



Spotlight by

Danya Sherman +
Deidra Montgomery,
Congruence Cultural
Strategies

**Mural Arts Institute
Leaders and Advisors**

Cathy Harris
Netanel Portier
Katelyn Rivas
Felix St. Fort

**Southside Community Arts
Center Project Team**

Producer
Dorian Sylvain

Project Manager
Tianna Bracey

Partners
Norman Teague
Jeff Phillips
Amanda Puck

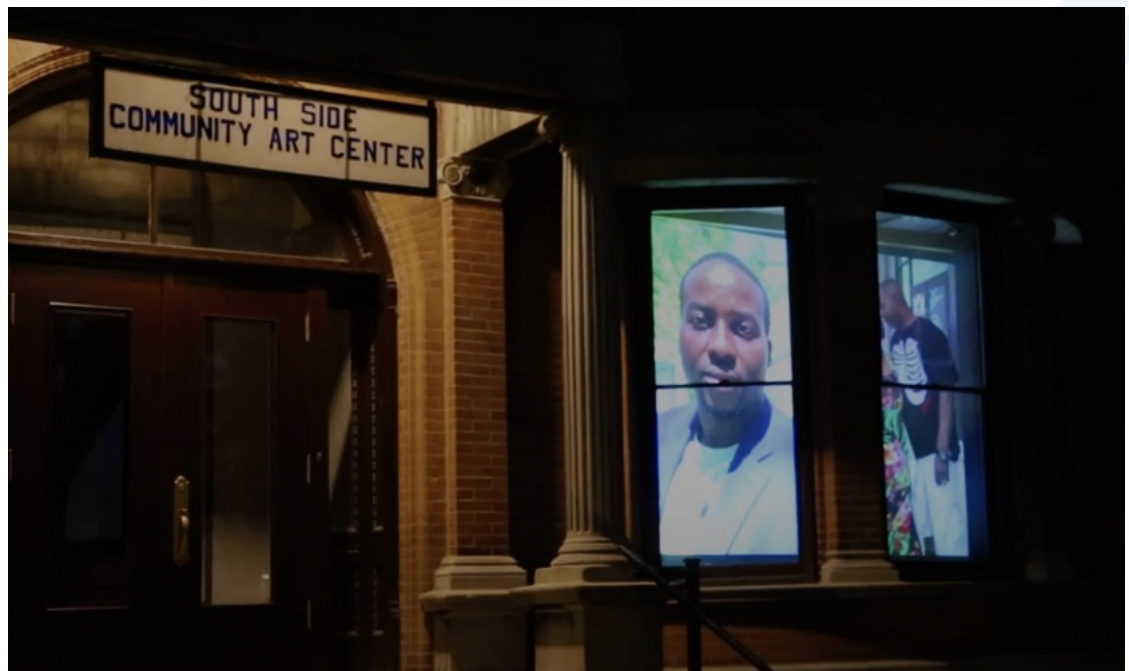
Special Thanks
The Chosen Few DJs
The Silverroom Block Party
Own Our Own Image
The Bronzeville Winery
The Sandbox Symphony
The Bronzeville Historical
Society

Address
3831 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60653

Dates
September 2021-
March 2023

Documentary Video
<https://bitly.cx/vupCb>

PACE CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVE PROJECT SPOTLIGHT



Cecil McDonald, *Metropolis: A City in Black*

Overview

For several months over the winter of 2022-2023, a video collage of images of Bronzeville residents through the ages were projected onto the windows of the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC), which is the oldest African American art center in the United States and is one of the only remaining community arts centers funded by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930's. Lauded multidisciplinary artist Cecil McDonald, Jr. created the piece by combining images from SSCAC's extensive archive, abstract city imagery, and portraits he collected throughout six months of 2021 at events and casually on the streets around Bronzeville, a historically Black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. This socially-engaged collage expands beyond the traditional public art practices of sculpture and mural-making to create a site-specific immersive experience, sharing SSCAC's history with its neighbors.

Selecting an Artist

Cecil McDonald, Jr.'s application and practice perfectly balanced this interest in artistic innovation and risk-taking with community engagement. The selection team was excited from the beginning about an artist who would expand beyond the typical projects they have decades of experience with: socially-engaged

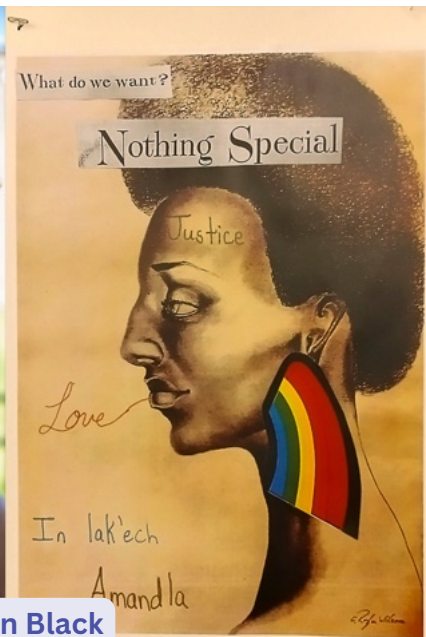


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murals. The team released the application and conducted workshops for artists considering applying in the spring of 2021. They received nine applications from artists working across a variety of media, and selected Cecil McDonald Jr. through a jury process. Jurors were excited by McDonald's experimental and multimedia approach. He is both a mature contemporary studio artist with an extensive list of shows and works in permanent museum collections, while also a public artist who regularly incorporates participants, public media, and students in his innovative practice. McDonald also has extensive experience as a teaching artist; working with youth and other community members was at the forefront of his proposal. He was excited to create his first piece of commissioned public art, and the jurors were excited by the idea of a project being a departure from the norm of public art. The team acknowledged that as this would be a new process for McDonald, he would need to acquire some skills - so Dorian Sylvain planned to act as a consultant and collaborator to help him brainstorm, think about media, connect him with other craftspeople, and more.



Still from Metropolis: A City in Black



Goals

The SSCAC team sought to accomplish many overlapping goals with this initial project, and their participation in the Public Art and Civic Engagement Initiative (PACE) program overall. SSCAC is a contemporary art gallery with deep roots in community arts. Accordingly, the team wanted to balance an interest in giving artists space to explore aesthetics and perhaps push the boundaries of public art beyond mural-making

and sculpture with creating opportunities to invite community members to engage with the Center. The team felt this could be an opportunity to communicate and share the rich history of SSCAC (as collected through their extensive archives) – while also creating an innovative piece of public art that allowed an artist room to engage in conceptual dialogue. The team knew that threading the needle of finding an artist who wanted to use their work to connect with community, deepen relationships with new and existing community members, highlight the unique history of SSCAC, and push boundaries may be a challenge - luckily, Chicago's extensive artistic community and ecosystem was excited to receive the call.



"My art asserts the full humanity and rich culture of Black Americans."

Cecil McDonald, Jr.

Devising the piece

Moving from conception to reality is always complex for public art - artists must find and secure rights to a location, plan for community involvement while adhering to aesthetic considerations, produce projects with weather and other unknowns in mind, and more. This piece had the added layers of complexity given the interest in developing a new media type and figuring out how to incorporate SSCAC history. Months of scouting locations, research, and discussion among Cecil and the project team was required. Monthly discussions with the Mural Arts Institute's artistic consultants and project managers also helped reassure the team that a mural was not required - paint was not necessary!

McDonald developed the work around the idea of collage, community, digital media, and imagery over time. He knew he wanted the piece to have a spatial element, and have a footprint. Initially he was thinking that the piece would be an LED booth, but cost estimates for that ranged \$80,000 - 90,000, while the budget for this piece was \$15,000.

McDonald wanted to ensure that the piece was locally grounded by using images of community. He brainstormed and dialogued with the team, exploring several ways to incorporate photographic community and get their input—maybe have them bring photos, images of their community, or of the neighborhood over the decades, that he could collage and incorporate. McDonald's expectations for community involvement may have initially been a little different than MAI's vision. While he does incorporate community partnerships in his work, he was used to working in a more individual way. The team worked to structure something so that McDonald could maintain his artistic vision but also include a way for community members to meaningfully contribute.

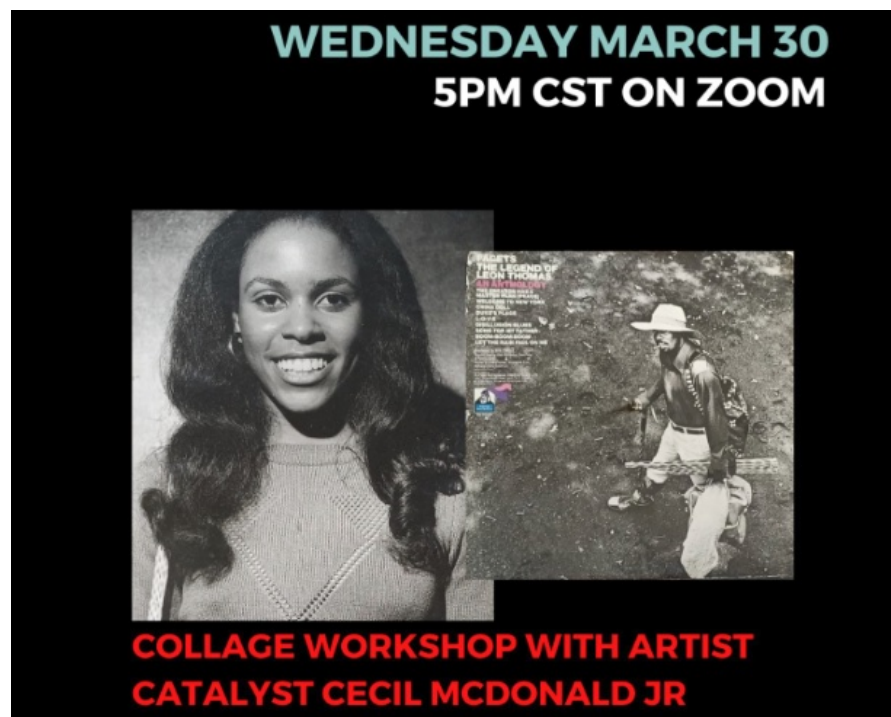


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In October, 2021, McDonald and Sylvain met with Monique Brinkman-Hill, the ED of SSCAC, who suggested that SSCAC itself be used as the site. The team was excited by this idea, and McDonald was especially enthusiastic given the extensive photography archives. Once the site was established, it was easier to determine what community the team would focus on engaging: SSCAC community members themselves, both new and returning. This was exciting to SSCAC staff as well, given the identified internal organizational need to invite more people in on a regular basis after the pandemic. By November, it was clear that the goal would be to build community around SSCAC. The team hired Tianna Bracey to project manage and liaise with SSCAC, who at the time had been working with Dorian as her Studio Manager, because SSCAC was short-staffed.

Making Art

McDonald worked from January through September of 2022 to gather material, edit, and install the final piece. From January to March, he was focused on the archival aspects of his project. From April to September the main focus was capturing portraits of community members to be included in the digital collage. McDonald and Sylvain hosted a hybrid in-person/ virtual collage workshop for eight participants on March 30th. Participants were asked to sign up in advance, and the artist team created packets for each person that were picked up at the Center, which included a curated selection of images from the Center's archives, scissors, glue, and colored paper.



Social media poster publicizing the collage workshop



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Still from Metropolis: A City in Black



During the session itself, participants were introduced to the project by McDonald and Cathy Harris from Mural Arts; Dorian led the collage in collaboration with McDonald; their dialogue was a highlight of the workshop. A survey after the workshop indicated that everyone was interested in learning more about SSCAC archives, and participating in more workshops led by SSCAC. Many were new to SSCAC, others had connected in the past.

The rest of McDonald's material came from his own exploration and use of the SSCAC archives, along with photographs of community members that were taken at six events - Father's Day and Juneteenth celebrations at SSCAC, a church event next door, an artist book signing, a local grocery store and the opening of a winery new to the neighborhood. - Those having their image taken signed a release form and had the option to opt into receiving updates about Cecil's project via the Center's newsletter, which furthered the community-building.

The final piece debuted on September 16, in coordination with the [Bronzeville Art District Trolley Tour](#). It is installed in the historic bay windows of SSCAC, making it viewable from the street as well as inside SSCAC. Three videos are projected from inside the space itself, made of portraits, candids, and collages that McDonald made from the archive.



Reflecting on the project’s goals and impacts

As part of the PACE initiative, the team had set various overlapping goals for artists, community, and organization. The project supported artistic goals in myriad ways. The project helped to expand definitions of public art; projecting from inside a building to the exterior of a public space is a new, innovative form of public artwork (way beyond the typical forms of murals and sculptures). The new form itself - a challenge to create from scratch, building artistic confidence - evolved from McDonald’s goals of wanting to embody the experience of walking - when you catch a glance of someone’s face in passing and then want to connect with them more. For McDonald, the project was also his most collaborative to date, and at the end reflected that he’d like to keep working in this more collaborative way.

For accomplishing community goals, McDonald wove in a way for community members to be directly involved in the art-making process. Artwork created during the collage workshop - which was itself drawn from archival source material from SSCAC, thanks to the mailing of packets to each registered participant - was incorporated into McDonald’s project. Of course, the entire project - comprised of images of community members around SSCAC past and present - was also a beautiful way to help connect more people to SSCAC and see themselves reflected in the ongoing artistic history and future of the neighborhood.

Incorporating community in this way also helped to expand and deepen relationships with community members and SSCAC. The project also helped SSCAC push its boundaries in many ways. Activating the exterior space was new and is now something that SSCAC wants to continue doing as a way of being more visible and welcoming to the public. In particular, the piece incorporated the particularities of a Chicago vernacular architecture - the three-pane bay window - including the wood between the glass panes. This also provided the center an

opportunity to enliven the neighborhood in the depths of a cold Chicago winter - projection requires darkness, so this form was something tailor-made to early sunsets. Lastly, this project allowed SSCAC to build new and in-depth relationships with community-engaged artists through daylighting its archive, and adding present life to it.

Overall PACE Goals

Change in People

1. Build collective power of BIPOC communities
2. Generate & equitably redistribute communally held resources

Change in Places

3. Reflect community cultural identities
4. Strengthen community-based cultural organizing

Change in Practice

5. Support and break down barriers for artists of color
6. Increase accountability of organizations to BIPOC residents



“This was about inscribing our names in history. We are not just ourselves; we have our history and influences. Now we are part of the living archive too.”

Cecil McDonald, Jr.

Reflecting on learnings

The PACE initiative was all about learning - projects are intentionally new for the organizations commissioning the work, and the public, community-engaged art-making is often new to the artists and others on the project. Given the unique, path-breaking qualities of McDonald’s project in particular, all stakeholders learned many valuable things that will help evolve their own and others’ practices. Project leaders at SSCAC shared reflections in the sessions with PACE partners that they then directly incorporated into the Catalyst 2 project. The juried selection

process worked very well - divergences surfaced productive dialogue, and the group was able to come to consensus, and it was replicated for the second process. In the first process, the jury noted that it was difficult to make a decision when the application hadn’t asked for the artists’ vision for the future piece. For the second, they asked the artist to present their vision for the project. They also expanded their search more intensively beyond the



Still from Metropolis: A City in Black



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neighborhood, increased publicity, and made it even more clear that a mural was not required as the format of the final project. The Center has limited staff capacity, making it difficult to host events on site and manage web/email newsletter updates for projects outside their core work. McDonald's project created momentum for engaging the public and its local community. McDonald and Sylvain in particular shared how wonderful the bridges built between Philly and Chicago artists had been – and how much more room for growth there is around that relationship.

About the Artist

Cecil McDonald, Jr. is interested in the intersections of masculinity, familial relationships and the artistic and intellectual pursuits of Black culture—particularly as it intersects and informs the larger culture. He investigates and questions the customs that govern our understanding of each other, our families and the myriad of our shared societal struggles and triumphs. He works to reveal the ordinary experiences, complexities and tenderness in relationships between Black people through photography, video, dance and performance.

<https://www.cecilmcdonaldjr.com/>

About the Public Art and Civic Engagement (PACE) Capacity Building Initiative

The PACE Initiative aimed to develop sustainable infrastructure to support the growth of socially-engaged public art in communities around the United States through a cohort learning environment which included mentoring, shared learning



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experiences and resources, and funding for capacity and two Artist Catalyst Projects. After a competitive selection process, the three host institutions selected to participate in the cohort were the [APANO Communities United Fund](#) in Portland, Oregon; [Louisville Visual Art](#) in Kentucky; and the [South Side Community Art Center](#) in Chicago, Illinois. During the 30-month initiative, each organization worked with artists and community to create two works of public art in a civically engaged manner, including sending the artists for an immersion incubator program to Philadelphia. Additional goals of the PACE initiative were to strengthen a national network of socially engaged public art practitioners, and produce and disseminate research, case studies and useful advice to a national audience. The Mural Arts Institute hired [Congruence Cultural Strategies](#) to lead the research and evaluation work for the PACE Initiative.

About the Mural Arts Institute

The Mural Arts Institute (MAI) was established in 2017 as an initiative of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the nation's largest public art program dedicated to the belief that art ignites change. As part of Mural Arts Philadelphia, the Mural Arts Institute is dedicated to sharing knowledge, ideas, and experiences that have shaped our approach to community-centered artmaking. At its core, MAI seeks to build connections, sustain relationships, and share skills about the practices that have been instrumental in creating works of public art with Philadelphians. We work with artists, arts administrators, and community leaders across the world to align knowledge, amplify voices, empower change, and distribute resources that move us all toward a more inclusive and equitable future of socially engaged public art. www.muralarts.org/institute

About the South Side Community Arts Center

Founded in 1940, SSCAC is the oldest African American art center in the United States and is a Chicago Historic Landmark. While taking pride in our rich past, we today build on our legacy and innovatively serve as an artist- and community-centered resource with programs, exhibitions and events that inspire. SSCAC showcases established artists and nurtures emerging creators. Through educational and artistic programs, exhibitions, talks, tours, and more, the center strives to engage, educate and connect community members to African American art and artists. <https://www.sscartcenter.org/>