

Feaster, Felicia. "Atlanta Artist Michi Meko's Work is "the Contemporary Experience of Black Life and Survival," *Atlanta Magazine*, 28 February 2018.

# Atlanta

## Atlanta Artist Michi Meko's Work is "the Contemporary Experience of Black Life and Survival"

After a sobering shift in tone, Meko has found his voice—and garnered national recognition

BY **FELICIA FEASTER**-- FEBRUARY 28, 2018



Michi Meko  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MARTINEZ

In 2009, artist Michi Meko walked me through some of Atlanta's seedier, trash-choked byways for a story I was writing about local graffiti artists. Five foot, nine inches tall with a hulking frame, he wore oversized retro shades with baby dreads piled under a knit cap—a look suggesting a hard-partying alt-rock bandleader more than a nationally renowned fine artist.

A university-trained artist and occasional graffiti writer who already had a residency at the Atlanta Contemporary to his credit, Meko built his early career on good humor and good times at rollicking, quirky opening parties where Pabst Blue Ribbon and fried chicken replaced the usual wine and cheese. At Barbara Archer Gallery, he created colorful, neo-folk collages with fellow artist John Tindel, billing themselves as "two fat Southern boys that paint." He seemed like a guy who could appreciate biscuits, monster trucks, historically black college marching bands, and the eccentricities of Southern culture—even as his work's allusions to mammies, lawn jockeys, and cotton bolls hinted at a more critical undercurrent.

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Eight years later, there is gray flecking the 43-year-old Reynoldstown resident's beard, and a bone-deep gravitas has settled like silt on a river bottom in Meko's art. His breakthrough 2015 show, *Pursuit: Almost Drowned*, at the blue-chip Alan Avery Art Company featured images of men floating, life preservers, nautical flags warning of trouble ahead, and miles and miles of inky ocean. In his mixed-media works, there are allusions to the shooting deaths of nine black men and women at a Charleston church, Hurricane Katrina, and direct references to America's first black president. His new work is an eternity from the tongue-in-cheek fun and occasional social commentary of his earlier collaborations. Now, the faces of people who appear to be young black men—but which Meko says are actually images of white male pop stars like Justin Bieber—have been erased with violent explosions of paint in works like *The Standard*, his first drawing purchased by the High Museum of Art.

The shift to more sobering content felt inevitable. Recent publicity about black men murdered by police echoed Meko's own experience. In 2000, after winning \$400 from an ex-con in a dive bar pool game, he finally escaped his native Florence, Alabama, for the big city. On his first night in Atlanta, police stopped Meko and his brother on I-20, dragged them out of their Ford Explorer, and trained six service pistols at their heads. The incident proved a case of mistaken identity but one that makes Meko see himself in headlines years later. "The Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis cases messed me up," Meko says. "I began to think about things I have done that could have easily gotten me shot, just kids-being-kids behavior."

Meko decided his solo work should not be a direct reaction to these events but a focus on "the contemporary experience of black life and survival." He says his current pieces reflect "purely my voice, my mark. I want to say something meaningful and poetic."

The national art world has taken notice of the dramatic shift in his tone. Last year, he received not one but two important national awards from New York nonprofits Artadia and the Joan Mitchell Foundation, with a combined prize of \$35,000. Travis Laughlin, the senior director of artist programs at the latter, calls Meko's work "incredibly relevant to ongoing discussions about race." Meko also won an award from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia and will present a solo show there in December.

It's not easy to survive as an artist in Atlanta. Local galleries shutter every year, and serious collectors often prefer buying work in New York. Meko's story reads like a self-help guide to career success. His personal mantra is: "Comfort kills pursuit. Pursuit kills comfort. All that is left is pursuit." In 2015, he almost drowned while fishing for striper on the Chattahoochee River. He swears the African water spirit Mami Wata saved him and, in the process, opened the door for his present accomplishments.

"He's a sweetheart," says collector Nancy Hooff, who owns two of Meko's works, including a chilling requiem painting featuring a scorched church fan, charred wood, and a sky black with smoke, which was inspired by the Charleston church shooting. Hooff, a Buckhead native, believes art like Meko's can help Atlantans understand the black experience.

"Unlike many artists," Alan Avery says, Meko "takes the viewer on a journey of understanding historical and current social ills but without the preachy condemnation."

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*An Attempted Undoing of Legacy* (2017)  
PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MARTINEZ

Meko's former gallerist Barbara Archer says that the artist "never holds back and is never satisfied." In fact, many of his biggest influences are not artists but athletes: He listens to audio, sans announcer, of Serena Williams playing tennis while he paints, as well as recordings of Muhammad Ali and celebrated poet and Guggenheim Fellow Fred Moten. His artwork expresses resilience. All of that imagery—first of men floating in a vast, black sea, struggling to keep their heads above water, and now with abstraction—depicts the metaphorical struggle at the core of his philosophy: "I am interested in African Americans and ideas about buoyancy, navigation, and being resilient. This resiliency for me is heroic."