Vaughn Spann's compositional choices generate a sensation of visual compression. Rendered in oil paint on canvas, the human form that dominates this scene poses in profile, wearing white cat-eye lenses and a cadmium and crimson red skull cap. Their muscular shoulders twist forward and away from their viewer and curve obliquely against the hard-edged cubes of a painted white brick wall.

Through the use of color, tone, and form, *Locked in (the stare)* confounds the monochromatic visual field. Typically, dark colors recede and lighter colors move to the foreground. But here in Spann's painting the dark foreground and lighter background seem to squash and flatten the figure's contrapposto-ed torso. The figure appears against this monochromatic background via contrasting colors and values, its relative dark tones spilling out against the dominant, achromatic whites. Where the viewer might expect the bleached background and gleaming foreground to reinforce a sense of flatness, it instead offers the discomfort of a too bright luminosity.

The arrangement offers the illusion of this figure's stuckness—between the austerity of a white brick wall and the glamour of bright, shiny things. The figure dominates the canvas with a colour-full form squeezed into a generic white tee that serves as the middle ground between a raspberry beret and the chrome-red candy paint of a shiny car top. Spann seems to offer in-betweenness as a key element across this canvas.

As the dark skin of this subject seems to strain against the clean edges of the objects in this visual field, its matte browns spill down from the cap and out of the shirt sleeve. In normal everyday life, the physics of compaction is caused by the application of heavy machinery. The visual compaction Spann applies herein may obliquely suggest the stresses being applied to this visual subject result in a more dense subject that is suggestive of black subjectivity and the dynamics of black beings in the world.

Viewers making sense of this scene via normal markers of self-portrayal, black portraiture, or racial representation may be frustrated by the minor expressions here. This bearded subject furrows its brow to squint in a way that seems more rational than emotive—it is as if the glamorous white lenses they sport are less than effective in resisting the impact of the luminous glare of racialized visual representation that this composition implies.

-RJ Salley, The Space for Creative Black Imagination at MICA