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Art Market

Artist Hugh Hayden Is Working to Create a More Just and Diverse Art World



Portrait of Hugh Hayden by William Jess Laird. Courtesy of the artist.

Though it seems like a lifetime ago, it's only been a little over two months since the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. In that time, ongoing protests for Black lives have set off a long overdue sea change that seeks to address and dismantle racism at all levels of society, in the United States and beyond.

The art world has been directly implicated in this global reckoning. From campaigns to bring down and replace racist monuments, to sales benefiting social justice organizations, to lists of diversity commitments, to public resignations, to open letters and social media accounts airing embarrassingly blatant instances of racism in museums and galleries, the initiatives that have sprung up in the wake of the current Black Lives Matter movement are appropriately numerous—the industry has a lot to account for.

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For artist Hugh Hayden, many of these efforts, while commendable and certainly worthwhile, weren't quite enough. "I didn't see these types of initiatives as the types of solutions I wanted; they felt more like Band-Aids," he said. "I didn't think that they would lead to real systematic change from my own understanding of them." As a result, Hayden carved out his own approach, leveraging his status and relationships as a young Black artist to create the Solomon B. Hayden Fellowship.

Named after Hayden's late father, the fellowship program was developed in conjunction with the artist's two representing galleries—Clearing Gallery and Lisson—and Columbia University (Hayden's alma mater) in order to support students completing the university's master's program who are "socioeconomically disadvantaged, have experience living or working in diverse environments, and/or who have demonstrated experience in or commitment to working with historically underserved or underprivileged populations." "I felt it'd be more surgically precise for me to help create more equity in the art world, specifically through arts education," said Hayden. "This is one way that I, myself, as a young Black artist who recently graduated from grad school and is showing with two galleries, could put these resources to better use."

By administering the fellowship through Columbia, Hayden was able to circumvent the hefty taxes that students would typically have to pay when receiving these types of scholarships. Funded by the sale of recent works from Hayden's series of cast-iron African masks (fittingly titled "Pan African"), Clearing Gallery's iteration of the program will be awarded to a graduating sculptor who, as the gallery stated in an Instagram post, "has demonstrated leadership in and support for the African-American and African-diaspora communities." Lisson's commitment, meanwhile, is to support "diverse candidates wishing to pursue a career in art history and/or curation," and is made possible via financial contributions from Hayden, along with Lisson's senior leadership.

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“As a gallery, we felt we needed to do more in terms of the representation of people of color in art history and in curatorial studies,” said Ossian Ward, content director at Lisson. This lack of representation in the cultural community is something with which Hayden is intimately familiar. Discussing his time at Columbia University, he described how, in an African art history class taught by a white professor, he was the only Black student. “It’s one thing to say that there need to be more Black curators,” said Hayden. “You need to go to the roots and look at what’s going on.”

While the monetary burden of pursuing a career in the arts is a major roadblock for many students of color, there is also the issue of access. Thriving in the art industry is infamously tied to who you know, a condition that all too often bars individuals from marginalized communities from participating. As a result, in addition to financial support, another major component of the Solomon B. Hayden Fellowship program is mentorship. “Especially for young artists who are entering grad school and aren’t from New York, the art world can be a very overwhelming place to navigate,” said Jack Eisenberg, a director at Clearing. “It’s not easy. A mentorship program gives us the opportunity to provide insight to someone who can find value in it.”

Hayden concurred. “One hope with these initiatives is to find a way of providing this sort of access and exposure and experience; that this can be something more than just tuition,” he said. In fact, it was through this tradition of mentorship that Hayden was first introduced to Clearing. As a graduate student at Columbia, he was paired with the artists Mark Dion and Michael Joo as part of the university’s mentorship program. During one of the mentorship weeks, Joo brought his group of mentees to visit Clearing and Korakrit Arunanondchai’s studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn. It was there that Hayden met the gallery’s founder, Olivier Babin, who invited the group to an opening the next day. The rest is history.

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Though the fellowship is currently limited to Hayden's galleries and alma mater, the hope is that it will inspire something that will be both enduring and replicated by other galleries and universities. "There are so many things in the world that have changed because of George Floyd's death that probably wouldn't have happened in a hundred years," said Hayden. "This was an impetus to create change at a time where there was greater visibility and energy."

Hayden's program is a testament to how artists' resourcefulness and creative problem solving can be used to create actual, tangible change. "These initiatives will not end systemic racism and inequity," Hayden wrote in a recent Instagram post, "but contribute to a more equitable future within the Art World and hopefully greater culture at large." As the art world comes to terms with all the ways in which it has upheld racism, it will require many more imaginative, innovative solutions to properly undo them—the Solomon B. Hayden fellowship is one way in which an artist is laying the groundwork. •