

CRISTIN TIERNEY



Art Installation at UH Invites Community Dialogue About Law Enforcement



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Written by Sara Tubbs

A piece by artist Shaun Leonardo that's intended to invite community dialogue about one's experiences with law enforcement will be installed on the University of Houston campus this week.

The phrase "Your First Interaction with Law Enforcement" will be presented on the exterior wall of the UH Fine Arts Building, prompting visitors to anonymously submit – through a QR

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code – memories of their initial interactions with law enforcement – creating an accumulating mosaic of narratives comprising the ways in which the University community has learned to define its relationships with policing. People of all ages, colors, communities and backgrounds are invited to participate.

Leonardo will collect these stories and add them to an archive he is compiling, with responses from the UH exhibit to be drawn upon in subsequent presentations of the piece. The anonymous messages will also be printed out and mounted alongside the same phrase, “Your First Interaction with Law Enforcement,” inside the Blaffer Art Museum in an exhibit that opens Saturday, April 17.

“To portray and feel deeply a fuller self that is not contained within these projections or these stereotypes— that has been my mandate. That has been the very thing I want to offer to the world,” Leonardo shared. “I wanted to pull more and more people into that exploration so it would not be contained [solely] to my own narrative.”

Brooklyn-based Leonardo is best known for his interdisciplinary work exploring the relationships between masculinity, sports, race, the prison system and healing. His combination of performance and participation to navigate societal expectations for Black and Brown men has been featured at The Guggenheim Museum, the High Line and MASS MoCA.

“The presentation of Leonardo’s work is aligned with the McGovern College’s commitment to creating a space for dialogue on race relations, and to facilitating a wider understanding of racism, its systemic roots and how to address these issues with sustainable solutions,” said Andrew Davis, dean of the Kathrine G. McGovern College of the Arts.

“Your First Interaction with Law Enforcement” is part of a larger exhibition at the Blaffer Art Museum on view Saturday, April 17 – Sunday, April 25 showcasing three artists-in-residence, including Leonardo, at the UH Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. The exterior component of Leonardo’s piece will remain on view through the end of May. His 2020 video work “Memory/Cycle” will also be on view in the exhibition, documenting a series of visual storytelling workshops with participants from four distinct groups, each with a unique relationship to prison— corrections officers, legal advocates, formerly incarcerated individuals and court-involved youth— as they translate their personal narratives into performative gestures without the use of words. There will be a discussion between Leonardo and UH Police Chief Ceaser Moore in reflection to “Memory/Cycle” next month. Refer to the Blaffer Art Museum website for details.

In addition to exhibiting his works at UH, Leonardo is leading a virtual, four-week workshop based on the Assembly program – an artist-led alternative to incarceration at the Brooklyn-based nonprofit Recess – for a select group of UH students and participants from 8 Million Stories, a Third Ward organization that transforms the lives of vulnerable youth through education, skills, training, employment and authentic relationships.

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Leonardo will also join Marvin Pierre, 8 Million Stories co-founder and executive director, and Elwyn Lee, UH vice president for community relations and institutional access, for a virtual artist discussion at 6 p.m., Thursday, April 22. [Click here to register for this event.](#)

“Building equity and inclusion is part of the University’s mission as well as its new strategic plan,” said Lee, co-chair of the UH Racial Equity and Social Justice Committee. “This art installation will facilitate important dialogue that goes well beyond the confines of campus, strengthening our partnership with the historic Third Ward and the organizations that are having a transformative impact in our community.”