

MoNA Moments presents Standing, Still Artist Interviews: barry johnson

Narrator: In this episode of MoNA Moments, you will hear a conversation between artist Barry Johnson and the University of Washington Museology graduate Danielle New, who worked collaboratively with their project partner Hanna Corneliussen on the current Outside-In gallery exhibition titled *Standing, Still*. This show features the artwork of barry johnson and 10 other local artists and was curated by Hannah Corneliussen and Danielle New.

Danielle New: Thanks for joining us here today, barry. We're super excited to hear from you. First off, would you mind just telling us a little bit about the piece that's going to be in this show?

barry johnson: Yeah, so I am super stoked about this piece. I have been working on this particular painting style for two years, and I typically work with house paint or anything else that can, like, create work very, very, very fast. But with this one, I've really been trying to broach this medium called Afro-artificial realism. It's really around artificial realism, which was coined by George Kondo. It's just like a take of it through the African diaspora. So what you'll see with this piece is it's going to be a black man, but what I've done is I completely blurred the piece all together. You know, if you had a camera and you were hitting the button trying to make it focus and you just get this really blurred background. I've been trying to be able to accomplish that in a painting for two years, and I've done hundreds of studies. I finally, just through intense practice, and focus, and caffeine, and weed, and alcohol, I finally figured it [out], finally got it. That is the piece that's going to be going to the show. I have not showed it to anyone, and I'm so super incredibly stoked to be able to have it in the show. It's going to be latex on paper.

Danielle: I guess I would also ask, what are some of those main themes that are going to be in that piece? I'm not sure what process you are in with creating it, but what themes do you see developing?

barry: Yeah. The reason why I spent so much time on this particular style, it really has to deal specifically with identity and this whole idea of being seen. Black people, historically, we've

never been able to be seen through the same lens as everyone else. That's our fight. If you look at what took place last year, Danny, there was a lot of response specifically around a thing that we've known and that's been happening in our world forever. It's really great to see that the nation is having a better response to it at this moment in that everyone is being more tentative to some of the events that are happening. The reason why I wanted to take this particular painting, and rather than make it be full-on clear that you can see it, is because we've been fighting a history of not being seen. I really just wanted to be able to encapsulate that in a painting, in a way that's not like my traditional paintings, where perhaps I'll block a face out with some type of found object, or I'll cut the face off through a painting. I've done that through previous works, but with this one specifically, I wanted to have the eye look and say, just through my brain, know that that is a human figure, but I can't be able to make out any details within the eyes, any details within the nose, face, or mouth. It's literally a blur.

Danielle: That is so cool and I totally see why you're trying to do that. That metaphor that you're talking about reads really clear to me. Thank you. This exhibit, "Standing, Still" has a dual theme, one of feeling frozen in time, and the second of emerging from the struggle still standing, hence the little double pun of standing still. I just am curious about what are some of your reflections on this theme as it relates to your work?

barry: Well, interestingly enough, this ties back to, I guess, the overarching theme of all of my work, which is being able to capture the lived, and past, and present experience of Black people and Brown people within America. So, you know, to reflect on that, I like the idea of "Standing, Still," because finally the pandemic forced us to take that moment to sit and reflect, and it'll be really interesting to see what comes out of this. I spent the whole time creating and just working on projects and really responding to everything that was happening real time. There was that whole idea of being able to create enough work to put it in the forefront of everything happening. But the whole idea of being able to stand still, that kind of really reflects on this particular piece, is even though you'll have a figure that is just standing completely there, before I blurred it, it was just a profile picture, but I wanted to kind of give it that hyper movement because we are in the midst of a really big transition, hopefully.

This is the first time that myself, being 36 and my dad being 69, both being able to reflect on things are actually starting to change. I don't know what change is going to come, but I can assure you that things are beginning to change. The hope is that as time goes on, we won't be able to live in the same time that we're living now, that people, we're still fighting for rights around. We're still acknowledging color like it's just not a natural thing and, like, it's not abundant through every part of nature. We're suppressing it. We're still finding a way to still suppress women's voices, still not be able to acknowledge our friends and allies within the LGBT community, like in everyone else that's still fighting for a place of equality. Hopefully we'll be able to get forward and move on.

Danielle: Yeah, that's such a powerful hope that I think a lot of us share. So thank you just for bringing that up.

barry: The hope is [laughing] maybe we'll get there!

Danielle: Yeah. So, how do you hope your art will impact viewers of this show? If anything, what ideas, emotions, and conversations would you like viewers to be having?

barry: More than anything, I truly hope that the work will cause people to take a moment to reflect on their lived experience now and the lived experiences of other people. That is the true hope for all of my work. There's no, you know, I've always created from a space of we, not me. I never create a work with the intention of someone being able to say, oh, barry did that and it's cool. That's not it, because really it's just a response to trauma, because that's all my work. It's very traumatic work. If anything, I am trying to be a part of the conversation that gets people to get more in sync on a collective consciousness around equality. I really would hope that while people view the work of mine and the others in this show, that it's more of a meditative time for people to be able to think back on their experiences presently and in the past and be able to think towards the future.

Danielle: That is so important, you know, with just being able to reflect on your own experiences and connect them to others is a lot of what we're trying to do with this show as well.

barry: Thank you. I really appreciate you being a part of the show and being able to do this. It's like, it's a heavy subject, you know, so, and still like, even though we're coming out of this pandemic, it's still a very heavy time because realistically, if we are to live to respond to everything that happened last year, then really the fight starts now, right? Because the world was like, okay, here's all these things that we know that have happened and we're going to do something. There was probably a time whenever we had to be able to push our laws forward to kind of soak up everything and to think about how it is that we're going to respond. Now that we're coming back together, I'm ready to see everything that people said that they were going to do, and I'm holding people to that. You know, I'm holding all brands to that. I'm holding anyone that said that they were showing up to a demonstration. I don't necessarily call it in protest because it's more so a collective consciousness of people coming together, like really responding to the tragedies that were happening. You know, protest is more looking at ways to respond and tearing things down to build something up anew. This is more so like we're standing in solidarity collectively. So I want to see everyone be able to act upon the things that they spoke about. So thank you for doing this show. I really, truly appreciate it.

Danielle: Just, you know, pivoting a little bit, I mean, you sort of already mentioned, but we're coming up on about the year mark, the 12 or 13 month mark of when, you know, the pandemic hit. We're wondering how these past 12 months have impacted you and just how your year has been. We've talked to a lot of different people who have had vastly different experiences. So anything you're willing to share on that would be great.

barry: Really, Dani, I needed it. You know, I really, I really needed it. It felt really great to just take that time to kind of sit, and consume, and reflect and think. I know everyone else's experiences have been a little different. Whenever the pandemic started, the biggest change was being able to teach from home, which gave me so much more, not that it wasn't there, but a stronger appreciation for teachers, right? Also being able to watch what happens whenever the world shuts down and how quickly you said a great word about pivoting, like how quickly we were able to pivot as best we could. You know, I'm not here to point a finger at administration or anything, like, it was a hard thing for everyone to be involved in. So I think as a collective, given

what was happening and the fact that there was actual real fear that plagued our society for months on end, so much that everyone just stayed inside.

I think it was a great time because realistically, this could have went a lot worse, like very, very, very, very, very worse. So, during the time I've just been staying close to family, connecting with friends and more than anything, I've been working nonstop, just creating as much as I can, you know, being able to... I was able to take part in the Black Lives Matter monument on, you know, on a CHOP, which was a really beautiful experience. I got to watch a really big piece of artwork come together in a way that I've never previously seen. I've worked on a lot of murals and I've never seen one come together in five hours like it was nothing. The response of that and then that turned into more work. The work was really deep because it's all about everything that was happening. So while we'd be out painting murals, multiple people that helped work on this mural had guns pulled on them. There were multiple times when people tried to start fights just for us being able to paint. There was a time whenever I was painting a mural over on Union Street and got into an argument over the course of three days with multiple people that just assumed the person I was painting was dead and why would I paint them? Why would I even paint a black man? When all these things happen, it got to rip the bandaid off. While that bandaid was ripped off, it was good for me just to sit back and say, yeah, I knew this was always true, but now everyone gets to see that it's true. You know what I mean? Like, you can't hide it anymore. So it was a time that I know maybe to a degree saying that it was good to have gone through it maybe sounds slightly as if it's unemotional, but that's not the case at all. I'm just saying that at times, sometimes like the worst has to happen for people to be able to really understand their experience and their life compared to someone else's. And that goes for everyone. Like, you know, my lived experience as a black man could be different than a lived experience of a black man on the other side of the United States. So, all of us collectively got a moment to be like, wow, like life truly is precious and very quickly like something can be taken away.

And I know it's a long breath, but I also want to be able to say the fact that, like, being able to get removed from like our elders was a really big impact on us. I got to see my dad, who lives

here, one time over the past year and a half. But our conversations on the phone have turned to like us being in high school. I talked to my dad like three, four hours at a time. So we've been able to build in ways that I don't think previously we would. So it's really, you know, it really has been kind of a really impactful experience in good ways. And my heart's out to everyone that was affected by COVID. I caught COVID. My daughter caught COVID. It was rough. So, you know, even being able to be thankful for health, all these things really kind of played a part in my life. I know that's a super long answer, but that's kind of a reflection of a year plus of everything. Well, a year of everything we've went through.

Danielle: Yeah, I mean, it's a huge question. So I think that that's a really interesting take on this past year. And I really resonate with a lot of what you said about people kind of awakening to issues that have been present for, you know, decades and hundreds of years, so, absolutely. Did you learn anything about yourself personally this past year or as an artist?

barry: Yeah, both as myself, as a friend, as an ally and as an artist, like I learned a lot through all of those lenses personally, just that I move faster than I should. You know what I mean? Like, I think that that's one of the things that we probably all found out is that it's OK to be able to kick back. Like, I know that's our very Americanized way of moving is like busy is the new norm. What's funny is I've been saying busy is the new norm for the past four years, but it really felt good to sit back. I don't know about y'all, but I very quickly lost track of time. I'll go back now and look at meetings and things I did through the pandemic, and it's very hard for me to be able to attach it to a time because so much of time is attached to a system. You know, we get up at a certain time, Monday through Friday, we have work, we go to work at this specific time, we go to class this specific time. Like, I worked and I've been in school this whole time as well. A lot of it just became a blur. But I tell you, this was one of those times that really impacted me personally in transformational ways that previously haven't.

In terms of being an artist... I'm appreciative to the city at large for being more accepting of art, because what happened whenever all these businesses got boarded up, the city then became a mural. Everyone from so many different backgrounds, because being able to like, you know, from an artistic perspective, being able to transition into public art is a very hard thing. As a

society entirely, as the United States, we're becoming more appreciative and more accepting of public art. But that barrier for entry is very hard. So it really gave a lot of artists the ability to then point at work that they've done now in the public format and say, look, I can make work that is of a larger scale. I can make work that is of a different variety. Also, we have so many people contributing to the, as I spoke about earlier, the collective consciousness. Like we got everyone from all walks of life, all contributing to art. It all made it beautiful. You know, like we were really, as a collective, pissed at a lot of the work that ended up getting removed from CHOP, because, you know, in this time, we weren't the ones to say that our work, our artwork should stay and their artwork should go. That's not it. We're all contributing to the collective consciousness. So as an artist, it really helped out as well, because I got to just continue to work. Me and a few friends all came together and were like, OK, we're going to make a pledge to ourselves to say yes until we can't say yes anymore. So every project that popped up, we said, yes, we'll continue to go. That, again, kind of threw me back into the, oh, no, now I'm busier working than what's needed. But sometimes, you know, society calls or moment time calls for you to respond that way. So we just kind of locked down and it really helped to grow my work in ways that I never thought I could. I started my journal series where I do a painting, a journal entry every single day for the year. Like, I'm on 96 today and we haven't even had 100 days in a year yet. I'm ahead because I've just been working ahead on days. But every day I make a portrait, which is something that previously, I'll just keep it or I'll keep it real, I couldn't do that. You know, like I find it to be very hard, and very hard on my hands, and thinking about what I should paint. But now, having gone through all the art that I made and all the experiences that I got to have both internally, both at my own community in Federal Way and my community in King County and America as a large, it really kind of put a few on my back.

As a father and as a husband, I'm so appreciative of my family because I got to be able to have a situation where I'm at home with my daughter and I get to be able to experience like, oh, I can be right there with you whenever you're doing your work or what is a new schedule look like for you? How do I keep very connected to you, but also not remove you from the ability to go out and play and have fun? So, you know, now we're out doing more walks. We're out at the park. Her love of nature has just grown in ways. She was already a very, very, very ferociously

interested person in nature, but it's bloomed. It's just been such a great experience just from those three different views. It's been personally, that's where I felt impacted a lot.

Danielle: That's really incredible. What do you hope will carry over into the transition into post-pandemic life, if that's even a thing? I'm just curious about that.

barry: Oh, it absolutely is. It absolutely is. You know, realistically, I want to keep a lot of those same, I want to keep those same systems in place. I finally, for the first time in my life, feel like I have a very well-oiled, established art practice. Like that is a hard thing for a creative to be able to do. You know, a lot of us can just work off energy, work off the moment, like, work off even certain creatives will work off trends. But to be able to have like a very well-oiled practice where it's super prescriptive and I can work and I can be able to immediately turn on the creative energy in ways that I never could. It's like, I need my creativity [to] work for four hours non stop. Let's go right now, and now I can do that. Just being an interdisciplinary artist, there's a day when I'll do a painting. There's a day when I'll be podcasting. There's a day when I'll be out shooting photography videos. So to really kind of have like a practice that kind of keeps this whole thing moving together is something that I was able to form during the pandemic that I'll continue to have.

The time that I'm spending with the kiddo, like she's back in school now for a couple hours a day. But even in this moment, whenever we get done here, we're going to go play at the park for a few hours and then we're going to go to gymnastics. It's just going to all be super cool. You know, we're already doing these things, but I don't know, it just makes it better.

To watch people come back together now is a really cool thing because I realize I've forgotten how to communicate with people. I'm talking so much right now because this is the most talking that I've done probably in months! I need to be able to figure out how to read the room and have social cues and everything again. You know, in school, like it's all been just Zoom. So I'll typically just turn the camera off and be like, all right, I got to clean the house and what's the work that needs to be done? I'm just going to read the whole book front to back. There's a lot of things that came out of this and more important than anything is, like I said, our elders want to

see like the people that made a very big impact on my life, make sure they're safe, be able to see them continually and be able to connect with them. My family at a large from afar as well, being able to connect with them and let them know that, you know, that I'm here if they need anything, that I value the time with them and I value just more experiences, just more authentically now, I guess in short.

Danielle: That's so true. And, you know, this is an interview where you're supposed to be doing all the talking, so, don't worry about that! Yeah, I'm so happy that we were able to hear from you today about your experiences this past year and about your art practice. Is there anything, any small thing you hope others can take away from this past year's events?

barry: Yeah, I know, I know I'm an old guy right now, so it never makes sense whenever people hear and it's probably been a washed over statement. But I'm going to say it. Life is precious. Life is truly, truly more precious than one would ever imagine. If anything, this pandemic has taught us that the here and gone, is a very real thing. It's a very real thing. I mean, like even just on a larger capacity, you know, just being like a very huge hip hop head and a very big music head, we lost a lot of people in music last year. Like, I'm very upset at the fact that, you know, one of my favorite rappers in the world, DMX, is now in the hospital. Like and he I don't want to say what could happen from that. But, you know, I really because, you know, words have power. I wish that brother a very quick, speedy recovery. But life is so incredibly, and I'm going to curse, it's so incredibly fucking precious. It's so precious, and you have to be able to understand the value of every breath that you take, because if anything, this pandemic through there is, you know, what did it do? It took people's breath away, you know. So that's a very it's kind of corny, but it's actually true. It's like life truly is so precious, and so, you know, live it up to both of y'all. Like y'all in the middle of school right now. I know that grind. I know the school grind, like enjoy the time because it really is delicate and can go away very quickly.

Danielle: Thank you. Thank you so much, barry. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we end? And, you know, how can people access your art and support your work? This is, you know, just insert your plugs here.

barry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, you know, I'm barry johnson. You can find me on Instagram at @barryjohnson. And my website is barryjohnson.co, not dot com. You can find me there. I'm always, like I said, I'm ferociously curious about projects. So if there's ever anything that I can do to collab with people, I love working with the youth and have done that for many a year. I'm just all about, you know, community activism and being able to create change like on a communal level to be able to reach everything out to the White House and afar is very hard for anyone to be able to do. That's more of a collective effort. But as it pertains to like my community, I am all about being able to do anything that I can to impact and change it. So, hit me up, you know, and also just create. It's a really beautiful thing. Create. Create love, create relationships, create happiness. Creating is such an important thing. I was a person that came to art later. I was working in consulting, just doing very traditional, it's me scoping out projects and doing numbers and pitches. And, you know, I found my way back to art in the middle of that and then started doing it and became an artist full time in the pandemic and still now can live as an artist full time, just being able to just create. So, I always tell people to create as much as you can.

Danielle: That's so inspiring. Thank you so much, and that'll be the end of our interview today.

Narrator: Thank you for listening to this MoNA Moment. "Standing, Still" will be on view in MoNA's Outside In Gallery from July 3rd to October 10th, 2021.