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‘A SPACE WHERE ART COULD BE NURTURED’: BROOKLYN MUSEUM MARKS 200 YEARS WITH ‘BROOKLYN ARTISTS EXHIBITION’

Open through Jan. 26, the exhibition showcases more than 200 artists working in the borough.

By [Sachin Bhola](#)

How do you mark 200 years of showcasing art in Brooklyn? If you’re the Brooklyn Museum, you showcase the work of more than 200 Brooklyn artists.

With the *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition*, the museum is spotlighting the work of more than 200 artists who have lived or maintained a studio in Brooklyn during the last five years. Their art spans a variety of disciplines—including painting, sculpture, installation, video, and more—and explores themes of migration, memory, identity, history, uncertainty, turbulence, healing, and joy. The Brooklyn Museum has long supported artists in the borough through exhibitions like the *Fence Art Show* and the *Working in Brooklyn* series. The *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition* is its largest-ever showcase of local artists.

To dive deeper into the exhibition, we spoke to three of the participating artists—William Villalongo, Tinuade Oyelowo, and Caleb Miller, whose submissions examine the Black experience and identity—about the role Brooklyn has played in their lives and work.

The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition *is open until Jan. 26. For tickets, visit BrooklynMuseum.org, or take a virtual tour of the exhibition. The Brooklyn Museum will continue to celebrate its bicentennial with Breaking the Mold: Brooklyn Museum at 200, a showcase of its legacy of championing artists and artworks that catalyze imaginative storytelling and brave conversations.*

William Villalongo

William Villalongo is a Brooklyn-based artist and educator whose figurative paintings, sculptures, and works on paper explore Black representation through themes including mythology and symbolic languages. His work can be found in collections at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Princeton University Art Museum, and more. His collage “Sphinx” is now on display at the Brooklyn Museum.

Can you tell us a little bit about “Sphinx” and the story it tells?

“Sphinx” brings together over 10,000 years of the Black presence enshrined in crafts and architectural marvels from the Great Sphinx of Giza to the Roman Empire to the Testa di Moro tourism crafts of Sicily today. Images of artifacts and cut-out floral shapes spiral along a double-helix formation on a black, velvety surface. The spiral is crowned with the image of a two-headed Etruscan vase, one side a Black figure and the other a European figure. At the base of the spiral, human hands are perched in front. All together, it creates a large, Sphinx-

like figure inspired by my research on the Black presence in antiquity in Egypt and Italy. Black people are essential to the human story; we are in every molecule on this planet.

What made you choose “Sphinx” for the exhibition?

The work speaks to deep time, healing, and connection. What I love most about the Brooklyn Museum is its range of arts from across the globe, and Africa in particular. I felt that this work was in communication with a lot of things on display in the museum, from antiquity to contemporary art. I also feel that images of healing and connectivity are needed now more than ever.

What do the *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition* and the Brooklyn Museum represent to you?

Community. There are so many artists in Brooklyn; it’s an impossible undertaking, but it’s nice that the museum tries.

How do you think working and living in Brooklyn has shaped you as an artist?

I’ve lived in Bed-Stuy for nearly 20 years, in the heart of the Black diaspora, and you can throw a rock out the window and likely hit an artist. It’s a school of sorts. I continually learn and grow from being here.

What advice do you have for young Black artists?

You may not have seen yourself represented much in academia, but space has been made for you out here. Take the bar and raise it!

Tinuade Oyelowo

Tinuade Oyelowo is a multidisciplinary artist whose work centers on social justice narratives—including race, gender, and sizeism—through an Afrofuturist lens. Her art has been exhibited in spaces including Trestle Gallery and the Clemente Soto Véllez Gallery. Her contribution to the *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition*, “Mine,” is a six-foot sculptural dress.

What story did you want to tell with “Mine”?

“Mine” is a love letter to Black America about our existence. A manifestation of reclaimed history that was never written down. A chance to heal and reveal ourselves, to walk through history with imagination and reverence. What’s unseen and unheard is still there. Even in the shadows, we exist.

“Mine” is a sculpture made out of Kanekalon hair. By applying loose hair weave to muslin, I wanted to create a dress that would unapologetically take up space—a sculpture that cannot be touched. The delicate nature of the piece speaks to the hidden truths of Blackness. The style of the dress references the Antebellum South, where Blackness was only seen in servitude. Co-opting the aesthetic, I am reclaiming it as our own. As Suzan Lori-Parks, a renowned playwright and author, states, “A Black play is a white play when you read between the lines.” “Mine” strives for the in-between of our American identity.

Why did you choose “Mine” for the exhibition?

When this opportunity came up, it felt like a divine moment of alignment. I created “Mine” eight years ago, while at an artists’ residency in upstate New York Wassaic Project. “Mine” was

always intended to be the first of a three-part sculpture series that, due to lack of opportunity, has not been created yet. Like many artists struggling to practice and live in this city, there were no prospects, and I wasn't ever able to book an exhibit. Being chosen and bringing "Mine" into the light felt like a full-circle moment—the perfect chance to share work that I believe brings something truly unique to the art world.

What do the museum and this exhibition mean to you?

Being able to connect with other local artists and see our community's talent on display has been incredibly meaningful. When I first visited the Brooklyn Museum for the *Ai Weiwei: According to What?* show, it felt like a space where art and artists could be nurtured and celebrated. It has been incredibly validating and exciting to work with the other artists and the team at the Brooklyn Museum.

How has Brooklyn influenced you as an artist?

Brooklyn has shaped me in so many ways. I'm the child of an immigrant who settled in Brooklyn. My parents met here, my extended family lives here, I received my Master's from a CUNY school, and I've built relationships and a community that I've treasured for over 14 years. This city has always been a space for the culture, Black excellence, and you feel it all around you every day. We share an understanding that we are connected and show up for each other. Brooklyn allowed me to exist and learn and grow within a community of other brilliant minds.

What advice would you give young Black artists?

Don't be afraid, don't stop, and define for yourself what success means for you. We have always existed outside the margins. We are the culture. Keep making work, keep exploring, stay curious, and your audience will find you.

Caleb Miller

Caleb Miller is a Brooklyn-born artist who grew up in Ohio. His work explores the Black experience in America through ceramics, photography, video, woodworking, and more. His art—including the collection of ceramics he's showing in the *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition*—is designed to spark conversations about race, from microaggressions to larger, systemic issues.

Can you tell us a little bit about the work you chose to exhibit?

My work in the exhibition are vessels made from stoneware clay. I am throwing a series of vessels of various sizes and sculpting faces on them. All of the faces represent different Black men, to feature the individuality of Black men and to highlight the experience of being both hyper visible and invisible at the same time. The sculptures are empty vessels because we are the product of what is poured into us. They are glazed in a manner that is partially dipped in one color with a contrasting glaze dripped around the rims, leaving some of the piece raw. The dripped glaze gives the feeling of tears and sweat to represent both pain, struggle, and hard work. The contrast between raw clay and glaze illustrates the duality of the experience of code switching—the inability to bring ones full self into spaces.

This work is driven by microaggressions I have been experiencing in the last 10 to 15 years. It became clear to me that many white people only see me as a person who exists to serve them and their needs; I am both hyper visible and invisible at the same time. They do not see me as an individual who lives and exists in the world.

What made you choose this selection of ceramics for the exhibition?

One of my goals over the last year or so was to start showing my work. Before setting that goal, a few folks in my life encouraged me to start doing something more with my work. I am not great at self-promotion, and I am not a fan of social media and only just started an Instagram account a few months ago. I am saying all of this because I believe if it had not been for the encouragement of a few coworkers and loved ones, my work would still be sitting on shelves somewhere no one would see it. I didn't even know about the exhibition until someone I work with sent it to my department.

Although I work in different mediums, my most recent work has been focused on ceramics. I chose the vessels with faces because they have more to say. The work was created as a series and works best as a group, but each vessel can stand on their own.

What does the *Brooklyn Artists Exhibition* and the Brooklyn Museum represent to you?

Living in Brooklyn, I assume there are tons of amazing artists all around. I assume this because of all the events, spaces, and creativity that is in the air all around, all year long. This exhibition took that feeling and assumption and made it tangible. What I love about it is every time I walk through the exhibit, there is something new to be found and viewed. I also know that this show is just a sampling of the amazing work being created in Brooklyn right now. I have had the feeling that we are in an art renaissance; this exhibition and the Brooklyn Museum as a whole are confirming that for me. I feel honored and humbled to be part of the exhibition. It is surreal to see my work in the same place as artists I have been inspired by and studied for most of my life.

How has Brooklyn shaped your art?

After living in Brooklyn for almost a year, I flew back to Ohio, and as I walked through the airport in Cleveland, I was one of a handful of Black people. It dawned on me that it would be a real struggle for me to move back to Ohio. The thing I realized was the lack of diversity. It was weird because I had lived a large part of my life in that environment and had never felt the lack of diversity so strongly. Brooklyn has given me a massive safe space, although I feel that space changing and shrinking with gentrification. I felt that way when I first moved to Clinton Hill/Bed-Stuy and Fort Greene over 20 years ago. That feeling is one of the reasons we moved to East Flatbush. We wanted to continue to feel that warm space, and wanted to make sure that our children grow up in that environment.

We are partly the products of where we are from and my art is a product of who I am. Although I did not grow up here, Brooklyn is home and has had a huge influence on who I am. From the sounds of hip-hop and reggae, the church I grew up in on Atlantic Avenue, to block parties and African street fairs, my grandmother's house on Macdonough, where I spent many summers and holidays, the schools where I have taught, to where we are raising our children—Brooklyn is part of me, and I am part of Brooklyn. I am Ohio-raised and Brooklyn-born.

What advice do you have for young Black artists?

Keep working—your creativity is part of you, and continuing to make work is a wonderful way to remain whole in a world that is constantly trying to break you into pieces. Remember: Just because we are not always represented in galleries and museums does not mean that we do not exist as artists in the world. We have always been here and will continue to be here. Find a supportive community of artists; they will help you grow in ways you cannot imagine.