

# Rising Painter Reginald Sylvester II Finds Refuge in Abstraction

Jewels Dodson | May 13, 2022



Reginald Sylvester II in his new show “Painter’s Refuge: A Way of Life,” at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture, Charlotte, North Carolina. ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

Looking at artist Reginald Sylvester II’s inaugural body of abstract paintings, “Nemesis” (2019), the work isn’t remotely retaliatory, vicious, or vengeful—anything but in fact. This work, which debuted at his London-based gallery Maximillian William in September 2019, is warm and inviting. Colorful brushstrokes dance across the canvas in a capricious cacophony of rhythmic markmaking. The result is a cohesive series of abstract work.

Sylvester is an emerging artist on the brink. His new show of works on paper, “CUTS,” on view at Maximillian William, features a body of work that is true to his practice—challenging the traditional

symmetrical shape that houses most art. He cuts curves into the work, altering the picture plane entirely while simultaneously experimenting with space and symmetry.



Reginald Sylvester II, *A War Within the Soul vs the Flesh*, 2019. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

Earlier this year, he was awarded the Northern Trust Purchase Prize at EXPO Chicago, which saw Pérez Art Museum Miami acquire his work *Four Corners* (2021). That work is currently featured in Sylvester's first solo museum exhibition, "Painter's Refuge: A Way of Life," at North Carolina's Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture. This exhibition marks a pivot in the artist's developing abstract practice: He turns away from gestural markmaking to explore materials that broaden the bounds of abstraction.

Through this work, Sylvester is expressing an evolving thought and exploring the plentiful possibilities of a developing artistic practice. "Nemesis" was super important to me because it was my foot into the door of abstraction," Sylvester said. With this work, Sylvester does what all great abstractionists do: He draws you in visually, only to seize you cerebrally with myriad thoughts, ideas, and questions.

"Nemesis," like much of Sylvester's work, is bound to Christian scripture. In these paintings, he cites a passage in the *Book of Galatians* that speaks of the battle between the soul and the flesh. The soul symbolizes purity and sanctity, while the flesh represents the indulgence of passion and desire; the latter, a revolt against God's will. The two entities are at war, yet coexist within the human being. "The show is

called ‘Nemesis’ because it was a call back to my internal struggles, flesh-wise and spiritual-wise,” Sylvester said.



Reginald Sylvester II, *Transgression*, 2019. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.



Reginald Sylvester II, *The Soul Told Tales of a Past Once Lived*, 2019. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

He uses religion and scripture to create a sort of structure for himself. For Sylvester, the freedom of the artist’s life is a fallacy; he’s discovered that freedom without structure is chaos. He believes following scripture and the Commandments is a spiritual investment. “I want to make it to the kingdom, I want to make it to heaven—who doesn’t?” he asked.

Sylvester, 35, is a native of North Carolina and spent his formative years in Oakland, California. And although the San Francisco Bay Area has a rich artistic lineage, Sylvester wasn’t privy to much of it; art at the institutional level was out of his reach. His exposure to art began with his father, whose own artistic work was based in typography, silkscreening, and hand-painted signage. He encouraged his son to study digital design under the notion that it could be a self-sustaining career path. Sylvester attended the Academy of Art University, majoring in graphic design, and though he was close, he was unable to cross the finish line of completing his degree program.

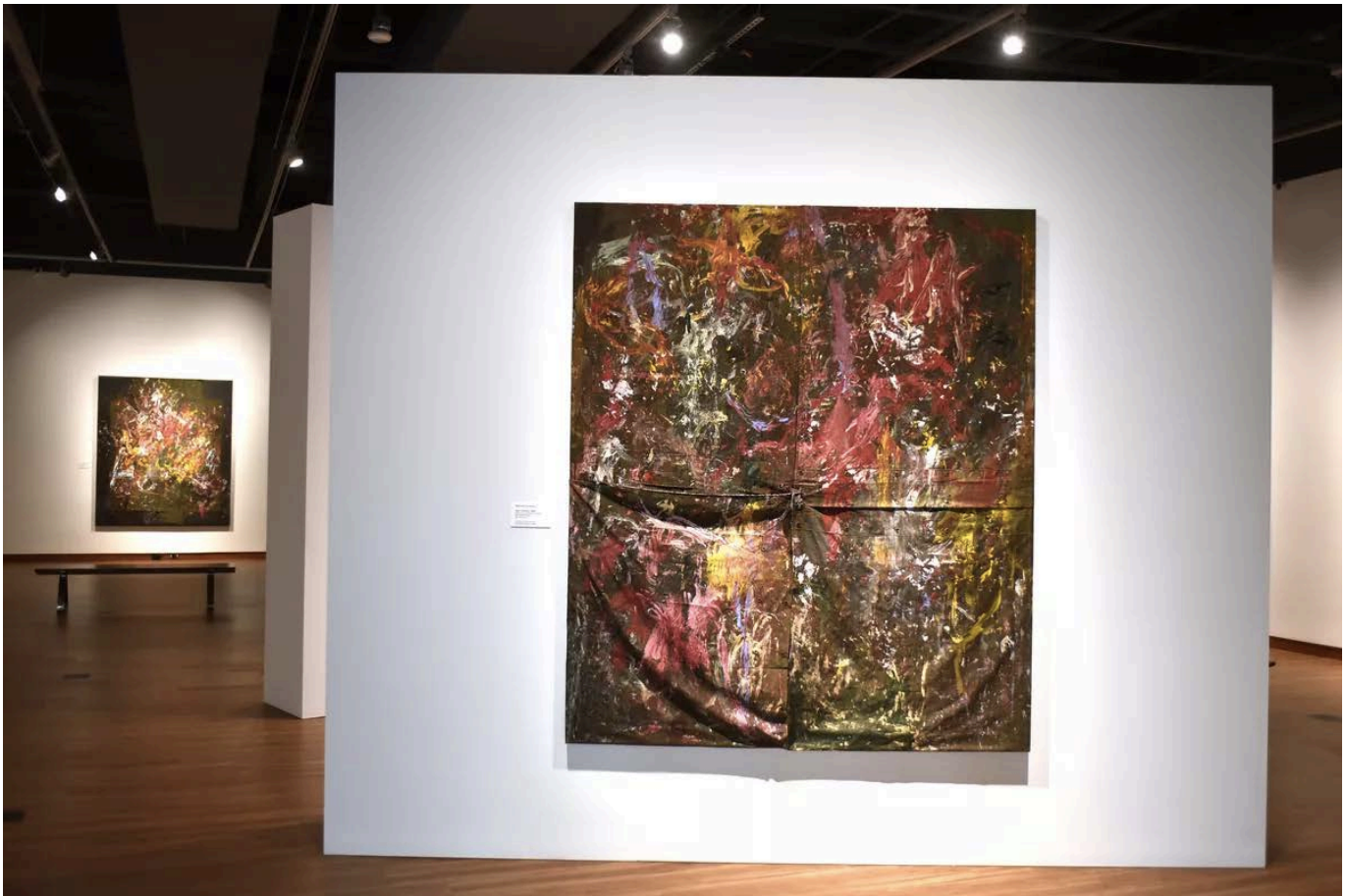


Reginald Sylvester II, *Untitled*, 2022. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

Nonetheless, he honed a strong skill set and began garnering steady freelance work. He created graphics, logos, branding, and packaging design. One of his clients was Gap Inc., where he did advertising design and worked on ad campaigns for Old Navy. He made a name for himself as a streetwear aficionado, and earned recognition and cachet when he started his own clothing label, Rare Panther. The nascent remnants of the brand still live on the street culture bible, *Hypebeast*.

Following the advice of his colleagues who recognized his talent, Sylvester left the corporate sphere in pursuit of a deeper purpose: art. “I’ve always wanted to be respected for my own visual voice. The next transition was painting,” he said confidently.

Prior to 2019, Sylvester’s work oscillated between figuration and abstraction. Inspired by Takashi Murakami, Andy Warhol, and KAWS, he began working in a figurative, pop, expressionist painting style. That culminated in a presentation at SCOPE Art Show during Art Basel in Miami Beach in 2014.



Installation view, Reginald Sylvester II, "Painter's Refuge: A Way of Life," at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture, Charlotte, North Carolina. ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

By 2015, Sylvester began to hear the call of abstraction. "I knew I wanted to go into abstraction, my hand just wasn't mature enough yet," he recalled. In the 2016 series "Reaching For Heaven," which debuted at Pace Prints, he slowly started to abandon the figure. Using oil sticks and acrylic paint, Sylvester created boldly colored organic shapes that were playful and cartoon-like. "From 2015, with every show I'm breaking myself down. Every single time my process is deteriorating," he said fervently.

In 2017, Sylvester made a very conscious choice: "I could've kept making the work I was making, but I knew there was a more refined place I could reach if I just took the time." So he took a hiatus and developed a serious and rigorous studio practice. "I went into the shadows for almost two years," he said of the transitional moment. "From 2017 to 2019 was the growth of going into abstraction. I went from making singular figures to a cacophony of figures."

In this incubation period, Sylvester spent copious amounts of time understanding his own hand and where he wanted to take his technique, as well as developing a deeper sensibility for gestural abstraction. He also explored how he wanted to approach and expand on drawing and painting by incorporating found objects. "Using exterior materials to make my paintings more tactile was at the forefront of my brain," he said.



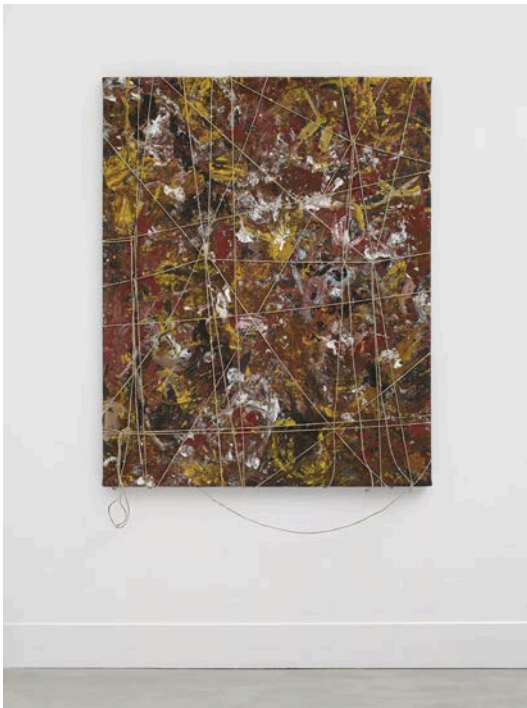
Reginald Sylvester II, *Swing Low*, 2020. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.



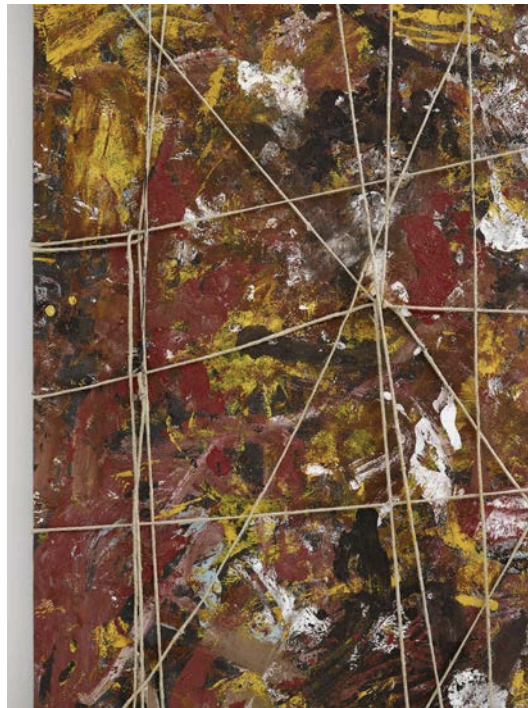
Reginald Sylvester II, *400 Yrs*, 2020. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

For his second solo exhibition at Maximilian William, “With the End in Mind,” held in summer 2021, Sylvester opened an escape hatch to explore a whole new world of materials. These works become an axis point where his internal world converges with the external through introducing found objects and residual materials.

Sylvester was inspired by Melvin Edwards’s 1963 “Lynching Fragments” series, in which he transfigured metal scraps into barbarous compositions symbolic of the violence that has been inflicted on African Americans for centuries. Sylvester affixed discarded fragments—“leftovers” from waste in his studio—onto the paintings. He enmeshed loose canvas threads from his studio floor onto the work. He also bound some of the works with heavier ropes twisting and knotting them around the canvas, an examination of freedom and bondage. The ideas may vary, but the concept of tension is an ongoing theme in Sylvester’s work.



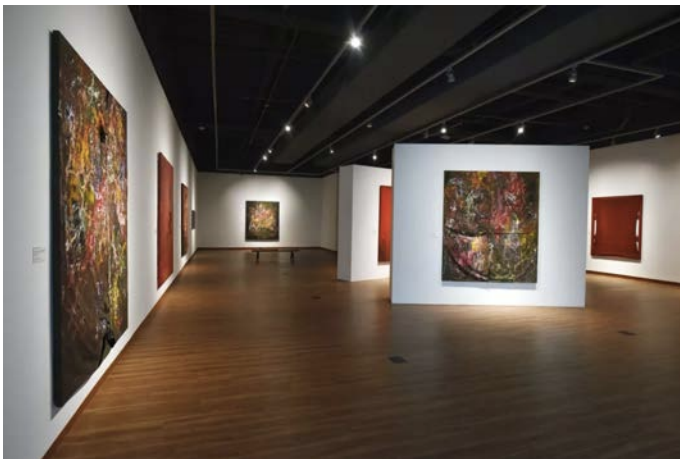
Reginald Sylvester II, *Bondage III*, 2020. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.



Reginald Sylvester II, detail of *Bondage III*, 2020. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

The foundation of “With the End in Mind” was a rich palette of brown tones—cinnamon, pecan, maroon, caramel, and mahogany, symbolizing diasporic communities. Sylvester creates connective tissue between materials and melanin. Though Black and Brown communities have been forced to exist on the bare minimum, diasporic creativity continues to thrive despite limitations.

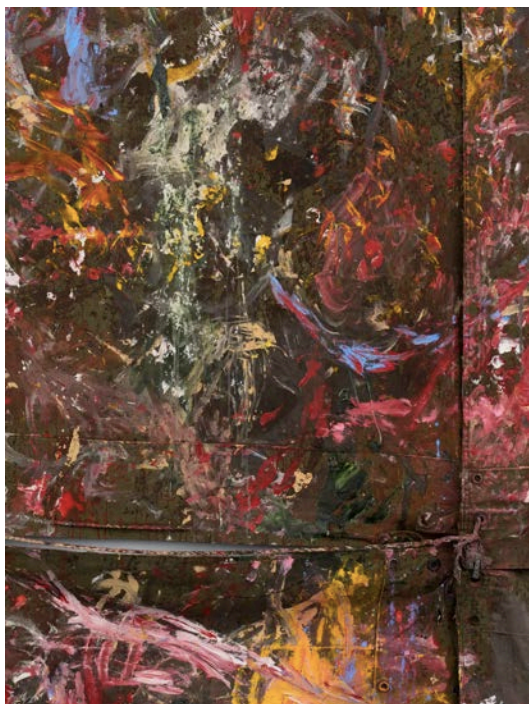
This concept is exemplified in *Bondage III* (2020), a canvas covered in a robust cluster of Nutella brown and auburns, contrasted against honey mustard yellow, accented by smatterings of white, and a hint of Costa Rican blue, then totally enveloped in a labyrinth of rope. Though it’s encumbered, the work’s resilience is reminiscent of philosopher Albert Camus’s prose: “in the midst of winter I found there was within me an invincible summer.”



Installation view, Reginald Sylvester II, “Painter’s Refuge: A Way of Life,” at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture, Charlotte, North Carolina. ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

His new body of work is featured in the Gantt show, “Painter’s Refuge: A Way of Life,” which is curated by Dexter Wimberly and on view through January 16, 2023.

The Gantt approached Wimberly, inquiring about artists to pay attention to, and he steered its focus to Sylvester. “I think there are some artists that not only make great work but the way that they think is special,” Wimberly said. “They aren’t approaching this the way so many other people are approaching it. I found the underpinnings of Reginald’s work refreshing.”



Reginald Sylvester II, detail of *Four Corners*, 2021. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.



Reginald Sylvester II, *Four Corners*, 2021. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

“Painter’s Refuge” diverges from Sylvester’s otherwise dynamic visual discourse. This work is more introspective. Sylvester is vulnerable, inviting us to observe his most internal dialogues. “[He’s] someone that’s not only fully engaged in making art but that’s willing to have intellectual conversations about spirituality and religion,” Wimberly added. “I find people often don’t know how to have those conversations anymore.”

For a year and a half, Sylvester investigated new materials inspired by his childhood and personal history. He recalls military paraphernalia omnipresent throughout his life—his father is a former marine. Through this examination, Sylvester discovered military tent shells used in the 1960s and ’70s to house soldiers. He began experimenting with the tarps, buttoning them over frames and painting on them. His wheels began to spin: “I started to think about the idea of refuge. Refuge in war. Christ being our refuge,” he expounded.





Reginald Sylvester II, *Misery*, 2021. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.



Reginald Sylvester II, detail of *Misery*, 2021. © Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist and Maximillian William, London.

Following his feelings towards refuge, he stumbled upon a liquid repellent rubber material used for roofing. Fittingly, it provided protection from the elements, and so the refuge theme persisted. After ruminating on a new process, Sylvester began using the rubber material as a canvas and layering the tent shells atop. He painted on this new surface, discovering a perfect tension between rubber and acrylic paint. “Most materials absorb paint; this material is rejecting it, so the paint dries on top of it,” he explained. “What’s been very good for me is putting myself in new situations with new materials and finding a way to work with them.”

When we met, the new works adorned the walls of his sun-drenched Ridgewood, New York, studio. In the light of day, their intensity radiates.



Installation view, Reginald Sylvester II, “Painter’s Refuge: A Way of Life,” at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts+Culture, Charlotte, North Carolina. ©Tyrus Ortega Gaines Photography. Courtesy of the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture.

This new series pivots deeper into abstraction. In addition to introducing new materials, Sylvester also moved away from the gestural markmaking that defined his last two solo exhibitions. This time, he centers monochromatic color play.

In *Offering III* (2021), the base material is not the familiar linen, but rubber stretched over a canvas frame. At the northern and southern ends of the canvas, there are peek-a-boo cutouts exposing the canvas's inner workings. A crimson lacquer engulfs the surface, it rages; the power is palpable, but so is the pain. Sylvester embedded rope below the enamel, making the political also present. This painting technique is more elusive than its predecessors, but it's not any less emotional.



Reginald Sylvester II, *Offering III*, 2021. ©  
Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist  
and Maximillian William, London.



Reginald Sylvester II, *Offering IV*, 2021. ©  
Reginald Sylvester II. Image courtesy the artist  
and Maximillian William, London.

To call Reginald Sylvester II an emerging artist is accurate. He is quickly rising, pivoting as needed, persevering beyond limitations, and pushing the possibilities of abstraction. With each new phase of his artistic journey, he unsheathes new layers of himself and another aspect of his practice. Onlookers witness the evolution of an artist and a person. His personal growth is inextricably linked to his professional development. In him, there's more humanity, and in his work, more honesty.