

Harris, Brandon. "Interview with Michi Meko," *Tennessee Valley Art Association*, 12 April 2021



## Interview with Michi Meko

By Brandon Harris

12 April 2021

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—Michi Meko

Brandon Harris, Guest Curator at the Tennessee Valley Museum of Art, interviewed artist Michi Meko about his exhibition *When It's Black Outside: Notes from the Before Times*. Meko is a native of Florence, Alabama who now lives in Atlanta. He has exhibited at museums across the country and was featured as an Artist in Residence on the streaming service Hulu in 2019.

**Brandon Harris:** What can you tell me about your background, your education and your artistic style?

**Michi Meko:** Well, I'm from Florence, Alabama. I live and work in Atlanta, Georgia right now. I received a degree from the University of North Alabama. And it was there where I learned my disciplines, and where I gained a lot of respect for mark making through my professor there, Ms. [Chiong-Yiao] Chen. I often think about Ms. Chen at the university because she pushed me to use more expressive marks. And that's what my work's foundation is—it's mark making and abstractions.

**Can you tell me about your inspiration for your art?**

Inspiration for me can come from anywhere. Venus and Serena Williams are two points of entry for my inspiration. Also, nature, the great outdoors. Also, Black life. And I think the odd parts of Black life are a big inspiration for me. Thinking about the patina of Black life and Black mechanics is a big thing, and the materiality of Black life is part of my inspiration. Also, music has a big influence or it can be inspiring. I mean, even just the way the breeze blows on a leaf in a tree or watching a tree, you know, like sway in the wind. Or hearing the river, or who knows what and where inspiration comes from. My mother and father and my brother are big influences on me. So, the thing about inspiration for me is that it can be found in the simplest things and the most complex things and the most common things.

**Can you tell me about some of your work which speaks on the topic of the Black male experience in America? Can you talk about being a Black man in America (more specifically the South) and how you want your work to be seen?**

On the topic of Black male experience, it's one that comes with a lot of layers, much like my work. There are a lot of layers, there are a lot of narratives that are intertwining and tangling together. I'm looking for historical fact and some sort of narrative, where I can think about a future and not focus on a trauma, but of my own existence. So, in my work, I'm looking to deal with an issue, but also become the hero in this abstraction or in this mapmaking or in this typography that is my life. So, in a way, I think that I'm mapping out my Black male experience, and for me, that's kind of finding my way from a youth, now into an adult, and then into an older man, and even further than that. How will this Black life contribute to future Black lives from the afterlife? So that's something that I'm also very interested in.

I would say my experience is one that Black males experience. I'm not only looking outward, inward, upward—I'm also thinking about this life in a psychological sort of way. A psychological experience of being

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Black, and in all of that I'm trying to map out a hero's journey. I'm trying to create an abstraction, a contradiction, and this sort of idea around typography, and all these things to sort of find my way.

But Black life in the South is typical Black life in the South. I mean, I've had a lot of different experiences, some good, some bad. And I won't say that everything has been bad, because it hasn't been; that would be a lie. So, it's the psychological parts of the South, the environment that becomes sort of the burden, or is the burden for me. It is due to environment, location and space.

I think that's why it's important that I continue to think about these abstractions and continue to think loosely about typography and loosely about cartography. And put my own spin on it, or as we say, do a "remix." Or as I would say, add the patina to this idea of what a map could be, or what defining space can be through these abstractions.

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I would say my experience is one that Black males experience. I'm not only looking outward, inward, upward—I'm also thinking about this life in a psychological sort of way. A psychological experience of being Black, and in all of that I'm trying to map out a hero's journey. I'm trying to create an abstraction, a contradiction, and this sort of idea around typography, and all these things to sort of find my way.

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**Because your work deals heavily with identity, I would like to know how you see yourself as an Artist and a person?**

Well, as an artist, I guess I see myself as an abstractionist. As one who is very interested in the idea of expressive marks. As one who is interested in the idea of the material, who's interested in the idea, or the functions of Black mechanics, and the shortcomings of that. And using what I have to sort of create these things. That's why a lot of the objects I use are these common objects that I'm looking to endow with some sort of narrative or superpower or to see if I can change the narrative around an object. Or see if I can redefine materials, or to see if I can even in my head, in my studio, I say "abuse" materials or push them to their elastic limit until they break or succumb to my will. I want to change the narratives on objects and place them out of context. That's sort of how I see myself as an artist.

[How I see myself] as a person. I mean I guess I'm the same as any person. But, I'm a little more simplified. I'm a man who likes the outdoors, and fishing is one of those activities. Camping can be one of those activities. I love a good practical joke. Laughter is very big to me as a person. Kindness, and all the sort of generic things that make up the human experience. But on top of that, I have this other thing that I'm dealing with as a person, and that's being an artist. Which, in some ways can be seen as, like, maybe I'm some kind of mystic. Because I can see these things in my head or have these long reaching ideas, and then make them come to life. You know what I mean? So that's something I'm dealing with, too, just as a person.

But as a person, I'm just a guy trying. I really am trying—to make contributions to history, to the narrative of Black expressions, and to the narratives in art history around Black abstractions. And more than anything, it's like some elaborate form of graffiti, of me just writing my name on the wall, writing like Cornbread or "Kilroy was here" or like the caveman just sort of blowing mud on his hand and we still see evidence of that, that human hand. It can be complicated I guess if you think about it. But I don't know, I'm just a guy going through life, and just trying to do the best that I can with what I have.