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The Artist Making Work About Sweat, Ghosts and the Rivers of Pittsburgh

With Project Blue Space, the sculptor and image maker Shikeith brings the city's Black history to the surface.

The artist Shikeith at his studio in Pittsburgh. Behind him are sculptures in various stages of completion. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

By Rose Courteau
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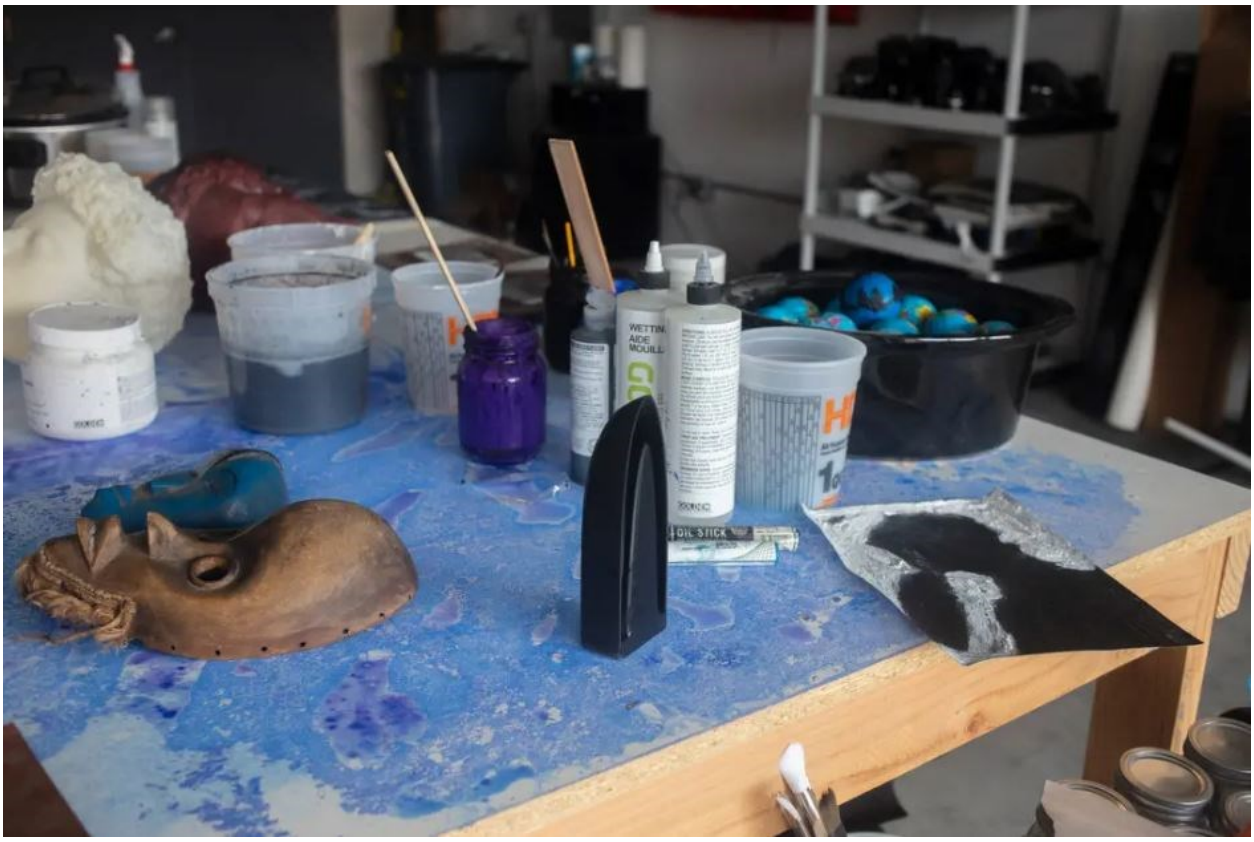
The artist Shikeith's photos often feature Black men covered in visible beads of sweat, though the reason — perhaps physical exertion or psychic exorcism — is rarely made apparent. Many of his installations, which have included glass-cast penises, dirt and ship sails, incorporate the range of colors known as haint blues, so named by the Gullah Geechee, a people descended from West Africans who were enslaved on America's Sea Islands. The Gullah Geechee believed the shades of green, indigo and light blue, when used to paint porches, windows and doors, would ward off evil spirits who'd mistake their homes for water. For Shikeith, 37, water's power lies largely in its mutability: It represents, he says, a "boundless way of being" that he aspires to.

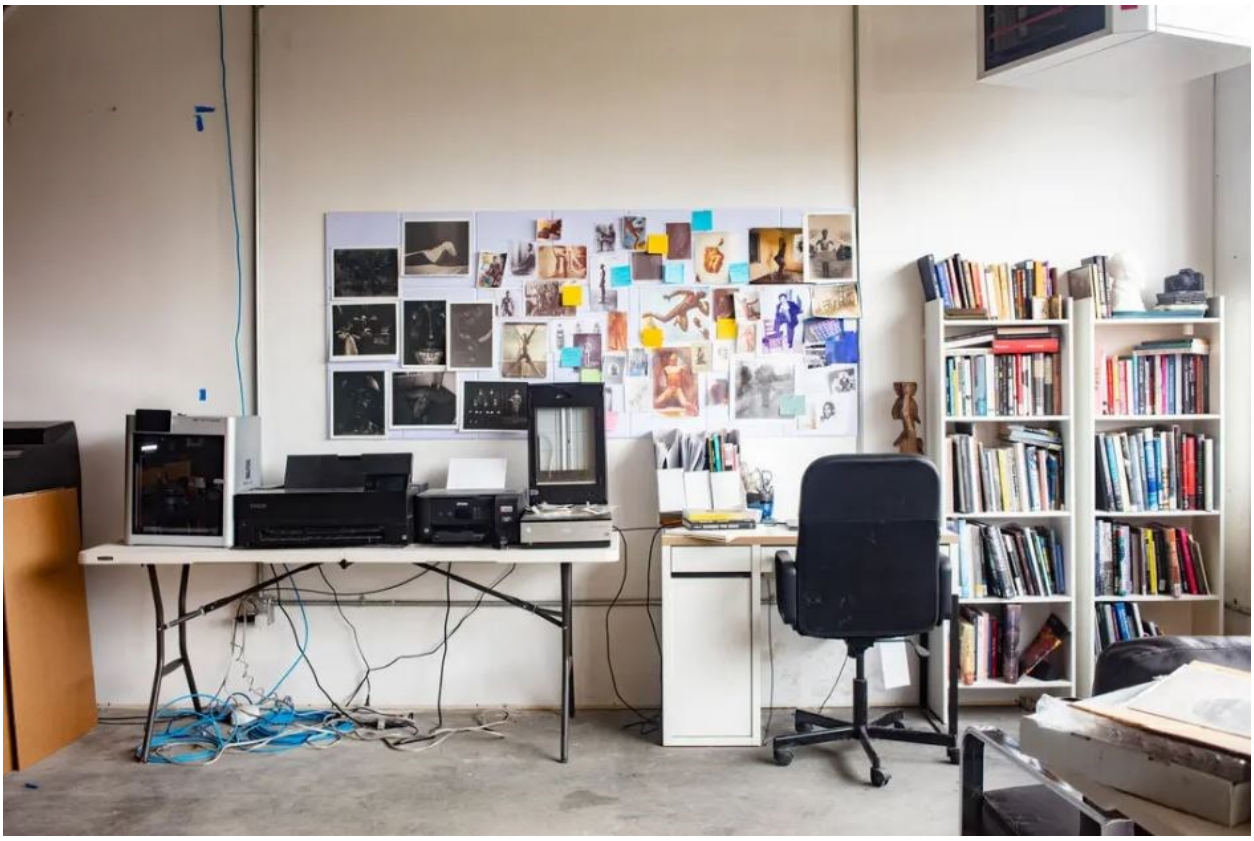
Shikeith grew up in North Philadelphia with his mother, Shenecqua, a hairdresser turned carpenter, in a rowhouse belonging to his maternal grandmother, an avid storyteller who believed their home was haunted. He dropped his surname, Cathey, early in his career, around the time he made "#Blackmendream" (2014), in which he interviewed men who spoke while naked, with their backs to the camera, as if to invite audiences to listen, not just look. In that work, now part of The Criterion Collection, and those that have followed, the artist depicts Black men with delicacy, trying to coax, from subjects and viewers alike, the amorphous, fluid emotions that patriarchy and racism try to contain. Often, these works are multidisciplinary and undermine strict distinctions between art and audience, creation and curation. The work "Notes Towards Becoming a Spill," for example, began in 2019 in Atlanta as an installation that viewers were invited to enter and meditate within, before morphing into an experimental opera and dance performed in 2021 on New York's Rockaway Beach, and then becoming, the following year, the title of his first monograph, published by Aperture and featuring Shikeith's atmospheric, apparitional photos of Black men alongside archival images collected from eBay and elsewhere.



West African tribal masks (left) sit alongside a miniature model (center) of Shikeith's new weathering steel sculpture "Hold" (2026). D'Angelo Lovell Williams

Most recently, he's been exploring the connections between water and the language of erasure — and how Black histories can be eroded or submerged, neglected and forgotten. In his newest work, "Project Blue Space," which launches today, Shikeith aims to amplify the history of Pittsburgh's Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers, which merge beside the city's downtown and played crucial roles in both the Underground Railroad and the movement of jazz music. Once again, he's moving his work beyond museum walls: The project includes an educational website, and the artist, who has lived in Pittsburgh since 2018, is collaborating with local nonprofits to create public programming around the waterfront, with a large outdoor dance party planned for

the summer of 2027. The launch also coincides with the installation of Shikeith's sculpture "Hold" in Arts Landing, a new public space in downtown Pittsburgh on the banks of the Allegheny River. Standing 10 feet tall, the sculpture is cast from weathering steel in the shape of a ship's hull. Its name carries complex connotations: To hold is to embrace but also to contain, as slave-trade ships contained African people who were forced across the Atlantic Ocean. A hold is the opposite of a spill, though the sculpture does emit, with breathlike cadence, a pulsing indigo blue light. "I think I'm always out to capture the space," says Shikeith, "between an inhale and an exhale." I spoke to Shikeith earlier this month, over coffee in Brooklyn, and then over FaceTime, when he'd returned to his sunny studio in a residential neighborhood of Pittsburgh. Here, he answers T's Artist's Questionnaire.



A small desk is bookended by a scanner and a collection of the artist's favorite books. Historical images of Black men in the nude form part of his current image board. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?

It's immeasurable at this point. All day, every day — even in my dreams.

What's the first piece of art you ever made?

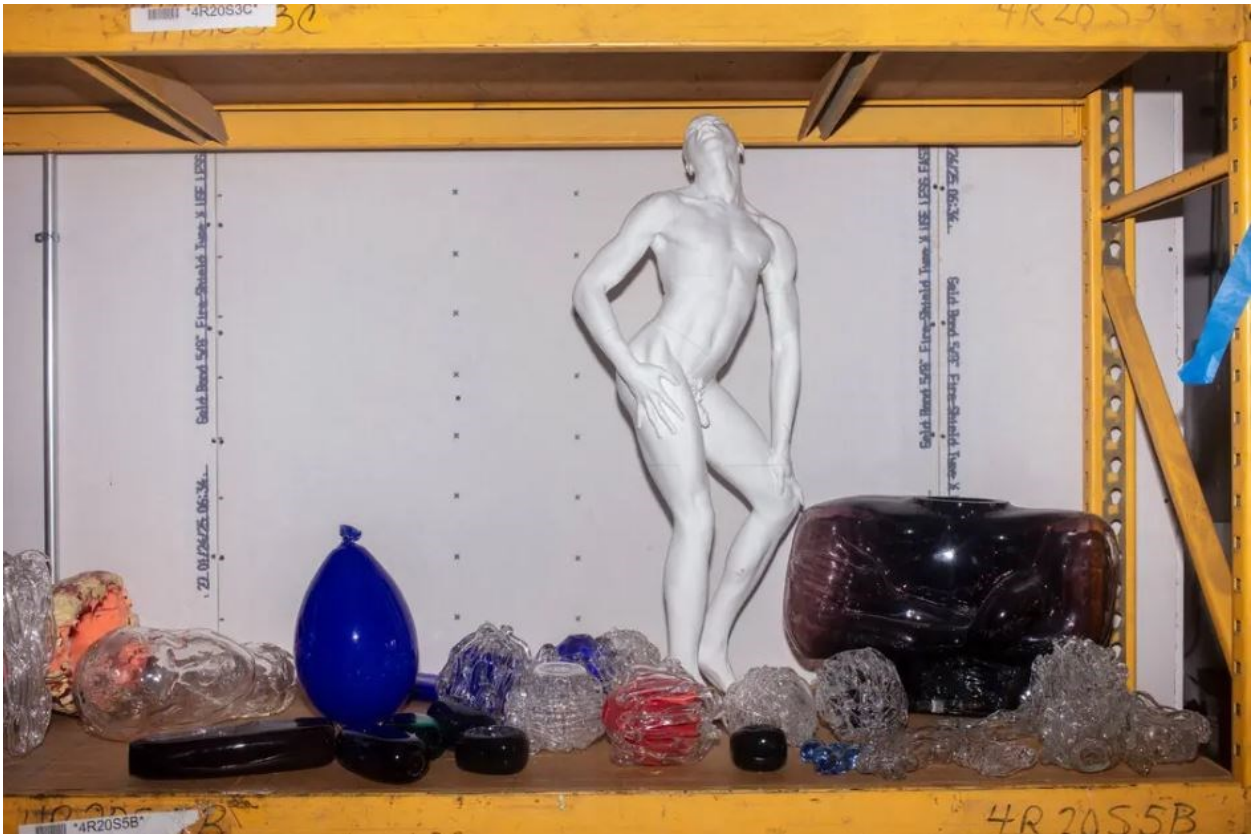
In my [paternal] grandmother's house, starting around 6 years old, I'd hide my drawings under her bed and hope that she'd find them. She's a hoarder, and she actually found two of them when I was in grad school [at the Yale School of Art] and shipped them to me. I got those drawings framed. One is a bear [with] balloons and an American flag.

What's the worst studio you ever had?

Part of me wants to say my grad school studio. It was a high-pressure environment. But I've always been appreciative of any studio that I've had — even my first studio post-grad that maybe had a little rat problem, or [my second studio], in a basement without windows.

What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?

"#Blackmendream," to Wroclaw Contemporary Museum in Poland [in 2017]. I was reaching out to other artists to ask, "How much should I sell this for?" I didn't have gallery representation at that time. [Shikeith is currently represented by New York's Yossi Milo gallery.] But someone told me about editions and how to approach selling a video work. The museum bought one edition of eight, and I came up with $8,000 as a price. I balled out as soon as the check cleared.



A 3-D print of a sculpture in progress depicting a nude male figure. Surrounding it are some of Shikeith's blown-glass experiments. He credits the Pittsburgh Glass Center with helping him learn about the medium. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

When you start a new piece, where do you begin?

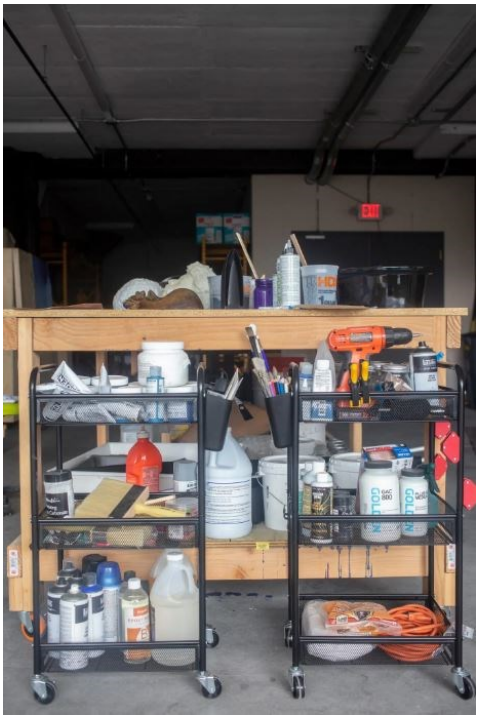
The first step is usually sketching. That's how I develop photographs, sculpture and films, even: throwing out gestures for the compositions I want to create. I write down words that I associate with the sketches as well. Sometimes the sketches come in the aftermath of reading certain things — academic texts, Black theory, fiction, poetry. Essex Hemphill's poetry was a huge point of departure for me. But oftentimes, they're pulled from dreams I've had the night before, and I jot them down in a sketchbook or my iPhone's Notes app. They're usually scribbles, but I'm able to realize them in a more significant capacity once I hit the studio.

How do you know when you're done with a work?

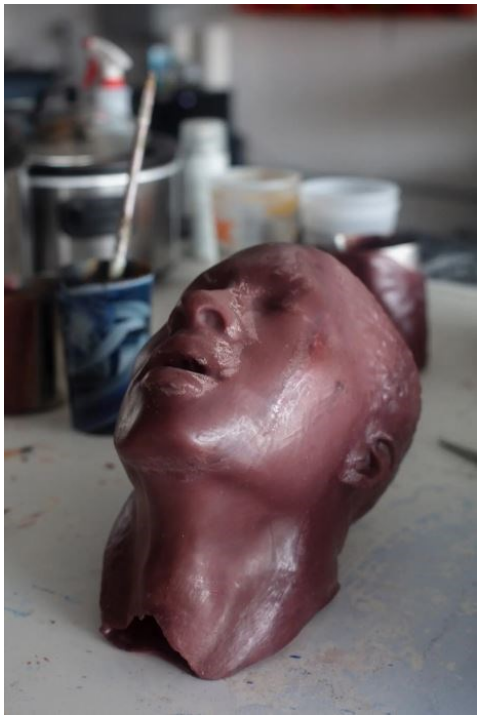
With a photograph, I'm done after it's gone through postproduction. But with sculpture, I've presented plenty of works that were not "done," because it's not exactly doneness that I'm looking for with those. I'm more interested in what happens after the fact — how they're engaged with by the public. Once I see how that happens, then I'm done.

What music do you play when you're making art?

Everybody from [the drummer and composer] Max Roach to [the rap duo] the City Girls. But the mainstay in my studio is Brandy. She's my favorite musician. I met her for the first time two days ago at the Brooklyn Paramount [at a tour stop] for her memoir. Growing up, people would tease me for listening to her. She's built up this image as this perfect good girl. But I always saw the human in her.



Utility carts with painting supplies. D'Angelo Lovell Williams



A life-scale wax casting of one of Shikeith's longtime friends. D'Angelo Lovell William

Are you bingeing any shows right now?

I'm a huge true crime fan, so I'm always binge watching "20/20" and "Dateline." My [maternal] grandmom got me hooked on those kinds of shows growing up. It's how I entertain myself, but also how I prepare myself for danger out in the world. More recently, I binge watched "Paradise" on Hulu.

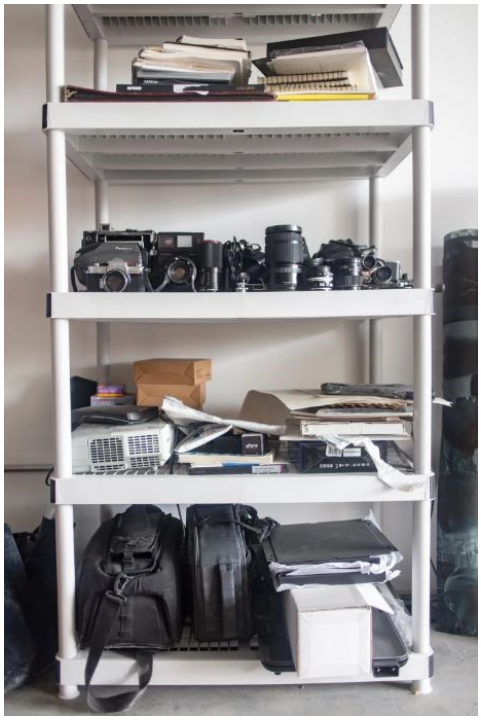
What's the weirdest object in your studio?

Probably this huge rib bone from a bull. I have no use for it; it's straight-up chilling. It cost like 30 bucks. I ordered it during the pandemic. Just bored and curious — and, at that time, I was doing a lot of work around spirituality and Christianity and tackling my upbringing.

How often do you talk to other artists?

Pretty much daily. One of my closest friends, who I met in grad school, is a painter named Vaughn Spann. One of my closest artist friends, London Pierre Williams, is a painter based here in Pittsburgh. I listen to my friend [the musician] Du'Bois A'Keen every morning. He has an album called "Sacred Song Suite" (2025). It's a reimagining of [the songs in] Alvin Ailey's [1960 choreography] "Revelations," and that music has been fuel to get the day going.

Pinned to a studio wall are some of the artist's photographic prints, among them new works that recently earned Shikeith the Aaron Siskind Award for Photography from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. D'Angelo Lovell Williams



Scrapbooks and cameras line a shelf in Shikeith's studio. "I kind of go with the wind" when selecting which camera to use for a shoot, he says, though he remains most loyal to a Mamiya 647. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

What do you do when you're procrastinating?

I like to watch podcasts on YouTube. I've fallen in love with one called "Our Ancestors Were Messy." It retells some of the archived gossip pages of the 19th and 20th centuries; the host, Nichole Hill, talks about all these messy encounters between people like the writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston — histories that we don't typically get to engage with because of respectability politics.

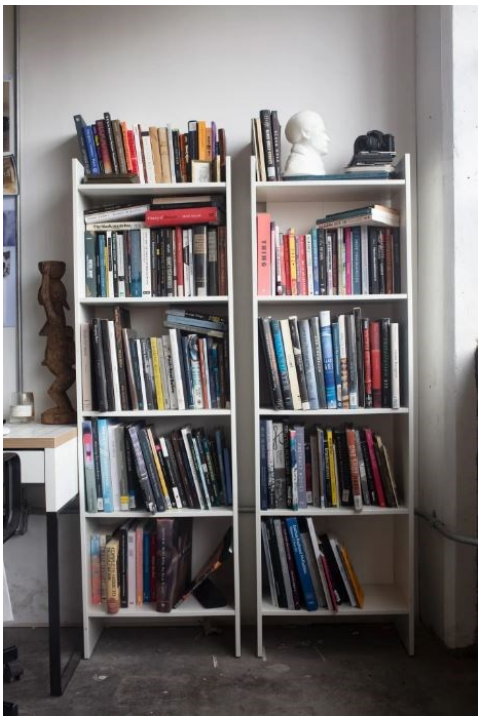
What's the last thing that made you cry?

I cry pretty regularly. I recently watched a movie called "Destiny" (1997) [by the Guinean director Mohamed Camara], which was one of the first West African films about homosexuality. It's so beautiful, how it was shot, the dialogue, the quiet moments.

Sometimes I'll have these moments where I feel so grateful for where life has taken me because I know where I've come from. I was recently awarded the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Aaron Siskind Award for Photography,

for a body of images that I'm working on right now. I had built up a lot of doubt inside of myself, but I embarked on this new work with a sort of fearlessness that reminded me of when I was a younger artist and didn't have an expectation of polish. I was rewarded for that risk. It affirmed that I should never place myself in a box again. I cried because I'd done that to myself.

Standing in the foreground is a resin casting of one of Shikeith's friends, who has modeled for him since 2015. To the right, a casting of another friend's head and torso. D'Angelo Lovell Williams



To the left of the bookshelves, a West African fertility sculpture that Shikeith bought from a street merchant in New York City; a 3-D replica appears on Project Blue Space's website. D'Angelo Lovell Williams

What do you pay for rent?

$1,400 [for my studio]. It's 1,200 square feet.

What do you bulk buy with the most frequency?

Film, always. Kodak Portra. They need to give me a sponsorship. I'm usually floating between 35-millimeter, medium format and large format. I'll photograph in color, and then in postproduction turn it black and white because black-and-white film processing is very expensive.

Do you exercise?

I started exercising more frequently in January. I've had back problems since I was a kid, so I've had to be serious about my core strength as I get older.

What do you usually wear when you work?

Even if it's hot outside, I like to wear hoodies, work pants and Crocs. My Crocs are beige, but they're also yellow, blue and white from paint and sculpture materials. There are pockets of foam hardened on them.

Shikeith's "Hold" (2026), at Arts Landing in Pittsburgh. Shikeith

What are you reading?

"A Soldier's Story" (2019), which is the biography of Kuwasi Balagoon, a Black queer anarchist who was part of the Black Panther Party. It's his poetry and prison writings, which includes his exercise routines. He led a very radical life, and I'm inspired by him. Also, I'm rereading Toni Morrison's "Beloved" (1987), as well as [the film and media scholar] Rizvana Bradley's "Anti-Aesthetics" (2023). Bradley was my professor at Yale, and she was a huge part of my developing my own language. I'm also reading Brandy's memoir, "Phases" (2026).

What's your favorite artwork by someone else?

My favorite installation would have to be Marcel Duchamp's "Étant Donnés" (1946-66). It was the first work I encountered as a child, at the Philadelphia Art Museum, that wasn't a historical painting, and it really transformed what I thought art could be.

My favorite film is "Tongues Untied" (1989) by Marlon Riggs. It's a historical marker on the Black gay landscape of the 1980s, a portrait of how Black gay men have dealt with racism, homophobia and the H.I.V./AIDS crisis and have in many ways sustained a unique form of creative and cultural expression despite that. My first time seeing it was on Tumblr, likely around 2014, and I was in the process of making "#Blackmendream." I was like, "Wait a minute, how did someone make this before me?" I was just very young and dumb. Seeing that awakened me to the fact that I don't exist in a vacuum. It was life changing. Whenever I'm teaching, I make sure to show it to my students, no matter what background they come from.

Whose work makes you the most jealous?

David Hammons's practice is so conceptually rigorous and adventurous. I'm always like, "Damn, I wish I could be more like him." It's not jealousy — it's a reason for me to be on my [expletive].

Which work of your own do you regret or would you do over in a different way?

There's a video installation that I showcased at MoCA Cleveland called "Still Waters Run Deep" (2021). It's a montage of archival photographs of Black men and original footage that I filmed in Florida of a 10-year-old African American boy on a majorette dance team. He's the only boy on the team. The montage and video are running on a loop and are projected onto ship sails. It's pretty chaotic, but I think I want to make it even more chaotic. Somebody call me because I would love the opportunity to do this again.

This interview has been edited and condensed.