



ARTIST

Aaron Turner

TITLE

Untitled

DATE

2015

DIMENSIONS

20" H x 16" W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2018.199

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-10D

AARON TURNER

BORN

1990

BIRTHPLACE

West Memphis, Arkansas

GENDER

Male

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American, Black

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, August 2018

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 210

BIOGRAPHY

Aaron Turner is a photographer and educator currently based in Arkansas. He uses photography to pursue personal stories of people of color, in two main areas of the U.S., the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas. Aaron also uses the view camera to create still life studies on the topics of race, history, blackness as material, and the role of the black artist. Aaron founded a curatorial project titled Photographers of Color in 2014 to aggregate the historical and contemporary work made by artists of color working in lens-based media. Aaron will be developing the beginning stages of the Center for Photographers of Color within the School of Art at the University of Arkansas in the form of a Post MFA Research Fellowship appointment with teaching duties, starting in the spring of 2019. He received his M.A. from Ohio University and an M.F.A from Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers University.

ESSAYS

Aaron R. Turner's practice comprises two distinctive bodies of work. Both offer a path to a center where they intermingle in what seems a magical moment of alchemy. One methodology encompasses a complex investigation of illumination and shadow, as found in the Light Studies series, which depicts the private corners of the artist's life. The other body of work, Black Alchemy, explores art history and black history within a constructivist, collage-based framework. Black Alchemy began in 2013. Within that timeframe, the sequence documents a vivacious evolution in Turner's way of seeing and, in turn, rupturing the image. There is a mindfulness that functions as an underpinning throughout his work, an elusive gentleness in the simultaneous presence and absence of his agency as a black male photographer. This is expansive and endearing. The history of photography carries with it a history of abstraction. Artists have used the medium since its inception to transform, to lift loose the appearances of the world, and to present us with images that may shift our perception. Within the vast definition of abstraction, Turner operates from the position of a minimalist. Occasionally he directly references the influence of photographers such as Leslie Hewitt, paying homage by dedicating a piece to her. This generative spirit is an apparent aspect of Turner's work. Occasionally the viewer can become lost in a geometric paper ocean, one lacking signifiers beyond the idea that the medium is the message. But anchors appear, references either in the titles or directly as what they are, portraits. Here I'm thinking of the piece, Looking at Drue King (2018). In another tribute piece titled LeWitt, Thomas, we see a post-post-black mash-up of art history and points of influence overdue for re-interpretation. With the use of collage, folding of paper, and re-positioning of historic narrative pressed against the geometry of his composition, the artist's gesture both juxtaposes and equalizes Alma Thomas and Sol LeWitt. In acknowledging these seemingly divergent sources of influence, Turner carves a necessary space for himself. This more inclusive narrative of art history takes a step toward closing the gulf between African American modes of cultural production and the "cannon" by pointing out exactly which modernist histories are seen and heard and which the dominant narrative excludes. The repetitive nature of Alma Thomas's mark-making as a color field painter says, "I'm here," over and over again, an assertion of her tenacity and her place within the story of modern art. In this instance, Turner suggests, with each bend of the paper, each geometric rhizomatic composition, his investment in pedagogy. Beyond that, in the history of image-making and the complex role that black artists play within it, he strives for the same tenacity through his own syntax. However, he does this in relation to a larger matrix suggesting "we" are here—the universal "we" clearly in relationship to black cultural production. Light Studies is where Turner's formalist leanings take the viewer toward softer, more poetic gestures. Full of mystery, yet not ominous, these untitled, vague intimations of "place" and "family" reach beyond otherness and touch upon a fullness one feels when alone in a space. This occurs mostly in the images free of the figure. There is an intangible strength residing in the solitary shadows of Turner's photographic universe. This intimacy is challenging in its attempts to address both the microscopic moments of an African American man's solitude and the immense cosmos of the history of image-making. The intimacy of blankets, chairs, window ledge corners, solitary shadows—all magnify the dialogue about abstraction and begin to break apart essentialist expectations surrounding black artistic production. Contrary to the previously mentioned works of homage, Turner seeks personal reward from seeing while striving to break down and rebuild ideas of one's relationship to site, to community, and to understanding the role of the black artist in private. In a sense Turner offers a "backstage" glimpse into the core of his burgeoning practice. Turner satisfies both the micro and macro relationships of being a maker, oscillating between addressing a collective solidarity and the extremely personal. By knowingly adopting the task of artist as alchemist, he is able to reveal and transform this binary aspect of his practice in equal measure. Photography, perhaps over and above painting, is the perfect vehicle for such activity—shifting between that which is objectively photographed and that which might be the subjectively transcendent image. Jennie C. Jones is a visual and sonic artist. She is MFA faculty at Bard College and a Critic at Yale School of Art. www.jenniecjones.com Aaron Turner lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and completed his residency at Light Work in August 2018. Aaron Turner: Black Alchemy, Forwards/Backwards Artist Aaron Turner's Arkansas Delta community and family taught him to know and understand African American history, honor its heroes, and respect his elders. The simple and profound gift of this upbringing has allowed Turner to pursue the role of Black artist and activist in our culture with unapologetic, single-minded intensity. Turner is in many ways acknowledging, standing on, and building from this foundation in his work. With deep affinity for the formal qualities of black-and-white photography, Turner uses his large-format camera and the alchemical darkroom process to move back and forth between abstraction, still life, collage, and appropriated archival images to literally take apart and then reconstruct his photographic images. The color black itself has a presence in this work—infinite, elegant, unknowable. Turner is also a painter; his use of large swaths of black is both a metaphor for race and related to abstraction and its emphasis on process, materials, and color itself as subject. An artist's studio is a contemplative space. A room set apart for a conversation. The Bauhaus School insisted on the cone, the sphere, and the cube were the building blocks of any image. Painters, sculptors, and architects all composed their work through the movement and arrangement of these simple forms. In his photograph then fold and fold (2020), Turner lays out these elementary tools of the trade, a tableau in his studio of labor, promise, and possibility. Amidst this moment's facile and flashy digital manipulation, Turner instead chooses to build with his hands. This longer, more labor-intensive process allows him to experiment with placement and displacement, allows us to step free of the continuous deluge of photographic imagery into his quieter, richer narrative. In the solitude of the studio, the artist is never alone. Quite the contrary for Turner. Sidney Poitier, Martin Luther King, Marvin Gay, Frederick Douglas, and others all move up and through the layers of cut paper and projections. The artist handles, arranges, touches both

objects and beloved figures, seeking, listening, directing, and responding. Some of these juxtapositions seem random, fluid, almost falling through space, but this is precisely the process Turner invites us to witness. Some images recur throughout his body of work, including a small self-portrait that you will find on the periphery of several collages. Silence is palpable in his photographs, and important. This too feels sacred, as Turner looks back and honors the fight for civil rights. His use of mirrors and reflective surfaces hints at deeply considering his own understanding and place within the struggle. Brother Hammons, an elder #2 (2018) beautifully exemplifies Turner's process of looking backward and forward, both historically and aesthetically. Here, Turner appropriates Dawoud Bey's iconic photograph of the elusive and legendary artist David Hammons, an artist whom curators, blue chip galleries, and some of the world's most significant and powerful museums and art institutions admire and pursue—invitations he famously declines with disdain. Both Bey and Hammons later became MacArthur Fellows, but in 1983 they were young artists living in New York City, showing at the renowned JAM (Just Above Midtown) Gallery, creating and documenting performances that celebrated Black community and culture. They especially confronted the elitism of New York's art scene. In this photograph, Hammons has set himself up as a sidewalk street vendor selling snowballs outside Cooper Union. He peers through Turner's collaging of cut paper, shadows, veils, possibly dripping black paint, as a prophet who warns us that commodifying art and artists is dangerous—both wise in choosing freedom and willing to pay the price. Bey's photograph feels both fractured and enshrined, an historical document we reconsider through Turner's intervention. As a visual language of disruption and upheaval, collage suits this political and cultural moment well. When Turner's photographs are purely abstract, he acknowledges his inspiration and allows us to follow his thinking process. Looking back (on understanding O'Keefe) (2018), appears as a cascade of organic paper forms that have somehow accumulated the monumental presence of Western desert canyons. And he allows the striped geometry in Questions for Sol (2018) to slip and misalign into a layered imperfection that contradicts the exactitude and minimalism of Sol Lewitt. Besides his studio practice, Turner is a teacher, curator, writer, founder of the Center for Photographers of Color (CPoC) at the University of Arkansas, and host of the CPoC podcast. Active in the photo and contemporary art community, he often uses these platforms to discuss his primary muses: other Black artists and activists. Bring a pen and notebook, because Turner is a name dropper in the best sense and you will want to look up these painters, sculptors, photographers, athletes, and activists whom he reveres, some hallowed and some obscure (for now). His generosity reminds us of artists like Deborah Willis, Carrie Mae Weems, and Zanele Muholi, who all—understanding art and power—have made it their business to bring a community of artists along with them through the doorway and into the spotlight. He too arrives en masse: perhaps his greatest tribute to his elders in the Arkansas Delta. Mary Lee Hodgens Associate Director