

*Miguel Johnson*

My high school 3D Design teacher never gave me a 100% on a finished project. He believed that there is always something more you could do to a piece to make it better. I always thought this same theory to be true about tough circumstances; there's usually something you can do to change your situation, even if it's having a positive attitude or persevering. My method was channeling my energy into education and art. School allowed space to explore options and realities outside of the shit show I went home to. I realize there are more sophisticated and pretentious words I could use, but that's what it was: a shit show. This essay will walk you through how I processed my experiences as a homeless youth by explaining stylistic characteristics of my piece, emphasized features inspired by my life as a poor black student, and intentional small details created to symbolize my battle with self-policing my actions and interest.

To put it simply, my piece is a bald, semi-realistic, colored bust. Traditional bust are hyper-realistic and clay-colored, but I make a habit of straying from tradition. My bust is mostly brown as a tribute to the youth of color who struggle both in and out of school. Many of us are just unlucky in multiple departments. Between the increased chance of being incarcerated and killed, education can't always be number one priority. Knowing this, I prioritized school at all cost, but straight A's didn't change my luck. That's why I decided to make my bust bald to resemble classic African warrior art. As a homeless youth of color, there was an 87% chance I'd drop out of high school. Being a homeless youth with psychosis and Major Depressive Disorder, the possibility of becoming a dropout was almost inevitable, as 1 of 5 teens with chronic mental illnesses drop out. I see myself and other black, mentally ill students as warriors and wanted my piece to show our potential and beauty, despite our challenges.

I'm big on symbolism and extended metaphors in both my art and writing. The most essential artistic symbolism within my bust is the carved in multi-colored areas. It looks as if a mask or protective layer is breaking off, revealing what is underneath. This expresses the way I let my desire to be seen and addressed as a black man cover my naturally flamboyant and effeminate personality. People who interact with me regularly would think I flourish when it

comes to being my authentic self, but no one would know the way I regulate and punish myself. I preach about acceptance and living wholeheartedly, but I too struggle to brush the comments and harmful perspectives of others off my shoulders. Often I focus so much on becoming this radical, affirmative, pillar of "black excellence" that I let it cover my ideas and bubbly nature. But I am more than my race, or my past, or my gender. I am remembered by the kindness I show others and the warmth and acceptance I make them feel.

There's power in diversity, as there is in education in creativity. I've learned the importance of expanding on my knowledge, individuality, and ideas when tough circumstances took them away from me. I struggled to ask for assistance, because of pride. Fortunately, help found me nonetheless. I don't want to imagine where I'd be if organizations like Synergy didn't exist, or didn't have the funding to offer all they do. If I could tell anything to youth in the situation I was in only 4 months ago, it'd be to never be too proud to ask for help and to use the resources available to you. You can make your situation all the worse by self-fulfilling a damaging prophecy, or you could make your life and future brighter by letting others in. If I could go back to younger me, before my life became literal feces, I'd tell myself that everything I'm trying to change about myself is perfect. That I am exactly who I'm supposed to be in that moment.