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“Street Matter” is a Multifaceted Artistic Experience

October 1, 2018, by [Tara Joy](#), Arts & Culture Editor

Visitors to “Street Matter – Decay & Forever/Golden Age,” the newest exhibition to open in the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery, may well end up staying longer than they anticipated. The exhibition, which opened this past Wednesday and displays the work of multimedia artist Kahlil Robert Irving, is full of subtle detail and invites close examination. Interested viewers were given the chance to interact more closely with Irving and his art at multiple events this week—an opening reception on Wednesday which included a discussion between Irving and Associate Professor of Science in Society, African American Studies, and Sociology Anthony Hatch, a Q&A with Irving on Friday, and a gallery tour run by student monitors on Saturday.

During the Q&A, Irving discussed a wide variety of topics with University students, including his experiences as a Black artist, his career track, and his artistic process.

“For me, the work that I’m making, it can almost exist in any space, because I made it in relationship to museum objects.” Irving said in reference to the significance of having his art displayed in a formal gallery space. “And I look at historical objects and make connections to them even though they are not distinctly registered. This is my first institutional exhibition, so to have my show at Wesleyan is kind of a certain level of recognition or prestige. So it’s a stepping point.”

Irving went on to connect his own personal career to a larger narrative about the challenges of being a Black artist, explaining why it’s a meaningful step forward when artists like him get to hold shows in elite spaces like Wesleyan University.

“We’re stateless, just like the Palestinians—stateless,” Irving said. “And the motherfuckers are just constructing us by the neck, and just popping our heads off one by one. We’re barely able to make it. So being in a position at a Wesleyan, having a show at Wesleyan, I push those doors open just a little bit more. I can remind them every time I get just a little bit more.”

Alongside his general experiences as an artist, Irving also discussed a few of his specific pieces. One such piece was “Map: depiction of a specific population, 1970’s,” a large canvas census map. Irving has made the unexpected choice to hang the map backwards, so all viewers see is a blank white canvas. By hiding the actual content of the map, Irving provides commentary on its validity, and on historical misrepresentations and erasures of Black communities.

“That found object, that map, the 1970s map of Black populations, I’ve had that for three years now,” Irving said. “And so I’ve been holding on to it, to have the right time to deploy the message, and to deploy that as a gesture in the space...I turned the map around because I don’t trust those numbers, and I feel like the system will always rework things even if it’s not in their favor, or it may be in their favor. Either way it goes it’s still like a runaround. It’s a coyote chasing Bugs Bunny.”

Another piece in the exhibition, which dominates the room with its size, is “Mobile Structure; Relief & Memorial: Cortege [Malcolm, Martin] (STOP: DROP: ROLL),” an enormous installation of wooden scaffolding that forms a large triangular prism. Standing on one side of the sculpture, viewers can see a panel containing an intensely saturated image of a blue sky full of fluffy clouds. On the other side, a long black and white American flag that stretches from the top of the structure to the floor becomes visible. Irving explained the context for the piece during the Q&A.

“That big wooden structure, it’s memorializing my paternal father figures who served in the army in WWI, to commemorate them and to also think about commemorating not just other civil rights activists, but all black people who do service,” Irving said.

During the gallery tour on Saturday, gallery monitor Gabriel Ridout ’21 offered further perspective on the piece.

“There’s something interesting going on here structurally,” Ridout said. “It reminds me almost of a playground, with the flag acting as a slide. And there’s something unfinished about it...it feels like a work in progress. He’s very deliberate with the images he chooses. On this side, there’s a collage of a skyscape which is a very intentionally artificial image. It’s very obvious that he photoshopped it. Speaking to it in conversation with the structure of [Zilkha Gallery], it’s taking this very artificial image and disrupting the gray tones of the gallery. He’s putting something very artificial in a place that we might think of as very serious. In over-saturating the sky and desaturating the flag he has done something both very playful and very serious.”

Adjacent to “Mobile Structure” are numerous small, individually named ceramic sculptures on metal stands. At first glance, these sculptures resemble each other but upon closer examination they vary widely and are each full of minute detail. Consisting of a combination of glazed ceramic pieces and decoupage news clippings and photos—all fused together in a kiln—the sculptures directly reference a wide variety of topics from politics to pop culture.

“These [works], more than anything else in the gallery, are a process-based experience,” Ridout said during the gallery tour. “The heat of the kiln both fuses things together and creates separations...There are also a lot of decals lining each piece. You’ll notice ‘Law and Order’ throughout, as well as different news ads and political ads, references to Jason Stockley and his victim Anthony Lamar Smith. Interestingly, [Irving] signs each piece with a little picture of him from his Apple ID, which is kind of a cheeky way to mark his work.”

In a way, this juxtaposition of the somber and the irreverent exemplifies much of Irving’s work.

“I think that is a larger theme in this collection,” Ridout said. “We have a lot of playfulness as well as a lot of solemnness.”

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