

# THE PUBLIC LIFE OF THE ARTS

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Eliza Myrie

Cathy Mooses

Faheem Majeed

AS PART OF a comprehensive investment in the arts on campus, the University of Chicago recently launched the Arts and Public Life Initiative (APL) to enrich its cultural interactions with the city and with local artists. Under the direction of renowned artist, Theaster Gates, APL will be a driving force behind new collaborations with the civic, cultural, and artistic communities of Chicago, with a focus on South Side neighborhoods. As envisioned by Gates, APL will be an incubator for emerging talent, a catalyst for new partnerships, and a forum for transformative thinking about the role that U of C can play in neighborhood growth. Establishing strategic partnerships will be one fundamental way in which APL is able to achieve its far reaching goals. To this end, APL will be partnering with the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture (CSRPC) this year to enhance the Center's already existing Artists-in-Residence Program. Meet Faheem Majeed, Cathy Mooses, and Eliza Myrie, the inaugural group of artists under this initiative. CSRPC student assistant and fourth year student in the College, Johnaé Strong, sat down with the artists to discuss their work. Read on to explore their backgrounds, artistic practices, and ambitions for their 2011-2012 residencies.

**Tell us a bit about yourself — your background, your studies, and your artistic practice.**

**Eliza Myrie:** I'm from New York State

and came to Chicago for grad school. I went to undergrad at Williams College for studio art and took a break between undergrad and grad to make sure art was the true life I wanted — a life dedicated to art isn't to be taken lightly. My work is a visual commentary on perception — commenting on invisible visibilities such as race in visual journalism. For example, Derrion Albert— I did a body of work about what the local newspaper was putting out there. The images of the tragedy without headlines can go a long way in showing what was being communicated. The newspaper showed a young black girl crying on the front page, which was Derrion's sister, I want to question the editorial choices that put a vulnerable character in such a position, while at the same time resisting a stance for or against anything specific.

**Cathy Mooses:** I recently relocated to Chicago after living in NYC for 10 years, where I worked as an artist, printmaker and educator. I am interested in how this move back "home" will influence my work. Born in Chicago into a Greek and Mexican immigrant household, we moved around between Uptown, Rogers Park, and Lincoln Park. We were supported by my grandmother's Mexican restaurants in the city and frequently traveled between Chicago and Northern Mexico. The travel had a large cultural impact on me and later influenced my work facilitating art projects in Latin America. My work includes forms of social practice, printmaking and installation art.

**Faheem Majeed:** I am a sculptor by training; I attended Howard University for undergrad. I received my masters at UIC. I am on faculty at the School of the Art Institute and Chicago State. I came to Chicago seven years ago with little to no resources. Artists introduced me to the South Side Community Art Center. It was a warm and nurturing space where I spent a couple months as an unofficial resident and was introduced to Chicago. Over the years, I developed from an artist in need to Executive Director of the space. My artwork is inspired by my observations and role within a culturally specific institution.

**What are you currently working on?**

**Eliza:** My work is shifting. I've done things that were blatantly racial for a while, which is a challenge for minority black women: to be charged with doing "black work" or "not doing black work." In the past I have used visual journalism as a vehicle to try and give some roundness back to things that have been made flat, such as still photos. My materials have included butcher paper, cardboard, and natural woods—all of which are shades of brown, essentially variations on skin tones. I've done a lot with Xerox copies, which are also tones of grey between black and white. Whether I am willing to talk about it or not, there will always be a tinge of color to my work. My work is moving in a new direction as I investigate optical illusions, motion, and distortion.

**Cathy:** My current body of work surrounds a pre-Columbian paper making tradition called amate. My interest in this process comes partially from my printmaking and bookbinding background, but is also a stepping stone for studying cultural transformations due to immigration and economic dependency on tourism. The images and sounds gathered from this research will inform a series of art installations.

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**Faheem:** My current body of work has been to create discourse around culturally specific institutions. To this effect, the “Demise of South Side Community Art Center” analyzed the institution as a critique of the dormancy of history and resources. Another piece, “Modernity,” speaks to Dr. Margaret Burroughs and her work as co-founder of South Side Community Art Center and founder of the Dusable Museum. I take the discourse of isolated circles and make them more public. My hope has been to advocate for these spaces and ideas through critical discourse.

**What is your ambition for this residency?**

**Eliza:** I am revisiting the initial impulse of coming to Chicago to engage with the real and perceived divide between North and South sides of Chicago. I am excited to be a part of a community that is engaged in and dedicated to learning. Looking to put myself on the campus in a way that allows for conversation as well as seeking out conversation. I aspire to be a catalyst by bridging communities such as artists and academics.

**Cathy:** Aside from developing my art and research on campus, I am excited that the APL Initiative is creating a platform for dialogue off-campus with a Chicago South Side neighborhood. My storefront studio in Pilsen is a temporary art space where I will offer workshops and a series of curated art projects for the neighborhood. Ideally some of these projects would also be presented at the Race Center.

**Faheem:** Playing on the idea of “building a bridge” I will create public artwork that will be installed in the surrounding communities that will critically highlight

local contributions. Along with the creation of artwork, a series of programs will be proposed. My hope is to further inspire future collaborations between the University and the surrounding neighborhoods.

**What, in your opinion, is one major advantage of being selected to work at the University of Chicago? You were one of three emerging artists selected by Theaster Gates; how would you imagine his ambition for the APL Initiative aligning with the ways in which you intend to leverage your time on campus?**

**Eliza:** It is a luxury to be in partnership with an excellent institution as apart of an inaugural program. I am happy to have the university put trust in my work; it is a big deal to have someone lend support to you even in the slightest. So to have a library, the Race Center, faculty, etc., is a huge deal. This type of support is crucial because it reinforces the ability to pursue a life in art—you want to give a return on that faith. I plan to utilize the access granted by this initiative to converse with the community as well as spark conversation within the communities and complete new work.

**Cathy:** I value being able to develop my work amongst critical minds and that this residency is situated in a place for interdisciplinary dialogue. Community and audience are very important to the participatory projects I am working on. The workshop structure at the Race Center is a great potential support for my studio projects.

**Faheem:** I think the reason Gates chose the other artists and myself was to bring our diverse opinions and neighborhood ties to the university. I have worked

with Gates in spaces like Little Black Pearl Workshop and believe that the ties artists have with community spaces can cultivate the use of untapped resources present in both worlds.

**Do you foresee opportunities for collaboration with your fellow residents?**

**Eliza:** I am interested in using some of my projects as advertisements for conversations Faheem, Cathy, and myself want to have. Collaboration is important to the creative process and it is great to have a cohort of artists/colleagues at the Race Center who can provide discourse and time away from solitude.

**Cathy:** I am glad that there is a small cohort of artists who have different approaches to art making. The diversity of practice keeps this inaugural initiative open for following participants. As an artist, it is important to be in a creative community in order to drive art and stimulation. Collaboration is expected to come naturally.

**Faheem:** I am excited at the possibility of working collaboratively with my fellow residents. Collaboration is an important aspect of my creative process.

*Visit the CSRPC website frequently for updates on public programs and exhibitions by our Artists-in-Residence. <http://csrpc.uchicago.edu>*

## BLACK STUDIES REIMAGINED *continued*

The University of Chicago’s place in these developments points to the strengths of the programs here as well as much work that needs to be done. This university does have a leading center for the comparative study of race and ethnicity that has as part of its foundation many leading scholars with their roots and current research firmly within Black

Studies. Yet, the institutional innovations, flexibility, and capacity, as well as the pedagogical visions of the programs at many of our peer institutions is lacking at Chicago. We do not need to, and should not try to, blindly replicate the extremely successful programs found at our sister institutions. It is time, however, for a renewed focus on determining how best

at Chicago we can move forward the comparative study of race and ethnicity. Learning from the nearly half-century of innovation, struggle and achievements of Black Studies will be a critical component of determining how best we can move forward and make our own contributions to this rich tradition.