

Smith, Kelundra. "This artist disconnected from the world to regain clarity," *Andscape*, 14 July 2021

ANDSCAPE

This artist disconnected from the world to regain clarity

In a year of pandemic and protests, painter Michi Meko escaped to the wilderness and found his better self

By Kelundra Smith

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One in a series on the arts world emerging from the coronavirus pandemic.

Boxes of aerosol paint cans are stacked by the door of artist [Michi Meko's](#) studio in Atlanta. He's dressed to move, wearing a gray T-shirt, gray joggers and blue tennis shoes with a red beanie atop his locs. He adjusts his grayish-blue glasses — a new addition to his life over the past year that seems to remind him that 40 is not the new 20.

Moving studios is yet another change in a year that has required Meko, 47, to fully show up for himself. Before the coronavirus pandemic hit, he was flying high. His work was included in the permanent collection at Atlanta's High Museum of Art. In 2019, he'd been a finalist for the prestigious Hudgens Prize and had three solo exhibitions between Atlanta and Los Angeles. He also weighed more than 300 pounds, had panic attacks, and drank and smoked marijuana heavily to cope with the pressure to perform.

"I remember not feeling inspired to make work," Meko said. "The day Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms said that the city was shutting down [due to the pandemic], I went into my basement, dusted off all of my fishing and camping gear, and I bailed. My therapist says that people are like energy vampires in a way — they take and no one's putting anything back in here. I was like f— it, I'll just go fishing."

By April 2020, he'd gone dark. No more posting on social media. No more interviews. No more painting. He was the wilderness he needed to explore.

"I get pissed off when people post about self-help on Instagram, because mine didn't look like getting a facial or going for ice cream," Meko said. "It was a lot of crying and throwing s—."

Driving down Interstate 20 the first time after the area began to close down, he said, the emptiness was palpable. However, that same feeling of isolation became inner peace over time. He started out just catching trout in the Smoky Mountains for dinner and then he taught himself to fly-fish, because why not?

After George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks were killed by police, Meko kept going back to the woods. His supply bag stayed packed. Whenever he went to set up camp, he always brought shea butter, fishing gear and music — his most listened-to song on Spotify last year was "[Wildfires](#)" by Sault.

"I felt privileged for the first time in my life," Meko said. "I had money saved, plenty of toilet paper and I ran to nature. In nature, I began to find a place where I could hear myself finally, even though the world was burning down."

Though the woods were more peaceful than the city, he still kept his head on a swivel. When his father found out that he was frequenting the forest, he gifted him with a .44 Special that Meko calls Shango, named for the Yoruba god that brings thunder and lightning.

In the studio, his worlds converge. The studio is nestled in an old warehouse between Atlanta's swiftly gentrifying Summerhill and Peoplestown neighborhoods. He was told two weeks ago that the building is being sold to developers just as he was trying to complete works for four upcoming exhibitions.

"The whole time I've been here [in Atlanta], I've had to move studios every five years because someone's building condos, lofts or live-play-work things," Meko said.

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He walks over to a bench and clears off some books. Right now, he's reading *Hanging Tree Guitars* by Freeman Vines. Vines remembers those lost to lynching by representing Black bodies as one-of-a-kind guitars. For the last six years, Meko has been grappling with the question, "How do you portray the Black experience without the figure?" He's interested in Black people's relationship with nature, especially in the American South.

This is undoubtedly inspired by his upbringing in Florence, Alabama, a small city on the border of Mississippi and Tennessee. There, fishing, camping and shooting were as much a part of his life as art. He sold his first two pieces at an art show at the local library for \$300 when he was in high school. After graduating from the University of North Alabama, he moved to Atlanta in a Ford Explorer with his paintings and four trash bags full of clothes. He showed his art to anyone he could.

His has not been an astronomical rise to the top, but when success found him, it latched on. Since 2015, he's saturated canvases with black and gold paints, creating abstract works inspired by nautical charts. Now, his work is becoming more concrete, incorporating camping supplies, with items such as lanterns, cast iron skillets and black trash bags hanging from the canvas.

He's moved most of his paintings out of the studio, but there are still four large pieces hanging on the walls, plus suitcases, books, papers and found objects stacked in corners up to the ceiling. Dried cotton and a dream catcher hang above the threshold.

There's a makeshift swatch sheet on the wall with different shades of black. In his new work, he saturates wooden panels with black paint and affixes objects to them that are central to the Black experience. After a year catching trout in South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia, the objects have become more personal. One piece has a lantern, black trash bags and fire pokers. Another has neon orange and yellow-gold cinders covering the black, like the fires he lit while camping in the woods.

Dozens of fishing flies are scattered all over his worktable. Colorful threads, feathers and castoffs from the urban South became his art.

"I sat down and my goal was to make 400 flies for fishing," Meko said. "I'm pretty sure I've surpassed that now. I wanted to see if I could catch a big fish with flies I made from things around the community — Rap Snacks wrappers, hair weave, I think there's an empty crack bag over there."

Catching a big fish is also his new focus at work. While he was in the woods, his art career carried on. With an increased focus on Black artists, he's nearly sold out of work to sell.

His work is currently on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in [The Dirty South: Contemporary Art, Material Culture, and the Sonic Impulse](#) through Sept. 6. He will also have paintings featured in the group exhibition, [Realms of Refuge](#), at Kavi Gupta in Chicago, July 10-Oct. 30, and in [Somethin' To Say](#) at Galerie Myrtis in Baltimore, Sept. 11-Oct. 16.

As he's getting ready to move into a new art studio near Tyler Perry Studios, Meko is determined to keep the lessons of the past year. He also wants to find more ways to support Black female artists, who are drastically underrepresented in terms of gallery representation and inclusion in museum permanent collections. He said he's still figuring out the best way to do that without falling into misogynoir.

"When you go camping, you're supposed to pack it in and pack it out, meaning you're supposed to leave it better than you found it," Meko said. "For me, I began to think of my journey as taking my baggage out there and leaving myself better than I found me."