

Cullen Washington, Jr. envisions painting, particularly abstraction, as an analog for hope. In his view, hope is the desire for a social ideal of interconnectedness, civility, democracy, unity, and inclusiveness. *Cullen Washington, Jr.: The Public Square* displays the artist's dramatic recent series of paintings, called *Agoras*. The suite explores the meanings of agoras, especially the idea of a gathering site that functions as the heart of the artistic, spiritual, and political life of a city. In response to this theme, a public assembly and programming space centers the exhibition, activated by excerpts of speeches by Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Kofi Annan, John F. Kennedy, and Barack Obama, and ringed by Washington's soaring monumental collages. A selection of the artist's related works on paper, along with a remarkable set of handprints completed during a residency in Athens, Greece, complement the sequence and reflect Washington's evolving philosophy of the relationship between art and equality, community, and enlightened governance.

In his *Agoras* series, Washington actively challenges the figurative painting tradition as he explores form, site, space, and a range of media. He breaks down and reassembles found objects, recycled canvas, paper, and tape, resulting in richly evocative and visually spectacular compositions that buzz with regeneration. For Washington, printmaking, collage, and mark-making with paint are in deep conversation, with each accorded equal status.

Washington describes his practice as "abstract meditations on the grid and humanity." His use of the grid to organize and contain his vibrant layered and textured works acts as a powerful metaphor for the equity and structure required for a pluralistic, civil society to function and thrive. Weaving these ideas through the *Agoras* series, Washington hopes his work amplifies and enriches our museum public square.

Vera Grant

Guest Curator

#CullenWashingtonJr

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