

CRISTIN TIERNEY

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At Mass MoCA, an artist draws a long line on police killings



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By Murray Whyte

NORTH ADAMS — There’s a chilling calm to “The Breath of Empty Space,” an exhibition of Shaun Leonardo’s drawings of Black and Brown men lost to violence, most often by police, newly installed at Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. It’s the stillness at the eye of the storm. In June, the show was abruptly canceled by the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland after Samaria Rice objected to drawings of her 12-year-old son, Tamir, killed by Cleveland police in 2014. Leonardo, who identifies as Afro-Latinx, blamed “white fragility” for the cancellation. (He had hoped to do significant community outreach with the show.) Jill Snyder, the museum’s director, blamed herself and resigned. Mass MoCA stepped into the breach just a few

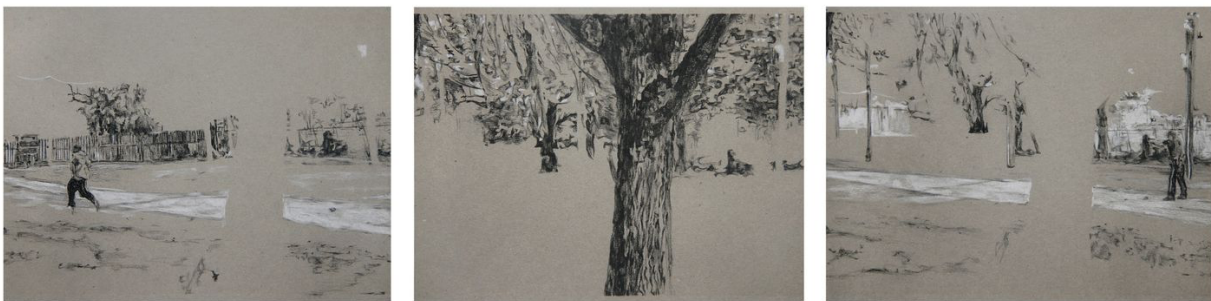
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weeks ago, and here we are. (Leonardo's two drawings of Rice are absent here, replaced by large black squares on the wall.)

It's hard to arrive at an exhibition without preconceptions when it's so front-loaded with controversy. Leonardo's work can feel timely — so, so timely, arriving amid months of racial justice protests and fresh nightmares like the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Wisconsin a few weeks ago — but seeing it, I think, the opposite is true. Leonardo's work has less relationship with the moment than with the simple fact that it isn't a moment at all, but a long and sustained bleak state of being.

In a technological environment where everyone has high-definition video capability in his or her pocket, we gawk at flashpoints, stunned — George Floyd's last breath squeezed out by a blasé cop in Minneapolis, Blake being shot seven times in the back while getting into his car. "The Breath of Empty Space" steps back from the explosions to see the violence on a continuum, in slow time. It asks you to leaven outrage and disgust with observation and contemplation. It wants you to see a serial nightmare with new episodes being added all the time. It invites you to look long, and not look away.

It's almost impossible to divorce Leonardo's subject from the gruesome scenes embedded within. But his choice of medium — charcoal on paper, purposefully softer and less distinct — is subtle and quietly brilliant, casting violent spectacle in shades of gray. The eyewitness photos and videos — the artist's frequent source material, as well as police dashboard and body cameras — have a chaotic rawness, captured in a traumatizing frenzy. Leonardo's work demands slow, deliberate attention, of both the artist and the viewer.



His triptych of the 2015 killing of Walter Scott, an unarmed Black man, by North Charleston, S.C., police, blunts the shock of that sickening moment and deepens its tragedy with close observation. You only have to Google Scott's name to see the eyewitness video of him running in his teal T-shirt, back

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turned, before being shot. In Leonardo's triptych, it is that exact moment, broken in pieces; you see it in fragments, read left to right. I think the artist intends an echo of Renaissance-era devotional triptychs, where the central panel carried the core narrative, with its wings reserved for the supporting cast. Leonardo's drawing leaves the central panel as a void: Scott on the left, running, officer on the right, gun cocked. The violence implicit, it's the space between that feels most important, and chilled me to the bone. You can think of it as a metaphor for so many things — the rift between Black and white, presumption and understanding, violence and peace. With that choice, Leonardo imbues the incident with a deeper, lasting power. I can't shake it from my mind. I think that's the point.



How these images embed in the collective culture — what we recall, what we think we know — are the questions at the heart of “The Breath of Empty Space.” They can be subtle, as in the Scott triptych, or much less so, as in Leonardo's scene of the brutalization of Freddy Pereira, who died in police custody in New York in 1991. Without photos or video, the scene is imagined, a knot of police backs and arms tangled with a silvery pool where Pereira's body

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would be. What you notice is the clear reflection of yourself, looking back at you from the chaos. The work implicates all of us: watching, passive, with brutality right in front of our faces.

In Leonardo's work, there is a deliberate fragmentation: With Eric Garner, who was put in a chokehold by New York police in 2014 (and whose plea, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry for the Black Lives Matter movement), the artist repeats the same image a half-dozen times, in different stages of completeness. Laquan McDonald, a Black 17-year old shot and killed by Chicago police in 2014, appears in two large pieces, his image all but swallowed by the dizzying wash of light and dark, streetlights bleary in the inky urban night. In a depiction of Rodney King, whose beating on a Los Angeles freeway in 1991 became a kind of origin document for civilian recordings of police brutality, the core of the picture is a searing void: King's crumpled body in white-hot silhouette, besieged by fists and kicks and clubs.



Leonardo's source material for the McDonald piece, a squad car's dashboard camera, offers blunt testament to the fog of uncertainty that all too often shrouds lethal decisions by police. (One of the officers involved was convicted of second-degree murder; three others were charged but acquitted of a coverup.) But Leonardo's work is also damning of a media cycle driven by proliferate images of brutality. It reminds me of Francisco Goya's "Disasters of War," a collection of 82 prints the Spanish master made as visual protest

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following the 1808 Peninsular War, where atrocity was so rampant that Goya was moved to isolate the specifics and, with his masterful hand, make them full and truly seen. Leonardo is not so blunt — the fog of perception amid an overload of competing imagery is as much his subject as the violence itself. But the goal is similar: Inured to the firehose of constant chaos, we are asked to slow down and look closely, to be with the moment.

Large charcoal portraits — of Trayvon Martin, killed in 2012 by George Zimmerman, a resident of the Florida townhouse complex where Martin was visiting family, and of Sean Bell, shot to death by New York City police at his bachelor party in 2006 — feel less successful, neither homage nor spectacle. It's in those moments between life and death, where the void opens wide and memory and image collide in the haze of confusion, that the power of Leonardo's work lies. It's in that empty space where we can pause and ask ourselves: When we look, do we really see?