

Politics of Breath: Pandemic to Protest

This special section emerged amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It began as a project to document the creativity and innovation that emerged as the world confronted fear, anxiety, and loss, as well as resilience and hope. However, this section took on new meaning after the death of George Floyd. The video of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis Police Officer that pressed his knee on George Floyd's neck for eight minutes, brought to the fore the systemic and institutional racism embedded into the foundation of America.

The right to breathe, the most basic of human rights, became a symbolic thread as COVID-19 hinders the ability to breathe and racism took the breath of Floyd. In a short period of time COVID-19 stirred both fear and heroism, while the death of Floyd reignited an international movement insisting that Black Lives Matter.

The Black Lives Matter protests that are sweeping the globe remind us of our history of colonialism, police brutality, and the inequity of our society. The problems of systemic racism, White supremacy, and settler colonialism are complex and require unique approaches if we are to begin to eradicate them. Interdisciplinarity is about solving big problems, wicked, complex problems. Problems that require researchers, artists, and activists to collaborate and challenge the status quo. 2020 has brought the world an extraordinary amount of change; we are learning how to live differently with ourselves and with each other.

Each of the artists whose work is included in this special section has uniquely and powerfully connected us visually to the pandemics of racism and COVID-19 that continue to steal breath and life on a daily basis. Tamara White's mixed media panel "No Breath" is a startling and coherent reminder of the injustice of inequality in America. The metaphor of the mask takes on multiple meanings and forces us to grapple with the reality of racism, the reality of the pandemic, and the reality that when one of us can't breathe we all suffer. Raúl Manzano illustrates both fear we feel and the fearlessness needed to rise above the uncertainty that COVID-19 has brought to every aspect of our lives. His painting reminds us that liberty is more than a symbol. It is an active stance that we must take if we are to survive the pandemics of racism and COVID-19.

Saint Paul photographer Heather M. Swanson's trio of photos depict the local aftermath of the death of George Floyd and remind us of the rioting and destruction that reached far beyond Minneapolis. These images are silent but loud representations of the need for activism and solidarity. Terae Soumah's mixed media piece "You are not alone." was inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement and is a call to action for a global movement to address human rights issues that are deeply rooted in racial inequality. The piece asks us to work together as an international community to begin to solve disparities in healthcare, economic, educational, and housing security due to racial prejudice and discrimination.

Sarah Sutro's paintings are about new, curious connections and confrontations between cultures, at a time when globalized living has scrambled assumptions about closeness and separation and COVID-19 has forced us to grapple with our own assumptions about closeness and separation. The artist says, "the drawn ink marks represent energies and forces of the human and natural worlds. They reflect states of mind and being, in one case, being able to survive chaos, and in another, facing dark uncertainty" (Sutro). This dichotomy is evocative of the uncertainty and need for survival that is an ever present part of our current reality in the face of racial injustice and COVID-19.

We have seen that radical action and bold steps can make the world a more equitable place - whether that is in addressing systemic racism or community health. We can see clear steps to making amends and taking accountability for a history that denies our Black brothers and sisters the right to breathe; a history that privileges some, not all. How we relate to our family, our friends, and our own histories are all interrogated in this journal. The next step must be to embrace and acknowledge interdisciplinary ways of knowing as a pathway to creating new futurity. Whether we are looking at our healthcare futures or our political futures, the need for interdisciplinary work and connection as a tool for our liberation must be at the forefront. The only way forward is through, together.

Penumbra Editorial Team

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