

Faheem
Majeed

UNITE

FREE DUSABLE, 2016, Billboard located at 207 N. Kedzie Street, Chicago, as part of *In the beginning, sometimes I left messages in the street*, curated by Allison Glenn. Photography: RCH | EKH Photography.

FREE
DISABTE

OUTFRONT

[REDACTED]

OUTFRONT



MATERIAL PROPOSITIONS

by Lee Ann Norman

A single institution doesn't establish a canon, unless that institution is the papacy. Canons get established—and broken down—by consensus, by people debating what's important. I prefer to think of what we do as making propositions¹.

When Robert Rauschenberg began creating the hybrid paintings he called Combines in 1954, prevailing art criticism emphasized strong distinctions between mediums. Black Mountain, the experimental art college he attended that inspired their making, encouraged students to collaborate and work collectively. Eventually, Rauschenberg and his future wife artist Susan Weil gained a reputation at the college for scavenging scrap materials during garbage duty.

Soon they began using this detritus in their art work, and this kind of material re-use would figure prominently in the Combines; they often featured various three dimensional objects including clothing and fabric, newspaper clippings, ephemera and debris that were then embedded in the canvas. Through material mixing, Rauschenberg highlighted the often-fraught boundaries between high and low culture, art and the everyday².

The Combines were received skeptically at first, but in the last few decades, their value has blossomed. Changes to cultural tastes, mores, and social perception are subjective.

For more than 15 years, Faheem Majeed has focused on exploring those ebbs and flows through a practice that spans installation, performance, and administration, yet remains rooted firmly in sculpture. For "Unite," Majeed investigates how artists, objects, and cultural workers can hold differing notions of value to facilitate the creation of more equitable institutional structures in the arts.

Majeed is interested in the significance of objects and materials, social movements, cultural institutions and marginalized communities. Using the hyper-local context of his South Shore neighborhood in Chicago for much of his work and practice, Majeed asks

Untitled (cabinets), 2014, wood, glass, steel, and acrylic on plaster, three parts, each: 36" x 12" x 37"



Robert Rauschenberg, *Canyon*, 1959, Combine: oil, pencil, paper, fabric, metal, cardboard box, printed paper, printed reproductions, photograph, wood, paint tube, and mirror on canvas with oil on bald eagle, string, and pillow, 81 3/4" x 70" x 24" (207.6 x 177.8 x 61 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York Gift of the family of Ileana Sonnabend, © The Estate of Robert Rauschenberg



My Black Box, 2017, Wood and assorted Kool-Aid flavors, 12" x 12" x 0.5"

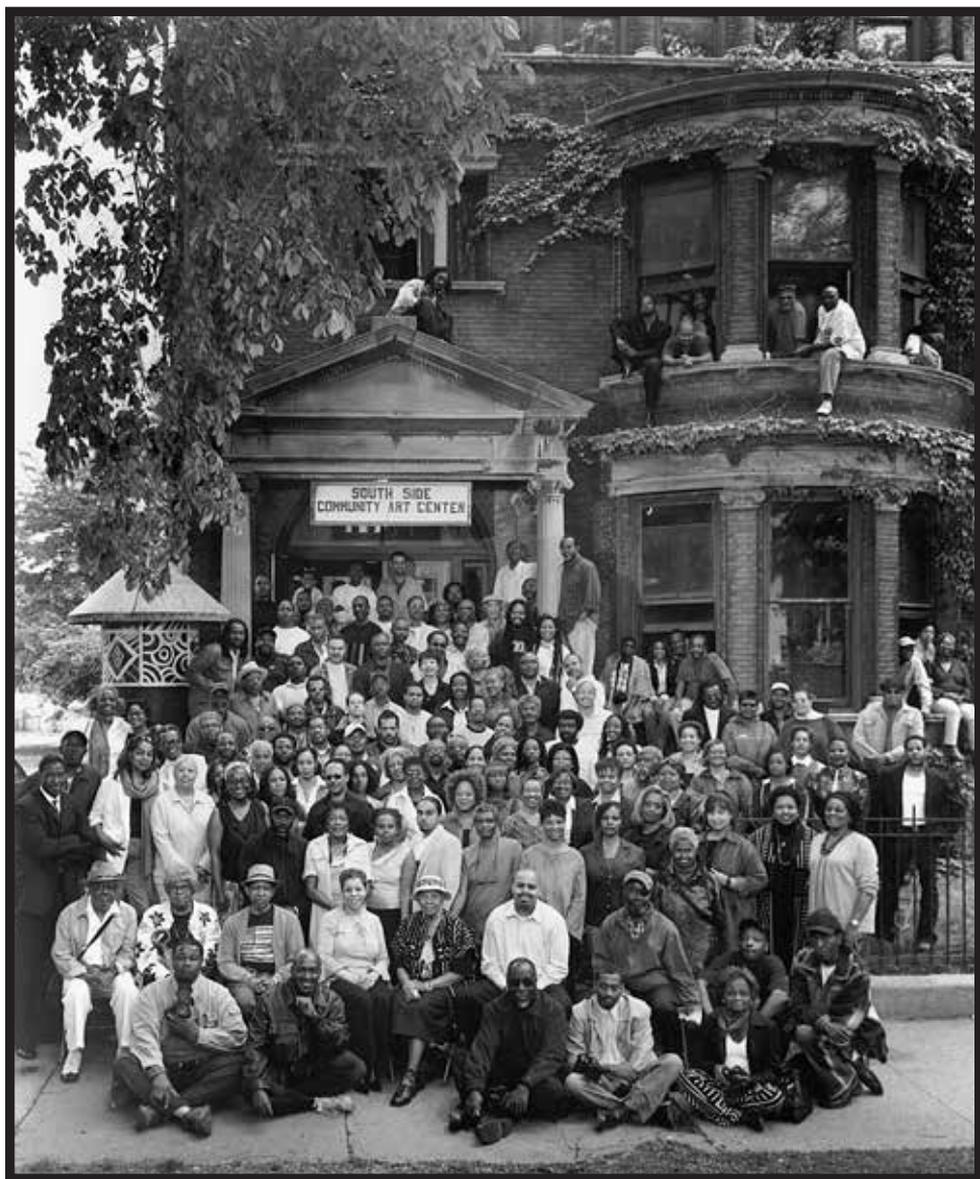




questions about our roles and responsibility as members of communities, systemic racism, and how those roles or responsibilities shift when we are engaged by institutions rather than each other. After moving to Chicago in 2003, Majeed quickly connected to the *South Side Community Art Center* (SSCAC), a black art museum developed as part of the New Deal Federal Art Project. It was created to make arts and culture available to and provide jobs for, artists and other cultural workers of color⁵, and quickly transformed into a community hub. Eager to interact with the artists he had only read about as an undergraduate student at Howard University and connect to a community of local artists, Majeed deepened his engagement with the center, going on to serve as its executive director and curator from 2005-11. In his new role, Majeed began to think about how the exhibitions he was curating could connect the historical legacy of SSCAC artists to younger contemporary artists and diverse audiences across the city. His first attempt at this endeavor was the exhibition “Reconnect,” but as the challenges of creating intergenerational linkages among the artists revealed themselves—Majeed learned how many emerging artists didn’t always experience the same warm reception he had at SSCAC—he began to wonder if culturally specific spaces could create platforms that did more than simply replicating the gatekeeping practices of mainstream institutions. In 2009, Majeed curated an exhibition that cleverly visualized the Southside Community Art Center’s demise. Ten artists—including Majeed—with significant experiences with the center took a loving, yet critical look at the way the institution has subverted and replicated mainstream structures to its benefit and detriment. “The Demise of the Southside Community Art Center” was a timely companion to exhibitions Majeed had previously organized that used the building’s physical plant and social history to ask fundamental questions about the institution’s legacy and future at an important moment, solidifying Majeed’s interest in relationships between individuals, institutions, and subjective ideas of cultural value.

Majeed first began exploring these ideas as a young sculpture student creating

A Great Day in Bronzeville, 2005.
Courtesy of Gallery Romain





elongated, waif-like figures that echo Alberto Giacometti's iconic works such as *Three Men Walking* (1948-49) and *Walking Man I* and *II* (both 1960). Rather than using purchased bronze or steel, Majeed used found and repurposed metal, quickly learning how to identify materials that might otherwise be overlooked: railroad ties, pipes from demolished buildings, or steel scraps tossed in an alley. Trained by master sculptor William "Bill" Taylor, Majeed was encouraged to focus on perfecting the techniques used to create the classical freestanding statues and reliefs of ancient Greece and Rome rather than adding more detailed and painterly elements in the work. As his practice evolved, he began to investigate ways to incorporate more abstraction into the forms—the use of color, for example—and these investigations continued during MFA studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC).

Majeed's previous explorations with abstraction, minimalism, and the use of readymades in his work were tentative in the beginning, but he soon began to expand this knowledge through juxtaposition (e.g. Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, or Robert Rauschenberg in conversation with William Walker). These contrasting pairings allowed him to reconcile an intense focus on the under recognized artists he learned from and about at Howard with the mainstream artists he was learning about and were emphasized at UIC. He also acquired a newfound confidence in his experiments with ideas and materials to ask questions about what is deemed high or low in contemporary art.

In *Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden* (2012–ongoing), Majeed uses a set of cedar wood panels in different configurations, from wall paneling to flooring and furniture, to mimic the 1930s Bauhaus paneling that decorates the interior of the *South Side Community Art Center*. The installation and activities that take place within the *Garden* create a dialogue between the formalism of Bauhaus that emphasizes pragmatism (e.g. no extraneous decoration, mass production) and the casual, informal engagement of the people and their use of the space. *Shacks and Shanties* (2012–

The Addict, 2006, Steel, 28" x 24" x 24"



Advertisement for Demise of the South Side Community Art Center Exhibition, 2009.



Piano Push , 2009, Video (color, sound) 10 minutes, 19 seconds





ngoing) works similarly by providing temporary structures on vacant lots in Chicago that are activated by those who encounter them. While the materials used to erect the structures are ephemeral, Majeed hopes the relationships born from interaction in and around them will be lasting.

After graduate school as Majeed continued to traverse the arts ecosystem as artist, curator, administrator, professor, and art enthusiast, ideas related to power and access became even more prominent in his work. During a studio visit with Hamza Walker (who was then the Director of Education and Curator at the Renaissance Society), Majeed realized that curating could be part of his artistic practice. After several years of organizing an ambitious program of monthly exhibitions, he began to approach exhibition making from the perspective of artists, and thinking about what resources and opportunities they need to thrive or how a show at SSCAC might facilitate their artistic growth. Exhibitions at the center grew more and more specific to the building, its history, and place in Chicago's arts community, and Majeed began to understand that his artist-centered approach to exhibition making could bolster the institutional equity he so often sought to create.

In 2016, Majeed was invited by Wormfarm Institute⁴ to create a site-specific intervention for their annual fermentation festival. *Field of Our Fathers* (2016) used a 30-foot-by-30-foot muslin cloth as a canvas for a charcoal drawing that would capture the fraught histories embedded in the crops that grew in the central Wisconsin fields. As the lightweight, gauzy cloth was carried in the breeze, the visual representations of struggle fixed in the material transformed into stories of triumph and resilience. With *Field of Our Fathers*, Majeed continues to explore the ways people without access to social power and resources might benefit from his own access to such institutional systems. About the project, Majeed writes:

After spending some time with the farmers and landowners, listening to them talk about their families' land, I was struck by the history and invisible boundaries

*Shacks and Shanties (South Shore Shanty), 2013,
Found wood & glass, mix media, Dimensions vary*



*Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden,
2012, Stained Cedar, Found Objects, Dimensions vary*

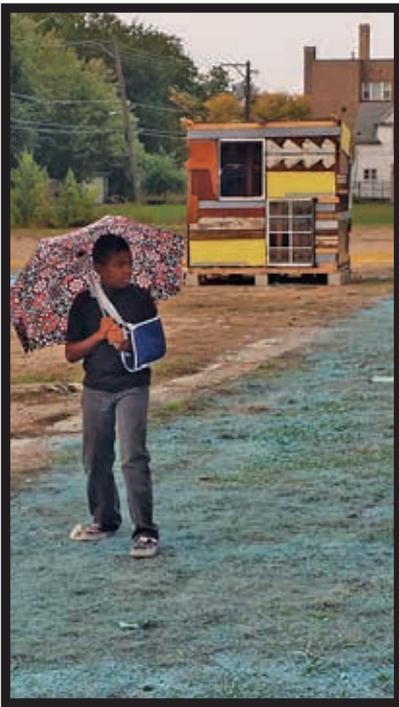


this land carried, about the dimensions of history embedded in the dirt, and extended out into this space that blurred convoluted red tape and land laws with memory, with family history⁵.

The works in “*Unite*” present a different arrangement of Majeed’s ideas around value, structural systems, and equity. While the objects are still sculptural, they are now in a direct conversation with painting, in much the same way as Rauschenberg’s Combines and similar hybrid works defy views of what objects might be deemed art and what materials might be used to

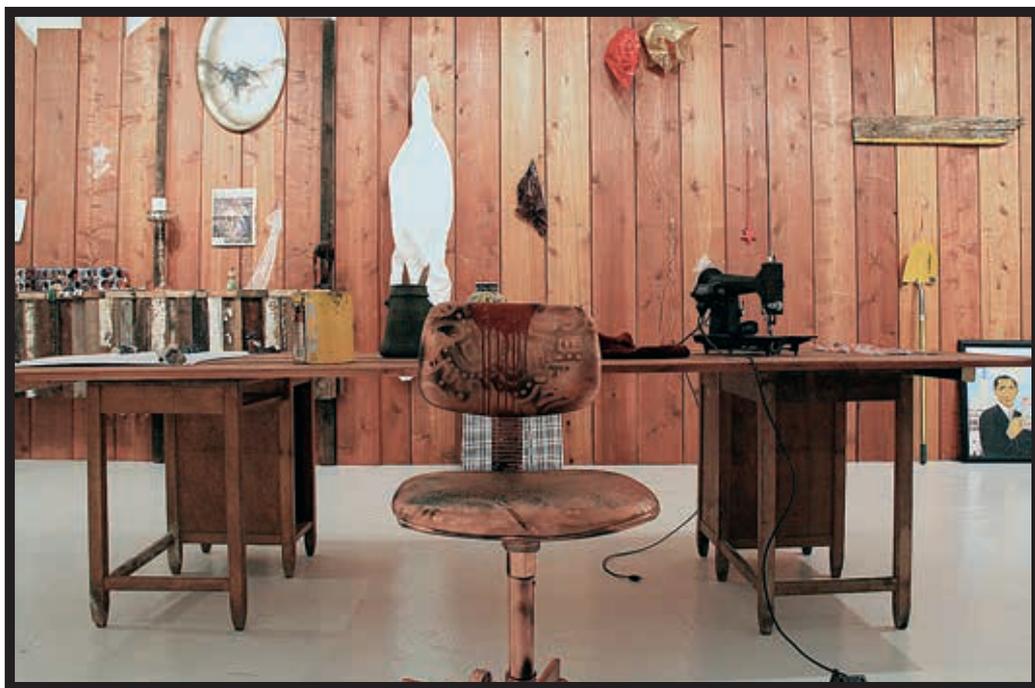
When the housing market crashed from 2007-09, Chicago’s predominantly black South Shore and Austin neighborhoods were hardest hit. Aggressive marketing of subprime mortgages and disinvestment by manufacturing and service companies contributed to high foreclosure rates in South Shore; the resulting instability has only been exacerbated by an increase in violent crime.

Many blocks remain peppered with boarded up or abandoned houses, creating a washed out landscape of faded browns and greys, colors that have previously dominated Majeed’s work. Most people view boarded up buildings as quintessential signs of blight at first, but Majeed wishes to challenge such perceptions. Board ups preserve the value of what remains inside the building, creating a barrier between the structure’s interior and the outside elements, both natural and manmade. A series of four-foot-by-eight-foot mixed-media billboards underscores this view. On the forward-facing side, Majeed, much like Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and other Color Field painters of the 1940s through 60s⁶, seeks to find the all-encompassing, expressive qualities of a singular color—in this case black—to create these particleboard paintings. Like the board ups protecting houses and the advertisements house flippers post along sidewalks offering to purchase them, these works are placed on custom-built armatures and installed slightly above or below eye-level, re-situating them as functional objects within the gallery.



Shacks and Shanties (South Shore Shanty), 2013, Found wood & glass, mix media, Dimensions vary

Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden, 2013, Cedar, Found Objects, Dimensions vary



Viewing Majeed's black billboards is complicated because they are really two paintings in one: Etched on the verso is the word "Unite." But these reverse images are only visible if viewers get uncomfortably close to the work, contorting their bodies and squeezing into the small space between the gallery wall and the particleboard canvas. Paintings are typically viewed from a reasonable distance in museums and galleries, and institutions often use barriers like stanchions to enforce this distance. Inviting a viewer to break well-worn rules creates an ambivalent comment on power, access, and the intimate social relationships inherent in cultural space.

Founded by Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams in 1968, AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) sought to create its own canon, not only to serve as a corrective to mainstream art history's focus on Western European art, but also to support a philosophy grounded in black liberation struggles. Influenced by the multi-disciplinary Chicago collective OBAC (pronounced "Oh-Bah-Si," Organization of Black American Culture), AfriCOBRA similarly sought to create pro-Black and culturally-specific art that could be experienced by as many people as possible. To that end, they relied on the language of the street that emphasized bright colors that reflected popular fashions of the time and simple text or symbols that could be remembered or understood easily and quickly, among other principles⁷. Many of their early works, such as Barbara Jones-Hogu's *Unite* (1971), which Majeed references, were also mass-produced as screen prints to ensure their broad distribution. In a series of smaller works consisting of layers of deconstructed and dip-dyed two-by-fours, Majeed picks up AfriCOBRA's experiments with colorful and mass-produced art work. Here, colors named after flavors of the popular powdered drink mix Kool-Aid—Blue Raspberry, Lemon Lime/Green Apple, Cherry, Orange, and Grape—visualize social relationships.

The choice of "material" Majeed uses has remained consistent—scrap metals, ephemera, and other things that at first glance appear as garbage alongside

Pictured, site source for Faheem Majeed's studio work, 2017.



UNITED, 2014, Found wood and oil paint, 36" x 84" x 1/2"

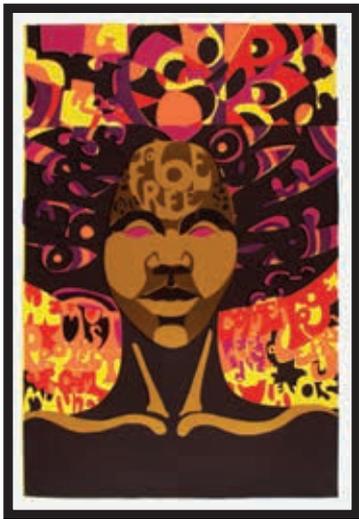


Installation view of *Fields of Our Fathers, Fermentation Fest*, 2016, Reedsburg, Wisconsin, 2016, 30' x 30', Charcoal on Muslim





Barbara Jones-Hugo, *To Be Free (TCB)*, 1972,
Silk Screen, 26 1/4" x 37"



the underutilized institutions and under recognized people who might engage with them. Its value is subjective, and when transformed into art objects serves as a quiet protest to market systems; a neutral landscape of rusty browns, beige, wheat, and patinaed grey-greens easily fades into the background, little noticed as we go about our day filled with looking. Visualizing such contrasts through exaggeration or theatricality, whether through color or material, can create a powerful bridge between high and low or subvert such distinctions all together. Like David Hammons who used the quotidian detritus of black urban life such as liquor bottles, barber shop hair clippings, or chicken bones in his work⁸ or Pope.L who uses the highly processed foods of the poor such as hot dogs, white bread, mayonnaise, or Jell-O to “dematerialize decomposition,”⁹ so too is Majeed seeking signifiers that can carry the gravity and tension of race and class and art.

The works in “Unite” serve as a reminder that all art results from relationships—between artists and institutions, curators and administrators, material, strangers and friends. There is a long tradition of artists of color asking questions about institutional structures: who gets invited to participate in the market, which art objects are circulated and canonized, and why. The Black Arts movement and AfriCOBRA emerged at a time when Abstract Expressionism was fading and Pop art and Minimalism were gaining critical interest. Although each movement’s philosophical approach was different, all continued a trajectory that still placed the greatest value on the material object—at its core, a formalist stance. AfriCOBRA artists were making work that similarly rebuked formalist notions, but instead were adding a focus on how notions of community and social practice might provide a way forward.

In work that is critical, though careful not to finger point or indict, Majeed accepts a complicit relationship with art world structures and systems. He recognizes that artists, cultural workers, curators, and administrators uphold institutional standards that continue to privilege some narratives, stories, people, art objects and artists over others, even when we think we are resisting.

Barbara Jones-Hugo, *To Be Free (Know the Past, Prepare for the Future)*, 1969-71, Silk Screen, 20" x 28"



Barbara Jones-Hugo, *Unite*, 1970, Silk Screen, 22 1/2" x 30"



Perhaps this dissonance is necessary for cultural institutions to become places that can make room for hidden histories and marginalized experiences. The slow, purposeful change that institutions do provide, however, can produce positive outcomes through productive risk and reward; Majeed has seen this firsthand.

Biographies

Faheem Majeed is a builder – literally and metaphorically. A resident of the South Shore neighborhood in Chicago, Majeed often looks to the material makeup of his neighborhood and surrounding areas as an entry point into larger questions around civic-mindedness, community activism and institutional racism. As part of his studio practice, the artist transforms materials such as particle board, scrap metal and wood, and discarded signs and billboard remnants, breathing new life into these often overlooked and devalued materials.

His broader engagement with the arts also involves arts administration, curation and community facilitation, all which feed into his larger practice.

Majeed was selected as the inaugural artist-in-residence for the University of Chicago's Arts in Public Life Initiative (2012) and has also been an artist-in-residence at MANA Contemporary Chicago (2014), and Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (2015). Majeed had a solo exhibition of his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 2015 and is currently working along with Jeremiah Hulsebos-Spotford, Andrew Schachman and Avery R. Young on the Floating Museum, which creates temporary, site-responsive museum spaces to activate sites of cultural potential throughout Chicago's neighborhoods.

www.faheemmajeed.com

Majeed Cares, 2014, Particleboard, Two parts, each: 84" x 1/2" x 36"



*Left to right:
Comments Suggestions Welcome, 2014,
Wood particleboard, 20" x 23" x 1/2"*

*BUY, MY NICGA, 2014, Wood Particleboard
27" x 24" x 1/2"*



Lee Ann Norman's research and writing focuses on relationships: between politics and aesthetics, art's perception and its cultural, social and market value. Her writing has appeared in *BOMB*, *Guernica*, *Artcritical.com*, *Hyperallergic*, the *Chicago Reader*, and *Newcity*, among others, and she has written about and interviewed national and international artists including Terisita Fernandez, Coco Fusco, Ralph Lemon, Jason Moran, Robin Rhode, and Mithu Sen. She earned the MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts in New York, and works between New York and Chicago.

Footnotes

1 Triple Canopy and Lemon, *On Value* (New York: Triple Canopy 2016), 59.

2 "Combine (1954–64)," *Robert Rauschenberg Foundation*, last modified November 21, 2016, <https://www.rauschenbergfoundation.org/art/series/combine>.

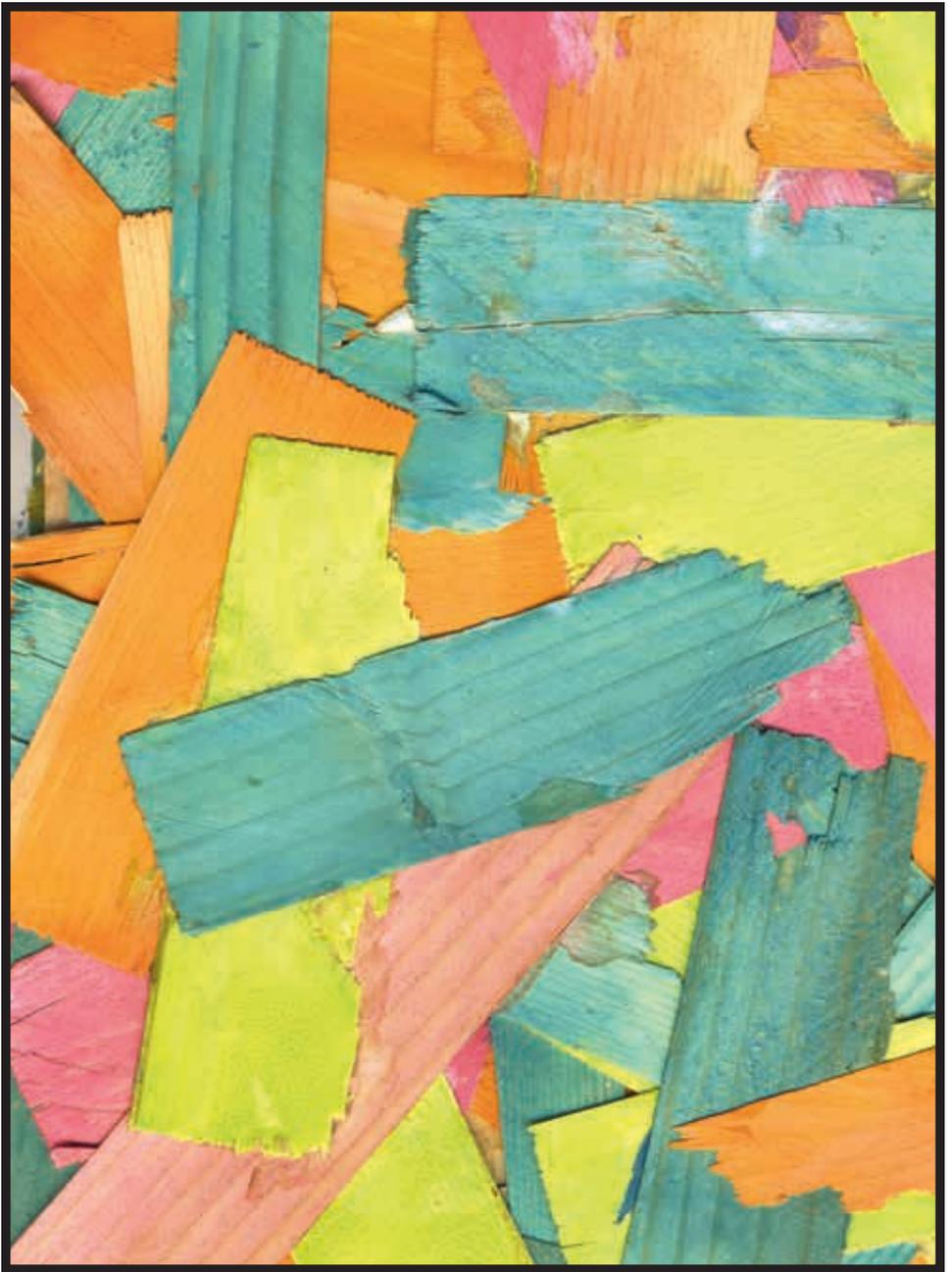
3 2017. *South Side Community Art Center*. Accessed November 25. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/73.html>.

4 Wormfarm is a nonprofit organization focused on building a sustainable future for agriculture and the arts by developing important linkages between people and the land. See <https://wormfarminstitute.org/> for further information.



Faheem Majeed in his South Shore (Chicago) studio, 2017.

Studio detail of work in progress



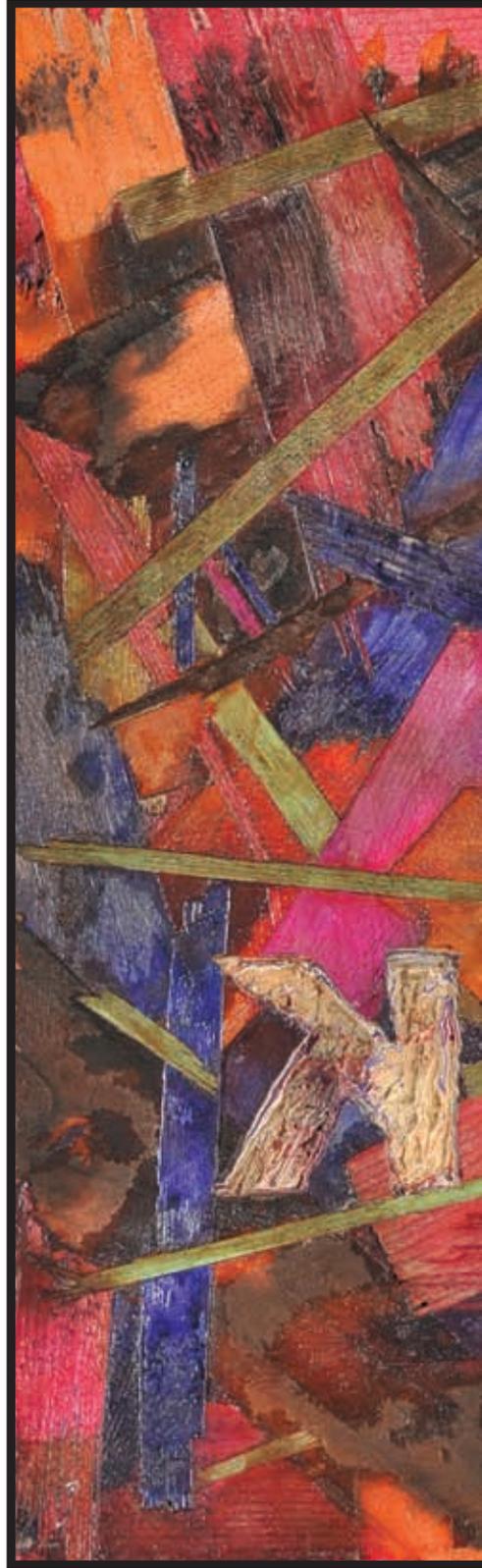
Pictured, site source for Faheem Majeed's studio work, 2017.

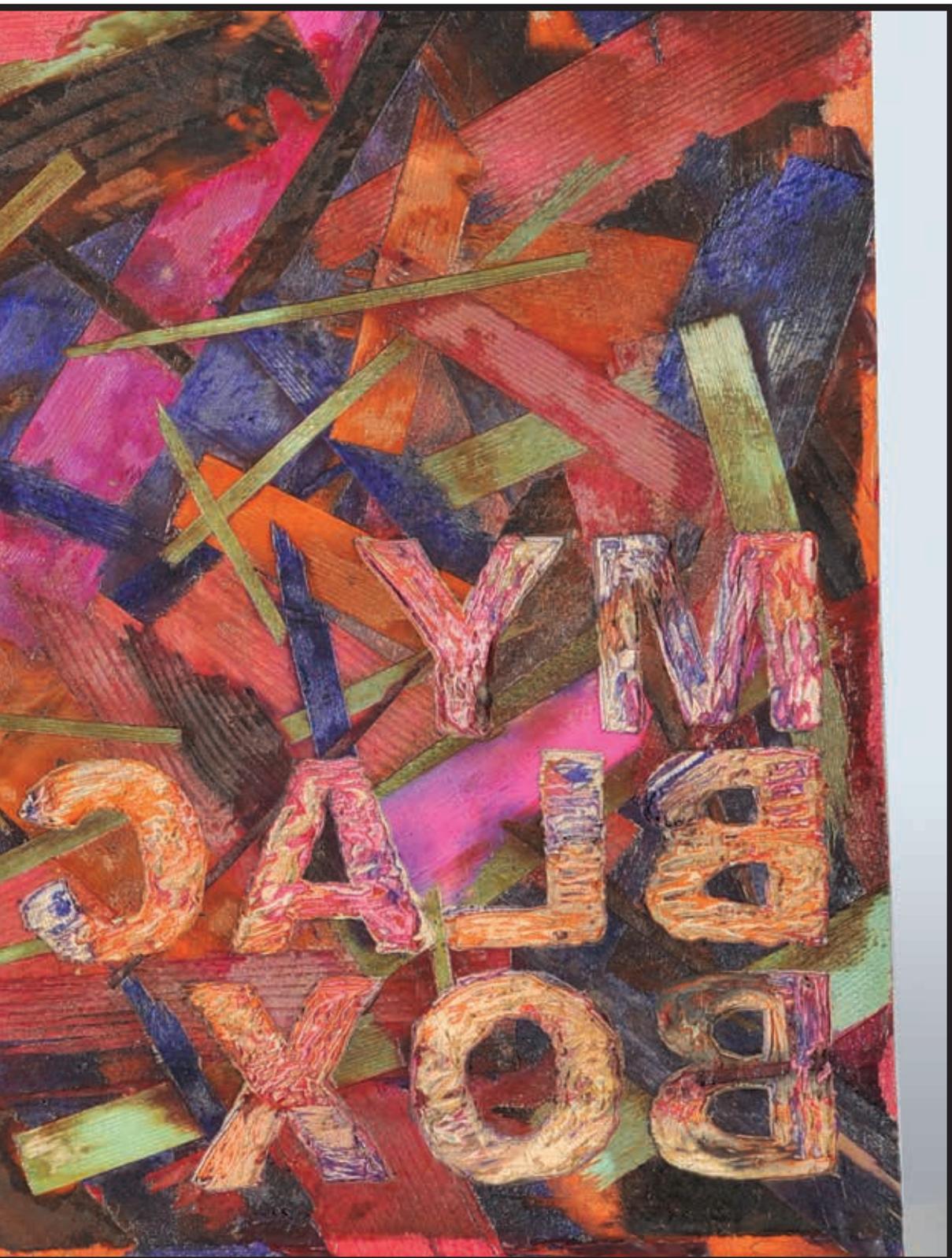




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My Black Box, 2017, Wood and assorted Kool-Aid flavors, 12" x 12" x 1/2"





5 2017. "Field of Our Fathers," *Faheem Majeed*. Accessed November 25.

6 See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/colour-field-painting> and https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/ad-reinhardt-abstract-painting-1963

7 Jeff R. Donaldson, "AfriCOBRA Manifesto? Ten in Search of a Nation," *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art*, 30: (May 2012), 81.

8 "David Hammons | MoMA." 2017. *The Museum of Modern Art*. Accessed November 25. <https://www.moma.org/artists/2486>.

9 Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge 2011), 135.

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CPS Mess (Studio Detail), 2017, Wood, Plastic, Kool-Aid, 12" x 16" x 2"





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