

Cullen Washington, Jr.: The Public Square

Magazine Article

Contemporary artist Cullen Washington, Jr. describes his work as “abstract meditations on the grid and humanity.” The UMMA-organized exhibition *Cullen Washington, Jr.: The Public Square* provides an expansive look at the work and concerns of this emerging abstract artist. The exhibition pivots around Washington’s most recent series, *Agoras*, which explores the ancient Greek public space as a site for activated assembly that functions as the heart of the artistic, spiritual and political life of the city. The installation is designed with an actual public square at its center, complete with sound components featuring samplings from political and aesthetic discourse and surrounded by Washington’s soaring monumental collages. Works from four earlier series by the artist form the perimeter of the Museum’s largest special exhibition gallery.

In the *Agoras* series, Washington uses recycled canvas, paper, tape, and found objects, resulting in complex and layered works that are largely two-dimensional and visually spectacular. Experiencing the fifteen-to-twenty-foot canvases close up reveals the cinematic dimensions of their surface: their poetic and textural contours; their knotty mappings of unfolding intersections of media. Washington transforms his gestural mark making, painting, and drawing into a fused dialogue, punctuated with intervals of printmaking and other reproductive techniques. The result is a vibrant journey through and with materiality. As the catalyst for these works, the Greek agora acts as a metaphor for the artist’s nexus of humanity. The simultaneously lyrical and bold compositions that fill the gallery’s emulated city square evoke real and imagined arenas of democracy and advance human interaction as an artistic, social, and political act.