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As Above, So Below

Paintings by Anthony Peyton Young

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Curated by Joseph R. Wolin

CLAMP is proud to present "Anthony Peyton Young | As Above, So Below"—the artist's first solo show in New York City. The artist's new paintings continue his interest in representing a Black Imaginary inflected by both personal subjectivity and culturally constructed identity.

These paintings begin with the purportedly most technologically advanced means of image-making, AI. Using the app AI Art Generator Wonder Avatar, the artist types in prompts that have included the following words and phrases: big afro Black anime man nude in landscape, brown blush skin, feminine, perfect symmetrical face, detailed pupils, evocative pose, smirk, blouse, eyes with elegant eyelashes, blush cheeks, oil painting, sharp, John William Waterhouse, Thomas Cole, Alphonse Mucha, glow and gold chains and jewelry in open nightscape surround by lots of watermelons basketballs and liquor, bottles, long hair, dark blush skin, melanin skin, hyper realistic, Hieronymus Bosch, sex, couple, Lisa Yuskavage, blackamoor with shiny blue skin and long hair coming out of a whirlpool in the ocean surrounded by basketballs and Hennessy bottles floating in the water everywhere around him very detailed, the basketballs are glowing brightly in a dark night sky, very detailed, Caravaggio, Salvador Dalí and Tintoretto, classical art, 400k.

The eccentricities of this list betray the artist's own interests and obsessions, as well as an attempt to achieve a specific sort of result. But the strangeness of the images that result speak not only of the machine's impersonal—which is not to say inhuman—logic, but also of the predilections of the programmers who created its protocols and of the large data sets that drove its machine learning. And it is probably a safe bet that the developers of AI Art Generator Wonder Avatar (which seems to be published by a Vietnamese entity), as well as the vast collective responsible for creating digital image repositories, do not comprise groups any less biased or racist than society as a whole. For all their novelty, Young's images, like all other products of the touted radicality of AI image generators, rely on familiar prejudices and



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pictorial conventions for their surreal affect.

Transferring the machine-generated compositions to black canvas by painting them with bleach, Young turns his underlying process into a metaphor. Is it too much of a stretch to imagine that the very creation of the image by means of the removal of color from the fabric by a whitening agent might echo the corrosive effects of a societal privileging of whiteness on the formation of Black identity? That the bleach-on-black-canvas underpainting reverses traditional artistic technique—working by subtraction instead of addition, rendering the image in light on dark instead of the opposite—serves to underscore the topsy-turvy nature of Young’s images.

The images themselves, finished more conventionally in oil paint atop the bleached underpainting, offer a plethora of compelling weirdnesses. A muscular nude looks directly at us, his Afro haloed by a crepuscular sky as he sits in a pumpkin patch where the pumpkins are turning into basketball-watermelons. Another man with a telescoping neck, seen in profile against a glowing cosmos, seems to stand in a rubbery whirlpool while a smaller one burrows into his hair. In a third canvas, a large Afroed figure with a gold chain rises godlike from the waves holding some sort of transparent bubble in which floats a face jug, a genre of ceramic vessels in the form of often grotesque heads, originally made by enslaved African Americans in the South (Young has made his own versions of face jugs, sometimes as self-portraits). Around the titanic man swim other figures like tritons and nereids around Poseidon, equipped with basketballs, durags, and other accoutrements.

Translating the AI-generated images, Young papers over some of the misunderstandings of the algorithm, leaving us with more legible—and conventional—compositions that merge strangeness with familiarity. They resemble the products of historical Surrealism, especially in its regional variants, as well as the popular, vernacular images that have been gathered under the rubric of “Black Romantic.” Young’s new paintings simultaneously reveal personal interests and fantasies, constituting a form of allegorical or psychological self-portraiture, and a glimpse into a collective unconscious, the images reflecting a broad, cultural, if also profoundly idiosyncratic, phantasmatic Blackness. Young has chosen to visualize his dreams, desires, fears, and random musings through a technological subconscious, the forward-facing image-making means par excellence of right now. We might then think of his new paintings as an Afrofuturism for the present moment.

Anthony Peyton Young is a Boston-based artist born and raised in Charleston, WV. Working primarily in painting, drawing, and collage, Young’s work explores identity, ancestry, and memorialization with heavy influences from Black Americana, film, and his home state West Virginia. Young earned his B.A. from West Virginia State University and his M.F.A. from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/Tufts University. Young has won awards such as the School of the Museum of Fine Arts/Tufts University Traveling Fellowship and the Walter Feldman Fellowship for Emerging Artist. His work is included in the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the Juliet Art Museum. He has also been featured in publications such as *GAYLETTER*, *Evergreen Review*, and *The Boston Globe*. Young has presented his work at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Harvard’s Black Portraiture Conference.

Joseph R. Wolin is a critic and curator of contemporary art based in New York. He teaches in the MFA Photography program at Parsons School of Design, The New School. He is the author of more than 240 art exhibition reviews for *Time Out New York* since 2006, and has also written for *The New Yorker*, *Canadian Art*, and *Modern Painters*. He was the Art Critic in Residence at the Bronx Museum in 2012–13, and since 2002 has served as a founding board member of Participant, Inc. in New York.

Image: © Anthony Peyton Young; “Fruits of My Labor,” 2023; Bleach, Black 3.0, and oil on canvas; 46 x 26 inches.