

# What is 'Black Art' in San Francisco in 2019 ?

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## Arts



Gabriel Christian and cross. (*Robbie Sweeny*)

A voice came from the area near the door in the lobby of the CounterPulse Theatre and Gallery in San Francisco, asking for all the attendees who identify as black or African American to come with them; the rest of the audience was instructed to head toward the general seating area.

A dozen black folks, a baker's dozen including myself, were escorted up a set of stairs and into a small room. That's where we saw a performance, an Igbo masquerade, for our eyes only. I'm not at liberty to recount further details of that aspect of the evening, but I can tell you this: I found what I had been searching for.

I had spent the previous week looking for, and trying to define, "black art."

I read the article in the *New York Times* about the "rising presence of black artists of every ilk"—and the side-eye responses.



*Pendarvis Harshaw*

I saw the film *Queen & Slim*, read the articles [praising it](#) and [critiquing it](#) (and I cracked up at the hashtag [#TweetLikeLena](#)).

I read about the issues around [Black Art spaces and ownership](#), spawned by Art Basel. (And of course, I saw the story about the [\\$120,000 banana](#), and [the person who ate the banana](#), and [the Kanye meme](#) it inspired.)

And I've been following Chicago rapper and book club founder Noname. She shook a few folks when she publicly stated [her stance against performing in front of majority white audiences](#).



**Noname**   
@noname

“When white folks come to rap shows to hear about our troubles, use rap slang on TV, put hip-hop songs in ads to create a cultural cosign effect, and don’t also fight/march/vote with Black folks, it’s easy to feel used.”

Via Noname's Twitter. *(Via Noname's Twitter)*

I found myself awake at 2am watching this interview with [Toni Morrison](#), describing what it's like to not adhere to the "white gaze" in her art. I also watched this old episode of Bernie Mac on [Def Comedy Jam](#), because I'm pretty sure that's where I get *my* definition of Black Art. The artists' method of oral storytelling, the audience rolling in the aisle in reaction, and ownership over the content.

But... damn. What about the venue owner? And the distributor? (I was watching on YouTube, owned by Google.) There's always something. Can you really have art that is fully black in America? Or is *that* a part of Black Art? You know, being creative despite the circumstances?



"mouth//full" performance at CounterPulse. (Photos by Robbie Sweeny)

At Counterpulse, after coming down the stairs from the small room, we were asked to sit on three pews set up in a triangle in the middle of the stage area. Two long pieces of church-style red carpet made a cross in the middle of the pews; a pulpit sat in the middle of that.

We were in the show. Everyone else sat outside of the triangle, in the theatre seating.

The two-person *mouth//full*, written and performed by [Gabriel Christian and Chibueze Crouch](#), included a set of spiritual dance performances and monologues focusing on experiences in the Black Church. Throughout the performance, the carpet became disheveled, and the minister's pulpit was hoisted on Gabriel's back and carried away; almost symbolically going from organized religion back to a space of open spirituality.

By the end of the performance, the group of us in the pews were invited to step into one of four groups based on affirmative statements we identified with—two of them led by guest artists Monica Hastings-Smith and Rev. Mutima Imani. Once groups were established, we shared in a session of communal chanting.

I damn near forgot there were other people in the audience.

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Intermission came and I caught a little fresh air before doubling back for the second act, *She-Verse*, a multimedia piece by Cherie Hill IrieDance, which explores the parallels between the way women and the planet are treated. The racially diverse group—Lashon A. Daley, Andreína Maldonado, Rose Rothfeder and dancer/choreographer Cherie Hill—put on a show that was a little lighter than the piece prior to it. But still, being written by a black woman makes it Black Art, right? Hill, a dance scholar, believes so.

"My work comes from black feminism. And when I think of Black Art, I think it comes from black people," she told me. "Black people are diverse, so there are going to be a lot of different things put out there."

Chibueze Crouch also believes there's a broad answer to the question, but when it boils down to it, "There's a shared sense of community in Black Art... there's always something shared in the experiences between the creators and consumers of Black Art."

In regard to the opening, Crouch told me, the aim was to center black experiences, uplift tradition and modernize it with subtle changes that nod to gender rights, as well. "It's about reclaiming that black spirituality; the masquerade was the original church, the original place where black people could gather and do art," Crouch said. "It's where Black Art comes from: the spirituality, the shared experience."

Gabriel Christian added, in regards to the play's format, that "everyone else has the privilege of seeing us in communion, but not everyone is going to get it... I've already had reviews from white people talking about how they didn't get it, and that's fine. I don't think it was meant to be gotten by anybody but the folks inside of that triangle."

Christian emphasized that those outside the triangle are privy to only "a snapshot of what it's like for us to be in community, and how powerful it is, and how sacred it is."



The Cherie Hill IrieDance cast. (Robbie Sweeny)

On that small stage, I saw something that spoke to Noname's concerns over who's consuming our art, as well as the conversation around *Queen & Slim*, and how black trauma is shown and African American Vernacular English is used.

Before concluding our conversation, Christian said, "I think it's impossible to *not* be an artist, and be a black person living here."

To which Crouch added: "We have to make survival palatable."

It made me think of the poet Toni Cade Bambara, whose work contributed to the Black Arts Movement, and who once wrote: "The purpose of a writer is to make revolution *irresistible*."



*'She-Verse' and 'mouth//full' run for two more performances, Dec. 13 and 14, at CounterPulse in San Francisco. [Details here.](#)*

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