

# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Pricco, Evan, "Troy Lamarr Chew II: The Visual Linguist," *Juxtapoz*, Issue #223, Fall 2022



At first glance, the Slanguage series appears to be a playful confetti of pop culture and simple everyday life. Bart Simpson joyously dances down the aisles of a grocery store, a Smurf snoozes on a pile of cabbage, and Sponge Bob dutifully mops the floor. For Troy Lamarr Chew II, the LA-based, SF-trained painter, these works serve as a place for pop and still life iconography to celebrate lyricism and choreography, employing hip-hop sayings and the history of dance to create compositions that vividly portray a deeper sense of how cultures present themselves. In his show this past winter at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, *The Roof is On Fire*, viewers could download an app to actually see, on top of the paintings, the dances that Chew was painting, the different poses where he captures his characters in motion. It was innovative and playful, but also, a psychological study of what we see and how we see art in the 21st century.

While this seems to portray Chew as some sort of digital visionary, he's much more of an Old World painter than you might presume based on this exhibition. Taking art historical narratives like still-life paintings, the self-portrait, and Folk Art, Chew then takes the most contemporary and evolving language of hip-hop and its coded meanings and applies them to these overarching motifs. With a background in psychology he hypothesizes his ideas in each series, but underscoring the work is a manifestation of the self as constantly evolving and exploring. The work is dense but approachable, and at heart, the dissemination of modern language through a dynamic, visually historic form.



**Evan Pricco: You grew up in LA and live there now, but your art career really started in San Francisco. Since everyone has a different opinion on the subject, what do you perceive as differences between the two?**

*Troy Lamarr Chew II:* Well, the thing that came to my head is better weed in the Bay. That is the first thing. I'm just getting acquainted with the art world in LA. Things are opening now, but I haven't been going out too much yet because I've been painting. So I haven't really met too many art folks, though I have met art school folks, like people who go to UCLA. I don't really know the gallery people. There are just so many tiers of separation in the art world in LA, whereas, in the Bay, everybody just kicks it together. The old Bay Area person that's been known forever would be hanging out with the younger person who's coming up.

**Weed and tiers! Let's move on to what I really wanted to start with, and that's your study of psychology. Given that background, give me a little bit of a breakdown of what you think is going on right now in the world right now? I promise this will lead to another question.**

I don't even know if my psychological background is going to step into this one because, honestly, it's just all these money problems going on. Big world, people with money, all the stuff that we can't control as little people, money issues contaminating the whole world. That's what I feel like.

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**What did you learn from psychology that helped you become a painter or helped you become an artist? I would think this would be an ideal place of study before art school.**

Yes, definitely. Research is one thing, as well as experimenting. They're probably the two most important things that I took from psychology and applied to art. I approach every series like a research paper kind of thing. I have a hypothesis and shit. I don't literally write it down, but I have an idea going in. I go into it with the hypothesis, thinking, "It's doing this and then I put it out into the world and that's the test." Whatever comes back is the feedback and I can see what goes forward.

**What was your hypothesis for the last show at Altman Siegel this past winter, *The Roof is On Fire*, and what was the feedback you received?**

I thought people were going to laugh and dance because the work is already so satirical and about dancing. Using technology already adds a sense of like, "Oh, this is fun," versus a regular art show (nothing against regular art shows!). It was my first time using technology as an element of the show, letting people use the app to see the dances on top of the paintings the way we did. I thought the outcome was going to be fun. There were no somber deep thoughts within this. Even when it comes down to the color choice, it was all just bright and colorful. All good vibes, like dancing.

**Have you ever failed with your hypothesis going into a show?**



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Yes, and I feel sometimes that opens up more interesting things to talk about because I'll have a hypothesis that people are going to consider but then it turns into a whole other thing. When I first started this Slanguage series, I didn't think it was going to be comical because I was just like, "Oh, these are words that I hear in hip-hop." I didn't think, "Oh actually, look at the cake on the top of a donkey," because that would make you laugh. I was thinking that I would just translate what I hear. But the literal thing, the actual painting, once I started getting feedback, I understood that it is very comical to see the composition of the items. It's in the lyrics, but visualized, it's funny.



## **Is humor missed in hip-hop, or is it just these compositions that bring it out?**

I won't call it just humor. I would call it a bunch of inside jokes that are linked to things within the culture. Or linked to beefs or linked to certain cities. There are a lot of inside jokes. Some rappers are comical, like Ludacris, who's a comical rapper; but I couldn't say Kendrick is comical. That would be so uncomfortable for me to say (laughs).

## **I just watched Kendrick Lamar's headline set at Glastonbury this morning...**

Oh yes. That was definitely not comical.

**Not comical. Fucking amazing. Fucking brilliant. Not funny. I just thought of this now, as you were talking about the audience. Do you use the pop culture elements in your paintings as an entry point for people or do you almost use them as a sort of**



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**barrier? Because a viewer could say to themselves, "Why is Bart Simpson in this painting?" Why are these cartoon characters here in a gallery? Are you trying to get viewers to focus on the cartoon and their relationship to them in culture, or are you trying to almost throw people off with a deeper implication?**

Good question. That's why I love this series so much because it's not me doing it. I don't make up the names of the dances. The only thing I do is select and pair the items. People like to look at people or things with eyes or even things with faces, so I spread them throughout the whole show. Then I combined it with the other things within the painting. It just made you want to look at it more, versus typical still lifes where it's just objects, making you have to think about composition to keep the person's eye on the canvas. This one was a little easier, but this Slanguage series is cool to me because I'm just a funnel for hip-hop to art. I don't pick anything. I pick the subject matter and then everything else is already there for me to go. I just look for what words represent what.

When I went into *The Roof is On Fire*, I was thinking about all the dances that were within hip-hop and the ones that I could actually have imagery for. Because I can't paint the doo-wop. I don't know if that's even a dance; there's no actual representation of a doo-wop out there. You can paint the tootsie roll. I make a list of all the dances, but also which ones kind of speak to each other, which body movements or which era the dance came out, and how I can make works that relate to one another.

**Are there any historical artists that you know worked with music in this sort of way, or worked with dance in this manner?**

None.

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**What I like, though, is that you still, at times, work with still-lives, so you're working within art history...**

Once I understood what still life was doing, where they had a secret language, I understood that hip-hop possesses the same element. It was kind of just the light bulb popped above my head and knew I had to show the language, though not literally. You still just see what you see but if you don't get the second context of hip-hop, then you're, like, what? And if you do see it, then you start to understand more. Once you look into it, they're just like the still lifes from the old days.

**Do you have recurring characters that you bring back into each painting? Do you repeat anything?**

Not necessarily, unless it just adds to the composition. There are so many new words that are created every day. Even with the dances, I had to leave a lot of the new ones out because the names were too much, people just naming anything. But with all the new names and words in hip-hop and dance, this series can go on for a long time...

**Simply put, you're a visual linguist.**

Yes, exactly. And that's what led me to this in the first place because I look at painting as a visual language. I always just looked at it as some kind of way of telling some kind of story. And this one is literally about words versus my other series which are not so much about words, but about the language of painting.

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## **You were in some of the paintings before.**

Yes, and you can see in the portrait we shot that I'm back in some of the paintings that are in my studio now.

## **So you're bringing you back?**

Each show I do is a different series. So my first show in LA was about me, just talking about myself and my history. But then this show at Altman Siegel was solely about Slanguage and language within hip-hop, art, and American culture. The work I had at Frieze this year was a little different and involved African cloths combined with oil painting. I work within so many series, so you never know which one you're going to get whenever some paintings come out.



## **Do you think the ones you were in were actually you telling yourself to get it together to be a painter?**

That was more me telling you I can be a painter.

## **So why are you painting yourself again?**

Well, typically, it is me, but it is like an invisible version of myself. And that is me just thinking about the artist and their invisibility compared to the work. Which is good and bad as it serves a purpose for both. As artists, we can be very invisible. People have walked up to me and just



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talked to me about this work in front of them, about the work which is my work and I'm just like, Wow. I don't know what I have to do, like have a badge on to let you know I'm an artist?

**A hypothesis continues. It becomes part of the whole thing.**

Exactly. That's really where the hypothesis comes from real life stuff. And then I come up with a theory and then keep going based on that.

**What is a typical day for you? Probably not doing interviews at 11AM..**

Not usually, but I wake up at 5AM and meditate, then head to the gym, come back home, and get ready for the day, so it's about 7AM at this point. Probably eat and then smoke a joint or something along those lines... After that, it's painting time until the next time to eat.

**So you meditate when you wake up? Painting is also extremely meditative, so that's a good way to stay focused. Is it crucial for your studio life to start the day with meditation?**

Not necessarily painting, but just dealing with the whole day in general. I mean, I'm going to paint even if it's like a shitty mindset that I have. It basically helps with dealing with the rest of the not painting stuff, because shit is crazy.



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**Do bodies of work change as you take in more of what's happening in the outside world? Even if you're dealing with lyrics or dealing with dances, do you notice yourself kind of moving things around as the world turns?**

Yes. That's what makes me work within series because there was a point where I was saying to myself, "I can't just be fucking painting still lifes right now with all of this shit is going on." And then I will jump back into my cloth paintings. But then when it comes to planning shows two years in advance, it's kind of just what it is. For some shows, I already know what I'm going to do and it usually aligns with what is going on in the world because I kind of think about the future a little bit.

**Talk a little bit about the cloth work because you mentioned it a few times. Describe it.**

The series is called Out the Mud. I got the phrase from hip-hop. It's the idea of starting from nothing, out of the dirt. And then when I got to grad school, I learned about African cloth made in Mali, made from mud, and then I was like, "Wow, it's literally out of the mud." But nobody really knew what the fuck I was talking about because I was in art school. They're like, "Oh yeah, it's out the mud." I just saw the connection and thought about how I can combine hip hop and our cultural fabric. The fact that I never even heard about Mali and mud cloth was like a connection for me linking the hip-hop world with the Old World where we come from. It's a West African country and that's where most of the slaves would come from. I turned it into a series where I planned and plan to work with all the West African countries and kind of use the cloth, learn about what it was made for, what they did with it, and then combine it with what I see within our culture now.

**If you weren't an artist, what do you think you'd be doing?**

Well, before I was an Uber driver. The pandemic and Ubering were kind of scary. So I might've found a different profession. I don't know. I probably would've started teaching, honestly, even though I already did teach, but I would've solely been trying to do more of that because it's more solid of a job.

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**Were you one of those Uber drivers who talked the whole time to passengers?**

Oh, no. If you talked to me, sure, but no. I put the music on and then if you got something to say, I will definitely talk, but I'm not going to be like, "So how about those Lakers? Did you see the blah, blah, blah?" No, because I take Ubers too and I'm, like, "Yo, I'm literally trying to send this text and I keep getting distracted from you talking to me right now."

But it is kind of fucked up when people don't treat you like a human and they just hop in your car and then are just on mute, and don't look up at all; they're just in their own world. That's what inspired the first invisible man painting because I was feeling like an invisible human. And then I would go to the studio and make art and be more invisible and then have a presence on social media, but my art is the presence and then I'm still invisible. And it was just a whole bunch of me. Where am I? Hello?

**That Invisible Man painting feels very seminal for you (Starting out in the art world, youth, especially being a person of color going into the art world). Does that resonate?**

Yes, definitely. I remember reading the book *Invisible Man* as a kid and it touches on the same ideas in the sense of it's a Black dude, not feeling like he's seen—but I feel the same way! He



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understood that it's also like pluses and minuses. So I understand that and use it to my advantage, but it is the way it is. That's just the role I have right now, the invisible man.

**Last question and I don't often ask this, but if you had to sit down with three artists, living or dead, for dinner, who would they be?**

And it's for dinner?

**Okay. It could be brunch. I mean, I don't know whatever you want (laughs).**

No, let's keep it in. Because everybody eats but not everybody smokes, so... (laughs). Because you never know... I don't know if I want to smoke with certain people. Magritte, Virgil Abloh and let's see, who's the next, who's the last find, but I got to get somebody alive? I'll do Kerry James Marshall as the last one. Yep. That's my three. Virgil, Magritte and Kerry James Marshall.