

‘Racism: The Other American Pandemic’ virtual exhibit at ECSU looks at persistent crisis

By [Susan Dunne](#)

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This artwork by Patrick Martinez is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, “Racism: The Other American Pandemic.” (Courtesy Patrick Martinez / Charlie James Gallery)

The fight for racial justice has defined 2020, as much as COVID-19 has. And as the coronavirus pandemic surges, recedes and surges again, “Racism: The Other American Pandemic,” an exhibit at Eastern Connecticut State University reflects a crisis that has been surging for 400 years.

More than 30 artists contributed work to the show, which highlights aspects of the Black experience, focusing primarily on systemic racism.

“Racism is an invisible plague that has been lodged in our social bodies for the last four centuries,” said Yulia Tikhonova, coordinator of gallery and museum services at ECSU, who curated the exhibit.

“It hides in our subconsciousness. It affects our most daily routine and thoughts. It is a caste system, whose rules and restrictions and privileges are the very air we breathe every day. It is impossible to escape, whether as victim or perpetrator,” Tikhonova said.



This artwork by Helina Metaferia is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Helina Metaferia)

The artworks in the exhibit range from images intended to shock – depictions of lynchings and Klansmen – to others that celebrate the beauty of Black women. Some artworks reflect historical view of the races; one artist, [Dread Scott](#), takes his name from [one of the most infamous decisions in the history of the U.S. Supreme Court](#). Other works acknowledge the dignity and necessity of outrage and protest.

The exhibit shows the power of the Black Lives Matter movement to transcend borders. Irish artist [Emmalene Blake](#) contributed a mural of George Floyd. [Ruhee Maknojia](#), whose work is inspired by Middle Eastern influences, puts a unique spin on the KKK in her artwork. Québécois artist [Nicole Royer](#) embraces Black Lives Matter in her abstracted works.

Among the artists are [inmates from Garner Correctional Institution in Newtown](#), who offer both visual and written works. One writer, identified only as [N. Gaines](#), wrote a poem:

Strip me of my cover, my skin

See I for what I am

Look to discover and you will find

One mind, one body, one soul

Colorless as the transparent sky

Defined by the speech of my words

And intent of my actions

I'm an individual

Bounded not by group or race

The title of [Patrick Martinez](#)'s artwork gets straight to the point of the exhibit: "Racism Doesn't Rest During a Pandemic."



This artwork by Stanwyck Cromwell is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Stanwyck Cromwell)

Seeing progress

[Stanwyck Cromwell](#) of Bloomfield contributed two pieces. "My Soul Says Yes" is named after a gospel song and depicts an aged Black person staring out over a collage of pieces of the U.S. Constitution.

"This person of color has lived a long time and has weathered many racial storms and is seeing progress," Cromwell said. "I put the pieces of the Constitution together like a puzzle, something you have to piece together. It asks, does the Constitution apply to everybody or just a chosen few?"

"My Message to You," is about voting rights, which mean a lot to the Guyanese-born artist. "When I became a naturalized American citizen and I appreciate that you can vote," he said. "If you don't vote, you don't have a voice and you shouldn't complain."



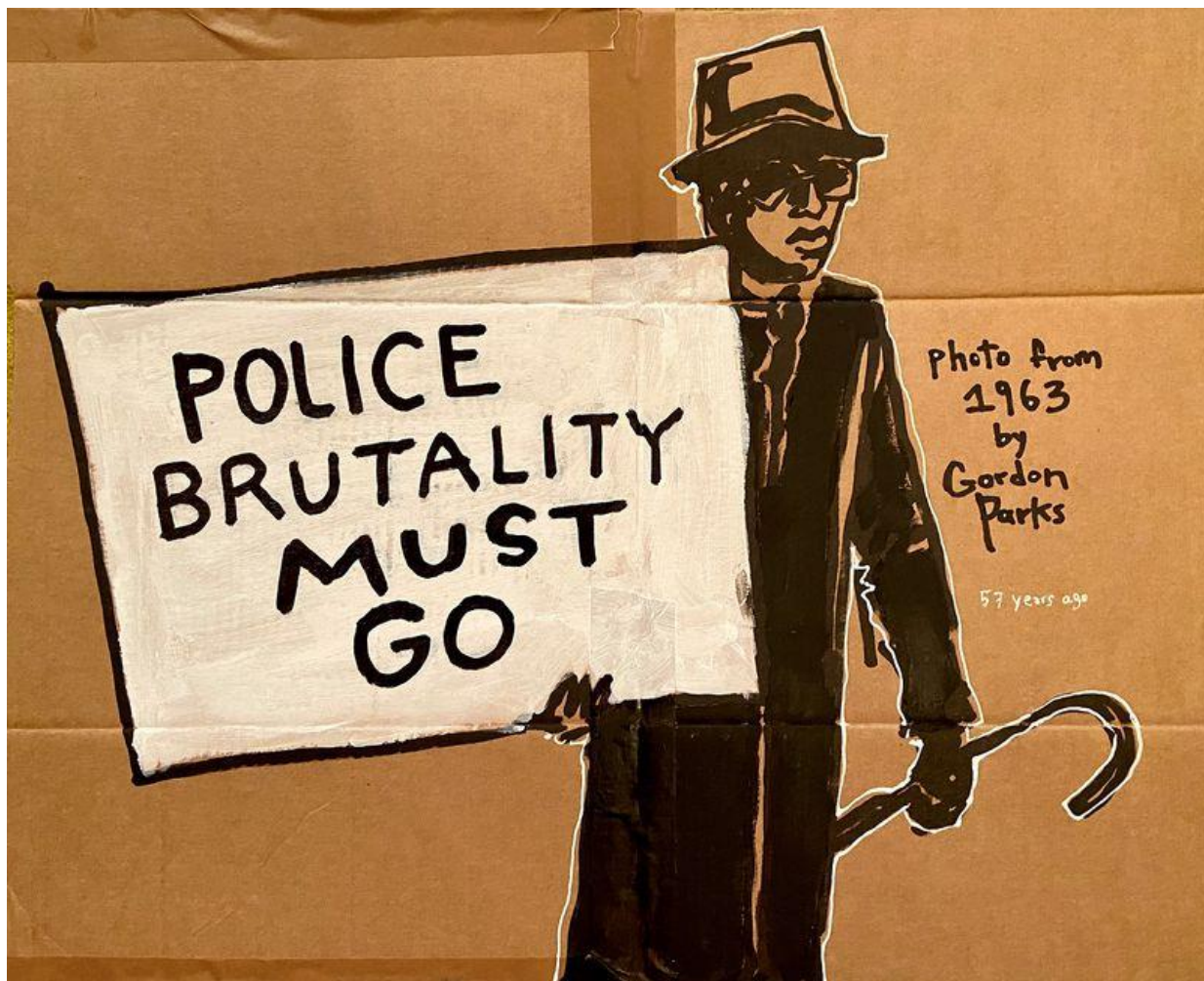
This artwork by Roderrick Davis is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Roderrick Davis)

‘The revolution is coming’

[Roderrick Davis](#) is an artist based in Townsend, Georgia, not far from where Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black man, was gunned down by three white men on Feb. 23, 2020. Davis' piece is called "We went from shackles to handcuffs but now the revolution is coming." It depicts an arm with fist raised, with a handcuff on the wrist.

"I feel that the fist represents the struggle, everything we've been through throughout the years, not just recently, everything from slavery on to police brutality," Davis said. "I wanted the piece to have a sense of hope. We didn't begin here. We didn't begin as slaves. We began as kings and queens. We won't end here. I feel like in the future there's a lot for my people."

Davis said his title was inspired by the current mood of protest. "I feel like we're at a place in America when everybody is waking up. We're starting to get more allies," he said. "The whole Black Lives Matter thing. When it first came out it was kind of taboo to say it or wear a t-shirt. But now it's being painted in the streets across America. It's no longer a Black vs. white thing. It's a right vs. wrong thing."



This artwork by Nicky Enright is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Nicky Enright)

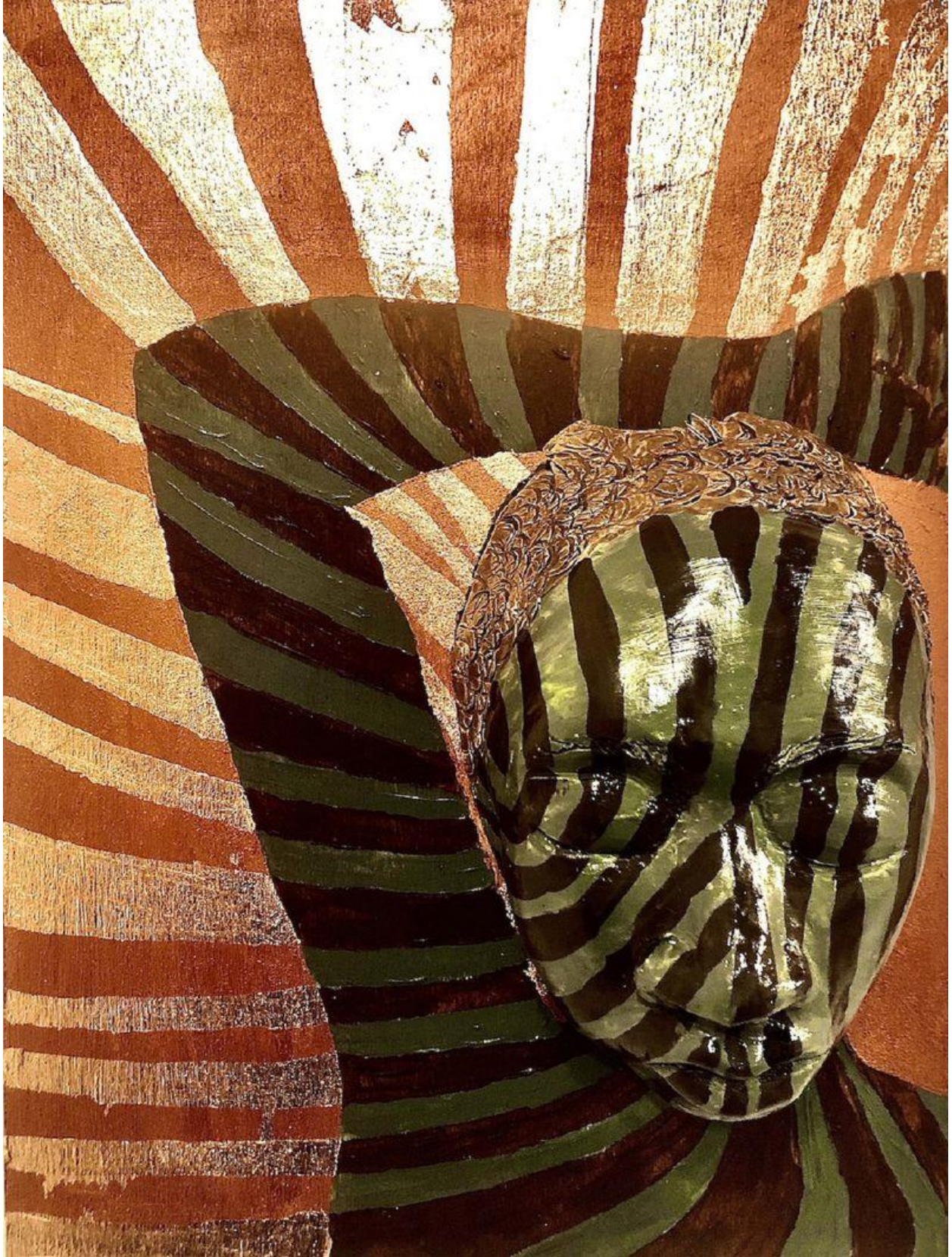
Repetitive protests

[Nicky Enright](#), a Latinx artist from the Bronx, contributed two pieces to the show. His mixed media-on-cardboard, “57 Years Ago,” was inspired by a Gordon Parks photo taken at a protest in 1963.

“One thing that is so striking and upsetting to me is how these protests are ultimately repetitive. We’re constantly protesting the same thing. You feel like it doesn’t change,” Enright said. “Here’s this guy with a sign saying ‘stop police brutality.’ It was taken 57 years ago. That’s longer than I’ve been alive.”

Enright’s second piece, “Security Blanket” is painted on a Mylar blanket similar to those given to immigrant children who are being detained at the border.

“When you are detaining adults you can say all sorts of things, that they are enemies, criminals. But there’s no way you can in good faith say that a child is somehow your enemy,” he said. “The minute you detain children, there’s no way around it, you are a criminal.”



This artwork by Aisha Tandiwe Bell is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Aisha Tandiwe Bell)

Trapped in their bodies

[Aisha Tandiwe Bell](#) of New York makes artworks on wooden canvases, where flat images are dominated by a head emerging, in 3D, out of the space. Bell said the heads literally emerge because people are symbolically emerging, or trying to emerge, from societally imposed limitations.

“My work is about the traps of race, sex and class. ... People are trapped in their bodies, in their place in quote unquote society, in the skin they’re placed in,” she said. “Some people are always finding ways of negotiating and climbing out of those spaces.”

Bell contributed two pieces, with poetic titles. “drip sweat sweet candy cane stripes like blood or prison,” is a red-and-white striped figure, with Bell playing with multiple interpretations of stripes.

The second work is titled “My fist have been punching the air so long / a moment these rays thought waves.” “This character looks like a person putting a fist in the air. But you could also see the fist across the head. I can look at it as a protest piece. Also I can look at it as laying back and the rays cascading on skin,” she said. “It’s that in between moment. That space between change and stillness.”



This artwork by Marvin Toure is part of Eastern Connecticut State University's virtual exhibit, "Racism: The Other American Pandemic." (Courtesy Marvin Toure)

A nebulous sadness

New York artist [Marvin Toure](#)'s sculpture, "Big Cry," is an anguished man, made of pieces of action figures, covered with black dripping paint. The work is from Toure's series Black Bile. In Medieval medicine, black bile was believed to cause melancholy, a subject Toure knows well.

"It's based on my journey with anxiety and dealing with depression at times. What does it mean to have a nebulous sadness without any specific cause?" Toure said.

Toure says the Black community often hesitates to seek medical or psychological help. "There is a lack of trust in the institution of medicine," he said. "It has a historical precedent with some of the more heinous acts committed against Blacks."

The hesitance goes deeper than that, he adds. "There are cultural things about keeping certain business in-house, and a heavy religious influence, telling people just go to the church and talk to a pastor instead," he said.

Toure wants his work to deal with serious issues like this by using the "objects of innocence," such as toys, to make the topics more accessible. "I want to create a threshold where people can engage with complex and charged ideas," Toure said.

Other artists in the show are [Joyce Kozloff](#), [Nate Lewis](#), [Vincent Valdez](#), [Ruben Natal-San Miguel](#), [Shirien Damra](#), [Courtney Ahn](#), [Cecile Chong](#), [Nick Cave-Bob Faust](#), [Josh Weber](#), [Phoebe Godfrey](#), [Juanita Lanzo](#), [Angela Siao](#), [Dominique Roberts](#), [Dane Adrian Smith](#), [Viviane Rombaldi Seppey](#), [Suzanne Broughel](#), [Beatrice Coron](#), [Edra Soto](#), [Helina Metaferia](#), [Felandus Thames](#) and [Gail Gelburd](#).

The timely exhibit "Racism: The Other American Pandemic" can be seen virtually at easternct.edu/art-gallery/racism-an-american-pandemic.html until Sept. 8.

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