

# Faheem Majeed

Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden

# Shrouds

Faheem Majeed *Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden: Shrouds*

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# An Impermanent Practice

Megha Ralapati

In the late 1930s, Bronzeville was abuzz with plans for a new art space to come up in the neighborhood. A coalition of artists, neighbors, society folk, and cultural leaders recognized the need to serve the growing community that had settled along the Black Belt, who were eager to engage with contemporary art: as makers, as students, and as patrons. Stakeholders collectively purchased a beautiful Victorian building, which was redesigned shortly after to itself become a cohesive work of art, using principles of the New Bauhaus, a radical approach to design associated with Chicago. The New Bauhaus held the idea that effective design could drive social transformation, and an exciting contemporary form for a community art space in a neighborhood without many amenities neatly fit that idea. On May 7, 1941, blessed by a visit from Eleanor Roosevelt, the South Side Community Art Center was born.

The project was initially government funded; the Federal Art Program, a visual-arts focused initiative of the New Deal's more wide-ranging Works Progress Administration, was a relief effort to provide employment opportunities to artists, commission work, and support traveling exhibitions. It aimed to be a powerful engine for neighborhood arts that could resuscitate a weary economy out of the Great Depression.

This included establishing community art centers. Interestingly, two of these were located on Chicago's South Side: Hyde Park Art Center and South Side Community Art Center (The Center), merely a few miles apart. Distinctly, The Center, like its short-lived New York predecessor, the Harlem Community Art Center, sought to create real opportunities for Black artists and audiences to engage with contemporary art, develop practice and discourse, and strengthen community bonds, despite and in contestation of the racism and segregation that citywide policies all but guaranteed.

Decades later, in the '60s and '70s, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements ushered in the rise of groundbreaking Black neighborhood museums, known as the Black Museum Movement, which included DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago and the International Afro-American Museum in Charleston.<sup>1</sup> Along with El Museo del Barrio and the Studio Museum, both founded around this time across Harlem, these "culturally specific" institutions did the radical work of cultural recovery and resistance, in the face of invisibility, exclusion, and miseducation of mainstream, predominantly white art institutions. The groundwork for these identity-based art spaces, which today include the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, and the Jewish Museum in New York, arguably



**South Side Community Art Center building**  
Circa 2010's

was first laid out by WPA-era "free spaces" like South Side Community Art Center to not only more accurately represent culture but to keep culture living, breathing, and evolving with the times.

Artist Faheem Majeed is the direct descendant of these lineages. Raised between Charlotte and Minneapolis, Majeed describes himself as a mix of Southern Hospitality and Minnesota Nice. He trained as a metal sculptor at Howard University and then made his way to Chicago, where he was reborn as the artist the city knows today.

After arriving, it didn't take long for Majeed to find himself at the doorstep of The Center, historically renowned and still the premiere space for Black contemporary art. At the time, a figurative metal sculptor, Majeed describes The Center as the space where "Art History got off the walls and whispered in my ear." And, early on listening was his main mode; without many other contacts in the city, Majeed would soak up the stories and life experiences of the elders at The Center, most notably, one of its founders and Chicago's vital institution-builder, Dr. Margaret Burroughs. Burroughs, an artist, teacher, and mentor—all roles Majeed today holds—became his hero and muse.

Burroughs, like Majeed in his early work, favored representation of the human figure in her painting and printmaking. In fact, figurative artwork has been a constant form in art for centuries across cultures; perhaps it is nonobjective, abstract art that requires more justification. To depict the human form was to represent life, community, and the human condition, specifically of the expansiveness of Black experiences. It is no wonder some of The Center's most well-known alumni: Jeff Donaldson, Charles White, Margaret Burroughs, and Archibald Motley were unabashedly figurative artists, affirming the power of the human form to explore cultural origins, spirituality, political



**The Addict**  
2007  
Steel  
36 x 18 x 12 inches  
Photography by Tony Smith.

hopes, and to reject artistic hierarchies. Throughout the twentieth century, American art criticism, largely based in New York, began to favor Minimalism, Pop Art, Color Field, and other nonfigurative styles. Burroughs, and other artists of her time, including others notably located in Chicago like the Hairy Who, continued representing the human form, despite and perhaps in resistance to its increasing disdain by the mainstream art world.<sup>2</sup>

Time passed, and Majeed became a busy artist and curator at The Center, which provided a wealth of opportunities to him: to show his work, to create space for other artists through exhibition-making, to expand his art education by diving into collections and archival materials, and eventually to lead the organization

as acting Executive Director. Majeed would stay late into the night to hang shows, in awe of the marks and traces left on The Center's warm, wooden panels, feeling connected to his artistic ancestors. He refers to those pockmarked walls, which he later recreated and incorporates into many of his own installations, as an "80-year didactic timeline." His artistic and curatorial practice became a living embodiment of The Center's legacy.

As Majeed moved around the city, often foraging for materials from demolished buildings to create increasingly larger-scale installations that toyed with the line between painting and sculpture, he also started growing a network away from The Center. He sat in on art critiques across the city from UIC to SAIC, learning about other traditions and approaches to art, and becoming interested in the work of John Cage and Jasper Johns. Eventually, Majeed went to UIC for grad school, where he developed fluency with new vocabularies, concepts, styles, and references. The code-switching began.

During this period, Majeed started to shift away from figuration. He does so not to fit in with his peers but upon realizing the limitations of his genre. He wondered if his artwork was making the impact he wanted to make on his community. His work, he thought, needed pressure applied to it to do what he needed it to do. This marks a move toward abstraction, incorporating his own body as a tool and vehicle for making work, and making that labor visible to an audience. "Piano Push" (2009) is a video depicting Majeed dressed in a black suit inside The Center as he attempts to move a grand piano around the space. It's a Sisyphean task with seemingly no end, nor resolution, a metaphor for the frustrations of being an artist who is also managing a small, culturally specific organization under constant financial duress.

In "Piano Push," we see the beginning of Majeed's practice of revealing the physical challenges artmaking posed to his body as well as an assertion of his agency as an individual, one who is intimately linked to a community, accountable to it and in living dialogue with it.

### **And what of this *community*?**

We know that *community art* was a common term during the WPA era and revitalized in the '60s and '70s, particularly around the way artists of the Black Arts Movement articulated an engagement with a diverse and sometimes disparate group of constituents considered to be the participants, activators, respondents, and provocateurs of their work. In *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-1975*, the art historian Rebecca Zorach explains that in activities of

Chicago's Black Arts Movement, visual artists laid hold of a strong notion of "community," one premised on negotiating rather than erasing difference. Rather than presuming an unquestioned homogeneity of interests, they sought solidarity across lines of class and education and profession. They emulated the "call and response" structure of Black musical forms and adjusted their artistic vision according to the responses they received. They renounced (white) art world frameworks and the aesthetic distortions that white patronage might produce, and sought extended relationships with non-artists in their own and nearby neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

Though largely unattributed as such, Zorach argues that much of this work set the precedent for today's field of social practice, in which artists work in extended relationship with communities, considering the evolving process of those relationships as much a part of the work as any tangible presentation.

As direct heir of the Black Arts Movement and son of The Center, Majeed's impulse toward community accountability is in concert with any impulse to create art. He was the receiver of oral histories and caretaker of The Center's treasured collection. Today he takes seriously the responsibility for disseminating and sharing that special, insider information only he and a select few were privy to. Particularly, in his role as art instructor, Majeed considers how to pass knowledge to the next generation, beginning with his students. He has started to properly collect and archive his own work and ephemera related to The Center. He invites intervention by students, recognizing that the stories given to him by those who have since passed must be shared, to continue fueling art practice in Chicago.



**Provenance Installation**

2008

Couch, lamps, framed paintings

(Jeff Donaldson, Charles Davis, Frank Neal, Tony Wade)

Courtesy of artist.

Majeed mined related ideas of access and visibility in a work called “Provenance Installation” (2008) in which he curated a small show of The Center’s collection work while a student at UIC. Except he hung the work facing the wall, so instead of seeing painted surfaces, viewers only saw their “provenance,” handwritten date and titles, WPA stamps, and auction and donation information. The aim of this provocative gesture was to deny access to viewers, highlighting Majeed’s role as gatekeeper to this alternative canon and calling into question the parameters of traditional museum collections, which had historically denied entrance to works like these. The historian Andrea Burns describes that content of Black neighborhood museum collections “offered a distinct rebuttal to the narrative of invisibility practiced by mainstream museums with regard to the presence and historical agency of African Americans.”<sup>4</sup> Today, Majeed’s pedagogical and artistic practice orients toward nurturing young artists, who bear their own responsibility of carrying these legacies forward, keeping them relevant and alive for future generations.

Black neighborhood museums and other culturally specific art spaces were established to meet the unmet needs of their communities and addressed the nuances of those cultural experiences with specificity and respect. Their work has been to transform the undertold stories of Black (and other) histories into *public histories*, for the benefit of all audiences. This is not to say that predominantly white art institutions haven’t been presenting art *of or from* communities of color for decades. However, they’ve done it with various degrees of commitment and

results. An early example is the 1969 Met museum’s exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, which aimed to respond to the Civil Rights movement, but—unfortunately and disastrously—excluded the work of Black artists living and working in Harlem at the time, which would have easily fit into the exhibition’s concept.

Linked to the Civil Rights movement and influenced by subsequent decades of eased visa restrictions and immigration to the United States, the ’80s and ’90s saw the rise of multiculturalism, identity politics, and a newfound interest by mainstream art institutions to represent *underrepresented minorities*. American art spaces began showing the work of artists of color in earnest, with the goal of expanding their audiences and *relevance* in a rapidly changing cultural climate.

**But how did this impact culturally specific and neighborhood art spaces?**

After some years leading The Center, Majeed’s frustration mounted. Not only was he feeling the perpetual squeeze of financial pressure, he believed The Center’s original impulse had shifted. It had started as a youthful, energetic space to harness the boldness of emerging artists. But six decades later, Majeed felt his own growth as an artist and institution-builder stymied. The risky projects he wanted to take on weren’t taking hold. The older guard had their guard up and viewed the future with anxiety. Perhaps this was a result of the mainstream art world’s new interest in presenting the work of Black artists. Maybe it was trepidation in the face of change. Whichever, The Center wasn’t living the way it once had, and in Majeed’s mind, always should..

**So, Majeed called for an end to The Center.**

It started as a theoretical provocation—his MFA thesis was titled *Demise of the South Side Community Art Center*—which then became a real one. He put together a show at The Center in 2009 with the same title, including artists Theaster Gates, Samantha Hill, and Dan S. Wang, who are also invested in the notion of culturally specific arts organizations and the communities they serve. The show, comprising work in varied mediums, teased the idea of tearing something down and publicly called for the end of this storied place. Artists sent out images of The Center on fire, and there was intentional rumor-mongering that this would be its last exhibition. Needless to say, it was Majeed’s last show there for a while.

According to Majeed, “Good books have a beginning and ending,”<sup>5</sup> and if The Center wasn’t living up to its potential, maybe its time was up. But, Majeed didn’t really believe this. At their height, neighborhood- and culturally specific spaces like The Center were the ultimate site of resistance to cultural hegemony, as embodied by government policies or art world customs. They played the essential role of





**Installation view of *Demise of the South Side Community Art Center***  
 2009  
 Courtesy of artist  
 Photography by Tony Smith.



***Demise of the South Side Community Art Center***  
 Planning discussion  
 2009  
 Courtesy of artist.

culture-keeping and history-building in real time. They became worlds in and of themselves, which tended to operate outside the orbit of Western museological tradition. They emphatically linked art *with* life, as it's lived inside actual communities and neighborhoods. Arguably, this dynamic makes for a different *type* of art, one that doesn't embody what Zorach describes as the "deadness of Western art forms, embalmed in museums and cut off from participation in life."<sup>6</sup> If The Center wasn't actively breathing life into art, it was, itself, dead and didn't deserve to continue. With *Demise*, Majeed was throwing out a flare to his people. If there was collective will, The Center didn't need to die; it could rejuvenate from the inside and be reborn as a new, more potent version of itself. The phoenix could rise from the ashes.

It's worth addressing this novel approach to *institutional critique*. This isn't an appraisal of the broader museum-gallery system, in the style of artists typically associated with this philosophy: Daniel Buren, Fred Wilson, or Andrea Fraser, who herself has warned against the "institutionalization of institutional critique."<sup>7</sup> Majeed describes his critique as *loving*, and it's one that seems immune to reification or "institutionalization" because it comes from a deep place of care and knowing. Unlike Fred Wilson, Majeed doesn't presume a space outside of The Center's machinations and politics, from which to critique. Rather, his attack is shaped by proximity and understanding of his own *implicatedness* in The Center's problems. Both loving and quite radical, Majeed's critique provides a powerful counterpoint to current movements to dismantle art museums by those operating from outside them.

This brings us to today, where Majeed embarks on a large-scale solo exhibition and the newest iteration of the ongoing series, *Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden*. This series has unfolded across time and space both locally and nationally, as an exploration of the *life* Majeed's recreated wood paneling, The Center's visual signature, imbues to other venues. The cedar planks have been reconfigured as walls, seating, flooring, a stage, and currently at Hyde Park Art Center, a massive pedestal to uphold a charcoal rubbing, which is the show's central focus.

Perhaps less of a pedestal, which traditionally supports a sculptural object, the configuration of panels here might be a *dais*, a raised platform historically found inside the medieval hall, which elevated a revered figure or guest. In this case, that guest is a monumental rubbing of The Center's building façade. Through Majeed's work, Hyde Park Art Center welcomes its fellow WPA-era arts organization into the main gallery, paying homage to The Center's history, legacy, and radical wisdom.<sup>8</sup>

### But, does this wisdom transfer?

In the medieval period, rubbings became a useful method of reproducing decorative stones or brass plaques set atop tombs, which served as memorials to important people buried beneath. At the time, considered a new type of *funeral art*, these images were made by rubbing a combination of wax and black pigment across a sheet of paper attached to the stone or plaque. The bas-relief surfaces particularly lent themselves to rubbings, which resulted in striking representations of tomb decorations, as well as novel observations of the past.<sup>9</sup> The practice waned and waxed over time, popularizing again in the twentieth century. Local lore says Burroughs would buy gravestones for deserving figures who didn't have them, and this unsurprisingly influenced Majeed's incorporation of the rubbing into his work—of gravestones or just about anything else he believes carries an aura worth capturing. In a sense, his rubbings are “snapshots” of important objects, and taken together, they form a sort of scrapbook of abstracted images. This unique approach to printmaking complements the radical ways Burroughs flexed and stretched the medium to suit her values. She famously photocopied her own print work, signed and distributed it, crumbling the traditional approach to valuing editioned prints. This is yet another way Majeed lives inside her legacy, inviting its spirit to move through his own practice.

The rubbings in this show, called *Shrouds*, vary in scale: they are monumental and intimate. The process of creating a rubbing, whether of The Center's brick exterior or the flooring inside, is a highly physical one. Years after the controversial *Demise* exhibition, with relationships mended, Majeed regained his special access to The Center and made these rubbings sometimes alone, sometimes alongside long-time collaborators, painstakingly inside and outside the building. It was a challenging and thoroughly haptic process: right arm burning, vibration shooting down the legs, cloth constantly shifting under hand, stillness of human body meeting architecture. A strenuous meditation. The rubbings scratch at the idea of the copy—less a photographic representation, these are intentionally imperfect tracings of The Center's most ephemeral qualities. Yet, in their own way, they're as authentic and faithful as any duplicate.

Works like *Demise Shroud (Floor 1)* and *Demise Shroud (Bauhaus 1)*, which are charcoal rubbings of the floor and walls, aim to capture the seemingly less important elements of The Center: hair, dust particles, sediment from shoes, which should normally be swept up and thrown out. But The Center's floor, including this residue, is a physical record of its history and most important for Majeed, its future potential. These are rubbings of ideas and mythologies. They are visual transfers, but also symbolic ones. Through them, Majeed asks: *How can a legacy be transferred to meet the present?* The rubbings function as a metaphor for knowledge-sharing and communication across generation and time.



**Demise Shroud**  
2016  
70 × 5 feet  
Charcoal and graphite on muslin  
Photography by Tricia Scully.