

Anti-Racism Protest Signs, Murals Destined for U.S. Smithsonian

By Reuters

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WASHINGTON — Days into nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd, demonstrators began to fill a tall fence in front of the White House with posters, flowers, paintings and photos in honor of black men, women and children who have lost their lives at the hands of police.

Placed on the recently renamed Black Lives Matter Plaza, the tributes have created a spontaneous memorial that are now being collected for a more permanent home at the Smithsonian Institution.

Graffiti artists and mural painters have designed visuals on the site where many protesters congregate to begin nearly nightly demonstrations in Washington.

Memorials have also popped up in New York where muralists decorated the city's Chelsea neighborhood, as well as cities around the world, including Nairobi, Karachi and Berlin. (<https://reut.rs/2YFci5s>)

Block after block in Washington, office buildings and windows of upscale restaurants that normally cater to lobbyists and business executives have been sheathed in plywood to protect against the short-lived outbursts of arson and vandalism that struck the city's center earlier this month.

Levi Robinson, one of the many artists who got the call to design and paint atop the plywood, said he stumbled onto the idea of making his depiction of military medics.

"I decided to show black medics who serve in the military after speaking with some examples who were on site handing out water began to tell me their stories," said Robinson of his piece adorning a boarded-up exterior window of a restaurant on Black Lives Matter Plaza.

Aaron Bryant, a photography and social protest historian and curator at the African American History and Culture Museum, said unlike most of the protest artwork of the 1960s civil rights era, which were made by professional artists and graphic designers, this moment's artwork is different.

"Today, people are making signs by hand and running out of the door. There is more diversity in the signs you see," said Bryant, who is leading the team of curators collecting plywood murals, signs and objects such as gas canisters that might one day act as a portal to this moment in history. His museum is one of several making up the Smithsonian Institution on the National Mall in Washington.

"It's hard to talk about this moment's artwork with one common denominator, but what I see is this idea of humanity and community. People coming together to make positive, social change, messages that will last for generations."

The Washington-based P.A.I.N.T.S Institute, in partnership with the Downtown DC Business Improvement District, organized some 42 artists and volunteers, including Robinson, to design protestor-inspired murals on the Black Lives Matter Plaza, an expansion of similar furnishings in downtown Washington.

Foot traffic, thinned by a two-month coronavirus lockdown, can be spotted taking selfies with some of the roughly 27 murals depicting black faces wearing masks that read, "Let Us Breathe" and "God is Love."

Once such first-time public mural artist, Jemn Napper, said she hopes her downtown Washington pieces ultimately help people realize that "even though we may have our differences, we can all play a part to come together and create change."

(Reporting by Katanga Johnson; Editing by Chris Sanders and Lisa Shumaker)