

LIFE

EXHIBITS

Art fellows take center stage at Transformer Station



"Critiquing systems is very much a part of my practice," said Amanda D. King, whose work is on view at Transformer Station. McKinley Wiley



Artist Erykah "E.T." Townsend adds a pop culture flair to her artistry in "New Work" exhibition. Influenced by "South Park," Townsend uses satire to unpack consumerism and cultural extremes. McKinley Wiley



"Godhead" (2021) by Amanda D. King. Courtesy of the artist



Sculptor Charmaine Spencer, one of the four FRONT fellows celebrated in the "New Work" exhibition at Transformer Station. McKinley Wiley



Artist Antwoine Washington says a stroke in 2018 forced him to reconsider everything — from his creative process to his communication. McKinley Wiley

A new show featuring these four Cleveland artists should be required viewing. The rigor and creativity of the region lives in microcosm there.

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Every art exhibition is a conversation — between artists and audiences, between personal histories and collective futures.

The Cleveland Museum of Art and FRONT International's "New Work: Amanda D. King, Charmaine Spencer, Erykah Townsend, Antwoine Washington" Fellows exhibition, open through Dec. 27 at Transformer Station, is one of the most critical ones in recent memory.

It's local, evocative and serves as the capstone to a three-year fellowship designed to nurture the next generation of Northeast Ohio artists.

Launched in 2022, the program gives fellows the space, funding and professional support to deepen their practices and expand their reach.

This year's exhibition gathers the work of four artists whose perspectives are as distinct as the mediums they work in.

Their work — spanning sculpture, painting, photography, installation and beyond — inhabits the gallery and interrogates the viewers while it plays, remembers and builds.

Collectively, these artists reflect the region's artistic energy while pushing well past its borders.

AMANDA D. KING: STRUCTURED VISION, LIVED RESISTANCE

If Amanda D. King's work feels deliberate, that's because it is. The Cleveland-based artist, cultural strategist and creative director builds her practice on systemic critique, weaving personal narrative and cultural history into an intricate, intentional whole.

Born and raised in Pittsburgh to parents

who were "very cultured" and collectors of African diasporic art, King was immersed in creativity from an early age.

"I believe the personal is political, is spiritual," she said. "You cannot remove the personal from how people are navigating systems. Critiquing systems is very much a part of my practice."

King's artistic foundation is rooted in photography, which she studied at the National School of Visual Arts in France before moving on to Bryn Mawr College and eventually New York City.

There, she worked at publications including Complex and W Magazine, interning under Editor-in-Chief Edward Enninful.

Seeing how high-level cultural production operates — stylists, photographers, lighting technicians, editors moving in creative unison — expanded her understanding of image-making far beyond the dark-

room.

While photography remains her first language, King's practice has evolved into something broader: a fusion of visual communication, creative direction and social critique.

The killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 marked a turning point. She left the elite media world for Cleveland, initially entering law school to support artists through advocacy.

That led to founding "Shooting Without Bullets," where she began reshaping both her own creative practice and the fragile local arts ecosystem.

"This isn't canned speech stuff," she told cleveland.com and The Plain Dealer. "This is lived experience. I am an artist and a creative who is in constant crit with myself. Everything that I do, it is with intention."

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CHARMAINE SPENCER: BUILDING MEANING BY HAND

For sculptor Charmaine Spencer, the studio is both a workspace and a refuge.

"I like actually working in my studio. It's kind of a comfort," she said in a recent interview.

Her material vocabulary is grounded in nature — reed grass, clay, mud — and inspired by traditional African building methods.

She shapes and coats each piece, then dries it in a heated tent, coaxing fragile materials into enduring forms.

For the FRONT Fellows exhibition, Spencer created a series of Coptic jars — vessels that meditate on how we hold and protect intangible things like memory, spirit and humanity itself.

"You can hold something valuable in it, or you can hold something that might be corrupted. But it's your choice what you choose to put in to save," she explained.

One jar, representing humanity, is textured with scar-like markings that resemble watchful eyes — a powerful metaphor for resilience and collective perception.

Spencer said that she draws influence from her surroundings and peers but ultimately wants the work to meet each viewer where they are.

"The work is always going to be interpreted through the viewer's eyes," she said. "I want a unity to come out of it — but through their vision, not mine."

ERYKAH TOWNSEND: POP CULTURE AND PRECISION

Known in the visual arts community as "E.T.," Cleveland artist Erykah Townsend has been phoning home with a blend of humor, cultural commentary and meticulous craftsmanship into her multimedia work.

Her "'Happy' Holidays" exhibition — about the trappings of consumer culture — at MOCA Cleveland last year was only a hint of where she's taking things.

Townsend, a graduate of both Cleveland School of the Arts and the Cleveland Institute of Art, has been creating for as long as she can remember.

"I've always been the artsy one in the family," she said.

Her process begins with deep research, then moves into playful material experimentation.

Many of her pieces mimic commercial mass production so convincingly that viewers are often fooled.

"Sometimes people approach my art and don't even know that I did it by hand," she explained.

Influenced by "South Park" creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, Townsend uses satire to unpack consumerism and cultural extremes.

"I'm usually not anti that topic," she said. "I'm more anti of it when it becomes too extreme."

For FRONT work, she zeroes in on joy, representation:

"I just wanted to create work with Black kids in it and they're just Black kids," Townsend said. "They have nothing to do with identity politics."

Looking ahead, Townsend hopes to balance her career as both artist and designer, with dreams of launching Milk Creek Studios, a multidisciplinary creative hub.



A sample of Antwoine Washington's pieces adorning the FRONT "New Work" exhibit at Transformer Station. *Jacob Koestler*

ANTWOINE WASHINGTON: FROM HISTORY TO THE PERSONAL

Early in his career, Antwoine Washington focused on preserving stories and documenting history.

But after suffering a stroke in 2018, his work shifted dramatically inward.

"It quickly transitioned into me kind of exploring the more personal and more vulnerable parts of who I am as a human being," he said.

The stroke forced him to reconsider everything — from his creative process to his communication.

"My brain [is] wanting to say one thing, but obviously like parts of my brain [aren't] all the way connected," he explained.

Through intensive reading and lifestyle changes, he's continued to create, drawing on deeply personal themes. His recent work reflects on grief and legacy following the loss of his grandmothers.

Washington hopes that when people encounter his pieces, they feel "a sense of hope, but also a sense of realism."

Looking ahead, he envisions his work expanding onto a larger stage, including institutions like the Studio Museum of Harlem.

He hopes people treat one another the way he moves through his life and his art.

"Always move with care, empathy and realism," he said.

FOUR VOICES, ONE MOMENT

Taken together, the works of King, Spencer, Townsend and Washington are a study in range.

Each artist's practice is unique — grounded in their personal narratives and sharpened through years of development — but all share a commitment to pushing boundaries while remaining anchored in community.

This exhibition is a snapshot of Northeast Ohio's creative future — one shaped by rigor, experimentation and lived experience.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The FRONT Art Futures Fellows Exhibition is on view now through Dec. 27 at Transformer Station, 1460 W. 29th St., Cleveland.

The program, launched in 2022, provides a \$25,000 stipend, travel and support for full participation in the FRONT Triennial.



Charmaine Spencer's "New Work" in the FRONT Fellows exhibition at Transformer Station. For the exhibition, Spencer created a series of Coptic jars — vessels that meditate on how we hold and protect intangible things like memory, spirit and humanity itself. *Jacob Koestler*



Erykah Townsend's "New Work" collection offers a playful view inspired by childlike wonder and pop culture. *Jacob Koestler*

Fellows were selected by a national advisory board of artists and curators, and their work spans painting, sculpture, photogra-

phy, video and installation.

More information is available at transformerstation.org and frontart.org.