

MAIN GALLERIES

Exhibition Guide

**Jamal Cyrus:
The End of My Beginning**

February 5–May 30, 2022



The End of My Beginning is the first survey of Houston-based multidisciplinary artist Jamal Cyrus (b. 1973) and the first presentation of the artist's work in Los Angeles. The exhibition spans sixteen years, gathering approximately fifty works that traverse the artist's eclectic material lexicon, including hybrid objects made with paper, graphite, papyrus, denim, and musical instruments. His expansive approach explores the evolution of African American identity within Black political movements and the African diaspora, and it is characterized by assembly and amalgamation across time, continents, archives, and individuals. This exhibition is a mid-career reflection that culminates the emerging period of Cyrus's practice while also establishing new footholds for the future.

Cyrus is especially attuned to the cultural intersections that emerged from cross-border interactions in historical eras—from Ancient Egypt and the sixteenth-century transatlantic slave trade to the Jazz Age of the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Citing academic Paul Gilroy and his decentralized thinking on diaspora as a model and muse, Cyrus explores “the Afro-Atlantic” as, in his words, “an intercontinental and multinational geography describing the circulation of ideas between Africa, Europe, and the Americas.” *The End of My Beginning* celebrates the artwork that has ensued, replacing the conventional idea of a singular homeland with fluid nodes of exchange, movement, and mutually constituted histories.

Jamal Cyrus: The End of My Beginning is curated by Steven Matijcio, Jane Dale Owen Director and Chief Curator, Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, with special contributions by Dr. Alvia Wardlaw, Director and Curator, University Museum at Texas Southern University.

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Pride Record findings—Tokyo, 2005–16
Mixed media on album cover, wood paneling, wood shelving, plastic bags
Courtesy the artist

Throughout history, music has served as a rallying call for the masses, even as various forces attempt to censor or suppress its power. As such, Cyrus probes the way stories have been told in and through music associated with Black culture. With its capacity to travel across continents and marry multiple cultural dialects, Cyrus is also interested in the way music can live as a shared mythology and an alternative archive. Since 2005, the artist has produced three installations (included in this exhibition) chronicling the semi-fictional tale of the rise and fall of Pride Records, an upstart studio label founded in the wake of the 1967 Detroit Rebellion to amplify and advance civil rights and Black pride. Based on histories of the Black Power movement and an actual pop label named “Pride,” Cyrus outlines how the initial success of Pride Records to reach an urban population led to FBI monitoring, economic pressures, reduced distribution, and a pronounced shift in tenor from politically charged soul to diluted, sugary disco.



Pride Frieze—Jerry White’s Record Shop, Central Avenue, Los Angeles, 2005–17
Mixed media on album cover, acrylic paint, plywood, wax, and Plexiglas
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Pride Frieze—Jerry White’s Record Shop, Central Avenue, Los Angeles recreates an LA storefront Cyrus saw in a book about Texas blues music. The frieze at the top of the brick-and-glass structure features altered vinyl record covers, while the storefront’s glass advertises a “Black History Music Sale.” Cyrus locates the second chapter of Pride Records in Tokyo, noting Japan’s continuing interest in African American culture and the expansive market for rare and limited-edition albums. Here, he populates otherwise inconspicuous wooden shelving, as one would find inside of any ordinary record store, to display several Pride Records “special releases.” The Pride Records installations are full of allusions and meticulously observed details as Cyrus intermingles found albums, albums with minor insertions or changes by Cyrus, and entirely fabricated albums within carefully constructed settings. Within this lively constellation, he blurs the boundaries of received history to return forgotten chapters and suggest provocative tangents.



Conga Bomba, 2007–08/2021
Deconstructed trumpet parts, leather, tape
Courtesy the artist

Central to Cyrus’s practice is his study of the ways in which music has both accompanied and advanced Black and global political movements. This is especially true of “trumpet music,” which evolved from a crude sound generated through a conch shell to a rallying siren heard in both popular and military contexts. Imagining a survivalist synthesis of these applications in a post-apocalyptic battleground, Cyrus transforms discarded trumpet parts and brass into simple axes, clubs, and improvised explosive devices in this work. Crafting a rejoinder to the claim that “jazz is dead,” he sets a stage for the undying capacity of music to adapt and endure.



Texas Fried Tenor, 2012–ongoing
Saxophone, flour batter, wood, and iron
Courtesy the artist

This sculpture is the product of an ongoing performance that creates a dynamic, sensorial, and unpredictable soundscape as Cyrus deep-fries a saxophone while reciting a poem based on the “Texas Tenor” saxophone tradition. The “Texas Tenors,” including Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb, Buddy Tate, “Fathead” Newman, and King Curtis, came to define a unique musical dialect in the 1970s that married the musical vocabularies of swing, bebop, blues, and R&B. Cyrus creates an ode to their legacy as the symphony of the sizzling brass instrument mimics the improvisatory nature of blues and jazz music. Cyrus’s choice to deep-fry the instrument also recalls his father’s past work as a short-order cook, as well as the stereotype of a southern cuisine characterized by fried foods. The performance is part of a larger series by Cyrus titled *Learning to Work the Saxophone*, which takes its name from the refrain of the 1977 Steely Dan song “Deacon Blues.” After listening to the song one thousand times on a road trip from Philadelphia to Houston, Cyrus became interested in the importance of the saxophone in American music—especially blues and jazz, which are celebrated as this country’s defining musical forms. As a result, the saxophone is not only an instrument of artistic expression, but also one of cultural and political significance.



Lemon's New World Blues, 2014
Latex paint on Masonite
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Lemon's New World Blues pays homespun homage to blues and gospel musician Lemon Henry “Blind Lemon” Jefferson (1893–1929), called the “Father of Texas Blues” by author and anthologist David Dicaire. As the youngest of eight, born to sharecropper parents in Couthman, Texas, Jefferson’s life in music was characterized by his quickfire guitar and high-pitched voice, influencing fellow musicians such as Lead Belly (1888–1949) and Lightnin’ Hopkins (1912–1982), the subject of *Lightnin’ Field (Fulgurite sample)*, also on view in this exhibition. Despite his many accomplishments, Jefferson was buried in an unmarked grave until 1967. To celebrate his life, Cyrus made this painting in collaboration with Houston-based sign painter Walter Stanciell, who has worked almost exclusively in the Third Ward area of Houston for over forty years. Much like blues and jazz music, sign painting is an enduring vernacular art form used to communicate, as well as commemorate, stalwarts of culture, style, and community.



Lightnin’ Field (Fulgurite sample), 2021
Acrylic paint, gel medium, spray paint, and grits on canvas, mounted on Styrene
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Lightnin’ Field (Fulgurite sample) is one of a series of works in which Cyrus recreates vintage Houston music posters out of laser-cut acrylic, pigment, and the unusual ingredient of grits. The posters serve as an informal archive of the many influential musicians who once performed in Houston, including Samuel John “Lightnin’” Hopkins, a prodigious country blues “jazz-poet” singer, songwriter, guitarist, and occasional pianist, considered one of the greatest guitarists of all time; James Brown; Bobby “Blue” Bland; Big Mama Thornton; and Al Green. It was Green who provided the inspiration for including grits in each edition. According to urban legend, Green became an “enlightened” preacher after an irate live-in girlfriend threw a pot of hot grits on him while he bathed, due to his reluctance to marry her. Grits also represent a staple of Southern cuisine, turning what was once considered a distasteful byproduct of food production into a proud cultural custom.



The End of My Beginning, 2005
Hair, wood, toy house, and plastic figures
Courtesy the artist

Thick mounds and rolling waves of bristly black hair blanket an otherwise genteel suburban setting in this 2005 maquette, immersing small trainset figurines and a two-story white clapboard house in the depths of a blizzard resembling an Afro. Drawing inspiration from the iconic work of artist David Hammons and his use of collected hair to cover objects, altering their appearance and subverting their use, Cyrus employs what he considers an eminently “Black” material to suggest—and arguably announce—the arrival of a new dawn. In this work, the dense bramble of hair envelops an idyllic island of upper middle-class life, forcing the residents to wade through an uncanny landscape and confront the undeniable presence of Blackness.



Blue Podium, 2008
Graphite on paper
Collection of JoAnn Hickey, New York

Blue Podium presents a scene of transition between speakers at a rally held for Huey P. Newton (1942–1989) during a period of incarceration in the late 1960s; Newton stood accused of murdering three people but ultimately was not fully convicted. Newton was the co-founder of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and one of the movement’s most charismatic, forward-thinking, and ultimately conflicted spokespeople. Under Newton’s leadership, the BPP established a nationally distributed newspaper and founded over sixty community support programs, including food and clothing banks, medical clinics, sickle cell anemia test sites, chartered buses for families of inmates, legal advice seminars, housing cooperatives, and an ambulance service. Newton earned a PhD in social philosophy and used his position as a leader within the BPP to welcome women and LGBTQ people into the party. Sourcing the image from a grainy video recording of the event, Cyrus’s drawing focuses on a silhouetted close-up of the podium and microphones in a moment of tense anticipation.



MSY, 2018

Root system, canvas, earthenware, and cast bronze
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase funded by Cecily E. Horton, Gregory Fourticq, Emily Todd, John Blackmon and John Roberson, Raymond Stainback, Nina and Mort Susman, Lea Weingarten, and Ric Whitney, 2019.440.A-.E

Tracing the lineage of both the trumpet and its accompanying “mutes” back to West Africa, Cyrus creates a diasporic trio of tribal instruments that spans the Atlantic Ocean. Cyrus cites the virtuosic trumpet playing and crossover musical success of Louis Armstrong (1901–1971) in the work’s title via the three-letter identifier for New Orleans International Airport, now named after the iconic musician. The conch reflects the music of the Middle Passage, while the earthenware jug symbolizes West Africa, and the root ball embodies the American South. The bronzed conch shell acts as a precursor of the trumpet and evokes its historical employment in political uprisings such as the 1791 rebellion of enslaved peoples in Haiti. Muffles or “mutes” are used to alter the sound of the trumpet; Cyrus invites the viewer to imagine how the root ball and earthenware vessel would mimic a mute’s effect, whether literally in a contemporary concert or figuratively in political consciousness. In 2018, Cyrus took a transformative forty-five-day journey across four continents, seven countries and twelve cities connected by the transatlantic slave trade; *MSY* draws parallels between the way mutes alter the path of sound similarly to the way migration and travel transform our ways of thinking.



The Black Messiah, Live at the Troubadour, 2008
Copy toner on paper
Private collection

In a series of haunting memorials, including *TBT (Lincoln Cells)* and *Blue Podium* on view in this exhibition, Cyrus pits absence against eminence or visibility—recalling the perilous trade-off between being heard and being targeted. *The Black Messiah, Live at the Troubadour* portrays the last podium that Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at in Memphis, Tennessee, before his assassination. Poised somewhere between the loss of revolutionary voices taken by force and the future generations their message inspired, this work, starkly yet expressively rendered with photocopy toner ink, laments the loss of King while abstracting and immortalizing the stage of his last public remarks. In keeping with Cyrus’s interest in connecting activism, revolutionary historical figures, and Black contemporary music, this work refers to the 1971 live concert album recorded by jazz saxophonist and Miles Davis collaborator Cannonball Adderley at the Troubadour, a famed music club in West Hollywood; the nickname of famed soul performer and composer Isaac Hayes; and FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s characterization of Stokely Carmichael of the Black Panther Party, a primary target of Hoover’s COINTELPRO surveillance program.



Untitled (Grand Verbalizer What Time Is It?), 2010
 Drum, leather, microphones, mic stands, cables, and speaker
 Collection of Ric Whitney and Tina Perry-Whitney,
 Los Angeles

In this work, a bass drum is sheathed in the signature black leather of Black Panther Party jackets and surrounded by microphones humming in anticipation. Much like a press conference in which the speaker is soon to arrive, a swarm of mics hover while awaiting the imminent promise of a speech or exchange. The drum has long carried cultural and ceremonial significance for African peoples, and the use of drum languages was especially prevalent among enslaved African American communities in the US. For this reason, drums—and their communal power—were purposefully made illegal in many parts of the Antebellum South to quell gatherings, as well as the suspected uprisings that could ensue. Cyrus’s drum, mics, and disconnected cables memorialize the music and voices that were silenced over the centuries, while also priming the space for reclamation.



On Floor:
Lights from the Garden, 2019
 Bentwood chairs, stainless steel rods, oak flooring
 Private collection

Lights from the Garden is an elegy to Malcolm X (1925–1965), the Black, Muslim minister and human rights activist who assumed a national platform as a fiery and often polarizing spokesman for the Nation of Islam. As X espoused an uncompromising vision for the future of racial justice, this work is also a graceful admonition to the internal strife that can tear nations and people apart. The sculpture features a stack of seven chairs like those on the stage where X was assassinated in 1965 by rivals within the Nation of Islam at the Audubon Ballroom in New York. The shape of the formation also references the minbar or pulpit from mosque architecture where an imam stands to deliver the sermon. The piercing of this stepped altar by fourteen stainless-steel rods (known in forensic science as “trajectory rods”) references the fourteen times X was shot, as well as the ambivalent nature of his influence, with themes of unification, congregation, and order simultaneously erected and perforated here.



X Codex, 2008
Graphite powder on paper
Collection of Greg and Alyssa Shannon

In the 2008 work *X Codex*, Cyrus reproduces and enlarges the envelope and cover page of the FBI's surveillance file on Malcolm X by laying a stencil over thick paper and roughly sweeping graphite into the substrate with a broom. The process turns drawing into an action marrying labor and performance, as Cyrus paradoxically reverses the metaphor of sweeping something away to instead remember something. Although we cannot read or know the information that once was contained in these files, these works nonetheless live as imperfect recordings. Cyrus later used the same technique at the Audubon Ballroom in East Harlem (where X was assassinated in 1965) to produce swept rubbings or reproductions of related documents in *Moon Eats Sun*. Its title refers to a solar eclipse, a rare but sublime occasion when the moon overtakes the sun. As a metaphor, the work speaks to the moment when those on the margins overtake the center, opening the possibility for reappraisal, rereading, and renewal.



Moon Eats Sun, 2010
Graphite powder on paper
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston



Ecstatic Blues Shape, 2019
Denim, cotton thread, bleach, and glue
Private collection, Houston

Departing from appropriating redacted documents, as he does in *Cultr_Ops* series (also on view in this exhibition), here Cyrus uses torn strips of denim to imagine a contemporary form of ecstasy long associated in art history with religious experiences. Euphoria and pain, typically opposing emotions, are represented in *Ecstatic Blues Shape* and *Vertical Procession (before the Second Line)*, respectively.

Ecstatic Blues Shape pays homage to the historically working-class form of improvisational African American song known as “the holler.” It began as vocalizations among enslaved people on plantations used to express feelings or convey messages; according to Frederick Douglass, these sounds were often melancholic, marked by vocal gymnastics. As the holler waned in usage over time, its musical elements were sometimes translated into gospel music, as well as the Blues.



Vertical Procession (before the Second Line), 2019
Black denim, vinyl records, and cotton thread
Collection of Marlene Marker, Houston

Balancing solemn remembrance with celebratory commemoration, *Vertical Procession (before the Second Line)* is inspired by the sorrow and ascendant sound found in a New Orleans Second Line procession, in which a marching jazz band ushers a casket before it is laid to rest. As Cyrus layers multiple references in a single work, *Vertical Procession* is also flecked with fragments of a “retired” 45 rpm single by singer, actress, and activist Aretha Franklin (1942–2018), the perennial “Queen of Soul.”



Book Sleeve Prototype for W.E.B. Du Bois's Encyclopedia Africana, 2016
Drum skin, books, twine
Collection of David Brown

For over fifty years of his life, the legendary Pan-Africanist sociologist, historian, author, and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) attempted to chronicle the history of the African diaspora in *Encyclopedia Africana*, an ambitious, comprehensive book that would reassemble, enshrine, and galvanize a culture fractured by the transatlantic slave trade. However, much like its aspirations for racial healing, the volume was never completed. Cyrus creates a humble monument to DuBois's unfinished epic in *Book Sleeve Prototype*, wrapping volumes of the author's writing in drumskin. In doing so, Cyrus positions music—specifically the African drumbeat—as an equally rich repository of cultural and historical knowledge. The books comprising *Book Sleeve Prototype* were given to Cyrus by artist, musician, and mentor Terry Adkins (1953–2014), further enriching this work as a shared monument and imbuing it with the aura of Adkins's fiercely evocative practice, as well as his belief that the past informs the present.



Misconstrued Rap Lyric #1, 2019
Metal and plastic triple beam balance, plaster bust, paint, and fiberboard shelf
Menil Collection, Houston; gift of Marlene Marker, 2020-6

In this work, Cyrus weighs the legacy of Baptist minister and civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968). The assemblage is inspired by a rap lyric that Cyrus believes he heard while staying in a dorm room at Howard University: “I’m like MLK on the triple beam.” While not actually part of an existing song, the image conjured by the misheard rap lyric left a lasting impression on Cyrus. This sculpture is a manifestation of what he heard, placing a timeworn golden bust of the cherished MLK on a scale high upon the wall. The figure's placement suggests an elevated position and status; however, some would argue that reductive readings of MLK's treatise on non-violence are at times deployed to numb political action within Black communities. Whether King's message of pacifism and determination carries on or can be achieved is left for future generations to animate.

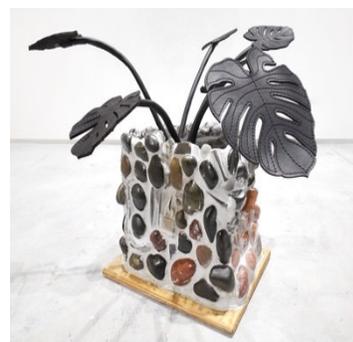


Bright Blue, 2018
Blazer, bells, satin
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Though Cyrus is not a musician, he regularly incorporates aural and performative elements into his sculptural objects. *Bright Blue*, a blue satin jacket embellished with bells and a flamboyant leopard-print lining, turns its proposed wearer into a literal and sartorial instrument. The jacket was made for *Boogaloo and The Midnite Hours* (2018), a performance by Cyrus and Jamire Williams where the pair, in their words, “mine[d] the most generative phases of Black musical evolution” with drum patterns and rhythms associated with music of the African diaspora. Taking as its starting point the phenomena of percussion rudiments and a particular drum pattern known as the “Boogaloo,” this work suggests multiple origins and ways of being, mixing aspects of the past, present, and future into recombinant rhythms.



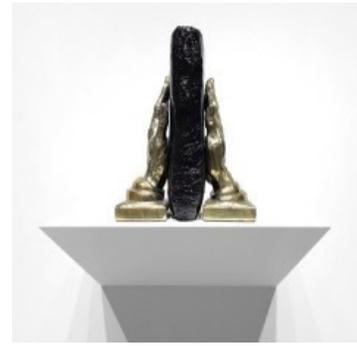
On Floor:
Ballad for a Child I, 2020
Leather, stone, seashells, metal, concrete
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston



On Floor:
Ballad for a Child II, 2020–21
Leather, stone, seashells, metal, and concrete
Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

The controversial life and politics of one-time Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver (1935–1998) are the subject of *Ballad for a Child*, in which leathery black leaves rise from concrete planters studded with locks, chains, seashells, and stones. Following his incarceration, Cleaver relocated to Florida and reinvented himself as a born-again Christian, Republican, and part-time entrepreneur, selling commercial planters with a similar mosaic treatment. As a successful, if no less unusual, “transplant,” Cleaver embodies the adaptable, migratory plant imagined by avant-garde jazz saxophonist Archie Shepp (b. 1937) in the eponymous 1972 song:

*I would rather be a plant
Than a man in this land
You can transplant a plant
Where it can grow free
But a man that's been transplanted can't
So you can see where I would rather be a tree
With branches and leaves I can grow free
If man had a choice before he's exploited
Then his offspring would do more than dream
Isn't that a shame*



Ancestral Relic, 2020

Bronze, sargassum, plastic

Courtesy the artist and PATRON Gallery, Chicago

In this work, a pair of found gold hand bookends cradle a mysterious, tightly wrapped packet that Cyrus suggests could be a Bible or a “brick” of cocaine, conveying an ambivalent blend of salvation, dependency, and danger. The bundle contains sargassum, a type of seaweed that floats upon the Sargasso Sea and often washes up and dries on coastlines from the Caribbean to Texas. As it dries, this curious weed changes color from green to reddish-purple to blackish-brown and accumulates into dense piles, its texture reminiscent of natural Black hair. By collecting and encasing the sargassum between gilded hands, presented as an ancestral relic, this work alludes to the transatlantic slave trade which crossed the Sargasso Sea between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries.



Africanismus_12469, 2006

Found padded vest, paperback books, cotton shirt
 Courtesy the artist

In *Africanismus_12469*, Cyrus fortifies a padded black vest with a tiled “shield” of paperback books by progressive Black authors, such as Angela Y. Davis, Alex Haley, and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), referencing a common practice by incarcerated people in which protective vests are fashioned from phonebooks to lessen the impact of punches, knives, and other assaults. In the work’s title, Cyrus memorializes the assassination of Fred Hampton (1948–1969), activist and chairman of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP), by Chicago Police on December 4, 1969. The charismatic Hampton, also deputy chairman of the national BPP, was a revolutionary socialist who founded the anti-racist, multicultural Rainbow Coalition alongside members of the Young Lords and the Young Patriots Organization in April 1969. In 1970, the local County Coroner inquest into his death concluded that Hampton’s death was “justifiable homicide”; a 1982 civil lawsuit awarded \$1.85 million to survivors and relatives of Hampton and fellow Panther Mark Clark who had died in the same raid.

BPPGG, 2016

Found leather jacket, leather pouches with unspecified contents, polyester fabric, metal curtain rod, wooden hanger, metal hook
 Collection of Eugene Fu, Chicago

Like *Africanismus_12469*, *BPPGG* suggests future wear at the intersection between armor and action. *BPPGG* (short for “Black Panther Party Gris Gris”) features a black leather jacket festooned with small pouches behind a translucent blue veil. Cyrus is invoking a similar, ritual-like process historically practiced in Haiti whereby ceremonial drums are stored behind curtains when not in use. This transatlantic amalgam combines a deconstructed Black Panther Party uniform of a blue shirt and black jacket with the traditional Malian hunter’s tunic, which has multiple sewn pouches—protective amulet pockets called “gris gris” in parts of West Africa and Louisiana—for medicinal herbs, animal teeth, salves, religious texts, and other charms.



Beneath the Obelisk II, 2021

Wax and ink on canvas mounted on dyed canvas
Collection of Buzz and Tina Ruttenberg, Chicago



Notes from the Pharaoh's Den, 2020

Blue denim, bleached denim, cotton thread
Collection of Gregory and Alyssa Shannon

Throughout the twentieth century, several Black public figures experienced ongoing state surveillance and intimidation. This resulted in decades-worth of covert operations and classified materials, which Cyrus excavates in his use of redacted FBI documents as source material. By removing all extant text from these partial archives and remaking them in materials ranging from graphite and wax to cotton and denim, he transforms trauma and erasure into generative abstractions. Cyrus's decision to work almost exclusively in denim for these pieces speaks to the ambivalent legacy of this textile as working-class, historically associated with enslaved African Americans. By tearing it into strips and reassembling the denim into a collage, Cyrus also pays homage to the Gee's Bend quilters from Alabama, as well as the Asante tradition of making kente cloth in Ghana. Many of these references come together in *Beneath the Obelisk II* and *Notes from the Pharaoh's Den*.

Looking at the enduring symbols, structures, and connotations of ancient Egyptian visual culture in the United States, Cyrus draws a parallel between the ongoing struggle of African Americans and that of the enslaved Children of Israel in ancient Egypt. In this light, the Pharaoh that Cyrus references here functions as a transnational, intergenerational oppressor from Cairo to Washington, DC. In *Beneath the Obelisk II*, Cyrus meditates on the Washington Monument as an obelisk and what the so-called "divine providence" of the Pyramid eye on the American one-dollar bill might entail. The Pharaoh figure reappears in *Notes from the Pharaoh's Den*, as Cyrus connects a redacted document from Malcom X's FBI file to the eccentric Pharaoh's Den grocery store in Philadelphia, dedicated to composer and musician Sun Ra (1914–1993) and operated by Danny Ray Thompson (1947–2020), his former manager and longtime member of the Sun Ra Arkestra.



On Floor:

Major & Minor, 2014

Wood, steel, fabric, silk screen, and tacks
 Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse; Museum purchase,
 Deaccession Fund, 2021.6

Here, Cyrus remakes a flag originally designed by historical abolitionist and freedom fighter John H. Brown (1800–1859), who believed he was “an instrument of God” destined to strike the death blow to slavery in the United States. As a fiercely pious soldier of God, Brown felt he had a “sacred obligation” to end this inhuman practice with violence, since peaceful efforts had failed. However, his efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Cyrus considers this unfulfilled legacy by placing an image of “captured” Black Panthers upon this intergenerational flag, thereby creating an uncomfortable reckoning. Cyrus evokes Brown’s revolutionary 1859 raid to free enslaved people and ignite a revolt on Harpers Ferry with a reprinted 1960s-era newspaper photo taken in a Tennessee courtroom as unnamed Panthers hide their faces with BPP newsletters. The bloodshed and protracted struggle that ensued during slavery and the civil rights movement complicates any narrative of success or failure, reflected in the symbol of a fallen flag and the cause that it still resolutely carries.



Jet Auto Archive (March 24, 1997), 2017

Mixed media on canvas
 Collection of Jereann and Holland Chaney



Jet Auto Archive–April 27, May 11, May 25, 1992 (Medicated L.A. Kente), 2018

Paper and cardboard
 Private collection

Cyrus translates the technique for making traditional Ghanaian kente cloth and quilt-making in the American South using hand-shredded copies of *JET* Magazine from the 1990s, a decade of several race-related flashpoints. In an act of personal and public catharsis, he confronts the commercialization of *JET*, transitioning from the politically driven publication of his youth to a glossy, ad-driven entertainment magazine.

In *Jet Auto Archive* (March 24, 1997), Cyrus reflects upon the March 24, 1997, edition of *JET* that featured an article entitled “Rosewood: The Story of How [a] White Mob Destroyed a Black Town in 1923.” The Rosewood Massacre was a racist attack on the predominantly African American town of Rosewood, Florida, by large groups of white aggressors. As the result of the violence, many were killed, the town was decimated, and the surviving residents were driven out permanently. The story of Rosewood was largely untold, with former residents hesitant to share their harrowing experiences; more awareness of the incident emerged following coverage in regional press and an episode of *60 Minutes* in 1983.

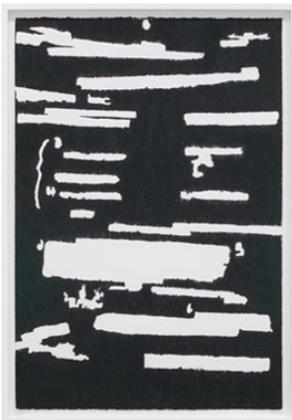
In *Jet Auto Archive*—April 27, May 11, May 25, 1992 (*Medicated L.A. Kente*), Cyrus remembers the brutal 1991 assault of Rodney King by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers, whose subsequent acquittal of all charges in April 1992 sparked a five-day period of unrest and uprising across the city of Los Angeles. The ensuing congregation of images and words evokes messages embedded in traditional kente, such as names, proverbs, and prayers woven by its respective author. This iteration of *Jet Auto Archive* also includes several protective amulet packets drawn from African hunting traditions called “gris gris” in parts of West Africa and Louisiana. The pouches in this work contain folded-up pages from the “Saved” chapter of Malcolm X’s 1965 autobiography, acknowledging how the Nation of Islam leader found epiphany, resolve, and salvation while incarcerated.



Pride Records Sighting at the Gary Convention of 1972, 2021

Found wood bookshelf, vinyl records, mixed media
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

While the first two installations related to Pride Records chart the global trajectory of an imagined music label through the 1960s and 1970s, from a Los Angeles storefront to a record display in a Tokyo shop, the third installment here is based upon a bookshelf that caught Cyrus’s eye in William Greaves’s documentary *Nationtime* (1972), which reported on the 1972 National Black Political Convention held in Gary, Indiana. Located in the vendor area of an auspicious convention that considered forming a third political party in the US, this shelf was notable to Cyrus for its uniquely curated combination of books and records, mirroring his interest in the relationship between literature and music.



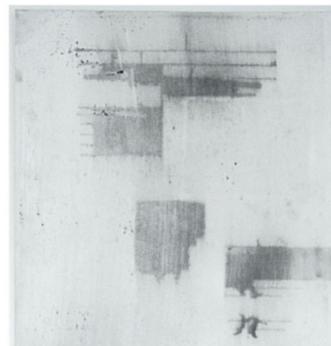
Cultr_Ops in Wax, 2020
Black wax crayon on paper
Private collection, Houston



Cultr_Ops in Blue, 2020
Denim, cotton thread, bleach, zippers
Private collection

In the *Cultr_Ops* series (2008–20), Cyrus operates under the banner of the semi-fictional surveillance operation “*Cultr_Ops*,” a reference to the FBI’s infamous Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), which conducted covert operations from 1956 to 1971 surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting, and disrupting domestic American political organizations, including the Black Panther Party. The works in this series share a compositional format based on documents produced—and later redacted—by the FBI.

Cyrus pairs a conceptual approach to form and materials with citations of pioneering eras in Black musical history. The denim of *Cultr_Ops in Blue* alludes to clothing worn by sharecroppers in the Antebellum-era American South, where Blues and nineteenth century spiritual music were the predominant musical styles embraced by Black laborers. Black wax, often identified with vinyl records, reflects Cyrus’s interest in late 1980s and early 1990s hip hop. Though each of these genres faced their own internal politics and censorship, they were all deployed by progressive forces in American society to energize civil rights campaigns and animate cultural expression.



Untitled (Faded Document), 2008
Graphite on paper
Collection of JoAnn Hickey, New York

To be seen and simultaneously not seen is one of the recurring conditions of Cyrus’s subjects—from African peoples who have been written out of Europe’s role in historical transatlantic slaveholding to the twentieth-century targeting of prominent Black artists by police and government monitoring. The latter was not without cause, for as writer Ciarán Finlayson notes, the artistic activity and socio-political attitude of the Black community was indeed a threat to the conservative political establishment. Many of the histories of African American activists, artists, and organizers that Cyrus researches and cites are hidden behind decades of omissions, edits, misinformation, and classified materials. One of the cornerstones of his work involves the location and translation of redacted government documents that reflect the monitoring and surveillance of Black Americans deemed to be “of interest” by the FBI, including political, religious, and cultural figures.



TBT (Lincoln Cells), 2010

Graphite dust dyed paper

Collection of JoAnn Hickey, New York

A melancholic blue tone washes across this suite of drawings depicting the setting of a 1939 performance by acclaimed African American opera singer Marian Anderson (1897–1993) in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The concert's staging before a statue of the US President who issued the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation is noteworthy, as the Daughters of the American Revolution, who operated Constitution Hall, a nearby venue for concerts and their annual conventions, had barred Anderson from singing there because she was Black. Anderson was also prevented from performing in the auditorium of a white public high school by DC officials upholding racist segregation laws. Accordingly, we neither see nor hear Anderson in these drawings. Instead, we are left with shaky, cloudy cells, drawn and reproduced from a documentary of the event. Anderson's silencing remains an indelible part of her history, complicating the legacy of what Lincoln hoped to accomplish over 150 years ago.



Captured Letter from Paris, 2019

Denim, thread, ink, wax, bleach

Collection of JoAnn Hickey, New York

Everywhere I look, Lord

I see FB eyes

Said every place I look, Lord

I find FB eyes

I'm getting sick and tired

Of gover 'ment spies

—Richard Wright, “FB Eye Blues” (1949)

In *Captured Letter from Paris*, Cyrus recuperates and reinterprets content from letters by activist-writer Richard Wright (1908–1960), author of *Native Son* (1940), written while living in self-imposed exile in Canada and France. Wright's novels, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction explored the cumulative violence and discrimination suffered by African Americans over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His prolific political voice, as well as enduring affiliations with the Communist Party in the United States, led to FBI surveillance. During this time, he would send letters back to friends and colleagues in the US, some of which were intercepted by the FBI and buried in classified files for decades. For Cyrus, the large, angled redactions of the letters evoke the crude woodcuts used for escaped slave posters of the eighteenth century. By translating the composition into shredded, dyed, and bleached strips of denim, Cyrus brings together multiple layers of abstraction to the point of generation and catharsis.



Like the Jungles in the Dead of Night, 2020
Blue denim, bleached denim, cotton thread
Collection of Alisa Miller

In this work, Cyrus draws sobering parallels between the FBI's surveillance and intimidation of activist-author Richard Wright in the 1960s (also seen in the work *Captured Letter from Paris*) and influential jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915–1959). In Holiday's now-legendary musical career, she notably refused to stop performing the 1939 ballad *Strange Fruit* despite numerous cease-and-desist directives from the FBI. *Strange Fruit* is now heralded as a trailblazing anthem for the civil rights movement in its protest of the horrific lynching of Black Americans by racist mobs across the United States. Her melodic defiance consequently raised the ire of notorious FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, as well as a lower-level FBI-turned-Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent Harry Anslinger, who became obsessed with keeping his agency relevant by taking down supposed illicit jazz clubs. His mocking description of jazz music sounding "like jungles in the dead of night" is recuperated here by Cyrus as the title of this homage to Holiday.



On Floor:
Piece of the Sargasso Sea, 2009
Coral, cymbal, stand, seaweed, acrylic paint, pedestal
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

The Sargasso Sea is an interstitial, quasi-mythical body of water within the Atlantic Ocean, unbound by land masses. The unique confluence of far-reaching ocean currents carries a variety of marine life, plants, weeds, and synthetic refuse into the heart of the Sea—producing one of the world's largest "garbage islands." In the process, the paradoxically clear waters of the Sargasso have taken on an aura of alchemy, danger, and contradiction in historical literature and popular legend. Beyond its ecological incongruity, this tangled reading is amplified by the fact that the Sargasso also carried many ships crisscrossing the Atlantic between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of the transatlantic slave trade. Many of these references converge in this sculpture: Cyrus presents a modified hi-hat cymbal on a triangular base painted with a pattern reflecting the currents and ship routes of the titular Sea. A chunk of "brain corral" replaces the top cymbal, as a triangle of sargassum—a type of seaweed that floats upon the sea, that to Cyrus resembles densely coiled, natural Black hair when fully dried—sits underneath. The work thus positions the exchange of the slave trade as the birthplace of music, religion, and colonial consciousness in the Black diaspora.



Duet, 2016
Laser-cut papyrus
Private collection, Houston

Cyrus excavates previously classified files produced by the FBI while monitoring a variety of Black artists and entertainers in the 1960s, seeking to “re-record” and entrench these histories with gravitas. *Duet* is made of laser-cut papyrus, a piecemeal woven tapestry of FBI memos investigating African American opera singer Marian Anderson (1897–1993) and her presumptive Communist ally, singer, actor, and activist, Paul Robeson (1898–1976). Cyrus utilizes the historical material of papyrus and its evocation of early civilizations such as Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt to expand the modern-day archive through ancient forms of record keeping. By uniting Anderson and Robeson’s legacies in this counter-archive, Cyrus celebrates—and amplifies—the convergences in activist history that we must actively remember.



Eroding Witness (Episode #204), 2011
Laser-cut papyrus
Collection of JoAnn Hickey, New York



Eroding Witness (Episode #213), 2011
Laser-cut papyrus
Collection of Lester Marks, Houston

In the ongoing series *Eroding Witness*, sheets of papyrus are laser-cut to reproduce archival documents, including FBI classified records and headline pages from newspapers. Papyrus calls to mind ancient methods of record keeping, but Cyrus employs the material to question how modern-day historical events are recorded, interpreted, and sometimes erased from cultural memory.

Episode #204 recreates a newspaper story reporting on the apparently retaliatory bombing of an iconic Nation of Islam Mosque in Harlem, New York, after the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X (1925–1965). Masjid Malcolm Shabazz (formerly known as Temple No. 7) is now a Sunni Muslim Mosque where X preached until he parted ways with his teacher and mentor, Elijah Muhammad (1897–1975), and left the Nation of Islam in 1964. When Temple No. 7 was destroyed in 1965, the building was redesigned by Sabbath Brown, and in 1976 the mosque was renamed Malcolm Shabazz Mosque by Wallace D. Muhammad, the new leader of the Nation of Islam, to honor the memory and contributions of Malcolm X.

Episode #213 recreates a scrambled newspaper headline taken from the intelligence file compiled by the FBI during their multiyear surveillance and monitoring of X. The FBI opened this file in 1950, after X (born Malcolm Little) wrote a letter from prison to President Truman expressing opposition to the Korean War and declaring himself a communist. It was during this time that X began reading the writings of Elijah Muhammad and started using the X surname as a repudiation of his given name of Little, associating it with the practice of enslaved people being renamed to further break any familial tie they once had.



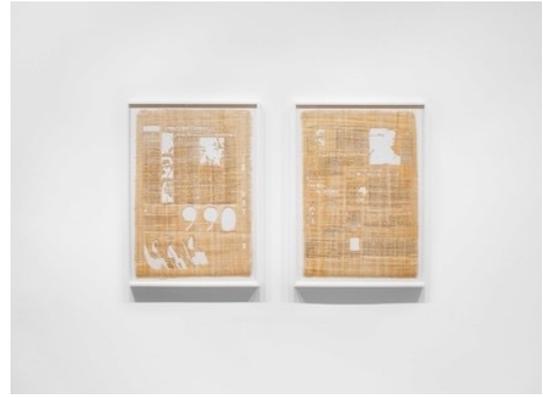
Remembrance (For H. Freeman), 2019
Digital print on vinyl over wooden stretcher, neon, shelf
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Saint John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church is an alternative church in California’s Bay Area that canonized pioneering jazz musician John Coltrane (1926–1967); Cyrus references its altar in the work *Remembrance (for H. Freeman)*. The titular H. (Haroon) Freeman was one of the first Black music students to attend Rice University in Houston, as well as one of five students to be jailed in 1967 during a series of demonstrations against poor and inequitable school conditions at Texas Southern University. Decades later, Freeman became a mentor to Cyrus, teaching him about jazz and sharing his album collection. After Freeman’s death, his wife loaned Cyrus a copy of Coltrane’s celebrated 1965 album, *A Love Supreme*, from Freeman’s collection. Cyrus then produced an enlarged digital scan of the album’s cover, replacing its title with “Allah Supreme” written in Arabic, a nod to Coltrane’s suspected Muslim faith and the rumored intended title of the album. In doing so, Cyrus cites multiple religious traditions to create a complex monument of a storied musician, awash in an aura of red light.



On Floor:
FA/TA/HA-, 2011/2021
 Digital print on Plasticore, sandbags, wood
 Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

Cyrus's interest in the revolutionary synergy of music and socio-political movements is further articulated in this 2011 installation, which has been remade for this exhibition. *FA/TA/HA-* also expands the artist's ongoing exploration of cultural interchanges that connect the United States to Egypt—in this case, drawing parallels between the Black Panther Party, Black Lives Matter marches, and the 2011 Day of Revolt in Cairo. Beginning in December 2010, unprecedented mass demonstrations against poverty, corruption, and political repression broke out in several Arab countries, challenging the authority of some of the most entrenched regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Such was the case in Egypt, where in 2011 a popular uprising forced one of the region's longest serving and most influential leaders, President Ḥosnī Mubārak, from power. Cyrus invokes the uprising by covering a provisional barricade with an image of demonstrators marching in Tahir Square, raising their shoes in the air as if they were fists, thus suggesting both protection and provocation. The work's title, the combination of three Arabic letters, is reminiscent of a musical scale. Written in all capital letters as if shouting, it aptly translates to "for something to be opened."



Eroding Witness, 2014
 Laser-cut papyrus
 Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

This iteration of *Eroding Witness* recalls a tragic event in Houston's history: the police killing of Black community organizer Carl Hampton on July 26, 1970. At twenty-one years of age, Hampton created an organization modeled on the Black Panther Party (BPP) named the People's Party II (PPII). Prior to Hampton's death, Houston police harassed a PPII member selling *The Black Panther*, the BPP's official newspaper, leading to an altercation between the police and Hampton and a subsequent warrant for his arrest. Armed PPII members and their allies in the Black community banded together to secure their headquarters in Houston's Third Ward district with Hampton inside, preventing his capture. After a ten-day standoff, police snipers stationed on the roof of a nearby Black Baptist church allegedly assassinated Hampton. Each of the panels reproduces a page from a different local newspaper reporting on the July 26 killing. Though the information is only partially legible, it is apparent that the papers convey different perspectives. The Black-run *Forward Times* and *Voice of Hope* focus on the culpability of the police, naming Hampton as a "victim." The *Houston Chronicle*, on the other hand, neutralizes the killing, referring to Hampton as a "Black militant," while the *Houston Post* did not announce Hampton's death on its front page at all.



We'll Wait for You, 2010
Graphite and paint on paper
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

The optimistically titled *We'll Wait for You* taps into the hope for heroic Black voices in history to be reappraised and recognized. Additionally, Cyrus adds a speculative dimension, employing previously classified FBI files on UFOs and connecting references and affinities for aliens and interplanetary travel in twentieth-century Black music, from the mothership in Parliament Funkadelic to Sun Ra's supposed birth on Saturn and cosmic musings, retroactively described as "Afrofuturist." However, the theory that aliens may have also built the pyramids in Egypt is far more contested, alluding to historical, racist suggestions that Africans could not have constructed something so lasting and complex. By aligning the ongoing plight of African Americans with the enslaved Children of Israel, Cyrus proposes a transatlantic version of what critic Merla Watson calls an "alternative genealogy" that "account[s] for myriad parallels among global cultures."



Kennedy King Kennedy, 2015
Laser-cut papyrus
Courtesy the artist and Inman Gallery, Houston

To critique perceived biases in the media, Cyrus highlights the virtues and politics of progressive media, specifically the Black-owned newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, in *Kennedy King Kennedy*. The *Defender* mobilized its support of the Great Northward Migration of formerly enslaved peoples (1916–1970) by offering jobs and assisting in resettlement efforts. Cyrus gathers a trio of the paper's front pages announcing the assassinations of three enduring champions of civil rights: John F. Kennedy (1917–1963), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), and Robert F. Kennedy (1928–1968).