

“Set it Off” exhibition engages visitors with a sonic experience

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An expansive overview of the exhibit space displays the dark cubes attendees immerse themselves in. Photo by Lily Doshi

New York based artist Jeremy Toussaint-Baptiste combined his passion for music and art in his sonic exhibition “Set it Off” which allows people to step in a dark space and explores topics such as uncertainty and the Black experience in America.

The exhibition at both the 1708 Gallery and Institute of Contemporary Art includes a large black cube where visitors can sit inside for a sonic and immersive experience. Toussaint-Baptiste described the intended experience of the exhibition from the audible perspective and the meaning behind “hyper-audible” for the viewer.

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Biology senior Samir Kurtu said he enjoyed the conceptual aspect of the exhibit and how it was a newer experience for him.

"It's a place where you can be in the moment, and, with it being dark inside, it allows you not to focus on your surroundings," Kurtu said. "I think the purpose of the sound is the focal point, and you can drive yourself back to the sound when you meditate."

The exhibition uses a car audio system as a part of the base and combines both auditory and visual art. The role of music in Toussaint-Baptiste's life was a part of the inspiration behind the art and who he is as an artist today, according to Toussaint-Baptiste.

"It's not about existing below the threshold of hearing; it's about shifting the way that we think about hearing something that happens in the ears and in the head to something that happens in our entire body," Toussaint-Baptiste said.

Music has always been a part of his life, as he has been playing music since he was 12 years old and continued throughout college, according to Toussaint-Baptiste.

"We didn't talk about music as art in music school. We talked about music as music," Toussaint-Baptiste said. "And that subtle shift in how and what music could do opened my eyes and mind up to like you can build a structure and have it be sonically focused."

Louisiana State University did not offer a jazz program when Toussaint-Baptiste attended. Only western classical music was offered rather than modern music and modern music theory, according to Toussaint-Baptiste.

"Once I started doing like, the western classical thing, I don't know, I got really tired of it or just really frustrated with the idea that the height of what it is to be a musician, in most contexts, is to play someone else's music," Toussaint-Baptiste said.

After he began to become frustrated, he went into a "weird act of rebellion" where he did not want to listen to classical music and he just listened to "noise" and the "avant-garde" music that his school actively refused, according to Toussaint-Baptiste.

Toussaint-Baptiste said he came to Richmond for a visit shortly after the exhibition's curators reached out to him.

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“I was running along the James River and sort of had this moment of thinking about the bodies, you know the bodies that were once considered property that were likely tossed into this river,” Toussaint-Baptiste said. “But also like the beauty of the river and the obvious power of the river and it being like the water source for Richmond.”

ICA and 1708 Gallery curators Amber Esseiva and Park C. Myers reached out to the artist because they had seen his previous work and wanted him to do a show in Richmond, according to Toussaint-Baptiste.

Esseiva found Toussaint-Baptiste through her interests in sound art, abstraction and performance, according to an email from Esseiva.

“Working with the artist and co-curator to realize this new project took a lot of collaboration,” Esseiva stated. “We had to identify what topics the artist wanted to address and what form the sculpture and sound would take in the galleries.”

ICA employee Kasidi Jordan felt the artistic impact of Toussaint-Baptiste’s exhibition and how it was different from ICA’s usual exhibits as walking into the exhibition was “overwhelming” and something that “immerses you” with art that “shakes your senses,” according to Jordan.

The ICA is known for having contemporary and modern art pieces with exhibitions entering and leaving the creative space, according to Jordan.

“I think this exhibit is really different from a lot of the exhibits that we’ve had in the past, in the sense that it is really immersive and just the nature of it feels really unique,” Jordan said.



**ICA employee Kasidi Jordan who spoke about the installation.
Photo by Lily Doshi**

Toussaint-Baptiste is set to continue his research presented in the “Set it Off” exhibition in his new fellowship in France called The Camargo Fellowship program. He describes what the exhibition allowed him to do as an artist in its totality.

“I was able to take these sounds that I’m able to create, and the thoughts that I’m having and make a statement or a gesture,” Toussaint-Baptiste said.

Spectrum Editor Gabriela de Camargo Gonçalves contributed to this report.