

Creators

Gold-Leaf Collages Contrast The Civil Rights Movement and The Space Race

Delano Dunn's mixed-media works highlight the concurrent historical developments of space exploration and the American Civil Rights Movement.

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Most of us grow up learning about the Civil Rights Movement in broad strokes. MLK had a dream, Rosa wouldn't get up, and now our nation is a Benneton rainbow of post racial-unity, the end. It's taught as foregone historical fact, important, yes, but distant, frozen in time, and only marginally relevant to us today. Even many of us black kids don't start to conceive of the Civil Rights Movement as the bloody, vital, and most importantly, *ongoing* struggle that it is until we get older.

"As a kid growing up in South Central Los Angles I used comic books, science fiction and space exploration as a way of escape," artist **Delano Dunn** tells The Creators Project. "Civil Rights—through no fault of my family— did not play an important role in my life. As I got older I began to understand just how significant the civil rights movement was for me as an African American. A few years ago I started a process of reconciliation, in the hopes of reconciling in myself the imbalanced importance of these two movements."



Procession

For Dunn, this reconciliation manifests itself in the beautiful mixed media works of his series ***In Our Time***. They pair imagery from the golden age of space exploration and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s. One particular coincidence struck him: On May 5, 1961, the Alan Shepard-piloted space capsule **Freedom 7** became the first craft to carry Americans into space. The day before their launch, the very first **Freedom Riders** left Washington, D.C., for New Orleans. "When Shepard returned from his 15-minutes-22-second journey he was greeted with a ticker-tape parade and a meeting with the President," writes Dunn. "When the Freedom Riders crossed state lines into the south, they were arrested and in some cases attacked." In his work, the New York-based artist contrasts these two kinds of heroes, the space pioneers whose bravery and importance was instantly appreciated throughout the country, and the racial equality activists who were initially greeted with violence and scorn.

Each material that figures into Dunn's collaged mixed media works is carefully selected. Vintage photographs highlight the historical facts that inspire his pieces, while tarnished gold leaf "[references] both the space program's utopian promise and its elitist reality." Tools from the domestic sphere, like wallpaper and wood veneer, figure large in his creations. "Woven into the fabric of the Civil Rights movement is domestic participation," says Dunn. "An overwhelming number of the women and men [in the movement] were everyday folks, perhaps people with service jobs, unremarkable professions, who were fed up and unwilling to sit

back and watch their rights or the rights of others be stripped away.” Many works feature shoe polish, a medium inextricably linked both to racist blackface performance and the labor of the black working classes.

Dunn combines all of these carefully curated elements in gorgeous historiographical collages that highlight the continued relevance of the Civil Rights Movement, and serve as a reminder that many of us have very different definitions of what it means to be an American hero.

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