



“We Are Born with Targets on Our Backs,” by Edith Juanah, an art therapy graduate student and painter.
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT



Dancer Rafael Tillery: “When you can access your story, that becomes a power that can implement change because then you’re talking to people’s hearts.” FRANCISCO GRACIANO

‘Talking to people’s hearts’

Artists can play ‘huge role’ in changing opinions

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

On July 17, the world lost two civil rights icons: Rep. John Robert Lewis and Rev. Cordy Tindell “C.T.” Vivian. Both men made sacrifices to courageously use their voices and advocate for human rights and justice. • In a time where the Black Lives Matter movement continues to combat violence, eradicate white supremacy and create space for joy and innovation, artists throughout Tallahassee are responding to the movement by sharing the power of their stories in the voices — and mediums — they know best. **See ARTISTS, Page 6C**

Artists

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Rafael Tillery wields his power with the swipe of an arm, the bounce of a knee. In June, he attended the Tallahassee protests against police brutality in the wake of George Floyd's murder. A self-identifying Black, queer, male artist, Tillery is an MFA candidate at FSU's School of Dance. He said he wasn't planning to improvise a dance in the middle of the protesters that day, and yet when the moment arrived he began to move and a drummer walked up to accompany him.

He has grappled with what dance means amidst a pandemic and fight for rights. Tillery stood inside the building tension of the swelling crowd, keeping a careful eye on armed officials pacing rooftops while he was confronted with derogatory yelling and the sounds of oncoming traffic. He took a breath as movement bubbled to the surface — movement rooted for him in gospel, afro-diasporic dance, voguing and childhood memories.

"When you can access your story, that becomes a power that can implement change because then you're talking to people's hearts," says Tillery. "As artists we have the power to speak to people's hearts that goes beyond politics. It's just being brave enough to share that story genuinely and with vulnerability."

"My biggest goal is to speak for those

who are unable to do so for themselves," affirms Edith Juanah, an art therapy graduate student and painter. "I've always used my artwork to communicate and explore feelings, and I like the idea of conjuring up emotions in the viewer. It's those conversations that will start to ignite change and bring people together."

Juanah's artwork is heavily influenced by Jean-Michel Basquiat, who focused on the dichotomies of integration versus segregation and used artwork as a tool to comment on power structures and systems of racism. Juanah's own acrylic style draws on relationships to trigger an onslaught of emotions in the viewer.

Her most recent work, "We Are Born With Targets On Our Backs," depicts a young black boy atop the shoulders of another against a wash of red. Both have bleeding targets taped to their white shirts, while the young boy holds up a piece of artwork that states, "I am 7 and I already know pain and fear. By the time I am old enough to go to college I will know pain, fear, trauma, injustice, and maybe even Death."

"As artists sometimes we think our roles are not as significant as policy makers or teachers, but I think we have a huge role," says Juanah. "I think our artwork can change people's opinions, strike up conversation and make them feel connected to something. I want to inspire and urge artists to use their creativity and their voice to say something about what's happening."

Juanah sees her brothers and young-

est nephew reflected in her latest piece. In her art therapy research, she is focused on how African-American adolescents are affected by microaggressions and interactions on social media. She hopes her artwork will not only bring awareness but will contribute to the ongoing conversation around intergenerational trauma.

"People say all the time children shouldn't be at these protests, but for us in the black community these are conversations we're having with our 4 and 5 year olds," says Juanah. "Our kids now are juggling with what's going on in the real world and still trying to be a child. Yet, the rest of the world is deciding that is not a little black boy, but a black boy who is a threat."

Interdisciplinary artist, Summer Hill Seven's book, "Hang Time: A Poetic Memoir" is dedicated to the black men in America who have not and will not reach the age of 40. The book was published in 2006 and written while Seven was on the precipice of his forties. Adapted into a poeconomy — which blends theater, hip-hop, and spoken word — Seven recently shared his piece on Instagram, "Overture L Overture," in reference to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution.

"My intention is to let you know that the inevitability and yearning for justice is coming," says Seven. "It's an overture, it's coming."

Seven's words details the church bombings and lynchings that have colored civil rights history as a way to challenge the notion of the American dream.

Ultimately, it connects L'Ouverture to American slave rebellion leaders, Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser. Seven continues to use his platform at the Poemedy Institute to teach eloquence in spoken language and writing as an alternative to violence.

"We stand on the side of eloquence because we know wars are won with eloquence," says Seven. "It's important for people who are not African-American to understand the ways to reinvent eloquence, reinvent the language and never-ending creativity that we can apply to these issues."

As Tillery reflects on his dance in the crowd of protesters, he ruminates on generational and childhood trauma and how that manifests in his body. He also thinks about the positive transference of energy as a conduit for creativity that can inspire others to make change.

"Maybe me being inspired in that moment can inspire someone else to do something," says Tillery. Seven agrees.

"Artists start with the empty space," concludes Seven. "We start with the theater, and a question. We dig holes and plant seeds."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org). This article is part of COCA's Creativity Persists collection, which highlights how our community uses the arts to stay connected and inspired during the COVID-19 pandemic.