

LOWELL RYAN PROJECTS

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Black-Man and the Cops of America

Kumasi J. Barnett at The Armory Show in New York

By Markus Binder

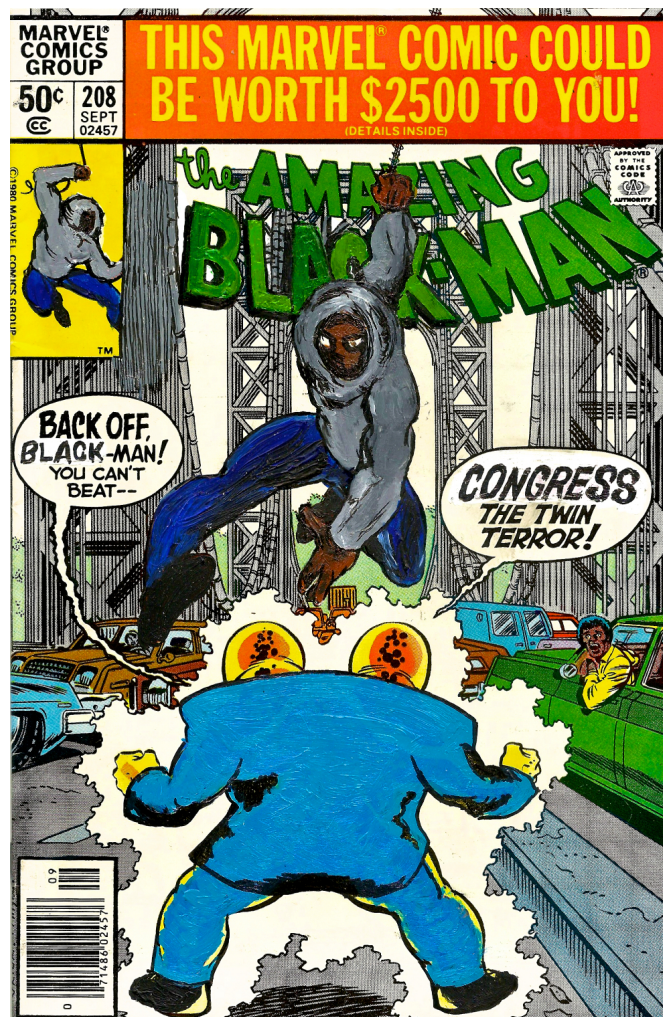
Anyone who wants to get a quick overview of the most important positions in contemporary art is in good hands at the Armory Show in New York: Leading galleries from all over the world present groundbreaking works by current artists in a small space. This time, Kumasi J. Barnett is right in the middle of it all. In his works, he deals intensively with current social issues - and he does so with a medium that is extremely astonishing, especially for comic book readers.

Of course, we are grateful to the superheroes of Marvel and DC for the legions of bank robbers, blackmailers, and con artists they have prevented from doing their evil deeds; for averting plane crashes and planetary collisions; and for helping the occasional grandmother get her cat out of the tree. Still, every now and then you wonder: With all their superpowers and abilities, shouldn't they be able to tackle the real problems that humanity is suffering from? Wouldn't it

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serve us all much better if Tony Stark would not invest his billions in high-tech toys for adults, but in the development and expansion of a climate-friendly energy supply? If Superman were to devote himself for a fortnight to demilitarizing war zones around the world and thus protecting millions of people from need, hunger and violence? Or if all of them together were to address the problem that even today in our Western societies people are still exposed to structural discrimination because of their religion, sexual orientation or skin color?

Indeed, superhero comics have always been very hesitant in their approach to social problems. Even a character like Black Panther, who has been regarded worldwide as a symbol of black self-confidence since its filming in 2018, was not a serious statement for equality and tolerance when it was invented in 1966, but rather an easily understood attempt to finally get the pocket money of black youths in the slipstream of the civil rights movement. And even today, with a few exceptions, publishers are still avoiding to take a stand on social grievances - or even to make them appear in their stories.



Kumasi J. Barnett, The Amazing Black-Man #208 Congress the Twin Terror, 2016
Acryl, Marker, Feder and Ölstift auf Comicheft, 15,9 x 24,8 cm., Courtesy of Lowell Ryan Projects

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Kumasi J. Barnett shows in his works, which are currently being presented by Lowell Ryan Projects at The Armory Show, that it could be done quite differently. He paints over the covers of old superhero magazines, reinterpreting the depicted scenes to situations in which racism and police violence break out into the open or big business secures its assets. Spider-Man thus becomes the hooded Amazing Black-Man who has to deal with Congress, the two-headed terror; instead of Captain America, the modified title lettering announces "Cops in America" or "Cash in America" - and the illustrations below leave no doubt as to whose service both powers are in.



Kumasi J. Barnett, Cash in America #233 Crosshire, 2015
Acryl, Marker, Feder and Ölstift auf Comicheft, 15,9 x 24,8 cm.
Courtesy of Lowell Ryan Projects

What puts any "bagged & boarded" comics collector in cold sweat proves to be an enormously effective artistic concept: charged with real meaning, the poses seen thousands of times unfold a completely new urgency, and the energetic but originally hollow dynamics of the illustrations suddenly develop real explosiveness when Barnett uses them to convey his concern to the viewer with force.

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Der Stand von Lowell Ryan Projects bei der Armory Show 2020. Courtesy of Lowell Ryan Projects

By the way, it is only five blocks from the Marvel headquarters to the Armory Show exhibition rooms. One could hope that one or the other editors make a detour to the harbor during their lunch break to get ideas from Barnett on how to give the artistically exhausted genre of superhero comics new cultural relevance. But let's be realistic - for the time being it will probably remain with planetary collisions and cats on trees.

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Thoughts on Comics, Graphic Literature and Everything