

‘It’s a prayer’: Tulsa Artist Fellow Yatika Fields on the harmony of ultra-running and painting

BY MASON WHITEHORN POWELL SEPTEMBER 18, 2019



On August 29, Osage/Cherokee/Creek artist Yatika Fields completed the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) TDS, a 145-kilometer (90-mile) trail race in the Alps with 9,100-meters of elevation change. The 2019 Tulsa Artist Fellow spoke with me from Leiden, Netherlands, where his mural at the Museum Volkenkunde, the National Museum of Ethnology, was in progress.

Mason Whitehorn Powell: Tell me about the race you just competed in.

Yatika Fields: That race was called “TDS” and it’s a part of UTMB, Ultra-Trail Mont-Blanc, an event that happens every year in Chamonix, France and Courmayeur, Italy. There’s seven different races that happen throughout the whole week. It’s pretty much a week-long celebration of trail running—a global running summit—so you have runners and racers from all over the world coming over here to be in these races. . . . And to get into these races you have to qualify by getting points and each race has different points that you need to get in. So I’ve been in the United States the past couple of years doing these different races and they’re pretty hard. They’re usually 100K or 50-mile races, and you have to finish them, then you get the UTMB points and if you get enough you can put your name in the lottery. And then if you get selected in the lottery you can get in the race.

Last year, it was 70-miles and this year they extended TDS to be 90-miles with more climbing. The big race they have is UTMB, which is 120-miles, and they say TDS is harder than that race because of the technical terrain, it’s the more technical race of the two. And it was technical. It was really hard.

Powell: For those who don’t know, what defines an ‘ultra-runner’?

Fields: Being an ultra-runner is anything past 26.2 [miles]—marathon distance. So, 50Ks, 30-miles, 32-miles, 50-miles, 60—anything above that is an ultra-marathon technically—but when you get into the ultra-marathon lingo and around runners: 50-miles, 60-miles, 100-miles, that’s when you really become an ultra-runner.

Powell: With this race in particular, what was it like being on those trails in the mountains? How was that experience for you?

Fields: It was dreamlike. Because I had never been on those trails before. I had never seen them in my life. I had never been over those mountains in my life. I had never seen that landscape ever. You go pretty deep into these places. I mean, you cross a border. You cross from Italy into France. You see new kinds of rocks. New kinds of flowers. You hear different kinds of birds. You feel a different kind of air. You hear people at various checkpoints: Allez, allez, allez! Saying, ‘Go, go, go!’ in their own language. It’s not English, you rarely hear English. It’s very different.

We started at 4 a.m. in Courmayeur, Italy. We took off, there’s 1,700 runners, and I wanted to get up to the front because I didn’t want to get stuck in a bottleneck in the back. So we all take off and [I’m] running pretty fast for a couple of miles. I wanted to be in the top 100 at that point—and I was—hit the first climb and up at the top of a mountain, we all have headlamps on. You just go for it. And I looked back and I see a whole line, about a mile of people climbing in one line with headlamps. It was magical. And that’s when it just hit me, ‘Ok, this is TDS. This is the race you’ve been training for all year. This isn’t just a run. This is a race you’ve been training for. You’re in Italy. You’re doing it. You’re here.’ It was wild.

Then reality hits: ‘Oh shit, better get comfortable, because I’m gonna be here running and moving for the next 30 hours. This is what you’re training for, so pace yourself.’ I don’t know, you just say, ‘Here we go.’

Powell: Is that what it takes to complete—30 hours?

Fields: For me, yeah. I wanted to get sub-30 hours. I think the elites finish in 22 [hours], something like that.

Powell: Could you tell me about how running is related to your practice as a painter?

Fields: I’m still figuring it out, but I think it’s the same thing: It’s about being patient with results. It’s about being consistent to the devotion of the art—running is an art form; painting is an art form; your body is an art form; movement is an art form. These are all things that are both shared between the brush and the legs and the mind. Running is colorful; painting is colorful. Running is poetry; painting is poetry. I’ve found a really eloquent correlation between the two that’s kind of hard to describe almost, but it’s about movement.

Powell: En plein air [outdoor] paintings seem to be a big part of your practice. You do a lot of those while abroad, so could you talk about that?

Fields: Every time I come here, to Europe, I usually try to make paintings, and this is the first time I’m letting it all go out and showing it as well. I started landscape painting in 2000 with a professor from Oklahoma City University, Marty Averett, and then a group of seniors from OCU, but I was a high school senior at that time.

I came to Tuscany, Italy, to study landscape painting that summer. I was 19 and it really opened my eyes up to the way color works and how looking at landscapes and painting them can train your eyes and hand to work in a different way and capture essence. Ever since I’ve been 19 to now—I’m 38—I’ve been painting landscapes. I’ve been training my eyes and hands to just capture the essence of things and the beauty of landscapes—the changing colors and the shade, the moving sun, the moving clouds. I just try to capture essences of places and paint quickly.

The spirit of it, that’s what I try to capture. Because once I do that, then I train my eyes and hands to capture those things and I can go into the studio and carry that same force and that same familiarity and put it into my canvases that are stagnant, that are on the wall, but yet I still understand that movement.

So that’s what the landscape paintings are about. It’s about being somewhere beautiful. It’s about sitting there for an hour or two really listening to that place, hearing every sound, smelling every smell that’s in the air, hearing all the birds, hearing all the wind, and then putting that into a painting. It makes you really familiar with the location—like no other. And it’s really cool. It’s really cool to just sit somewhere and evaluate, and kind of put all your senses to the test, and just try to capture it, and that’s better than anything. For me, that’s the most exciting thing to do.

Powell: Tell me about some of the runs you’ve done on Indigenous lands.

Fields: Anytime I run in the United States, I’m running on Native land, Indigenous land. . . . As long as I’m in the States and running and feeling the earth, then things are good. Things are good in France, in Italy, with this race. Just, I think, because I carried the prayers and words from back home, and I thought about that often, so I had that with me and carried that with me. I carried cedar with me and decorated the sling on my back that holds the poles, the quiver case, with Osage ribbonwork and two scissortail feathers on it. So, I was carrying part of Oklahoma, part of who I am with me in the race, which made me strong and move well.

But running on Native land is beautiful. You think about everything that’s happened before you and under your feet. And you think of everything that’s also laid tracks down and a path for you to be here today. We’ve moved far. We’ve had to come over hardships as people from relocations with their own feet; people have died, people have cried. We’ve been challenged as a race, as a nation of people through of movement of our own legs and feet. With force. I think about these things: If it weren’t for them and their survival and resilience, I wouldn’t be here. This is the least I can do in honor of them. That’s what I think about when I run on United States land, and Native land.

It’s a prayer. I grew up in ceremonies. I grew up in a way where I look at running as something that’s an extension of that. Because I know I’m at an age right now where I can do it, but it’s not always going to be like it is right now and I’m aware of that. But for right now something fun is happening within me through running. And I’m to tell a story and share something unique through it, and that involves my art as well. I’m still figuring it all out, but I’m getting hints of what it’s about here and there. Maybe I’m not supposed to fully know what it is, but just kind of enjoy it and see the world through movement like I am.