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## All in the Family: Aaron Fowler's Elaborate Assemblage Works are Highly Personal

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jun 8, 2018 • 11:58 am



"You Deserve It Mama!!" (2017) by Aaron Fowler.

ABOUT 20 IRONING BOARDS, a broom, family photographs, LED rope lights, a stuffed donkey, a stuffed dog sans the stuffing, and a tall pane of glass are among the myriad objects **Aaron Fowler** incorporated into a massive assemblage work called "You Deserve It Mama!!" The artist seemingly puts everything into his work, both materially with found objects and emotionally through candid personal narratives. Recently on view at the SCAD Museum of Art, "You Deserve It Mama!!" is a tribute to Fowler's mother, who was a teen mom and raised the artist and his two younger siblings on her own in St. Louis.

In New York, two assemblage paintings by Fowler are currently on view in the front windows of the New Museum. "Lex Brown Town" (2017) gives reverence to a fellow artist, collaborator, and classmate. Brown and Fowler both earned their MFAs at Yale School of Art. Installed in the left window, his homage to her involves paint tubes, hair weave, Christmas tree trunks, piano keys, CDs, a graduation cap, and a Minions backpack. Fowler's would-be daughter inspired "Miss Logan" (2017-18) in the adjacent window. The New Museum exhibition, "Aaron Fowler: Bigger Than Me," is on view through Aug. 19.

"A lot of love goes into my work and its all about my friends and family," Fowler told me when I spoke to him at SCAD Museum of Art last October.

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— Aaron Fowler**



“Aaron Fowler: Bigger Than Me,” 2018 (From left, “Lex Brown Town” and “Miss Logan,” both 2017). Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. | Photo by Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

FOWLER, WHO SPLITS HIS TIME between New York and Los Angeles, was one of five contemporary artists commissioned to create a new work of art for the centennial exhibition “Jacob Lawrence: Lines of Influence” at the SCAD Museum of Art. SCAD asked Fowler, Derrick Adams, Meleko Mokgosi, Barbara Earl Thomas, and Hank Willis Thomas, to make works inspired or influenced by Lawrence. Fowler contributed “You Deserve It Mama!!”

The commonalities between the up-and-coming artist and Lawrence are based in Harlem. The elder artist grew up and found his artistic voice there with encouragement from Charles Alston and Augusta Savage. Fowler, lives in Harlem part time and keeps a studio in the neighborhood where the streets are a fruitful inspiration, a source for many of the found materials and objects he incorporates into his assemblage paintings, mixed-media sculpture, and installation works.

When Storm Janse van Rensburg, SCAD’s head curator, reached out to Fowler about making a work for “Lines of Influence,” the artist had already started on “You Deserve It Mama!!,” a piece that he thought we be perfect for the show.

The entire installation represents the interior of his mother’s house, where a framed image of her hangs on the wall. Fowler adapted the portrait for “You Deserve It Mama!!” He used one of the panels from Lawrence’s Migration series which depicts a group of figures walking and collaged the image of his mother on top of it. This element, drawing from Lawrence’s work, was already in place when van Rensburg invited Fowler to participate in the exhibition.

“I love what God can do. I don’t know, things just happen right on time. I was asked to be a part of this show at the moment that I found that and that told me to finish this piece for this show,” said Fowler. “It was literally like fate. I am always working on a bunch of different things at once and I had a studio full of stuff and then I was asked to do this show and it was like perfect.”



AARON FOWLER, Detail of "You Deserve It Mama!!," on view as part of the exhibition "Jacob Lawrence: Lines of Influence," 2017. | Image courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design

"You Deserve It Mama!!" envisions the future. Fowler's mother was 14-years-old when she had him, he said. He was her first child and he has a younger brother and sister. They were all born four years apart. To support the family, his mother has been working at Hertz, the rental car company, "for like 18 years or something." With his art career taking shape, he hopes to be able to give her a permanent break. He intends to buy her a house, too, before he gets one for himself.

"My main priority is I want to free my mom so she could basically be with me ... I am like, well, it's time for me to give you a break. She wants to help me out with what I am doing. The art world can be kind of crazy and I am also new to the art world. I am very close to my work, so when I am doing business and stuff, it is kind of hard to navigate that and separate that from the closeness of your work. My mom is like I want to be there to help you out," Fowler said.

"I basically want to create that for her. I feel everything that I paint coming into fruition. This is like me painting that picture because I know once it's done, which it is, it's going to happen."

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The female figure standing at the center of the work depicts his mother. Fowler has given special attention to her outfit, embellishing it from head to toe with a meticulous horizontal pattern achieved by wrapping white string in a zig zag pattern around hundreds of screws. “You deserve it Mama” is spelled out in reverse with LED rope lights along the side and across the bottom of the work.

“It feels like a prayer. I feel like my paintings are like prayers,” he said.



“Aaron Fowler: Bigger Than Me,” 2018 (Detail showing “Miss Logan,” 2017). Exhibition view: New Museum, New York. | Photo by Maris Hutchinson / EPW Studio

AFTER I SPOKE TO FOWLER about the assemblage work dedicated to his mother, he was on an [artist panel](#) at SCAD in the museum’s auditorium. The program was part of a two-day [“Lines of Influence” symposium](#). He spoke at length about his work and, at one point, mentioned going on a 10-day silent meditation retreat. Upon his return, he said, “I found out I might have a daughter.” It was an unexpected turn in his remarks. “I pretty much felt like I was on trial,” Fowler said. “I was dealing with this situation where I thought this little girl was mine, so I was making paintings of her.”

Last month, about seven months after the panel appearance, [“Aaron Fowler: Bigger Than Me.”](#) opened at the New Museum. The two-work window installation is the artist’s first solo museum presentation. “Miss Logan” is one of the paintings he made of the little girl. According to the museum’s description, the assemblage painting “is a portrait of a young girl whom Fowler believed to have been his own daughter. While DNA tests eventually proved otherwise, the artist felt a strong connection to the child, and began this painting of her as a mermaid the day the two met.”

Fowler also has a strong connection with Lex Brown, the subject of the other painting in the installation. The two artists are presenting [“Lex Brown and Aaron Fowler: C.E.”](#) a collaborative performance at the New Museum on June 9. The performance “brings together the sci-fi worlds of Brown’s interdisciplinary practice and Fowler’s storytelling approach to personal narrative. Each playing an A.I. named Alexa, Brown and Fowler navigate systems of social and economic control in search of the people who have gone missing in a privatized world.” **CT**

TOP IMAGE: AARON FOWLER, “You Deserve It Mama!!,” on view as part of the exhibition “Jacob Lawrence: Lines of Influence,” 2017. | Image courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design

**Aaron Fowler's work** is also featured in **Made in L.A. 2018** (June 3-Sept. 2, 2018) at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

#### BOOKSHELF

African American artists have a deep connection with assemblage art, particularly those active in Los Angeles and the South. "[My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South](#)" was just published. The following volumes also explore the broad style: [Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980](#) and [Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada](#). And two catalogs "[Betye Saar: Uneasy Dancer](#)" and "[Betye Saar: Still Tickin'](#)" document the artist's recent retrospective exhibitions.



"Aaron Fowler and Lex Brown, C.E.," 2018. Performance: New Museum, New York. | Courtesy New Museum, Photo by Scott Rudd