

Artists and activists rush to save Black Lives Matter murals

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Banners representing the 24 murals that were painted in the downtown area of Indianapolis, Indiana, are displayed at the Central Library on December 10, 2020. Photo: Darron Cummings/AP

As Minneapolis, Minnesota, grieved over the death of George Floyd, Leesa Kelly and Kenda Zellner-Smith found comfort in the messages of anguish and hope that appeared on boarded-up windows. Residents turned miles of plywood into protest art. Now, the two are working to save those murals before they vanish.

Floyd, a Black man, was killed in May when a white Minneapolis police officer pinned his knee on Floyd's neck for many minutes. His death sparked months of protests across the country and world.

Kelly and Zellner-Smith formed Save the Boards to Memorialize the Movement. It's part of a push to preserve the expressions of anger and pain over racial injustice.

"These walls speak," said Zellner-Smith, who said she was too numb to cry after Floyd's killing. They're the expressions of communities, she said. "We want these feelings, hopes, calls to action to live on."

Some artists began painting detailed murals, but many spray-painted messages of anguish.

Saving The Art Before It Disappears

"Some of these boards aren't pretty," she said. They show pain and grief, and each tells a part of the story, she said. "And now we get to tell that story to everyone."

One is the word "MAMA" scrawled onto the side of an empty store. It was Floyd's last word. Now it's part of a database of art called the Urban Art Mapping George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database.

"The art was changing quickly, and these raw, immediate responses were being erased and painted over," said Todd Lawrence. He is a professor at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, and one of the database's creators. "We want people to see the full range of responses, the complexity, the multitude of voices."

Lawrence and Professor Heather Shirey were on a research team already documenting street art. When the streets of countless cities became temporary galleries after Floyd's death, they set out to save the art before it disappeared.

Although many of the 1,600 artworks in the database come from Minneapolis, Shirey said they hope to include pieces from around the world.

Street Art Appears On T-shirts And Banners

In Indianapolis, Indiana, organizer Malina Jeffers is unsure about the future of the Black Lives Matter street mural stretching across Indiana Avenue. The mural is wearing down from traffic and weather.

However, the mural will live on in prints and T-shirts created by the Black artists who made the mural. Banners representing other murals painted in the city are displayed at a city library.

"All of us know the mural won't be there forever," Jeffers said. "So we all wanted a piece of it to hold onto."

Similar work is going on across the country as groups work to keep the art alive.

Murals And Virtual Shows Help Preserve Protest Art

In New York City, New York, the Soho Broadway Initiative worked with arts groups to get permission for murals and provide artists with materials. As murals started coming down, the organization returned 22 artworks to artists and collected 20 more to be returned.

In Seattle, Washington, the Black Lives Matter street mural was starting to chip. The original artists repainted the mural, planning to touch it up again in five years.

Designers at a Seattle architecture and design company called GGLO are using a different approach to preserve protest art. They created an art show that allows visitors to use smartphones to view works scattered around the city.

Gargi Kadoo, a member of the design team, said much of the protest art around Seattle was removed. Street art has been erased in many other cities, including Tulsa, Oklahoma, where

workers in October removed a Black Lives Matter painting at the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre, where in 1921, a white mob attacked a prosperous Black district, killing an estimated 300 people. Other cities such as Indianapolis and New York City have seen their Black Lives Matter murals vandalized.

"This is our homage to the art that is gone," she said. "It's trying to keep the message alive virtually, in a form that no one can take down or hose off."

"We know how to best tell this story"

In Oakland, California, community arts organizations are preserving and cataloging more than 700 murals. The team is discussing plans to do indoor and outdoor exhibitions. High school lesson plans on the artwork are also being discussed, said Jean Marie Durant, president of Oakland Art Murmur Board of Directors.

The Black-led Black Cultural Zone has a leading role in the project. The organization supports and uplifts Black folks in East Oakland.

"We've been living this story, this trauma for a long time," said Carolyn Johnson, a leader of Black Cultural Zone. "That gives us a perspective that others may not have. We know how to best tell this story."

In Minneapolis, Save the Boards is working with Lawrence and Shirey as well as the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery to document and plan an exhibition. It will be in May 2021, the anniversary of Floyd's death.

Saved Boards Encompass Pain And Grief

Kelly and Zellner-Smith have filled their warehouse space. They started out by putting boards in their garages. Now, they have 537 in a warehouse. They say watching the space fill up was surreal.

"Being surrounded by these boards that encompass this pain and grief and hope, it was spiritual," Kelly said.

The next steps are to catalog the boards, do virtual scans and build a virtual gallery.

"They all need to be saved," Zellner-Smith said. "They all matter, and we want to keep collecting."

Quiz

- 1 Which section from the article BEST explains why many people are working to save the protest murals?
- (A) "Saving The Art Before It Disappears"
 - (B) "Street Art Appears On T-shirts And Banners"
 - (C) "Murals And Virtual Shows Help Preserve Protest Art"
 - (D) "Saved Boards Encompass Pain And Grief"
- 2 The following sentence from the section "Murals And Virtual Shows Help Preserve Protest Art" helps to prove the claim that protest art can be preserved.

The original artists repainted the mural, planning to touch it up again in five years.

Which sentence from the section provides further support for the claim?

- (A) In New York City, New York, the Soho Broadway Initiative worked with arts groups to get permission for murals and provide artists with materials.
 - (B) They created an art show that allows visitors to use smartphones to view works scattered around the city.
 - (C) Gargi Kadoo, a member of the design team, said much of the protest art around Seattle was removed.
 - (D) Other cities such as Indianapolis and New York City have seen their Black Lives Matter murals vandalized.
- 3 According to the article, WHY did Malina Jeffers support the T-shirt project featuring images of the street mural?
- (A) because it is a way for people to wear the art around the city
 - (B) because she thought T-shirts would make money for the cause
 - (C) because it will help people remember the mural's importance
 - (D) because the T-shirts can be on display at the city library
- 4 Which reason MOST influenced Leesa Kelly and Kenda Zellner-Smith to start saving the protest murals?
- (A) the death of George Floyd by a police officer in May
 - (B) their decision to form Save the Boards to Memorialize the Movement
 - (C) the comfort they found in the mural messages and not wanting to see them vanish
 - (D) the support they got from their community to keep the protest spirit alive