

Act locally: Area photographers' exhibit focuses on systemic racism

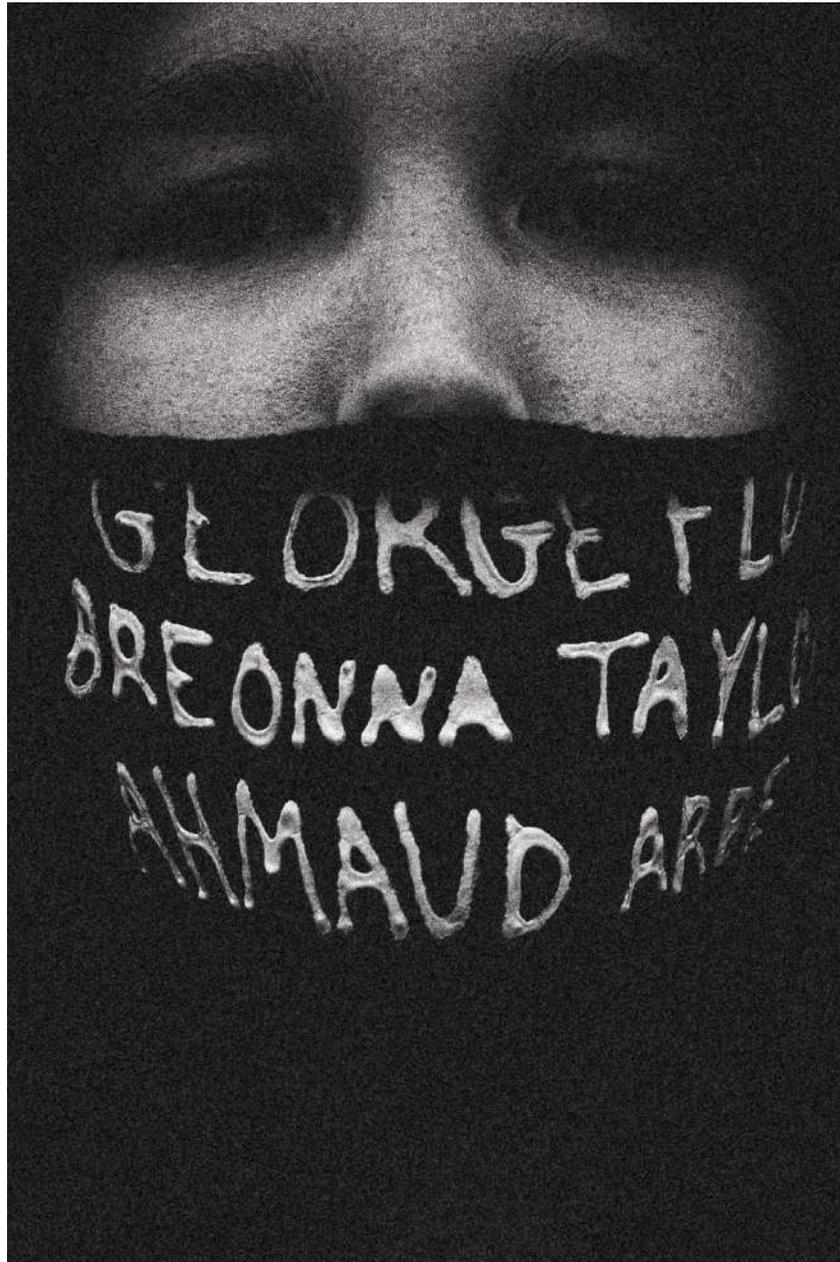


Image courtesy of Eze Amos.

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This spring, just as people were grappling with the new normal of living in a pandemic, George Floyd's homicide threw a Molotov cocktail of anger, frustration, and heartbreak onto an already stressful situation. After Rodney and Eric, Trayvon and Sandra, Breonna and Elijah, and countless other African American lives were taken by aggressive policing, Floyd's killing became a galvanizing moment. People took to the streets, here and around the world, to say these lives—taken so casually and so cruelly—mattered.

In Charlottesville and Richmond, protesters turned their ire to Virginia's Civil War monuments, those unmistakable symbols of white supremacy. The activists' desire to remove these monuments is not about erasing history, but rectifying it. The statues were installed long after the war ended, deep in the era of Jim Crow, with the express purpose of intimidation. They are indeed heroic monuments. But it is a misplaced heroism, glorifying a history that didn't exist, and a cause that was contemptible.

"Bearing Witness" at Second Street Gallery is an ambitious show that presents the Black Lives Matter protests from an artist's perspective. Eze Amos, Ty Hilton, Marley Nichelle, Derrick J. Waller, Sandy Williams, IV, and Jack Doerner were given significant control over the substance and scope of the exhibition by Second Street's Executive Director Kristen Chiacchia.

"I wanted to do a show that not only reflected on the protests against systemic racism happening in the community and around the country this summer," says Chiacchia. "I wanted to look at it not as an historical exhibition of events that occurred, but to present it as an ongoing conversation."

The photographs have a you-are-there immediacy. This is particularly evident in Eze Amos' tight compositions, where you feel like you're in that crowd. Amos deftly conveys the raw emotion of the protests by training his lens on the protesters' faces. There's a timelessness about his photographs; they could have been taken during the civil rights or anti-war protests of the 1960s, but for the masks. These evocations of the past drive home the fact that we are still dealing with the same issues and fighting the same battles years later. Amos has a great eye for composition, and revels in the black-and-white medium, manipulating contrasts of dark and light to add drama and visual richness.

There's a special power to Derrick J. Waller's photographs of the protests that happened just a few blocks from Second Street Gallery. And his "Skating the Revolution," taken in front of Richmond's Robert E. Lee monument during the euphoric time following the June 4 announcement of the statue's removal, is a wonderfully animated image. The mask and the graffiti adorning the pedestal root it in these tumultuous times, adding a sense of unease to the carefree young man captured in midair. The skater seems in control, but we can't miss the fact that, as a Black male, he's also vulnerable. Waller's photograph "Value the Work of Black Women" shows signs held by protesters in Charlottesville, and some of the signs, made by the Black Youth Action Committee, are also on display in the exhibit. Looking at the signs, we are reminded never to forget that these individuals went out into the streets during a deadly pandemic to stand up for social justice.

Ty Hilton doesn't focus on the protests, but turns his gaze to inanimate objects transformed by the BLM activists. His aerial photograph of the J.E.B. Stuart plinth—sans statue—is startling. Looking down from above, it's covered in a colorful jumble of graffiti. One sees not only how the protesters altered the monument with their additions, making it their own and creating a dynamic new artwork in the process, but also, in the empty rectangle at the top, what they accomplished through their protests. The power of absence is palpable.

Marley Nichelle's images of the burning Confederate flag ("F*** Your Confederacy") and Richmond's Lee statue, taken from the rear with electric Breonna Taylor graffiti emblazoned at the monument's base ("Justice for Breonna"), are potent and beautiful. In his image of a young Black man sitting on the sidewalk overcome by tear gas, or emotion, or both, he captures a quiet moment that is subtle and exceedingly moving. Gazing at the

image, we are brought into the man's reality, pondering his life and the physical and psychic pain he is experiencing.

The exhibition shows us instances of passion, beauty, and grace parsed out from the larger turmoil of the protests. Yes, they bear witness to this important period in history, but they also touch something more eternal that speaks to our humanity. It is this quality, together with the photographers' mastery of their medium, that elevates the images into art.

All the photographs are printed on the same matte paper, which draws the viewer in and adds a cohesive flow to the exhibition. Hung directly on the wall using magnets, the images have particular immediacy. This quality is enhanced by the fact that no glass or frame separates them from the viewer.

Shifting gears, we come to Sandy Williams, IV and Jack Doerner, who work in a variety of media including sculpture, performance, and film, all of which are incorporated into the images on view in the exhibit. Williams and Doerner began by creating monument-shaped candles from 3D scans. The miniature wax replicas trivialize the statues and undermine their import. Then the candles were taken to the monuments, lit, and filmed as they burn down. Watching the colorful surrogates melt away is satisfying, subversive, and mordantly amusing. At the gallery, a selection of the candles is displayed along with images of them smoldering at the bases of their stone counterparts. The images are printed on aluminum, which creates a luscious slickness and gives the pieces a three-dimensional weight.

To introduce an interactive element and promote audience engagement, the gallery tapped artist and activist Destinee Wright to produce a version of her "Solidarity Cards Project," which she first initiated in response to the 2016 election. Visitors are invited to write their reactions to the show on index cards that are pinned to the wall.

"I had to move some things around in the season to make these two shows possible," says Chiacchia. "But we're keeping them up through November 14. I think it's very important that they're up through the election to remind people that deep, historic, systemic racism still exists and the fight isn't over."