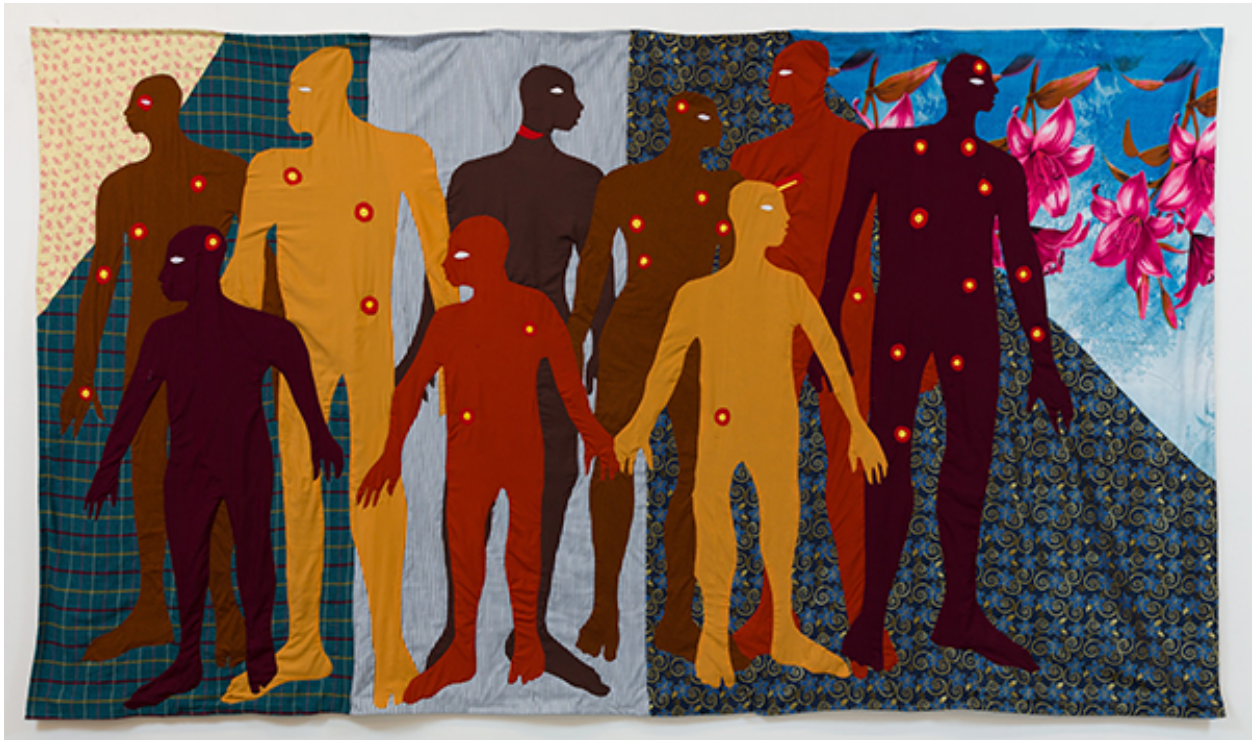


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National Gallery of Art Acquires Textile Work By Christopher Myers Memorializing Victims of Police Murder

By Victoria L. Valentine – April 27, 2021



CHRISTOPHER MYERS, "What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)," 2019 (cotton appliqué on furnishing and specialty fabrics, 243.84 x 426.72 cm / 96 x 168 inches). | © Christopher Myers, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Purchased as the Gift of Glenstone Foundation, 2021.1.1. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort

A GATHERING OF NINE silhouetted figures in a medley of autumn tones against a backdrop of patterned fabrics forms a compelling composition. It's a striking assembly with a sobering message. "What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)" (2019) by Christopher Myers memorializes the lives of Black people killed by police (and in police custody).

The murder, tragedy, and injustice that consumes cable news and social media, and touches too many Black families and communities, is making its way into major art museums. The contemporary movement shining a light on police

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murder, addressing police misconduct and accountability, and giving a voice to the clarion call that Black Lives Matter is increasingly explored through exhibitions, programming, and acquisitions.

“What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)” was acquired by the National Gallery of Art in January. The Washington, D.C., museum announced the addition to its permanent collection on April 26. The mural-style textile is the first work by Myers represented in the National Gallery collection.

Created a year prior to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Myers renders his subjects in an array of ochre, burnt sienna, russet, mocha brown, and bordeaux. The otherworldly figures share a common constellation of randomly strewn wound sites. Replicating forensic autopsy diagrams, yellow and red mini targets indicate bullet wounds. One at the back of the head in one instance. Eleven in another, mapped from the head to the torso and thighs of yet another Black body extinguished at the hands of police.

About the work, Myers has said: “The image of the autopsy sheet marked by a coroner has become central to the imagery and conversations of Black Lives Matter. Here I combine several of the wounds from some of the more high-profile cases... I wonder what can be done to tell our young people that they matter, before they are inscribed in a coroner’s report. Included in the piece are the autopsies of Laquan McDonald, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown Jr., Antwon Rose Jr., Miriam Carey, Emantic Fitzgerald Bradford Jr., Ezell Ford, and Jordan Edwards.

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All of the victims the artist depicts in the appliquéd work are men, except for one figure representing Bland, 28. In 2015, she was found hanged to death in police custody, in a Waller County jail cell, in Hempstead, Texas. Myers indicates her fatal wound with a single red slash at the side of the neck.

BASED IN BROOKLYN, N.Y., Myers works in a variety of formats with a keen interest in cultural exchanges across geographies and disciplines. He’s a writer, children’s book illustrator, and visual artist who has collaborated with puppet makers in Jogjakarta, Indonesia; engaged with silversmiths in Khartoum, Sudan; and worked with young musicians in New Orleans, woodcarvers in Accra, Ghana, and conceptual video artists in Vietnam.

Craftspeople from Luxor inspired recent work, too. Using 70-year-old Egyptian sails, Myers has been collaborating with them on figurative quilts. He has also teamed up with New York artists. He co-directed a short film about Kenyan creatives and entrepreneurs with Hank Willis Thomas. Earlier this year, Myers worked with Kaneza Schaalon “Cartography,” a youth theater performance about immigration

Before it was acquired by the National Gallery, “What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)” was presented in “Christopher Myers: Drapetomania” (Dec. 14, 2019- Feb. 8, 2020) at Fort Gansevoort, the first exhibition the gallery presented in its Los Angeles space. Exploring themes of freedom and bondage, the exhibition title references an unfamiliar term.

Described by the gallery, Drapetomania is “a debunked pseudoscientific theory of mental illness promulgated by American physician Samuel Cartwright in 1851, describing a form of mania—an irrational desire to flee—that caused enslaved Africans to attempt escape.”

“What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)” was on display in the front window, a monumental, 14-foot-long, street-facing memorial. CT

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Installation view of CHRISTOPHER MYERS, "What Does It Mean to Matter (Community Autopsy)," 2019, Fort Gansevoort, Los Angeles. | Courtesy Fort Gansevoort

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