

# ALTMAN SIEGEL

1150 25TH ST. SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94107

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## San Francisco Chronicle

Bravo, Tony, "Troy Lamarr Chew II explores invisibility at Altman Siegel," *San Francisco Chronicle*,  
November 30, 2024



Troy Lamarr Chew II, "Overly Dedicated," 2024.

Photo: Troy Lamarr Chew II / Altman Siegel, San Francisco

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Altman Siegel's second show with artist Troy Lamarr Chew II features his most recent series of paintings centered on invisibility.

The former Headlands Center for the Arts resident created a new body of portraits using friends and relatives as models. Although the work settings and trappings of the paintings are intricately detailed, the subjects themselves are shown as clear figures that we can see through. All that defines them is their surroundings, the clothing over their invisible form, and the labor they perform.

Chew said that he has experienced feeling invisible in different jobs. For example, working as a driver in San Francisco, people would speak in front of him almost as though he wasn't there. It led him to think about whether or not being unseen might be a kind of "superpower" for some people. When combined with the connotations of invisible labor, it's certainly food for thought.

*Troy Lamarr Chew II: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday. 11 a.m.- 5 p.m. Saturday. Through Dec. 21.*

*Altman Siegel, 1150 25th St., S.F. 415-576-9300. [www.altmansiegel.com](http://www.altmansiegel.com)*

# HYPEBEAST

Ikeuchi, Erin, "Troy Lamarr Chew II Brings the Invisible into Focus at Altman Siegel," *Hypebeast*,  
October 7, 2024

## Troy Lamarr Chew II Brings the Invisible Into Focus at Altman Siegel

For his latest solo exhibition, the artist spotlights the hidden heroes in his life.



Troy Lamarr Chew II Exhibition Altman Siegel San Francisco.

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[Altman Siegel](#) is showcasing a solo exhibition by Los Angeles-based artist [Troy Lamarr Chew II](#), now on view through December 21, 2024. For his second show with the gallery, the Los-Angeles based artist, best known for his realist paintings, confronts Eurocentric traditions of Black exclusion with an iridescent invisibility.

Chew summons a new suite of paintings that reimagine his close friends and family as invisible, bringing a well-deserved spotlight to a cast of unsung heroes. While each figure is composed with assiduous precision, there is something missing: in place of skin is a distorted refraction of their immediate surroundings – the clothes they wear and their places of work.

The series was inspired by his experience as a driver in San Francisco, though it was through this lacking visibility that he realized the “superpower” of silent observation. “If you are ungraspable, you cannot be caught,” the gallery notes.

Many of the figures featured in the [exhibition](#) are people whose work fuels Chew’s artistic practice. From portraits of his mother, the manufacturer of his [Wetpaint](#) garments, to the curators and collectors who have supported him through the years, Chew brings attention to the fact that it takes a village and the village deserves some love, too.

## **Altman Siegel**

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# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Pricco, Evan, "In Troy Lamarr Chew II's New Exhibition, He Makes the Invisible, Visible," *Juxtapoz*,  
November 6, 2024

## In Troy Lamarr Chew II's New Exhibition, He Makes the Invisible, Visible

Altman Siegel, San Francisco // November 07, 2024 - December 21, 2024

November 06, 2024 | in Painting



*All Smiles*. Courtesy the artist and Altman Siegel, San Francisco

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**Troy Lamarr Chew II** learned a lot from being an Uber driver, and his observations sort of speak to a universal understanding of how we have absorbed tech into our daily lives. When we asked Chew a few years ago about being a driver, he told us, "... 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?"

It's been a few years since this conversation, but Chew is intently working on the "invisible" series, this time applying it to his friends and family in a new exhibition at [Altman Siegel](#) in San Francisco. Historically, in terms of portrait painting, Chew is changing the game here, rather taking away the subject rather than the "Eurocentric canonical portraiture" that the gallery notes. That in itself is an act of power, challenging the history of painting and how we see not only how we lack acknowledgement to those around us, but who we canonizing. Chew canonizes those around him, his friends, his family, those working around him. It's a beautiful and powerful statement of how we see, what we see and what the artist needs us to see. —*Evan Pricco*

**T** The New York Times Style Magazine

Shirley Ngozi Nwangwa, “Multilayered Paintings That Pay Tribute to Hip-Hop Dances,”  
*The New York Times Style Magazine*, January 31, 2022



Troy Lamarr Chew II, *Made in America*, 2021

Last year, Troy Lamarr Chew II spent countless hours in the studio. If he weren't an artist, though, he might be a linguist, a semiotics professor or a rapper. Or at least that's the sense you get after spending time with his “Slanguage” paintings, which are imbued with messages that aren't immediately apparent, and that often require knowledge of wordplay to decode. The series began, in 2019, as a shout-out to regional slang from Oakland, Calif., and the rest of the Bay Area. Take “Yay Area” (2020), a realist composition that brings together recognizable and mundane food items: a Coca-Cola bottle turned on its side, a chocolate layer cake atop a pedestal and a glass bowl filled with scoops of vanilla ice cream. At first glance, the still life, which recalls the work of the American painter Wayne Thiebaud, impresses with its skill and precision and evokes nostalgia for sugary childhood treats. Depending on your familiarity with certain hip-hop lyrics, though, it may later occur to you that the artist has depicted foods whose names, like the “Yay” of the title, are slang for cocaine (coke, cola, cake), and one that references the Oakland artist Dru Down's 1993 song “Ice Cream Man,” its title an allusion to a drug dealer (though he's hardly the only rapper to have used the term). Another work of Chew's, “Ball Street Journal” (2020), includes images of cheese, bread and paper — all terms for money.

Partly, Chew, 29, creates his pictorial riddles simply because he can. It's as though he's a slick lyricist spitting lines onto his canvas, rewarding the close viewer, like the listener of a rich track played on repeat,

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with new layers of meaning. But Chew is also interested in centering Black language and experience, in highlighting the extent to which Black culture has shaped American culture at large and in exposing and scrambling people's assumptions. Working in a fine art context, he is pushing against various forms of exclusion that have long reigned in that space.



Chew's "Ask ya Mama" (2021). Troy Lammé Chew II. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel gallery, San Francisco.

Chew's latest paintings, an extension of "Slanguage," make up "The Roof is on Fire," his debut solo exhibition at Altman Siegel gallery in San Francisco (on view through Feb. 19), and take on the mimetic dances hip-hop has spawned. In "Made in America" (2021), Bart Simpson wreaks havoc in a harshly lit supermarket with seemingly unending aisles; in his cart is a box of instant mashed potatoes and a bottle of Heinz ketchup. It all seems a lighthearted critique of overabundance. But present in the scene, too, are nods to three dances: the Bart Simpson, for which the dancer moves her arms across her body and then into a goal-post position as she slides from side to side; the Mashed Potato, which has her twist her feet in and out while standing on a slight tiptoe, then kick out her heels, and can be traced back to the song "Mashed Potato Time," first performed by Dee Dee Sharp in 1962; and the Ketchup Dance, which was popularized by the Spanish pop group Las Ketchup around 2002 and starts with horizontal chopping motions made with the hands. Last is the Shopping Cart, that self-explanatory classic whereby the dancer mimes pushing a cart to a beat, grabbing supermarket items and throwing them in.

Another work on view, "Ask ya Mama" (2021), shows Roger Rabbit lounging in a cabbage patch. Behind him, peeking over a leaf, is a smirking Smurf. Here, the artist is referencing the Roger Rabbit, a move that has the dancer skip backward in place while pumping her arms and chest; the Cabbage Patch, for which she looks to be stirring an invisible, chest-high pot; and the Smurf, for which she bounces at the knees while moving a bent arm diagonally across the body. In "Soulja boy tol' Em" (2021), Clark Kent reads a copy of Vogue whose cover pictures the rapper Soulja Boy, who, in his song "Crank That" (2007), directs the dancer to "punch then crank back three times from left to right" and fly like Superman. It's a clever scene that shows a tired cultural figure depending on a rapper for renewed inspiration and



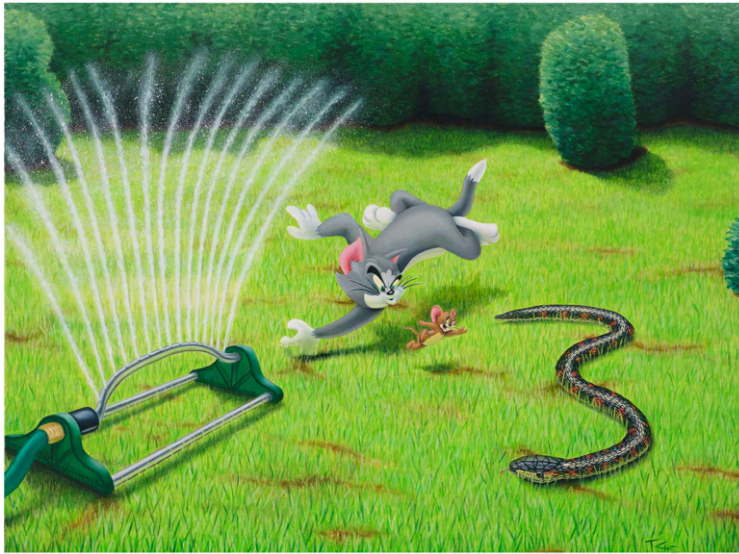
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relevance. And to all this Chew has added another layer still. If you download the app Halo AR, follow the artist at [tchew2](#) and then hold your phone in front of any of the paintings (or in front of the photos of them published here), holograms of his friends and family members, some of them professional dancers, will pop up and perform each dance.



Chew's "As Seen on TV" (2021). Troy Lamarr Chew II. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel gallery, San Francisco.

Chew did a lot of research for the works, consulting friends, other artists and the internet. Still, hip-hop was familiar territory to him long before his “Slanguage” days. He grew up in Hawthorne, Calif., which is part of Los Angeles County’s South Bay. “It’s where the Beach Boys are from, but it’s also close to the hood, to Inglewood and Compton, so it has a little bit of both worlds,” says Chew. It’s where he first came to know West Coast groups like Digital Underground and MC Hammer (both of whom you’ll find in Chew’s new paintings if you know where to look). As a child, Chew would often sketch while rap music videos played in the background, and he describes his early art as fan art because he was often drawing the people on the screen. He still has his old sketchbooks — the beginnings of a life spent archiving the culture, as he sees it. The other art form that he gravitated toward was dance. At his middle school, dance battles weren’t uncommon, and he performed for a number of his teen years with the Y Troop, a competitive hip-hop dance group based out of his local community center. In the end, though, Chew chose art, which only occurred to him as an option when he was voted “best artist” by his high school class. “I was somebody’s best,” he says, “so I kept going.”

In college, he majored in psychology but kept sketching, watched instructional art videos on YouTube and took a few studio classes, in which he learned basics like the differences between acrylic and oil paint. “Before, I was just mixing everything I had so I could get a certain color,” he says. Eventually, he applied to the MFA programs at six schools and was rejected by all of them. But he continued to hone his skills and began adding conceptual elements to his compositions. “Pockets” (2015), a still life of all the items (a pencil, lip balm, rolling papers) inside his pockets at the time he started painting it, dates from this period. The following year, he reapplied to the same schools, and this time he got into all six. Chew

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graduated from San Francisco's California College for the Arts in 2019. Along the way, he solidified his aim of honoring the legacy of the African diaspora, and co-founded the 5/5 collective, a multimedia group dedicated to making and curating work that explores Blackness.



Chew's "Alright stop watche doin, cuz I'm about to ruin, the image and the style that you're used to" (2021). Troy Lamar Chew II. Courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegel gallery, San Francisco.

The paintings that make up “The Roof is on Fire” continue in this vein. In the first months of lockdown, Chew was completing an artist residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito. “[The pandemic] didn’t feel real then, not like it would later. We were bumping music all the time, chilling,” he says. Once he left that safe communal environment, however, the gravity of the situation sunk in, and Chew greatly missed the feeling of losing himself in movement with another or with an entire crowd. In place of that, there was TikTok, a paltry substitute. And it wasn’t lost on Chew that most of the moves popular on TikTok were created by young Black dancers and then appropriated by white ones.

Once he’d decided to explore specific dances on the canvas, he made a point of including, along with some current crazes like the Renegade, created by Jalaiah Harmon, and the Savage, created by Keara “Keke” Wilson, older moves that have yet to be co-opted by the cyberspace mainstream: dances like the Tootsie Roll, which dates to the 69 Boys’ 1993 track of the same name, and the Milly Rock, named in a 2011 song by Terrance “2 Milly” Ferguson. Also included in Chew’s mix are, to name just a few more, the Mop, the SpongeBob, the Whip, the Humpty, the Hammer Time, the Chicken Noodle Soup, the Robot, the Butterfly, the Tom & Jerry, the Snake and the Sprinkler.

Chew is unconcerned that the paintings take time and effort to figure out. “Once I got to grad school, I stopped spelling stuff out so much,” he says. “If you really want to know, you’ll go search for it.” He continues, “That’s what I noticed about fine art, or art that is memorable. It just is what it is and if you want to know more, you go and do that.” In other words, if you know, you know. And Chew will continue figuring things out for himself, too — he plans to explore vernacular from other parts of California and, eventually, other parts of the country. “I always refer to myself as a kind of rapper in my

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head, because I'm playing with words," he says. "Rappers are like Picasso with their words. I feel like I'm the reverse: I'm Jay-Z with a paintbrush."

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## FRIEZE

Boas, Natasha, “What to See During San Francisco Art Week,” *frieze*, January 19, 2022



Troy Lamarr Chew II, *As seen on TikTok*, 2021, oil on canvas, 152 x 91 cm. Courtesy: © the artist and Altman Siegel gallery

### Troy Lamarr Chew II

Altman Siegel

13 January – 19 February

‘The Roof Is on Fire’, Troy Lamarr Chew II’s first solo show at Altman Siegel, presents new paintings in the artist’s ‘Slanguage’ series (2020–ongoing), which translates the coded meanings of rap lyrics into visual puns. Unlike his earlier works, however, which alluded to Flemish *vanitas* still lifes, here Chew samples cartoons and other pop-cultural subjects, including several references to popular hip-hop dances. In *Made in America* (2021), for instance, Bart Simpson (from *The Simpsons*, 1989–ongoing) is in a supermarket with a shopping cart loaded with a bottle of ketchup and a box of mashed potatoes – each element (the shopping cart, the ketchup, the mashed potatoes and Bart himself) recalls the name of a different dance move. Adding a performative and interactive dimension, Chew filmed his friends and family dancing the moves denoted in each painting; by downloading an app, visitors can watch them dancing on the works in augmented reality.

# JUXTAPOZ

Art & Culture

Pricco, Evan, "The Roof is on Fire: Troy Lamarr Chew II Captures the Mania of the Times,"  
*Juxtapoz*, January 18, 2022



Even in a still-life of soup dumplings on a table, Troy Lamar Chew II is channeling something of a rhythm. The stillness has sound. His realist style captures a sense of something else happening off to the side, a sound, a bass riff, a drum beat. Pop culture gets mixed with family tradition, but all with the backdrop of hip-hop lyrics. As Chew told us in our Winter 2021 issue, "Language is the biggest thing in my practice because it's all a story to me. I'm trying to convey an idea to you, and I'm trying to get it off as clear as possible, even though I know everybody will have their own interpretations. I have an idea I'm trying to get across, and I do that through my visual language."

And yet the beauty of the Los Angeles-based Chew's works is that nothing is clear. There's a rush and a stillness to the work. And there is storytelling through metaphor and bravado, while telling the story of storytelling. His newest solo show, *The Roof is On Fire*, on view at Altman Siegel in San Francisco, sees Chew at his most eccentric, mixing lyrical interpretations and realist painting in one of the more unique bodies of work we have seen over the past few years.

As the gallery notes, "In Chew's ongoing *Slanguage* series, coded meanings within wordplay in rap lyrics are teased out visually through the painting of everyday objects that carry specific symbolic innuendo. The paintings featured in *The Roof is on Fire* expand upon this body of work, adding legendary hip-hop dance crazes to the artist's ever-evolving pictorial dictionary."

ARTSY

Juliana Lopez, “5 Artists on Our Radar in January,” *Artsy*, January 4, 2021



*Brrr!*, 2020

During Altman Seigel’s online viewing room presentation for Art Basel in Miami Beach this past December, a work by the young Los Angeles–based artist Troy Chew was listed as sold shortly after the VIP preview went live. A 2018 MFA grad from California College of the Arts (CCA), Chew creates work that highlights the contributions of Black artists within popular culture, with a particular focus on hip-hop culture. For instance, his early series “Out the Mud” refers to the common trope used in rap and hip-hop circles to refer to those rising talents who find success despite humble beginnings. Chew visualized this idea literally and figuratively in the series by overlaying mud cloth—a traditional textile of Mali in West Africa—atop canvases showing scenes of wealthy and accomplished Black subjects.

Chew built upon his “Slanguage” series this past fall in the exhibition “Yadadamean” at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco. The “Slanguage” series of still-life paintings reference slang terms for themes that are popular in rap music and culture—such as bread, cheese, and bacon to signify money. Painted in the style of 16th- and 17th-century Flemish *vanitas* still lifes, the works imagine a history in which Black culture was recognized within fine art, especially during a period in which it was excluded and unrepresented.

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In fall 2020, Chew's new series "Three Crowns," made up of three tooth-shaped paintings—representative of the number of teeth Chew lost when attacked by police—was exhibited in "Fuck the King's Horses and All the King's Men" at Parker Gallery in Los Angeles. The series explores the evolution of cosmetic dentistry and use of grills in hip-hop and mainstream culture.

Since graduating from CCA, Chew has exhibited widely with galleries throughout California. He was named the 2019 Facebook artist in residence and awarded the 2019–2020 Tournesol Award and artist residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts in 2018.

# FRIEZE

Natasha Boas, “Troy Chew’s Hip Hop Symbology,” *frieze*, November 23, 2020.



Troy Chew, *Yay Area*, 2020, oil on canvas, 50.8 × 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco

Troy Chew’s oil paintings in ‘Yadadamean’ at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco, burst with semiotic energy. A graduate of California College of the Arts and a highly skilled realist painter, Chew pays tribute to the lexicon of hip-hop culture through his images. In ‘Yadadamean’ – Bay Area slang for ‘You know what I mean?’ – his lush and luminous still lifes play with words coined from the 1990s lyrics of seminal West Coast rappers such as Too Short, Mac Dre, B-Legit, E-40 and the duo Luniz, among others.

In a recent conversation, the artist told me that his entryway into art history was through reproductions of 16th- and 17th-century Flemish *vanitas* or still lifes that he encountered in a high school art class. Drawing inspiration from these historical works, Chew creates his own *vanitas* and, staying faithful to the genre, depicts each object in his paintings as both signifier and signified. In the Flemish tradition, a bowl of strawberries, for example, might symbolize heaven; pomegranates, fertility; medlar fruits, death and decay as *memento mori*. Chew’s symbolism, however, is devoid of such allegory and, instead, is more focused on the *bon mot* of urban slang. For example, in *Yay Area* (all works 2020), a chocolate cake, a bowl of vanilla ice cream and a Coca-Cola bottle are displayed on a reflective glass surface, bringing together different archetypes of sweet treats as stand-ins for yay: the Bay Area’s playful term for cocaine.



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Similarly, in *Five on it* – a direct reference to Luniz’s hit track ‘I Got 5 on It’ (1995) – cauliflower, broccoli, grapes and Girl Scout cookies are framed by crutches, recalling terms used to describe marijuana.

Investigating the ‘slanguage’ – as the artist calls it – used to speak about money, women and drugs, and re-contextualizing it within *vanitas* still lifes, Chew plays on notions of appropriation – not only in terms of his use of European painting traditions, but also in relation to how slang and hip-hop culture have been co-opted and even effectively killed off through capitalist exploitation. Chew is sensitive to the debates around what is contestably referred to as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) – or, even more problematically, Ebonics – and understands that communities of colour create their own forms of communication as a reaction to systems of social and economic inequity and erasure, and that ‘slanguage’ is as viable as any other language. The artist expands on the unfortunate irony that sees the culture of marginalized groups being monetized for profit. For example, in *Ball Street Journal* – named after the eponymous E-40 album – loaves of bread lie next to cabbage, basketballs and paper: all symbols for money. Yet, the painting’s imagery equally points to the poverty and food insecurity in the same communities where these vernaculars are born.

*Like tic, tic* – a still-life painting of sticks of dynamite and a used juice box branded with the artist’s name – addresses the lifespan of the phrase ‘the bomb’. The dated term, once used as flattering hyperbole, is now perhaps reborn or rebranded, but teetering on the edge of obsolescence. Chew seems to ask: what is our role in consuming and using these expressions? Is it to celebrate Black culture, or wipe it out? By framing and reframing the richness and pervasiveness of Black language, Chew embeds it into the history of art, exposing language’s power to both reify and deny the antagonisms and commoning around representation and race.

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Troy Chew, *Five on it*, 2020, oil on canvas, 121.9 × 91.4 cm. Courtesy: the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco



Troy Chew, *Like tic, tic*, 2020, oil on canvas, 30.5 × 30.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions, San Francisco

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## JUXTAPOZ

Kristin Farr, “On Award Tour: From LA to The Bay, Troy Lamarr Chew II Shines,” *Juxtapoz*,  
December 7, 2020.



Troy Lamarr Chew II is a precious gem who fittingly paints symbolic glints and sparkling jewels. He won the prestigious Tournesol Award and residency at San Francisco’s Headlands Center for the Arts in 2020, and when the studios temporarily closed, Troy headed back to his LA studio to continue painting for two solo shows, both stunners.

**Kristin Farr: Tell me about your show at Parker Gallery.**

*Troy Lamarr Chew II:* It was titled *Fuck the King’s Horses and All the King’s Men*. It was inspired by an incident that happened the night I graduated from undergrad. I got beat by the police when I was walking home, and then thrown in jail. They knocked my teeth out, and I was trying to make a show remembering that. I made three paintings in the shape of a grill or a tooth, and each one commemorates the teeth I lost. I was thinking about the fragility of life, and teeth, specifically.

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The glasslike self-portrait was made at The Headlands Center for the Arts, right when I had gotten the Tournesol Award. I was thinking about my place in San Francisco, as a black dude, and I was also Uber driving. It was this weird feeling of invisibility in several aspects of my life, so I wanted to recreate that in a painting.

**I'm so sorry that happened to you with the police. You've said it was a catalyst.**

Not to give them any praise, but it woke me up and showed me that I wasn't living for anything. I was just going with the flow, drinking and going to parties because everyone was, versus thinking for myself and doing what I want. It was a big growing moment, if anything. It's still a motivator, because, when I see my tooth in the mirror every day, it reminds me to stay in control. It was supposed to take away the shine inside of me, but it really brought it back out. With *Fuck the Kings Horses and All the Kings Men*, I wanted to make a metaphoric painting to show that the shine is still gonna keep going, whether you knocked my teeth out or not.

**You paint light and reflections so well, with the gems, too. What's the symbolism with jewels?**

I was thinking a lot about how rappers with diamond or gold teeth use metaphors about how their words are pricey, or the words they say have a price tag.

It's hard to vocalize, but also thinking about how my mouthpiece was damaged... putting stones and gold in there is my way of repairing it. That's the only way to elevate broken teeth. It's not a regular tooth, it's gold, it's a precious metal, so it elevates the tooth to a whole other level. But now that they were knocked out, I see their value even more. I have fake teeth, and I think about having porcelain in my mouth, versus my natural teeth often... but when I put gold in, it's me choosing it, like a decision I made—not just the porcelain the dentist gave me by default.

**Teeth are significant.**

They're used to identify people and all that. I was kinda thinking about that in the painting with the red stones. It has ancient skulls on it, linked to Mayan and Egyptian culture. They used stones to make their teeth beautiful, but the gold was typically a form of dentistry. Bridges were made with gold wire or gold plating to keep the teeth together.

I was looking at how “grillz” changed throughout time, and even within my own family. My dad has a false tooth in the front, my Granddad has two front false teeth... and they're gold. Then I have three, so I'm looking at that lineage of the front teeth being replaced. But yeah, hopefully I'm the last one with these false teeth in my family.

**Amen. I always thought it was interesting that the most common dream across all cultures is about losing teeth.**

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The teeth not being perfect, or the front of your face not being “presentable,” that is scary to people, especially when thinking about the pain. It makes me think of the tooth fairy or even Humpty Dumpty, and how he got cracked and nobody could fix him. All the king’s horses and all the king’s men tried to put him together again... But I feel there’s a line in that story that they’re not telling us. He didn’t just fall and nobody could fix him. That story had to be about fragility of life, or teeth at least. But that missing piece of the story reminds me of the police or authority figures covering something up and reporting it differently.

## **You paint figures in a lot of different ways.**

I’m kind of a different painter with each series. There’s a series I have called Out The Mud, where I’m working with West African cloth. These cloths are usually understood from generation to generation within African culture, and are typically passed down. But since I’m not a part of that culture anymore, I’m searching for that connection. I kind of let the cloth speak to me.

I recreate the clothes, then fill in the fabric with something that I think parallels black culture in America—just searching for the similarities and differences within the two cultures. I also don’t like to show the faces in the Out the Mud paintings because it’s more about the situation. I want the audience to fill it in—if you don’t know the situation, it could be anybody... it could be you.

## **Tell me about the other self-portrait where you are more vaporous.**

*Invisible Man.* I was thinking about the invisibility of being in the art world and in San Francisco. You could come to my shows and not even know I’m the artist. There’s been so many times where people talk to me like I’m anyone else at my show, and they might say the paintings are cool, and then after I say thank you, they’re like, “Oh, you did this?”

But then, I was an Uber Driver, and people would hop in, and ask if I’m Troy, then almost instantly put in their headphones. It was like I wasn’t being seen, but, I was, at the same time. That’s why I made it like a glass invisible man, something you can see, not totally invisible, but you can see through it if you choose to, or not.

## **You think a lot about words in your work.**

Language is the biggest thing in my practice because it’s all a story to me. I’m trying to convey an idea to you, and I’m trying to get it off as clear as possible, even though I know everybody will have their own interpretations. I have an idea I’m trying to get across, and I do that through my visual language.

## **Your “Slanguage” paintings are like riddles with research.**

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It's like when you listen to hip hop. Some lyrics go over your head, and you don't know what they're saying, but sometimes you do. Listening to more of that music, it can help explain itself, like context clues, but it goes deep sometimes.

I'm researching from the beginning of hip hop to now, so that's almost 50 years worth of words. It's a lot of music to listen to, but I feel like I have to do the research to learn, and that is listening to music.

## **Let's talk about your latest show at Cult Exhibitions.**

*Yadadamean*, that show was all about the slang created in the Bay Area, so it's a lot of E-40, B-Legit, Mac Dre and Too Short references—all the words they created that are now popular within hip hop culture and American culture. I typically group the words based on topic, then put all the ones that relate into one painting—looking at it as a visual lexicon.

Cheese, bread, paper—all words for money created in the Bay Area. Weed references they made—crutch, broccoli, cauliflower, Girl Scout cookies... You hear them say it in the songs, but you gotta use them context clues to fill in the blanks, especially because some of that music was made 20-ish years ago.

There's a lot of wordplay that was created right here in the Bay, and a popular weed company called Cookies comes out with different strains that are sweet-related, and that's more slang that gets put into the culture, and into one of my paintings. Once a rapper says it in their songs, it's everywhere. I listen back to who said things first; it's a lot of hours of listening to music.

## **420, also coined in the Bay.**

I have something in *Yadadamean* referencing that too.

## **What other cross-cultural connections stand out to you?**

There's a connection that Black people have to Africa that is obvious, but it also needs understanding. The way we dance, for instance, or even the way I paint, I see connections, because the traditional African cloths are also paintings. They were painted with natural materials from the Earth, just like oil paint comes from the Earth. The cloths are just like the paintings we look at that are worth millions of dollars. It's all painted on cotton, it all comes from the Earth, both are the same thing, you know? That's why I put them both on the same picture plane—now which one is worth more? I'm trying to bring them to the same level.

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# SF WEEKLY

Jonathan Curiel, “Wayne Thiebaud’s Lonely Islands + ‘Yadadamean,’” *SFWeekly*, October 26, 2020.



*Reminiscent of Wayne Thiebaud, the work of Troy Chew offers up Bay Area-centric hip-hop puzzles. (Art: Troy Chew)*

At first glance, Troy Chew’s painting *Yay Area* looks like it was done with Wayne Thiebaud in mind. There’s the layered cake on a circular dish and the ice cream plopped in distinctive glassware. Because the deserts are on a mirrored tabletop, the dishes’ repeated circular reflections create distinctive patterns. But no. *Yay Area*, which also features a Coke bottle, is a kind of hip-hop riddle. The same goes for all of Chew’s paintings on display at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions.

These riddles — and the game of deciphering them — are an underlying appeal of “Troy Chew: Yadadamean.”

Chew doesn’t want to explain each work, so it’s up to the viewer. Hip-hop music playing over the gallery’s sound system (E-40 is prominent) helps to provide clues. Some of the references are easy, like the digital clock that announces “4:20” in *Ask Berner*. But the pickle? Also reference to marijuana.

In *Yay Area*, the spoon may be more related to the bottle of Coke than the ice-cream (as the etymological roots of “Yay Area” lie in “yayo”). By incorporating references to rap lyrics, slang words, and Bay Area culture (the exhibit’s title is one way to say, “You know what I mean?”), and by painting in a flawless and moving style that winks at painting’s most vaunted traditions, Chew is marrying disparate cultural scenes — not unlike Kehinde Wiley’s portraits of rap artists that he did in a style reminiscent of historical paintings. These works aren’t hyphenated art forms. They’re evolved expressions of contemporary culture that stand on their own — even without a guidebook for the newly curious.



# METAL

Lucy McLaughlin, “Troy Chew - Black vernacular and the new Flemish still life,”  
*Metal Magazine*, 2020.



Part of his series billed *Slanguage*, *Yadadamean* is the newest exhibition from the United States' Bay Area artist, Troy Chew. Showing at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco until December 12th, the artworks draw largely from hip-hop – Chew's still life work exploring the contemporary Black household in conjunction with the Black vernacular and oral tradition. Through a discussion of the artist's content and stylistic choices, we may gain a greater understanding of what is meant by 'Yadadamean.'

**Troy, firstly, I would like to congratulate you on your solo exhibition with CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions. Before we dive into *Yadadamean*, can you tell our readers a little bit about yourself, your formal training and what inspires your artworks?**

I'm a painter from Los Angeles. In undergrad, I studied psychology at the University of California, Merced. I attended California College of the Arts (CCA) for my Masters of Fine Arts, where my formal training in fine art began. Hip-hop is a major inspiration. I think about words a lot in my practice, so I started to incorporate words from hip-hop music into my art. Often, people would ask what words mean

when listening to a song. I started thinking about how words coded to language, so I made a series about that called *Slanguage*.

**I understand that ‘Yadadamean’ is a vernacular term for ‘You know what I mean?’. Can you tell us what you mean with *Yadadamean* and your engagement with colloquial speech and Black linguistics?**

That’s a good question. *Yadadamean* is an analysis of Bay Area-created words. That’s what I mean with it. My engagement with speech and linguistics is expanded through music. Black linguistics is a very oral tradition. Within that tradition, hip-hop is a language of efficiency. Music passes ideas, expressed with words, down through the culture. Music permeates linguistics in a different way because it is played all around the world. In turn, as words and music become mainstream, they become American culture.

**In *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher claims that hip-hop became increasingly popular due to its rejection of nostalgic illusions, the fact hip-hop nods to the ‘real’ much more than other music genres. Can you speak to this in your exploration of the language associated with Bay Area hip-hop?**

Hip-hop culture nods to the real. I notice the phenomenon in hip-hop that we respect the real and honest. Through lyrics, everyday words are presented as metaphors so they transform to an altered reality. Using metaphors within my work is not necessarily real.

The objects I paint are everyday items in Black people’s homes. Often that’s how slang originates, based on things that are in our life daily. My work considers ownership and elevates mundane objects into the vernacular. The objects I portray tie to representation and are cues to things people appreciate in the works in *Yaddamean*.



**As an artist who works primarily in the mode of oil painting, may I also ask where this interest in language and linguistics comes from? It is quite a unique aspect of your art.**

My interest in language and linguistics hails from hip-hop. Hip-hop is all about words and the stories that artists tell. The complex way the words tell a story, whether direct or through metaphor, is similar to my style of painting.

**There is a clear and deliberate portrayal of motifs rooted in Black culture within your still life work, such as the sneakers in *Ghost Rider* or the basketball in *Ball Street Journal*. How important was it for you to paint objects that have since been appropriated from their Black origins and assimilated into mainstream culture?**

Objects communicate our lived experience. I thought about the Black household but wanted to push past that and think about the metaphors they represent. Black people are not thinking about how our everyday is translated through whiteness. Likewise, I don't think of my work in proximity to whiteness; it's my lived experience. I paint objects that are common so they can be identifiable – I am not showing culturally-specific items like edge control. So the objects like basketballs, lettuce and bread I paint aren't synonymous with Black culture only. Most things Black people own are known in the mainstream. I'm not thinking about appropriation. I'm thinking about my lived experience.

I feel that anything Black people create, once it becomes popular, everyone uses it. Like 'fo'sho,' for example. Everyone says that now. It's similar to the items I've chosen to paint. They're popular items in America, but Black culture is the lens I'm coming from.

**Is there a particular reason you chose to fuse Black culture with the aesthetic traditions of Flemish still life painting?**

In my early years experimenting with art, I just liked painting the things around me. I encountered Flemish still lifes during my MFA program. I liked the composition of still lifes but at that time it was just a category to me, like landscapes, portraits, etc. I was just drawn to any dope painting that inspired me. But the main aspect of Flemish still lifes that inspires my work is the coded language; I saw a parallel with the visual language within hip-hop.

**While your art clearly works with these aspects of European and Flemish tradition, would it also be fair to say you engage with the mass object and consumer culture inherent to pop artists like Warhol and Oldenburg? Furthermore, did you grow up consuming these iconic objects depicted in your art such as Coca-Cola, juice boxes, etc.?**

I sourced the subjects from consumer culture since these are the most popular objects, so the viewer relates to them more. They are things very common in many households. They are what we see every day and get turned into 'slanguage.' Sometimes I think of the consumer culture aspect, like when I'm painting Yeezys.

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**On that note, what artists would you say influence your work the most? Are you inspired by one movement/group/school more so than others?**

I am most inspired by hip-hop and Black culture. Black artists like Ernie Barnes, whose art was in my home growing up, got me into making artwork. I grew up seeing his art but was not necessarily consciously influenced by it; my work doesn't look like his. I related to the work because I recognized the culture within his art and other Black artists like him, and I wanted to make art also. For a long time, Black artists like Barnes were excluded from the art canon and institutions. They painted unique creations of their culture, Black culture, that ultimately became mass-produced and acknowledged.

**Continuing with your influences, can you tell us more about the Bay Area in general and how this space permeates your work? Can you expand on your relationship with the Bay Area?**

I'm from Los Angeles but the Bay Area has always been a sister city. Bay Area culture was in the music I listened to and on TV, too. Once I moved to the Bay, I began to understand the culture even more. The rapper E40 is one of my biggest inspirations. He expanded and created new words and has been a pivotal person in the way I think about words. He inspired, maybe created, the word 'slanguage.' A lot of Bay music has influenced the country and the world.

**Do you plan on creating more continuations of the *Slanguage* series such as *Yadadamean*? Where do you see your work progressing at this moment?**

Yes, I plan on doing a subseries that will travel to different cities. *Yaddamean* explores the Bay Area and I want to look at all cities like Los Angeles and New York City. My cousin who lives in NYC calls money

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'butter.' I'm thinking about how slang is different across cities. It can be very local and yet general at the same time.

**Finally, what do you want your audience to take away from your art – if anything at all? Are you aiming for a certain emotional response with *Yadadamean* and the wider *Slanguage* series?**

I want people to listen to the music they are listening to a little deeper. These words are context clues and can help be identifiers to understanding the music and maybe even understanding Black culture.



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# It's Nice That

Jyni Ong, "Troy Chew explores colloquial speech rooted in Black linguistics in his Hip Hop-inspired oil paintings," *It's Nice That*, October 15, 2020.



Masterful Flemish still life and contemporary emblems of the African diaspora collide in the highly technical paintings by the San Francisco-based artist Troy Chew. In a new solo show *Yadadamean* – taking place from 17 October to 5 December at Cult Aimee Friberg Exhibitions – Troy showcases his latest series in a continuation of works known as *Slanguage*. It's a reference to the colloquial speech rooted in Black linguistics, “yadadamean” being an example of this – a more efficient term for “You know what I mean?”

Troy's work sparks discussion on the historic exclusion of Blackness in western art by colliding established European painting techniques with symbolic images of Black culture. A basketball, chocolate cake, a pair of sneakers amidst other signifiers to Hip Hop make their way into his considered depictions. It's a concept he's been working on for a while now, he tells us: “One of the most important themes is Hip-Hop culture and everything that is continuously coming out of it. Its impact goes so far beyond the genre and its smallest elements can inform an entire culture. Hip Hop bleeds into every part of our life.”

In a nutshell, this spontaneous and unique culture is what Troy's artistic visual language embodies. As Hip Hop as a genre has become saturated by the mainstream, and transformed in infinite variations since its beginnings, Troy's paintings draw on this sense of freedom and energy. As the artist puts it: “Hip-Hop created its own rubric. With Trap, people would complain they didn't understand what Young Thug was saying. And it's like, you're not really supposed to. When jazz musicians were experimenting with jazz music it sounded crazy to some people because they weren't really following a certain rubric. They were using their own language.”

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For Troy, it seems as if he's always created paintings. Spouting from the act of drawing, a natural progression for many painters, painting seemed like the obvious next step. There are countless other fascinations with the medium however, beyond this logical development. Troy puts it rather poetically: "Paint has a certain permanence for me; it's more like an exclamation mark than any of the other art forms I was working with at the time." He recalls his first tries with oil paint which felt like "creating real colours." In comparison to acrylic paint, or graphite which produces more muted effect, oil paints invoke another dimension to reality.

"When I started using colour the work just jumped off the canvas," Troy reveals. "Going in straight with the paint is something much different. Sometimes I think about paint almost like a sculpture, you can build it up to a place you want by layering." It was while studying for an undergraduate degree in psychology, Troy took his first art class. "The rest is history," he recalls of that moment, and hasn't looked back since. Later enrolling at California College of Arts, he soaked up as much as he could while utilising his background in psychology as research. "I look at all of my work as some sort of survey into a part of the culture," Troy explains on the matter, with this 'slanguage' series for instance, he looks into certain words, researches them through listening to music and delving into archives.

Importantly, he also contemplates how these words affect us. Similarly to how we can understand more about a place by someone who comes from it, he prescribes the same logic to that of words, who uses them, then expresses this through painting. Focusing on Black culture, he cites how many music lovers "understand so much about Atlanta because of Outkast" or "so much more about Houston and New Orleans because of Hip Hop." In turn, Yadadamean offers a glimpse into another micro-culture.

Troy also touches on places such as Detroit, Memphis, Compton and the Bay; all of which are "very important cities to the Black narrative that don't necessarily get talked about in the mainstream." Nonetheless, their cultures are strong and it is to these lesser known pillars of society that Troy also hints at. Where music meets culture meets language meets art, this is an intersection where Troy has and will



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continue to flourish. It's what he hopes for when it comes to the future. Finally going to say: "I'll keep listening to music and manifesting everything that's gonna happen in my life. It's gonna be dope."



# Hype Art

“Troy Chew’s ‘Yadadamean’ Solo Exhibition Highlights Bay Area Culture Through Oil-Painted Still Lives,” *Hypebeast*, October 11, 2020.



California born and raised artist Troy Chew is set to premiere *Yadadamean*, his first solo exhibition of oil paintings at CULT Aimee Friberg Exhibitions in San Francisco, running October 17 through December 5. The collection highlights the important role Black culture continues to play in shaping mainstream aesthetics while also recognizing the historical exclusion of Blackness in Western art.

The showcase is a continuation of Chew’s *Slanguage* series which references colloquialisms rooted in Black linguistics. *Yadadamean* stems from “You know what I mean?” The artist’s still lifes repurpose everyday items ranging from spilled Coke bottles and chocolate cake to Runts candy and an alarm clock. “Ghost Rider” focuses on a pair of YEEZYS. “Ball Street Journal” plays with traditional still life construction while adding white bread, slices of American cheese and piling bills. He handles each object in his paintings with nuance in an effort to combat the stereotypes associated with them.

“Chew’s paintings also recall the genesis and evolution of Hip Hop, a genre that has faced ongoing appropriation and whitewashing. The originators of Hip Hop developed and used specific language to communicate shared experiences,” a press release detailed. “Hip Hop, and countless other forms of Black expression, exist as incubation spaces for storytelling and community building. *Yaddamean* challenges this ongoing erasure—the proliferation and sometimes co-opting of language—with skillful iconography that recreates a safe space for language and culture to thrive.”

## broke-ass stuart

Kirsten Chen, "Troy Chew's 'Slanguage' of Painting," *Broke-ass Stuart*, April 25, 2019.



"Mac death"

Troy Chew is an artist whose work explores the African Diaspora within the context of urban culture. His ongoing painting series "*Slanguage*" references the colloquial speech rooted in our urban areas and Hip-Hop music. He has a new solo show at Cushion Works (yes, an actual cushion-making business) in the Mission on opening May 3rd, so we wanted to learn more about Chew's practice before that.

**Hi Troy, tell me about the *Slanguage* series? I remember first seeing your work at a show at CCA, then seeing *Soft n' the Blow* in the Graduation show at Good Mother Gallery...**

Well, my life has been surrounded by hip hop since birth; It's my culture, it's Black, it's American, it's my language. *Slanguage*, is an analysis and or a lexicon of the language used in urban, hip hop, black, American culture.

**Your work deals with language, both in terms of translation and mistranslation. Slang is an awesome, often difficult to translate, part of everyday conversation. Do you have any favorite slang phrases? Or any phrases that you really can't stand?**

Haha, favorite... well, all the weed-related ones are fun to paint. Words like "onion," "roach," "gas," or

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“gorilla glue” are a good composite of objects for an interesting still life painting, but if you know (or learn) what the objects represent, It’s way cooler.

And hmm, I can stand them all! They’re just words. But, I just can’t stand when good words don’t translate to an image. Like I can paint an 8-ball as a representation of an 8-ball of cocaine, but I can’t paint a word like “fosho” hahaha. Like what would that look like?



**Speaking of graduation, you recently graduated from CCA’s MFA Program, what are you working on now? Is there a particular reason why you decided to stay in the Bay (instead of moving back down to Los Angeles)?**

Yeah I stayed in the Bay Area because I was given the opportunity to be one of the Graduate Fellows at the Headlands Center for the Arts. It is a year-long fellowship in Marin. I’m super thankful because just like Stuart, my ass is broke and I definitely needed a studio. It’s been a pretty dope experience!

**What about Hip-Hop music? Any favorites? Are you a big fan of Bay Area Hip-Hop?**

Yup. I’ll give u my top 10. Remember I’m young. Haha No specific order: Kendrick, Jay-Z, gotta have Ye, Weezy, Schoolboy Q, Rick Ross, Young Thug, Robb Banks, Tyler and, I saved E40 for last because he from the Bay and inspired the title of the series. He is craaaaazy with that wordplay and I’m sure all the previous rappers I named would agree. The Bay in general has “hella” wordplay in its culture.

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**I first saw your sculpture “Lil’ 40’s”, and it seems like you’ve also been working with candles and video (as seen on your Instagram). I love the way you’re able to capture objects that are easily recognizable in real life. But, what draws you to painting?**

Well, painting is just the medium I am most used to at this moment. It’s the backbone of my practice, so the same ideas of language and hip hop that I use to make paintings are in my sculpture and video work. But some ideas just can’t be paintings. For example, the “it candles” are based on the phrase “it’s lit”, so I figure make I could “it” into a candle, light the candle, and bingo... ITS LIT.

**What inspired the title WWJZD of your solo show?**

The title of the show came from a genuine question I asked myself while painting, “what would Jay-Z do”. We know Jay-Z is not a painter but the decision and moves he make are well thought out and almost seem flawless. But I found myself being lazy one day while painting and I asked that. Then I noticed the subtle wordplay that alluded to “wwjd”. Jay-Z ability to manipulate words is damn near the best and most polished, so being that all the paintings in the series are about words and arrangement, I figured what would Jay-Z do was the perfect title.



**Tell me about the 5/5 Collective– How did you initially get involved? Is the work you produce with the collective different from what you normally do?**

5/5ths is based on the 3/5ths compromise, when black people were considered property and counted only as 3/5ths of a person. 5/5ths was created by Tania Balan-Gaubert, Nkiruka Oparah, and myself. We created 5/5ths while in grad school, initially to share resources. We noticed a through line in our works, and decided to curate exhibitions surrounding our current thoughts.

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