

Meet the Mixed-Media Painter Inspired by Lil' Kim



On a windy winter morning in the South Bronx, the artist Eric N. Mack stands in his light-filled studio, with delicate pieces of red and blue silk organza and brown polyester — all stitched together on his nearby sewing machine — spread out before him.

It would be easy to confuse the painter's studio with a messy fashion atelier before a big show: Heaps of beautiful fabrics, photographs and ready-made art objects that serve as references line the floor. In a full outfit by the Japanese label Montbell, complete with a blue hoodie, Mack, 30, calmly moves about his studio, stepping around the textiles he forages on the street and sources from Mood Fabrics. Hanging from exposed pipes are mixed-media paintings in progress for his upcoming exhibition at Simon Lee Gallery in London.

“I think the show is going to be called, ‘Misa Hylton-Brim,’” Mack says, referring to the costume designer and fashion stylist — known professionally as Misa Hylton — who dated Sean “Diddy” Combs in the 1990s and extended the pop cultural legacy of Bad Boy Records beyond music by dreaming up iconic fashion statements for Combs, Lil’ Kim, Notorious B.I.G. and Mary J. Blige. Mack sees the 1990s — and Hylton’s designs — as a part of his formative years for understanding style and art. “It’s about a tribute, about a time period,” he says.

Mack grew up in Capitol Heights, Maryland, and both of his parents worked at the National Gallery of Art; he remembers wandering exhibitions at a young age. He also cites hip-hop music video sets and the fashions his father sold on the side in his discount clothing store as early influences. Mack moved to New York in 2006 to study at Cooper Union, and received his MFA in painting and printmaking from Yale University in 2012.

Since then, he has been interested in quotidian objects (old photographs, rope, pegboard, folding fans) in his art-making: He generally uses an array of these materials and textiles as the surfaces of his paintings. Mack calls the works “fabric collages,” and styles them into sculptures and monumental installations that explore histories of both art and fashion and transform the spaces they take up. “I constantly think about how I could make a work in a space that would be as effective as like, a number of Lil’ Kim looks,” he says of the rap legend who challenged preconceived notions of beauty, dress and presentation when she famously wore a single nipple pastie (that Hylton created from Indian bridal fabric) to the MTV Video Music Awards in 1999.

The artist has shown some of these conceptual works in various museums — and earned a spot in the Studio Museum’s prestigious artist-in-residence program. His art has also caught the attention of the British designers Duro Olowu and Grace Wales Bonner. During the latter’s fall/winter 2018 presentation, models paraded past one of Mack’s fabric installations, which was inspired by nautical flags and African-American migration. Mack says that Wales Bonner’s consideration of her wearers and her interest in identity and fabric is “an affirmation to the language I’ve been working through this year.” (He recently collaborated with her on another blues-inspired piece for the retailer Totokaelo.)

A few feet away, spread across the floor of the studio, sits “Menagerie,” one of his signature fabric works, which is almost complete. Its surface is a blue packing blanket, which Mack found at U-Haul and dyed with red, blue and green abstract shapes. On top of it are paper media: images of his sister wearing a shirt he created, a photograph of a Richard Tuttle installation and a sly reference to Hylton’s styling prowess in the form of Mary J. Blige on a ’90s cover of Pulse! magazine.

“It’s about a set of questions,” Mack says of his work, glancing around his studio. “I’m trying to be free, and I’m trying to bring forth things that are interesting and beautiful. I’m also really keyed into what presence does to change a space, or to change an object. That’s the thing about painting: It doesn’t mean anything for something to be painted unless it actually is able to change the system of value spoken through the paintings to the viewers. I think paint is extraordinary, I think paint should be extraordinary.”