

Press Release

---



Partial installation view of *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)* at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Photo by Andrew Buckler.

**Media Contact**

For high-resolution images or media inquiries please contact:  
Kent Michael Smith, Director of Communications and Marketing  
ksmith@camh.org | 713.284.8255

Artist Commission  
**Artist Nathaniel Donnett  
Creates a Public Installation  
that Bridges Communities  
July 23–August 31, 2020**

HOUSTON, TX (July 22, 2020)—Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is pleased to present *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)*, a newly commissioned public art installation by Houston-based artist Nathaniel Donnett, as part of the Museum's new *Beyond CAMH* initiative series. The community-engaging work is located upon more than 120 feet of construction fencing surrounding the Museum's front lawn during its ongoing capital campaign renovations. Initiated through a backpack exchange with the youth of Houston's Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards, the text- and object-based artwork acknowledges and reflects the importance of history, education, family, and visibility in these communities and Black American social life. The work will remain on view—day and night—through August 31, 2020.

*Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)* sets an important precedent by including youth as an integral part of the public art process through direct collaboration with community organizations, including [S.H.A.P.E. Community Center](#), [Change Happens!](#), [Lindsay Gary](#), [Jack Yates High School](#), and [Kashmere Gardens Elementary](#). For Donnett, this project engages the youth's social imagination by uplifting everyday objects as material for the artwork, and posits exchange as a gesture of human kindness. The exchange seeks to inspire youth around the value of education, through the gift of a new backpack and by highlighting the inner

# Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard  
Houston, Texas 77006  
CAMH.ORG | #atCAMH

#BeyondCAMH  
#atCAMH  
@camhouston

## Press Release

---



Nathaniel Donnett. Courtesy the artist.



Artist Nathaniel Donnett and Kenya Evans conduct a community backpack exchange at CAMH with children from Houston's S.H.A.P.E. Community Center. The used backpacks collected become part of the artist's installation *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrhythm of Being(s)*. Photo by Kristin Massa.

resources and strength of Houston's Black community. The multi-faceted nature of this artwork emphasizes the power of direct action and social exchange.

The artwork comprises a 120-foot pre-existing fence, upon which is printed imagined words and phrases common to the aforementioned neighborhoods, and a series of backpacks mounted on the fence. Some of the backpacks contain photographs taken by the artist and objects collected from these three neighborhoods, which reference Nkisi power figures of the Congo and the notion of being both present and not present at the same time. At night, the backpacks are illuminated with lights that continuously pulse in Morse code, the phrase "A Love Supreme" from the John Coltrane song "Acknowledgement," an excerpt from a James Baldwin's essay "The Uses of the Blues," and a verse from the song "Mad" by singer-songwriter Solange.

"After Emancipation, newly-freed Black Americans in Houston, Texas established three neighborhoods—3rd, 4th, and 5th Wards," said Donnett. "Gentrification, cultural erasure, income disparities, and unjust state and municipal policies are among the myriad events that have thrust the primarily Black residents of Houston, Texas's historical Black neighborhoods into a state of precarity and invisibility. Yet, Black expressive use of language is both a form of imagination and resistance, social aesthetics are indicators of history that remain forever present, and acts of exchange demonstrate the importance of societal interconnectivity."

*Acknowledgement* examines the formal and conceptual vernacular of these communities, including architecture, iconography, and language practices, to explore the parallels between an evolving artistic process and social transformations. Informed by Fred Moten's notion of "Black fugitivity," Antonio Gramsci's essay "Language, Linguistics, and Folklore", and John Coltrane's song "Acknowledgement", Donnet's overall project serializes the process of navigating structural systems of race and class.

While CAMH remains closed for construction and COVID-19 precautions, Donnett's work provides a source of community-based art in keeping with the Museum's mission to present extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

### **About Beyond CAMH**

*Beyond CAMH* is a newly launched initiative that reflects contemporary art's ever-expanding influence through an ongoing series of artist-driven projects and public partnerships extending beyond the walls of the Museum. CAMH's work outside

## Press Release

---

our galleries—including public artworks and cross-sector collaborations—aims to reach new audiences, embrace unexpected contexts, and directly impact civic life in Houston and beyond. Spanning multiple scales and contexts, *Beyond CAMH* positions artists as primary catalysts of cultural and public realm transformation.

“CAMH’s doors have been closed for the past four months as we prioritize the safety of our staff and audience in response to the increasing effects of COVID-19,” said Executive Director Hesse McGraw. “During this time, we’ve amplified our digital engagement, performed a stunning renovation of the gallery (we can’t wait to show you!), welcomed new staff, and most importantly—we’ve had time to think. To be quarantined and disconnected from daily, in-person contact with artists and audience is disorienting for a museum that exists solely for that purpose. Yet, with our doors closed, we’re working to re-imagine the ethic and practice of a more porous museum—one that spills onto the street, engages in long-term collaborations with artists, meets audiences where they are, and serves our communities’ most urgent needs. We are working to reimagine and recommit to our role as a civically engaged institution. We know that by trusting artists, and working to expand their agency in the public realm, meaning will shine through.”

As long as our doors are closed, you can find us outside and online. And when our doors reopen, you can continue to expect more—in, around, and beyond CAMH. For more information visit [camh.org/beyond](https://camh.org/beyond).

### **About the Artist**

Nathaniel Donnett lives and works in Houston, Texas. Donnett received his BA in Fine Arts from Texas Southern University and is a 2021 MFA Candidate in Painting at the Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut. Donnett is a current recipient of a 2020 Dean’s Critical Practice Research Grant and a 2020 Art and Social Justice Initiative Grant. Donnett is a recipient of a 2019 (Fresh Arts Houston) and 2018 (Project Row Houses) community-based art project commission for his ongoing *What’s The New News* project and a 2015 *Houston Downtown Vehicular Wayfinding Signs Project* public art commission. Donnett has also received the 2017/2011 Houston Arts Alliance Individual Artist Grant, a 2014 Harpo Foundation Grant, 2015/2011 Idea Fund/Andy Warhol Foundation Grant, and a 2010 Artadia Award. His work has been shown widely, including at Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, Virginia Beach; Mennello Museum of American Art, Orlando, Florida; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, Kansas; McColl Center for Art + Innovation, Charlotte, North Carolina; American University Museum at The Katzen Arts Center, Washington, DC; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art,

# Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard  
Houston, Texas 77006  
CAMH.ORG | #atCAMH

#BeyondCAMH  
#atCAMH  
@camhouston

## Press Release

---

Kansas City, Missouri; Hotel Theresa, Harlem, New York; Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture, Charlotte, North Carolina; Community Artist's Collective, Houston, Texas; Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, Connecticut; Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas; Project Row Houses, Houston, Texas; The University Museum, Houston, Texas, and The New Museum, New York, New York.