

# ANDRE BARKER JR.

2024 MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

---



DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

# 2024 MFA THESIS EXHIBITION

5th Floor Student Center May 6–28, 2024

---

*The 2024 MFA Thesis Exhibition* features the thesis works of the MFA candidates in Columbia College Chicago's Art I Design and Photography Departments. The exhibition, which includes paintings, prints, drawings, photography, sound, and installation, captures the extensive research, exploration, critical analysis, creative inquiry, productivity, practice, and achievement these emerging artists have maintained throughout their time in the programs. With varied approaches to subject matter, distinct methods of creation, and a unique blending of personal, political, and historical narratives, the artists in this show weave together the nuanced strands of the contemporary moment.

**Participating Artists:** Andre Barker Jr, Nora Benjamin, Callie Clark Wiren, Noah Fodor, Eli Giclas, Ash Huse, Hillary Irene Johnson, Adam MacArthur, Giselle Mira-Diaz, Grace Papineau-Couture, Arrietta van der Voort, and andrew vogelpohl

*The 2024 MFA Thesis Exhibition* is presented in conjunction with the Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), the Art I Design Department, and the Photography Department.

# ANDRE BARKER JR.

---

I am an Afro-Surrealist who uses figurative painting to visually represent the poetic weirdness of the Black experience in the United States by telling Black stories—my story. I do this by featuring Black and Brown people in iconic works that we have historically been excluded from. I capture feelings of alienation and frustration in my paintings using color, expression, and dramatic lighting to continue the conversation about the change our society desperately needs.

**Andre Barker Jr.** (b.1997) is a figurative painter from Detroit, Michigan, currently an MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago (2022-2024). He has received the Dwight W. Follett Continuing Graduate Student Fellowship, a Diversity and Inclusion Award, and the Albert P. Weisman Award from Columbia College Chicago. He has shown his work at the 3 Square Art Gallery in Fort Collins, CO; The Buckham Gallery in Flint, MI; The KCAD Alluvium Gallery in Grand Rapids, MI; The Detroit Historical Museum in Detroit, MI; and will soon have a solo show at M Contemporary Art in Ferndale, MI in 2024.



Heatwave 1, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 24" x1 8"



*Heatwave 2, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 18"*



*Heatwave 2 (Detail), 2024, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 18"*



*It's Just Hair*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36"



*You see me*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 36" x 36"





*Are you seeing this?*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30"



*Are you seeing this?* (Detail), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 40" x 30"



*Writings of Amir*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"



*Writings of Amir (Detailed)*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 48" x 60"



*Attack on the Night*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60"



*Attack on the Night* (Detail), 2023, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 60"

# INTERVIEW WITH ANDRE BARKER JR.

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

---

**Rachel Manlubatan:** What symbols do you use to portray the Black experience in your pieces? How do you manipulate lighting and color in your artwork to create meaning that connects to your audience?

**Andre Barker Jr:** One of the main symbols that I use is the idea of the wasp - the insect. Wasp of course stands for white Anglo-Saxon Protestant and both them and bees are invasive species. However, some wasp – like the Cicada Killer Wasp – can attack and kill other insects. I relate that to how racist people see Black and brown people as lesser and can attack and kill us. However, the wasp is not included in every piece so, instead, I focus on lighting. I use a lighting technique called chiaroscuro to show that there is a spotlight on Black people and how we must navigate our society with more awareness than others to avoid making white people uncomfortable. I want the people outside of the Black experience to see Black people in a way that they may not have seen them rendered before. And call them out on the fact that everyone tends to watch what a Black and brown person is doing even when we are minding our business. So in a way, this light is including the audience in this voyeuristic act that happens to people of color every day.

**RM:** How do you determine what pieces in history are “masterpieces”? What elements do you add or adjust to them to fit your project, and what do you consider in your brainstorming process to flip the original, white-dominated narrative to one centering around Black and Brown communities?

**ABJ:** I consider a piece a “masterpiece” when it is well-known and people who are not interested in the arts can recognize it. Though I will always look at art history for inspiration, now I am more interested in looking at artwork from various periods and base my

artwork on the feeling that I get when looking at it. When it comes to my brainstorming process when selecting these pieces, I focus on the connection that I have to the piece and how I can transform it into something else... To mean something else and to insert us into the narrative beautifully depicted by the old Masters. The only things I tend to change are the people, background, lighting, and environmental details while sometimes keeping the composition or parts of it to keep it in line with why I loved the original to begin with.

**RM:** How has Afro-Surrealism in mainstream media influenced the art you create? What additional genres/styles in other art forms inspire your work?

**ABJ:** Afro-surrealism influenced the art that I created because I saw that it was a nuanced way to talk about our experience. Though it touches on trauma done to the Black community, like my work, it talks more about the aftermath of trauma and how Black people exist in our society today. It also focuses on the weird situations that people of color may find themselves in by just existing. So, when I saw that, I tried to figure out a way that I could capture that in a painting or drawing. Some other art forms that inspire my work are graphic novels, video games, and anime. This influence shows up in my work in the way that I love creating narratives in my paintings, and why I call myself a visual storyteller. I also carried over some stylistic choices that are heavily featured in those mediums such as the lines that outline some of the figures to separate them from the background.

**RM:** What differences do you find between exploring Black trauma versus exploring the absurdity that comes after that trauma? How does your art shift the perception of the Black experience to one more complex than just anger?

## INTERVIEW CONTINUED

---

**ABJ:** I think that exploring Black trauma is something that is overly done in media to the point that it feels like that is all people know about Black people. What happened during the time of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, what is Mass incarceration, over-policing etc... and though they are important subjects, I am more concerned about the aftermath and the effects of those traumas. How does it feel to be a Black person living in a society that did all of that to Black people today? How do I show how uncomfortable it is to be the only Black person in a white space? How do I show the alienating feeling of living in a society that has an irrational hate, fear, and misunderstanding of you but loves your culture? These are the questions that I asked myself when I started thinking about these paintings and questions that I will continue to ask myself moving forward. I hope that these questions will shift the perception of the Black experience by showing us in different situations and capturing emotions in my work to let people outside of the Black experience to understand it more. This way we can start a conversation that will hopefully lead us toward the societal change that we need.





## THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series and graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at: [colum.edu/deps](http://colum.edu/deps)

Contact information: Mark Porter, [mporter@colum.edu](mailto:mporter@colum.edu) / 312.369.6643

Follow us on [Instagram!](#)

Like us on [Facebook!](#)

---

Columbia College Chicago Student Center  
754 S. Wabash Ave., Fifth Floor, Chicago, IL 60605  
Gallery hours: Monday–Saturday 9 a.m.–5 p.m.