

movements of the 1960s. Counting Gilroy and his decentralized diasporic thinking as both a muse and compass rose, Cyrus surveys “the Afro-Atlantic” as, in his words, “an intercontinental and multinational geography describing the circulation of ideas between Africa, Europe and the Americas.” The 2018 BMW Art Journey Prize was a pivotal catalyst in this pursuit, propelling Cyrus on a 45-day voyage across 4 continents, 7 countries, and 12 cities to investigate the centuries-old exchange of culture, commerce and ideas amongst countries of the Atlantic Rim. In combination with his ongoing “domestic” survey of the Black Panther Party (BPP), Blues & Jazz music, and FBI surveillance of African-American artists, activists, and entertainers, Cyrus has developed a fertile material language that preserves socio-political cargo while also cobbling intertextual readings. From papyrus, sargassum, grits, and denim, to club posters, torn magazines, stained glass, and leather, nothing is autonomous or cloistered in this cumulative lexicon—poignantly reflecting the motley mutation, and cross-pollination, of his subject matter.

[Essay excerpt from forthcoming catalog]



Jamal Cyrus. *Jet Auto Archive*—April 27, May 11, May 25, 1992 (*Medicated L.A. Kente*), 2018 .

Paper and cardboard collage. Collection of Megan & Casey McManemin, Dallas, TX.

*Jamal Cyrus: The End of My Beginning* is co-curated by Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator, Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, and Dr. Alvia Wardlaw, Director and Curator, University Museum at Texas Southern University. The exhibition at the Blaffer will be on view through September 19, 2021; the exhibition *Levels and Layers* at TSU will be on view beginning June 18, 2021. This survey is accompanied by the first monograph devoted to the artist, which be released in September 2021. It will feature essays by Grace Deveney, Ciarán Finlayson, Jamillah James, Steven Matijcio, Ana Tuazon, and an interview with the artist conducted by Dr. Alvia Wardlaw.

This exhibition will travel to the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles in 2022. Lead support for *Jamal Cyrus: The End of My Beginning* is provided by The Ford Foundation.

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# JAMAL CYRUS

## THE END OF MY BEGINNING

Blaffer Art Museum



Jamal Cyrus. *The End of My Beginning*, 2005. Hair, toy house, and figures. Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery, Houston.

Thick mounds and rolling waves of bristly black hair blanket an otherwise genteel suburban setting in Jamal Cyrus’s 2005 maquette *The End of My Beginning*, immersing small trainset figurines and a two-story white clapboard house in an Afro-esque blizzard. Drawing inspiration from the humbly iconic work of artist David Hammons and his use of hair to encroach upon objects and their accompanying norms, from sofas to stones, Cyrus employs what he considers an eminently “black” material to suggest—and arguably announce—the arrival of a new dawn. With elemental might the dense, brambled hair in this Cyrus work envelops an idyllic island of upper middle-class life, forcing the residents to wade through an uncanny landscape thick with the mass, weight, and the undeniable presence of blackness.

Such a mottled reef also evokes the broad swaths of a seaweed known as “sargassum” that float upon the Sargasso Sea—a unique, some say “legendary” nexus of the Atlantic Ocean unbound by land masses. This curious weed changes color from green, to reddish-purple, to blackish-brown as it washes up and dries on coastlines from the Caribbean to Galveston, Texas—taking on the anthropomorphic appearance of African-American hair in the process. In its natural environment, this sargassum often mingles with a variety of plant life and synthetic refuse carried by a myriad of ocean currents that collect in the heart of the Sargasso Sea. Consequently home to one of the world’s largest “garbage” islands, the paradoxically crystalline waters of this Sea have taken on an aura of alchemy, danger, and contradiction in historical literature and popular myth.

Beyond its ecological incongruity, this tangled reading is amplified by the fact the Sargasso also carried many ships crisscrossing the Atlantic between the 16th and 19th century as part of the infamous Transatlantic slave trade. Between the “First Passage” of transporting African peoples and loading them onto ships, and the “Final Passage” between port and plantation, where these people were forced into enslavement, the “Middle Passage” involved epoch-shaping exchanges upon the waters between Africa, North America, and Europe. In the intense, often life-threatening state of “in-betweenness” for those being traded from Africa to America, in close quarters and the intentional intermingling of those from disperse communities (to break up existing tribes), captive Africans forged unlikely kinships and lasting exchange.



Jamal Cyrus. *MSY*, 2018. Root system, canvas, earthenware, and cast bronze. Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



Jamal Cyrus. *Sargasso Sea*, 2009. Coral, cymbal, stand, seaweed, frankincense and myrrh incense sticks, safety tape, pedestal. Courtesy of the Artist and Inman Gallery, Houston.

This redemptory survivalism informs the thesis of British historian, theorist, and academic Paul Gilroy in his groundbreaking 1993 book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, where he traces the gestational period underpinning the birth of Black cultures in the New World. Separated from the traditional relationship to a fatherland forever more, Gilroy argues “authentic” Black culture was built—then and now—in the cultural interchange conducted via ship and sea, in the liminal space outside the auspices of nation states. In the ensuing alloy of identity and otherness, which has now become highly influential in contemporary diasporic studies, Gilroy challenges historical tenets of absolutism, nationalism, essentialism, and origin geography with that of hybridity, movement, impurity, and amalgamation. Recognizing the lasting significance of displacement and migration upon today’s cultural consciousness, Gilroy’s thereby positions the Black Atlantic as “a space of transnational cultural construction” where histories are mutually constituted and invariably entangled. Such thinking heralds the end of a singular, originary beginning (and unfettered lineages of racial heritage), and the onset of something more circuitous, unwieldy, and auspicious.

Such thinking circulates through the expansive, research-driven practice of Cyrus as he explores the evolution of African-American identity within Black political movements and the African diaspora. He is especially attuned to the cultural hybrids that have emerged from cross-border interactions in eras from Ancient Egypt and the Transatlantic slave trade to the 1920s Jazz Age of the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights