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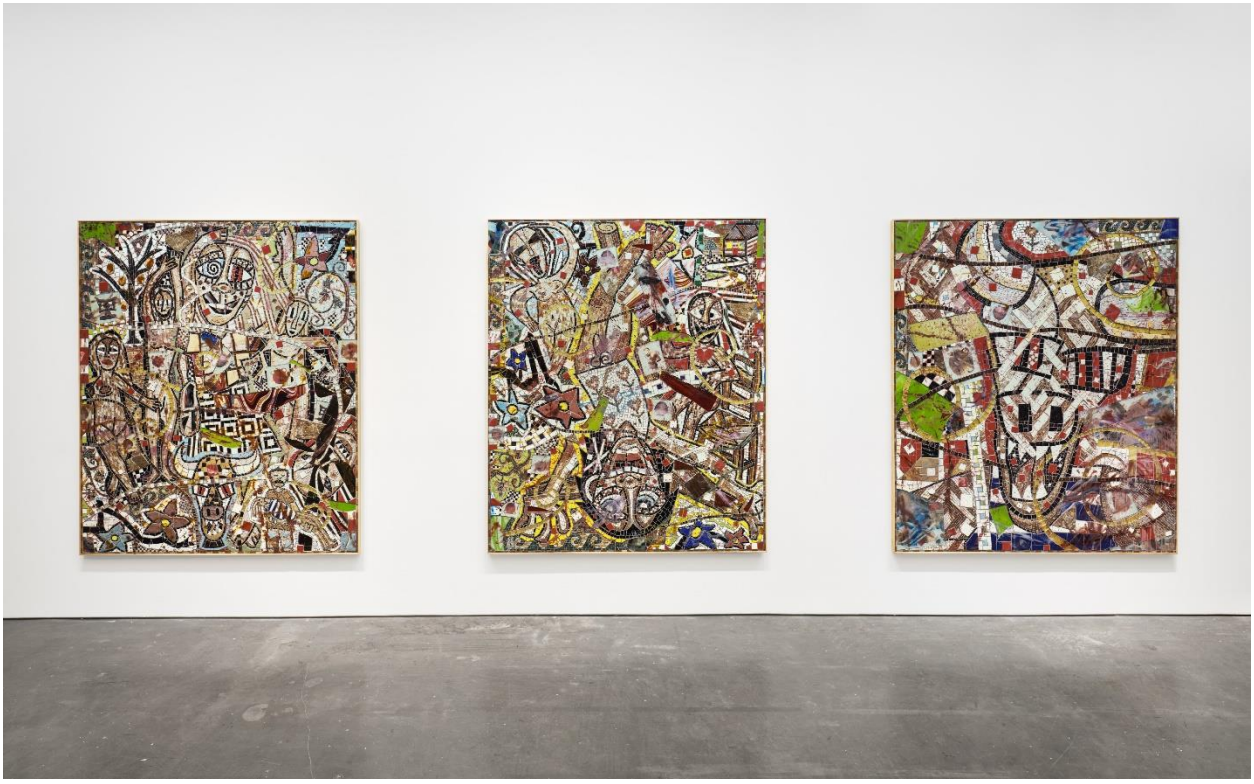
Book cover: Mosaics

Interview with Cameron Welch

By Byron Armstrong | October 7, 2024

Cameron Welch (b. 1990; Indianapolis, IN) draws inspiration from antiquity and contemporary life to explore and develop new mythologies. The artist builds visual narratives with a diverse array of references and symbolism, ranging from the personal - his memories, experiences, and biracial identity - to the collective, mining different cultural and visual traditions from across time. While Welch's chosen medium evokes ancient traditions going back to ancient Greece and beyond, the subject of his work is contemporary, alluding to the anxieties of the (Dis)Information age with his chaotic, jumbled compositions. Amidst the pictorial chaos of Welch's mosaics, the figures emerge, from the familiar to the foreign, comical to heroic. Welch frequently depicts himself and figures from his own life and sheds light on unsung histories. His second exhibition *CAMERON WELCH: LABYRINTH* at Yossi Milo Gallery (Sept 6 to November 9) coincides with the launch of his debut monograph *Mosaics*, (co-published by Radius Books and Yossi Milo), and The Armory Show, where his work will be shown alongside other artists represented by Yossi Milo, including past Whitehot Magazine feature Natia Lemay.

In an interview with Welch for Whitehot Magazine, we discussed the book, his work in the latest exhibition at Yossi Milo, and his thoughts on the rapid decline in art sales (is it simply a correction or a speculative act of manipulation), and how he believes this new reality will or should influence how he and other artists navigate the art world.



Installation View: Cameron Welch, Labyrinth. Yossi Milo, New York. September 6-November 9, 2024. © Yossi Milo. Photo Credit: Thomas Barratt

Your personal story, bi-racial background, where you've travelled, and the society in which you live figure heavily into your work. So I think a good place to start is with a basic rundown of who Cameron Welch is, where he's been, and how that's reflected in your work?

I think autobiography is something that's always sort of found its way within my work and the practice and one way or another, throughout the entirety of me making much of anything. I'm from the Midwest, and like you said, I'm biracial, and grew up in this sort of liminal space within Indianapolis, where I'm from. For a long time, I've been interested in delving between these two polarities within identity and sort of how I fit within them. I went to undergrad in Chicago at SAIC (School of the Art Institute of Chicago), which was an amazing platform for thinking within material sets — that hold context and signification — and always really drawn to collage as way to find a parallel to this way I felt as a young person growing up in the Midwest. Mosaic was a sort of very calcified version of a lot of those concerns where the amalgams that are forming between the colliding of contexts shoots a really direct parallel back to the very early core moments of navigating my own identity. I went to graduate school in New York at Columbia University.

And you're still in New York?

Yeah, I'm based in Brooklyn. Not many people know, you know, which is really funny. But I think there's this blue collar thing about the way I work, and also I think SAIC in particular produced a lot of really great artists who are navigating their own story within different sets of materials, like painters that are painting with things that aren't paint.

According to the introduction in Mosaics, your first contact with mosaics occurred on visits in Italy and then at The Met - particularly the Greco-Roman galleries - what is it about mosaics that you found and still find so attractive, and aside from your visual interpretation, how does that inform the way that you work?

Totally, yeah. The very first instance I came across mosaics, even just as an idea, was making them with my grandmother. I was raised by a single mom, and she bartended to help support my family. So my sister and I would often spend the night at my grandmother's house, and she would take us to Michael's so we could get these kits to make paving stones. So the very first instance of coming across that in craft form was on her living room coffee table.

Where did your grandmother acquire that skill?

I don't know. She's always been a very craft obsessed person. I recently saw her and it was really one of the proudest moments she's had within her life. She's like, 'I never knew when we were doing that when you were a kid that it would become your life's work. It felt like a big, full circle thing, where the work is invested in history in a way that becomes autobiographical. But my stepfather is from Italy, and he and my mom met in a painting class in the 90s. The first time I ever came across mosaics in a historical context was in Italy. I had never even seen the ocean before. Until then, I'd never come across work that held so much history, both in terms of when it was made, but also its interaction with history and the way that they're found. They're dug up out of the ground, you know, found, oftentimes by accident. So speaking to the book, that's how that came across.

So what is it about mosaics that you found and still find obviously so attractive, you know, aside from the visual interpretation, how does that inform the way that you work?

I think history was my initial draw to the medium. It's also parallel with collage, but it's one of the earliest, skilled forms of representation, analogous to painting. I also love the materiality of mosaics in a very art historical sense. Marble for instance, where each individual piece of tesserae has had to grow in sediment layer history for a million years, and then it's milled and quarried, and then I get scraps. Then that ends up as one small facet or piece within a larger composition. So in each part, there's a larger history that I'm not even able to render, you know?

Which is true of people since we are all part of a larger history, and we don't know how we figure into it.

Exactly, and so there's a parallel there that I believe is really poignant and a lot of people respond to, including myself. That's one of my fascinations with that. I think it speaks to how we operate as people within histories and culture, and it's also talking to painting's history, but also sort of archeological history. It can hold so many different themes and context within itself that I think is really fascinating.

Cameron Welch, Sleepwalker, 2024. 100" x 97" x 27" (254 x 246.5 x 68.5 cm) © Cameron Welch, Courtesy Yossi Milo, New York

You've mentioned identity so let's get into it. You've chosen to tell your story and examine contemporary society using an ancient artform that pulls from ancient mythologies, and yet, in works like Black Bacchus, you reference Picasso with the African mask motif to kind of call him out for appropriation. Where is the line between appropriation and reverence?

For me, that isn't very clear, and I think it took me a long time as a maker to come to terms with that. When I was really young, I was very critical. I think there's a parallel there with me and my own identification. I've found that my interest as a maker, in terms of what's in the work as opposed to just technique and material process, is very much interested in liminal space — the space in between where things start and stop. I think the space between reverence and critique is not always so clearly defined, and that could apply to a lot of different issues. I think it's talked about a good amount, but there really hasn't been a huge examination of that space where Picasso was looking with the sort of gaze of what you would consider African iconography. And I love touching on that within the practice. At times, both him and Modigliani pop up in the work every once in a while in a way that is humorous and playful. My parents used to play the Modigliani movie, where Andy Garcia played him, and there's this relationship with African iconography that isn't really touched on.

To that last point, when I did a little research of North African mosaics, specifically in Tunisia between the second and sixth centuries, in contrast to the official art of imperial Rome, mosaics generally expressed the worldviews of private citizens. So in actuality, there's a very close correlation to how you express yourself through mosaics going back to an African lineage…focusing more on yourself and how you experience the world. Were you cognizant of that when you decided to work this way?

Not in the very beginning. It's something I learned along the way, and once I found out it was provided this added layer of significance within the medium. It's a reason to stay and build a home within the material set in the practice, the process, I should say. It's also a space that's fairly untold. I always talk about walking around the Met and not seeing people of color depicted within the medium of mosaics. Then I later find out that there's this other history of makers within Africa that isn't included in any of the coffee table books on mosaics. That made it really poignant, and has sort of followed me throughout the making of them.

Of course, Black people were a part of antiquity and beyond into the Renaissance and are represented as such, however, they haven't necessarily been given agency as individuals worthy of recognition until now. In the book, you mention the act of infiltration as it pertains to representation of people not usually represented in art or even galleries in general. What's the importance of that for you?

One, it's a way of connecting to my own story with an identity. Two, I was taken aback by how rare it is to see people of color represented within this ancient medium, so much of it became about hijacking the medium and the context within that. Many people have a relationship with mosaics — whether it's cafe floors in France or your friend's tiled bathroom — but they have an access point. It's a way of trying to create new mythologies around what could be a future, or something slightly rooted in ideas right now for futurism that poses a different sort of timeline. Exploring what these mythologies from the separate timeline look like and suspending the actual space and time where they live. So there's marble next to gilded gold leaf next to reverse glass pane in the studio with the materials having different sites and locations within a timeline. History becomes really elastic both materially and contextually, and is a form of infiltration. Works like black Bacchus borrow from older myths and examines what happens when we address this within a context of people of color proposing a different idea around these mythologies?

So street art or graffiti in its most basic form is often considered a contemporary form of hieroglyphics or cave paintings if you're going back further. I look at your work as a sort of vehicle of communication, and when I look at your pre-sketches of work - the Mosaics book has the drawing and accompanying mosaic of "Festival of the Deities" - I also get the same feeling of looking at street art or graffiti. As a New York artist, do you have any background or take any influence from that? Do you see some correlation?

Yeah, totally. Street art has so many connotations, which oftentimes, in a hierarchical context, become distasteful for whatever reason. But I think that, as a gesture, there's something really kind of incredible about what's happening in that moment. I mean, it's another form of collage where you have one context and set of histories — a building — and you have another person that's attempting to sort of change or interrupt that moment. The two things, whether it's spray paint or whatever, are just materially wrestling with and against each other, and there's something that happens in between that space that is really profound. Also the subject of 'time' is inherent in both of those things. The building is old and the brick by brick process of making buildings is labor intensive. The act of scrawling or writing is literally an infiltration. The connecting context is in the ways my works are painted on after the mosaic portion is completed. So a lot of people bring up street art when they look at my work. But when you see buildings that are really old that have sat dilapidated and

untouched forever, they've accumulated layers of histories in that same manner. So, like, vandalism is definitely a space I consider in my work.

You're quoted in the book as saying, "I daydream about them being excavated hundreds of years from now, when people will have to gauge what the current moment was like by engaging with the mosaics." When people are describing the political environment right now in America, there's usually some reference to Rome, whether it's a declining empire, or some emperor like Nero supposedly fiddling while Rome burns around them. What do you think people may take from your work regarding these times?

It's something that I think about a lot just purely by the nature in which we come across mosaics in most contemporary archeological settings. One of the first times I saw one in Italy was in a United Colors of Benetton store. They found a mosaic on the ground while they were digging up the store. And I guess the rules are you can't remove it. So there are ropes around where the mosaic is, and then the store happens around it. I couldn't handle the sort of schism, the tension between those two things. That's one context of a society that no longer exists, right? Rome fell, and that story is amazing but also, you know, tragic. People draw parallels between that story and the West as it is currently. My work is made with that in mind. At some point, this suspended space we're in will decompose and then we'll be left. Canvas weave frays and deteriorates, and stone glass, I can't help but think that at some point a similar thing could happen. The ideation of that, I think, is something that's inherent in the work. History is cyclical, and they're speaking so much to antiquated spaces, but also, very much referencing the fact that Rome fell at some point. I mean, it can't last forever.

So speaking about excavation, can you tell me a little about your chosen materials and how you source them? Also, is there any relevance in what you choose and where you find it?

The book stretches over what I've made for the last seven or so years, and in the very early works, I came across found objects just by wandering the area around my studio and my neighborhood. I was really interested in how an object could sort of have a life inherent within it that I as a maker couldn't render, and the effect that is inherent within that was really sort of profound. Like, how do you incorporate that into a mythological narrative around a character that activates the figurative elements in the work in a way I wouldn't be able to paint. The first show I was working on for Yossi Milo, I'd made this transition to working more with marble and stone to speak directly to antiquity histories within mosaics. All of that is sourced from Italy and Turkey to get closer to that space within my own history. A lot of the other materials are made in the studio. So there's a lot of reverse glass painting that's happened in this latest body of work, used with just clear plate window glass that's gesturally painted on — very quickly — and having those two spaces of sedimentary and slow, next to something that occurs very quickly sit next to each other. Then the gilded gold leaf that's applied is 24 karat. However, there are some portions that are gilded with the leaf that's made for acrylic nails and nail salons, so within a lot of the material sets, there's a high and low sort of thing going on — another space for polarities or dualities. The way some of the limestone and marble pieces are broken up with hand tools I use once it's completed, people don't point to them and the pieces and say, *'Oh, that's marble'*. But I also include these printed porcelain pieces that are a sort of cheaper material that would have been used in my house as a kid since it's widely available. So there's this other sort of high and low where there's this funny sort of mimicry going on that I think is kind of

humorous. Lately, things have been more subtle in terms of their materiality, signification, and how they speak to the world.

Does the news of wealthy people not buying as much or paying less for art mean anything to you? How should this dip influence how artists navigate the art world, and if art is priced at a bazillion dollars, how do we get to a place where art really is for everybody?

I obviously think about this question. I know a lot of people are very stressed out about it. I think, number one, it's not the first time this has happened. Markets dipped plenty of times since I've been cognizant, and that's a cyclical space too. I really believe in art more than most things in this world, and I think that artists are resilient, resourceful, and also stubborn. That space could also provide an amazing opportunity. We've seen it within and shortly after these sort of dips that have happened in a market space, where artists have retreated and gone deep within themselves to create something that isn't necessarily burdened by a market space. I think out of that can come a really exciting potential for the future in terms of what's shown, what's exhibited, and how it's done. That is the mentality I'm leaning into. So I think it's important for artists to consider this, and I also believe it could create a space where art is more accessible to more people.