

Iyaba

an interview with Hadiya Presswood

edited for clarity; all photos provided Courtesy of Iyaba

Iyaba is a multimedia and multi-talented artist and historian from Antigua who tells stories about Black people, Black culture, and Black history with an authentic and reflective voice. In this interview, he talks about the relationship between identity and art, the processes of creating, and the impact of COVID-19.

What perspective do you gain from the intersection of being a historian and an artist?

The two overlap and intersect for me more than anything else, so seeing them as one thing is very natural. My maternal grandfather was an artist who channeled his gifts into tailoring men's suits, but my greatest memories remain the way he would tell stories and folklore about our country, culture and our people. He did impressions and invented a multitude of voices and characters to make his stories exciting and engaging. Once I realized that storytelling was my medium, I knew I could use my art to articulate moments and persons in history that have either been ignored, whitewashed or erased.

As a multi-media artist, do you feel self-imposed or external pressure to feed one craft more than the others, or do you attempt to devote equal time to them, and how? Do you have a favorite medium?

I did at the beginning of my journey; I thought you could only pursue one discipline so I relegated the other things I knew I had a passion for to secondary hobbies. I realized at some point that I had friends who knew my poetry and friends who knew my paintings, but very few who knew I did both.

So, I created my one man play Self Portrait unFRAMED, an autobiographical performance piece that would showcase both, by telling the story of my life in poetry and prose while painting a self-portrait. That led to an opportunity to act in someone else's play and fall completely in love with theater, where everything goes.

That was when I began to imagine being a storyteller and my talents being tools or different ways to tell stories. No more writers block or painters block etc., if it's not coming as a poem maybe it wants to come as a painting, or a song or a performance piece or a sculpture. So, the medium I nurture most is storytelling, but painting and drawing, which I discovered first, come easiest.



What is your process or ritual that aids you with creating? How do you know when a piece is complete?

Ganja and music, plenty Fela, Bebop/Jazz and Reggae, and the quiet of night, vibrations are higher and clearer after midnight. I listen with all my work, listen for the what-comes-next and for the feeling of completion. I describe it to my painting students as that vibe you get while getting dressed, the outfit isn't ready till you feel it.

How have the components of your spatial and national identity been captured and manifested through your art?

My art in many ways defines them both, even when I was the insecure, super introverted eleven years old immigrant kid, my art created a space/identity for me. Discovering that I was a D'jeli (a Griot or storyteller) made telling the story of my people foremost for me and discovering elders like Jacob Lawrence and Richard Wright opened my eyes to the guild I was a part of. That led to the path I remain on today. As a visual artist, the colors, flavors and history of the Caribbean inform every aspect of my work. As a writer and performer, exploring the melody of my native patois and the Akan roots of our Soca/Calypso has been a beautiful adventure of continuous discovery.



You called yourself a “black man in training” and an “artist in training” in a few interviews: What does “in-training” mean with respect to both phrases and what have you learned about yourself as a black man and as an artist?

Artist, with a capital A, means honesty on an almost self-deprecating level, down to the marrow. I am the child of a Black man who fell back on the shallowness of his handsome athletic prowess and a Christian mother who adhered too long to the tenants of a good woman that Christianity demands. Climbing out of that place is a work in progress, it informs my work and at times it clouds my clarity.

As an artist, I can remember being a 22 year old senior, receiving the accolades of my painting professor and asking him with all the testosterone-fueled ego of a boy too full of himself, “so how long do you think it will take me to be a great artist?” He responded immediately with a dry, matter of fact, “ohh, you will be well into your 40s, perhaps early 50s before you even find your style.” He was walking away from me as he said it. I was pissed, how dare he? 29 years later I am 51 years old and just now beginning to hear folks say, “hey Iyaba, I saw a painting the

other day, and I could tell right away it way yours!" That frign ole man musta had a crystal ball, I can still see the influences of the kats I studied, Jacob, Norman, Pablo, Diego, Henri, Paul, in my work but not as much as I did at 41.

I hope to remain an artist in progress.

As a poet and cultural worker how have you managed during the coronavirus pandemic, personally and professionally?

When the lockdown became an official thing, I had been at home for less than a week from my Caribbean tour, the plan was to (have) down time for about three weeks and then continue the tour with a dozen gigs in the British Virgin Islands, and then to my country Antigua to work on "Silver Bracelets" with actors there; hopefully we can continue that tour soon. But it has been a blessing for me: over 50 major paintings, lots of new really kool discoveries, finally finished my first children's book "Navel Strings (belly button)" and wrote a new one, "Kwaku's Mask". We are also working on a Zoom reading of a new play "Silver Bracelets" written in Antiguan patois (and will be non-Caribbean-native friendly) and a new collection of poetry "Season Rice". As a master teaching artist I've enjoyed the inspiration of zooming with my 4th and 5th graders and exploring household objects as art materials.



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