The Scholarship of Fine Arts: UA Printmaker's Path Began Under a Bridge With Spray Paint in Hand

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For many UA faculty members, conveying their scholarship or expertise is accomplished through published research that appears in journals, books and lectures.

But in the College of Fine Arts, scholarship manifests itself in hours upon hours of mastering an art ? creating, rehearsing, or both ? before putting it on display in front of an audience. This is a critical component of the UA's mission as a research university, which charges its faculty with pursuing not only research, but creative activity, says Tannis Gibson, an internationally recognized pianist and interim dean of the college.

"Everything that we do in terms of performance falls directly under that creative activity," Gibson says. She notes that there is indeed an entire cohort of College of Fine Arts faculty who consider themselves scholars before anything else: art and theater historians, musicologists and art-education experts.

Performance scholarship, she said, is indeed different. But, like scientific research, it still has the power to change the world by illuminating or challenging ideas.

"Art," Gibson says, "has the power to transform people."

In this series, Lo Que Pasa explores the unique nature of scholarship in the fine arts through profiles of faculty in its four schools, the School of Art, the School of Music, the School of Theatre, Film and Television and the School of Dance. This is the first of four stories.

Not even two decades ago, Aaron Coleman was spray-painting trains.

The Washington, D.C., native is now an assistant professor of art and a printmaker whose lithography and mezzotints are in collections and exhibits all over the world.

But his passion for the thoughtful visual art he produces today was cultivated in an unlikely place: on the streets of D.C. and later Indianapolis, where Coleman and his friends made fond memories "re-appropriating the landscape" ? spray-painting block-letter graffiti and murals on bridges, billboards, trains and anything else that served as a canvas.

"At first, it was this kind of young, reckless way to maybe rebel or to get out some aggression," he says. "I'm not sure why we didn't play basketball or ride bikes. It's just what we gravitated to."
But Coleman soon found out that creating art where others didn't want it wasn't a sustainable pastime. He avoided brushes with the law, but the prospect of getting arrested led him to give up graffiti.

"I was like, 'I've got to find a way to do what I want to do in a ? safer way, I guess, or more responsible way,'" Coleman says.

The artist finds his niche

Coleman attended the Herron School of Art and Design at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. He dabbled briefly in graphic design and painting, but neither moved him.

Then he found printmaking.

"Printmaking has this amazing community component," he says, explaining that the large-scale equipment that printmakers use requires them to work in shared spaces. "There's this kind of natural component of working alongside other people, which, to me, was just like standing under a bridge painting with 10 people."

Coleman's early work explored human interaction with technology, and featured imagery of machines protruding from living characters.

The work helped him hone his craft, and eventually led him to graduate school at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb in 2010. It was there, he says, where he dove back into politically inspired art fueled by the "political and social upheaval" surrounding Barack Obama election as president. The urge to address those themes in his art, he says, was similar to what he felt when he held a spray can as a kid.

"This act of painting your name on something and taking back public space was a political act just by the sheer nature of it," he says. "I just used that as fodder to start a new body of work."

The scholarship of printmaking

Most of Coleman's recent prints, he says, address a singular political event, and aim to make people ask questions or reconsider something they thought they understood. The art helps people take notice, Coleman says. Some of his latest work involves merging comic book-style art with religious imagery found on stained-glass windows.

For Coleman, the scholarship is in the preparation behind each piece. A print that includes historical religious imagery requires hours of research to understand what the artists meant to convey at the time they created their work.

"I definitely think there's a high level of scholarship that goes unseen in the fine art world," he says. "There's a lot of research and writing and thinking and learning that goes on behind what we make."

After switching his focus to printmaking, Coleman's work took off. By his second year of grad school, his prints were in collections and exhibits all over the world. Universities and museums whose collections house Coleman's work include the University of Colorado, Wichita State University, the Ino-cho Paper Museum of Art in Kochi, Japan, and the Yekaterinburg Museum.
The move to academics

Coleman's time as a grad student also found him teaching drawing classes, and later a printmaking course. These experiences planted the seed for his teaching career, but Coleman says he didn't anticipate a move to the academic side of art.

"I wasn't really making any decisions," he says. "It was just kind of happening."

Just as Coleman was completing his degree, one of his mentors left her teaching position at Northern Illinois University, paving the way for Coleman to take her place on a temporary basis. A year later, he began teaching printmaking full time as an adjunct instructor, alongside stints teaching drawing at Elgin Community College in Elgin, Illinois, and lithography at the Chicago Printmakers Collaborative.

He discovered that teaching allowed him to provide the kind of guidance to students that he wished he had experienced when he was in their place.

"I quickly realized that what I didn't have when I was in school was direction?somebody who was right there by my side saying, 'This is what you need to do,'" Coleman says. "To be able to do that for people like me in that position was really fulfilling."

Coleman took a tenure-track position teaching printmaking at California State University, Fresno, in 2015. Toward the end of his first year, he received an email with a simple subject line: "A conversation to have."

The email was from Andrew Polk, a longtime UA printmaking professor and former School of Art director. Polk's email was short, and simply asked if Coleman had time for a phone call. When Coleman reached him by phone, Polk cut right to the chase, saying: "I'm retiring. Do you want my job?"

The School of Art's search for Polk's successor on the faculty had led to Coleman, who began as an assistant professor in the fall of 2016.

Coleman admits that when he looks back on his beginnings as an artist, standing under a bridge with a spray can, the notion that he would become an art teacher?or even an art scholar?seems odd.

"It's really weird for me to be here doing this," he says, "to have so many people take what I do seriously, and trust that I can help usher in the next generation like myself."