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Musical portraits of joy, in jazz and vibrant blue

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ART, MUSIC

Music meets the art of Derrick Adams in a recent project from Tandem Press and UW-Madison student composers.

Image: Derrick Adams, "Boy On Swan Float." Courtesy of Tandem Press.

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You are right in front of two very bright pieces created by artist Derrick Adams and printed at Tandem Press, UW-Madison's printmaking studio. You find yourself watching a boy on a swan-shape raft simply floating in a vibrant blue pool. He is just sitting there, enjoying a hot summer day.

But then, you move onto the next print and find yourself watching a party guest wearing a colorful triangular polka dot party hat. You feel as if you're at the party, stare at him for a long time and wonder what this man is thinking about. Is he talking to someone else because his eyes are not looking directly at you? Or, is he planning something we do not know about?

Who knows? What the New York-City based artist is really trying to capture in these pieces is radical Black joy. These two prints, simply titled "Boy On Swan Float" and "Party Guest 1" are part of a larger series of works in which Adams portrays Black people enjoying their leisure time, rather than following the traditional portrayal of oppression. Adams' art has been showcased at the Museum of Modern Art and the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Derrick Adams, "Party Guest 1." Courtesy of Tandem Press.

The depth of these themes, and the many questions the works might raise for one viewer or another, created an opening for two jazz musicians and composers currently studying at UW-Madison, Collin Dedrick and Luke Leavitt, to create original music inspired by Adams' art.

"To Party And Plan" is an interpretation of "Party Guest 1" and draws its title from Adams' series *We Came To Party And Plan*. Dedrick set out to build on Adams' efforts to show positive images of Black people resting, enjoying themselves, and maybe planning a revolution at a party.

"There was a [great interview](#) that Adams did where he was talking about how Black joy is such a great thing that gets overlooked in pop culture and in the media," Dedrick says. "Whenever the Black community is portrayed, it is usually their fighting for justice, struggling and fighting. [Adams] was talking about how that is obviously not all what the Black community is and that they're allowed to be happy and enjoy themselves... I thought that was such a beautiful sentiment, that you're allowed to be happy and you want the world to be able to see that."

But when trying to portray that in his music, Dedrick encountered a challenge.

“For me, personally, trying to create artwork based on this, as a white person that hasn’t experienced that Black culture in the way that he has, I didn’t want to just create a piece of music that was reflecting what I took away from his gallery,” Dedrick says. “I did a lot of research into his interviews, his write-ups about his pieces and what other people had to say about his series. I wanted to, as accurately as possible, not just portray his art, but portray his takeaways.”

When composing “Boy On A Swan Float,” Leavitt also took up that search for joy. But he also wanted to give the piece a sense of action, and ended up crafting an array of at once mellow and dynamic melodies. Leavitt drew further inspiration from the vibrant blue in Adams’ print. Leavitt studies both geography and music as a graduate student, so the notion of a musical landscape—balancing sound, color, and space—makes a lot of sense to him.

“When I make music, I’m constantly feeling the pull of a landscape or type of landscape in that virtual sense,” Leavitt says. “What are the horizons that I want this music to take a listener? Where do I want to transport them?” Leavitt, who also makes electronic music [under his own name](#) and the moniker [Cop Circles](#), found that working from Adams’ print gave him a lot of powerful cues.

“There’s already a visual pull when I’m making music. And when I look at images, [it happens] too, if it creates a sense of awe or wonder, a new way of feeling, looking or even something that disturbs and complicates what I’m expected to think,” Leavitt says.

The visual pull in Leavitt’s “Boy On A Swan Float” composition is a result of the abstraction of the themes of leisure and action that he drew from Adams’ “Boy On Swan Float” print.

“Leisure is not something that you escape to when you’re done with your sort of sense of duty to society or whatever compels you to work for a greater good,” Leavitt says. “But that leisure, social action, collaboration and transformation are intimately intertwined,” Leavitt says. “And music is a testament to that: all the music that speaks to social change,

that opens up possibilities for a feeling, thinking differently and for visualizing a different kind of world.”

The impulse to visualize a different kind of world is also present in Adams’ prints as a source of inspiration and empowerment. “The motivation [for ‘Boy On Swan Float’ and ‘Party Guest 1’] is to present normalcy in the imagery of the Black figure, as opposed to images of us being oppressed or in reaction to oppression,” Adams writes in an email interview with *Tone Madison*. “The Party Guests are simply people at the party, having fun, or in meaningful conversation or deep discussion making plans for the future, or just chilling,” Adams says. “The boy on the swan float is from an image of a family friend having a quiet moment, just existing.”

With these portrayals of Black joy, Adams is advancing the change he wants to see in the world through his art.

“My images are born out of the laughter and joy of family and friends. We are a product of the Middle Passage; we learned it; we know there is oppression and segregation—to this day—but that is not our focus,” Adams says. “My focus is to present positive images for the next generation to see, going forward. To balance the narrative... I want my work to speak to the people that need a break from that oppressive narrative. My art is a form of communication: another language,” Adams says. “I want it to be a mirror of an alternate reality of the Black experience.”

A meeting of printmaking and jazz

Since 2014, Tandem Press Director Paula Panczenko and UW-Madison jazz studies director Johannes Wallmann have been working together on the Tandem Press Jazz Concerts, which during non-pandemic times are held six times throughout the academic year at Tandem Press’ space on Madison’s north side. These concerts initially started out as Tandem Press seeking to expand its audience.

But for Wallmann, it was an opportunity to have his students play in front of a different crowd. Over time, the collaboration ended up being a space to explore the natural affinities between music and visual art. “Music has always been hand in hand with the other arts and going to a place like Tandem, where we see the completed art and experience the

[printing] process is a really wonderful opportunity for our students to interact with the master printers,” Wallmann says.

The pandemic led Wallmann and Panczenko to think creatively and come up with a solution to reimagine a virtual Tandem Press Concert. “We sat down and we talked during the summer, Johannes and myself, on how we could do this,” Panczenko says. “I said: do you think we could do something virtually? With the rest of our work [at Tandem], that’s how we’ve done everything since COVID. We have basically done everything virtually. We’ve done art fairs. We’ve done virtual viewing rooms.”

That just raised a question for Wallmann.

“We tried to figure out: how can we still connect with the people who would love to come to a regular Tandem concert?” Wallmann says. So he took the leap into asking his students to create music based on the works that dozens of visiting artists have contributed to Tandem Press over the years.

Wallmann also turned to Audio for the Arts, a downtown recording studio that has also hosted small concerts in its live room, and the video agency Microtone Media, to record and film the music students and Tandem Press staff. Rather than presenting all this into a straightforward live-streamed concert, Microtone Media edited the pre-recorded elements into an hour-long event that combines performances of the original compositions, visual art, and commentary from Tandem Press curators.

Wallmann told his students to rely on their musical tools just as artists do so with their visual ones. “You’re writing music for people, so be aware of what those people can do; what they’re going to sound good doing and maybe use that visual analogy,” Wallmann says. “Use the people as a painter would use different colors... You might get inspired if you know that you have some incredibly vibrant blue pigment. [The same happens if] I have a great trumpet player with a great tone that would sound wonderful playing this sort of thing,” Wallmann says.

That vibrant blue pigment turned into vibrant musical palettes, or ensembles, for both Dedrick and Leavitt.

Dedrick's relied on Charlie Palm's trumpet, Bennet Leclaire's tenor saxophone, Travis Cooke's trombone, Mark Goodden's keyboard, Alex Feucht's bass and Ian Kenney's drums to take you to an actual party, or an illusion of it, during pandemic times. At the beginning you listen to people talking and then the music starts with the keyboards, drums, saxophones, trombone and trumpet to set the mood of the relaxing party. (Dedrick, a pianist, doesn't play on the piece himself. Wallmann and reedist Maggie Cousin produced the recording.)

Leavitt used his own piano, Nathaniel Schmidt's trumpet, Mina Stumpfoll's alto saxophone, Bennet Leclaire's tenor saxophone, Bryson Bauer's trombone, Jake Kruse's guitar, Mathew Podolske and Peter Dominguez's bass and Nathan Heywood's drums to transport the listener to a relaxing vibrant blue pool on a hot summer day. (Dominguez, also a professor of double bass and jazz at UW-Madison, co-produced this recording with Leavitt.) It makes you experience the floating feeling of simply existing and relaxing.

The floating feelings and sense of enjoyment in Dedrick and Leavitt's pieces work on multiple levels: as responses to Adams' vibrant color palette, as attempts to create musical paintings that feed back into the prints, and as efforts to explore the human experience and make sense of the world. "All of the arts in some way explore what it is that makes us human. They create ways to give meaning to the human experience," Wallmann says. "Hopefully, they provide solace during difficult times. They can be a powerful way to protest. They can reframe the way we think about things, and how we experience the world."

[derrick adams](#), [luke leavitt](#), [collin dedrick](#), [tandem press](#), [johannes wallmann](#), [audio for the arts](#), [paula panczenko](#)