

Forbes

Umar Rashid Brings Expansive Story To Tiny Space In Washington, D.C.

Chadd Scott Oct 22, 2021,08:29am

The year is 1794. A feast in the Belhaven Republic attended by Frenglish and Fenoscandian colonizers and visiting global dignitaries is violently interrupted. A rebel fighting force of freed slaves, militiamen, dukes, lords and tribesmen crashes the party.

Umar Rashid's fictional Colonial Era universe, 18 years in the making, reveals its latest chapter in Washington, D.C. with Rashid wrapping up his tenure as the inaugural artist of the Capital Artist Residency, a new annual initiative from arts nonprofit CulturalDC.

Belhaven stands as the artist's fictional designation for the D.C.-area transatlantic trade port of Alexandria, Virginia, once the busiest slave port in America. Frengland and Fenoscandia are the global superpowers who have colonized the area.

"Culinarialism" continues Rashid's examination of historical power structures with a focus on the class dynamics of food using the narrative framework of a ritzy dinner party—the ultimate embodiment of how food that's available exclusively to a privileged class has always reached their plates at immense human and environmental cost.

Among 17 works total, six large paintings depict various stages of the party and the uprising that ends the festivities—assisted in part by divine intervention from the Yoruba gods. Rashid's



Umar Rashid, We up. We down. The Belhaven Invitational Basketball tournament and cook out ends in defeat for the Irish indentures at the hands of Supreme Team Tobacco. The historical origin of the half smoke, 2021. Acrylic & spray paint on canvas 36 x 36 in (91.44 x 91.44 cm)

images contain a mashup of historical and cultural references combining elements of 18th and 19th century colonial portraiture and folk art with visual signifiers of contemporary urban culture, including jewelry and body art.

Casks of Hennessy are plundered.

Pizza is served at St. MacDonald's table in a painting titled, Premonition of a horrible American diet. The feast commences. Start the dance. Quantity over quality. All of the imported vegetables, grains, cheeses, and meats produced pepperoni pizza, pork fried rice, and churrascaria. A rebel appears in a green jacket. St. MacDonald watches over us. No secret. Rashid's extraordinarily long titles recalling Jacob Lawrence series.

District insiders will note his reference to "half-smoke," a local sausage delicacy. They might also recognize their neighbors. Rashid included D.C.-area patrons of his work into the narratives like Renaissance painters would occasionally do.

The artist's simultaneous representation of the historic and contemporary drives home a sobering reality.

"Nothing really changes in human history. We have jumps in technology, but everything else pretty much remains the same," Rashid told host Tyler Green on the January 14, 2021 episode of "The Modern Art Notes" podcast. "The mashup is just to get people to realize this time is no different than any other time, but it does create room for a more optimistic view of a possible future. Everything that has happened has happened, we can talk about it, we can sit around and argue about it, we can live in that misery, we can live in that trauma for as long as we like, however, it will—more than likely—repeat itself again."

Sadly, the lack of meaningful change to America's health care, economic, policing or social justice systems in the year following 2020's double-whammy of COVID-19 and George Floyd's murder—after which so many thought "this will change everything"—prove the artist's point.

Rashid's work could loosely be associated with Afro-Futurism, a concept the artist described to Forbes.com as "tricky" for its "all encompassing" parameters. The term has gained popularity in recent years as more Black artists across all genres seek to imagine what the future for people of the African diaspora could look like—and critics and galleries try placing a label on it.

"As far as I know, Afro-Futurism is a genre in painting, prose and film that shows Black people in the future, doing future things," Rashid told Forbes.com. "From Rosalind Cash in the 'Omega Man' to Billy Dee Williams in 'Star Wars.' Outside of this binary, all things are possible. I don't reject the moniker, but I'm sure that someone, someday will come up with something else to describe it."

London's Tate Modern defines it as "a cultural aesthetic that combines science-fiction, history and fantasy to explore the African American experience and aims to connect those from the Black diaspora with their forgotten African ancestry."

Rashid's expansive universe finds as its D.C. home one of the District's smallest art spaces. "Culinarialism" is staged within CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery, a shipping container that's been converted to have a fully white-box interior and gallery lighting for an effect reminiscent of many small New York Lower East Side galleries. The roving program is an accessibility initiative that brings art to locales outside of concentrated cultural districts.

Of all the world's injustices and inequities, why food?

While researching during his residency, Rashid learned about recurring abuses in the food system that span history, from mass enslavements for the sole purpose of food production, to various contemporary examples of the problem with one specifically being how quinoa was an Andean nutrition staple until global trends drove prices up to an extent that precluded its regional accessibility.

"The economics of food production have changed very little from the colonial age," Rashid said in announcing "Culinarialism." "Desertification from overgrazing, poisoning of lakes and rivers from fertilizers create algae blooms, zootrophic diseases infest the livestock and become transmissible to humans. There's the gross waste and mismanagement of arable land to grow a single crop for profit resulting in devastation of the land and ecosystems, and in some cases widespread death from famine and overwork."

"Culinarialism" can presently be seen at Sandlot Southeast (71 Potomac Avenue SE) near Nationals Park, the final stop of the exhibition which closes November 21.



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