



April Fitzpatrick's "Young, Gifted and Black," is part of "A Symbolic Transformation" exhibit at the Artport Gallery on display now through June 13. APRIL FITZPATRICK

'Identity is so rich'

Symbolic pineapple at the core of artist's new exhibit

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As a child, April Fitzpatrick's favorite fruit was undoubtedly the pineapple. The bright, sweet yellow center eventually became a metaphor for the joy she sought to surround herself with living as an artist and board-certified art therapist.

When Fitzpatrick's grandmother suddenly passed away in 2013, painting and art became her refuge. Pineapples began to surface in her mixed-media works around 2017.

If you go

What: A Symbolic Transformation

When: Sunday-Saturday 8am-11:30pm through June 13

Where: The Artport Gallery, 3300 Capital Circle SW

Cost: Free and open to the public

Contact: For more information, visit coca.tallahasseearts.org. Gallery can be viewed virtually in COCA's Online Gallery at cocaonlinegallery.zenfolio.com.

Fitzpatrick decorated her bathroom with pineapples, shopped for clothing featuring the fruit, and even started building a curriculum on how to use the pineapple symbolically in her art therapy work. Fitzpatrick even had friends send her photos of pineapples they would find out in public spaces.

Once she started to dig deeper into

the pineapple's history however, she found definitive intersections between her favorite fruit, art, activism, and identity.

"I researched further and saw its connection to Africa, indigenous communities and slavery," says

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Exhibit

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Fitzpatrick. “White colonizers would put a pineapple on a stake to signify when a new shipment of slaves had arrived, so the fruit got associated with wealth and aristocratic behavior. I began to understand how the global commodification of pineapples came up alongside the commodification of Black lives.”

Psychology behind ‘Transformation’

Fitzpatrick’s exhibition, “A Symbolic Transformation,” at the Artport Gallery explores these symbols through abstract and experimental paintings and mixed media collages. The exhibit is on display now through June 13 as well as in COCA’s online gallery. The 30 works capture the layered realities that Fitzpatrick sees in Blackness, racial trauma, identity development, and oppression.

Her psychological approach to art-making is present in every step of her process. Fitzpatrick considers how theoretical frameworks can be used as inspiration, and often considers theories like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs when showing how identity is represented in art. As an art therapist, she uses the container of the pineapple to explore how this is further influenced by geographic location, family, and social systems.

“If you give a person what they need to thrive, they’ll keep thriving, and that’s when I bring in the pineapple,” says Fitzpatrick. “If you put a pineapple in its natural environment, and give it what it needs, it will survive up to 50 years in the wild. If we give people what they needed, and offer opportunities for creative expression and exploration to take risks with support, who would we become? Who would we be?”

Exploring facets of identity

Fitzpatrick uses herself as a case study for these questions. Her use of acrylic paints, oil pastels, fabrics, found objects, and modeling paste is part of her sensory, kinesthetic process which she finds to be deeply cathartic.

Just as a pineapple is comprised of several flowers to create the whole fruit, she considers the many facets of her



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APRIL FITZPATRICK

own identity and embeds that into her artwork.

Flipping through art books filled with Black visual artists, Fitzpatrick will feel inspiration strike. She’ll begin to sketch out ideas and situate the pineapple — sometimes appearing in the foreground, other times embedding it within the background. Then comes the process of touching all the collage materials and finding which ones align best with her vision.

Fitzpatrick enjoys working on large surface areas, and has been especially drawn to creating on tondos, or circular canvases. She doesn’t judge where she places any given material, but instead trusts her intuition as another form of healing from self-doubt or perfectionism.

‘Not a linear journey’

“My work matches the art therapy and therapy process because it’s not a linear journey,” says Fitzpatrick.

“Identity is so rich, and there’s so many different pathways you can take that go even deeper. I think about myself in my family system, as a Black female artist, a native of Mississippi, a Black woman in America, and one of the few Black art therapists,” Fitzpatrick said. “All of those things are so intricate, that if you don’t pay attention to the richness of it all, it can become very

chaotic very quickly. I think that’s how people lose sight of their identity.”

Fitzpatrick credits her mother with encouraging her remain steadfast in her beliefs and dream big. She is also grateful to the professors, teachers, and community members who have played a role in shaping her identity.

Fitzpatrick strives to make work that challenges the eyes to be in constant motion as they rove over the canvas. Her fabrics are bright and multi-patterned. Similarly, her portraiture is just as multi-dimensional and embodies her philosophy to “make room for your crown.”

She often tells her clients that art requires no explanation and prioritizes the process over the product. Regardless, she hopes viewers will see the end products of her art pieces as an invitation to go below the surface and self-reflect.

“I hope that people can use my art as a way to engage around spiky topics,” says Fitzpatrick. “It can serve as a holding space and a mood increaser when processing some of these difficult emotions and ideas. It creates room to know people on a spectrum and understand that multiple things can exist at one time.”

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area’s umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).