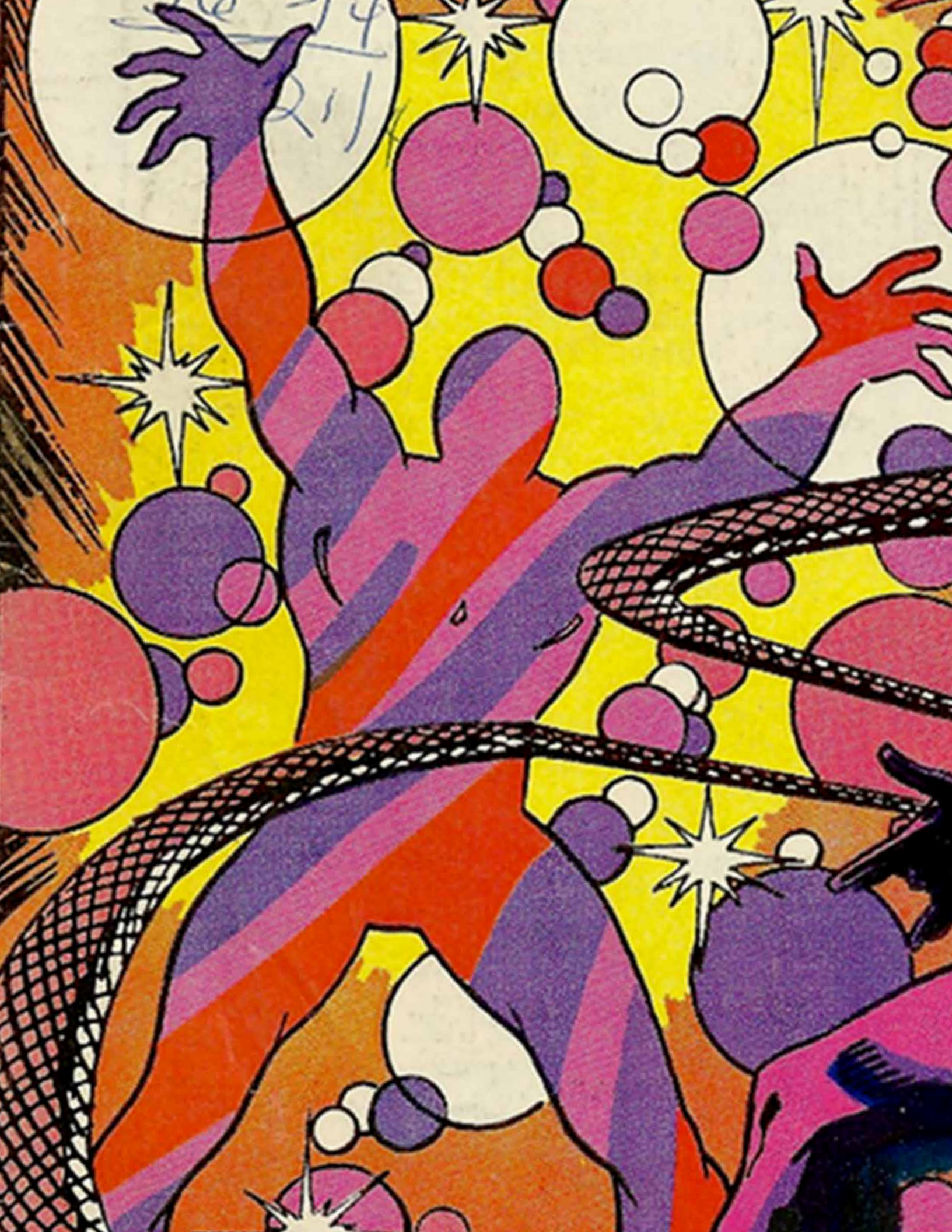
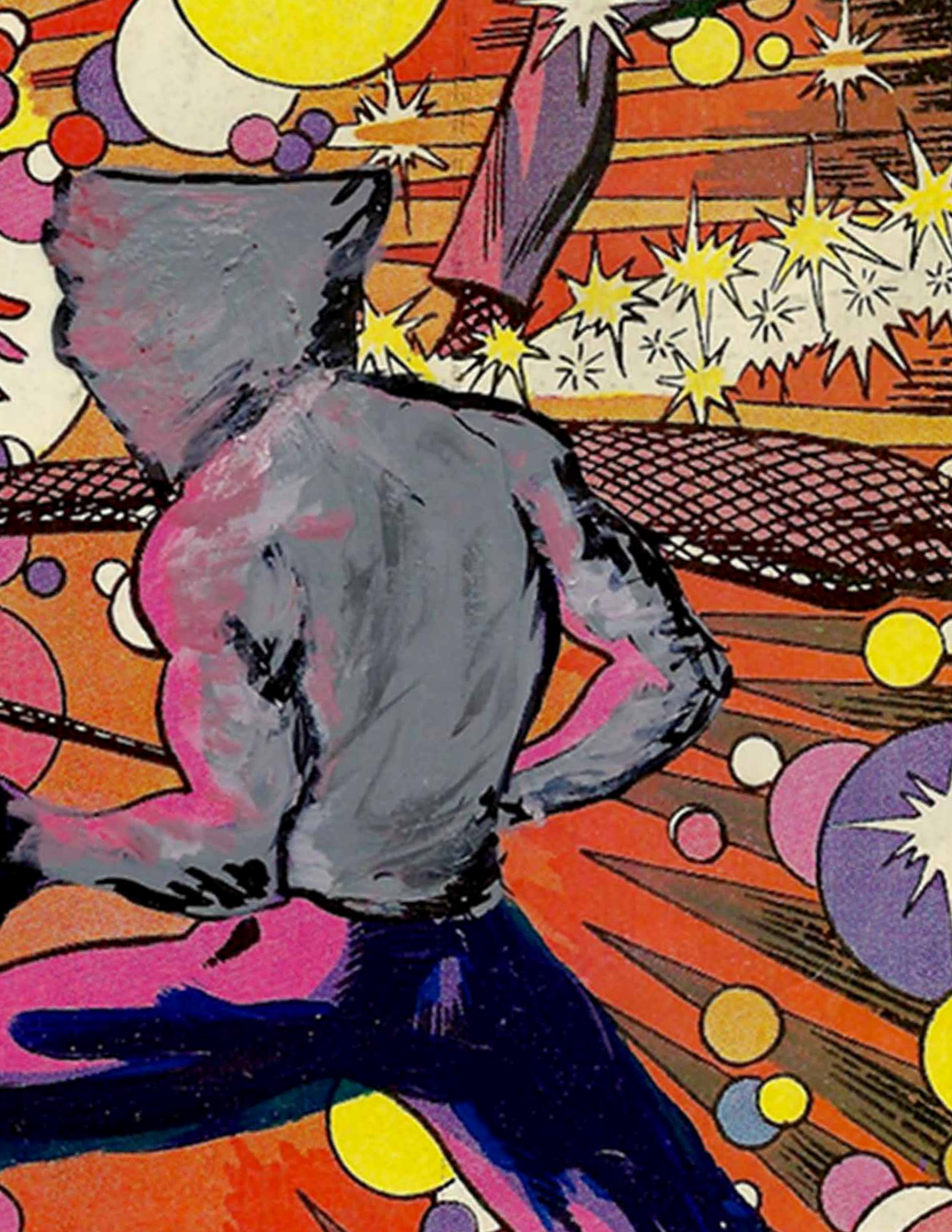


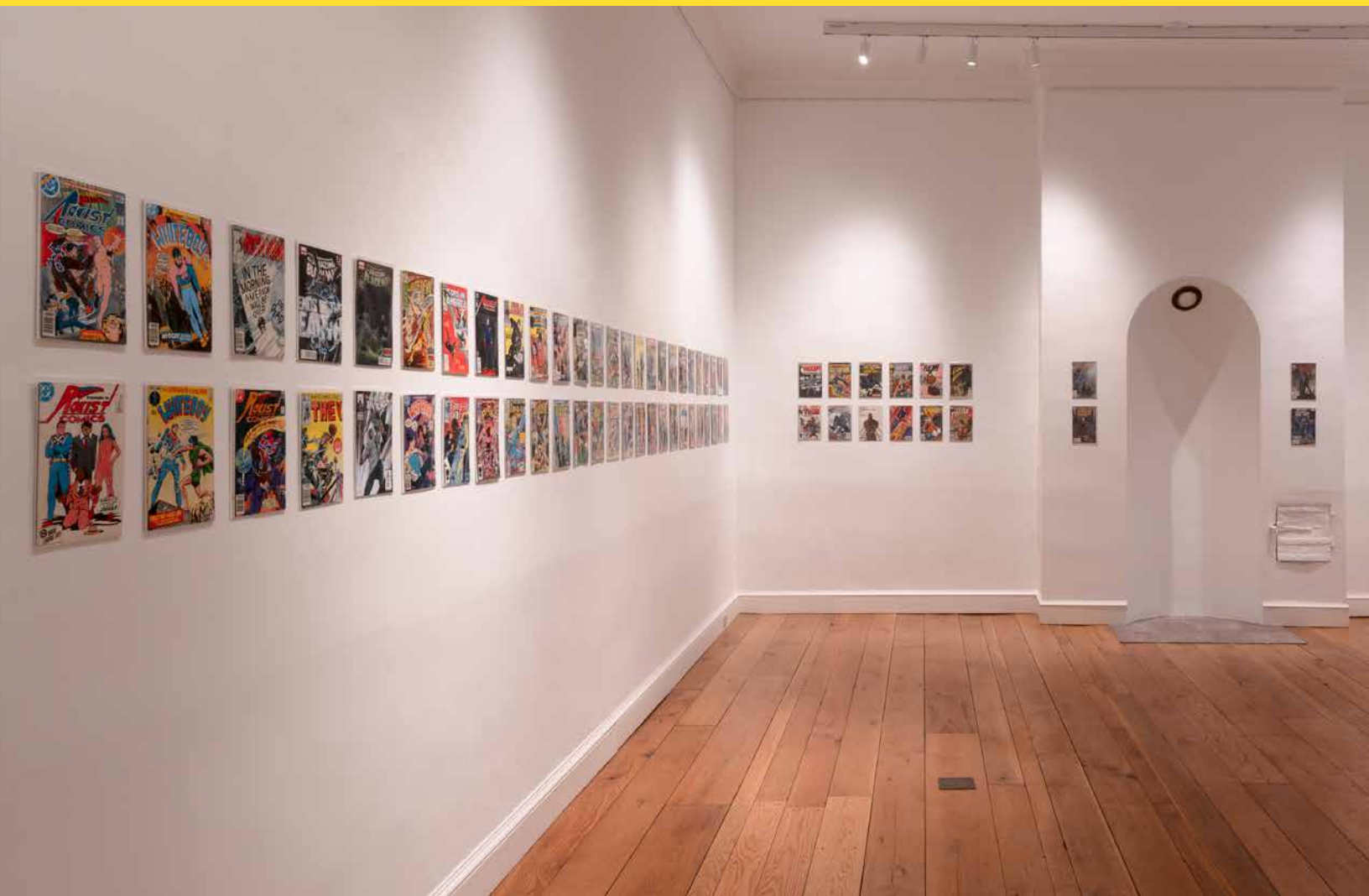
AMAZING
BLACK-MAN
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KUMASI J. BARNETT

THE PEALE, 2022







Installation view of the exhibition at the Peale.

the AMAZING BLACK-MAN



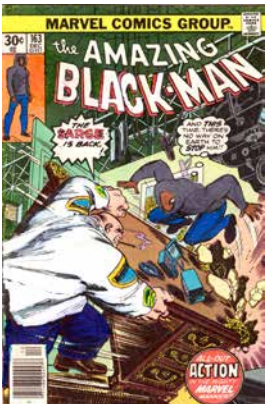
THE AMAZING BLACK-MAN, curated by Jeffrey Kent, The Peale's Chief Curator, is Kumasi J. Barnett's solo debut exhibition in Baltimore. I was introduced to Kumasi's work during my time at Connect+Collect Gallery in Baltimore, MD, by former colleague and one of the founding directors of the gallery, Jeffrey Kent. At first glance, I thought what he was exuberantly showing me was a digitally designed comic book cover, but upon closer inspection, I deciphered the intricate paint strokes. In fact, Kumasi J. Barnett had physically and painstakingly hand-painted each detail onto the vintage comic book covers to update the past with his present. I was amazed.

The resulting artwork is strikingly brilliant and piercing in its ability to not only clearly depict the artist's emotions, but also in its representation of Black life in America in 2022, which sadly echoes decades past. In the wake of a global pandemic, a monumental civil rights movement and

cultural shift, the precarity of Black life is emphasized and even more precious.

Each piece in Barnett's exhibit is an original Marvel or DC comic book that was repainted in acrylic marker and oils. His work is a literal remixing of American pop culture, seamlessly blending iconic characters like The Amazing Spider-Man and Superman with his inserted Black creative representation. The nostalgic comic books, equipped with their inspiring characters and transcendent escapism are met with his contemporary cast of characters including "The Media's Thug" and the eponymous "The Amazing Black-Man."

At first glance, one may overlook the seriousness of Barnett's physical reimagining of these comic book worlds, but once you notice those ideals, you are unable to see anything else – the conceptualizations will reveal themselves to you forever. The first example being how he often switches Spider-man's traditional



outfit for a hoodie and jeans. I can't help but think of Trayvon Martin who was extrajudicially murdered in Sanford, FL, in a similar outfit. The power of Barnett's work is often located in moments when looking at the artwork immediately evokes the connection realized between it and real life.

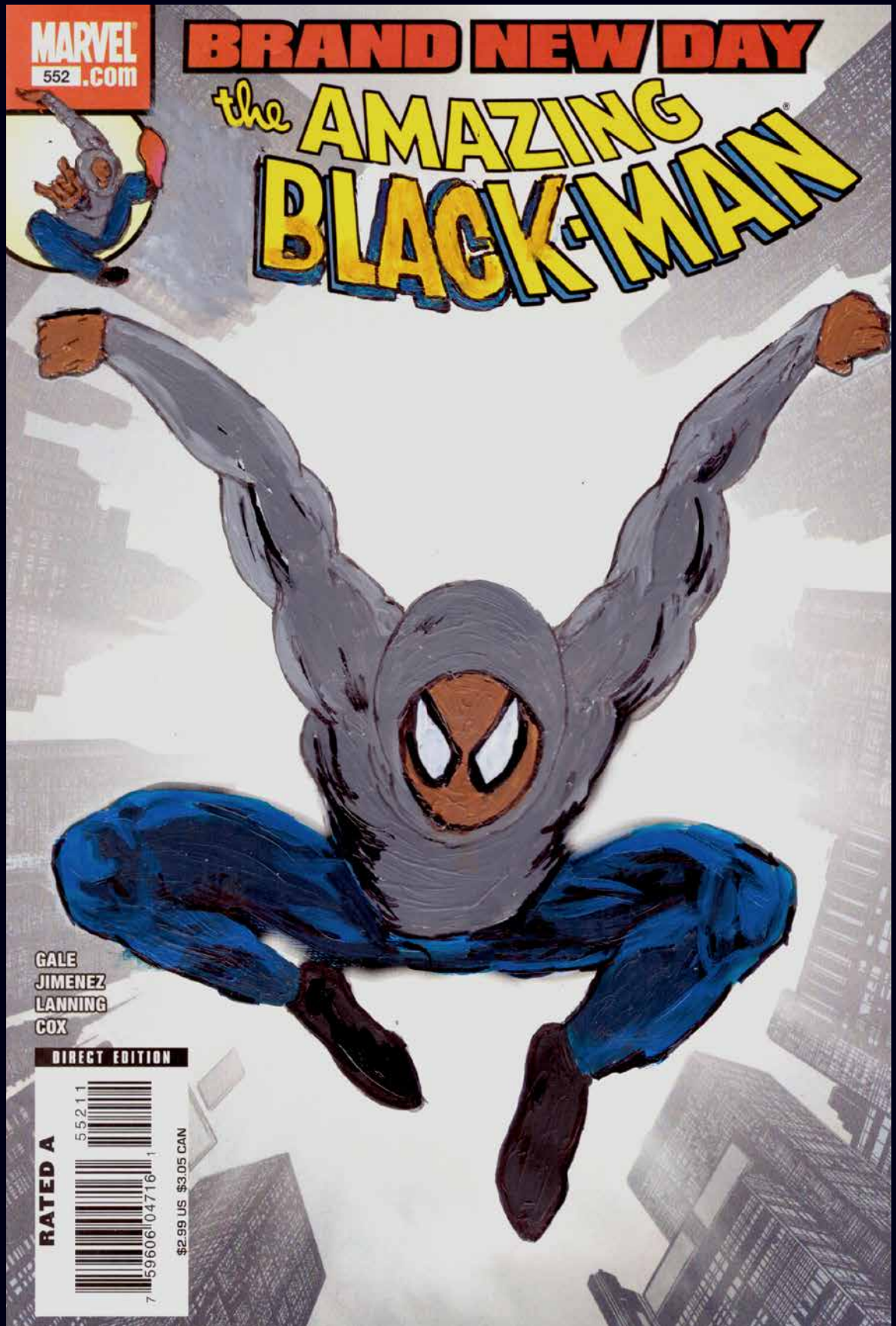
In one of his artworks on display in The Peale, *The Amazing Black-Man* #569, a row of text that reads "NEW WAY TO DIE!!! BOOK TWO," floats above an elegant web that displays the words *The Amazing Black-Man*. Centered is a familiar archetypal character of comic book lore: The Villain. He is monstrous, a beastly character, intense and dangerous, with a wide-open mouth revealing a set of razor-sharp teeth and a long reptilian tongue. Upon initial viewing, I was struck by the vehemence of the character displayed. I imagined Barnett applying the layers of paint with care, time and focus; and I could not help but to think about the parallels of how I would describe the image and how white supremacy has described Black men with similar adjectives. A small text box in the upper corner of the image displays the words "Variant Edition" and on the apparent eve of a Covid-19 surge, this work made in 2019 remains

painfully relevant in 2022. The villains delineated throughout Barnett's oeuvre, the darkest and most dangerous, are actual representations of present-day authority: police officers falsely adorned with badges and belts. In Barnett's comic book universe – and in the physical world in Baltimore, in America – there is always a possibility of death caused by these actors. The bold red text that anchors the top of the image, "DIE!!!" rings both alarming and true.

THE AMAZING BLACK-MAN is a piercing exhibition that encourages you to closely reflect upon your location, both physically and metaphorically, to Black life in America. What are you doing to protect and honor the work of Black artists today? In this exhibition, in this location (the oldest purpose-built museum in America) Kumasí J. Barnett offers the viewer the space and time to examine his artwork and to recognize the parallels that exist between his comic book-based universe and the reality of America today.

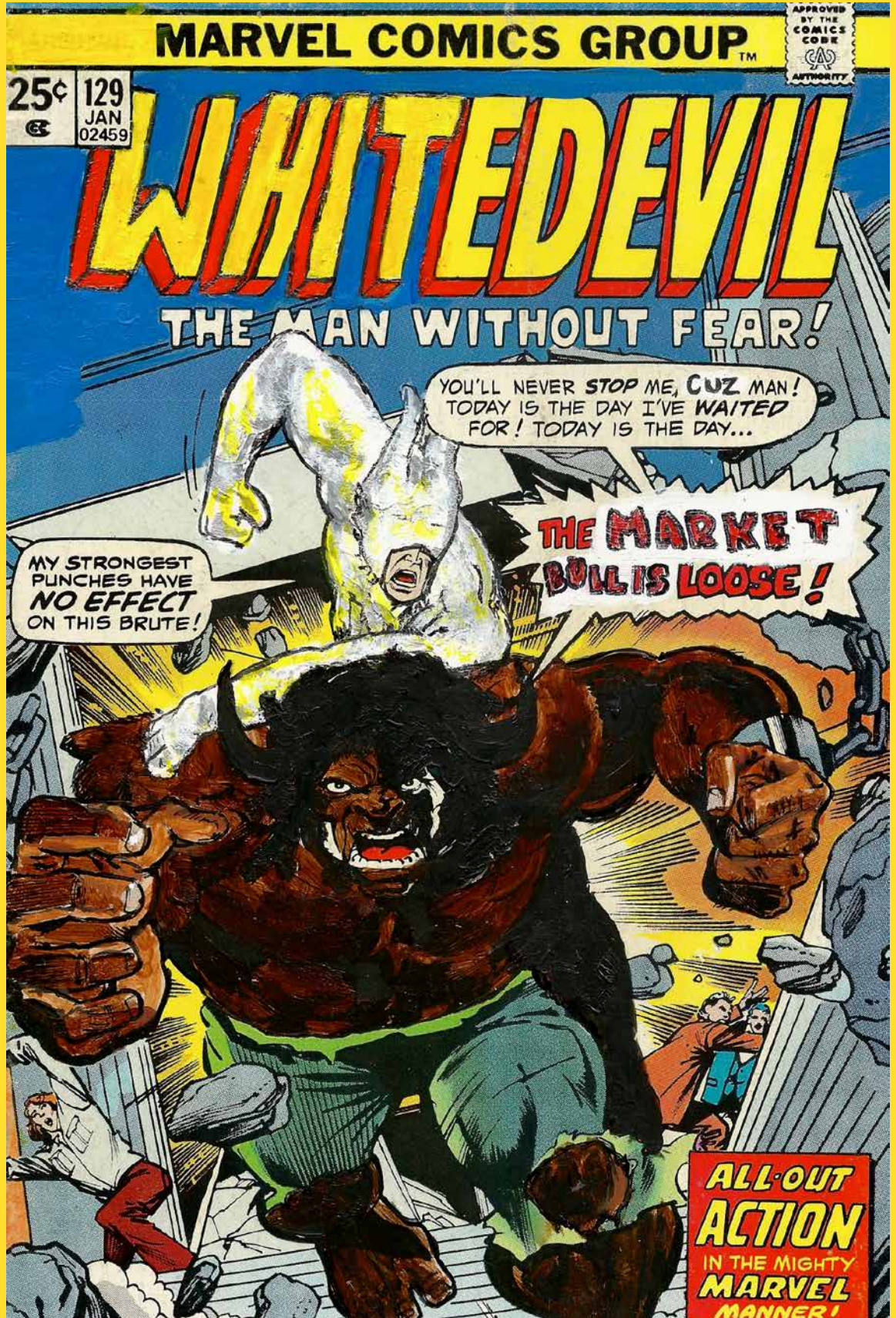
Teri Henderson

Founding Director of Black Collagists
Arts & Culture Editor of Baltimore Beat









THE AMAZING BLACK-MAN

by Auttrianna Ward

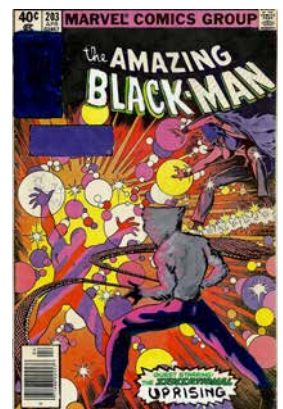
Kumasi J. Barnett wants to overwhelm the audience with the sheer amount of work he has created. He was born and raised in the historically black community of Turner Station. Located in the southeastern corner of Baltimore County, Turner Station is one of the last remaining Black communities that was founded in the county between the Civil War and Jim Crow Segregation.¹ He spent his childhood learning to read via classic comic books of the Golden, Silver, and Bronze ages. As a native Baltimorean, he was keenly interested in the ways Black families hold on to histories and parables. After receiving his MFA from Ohio State University and spending the next few years in Brooklyn, he returned to his hometown in 2019 to teach and expand his connection to the local community.

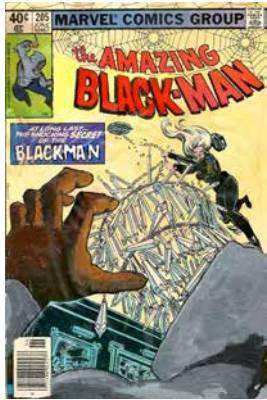
As an artist, Barnett builds upon the African American tradition of parables and oral histories to bend and alter classic images of Americana. The comic book is the vessel through which he tells the story – the American story. As an artist, he works across both abstraction and figuration, but at his core, he is a storyteller. Known more recently for his series *The Amazing Black-Man*, Barnett has exhibited internationally and abroad at spaces including Lowell Ryan Projects in Los Angeles, CA, The Arsenal Gallery and Brooklyn Public Library in New York, NY as well as the Zietz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town,

South Africa. His work has been featured in *The Guardian*, *Hyperallergic*, *Vibe*, *Huffington Post*, and *Artforum*.

Through his work Barnett wants you to “remember if you already know and to learn if you don’t.” He wishes to evoke the memories of both his childhood and yours. He began this series as a part of an exploration of Americana and its relationship, or lack thereof to Blackness – both historically and in the present. Barnett’s interpretations of the comic books which have shaped the childhood of so many children – both Black and White – could be placed in any time period in the last 50 years. His work calls upon us to go back in time while also being on time and current to the present moment. The work encourages the audience to ask – is this now? Is this then? Where do the differences lie? And ultimately where Kumasi strikes his strongest blow is how familiar the themes of his work are to the current generation of Black Baltimorean youth.

This summer’s exhibition at the Peale museum comes two years after the police murder of George Floyd and seven years after the police murder of Freddie Gray. The survey features nearly 250 hand-painted comic books with reenvisioned superheroes including *The Invincible Black-Man*, *The Media’s Thug*, and *Whiteboy*. Each work itself is a self-contained story with a painted over title playing on





original comics from the '60s through the present. *Whiteboy #168 Goodbye! I'm Never Coming Back!* depicts the origin story of the Whiteman superhero. The Superman-esque figure is being chased out of town by other White people with a solitary tear coming down his rosy face. He has a pink sweater tied around his neck in an affront to the typical masculine attire of the macho American Superman. In his 2019 work *Invincible Man #90 Power versus Power!*, Barnett depicts a city about to be crushed by The Officer. The villain is an angry white officer wearing typical police blue and terrorizing the city. In this cover, even the white woman is a potential victim of The Officer. The themes draw upon the power imbalances that exist in many of America's cities, notably Baltimore. But in this reality, The Invincible Black-Man, a brown-skinned figure, has a fighting chance and is potentially equipped to win the fight against the brutal Officer.

Kumasi calls upon his audience to imagine a world where Black men not only survive but thrive. In an earlier work, *The Amazing Black-Man #234* he names The Amazing Black-Man a "Descendent of the Gods". Ultimately pushing the viewer to question what would it mean to see the Black-Man as not only human but beyond? Is this the answer to the racism that has plagued this country while also building it?

The Peale Museum was the first building in the Western Hemisphere to be designed explicitly for museum use.

Founded by Rembrandt Peale in 1814, the building has had various iterations. Since the 1800s it has been used as a public, educational, commercial, and artistic space. It housed the first public school for African Americans in Baltimore.² In 1965, the building was designated a National Historical Landmark. Three years later, riots after the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would devastate and restructure the racial and economic makeup of Baltimore City. Soon after many affluent families both Black and White moved outward to Baltimore county and beyond. Presently Baltimore exists as one of America's largest African-American majority cities, with a Black legacy that extends back to its history as a slave port. And as Kumasi tells the story of *The Amazing Black-Man* he also forces us to engage with the present reality of the average Black man in Baltimore.

Standing in the nation's oldest museum we are encouraged to ask – what does it mean to have the Black story front and center? In a city where as beautiful as the Blackness is, it is never fully appreciated or contextualized within the American story. How long did it take America to discover the elongated yous and twos that blend rhythmically from the voices of many Black Baltimoreans? How long will it? How long until the greatest city in America is appreciated for all its glory and the Amazing Black-Man is allowed to thrive?

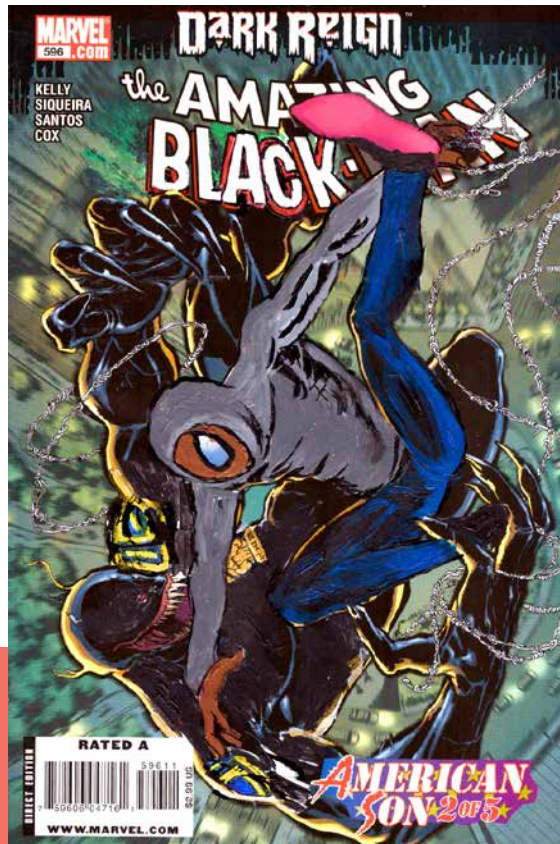
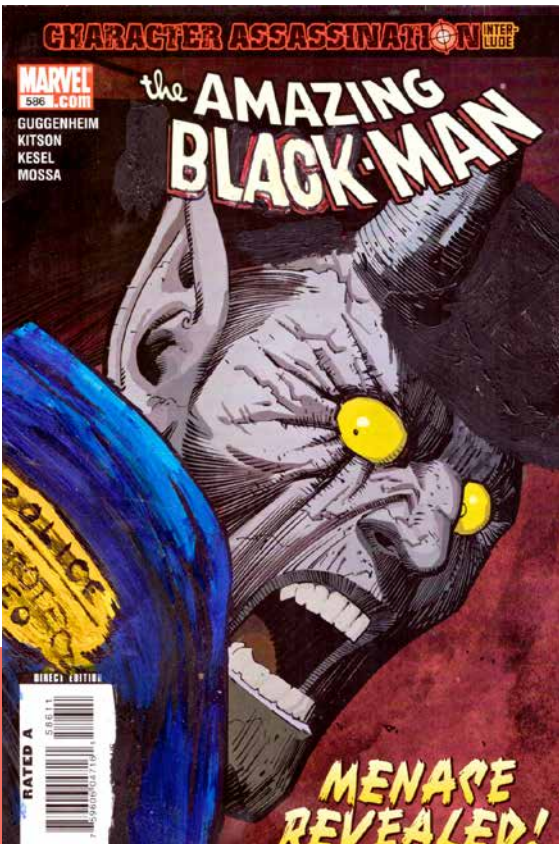
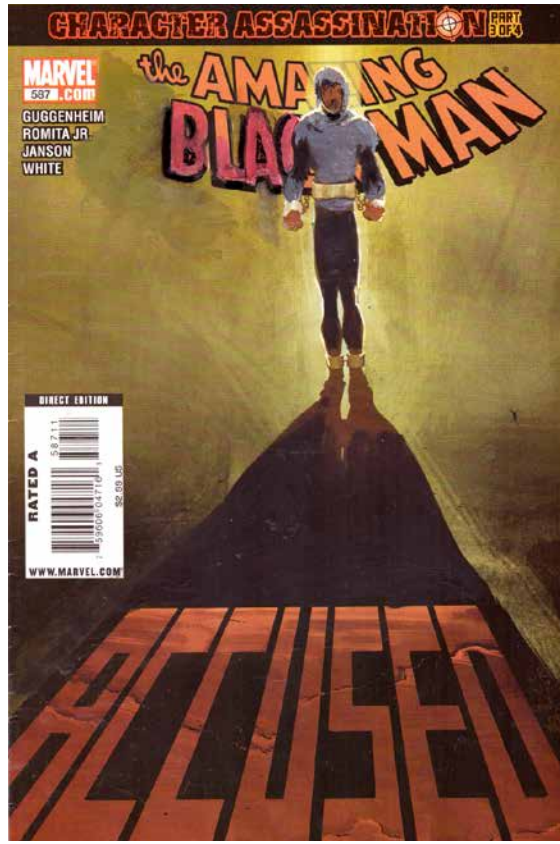
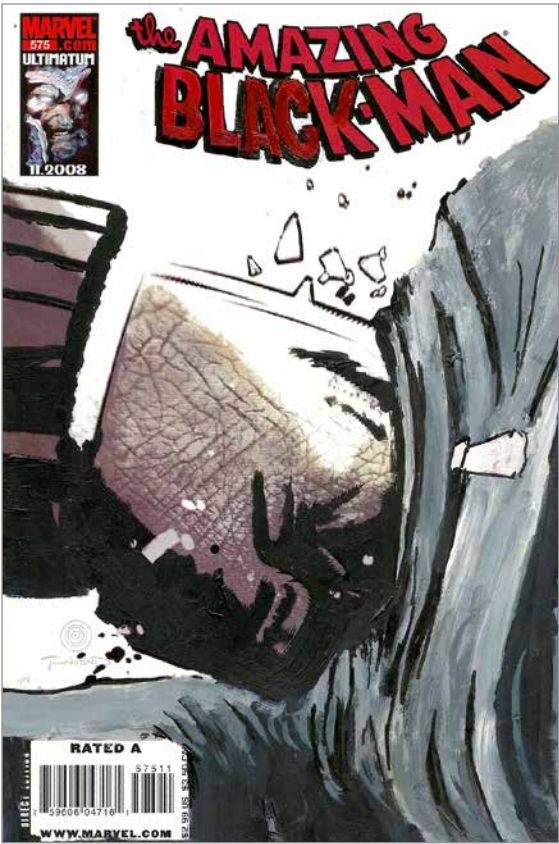
Auttrianna Ward

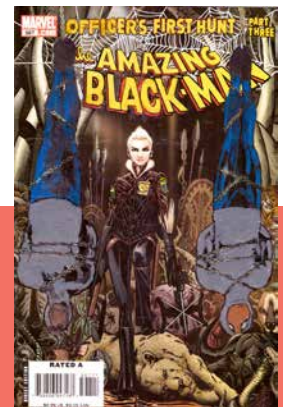
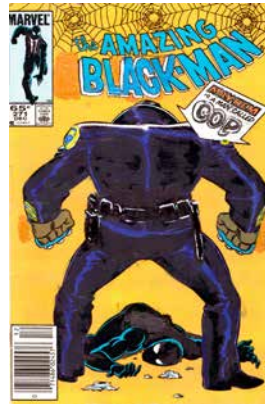
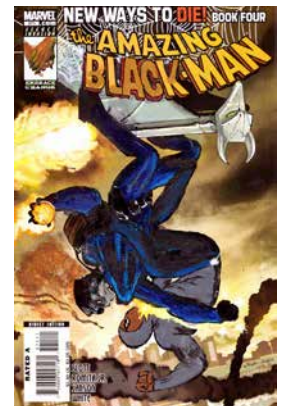
Independent Curator and Writer

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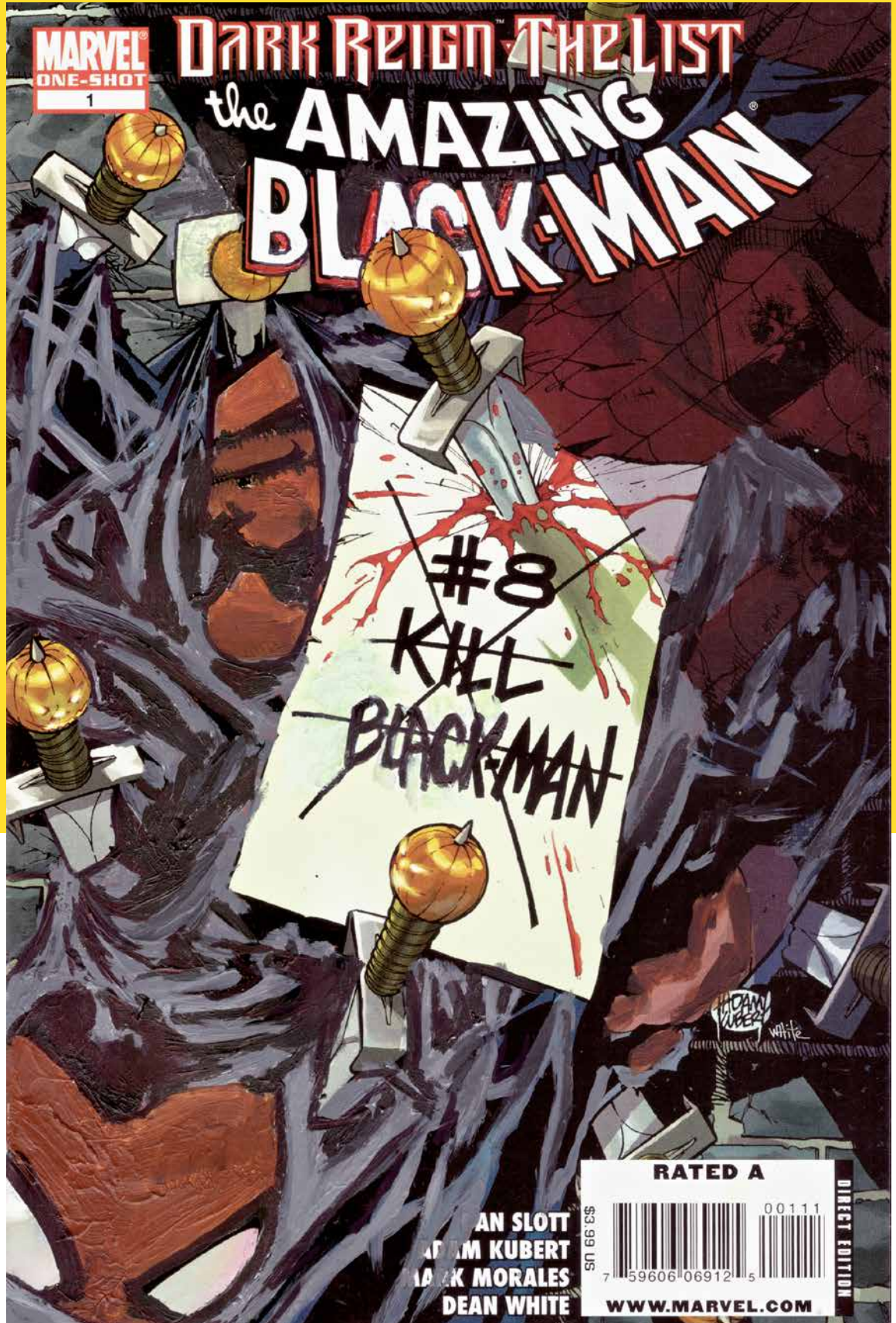
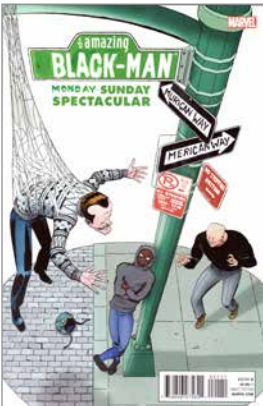
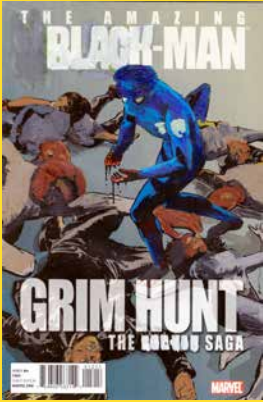
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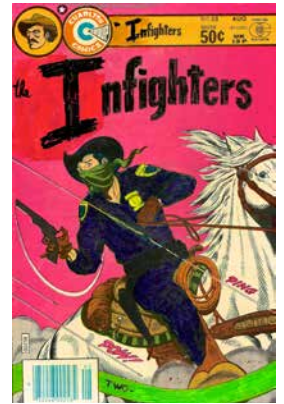
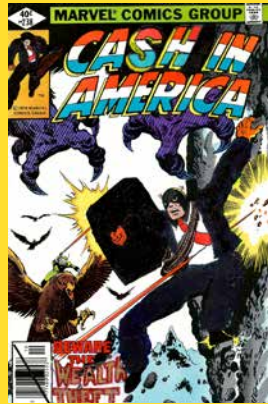
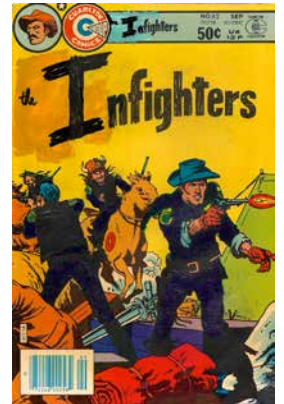


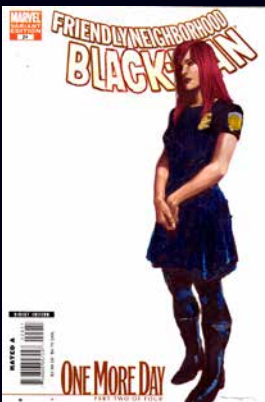








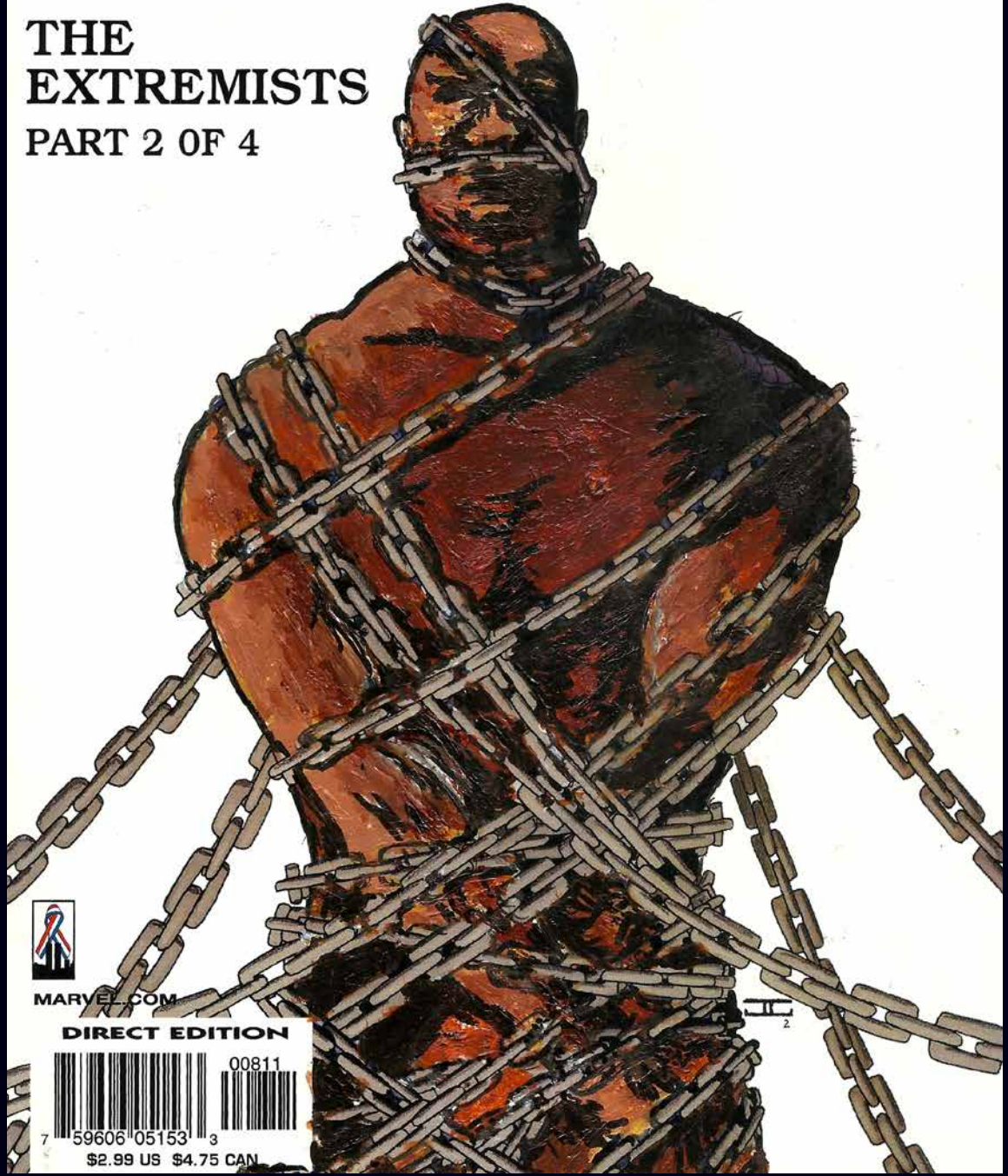




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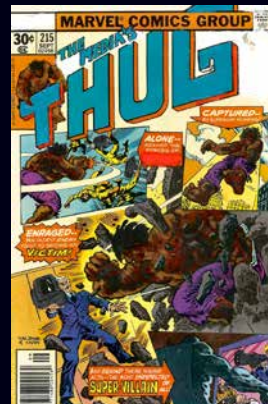
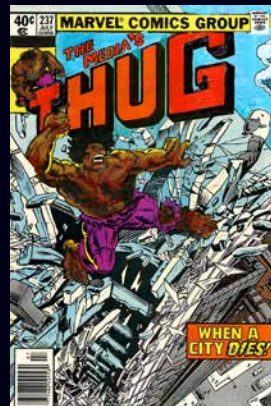
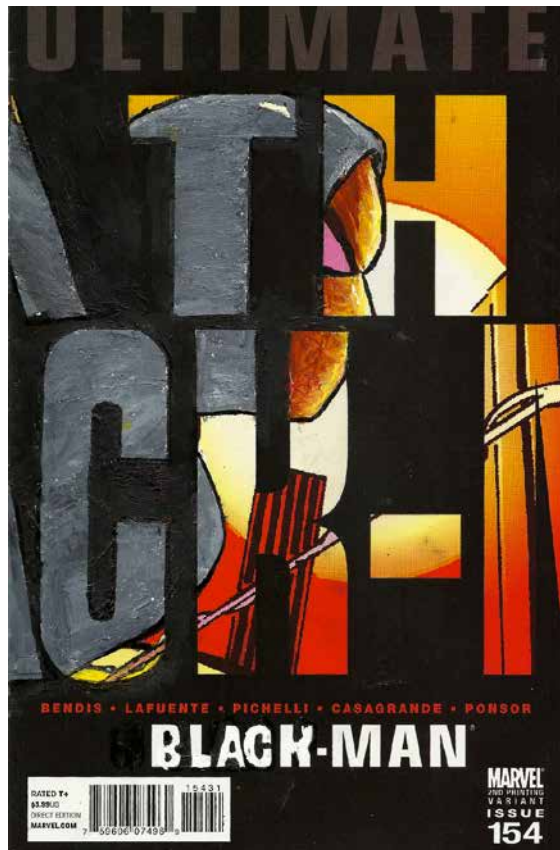
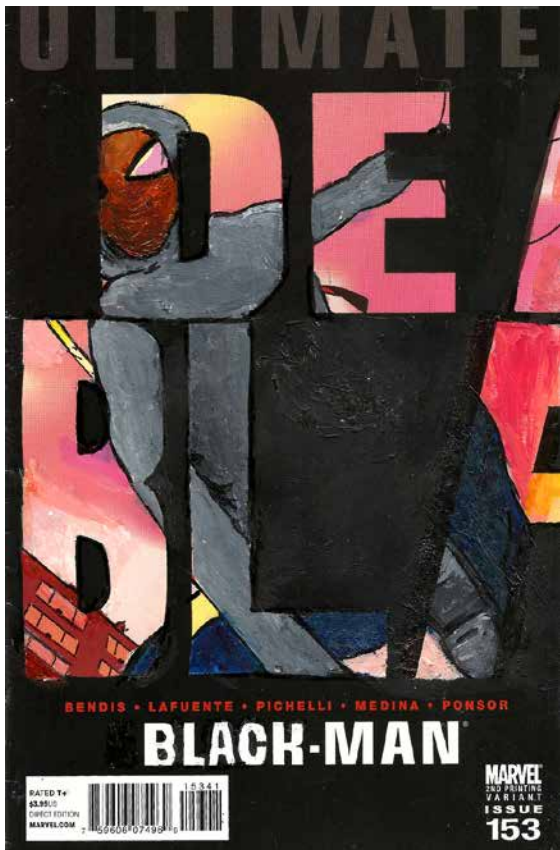


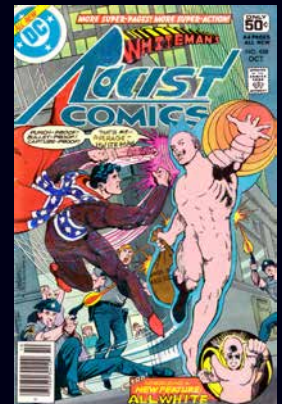
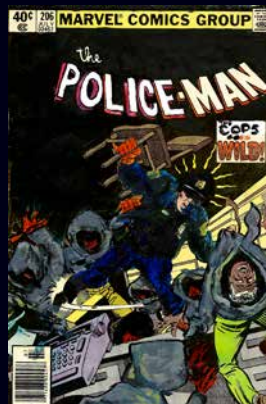
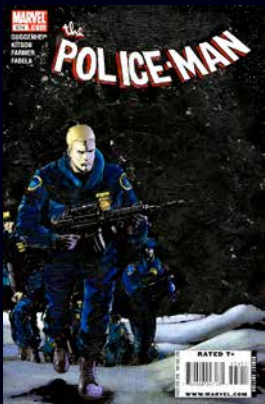
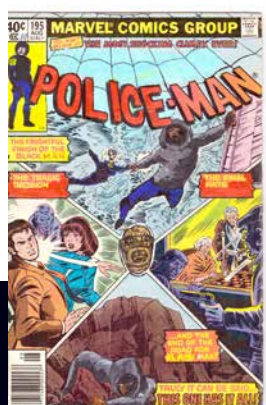
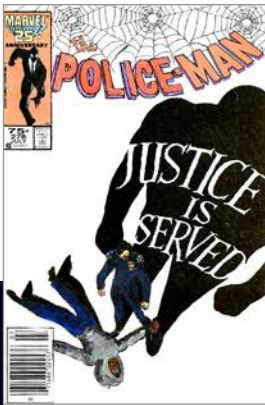
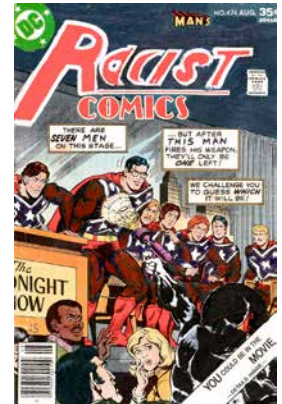
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KUMASI J. BARNETT (b. 1974, born in Providence, RI, and raised in Baltimore, MD) received his MFA from The Ohio State University, and lives and works in Baltimore, MD. Influenced by the aesthetics and narratives of comic books, his work subverts and imbues the often-timeless genre with a present-day social consciousness. Barnett frequently paints directly over old copies of comic books, changing their narratives into critiques of social and political issues including police brutality, systemic racism, fake news, and our political system. Barnett's works have been exhibited both in the United States and abroad, including exhibitions at Lowell Ryan Projects, Los Angeles, CA; BravinLee programs, New York, NY; the SPRING/BREAK Art Show, New York, NY; City Lore, New York, NY; Con-Artist Collective, New York, NY; The Arsenal Gallery, New York, NY; Sulphur Bath Studio, Brooklyn, NY; and The Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn, NY. Museum exhibitions include the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, South Africa; The Boca Raton Museum of Art, Boca Raton, FL; and most recently the Verge Center for the Arts, Sacramento, CA. Barnett presented a solo booth with Lowell Ryan Projects at The Armory Show 2020, in the Focus section curated by Jamillah James. Barnett currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and his work has been featured in *Artforum*, *Ammo*, *Vibe*, *Hyperallergic*, *Huffington Post*, *Autre*, *Artnet News*, and *The Guardian*, among others.

the AMAZING BLACK-MAN

THE PEALE

MAY 21 – JULY 16, 2022

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ARTIST

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