

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

A Boundary-Busting Artist Seeks to ‘Learn Through the Chaos’

Two years after graduating art school, Vaughn Spann has museums collecting his work and a solo show opening in New York

By Kelly Crow
January 15, 2020



Photograph Courtesy Almine Rech

The art world tends to reward up-and-comers who create singular bodies of work that are easy to identify—and therefore sell—but Florida-born artist Vaughn Spann is poised to become the season’s breakout star by taking the opposite approach.

The 27-year-old artist’s solo show opening Wednesday at New York’s Almine Rech Gallery looks like it could have been painted by a motley group: The pieces swing from thickly textured abstracts to smoothly surreal portraits. One of these, “Parisian Girls,” depicts a woman with two heads petting a pair of Dalmatians. Other canvases contain universal symbols like U.S. flags and X’s.

Last month, the same artist caused a social-media stir when he unveiled a wall-size depiction of a quivering rainbow at Miami’s Rubell Museum during Art Basel, but his new show intentionally lacks rainbows—another market-confounding dodge.

ALMINE RECH

“I don’t want to choose one conversation,” Mr. Spann said. “I want to be rebellious and think through lots of ideas. I learn through the chaos.”

The artist’s maverick methods are attracting the attention of major galleries like Gagosian, which included Mr. Spann’s work in a group show curated by dealer Bill Powers a few months ago. Mr. Powers discovered Mr. Spann’s work while the artist was still in school.

Mr. Spann is also garnering praise from more established artists like Titus Kaphar, who describes Mr. Spann as being “visually bilingual, alternating between the languages of abstraction and figuration.” Since graduating with a master’s in fine art from Yale two years ago, Mr. Spann’s work has already been collected by at least eight museums, including the Rubell and Atlanta’s High Museum. His show at Almine Rech runs through Feb. 22.

Mr. Spann isn’t the first artist to attempt a varied practice. German postwar artist Martin Kippenberger was known for mixing up his styles and subject matter. German painter Gerhard Richter still creates distinct bodies of work, toggling between abstracts and paintings that evoke blurry photographs. Yet Mr. Spann, who is black, said artists of color in the U.S. used to be criticized if they attempted to stretch beyond artistic norms. By way of example, he mentioned artist Howardena Pindell, who has often spoken about the flak she got from curators in the 1960s because she wanted to paint abstracts at a time when black artists were better known for painting figures.

Mr. Spann said his mash-up became his way of pushing against this hemmed-in history. Early on during his graduate studies in art, his professors balked at his experiments juxtaposing figurative paintings with seemingly dissimilar abstracts. Rather than give it up, he said he decided to “double down on the mess,” he said. “There had to be a way to do messy better.”

Today, those who burrow into his growing oeuvre will spot common elements. Most of his paintings, including the abstracts, recall memories he made during his working-class, small-town upbringing in Florida and later in Orange, N.J. His untitled painting of a U.S. flag in the show uses bits of terry cloth and pays homage to his grandfather, who fought in the Korean War, as well as his grandmother, who often sought his help folding towels.

Mr. Spann started his “Marked Man” series of X-shape paintings after being stopped and frisked by police. “I just remember feeling frozen, standing in a hands-up position,” he said.

Then there’s the flag and the dollar bill. I’m trying to better understand the connection between American iconography and what it really means.

Painting is the best way to observe something. By replicating the dollar bill, I saw things that most people don’t notice with the normal handling of it—like the spiderwebs and the small owl in the top right corner of the bill.

He started painting rainbows after learning that Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer in 2012, had Skittles in his pocket. For him, these rainbows represented an intense period of political outcry, but when he showed these works to a friend who is gay, he said she found them joyful—and this jarringly different interpretation felt in sync with what he was trying to achieve as an artist.

The same might be also be said of his two-headed portraits, which started off as political protest but have morphed into something different. He said he first painted a black boy with two heads a few years ago to be a symbol of watchful vigilance, but lately he’s started painting polycephalous people in more tranquil postures, petting their dogs or lounging at the beach. He said even though these works fleck to troubling issues of race, class and identity, he is determined to keep switching up his own tropes. “Now, I’m allowing them to relax.”