

This Dumpster Diving Artist Makes Beautiful Mosaics Out of Trash

He's putting blackness back into classic mythology.



CAMERON WELCH, NARCISSUS, 2018. ALL IMAGES COURTESY THE ARTIST



By [Antwaun Sargent](#)

May 10, 2018, 6:11pm

The first time 27-year-old artist Cameron Welch dove into a dumpster in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, he was thinking about how the ancient relics and mythology celebrated by modern society largely exclude black identity. Sifting through the trash, he found artifacts of the recent past: CDs, brooms, mirrors, statues of black angels, and an Aboriginal Djembe drum.

“All the things I find have histories to them. They are references to time and identity. You go to the Met and you don’t see people of color,” he told VICE. “What do you do when you want to pose a new paradigm in representation? People always look back to look forward but stop at like 1950, and I’m like, ‘Why can’t we look back to Greece and ancient craft making?’”

Welch’s recently opened exhibition *Retrograde* at Rental Gallery incorporates objects the artist found while dumpster diving, but reinterprets them as a cross between painting and mosaic. It’s classical art making with a twist—instead of ancient ceramic fragments, Welch uses smashed pieces of colorful bathroom and subway tiles.

VICE caught up with Welch recently to talk about nostalgia, vandalism, embedding his personal identity in art history, and why modern culture needs new myths.



PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST BY JOSHUA OLLEY (L). CAMERON WELCH, SLOW DANCE. OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY, COLLAGE, FOUND OBJECTS, AND CERAMIC ON PANEL. 60 X 48 INCHES. 2018 (R)

VICE: What inspired you to start using mosaics in your paintings?

Cameron Welch: I was thinking a lot about what could be a new myth and trying to create a new world where people of color get to be represented in this way. So I thought about mashing ancient myths around beauty, sexuality, and identity with more modern signifiers. There are CDs—which are like fossils in the world now because we don't use them anymore. I was interested in the stories they evoke for people. Or you have a keyboard in Jazz that someone played and then threw out, and I wanted those histories embedded in the work. The mythology doesn't really stop at the depiction of the thing by me but takes on different things with the different people who see the paintings.

How did dumpster diving make you more interested in using black figures in your work?

I always rely on the readymade. There's something about the tactility of an object that's lived within an image. I was trying to combat institutional painting, a very white history of painting, and surround it with a story of blackness. Now I am creating a [more direct] new narrative. I can pose different questions while bringing in all of these things from the outside world. I'm now thinking about actual objects.

How does embedding the actual objects rethink ideas of race presently and in the past?

The entire body of work is about the intimacy of self recognition. The use of mirrors for every figure's eyes makes you address your own relationship within the proposed narrative and past narratives. Like *Lover Boy* is about romance—it's the idea of a Romeo, or the ancient romantic—and we have a black figure holding a bouquet of flowers in the mirror, and it's more about you seeing yourself as this person.

I create mosaics because there's something kind of cozy about them that's inviting and beautiful and asks, "Where are you within this story? What do you see when you literally see yourself reflected in this thing?"



CAMERON WELCH, PERSEPHONE. OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY, COLLAGE, FOUND OBJECTS, AND CERAMIC ON PANEL. 60 X 48 INCHES. 2018

Persephone is the only depiction of a white figure in the show. What are you trying to advance with that around the myths of identity?

It's interesting because I'm mixed, and I've used my work to navigate my own identity. It's funny, too, because that figure is exactly the same as the black figure in most of the other paintings. I wanted to see what it'd be like when just one of the figures in the entire show was white. It's all about that same question I was posing: what happens to a viewer when they are forced to see themselves in a narrative? The white figure is sort of a bait and switch even though they are all painted the same way; all of the characteristics of their faces are the same, but one is white. What happens? I'm posing more questions than answers.

One of the other things you do, that brings the street into the mostly lily-white tradition of history painting, is use graffiti on the mosaics, which alludes to tagging. Do you think of your paintings as a form of vandalism?

It is vandalism as a means of establishing a new history. I am literally rewriting old histories by writing on top of them. I think there's something really radical about that reclaiming of space. The mark making in my work references the potential of reversing power structures.



L: THE ARTIST AT WORK. PHOTO BY CORINNE RENDINARO. R: OUTWARD BOUND. OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY, COLLAGE, FOUND OBJECTS, AND CERAMIC ON PANEL. 48 X 36 INCHES. 2018



CAMERON WELCH, LOVER BOY. OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY, COLLAGE, FOUND OBJECTS, AND CERAMIC ON PANEL 48 X 36 INCHES. 2018

Why do we need new myths?

I think it's all about possibility. I think I've always tried to find balance in the sort of binaries of my own self-identification. In terms of gender, race, and politics, I think we have gotten to this point where we see fluidity in a lot of the socio-political realms in society that has bubbled up to the surface. I have a younger brother, for example, and a lot of his friends don't identify as one thing or another. They actually hate the idea of being forced to identify as one thing. I think that's a beautiful idea that's often talked about in this really grandiose, utopian way.

And with bringing people of color into the representative sphere of mosaic making or history painting, I'm starting to talk about that. The paintings are proposing the idea of getting rid of a lot of these boundaries. I'm putting black figures in romantic spheres to do away with the construct that people of color can't be represented in that way. I'm an artist that doesn't want to be bound, materially speaking, to one mode of representation. I think it's all about pushing a new myth of liberated existence in terms of self-identification but also knowledge and narrative. I think it's all about being free.



CAMERON WELCH, JAZZ. OIL, ACRYLIC, SPRAY, COLLAGE, FOUND OBJECTS, AND CERAMIC ON PANEL. 60 X 48 INCHES. 2018