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Shaun Leonardo's Stark Images Of Police Brutality Leaving MASS MoCA, Without Incident, Headed To The Bronx



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By Chad Scott

Before Phillip Guston, there was Shaun Leonardo.

The postponement of Guston's retrospective scheduled to open this summer at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. made international headlines, provoking curiosity far outside insular art world circles.

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"This additional time will allow us to slow down, get past COVID, and bring the Gallery's community together in person for challenging conversations that will help inform how we rethink the exhibition," Kaywin Feldman, director, National Gallery of Art, said in a statement released November 5 announcing the exhibition will now debut May 1, 2022 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Similarly, in March, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Cleveland cancelled the presentation of Leonardo's "The Breath of Empty Space" exhibition, "after people both inside and outside moCa expressed concerns that the museum was not prepared to support the show responsibly and that its impact could be harmful to our community," the institution said in a statement, adding, "these concerns included ethical questions about the representation of Black trauma and death, and criticism that moCa was not in a position to center the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color before tackling issues such as anti-Black, state-sanctioned violence."

Leonardo wasn't buying it.

The artist released his own statement in response to the cancellation which read, in part, "I must make it clear that I was never given the opportunity to be included in outreach, and therefore, never had a moment to engage any community member regarding the show. What has become evident to me... is that after grave mishandling of communication regarding the exhibition, institutional white fragility led to an act of censorship."

It is important to note that two of the most prominent voices in Cleveland speaking out against the presentation of Leonardo's work there were Black women, Amanda King, a local artist and activist, and Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir Rice. Tamir Rice was 12-years-old when he was shot and killed by police in Cleveland in 2014, one of the most infamous examples of murder perpetrated by law enforcement in America.

Leonardo depicts the park where Tamir Rice was killed in a drawing on view in "The Breath of Empty Space."

Guston (1913-1980), a white artist, had the brakes put on his retrospective when organizers became uncertain of their ability to display his paintings depicting members of the Ku Klux Klan in their appropriate context.

Both situations beg the question: if America's art museums, tasked with interpreting the culture, staffed by countless PhD's who've dedicated their lives to studying these artists and their output, are ill-equipped to carefully lead their communities through difficult times by presenting difficult artwork, what, exactly, do they exist for?

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Fortunately, there are institutions who've stepped up to the challenge of presenting difficult art through difficult times, assuring the work has context to engage and enlighten, not merely provoke. One such place is the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA). It, along with the Bronx Museum of the Arts, opened their doors to "The Breath of Empty Space" following cancellation in Cleveland. MASS MoCA presents the exhibition through December 20; it will open in the Bronx on January 10.

MASS MoCA credits its history of working with Leonardo previously for being able to take on the show with short notice while making sure the artwork on view was thoughtfully contextualized.

"I believe that challenging artwork should be shown, with the caveat that the museums should be well prepared and transparent about the problems, and sensitive to audiences in their interpretation, display and programming efforts," Laura Dickstein Thompson, Director of Education + Curator of Kidspace at MASS MoCA, told Forbes.com. "Shaun's work is important, as is Guston's, and for that matter many challenging artworks, because they slow us down so that we can more fully bear witness."

Slowing viewers down to bear witness is what Leonardo hopes to achieve with works in this exhibition.

"For these drawings, I take some of the most widely disseminated images of police violence, both recent and historical, and make choices that I think will slow down our looking," Leonardo said. "I wish to literally create space in these images, so that we can sit with them differently, even in the hurt."

In addition to a history of working with Leonardo, MASS MoCA has also made it a priority to work with its community—all members—giving it the "street cred" to authentically take on this material. That's less common across the sector than should be the case.

"We have been doing anti-racism work already with the schools, creating an annual social justice curriculum, and with the community on tours, artist talks and a community advisory network; we felt Shaun's exhibition would contribute to, and deepen, our existing platform," Thompson explains. "The exhibition fit into what was already going on in the museum and the work we were already doing; we have at least three exhibitions currently on view that also are delving into race and identity including by artists Wendy Red Star, ERRE, and Ben Ripley."

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There's an old saying, "when you stay ready, you don't have to get ready."

When looking at the industry as a whole, it's hard to argue against an opinion that art museums were not "ready" for the racial tumult 2020 has wrought.

Part of MASS MoCA's community outreach around "The Breath of Empty Space" featured a "curriculum takeover."

In the past three months, 14 local high school students worked over Zoom with Leonardo and Amanda Tobin, Associate Director of Education at MASS MoCA, to discuss his exhibition and design a Black Lives Matter curricular intervention. Instead of having teachers tell the students how and what they should learn, these students suggested to their teachers projects that would correct and expose where and how Black lives have been omitted from history. They presented their ideas to an audience of local teachers, a representative from the county's district attorney's office, the president of the Berkshires chapter of the NAACP and other community leaders.

"One student commented that 'it is important to start with kids our age,' and another, 'I had to teach myself about aspects of history not covered in school,'" Thompson recalls. "It was an inspiring event and gave evidence to the motivation and leadership of young people to bring about change during these very difficult times."

Additionally, Leonardo conducted training with the museum's front of house staff. He is also working with Erica Wall, Director of the Berkshire Cultural Resource Center, and Thompson, on designing a series of talks called "In Session," panel discussions on anti-racist work in museums streamed live on MASS MoCA's YouTube channel and Facebook page.

MASS MoCA's relationship with Leonardo will continue after his exhibition leaves. He is scheduled to be a featured artist in Kidspace's 2022 *Defining Moments* exhibition. Kidspace is the museum's child-centered art gallery and hands-on studio presenting exhibitions and educational experiences in collaboration with leading artists.

Lastly, the museum recently received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to work with Leonardo on organizing a social practice project titled *You Walk...* for a dedicated interactive community space within the museum to open in May 2021.