



“When We Wear a Mask”: Public Blackness as Art

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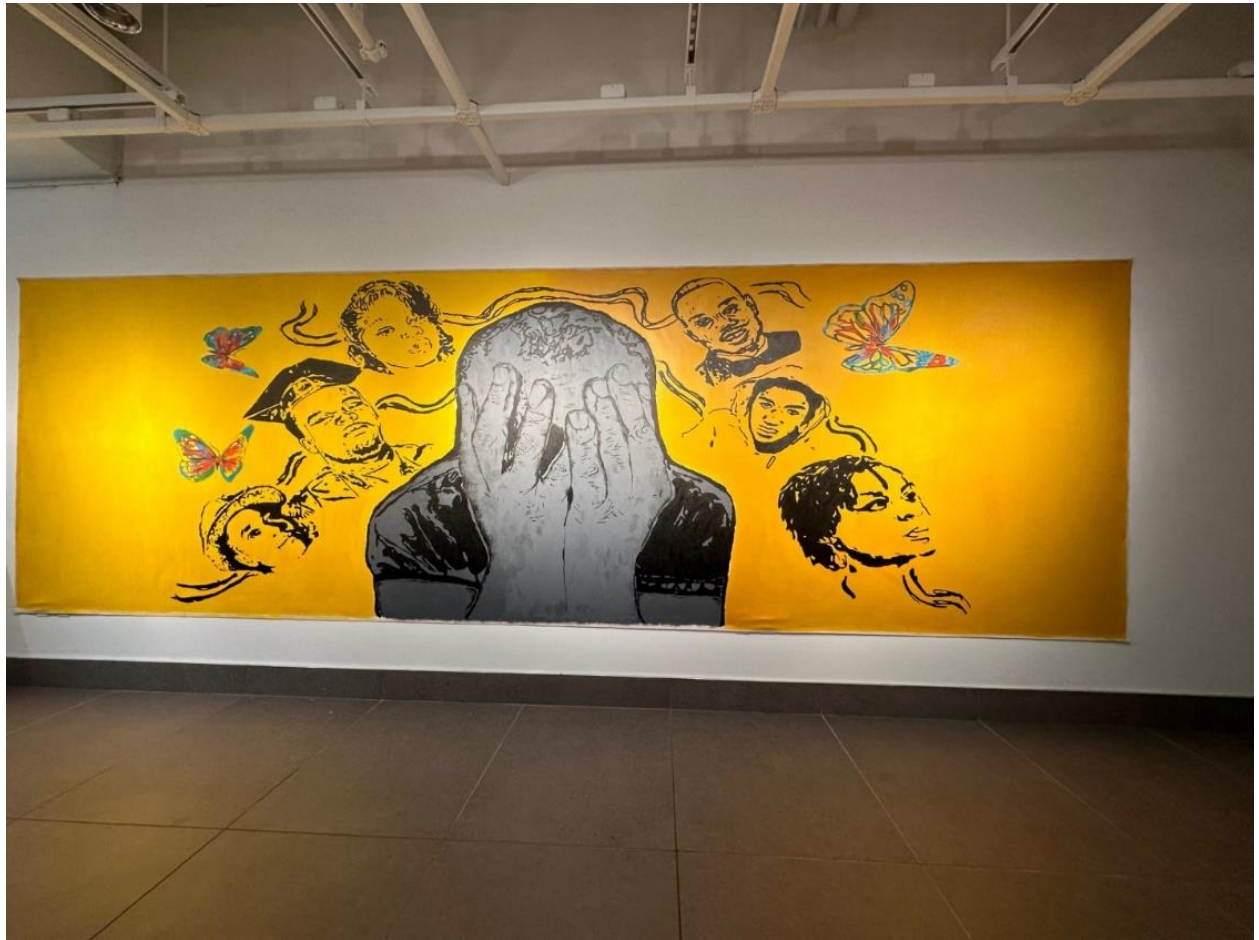
“WHEN WE WEAR A MASK”:
PUBLIC BLACKNESS AS ART,
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EXHIBIT OVERVIEW.

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The opening of *Public Blackness* achieved record attendance. The exhibition that expanded three galleries (Turman Gallery, Yang Family University Gallery, and Bare-Montgomery Gallery) located on the campus of Indiana State University, included a large number of paintings, photographs, and media installations from invited artists such as Abe Abraham, Dread Scott, Idris Habib, and Ayanna Ross. The art exhibition was also my first one, and it was inspired by a piece I wrote for *The North Meridian Review*, which was published in 2021. “Public Blackness and the Burden of Black Privacy” explored themes of identity and belonging through a time of protest around the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, interwoven with my personal experiences and observations as a Black male. It was the idea of being Black in public that I wanted to explore through the lens of a visual artist. In my examination of how blackness and the bodies of Black people are perceived in public, I started to wonder how I could bring other people from all walks of life into my web of thoughts on what and how it feels to be Black in public. I wanted to challenge the notion that the Black experience is singular and static, and instead showcase its diversity and complexity in a time of heightened anti-black racism. By incorporating various artistic mediums such as painting and photography, my aim was to create a more inclusive and immersive experience for viewers. Through this exhibition, my intent was to foster dialogue and understanding among individuals from different backgrounds, encouraging them to reflect on their own perceptions of race and identity in public spaces.

Upon arrival into the first gallery, which sits north of the campus, attendees were greeted with a display of racial artifacts from the Jim Crow era dating back to the late nineteenth century. These artifacts came from my private collection. On the side of the artifacts displayed a mature content sign advising the attendees that the exhibition contained mature and potentially provocative content that may cause a range of responses based on personal ideologies. Along with a “mature content” sign, there was also a description explaining the history behind the artifacts on display.





The reason behind the artifacts was to educate the public on how Black people's bodies are imagined and scripted through many forms of media as objects that are often seen as everything but how it ought to be seen—as human. Thus, the artifacts served as an entry point that demonstrated how the Black body becomes entangled in web of anti-black thoughts and how detrimental those thoughts can be to the existence of Black people. As the attendees walked through the entrance, they were faced with a description of the exhibition:

This exhibition demonstrates how the Black body in a racially divided society gradually disappears from our understanding of what it means to be a human. What transpires when the Black body is captured in our gaze—a gaze that has been trained to only view it as a problem everywhere it exists? What happens when the myths from our past—which were frequently used to justify its destruction—become ingrained in our imagination of its existence today? When these myths become the foundation for how we perceive and interact with bodies of Black people, we often overlook their value and humanity. In other words, by only seeing the Black body through a racialized lens and not allowing for its true humanity to be seen, we are upholding the structures of white supremacy, which have been so pervasive throughout history. We must actively challenge the idea that the bodies of Black people are inferior and shift our gaze to a lens of equality, appreciation, and value. By examining the past and how it has been reconstructed in our present, we can begin to actively seek out ways to undo the power of racism and dismantle its embeddedness in our culture.

One should leave the exhibition knowing a bit more about what makes the Black body vulnerable to the violence it still endures today. With that knowledge, one should be empowered to view and treat the Black body not as an object of fear or mistrust, but with respect and appreciation. This exhibition forces us to ask hard questions and confront painful realities about the ways in which we have historically, and continue to, marginalize Black people and their bodies within our society. By examining the unique history of the bodies of Black people and their collective experiences, this exhibition reveals a complex interplay between past and present understandings of how the myths from our past have become intertwined with the realities of what it means to be Black today. As an observer, this exhibition pushes us to think deeply about the themes of power and oppression that have long been tied to representations of the Black body and encourages us to consider our own roles in the continued marginalization of the Black people within our society. This exhibition not only reveals the painful realities of our past, but also challenges us to make a conscious effort to learn from our history in order to create a more just and equitable future for everyone.

Going forward, it is essential to take these difficult conversations and use them to help foster a more equitable society that works towards dismantling structural racism, prejudice, and discrimination in order to ensure a brighter future for everyone. As such, the exhibition presented in this way serves as a call to action for all viewers, inspiring us to use the difficult conversations that these powerful works of art bring up as a tool to educate and advocate for change. Moving forward, it is our duty to use these powerful works of art as

a platform for learning and a call to action in order to make a lasting impact for generations to come.

As those present made their journey into the core of the gallery, they were greeted with an 18x16-foot mural painted in acrylic, which took me two weeks to complete with the assistance of a graduate student. Right in the center of the mural is my face, encompassed by the faces of Emmett Till, Michael Brown, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Sandra Bland. The mural functioned as a powerful representation of the ongoing fight against racial injustice and police brutality. Each face depicted on the mural symbolized the lives lost and the need for systemic change, urging viewers to reflect on the urgent need for justice and equality in our society. The mural was also an interactive mural that offered attendees the opportunity to write and reflect on not only the work itself, but also the atrocities that they have seen or witnessed regarding racial violence, which has taken the lives of many people of color. The interactive aspect of the mural provided a space for healing and collective grieving, allowing individuals to share their personal experiences and emotions. It served as a powerful reminder that the fight against racial injustice requires active participation and solidarity from all members of society.

Next to the mural were three 48x32-inch black-and-white digital photos mounted on foam core. These photos aimed to capture the complexity of the black experience, highlighting the internal battles and challenges faced by individuals in their everyday lives. By presenting these images in an abstract manner, I wanted to encourage viewers to reflect on and empathize with these struggles, fostering a deeper understanding of the systemic issues at play.

By using photo manipulation to illustrate how some black people and their bodies respond to public blackness, my goal was to capture the everyday struggle and resistance against the embodiment of societies collective views of blackness which is often seen as the consequence of humanism in which those who appear to exist in blackness can be alienated and exiled at any time.

In conclusion, my ambition for this exhibition was to generate greater knowledge of the persisting and-often neglected local and national racial issues. Through the effectiveness of visual storytelling, both my work and the works of the other artist attempted to stimulate conversations and inspire a sense of

urgency for change. The exhibition aimed to dismantle stereotypes and challenge societal norms, urging spectators and attendees to examine their own prejudices and diligently work toward a more inclusive and equitable society.



