On discovering what excites you

Painter and installation artist Alteronce Gumby discusses finding your interests in the unknown, harnessing parallels between artistic disciplines, and forever being a student.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2836 words.

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Color and patterns are the primary touchstones of your paintings. You're also making a documentary called *COLOR*. Can you talk about how one can harness a singular fascination to create works of art or build an artistic career?

It's really following an interest, and I don't know if it's one singular thing. It's multiple moments that lead up—or multiple interests that divert you—to a single path of creativity, discovery, and interest. Especially when you're an artist or someone just moving through life, maybe through grade school, you're given this path. But then, at a certain point, it's always good to venture into the unknown by yourself and figure things out on your own.

Some people go on a walkabout, they go on a Euro tour, they go to India for a month, or they change states, they pick a different career. You put yourself in a place where you're a little uncomfortable or something is new or foreign to you, and through that, you have this sense of discovery of who you are, and maybe an interest intrigues you enough that it then becomes your life passion and drives you to become the person you know you've always wanted to be.

I had this moment of discovery when I was studying architecture in my first year of college. I was interested in architecture design, but it wasn't until I went on a study abroad during my freshman year of college that I was introduced to art. We were in Barcelona and we went to the Picasso Museum. That was my first time in an art museum. It was my first time in a foreign country.

Having dinner with people that night, I kind of knew to myself that I was done with architecture. I didn't want to say it to everyone there, especially my architecture professor, because that would've made for a very uncomfortable rest of the trip. But I knew then. I was like, "I'm done with architecture and interested in something else." It wasn't until a few years later that I knew art would become a thing that I would then build a lifestyle around. I put myself in that position to open me up to the possibilities of discovering.

When you talk about it, it sounds like your way of finding what you want to do, and the artistry that you want to pursue, was just living life.

Yeah. And it's living life a certain way. It's living life the way I desire to live. I feel very fortunate to be an artist and living with my work, and every day, I wake up and I get to be creative, and I get to decide how my day's going to go. I get to decide the task. And also, having a sense of liberty where I actually travel as part of my inspiration, as part of my research. I'm constantly on a plane going somewhere, and it's work-related. That's part of my lifestyle.

You're saying that, in early adulthood, you realized you were going to be an artist. Were there moments in your

childhood when you realized this? Did you have an artistic upbringing?

No. I didn't know being an artist was a thing when I was a kid. I grew up in a very religious household. My mother was a pastor. My father worked for the state as a custodian. It was very working-class. When I was growing up, everyone encouraged me to pursue that path. Most of my family worked for the state of Pennsylvania in some various department. When I was telling my family I was going to go to college for architecture, they immediately told me, "You could work for this department for the state, designing buildings for the state of Pennsylvania."

The creative thing I was really into when I was a kid was music.It wasn't until later that I discovered fine art. I moved to New York to pursue a music career, not a painting or a fine art career. That art came later as I wasn't making it as a musician.

As you've focused on visual art, have you remained creative with music, or has it just become a thing you enjoy?

I was such a student of music. There's a certain way in which you construct a song. You have to find a melody, you have to find this mood that you're going for. You find the scale that relates to that mood. You're writing lyrics that are trying to tell a story, or give this relation to an experience you've had in the past, that will also resonate with the audience. And then, on the technical side, you're using various mediums, in terms of sounds and instruments, to build up this melody, to construct this song.

In some ways, I'm still thinking about that. I feel like, still, when I'm making a painting, I'm thinking about what key it is, in terms of a palette. I'm thinking about scales. I'm thinking about what color sits next to what, or what hue is in relationship to this, to give this essence, this melody or mood of the painting. And then, through the alchemy of materials, I'm kind of being a music producer, where maybe I'm constructing a little bit more bass in the composition, or maybe I'm bringing certain things down, or certain gemstones I'm using, I want them to be a bit more high-key. There's definitely a correlation and a creative relationship between music and fine art.

I'm also looking at other mediums, like filmmaking. When I look at a painting, I get really close to the artwork, trying to see how this thing is constructed. And within that, a story is being told. A narrative is being portrayed to you as you look at an artwork, especially as an art maker, on how it was constructed. I feel like we do the same thing when we're looking at a movie. You know whether you're looking at a film that was recorded on an iPhone versus something shot with a really high-definition camera, and how those edits are cut from one scene to the next. There's intention behind all of these things. Intention and certain moves, and the way certain things are constructed, transitions from music to making a painting, making a film.

How did you learn to expand into filmmaking from the paintings and other forms of art you're better-versed in?

I've always been into the performing arts. When I was at Yale, I collaborated with a few students from the Yale School of Drama, which I feel like is where I got my minor in, where I was in a few productions. I was building up this performance background repertoire and started taking some acting classes after I graduated. I was always moving in the direction of making a film. I always had the desire of making a film. I was really working towards that in some way, shape, or form.

This year, I set aside some time for myself to do a year of research and development. I was going to take a good portion of this year to travel and refuel on inspiration before I jumped into my next big project or exhibition. I set out a few places I wanted to go to. I thought to myself, "It would be really cool to document this experience." And then, maybe, I'd use it as a part of my exhibition promotion later.

I started talking to a few filmmaker friends in the art world, and one of them was John Campbell. I asked him, "I'm thinking about making this documentary. How would you shoot it?" I was thinking about shooting it on my iPhone, and then I started talking to a few friends who said, "No, you should definitely use a video camera and meet up with a few people along the way to help you shoot it, just to get different perspectives."

I talked to John about it and told him the idea. He said, “This sounds really intriguing.” He asked me to put it in a one-pager for him. Apparently, that was his way of testing me. That turned into him coming back and telling me he was really into the project and would be willing to help me put this documentary together. That happened in January of this year, 2023. From then till now, we’ve shot so much. It’s developed into this full-blown documentary about color.

I feel like it’s an extension of my practice in the sense that I’m talking about all the ideas that have influenced me to make paintings about color. But now, I feel like the audience gets to see. They get to go on a journey with me, from having conversations in my studio with people like Michael Ambron to Tomashi Jackson to Cara Piazza, to traveling internationally and domestically, from Mardi Gras in New Orleans to the Holi Celebration in India. All these things have their aspects and perspectives on color and things that I feel like [are] just part of this world. It’s something we should all go out and experience.

You have a BFA and an MFA. How has formal training shaped your artistic process?

I was not a good student in grade school. I almost failed, or was held back in, high school. I went to summer school every year in high school except for my senior year. It wasn’t until I went to school for art that I actually became a straight-A student. I was part of the Honors Society. I was getting scholarships awarded to me. It gave me structure and a sense to really hone in. Being a part of educational institutions definitely helped me become a better student. It taught me how to do research and fueled that hunger for knowledge that I still carry with me to this day. I’m still very much a student, and I’m going to be a student for the rest of my life.

I feel like part of this documentary is just showing people how much of a nerd I am and just wanting to ask questions and seek information. I still go to art museums every week to learn about new artists and educate myself. I feel like a lot of those tools and habits are something I developed while I was a student at Hunter College and Yale.

Knowing that you work with gemstones and tempered glass has made me wonder: To what extent do your materials and media dictate your process, or vice versa?

The gemstones came from thinking about the history of color, the history of pigments, and where they come from. Pigments originally started out from organic matter like gemstones or plant and animal life. What drove me was learning that [Neanderthal] cave paintings were made from gemstones like red ochre or red jasper, and yellow ochre or red jasper, and also charcoal, from burnt wood. I really started wanting to know more about these materials.

If you fast-forward, a lot of those minerals, like lapis, red jasper, ochre, and emerald, were grounded up by chemists and developed by what they call paintmen in the Renaissance Era, where artists would go to these people to buy paint. To go [in] the other direction, all these gemstones and minerals were forged in the Earth’s crust thousands to millions of years [ago]. All of that matter that was attracted to the earth by gravity from asteroids or meteorites hitting the earth—and growing and forging throughout the earth’s crust—turned into, over time, through heat and volcanic eruptions, floods, and climate change, these gemstones.

All these gemstones hold the history of this planet, and they hold the history of our solar system and galaxy. When I’m using gemstones, I’m holding a piece of history. I’m using material that is older than me. It’s older than human existence altogether. All that matters is telling a much larger story than I could ever tell from my own personal history of being on this planet for 37 years. But then, the more I looked into it, I started realizing that the color of the gemstones is attuned to the frequency they give off. Just as human beings give off frequencies and energy, so do these gemstones.

Human beings started to mine these materials and turn them into dry medium, which then gets transferred into wet medium, which is oil paint, acrylic paint, dyes that we use for fabric. The transformation of matter, time, and color is all embedded in these gemstones. When I’m using these gemstones in my artwork, I’m not only talking about my own personal history, as I often do. I’m also speaking to the history of the cosmos or this planet.

It sounds like you've been able to make a full-on living out of your art. How have you been able to turn your artistic pursuits and creativity into a sustainable career?

Early on, I realized that being a working artist also means that I'm a small business owner. I feel like, a lot of times, when people start saying, "I want to be an artist, a musician, an actor, anything in the creatives," we often forget that, in the eyes of capitalism, you're either an independent contractor or a small business owner. You're an entity.

Once I realized I was a small business owner, I started educating myself as if I was running a small business, because I was. I had to figure out, how much money is coming in? How much money do I need to pay my rent, to pay my monthly expenses, in relation to how much my artwork costs and how many artworks I have to sell to feed myself this month or next month? Once that mentality started to shift for me, then I started transitioning into [being] a full-time artist and making sure I was selling enough artwork, or having enough opportunities for myself to sell artwork, so that I could live off it.

In the beginning, it wasn't easy. I did a lot of residencies that would give me a stipend or some sort of support to help me make my work. A lot of it, before I was signed with a gallery, was reaching out to collectors directly and asking them to come over, take a look at my work, and see if they would be interested. It took a lot of hustle, and especially being in New York, where the cost of living is very high, I had to hustle a little harder. But the good thing about being in New York is that the art market is here. It's kind of the capital of the art market. It's Paris in the '20s. There's a lot of art collectors, there's a big art scene, there's a lot of support for the arts, and I was able to make it work.

Alteronce Gumby Recommends:

Five Recommendations: About COLOR and Travel

In **New Orleans**, make sure to travel there on Fat Tuesday to witness the Mardi Gras Indians! They have the most colorful costumes out of all the parades I got to see. The Mardi Gras Indians and their traditions date back to the 1800s when Native Americans helped shield runaway slaves. Mardis Gras Indian culture is influenced by both ancestral enslaved Africans and the friendship forged with Native Americans.

In **India**, you must stop by Mathura to learn more about the powders, or gulal, used during the Holi Celebration. There are about 25 different shades which hold their own meaning. For example, red symbolizes love and fertility while blue represents Kirshna, the Hindu God of protection and compassion.

In **Morocco**, saffron is a purple flower which grows in the fields of Taliouine. Typically lasting three weeks in late October or early November, women gather early in the morning to complete the day's harvest before the sunlight hits and the flowers begin to bloom. We'll be traveling to Morocco in June to learn more about saffron!

In **Australia**, Coral reefs are bright and colorful because of the algae that live in them. When water temperatures rise too high, the algae are forced out of the coral, causing the reefs to lose color and potentially die. If you're traveling there, make sure not to touch the coral or anchor your boat on the reef. Here's a link to what you can do to protect the coral reefs including recycling and disposing of waste properly!

In **Norway**, The Northern Lights can be seen when the sky is clear and dark, and the optimal conditions are usually when the weather is cold and dry. Between mid-September until early April is the best time to visit if you'd like to see the aurora borealis!

Name
Alteronce Gumby

Vocation
painter, installation artist

Peter Garafalo and Rishabh Gupta