

## Conversation: Sai Clayton, FAM's First Fellow



Sai Clayton and Brandi Coates demonstrate art-making activities in a Frist Art Museum Art Trunk video

As a little girl, Sai Clayton visited the Frist Art Museum with her parents, admiring the beautiful art and making her own—she even had her artwork displayed in an annual school art show. In fall 2021, she became the museum's first fellow, working with Frist curators and educators on interpretation, resources, and programming for exhibitions such as Alma W. Thomas: Everything Is Beautiful and Knights in Armor. Sai is now approaching the end of her term as the inaugural Frist Art Museum Fellow and graduation from Middle Tennessee State University with a major in visual arts and minors in Japanese and dance. In March 2022, Engagement Coordinator Brandi Coates sat down with Sai and asked about her experiences and takeaways from this opportunity. The following is an edited excerpt of their conversation.

### **BC: What drew you to this fellowship?**

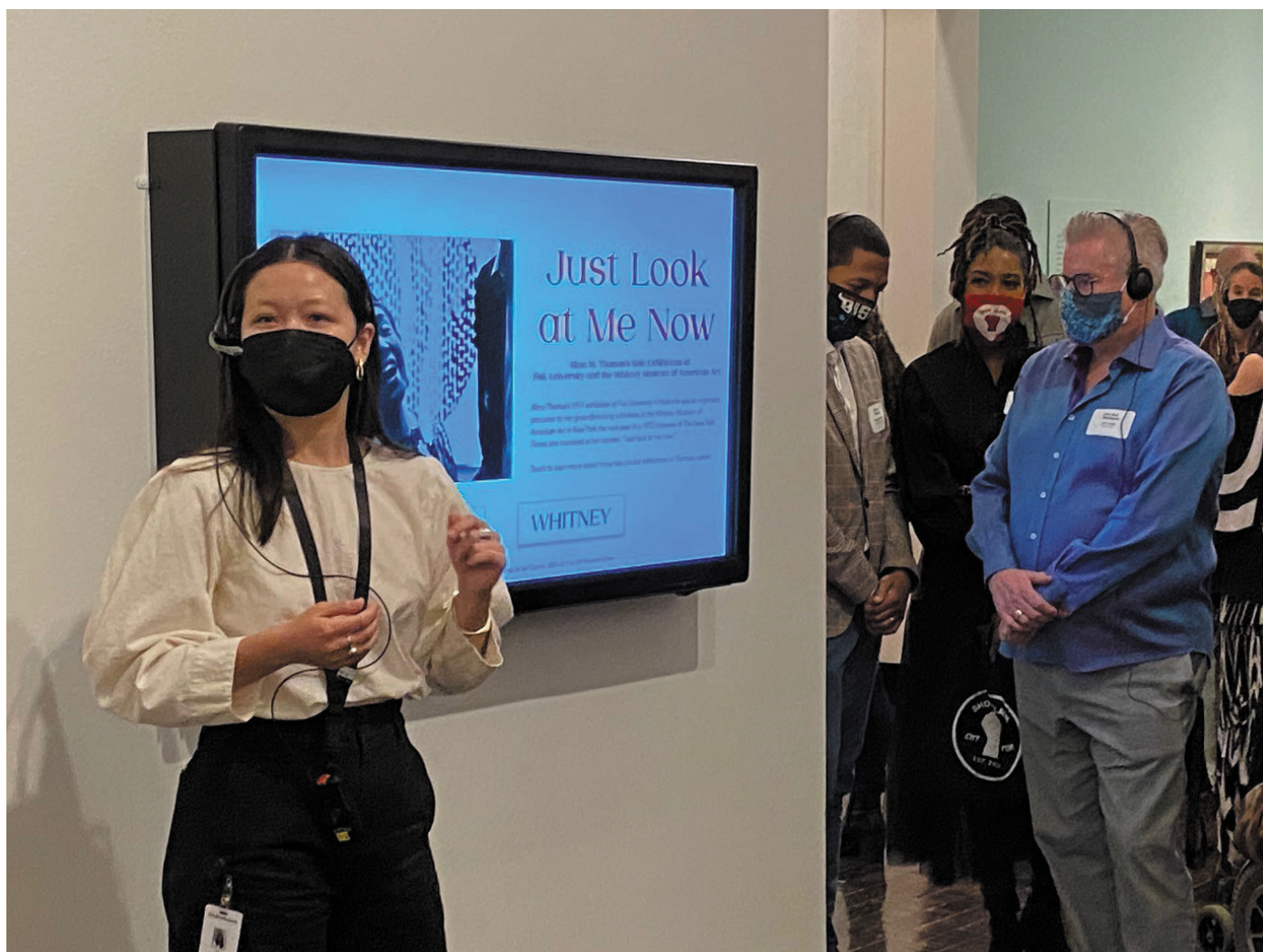
**SC:** I have creative parents and have always been interested in an arts career, but I didn't really know what that could look like beyond a career in fine arts. Born and raised in Nashville and growing up at the Frist, I've always looked at the different opportunities here and have wanted to be more involved. When I read about the fellowship, my jaw dropped. It seemed like the most perfect experience to get an inside look at museum careers, especially curation. And since this was a paid fellowship, it was accessible.

### **BC: How would you describe your experience during this fellowship?**

**SC:** It's been very eye-opening and provided exposure to a professional office workspace. It's also reassured me that I am pursuing the right field. Interacting with so many passionate and intentional people in a creative space has really shown me the community that's behind the Frist and who is invested in the arts. I want to pursue an arts career that will contribute to community engagement. It's truly been life changing. You don't know whether you can pursue a museum career until you have the experience to be able to explore it. This fellowship has given me a chance to see all the different types of careers and get hands-on experience without committing to graduate school. It has reassured me that this is what I want to do, and now I can feel more confident moving forward.

### **BC: What has been the most rewarding part of your experience?**

**SC:** I know I may not have a lot of visibility in this position now, but moving forward, I hope to be in more positions of responsibility within the art field so that people who look like me—who are Asian or biracial and raised in the South—can see me as someone who can take up space and contribute to an arts institution. It's also been incredibly rewarding to work in a field that I am deeply pas-



Clayton presents during the Alma W. Thomas: *Everything Is Beautiful* media preview

sionate about. For the first time ever, I've been able to work toward something that I can genuinely look forward to every single day. Of course, seeing an exhibition go up after you've worked months and months on it and knowing the team behind it is so rewarding. It's magical!

**BC: What are your next steps after this fellowship? How has this shaped your purpose and the kind of impact would you like to have?**

**SC:** I have always wanted to go to graduate school in New York City and to be a part of a world-renowned art community. But recently, I've begun to think that there's more for me to explore in Nashville. That's not to say that I

won't go somewhere else eventually, or that there aren't things to learn from other places, but I think Nashville's art community—especially the underground art community—needs to grow and have the resources that music and performance have in this city. I'm really interested in contributing to that. Being familiar with Nashville and seeing how larger art institutions like the Frist can collaborate with smaller galleries, I hope to open spaces and opportunities to local emerging artists, making Nashville a destination for art viewers and artists alike.

This fellowship has also shown me how museums are facilitators of culture and how museums have the responsibility and privilege to bring different groups of people together and elevate different voices.



Clayton demonstrates an activity during Art Trunk filming

Moving forward, I want to see how I can do those things at a more grassroots level. My current goal or dream is to provide an affordable studio and/or gallery space to emerging artists. There's a barrier to entry in most art scenes, but especially in Nashville, it feels like we don't have an emerging, robust underground visual arts scene like other cities our size. I would like to see the visual arts elevated and prioritized the same way music is here. That's my dream for Nashville.



Scan this QR code for an extended transcript of this conversation.

## *Project Uplift*

This summer, the Frist Art Museum is offering a new internship for a student or 2022 graduate of a historically Black college or university (HBCU) in Nashville. This intern will have the opportunity to curate, design, market, and create programming for a micro-exhibition featuring a local artist of color. In August, the show will open inside the elevator accessible on the Frist Art Museum's Main Level near the auditorium. Don't miss this exciting collaboration!

*Project Uplift* is supported in part by the Metro Nashville Arts Commission's 2021–22 Racial Equity in Arts Leadership (REAL) Cohort.

For more information, visit [FristArtMuseum.org/collegeinternships](https://FristArtMuseum.org/collegeinternships).