Megan O'Grady, "Arthur Jafa in Bloom," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, August, 2019

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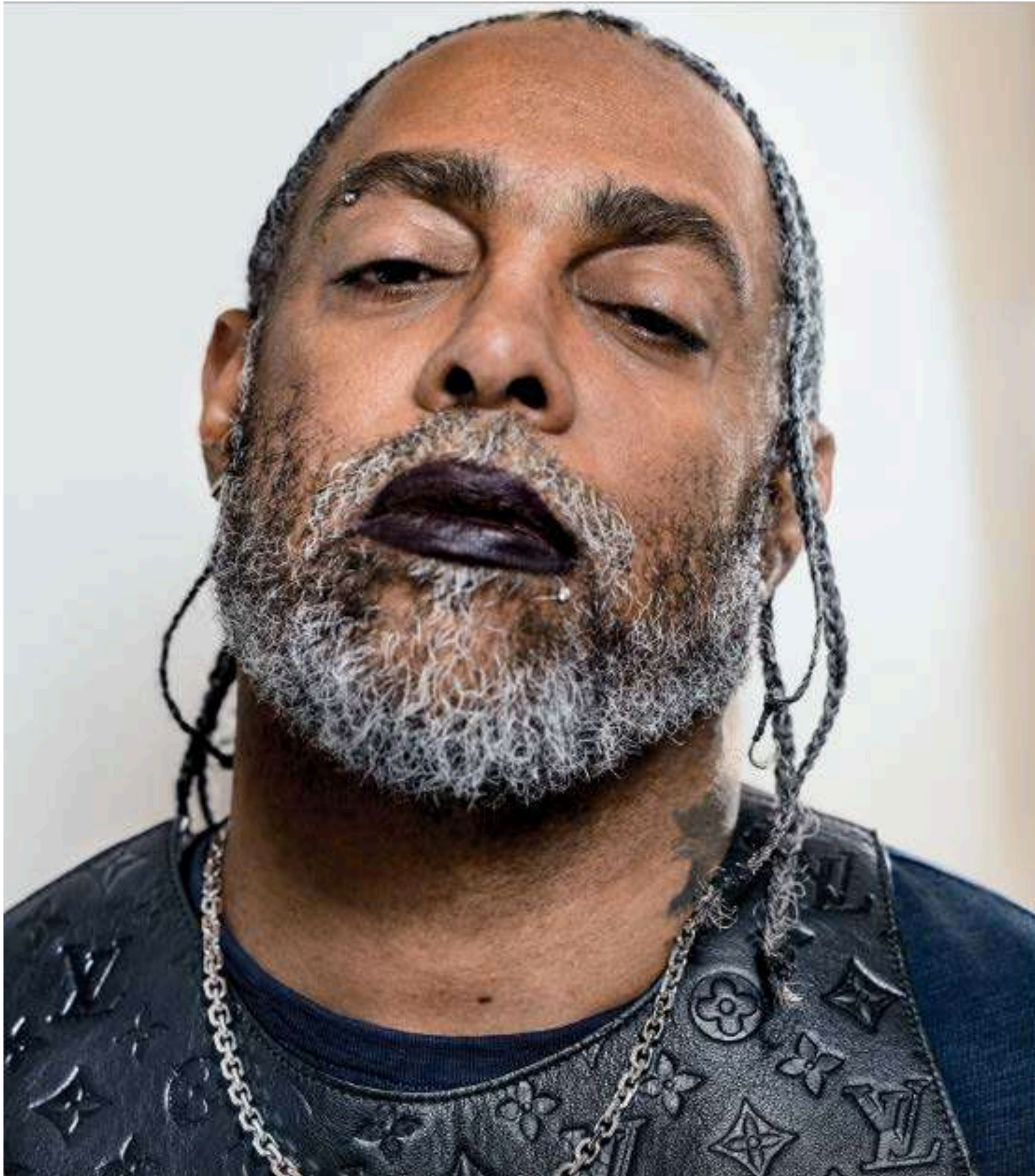
Arthur Jafa in Bloom

Sought after by Spike Lee, Stanley Kubrick, and Solange Knowles alike, the visual artist is changing representations of blackness in museums and beyond.



Arthur Jafa photographed at his studio in the West Adams neighborhood of Los Angeles on May 21, 2019. Success has come late for the artist, 58, who has had a long career in commercial film — but it has also come all at once. Last spring, Jafa was awarded the Golden Lion for best participant at the Venice Art Biennale.

“VIBES,” SAYS ARTHUR JAFA, clicking through images on a screen in his Los Angeles studio, all part of an extended mood board for a future project — photographs from the Harlem Renaissance, glamorous black-and-whites of vintage cars and fashion, work by Roy DeCarava — “more vibes.” It’s the morning after Jafa’s 58th birthday, and the polymathic artist, cinematographer and theorist of black culture threw himself a party the night before in this space in the West Adams neighborhood, not far from his home in Ladera Heights.

The spotless studio is now empty save for a suite of computers and a large-scale photographic printer the size of a refrigerator. On one wall, there’s a sculpture: a seated man, his horrifically fissured back turned to the viewer. The work was inspired by an 1863 abolitionist photograph of a former slave identified as Gordon — it is at once abject and regal and, in Jafa’s 2017 rendition, creepily mesmerizing. The space is new, a place to test out ideas before placing them in a gallery, and late in the day, he shows me a prototype that didn’t work out, tucked in the back: an adult-size oblong of industrial-grade plastic. It takes a few moments of mounting dread to understand that I’m looking at the bundled shape of a lynched woman, meant to be part of a series called “Hang Time.” “Now I have a $60,000 hat stand,” he says dryly.

Success has come late and all at once for Jafa — he still mostly goes by A.J. — but his influence was everywhere long before we knew his name, before he won the Golden Lion for best artist at the Venice Art Biennale last spring. He shot Spike Lee’s 1994 “Crooklyn” and did second-unit cinematography for Stanley Kubrick’s 1999 “Eyes Wide Shut.” He co-directed the haunting video for Jay-Z’s 2017 “4:44,” which collages together images of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Jay-Z’s daughter Blue Ivy and a pair of dancers, Okwui Okpokwasili and Storyboard P, locked in a pas de deux of sorrow and repentance. He shot Solange’s 2016 videos “Don’t Touch My Hair” and “Cranes in the Sky,” and his influence is evident in Beyoncé’s “Lemonade,” the film co-directed by his friend Kahlil Joseph and based on the 2016 album of the same name. Its aesthetics were inspired by Julie Dash’s landmark 1991 film, “Daughters of the Dust,” about an early 20th-century Gullah family’s migration from the Georgia Sea Islands to the mainland.

The lushly gorgeous “Daughters,” a touchstone in black filmmaking from the moment it was released, was shot by Jafa — who also produced the film with Dash, then his wife — after their cinematographer took another job. Its distinctive look merges Dash’s concept with Jafa’s intuitive visual instincts. (The celebrated painter Kerry James Marshall served as production designer.) Jafa had never worked with a 35-millimeter camera before, but the film earned him the cinematography award at Sundance.

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In addition to his commercial work, Jafa has also been a documentary cinematographer (on films about Malcolm X, Audre Lorde and W.E.B. Dubois); in the early aughts, he started and abandoned a fine-arts career. A low point followed his 50th birthday, in 2010; he had moved to California to be closer to his then 6-year-old son but didn’t feel he was making work that was meaningful to him. A major shift began in 2013, when he made a magnificent but under-seen 52-minute film essay called “Dreams Are Colder Than Death.” Framed as a meditation on the legacy of the civil rights movement, 50 years after Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, it includes interviews with African-American intellectuals and artists like Fred Moten, Kara Walker, Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, their faces and voices interspersed with slow-motion images of water and stills of deep space as they meditate on American blackness and its complicated inheritance, what Spillers calls the “flesh memory” of pain.

What gives the film its lyricism and grandeur is its unusual range of scale, linking the intimately human to the geologic and cosmological. In 2016, he restarted his career as an artist when the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles included him in its “Made in L.A. 2016” biennial, inviting him to show the hundreds of binders of images he’d compiled over decades, culled from magazines and books — a kind of visual lexicon of diasporic blackness, including fashion photography, pictures of athletes and celebrities, art from superhero magazines and ethnographic imagery. The binders stretched across the gallery.

The tipping point for Jafa was a seven-and-a-half-minute film he made the same year, “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death.” Composed to a large extent of found footage spliced together, it’s a kind of D.J. mix of pure chills, spun with urgency: The white South Carolina police officer Michael Slager shooting and killing the unarmed black forklift operator Walter Scott in 2015; a black Texas teenage girl in a bikini being hurled to the ground by a white policeman two months later; a clip of the British sprinter Derek Redmond pulling a hamstring in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, followed by his father rushing to help his injured son hobble to the finish line. We see swaying crowds and iconic faces — Coretta Scott King, Nina Simone, Barack Obama singing “Amazing Grace” — as well as newer ones, like the young actress Amandla Stenberg, who asks, “What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?” In the finale, LeBron James gloriously dunks a basketball, the surface of the sun blazes and James Brown grabs a microphone stand and collapses onto a stage. A phantasmagoria of brutality and magnificence, the short unsparing film is an expansive, unshakable fever dream of blackness as both a creative force and an object of white violence, a kind of digital-age “Guernica.”

Jafa’s distaste for what he calls “microwave epiphanies” has led him to work that expands upon themes embedded in “Love Is the Message” and to play with new forms, including, in his 2018 show at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, “Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures,” an arresting set of seven-foot-high tires wrapped in chains. But his strongest work draws upon visual culture and its relationship with blackness, from ironic self-portraits — including one from 1988 titled “Monster” — to the visual representation of historical events, some of which may not be known to younger generations of Americans. In a 2017 show at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in London, “A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions,” visitors were greeted with a wall-size reproduction of a press photograph of the 1970 Marin County courthouse siege, in which the teenage activist Jonathan Jackson — gun-toting, visibly nervous and very young — and three other Black Panthers took hostage a judge, three jurors and a deputy district attorney with the goal of freeing Jackson’s older brother and two others from prison.

Jafa’s latest film, “The White Album,” which was shown at the Venice Art Biennale, turns a black lens on the fragility of white self-conception. A 30-minute film with longer clips than “Love Is the Message,” it contains material ranging from the intentionally banal (a dim teen explaining why she’s “the farthest thing from racist”; goths dancing to hip-hop) to the searing (like CCTV footage of Dylann Roof entering and exiting Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, where he would shoot and kill nine worshipers in 2015).

A series of bad dreams about race and power, it contains an almost unwatchably painful sequence, one that recalls the scene in “Love Is the Message” in which a black father stands his young son against a wall to show him “what the police do to you.” In the new film, we see a small, tender boy repeatedly reduced to tears by his adult brother’s teasing. In both cases, and in much of his career to this point, Jafa’s intention is clear: to show a kind of misguided, preparatory tough love, the overture to the coming nightmare.

THE ART DEALER Gavin Brown saw “Love Is the Message” during Art Basel in 2016 when Kahlil Joseph showed it as a prelude to a private screening of his cut of “Lemonade.” Brown tracked down Jafa’s number and called him directly. “I was driving my son to school at the time, so I was like, ‘Yes, I know who you are. What do you want?’” recalls Jafa. His film opened at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise in Harlem in November 2016, just days after the presidential election. The timing was brilliant — it seemed to be a perfect riposte to the atavistic white fears evident in the electoral breakdown; the reception electric. Lines began to form inside Gavin Brown’s Enterprise as people flocked uptown to see it.

As Jafa tells it, “Love Is the Message” came together over the course of a few hours in editing, but it sprang from many years of thinking about how to make films in a vernacular that might intimate the African-American experience as well as popular music could — what Jafa has called “black visual intonation.” After Jafa was released from a commercial project for YouTube in honor of Black History Month (the direction he was taking the film was deemed too dark), he began stringing together archival images — a digital version of what he’d been doing for decades in notebook form, refining his ideas about ways to centralize black life in art apart from Eurocentric ideals.

He refers to his juxtaposition of footage he shot himself with found imagery culled from archives and dash cams and unseen corners of the internet — “If my dope register goes off, I use it” — as “affective proximity,” borrowing a term from his friend, the British filmmaker John Akomfrah, and the result challenges viewers to know and feel on a deeper level things we might have thought we had already known and felt. The montage form brings to mind the French filmmaker Chris Marker’s hypnotic collages of word and image, or of the various ways in which Andy Warhol harnessed pop culture to reflect

us back to ourselves, but neither comparison goes very far in describing the improvisational virtuosity of Jafa's editing, with its changes in pace, jump cuts, drags and dissolves. It's more useful to consider the film's place within a lineage of black art, of making something new and transcendent from leftovers (giblets, not tenderloin; found footage, not a solid chunk of marble) — and of the potential for visceral truth-telling art to emerge from a state of emergency.

A self-portrait of Jafa titled "Monster" (1988).
Arthur Jafa, "Monster," 1988, gelatin silver print mounted on aluminum, courtesy of the Artist and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York/Rome.

Jafa, an attractive man in a blue button-down and jeans, with braids, excellent glasses and a graying beard, is appealingly neurotic, an intellectual prone to conversational riffs that expand and loop back, inviting you into his thoughts. Two impulses seem to govern him: the need to, as he puts it, "keep it real," despite the sudden attention, and a determination to advance the larger project of black representation in visual art and beyond. Initially, when Joseph, unbeknownst to Jafa, first began showing "Love Is the Message" in 2016 at the Underground Museum, the art space Joseph co-founded in Los Angeles, Jafa was confused, and then flattered, when people would approach him to say, "Much respect." But he's since become more ambivalent to the unequivocally positive response to "Love Is the Message," which was quickly acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, among others across the country — perhaps especially the reaction of white viewers.

"A thousand people have told me that they cried when they saw it," he tells me, looking pained. So I ask him: "What do you do when you have a nice white lady coming at you weeping after seeing 'Love Is the Message'? Surely there's a part of you that thinks, 'This isn't really your experience or reaction to have.'"

Jafa laughs, cringing, "Fortunately, I haven't had to see the full-blown white lady weeping. I've just had people coming up to me saying, 'I was super moved,' 'I cried' — a pretty moderate articulation of their experience. I'm very happy that people are moved, but I do think it's complicated when you say, 'I cried.' O.K., is that what art is supposed to do? Does that make you any less whatever the hell it is you are? Is that transformative crying or is it just crying? I don't know."

Jafa at his studio. On the wall to the right is his sculpture “Ex-Slave Gordon” (2017), inspired by an 1863 abolitionist photograph of a slave who had fled from a Louisiana plantation.
Photograph by Wayne Lawrence. Artwork in background from left: Arthur Jafa, “Bloods,” 2019, Epson fine art print mounted on aluminum panel; Arthur Jafa, still from “Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death,” 2016, video; Arthur Jafa, “LeRage,” 2017, color print on dibond, aluminum plate stand; Arthur Jafa, “Ex-Slave Gordon,” 2017, vacuum formed plastic. All artwork courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York/Rome.

As we talk, I think of what’s behind those earnestly felt but un-thought-through white tears: empathy, no doubt, but perhaps also — one hopes — a fresh recognition of unearned privilege and its ethical responsibilities, a sense of just how profoundly we’ve failed to rectify structures and vote out ways of thinking that deny or perpetuate racism. While things have begun to change in the art world, with increasing numbers of curators and gallerists and other gatekeepers of color, black artists still face all kinds of complicated questions. Who are they making art for? Who gets to decide what work is worthy and what isn’t? Are the people they actually want to see their work able to do so, or do they lack the institutional access or sense of cultural entitlement? To these questions, Jafa adds the strangeness of having presented — and sold — in a gallery something that he could have theoretically uploaded to YouTube. After some thin years, the money is nice — in addition to his daughter with Dash, who is now 35, with a child of her own, he has a son with the artist Suné Woods — and family and legacy are on his mind. Perhaps he’ll build that house he always imagined designing, back when he was studying architecture at Howard University. But it also feels a bit like “Monopoly money,” he says — not quite real.

JAFA WAS BORN in Tupelo, Miss., in 1960, into a middle-class family and an immediate awareness of “certain categorical constraints.” His parents were both educators. His mother taught business administration; his father taught math and science and coached football and basketball. His first-grade class was among the first to be integrated. He remembers being one of three African-American children in the class; 20 years later, his teacher attended his wedding. The following year, his parents took jobs in the largely segregated Mississippi Delta town of Clarksdale, where he spent the rest of his childhood. He doesn’t remember a time when he didn’t feel aware of other people’s projections, of being invaded by the perceptions of others. As a young teen on family shopping trips, he avoided walking with his family, preferring to walk by himself across the mall or store. He mimes interlocking arms, a gesture of solidarity familiar from civil rights marches, one that also troubles Jafa in the way it perpetuates a perception of sameness, a kind of monolithic blackness — the very erasure of identity at the heart of the slave experience, of being separated from one’s family and specific ethnicity via the Middle Passage to become “a culture in free fall,” as he puts it. “And that’s part and parcel of what it means to be black, and that’s part and parcel of what it means to be subjected to white supremacy. It’s what I think I was responding to when I didn’t want to walk with my family. I don’t want to be leveled.”

A set of truck tires wrapped in chains, with one hanging as if from a gallows, from Jafa’s 2018 show “Air Above Mountains, Unknown Pleasures” at Gavin Brown’s Enterprise.
Arthur Jafa, from left “Big Wheel II,” 2018, and “Big Wheel I,” 2018, installation view, Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, courtesy of the Artist and Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, New York/Rome, photo by Thomas Müller

With his brothers, he watched a lot of television growing up — “The Green Hornet,” “I Spy” — that ignited a sense of possibility and fantasy; science fiction, comics and fanzines, including Warren Publishing’s Famous Monsters of Filmland, were his obsession, though only later could he unpack his complex identification with the yetis and aliens in them. (In a 2017 piece that Jafa considers a self-portrait, a stand-up cutout image of a grayscale Incredible Hulk-like figure pounds his fist furiously into his little bit of earth. Jafa calls it “LeRage.”) When he was about 12, he started cutting kung fu film advertisements from the newspapers and pasting them in notebooks, and he became fixated on a nearby college library, staying there till 4 in the morning, falling asleep in the stacks (the librarian gave him a key), reading everything from Sports Illustrated and Life to Popular Mechanics, where he learned about technologies used in film special effects. It was in the library at Howard University several years later that he first encountered the concept of African retention, in LeRoi Jones’s book of essays, “Home.” “The idea that there was some sort of continuity between black people in America and black people in Africa around cultural practices was about as radical a concept as I’ve ever been confronted with, and my head just exploded right there,” he says. At Howard, Jafa learned of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and ’70s and began thinking more about where he might fit into a lineage of black aesthetics. One of the professors in the film department at Howard was Haile Gerima, who was part of the L.A. Rebellion, a loosely affiliated group of young African-American filmmakers who came out of U.C.L.A. film school that flourished roughly from the late ’60s to the late ’80s. Gerima introduced Jafa to Dash and Charles Burnett, the legendary director of “Killer of Sheep” (1978) and “To Sleep With Anger” (1990), for whom he briefly worked as a camera assistant in Los Angeles.

But as Jafa told it in a 2003 essay titled “My Black Death,” the bar had already been set for him at the age of 10, when he first saw Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), a film that remains a model for him of how powerful art can be. After the film ended, he emerged into the cinema’s lobby dazed and, though he was unaccustomed to “unchaperoned interactions with white people,” asked the theater’s manager, standing in the ticket booth, what the film was about. “Son,” he replied, “I’ve been looking at it all week and haven’t got a clue.” The film also provided a template for what Jafa would later understand as a common thread in science-fiction films of the time: a latent preoccupation with, and unprocessed anxiety about, blackness, which in America is never simply figurative. Decades later, when he was working on Kubrick’s “Eyes Wide Shut,” his unit would often receive calls from the director, and an intermediary would relay Kubrick’s instructions and encouragement. Jafa waved the phone away whenever Kubrick asked to talk to him, ostensibly because he was too busy shooting. Shortly before the film was set for release, Kubrick died, and Jafa fell into a brief depression. “I wondered why, in over a year of working on the film, I’d never been available to speak to him. I realized that there’d been too much that I’d wanted to say. I’d unconsciously been waiting for the film’s completion in the hope that I’d be able to have a real conversation with him,” he recalled in the essay.

The other key to Jafa's ambitions and inspiration lies in the Mississippi Delta itself, which he calls "the black Jurassic Park. It's like this primordial, out-of-time kind of space, but it's also like ground zero in terms of black musical culture, and if it's ground zero in terms of black musical culture, then it's ground zero in terms of American musical culture, which in the 20th century kind of means it's ground zero in terms of American culture, period." Delta blues is an origin point for rock 'n' roll, hip-hop and other genres of music, but Jafa sees it also as an attitude and a mode of survival, a counterpoint to that offered by the black church, with its message of perseverance through suffering to reach the kingdom of God. Jafa's 2018 film, "Akingdoncomethas," illuminates this communal search for higher ground in a 105-minute collage of preaching African-American evangelists and gospel singers and their enthralled congregations — a spellbindingly bizarre extended catharsis. In contrast, black music, from blues to hip-hop, has become the place to talk about things like sex, drugs, violence, adultery and disenfranchisement: a place, in short, to keep it real. His current project, a feature film, is his life's ambition: to create a visual experience that matches the impact of black music on American culture. "I just want to make things that look like they came out of some alternate universe, a universe in which black people have had way more leeway to make cinema," says Jafa. "You know, something like unspoken dreams."

JAFA DOESN'T DO UPLIFT. He rejects redemption stories, the myths of the American dream and fairness and opportunity for all — and as a parent, this can pose some quandaries. Recently, his son was learning about the civil rights movement in school. "He was like, 'Dad, they had to sit in the back of the bus and it wasn't fair.' I just started laughing, because it's the #MeToo generation, the whole #BlackLivesMatter generation. Millennials, they be like, 'We have to change the system because it's hurting our feelings.' It's just mind-boggling to me. On one level, I'm happy for it because I think black people should feel entitled, too, but that's just not realistic. It's not keeping it real. It's *not* really seeing this for what it is, and I think that's super critical. This whole idea of seeing is believing." Jafa thinks a lot about how black identity has shifted over the years. "One of the basic conundrums of black being," he tells me, "is that the very things that have oppressed us are the very things that define who we are, and if we erase all the suppression and stuff, we sort of erase ourselves."

An Incredible Hulk-inspired self-portrait of Jafa titled "LeRage" (2017).
Arthur Jafa, "LeRage," 2017, color print on dibond, aluminum plate stand, installation view, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, image © Mike Din

Jafa's work can be seen as a kind of missing link in our understanding of just how crucial it has been to civil rights to turn the camera back upon the white gaze in order to make the world see and believe. In 1955, Jet magazine published images of the mutilated face of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old who was lynched by two white men in Mississippi a few days after he whistled at the wife of one of the men, helping to catalyze the civil rights movement. In 1965, when voting-rights marchers in Selma, Ala., were run down by policemen, tens of millions of Americans watched on the evening news. "We no longer will let them use their clubs on us in the dark corners," Martin Luther King Jr. said soon after. "We're going to make them do it in the glaring light of television." #BlackLivesMatter became a hashtag in the summer of 2013, when the community organizers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi responded to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who killed the black 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. Since then, it has become the banner under which disparate organizations and millions of individuals press for change, but even Jafa didn't anticipate the ways in which citizen documentation by smartphone would become an instinct, a reaction to a social pressure that has been building against centuries of white denial. "I remember distinctly telling somebody, 'That's the dumbest idea I've ever heard. A camera in a phone?' But here we are. Once someone documented [this brutality], it became a modus operandi. At a certain point, it wasn't just that they knew they could do it — they felt *compelled* to do it."

If Jafa's late-career success also feels like a triumph for other artists striving to make films that exist outside Hollywood structures and conventions — more experimental filmmakers like Joseph, Ja'Tovia Gary and Terence Nance — it nearly didn't happen. He recalls a conversation with Bradford Young, the cinematographer of 2014's "Selma" and one of several friends who tried to intervene when the bottom fell out for Jafa in 2011. "I'm sitting in his car, and I'm really depressed, real suicidal," Jafa says, "and Brad turned to me and he said, 'Why do you think you're not enough?' And I was like, 'Because I'm a big failure.' He said, 'Well for us, you are enough, because we all feel like you kinda ...' And then he didn't say anything for a long time." Young broke the silence by saying that for young black filmmakers, "You're like our Frodo," the central character of J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," who goes on an arduous journey to destroy the One Ring, an object of mysterious power. Jafa's love of science fiction didn't extend to fantasy ("I don't like unicorns or fairies or stuff like that"), so Young explained the story for him: "And he said, 'You have Aragorn, he's a classic king with a sword and born into it. And you've got the elves, and they have the archery and telepathy skills. And you've got the dwarfs who can forge iron weapons. And then you have Frodo. Frodo was little. He wasn't strong. He wasn't the smartest. He wasn't the bravest.' "

"But," Young told Jafa, "he could bear the weight of the Ring."