

## In Conversation with Jaleel Campbell: Cultivating Pleasure Through Community-based Art in the City of Syracuse

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*My roots run deep here in Syracuse, and so it is so important for me to not only showcase the beauty and the essence of my Syracuse, you know, but to also showcase the people who have placed such an influential role on me and everything that I do (personal, communication, Campbell, 2020)*

A recent Master of Fine Arts graduate of Purchase College, multimedia artist, Jaleel Campbell is known for creating multimedia art consisting of dolls, digital illustrations, and wearable fashion with signature designs and music videos that involve community participation in his hometown, Syracuse, New York. Jaleel, a Black American artist, also engages local community members through social justice-oriented art workshops and public programming at the only African Diasporic Arts Center in the city of Syracuse, the Community Folk Art Center (CFAC).<sup>1</sup> As CFAC's Executive Director and a professor in the Department of African American Studies I have collaborated with Campbell to bring public programming and exhibitions at the Community Folk Art Center (CFAC), including a virtual art exhibition that showcases a retrospective of Campbell's multimedia artwork. This collaboration has allowed us to bridge multiple communities that are oftentimes disparate.

On June 27, 2019, Campbell hosted an annual summer exhibition called "Collective Display" that featured emerging artists from the Syracuse community. During his exhibition tenure, he also taught doll making workshops in which he shared his artistic process on how he made a series of mixed-media material dolls known as "Jalethals." His reach and intentional advocacy for the black community was supported by the Gifford Foundation's "What If" mini-grant and as an *OnPoint* alum, Jaleel was commissioned by Burrell

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<sup>1</sup> CFAC is the only African Diasporic Arts Center in the city. Established in 1972, CFAC is both a 501c3 organization and a unit of the Department of African American Studies at Syracuse University. The organization's mission is to promote and develop artist of the African Diaspora and to exalt cultural and artistic pluralism by collecting, exhibiting, teaching and interpreting the visual and expressive arts. <http://communityfolkartcenter.org/index.html>

Communications, the country's leading black-owned design agency, to design Walmart's swag bags for the 2018 Essence Festival.

Yet, perhaps what is most evident about his artistry is how he uses creativity to build community and nurture the overall growth of community members in Syracuse. In 2018, Campbell, with the help of fellow creative Christian Kaigler, co-produced the music video, *Feel That Funk: A Short Film*<sup>2</sup> that featured community members in Syracuse dancing, and posing for a complimentary photoshoot as an homage to the 1970s. Subsequently, in 2019, Campbell co-produced another community-based video shoot with Kaigler, *Feel That Funk: The Crush On You Experience*<sup>3</sup>, that is inspired by rapper Lil Kim's 1997 *Crush On You* video ft Lil Cease and a dance scene from the *Whiz* (1978). Both videos, filmed at the Community Folk Art Center, demonstrates the power behind Jaleel Campbell's artwork, which is to bring people together with an emphasis on Black Joy. Black joy described by Cooper (2018) arises from an internal clarity about our purpose. Campbell demonstrates this through his artwork and when he shares personal stories with community members of how his own trauma has catapulted his journey as an artist.

As a form of community engagement, community art is also connected to what John Dewey (1916/1986) contends is progressive education and is a pathway to civil responsibility and maintaining democratic values. In communities like Syracuse, New York where the poverty rate remains among the nation's highest and 30.5% of the city's population lives below the poverty line (Weiner, 2019), community art serves as a form of liberatory practice that is both participatory and collaborative. Campbell understands this as a role of creative activity, as evidenced in his words at the opening of this paper. Campbell's commitment to working with grassroots arts organizations demonstrates the impact professional artists have when they work directly with local organizations to create art in the public's interest (Krensky & Steffen, 2009). His work also supports Lawton's (2019) stance that community-based art is most affective when it is

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2 *Feel That Funk: A Short Film* explores the importance of celebrating what it is to be black in times of uncertainty. Very Wakanda meets The Wiz and Soul Train. This Film aims to empower and show black folks in a way that breaks all boundaries; Pride, regality, fun, laughter... In other words, a good black ass time! [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=2&v=p50BODPs8Pg&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=p50BODPs8Pg&feature=emb_title)

3 Inspired by the video work of Hype Williams in the 1990s, *Feel That Funk: The Crush On You Experience* serves as a catalyst for filling in the gap that separates the past and the future. This film also aims to serve as an acknowledgement to the work of hip-hop pioneers such as Missy Elliot, Busta Rhymes, P. Diddy / Bad Boy Entertainment and a tribute to the great Lil Kim. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erRe5qWXqKE&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erRe5qWXqKE&feature=emb_title)

connected to public welfare and civic responsibility (Lawton, 2019). Yet, what is most compelling about Campbell's artwork and community-based arts initiative is how he navigates through his own experiences with anxiety and rage by cultivating joy and focusing on how to create collective experiences of pleasure. Campbell provides space for affirmation and wellness for all participants including himself. It is the artist's development of pleasure through artmaking that the following dialogue reveals pathways to individual and collective wellness. Furthermore, my conversation with Campbell highlights the clarity that comes from experiences of rage, something that Cooper (2018) explains is needed in order for people to determine what kind of world they want to see and not just what kind of things they want to get rid of.

In a one-on-one interview I sat down to discuss how Campbell's personal and community work, which often centers social justice initiatives, is a form of liberation. Currently, Campbell has an exhibition on CFAC's newly launched online gallery<sup>4</sup> and it features music videos, *Feel That Funk* photographs, digital illustrations, and a featured film about Jaleel Campbell *The Jaleel Campbell Experience* (2020).<sup>5</sup> Some of these images are discussed below as poignant examples of How Campbell finds pleasure in making art.

### Artist Jaleel Campbell Defines Pleasure

**T: How do you know when you are enjoying what you do as an artist? Or that you are going to finding pleasure in the process of making art?**

**J:** When I'm up at five o'clock in the morning, still working on something that is how I know I'm in my zone, that is my sense of pleasure, um, it's just not being able to put it down. I find myself in a constant state of work but it doesn't feel like work and it doesn't matter how long it takes to create. When I'm in the middle of creating a new product or something that I really like I give it my all. So, I just started making these berets. And like, that just came to me on a whim. And so just testing out new ideas and everything that is when I'm just like, it's, it's so much fun. Like it's really fun because I feel like a mad scientist just playing around with stuff and you don't know what the end result will be. Uhm, so sometimes it doesn't hit but most of the time it does and, it's just so much fun to be able to literally make things [laughs], out of a variety of materials. Like you can see something in your head and bring it to life. Not a lot of people can do that. I'm just really, uh, I'm really, really happy that I've gotten to this

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4 <https://www.cfacgallery.org/jaleel-campbell-exhibit/>

5 Philavanh, Kai, (2020). *The Jaleel Campbell Experience*. <https://www.cfacgallery.org/jaleel-campbell-exhibit/>

point where I can have so many different products and services and stuff to offer.

**T: So that leads me to why I wanted to talk to you because what I am trying to ascertain is how you define pleasure in the work that you do? Also, I'd like to know if you identify your work as social activism?**

**J:** You know people---they tell me that my artwork is a form of activism. However, I don't go into different projects thinking about that. I'm just trying to uplift and showcase the beauty of black people and all the different avenues that-that takes. I'm with it, you know?

**T: Could you elaborate on how you approach uplift and showcase the beauty of black people?**

**J:** I just like to provide spaces for us to have a good time and to heal. And, that's really my thought process behind my work. How do I get pleasure from it? Well it is in that creating process and I love being able to make people feel joy. I just love bringing people together.

**T: Yes, I've observed this in many of the projects you've brought to the Community Folk Art Center.**

**J:** Yes! I've really, really loved bringing people together, getting them to have a good time and not have to worry about all the different things that they have going on in their own lives. They can put that to the side for a minute to create art and come and dance or come listen to some music.

**T: One example that demonstrates what you are describing is the open mic night events that are held in CFAC's black box theatre. Do you agree?**

**J:** Yes, listening to people perform through singing, spoken word poetry or even participating in some of my workshops literally helps everyone involved to distress from their regular day to day. Uh, I think that there's power and community building in what we bring to these events, and I want to keep cultivating those experiences in spaces like CFAC.

### Collective Display Exhibition

**T: So, let's talk more specifically about some of your projects. We've talked about them in a very general way. But let's talk about some of your projects that you've done that builds community, and that adds to the pleasure you get from being an artist and art activist. What are some specific things that you've done to build**

**community?**

**J:** Okay, so, I am approaching a 6-year anniversary for one of my projects, a group exhibition called *Collective Display*. I developed this project right after my freshman year at Cazenovia College. During that time, I was extremely defeated. I was going through a terrible breakup and I just felt like the lowest of the low. And so, I had to figure out a way to get back to me, you know? While I was in this space, I was working on a lot of new artwork and I felt like I needed to showcase it to the public. I wanted to have a different conversation through my art than what I was having with myself. So, um, I talked to my barber at the time, and she actually let me use her space to host my first art show. Yeah, so over on the north side of Syracuse, we held this group artists exhibition called *Collective Display*.

**T: Who was part of the exhibition?**

**J:** Well, I reached out to four or five of my friends to be a part of the show as well. It's now a collective and, 6-years later, we've had it at, the south division center over on the south side. We've also had an exhibition at the Everson Museum. And now we have found our home here at CFAC. I think exhibiting at the only Black arts center in the city of Syracuse is extremely important for what we're trying to cultivate through *Collective Display*, which is to bring visibility to young black artists in the city of Syracuse,

**T: Yes! Needless to say, that I am happy about that. Collective Display definitely connects with the mission of the Community Folk Art Center.**

**J:** So, it is beautiful to see how much positivity can come from that pain. From that pain and hardships and other things that I was feeling, I learned that I can thrive from the pain. As much as I hate it. It is a terrible curse. Everything that I do, I feel like it really does stem from a place of pain and, um, right now I'm doing like a whole bunch of internal work to sort all of this stuff out.

**T: I personally think that doing the necessary internal work provides great outcomes for artists because you're actually digging deep in the issues that push or pull you in life.**

**J:** Absolutely! Going back to your question about pleasure, my way of coping with my pain is turning it into pleasure or happiness for others as well as for myself, and this is meaningful work for me, you know.

**T: Absolutely. So, you have an annual Collective Display exhibition and subsequently you're bringing people together creating an opportunity for these emerging artists to showcase their work.**

## **What have been the major outcomes for artists who participate in *Collective Display*?**

**J:** I think this exhibition contributes to building equity and opportunities for underrepresented artists in the field of art. These artists might not have necessarily ever exhibited artwork on this scale or in a legitimate gallery. For instance, to have Amiah Crisler this 12-year-old genius be a part of the show last year and to have her, uh, refer to me as Mr. Campbell, and to just tell me like this is her first time exhibiting in a show with such enthusiasm, Uhm, I was about to start crying, you know. I look at the response from the community who attend the *Collective Display* opening exhibitions and I can see that we're starting to shift the culture here in Syracuse. You know we're really starting to shift the viewpoint that some people have about art and who can be considered a legitimate artist. Also, I recognize that the community takes this exhibition seriously based on the large attendance and their tremendous show of support.

**T:** Well the quality of the art, the curation and even the venue of the exhibition being in a university art gallery that is accessible to the public are all contributing factors. *Collective Display* is really a great example of the Community Folk Art Center's mission which is to provide a platform for African Diasporic Artists and as well as artists from other underrepresented groups and that is especially the case for emerging artists. So, tell me what is your main goal when curating the exhibition?

**J:** I'm just trying to build up other artists. That's really what my goal is.

**T:** That's beautiful. I see this endeavor to develop a platform for other artists who are oftentimes marginalized in mainstream art spaces as part of the activism in your work.

### **Creating a Space for Wellness and Pleasure Through Doll Making**

**T:** In addition to curating community-based exhibitions, you also are known for creating a body of work called the Jalethal Dolls. Please explain more about the dolls, how you came about creating them and also how these dolls are centered around your notion of pleasure.

**J:** Okay, so for me growing up, I have always loved dolls. I loved Bratz dolls in particular. Bratz dolls have a certain personality. They reminded me of Black women, you know.



**Figure 1.** *Jalethal Doll (Orange) Mixed Media (2019)*

**T: How so?**

**J:** The Bratz dolls are just so fly. When they first came out on the market, I had never seen anything like them before. Barbie didn't have anything on the Bratz dolls. I remember how I would take my sisters' dolls and at that time I actually had all of the action figures or what society says are boy dolls anyways. So, playing with dolls was not foreign to me. However, I would take my sisters' dolls. I would design clothes and do their hair with different stuff from found objects around my house. For example, I would take the latex from a balloon and turn it into a dress or something for the dolls you know like I was really crafty, with paper mache too. I would replicate the mummification process with paper mache and create a body cast with the dolls. Yeah, there are just so many different instances where I, look back like yo, I was really onto something, you know [laugh]. And, um, it was just fun and liberating to me to have these little people that I could, uh, dress up and create you know and come up with scenarios in my head about who these dolls were. So, um, I loved playing with them. However, my father hated it, though. While growing up I had to be extremely discreet with the dolls and my mother was my lookout. She would let me know if my father was on his way home in time for me to put the dolls away. In my mind I'd tell myself I've gotta put these dolls up so he doesn't come in and beat me

or cuss me out for playing with them.

**T: How does your early experiences with playing with dolls and your relationship with your father inform your work as an artist?**

J: Well those experiences have always been really hard to work through. Once I got older, I tried to forget all of those memories of the dolls and, um, all of that pain that was attached to them. Uhm, my relationship with my father has become like way better now because we've been able to discuss the past and he has apologized about the way that he has treated me but you know, of course, the anxiety that I experienced doesn't go away overnight. So, um, I will say that I'm just so glad that I was able to find, an outlet or a way to go back to that younger Jaleel that found pleasure in designing fashion for dolls. From there, I wanted to make a doll that I would have appreciated when I was at a young age, and I did.

**T: You've really come full circle by creating something that gave you joy at a very young age but that also is connected to a lot of pain you've experienced. This seems to be a pattern in your life. In regard to the Jalethal dolls can you describe what exactly they represent?**

J: Well the Jalethal Dolls are non-gendered, however it's interesting to hear how people refer to them or see them. Some people refer to them as he. Some people refer to them as she. Regardless, I leave it up to the person to decide what the gender of the dolls are.

**T: How does this connect back to your earlier experience with playing with dolls?**

J: Uhm, because I know what it feels like as a little boy to want to play with these dolls but to feel restricted, and I don't want to put restrictions on people who interact with the dolls I make. I want people to feel free interacting with the Jalethal dolls and not worry how it's gonna look if they do- like the world is moving into such a new place in regard to gender.

**T: I agree. One thing I've notice about the Jalethal Dolls are patterns that reflect a West African aesthetic.**

J: Absolutely, I want these dolls to reflect the African Diaspora and black culture. So, I borrow West African aesthetics and textile patterns to design my dolls. I also create my own unique design patterns because these dolls are connected to my own identity. That's why the dolls are called Jalethals, which is a variation of my name Jaleel and in some ways represents my alter ego.

**T: In regard to the community interacting with the Jalethal dolls, what have you observed?**

**J:** One thing that I am really fascinated by is how young black boys interact with the dolls. I participated in a show at the Sankofa Festival over the summer. And all these little kids came up to me and asked, "Uhm is these voodoo dolls?" [laughs]. And I'm just like, "No." And I'm like, "Do ya'll wanna hold them?", and they held one. Next, I'm playing with these kids from the community and they took pictures with the dolls and everything. Here were these little black boys just having such a good time. And I was like, "Oh my God, this is so cute, this so cute. "I was so happy because it's what I hope for, I knew that these dolls would have such a strong impact, you know?"

**T: This goes back to your goal of creating experiences of joy for members in your community, right?**

**J:** I agree, I've also been able to channel all of the different emotions, uh, pain and turmoil that I've held onto throughout the years. My personal journey is something that I'm turning into something positive through art, and this is something that I have prioritized. Uhm, so I would say that another approach to creating positivity and pleasure is through my community-based doll making workshops.

**T: Well, I love that you've brought these workshops to the Community Folk Art Center. The doll making workshops definitely establishes a strong sense of community through art.**

**J:** That's great to hear, I want to again, bring people into this space and it's not only about learning how to create dolls. It's more so about the dialogue surrounding the creating of the dolls you know what I'm saying? Uhm, I have for like the past two or so years, really been trying to work on getting people to trust me enough to open up and show me who they really are. I feel that people in my community, we have so many different walls up because you never know who you can trust, you know what I'm saying? It's really hard to let our guard down. And so, whether it's with the *Feel That Funk* videos that I create, the Jalethal Dolls or even the *Collective Display* art exhibition, I want to also create a safe space for people in our community to let their guard down.

**T: I'm glad you mentioned the videos. We'll get to the *Feel That Funk* videos a little later but I'm curious to know what's the nature of the dialogue you are facilitating during the doll-making workshop? What are the things that the community is talking about?**

**J:** Right. So, with the doll making workshops, I give people a chance to come into the space with whatever problems or situations that they have going on in their lives. And we all just sit down, in groups that are multi-generational to create and talk, in these workshops. I hear so many different outlooks on whatever issue somebody might be facing. For example, there was this one day, when one of the women that was, uh, in my last workshop, she came in the space frustrated. She was having such a bad day because of her job and she talked about how she was feeling unappreciated by her boss. Also, she just didn't feel like they valued her as much as she felt like they should. And so, we all talked about it, you know, we built up this relationship with her and we were just trying to give her positive affirmations to speak life into her and remind her of how important she is and that she is needed in the community. This conversation took place while we were creating these dolls, and it was nice to see everybody band together to support her in that moment.

I should also mention that while we were doing all of this doll making and talking, we were listening to house music in the background. So, I also got to introduce different music to younger participants, that they might not have heard before, you know some of my favorites. This is also an example of how my art making process brings pleasure for myself while creating a space for healing in our community.

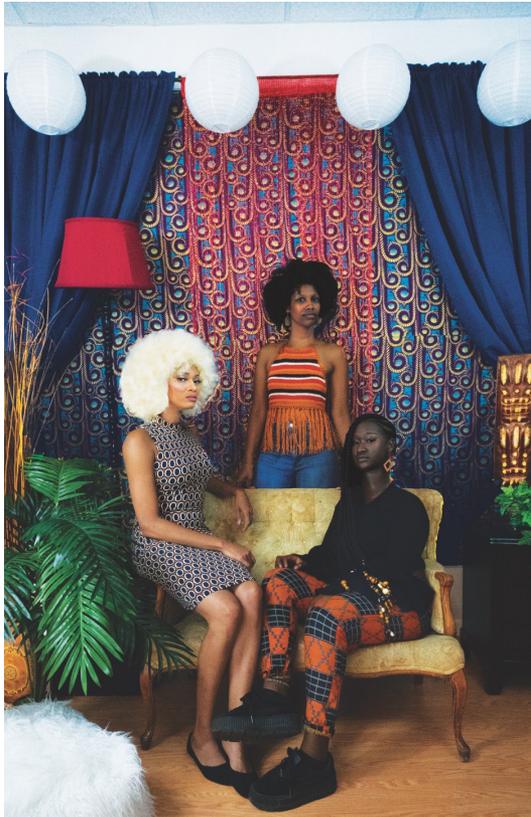
**T: Yes, creating a space for healing adds to the overall building of wellness and based on the nature of some of the group's conversations, would you say that you are also creating a space to discuss some of the social injustice that is experienced in your community?**

**J:** I agree. We discuss a lot of issues that have negatively impacted the African American community in Syracuse because sometimes our collective experiences are also individual experiences that we carry with us. Overall, for me it's just really nice to get to, plan and teach a creative skill while at the same time give space for vulnerability, and to support as much as I can. Uhm, the people that participate in these workshops are really important to me and they allow me to be vulnerable and establish wellness for myself. One great example of this are the music videos I co-produced that involves the participation of community members.

### **Feel That Funk: Building Community Pleasure Through Digital Media**

**T: Okay, now let's talk about the *Feel That Funk* music videos. Where did you get the idea to create music videos that involved the participation of so many community members?**

**J:** The *Feel that Funk* project began after the first solo show that I curated at CFAC last summer, um, or two summers ago, in 2018, and that came out of me just wanting to have a real-life version of my illustrations at the time.

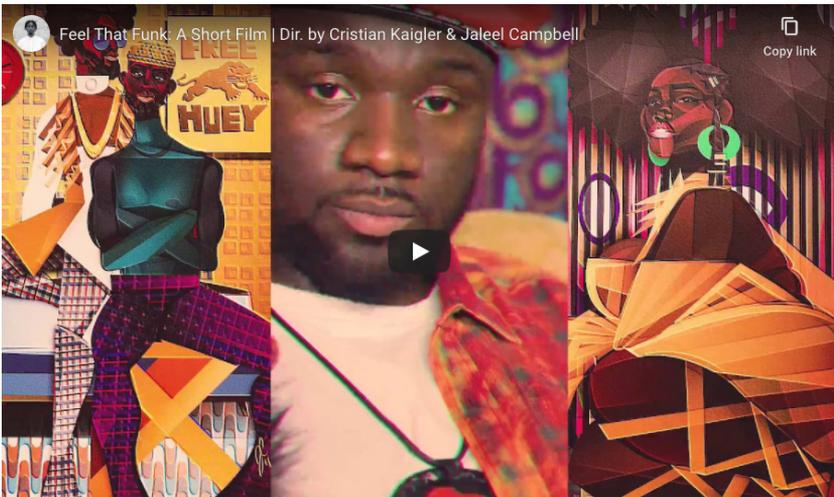


**Figure 2** *Tenekqua, Mazzy, Shay*, Digital Photo (2018)

I created a digital illustration series called *Feel that Funk*, which is based on 70s aesthetics. I wanted to bring these images to life. So, um, I got a grant and I ended up coming up with these two installation rooms where people got a chance to come in dressed in 70s attire, and just pose for the camera.

The pictures that we produced from this photoshoot were so beautiful and for 14-hours we had a photo session for community members here in Syracuse as well as a house party that turned into the production of a music video.

**T:** That's incredible; I didn't know this was a full day of production. Please walk me through the experience of producing a music video at the Community Folk Art Center.



**Figure 3.** *Feel That Funk: A Short Film* (2018)

**J:** It was a long but amazing day. Uhm, I just wanted to treat people like they were royalty and just have them come in and have a good time. Me and the production team provided drinks and food and then participants got their pictures taken. From there, the event became a social gathering for people to network amongst each other while we got everybody's pictures taken.

So that was half of the day. Then we brought everybody into the black box theater where we had built this entire set and decorated the space. This is where the video portion of the *Feel that Funk* series came in. So, um, we had this list of 70s songs and we just had a 70s party. We were in there dancing and people were feeling really good. They were really feeling good especially after the liquid courage kicked in [laughter]. I'm so glad that I was able to get people loose. These people did not know each other at all. Their only relations with each other was me and their love for my artwork and creativity.

**T:** This definitely another strong example of how you build

## community and experiences of pleasure through art.

**J:** Mm-hmm. So, to bring all of these people that I love and who support me into the same room and have them dancing together as if they were old friends; definitely brings me pleasure as a creative. You know, like, that was such a beautiful moment for me. I really felt supported as an artist because the community participated for a long time. They danced for almost 6 hours or so in order for us to get as much footage as possible for the video. What's most impressive is that no one complained [laughter]. This was my first time doing any project like that, so I didn't know what to expect at all. At one point the video set almost fell down and my afro wig was about to fall off during some of the dance scenes [laughter]. But when I saw the final product which was this video, I was shook, you know like the video came out so nice. And me and the production team exhibited my illustration work throughout the video. It was like a cross-promotion for not only this music video but also the *Feel that Funk* series digital artwork as well.



**Figure 4.** *Rahm*, Digital Photo (2018)

**T: One thing I have definitely observed is that you are excellent at promoting your artwork on social media. It's fascinating to see you do it and subsequently how you are able to expand your audience beyond the city of Syracuse.**

J: Thank you. You know this video was posted online, and we used the song by the R&B group, *The Internet*. Uhm, we used their song *Roll* from their last album *Hivemind* and, um, they saw the video and they loved it! I was contacted by their tour manager because the group was gearing up for a tour at the time, and they showed the video to audiences while touring across the country.

**T: So, is this a R&B group that also plays Funk music?**

J: Yeah, yeah. They're associated with Tyler, The Creator. So, it's very, um, R&B funk. Their last album was really, really dope and that song, in particular, is just intoxicating.

**T: And what's the name of the song?**

J: Um, *Roll (Burbank Funk)*.

**T: Why do you feel that it's important to specifically bring people in the Syracuse community together to have these experiences whether it's through doll making workshops or photography and video productions like the *Feel that Funk* project?**

J: Well, when I'm on Facebook, I see so many different statuses of people complaining about Syracuse and how there's nothing to do. This is a city whose Black and Latino community face one of the highest poverty rates in the country and people need to be inspired and encouraged. Also, on Facebook, there's a group called Syracuse vs. Rochester where it's like, all these black people competing and debating about whose city or community is better and it doesn't make any sense at all to me but it means something to my community to have unique experiences like the ones I'm trying to create through art and really public programming. I'm trying to give people the alternative to those different negative tropes that are being said about Syracuse. There are positive things to do here and there are so many dope and creative people that live here. And, um, I wanted to see what can happen when we bring all of these dope people into the same room, you know.

**T: What would you say are some of the most positive outcomes from your creative social experiments [laughter]?**

J: [Laughter] well so many relationships have been built from these different projects that I have done. There are so many different people

people who have told me, “You know, thank you for introducing me to this person”, or, “We met at this place, like at one of these different events and I’m just like--

**T: You’re a connector.**

J: Yeah, I’m a bridge--[laughs] and this adds to my overall sense of enjoying life and pleasure because it just is really important that I contribute to building a strong sense of community.

My conversation with Jaleel Campbell reveals that pleasure comes from answering the call on one’s life and for Campbell that call is to be an artist. His ability to manifest ideas into creative projects is a process that keeps him in what he calls “the zone”. Yet, what is most revealing is that Campbell’s sense of pleasure is deeply rooted in trauma and it is through creating art that this artist has created a space for healing and wellness. Campbell also makes a distinction between pleasure, a feeling he gets while making art, from joy, particularly black joy, an experience that is harnessed through his community-based arts projects.

Campbell provides space for people to heal and to have what he calls “a good black ass time.” Doll-making workshops, music video productions, open mic nights and his annual art exhibition, *Collective Display*, are just a few examples of how Campbell seeks black joy within his community. Through community-based arts he centers black people, black culture, and the black aesthetic. Both Campbell’s personal journey as an artist as well as his work with community members gives space for vulnerability, healing, and wellness. Most importantly, Campbell prioritizes these attributes for himself and others, a revolutionary act that is a form of social activism in and of itself.

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