Dear Reader,

It is with great enthusiasm that I share this manuscript with you. It compromises the final synthesis of my collaboration with artists and literature entitled Creative Activism: Role of Art in Oppression and the City. This work aims to study and report on the use of art by artists in the ever-evolving digital landscape that we find our global society entrenched in. The artists featured have all used this urban mesh to their advantage, promoting -- through their work -- their own unique virtues and passions for the betterment of others.

I was truly humbled to have been able to work with such a talented group of individuals able to lend their thoughts and artwork with myself. I would be remiss should I not thank all the individuals for which this work would not have been possible. This includes (in no specific order):

Nadia Waheed, Alexis Hunley, Raheim Simon, and Alexis Hunley.

Also, I would like to give a special thanks to Professor Marieme Lo & The School of Cities department at the University of Toronto for allowing me the space and resources to take on this project. I could not have engaged in this work without any of these parties.
1. Introduction

Racial uprisings and social unrest, even in the midst of a global pandemic, have been one of the defining narratives of 2020. Now more than ever in recent history, the outcries from the Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) community regarding their mistreatment by policing and various other social systems that exist within the Global North have diverted all eyes of the world, focused on the prevailing societal inequities that exist amongst these groups. It is evident now more than ever that the society we live is burdened by institutionalized inequities that are systemically perpetuated; the vestiges of racist and sexist practices of the founders that brought it about.

A number of significant demonstrations and social movement mobilizations, such as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (originally formed after the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin), have been particularly galvanized by recent, high-profile instances of excessive use of force by police officers against racial minorities in Canada and the United States. This includes the deaths of individuals like Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, and George Floyd. Regardless of the organization, there exists one common theme: the eradication of systematic racism and oppression in any form it takes.

To some, these calls for change are seen from a quixotic lens, demurred due to the scale of change in mindset and action that is needed. Yet, we are now in a turning point in history and the world is watching. The question then follows: What progresses such a movement? What enables such political viewpoints, messages, and actions to be forwarded?

"I’m not sure what kind of revolution is needed to change the future, but I am optimistic that, as with all revolutions, artists will be deeply engaged in the process."
- Titus Kapher, 2015

This line, quoted directly from an interview with esteemed artist Titus Kapher by art magazine Art21 puts the argument of this current manuscript into astute terms. Indeed, it is within this document that I argue a central role of artists who take on a political activist role through their artwork (termed, ‘Creative Activists’) and have become forebears for such movements in contemporary times. It is precisely the ability of art to be a voice or call to action to the masses.

The theoretical framework of this monograph is provided by two distinct strands of research. This includes the rising importance of arts and artists in contemporary society (‘the public sphere’) and the ability of digital information and communications technologies (ICTs), especially social networking (SN), to enhance political activism.
On Voices in the City

Whether favoured or not, the modern city is a diverse avenue of opinions. It is within this public forum that we lay audience to the simultaneous, constant, and oft-clashing voices of its members -- claiming their right to the city and its resources and through this contributing to the diversity of the city itself. Although COVID-19 pandemic restrictions may presently close us to partake in remembering, we see this phenomenon everyday whether this is in discussions between left or right-wing politics, in disputes between tenants and landlords, in calls for better services for homeless populations -- amongst a great myriad of others.

Such symptoms are critical to the understanding of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas’ theory on the public sphere (German Öffentlichkeit): a realm of our social life in which all individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. The theory of the public sphere was originally introduced within Habermas’ first major publication, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society (1962) and has since been proven enormously influential within the fields of political science, media studies, and rhetoric. Its social dimension is distinguished by the fact that entry into this sphere is unrestricted, the opinions expressed in hegemonic debate are not pre-structured, and the established power structures can be challenged. Indeed, Habermas saw a vibrant public sphere as a positive force, one that can keep authoritative powers within bounds lest face ridicule or revolt.

However, this does not mean that the contemporary public sphere is lacking of power structures or inequity. These structures are indicated to us today in the outstanding question of access and inclusion to “the public” that is continually poised by repressed groups within structures or inequity. These structures are indicated to us today in the outstanding question.

The notion of the public sphere is fundamentally a concept of debate. It is one in which diverse counter-publics exist and the audiences, social normatives, and localizations of the spheres vary. Some critics even go as far to claim that the ideal is just that -- an ideal. While the essence of a public sphere is one that should be strived for, it is an idealized concept that it only exists so far as that it excludes important (often marginalized) groups; including women, criminals, the poor, slaves, and migrants. In Habermas’ own thoughts, a true public sphere is an ‘unfinished project of modernity’.

Nancy Fraser is one proponent of this latter mode of thinking. Fraser argues that the exclusion of marginalized groups in universal public spheres does not prove inclusion at all. Rather, it is stipulated that these repressed groups instead form Subaltern counter-publics which are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser, 2005).

Another further revision of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere is the Rhetorical Public Sphere debate proposed by Gerard A. Hauser. In his 1990 publication, Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres, Hauser suggests that spheres form around ongoing dialogues on public issues by active members of society rather than by the identity of the group engaged in discourse. Rather than the notion of a single public sphere populated by rational, often disinterested individuals discussing common issues, Hauser imagines that urban or public spheres serve as structures for providing interactions between the numerous vernacular of publics (including subaltern counterpublics of repressed peoples). In his own words:

“[Public spheres are] discursive space in which strangers discuss issues they perceive to be of consequence for them and their group. Its rhetorical exchanges are the bases for shared awareness of common issues, shared interests, tendencies of extent and strength of difference and agreement, and self-constitution as a public whose opinions bear on the organization of society.” (Hauser, 1999)

Thus, it is within public spheres, whether subaltern counterpublics or within a universal urban mesh, that individuals are able to formulate and (re-)negotiate societal arguments; making it possible for members of the urban landscape that we know as the city to lay audience to different voices. The sphere is complex in the sense that the multitude of opinions expressed are not determined by a true-or-false scheme, but subject to constant renegotiation. These negotiation practises have an influence on urban society’s power relations and contribute to the growth of urban public spheres. This is exactly the same spheres that artists use to lay claim to their thoughts and opinions, challenge power structures, and posit change through dialogue. These thoughts and opinions that artists create and voice are laid through the internet, in a kind of virtual public sphere. It is through the emergence of the internet and other digital technologies that a new global public sphere ought to be created in the wake of increasing globalization and global institutions, which operate at the supranational level.

On the Rising Importance of Dialogue and Artists

So public spheres exist. So what? What relevance does this have to the city? And what jurisdiction do these discussions have toward lasting change?

Of particular relevance here is the work of esteemed political theorist SS Fainstein. This is most notably due to her work that is concerned with the moral establishment of the ‘just city’ -- an urban justice philosophy in which “equity,” democracy “and” diversity” are the core issues of urban development, with equity prevailing when such outcomes clash. Fainstein recognises these principles as intimately connected mechanisms capable of acting as a counterbalance to prevailing and institutionalised social inequities meant to serve the interests of the ruling elite: “When state power is mobilized for elite interests, effective democracy can counter its unjust effects.” (Fainstein, 2010).

Within the city there are a plethora of users who all contribute to a being of a just city. In particular I contend that in the move toward a just city it is artists who are among those most explicitly and visually engaged within the public sphere. This is in their ability to leverage the urban fabric to communicate their calls for equal rights and democratic participation, and thereby enact a distinct public sphere within the city. In their investigation of street art in Athens, Greece, for example, Tsilimpoundi and Walsh (2011) implicate the use of art in order to reaffirm profoundly ethical concerns such as violations of human rights:

“When human rights are being violated and the existing power elite does not allow voices from the margins to be heard, when human suffering plays mute on the news; then political street art is a powerful and ironic critique written on the wall, informing passers-by that an alternative history is playing out.” (Tsilimpoundi and Walsh, 2011)
When artists create and share art, whether that be street art, graphic art, photography, poetry, music, or otherwise, they use their art and the urban fabric to communicate with their audience, the "public". In doing so, the artist is creating a public sphere at the location of their art or amongst their audience. In recent decades, sociologists have observed an increasing importance of the arts, artists, and of culture in late modern urban landscapes. The rise in demand of the cultural and creative industries is one indication of this change. In addition we commonly observe the presentation and promotion of art that is closely tied to capitalism. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in The New Stage of Capitalism within France, mark this change in presence of artistic expression in societies where artist’s critiques on capitalism are now of benefit to capitalism.

The relationship is largely asymmetric: artists in most cases communicate with the public, it is clear that there is a defined space, or niche, for artists to use their voice. For example, they cannot anticipate who will attend their exhibitions. But the spectators most often know who the artist is, turning the relationship into an asymmetric one. In very few cases (such as anonymous street art) is there a symmetric relationship where the audience nor the artist know each other. In the context of the ever-changing presence of artistic expression in societies where artist’s critiques on capitalism are now of benefit to capitalism.

Thus, by comparing the importance of enacting public spheres in the move toward just cities, along with our analysis of the artist’s increasing ability to contribute and communicate with the public, it is clear that there is a defined space, or niche, for artists to use their voice within the city. The question that remains, however, is whether this role is filled in art today.

### 3. Digital Communication & Political Activism

#### On the Rising Influence of Social Media

Three interrelated properties of the rise of social networking-based communication are commonly seen by proponents as integral to the perception of contemporary media technologies as politically progressive and engaging. First, that the convenience in creation and subsequent dissemination of the digital media has allowed an unprecedented amount of information to be spread; in turn, this has allowed alternative, minority, and dissenting accounts to be accessible to a worldwide audience in a capacity not previously possible. If this statement holds true, the logical outcome here is that state and corporate media oligopolies may no longer retain the same hegemonic hold as they did previously on the development and distribution of news and political discourse. Second, there is an expanded capacity to communicate through space with others and thus to coordinate, inspire, and provoke resisteive political action, contributing to more numerous and effective political activities. Lastly, there exists the notion that social networking has enabled an increased readiness to communicate individual opinions and dialogue on political matters, aiding the reinvigoration of a public sphere of discussion.

The argument offered by those positive about the effectiveness of new-age media in creating socio-political change makes logical sense. There is no question that the emergence of social networking (SN) and other contemporary digital information and communication technologies have greatly expanded the number of data sources (and thus selection of information) to the general public. Through connecting people, it’s perfectly logical to see that social media usurps the implicit hierarchies of established political institutions and generates an ecology of political discourse, which in turn creates dissent and ultimately mobilizes spontaneous technology-led reactions. While this is largely a benefit, such a development can be said to have a potential negative consequence. That is, that the addition of information choice and data availability may unintentionally allow one to surround oneself with news, information, other people, and (thus) ideology that in essence agree with one’s own position and biases (known as the ‘Echo Chamber Effect’). It is in light of such a claim that it is often argued that such social devices only maintain the ‘status quo’ and rather make no attempt to resist it.

More contemporary critics argue not with this first point, however, (especially as the ability of social media to create and disseminate information is well cited within literature) but with the latter of the two. Namely, the effect of the social networking device on the ability to converse and to mobilize political action. According to dissidents, neither of such claims are backed up sufficiently by literature: there appears to be no compelling proof to either claim due to a myriad of contradictory literature on the subject. Furthermore, it is frequently stated that when there is data provided in favour of these opinions, that it is often methodologically unreliable, relying on media reports, anecdotes, or interviews with social media activists who may over-represent the effectiveness of social media.

While there exists literature on the contrary, there exists even more in support of the link between social media networking and political activism. I attest that the claim of no relation in mobilization and conversation with social networking use is simply not true. In a study by Kahn et al. (2018), for example, social networking and political activism (in support and in participation) was found to be positively related to anti-policing and BLM protests among university students in Portland, Oregon. I do agree that there is contradictory data on
Social Attitudes & Collective Action

Social attitudes are formed and influenced by many factors. Such factors can include observation of interpersonal interactions, cultural traditions, education, media sources, and so forth. In particular, racial attitudes are positively related to cross-race intergroup contact, overall awareness of racial discrimination, inter-circle attitudes, and additional identity-related and group-based factors. In essence much of literature argues that it is largely a mixture of one’s contact with others, one’s social groups, and one’s learned beliefs that determine racial behaviours and attitudes.

The need for dialogue is a common factor among all these latter traits and attitudes. It is through dialogue that we are obliged to acknowledge the other, which in turn obliges us to acknowledge ourselves. It is through dialogue that we are held accountable for what we say, that we are obliged to defend our positions on issues, and even to change our points of view when they are no longer justified. Politically engaged publics, which are central to the functioning of our democratic political process, and central to the democratic revolutions of the past, are spurred by such dialogues. Finally, it is dialogue that is paramount to Habermas’ notion of a healthy public sphere.

As a transformative political weapon, the optimistic outlook puts a great deal of confidence in social social media to reinvigorate an ossified public sphere through its ability to engage people in dialogue and transform them into political subjects that would in turn promote social change. Much literature well backs up this point with various social attitudes influencing support for political and social efforts aimed at injustices. How much an individual is familiar with politics in general or with structural advantages and disadvantages (which can include understanding of one’s privilege or the possession of advantage denied to others based on social identity, of oppression, or the realities that other social identity groups face based on their social identity alone), for example, has been shown to promote engagement in political action, protest, and other activities (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1993; Galston, 2001; Diemer & Li, 2011; Stokes, 2003; Johnson, 2001). A greater understanding of the causes of systematic and interpersonal manifestations of racial inequality is demonstrated by the recognition of privilege and oppression together.

Again, it is in this argument and evidence that social media technology fosters meaningful dialogue that is integral to the creation of this urban public sphere. Aside from what attitudes that an individual might have, it is crucial to understand what factors may motivate an individual into taking the jump into political action based upon those aforementioned beliefs and attitudes. Placing more emphasis on the psychological predictors of participation and collective action, it is crucial that we look at the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA). SIMCA, a prevalent social behaviour model developed by psychologists Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, understands perceived inequality, politicised social identity, and perceived efficacy of collective actions as critical in explaining why people engage in collectivism. That is, whether an individual participates in collective action is prompted by their perception an injustice has occurred to a specific group or person, the relevance of one’s social identity to the problem at hand, and whether they feel that their actions are likely to be effective in protesting the aforementioned injustice. Just as traditional media forms have shown (such as print or televised news media), social media has also been shown similar effects on political attitudes, political participation, and voting behaviors (Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2009).

If, in looking at the relationship between social media and politics, creative activists are able to do just this, then it is reasonable to assume the correlation between activism efforts and virtual public spheres.

Creatives In the City

Closely in conjunction with this manuscript, I conducted a virtual sit down with a group of extremely talented artists hailing from Canada and the United States. All of these artists have made large strides in their artwork and have used social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter in order to promote their work, widen their fan base, and share their voice. All of the artists chosen are traditionally underrepresented individuals in the artistspace – all have taken the role as an advocate for other marginalized populations. These interviews were conducted to serve three aspirations:

1. To promote the work of creatives by highlighting their work in the monograph
2. To better understand the role of art in subverting traditional narratives regarding oppression and marginalization as well as in the creation of a culture within cities
3. To raise up the voices of the individuals and groups that need to be heard the most

Although the main component of this manuscript, I bring up this section last in order to ensure that the importance of the work of these artists is not misunderstood. Many notable themes emerged from thematic analysis of the artist’s responses. Indeed, although the artists highlighted in this paper attempt to focus on a wide and differentiating variety of subject matter, they all engage in a advocate lens through their work.
Alexis Eke is an illustrator and designer based in Toronto, Ontario. Inspired by Renaissance portraits and traditional Japanese art, she illustrates Black women in a contemporary light. Her mission is to expand the representation of Black women in design and to evangelize, by creating a space for audiences to deeply reflect on themselves and their relationship with God.

With the foundation of a strong female Caribbean upbringing and Christian faith, she aims to use these important aspects to design a unique space for audiences to view her work. Growing up with women with strong personalities, she has always viewed women as resilient and independent. This has later translated into her artwork, as all of her illustrations are of women, to reflect her cultural and personal experiences.

- Alexis Eke, 2020
Alexis Eke was one of the first names that came to mind when receiving the approval for this project. Hailing from our own Toronto, ON, Alexis has made her mark on the map with collaborations with AGO, Adidas, Bloomberg, CBC, Canada Goose, Nike Jordan, Raptors, Union Station – among many other clients. With upwards of 43K+ instagram followers at the time of this publication, Alexis, has certainly been able to grow a following and use her platform. This is in spite of any barriers she faced inherent in her identity as a Black woman. I sat down with Alexis on one Wednesday afternoon in order to inquire more about her identity within the art world and how she has been able to use it to make a space for others. I’ve provided her answers to my prompts below:

What do you see as the purpose of your art? Why do you make art?

I’ve always been an artistic person. It’s been such a huge part of my life for so long that at this point in my life I feel as though it is something that I am called to do. If I were to go through life without making art it would feel very odd to me. I guess there’s two real reasons why I still pursue art and why I pursue it the way that I do. The first reason is that when I was a lot younger, there wasn’t a lot of black representation with the artists I was taught about and even contemporary artists in North America. There weren’t really any artists that looked like me. I think it was because of this that actually made me intimidated to actually pursue a career as an artist -- I didn’t really see myself in that industry. It is for this reason that with all the work I do, I try to expand that representation so that others - especially younger black artists - can see that there is a space for them to succeed in this industry. With a large body of my work filled with portraits of Black women, I aim to ask audiences one question: “how are Black women represented in the art world?” I hope through my work, they can feel seen and appreciated and even better relate to themselves in my pieces as well. This one of the main reasons why I do what I want to do: I want to expand that black female representation in this industry.

Looking at my work you can immediately see that there are white lines that extend from the eyes to the mouth in all of my pieces. The white lines connect from the eyes to the mouth to represent what we see influencing how we express ourselves. “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.” (Matthew 6:22). What (or who) we surround ourselves with, what we consume with our eyes, will have an effect on who we become and our relationship with God. With this part of my work, I am trying to represent how people can look at the world and in doing so reflect on themselves. The reason behind those lines is communicating the fact that what we see and the environment around us has an effect on us and on the ways that we act. I wanted that to be a main topic that people looking at my work can think about for themselves. For example, “the things that I am seeing and consuming, are they affecting me in a positive way or are they affecting me in a negative way?”

When it comes to underserved artists, do you feel like they are given the platform that they deserve and need? If not, what can be done?

I definitely think that more can be done. In terms of what I’ve seen, I have see other marginalized artists being given really awesome opportunities to spread their work on a larger platform—which is amazing, but I still think that much more can be done toward finding more of these types of artists to collaborate with. From the community that I see so far, I feel like there is a repetition of using the same types of people over and over again. Rather, I think that we should use more of that room to cater toward more up and coming artists who may not have the same type of opportunities or connections of the individuals that often take centre stage. I think that the focus should be toward giving them a platform; a bigger opportunity to expand their own career. That’s really what I’ve been noticing so far.

Do you think its important for artists like yourself to speak on issues such as anti-black or anti-indigenous racism?

I think it’s very important for artists to speak on these issues. I think there is a really long-lasting relationship between activism and art especially today. When artists speak out -- when they make pieces that reflect what these problems are and what’s going on in the world, I think it really helps to inform other people at a faster rate than a bunch of dry text on a page and all that. I think there’s a lot of power when artists are able to use their talents to speak up on important issues and in doing so help build a better community and help community members be better informed on what’s happening in the world.
Have you seen the impacts of the sort of work you do for black individuals, especially black women?

I have actually. Quite obviously it’s really been amazing. I’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback from other black women and how them seeing my work has encouraged them to pursue the artistic field and how they feel. I’ve also gotten a lot of feedback about how black women have felt through seeing my work and seeing themselves in my work especially that it is realistically portrayed. It was really encouraging to hear this as this is exactly what I am aiming on doing. So I’ve gotten a lot of feedback about that.

I measure the success of my work by if it’s actually inspiring or encouraging people to pursue the artistic field because that’s really what I am aiming to do in my representation of the themes highlighted in my work. I think that’s the most important thing regardless of who (clients i.e. businesses, companies, individuals) that I have worked with. The main thing is really encouraging people to expand black female representation in the industry. So when I see that there are people actually being encouraged, that there is some change happening in the industry on a lot more collaborations, commercial projects, things like that, that’s kind of where I would see that I have had some type of success. And these seem like they are happening bit by bit.
BLACK SOAP
aka Raheim Simon
Raw, emotional, relaxing, dark, clean, imperfect, and different. A New York diary. These are the words that immediately come to mind when looking at the collection of photographs within the collection of Raheim Simon -- more commonly known as Black Soap. A Husband, Father, and Brooklyn native, Black Soap is New York, the Bronx, and Brooklyn through and through: this is evident from his work. Having amassed a great following on Instagram alone, as a much sought after photographer for brands like American Express, Honda, Nike, Verizon, Adult Swim, and the Tribeca Film Festival to name a few, or for being an advocate for the rights of marginalized populations -- especially within the current BLM protest tide that is sweeping much of the global north -- I thought it paramount to contact Raheim in order to learn more about his work, his beliefs and attitudes, and his perspective on everything going on and his role as an artist in the contemporary space.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and geographic limitations, I conducted a virtual sit down with Raheim. His responses to my prompts are offered below:

1. Can you tell me about yourself?

Husband to my beautiful wife. Father of a charming little girl. My name is Raheim Simon and I am a creative hailing from the North-East Bronx, currently living in Canarsie, Brooklyn.

I make art because it makes me feel free. When I am creating art, I feel invisible. I feel like I can accomplish anything I want in life. Nothing can stop me. Life can feel repetitive at times and art keeps me focused on wanting to try and experience different life lessons. Art makes me feel young and athletic (even though my knees are done). Creating makes me feel sane in an insane world. Makes me happy, to say the least.

It was rough growing up in a single parent household. My mother tried her absolute best. She moved us into a beautiful home in the NorthEast section of the Bronx after busting her ass for years working three jobs. Her determination and ambition got her to where she wanted to go. I wasn't able to go explore and leave my neighborhood when I was young. You get caught up in staying on your block instead of going out and seeing something new, something different.

When I first started making art, I started because I had a feeling of regret. I didn't know as much about New York City as I had thought I did. I felt that as someone who lives in such a beautiful city I didn't take the time to go out and enjoy it. Go out and see something different, something new. I decided to start creating so that it could be more fun and memorable as I explored my city. Personally, I make art for New York City and everyone who was born and raised here. Of course it's [not] for everyone but I'm just so proud to be a New Yorker.

Now, I try to take in as much knowledge as I can. I try to understand each situation from both sides. Then create something from that thinking process. How can I make someone in Dubai feel like they're walking down a block in Brooklyn?

I would define my work as raw, emotional, relaxing, dark, clean, imperfect and different. A New York diary. When I first started making art, I started because I had a feeling of regret. I didn't know as much about New York City as I had thought I did. I felt that as someone who lives in such a beautiful city I didn't take the time to go out and enjoy it. Go out and see something different, something new. I decided to start creating so that it could be more fun and memorable as I explored my city. Personally, I make art for New York City and everyone who was born and raised here. Of course its [not] for everyone but I'm just so proud to be a New Yorker.

Now, I try to take in as much knowledge as I can. I try to understand each situation from both sides. Then create something from that thinking process. How can I make someone in Dubai feel like they're walking down a block in Brooklyn?

2. Why do you feel it essential to highlight the subject matter that you exhibit in your artwork?

My work highlights themes around street culture, hip hop, fashion, race and wealth struggles. I feel it is very important to highlight these subjects because it's where I come from. I feel it's best for the artist who has lived the struggle to share that vision through their artwork. Someone looking in from outside the culture may not understand the certain ideals and I believe that the artist can bend that line to make it understandable from all sides.

3. What do you see as the role of art within modern society? Should art be made with the intention to achieve a certain thing?

The role of art in society should continue being what it has always been. It's an outlet for people that feel the culture may not understand certain ideals and I believe that the artist can bend that line to make it very important to highlight these subjects because it's where I come from. I feel it's best for the artist who has lived the struggle to share that vision through their artwork. Someone looking in from outside the culture may not understand the certain ideals and I believe that the artist can bend that line to make it understandable from all sides.

4. When it comes to photography and NYC/Bronx photography, you are one of the iconic names on the scene. Do you feel that this spot in the industry comes with some level of responsibility? Have you been able to see/measure the impact of your voice and work with your platform?

With this spot in the industry, I feel like now more than ever I have to be responsible. With everything going on in the world today, I believe creatives learn from their peers. If I don’t go out and document the protests against police brutality and the after-effects of covid in a large urban city such as mine I personally feel like I’m doing my art and what it represents is a disservice. The hardest and unexpected times are the best times to create. When I talk to artists/creators from all over America they have thanked me and let me know they appreciate what I’m doing. As far as using my art to create a voice for our people who feel they are not being heard, I want the next young black creators to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. That’s when we do our greatest work.

5. When it comes to movements (for example BLM, which engages in anti-black and anti-indigenous racism), do you feel like artists have had a role to play? Do you see the impacts of art and artists in leading these movements or catalyzing change?

I feel like certain artists have a huge role to play. I am a black man in America. Most of the people that have been murdered/drugged by police look like me, or could have been my aunt. Therefore all of these situations personally affect me to a great degree. There have been so many people coming out and working with different artists to share different stories of this crazy year of 2020. I feel it is working as far as making people who are blind start to open their eyes and have a real conversation about what’s been happening to our country.

I do not necessarily deem it essential for artists to take on social justice/activism through their work though. I believe that if you are personally affected by the accounts of what has been happening in this country for so long, then you should take it on yourself to go out and do it. If you don’t feel it in your heart, then you should not be creating something that can be looked at to change perspectives. Black artists need to be seen and heard. I feel like other races of artists should take a back seat [on these types of race-based issues] because it’s hard to create/speak on something that you personally have not experienced. I mean they can do it but it will never be as meaningful.

6. Related to the above answers how do you judge the success of your artistry? If based on changing the traditional narratives regarding the subject matter of your art, how do you quantify or measure these changes?

I don’t ever judge the success of my artistry. I just create art. If it makes you happy, sad, mad, emotional, then thats great. It doesn’t then it is what it is because I will always create for myself. I know that I am doing well when a large company reaches out to try and expand one of my own ideas opposed to their own.

7. Do you feel like there is enough private/public funding to traditionally marginalized/underserved artists?

Personally, I have applied to a couple of funding sources that were made available to me when the protests began. There was a huge reach out to artists all over the country and I got lost in the shuffle. I didn’t think there was enough funding resources out there for artists such as myself. It was expensive, especially photography and videography. It would be great to have different sources and even the government working on giving more grants to creatives in poverty stricken neighborhoods. It took me almost 3 years to save up and buy a professional camera and then another long time to purchase a pro lens. Art isn’t cheap.

8. Do you feel like artists like yourself are generally given the platforms that they deserve to spread their art and messages? What more could governments, communities, or other parties do to support artists, especially marginalized or underserved artists?

I believe that artists like myself choose which platform we want to use to share our work. Now that covid is a big part of life, it would be great if communities or the government could make open spaces for artists to share their creations. I believe the government can also send out and approve a bunch or creative grants to help continue to move the growing culture forward.

“Intimacy is when we feel seen and connected with another. It is emotional and vulnerable. Translating that into a single photograph or photo essay involves careful consideration of composition, lighting, body language, and facial expressions. I trust the naked truth of my own feelings. All of my images unveil my own grief, joy, anguish, rage, and hope.

I started teaching myself photography at the end of 2017. After my grandmother passed around the same time, I was grieving and feeling lost and was searching for a way to stay connected to her. She had always been the artist of the family. Taking photographs, developing film, sewing, laying tile – she did it all. She was a beautiful inspiration to me, artistically and emotionally. In the midst of my heartache and my memories of her, I began to trust in my own vulnerable exposure – because I believe that is the price of authenticity. And that is everything.

Propelled by my love for the interplay between science and art, I am naturally drawn to connecting a visual narrative to the psychological facts and figures that fascinate me. From that perspective, physical touch and emotional intimacy are integral to our emotional as well as our physical well-being. I look for real communion and chemistry between the people I surround myself with personally and those that I photograph.

‘I’ve learned to trust my eye as an acute translator of all that is important to my creative process – emotion, shadows, sunlight, color, connection, sensation.’

- Alexis Hunley, 2020
“Visual storytelling is my greatest passion. It feeds my soul. I make art because I want
to tell stories. Emotional and impactful stories. I strive to create work that pushes us to
really see not just each other but ourselves.”
- Alexis Hunley, 2020

From partnerships with Rolling Stone to GQ, New York Times to Wired, Alexis Hunley -- a self-identifying Black queer femme photographer based out of Los Angeles, California has made great strides in the artistic world. Indeed, Alexis' rising popularity, with an Instagram following of (at the time of publication) 25K+, speaks volumes for itself. I was specifically drawn to interview Alexis due to the voice of advocacy that she has taken on in regard to the ongoing anti-policing protests and COVID-19 boundaries that have greatly swept the United States and Canada. I virtually interviewed Alexis in my deep interest to see what she had to say:

How did the way you grew up influence the way you now live your life and create art?

I grew up a coach's kid. My dad coached college and professional football and thus weekends were spent at stadiums and summers were spent moving to new cities. As a painfully shy kid constantly moving to new cities and schools I found comfort in creating. I would draw sketches of buildings, sit for hours writing short stories, and direct short films with my sister. Despite my love for creating, I wanted to be just like my dad so I put away my notepads and camera and focused on practicing my three-pointer and memorizing plays.

After the recession in 2008 I realized that I did not have a safety net. There was no savings account, trust fund, or disposable income that my family could use to support me if I choose to pursue an "unstable" career. As a college graduate with student loans I found myself pushed toward jobs with stable salaries, benefits, and boring titles. Without realizing it, I lived art adjacent, in roles that supported or complemented artists but still afforded me stability and financial security. I had opportunities to pursue my secret passion for art but ran from them because I was scared to fail. So the more I avoided spaces where I might ‘fail,’ the more I found myself drawn to friends and peers that were freely expressing themselves as artists. I was always so happy to be a support system for the artists in my life, providing structural and organizational support in any way possible. Remaining ‘art adjacent’ so that I could be near the art I secretly wanted to be creating without ever having to expose myself to the vulnerability that came with being authentic.

But about three years ago, I had a moment of clarity after my grandmother passed. I was grieving and feeling lost and was searching for a way to stay connected to her. She had always been the artist of the family: taking photographs, developing film, sewing, laying tile... she did it all. I stumbled upon some old pictures I had taken over the years and they weren't half bad. The wheels started to turn in my head as I started to open up to the possibility of photography. After a little more coaxing from family and friends, I decided to just go for it, and it has been the greatest decision I have ever made for myself.

Why do you feel it essential to highlight the subject matter that you do in your work?

Race, sexuality, gender, and identity are not just themes to me - they are personal. Creating work that reflects on these integral pieces of who I am provide me with opportunities to affirm my existence as a queer Black woman.

Do you deem it essential that artists take on a social justice/activism lens through their work as you do?

Essential? No. Important? Absolutely. There is room for everybody to engage in activism and social justice work in ways that doesn't necessitate that all artists utilize their medium all the time. However, I strongly believe that artists from the groups being directly impacted by specific systemic ills that are engaging in work that speaks to those issues should be given the space and support to lead conversations around these movements. Specifically related to this moment in time, this is not to say non-Black artists cannot contribute meaningful work, but rather that the time, attention, resources, and amplification should be focused on the Black artists who are being directly impacted by systemic anti-Blackness.

How do you judge the success of your artistry? If based on changing the traditional narratives regarding the subject matter of your art, how do you measure these changes?

I feel successful as an artist when my work has resonated with somebody on an emotional level. Maybe it’s made them feel so deeply that it has inspired action or change in their daily life. Perhaps they were able to see themselves in a project and felt understood in a way they hadn’t experienced before. If I reach just one single person but they now have a new understanding of a group they are unfamiliar with or have now developed a deeper love for themselves then I have succeeded.
NADIA WAHEED

Born in Saudi Arabia but originally from Pakistan, Nadia Waheed (b. 1992, BFA 2015 School of the Art Institute of Chicago) makes large scale allegorical figurative paintings that are partially autobiographical and explore female selfhood, vulnerability, and cultural trauma. Exhibition history includes shows with Arsenal Contemporary NY, BEERS London, Patel Gallery in Toronto and Mindy Solomon Gallery in Miami. She has lived and worked in Austin since mid 2018.
Why do you make art?

I make art because without it I am not Nadia. Inherently I am someone who needs to work and make work to be themselves, to be comfortable in their skin and this world. As I’ve grown up my human experience has become hollow without painting. Looking at it from that angle I primarily make my work for myself, but do think abstractly about my experiences and believe that they’re not uncommon. I know many people feel and have been made to feel the same way as I have, so in that way my work is also for them – people like me who have felt disenfranchised, abandoned, misunderstood.

How did the way you grew up influence the way you now live your life and create art?

I grew up with no significant roots anywhere, my family frequently made continental moves and I to this day haven’t lived anywhere longer than four years at once. I labelled Karachi my home because through the years it was the place that was the most consistent for me, we would visit once or twice a year and it would be the same homes every time, same people every time. “Roots” could be there. However as I grew up a boundary line was drawn between me and Karachi, it was made clear to me that I wasn’t seen as a Pakistani, and despite living in the West I wasn’t seen as Western either. So if I wasn’t Pakistani or Western, then who was I? What was I? I felt I belonged nowhere - a feeling I’ve carried with me my whole life. The perpetual interloper. My sketchbook became the only consistent place that I could be that didn’t demand anything from me, didn’t judge me, didn’t scrutinize me, put me in a box. As I grew up and my studio practice developed, my art making evolved into a form of worship, and done so with the same religious fervor and zealotry - hours spent in deep reverence at the altar of the painting gods, the only god to really truly accept me as I was. My studio became the only place I could truly belong.

Your work reflects heavily on themes around culture, race, sexuality, feminism, beauty standards, and violence/struggles that are perpetuated by the normative archetypes of power on these aforementioned groups. Why do you feel it essential to highlight this subject matter in your artwork?

Everything I speak about in my work is drawn from my life. I highlight it because these are the things that I grapple with the most as a human being, and above all I value honesty - therefore I feel have an obligation to speak about these things with as much transparency as possible. Faith, feminism, beauty standards, violence - the definitions of these things are vastly different from an Eastern versus a Western perspective, and as someone trying to find a middle ground between those two values systems I find it immensely difficult to reconcile the disparities between them. As I said earlier, I know many people feel the same way as me. If me speaking openly brings solace to someone else that experiences feelings of difference or cultural rejection then it’s worth the effort.

What do you see as the role of art?

My life has been profoundly impacted by the art I’ve seen and experienced in my life - painting, writing, music. I never felt alone with a book in my hand. I think it’s vitally important to look at art and challenge ourselves to try and understand it, because in doing so we can confront and begin to understand ourselves. I believe what I see in a painting is a reflection of myself - I connect with van Gogh’s desperation, with Munch’s madness. Art reveals; we discover ourselves through it.

Re: should art be made to achieve a certain thing – very complicated question. So much of what I do is fluid, an existential building over time, layers of image making coming together to bring something to life. I have a goal, certainly, but I let the painting become what it wants to become over achieving what I had in mind, and in doing so the paintings end up becoming so much more than the sum of their parts. The artists who immerse themselves wholly in their work and thoughts develop a rare kind of potency, where a single line could hold more significance than an entire body of work by a less focused painter. I wouldn’t say the intention to “achieve” is necessary, more the intention to say. An artist needs to have something specific they want to say, or a question they want to ask. Using that voice the best they can I believe is more important than hitting the bullseye in terms of technical or conceptual execution.
When it comes to movements (for example BLM, which engage in anti-black and anti–indigenous racism), do you feel like artists have had a role to play?

I believe so, yes - whether it’s intentional or not is another conversation. Nothing in this world is self-referential, everything has context and is informed by the environment around it. When we study art history we can clearly see how so much of art was a response to the political or religious cadence of that time. Citing a very mainstream example, Shepard Fairey’s portrait of Barack Obama in his 2008 presidential campaign, it’s evident how significantly that changed the trajectory of his arc as a candidate. Art has the potential to take on power and impact change on a massive level.

I think art more often than not can be a catalyst for change on a personal level; like I said earlier art reveals. It can reveal your prejudices, biases, or unrolling perspectives towards yourself or others. Art can open the door for you to reconcile that within yourself, to develop more empathy for your friends and neighbors. I recently went to the deyoung Museum in San Francisco to see the show Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963–1983, and holy shit, let me tell you - I have not been hit that deep in my spirit in a long time. Wadsworth Jarrell, Barkley Hendricks, Cliff Joseph – seeing their work in person for the first time opened my eyes to things I hadn’t considered that impacted and impact the lives of Black people in America. At times it was incredibly confronting, bearing witness to work responding to intense generational suffering and systemic exploitation. Art that is made from a place of intense visceral truth can be the hardest to look at, the hardest to hold within yourself, and the most important to not look away from - I think we can all agree on that especially at this juncture of history.

Do you deem it essential that artists take on a social justice/activism lens through their work as you do? Do you think that artists from these backgrounds should be the ones speaking on these issues through their work or should all artists take on these issues/reflect these values in their artistry?

Another difficult question – I’m not sure. I’m not sure if I actually make work from a social justice angle. I just try to reaffirm the truths that I’ve developed for myself outside of societal and cultural expectation; truths that I think are more unconditionally accepting and universal than the ones that exist in Pakistani culture or Western society. There are things that exist in those two spaces that are damaging and limiting to all people, but I’m looking specifically from my lens as a Pakistani woman to their impact on the lives of women and it’s a lot more power in our deepest human truths and I try to speak from that place. It makes me sad actually, if I’m vehemently asserting “I have worth, I have value” is social activism. But I guess no, I don’t think it’s essential to work from a place of activism or social justice. There are an infinite number of questions to ask or things to explore when making art, and they’re all legitimate as long as it’s coming from a place of deep honesty.

Re: Artist backgrounds & speaking on issues: this can get kind of prickly, this topic, at least for me. When I see White artists painting brown bodies, I bristle, there’s something about it that doesn’t agree with me. My body is barely my own as it is, and for someone else to take ownership of my complexion or history by painting it with some kind of specificity… I don’t know. It doesn’t feel right. I am cognizant of my own emotional baggage around this topic therefore it’s not something I’m comfortable making a definitive statement about. I will say however that I do believe in intersectionality. I do believe I’ll never really understand what it’s like to be black, what it’s like to be trans - so that means I need to very deliberately open my ears to listen. I think all people in general should try to develop more accepting and compassionate views towards others - even people on the other side of the line from them. But an artist speaking specifically about things that they have no experience of isn’t honest. Championing a cause or reflecting more all encompassing and accepting values is another thing and is the prerogative of the person making the work.

How do you judge the success of your artistry? If based on changing the traditional narratives regarding the subject matter of your art, how do you quantify or measure these changes?

F*ck, I don’t know if I can measure it at all in that way. Culture is a densely woven web of values and traditions that have been formed over hundreds and hundreds of years. Can I impact change on an individual level? Perhaps. It’s a lot more realistic for me to think I can help a brown girl in the West find space for herself in her own body rather than deeply impact the entire corrupt machine. I’m realistic about my reach. After all - who looks at art? Educated people who already have an interest in looking at art. Am I going to change things so far and wide that honor killings no longer happen? That women’s bodies belong to themselves and no one else? That women are no longer raped because they’re not inherently and immediately sexualized? No. I wish I could change these things with immediacy. If I had that power I would use it, and I pray in the future I will be able to develop enough clout to be able to impact change in a much larger and more direct way. In the meantime though if I can make even one person feel more at peace with who they are or the decisions they make in order to be themselves then I consider the work a success.

Do you feel like there is enough private/public funding to support marginalized artists -- especially those who are engaging in related topics through their work?

Probably not, no. The few things I’ve unsuccessfully applied to for funding left me with the feeling that I’m not going to get it so why try? The barriers to entry in the arts are much higher than we realize – pursuing a career as an artist is an incredibly risky financial move and fraught with instability unless you’re independently wealthy or are privileged enough that it’s a viable career for you to pursue (e.g. money is not an issue.) In this industry even if you “make it” it’s not guaranteed that you’ll stay made, the market is fickle and you might go through very lean periods where no one wants to buy your work, that’s just the reality. For those who have families to support or who have spent their lives living on the edge of a knife financially, it’s seen as a terribly irresponsible pursuit, especially if you choose to go to university and shoulder that debt on top of cost of living. The societal barriers to entry are high, and yes, there is not nearly enough funding for the arts or education, and whatever there is it’s so unbelievably competitive that it feels very unlikely that one would actually receive that grant or award. Frankly, it’s just not realistic to believe that funding could be a viable source of financial support, at least from my perspective and experience.

Do you feel like artists engaging in this sort of work like yourself are generally given the platforms that they deserve to spread their art and messages? What more could various parties do to support artists, especially marginalized artists?

I think in this day and age a lot of control is in the hands of the people in regards to platforms - Instagram, Facebook and Twitter have been incredible grassroots tools for artists to use to promote themselves and build connections with other people in their industry. Government should set aside more funding for arts and culture, absolutely. The people who want to make their work should be helped however possible, but the most direct way is for the community to purchase their work. Buy work by POC, WOC when you can, find work that resonates with you and support that person and their career, that’s honestly the most significant thing an individual can do to help someone else’s career.

“omira” (2020) | Nadia Waheed

Conroy Gomes (2020). Creative Activism: The Role of Art in Oppression and the City. A research report. Toronto: