

Schnitzer museum hosts BLM grant artists

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The philanthropist wanted to invest in artists who told their own stories related to the social justice movement.



COURTESY PHOTO: JSMA/PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY - Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University will feature work by Black Lives Matter Artist Grant Program artists, including Amirah Chatman with pastel on chipboard, "Heaven's Probably in Phoenix."

When the social justice movement exploded in 2020 upon the killing of George Floyd by a policeman, and companies and individuals leaped into action to help the cause of Black people, Jordan Schnitzer wanted to be part of the solution.

The Portland philanthropist and businessman established the \$150,000 Black Lives Matter Artist Grant Program in July 2020. Each of the three universities that housed Schnitzer museums — Oregon, Portland State, Washington State — offered \$2,500 each to 20 artists to make work that responded to the time.

"Artists are always the chroniclers of our time," he told the Portland Tribune at the time. "I believe if we go forward 20 or 30 years, and we ask historians and sociologists to talk about the 2000s and the most important shifts in this country, it will be that people of color came more into their own, decades too late."

Schnitzer set out to help artists associated with Black Lives Matter, which is both an organization and the default slogan for the latest social justice movement. He did, however, say the grants would not be restricted to BIPOC artists.

"This granting initiative, which categorically references the Black Lives Matter movement(s), gestures toward the germinating financial and intellectual investment in artwork borne out of a continuing, centuries-long fight for Black autonomy, freedom and, most notably, life," a news release said.

Now, starting Jan. 18, a day after MLK Day, an exhibition of work by 20 Oregon-based artists who received the grant will be shown at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art at Portland State University. There'll be exhibits of installation, photography, video, painting, performance, textiles, sculpture, poetry and printmaking — all stretching the notion of "socially engaged artwork beyond its cursory definition."

The exhibit's news release said some awardees found it imperative to "use art as a vehicle to depict the horrors of white supremacy," while others "tend the intricacies of their individual craft, or the richness of material culture."

Said Schnitzer: "Black Lives Matter — we have all heard these words many, many times — but what do they mean? How do they affect you? How do we gain knowledge and understanding of each other? Like all of us, I struggle to know how to deal with my own thoughts (around) prejudice and (it needed the) community coming together to deal with issues of supremacy, privilege and racism. So I turned to a group — artists — who from time immemorial have helped us deal with issues affecting society. The 20 artists in the exhibition force us, in different ways, to reach into our hearts, mind and souls to help find answers."

The exhibit shows through April 30.

For more: www.pdx.edu/museum-of-art.

— Jason Vondersmith