

Exhibition: A Love Letter to New Orleans

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If you've ever dreamt of exploring someone else's memories, the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts has what you're looking for. Visit *A Love Letter to New Orleans*, an exhibition by Langston Allston and Demond Melancon, and you'll feel an unspoken connection to their childhoods, upbringings, and culture. Melancon crafts elaborate Mardi Gras Indian suits by hand, while Allston captures the world around him in drawings. Each piece illustrates a personal experience before surrounding the subject with lines and lines of text. Rather than being merely decorative or blunt, the fragmented narratives elaborate on the emotions and nostalgia attached to the memory. Together, these works paint a blurry picture of the past that's more of a feeling than a concrete image—sort of like the difference between a painting and a photograph of the exact same scene. The individual works seem to be untitled, but my favorite is Langston Allston's portrait of Big Chief in costume.

When I first looked at this piece, I was instantly stunned by the intricate details of the linework. Despite the simple medium (marker on tarpaulin, a.k.a. waterproof canvas), Allston achieves several different textures and layers through the manipulation of stroke, patterns, and tone. Big Chief, a major leader and role model for Melancon, is shown standing with his hands clasped and his eyes shut while wearing an extravagant Mardi Gras headdress. It's a stark contrast to his T-shirt, jeans, and various chains. His arms are adorned with tattoos, and his body is surrounded by storyboard panels featuring aspects of the annual ceremony. I love how his ensemble connects his Indian tradition to the modern-day Black aesthetic, and demonstrates how the two can coexist. It reminds me of the "double consciousness" lesson in which we discussed balancing racial identities. Because this is such a large piece, Allston anticipates that you won't be close enough to read the text, so he plays with sizing and negative space in order to draw you in. The concentration of black in Big Chief's dreads brought my gaze to the center of the image, and the extensive layering encouraged me to move closer for a better look. It's beautiful how the finer elements appear to just be gray when viewed from a distance. It could represent how the complexity of a culture, location or person slowly unravels as you begin to interact with it.

What makes this particular exhibition different from any other are the raw stories written directly onto the artwork. They're completely unfiltered: slang, spelling errors, and names given out of context make the anecdotes feel authentic, without leaving the reader in the dark. Mini doodles accommodate the writing, just like in journal entries. Allston's messy handwriting offers details about New Orleans that only an insider would know: late nights on St. Claude, marching through the streets to a drumbeat, running inside at the sound of gunshots, stapling beadwork back on mid-parade ... all subtle signs of the relationship between the writer and his neighborhood. I like that he doesn't romanticize the violence—he just tells it like it is. I also see beauty in the fact that Big Chief inspired change for the better, rather than holding onto the common mentality of “it's always been this way.”

All in all, Langston Allston and Demond Melancon did an exceptional job at honoring their city and the people they've met within it. Their duo exhibition, *A Love Letter to New Orleans*, offers two different memoirs of how their neighborhood's culture has shaped them as both artists and individuals. You can tell they belong there just from the passion embedded in their artwork and narration. The good times they share are powerful enough to make even an outsider like me feel nostalgic.

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