



OPINION CHARLES M. BLOW

WEDNESDAY WILL BE the second anniversary of the lurid street murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. The killings of Black people had become almost banal in their incessancy and redundancy, but something about this one — captured during an advancing pandemic that had forced people apart and inside, watching the world through windows and screens — drew thousands of people out into the streets, where boarded-up storefronts produced the tempting tableau of a country strewn with canvases.

Some saw in the uprising the potential for revolution. They talked about the protests in the lofty language of a “racial reckoning,” an “inflection point,” a fresh start on America’s path to absolution from its original sin.

But flashes of guilt, outrage and shame often stir fleeting fealties, and the heavy gravitational pull of racial privileges and power can quickly draw mercurial allies back into the refuge of the status quo.

Some good came of the protests, to be sure. Some states and local municipalities passed or instituted police reforms. Money poured into Black Lives Matter, as well as other racial justice organizations and Black institutions. Individuals began personal journeys to become more egalitarian and more actively “antiracist.” And artists produced hundreds of murals and thousands of pieces of other street art that, for a time, transformed this country.



Atlanta



Baltimore



Spartanburg, S.C.



Brooklyn



Topeka, Kan.



Harlem, N.Y.



Atlantic City, N.J.



Pittsburgh



St. Petersburg, Fla.



Montgomery, Ala.



Kansas City, Mo.



Oakland, Calif.



Los Angeles



Brooklyn



Ypsilanti, Mich.



Austin, Texas



Birmingham, Ala.



Washington



Manhattan



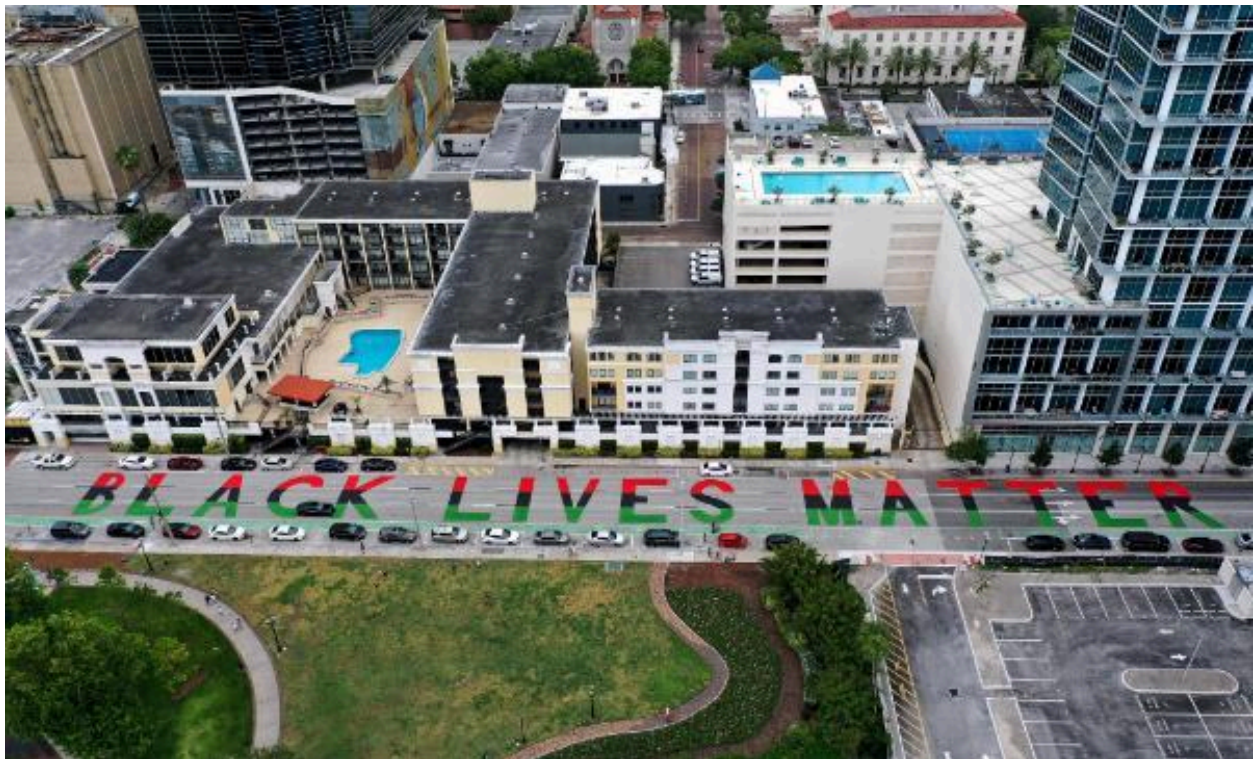
Bennington, Vt.



Newark



Seattle



Orlando, Fla.



Santa Cruz, Calif.

In the end, transformative national change proved to be an illusion. Inflation, a war in Ukraine, public safety, abortion and even a baby formula crisis have overtaken the zeitgeist. Support for Black Lives Matter has diminished. Federal police reform and federal voter protection both failed to pass the Senate. And the founders of Black Lives Matter have been drawn into controversies about how they handled its money.

I've learned not to expect much from America; it has a deep capacity for change but a shallow desire for it. I have embraced the "wise desire not to be betrayed by too much hoping," as James Baldwin put it. But I worry about young people in all of this. It is their faith that's most vulnerable to damage. They were the ones who most believed that change was not only possible but imminent, only to have America retreat and retrench.

Now not only are their allies reversing course on issues like police reform; the country is also facing a full backlash toward protest itself. Dozens of states have passed laws restricting the right to protest (just this week, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida barred citizens from protesting outside private homes), and more than a dozen have now criminalized teaching full and accurate racial history.

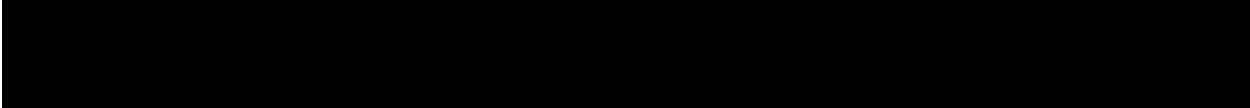
The Great Erasure is underway, not so much an attempt to erase the uprising itself as an attempt to blunt its effects.

THERE IS NO EXAMPLE of this erasure more striking than the continual destruction, removal or slow vanishing of much of the street art produced in the wake of Floyd's killing.

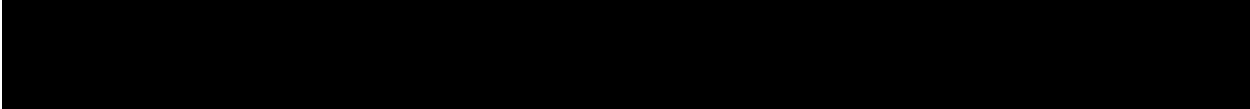
According to a database compiled by three professors at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota — Heather Shirey, David Todd Lawrence and Paul Lorah — there were once approximately 2,700 murals, graffiti, stickers, posters affixed to surfaces and light projections created in response to Floyd's killing, mostly in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Shirey and Lawrence called it “the largest proliferation of street art around one idea or issue or event in history.” But many of those pieces have disappeared, sometimes because of exposure to traffic or the elements and sometimes because of deliberate attempts to erase them. Business owners quietly removed the graffitied planks from their storefronts. Some of the murals have been defaced.

For this project, my colleagues and I looked at 115 murals created after Floyd's death and tried to determine how many had been maintained. (It is not a comprehensive list, although it is

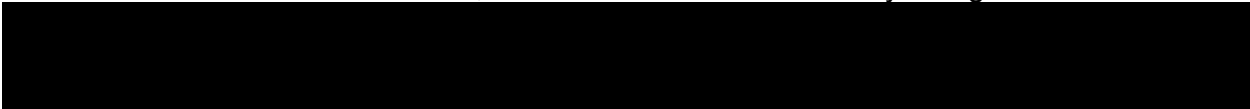
hard to imagine any such list could be.) Only 37 were fully intact. In cities from Oklahoma to California, few vestiges remain of what were once vibrant murals, painted on asphalt and walls.



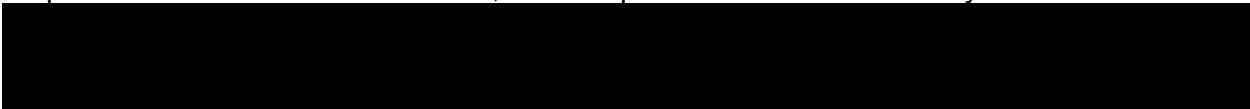
In 2021, six police officers sued Palo Alto, Calif., because it had commissioned this mural, which included a portrait of Joanne Chesimard, a former member of the Black Liberation Army convicted of killing a state trooper in 1973. The lawsuit was dismissed, but by that point, the city had already removed the mural.



This mural, designed by Avrion Jackson, was one of six that an army of some 1,000 volunteers painted around Kansas City in 2020. Last fall, the organizers said they planned to raise funds to restore the murals, but work on this one has not yet begun.



In spring 2020, city officials teamed up with local organizations to commission various artists to design and paint each letter of this eclectic colorful mural. The city reopened the street to traffic that fall, and the paint has since worn away.



When this mural first appeared on Fulton Street in June 2020, the district's council member said he would seek to turn the street into a permanent pedestrian plaza. But it soon opened to traffic, which erased the lettering.

Over the past two months, I talked to art historians, museum directors and curators, activists and artists who had created murals. The picture that emerges is of a group determined to preserve as much of the art as possible while understanding that it can't all be saved, and an acknowledgement of the inherent, ephemeral nature of street art. This art was created in a moment, for a moment. Permanence was often not its central consideration. But to lose it would be to lose a cultural record of the time, a record of the profound significance and magnitude of what transpired: A generation of young people and young artists found their voice and used it, creating an arts movement that sits in the canon alongside the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s and the Harlem Renaissance. You might even say it mirrors on an enormous scale the Wall of Respect mural first painted in 1967 by the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture in Chicago.

What may have been different about this movement was the outlook of the generation that created it. Aaron Bryant, curator of photography, visual anthropology and contemporary history at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, described it to me as a "sense of entitlement." These activists and artists believe "they have an absolute right, and even a responsibility, to express themselves," he told me. "They aren't necessarily a generation that was raised to be silent."

The art produced during and after the uprising was powerful, emotional and energetic, like a lightning storm. But like lightning, the illuminated contours of the way it split the sky soon dimmed and vanished.

The art tapped into something and provided a language for it. As Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, put

it, “Some of the best art is created under situations of not only duress but of immediate response, and that is part and parcel with this sense of collective identity that I think many of us felt in that moment, and to see it visualized was really heartening.”

For me, it was transcendent. It brought a fresh, abounding energy to a standing tradition.

Murals as instruments of memorial have long been a feature of Black grief and remembrance. They are what Amaka Okechukwu, assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at George Mason University, so eloquently describes as “gravestone murals” or “wake work” haunting the urban spaces where Black lives have been lost.

By no means are these murals the expression solely of African Americans. They can be found in many communities and in many cultures around the world, where the tradition of producing them is centuries old.

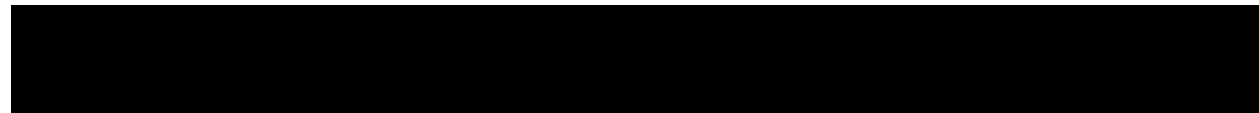
But in a way, Floyd’s murder globalized gravestone murals in service of a singular subject. Perhaps the most iconic of these murals were those with the words “Black Lives Matter” written in large block letters down the middle of streets. The first was painted by the District of Columbia and was so large that it was legible on satellite images.

People like Sarah Lewis, associate professor of history of art and architecture and African and African American studies at Harvard University, saw it as a powerful testament “symbolizing the precarity of black life in open terrain.” But activists soon pointed out that the politicians who supported the art often resisted policies designed to rectify the historic injustices Black Lives Matter had highlighted. When the District of Columbia painted its mural, the local Black Lives Matter chapter called it

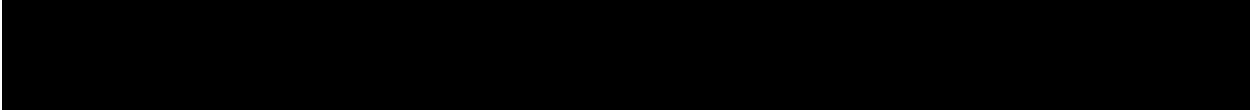
“a performative distraction from real policy changes” designed “to appease white liberals while ignoring our demands.” Mayor Muriel Bowser was “on the wrong side” of history, they said. “Black Lives Matter means defund the police.” These tensions stretched beyond Washington.

In Minneapolis, at the intersection where Floyd was murdered — now called George Floyd Square — the George Floyd Global Memorial project has taken on the Herculean task of preserving all protest objects, items the group calls “offerings,” including art and murals, in the square. So far it has collected over 5,000 artifacts, preserved them with the help of art conservators and stored them in cardboard boxes in a small room in a community theater. The group has ambitions to one day build a museum to house it all. Some of the murals in George Floyd Square were being repainted when I visited this month, ahead of the observances of the second anniversary of Floyd’s murder. New ones have been added featuring other Black people killed elsewhere, some lost to community violence rather than state violence.

This level of ambition makes Minneapolis both the epicenter of the preservation efforts and an anomaly. Governments in cities across the country, like Tulsa, Okla. and Redwood City, Calif., have erased the murals, reflecting the reality that many lacked the true, sustained commitment to Black lives.



Activists painted this mural on what was once "Black Wall Street," the wealthy community ravaged in Tulsa's 1921 race massacre. City officials later removed the mural because it was never officially approved, but before they did, protesters erected paper tombstones on the site to memorialize Black lives lost to violence.



A married couple worked with volunteers to paint this mural on the fence outside their home in 2020. It was painted over the following year to comply with city ordinances that prohibit fences from being more than one color or from displaying words, pictures or signs.

Further complicating the preservation efforts is the degree to which these pieces of art were politicized from the moment of their creation: Murals were going up as Confederate monuments in cities like Montgomery, Ala., continued to come down. It fueled the fears held by white supremacists that white people and white culture would eventually be superseded.

In their zero-sum worldview, BLM's pro-Blackness was inherently anti-white. President Donald Trump called a Black Lives Matter mural to be painted in front of Trump Tower in New York City a "symbol of hate." Historical revisionists held fast to the lie that Confederate monuments were about history, rather than racism. The fight was over which art representing which points of view was more deserving of public display. It's perhaps also no coincidence that much of the artwork created after Floyd's death is vanishing as the public embrace of the Black Lives Matter movement is waning. Polls last year by the Pew Research Center found that support for Black Lives Matter, which peaked in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's death, had fallen back to its 2017 levels, pre-George Floyd. Black support had remained high; it was the support among white people that fell.

Activists chafe at the notion that the BLM movement itself is waning.

"Every off year we write Black Lives Matter's obituary, and we eulogize it and we talk about the waning Black Lives Matter

Movement,” Frank Leon Roberts, creator of the Black Lives Matter Syllabus, a public curriculum for teaching BLM in classrooms and communities, and newly appointed assistant professor of English and Black studies at Amherst College, told me.

“The movement actually is not waning,” he said. “The movement from its inception has operated in waves.” He predicts that “there will inevitably be another heinous event of police violence which will once again incite something in the people, and then we’ll be having this same conversation.”

But police killings have continued unabated. In fact, last year saw a record number of police shootings, the most since The Washington Post began keeping count in 2015. The police killed 1,055 people across the country in 2021. And yet, there were no nationwide protests.

In my life I have arrived at the conclusion that real liberation — equity, safety and “the pursuit of happiness” — is not rooted in feelings and personal evolutions. Only a change in the parameters of power — political, economic and cultural, who has it and who gets to exercise it, who is benefited by it and who is harmed by it — can transform this country.

Passions flare and subside; power endures. Like the art, broad-based, transracial interest and energy to support the Black Lives Matter movement are fading. I mourn the loss of that energy, but I also mourn the loss of the movement’s art from public space. In the streets it was both declaration and confrontation, brazen and assertive. It was forcefully in your face.

Now, even among the artifacts that can be or have been saved, the context will change from the urgency of in-situ to the sterility of institutions or the impersonal distance of digital space.

The art that once shouted and demanded and documented the movement is being culled and reduced to the dulcet-toned advocacy of a few heroic curators.

Additional reporting by Rose Adams

Cover photograph by Ike Edeani.

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