

Where Understanding Begins



Nathan Murray in his studio surrounded by his work.

I began the interview for this article with an apology to Nathan Murray, a man of mixed race, for any racial ignorance on my part. As a white woman, I felt both inadequate and self-conscious about trying to represent him and his work through my lens. By the end of our conversation, however, he had made me feel that I too had valuable insight. He observed that, "It would be challenging for me to speak from a white woman's perspective. We all need to acknowledge our unique perspectives and strive for a desire for understanding." This attitude of inclusiveness accounts for Murray's ability to make work that confronts social issues in a healthy and productive way.

Murray's most recent show, "Color Theory," explored different perspectives of racism and challenged the stereotype of what it means to be black. Drawing on conversations with friends and acquaintances, he portrayed individuals' reactions to current social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Using clothing, he challenged viewers to think about their own reactions. For example, *The Threat* was set up at the entrance of the gallery so that the audience could see only the back of the hoodie upon entering. Walking around the sculpture, one discovered the unexpected face of an innocent girl with downcast eyes. Across the room, however, the gaze of a police officer in *The Blue Wall* was fixed with suspicion on the hoodie.

I can't let you in the club with that hat bro, which uses clothing to the opposite effect, was inspired by an experience Murray had with a black friend who idealized what it meant to be a white American. He presented his patriotism and desire to belong through his choice of shirts and the non-threatening fedora hat that he wore. Nevertheless, he was turned away at the door of a club. The idea of clothing as costume is completed in *About the best we can do for ya* in which a teenager wears an elf hat in an attempt to embody something he's not.

As human beings we naturally categorize our world to make sense of it, yet every person is so complex that he or she could define a unique category. Like Murray himself, born to a white mother and a Jamaican father, the woman in *The Crossroads* appears to be questioning where she fits as someone of mixed race. Murray explains that society will never identify him as white, though he is just as much white Nebraskan as black Jamaican. To ignore that would be denying half of his ancestry. The woman in the sculpture has painted her face black, as if to say, "If I'm going to be black I have to look black."



Murray working in his studio.



Brown and Black, 38 in. (97 cm) in height, earthenware, underglaze, acrylic wash, 2016.

Murray's most recent work acknowledges all the facets that create a person's identity. He is interested in differences—all differences. "White people have unique histories too," he states. "To categorize people as white, black, or Hispanic is putting them in a box and not getting the full picture." In order to venture beyond skin color, Murray has begun to depict specific people, though he views the sculptures as an entry point to conversation rather than portraits. He does not claim to accurately represent the individuals, because they are filtered through him—his artistic voice represents his perceptions and interactions with people. Ultimately he looks at the works as collaborations and hopes that they present ideas in a personal way.

For the past seven years, Murray has worked at Region V Services, a Nebraska organization that provides support to individuals with developmental disabilities. During this time, he has mentored a man (in the interest of privacy I will call him Scott) who speaks in metaphors and does not censor his thoughts, as many would do in order to be socially correct. With these filters removed, he has taught Murray about how complex, flawed, and beautiful each of us are. Ethnically, he identifies himself as “one-fourth Native American, part Rocky Balboa (Italian), part Hitler’s daughter (German), and part *Polack* (derogatory for Polish).” Scott’s native background largely overshadows other aspects of his identity even though he acknowledges them. The dominant native imagery in his ceremonial headdress, along with his more modern attire, are used to make people question their preconceived ideas about what it is to be a Native American in contemporary society. Murray represents Scott’s epileptic seizures with a gold luster lightning bolt that extends up through the tips of the feathers in the headdress. In the sculpture, he wears a shirt that says *Rocky* and his face has an expression of deep concentration and inner strength and peace. Murray wants to celebrate Scott in a way that invites people to try to appreciate his unique perspective.



Figures/busts from the “Color Theory” exhibition. From left to right: *He’s cool but he doesn’t really act black*; *The Crossroads*; *The Blue Wall*; *I can’t let you in the club with that hat bro*; *How do I fit into this?*; *About the best we can do for ya*; *The Threat*. All pieces: various dimensions, earthenware, underglaze, gold luster, acrylic wash, oils, 2016.

In *Black and Brown* Murray also represents the many facets of the identity of an individual. He uses an individual’s likeness in facial structure and body type, layering the inner details of who she is over the exterior form. Her face is painted with classic *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) imagery and her corset is adorned with traditional colorful Mexican floral designs. Oaxaca, Mexico, her birthplace, celebrates the many indigenous cultures that live in the Oaxaca valley. Although I have attended the Guelaguetza, an annual indigenous festival centered on traditional dancing in pre-Hispanic-style costume, I have never seen, nor does the Mexican government recognize, the Black-Mexican minority. This suppressed part of his subject’s identity is referenced by Murray through the black and brown African Adinkra symbols that are only visible upon close inspection. The symbols on her sides above the standing relief figures represent harmony, and the symbol on her lower stomach represents freedom and emancipation. The symbol on her forehead represents strength, depicting her personality. Her pose and expression convey a strong sense of pride in her culture and confidence in her identity while speaking to the struggles of a Black-Mexican woman in Mexico.

Murray uses the human figure to evoke reactions and engage people in a non-confrontational way. Labeling his sculpture as racial or as black art would be to engage in exactly the kind of categorizing that he is working against. Through his work, he asks people to deconstruct categories in order to see things from other perspectives. His work celebrates the positive things that each culture contributes to our world

and encourages people to listen, learn, and appreciate rather than employ stereotypes and raise boundaries. Murray's approach to counteracting racism involves engagement and empathy. While he knows that no one is right or wrong, he finds the best place to start is through acknowledging differences. He welcomes questions and conversations, affirming that, "disagreement is ok. If you offend me, I'll tell you, but open dialog is critical. Ultimately we are all family in this together."

One reason stereotypes are so dangerous is that they create expectations. Murray describes how early-childhood experiences affected him. As a second grader, he was blamed for something that he did not do. As the only black student in the classroom he was assumed to be guilty. He was never expected to go to college, let alone earn a graduate degree. Society at large, some of his teachers, and occasionally even family members had low expectations. Part of him turned off in response, and little experiences grew exponentially to the point where he could easily have been one of the people who fell through the cracks. Murray describes how seeking understanding is better than imposing beliefs or setting expectations based on stereotypes.



Pride, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, earthenware, underglaze, gold luster, acrylic wash, 2016.

Equally dangerous is living with color blindness—failing to recognize the implications of racial appearance. Murray explains that his mother's color blindness impacted him as a child. He knew that he looked different, but he didn't understand how deeply that would affect his life. He didn't care how society saw him, but with time he learned that society would treat him in certain ways nonetheless. Color blindness is great, but it's not reality. White privilege allows some people to be color blind—we can be blissfully ignorant because race doesn't have to mean anything in our lives. To counteract that ignorance, it is important not to approach all people as if they were the same, but rather to treat them as individuals with whom we can seek understanding.

While Murray uses his work as a vehicle for conversation and social commentary, he also lives his mission through teaching. He is currently an instructor at the LUX Center for the Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska. While people take his classes to learn ceramics, he also views his work with them as an

opportunity for open dialog. Through everyday interactions as well—at the grocery store or gas station, or with colleagues—Murray tries to live with an open heart. He seeks understanding and treats others with the compassion with which he wants to be treated.



The Threat, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, earthenware, underglaze, acrylic wash, 2016.

In Murray's MFA thesis is a quote from American social critic Cornell West that embodies key aspects of Murray's own thoughts:

"We've forgotten that a rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. We need the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, the courage to fight for social justice. In many instances we will be stepping out on nothing, and just hoping to land on something. But that's the struggle. To live is to wrestle with despair, yet never allow despair to have the last word."

Ultimately, it will take all of us fighting the same fight from different angles if we are to maneuver the world toward the equality, appreciation, and understanding that Murray envisions.

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