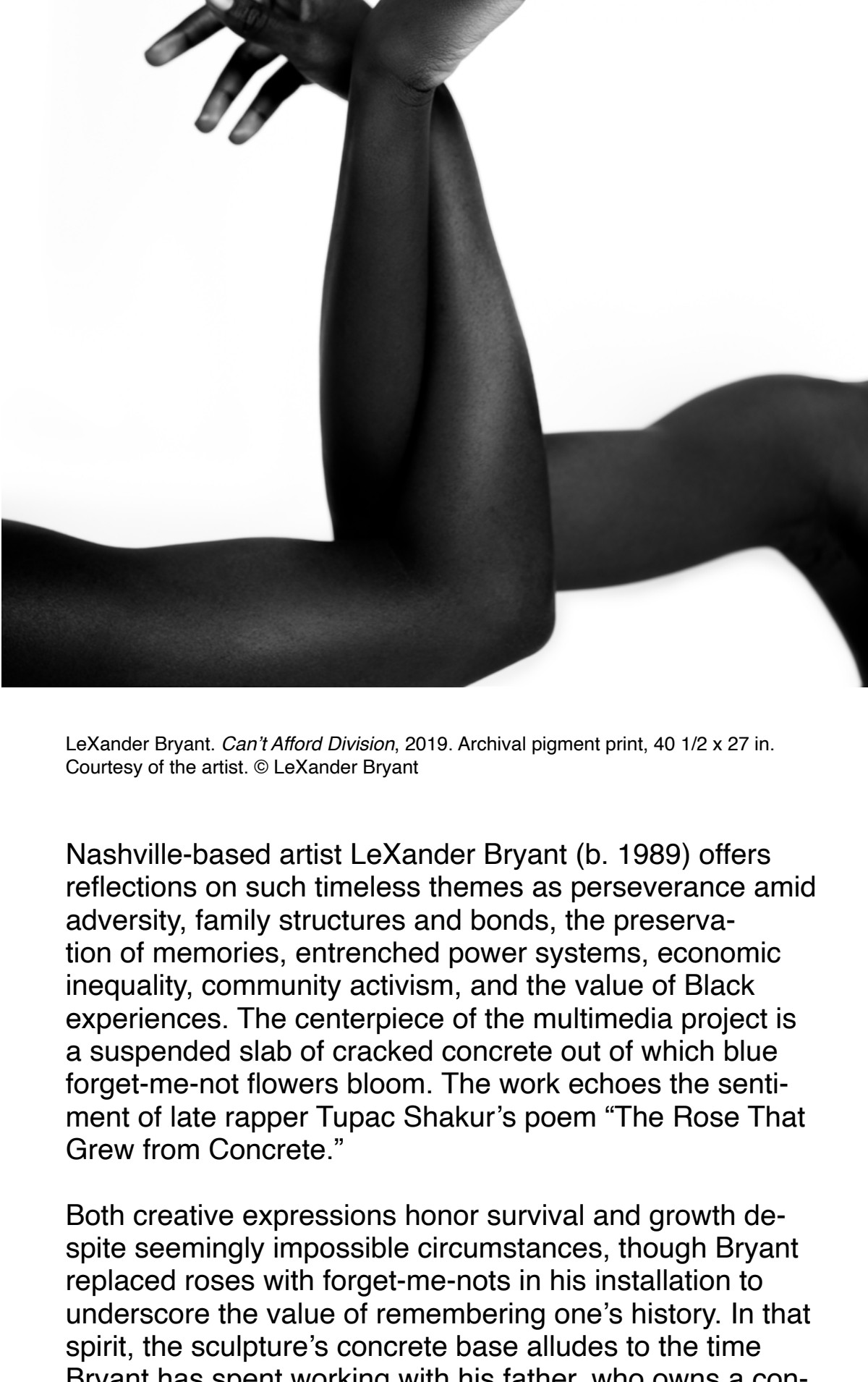


L E X A N D E R B R Y A N T

forget me nots



LeXander Bryant. *Can't Afford Division*, 2019. Archival pigment print, 40 1/2 x 27 in. Courtesy of the artist. © LeXander Bryant

Nashville-based artist LeXander Bryant (b. 1989) offers reflections on such timeless themes as perseverance amid adversity, family structures and bonds, the preservation of memories, entrenched power systems, economic inequality, community activism, and the value of Black experiences. The centerpiece of the multimedia project is a suspended slab of cracked concrete out of which blue forget-me-not flowers bloom. The work echoes the sentiment of late rapper Tupac Shakur's poem "The Rose That Grew from Concrete."

Both creative expressions honor survival and growth despite seemingly impossible circumstances, though Bryant replaced roses with forget-me-nots in his installation to underscore the value of remembering one's history. In that spirit, the sculpture's concrete base alludes to the time Bryant has spent working with his father, who owns a concrete business, and foregrounds the skilled labor required to pour the substance properly. Using the material of his father's trade, the artist inserts his family history into the work, making it a literal and symbolic foundation.

The sculptural form is elevated to remind viewers, especially children, that just because we can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there; it also suggests aspirational goals. Bryant wants Black youth to know that there are multitudes of fulfilling careers beyond music and sports. His own creative path has been circuitous, partly because he had limited knowledge of vocational opportunities while growing up in rural Alabama. Bryant spent six years in the Air Force Reserve after high school before studying industrial technology with a concentration in graphic communication at Alabama A&M University, an HBCU in Huntsville. These experiences greatly shaped the emerging artist and remain ingrained in his memory.

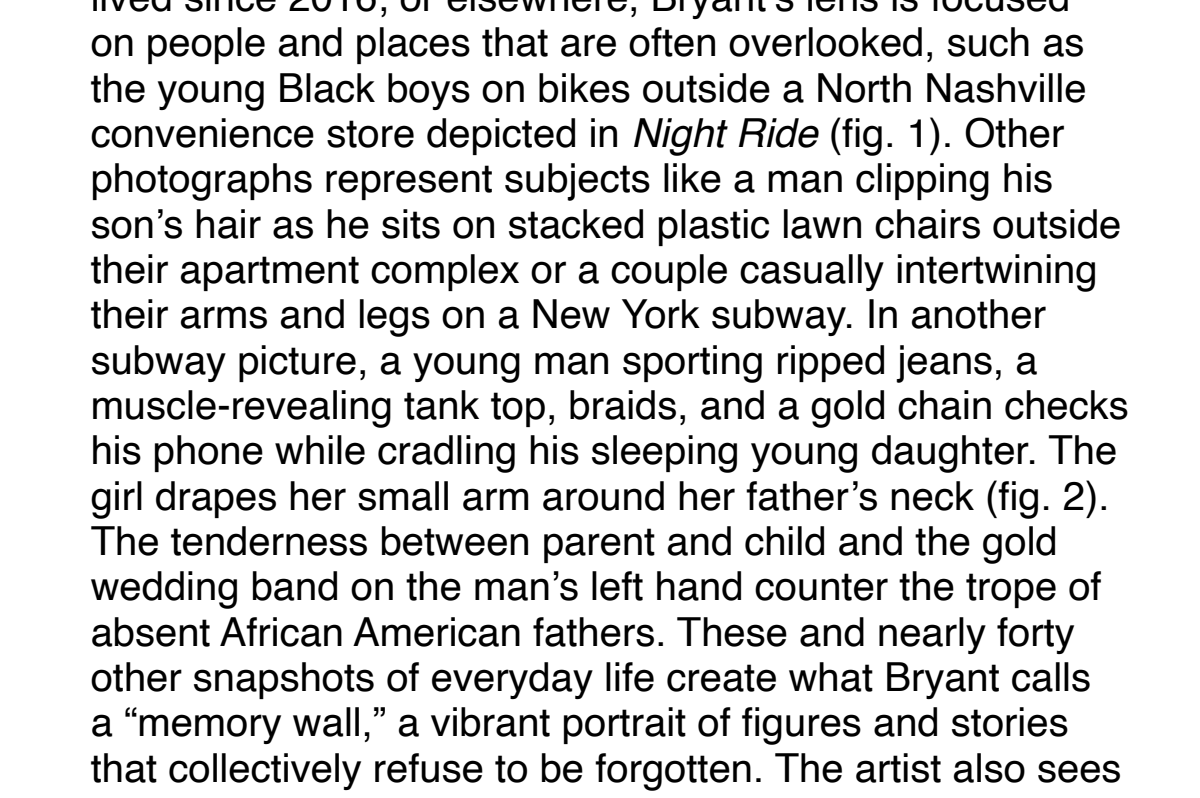


Fig. 1: LeXander Bryant. *Night Ride*, 2016. Archival pigment print, 10 1/2 x 15 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist. © LeXander Bryant

Community is a core component of Bryant's prolific photography practice. Whether in his hometown of Jackson, Alabama; neighborhoods in Nashville, where he has lived since 2016; or elsewhere, Bryant's lens is focused on people and places that are often overlooked, such as the young Black boys on bikes outside a North Nashville convenience store depicted in *Night Ride* (fig. 1). Other photographs represent subjects like a man clipping his son's hair as he sits on stacked plastic lawn chairs outside their apartment complex or a couple casually intertwining their arms and legs on a New York subway. In another subway picture, a young man sporting ripped jeans, a muscle-revealing tank top, braids, and a gold chain checks his phone while cradling his sleeping young daughter. The girl drapes her small arm around her father's neck (fig. 2). The tenderness between parent and child and the gold wedding band on the man's left hand counter the trope of absent African American fathers. These and nearly forty other snapshots of everyday life create what Bryant calls a "memory wall," a vibrant portrait of figures and stories that collectively refuse to be forgotten. The artist also sees parts of his own past in these images, recognizing the influence of elders in his community, for example, or the success his cousin's Oldsmobile Cutlass symbolized for him as he developed and matured.



Fig. 2: LeXander Bryant. *Protect (Her)*, 2019. Archival pigment print, 15 3/4 x 10 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist. © LeXander Bryant

In contrast to the collage-like assemblage of documentary street photography is a selection of Bryant's studio works that are more singular in their emphasis. These larger-scale compositions zoom in on one part of an individual's body, signaling the universality of the human form and the need for physical and spiritual nourishment. Here, a young boy's head with eyes closed floats half-submerged in a bathtub; a man gingerly reaches ringed fingers into a natural body of water; and two bare arms gracefully interlock in a manner similar to the Three Graces in Botticelli's painting *Primavera*. Instead of the fair maidens in that Renaissance work, young Black women are Bryant's creative muses (cover). In *Don't Blame the Youth*, a photograph shot in conjunction with local rapper Mike Floss's 2015 album of the same name, a boy holds a spoon filled with milk and gun shells rather than the cereal that should have come from Lucky Charms box on the table (fig. 3). Bryant is pointing out the unlucky position many young people face as they attempt to escape the lies they are fed by the media, advertising, and other sources and move on to lead healthy, creative, and intentional lives.

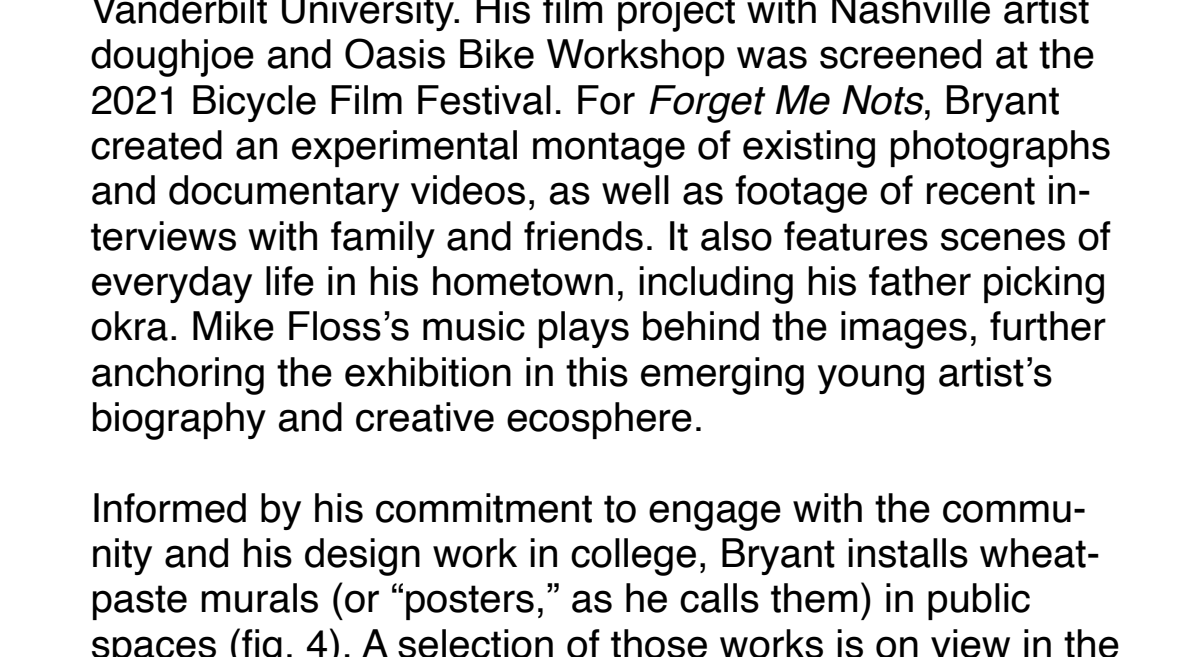


Fig. 3: LeXander Bryant. *Don't Blame the Youth*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 27 x 40 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist. © LeXander Bryant

Bryant is also a prolific filmmaker and has collaborated with many local creatives on projects ranging from Slim & Husky's Pizza Beeria to visual artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons's Engine for Art, Democracy & Justice at Vanderbilt University. His film project with Nashville artist doughjoe and Oasis Bike Workshop was screened at the 2021 Bicycle Film Festival. For *Forget Me Nots*, Bryant created an experimental montage of existing photographs and documentary videos, as well as footage of recent interviews with family and friends. It also features scenes of everyday life in his hometown, including his father picking okra. Mike Floss's music plays behind the images, further anchoring the exhibition in this emerging young artist's biography and creative ecosphere.

Informed by his commitment to engage with the community and his design work in college, Bryant installs wheat-paste murals (or "posters," as he calls them) in public spaces (fig. 4). A selection of those works is on view in the exhibition, and this guide unfolds into a print of one of the posters. Affirming messages, typically expressed in bold red-and-yellow designs meant to evoke the color palette of McDonald's ubiquitous marketing campaign, offer counternarratives to what many Black children absorb through overt systemic racism and subtle microaggressions:

DO NOT ALTER
EDUCATE YOURSELF EDUCATE YOUR PEOPLE
DONT BELIEVE YOUR LYING EYES
DONT SETTLE FOR WHAT AINT YOURS
LOVE YOURSELF LOVE YOUR ENEMY
ITS OK TO SMILE

Bryant hopes these temporary public posters help those who see them unlearn harmful propaganda and declare the value of Black lives. Together, the works that make up *Forget Me Nots* offer an opportunity to consider one's present position by critically thinking about the past and envisioning one's legacy.



Fig. 4: LeXander Bryant. *Who Are You and Why Are You Here? Wheatpaste, Out North*, 2017. Archival pigment print, 10 1/2 x 7 in. Courtesy of the artist. © LeXander Bryant

LeXander Bryant: Forget Me Nots

January 28–May 1, 2022
Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery
Organized by the Frist Art Museum

Funded in part by the
Gordon CAP Gallery Fund

With additional support from
FOCA | Friends of Contemporary Art

Frist Art Museum
919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203
FristArtMuseum.org

The Frist Art Museum is supported in part by
THE FRIST FOUNDATION

METRO ARTS
NASHVILLE'S OFFICE OF ARTS & CULTURE

TENNESSEE ARTS COMMISSION
Creative. Connect. Inspire.

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
www.nea.gov

Connect with us @FristArtMuseum
#TheFrist #FristLeXander