

MASS MoCA

SHAUN LEONARDO: THE BREATH OF EMPTY SPACE TO OPEN AT MASS MOCA ON AUGUST 26

The Exhibition, which Reframes the Visual Narrative of Systemic Violence Against Black Men in the United States, will also travel to the Bronx Museum

North Adams, Massachusetts – August 24, 2020 – The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) has announced that it will present the exhibition *Shaun Leonardo: The Breath of Empty Space* from August 26 through December 22, 2020. Through his work, the Brooklyn-based artist addresses how the mediated images of systemic oppression and violence against Black and Brown young men and boys in the United States have shaped our fear, empathy, and perception. This exhibition originated at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA), Baltimore, and was curated by John Chaich. It was organized for MASS MoCA by Laura Thompson, MASS MoCA's Director of Education and Curator of Kidspace, and will travel to the Bronx Museum of the Arts, where it will be organized by Jasmine Wahi, from January 20 through May 2021.

Through a series of intimate drawings based on images widely disseminated in the press and popular media and accessed from his own recollection of these tragedies, Leonardo applies the additive nature of drawing—a rigorous visual editing—to explore the reductive nature of memory, powerfully addressing how time and the endless cycling of images in the media affect what we remember, and what we forget. The artist employs material strategies of blurring, removing, die-cut, and mirrored tint to draw attention to information and reframe content.

Leonardo and MASS MoCA have a longstanding relationship. Leonardo is scheduled to be a featured artist in the *Defining Moments* exhibition in Kidspace in 2021, and at that time will also organize a social practice project titled *You Walk...* for a dedicated interactive community space within the museum. In 2018, a number of the works in *The Breath of Empty Space* were shown at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) Gallery 51, when Thompson, who is also a professor at MCLA, had her class involved in the organization of the exhibition entitled *Witness* which included Leonardo's work. In 2016, at MASS MoCA, Leonardo conducted an artist residency with teens in conjunction with the exhibition *Nick Cave: Until*, which focused on race and policing.

The Breath of Empty Space extends the exploration of race and masculinity—and the power structures that form and uphold them—that is at the core of Leonardo's practice. Created between 2014 and 2019, this series asks viewers to confront uncomfortable images in order to bear witness to and recall the names, bodies, and lives of those depicted from Rodney King and the “Central Park Five” to Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Stephon Clark, and beyond.

“For these drawings, I take some of the most widely disseminated images of police violence, both recent and historical, and make choices that I think will slow down our looking,” Leonardo said. “I wish to literally create space in these images, so that we can sit with them differently, even in the hurt. I am intentionally removing or isolating details in order to point to the absence of lives lost and to critical information that would otherwise go overlooked. Ultimately, I want to turn people's looking into bearing witness.”

The works in this exhibition offer but a few instances of violence. Just months after its debut at MICA in January 2020, the United States has witnessed the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Tony McDade, Breonna Taylor, and many more. In this environment of systemic violence against Black and Brown bodies, Leonardo continues to encourage us to engage in complex dialogues around race, representation, and the power of art with the belief that art, and thoughtful conversation about it, can inspire change.

Following its premiere at MICA, *The Breath of Empty Space* was intended to travel to MoCA Cleveland earlier this year, but the exhibition was cancelled before it was scheduled to open, and before the artist was able to engage in meaningful discourse with the community. Leonardo considers community dialogue, and his own personal engagement with communities, to be at the very center of his work.

Programming relating to *The Breath of Empty Space* will include a virtual Social Justice Teen-Designed Curriculum in which teens and college students will work with Shaun to design a social justice curriculum this fall. Additional programs, organized in collaboration with the Bronx Museum and Williams College Museum of Art, will include artists talks and panel discussions about topics such as racism as a public health issue.

ABOUT SHAUN LEONARDO

Shaun Leonardo's multidisciplinary work negotiates societal expectations of manhood, namely definitions surrounding black and brown masculinities, along with its notions of achievement, collective identity, and experience of failure. His performance practice, anchored by his work in Assembly – a diversion program for court-involved youth at the Brooklyn-based, non-profit Recess – is participatory and invested in a process of embodiment. Leonardo is a Brooklyn-based artist from Queens, New York City. He received his MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, is a recipient of support from Creative Capital, Guggenheim Social Practice, Art for Justice and A Blade of Grass, and was recently profiled in the *New York Times*. His work has been featured at The Guggenheim Museum, the High Line, and New Museum, with a recent solo exhibition at Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). From fall 2018 through spring 2020, Leonardo enacted socially engaged projects at Pratt Institute as the School of Art, Visiting Fellow.

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