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## Arts and theater

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### Ferguson artist explores beauty and resilience from tragedy

By Debra D. Bass St. Louis Post-Dispatch 3 hrs ago





Born and raised in Ferguson, artist Jermaine Clark left the city to attend university and expand his horizons. He found a mentor in Atlanta. Traveled with him to an international art show in Miami where he met two gallery owners from St. Louis.

"We were just talking about the work, my work, and then we're exchanging numbers and she literally punched my arm when I gave her my 314-area code," Clark said speaking from his studio in Atlanta.

Clark is the only St. Louis artist in the Projects+Gallery show called Haute Hip-Hop which runs through Saturday. Six of his works are side by side with national and internationally known artists including Kehinde Wiley, Marilyn Minter, Shepard Fairey and Toyin Ojih Odutola.

It's a visceral and invigorating showing of glamorous and iconic hip-hop culture art.

One of the works stands 10 feet tall, Black Boy Fly by Fahamu Pecou. Pecou is Clark's mentor and the partially gilded work portrays a guy with saggy pants and layers upon layers of colorful underwear seems to idealize everything the show looks to showcase. The subject looks weighed down physically (and metaphorically by possible presumptions) but he's caught mid take-off against a golden backdrop. What could be more optimistic.

The showing coordinated by Susan Barrett, Dorte Probst and the team at Projects+Gallery, 4733 McPherson Avenue, celebrates the transcendence of an artistic undercurrent that began in the streets, in lower class neighborhoods, and yet has

become one of the most dominant-influences in culture both pop and haute.

The show notes read:

*Haute Hip-Hop celebrates the rise of the hip-hop phenomenon and its preeminent influence on contemporary art, culture, and fashion. Beginning in the 1970s as a vibrant grassroots youth movement, hip-hop has evolved into an international artistic, economic, and philosophical phenomenon.*

*This exhibit examines the progress of hip-hop style and influence, ... hip-hop has inverted the traditional path of diffusion, rising from the streets to the throne of haute couture, revolutionizing what we wear, what we listen to, and who we are, while always keeping it real.*

Clark graduated from McCluer High School left Ferguson in 2011 to attend Alabama A&M University. After he graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree, he returned briefly. He left again for an opportunity to attend the prestigious Savannah College of Art and Design, but the tuition was beyond his means at the time. He left before completing his first semester, but he decided to stay in Atlanta to continue his craft.

"Life happened, so I had to get a job," Clark explains.



Black Boy Fly by Fahamu Pecou.

**Discomfort zone** • “I wanted to get out (of Ferguson), not because I thought I couldn’t make it here. There are artists thriving in St. Louis and I always knew I could come back but the art scene wasn’t as big back then. I wanted to spread my wings, you know, leave my comfort zone. I knew I could always go home but that wasn’t where the growth was for me. I had to get out and be a little uncomfortable and figure out what I really wanted to say,” Clark said. He also knew that ultimately what he’d say needed to matter deeply to viewers.



"Fall Hard" by Jermaine Clark

**"Ferguson is part of me"** • But not the Ferguson you’d anticipate from current news events. One of Clark’s six pieces in the Projects+Gallery showing is called “Fall Hard, Land Softly”. He finished it about a year after Ferguson became an international news story. The piece is a diptych, but each panel can be purchased separately.

"I was tired of all the negativity. I was really tired of seeing (my hometown) viewed that way. It's not all black vs. white. It's much bigger than that. What we look like and where we come from." And though some will see his "Fall Hard" panel of a boy's leg stretched out on a bed of roses, next to "Land Softly," an image of a boy, arm outstretched, head tilting sideways also on a bed of roses and make instant meaning with the unarmed black teenager shot and killed by a white police officer. Clark said that it's not about Michael Brown or Darren Wilson.



"Land Softly" by Jermaine Clark

**"There's always hope"** • "We all fall and the images look eerie when people are thinking hard about police brutality, but this is what I had to say about any time you fall. Let's hope you land soft enough that it doesn't take you out of the game. It's about landing with grace and when you pick yourself up and put yourself back together you'll be better than ever. It represents the people, my people, our culture, all of us. I'm really tired of the negative. We're bigger than that."


Clark is preparing for his next show at a gallery in Atlanta, "Stay Dreamin'." See more of his work at [staydreamin.com](http://staydreamin.com).

**"Haute Hip-Hop"** at Projects+Gallery runs through Saturday. For more information and to view images from the show, peruse artwork still for sale and see images from the grand opening visit [projects-gallery.com](http://projects-gallery.com).

## Debra D. Bass

Debra D. Bass is fashion editor for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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