

Glitter in the Navy
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Walter Price, *Discomfort*, 2022. Acrylic and gesso on canvas, 40 x 40 inches (101.6 x 101.6 cm).
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York. Photo: Zeshan Ahmed.

In *Beautiful, Vivid, Self Contained*, presented at the Hill Art Foundation, *Discomfort's* disembodied faces and lively nature invites and captivates you as you enter its space. *Discomfort* was made by Walter Price in 2022. Price crafted this piece with acrylic paint on a gesso coated canvas. Price also topped off his work with sprinkles of glitter. Price's work often fuses abstraction with narration, creating eccentric worlds that immerse the viewer. Walter Price's *Discomfort* uses various colors, mediums, overlapping and disembodied figures to confront

hyper-masculine ideologies embedded into the black community while spotlighting the female experience.

Walter Price was born in Macon, Georgia, in 1989. He is currently 34 years old and resides in Brooklyn, New York.¹ The creation of Price's art follows a specific and unique process. Every morning, before he gets in the studio he wakes up at 4 am to go play basketball.² He then goes to the studio exhausted. He believes dedication to this ritual will elevate his artistic practice. This dedication comes from his strong aspiration to achieve ambidexterity. This goal is crucial for him because by honing the ability to create with both hands, Price ensures that his artistic vision remains unhampered, regardless of any unforeseen challenges that may affect one of his hands. Along with his daily routine influencing his art, he also includes recurring motifs such as a TV monitor, a sofa, brick walls, automobiles, small hats of uncertain origin, and a character from *The Wiz*.³ Price pulls these motifs from things he observes in everyday life and incorporates them into his art. His artistic style is characterized by the use of vivid colors and fragmented faces, creating an enigmatic and funky tone. It strays away from the traditional elements of art such as: completed figures and landscapes, among other components. He strives to infuse this mystifying tone into all his pieces. Price's use of mundane items and lively colors in his work blends notions of prosaic life and bliss which effectively connects all of society.

One aspect of his life that heavily influences his work is the fact that he served in the US Navy before pursuing his passion in art.⁴ Being a black man, his time in the Navy left him with ultra-masculine ideals, significantly influencing the narratives he chooses to convey through his art. This idea that Price specifically chooses stories based on the black experience becomes

¹ "Walter Price Biography," Greene Naftali, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.greenenaftaligallery.com/artists/walter-price>.

² Walter Price, "On Doodling (Walter Price, artist & Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator) | DLD 18," interview by Hans Ulrich Obrist, *On Doodling (Walter Price, artist & Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator) | DLD 18*, 2018.

³ "Walter Price," Greene Naftali.

⁴ *Ibid.*

evident as he takes heavy inspiration from acclaimed Jacob Lawrence, another black artist who focuses heavily on documenting the black diaspora.⁵ Through abstraction, Price reproduces his encounters as a black man affected by hyper-masculinity.

Price's tenure in the US Navy deeply influenced both his artistic expression and narratives. *Discomfort*, in particular, serves as a reflection of his encounters as a man who comes from a virile past. This work acts as a means to challenge the embedded ideology of hyper-masculinity within the black community. Darby English remarks that “Price came into a sense of his people during the twentieth-first century. In twenty-first century fashion that sense is definitively interracial, likely cemented during the time he spent, directly out of high school, in the US Navy’s hermetic, masculinist multicultural, which challenged and expanded him.”⁶ Price gained a profound understanding of his people during the twenty-first century, and this likely solidified during his time in the US Navy. This formative period in Price's life impacted his beliefs, cognition, and subsequently, his artistic approach, adding depth and authenticity to his work.

The many components of *Discomfort* help the scene of the piece to harmonize. Upon observing *Discomfort* the spectator may notice the vivid colors vaulting off the canvas. Textured red and brown acrylic paint create a captivating backdrop. A moon graces the top left, overseeing the scene. Repeated illustrations of brown sofas and male figures to the left seated upon them are shown. However, as the viewer delves deeper into the work, the painting begins to suggest new comprehensible feelings: the red patchy and textured background overtakes the painting by exuding a feeling of uncertainty and uneasiness. In contrast, the brown textured paint gives this scene a homey and inviting feel due to its natural and earthy characteristics. In attempts to keep

⁵ Dandy English, *Pearl Lines* (n.p.: Camden Art Centre, n.d.), [Page #].

⁶ Dandy English, *Pearl Lines* (n.p.: Camden Art Centre, n.d.), [Page 13].

his work mysterious, Price depicts looming male figures all over the painting, leaving the viewer intrigued and questioning their origins and intentions. The smaller scale of the painting fosters an intimate connection between the viewer and the artist. There is also glitter sprinkled across the piece, adding depth to its meaning. Price claims that his use of the glitter was meant to resist the assumption that this medium is an effeminate one.⁷ Amidst the striking imagery, a female onlooker emerges in the bottom left corner, portrayed with a shimmery lavender paint. Her presence, once noticed, overtakes the scene with an eerie sense of apprehension. When viewing the artwork, the interplay of vivid colors, textured elements, and symbolic representations weave together, providing the viewer with a captivating and thought-provoking journey of *Discomfort*.

The essence of *Discomfort* is concerted in Price's experiences, and complemented by the visual cues he incorporates into the artwork. Furthermore, the only female is portrayed in purple shimmery paint as merely a watcher. Her presence as a mere spectator within this male-dominated scene reflects the role of women in the hyper-masculine black community. *Discomfort* seeks to portray the notion that women in the black community are always around but intermittently acknowledged. The sparsity of female depictions in the painting, coupled with the use of glitter throughout the artwork, becomes a means for Price to transcend gender stereotypes. By employing these artistic choices, Price challenges traditional gender norms and highlights the complexities of gender roles within the black community.

When I first looked at this painting, *Discomfort* appeared as a dream-like setting of a group of people sitting down drinking coffee. I didn't perceive it as anything more than that, a scene of people enjoying themselves. After our artist talk with Walter Price and as I continued to look over this piece, black cultural ideas ingrained into my mind began to overflow. I saw a coherent story. *Discomfort* perfectly depicted what it is like to be in a black space while

⁷ HAF, Walter Price Talk

deviating from societal norms. The clashing colors help to carry out this message: while there is certainly a feeling of home, there is also a sense of precariousness that must be carried at all times. I believe *Discomfort* speaks to social concepts that are ingrained into humanity's experience which fundamentally connects all people to this piece.

No matter how *Discomfort* is perceived by the viewer, its meaning takes on a powerful message. I believe Price has engaged with questions of the black experience, hyper-masculinity, and feminism. He analyzes these ideas while opposing their power. *Discomfort* highlights Price's experiences, and acknowledging these experiences infuses his work wisdom. Indeed, understanding the various components that contributed to the creation of *Discomfort* enriches the viewer's experience and enables them to approach the artwork with empathy. Recognizing the attention to detail, the artistic influences, and Price's personal background and experiences aids in adding nuance to the piece. This also allows the viewer to develop compassion for the piece which ultimately conserves it forever.

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