

ArtSeen

Dewey Crumpler: *The Complete Hoodie Works, 1993–Present*

By Maddie Klett



Installation view: *Dewey Crumpler: The Complete Hoodie Works, 1993–Present*, Cushion Works, San Francisco, 2021. Photo: Phil Maisel.

Dewey Crumpler is a painter living in the Bay Area. His solo exhibition *The Complete Hoodie Works, 1993–Present* at Cushion Works in San Francisco’s Mission District features over 100 small paintings on canvas made over the past 28 years. All feature faceless, grey-hooded protagonists in situations colored with the grass-hue of a cinematic green screen. The “hoodies” zoom through art museums and outer space, and sometimes morph into the subjects of notable masterpieces (Marat in Jacques-Louis David’s *The Death of Marat* (1793) and the decapitated son in Francisco Goya’s *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819-1823)). They also appear in newsworthy events, like the 2008 presidential inauguration of Barack Obama and the 2018 shredding of a Banksy painting at auction.

To call the hooded figures protagonists is perhaps a misnomer. In an interview that accompanies the show, conducted by Cushion Works director Jordan Stein and co-curator Sampada Aranke, Crumpler describes the genesis of the figure as a void of human form. He recalls coming up with the idea when his son left his hoodie on a chair, and he mistook it for a person. The hoodies are anthropomorphized in the paintings when they visibly bend and swerve in their reactions to works of art. They also excrete parabolas of urine from their darkened insides (pee is everywhere...). However, unlike human characters, they aren’t unique. Like any mass-market garb, the hoodies are interchangeable. They come and go, and it’s unclear how many exist or if that even matters to the narratives at play.

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The hoodies are neither human nor object, but this ambiguous status doesn't relegate them to a lesser existence. In the interview, Crumpler notes:

The void is blackness, but in blackness is light, all colors—the form is metaphysical. There's an energy in the darkness, and that energy is what I think of as potentiality. The garment itself surrounds an entity that I think of as potentiality. And it's in expression—through clothes, movement, and rhythm—that potentiality is activated.

Sitting in this state of potentiality, the hoodies seem to have the power to travel through time without the burden of intersecting with the future, present, or past.

Their most human quality is that they often cast a shadow, and it is always the same: an oval ring.

Crumpler based this shape of an iron slave collar he saw at an African art store. He learned that these were based on ornaments worn in Africa on the wrist and ankle to make sound during dance rituals. They were reconfigured in iron as symbols of capture when enslaved people were forcibly brought from West Africa to the Americas. To Crumpler, that transformation of an object—through processes of commodification and dehumanization—imbues the oval form with the memory of this brutal appropriation.

The reoccurring shadow seems to operate as a shackle that ties the hoodies to the flesh-and-blood, time-based human world. The paintings begin with depictions of the hoodies in poses—some human (a tilting “head” in *Sway* [1993]) and some extra-human (melting *In Liquid Form* [1993]). Works of art begin to appear in 1993 with Manet's *Olympia* in *Green Breeze*, but these references really take off in the late '90s and early 2000s. Crumpler is drawn to history paintings that point to the role of visual culture in the construction of history (the pro-revolution bent of Jacques-Louis David's depiction of Marat's murder, for example) and the narrativization of art history (Alfred Barr's chart “Cubism and Abstract Art” appears multiple times). Crumpler also dabbles in collage and includes an image of John Gast's *American Progress* (1872), which depicts the 19th-century notion of “Manifest Destiny” celebrating the defeat of Indigenous peoples and the Euro-American expansion to the West Coast.



Dewey Crumpler, *In Liquid Form*, 1993. Courtesy Cushion Works.



Dewey Crumpler, *Worlding*, 2017. Courtesy Cushion Works.



Dewey Crumpler, *Behind*, 2020. Courtesy Cushion Works.

Historian Priya Satia calls the modern historical imagination “time’s monster” regarding the power it has had in shaping and validating imperialism and mythical concepts like nation, progress, and race. As the hoodies pop in and out of museums—a colonizing project we’ve inherited today—the legacy and self-sustaining power of that project lingers. “Time’s monster” is the shackle the hoodies carry.

There is a shift away from art historical references, and the earthly world in general, in many of the later paintings, which are grouped on the exhibition’s back wall. The hoodies travel in sneaker-shaped ships to outer space. The cell-shaped shadows are no longer tied to their objects and begin to appear in patterns on the planetary surfaces in *Worlding* (2017) and *Behind* (2020). In their otherworldly existence, the hoodies seem liberated from human time—indeed, they are physically liberated from their shadows. Crumpler likens the possibility of this liberation to his childhood memories of his family’s church in Arkansas, and the singing and humming of Black congregants creating a force strong enough to move outside of time and space—“a tuning framework for dissolving the ominous conditions outside of those doors.” Finding space for momentary freedom, that seems to be what Crumpler has sought all along in his *Hoodie Works*.

Contributor

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