works to the moments, thoughts, and feelings that inspired their creation, before allowing the artworks to take on lives of their own.

Take his "X" series, for example, inspired by his experiences of racial profiling. "I was stopped and frisked for the first time while I was an undergrad student," he says. "I was walking home from studying at a friend's house. Cops pulled me over. Four other cop cars come by. They put me against a gate, and my hands are up, split. That same gesture echoes the X. And, for me, that's such a symbolic form, and so powerful to this contemporary moment, that I formally needed to figure out the components of that."

That doesn't mean his "X" paintings are about stop-and-frisks. They're about exactly what you see. In fact, part of what draws Spann to the "X" figure is the vast number of meanings an "X" can hold symbolically. He doesn't want to engender singular interpretations and despises limits and labels. "I need to allow myself to have a sort of freedom and not be limited to what I should be doing, as opposed to what I wanna do," he says.



If you want to know his opinions of the world, you're better off just asking him. He'll tell you, for one, about his disdain for art history survey courses that skim over black artists in favor of long-winded praise for European "masters."

"I was like, 'I'm not getting enough about people that look like myself and I really need that, for myself, for my confidence,'" he says. "I need to know that I'm accepted, I need to know my ideas are valid and that I belong in this conversation."

In 2019, it's clear Vaughn Spann belongs. He's been covered in the press relentlessly and his profile will only grow. Perhaps the fascination with him derives from his fascination with the world. His intelligence is defined by his ability to absorb. He is enamored with the process of creating and simply seeing. And his ambition, though tested, remains unfazed.

"I'm 6 foot 2," he says. "I always felt like a tall black kid walking through campus in an area I'm not necessarily supposed to be in. But I'm here."