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## Catch 'Haute Hip-Hop' Before It Closes In March

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*Arguably one of the most anticipated events in the St. Louis art community, "Haute Hip-Hop" opened earlier this month at projects+gallery to an eager and colorful crowd. Now St. Louis only has until March 12 to catch the exhibit before it closes, and we're taking our audience back to the night it all began.*

Nestled in a corner of the Central West End's bundle of shops and boutiques, the gallery sits on a relatively quiet street, half a block from one of the Central West End's many residential areas. The evening was beautiful and surprisingly warm, adding an extra dose of energy and delight to the night's event. Soon, coats were off, people were laughing and mingling, and everywhere, *everyone* was snapping photos—anything to try to capture the beauty of that one-of-a-kind night.

The gallery opened with a hallway, decorated on both sides and providing an early taste of the rest of the gallery ahead. The left wall featured "a brief timeline of hip-hop" arranged chronologically, with photo portraits of some of hip hop's most famous demigods—from Eazy-E and Salt-N-Peppa, to Tupac, Biggie and Wu-Tang Clan. Beneath the photos, stretching down the length of the hallway, was a brief explanation of the exhibit's celebration of the history of hip hop and its attempt to simultaneously celebrate the culture's ever-evolving contemporary form.

Finally leaving the hallway—not because it was long, but because it was fascinating and warranted the extended pause—the gallery opened into a larger space. I was immediately struck by how dynamic the room felt, how effectively and beautiful each of the pieces were presented in conversation with each other. The DJ in the corner was playing some beats that wouldn't permit me to *not* dance, so I bobbed my head as I made my way around the room.

Fahamu Pecou's acrylic and gold leaf work were immediate favorites. One in particular, "Black Boy Fly," an impressive ten-foot-tall piece, seemed to embody and celebrate the very real, less glamorous lived experiences that birthed the flashier hip-hop we know today. It was a tribute to the everyday hip-hop, reminding the viewer that the culture is as much Drake and Rick Ross as it is the black kid on the corner, pants sagging, exuding whatever masculinity he had learned from the world.

Another notable was Kehinde Wiley's series of works reimagining black men and women in poses that mirrored Victorian-era-esque portraits or lounging like Greek nobility. Something about the playful rendition of Grecian opulence, and the juxtaposition to such casual Black working-class dress—jerseys, baggy hoodies and fitted hats—made the pieces particularly memorable. But by far, the most remarkable of these was a piece named "Gypsy Fortune-Teller," a 53-square-foot tapestry, done in the same style as the rest of Wiley's work. It was in many regards the night's showstopper.

Towards the back of the gallery near the DJ table, was a make-shift bar offering various spirits. I thought nothing of it until I read the featured drinks: Tech N9ne's delicious K.C. Tea, 2Pac's Thug Passion—which was the first to run out, by the way—and the Beastie Boys' famous Brass Monkey. For an exhibit as focused on honoring hip hop's roots as it was on displaying its contemporary iteration, these drinks were truly icing on the cake.

Other stand-out artists included Hank Willis Thomas' "Black Power," Jonathan Mannion's "JMJ Chain," Toyin Ojih Odutola's "You Have the Right," Marilyn Minter's "Wangechi Gold #4," and Jermaine Clark's "Fall hard, pt 1." and "Land softly pt 2." Jermaine Clark, a St. Louis native now living in Atlanta, Georgia, attended the show with friends. He appeared at ease,



Photo by Jacqui Germain

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back in his hometown, mingling with strangers and posing for photos. Near the beginning of the night, I saw him take a group photo with ten or so friends, all posed in old-school and new-school hip hop stances, in front Clark's stunning two-piece acrylic painting mentioned above. The shot was *everything* hip-hop—rocking the crispiest outfits with today's fly-est accessories while paying homage to some of hip hop's most iconic poses at the same time. And that, really, was the whole night. "Haute Hip-Hop" met my expectations, and easily surpassed them—with the effortlessness of a jump shot, or the casual defiance of hip hop's biting and unapologetic fashion.

To say this opening was a success is an understatement. If you missed the event, stop by the gallery during their open hours. *Trust me*, you want to see this exhibit while it's still up.

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