

Alwa Cooper, "Two Men Walk into a Barbershop, as Envisioned by Marcus Brutus," *New York Times Style Magazine*, March 25, 2022



Two Men Walk Into a Barbershop, as Envisioned by Marcus Brutus

On the eve of a new show, the artist explains how he collects images in his mind and then puts them together in a way that highlights the Black experience.



Marcus Brutus's "2 Tone Barbershop" (2021). Courtesy Harper's, New York

By Alwa Cooper
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*In each installment of *The Artists*, *T* highlights a recent or little-seen work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work in context. This week, we're looking at "2 Tone Barbershop" (2021), a painting by Marcus Brutus, whose next show, "Maiden Voyage," opens on March 31 at Harper's Chelsea 512 in Manhattan.*

Name: Marcus Brutus

Age: 30

Based in: Queens

Originally from: Silver Spring, Md.

Where and when did you make this work? I made it in my studio in Brooklyn back in October of 2021. I moved to New York in 2009 for school and fell in love with the city and with Queens, specifically.

Can you describe what is going on in the work? It depicts the waiting area in a barbershop; that's why there's that spiral barbershop motif in the background. I started off with a found image of the pattern that's behind the two gentlemen's heads and chose their poses to sort of mirror that design. They both have their legs crossed—one of their expressions is less disinterested than the other's, but there's still a synchronization. I named this painting "2 Tone Barbershop," after a fictional barbershop I invented that references the two-tone genre of music from the late '70s and '80s, because of that mirroring. The music meshed punk and ska and the artists created a lot of really synchronized imagery, where the guys and girls would all wear very simple black suits and things. That's where my head was going when I was putting it all together.

What inspired you to make it? Every day I collect pictures and screenshots, and watch documentaries and archival footage, and then I kind of just live with those images for months. Then, when I'm thinking about making a new painting, I return to my memory bank. My approach to making paintings is almost like that of a collagist, because there's no singular image that I reference; there are all sorts of different elements that I pull from to create one cohesive picture. What I used as my reference point for the faces that I created here — that image had nothing to do with the one I used for the bodies that they're attached to, or the scene in the background. Basically, I try to pull together images that move me, anything that piques my interest, and superimpose Black figures onto them to put all of the things I'm interested in one space.

I've always had paintings that deal with either being in the hair salon or the barbershop — this is the first one that isn't of someone being actively worked on but just makes reference to that environment. Most of the subjects of my paintings are imagined figures that I try to make feel representative of a singular yet collective experience — in reality, they're not, because we haven't all had the same experiences, but I try to find those scenes that would first come to mind when we think of something that most Black people have known. So each painting is supposed to depict a monolith of the Black life, which I combine with really bright, fluorescent colors to make things a bit more accessible.

What's a work of art in any medium that changed your life? I would say Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" (1992). I watched it when I was 15 years old, and it focused my interest on the Black experience and Black history and on learning more about these things. Before that, I didn't have a great understanding of or interest in the subject, and opening my mind to that led to me becoming an artist. I point to watching that movie as the beginning of everything I do.