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PLATFORM. "Spotlight: Muzae Sesay, The Oakland-based artist on his deep love for the city he calls home and the limits of memory," PLATFORM Art, 2023



Muzae Sesay
Bellevue Bandstand, 2023
Oil, oil pastel, vinyl emulsion, and colored pencil on canvas
59 x 59 in
149.9 x 149.9 cm

SPOTLIGHT:

MUZAE SESAY

The Oakland-based artist on his deep love for the city he calls home and the limits of memory.

Muzae Sesay may be an Angeleno at heart, but (most of the time) he calls Oakland home. The artist originally studied to be a sociologist and there's just something about the people in the Bay Area city that inspires him like nothing else. From his private studio, Sesay spoke with Platform about the validity of memory, fleshing out his spaces with myriad collections and how the spirit of his community inspires him to create.

PLATFORM

A lot of your works deal with remembrance and ideas surrounding memory. Is that a subject that you've always been interested in? How did it first enter your work?

MUZAE

I think it's important to understand where the work's coming from too, that it's really a personal way of digesting the world. I've had some semblance of a practice since I was a baby, not necessarily a professional practice, but just the importance of art in my life. And it's always been about me having ideas and seeing the relationship between things in the real world, having theories about things and then applying them or uncovering them through the art-making process. Memory specifically is something that I've been interested in for a while since I've always had a very spotty memory.

I can remember things from when I was four or five years old. I have this old memory that's really solid, but then you could ask me what I did this morning, and I don't even remember. I used to get in trouble a lot just for forgetting things. I would get in trouble with my dad, and I would be pleading that I really forgot. He'd be like, "No, you didn't." I've always had a tumultuous relationship with memory and the validity of memory. That's only heightened today.

There is also the way I think about things that are happening in terms of collective memory and the reshaping of history based on collective memory. We have this super compartmentalized reality where everyone has their own reality based on their own loyalty to their memory. And I like to break down the loyalty and questionability of that memory itself. That plays out in the practice by depicting things that aren't necessarily true of the image or of the space, but more so capturing an emotional takeaway from memory. That's something that I've always thought was the real

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Muzae Sesay
Slippery Bottles, 2022
Oil pastel, vinyl emulsion, acrylic, and colored pencil on canvas
63 x 59 in
160 x 149.9 cm

importance of memory. I can't remember who was at this party or everything about the details, but I do always remember how I felt about it and whether it was a positive or negative experience. I try to focus on the feeling of a space instead of the facts of the scene.

PLATFORM

I love that phrase that you used—"the validity of memory"—and how memory can be this nebulous thing sometimes. There are things that could perhaps, like you said, be larger truths that maybe didn't happen in actual fact. Is that what makes a memory valid to you or makes it most legitimate?

MUZAE

Yeah, exactly. Because I think it's that loyalty. If you hear me recall a story, there are so many caveats like, "It could have been like this or like that," or "I think these people were here." I'm very truthful about not knowing and I think that translates into the practice as well.

In terms of memory, the truth that I can walk away with is that emotional response to something while all the other things are not as important. I always think people's loyalty to an idea, when people think, "No, this is exactly how I believe this to be," is so sparse and causes fractures in a reality. Sometimes those beliefs are what cause conflict and create a tumultuous relationship with the memory, and then you have to uncover it and do that type of personal mental work. And a lot of people don't do that in terms of negotiating their memory. For a lot of people, it's not a negotiable thing, it's fact-based. I try to think of it as being kind of negotiable.

PLATFORM

Do you think that, when it comes to your work specifically, that admission of not knowing gives you a certain freedom that you wouldn't have otherwise?

MUZAE

Oh, 1,000%. Freedom is something I try to foster in the practice, it being the space where I do have that freedom to do whatever I want and think of whatever I want and uncover the things I want to uncover. I think there's a strong sense of that in thinking of memory in this very unrigid, negotiable way. In terms of form on the canvas, it allows me to simplify things and reduce things to shape and color. In terms of telling the truth, I love constructing the canvas with two-dimensional planes of color, which I would argue is the truest thing I could do on a canvas, because the canvas is a two-dimensional plane itself. I'm very true to the flatness of the surface. With the juxtaposition of those shapes and where things are, you can really play with a skewed third dimension and allow people to discover and create their own dimensionality in

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Muzae Sesay
Fashion District, 2022
Oil pastel, oil, colored pencil, and acrylic ground on canvas
59 x 63 in
149.9 x 160 cm

something that's so flat. That's something that I love: transmitting that freedom to the viewer.

PLATFORM

Speaking with so many artists, I feel like many people are working through different things and getting different things through the experience of their practice for themselves. I'm wondering, what is that for you? What does your practice give you in a larger sense?

MUZAE

First off, it gives me chills to think about that because that's just the beauty of art itself: to see people seeing things and how they work things out on a universal surface. That's what I love about painting in general and seeing other people's paintings. How that works for me is absolutely an endless well of thinking and seeing. I approach the canvas in so many different ways, and it depends on the things that I'm thinking about. I take a lot of photos because I see a lot of interesting compositions in the world that spark compositional ideas: I see something in the world, I love the juxtaposition of something, I think it's weird, or there's something interesting about the visible scene that I'm seeing that makes me think about something else.

It's those thoughts and theories that make me want to work it out on the canvas. I think once something sparks my visual joy, I immediately think about how I can transmute that energy through my practice and how I can be a part of the energy that I'm seeing. I also didn't study painting or art practice; I studied sociology and that is a big part of how I think about everything. I'll theorize social happenings, social constructs, people and how people act with people, and that will inform the work. Usually, that type of work is a series, or companion pieces, because of the theoretical stuff. If an image sparks my joy, that's usually one piece. Often when I'm doing something theoretical, I like to play it out through multiple pieces, and it works as if I'm telling a story with painting instead of with words. With painting, it's more of a poem, it's more of an activation of the viewer to get somewhere on their own.

That process is an endless well of ideas where I can think about macro ideas of human migration and economic systems, history, big things. Then I can also think of really, really small things: my personal relationships, trees in my neighborhood, cracks in the ground, certain types of architectural elements. The well I tap into is just endless.

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Obviously, the world has a lot going on in it at the moment, but are there any particular constructs, interactions, archetypes, or anything along those lines that you feel is really drawing you in

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Muzae Sesay
Goodnight West Oakland, Love 980, 2022
Oil on canvas
47.25 x 74.75 in
120 x 190 cm

more than others?

MUZAE

Oh, yeah. I have a hectic practice where I work on eight different things at the same time, and oftentimes there are different ideas that require me to really dig into them. It changes by the week. I should caveat that and say everything I do is very social, very about the people, but without painting the figure. I love figurative painting, don't get me wrong. My friends are figurative painters, great, love it. I have figurative painting ideas that I just don't do because I think it's a little too trendy right now and I don't want to hop on a random trend.

I really think that when you put the figure in, you're blocking the viewer from entering the work in a way. You're like, "You should see this and see this window into another person, but you shouldn't go into the painting." And I think the more social work for me is having a lot of space for the viewer to move around and decipher. Is this a door? Is this space? Can I go here? Utilizing these steadfast cues, doors and stairs and chairs, like an abstract two-dimensional plane construct so that people can read it as a space to be explored. I think of them as guided meditation-type things in which I'm kind of the conductor. But that wasn't your question . . . What was your question?

PLATFORM

It was about if there were any particular archetypes or interactions that have drawn your attention lately?

MUZAE

So many. I should say I've been going in this less vague direction right now. I love the idea of having a vague, more abstract landscape that allows people to really sit with it and figure things out. I made some paintings like that in the spring, but since then, in the past nine months, I've been really focusing on actual spaces, being a little bit more hyper-local and painting Oakland and Los Angeles. I'm pretty much between Oakland and Los Angeles. A lot of the things that I'm painting are of that other style that I was mentioning of an image or things in the world that are interesting to me. For example, I haven't made any paintings of it, but I've been obsessively taking photos of outdoor water spigots. They put these locks on them because of the water shortage, and it becomes this really simple architectural image that has a lot of weight to it. Then there are these fake palm trees everywhere in Los Angeles that are 5G towers. I've been really interested in that infrastructure a lot. My last painting that I just made and released with Philip Martin Gallery in LA is about the 980 freeway, a two-mile stretch of freeway in Oakland. It is about the history of it, the contemporary view of it and its future. A really, really niche history.

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Muzae Sesay
Memorial Table, 2023
Oil pastel and vinyl emulsion on canvas
48 x 36 in
121.9 x 91.4 cm

I'm a history nerd: I love history, I love local history, I love nerdy podcasts. When something sparks my interest, whatever it is, even something that my friend is saying, I think about it in terms of making art about it. So anytime I hear anything interesting, I'm immediately asking, "How can I draw that out? How can I compose that on a surface? And how can I think about these things for myself and provide that for others?" When I'm making work, I'm thinking about it a lot. I do a lot of research for some pieces and others not. It's all over the place.

PLATFORM

I was really interested to hear you mention Oakland, because in reading about you, I got the impression that you have such an affinity for the city and are so interested in its history. You mentioned in another interview that there's something about Oakland and its people that is inherently creative. How did you first come to live in Oakland? And what do you think it is about the city that really fosters that kind of environment?

MUZAE

As a sociologist, it's just my type of realm. I'm from the suburbs of LA and Orange County, but my high school friend went to Berkeley and me and some friends would go up and do trips to Berkeley. I saw what was going on in San Francisco around 2009/2010 and it was a literal freak show. People would wear whatever they wanted out on the streets, robes and slippers to the grocery store. Everyone was smoking blunts anywhere that you can, people were talking to you if you walked down the street, random people would say, "Hey, how's it going?" It was a real freak show environment, and I loved it. Everyone was doing art in San Francisco at the time and then San Francisco got uptight and changed a lot from what I saw. Musicians, artists, galleries—everyone left.

It was around 2016 that I was feeling extra edgy with everything going on. I thought "I've got to get out of here." I had a studio in Oakland at that point, so I was commuting. Every time I went to the studio I thought, "Why am I going back to San Francisco tonight? I just want to stay here." So, I moved to Oakland and everything kind of came together there. Just my peers, my friends, the art practice, my gallery that's here, my social circle; they all came together in this really nice mesh. I love Oakland very much. I also love LA, and I'm honestly an LA person. I've always thought that I was just going to live here for a little bit of time and move back to LA, but now it's hard because Oakland is very charming.

It has a special quality of wildness. Mentality plays out in all different types of ways, but in the creative realm, everyone I know creates in some way. And it's not at the same level as people in New York and LA think about it, where it's career-based and everyone's career, career, art, we got to make it happen in the

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Muzae Sesay
Mourning Vendors, 2022
Oil pastel, vinyl emulsion, and colored pencil on canvas
43 1/4 x 31 1/2 in
109.9 x 80 cm

grind. I love that. I love it. Here, we all celebrate each other's love and passion for creating and hype people up. It's very communal. Everyone just makes something and I think that's so important for everyone.

I'm a huge believer that everyone should have an art practice. It does not have to be capitalist-driven. It should not be capitalist-driven. If it does become lucrative, then good for you. But I just don't believe that that's where an art practice should start. That's my mentality and I think a lot of people here share that mentality and that's what keeps me here. I have my own career drive, but it didn't start as a career drive, it started as a passion drive. I wanted to be the best that I can be in painting and in thinking. It's just unfolded into a career. I just think that that's the best. Maybe I'm biased because that's what I did, but I think that's the way a lot of people should do it. And a lot of how people are doing it here is not in competition. It's all supportive and just a positive place to create.

PLATFORM

We spoke about depicting interior spaces your work and I'm wondering about the environments you create for yourself in real life. How do you like to shape your own spaces?

MUZAE

I'm definitely very hands-on in creating my spaces. It's interesting because I'd only lived in communal spaces for so long, both with roommates and studio mates. As of this summer, I don't have roommates or studio mates, so my studio is all me and my apartment is all me as well. I don't want to say I'm a control freak because that sounds bad, but I do like to control the space and have my zone and my things. I'm also a collector, so I collect a lot of records and tapes and I have a massive amount of hobbies.

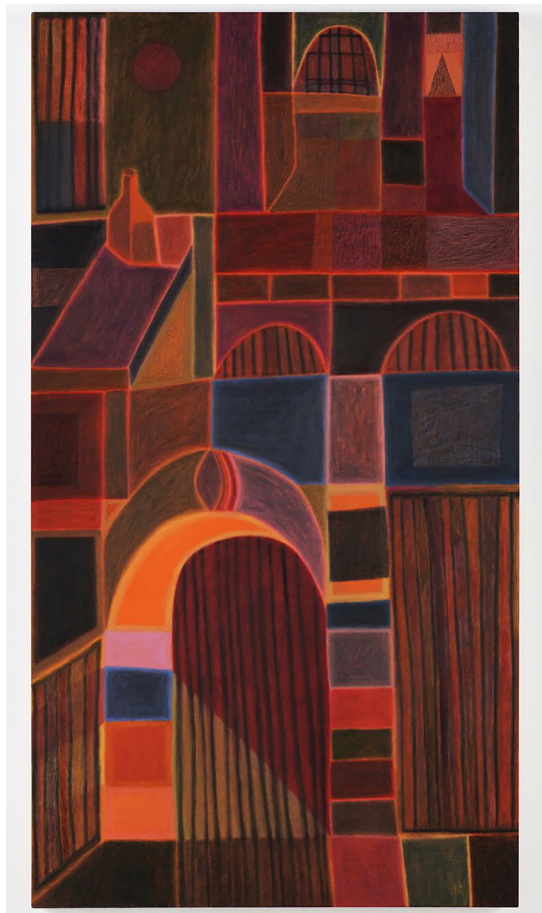
I take film photography, and I collect film and film cameras. I have a lot of random little collections. There's this urge to have everything now. When I'm furnishing my apartment, I think I need all of these things, and I spend hours searching for the perfect coffee table. But there's also this sense of letting life happen and allowing space for things to come in randomly. I don't get everything immediately and I wait until I see something that really sparks some type of joy and I put that into my space. But I have a lot of energy things in my space. I have a lot of plants and I personify a lot of things. I'm always just like, "Oh, how are you?" I think that creates a positive space. I've been in this studio for six years and a lot of people get that. I love the lived-in feel.

I also live in a lot of hypocrisies. I see myself as both non-serious and super-serious at the same time. I have a lot of contradictions like that. And I want my spaces to be clean but also not too clean

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Muzae Sesay
Closed, 2023
Oil pastel and colored pencil on canvas
86 1/2 x 47 in
219.7 x 119.4 cm

and lived in. I want to have them to have the energy of me.

PLATFORM

This could be very existential or not, but what's something you wish you were asked more often?

MUZAE

The first thing that comes to mind is I wish I was asked about potential solutions to problems more often. I think that's such a Capricorn thing of me to say because when I think about things, I'm very solutions-oriented. If there's some sort of issue, whatever it is, I don't dissect the issue unless it is in the conversation of what can be better. And oftentimes when people ask me things, they're not looking for a solution. Oftentimes, it's just to get it out or to vent or to have a discussion.

But I love mind-melding with people and uncovering solutions to things. The way that I think about things, with that mentality, I could solve a lot of problems. A lot of the time, that's also the way I think about paintings too. Once you make a mark, it's just a problem to be solved. Now you have to put it together to solve this abstract equation.

It's not really a specific question that I wish I was asked more, but more a direction of questioning I wish was more common with everyone: thinking about what we can do. Often, the solutions are masked because you can't see them. We don't know, we don't have the answer. It's hard to think about the answer and think about what an answer could possibly be. That's the type of thinking that I wish was more present when I walk away from conversations. A lot of that has to do with social issues.

Oakland is very socially active but thinking pragmatically about solutions is not always what people want. People want to burn it down, which I'm for. But I think that there are viable solutions that are real, that we can get. And sometimes that's just not the way everyone else is thinking about it.