

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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HYPERALLERGIC

A Procession of Black Love Responds to Controversial Michael Brown Exhibition in Chicago

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Artists and families gather for the Black Love Procession in front of the Chicago Defender offices in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood. (images by the author for Hyperallergic)

CHICAGO — After the scene of Michael Brown's death was staged at Guichard Gallery as an artwork this summer, there was a public discussion about the exhibition and the fact that it was created by an artist who identified as white, Ti-Rock Moore. Many voices, including Kirsten West Savali, explained that the image of Brown's body left by police was already emblazoned in the hearts of the black community — they didn't need this work to be reminded. Deepening the blow of the exhibition was its location in Bronzeville, a historically Black neighborhood that had its beginnings during the Great Migration, and has been home to several great American African artists.

Cauleen Smith, an artist and filmmaker, lives down the street from the Bronzeville gallery. While visiting the exhibition titled *Confronting Truths: Wake Up!*, she explained that her opinion was quickly dismissed by the gallery owner after being engaged and not receiving the conversation about race he had hoped to conduct. Smith saw the exhibition as a gallery filled with work that she deemed violently offensive, and she believed it had been fabricated by a person with more money than basic human empathy.

"As Black folks living in this affluent and powerful country, the bitter irony of our selection as fodder for state sanctioned violence, and as a receptacle for fantasies of demonic evil had kind of bubbled over," Smith told Hyperallergic. "This feeling of alienation and outrage was then amplified by that exhibition being mounted in the heart of Bronzeville on the ground floor of the Bronzeville Artist Lofts (housing mostly black artists) in the Guichard Gallery."

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This visit prompted an informal Facebook call by Smith for an artists' response, which then led to a formal meeting. The group of artists wanted to push against the exhibition while also relating its content to a greater context. Smith and others envisioned something larger than a protest, something that would register as an offering rather than a single-minded complaint. "We agreed that our real project/mission was to do something no one else was doing," said Smith. "We just wanted to tell our folk that we loved them."

This love came in the form of a procession on Sunday September 6, a literal translation of their intention and a way to honor the losses to the Black community that have been felt so strongly this year while also creating a hopeful environment. The march, named Black Love Procession, attracted roughly 20 participants, mostly artists, curators, musicians, and arts advocates, and it was led by a joyous ice cream truck. Metallic balloons, handmade banners, and fresh flowers decorated the cars while participants were part of the spectacle and encouraged bystanders to join the roving march of artists.

The procession began at the offices of The Chicago Defender, a newspaper that has written about and advocated for the black community since 1905, and as Smith explained, it was the original model of how to demonstrate care and love for the city's Black community. The slow-moving procession then marched, roller skated, biked, and drove a little more than a half mile, winding past a public park the group knew would be filled with people grilling during Labor Day weekend celebrations. The march ended at Guichard Gallery, which participating artist Danny Giles explained was intended to be symbolic but also served as an offering of participation to the artists involved with the gallery.

During the procession Giles created and slowly pushed a work of his own, a large black monolith modeled after the one that appears in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. Described by Giles as a bizarre intervention throughout the classic film, the artist believes that the object is both a funny joke about the pretenses of public art and points to his presence in society as "partially alien," which he says is how he feels when he is performing public art.

"Building, transporting, and performing this piece became a practice in labor for love that was really unconditional," Giles said.

On the banners carried by marchers, Smith had emblazoned quotes from a famous Bronzeville citizen, the great poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Quotes were taken from Brooks's poem "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," and included phrases and words such as "Conduct Your Blooming," "Noise," and, "Whirlwind," sparkling high above the procession.

"This poem is a love letter to working class black people," Smith said. "Before I ever set eyes on Chicago or Bronzeville I loved this poem. I believe that I live in Bronzeville now because of Ms. Brooks' luminous and rigorous poetry. She wrote that poem and ended it with her wish and her will for us: 'Conduct Your Blooming In the Noise and the Whip of the Whirlwind.' What more could one want for the people she loves?"