

Artist Interview

Kyra Watkins

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By Patricia A. Schechter

Patricia Schechter: My friend Kyra--thank you. Thank you for your time today. Thank you for sharing your genius with our community. We're here to do your exit interview. Today is May 17th 2024 and we are at Portland State University in Smith Center. Kyra, how does it feel to be in the space where your painting is going to be?

Kyra Watkins: It feels good, it feels more and more real, more and more real every day. I'm excited! It's funny because when my sister was pregnant--both times--it's just like I knew there was a baby in there. But I'm like...there's a small chance that there's no baby in there...until it's time for labor. That's how it's feeling right now. I'm like: "It's happening!" I know it's happening. I've seen the work. I know it's done but it's not as real as when I'll see it on the wall, you know? So, there's always the element of surprise.

Patricia: Even though you have been working step by step, it sounds like there's always that element of surprise for the big reveal.

Kyra: Yeah. And then that's when it's like it's real. Just like when: the baby's here!

Patricia: Your work is a watershed -- the family loves it--and it is so momentous for this community to be able to have a reckoning with a terrible incident through the inspiration of your art.

Could you take us back and talk a little bit about what attracted you to apply for this artist's residency?

Kyra: Well, I have applied to many projects. That's just the life of a freelancer. But I believe someone reached out to me with this RFQ. They said "Hey, Kyra, I think this is a great opportunity. You should apply!" Then, when I looked at the request for qualifications. I saw that my skill set directly aligned with what was being asked. This is it! It has my skills and my talents written all over it.

I went in very confidently Before I even had my interview, I was telling my friends: "Hey, I have this cool project coming up!" I always do that. I like to speak as if I already got it. Like I have already received. I went in with just this unwavering faith that I'm what the committee was looking for. It turned out I was!

Patricia Schechter: You absolutely were. I'm getting emotional, but you absolutely were. And one of your many gifts beyond your art is the gift of your spirit. I just want to bear witness to that specialness right here!

Can you talk a little bit about meeting the family, connecting with them? I know you were well prepared but how did you navigate the personal part?

Kyra: For me it was how they took a story and brought it to life. Not that I want to “summarize” Jason into just being a story, but that is how he's presented to people who aren't directly impacted, especially when we see things in a news. We kind of disassociate ourselves from the possibility of this [kind of killing] being our brother, our friend, our husband. It's almost on a subconscious level. It's not like I intended to just view it as a story, but we get so many stories that we become desensitized.

Being with the family humanizes the story that much more. I really feel like I've met Jason through his family. They're such a tight knit bunch, such a loving bunch. I feel so much love when I'm in the midst of them together. If I can just say how thankful I am one that they were willing to be so vulnerable with to share their story, not only with me, but with PSU and the students and the faculty here. And how brave and how courageous they are to share their story and be vulnerable. When I'm around them, I see how their family dynamic is. It feels like a very close-knit family. They're like cousins and it all feels like it's a family reunion! Especially Kayla, being so generous to invite us to her daughter's birthday party. Just as much as I wanted to be there to embrace them, I also felt embraced by them. That was amazing. That was absolutely amazing.

Patricia: That's really lovely. I think that it takes two, right? You were drawn to them and they were drawn to you. I want to give a shout out to your generous spirit and your deep grounding in who you are and what you do that gives people permission, I think, to be vulnerable with you. I want to celebrate that and say it out loud!

Now on the artist side: As you were playing with ideas with this project, when did it click? Walk us through the design part a little bit.

Kyra: My thing was: portrait first. I looked at Jason as a figurative artist, a portrait artist. That's number one. I want this to represent the person I'm trying to represent as best as possible. First and foremost. The portrait came before everything. I want to represent him; I want the piece to not just look like him but to look like him in a demeanor that most people would come across when they when they meet him. And so, in knowing his family, I just get a sense that this is a guy full of jubilee! They just give off that sense. And I wouldn't be surprised if he had a bit of sense of humor to him, just like in the videos that you shared with me, and that Michelle shared with you. Of him being with his grandkid. I'm trying to just tell that he was like a big kid himself as a grandfather, just full of fun! So, I wanted to have that expression of jubilee. Someone who is happy. I wanted to depict him as who he was in life, not summarize him down to his last moment. And it was also important that his name be incorporated. That way it would encourage people to look him up. Like an historian, learning through looking him up. They will learn of the injustices in that way, but I wanted him to be represented in a very thankful peaceful light, a happy light. I wanted his family incorporated, because now that's the only representation that we have with him left. I wanted his family to be in the piece as well, to symbolize what we have of Jason here still, on this wall.

Patricia Schechter: Your care with the portrait and your care with the human face during the initial interview with the committee made a huge impression. You really stood out for your talent, and for your commitment. Your dedication to the human face and the spirit that comes through in people's eyes or their smile. Could you talk a little bit about how you became a portraitist?

Kyra: Well, I don't want to say that it stems from my stubbornness, but it has to do a little bit with my stubbornness. When I want to learn something, it's just like I'm going to continue to do it until I get it right. Growing up, it's not so much that I knew that I was going to become an artist, but I knew whatever I chose to do that I was going to give so much of my effort into it that I was gonna be the best at something!

I just had to niche down. And it just so happens that I've been blessed with a gift to draw. What really inspired me to take off with portraiture is this: When I was 13 I drew a portrait of myself from a picture that I had in my room of me when I was like 6 years old, 5 years old. I drew that portrait, and when I saw it, I was like: "Oh, this is the absolutely most beautiful portrait in the world!" I still have it to this day. Now I look back on it and, I'm like, it's not that great, but it inspired me to stick to it. Because in that moment was: I felt great. I felt: "This is amazing. I'm gonna be the biggest person in the world!" So I continued on that path. I made portraiture my niche because that's just where I started. There are faces all around me. I know that each year I can get better and I think I do get better.

Patricia: Beautiful. It reminds me of Octavia Butler and her journals that are coming out now. You have a kind of radical ownership of yourself and your gifts and your being that shines through in how you talk about your work, and of course, in the work itself. I just want to salute that and honor that because it's a privilege to be in your orbit for a little while!

So on to my last question: Some people have the idea of the lonely artist that works in isolation and suffering or even agony. You had a chance to be on campus and at the School of Art, Art History, and Design. Do you have something to share about that? What was it like being back in school with other artists and students?

Kyra: I tell you I love school so much more when I don't have to do schoolwork. That was the best part. It's just like being able to utilize the campus for something that I just wanted to do, something I was passionate about. And being in that studio. It's funny because I'm gonna give a little shout out to Gilly and Olivia. I ran to them at a party afterward! Everyone was just so helpful. You've been amazing! If there was anything I needed, you got it. You've been a great champion. I feel like I didn't have to do any of the heavy lifting. I just had to focus on the art. Even when things didn't go as we planned it still felt great because it wasn't my battle. I am thankful that I've been insulated from a lot of the things that tend to go awry when we're dealing with bureaucracy. But the community, like Katie at DisarmPSU, and the committee, Julie [Perini] always coming through with having me in her classrooms, and the students being absolutely amazing. This is probably my best--don't tell UC!--college experience. Although I had an amazing college experience, but I think it's the more the idea of: "I'm here, and I don't have the pressure of being graded." That made it just amazing.

Patricia. I felt like it was almost like you were like faculty. So, what did the students add for you? Did our students surprise you at all or did any of their questions to you stand out?

Kyra: They are so tapped in. They're so tapped into what's going on. I know when I was dealing with my [undergraduate] course work, I had no capacity to be involved in things that I felt were bigger than me. But when I went to Julie's first class--forgive me, I can't remember which class this was--I reached out to the students. I'm like: "Here's my email. If anybody have any suggestions about who we can reach out to or about what we can do...." And I got emails back! Like: "Hey, I have

connections here and this” and “Here’s something...” And it's funny because [some ideas] came up in our committee meeting. So, their minds were already where our members’ minds were! They were so tapped in and ready to be involved and eager. And I can only imagine what their bandwidth is, just as being students and having their regular course load.

Patricia: That willingness to be involved might be specific to the artists on campus, their spirit of collaboration. I also think it’s the Dean’s [Leroy Bynum] leadership. He has been a north star for people to be open to community, open to change, open to social justice. In other words, your experience was not an accident.

Maybe we could just wind up with any suggestions you have for another artist like yourself in relation to Portland State. What are some things you’d recommend so that artists have a good experience on campus?

Kyra: I think that, honestly, my experience has been so positive that even when there were hiccups, I was insulated by people willing to do the whole work and leave the art to me. If we could just push that up another level. Anytime something goes awry versus like coming to me with like the issue. Having the people at the forefront to take care of it. I feel like I've had that [support] even though I also feel like I was just really kept in the loop, I don't really feel like I had to bear the burdens of things that were going around. I had you for that.

Patricia: Right – there’s an opportunity to create a little bit more barrier for the artist. Communication is good but there is something to learn about keeping that boundary a little more firm. Taking it up a notch. Any final thoughts about your experience?

Kyra: It was absolutely great. This is my very first residency, and I have had such a lovely experience. I want to do a couple of more of these! I'm looking to apply to more residencies. I felt so embraced. And I'm thankful, so thankful to the university, and, above all, to the Washington family.

Patricia Schechter: Splendid! Well, if we can be helpful in your next steps. If you need a letter or a reference, please include us. We would all be just delighted to cheer you on to your next steps and to support your continued success. Thank you so much!

Kyra: Thank you!