

Teacher Guide

Nathaniel Donnett *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrhythm of Being(s)* July 23–August 31, 2020



Installation in progress on Nathaniel Donnett's *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrhythm of Being(s)*, 2020. Photo by Kristin Massa.

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Public Art Installation Overview

- *Acknowledgement: The Historic Polyrythm of Being(s)* is a newly commissioned public art installation by Houston-based artist Nathaniel Donnett.
- The artwork is located upon more than 120 feet of construction fencing surrounding CAMH’s front lawn on the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet in the heart of Houston’s Museum District.
- An exchange of backpacks (old for new) with youth from Houston’s Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards was part of this work. A selection of the old backpacks are lit from within and on display as part of the installation.
- Some of the backpacks on display contain photographs taken by the artist and objects collected from these three neighborhoods.
- The work also includes large banners with words and phrases common to these historic neighborhoods.
- For Donnett, this project engages the youth’s social imagination by uplifting everyday objects as material for the artwork, and the exchange as a gesture of human kindness.
- The artist references nkisi power figures of the Congo and the notion of being both present and not present at the same time.
- The text and object-based artwork acknowledges and reflects the importance of history, education, family, and visibility in these Houston communities, and of Black American social life.
- From 7PM to 6AM the backpacks are illuminated with lights that continuously pulse in Morse code the phrase “A Love Supreme” from the John Coltrane song “Acknowledgement,” and excerpt from James Baldwin’s essay “The Uses of the Blues,” and a verse from the song “Mad” by singer-songwriter Solange.



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Key Questions

- How are we connected to each other? What have you learned about how we are connected during this time of COVID-19?
- What are other examples of artwork that is created through an exchange of objects or thoughts?
- How does light (day versus night) change how you view this installation?
- What are other examples of artwork that are created with everyday objects like backpacks?
- How do specific nuances in language—phrases and words—connect you to your neighborhood, city, or state?
- How does your understanding of this work change with the knowledge that the blinking lights communicate a coded message?

Curriculum Connections

Visual Art | Nathaniel Donnett created a participatory element into his public installation by organizing a series of backpack exchanges where students from Houston’s Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards donated their old backpacks in exchange for a new one. The old backpacks were used in the artwork. Can you create an artwork based on the idea of exchange? This exchange could be objects or ideas. What do you exchange? Are people willing to participate in your exchange? How does this change and give ownership over the artistic process? How does the exchange leave an element of chance in the creation of the artwork?

History | What is the history of your neighborhood? Where can you find out information about this history? Are there neighbors or organizations that have been in your neighborhood a long time? How did your neighborhood start? How has it changed through time? Can you find old pictures of your neighborhood? Compile this information to share with your classmates.