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Rest in Power Portraits: Reverberations

Traci Molloy

Abstract

A close description of a 2020 summer public art project in support of Black Lives Matter, at Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York.

I came up with the idea for the *Rest in Power Portraits* as the Black Lives Matter protests were happening all over the country in the summer 2020, in the middle of the pandemic lockdown. I wanted to participate in the protests in a meaningful way, yet I was fearful to be close to people due to my autoimmune disease and no vaccines in sight, so that prohibited my ability to march and join large gatherings. One day, while walking in my neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York, I saw a child's chalk drawing on the sidewalk. I started thinking of the ephemeral nature of the materials used and of pop-up memorials, where we often see candles, flowers, stuffed animals, and photographs in honor of the deceased. Could I use chalk and pastels to create a large-scale memorial drawing to call attention to the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Elijah McClain—victims of police brutality? If I use impermanent materials, the drawings will exist for a finite amount of time, usually a few days, and then disappear, to exist only in memory, thus echoing the impermanence of life. Our country was in a state of crisis. People were dying. Like the body, an ephemeral drawing will cease to exist and linger only in our consciousness after it washes away. This parallels sound. You hear something, it makes an impact, it reverberates, and then it disappears, leaving intangible traces in your mind.

I knew what I was going to draw right away: a portrait of George Floyd. In my other work, I often use figurative portraiture as a reference point for memory and loss. I construct public art experiences where I often partner with trauma survivors. I needed to determine a location for the drawing, the materials to be used, and possible co-collaborators. I knew that I will draw on the ground with chalk and pastels, to mimic the notion of children's sidewalk chalk drawings.

I knew that there was a family march concluding at Grand Army Plaza—a well-known gathering nexus for Brooklynites--on the afternoon of June 7th, 2020. I decided to do the drawing there, on that same day, but in the morning. The drawing would provide a quiet respite after the noise of the protest where people could gather around, in collective grief. I reached to a fellow Brooklyn artist and activist, Karen Oh, to see if she wanted to work on the project with me. We then found two additional artists, Eric Miles and Taylor Denaburg, to assist us. I gathered together every piece of chalk (including sidewalk and blackboard chalk), pastel, and charcoal that I had in my studio. Karen brought some too. The stores were closed and we had no time to order anything online.

I had to use a social media picture of George Floyd as reference for my portrait of him because I have no personal connection to him. The picture online that circulated most had become an iconic George Floyd image, representing both him and his horrific death, and the hundreds of years of unjust deaths that Black Americans have experienced. The picture had become synonymous with the Black Lives Matter movement. The march that was concluding at Grand Army Plaza on June 7th was a Black Lives Matter one. I wondered if I could depict a level of George Floyd's humanity through the artistic process and simultaneously activate a public space without impeding the public from navigating the space.

Karen, Taylor, and I started the drawing at 9:30AM. I started work on the portrait, Karen – on the typography, and Taylor – on adding color to the Black Power fist. There was hardly anyone at Grand Army Plaza at the time. It was so quiet, I could hear the sound of the chalk scratching against the asphalt as I was drawing. Eric showed up at 10AM, and started creating the ribbon banners around the text. People started gathering around us, asking questions but all conversations were muffled because everyone had their masks on. The sounds that were not muffled were traffic noises, buses, honking, bicycles swishing by, kids scootering around, dogs barking (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. *Rest in Power: George Floyd*. In progress. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. June 7, 2020. Photography: Traci Molloy.

And then, there was a cacophony of sound and we did not know where it was coming from because we were drawing. We realized that bicycle protesters were riding down Flatbush and they were blowing whistles and yelling. Everyone milling about Grand Army Plaza started responding to them with claps and cheers. The traffic almost came to a stop, with honks, in support of the protesters.

By 12 noon, we were done. Our charcoal supply and the majority of our pastels were depleted. The drawing was finished. We left the site.

I then participated in the family march that ended at Grand Army Plaza. Like most marches, there's euphoria, there's movement, there's protest signs, and there's call-and-response engagement. Someone with a megaphone leads us to vocalize our slogans. But this time around, I heard people from the sidelines: "Do you want water?" "Do you want a snack?" "Do you need anything?" Instead of cars honking, we heard people clapping from their 2nd and 3rd story apartment windows. The positive sound coming from above, in support and encouragement, was in direct contrast with the threatening police helicopter sounds we heard every night during the citywide curfew.

At the conclusion of the march, I had positioned myself off to the side, to watch people interact with the drawing. People were quietly photographing, or just standing in silence, staring, reflecting. If someone by accident walked on the drawing, others would nudge them to watch where they were going and move away. The drawing was interrupting the natural pattern of movement, which was making people stop, pause, and pay attention. This is similar to how protest sounds impact the urban environment. As urban dwellers, we are used to hearing honking cars, emergency sirens, and people yelling and cursing all the time. Protesters disrupt the standard noise level with their volume, intensity, and cacophony, making bystanders and traffic change their patterns of behavior. The amplified urgency forces us to stop in our tracks and take notice (Fig. 2).

The George Floyd drawing interrupts the environment with silence. As people notice it, they engage with it, and move away from it, they do not clap, cheer, or whistle. Instead, they pause, they document, and they reflect quietly. The ephemerality of the drawing is like the impermanence of the sound. Both are fleeting.



Fig. 2. *Rest in Power: George Floyd*. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. June 7, 2020. Photography: Traci Molloy.

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On June 28th, 2020, Karen, Taylor, and I returned to Grand Army Plaza, with more supplies, and we generated a new portrait to draw attention to the injustice inflicted upon Breonna Taylor (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. *Rest in Power: Breonna Taylor*. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. June 28, 2020. Photography: Traci Molloy.



Fig. 4. *Rest in Power: Breonna Taylor*. Taylor Denaburg, Traci Molloy, Karen Oh, and Cherokee Rado. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. June 28, 2020. Photography: Brian Pennington.

On August 23rd, 2020, Karen and I were back at Grand Army Plaza, one final time, and with a lot more supplies, to generate a portrait commemorating the 1-year anniversary of the killing of Elijah McClain (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6).



Fig. 5. *Rest in Power: Elijah McCain*. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. August 23, 2020. Photography: Brian Pennington.



Fig. 6. *Rest in Power: Elijah McClain*. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. August 23, 2020. Photography: Traci Molloy.

The drawing physically dissolves as people engage with it. When they walk across it, the chalk dust sticks to the bottom of their shoes and they take bits of that drawing to wherever they go, dispersing it along the way. Sound also branches out, dissipating, as it thins out through the air. Yet we all carry memories of what was said and seen inside of us. These memories become visceral as they attach to emotions. This is how fleeting images and sounds become permanent in the mind (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The ghost of *Rest in Power*: Elijah McCain. Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, New York. August 26, 2020. Photographer: Traci Molloy.

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About the author

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