

Breaching Stereotypes: In Vivid, Complex Staged Scenes Derick Whitson Creates New Narratives

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The [Galveston Artist Residency](#) is a gem of a program hidden away on Galveston Island, offering practicing artists the time and resources they need to focus solely on their practice. The balance of inviting artists lies in the strong resources and connections that exist within the residency, and ensuring that artists will be happy and thrive on the tiny island for 11 months.

[Derick Whitson](#), one of three invited artist for the 2018-19 residency cycle, is allowing the experience to influence the ways he thinks about his work.

Earlier this fall, during my own time as GAR's first curator-in-residence, I walked into Derick's studio and the reality show "Big Brother" playing in the background. The sounds of the chatty characters echoed through the large studio space, a former industrial building on the edge of downtown Galveston.

It was obvious that Derick was still moving into the studio. Only about half of the space felt occupied, and in that half a mashup of patterned oil cloth had been adhered to the floor in a seemingly organic pattern of patterns. Derick had talked before about "Big Brother" but I hadn't

totally understood the connection or his interest in the show. And as someone that has never been able to sit through an entire episode I was curious about Derick's fascination with the show that isolates a group of housemates who are continually monitored by live feed cameras.

"It's an extreme social experiment" Derick said. "The camera is always around, and the context of the people changes intensely based on how pushed they are to their limits. I think that with (my own) traveling and trying to get to know people, I always wonder which version of the self I am meeting or even giving."

"Is it sort of which version of yourself you feel like giving that day?" I asked.

"Exactly," he continued, "and I think about that with my costuming. I think ("Big Brother") aligns with what I do the most because it's all about the perception of being viewed in different spaces and in different places."

"Big Brother" had never entered the studio realm in all the years that I've visited artists. So Derick was quick to enlighten me.

He hit the play button. Several "Big Brother" contestants sat outside discussing sexual attraction as the conversation moved around the room, a male contestant argued that straight males are typically not attracted to transsexual women. A woman retorted and continued to argue a societal role in his lack of attraction to trans women. Next, the conversation turns toward activism in the queer community.

Derick interrupted the playback and looked at me: "It's interesting and complicated. It's like me saying I don't want to go to the Black march specifically based on my view of being a Black male in that space. This show has these complicated conversations, which is really interesting."



Derick Whitson, work-in-progress, studio. All photos courtesy the artist.



Derick Whitson, From the series "Sugar (Chapter 2)"

Derick is a classical photographer. He references the great portrait painters and the documentarian photographers that shaped the burgeoning field in its youth. But his perspective on identity, place, and his twist of humor in the content allow for every place and space that he experiences to make its way into the work.

Derick grew up in the small town of Mansfield, Ohio, where he was born. From Mansfield he studied at the Columbus College of Art and Design where he earned his BFA in photography in 2014 before. From Columbus Derick moved to New York to pursue a Master's degree in visual art from Columbia University, a degree he finished in 2017. After graduating he was invited to the Fountainhead Residency in Miami before moving to Galveston in August of 2018.

Later, over beers at favorite Galveston dive bar Press Box, Derick said apropos absolutely nothing: "I wonder if I can get a mannequin head."

Since embarking on his Galveston Art Residency, Derick has focused on costume making, and creating scenes for his staged photographs.



Derick Whitson, From the series "Sugar (Chapter 2)"

"I am working on a shoot. I'm trying to make new outfits specifically for the shoots here mainly so I am sure that my influences are based on my experiences here," he said. "I am planning on doing some photo shoots in a few of the historical homes here, some that are now museums."

One outfit he was in the process of working was much darker than his typically colorful and exuberant repertoire. Derick used plastic oil cloth with gold ornamentation against a black background. He had cut two armholes out of the fabric creating a higher neckline in the back and a dramatic drape in the front as the fabric fell loosely around the body and over the full body jumpsuit it required underneath.

"I think the ghosts in Galveston have been inspiring me," Derick said.

"I feel like I'm going to figure that out afterwards, but I've been thinking about all these haunted spaces here that are also beautiful and glamorous but have this intense history with death. I think as a result I'm even becoming afraid of seeing a shadow, so I've kind of created this shadow figure that goes underneath this idea of glamor in these nice glamorous spaces that we have access to here. I think they've highly influenced me to create an image that is so dark."

"But you know, it's also not heavy necessarily," I chimed in. "You're approaching these subjects and breaching stereotypes in ways that are fun but also challenging. It's not aggressive, which I think allows for more entry points and more people to engage with it."



Derick Whitson, From the series "Sugar (Chapter 2)"

"I am playing with different levels of attraction," he responded, adding that his vivid, complex staged scenes have their own narrative and language. "It's like I'm trying to give the viewer candy, and while they're eating it they are given the opportunity to engage with the work, with the social context of what is in the space I created."

"It's like I'm offering them a choice," he said. "You are offered the moment to think about this more intellectually if you want to."

“Or you can just enjoy the photos,” I interjected.

Derick laughed. “Yes, I enjoy that about the work, I enjoy approaching it lightheartedly. There’s a true joy in that”

It’s rare to hear artists today refer to their practice with the word joy, a word so often taboo in the art world.

“What a word,” I said.

And with that, we ordered a round of tater tots.