

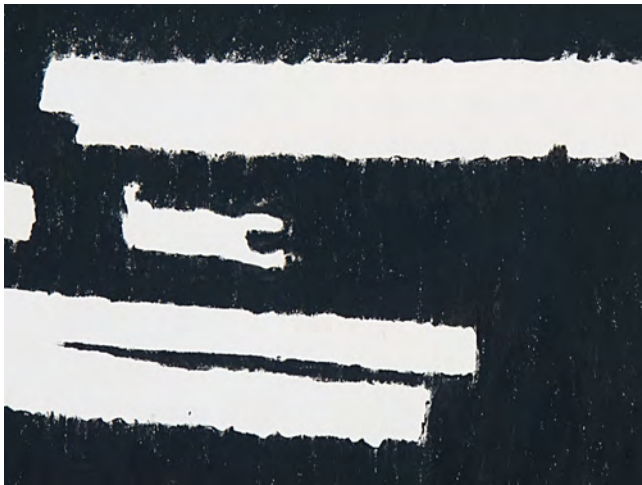
Jamal Cyrus *Cultr-Ops on Wax*, 2015
black wax crayon on paper, 47 1/2 x 33 1/2 framed

“To infiltrate you have to understand.” So says avowed FBI informant Dathard Perry before confessing to the 1973 arson of the Watts Writers Workshop, a literary group founded to revivify the beleaguered Watts community after its 1965 uprising. The espionage was of part of broader FBI efforts to disrupt Black cultural institutions under a program known as COINTELPRO. As a subsequent Senate committee investigation revealed, the program included the surveillance and persecution of leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. But even with 50 years of public pressure to disclose the full extent of the intervention, many documents of that era remain heavily redacted. The FBI’s continued secrecy offers a corollary to Perry’s formulation: if understanding provides access, then ignorance provides shelter.

Cultr-Ops on Wax takes an unexpected approach to the FBI’s front. When met with stonewalling, the almost irresistible impulse is to chip away. But Jamal Cyrus builds higher: his drawing is made from redacted portions

of the Bureau's file on Malcolm X, whose influence on Black artistic expression often goes unappreciated. Inspired by the notational devices of composers like Anthony Braxton and John Cage, Cyrus cut out the redactions, arranged them into sheet music of a sort, worked the entire paper over with black wax crayon, and then removed the cutouts. The result is a string of contrasts and reversals. The redactions are white where once they were black, and although Cyrus treats his drawing as a score, the "notes" are white, contrary to traditional musical notation. But the central irony is the hymn composed from silence.

A grim wit can be found in these inversions, and given that just this year a petition was circulated to release the unredacted files on Malcolm X, it might seem perverse to turn an act of suppression into a form of expression. But an art of opposition thrives under just such circumstances: it draws energy from restraint, and defines itself according to what it isn't. The FBI was successful in many of its forays – and may still be successful in covering them up – but its larger goal of subversion through understanding was fundamentally misguided. Its intrusions and whitewashes provided the conditions for a culture of resistance to evolve. The negatives become positive; the erasures become building blocks. ***Cultr-Ops on Wax*** makes no pretense of understanding, but neither does it allow that lack to mute its force. The willingness to persevere in the absence of certainty isn't only a social virtue: by some lights it's a prerequisite for making art. Control of knowledge doesn't necessarily guarantee control of spirit.



Cultr-Ops on Wax, detail

A government file, furthermore, isn't the only repository for memory. Even without official documents, a community's collective history is maintained orally and artistically. The work's title is a reference to the generations of Black artistic production (putting a record "on wax" idiomatically survived new technologies) advancing the legacy of Malcolm X. Cyrus' drawing is one such tribute, though his use of wax does much more than simply record time and effort: his dense strokes have a vitality and immediacy that bring to the fore what might otherwise read as background. It's a formal device – a transposition of figure and ground – that hits deeper, giving life and intensity to the margins.

Jamal Cyrus (born 1973, Houston, TX) lives and works in Houston. He received his BFA from the University of Houston in 2004 and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2008. In 2005 he attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. He was an Artist in Residence at Artpace San Antonio and has won several awards, including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, the Artadia Houston Award, and the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship. He is a member of the artist collective *Otabenga Jones and Associates*, and has participated in national and international exhibitions, including ***Day for Night***, the 2006 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Menil Collection in Houston (2007), The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington DC, The California African American Museum, Los Angeles (both 2008), The Kitchen in New York (2009), The New Museum, New York (2011), The Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston (2012), and the Studio Museum, Harlem (2013).

Cyrus' work is on view as part of the traveling exhibition ***Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art***, organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and currently on view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in SF through October 11, 2015, as well as ***The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 To Now***, currently on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, through November 22, 2015.