

Tran, David. "Sparking Conversations: 1708 Gallery's Billboards Spotlight Social Issues, Civic Participation," *RVA*, 5 November 2020.



Two new exhibitions from 1708 Gallery invite guests outside with billboard installations around the city. Artists Wilmer Wilson IV, Earl Mack, and Nikko Dennis hope to spread positivity and start important conversations.

Under the auspices of 1708 Gallery, public art installations by Wilmer Wilson IV and Chilalay founders Nikko Dennis and Earl Mack are currently on display around Richmond, hoping to invoke conversation on themes such as racial injustice, activism, policing, politics, and civil participation.

*'til bronze flows through the streets*, a billboard series by Richmond-born artist Wilmer Wilson IV, intends to disrupt billboards' typical role of advertising by using the platforms to display texts and imagery that will initiate discussion about the anti-police brutality protests and other local activism happening around Richmond over the past few months.

"I hope people will spend time re-imagining our shared institutions from the ground up," Wilson said via email, "and catching glimpses of the beauty that awaits there, amidst all of the hard work that it will take to truly change how we relate to one another."



Richmond has been and still is one of the pivotal sites of movements against systemic racism and police brutality. The removal of Confederate monuments, just a few of the many buildings and architectural structures around the city that are rooted in Richmond's past, has been a discussion over the past summer.

To Wilson, the removal of such monuments falls short of establishing meaningful structural change, and allows systemic racism to silently continue. He wants his billboards to be a starting point for more conversations about this idea.

"Virginia history is one of terror in so many different ways. It's visible in the very infrastructure of the city of Richmond," he said. "Intervening onto the infrastructure and the landscape, however small or temporary, felt meaningful, hopefully not just to me but to all whom this place subjugated, and continues to subjugate, to constitute itself."

The locations of Wilson's three billboards are no accident either. Wilson said that two of the billboards, which are displayed together on the 200 block of West Grace St and are entirely text, are located across from the Richmond Police Department as an "annotation to or interjection into its existence there."

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The third billboard, located at 21st St and East Broad in Church Hill, is image-based, which Wilson said allows a "more grounded entry point" for conversations surrounding activism and political activity in that residential area, which he notes has recently undergone "fraught social changes."



Wilmer Wilson IV, *'til bronze flows through the streets*, 2020. Billboard, dimensions variable. Photograph by David Hale, courtesy of the Artist and 1708 Gallery.

Bronze and brass are at the core of Wilson's pieces, two metals that, he said, are historically known for their durability, corrosion resistance, and spark-striking resistance. These copper alloys are used for cultural and utilitarian purposes, and Wilson suggested that in the same way, existing public structures that call to mind, and thereby reinforce, institutional racism can be "melted down" for a better use – perhaps rebuilding our institutions.

The second billboard project 1708 Gallery is currently presenting in Richmond is called *SMILE...* It was created by Nikko Dennis and Earl Mack, founders of the local design and apparel brand Chilalay.

Driving down Chamberlayne Parkway, drivers and passengers are greeted by a yellow-pink gradient billboard with a reminder to smile. The billboard suggests that a brighter future can be achieved through collective positivity and civil participation, such as voting. Part of the billboard stresses Richmonders to vote for "justice" and "peace" on Nov. 3.

Since the billboard is located in Jackson Ward, it was important for the gallery to make sure the space was occupied by voices within that area, explained 1708 Gallery's curator, Park Myers.

"Beyond the incredible importance of the neighborhood, it was important in working with and inviting Chilalay, because of that," said Myers. "Their entire creative endeavor, their business, where they cultivate their ideas, happens in Jackson Ward."



Dubbed "Black Wall Street" and "the Harlem of the South," Jackson Ward has been a historic center for Black entertainment and businesses since the nineteenth century. To this day, the neighborhood remains a cultural hub for Richmond's Black community.

Both Dennis and Mack are Virginia Commonwealth University alumni. Having launched their Black-owned small business in 2012, their presence in the Jackson Ward neighborhood has been well-established.

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When drivers or pedestrians pass by the billboard, Mack said he wants it to serve a reminder that some things are beyond our control, no matter how hard we try to fix them. "No matter what you're going through, a smile will last forever," Mack said.

While planned since before the pandemic began, the billboard installations are part of 1708's continuous effort during the coronavirus pandemic to hold socially-distanced onsite and offsite exhibitions.

"We're thinking about how our ambitions to support emerging artists continues in a time when we might not be able to be viewing exhibitions within the gallery space," Myers said.



*'til bronze flows through the streets* is now on view through Dec. 4 on 211 W. Grace St. and at the intersection of North 21st St. and East Broad St. *SMILE...* can be viewed until Nov. 29 at the intersection of West Jackson St and Chamberlayne Avenue.

*Photos by David Tran unless otherwise noted*