BOMB

Pastiche Lumumba by Brian Droitcour

Documenting Black culture on the internet.

By Brian Droitcour
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Pastiche Lumumba, *Cut the Cameras, Deadass*, 2025, oil on canvas, 8 × 11 inches. Photo by the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

Most memes have a shelf life of five to ten days. Use a format two weeks after it blew up, and you'll look like a laggard. Better to wait six months, when the meme will feel like a callback, when the passage of time has added layers of humor and meaning. Just as a review of an exhibition in a newspaper can feel tossed off in the moment but yield insights into the views and values of the time when an art historian revisits it decades later, memes capture something of a current public mood and can be used to understand how it has changed. Pastiche Lumumba has been making memes for over a decade, and these days he starts his morning by checking Facebook Memories to see what surfaces so that he can remember what was happening five or eight years ago and how he expressed his take on it. By looking to the past, he gets a sense of where we are now.

Last year, Lumumba started the series Images You Can Hear, which are paintings of stills from videos in which Black celebrities and content creators utter iconic phrases. Nine of these paintings are included in Code Switch: Distributing Blackness, Reprogramming Internet Art, an exhibition initiated by the Kitchen in New York City and now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. In the interview below, Lumumba discusses memes as a vehicle of critique and as a cultural form he wants to preserve through

museological practices of care and provenance.

Brian Droitcour
What does it mean for you to paint a still from a viral video?

Pastiche Lumumba
One of the many aging millennial crises that my peers and I have been experiencing is the loss of online culture. As a twentysomething in the early 2010s, I took it for granted that if something was on the internet it would be there forever. This is not the case. My painting project came out of a necessity to preserve those videos. Paintings have a history of being stored, having provenance, being curated—of literally being saved in time.

BD
The images you paint are connected to certain sounds and phrases. Do you have a way of exhibiting the audio with the paintings?

PL
It's very important for me to keep the downloaded file, and if I transfer the paintings I include the video file. But nobody I've talked to has been interested in exhibiting the videos. There's an assumption that the context is understood. I disagree with that. I'm still trying to figure out how to include it. As a music-adjacent person, I think of myself as sampling these things in a way that a Jersey or Baltimore club DJ would sample viral videos and put them into a track.

BD
Has painting always been a part of your practice, or is it relatively recent?

Pastiche Lumumba, *Woke Gentrifyer Starter Pack*, 2019, various found objects, acrylic, 24 × 24 inches. Photo by the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

BD
It seems like meme-making is a less significant part of your practice these days. Why is that? How have you seen the context for memes change?

PL
When I was a teenager, the big meme format was the inspirational poster. They'd get posted to message boards. There were no authors. They were supposed to be general expressions of axiomatic truisms. In the mid-2010s, Weird Facebook became a thing. There were groups of people who had meme cabals, making memes together and branding them, like Lettuce Dog or Cabbage Cat. After that, when Facebook bought Instagram, there was the auteur era of memes. People like Gangster Popeye, Cory in the Abyss, Yung Nihilist, and myself had very clear styles. You could see it in the font choice, the bisexual lighting gradients in the background, even the words being used. That's where I came up. We'd meet up IRL at dance parties with memes projected in the background.

I haven't become disillusioned with memes. But the scene declined because making memes didn't bring any money or opportunities. Some people have made a career of being a content creator, but I don't know anyone who gets paid to shitpost the way the best meme-makers I know were shitposting.

BD
Memes have become a vehicle for cultural commentary, and a few people have gotten some visibility by using them to talk about the art world—Jerry Gagosian, Brad Troemel, freeze.de, Avocado Ibuprofen. Often the appeal of these memes comes from the juxtaposition of references to the art world and to online subcultures. Do you think of those meme-makers as peers, or do you feel like you're doing something else with the format?

Pastiche Lumumba, *Wack*, 2025, oil on canvas, 8 × 8 inches. Photo by the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

PL
Brad Troemel's memes critique tropes of art history and the contemporary art market, whereas my critiques were aimed at people who exist right now. I stopped wanting to talk shit and speak the truth in ways that would jeopardize my career. The critical lens through which I see things just happens to be more antagonistic to institutions because I'm a young Black person. In 2017, the Guggenheim had a show of Chinese art called *Theater of the World* named after a work by Huang Yong Ping where live insects and reptiles fight for survival in a big cage. They pulled that work from the show before it opened because animal-rights protesters made "threats of violence." I was like, Shit, if threats of violence can get a work pulled, let's go threaten some other museums!

Because anti-Blackness exists, I don't get the same grace. What I have to say, while still comedic, seems more antagonistic to the core of what these institutions stand for. Last summer, after Kamala Harris said something about Hamas, I made a meme with the Brat cover that said, "You think Hamas just fell out of a coconut tree?" That's not going to circulate the same way as a meme about something Chris Burden did forty years ago. In short, my memes aren't safe. That's why in the last ten years I've leaned into the fact that my practice is about the passage of time. It will make sense in the future, but people who are curating shows about institutional critique are not going to feature something that's critical of the views of whoever is on the museum board right now.

"Because anti-Blackness exists, I don't get the same grace. What I have to say, while still comedic, seems more antagonistic to the core of what these institutions stand for."
— Pastiche Lumumba

BD
Is there a critical element in your paintings of viral videos? Or are they more celebratory?

PL
I like that word—*celebratory*. On an external level, they are fun and celebratory. On an internal level, I think about how they exist as a catalogue to be deployed when the time is right. When I painted the image of @ lilleezyv on TikTok from the video where she says, "Y'all weak in the knees. Stand up!" I posted a screenshot for the six hours when TikTok was shut down when Trump got in office. I make the paintings in advance because I know that they will become relevant.

Pastiche Lumumba, *Bae*, 2015, neon, 36 × 36 inches. Photo by the artist. Courtesy of the artist.

BD
These questions of context are relevant to the idea of the exhibition title *Code Switch*, which posits a tradition of Black internet art, and I'm curious what you think of the phenomenon of Black net art or even a Black internet. Would you describe something like "Black Twitter" a community of users, an idiom, a set of practices, or something else?

PL
The way Blackness moves on the internet is a major concern of my work. Going back to manuel arturo abreu's "Online Imagined Black English" or Aria Dean's "Rich Meme, Poor Meme," a lot of my work is about cataloging gestures that get misappropriated and taken from their context. One of my favorite works ever is *Notes on Gesture* (2015) by Martine Syms, which is from her show *Vertical Elevated Oblique* at Bridget Donahue. It's a video of Diamond Stingily doing vocals and gestures from vernacular Black English. Ten years later that video exists as a document that can refute news articles about Gen Z slang, referring to things that Black people have been saying IRL for forty years.

Since the advent of the internet, there has been a need for work that catalogs the provenance gestures that would otherwise fall into the oblivion of nonattribution. Blackness moves on the internet in a way where people erase the authorship. Language spreads in a very diffuse and vernacular fashion, such as when a white girl misappropriated the saying that a person's "body is tea" in a video where she said "her body tea is amazing." And then Black people on Twitter started using "body tea" as a noun in and of itself. Part of my work—and this relates to my work in *Code Switch*—is preserving and documenting Black culture from the internet. It seems almost silly while I'm doing it. But somebody at some point is going to say, This came from nowhere, when in fact it came from a very specific video. If people see a painting by me in a museum and then go look me up, I'll be pointing them to the person who actually made what I painted. A painting can get shown in a museum in a way that a TikTok can't. Not now, probably not ever, because that platform might not exist in five years. It will be lost in the same way that we've lost everything else. The work that I'm making now is providing a link from the original thing that I lived through in real time to the infrastructure of provenance that exists in the art world and is not afforded to the original creators.

Pastiche Lumumba's work can be seen in the group exhibition Code Switch: Distributing Blackness, Reprogramming Internet Art *at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit in Detroit until August 10.*

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