

Ashanti Africana

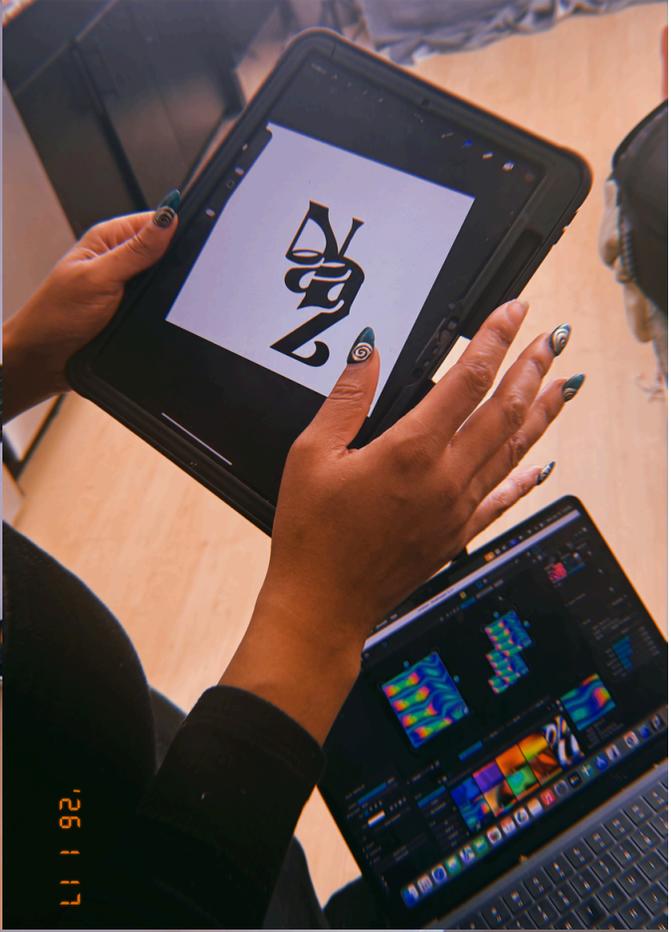


(313) 669-8413
Detroit Now + Then

Naaz Lab

I think often we think of art as we were taught it. It's sculpting, it's painting, it's drawing or things we do with our hands. But as the world modernizes, things that have always been there, but used as less of an art form, have gained popularity but not recognition, or even at times the same respect as art itself. So what happens when you mix tradition with modern advancements and technology? What happens when the art includes light, movement, animation even? When you see an iconic piece brought to life using AI, does that make it less than, or is it reinventing art? Does it birth a new wave of imagery and experience?

Analog girl in a digital world—a concept that filled the space the entire time I sat with Ashanti Africana in her loft downtown. Her walls are filled with art from some recognizable artists, toddler toys neatly put away, countertops full of herbs, fruits and veggies. It felt like home, even though I was completely a guest. Projections and current projects were on show, over the front door was a digital piece adding ambience to the space. We initially began our conversation discussing the art piece she'd currently been working on. A painting in which she was still installing its digital legs, giving it a 3D effect, new depth and texture that has become her signature style.



I had seen her work both online and in person, even experiencing the live projections so I recognized some elements from the piece. Some of the digital pieces reminded me of her logo for Naaz, an experimental creative lab where strategy, art, and technology connect. Inspired by her daughter, Naaz is a play on her name and an extension of her, honoring the creation of life and art.

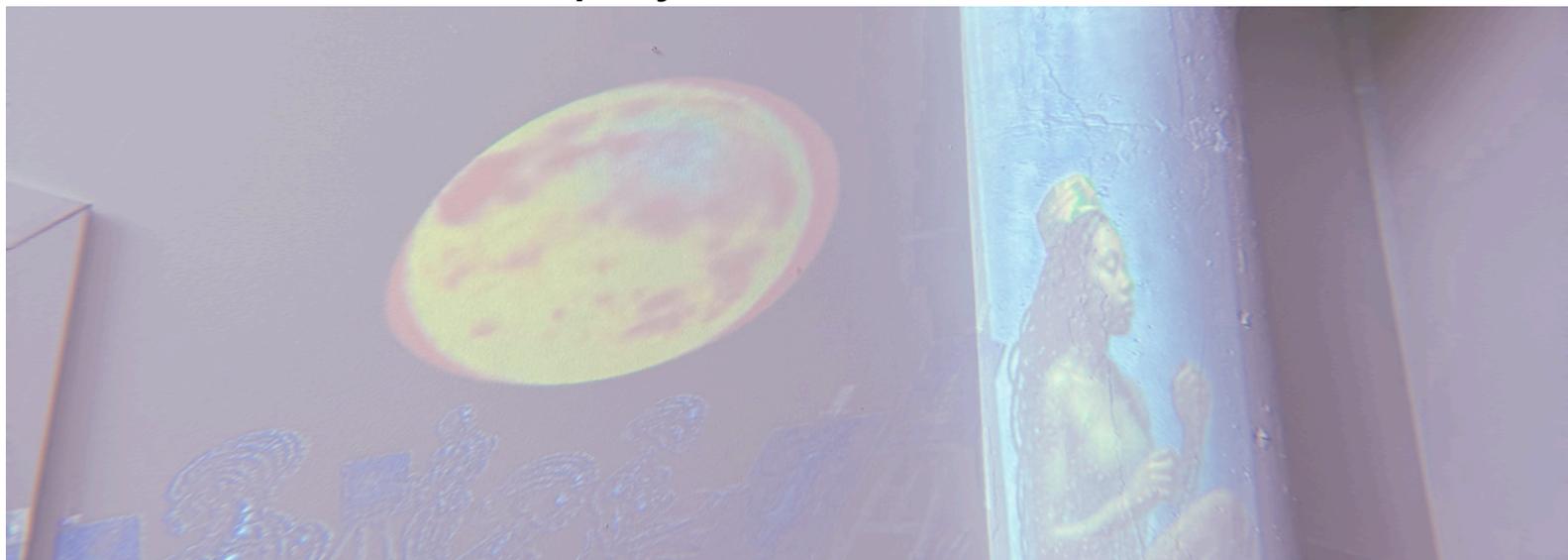
“Most of my work is Afro futuristic. I love tech. I love science. Just experimenting alone, it just feels like that's just been a flow in my life. My childhood was Dexter's Laboratory, My Life as a Teenage Robot, Xenon – I love stuff like that,” she shared with me. Taking it a step deeper, “Then also [it] just ties into my history. I'm a cancer survivor and what healed me was experiments. I was experimented on. So it was kind of like I fused the two into making this like a positive thing.”

As a kid, those shows helped her get through and helped shape her mind around what it means to be in this space. “This lab, science thing has just always been in my life and the futuristic just tied into it.”

Curating + Creating

Naaz Lab being born of the same energy and concept but also motherhood. While pregnant, an incubator of life. Her womb, literally a lab for her daughter, making it more literal. A continual theme for her life, a baby outside of her own that she nourishes and grows as they do.

She followed her passions, studying technology and art in college. Her signature style included collage works crafted with oil paint and digital designs she'd draw via various design programs. Once she became a mother, she dove even deeper into experimentation and holistic ways of raising her daughter. This is the original birthplace of Naaz Lab, however it changed once she realized this was her way of mothering, and yet being a mother was not all she could be. After a few shifts in life and finding a new version of herself in a new space and light, art found its place back at the forefront, and the foundation began to find its roots with the arrival of her projector.



“Digital art for me, it came out of me being impatient... I have a concept and I want to see it now.”

Her projections have been seen at several locations, living for moments in time, creating moving photo opportunities, reimagining art on flat walls and ordinary spaces. The concept in my mind feels different for Detroit, an art-filled city, but not in this way. It's ahead of its time in our city, or maybe it's right on time.

“I haven't really done what I want to do per se because I'm trying to bring this into the fine art space,” she shared, but for a limited time. Ashanti learned the ins and outs of time-based installations during her time at Eastern Michigan. We've seen in pop culture how that creates hype for both the artist and the art itself. “That's the type of experience I want to have for people. This time-based art is what makes it special.”

We hear discourse about AI and the bad it does, but Ashanti's mission within Naaz is not only experiential art, but teaching people how to use these tools responsibly while keeping traditions alive. Traditions being the tangibles, but keeping up with the times, empowering art lovers and digital artists to tap into.



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“With my art, I do use technology. I do use AI for animation and in a fine art space, the moment people hear that, they're like, no, it's not real. And it's like, well, if you look at any of my work, you see how real it is.”

She spoke about our community, as a Black mother, how important it is for us to keep up with new technology that allows us the time needed to be present with our families. “We have to keep up with these things because we already, as a people, are forced to be set behind where now we have a tool that can propel us in many ways if we use it right.” Her vision allows us to use this sort of media + tech for unlimited expression, access, and overall human good.

We connected on many topics as artists and mothers, one being the changes motherhood brought to our craft. Her style, “was kind of already in me, but at the same time, I will say I toned it down a little bit.” Always a girls girl, highlighting women's bodies, futuristic, digital elements within collages, bold statements and nudity — now, still present, but within her bounds. **Ashanti's work feels like Ashanti.** Inspired by Frida Kahlo, she finds ways to weave herself into pieces making a statement and keeping herself grounded in her individualism. Honoring herself, as not only an artist, but as art.



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“That's why Naaz had to come from being this baby brand, holistic brand to making it about me, but also about her because that's what it is. It's a whole ecosystem and I can just build off of one thing, I had to build off the whole thing.”

The goal, transition into more of a fulltime artist being contracted to make these projections and experiences with and for other brands. “People are actually very connected to it and that's what I've always wanted my art to be, an experience.”

“I feel like no one has really taken it to a deeper level or even on a smaller scale where it's not just the same things you see at a big museum as a DIA, you could see it at a smaller gallery or at a party and still get that same immersive, moody soulfulness.”

And that is exactly what's next for Ashanti. Currently working on piece after piece to build a gallery fit just for her. To exist in the art world as she wishes to be seen, digitally and tangibly. Understanding her work isn't one size fits all, it's layered with depth and multiple elements, it's fit for specific rooms and her confidence and belief in herself have led her to create that space.

“I'm gonna do my own events, my own space because my art is space, so I need to be able to take up the space that I need and do what I need to do in order for my, what I intend to do to actually be done.”

We finished the conversation talking about our kids, cycles of fashion, music, and even art. How one generation of each inspires the next, and how art is the only world where inspiration is viewed with a skewed perspective. For Ashanti, this concept makes her work even more meaningful, because it's fighting the stigma and shifting from copying to reworking, the same they do in every other industry.

For Detroit, this will be a shift in the art scene, an immersive feature within spaces that will wake up iconic elements of the city, our culture, our history, our people and bring their energy, light, and soul to life.

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