

LEXANDER BRYANT

forget me nots

In this multimedia exhibition, 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 engagement, and the value of Black experiences. The centerpiece is a suspended cracked concrete slab out of which blue forget-me-not flowers bloom, a reference to the late rapper Tupac Shakur's poem "The Rose That Grew from Concrete." Although Bryant has replaced roses with forget-me-nots to underscore the importance of always remembering one's history, both works honor survival and growth despite seemingly impossible circumstances.

Forget Me Nots, the artist's debut solo museum exhibition, also comprises a selection of large-scale studio photographs depicting individual figures in moments of contemplative solitude, as well as a "memory wall" containing dozens of community-based images that collectively tell a story of cultural vibrancy. Though often overlooked, the people and places in these photographs refuse to be forgotten. The far gallery features wheatpaste posters—originally designed to be installed in public spaces—that recall Bryant's work in the 2019 Frist Art Museum exhibition *Murals of North Nashville Now*. Affirming messages such as "DO NOT ALTER" and "BABY JESUS" counter the harmful narratives often directed at Black youth. Lastly, Bryant created a new film composed of clips from previous collaborations and new documentation of everyday life in his hometown of Jackson, Alabama. While it is anchored in this emerging young artist's biography and creative ecosphere, this exhibition encourages viewers to consider their own current position by thinking critically about the past and envisioning their legacies.

All works appear courtesy of the artist.

Forget Me Nots, 2021
Concrete, aggregate, and artificial flowers

Like the late rapper and poet Tupac Shakur in his poem "The Rose That Grew from Concrete," LeXander Bryant acknowledges the beauty that can exist despite inhospitable surroundings or a lack of cultivation. In this suspended sculpture, he has used forget-me-nots rather than roses to underscore the importance of remembering one's past. The concrete base is a reference to Bryant's father's business and the time the two have spent together working with the substance. 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 younger ones, that just because we can't always see something doesn't mean it isn't there; it also suggests aspirational goals.

Community is a core component of Bryant's 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 young Black boys on bikes outside a North Nashville convenience store or a couple casually draping their arms and legs over each other on a New York subway. Nearly forty snapshots of everyday life have been selected for this installation to 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 the community, for example, or the success his cousin's Oldsmobile Cutlass symbolized for him as he developed and matured.

Bryant's studio works are more singular in their emphasis than the collage-like assembly of documentary street photography in the memory wall nearby. These larger-scale compositions focus on one component of an individual's body, signaling the universality of the human form and the need for physical and spiritual nourishment. 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's hand holds a spoon filled with milk and gun shells rather than the cereal that should be contained in the Lucky Charms box on the table. 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.

Informed by his commitment to engage with the community and his design work in college, Bryant installs wheatpaste murals (or "posters," as he calls them) in public spaces. 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. Bryant hopes these temporary public posters help those who see them unlearn the messaging of harmful propaganda and declare the value of Black lives.

Bryant is 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. A recent film featuring Oasis Bike Workshop and artist doughjoe engaging with Nashville youth was screened at the 2021 Bicycle Film Festival.

For *Forget Me Nots*, Bryant created this experimental montage of existing photographs and documentary videos. It features scenes of everyday life in his hometown of Jackson, Alabama, and recent interviews with family and friends there. Local rapper Mike Floss's music plays behind the images, further anchoring the exhibition in this emerging young artist's biography and creative ecosphere.

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