

The Radar

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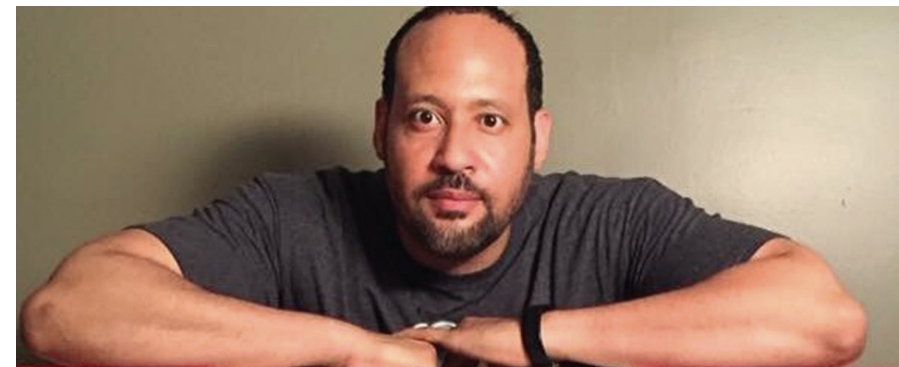
Visual Artist Paul Branton

THE CHICAGO PAINTER TAKES US INSIDE HIS MIND'S EYE WITH ILLUSTRATED LANGUAGE **By LATOYA CROSS**

SOMBER SUBJECTS FLOAT IN POOLS of bold yellows, reds, greens and blues in the visual compositions created by Chicago painter Paul Branton.

For Branton, 43, color is “a relationship and a conversation that’s going back and forth between me and my work.” His attraction to the juxtaposition of boisterous hues and complex subject matters was birthed from working through personal pain.

“It was kind of a therapy,” says Branton,



Much of the work of Chicago artist Paul Branton explores and celebrates Black culture. The piece above, titled *44*, was part of a farewell exhibit for President Barack Obama at the NYCH Gallery.

Intentions” collection exhibited at Chicago’s NYCH Gallery in February. Using a mixture of acrylic, ink and oil pastels, the collection investigated Blackness in America and questioned “the position of a people who are disjointed from these united lands.”

Three of Branton’s paintings will complement poetic prose in Kevin Coval’s book *A People’s History of Chicago*, which will be released on April 11. With a foreword penned by Grammy-award winning artist Chance the Rapper and additional illustrations by Hebru Brantley, among others, the tome celebrates the city from the perspective of those whose stories often go untold.

“It’s important for people to document their history. That’s one thing that art does readily and heavily,” Branton says. “I think that artists, poets and filmmakers are always at the forefront of being a voice.”

Inspired by artists such as Ernie Barnes and Langston Hughes, Branton, who views art as being “extremely personal,” creates with the intent to move Black culture forward.

“There [are] some forms of art that exploit Black culture, which I hate, because I think that everything that we do, especially in art, should be to uplift the culture, grow the culture and to promote love,” he says. “I think that’s the most important thing that art does.”

To learn more about Paul Branton’s work, visit paulbranton.com.

who is also a poet and filmmaker. “I would take these bright elaborate colors to make [pictures] pretty. Not using any white or black in my paintings, I had to use color in a different way to reflect light and shadow. It really became part of me.”

Add to that the vibrancy, complexities and various communities that make up his Chicago hometown, and Branton’s canvases blossom into stories that explore and investigate Black culture, hip-hop and jazz. The deep appreciation and incorporation of music in his paintings come as compliments to his late father, an avid record collector, and his mother, a “big” Motown fan.

Branton, who resides in the city’s West Chatham neighborhood, is himself a self-described “hip-hop baby,” sharing the same birth year as the genre, 1973. His love of the music inspired the “16 Bars” series, which highlights 16 potent lyrics that relate to society on personal and universal levels. Examples of the project include Lauryn Hill’s

verse on “Zealots” from the Fugees’ 1996 hit *The Score* and Jay Z’s “December 4th” from

The Black Album.

“I grew up with hip-hop, [and it] was a genre that encompassed all other music. It just absorbed and remixed it,” Branton says. “That’s how I approach visual art. I absorb all this stuff and regurgitate it on canvas.”

Within the strokes of the artist’s visual works are ridged lines and bright palettes that translate not only the fabric of his upbringing but also the present world around him.

“The city is like a living organism. I’ve always been fascinated [by] and attracted to the urban environment,” he says. “I love when people put a million stickers on the light pole and [then] peel them off. As a kid, when [I] saw rusted steel and dilapidated buildings, that was beautiful to me. It’s like artwork. That always shows up in my work.”

Under his urbanmenta moniker on Instagram, Branton’s postings reflect this aesthetic and create conversations surrounding the importance of art in the Black community and documenting history. These themes were also prominent in his “Pure

COURTESY PAUL BRANTON