



M&T Bank Gallery,
Knox Building
March 8–
September 30, 2024

Before and After Again

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Before And After Again is an exhibition of paintings, prose, and poetry by the Buffalo-based artists and cultural producers Julia Bottoms, Tiffany Gaines, and Jillian Hanesworth, respectively. Their works respond to the tragic slaying of ten Buffalo residents on May 14, 2022, at the Tops Friendly Market on Jefferson Avenue.

Many of us struggled and continue to struggle to make sense of the 5/14 tragedy. We open our mouths to speak, and the weight of sorrow interrupts our thoughts, breaks our voices, and leaves us with tears. In the wake of the shooting, Buffalo visual artist Julia Bottoms asked, “How do you make the unspeakable spoken? How do you celebrate the vibrancy of extraordinary lives in the presence of a wound that will never heal?” Tiffany Gaines, the first Black curator at the Burchfield Penney Art Center and an artist and writer in her own right, pointedly addressed this challenge. In an American environment replete with

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racist violence, “How do you really process something that you have seen again, and again, and again? What could possibly be said to make any of this feel any less difficult than it is?”

The artists assembled for this exhibition have spoken with families in their grief, have borne witness to a community in its terror, have listened to stories of rich lives lived. Parting with Garnell Whitfield, Jillian Hanesworth, Buffalo’s inaugural poet laureate, wished him healing. Garnell, the son of the slain Ruth Whitfield, responded, “What is healing?”

There is no universal answer to that question. Some of us will never heal. These three artists offer their version of healing through sharp and lucid perspectives that glimpse the depth of our collective heartache. Nonetheless, when they raise their voices, we can better see ourselves and recognize our shared humanity. With their vision we can continue the process of our own healing, whatever that means individually. The works these artists produced challenge us to confront the tragedy of 5/14, but in doing so, they pose questions that compound the issues they raise. What does healing mean, not just in the wake of a tragedy, but in the everyday lived experience of being Black in Buffalo?

Buffalo has long since lost the economic infrastructure that once supported a thriving Black middle class. Flight to the suburbs, ill-conceived urban planning projects, and the racist practices of redlining have calcified the economic and racial segregation of the city. The result of planned isolation and intentional hardship, places in the city like the East Side are left without access to

affordable and quality food options. Though it could not solve the scarcity issue by itself, for a brief moment in the 1980s the East Side had FIGMOS ptl—an acronym: Finally I Got My Own Supermarket, Praise the Lord—a Black owned grocery store at 1511 Jefferson Avenue. In 1981, when the store opened, its owner Douglas Goggins was quoted as saying, “The community is crying for someone to care.” FIGMOS would close within a few years of opening. The Tops Friendly Market would not open until 2003. There were decades of struggle in between, and our community suffered.

This provides context for the tragedy that took the lives of ten beautiful people, but it does not account for their humanity. We honor the good that each of these individuals brought to their community and acknowledge the breadth of love that each extended well beyond their immediate families. In their conversations with families and community members, the artists in this exhibition were often struck by the humbleness, the realness, the everydayness of those we lost. These were people going about their day, shopping for milk or strawberries. When Hanesworth asked Mark Talley, son of the slain Geraldine Talley, what made his mother special, she expected to hear about a figure that was larger than life. Mark’s response was simply, “She was just my mom.” Our mothers are so much to all of us. How could anyone summarize the profound ways in which their mother extended care and love over the course of a lifetime? Mark’s response confirms that a word like “mom” comes to represent all the experiences of loved ones that go well beyond our capacity to describe. The artists in this exhibition are engaging

us in a conversation about that deep humanity.

Bottoms says of her time with some of the families, “I think the thing that overwhelmed me in all of those interviews was just how much grace and love each of them brought to it. Their vision for the future and what they wanted to accomplish, beyond the pain of this moment—I can’t imagine.” Gaines, like her fellow artists, grappled with the profundity of that pain, saying, “In working on this exhibition, I think we really wanted to restore that humanity in the best possible way that we could, but there’s nothing, there’s literally nothing that any of us could do to ease the pain of that loss.”

Each of the artists acknowledges that they are only individual voices within our community, that they speak for themselves. In doing so, they endeavor not simply to be heard, but to be in dialogue. This exhibition is meant to be a space of healing and conversation, where we can gather to share the vastness of our experiences, to unequivocally announce our shared humanity, and to ensure that our loved ones are not forgotten.

Hanesworth mused, “Once we stop thinking about art as something that we’re infusing into the situation to help us and instead we think about art as a living, breathing part of us, we understand that we’re just being given this water, this air.” Art can be transformative, and the work produced for this exhibition offers that opportunity, that water, that air.

–Aaron Ott
Curator of Public Art



Above: Julia Bottoms. *A Dance Partner*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 66 1/2 x 52 1/2 inches (168.9 x 133.4 cm).

Cover: Detail of *Mementos*, 2023. Oil on canvas. 65 3/4 x 48 1/4 inches (167 x 122.6 cm).

All works courtesy of the artist. © Julia Bottoms. All photos: Amanda Smith, Buffalo AKG Art Museum

Strawberries

by Jillian Hanesworth

The strawberries were bitter this season
Not as sweet as I recall them to be
The once refreshing treat burning my tongue with its tartness
I'd never choose strawberries so sour to taste

These strawberries chose me
Reflecting the bitterness of the world in every bite
Making me grateful for the sweetness I remember
Hoping next season sprouts that beauty again



Julia Bottoms, Detail of *Strawberries*, 2023.
Acrylic on canvas. 53 1/2 x 38 1/2 inches (135.9 x 97.8 cm).

Mental Health Resources

This exhibition raises emotionally difficult subject matter. If you are having a hard time processing the show or would like someone to talk to, consider reaching out to one of these resources:

Alkeme is an application that provides mental health resource created specifically with the Black community in mind. Visit alkemehealth.com/ to learn more.

BestSelf Behavioral Health is a Western New York-based behavioral healthcare provider. Visit bestselfwny.org/ or call their intake line +1 716 884 0888.

Horizon Health Services provides comprehensive services to Western New York managing mental health challenges. Visit horizon-health.org/services/outpatient/mental-health-psychiatry/ or call their intake line +1 716 831 1800.



Listen to Naila Ansari's movement through joy exercise, specially recorded for this exhibition.

Before and After Again was organized by Aaron Ott, Curator of Public Art

Before and After Again is presented by Tops Friendly Markets and M&T Bank.



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The exhibition is made possible through the generosity of the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature; Nicole and Steve Swift; and an anonymous donor.



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