

## DEMETRI BROXTON ARTIST STATEMENT

Demetri Broxton is a mixed media artist of Louisiana Creole and Filipino heritage. He was born and raised in Oakland, CA and earned a BFA with an emphasis on oil painting at UC Berkeley in 2002. His training in oil painting helped him to develop a love for lush colors and a strong interest in composition. Demetri is influenced by craft and folk traditions and is passionate about infusing these traditions into fine art. Over the last five years, he has mastered various bead weaving and embroidery techniques and recently began assembling larger beaded sculptures.

Broxton's artwork illustrates his deep personal connection to the sacred art of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, beading traditions of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians, and his love of hip hop and graffiti. He sees his work as an active investigation of cultural continuities from Africa to America and is particularly interested in how these ancient cultural forms find their way into mainstream culture. Thus, elements of Nigerian royal regalia, sports equipment with significant ties to African American history, Southern voodoo/hoodoo traditions, and quotes from hip-hop artists are seamlessly blended with beaded patchwork employing the same techniques used by the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians.

His latest work explores and makes reference to the Yoruba people of Nigeria, where beads and beadwork are seen as sacred and reference the Oba's (king) divine connection to the ancestors and the gods. Traditionally, the Oba's divine connection is seen as so powerful that common people cannot look into his eyes, thus veils of beads cover his face, protecting onlookers from his piercing gaze. In this same fashion, the contemporary hip-hop artist has become god-like. Their lyrics and ascension into stardom elevate them to a level unparalleled by the masses. Hip hop artists follow a long line of other African American performers who have ascended into superstardom and defied the social constraints imposed upon their peers. In this series, *I Got the Power*, Broxton merges the Oba's divine status with god-like hip hop artist lyrics, and references to boxing legend Jack Johnson. Johnson was the first African American allowed to fight white men as part of the World Heavyweight Championship. Mainstream White America also allowed him to openly date and marry a white woman during a time when Black men were lynched for much smaller 'social transgressions.' Much like the Oba, Johnson was a superhuman – a god amongst men.

Each piece in Broxton's collection is hand-embroidered with beads, using a backstitch technique used by Mardi Gras Indians – an adaptation of Yoruba beading traditions and Native American beading techniques. He also weaves in objects of power and protection, such as High John the Conqueror root, a staple in American Hoodoo traditions and other hidden talismans. Broxton's work connects contemporary hip-hop artists to the tradition of the Oba, where lyrical quotes and personas embody superhuman power and even some, like Pusha T, call themselves gods.

In the Yoruba and New Orleans tradition, men are the creators of beaded regalia; however, this is not the case in mainstream American culture where beading and weaving techniques are often seen as women's work. Broxton's mash up of bead weaving, which quotes hypermasculine phrases from hip-hop songs, creates an intentional tension and contrast

between delicate and powerful, beautiful and dark, masculine and feminine. The use of cowrie shells adds an additional layer of complexity to the underlying ideas in Broxton's work. Cowrie shell sculptures in the Yoruba tradition are called Ilé Ori or House of the Head Shrines. Ilé Ori are shrines to a person's spiritual essence; protected by a shield of cowrie shells. During the height of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, human beings were purchased with cowrie shells brought by Portuguese slave ships. In some cases, owning an Ilé Ori could protect a wealthy Yoruba person from being sold into slavery. This juxtaposition of beauty, pain, power, and influence can be seen throughout Broxton's series; as the shells in Broxton's artwork represent the violence and wealth of the slave trading economy – a heritage that continues in sports and hip-hop lyrics.