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A Radical Black Arts Renaissance Is Reshaping a Fractured St. Louis

James McAnally / Jul 9, 2018

You ought to be paying attention.



Damon Davis and Katherine Simone Reynolds, photographed by Shabez Jamal

When I arrived at Damon Davis and Katherine Simone Reynolds's adjacent studios in South St. Louis, the artists were already deep in conversation. They finished each others' sentences, like siblings for whom most thoughts don't need to be spoken, as they talked about everything from the conservative politics embedded in the Black community, to Kanye's problematic return to Twitter, and the gritty leather bar where Reynolds was headed after our chat.

The broken AC in the studio mirrored the hothouse effect of this small city, where the art scenes unpredictably tangle and overlap. It is a scene heating up in every sense, with art and activism intertwining following the Ferguson uprising, art spaces opening and expanding rapidly, and a new wave of artists

fleeing the coasts—some in search of cheap space and room to experiment, others returning to their roots after years away.

Davis and Reynolds have each been at the forefront of this emerging scene, making names for themselves by trespassing outside expectations—of the city, of its cloistered communities, and of simplistic visions of Blackness. The pair, alongside an expansive community of artists, activists, rappers, producers, curators, and organizers are authoring an alternate identity for creative young people in St. Louis. Every time they speak, they know they are performing a role: that of rising Black artist from the 21st century home of revolt.



Damon Davis and Katherine Simone Reynolds, photographed by Shabez Jamal

St. Louis, Missouri, is the birthplace of gated communities and contains some of the starkest segregation in the nation. The rupture that started in Ferguson almost four years ago wasn't exactly news from nowhere. Dating back to at least the Dred Scott case and Missouri's designation as a slave state, the city has been a site of recurring contention. In recent decades, St. Louis slid into a familiar post-industrial malaise felt across much of the Midwest. National news outlets focused on crime statistics and the city's flyover status.

When Michael Brown was killed on August 9, 2014, and the cameras arrived on Canfield Drive, they came for a flash in the pan protest but stuck around as the protests became a new Civil Rights Movement. The energy of the artists and activists who helped shape it spilled out into the city's streets, politics, gatherings, and galleries.

Witnessing (and participating in) this uprising shifted my own work as an artist and arts organizer. My partner Brea and I founded The Luminary, a far-reaching independent art space in St. Louis, ten years ago. We see the space as a means to center artists within the city's trajectory, not just as voices of our time but as a means of envisioning new futures. We seek to be a lynchpin in this "new" St. Louis, pushing art to its limits to propose a more innovative, equitable city amidst the urgencies of our moment.

From this still-simmering uprising, a new Black arts renaissance has flourished in St. Louis, and Davis and Reynolds are taking this work to its bleeding edge, crossing boundaries and shattering previously assumed ceilings of the St. Louis art world. They are impossible to ignore in part because of their hybrid, more-is-more approach to their art—Davis calls his work "post-disciplinary" and Reynolds uses "multi—" or half-jokingly "manic-disciplinary" to describe her eclectic output.

Davis is best known for co-directing the Ferguson documentary *Whose Streets?* which propelled him to a national stage and a TED Fellowship. But he also helms the long-running music label Farfetched and is a prolific visual artist, with a major solo exhibition currently up at The Luminary and work in the collection of the Smithsonian Museum of African American History.



L: Katherine Simone Reynolds. R: The author, James McNally. Photographed at The Luminary by Shabez Jamal

Reynolds uses her body to explore notions of Black beauty and love in striking dance, video, and performance art. She's collaborated with big name friends—she was the face of Martine Syms's major commission at MoMA last summer—and is becoming a regular at art fairs and exhibitions around the nation.

Fittingly, my early summer chat with Reynolds and Davis fell between the artists' twinned exhibitions at The Luminary—*Mane 'n Tail* and *Darker Gods* in the Garden of the Low-Hanging Heavens. We've

worked with the pair in almost every permutation, hosting Davis's music label parties and Reynolds's Citizen Book Club, and showing their work in group exhibitions alongside acclaimed artists like Hannah Black and Dread Scott. When Brea and I heard about their new projects, we revised our schedule to make way for two of the most important voices in our community. In a city fissured with inferiority, their work engages the histories of this place and proposes a brighter future.



Damon Davis, photographed by Shabez Jamal

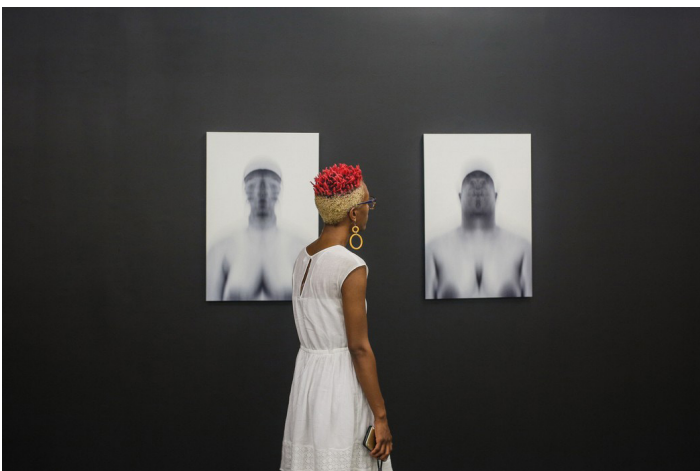
Darker Gods is Davis's largest solo show to date, and opening it in St. Louis, despite offers from both coasts, was an intentional statement. "So many run to seek validation from the art world at large, like if it doesn't happen in New York or L.A. it doesn't matter," Davis said. "I think the folks here should see this work first, because it is about exploring and creating a new universe, a new world, new experience and ideas. We don't get that from running to the old structures off the bat."

"Over the last few years there has been a renaissance of creation, thought, and transformation [in St. Louis]. I think it is the perfect place to bring forth a world of new Gods that speak to a different interpretation of the world," he added.

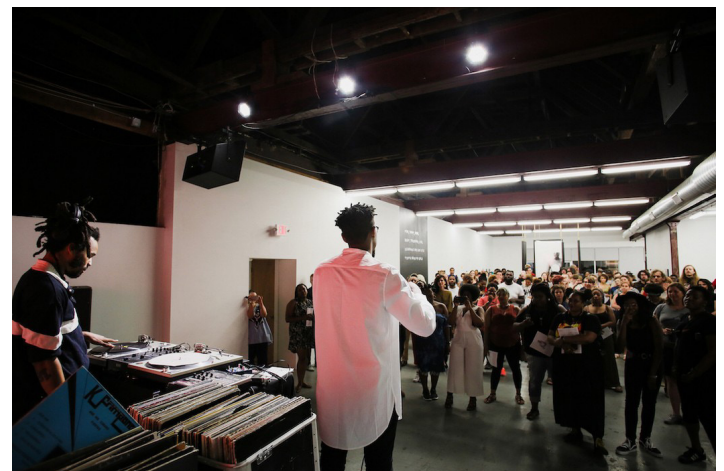
Davis calls the show an "afrosurrealist epic" and sees it as the start of a long-running project examining the awful weirdness of our era, where "Black Death Spectacles" are common, police violence is livestreamed to our phones, militarized tanks roll through our neighborhoods, and influential rappers don MAGA hats. "In the most basic and realistic terms, the lives of Black people, in America especially, is absolutely surreal in nature. The day to day obstacles and events we live through as commonplace are as surreal as it gets. Our very existence is something that conjures awe and inspiration," he said. "The songs of the Blues, the myths and mysticism of the South, the street tales of hip-hop, the soul-moving spiritual religious rites of Jazz, the fashion, the film, and the stereotypes of horror built by White supremacy—these all lend themselves to something surreal."

Darker Gods is an alternate mythology, imagining dieties whose superhuman characteristics come from negative tropes of Blackness. Take "the god of those out of options," for example: a child whose creativity is stolen by a "pale white horse" grows into "Lord So Will It," a hustler whose creativity is aimed at survival. Davis offers him a prayer:

*Lord So Will It, bless the Trap
For the ones we lost and we'll never get back*



*'Darker Gods' installation view.
Photo by Brea McAnally*



*Damon Davis at the opening reception for 'Darker Gods.'
Photo by Brea McAnally*



Katherine Simone Reynolds, photographed by Shabez Jamal

If Davis is rewriting the present through epic allegory, Reynolds is reframing Black love and beauty by confronting the restrictions Black bodies still experience in public and art spaces equally. A little like Tessa Thompson's artist-activist character Detroit in Boots Riley's new film *Sorry to Bother You*, Reynolds's nuanced performance of Black femininity extends beyond her art, to the deployment of color-coded wardrobes and constructed social encounters.

Recently, I walked in late to a performance by Autumn Knight at the Pulitzer Arts Foundation. Reynolds turned to greet me wearing a pair of bright yellow contact lenses with smiley faces that covered her pupils and irises. They complimented her canary-colored outfit that, it turned out, was meant to match her video art screening just outside the Pulitzer. She remarked later that she bought the contacts after a customer at her day job asked her why she wasn't smiling. She sent the smile back as a weapon, a defiant statement.

This informal performance is consistent with Reynolds' fluid approach to her work, in "constant pursuit of authenticity and 'real' emotion." *Mane 'n Tail* brought together ten female-identifying artists of color in the intersectional context of a beauty supply store. It "discussed the interwoven lives of the community and the beauty supply, and wondered why

there are still major cultural barriers that collide in these spaces."



Video still from 'You're the Only Reason I'm Staying Here,' courtesy the artist

Reynolds saw the show as a social construction itself, with "a lot of language and trust barriers that I wanted to see in a room together having a 'conversation,' or wanted to make the audience have a conversation about." Art-world risers like Narcissister and Diamond Stingily showed work alongside local artists like Yvonne Osei and Rachel Youn, and the silo-shattering show had the energy of a block party outside a beauty supply. It was, in the words of one visitor at the opening, a glimpse at the future St. Louis they wished they lived in.

“This need for immersion in quote/unquote ‘Blackness’ is an issue when it comes to exploring different avenues for Black thought,” Reynolds asserted, before Davis finished the thought: “You can’t be multiple things when you’re Black. You’ve got to be in a small box.”

Reynolds’s expansive three channel video for the Pulitzer Arts Foundation took these small containers of identity and collapsed them altogether. The film moves through a post-industrial landscape scored by a DJ spinning trap music to operatic overtures sung by Black vocalists (including the artist’s brother Miles Wadlington). In the final scene, Reynolds pushes her body beyond exhaustion on a yellow treadmill in an empty field. It’s an eloquent allusion to the grueling labor of constantly performing one’s identity.

Near the end of the video, Reynolds breaks stride, finishing the too-far sprint with a smile—a real one, even—as she exits the treadmill but remains in the charged landscape, catching her breath. The shot lingers on the treadmill after she’s gone, still spinning with the video’s title text painted on its belt: *You’re the Only Reason I’m Staying Here*.

It feels like a tenuous acknowledgement of the crushing responsibility of being young, Black, and outspoken in a place like St. Louis. It is all too exhausting: the unending requests to perform the

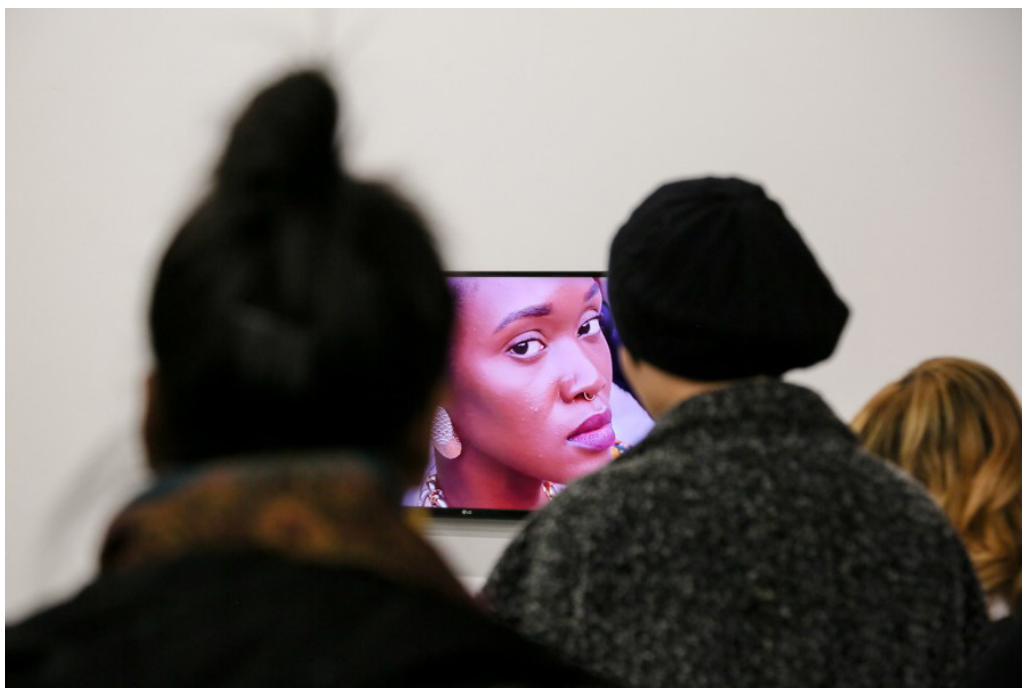
role of rising Black artist; the pressure to deliver career-defining work seemingly every other month; the urgency to figure out how to get yourself and others free; the desperation to move beyond the city’s histories and its continuing containments.



‘Mane ‘n Tail’ installation view. Photo by Brea McAnally

“I am trying to build worlds, not just bodies of work,” Davis said of the force underlying his labor. “My work is about getting free. If we talk about really being free, we’re going to have to let a lot of [these expectations] go too.”

It’s hard to imagine Davis and Reynolds, like the many other artists composing the largely Black-led creative community remaking post-revolt St. Louis, not continuing to push themselves too far. But maybe a better world isn’t much further.



‘Mane ‘n Tail’ installation view. Photo by Brea McAnally