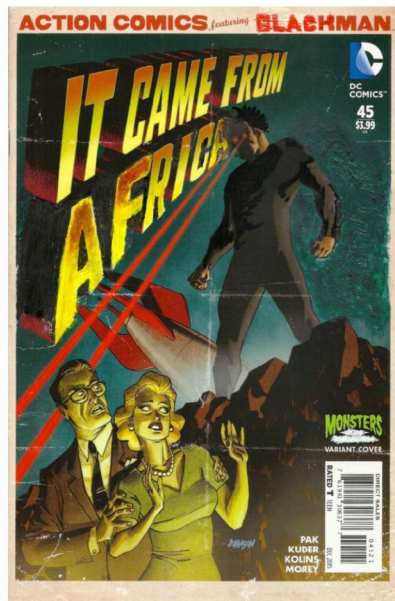
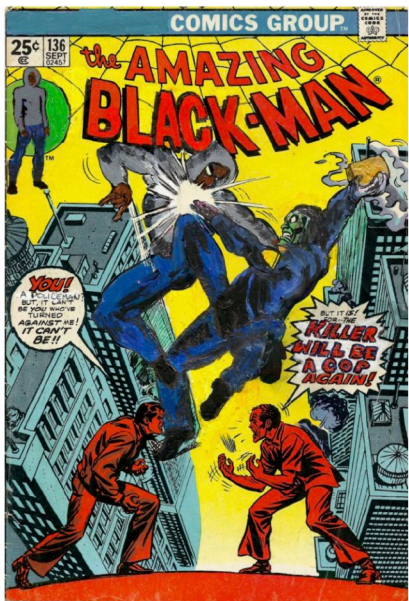


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Artist Kumasi J. Barnett on Redefining the American Superhero



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The Amazing Black-Man #136 | Kumasi J. Barnett (Image credit: Joe Chea) | Action Comics featuring Blackman #45

Artist Kumasi J. Barnett alters actual comic book covers to transform classic good vs. evil stories into a reflection on the problems that plague our society: systemic racism, police brutality, corporate greed, and political corruption. A collector of comics from a young age, Barnett blends a shared pop culture history with storytelling tropes and the experience of being Black in America, creating a series of works that stay true to the comic book medium on which they are based.

We spoke with Barnett on his process of transformation, and the conversations he hopes to generate with a body of work that finds amplified relevance in our current moment of growing awareness:

Shelley Holcomb (Curate LA): So let's start from the beginning: where you're from, where you are now and how did your work get to be where it is now.

Kumasi J. Barnett: *I'm from Baltimore. I just got back in August after being gone for like fifteen years living in New York. I was trained as an abstract artist. I did abstraction forever and started this [the comic book series] probably in 2015 after Freddie Gray was killed in the back of a van. I had been painting individual brush strokes on acetate and then cutting them out of the acetate and composing paintings on the wall. It was all about what is necessary; what*

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is the least you can do to have a painting. But I couldn't express what I wanted to say with abstraction...

I'm an artist — that's the way I talk, the way I express myself.



So, like, even if I'm out there, I'm usually quiet because that's not the way I express myself. In 2015 when I was living in Brooklyn, Baltimore was fighting itself — my dad lives about five minutes away from where everything was happening — I went to my comic books, which were sitting in a closet, and I thought, “These are really important; I've had them forever. I've collected them. They're a part of me. Let me just see what I can do.” And I made ten of those [comic paintings]. That's where it started.

Shelley: What was your process in choosing comics? Was it something that you really related to, or more something that you felt could convey your message clearly?

Kumasi: *It's something that I related to. I learned to read by reading comics when I was a kid in the library. It's something that's specifically mine that I grew up with, that my friends and my brother all grew up with. Then you get into a larger audience, and there's a*

feeling that this doesn't belong to you. You get to comic cons and people are like, “No, no, no, no, no. You can't comic con as this person; this person is white.” Or, “No, no, no, you're not a big comic book guy. You don't know what you're talking about.”

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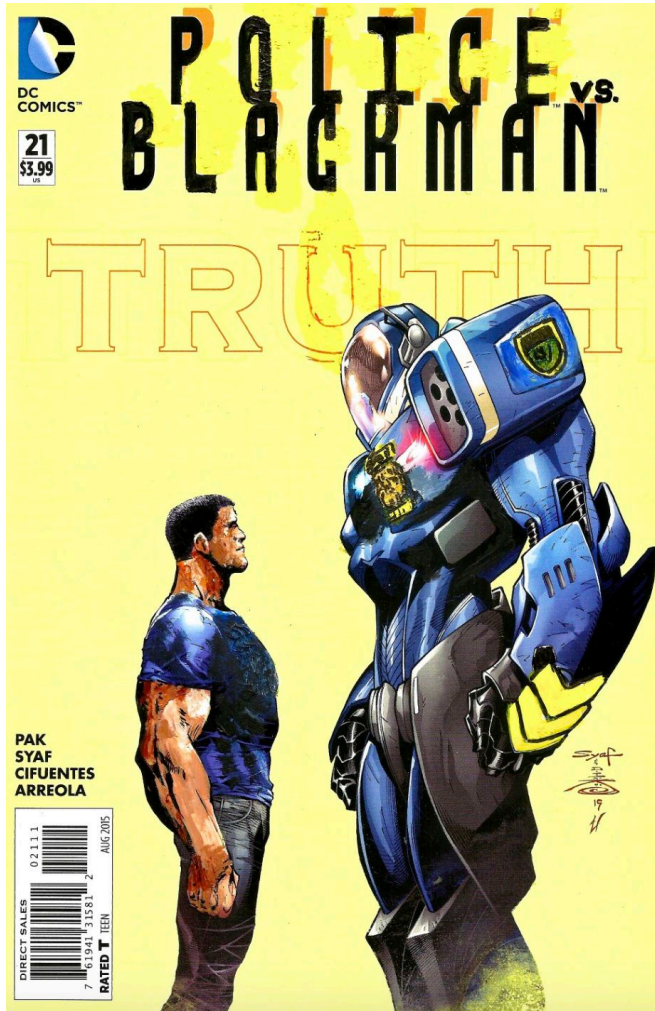
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I learned to read by reading comics when I was a kid in the library. It’s something that’s specifically mine that I grew up with.

There weren’t any real Black heroes that didn’t have an issue. One of my favorite comics growing up — probably the favorite — was X-Men. And of the Black heroes in X-Men, one was African — not American, so it’s not the same type of thing. Then another Black hero came and they’re like, “No, no, no. He’s Aboriginal. He’s not, like, from here.”



So the Black heroes either had some problem where they went to jail first and then were released and now they’re fighting against something — or they’re just extremely angry without any context for why they’re mean. Like, “Oh, just an angry Black dude. But he’s got powers now.” It always felt like you [as a Black person] had to project yourself onto a white character that was close to what you believe in. I don’t think a lot of white people have to experience that.

America has this way of having Black people be part of everything but separate from it. It doesn’t belong to you.

[Comics are] one of those things. It’s like, no, this purely belongs to me. It’s one of the most personal things that I had growing up: collecting comics with my brother. They’re such a part of me — I know the people that they are a part of and the larger pop culture. I know it inside and out.

Shelley: Can you talk about your process of intervention with these comics?

Kumasi: *So I try to change as little as possible in the comic, to shift the narrative of what’s already there. The starting point is always the title. And then, since each one is an individual story, they each have an individual narrative unto themselves. They’re like little stories that make up a larger contextual story. I try to do as little as possible so that you don’t notice it from afar — but the closer you get, the more you notice that it’s actually painted.*

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The Amazing Black-Man #237 | The Amazing Black-Man #278 | The Amazing Black-Man #196, Kumasi J Barnett

Shelley: What about the size? Is there a reason you're not blowing them up into larger paintings?

Kumasi: *I have blown them up into larger paintings. But they're a different thing. [Comics are] a pop culture object. [By keeping them the same size,] they're understood in the cultural narrative, even bagged in the same way. A painting is a reference to a comic book. There's a feeling when I paint something big that I have to do 'painting things.' Comics are weird — the way they're drawn, the way they colored — the lighting is wrong all the time. The structure of the figure [in comics] is very interesting because it changes over time, depending on what's going on. The heroes get bigger and smaller; they get lankier, they get weirder. It's just very interesting. But you don't notice it because it's a comic book. When you take it out of that comic book context and make it a big painting, suddenly all of art history has to come into that painting world. It becomes more of a history painting in the way that old French history paintings have stories inside of them; people have to be placed at specific angles and in specific ways*

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and golden ratio types of things — which I'm totally into, and I'm going to keep doing. But I don't think people should see those here.

With comics, it's almost like an anti-aesthetic — or anti-traditional aesthetics that we are taught as painters.

And yet your eyes move through comics. They're so entertaining. You can't stop looking at them.

Shelley: There are some motifs or characters that are recurring in your work — the



Amazing Black Man, the Pigs — and I feel like now in this current moment in America, we can as a society better understand the correlation between these figures and the stories you're portraying, but you've been making these paintings for a while now. What drew you to these particular characters?

Kumasi: *Each one is an individual story, a different parable.*

I think the more you experience America, the more you understand each painting.

Because we are a hundred thousand tiny little stories that are replicated over and over again. So the characters are the same, but just like you — you're not just one story. You're not just today. You're not just yesterday. You have a thousand stories; things that you have forgotten that your parents know about you from when you were little. These stories are different moments in their

lives.

The thing about America is that these stories work for the 400-whatever years that we've been here. You can put these stories anywhere in American history and they work. That is the saddest part. We're trying to change, but there's a lot of stuff that's still the same.

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I think if someone found stories like these in ten thousand years, they could compose a view of what America was and it wouldn't be far off.

Shelley: What's interesting to me about your paintings is considering the person who is looking at them. When a Black person looks at your paintings, it might feel — like you were saying — like it's every Black person's story. When a white or non-Black person looks at your paintings, they might think they are fantastical. Particularly before now, when we seem to be experiencing a revolution of white people understanding racism more deeply, what have you noticed to be non-black sentiments towards your work?



The Amazing Black-Man #208 | The Amazing Black-Man #203, Kumasi | Barnett

Kumasi: Well, it's pretty similar to what you're saying. Black people understand the work and they understand that [the work] is actually far less dramatic than the Black experience — because it can be much, much worse. I've been trying to focus on telling the stories I know and telling the stories that the people I know have told me that are true. Things that I've seen, that I've experienced, and things that other people have experienced, from my perspective. So it is very much from a Black perspective. Unfortunately, I don't have those conversations with white people who feel that way, because they usually don't talk to me about it. But I'm down for that conversation.

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That's what I like. That's what I live for. I feel like white people come in and they're like, "Oh, this is way too much." But it's actually kind of mellow.

The most dangerous thing to be in this country is a Black person from age 14 to 25. Cops treat you differently after you grow up. I don't know what it is about being young, but I've known cops who treat people very differently for doing the same things that they did as kids. It's disturbing.

What I'm really interested in is having these conversations with people who don't believe the same thing that I do, because I know my side and I want to see how they come to their side.



The Media's Thug #241 | Cops In America #335 | Donald Fuck #161, Kumasi J. Barnett

I think there is a place for the conversation to happen between white people, where they don't feel as scared to talk. And they can be like, "Yeah. I used the N-word a lot when I was young, I just didn't know any better." And then they can explain to another white person, "No, no, no. This is why you shouldn't use it." At least I hope.

Shelley: Can you talk more about the character transformations within the narratives in your works? How the Incredible Hulk becomes The Media's Thug, or the Captain America series morphs into Cops In America, etc?

Kumasi: *Each character transformation is one unto itself. The Amazing Black-Man is from Spider-Man, who is really the hero of comic books. People think it's Superman or Batman, but it's not.*

Spider-Man was the first hero to have actual problems.

Every cover was a fight that he won but didn't really win. That's also where Police-Man came from. The villains seem to be winning on the cover and killing him. It's [Police-

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Man's] story of congratulations — his superhero story about killing the Black people. Throughout history, you can find a lot of police who were just gonna go out on a Friday or Saturday night and try to get them some Black folks.



The Amazing Black-Man #158 | Police Squad #39 | Racist Comics #328, Kumasi J. Barnett

The World's Finest Comics, for example, which are Batman and Superman that I then transformed into the World's Whitest Comics, because before Spider-Man and those issues came into comics, [Batman and Superman] were just a series of wacky things that happened. It was just like "Looney Tunes" with a guy with superpowers. He didn't really have any issues. I feel like that's a very white way to live in America, where you've never had anything bad happen to you.

The problem with [Batman] for me is that I don't know who that man is. He is the typical bourgeoisie middle/upper-class white person who inherited tons of money, but instead of helping communities and the city get better, he dresses up like a character and runs out to punch people in the face. Like, there are real problems with that place, what is he defending? Is he defeating crime and punishing people for doing the wrong thing? How do you dress up as a vigilante and do that?

Like, Batman has real economic wealth that could help people. But instead, he built a cave and a super-fast car.

Shelley: I feel like the concept of a vigilante is a very white idea in and of itself, because a Black person in this world could not be a vigilante if they wanted to. I think society would only accept it from a white person.

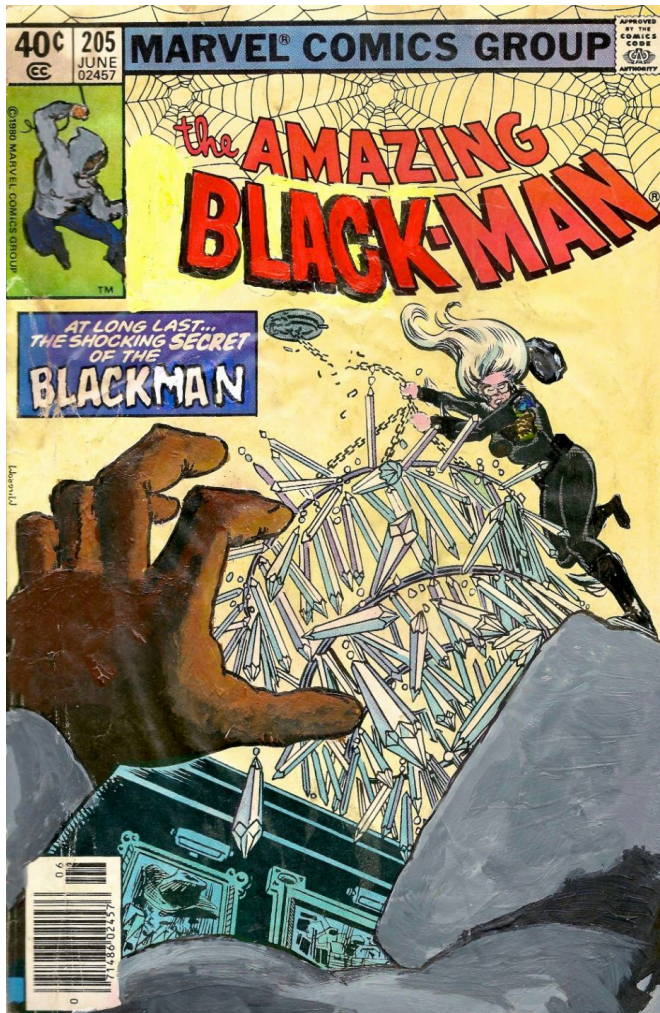
Kumasi: Well, you see that a lot — like the Black Lightning comic books, where he is a vigilante, but he's hunted down because he's a Black guy running around with powers. And cops are as much the enemy as drug dealers are the enemy. It's weird what is acceptable. Who can have that power? It is super problematic.

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For example, Black people — in my opinion — I think they were really on O.J. Simpson's side because that was the first time in history that Black money bought the same thing that white money bought.

It showed that in America if you get rich and famous enough, it doesn't matter if you're Black or white, you can get away with it.

Not that he's a hero and not that anybody thought he didn't do it. But we have seen white people get away with murder, rape, all types of things just because they have money. To see that same thing work for Black people was astounding. It's like when Tom Hanks got coronavirus. Like, that's the first time it became real for white folks.



Shelley: What is the definition of a superhero to you? Either the broader definition as you think “the world” would define a superhero or how you define what a superhero is within your paintings. Or both...

Kumasi: *Ok. This is hard, but I think a superhero is a person with extra-human powers. These powers are things that are not available to the mass of humanity, thereby setting them apart in terms of power. They then use these powers to “help” people.*

I think that we could honestly add superheroes to our current world and it wouldn't fix any of the problems with society.

By the way, “extraordinary” is one of my favorite words. The idea that these two bland words combined take on a dynamic new level and a completeness pronunciation makes my day.

Shelley: So what are you working on right now? And what can we look forward to from you in the future?

Kumasi: *Right now I'm working on some World's Finest Comics — World's Whitest Comics — and some Donald Duck comics. I'm really interested in how money moves right now — where the money is going. There's also a series of Legion Of Democrats —*

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a legion of people fighting a singular force. I'm not sure if that force is Donald Trump or Joe Biden.

I'm at the point, you know the song: "Democrats, please don't make me vote for Joe Biden. Please don't make me." There are a lot of people that feel that way. I think the only reason a lot of us are going to vote is because Trump is Trump. And that's no way to listen to people or to move a party forward. I don't know. It's so disappointing. Personally, I am going to build out a little model gallery that I can show tiny model works in because I think I want to get a space in Baltimore. A space downtown where I can show other people's work, maybe set up some studio space. That's long-term. I've had plenty of time to think. Just me, the wife and the baby in the house; plenty of time to plan long-term.

Follow Kumasi J. Barnett on Instagram at [@thekumasi](#) and visit [Barnett's website](#) to see more work. Barnett is represented by [Lowell Ryan Projects](#) in Los Angeles. All images courtesy of the artist and Lowell Ryan Projects.

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