

Ashon Crawley

Published on May 11, 2020. [Ashon T. Crawley](#) is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and African American Studies at the University of Virginia and author of *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Fordham University Press), winner of the 2019 Judy Tsou Critical Race Studies Award from the American Musicological Society; and *The Lonely Letters* (Duke University Press). He is also an audiovisual, choreosonic artist, combining sound, visual and digital art to expand the domain of the possible. All his work is about alternatives to normative function and form, the practice of otherwise possibility.



Ashon's *I will fear no evil* series was to anchor our April juried exhibit at Welcome Gallery. The show has been rescheduled for early 2021 — keep an eye out for more information.

In the [Working from Home series](#), Charlottesville artists are sharing about their work and life in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our second featured artist is Ashon Crawley.



1. Tell us a bit about yourself.

I am a teacher, writer and multidisciplinary artist living in Charlottesville. My research for my art practice as well as my scholarly life engages the simple idea of *otherwise possibility*, the idea that alternatives to the normative world not only are utopic and tending towards the future but actually exist in our current moment, that we have to have a sense perception towards and for the practice of alternatives in the current world. I first noticed the possibility for alternatives in my religious upbringing, in Blackpentecostalism, a modern Christian practice that places a lot of emphasis on the flesh as the conduit through which Spirit happens. So we'd dance and holler and run and leap and cry and faint, and none of this was embarrassing or shameful but was celebrated in community. But because I practice queerness as my mode of relationality, I am excluded from the community that made me possible. So my art practice is an attempt to honor the lifeworlds that formed me, the lifeworlds from which I emerge, while also honoring blackqueer practice as a vitalizing force.

2. How has the pandemic changed your daily life?

I live alone and am single, so I've been thinking a lot about loneliness and singleness during forced isolation. I've also just published a book, *The Lonely Letters*, that attempts to think through connection, desire and feelings of being alone because of abundance and fullness and wanting a place, a person, to pour into in a relational way. The pandemic makes all these ideas and thoughts much louder in my head, it makes them much more difficult to escape, much more felt and known viscerally in a kind of exponential way. So I've been hiking, about 4-5 miles at least four times a week, something I'd never done before this. I've been enjoying listening to nature—to water, to trees, to bumblebees—and it's given me some sense of grounding. Being alone in the house with the sound of the tv gets old, the sound of the refrigerator can be disconcerting. So I'm thankful I'm in Charlottesville and can at least get to the woods several times a week and just breathe, and be.



3. Has it changed your practice? How you work?

I sleep a lot more now, feel the physical distance from family and friends in ways I didn't anticipate because I'm introverted and enjoy my time alone. So the pandemic has slowed down the pace of my work and I'm ok with that, I think more slowly and let that lead me to the canvas.

4. Tell us about something you're working on.

I've been working on a series since the beginning of the pandemic, "yes. surrender. bloom." The series is primarily about the Blackpentecostal tradition, a gesture used in worship services, of hands raised as a form of praise. We were taught that this posture, this gesture, is one of surrender, of saying yes. I've been thinking a lot about blackqueer life as another mode of saying yes, of surrender, of blooming. Saying yes to a kind of living that is marginalized, saying yes and surrendering to a kind of life that produces exclusion and sometimes violence. What does it mean to say yes, to surrender, to such a life when such a life makes you more vulnerable to a violent world? How does one continue to move in those conditions? So in the series, I take pictures from church services with saints praising, primarily but not only with hands raised, in order to think about this practice of openness and vulnerability. And I've been trying to think about the practice of openness and surrender as, too, a blackqueer practice, such that black praise and blackqueer relationality both emerge from a saying-yes, a surrendering, a blooming.

5. What is inspiring you/bringing you joy these days?

I watch cartoons—Steven Universe; She Ra and the Princesses of Power; Summer Camp Island—because they remind me that practicing care, being thoughtful and kind, are necessary and urgent. They bring me joy, they make me laugh.



6. Whose work are you drawn to right now?

Recently, I've been really inspired by the work of Lanecia Rouse Tinsley's work (IG: [@larartstudio](#)), the use of color and neutrals, working with black girlhood to think about freedom.

Images courtesy of the artist. Each painting is from the "yes. surrender. bloom" series.

The opinions expressed in this interview are solely those of the artist and do not necessarily represent the policies or positions of NCAI.

See more of Ashon's work on his [website](#) or on [Instagram](#).