MURAL ARTS INSTITUTE · ART IGNITES CHANGE

LVA LOUISVILLE VISUAL ART

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Documentary Video
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Photo courtesy LVA

Michael Coppage, *The Rotunda of the Ancestors*

Overview

"The Rotunda of the Ancestors" is a site-based installation designed and installed by artist Michael Coppage at the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage (KCAAH). The piece, designed using a combination of photography and artificial intelligence, represents significant African figures from 3,000 years prior to the enslavement of Africans in the United States and European Colonies. Intended to help create an experience of empowerment and education, each image houses two spirits: the ancestral spirit and the spirit of present-day Louisville natives creating a continuous link from the past to the present. Coppage engaged with students at the University of Louisville and sixth-through-twelfth graders at the Grace James Academy to offer educational and imaginative components that influenced the depictions of the ancestors, who stand as guardians in KCAAH's Rotunda. Collaboration also involved other community members, including staff from KCAAH. "The Rotunda of the Ancestors" serves to educate KCAAH visitors about pre-Diaspora African history disconnected from enslavement of Africans by White European and American colonists.
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Mellon Foundation

Selecting an Organizational Partner

For its second Catalyst project as part of the Mural Arts Institute's Public Art and Civic Engagement Capacity-Building Program (PACE), Louisville Visual Art (LVA) opted to begin working with a community partner prior to selecting an artist to create a socially engaged artwork. LVA wanted to work in predominantly Black spaces for the Artist Catalyst program, bringing artwork, restoration, and healing to places in the Black community. The Kentucky Center for African American Heritage stood out as an organization that was already uplifting that community. Ultimately, LVA decided to partner with the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage (KCAAH). After meeting and speaking with Aukram Burton, the Executive Director of the museum, and Marjorie Marshall, a Board Member of the museum and a locally beloved musical performer and teacher, LVA selected the Louisville-based organization whose mission is to enhance the public's knowledge about the history, heritage and cultural contributions of African Americans in Kentucky, and in the African diaspora.

Project co-manager Jared Diaz said "The selection of the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage was a really exciting opportunity to work with an institution that was really really about creative opportunities for Black folks of African descent in the neighborhood and showcasing that art while also educating people on that history. For this particular catalyst, we were looking to see if there was an institutional partner whose resources, network, and space would not just be a host for the public art piece but also be a voice and an asset in the generation of the work." Having selected a partner, LVA was ready to find an artist for the second catalyst project.

Selecting an Artist

A team consisting of project co-managers Desmone Stepp and Jared Diaz, four other stakeholders in the Louisville educational and artist communities, and two representatives from the KCAAH selected Coppage. The co-managers sought to "solidify a template for having transparent and accessible rubrics for art calls at LVA," Diaz explained. The team also wanted to figure out how to include Black artists around the entire region, so opened the call up to a slightly larger network than they did for Catalyst 1 (which was local to Louisville). This made it possible for artist Michael Coppage, who resides in Cincinnati, OH, to be eligible.

The call was shared via LVA's newsletter, social media accounts, and through the co-managers' personal networks. The team received 9 applicants. The KCAAH

supported Coppage's application with enthusiasm, in part because of his experience working in collaboration with community. Stepp shared that the team was excited about Coppage given his track record of changing certain people's mentalities of certain aspects of people within communities. He already had his feet so deep in working with creating social change and having his artwork be a place where people who may not normally be listened to were able to be heard— were able to have their perspectives be seen."

Devising and Creating the Artwork

Coppage and Kentucky Center Executive Director Aukram Burton first had several dynamic brainstorming conversations. They discussed how the Center could express its mission - while also creating a space where the Black community can see themselves - with this project. For example, when teaching about the history of the African diaspora, the KCAAH works to de-center the institution of slavery. Accordingly, the whole team aligned with Aukram's and the Center's interest in creating an artwork that portrayed the history of African Diaspora before slave trade and a process that allowed an opportunity for the community to participate in learning, reflection, and healing.

They decided that the Center's Rotunda of the Ancestors, the area visitors walk through before entering the Center's main hall, would house Coppage's artwork - and that it would venerate ancestors of the African diaspora, recreating figures from a conventionally untaught history who would act as guardians for those entering the space.

Photo courtesy LVA.

Community engagement occurred within and outside of the KCAAH. LVA facilitated collaborations between Coppage and the Pan-African Studies Department at the University of Louisville and art department at the Grace James Academy, a school for Girls Excellent in Math and Science that focuses on Afro-centric teaching. The engagement with students at he University of Louisville included an activity where students heard about

Students from University of Louisville's Pan-African studies Department engage with material during workshop.

African figures in history and then illustrated what they thought those people looked like—including how they wore their hair, what jewelry they wore, and what the fabric of their clothing looked like. For the engagement with the Grace James Academy, Coppage developed a series of activities to build out the historical figures through coloring pages, teaching the historical significance of the ancestors while creating their figures. Coppage integrated the descriptions and styles depicted and articulated through these activities into his description of the African figures in the rotunda space. Through these engagements, participants co-created the concept and design of the artwork.

Coppage and the LVA team also held a community photography event that engaged residents. Community members were invited to a local professional photographer's studio for free professional headshots that they could use for their own purposes. Those participants also granted permission for Coppage to introduce their images to an artificial intelligence environment to create the representation of historical figures. Michael augmented and developed photographs taken at this event with artificial intelligence inputs (specific descriptive elements related to history) to create the final images for the work.

Coppage reflected, "We created a through-line in history from the past to the present. Photography was combined with community-led and community-driven information related to figures of history from the three thousand years before slavery happened. I hope that what people see is people who are alive today embodying the spirit of people who lived in our past."

To fabricate the installation, Coppage and team printed images using a dye-sublimation process onto cloth panels to be hung and displayed in the rotunda.

Image courtesy LVA

Students from University of Louisville's Pan-African studies Department engage with material during workshop.

Reflecting on the Project's Goals and Impacts

When the team began preparation work for the Catalyst 2 project, they had three main goals:
(1) Promote the education of pre-diasporic African history and knowledge to individuals of diverse ages and backgrounds, both among KCAAH visitors and the broader Louisville community,
(2) Create an artwork that depicts the royalty, richness, and diversity that lives within the history of Ancient Africa, and
(3) Be a mirror to the community.

To accomplish these goals, the team met with educators and pursued partnerships with educational institutions that would allow Coppage to work with students across a breadth of ages. They then engaged materials to spark participants' imaginations in ways that determined the look of the final figures. Finally, the community is represented through the foundational portraits of real Louisville residents that were adapted into the ancestral images.

Coppage's work also engaged the community in an effort to support and represent Black artists in the community, which he accomplished through several activities described above. To preserve and promote the history of the African diaspora through his work, Coppage worked with students and introduced a new way of looking at figures in history that they might not have been acquainted with. Coppage created space for imagination - and then joined his own vision with what he heard from participants.

"We created a through-line in history from the past to the present."

Michael Coppage

Stepp reflected on the photography event, sharing, "We had a good amount of people show up for that. I loved hearing the different things the community members do— we had actors show up, we had comedians and poets come out— people that were so creative and talented. It was heartwarming to see their excitement for the project, and then how it felt when they got to see how those images were transformed, it was really beautiful. That was my highlight of this project."

Former grants administrator and current Interim Executive Director Grant Johnson, said the "Rotunda of the Ancestors" unveiling and dedication was "one of the most inspiring events that LVA has hosted or co-hosted in my 6 years with the organization." Williams explained that a diverse group of attendees received the piece with a lot of enthusiasm, including a community leader who shared that "she planned to bring her grandchildren to help them start off in life with positive images of themselves, their community, and their ancestors".

While the project team views the development and creation of "The Rotunda of the Ancestors" as a success, Coppage acknowledges that the community's relationship to the piece is still evolving. "When folks come to the Center, I hope that they see themselves reflected. I hope that they see the spirit of our ancestors embodied in these images. I hope that it prompts them to go on a journey to learn more about the figures who are represented in the space. I hope that they feel small in the space, like they're surrounded by giants—because a lot of the folks who are represented in the rotunda were giants. These are the folks who created the keystones to the foundation of civilization."

Reflecting on Learnings

The PACE initiative promotes reflection and learning at every stage. With newly commissioned work, cross-organizational partnerships, and community engagement, there is much to be learned.

Overall PACE Goals

Change in People

1. Build collective power of BIPOC communities
2. Generate & equitably redistribute communally held resources

Change in Places

3. Reflect community cultural identities
4. Strengthen community-based cultural organizing

Change in Practice

5. Support and break down barriers for artists of color
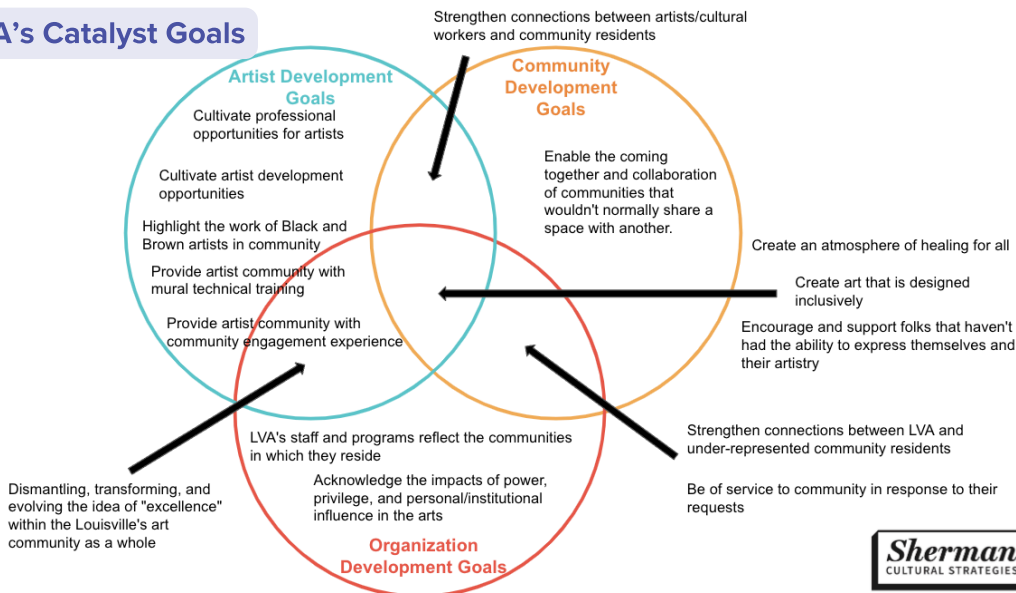6. Increase accountability of organizations to BIPOC residents

"Successful partnership takes effort, communication and transparency."

Desmone Stepp

Many of the learnings of this project related to partnership. Establishing the KCAAH as a partner before selecting Coppage necessitated more extensive relationship building with the community at large and with leadership in the partner organization. With both artist and organization bringing their own strong ideas and priorities, it took time, intention, and many conversations to settle into a plan that felt good for all parties.

Note: The indications of impact were shared with PACE project staff and learning consultants. While longer-term impacts need to be tracked over time, many of the indications of impact relate directly to the goals PACE had set out for itself in terms of how it can impact change in people, place, and practice with the ultimate goal of creating more just and equitable cities through cultural and creative practice.

LVA's Catalyst Goals

Strengthen connections between artists/cultural workers and community residents

Artist Development Goals
Cultivate professional opportunities for artists

Cultivate artist development opportunities

Highlight the work of Black and Brown artists in community

Provide artist community with mural technical training

Provide artist community with community engagement experience

Community Development Goals

Enable the coming together and collaboration of communities that wouldn't normally share a space with another.

Create an atmosphere of healing for all

Create art that is designed inclusively

Encourage and support folks that haven't had the ability to express themselves and their artistry

LVA's staff and programs reflect the communities in which they reside

Acknowledge the impacts of power, privilege, and personal/institutional influence in the arts

Dismantling, transforming, and evolving the idea of "excellence" within the Louisville's art community as a whole

Strengthen connections between LVA and under-represented community residents

Be of service to community in response to their requests

Organization Development Goals

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Some of the important aspects of a successful partnership noted were:

- Opportunities for public art installation site partner to share their vision and goals
- Understanding what a partner wants from an artwork
- Agreeing about how partners will collaborate and communicate
- Seeking support from partner for engagement with their community
- Meeting regularly to update partners
- Communicating openly and transparently about changes
- Preparing internally for meetings with external partners

About the Artist

Michael Coppage is a conceptual artist using an interdisciplinary, dialectical approach to address social issues surrounding race and language. Originally from Chicago, He has lived and worked in Cincinnati since 2007. Coppage is the three-time recipient of Artswave's Truth and Reconciliation grant, Ohio Pretrial Justice grant, and received Awesome Foundation grants in New York and Philadelphia. He is the recipient of the Ohio Arts Councils Individual Artistic Excellence award, Artist Opportunities Grant and The Ohio Psychiatric Physicians Foundation Enlightenment Award. He completed a TEDx Talk titled "Everybody's Racist....and it's O.K" and he gained international attention with his recent project "BLACK BOX"

QUEEN NYAMAZANA

Image of community member (name?) side by side with historic overlay. Image courtesy LVA.

a community impact project aimed at demystifying blackness and creating authentic experiences that replaces bias and preconceived notions related to "Black". This series has impacted over 2 million people in 29 countries and has been exhibited in Puerto Rico, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, 21c Museum Hotel, Medici Museum, Ohio Arts Councils Riffe Gallery and at ArtCrawl Harlem on Governors Island (NYC) two consecutive years in a row to name a few. Coppage has gained some attention recently with a body of work entitled "American+" and has completed several public works in the United States.

About Louisville Visual Art

Founded in 1909, Louisville Visual Art nurtures Louisville artists throughout their creative lifecycles with art education, professional artist development, and art in public spaces. As a creative hub now established in the Portland neighborhood, LVA is dedicated to encouraging artists through programming such as Children's Fine Art Classes, MAP, Artebella, Open Studio Louisville, outreach programs and weekly calls for artists. They enrich artists' lives through exceptional art education, vital artist support, and uplifting community outreach. Each year, LVA's programs activate more than 140 sites in five counties, serving thousands of students, artists, and members of at-risk communities. Open Studio Weekend, art[squared], and the Louisville Visual Art Honors are among LVA's essential annual events that help make Louisville the kind of city we're all proud to call home. Join us as we light the way to thriving visual arts by visiting www.lousivillevisualart.org

About the Kentucky Center for African American Heritage

In 1994, the African American Heritage Foundation began with the initial goal of preserving African American sites, communities, and culture. This started with the preservation of historic structures in the African American community in Louisville, as well as the use of historic markers to recognize important sites. The Kentucky Center for African American Heritage is the next step in this process of preservation, with the added goal of acting as a source of revitalization and education for the Kentucky African American community and beyond. An evolution of the Louisville and Jefferson County African American Heritage Committee, the Heritage Center is a place for African American spoken word, visual and performing artists, to collaborate and give the rich heritage of African Americans the voice and platform they deserve. The Heritage Center's campus sits on the historic Louisville Street Railway Complex, a centerpiece for the fight

for transportation equality in 1876. Since the renovation of the 55,000 sq. foot campus, we've worked to raise public awareness about the history, heritage, and cultural contributions of African Americans in Kentucky and in the African Diaspora. The Heritage Center is also a vital, contemporary institution, providing space for exhibitions and performances of all types.
https://kcaah.org/

About the Public Art and Civic Engagement (PACE) Capacity Building Initiative

The PACE Initiative aimed to develop sustainable infrastructure to support the growth of socially-engaged public art in communities around the United States through a cohort learning environment which included mentoring, shared learning experiences and resources, and funding for capacity and two Artist Catalyst Projects. After a competitive selection process, the three host institutions selected to participate in the cohort were the APANO Communities United Fund in Portland, Oregon; Louisville Visual Art in Kentucky; and the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, Illinois. During the 30-month initiative, each organization worked with artists and community to create two works of public art in a civically engaged manner, including sending the artists for an immersion incubator program to Philadelphia. Additional goals of the PACE initiative were to strengthen a national network of socially engaged public art practitioners, and produce and disseminate research, case studies and useful advice to a national audience. The Mural Arts Institute hired Congruence Cultural Strategies to lead the research and evaluation work for the PACE Initiative.

About the Mural Arts Institute

The Mural Arts Institute (MAI) was established in 2017 as an initiative of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the nation's largest public art program dedicated to the belief that art ignites change. As part of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Institute is dedicated to sharing knowledge, ideas, and experiences that have shaped our approach to community-centered artmaking. At its core, MAI seeks to build connections, sustain relationships, and share skills about the practices that have been instrumental in creating works of public art with Philadelphians. We work with artists, arts administrators, and community leaders across the world to align knowledge, amplify voices, empower change, and distribute resources that move us all toward a more inclusive and equitable future of socially engaged public art.
www.muralarts.org/institute