

SYRUS MARCUS WARE
Irresistible Revolutions



Syrus Marcus Ware
Ancestors, Can You Read Us? (Dispatches from the Future), still
as presented at Toronto Biennale, Salah Bachir Media Wall, 2019
Video, 3 min 15 sec

ABOUT THE ARTIST

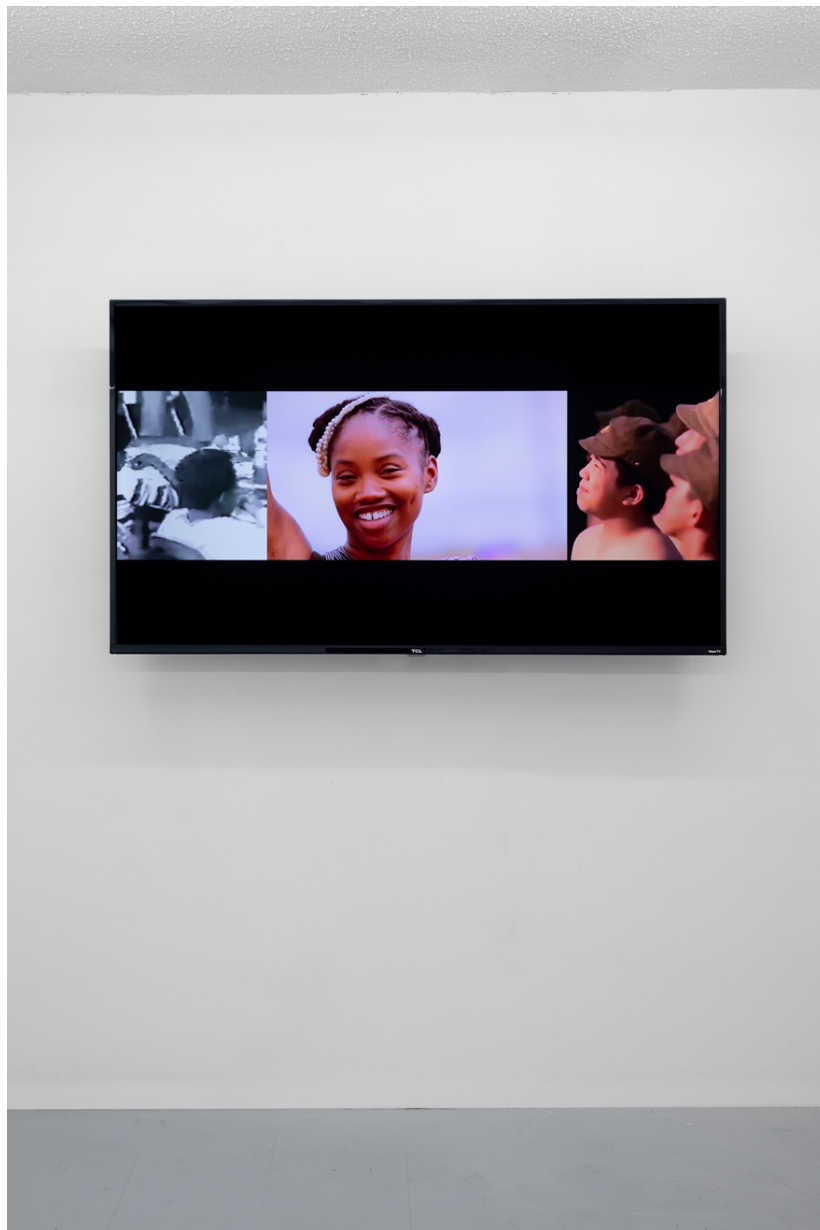
Syrus Marcus Ware is a Vanier Scholar, visual artist, activist, curator and educator. Syrus is an Assistant Professor at the School of the Arts, McMaster University. Syrus uses drawing, installation and performance to explore social justice frameworks and black activist culture. His work has been shown widely, including in a solo show at Grunt Gallery, Vancouver (2068:Touch Change) and new work commissioned for the 2019 Toronto Biennial of Art and the Ryerson Image Centre (Antarctica and Ancestors, Do You Read Us? (Dispatches from the Future)) and in group shows at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Art Gallery of York University, the Art Gallery of Windsor and as part of the curated content at Nuit Blanche 2017 (The Stolen People; Wont Back Down). His performance works have been part of festivals across Canada, including at Crippling The Stage (Harbourfront Centre, 2016, 2019), Complex Social Change (University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, 2015) and Decolonizing and Decriminalizing Trans Genres (University of Winnipeg, 2015).

He is part of the PDA (Performance Disability Art) Collective and co-programmed Crip Your World: An Intergalactic Queer/POC Sick and Disabled Extravaganza as part of Mayworks 2014. Syrus's recent curatorial projects include That's So Gay (Gladstone Hotel, 2016-2019), Re:Purpose (Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 2014) and The Church Street Mural Project (Church- Wellesley Village, 2013). Syrus is also co-curator of The Cycle, a two-year disability arts performance initiative of the National Arts Centre.

Syrus is a core-team member of Black Lives Matter-Toronto. Syrus is a co-curator of Blackness Yes!/Blockorama. Syrus has won several awards, including the TD Diversity Award in 2017. Syrus was voted "Best Queer Activist" by NOW Magazine (2005) and was awarded the Steinert and Ferreiro Award (2012). Syrus is an ABD PhD candidate at York University in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. He is the co-editor of the best-selling *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada* (URP, 2020).

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Video, 3 min 15 sec

[Click here to view the full video](#)



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Video, 3 min 15 sec



ABOUT THE WORK

Toronto-based artist Syrus Marcus Ware imagines a world where racialized people have survived the “Black death spectacle” writ large on the nightly news; survived the catastrophic impact of the Anthropocene; and survived the crushing effects of white supremacy. Commissioned by the Toronto Biennial of Art and the RIC, the artist draws on the shared language of speculative fiction and political activism to transform the Salah J. Bachir New Media Wall into a portal through which the next generation of racialized activists communicate with us, their ancestors, and offer us insights into the future.

<https://torontobiennial.org/artist-contributor/syrus-marcus-ware/>

<https://torontobiennial.org/work/syrus-marcus-ware-at-ric/>

Left:

Syrus Marcus Ware
collapse/survive, 2020
Mixed fabrics, collaged
144" x 68"

Right:

Syrus Marcus Ware
Portrait of QueenTite Opaleke, 2015-2018
Graphite on paper
59.5" x 108" approx.



collapse/survive

This textile was created as part of The Future Is Floating, a Vancouver and Sydney, Australia collaborative residency that took place in Sydney in January 2020. The residency brought together 6 artists from BC and Toronto with BIPOC artists from Australia. Working with Clare Coleman, Jen Rae and Vanessa Possum, we hand sewed this banner for use in our performance about climate change and white supremacy that was part of the Sydney Festival last January. We also put the banner into use—marching with it on Invasion Day 2020—a day to commemorate the violent invasion of Australia by Captain Cook, and to resist ongoing colonial efforts on the continent. This timely textile work has us question ideas of collapse at a time when our system is collapsing before our eyes—because of COVID, because of capitalism dying an inevitable slow death, and because of state sanctioned white supremacy writ large everywhere. The textile has a focus on the binary of collapse/survive with a question: which side do you want to be on? As we fight for the survival of all life on this planet, as climate change rages on and as racist violence plagues us everywhere—we need to find new ways of surviving, together, now and in the near future.





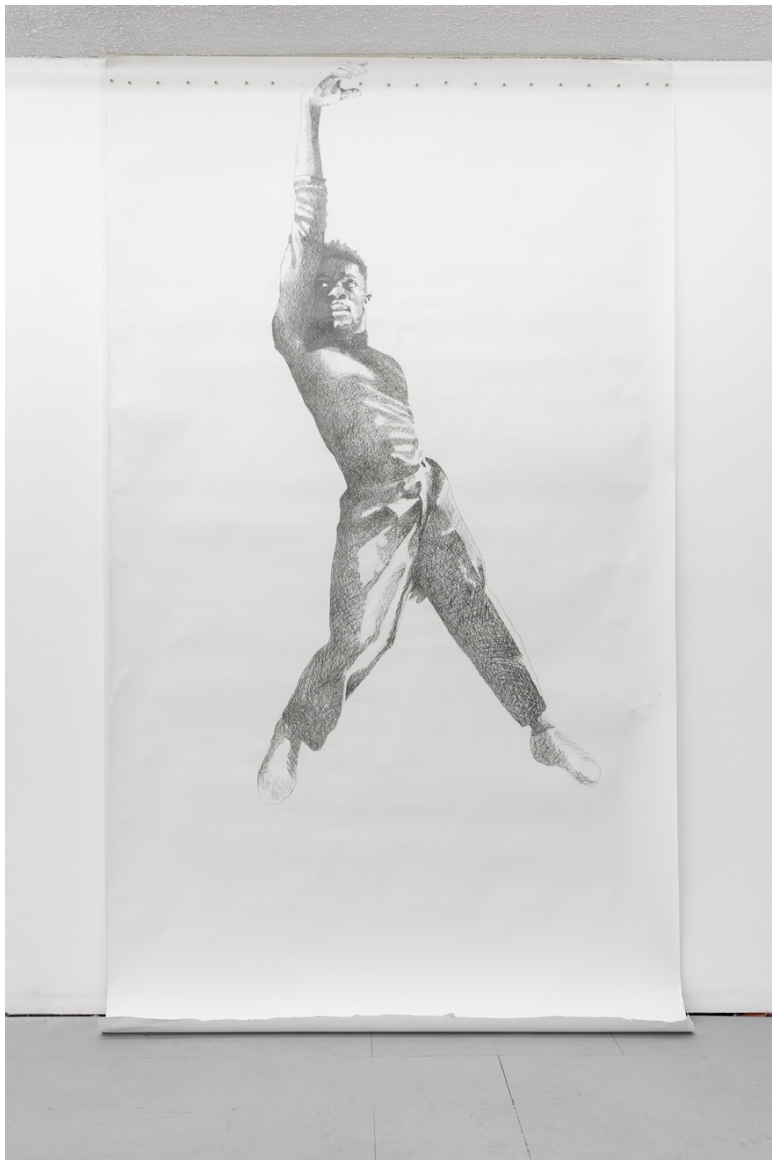
Activist Portraits

Syrus Marcus Ware

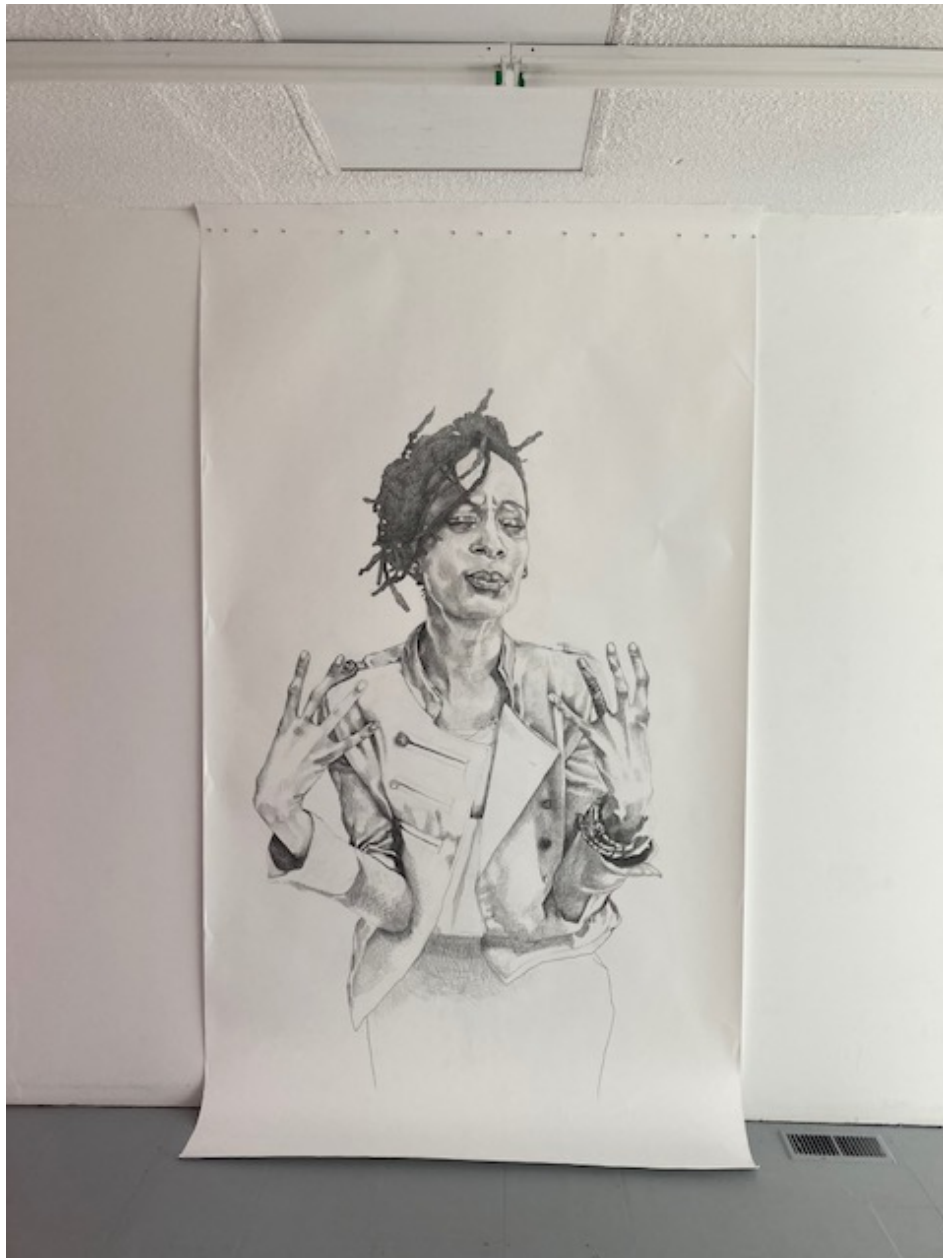
Portrait of Rodney Diverlus, 2015-2018

Graphite on paper

59.5" x 108" approx.



Syrus Marcus Ware
Portrait of QueenTite Opaleke, 2015-2018
Graphite on paper
59.5" x 108" approx.



Syrus Marcus Ware
Portrait of Thandi Young, 2015-2018
Graphite on paper
59.5" x 108"



Syrus Marcus Ware
Portrait of Dr. OmiSoore Dryden, 2015-2018
Graphite on paper
59" x 84" approx.



Rodney Diverlus

Rodney is a Black queer dancer, choreographer and long-time activist. As co-founder of Black Lives Matter- Toronto, Rodney helped spearhead a new generation of Black liberatory movements on northern Turtle Island. He spent years in the west of Turtle Island, dancing for Decidedly Jazz in Calgary and engaging in revolutionary struggle there.

Hampton Gerbrandt

Hampton is a Black, trans local musician and activist based in Vancouver. They create evocative, personal works that bridge improvisation and archival explorations. As an artist, Hampton also works in sculpture and drawing to explore land work, activism and Black culture.

Dr OmiSoore Dryden

OmiSoore is a long time Black queer organizer who is currently serving as a research chair at Dalhousie University in Halifax. OmiSoore started the “Got Blood to Give?” campaign addressing homo and transphobia in Canadian Blood Services policies. She spent several years in the lower mainland, engaging in direct action and organizing in Vancouver and in Victoria in the early 2000s.

Troy Jackson and El Farouk Khaki

Troy and El Farouk are both activists who grew up in Vancouver. As individuals, Troy and El Farouk have built reputations as an artist and design and human rights lawyer respectively. Together, they run a queer Muslim group in Tkaronto with global membership and are co-founders of Supreme Tamu, an eco and ethically sourced children’s clothing company.

Tauí Green

Tauí Green is an activist in Minneapolis. This image comes from a 2015 protest that they participated in at the Mall of America during which BLM protestors occupied a public space demanding justice for Eric Garner.

Thandi Young

Thandi is a long time Black queer activist who has worked in the area of housing and mental health support. She is cocurator of Blockorama, a large-scale Black queer and trans festival that has run for 24 years at Toronto Pride.

Tina “QueenTite” Opaleke

Tina “QueenTite” Opaleke is a Nigerian/Jamaican hybrid of the African diaspora and the co-founding director of PFFD (Prosthetics For Foreign Donation). A former international model and spoken word poet, she led chants for the Winnipeg Women’s March on Washington 2017, was awarded The ACA Humanitarian Award 2019 and is now pursuing her honours BA in behavioural sciences.

Syrus Marcus Ware, *Irresistible Revolutions*, 2020
Exhibition View
Wil Aballe Art Projects | WAAP
Vancouver, BC



**ARTISTS VANESSA DION FLETCHER AND LINDSAY FISHER IN
CONVERSATION: SYRUS MARCUS WARE'S ACTIVIST PORTRAITS**

Courtesy of The Robert McLaughlin Gallery



Syrus Marcus Ware

I have been making work actively since 2000, primarily as a painter. I typically make large-scale works that incorporate mixed media, portraiture, anatomical illustrations and cultural symbols to explore gender, disability, racialization and hope. Recently, I've been exploring large-scale portraits of organizers/activists who have experienced and felt the implications of the prison industrial complex and complex security measures in Canada. This work will build on my artistic practice exploring activism and the lived experiences of community mobilizers, with a particular focus on queer and trans racialized activists. The activists are people that I have some familiarity with, much of my work draws on personal connections and is inspired by relationships and history together.

<http://theimagesinourheads.ca/Ware.html>



Description of work:

Portrait of Queen Tite is a drawing of a figure from the torso to head rendered in graphite on white paper. They have their eyes closed and prominently feature their hands spread open and upward.

Portrait of Thandi Young is a drawing of a figure including the hands, shoulders and face. The figure's eyes are closed and is smiling or laughing.

Curatorial reflections

Vanessa Dion Fletcher: The size of these portraits is significant to how we understand them: they are works on paper and are 12 x 6 feet. It is an unusually large size for a drawing. Sometimes, drawing and painting are put into a hierarchy, a drawing being thought of as a sketch, something you would do in preparation for a painting, and are done on paper rather than canvas and they're more delicate, less permanent than paintings. They have a beautiful immediacy and intimacy that is associated with the materials but at the same time they are a size usually associated with painting so they take on a monumental quality. The scale allows the figures to be life size or larger, which I also think is important.

Lindsay Fisher: The more I look at them and get to know them, the more they vibrate with the fullness of visibility. They seem to go deeper into the notion of visibility—the scale and the detail of the graphite medium—so that visibility is not just rendered through images and faces but also through layers and texture and the markings of labour. In that way, they're quite powerful. Syrus uses the tradition of portraiture and monuments in a way that makes you want to know who these people are.

<http://theimagesinourheads.ca/Ware.html>

VDF: I was thinking about how interesting the relationship is between knowing and not knowing who the people are. There are multiple experiences the viewer can have in terms of understanding the portraits. If it is of a person from your community or a person whom you know, then you'll be seeing them through the lens of the experience of recognition. If you don't know who they are, like you said, there's an entry point, to find out more about them. These drawings function to both celebrate these people and to also reveal, for a portion of the audience that they don't know, who the people are. It's kind of nice that Syrus isn't telling you. It's not a case of explaining to the audience. The portraits provide some impetus or some space for the audience to do that work.

LF: Syrus says in one of his artist statements: "I began exploring portrait as a way of painting my community into art history and as a way of documenting my reality"

VDF: "Documenting my reality", such a great way to put it. I'm thinking about the images in terms of space, both the physical space in the gallery and the mental space in our imaginations. If the people who are doing important work in our community are not acknowledged—if they're not visually represented, then there is an absence and by having those images in our heads and in our worlds, you're creating more space for them literally in the gallery and more space in people's imaginations and thoughts and the discourse around Ideas that are important to us.

LF: One thing Gloria Anzaldúa talks a lot about is culture and how it forms our belief and dictates what we perceive as our reality. It's interesting to think about the role that documentation plays in that process and how we represent history. I like that there's a conscious awareness in these works—that in making them, Syrus advocates for space to be conscious in how we document experience, and make visible different histories. The people we choose to represent and document in our lives empower the viewer who identifies with that subject and who then further empowers the experience of difference by witnessing and seeing that work.

VDF: To a certain extent, we have the ability to celebrate the people who we think should be celebrated. How do we draw our attention away from political or other "important" figures to the people in our lives who we think are doing really important work and make sure we create spaces of visibility for them?

SYRUS MARCUS WARE

EDUCATION

PhD Candidate, ABD, Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University (2014)
New Fundamentals, Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (2016)
M.A Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, University of Toronto (2010)
Honours B.A., University of Toronto, Visual Studies & Art History (2001)
University of British Columbia, Art History (1996)

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

Irresistible Revolutions, Wil Aballe Group Projects, Vancouver, 2021
2068: Touch Change. Grunt Gallery, Curator: Vanessa Kwan. Vancouver. (drawing and multiples). (2018)
Vaseline in His Back Pocket. The AGYU Performance Bus. Art Gallery of York University, Curator: Emelie Chhangur. Toronto. (Performance) (2012)
Tandem. The Trane Studio. Curator: Frank Francis. Toronto. (Painting) (2007)
Too Sexy for Our Bodies, Come As You Are. Solo Show. (Painting and mixed media) (2005)

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

In the No Longer Not Yet, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery Concordia University, Curator: Julia Eilers Smith, 2020
Taking a Stand, Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI. Curator: Srimoyee Mitra, 2020
Toronto Biennial of Art, 259 Lakeshore E, Toronto. Curators: Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien, 2019
Toronto Biennial of Art, Ryerson Image Gallery, Toronto. Curators: Candice Hopkins and Tairone Bastien, 2019
Gender Conspiracy, Art Gallery of Burlington. Burlington. Curator: Suzanne Carte, 2019
Summerworks: Burn, Burned. Massey Harris Park, Toronto. Curator: Laura Nanni, 2019
Summerworks: Antarctica. The Theatre Centre, Toronto. Curator: Laura Nanni, 2019
Mayworks: 2019, Various Locations, Toronto. Curator: Farrah Miranda, 2019
Still I Rise, Art Gallery of Newmarket, Newmarket. Curator: Logan Bales, 2018/2019
Nuit Blanche, Queens Park, Toronto. Curator: Barbara Fischer, 2017

Nuit Blanche, Nathan Phillips Square, Toronto. Curator: Umbreen Ilaneet, 2017
 Deconstructing Comfort, Open Space, Victoria. Curator: Michelle Jacques, 2017
 Every Now Then: Reframing Nationhood, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Curators: Andrew Hunter and Anique Jordan, 2017
 Black Voices, Black Words, Rhubarb Festival, Buddies in Badtimes Theatre, Toronto, Curator: Luke Reece, 2017
 The Images in Our Heads, Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa. Curated by Vanessa Dion Fletcher and Lindsay Fisher. September 10, 2016 – January 08, 2017
 Centre for Incidental Activisms #3. Art Gallery of York University, Toronto. Curator: Emelie Chhangur & Suzanne Carte. Installation & Residency, 2016
 Complex Social Change. Doris McCarthy Gallery. Curator: Josie Mills. Installation & Performance, 2016.
 EXVEE (XV). Artscape Gibraltar Point, Toronto. Drawing and digital prints, 2015.
 Border Cultures: Part 3 (security, surveillance). Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario. Curator: Srimoyee Mitra. Drawing, 2014.
 Intergenerational LGBT Artist Residency. Artscape Gibraltar Point, Toronto. Curator: Tobaron Waxman. Drawing and performance, 2014.
 Crip Your World: An Intergalactic Queer/POC Sick and Disabled Extravaganza. Palmerston Library, Mayworks Festival of Working People in the Arts. Curator: PDA: PerformanceDisabilityArt. Performance, 2014.
 We Can't Compete at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta. Curator: Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue; and Josie Mills. Activist Love Letters performance, and installation, 2014.
 That's So Gay: Say it to My Face. Gladstone Hotel, Toronto. Curator: Elisha Lim. Painting & Performance Art, 2013.
 Certain Days: Freedom for Political Prisoners Calendar. Wide release. Canada. Reproduction, 2012.
 Poster/Virus. AIDS Action Now. Launched at Art Gallery of Ontario; wide distribution. Poster Design, 2012.
 An Audience of Enablers Cannot Fail. Power Plant, Art Gallery of York University and the Feminist Art Gallery, Toronto. Curators: Jon Davies, Emelie Chhangur, Allyson Mitchell. Performance, 2012.
 Artists of the Gallery. The Hangman Gallery. Curator: Lisa Morton. Toronto. Painting, 2007.
 I Represent... ASPACE Gallery. Toronto. Curator: Natalie Wood. Painting and mixed media, 2006.
 Ten, Trane Studio. Curators: SEEN Collective. Painting, 2005.
 Visual Art for Change, ARCfest: Art for Real Change Festival, Curators: Josh Bloch and Elikhai Shaffir. Painting and mixed media, 2004.

GRANTS, AWARDS AND HONOURS

Visual Arts Projects Grant, Ontario Arts Council. (2019)- \$9,000
Visual Arts Projects Grant, Toronto Arts Council. (2019)- \$10,000
Explore and Create, Canada Council for the Arts. (2019)- \$40,000
Visual Arts Projects Grant, Toronto Arts Council. (2018)- \$11,600
Visual Arts Projects Grant, Toronto Arts Council. (2017) \$11,000
TD Diversity Art Award, Toronto Arts Foundation- \$10,000
Vanier Graduate Scholarship. (2016)- \$150,000 (over 3 years)
Cultivate Grant, Canada Council for the Arts. (2016)- \$7,500
Disability & Deaf Arts Projects, Ontario Arts Council. (2016)- \$8,000
Visual Arts Projects Grant, Toronto Arts Council. (2015)- \$3,000
Sylff Fellowship, York University. (2015)- \$27,000
Access & Career Development Grant, Ontario Arts Council. (2014)- \$15,000
Visual Arts Projects Grant, Ontario Arts Council. (2014)- \$5,700
Steinert & Ferreiro Award, Community One Foundation. (2012)- \$10,000
Canadian Institutes of Health Research Grant, CIHR. (2011)- \$100,000 [Co-Principle Investigator]
Best of Toronto Award: Best Queer Activist. NOW Magazine. (2006)
Untitled Art Award: Best exhibition in an Alternative Setting. (2005)- \$1,000 [for “The Living Room Project”]
Exhibition Assistance Grant, Ontario Arts Council. (2005)- \$800
Arts and Culture Award, Lesbian, Gay, Bi & Trans Youth Line. Toronto, Ontario.(2004)
Academic Merit Award, Copy Well Press (Sexual Diversity Studies). (2000)
Canada Millennium Scholarship (Art History). (2000)- \$1,000

The Chicago Maroon

ARTS / January 15, 2018

Portrait of the Artist as an Activist

By Jad Dahshan



Courtesy of Syrus Marcus Ware

Last Thursday, the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality hosted a conversation with artist and activist Syrus Marcus Ware and diversity advocate Precious Brady Davis, moderated by scholar and writer Jenn Jackson. The discussion revolved around Ware's and Davis's efforts and experiences in activism, particularly within the Black Lives Matter movement and LGBTQ+ advocacy, as well as their view of art's role in driving social change.

Jackson, a Ph.D. candidate in the political science department focusing her research on intergroup and intragroup political differences within the black community, initiated the exchange by referring to the ubiquity of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on

social media, especially during the protests following the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin. Ware, a founding member of Black Lives Matter in Toronto, expressed his belief in the occurrence of a modern-day black cultural renaissance much akin to the historical Harlem Renaissance. The Afrofuturist artist described his collaboration with Blackness Yes!, a Canadian black and queer community-based committee, in producing Blockorama, a series of multimedia performances on one of the biggest stages at Toronto Pride.

<https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2018/1/16/art-activism-movement-black-lives/>

Having worked for over 15 years in leadership development and youth empowerment, Davis also sees current movements for social justice as revivals of history. “We [have] always taken that which oppresses us to liberate us,” she stated, evoking the Black Panther Party and the role art played in propagating their message, including Emory Douglas’s galvanizing images of “bad policemen,” as an example. Her own activism involves a lot of public speaking; she’s given talks at universities around the country.

Cosponsored by the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, the conversation was preceded by a three-hour live drawing performance by Ware as part of his *Activist Portrait Series*. These 12x5 foot larger-than-life portraits of activists are meant to reverse the art-historical convention of reserving large-scale portraiture for white, male authority figures; instead of immortalizing popes or kings, Ware has chosen to celebrate those he believes are putting their lives on the line to better their communities. In a similar vein, another one of Ware’s projects pays tribute to underappreciated activists; in *Activist Love Letters*, Ware invited participants to write letters of thanks to their local activists and went on to mail them.

Most of Ware’s art is inextricably linked with his activism, and although it has won him praise, that wasn’t always the case. As an art history and visual studies student at the University of Toronto, his art was often criticized for being too political. In addition to being taught a predominantly white curriculum, Ware recalled being taught that black women did not start making art until the 1970s; he described these experiences as “invisibilizing.” This casts a new light over his gargantuan portraits: they’re informed by a need to recognize, record, and reify a section of society that will likely otherwise be neglected—or “invisibilized”—by a patriarchal white society.

Precious Davis had comparably devaluing experiences throughout her own educational career. During the talk, she recounted being undermined by her Columbia University musical theatre professor for experimenting with gender identity (before coming out as trans). Davis would later return to her alma mater as the Assistant Director of Diversity Recruitment Initiatives, a position from which she could challenge key administrative figures to reform institutional policies concerning admissions and community engagement. Living in the intersections of black, trans, and queer communities, she made sure that “diversity” became an actualized practice that produced an environment of “inclusion, equity, and justice.”

<https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2018/1/16/art-activism-movement-black-lives/>



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The panelists' work demonstrated that there are many ways in which one can be an activist: Syrus Ware leads a three-week activism and arts training camp for children; Jenn Jackson performs research that allows for meaningful dialogue about the best ways to tackle such ingrained injustice; and Precious Davis works within bureaucratic structures to make them more inclusive.

<https://www.chicagomaroon.com/article/2018/1/16/art-activism-movement-black-lives/>