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Brown, Kate. "To Make His Pocket-Sized Artworks, Curtis Talwst Santiago Needs Silence. But Things Get Loud When He Goes Into Painting Mode," *Artnet News*, February 15, 2022.



Curtis Talwst Santiago  
"Mother and Mango," 2017  
Mixed media on canvas  
52 x 41 inches

Many of Curtis Talwst Santiago's artworks are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. The Trinidadian-Canadian artist creates miniature dioramas that are delicately set in repurposed antique jewelry boxes. The scenes he creates are meticulously detailed and often depict underrepresented histories. Though the scale of these worlds may small and sweet, the stories they tell can be startling. Some works address subtle moments, like *Quarantine and Basketball* (2020), which depicts a man lying on a grassy field with a ball by his side; other works are replicas of intimate moments the artist spent with his family in their basement in the 1970s. Santiago's paintings encompass a very different scales and energies, but they also focus on the liminal, and either subvert classical European portraiture, or conjure ancestral references. We spoke with the artist, who is currently setting up a studio in Tennessee, about how he switches modes in his art practice, and why Instagram is not the best place to pick up ideas.

*What are the most indispensable items in your studio, and why?*

What is most indispensable at the moment are my two pots of Stuart Semple's black mirror paint for my Jab Molassie paintings. [Jab Molassie is a carnival character in Trinidad and Tobago.]

*What is the studio task on your agenda tomorrow that you are most looking forward to?*

I'll transcribe a drawing my mother recently made for me of a specific childhood memory of her and her siblings hiding under their parent's bed after a Jab Jab from the carnival procession chased them from the street into their home.

*What kind of atmosphere do you prefer when you work? Do you listen to music or podcasts, or do you prefer silence? Why?*

This truly depends on the project or medium I'm working on. If it's my miniature sculpture, I listen to audiobooks or have silence, because I'm sitting so still and focusing on minute details. For these current paintings, it's been a lot of steel pan music from the '60s or Westside Gunn. I need that intensity.

*What trait do you most admire in a work of art?*

Realness and honesty.

*What trait do you most despise?*

When shit's too slick, too perfect, too refined, too polished, too clean, too safe.

*What snack food could your studio not function without?*

I need me some fat Satsumas.

*Who are your favorite artists, curators, or other thinkers to follow on social media right now?*

I'm on idea mode right now, so it's not healthy for me to be looking at social media on the heavy like that. Books are my Instagram.

*When you feel stuck in the studio, what do you do to get un-stuck?*

Dance, fresh air, orgasms, push-ups, read, call a loved one, sing, and send a meme. I've stopped smoking weed.

*What is the last exhibition you saw (virtual or otherwise) that made an impression on you?*

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's "Fly in League With the Night" at K20 in Düsseldorf. It was church and it was university and it was masterful. It felt like putting on a pair of Jordan's and thinking they make you jump higher.

*If you had to put together a mood board, what would be on it right now?*

It would have images of Vagia Beach, BooGoo, Roti, Sunnei's tunics from spring/summer '21, Lil Uzi, Lord Blakie, moko jumbies, Guston's man-laying-in-bed painting, Toulouse-Lautrec's drawing *Chocolat* dancing in the Irish and American Bar.

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