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DIVE IN THE ARCHIVE

CEY ADAMS, DEPARTURE: 40 YEARS OF ART AND DESIGN, CURATED BY LIZA QUIÑONEZ AND YUTONG SHI

Stone Gallery, Boston University, 4 October–11 December 2022

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The usual career retrospective reflects on the achievements accumulated over a career of work. The highlights contain a linearity that eschews the significance of revision. And as such, retrospectives often lack the opportunity to explore how the subject is shaped by the culture and how the subject participates in the shaping of the culture as well as its evolution.

But in the case of graffiti pioneer, Cey Adams, his career serves as a prism through which we can understand, yes, his impact, but more critically, an era, a series of movements, and a visual practice and aesthetic that articulated a reconsideration of what it meant and still means to belong in America. The exhibition, *CEY ADAMS, DEPARTURE: 40 Years of Art and Design*, offered one such retrospective and in so doing, he unearthed an opportunity for viewers of the exhibition to revisit their own understanding of the hip hop movement's evolution and cultural development.

In 1993, Cey Adams's words were strewn across a *New York Times* Sunday article with the headline 'Too legit to quit'. His message was singular: his work, and that of other artists like him, was not seen as professional, not respected as part of the fundament of the imagined and real. Adams told Michel Marriott, former *Times* reporter, 'I've gotten ripped off enough in this business' because somehow as a graffiti artist he wasn't seen as a 'professional set designer' – despite the crossover appeal, the transferability of his skillset – and, as such, he received far less pay (Marriott 1993: 8). It is perhaps this quote that best situates the context of the Adams exhibition and subsequently the way in which his career represents a cultural evolution. In part because his words articulated at his exhibition bear little resemblance to the words he uttered in 1993.

Stuart Hall provided a reason for why, though not directly pertaining to Adams, writing that popular culture is a

theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies. It is where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.

(Hall 1993: 113)

These theatres of popular desires often are overwrought with sentiments biased in favour of the artistic and cultural outputs from non-marginalized communities. To that end, Cey Adams's *DEPARTURE* exhibit at the Boston University's (BU) Stone Gallery displayed how and in what forms our popular fantasies have indeed taken shape and, in fact, evolved. This gallery, among many other labels, should be considered an indictment of how we remember those who have created the visual depictions of the messy amalgam of American culture from the vantage of hip hop.

Brands, companies, galleries, wealthy and elite patrons, and the like have participated in the changing of their and our, popular desires. They try to identify trends and situate their work as propellers of, trendsetters within or explicit contrarians of this set of popular desires and emergent culture. At the time that Adams gave his interview to Marriott, that theatre of popular desires did not value his work. Less than a couple of decades earlier, Adams, a self-proclaimed child of the 1960s, was displaying his work on canvases not legitimized by mainstream tastemakers and cultural gatekeepers.

But in the *DEPARTURE* exhibition, we might see the transformation in the same room, giving, perhaps, to those who have not carefully marked the phenomenon of this cultural transformation, an illusion of its rapidity.

Whether it was designs for the Beastie Boys or album covers for DMX, Jay-Z, LL Cool J and the list goes on (while he was head of Def Jam Records' internal design arm, the Drawing Board), Adams's artistic expressions captured and powered, visually, the contouring of the emergence of the hip hop movement (Figure 1). It was from the exterior and margins of society where his artistic expression – specifically graffiti existed.

But let Adams tell it: 'I started out and I was doing graffiti. I transitioned to graphic design, and I also got the opportunity to make Fine Art'. But admittedly, one must wonder if graffiti, graphic design and fine art are all of a piece. His influences, but also friends and peers, as he mentioned, were Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat (Figure 2), whose own art might have started on the periphery of what was considered fine art, but whose work now fetches millions of dollars and whose originals can rarely be viewed outside of galleries, museums and or selective personal collections.

Adams's exhibition demonstrates that his rise as an artist has not been just a function of his talent – ascendant though it is. It has also been a function of two tendencies which Adams, both in his words and his exhibited works, conveys: (1) the centring of hip hop as a core American cultural output, even if the essence of hip hop's emergence has been cultivated in standing in opposition to the American cultural production and (2) Adams's adherence to the tenets of revision as a core ethic in his craft.

Though Adams's ascent gained widespread social currency in the 1990s, his work, as previously mentioned, could be understood in his early days of



Figure 1: Album covers designed by Cey Adams and Steve Carr of the Drawing Board, 2022. Photo by Jacob Chang-Rascale.



Figure 2: The broad scope of Cey Adams's art on display, 2022. Photo by Jacob Chang-Rascale.

subway graffiti, which by his own admission he adapted into graphic design for countless covers of albums during this period. Street art, though, was considered perilous by some. Adams, though a well-regarded street artist, could have been regarded as only what law enforcement authorities sought to see him as: a broken window. At the time, under the leadership of Rudy Giuliani, the then-mayor of New York, small acts of expression or even lack of

expression, just existence (through the form of loitering) could land those who practised street art in legal trouble.

Perhaps that is the essentiality of hip hop both now and then: to stand beyond the vanguards of what is considered acceptable and stretch the centre to accommodate that which has existed on the periphery. In his own words, in 2006, Adams described graffiti as being ‘words and images work[ing] together to communicate an idea’ (Chang 2006: 119). ‘One of the things I immediately thought about when I started to approach the idea of graphic design was that I am hip-hop’, Adams continued (Chang 2006: 122). So even in the graphic design to which he had adapted his street graffiti techniques, he still articulated a need to wonder aloud what his work could do and how it can reflect his origins: ‘Where’s the graffiti? Where’s the dripping paint? This doesn’t look street enough’. And I said, ‘It’s in me, and it’s in the artist. Why does it always have to be on the page? Why does it have to be something that’s plain to the naked eye?’ (Chang 2006: 122).

It is the naked eye that might see only skilful design, maybe even the capturing of a movement, a mood and musical styling. Yet the naked eye might miss the hidden transcripts. Robin D. G. Kelley wrote,

Despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a ‘hidden transcript’, a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices. One also finds the hidden transcript emerging ‘onstage’ in spaces controlled by the powerful, though almost always in disguised forms.

(1993: 77)

Displayed behind Adams during his talk was one of his more recent pieces, a painted flag, an American one, that contains multitudes not ordinarily and certainly not initially accommodated in the creation of the traditional American flag (Figure 3). For Adams, the flag was ‘a canvas to tell an incredible story about who we are’. The flag – replete with collage images – became narrative



Figure 3: Cey Adams with American Flag (Black), mixed media collage on panel, 2017. © Janette Beckman.

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to be reconstructed which has had the effect of, as Adams put it, 'changed his life'. Comprised of pictures containing the scenes of subjection, protestation, joy and angst, the flag contained scripts both overt and subtle. Hip hop is in fact in him, and in finding the ways to reconstruct life on the canvas – life both real and imagined. And it is that essentiality of hip hop which is imbued in him that displays the revision he not only applies to himself but to the very emblem of patriotism: the American flag.

Adams cannot escape a quotidian endeavour for the artist: to survive. His exhibition and his talk made clear that there exists for the artist the need to live despite the difficulty to do so. It is the difficult task of both becoming artist, embracing the identity of artist and living enough to see the art through that we often reflect on as trio of tasks – becoming, embracing and living while surviving – which make the artist's life. But then, in terms of audience impact, we then must consider, especially in ages where our consumption patterns have changed so drastically, what it means to capture peoples' attention. It is in this that we find the cultural workings of hip hop to have changed – likewise to all cultural work that exists within a capitalist framework where, as Adams put it in a gallery talk (21 November 2022), cultural workers like him need to 'figure out what can keep the culture moving forward' whilst also 'keeping the lights on'.

This dualist task – keeping the culture moving forward and keeping the lights on – is perhaps the life quandary many artists find themselves in, especially when the culture he is trying to keep moving forward stands outside what is accepted by mainstream purveyors of culture. However, in a talk accompanying a recent exhibition at the University of Michigan, Adams articulates a personal axiom which he turned into a message for his listeners, many of whom were students:

I know a lot of times that we're taught that brands and big businesses are bad. But I will tell you that there are a couple of opportunities and situations where big brands really do understand the power of creative and they really will give you an opportunity to shine, especially if they understand that you understand not only the audience but how you communicate their message with pride and integrity.

(Adams 2022)

Adams embraced corporate commissions as a collaborator. Therefore, we see that in 2014, he was chosen to redesign the Google Doodle on its signature landing page in honour of hip hop's 44th anniversary. Even in his *BU DEPARTURE* exhibition and in his prior talks, he refers with gleeful pride to his reimagination of the Levi Strauss flagship store in New York and many of their products. The same could be said of his work for consumer-packaged goods, brands, apparel and the like (featuring recognized consumer brands like Mattel or Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer). His work with corporate brands reflects not only Adams's ability to adapt in order to 'keep the lights on', and fulfil his desire to 'keep the culture moving forward', but it also reflects the changes within that theatre of popular desires to accept products from the culture of hip hop it formerly did not accept.

This transition from street-based and subway graffiti, to hip hop-oriented graphic design, to gallery art and to corporate graphic design reflects an ethic of revision. Kiese Laymon wrote in his seminal memoir, *Heavy*, 'I learned you

haven't read anything if you've only read something once or twice. Reading things more than twice was the reader version of revision' (Laymon 2018: 143). This, too, could be said of the work of Adams who stated,

I was someone who wrote graffiti. That was where I got my first education about formal design. I honestly didn't even know what design was before that. And for me, I think that was the first time when I really started to think about how words and images worked together in order to communicate an idea.

(Chang 2006: 119)

That communication between words and images is in fact an iterative process which requires revisiting concepts and terms. Doing, undoing and redoing how words and images interact and build upon one another and then subsequently how he, Adams, became known for it, requires revision. His gallery exhibition, while an ode to many aspects of his career, his accomplishments and paths he has paved, is more than anything else an ode to revision.

bell hooks would likely valorize Adams more than he would valorize himself, especially for this revision he has applied to his craft, his career and to the cultural products which this country might or might not value (Jhally 1997). In his words, '[p]eople think I'm making some radical statement. I just like to tell stories about people I love' (Jhally 1997). But within hooks's framework, Adams is both a culture worker and a culture critic, an enlightened witness. Adams discussed how his 'friends created a cultural movement' and like the artists, writers, archivists, architects and historians of any age, he documented their experiences. To borrow once again from Hall, Adams repopulated the theatre of popular desires with impressionistic and surrealistic renderings of our experiences – in ways fantastical, aspirational, imagined, real and quotidian. He reconsidered and recast our evolving ways of capturing and conveying Black life. But within a culture worker's identity, he does not shy away from the realities of the work and the need to exist and live and thrive: 'I'm trying to stay alive', he told his audience, but he does so by 'trying to show people that they are enough'. His *DEPARTURE* exhibition is an ode to that notion of being enough and that hip hop was, is and always can be enough; that his street graffiti, his graphic design, his fine art, his reinvention of everything from the American flag to iconic brands are all enough. The criticality of his work, the criticality of this exhibit is the expression of being enough, in spite of a world that might say otherwise.

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