

Trevon LATIN

Colossal Magazine,

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Everything is Drag*

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A Colossal Interview

Trevon Latin Questions His Impulse to Solve Problems, Navigating Solitude, and the Idea That Everything is Drag

MAY 19, 2022



When speaking with Trevon Latin several words run through the conversation like a refrain: feel, thought, existing. As we video chat, Latin interrupts himself several times to warn me that his tangents have tangents,

but they are less tangents than branches of thought that erupt as he allows himself to ponder the possibilities, the new ways into the work. For Latin, the best use of questions is to breed more questions, which he answers through his practice.

As he works, each painting or sculpture becomes its own Mobius strip of call and response for both the viewer and himself. This is perhaps why, while Latin has recently (in the last few weeks he notes) come into an understanding of himself as an artist, he is more prone to think of himself as a problem-solver. Each quilt remnant, each barrette, each string of beads he incorporates into the work asks, What does masculinity look like? What does it mean to present yourself as a Black person? What does intimacy look like? What does it mean to exist as a corporeal, analog self versus a digital self or a self mediated through a work of art? For Latin, there are no static answers to these questions, and as we speak, he is deeply reflective, linking up new thoughts to old, scribbling notes about ideas he wants to pursue further when he is alone again.

Latin, who was born and raised in Houston, holds a BFA from the University of Houston. Early in the pandemic, he completed his MFA from Yale University's Department of Painting and Printmaking. His work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions, and last summer, New York's Perrotin hosted his first solo show, *Trinket Eater*. Comprising both sculptures and two-dimensional multi-media pieces, the collection plays with what is hidden and what is revealed, what is protected, and what is exposed. As noted in the text for the show, Latin's works, "... blend futurity and fantasy,

mythology and religion, creating landscapes where the characters portrayed exist in a state of becoming.”

Colossal contributor Paulette Beete spoke with Latin in April 2022 via video. This conversation has been edited and condensed. Shown above is “Untitled (Michael)” (2021), oil on canvas and fabric stretched on panel. 36 inches. Photo by Jason Mandella, courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Paulette: Tell me about your journey to becoming an artist.

Trevon: Thinking I’m an artist literally happened within the past couple of weeks. I was like, oh my god, I’m an artist. I actually make art for a living. I never really thought that I’d be doing this. I say this a lot—because it really reflects a lot of how I feel about art, how I engage with art, how I consume art—I thought that I was going to be a video game designer. I really thought that that was my calling. That’s what I wanted, and I went after it. One of the things that I wanted from it was to learn how to paint and how to construct the human body. Those things are really important to that genre. I really felt like it’s one of those one-in-a-million jobs like being a YouTuber or like an influencer. It’s something that rarely happens, but when it happens, it’s good.

I went into painting thinking that we were going to learn things that I could utilize in game design, but InDesign is its own thing. And to be in the game design business you have to travel. You have to move to certain places like L.A. It’s just a lot that I was not prepared for. It made me switch gears. But also I feel like me wanting to travel played into me becoming an artist because when I came to New York, it was like a very intense feeling of, oh, it’s not as easy as I thought it was. And I was okay with that. So there’s a lot

that pointed me in the direction of becoming an artist, but my realization was like a month ago that I am an artist.



“Knead Myself” (2021), fabric and sequins stretched on panel, 42 x 42 x 4 1/2 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

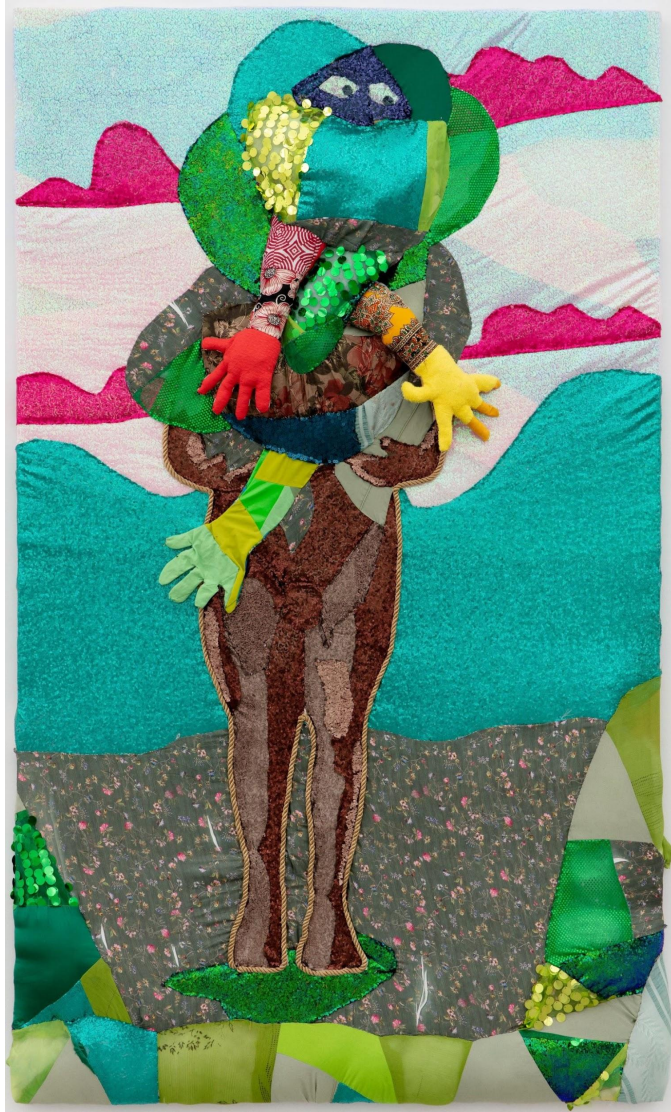
Paulette: How did you think of what you were doing in terms of the work you were making if you didn’t think of yourself as an artist?

Trevon: I had the conception that [to be an artist], I needed to paint portraiture, and I needed to paint it on canvas because that was what I was

being lauded for when I was studying at the University of Houston, for instance. They really enjoyed my painting. They likened it to Lucian Freud, who I love as a painter, but that wasn't what I wanted. My world consists of things that I'm way more interested in, and that's materials and storytelling narratives. At the end of the day, I'm a problem solver, I enjoy solving problems. I think that's why I love video games so much because I look to that as a way to relax. I've noticed relaxation to me can probably be a very intense problem that I need to solve. And I'll go to sleep and dream about it.

A lot of what came out of my time at Yale really was me putting together my interests. That's how a lot of the three-dimensional works, the more sculptural things came about. It's because I was solving problems like what makes my work my work and what am I interested in. How do I make my work make sense in the lens of academia, which in itself is problematic? There's a lot of problems outside of the construction of work, the articulation of work that I'm looking at. The pandemic brought up a lot of stuff, and I had to keep an art journal. I had to really deconstruct why I do what I do because it's really hard to explain my work to a world that thinks that Black folks are just supposed to make portrait paintings. I feel like we're boxed into some kind of way to make work, and I don't agree with that. I should be able to do whatever, whenever I want.

I'm pretty sure there are people that probably work like me, but I feel one with it because I kind of came up with the way that I make a lot of the work. A lot of it is very organic in the way that I construct. I feel like I'm solving a problem. I solved an issue within myself and within the work that I'm able to express in the way that I made it. I'm so satisfied with that. That is liberating.



“Nesting” (2022), fabric and sequins stretched on panel, 48 x 48 x 2 1/2 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Paulette: While I was researching for this interview, I read a review of your exhibit *Trinket Eater* that said the works were melancholy. And while I understand that the work will land differently for different viewers, I found myself resisting that idea of melancholy because it felt like a little bit of a cliché as to how to describe the Black experience.

Trevon: I think, overall, the work is pretty melancholy, especially with this new work that's happening, it has its own sense of aloneness. Solitude is one of the things that I'm working out mentally. I think about Toni Morrison a lot. One time she was asked about her drinking or something. And she was like, "I don't drink because I want to feel those feelings." That's really how I navigate life. I want to feel those feelings. I want to celebrate those feelings. I want to celebrate this melancholy. When I was in Houston, I was very sad. My best friend had left, and it was just me. I really had to figure out how I was going to navigate Houston, being alone, being an artist, not really feeling like I fit in. But I just feel like there's instances where I'm celebrating that experience of aloneness and and growing up feeling different.



"Terra Forma" (2021), fabric, sequins, gloves, upholstery cord, 83 x 49 1/4 x 5 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Paulette: A repeated gesture I noticed in the work is how faces are hidden or the eyes of the figures are hidden. To me, that speaks of stillness and intimacy, and I love the idea that maybe we don't really know what's going on. Can you speak about that tension between what's hidden and what's revealed?

Trevon: In my final MFA critique at Yale, a friend of mine looking at the work said, "Oh, I just see this as transformation." And I feel like that's so on the nose. It makes so much sense to me. Throughout all my years of my life, I've always wanted to express that I'm more than just this shell. I'm more than just this body. My work is very much surrounded by transformation in trying to show that I'm more than just my skin. I'm more than just any of this. I think in a way it's kind of a recoil against mainstream media.

I also noticed that I have a lot of anxieties around people, like being in a gallery space performing. I'm not really interested in that at all. I think a lot of my work, especially when we come to performance and transformation, being online and existing online definitely lends itself to my work. That's honestly how the performance work was born. It is my need to not be physically present in places and be able to exist online, however I comfortably feel, which leads me to glitch feminism.

My friend sent me this book, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* by Legacy Russell. I read that, and I was like, this is me down. This is how I've always been. I really wasn't tech-savvy or anything, but I think my work is the analog version of what I would have done online. So I think a lot of the costuming, a lot of the hiding of the faces, like Legacy refers to it, is a glitch.

It is something that is me deconstructing the world around me myself. It was all very subconscious, but the more and more I looked at it, a lot of the work is me hiding myself, hiding me from people. To quote RuPaul, I do essentially agree with that sentiment that we are all born naked, and the rest is drag. That is a very real statement. Everything is so performative. It's all been so subconscious, but now that I know what it is, I can be purposeful with it.

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Paulette: I think the work also plays with the idea of intimacy and distance, particularly the sculptural work. As a viewer you'd like to touch them, but, of course, you can't.

Trevon: I'm actually working on a series where I'm making these terrariums, and it's about the idea of having access to spaces, whether they be queer spaces or just spaces in general, how we create our own spaces. I do want to speak on intimacy. I know that the fabrics and things that are used are sourced in a way that is very intimate to me. Like, for instance, my grandmother gives me a lot of fabric she's been collecting. She gave me a box full of dresses that she got from church that were prom dresses. So there's intimacy on that level and the intimacy of me actually composing the work, making it make sense. And the viewer, I don't know. I'm still working it out. But I know that this next series of work, that idea is definitely going to

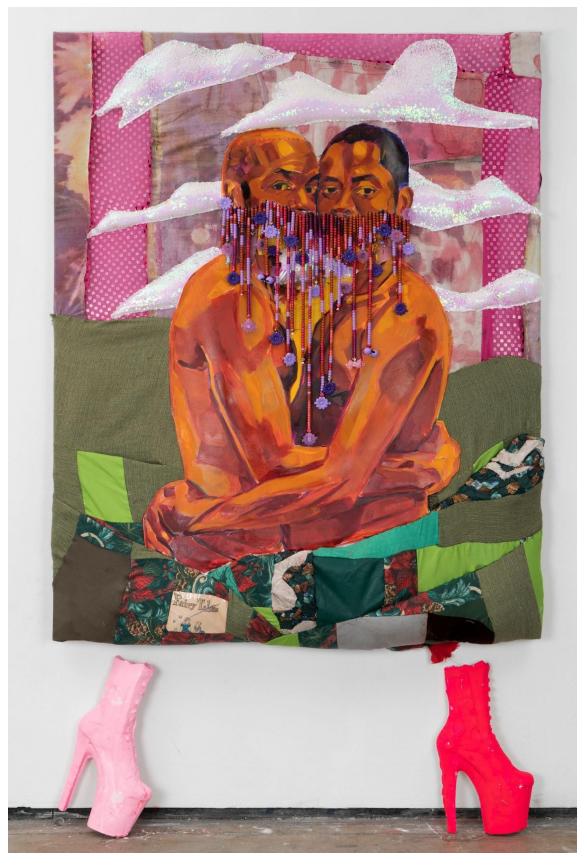
be one of the driving forces behind it, the fact that you can't get into these spaces to actually touch them. I'm doing these much more larger scaled versions of what was in *Trinket Eater*.

Paulette: I'd like to talk more about the materials you use and the way they speak of intimate Black family relationships. I'm thinking of the beads that are like what I wore when I was a kid, the barrettes. There are also parts of old quilts, all these things that you find in domestic, intimate spaces.

Trevon: Some of my most intimate times have been going with my home girls to the beauty shop. I look at beautification, specifically Black beautification as survival. It's us figuring out how to protect our hair, our body. As a kid, there were things that I would see girls wearing and I was like, I wish I could wear that. I wish I could express myself in these ways. Some of the work I'm working on right now I'm using du rags. I think going back to the idea of drag and performance led me to those materials. I like to use the beads because it reminds me of a childlike me. In my way, I'm playing with the idea of coming of age. I think that me using those materials to hide the figure plays into that draggy perspective. These characters or these sculptures, these are the accessories that they're performing with as these are the things that they're using to shield themselves from the world, essentially.

One of my favorite pieces is the two figures embracing and looking at the onlooker and being like, No, you can't get all of me. You'll get pieces of me, but you won't get all of me. I think, in a way, they're taking back their control.

I have been influenced by club kids especially when I came here to New York, that idea of taking up space, of transforming the body, morphing the body, not looking human. I'm using these items from childhood to tackle adult, not even adult problems, because kids have some adult problems. They're going through it because the world is not ready for these conversations about identity. Clearly, they're not ready when we got all these anti-trans bills. These items have always been a tool for me to express myself. I'm using them to transform objects around me. Things make sense to me when I'm able to transform them and make them make sense.



“Purple Love” (2020), oil on canvas, fabric, barrettes, pony beads, 5 x 4 feet. Image courtesy of the artist and Perrotin

Paulette: We've been talking a lot about your own journey through the work, what you're seeing, what you're learning. As a storyteller, what do you want the viewer to take from your work?

Trevon: I think my art is about regular folks. I mean not regular people but people that are just existing in these ways that I'm discussing. I'm talking about queerness, performance, body, Blackness. People out in the real world doing shit and really trying to survive and exist. Those are the people I'm talking to. When I was a kid, I had a big box filled with action figures. My action figures wouldn't be Batman. It would be Poseidon, the god of water. I would completely change these codes that were given. That is what a lot of my work is saying, and I hope that that's what people take from it, to question Why? Why do I have to do a nine-to-five? Why do I have to work? We really need to be asking these questions because we got a lot to dismantle. This world is in shambles, and I don't think it's going to get any better without these questions being asked. So I hope that, at least throughout all of that, with this work that's the takeaway. Let's ask questions.