

DEWEY CRUMPLER
CROSSINGS



RICHMOND ART CENTER

DEWEY CRUMPLER CROSSINGS

Exhibition: April 6 – June 4, 2022
Opening Reception: Sat, April 2, 2pm–4pm
Artist's Talk: Sat, April 30, 1pm

Dewey Crumpler: Crossings asks us to consider the history, lived legacy and future impact of the global shipping industry. Presenting over 120 works, from sketches to large scale paintings, the exhibition represents Crumpler's twenty-five years of investigation into the beauty and power of ribbed, metal cargo boxes.

In Crumpler's work shipping containers are dense metaphors; encompassing stories of mass migration, transformation and voyages destined to be repeated. They trace transatlantic trade routes that emerged in the 15th century and are still used today. They also show industry that has irrevocably shaped port cities like San Francisco, Oakland and Richmond. Through connecting historical and contemporary systems, time in Crumpler's work becomes a loop of rebirth and decline pressed forward through the crossing of water. Crumpler explains, "At the heart of these works is memory."

Dewey Crumpler: Crossings was organized to be presented at Richmond Art Center in 2020, but was postponed for two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In this time the world has seen financial crisis, climate disruption, global pandemic, and wars with no historical parallel, and Crumpler's shipping containers have become even more prophetic; predicting the collapse of globalism and events that continue to shape the first decades of the 21st century.

About the Artist: Dewey Crumpler is an Associate Professor of painting at San Francisco Art Institute. His current work examines issues of globalization and cultural co-modification through the integration of digital imagery, video and traditional painting techniques. Crumpler's works are in the permanent collections of the California African American Museum, Triton Museum of Art Los Angeles and Oakland Museum Of California. Crumpler has received the Flintridge Foundation Award, National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, as well as The Fleishhacker Foundation Fellowship Eureka Award. Collapse was Crumpler's most recent exhibition at Seattle University's Hedreen Gallery. He is represented by Jenkins Johnson Gallery. deweycrumpler.com

About Richmond Art Center: Richmond Art Center has been sharing art and creating with the community since 1936. Our programs encompass classes, exhibitions and events at our facility in downtown Richmond, as well as off-site activities that bring free, high-quality art making experiences to WCCUSD schools and community partners. richmondartcenter.org



Dewey Crumpler, *Untitled*, 2013. Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery

DEWEY CRUMPLER'S CONTAINERS

THE SHINE AND THE BLUES OF THE BLACK PACIFIC

Essay by Thea Quiray Tagle

Negropolitans, Post Atlantic, Opaqueness, Birth Cool & Hip: These are some of the words and phrases emblazoned atop Dewey Crumpler's most recent paintings, some of a massively accumulating series of "container" paintings, collages, and drawings he has made intermittently since the 1990s. In these 72" x 60" works, wood letters used for residential and commercial signage are repurposed as markers—but of what? All of the forms of Black life that (have) matter, perhaps, but which exceed the containers that bind them.

Mostly devoid of figurative representation, save a small section of collages including the likenesses of Black icons such as James Baldwin, Jimi Hendrix, and Biggie Smalls, the works in this exhibition at Richmond Art Center elliptically gesture to inchoate and sometimes incomprehensible forms of Black life and knowledge through the metaphorical and material site of the

shipping container. Within the containers—sometimes deconstructed into undulating snakeskins and other times flattened into penciled lines or rendered as match-head thin rectangles—the multiple and overlapping histories of Blackness are alternately compressed and spill over, rendering the Pacific Rim generally and the East Bay specifically as a geography of Black life, death, and ultimately, transformation.

Black geographies are oceanic, with what Edouard Glissant calls "submarine roots": "a network of branches, cultures, and relations that position black geographies and the oceanic history of diaspora as integral to and entwining with—rather than outside—what has been called 'coloniality's persistence.'"¹ Paul Gilroy has theorized the water and land masses of the Black Atlantic in part through the ship, as the "living means" and "mobile elements" that connect the political, cultural, and economic histories and geographies of the middle passage, industrialization, and globalization.² What Dewey Crumpler gives us are the container ships which move through the Black Pacific, unloading and loading their cargo on ports across the US West Coast, part of the expansive Pacific region that Dorothy Fujita-Rony has dubbed the Transpacific West.³ The Bay Area neighborhoods and cities where Crumpler was raised in, walks through, and resides—Bayview Hunters Point, West Oakland, and Richmond, to name a few—have utilized African American labor in military and industry since The Great Migration; so too have these areas, at different moments, enabled, fostered, poisoned, and displaced the Black communities who have made homes in these places. By the 1940s, thousands of Black laborers, Pullman porters, redcaps, dining car waiters, union organizers, and longshore and warehouse



Dewey Crumpler, *Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery

workers had settled in West Oakland alone: between 1940 and 1944, the African American residential population in Oakland jumped from roughly 8,000 to 21,770, and by 1950, Oakland's Black population numbered 42,355.⁴ In 2020, *Moms 4 Housing*, a collective of Black women in West Oakland fighting for rights to take back homes for themselves and their children, are among the most radical of the ongoing anti-displacement movement in the Bay Area.⁵ All of these people, these communities, and these temporalities are part of the oceanic geographies of the Black Pacific that Crumpler maps, and bears witness to, in his multiple representations of the container ship that you see in Richmond Art Center.

Walking the West Oakland waterfront for days on end, Crumpler began in the 1990s to sketch, paint, and otherwise document the growing masses of shipping containers stacked high at the port. As the decades passed, the scale and the intricacy of the shipping container paintings exploded, and they became more blinged out with sequins, gold and silver foil, and, later, found images and text. Saidiya Hartman asks: "can beauty provide an antidote to dishonor... [can it] 'exhume buried cries' and reanimate the dead?"⁶ It certainly seems that, for Crumpler, the answer is yes.

On one hand, Crumpler's large-scale *Untitled* paintings from 2017, first exhibited at Seattle University's Hedreen Gallery in 2018 and shown now at Richmond Art Center, uses beauty to mimic how capitalism hides its violence through shine. Global popular culture and commodity fetishism are signaled in these paintings—the Bart Simpson figure obscured beneath a layer of bubble wrap in *Untitled 1*, a cargo of sneakers spilling out of its container in *Untitled 2*—and are backlit in gold and silver, exuding (in Crumpler's own words) "a kind of power that is attractive and transformative."⁷ Noting the ways that "distraction is a modality of soft power," Crumpler methodically applies silver and gold foil in order to seduce us, at first, into taking in the paintings themselves as mere commodities for our enjoyment.⁸

But the longer one looks at the paintings, the more other shapes and allusions appear. It is impossible, for example, not to notice that Crumpler's simplistic outlines of the container ship, sketched in pencil over paint splotches applied to his mixed-media collages from 2018 recall the terrible schematics of the slave hold. If the Black Atlantic is the oceanic geography that transformed people into commodities, in the 21st century it is the Black Pacific that conveys the goods made with the sweat, blood, and lives of exploited laborers in export processing zones and maquilas from China to the Philippines to Tijuana for First World use, consumption, and pleasure: this is what the paintings revealed to me once my eyes became accustomed to the shine.

Ultimately, the sequins, gold, and silver that Crumpler deploys are a shine that illuminates what is truly valuable, and that points to the ongoing "resistance of the object": the person made commodity, or the commodity that speaks.⁹ Krista Thompson writes that bling and shine, as a Black aesthetic of resistance, "calls attention to the failure of vision, to how vision obscures from view that which it purports to reveal."¹⁰ Crumpler's use of sequins and gold reflects light in a way that saturates the visual plane, temporarily blinding the viewer or denying them full vision. In being blinded by this shine, viewers "must confront the sublime and the physiological, even painful, limits of vision"—stirring, it is hoped, an awareness that we will never know the truth of what the container or the ship holds.¹¹ The cargo within the ship—the Black body, the commodities bought and sold—is, as Crumpler is keen to remind us, "absolutely not knowable."¹² That is to say, while the ship is an oceanic technology that un-makes subjects into objects, there will always remain forms of Black knowledge, beauty, and life that can never be apprehended, contained, or killed within this space or any other.

This is the power of the blues that Crumpler possesses and which he wields; blues knowledge is, in the words

of the late Clyde Woods, the truth and symbol of freedom (oft shrouded by metaphors, triple entendres and misdirection) that enables the construction of new communities, institutions, and social practices where Black life can flourish in the face of profound spatial and racial violence.¹³ The blues is a genre of music to be sure, but it also is a practice and mode of Black life counter to the demands of capitalism and commodification. The blues and its descendents (jazz, funk, soul, and hip-hop) saturate Crumpler's container paintings. Yet it is not just that Crumpler places the visages of Black musicians alongside customary African crafts and ceremonial objects in his mixed-media collages that make his art a type of blues. It is not even that Miles Davis albums (*Birth of the Cool* and *Kind of Blue*) figure as textual basis of the newest, most abstracted series of paintings. It is that Crumpler obfuscates, first, then lets us catch glimpses of great secrets of Blackness without giving them all away—his work offers flashes of Black vision, Black sound, Black joy, and Black life which exceed, and which never can be contained within, the global imaginary and reality of Black death and Black pain. It is the viewer's burden to comprehend what's reflected in the shine.

Dr. Thea Quiray Tagle is a curator, writer, and an assistant professor of ethnic studies and gender & sexuality studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research broadly investigates socially-engaged art and site-specific performance, photographic histories of violence and waste, and speculative futures in and across the Pacific, and her writing can be found in scholarly and popular publications including ASAP/J, American Quarterly, BOMB Magazine, and Hyperallergic. As a practitioner, Thea specializes in curating contemporary art and performances by Black, Indigenous, people of color, queer, and diasporic artists working in installation, photography, new media, and film. Her curatorial projects have been exhibited at venues including Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco), Berkeley Art Center, and the Vachon Gallery at Seattle University. For more about Thea's writing, teaching, and curation, visit her website: www.theaquiraytagle.com

Dewey Crumpler: Crossings was organized with assistance from Marguerite Thompson Browne.

RICHMOND ART CENTER STAFF: José R. Rivera, Executive Director; Marisa Burman, Ceramics Manager; Ilene Conde, Education Director; Addela Garboos, Operations Director; Roberto Martinez, Curator; Elaine Moreno, Visitor Services Coordinator; Carolyn Rodkin, Chief Financial Officer; Severo "Petey" Rodriguez, Facilities Coordinator; Amy Spencer, Exhibitions Director

COVER IMAGE: Dewey Crumpler, *Untitled 1*, 2017, Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. Photo by Yosef Chaim Kalinko, Seattle University. Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

ESSAY FOOTNOTES: **1.** Qtd. in Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, "No One Knows the Mysteries at the Bottom of the Ocean," in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, 1-13. Eds. McKittrick and Woods. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007. p. 5. **2.** Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 16-17. **3.** Dorothy Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919-1941*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. **4.** Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003. p. 4, 47. **5.** <https://moms4housing.org> **6.** Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1014. p. 4. **7.** Conversation with the artist, February 28, 2020. **8.** Ibid. **9.** Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. p. 14. **10.** Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop," *The Art Bulletin* 91:4 (2009): 481-505. p. 489. **11.** Ibid., 484. **12.** Conversation with the artist, February 28, 2020. **13.** Clyde Woods, "Sitting on Top of the World: The Challenges of Blues and Hip-Hop Geography" in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, 46-81. Eds. McKittrick and Woods. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007. p. 59.

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Dewey Crumpler, *Untitled 2*, 2017. Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery



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