

Art and design

Respond: artists offer bold, urgent take on #blacklivesmatter

A gallery in New York invited artists to respond to issues of racism and police brutality in the wake of the Eric Garner case. We spoke to 11 of them



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📷 Dread Scott, Sign of the Times Photograph: Dumbo

“My bone to pick with the art world,” says artist [Joseph DeLappe](#), “is that it’s too slow to respond to anything.” He’s right: the New York art world in particular isn’t known for being especially responsive to current events, especially not when regarding the concerns of black folks.

But some 600 artists replied to the recent open call for [Respond, Smack Mellon gallery](#)’s hastily arranged but beautiful show curated around the killings of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown and other black Americans.

Smack Mellon resident artists (including [Dread Scott](#) and [Steffani Jemison](#)) selected some 200 recently created works of art. No matter how much you may have read about the death of these young men and women in newspapers, there

is something extremely powerful about seeing responses by artists - a power exponentially amplified seeing so many pieces together and in conversation with one another. If the Philadelphia Museum of Art's current show Represent: 200 Years of African American Art is "[not bold, but dutiful](#)", the 200 works which make [Respond](#) are most definitely bold - unnervingly so.

The Guardian spoke with 11 of the artists - white, black, new to the fine art world or highly experienced within it - about their contribution to the show.

Every Mother's Son, [Sophia Dawson](#), 2013



📷 Sophia Dawson, Every Mother's Son. Photograph: Dumbo



Dawson: "I took an anti-police brutality class in 2010, and the basis was a film, [Every Mother's Son](#) by Tami Gold. It followed three women whose sons had been killed by a police officer - Amadou's mother [Kadiatou Diallo](#), [Iris Baez](#) and Doris Busch Boskey - and their journey from grieving to becoming organisers around this issue of police brutality. At the end of the film, there is some text that all three of these officers were acquitted. I found that really heartbreaking, and shortly afterwards [Ramarley Graham](#) and [Trayvon Martin](#) were killed.

Portrait of Renisha McBride, [Oasa DuVerney](#), 2014



📷 Oasa DuVerney's portrait. Photograph: Dumbo



DuVerney: “I’ve been responding to the [Renisha McBride](#) case since I heard about it, in late 2013. I have a teenage daughter. Her story, it made me really sad as a mother, as a black person, as a person. This idea that our kids are not allowed to make mistakes. [McBride was shot dead after crashing her car at around 4.30am and knocking on a house for help.] We can’t do it, because they will show us no mercy.

“I believe we are just invisible, period, in every such debate. Women in general are silenced, and women of colour in particular. When we are not being silenced by the privileged white male, we’re being silenced by our own men, and that’s the way it is in every conversation. They’re always questioning our motives.”

Sign of the Times, [Dread Scott](#), 2001

Scott: “This was designed in 1999 and printed in 2001. I did the first sketch after [Amadou Diallo](#) [shot by four plainclothes police in New York]. A poster of it is on display at Revolution Books in Manhattan, where someone recently tried to destroy it.

“I was also recently working on another project called [Wanted](#). In the midst of it, Eric Garner gets killed, and so a lot of the conversations began about that. The last day the project was public, in Harlem, word came in that [Mike Brown had been killed](#). We didn’t know who he was or where all of this was going to go. These murders have bracketed both of these projects.”

Funeral for Jose Luis Lebron, [Nina Berman](#), 1990



📷 Nina Berman: ‘for the families, it will remain as a shock and a loss.’ Photograph: Dumbo



Berman: “This picture was taken in 1991. I was photographing different scenes of violence in New York. It wasn’t just police violence, there were over 2,000 murders [annually] in New York then. But in the space of a week, two young people were killed by cops in Brooklyn. And I went to the funeral of this boy, [Jose Luis Lebron](#). He was being chased for having allegedly stolen \$10, and was shot by [officer Frank Albergo](#).”

“I wanted to include this photo so people can have an understanding that this isn’t new, what’s happening with [Eric Garner](#) and Akai Gurley and all the rest. With each new story, the older ones fall further from people’s memories. And yet for the families, they will always remain as a shock and a loss.”

Strange Fruit, [Rosetta DeBerardinis](#), 2011



📷 Strange Fruit. Photograph: Dumbo

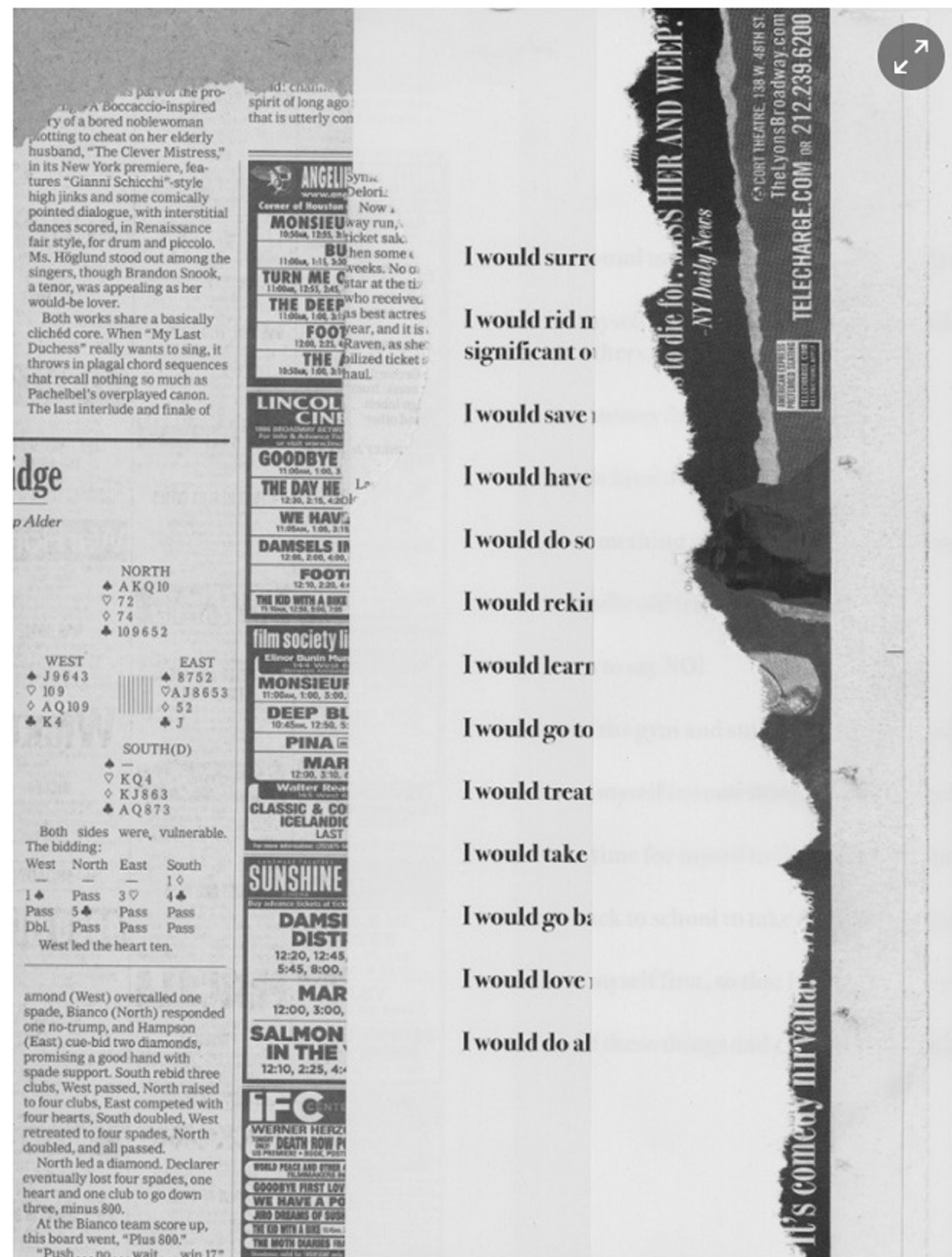
DeBerardinis: “When I was a senior at Vassar College, my boyfriend came to New York City to buy books and asked me to pick him up at the train station. He wasn’t there when I arrived. He called me a couple hours later. And he was crying, and he told me something bad had happened. His clothes were torn, his lip was busted. He was waiting for the train. He had a ticket. He wasn’t doing anything unlawful. And when he showed the police his Vassar ID, the cops said, ‘This nigger can read and write.’ Charlayne Hunter-Gault broke that [story](#) in the New York Times. He was sodomised.

“It changes your whole perception of justice, of the police. When I was a kid you went to the St Patrick’s Day Parade and you were taught to respect them. As you become older, you learn to fear them.

“When this show came, I wanted to respond. The noose, I wanted to make it beautiful, but I wanted to show the weakness of the noose at the bottom, because whatever their intention, it failed. It’s called Strange Fruit - [Billie Holiday did a song](#). It’s about the black people who were lynched from trees. This is kind of a modern-day lynching.”

Sims: "When word of this show came out, I was working on a series of paintings dealing with where and how often you see yourself in the world. I work with the same male's face, and it is placed in objects I can see myself in, or react to in some way. The piece is called Red Light, Green Light because that's the children's game we played, and he is the yellow light. He's the cautionary one, not knowing if he should stop or move forward. Like being cautionary while driving while black."

Affirmations for Living, [Steffani Jemison](#), 2013



📷 Affirmations for Living. Photograph: Dumbo



Jemison: "This work was created in response to the [murder of Derrion Albert](#), a Chicago-based high school student, in the fall of 2009. The reporting surrounding his death describes a text, [Affirmations for Living](#), that he kept next to his desk, to inspire him as he did his schoolwork. It was circulated informally as a kind of inspirational text, written from the perspective of an adult as a series of regrets. 'If I could, I would finish school.' What was poignant to me was that he kept this list of regrets that ended up never happening. He never lived long enough to not regret finishing school, or to not regret going to the gym often enough.

"Albert was killed a few months after a cousin of mine, [Gregory Robinson](#), who was 14, was killed in Chicago, when I was a graduate student. His murderer was never brought to justice. He was the 29th Chicago public school student to be killed that year.

“As I was helping think about the work for this show, I was thinking about the broader way in which the justice system fails black people, and also thinking about the resonance of the hashtag [#blacklivesmatter](#) - as it refers not only to the killings of black people that may be perpetrated by police, but also to the ways in which the loss of black lives fails to garner the same attention, outrage and justice as the broader community.”

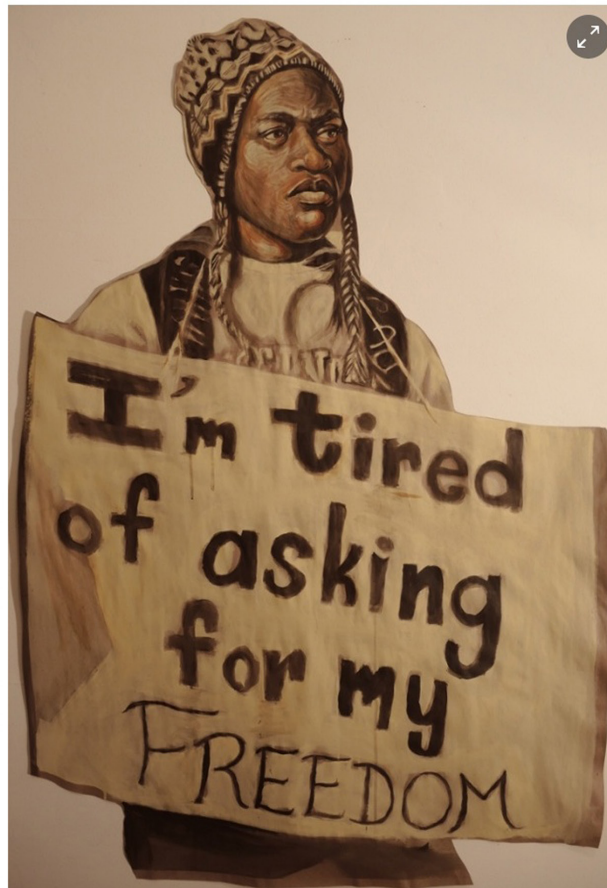
For Till (Quilt Collage #1), [Damien Davis](#), 2014



📷 Damien Davis, For Till (Quilt Collage #1). Photograph: Dumbo



Davis: “I had been thinking about quilting and collage. My mother was a home economics teacher, so I grew up in a house that had a lot of making things by hand, and that’s how I got involved in the arts. She also taught African American history, and we always had these books around, so that’s how I got interested in the intersections between American history and craft and slavery. The idea was to make a collage that utilises patterns that are contested to have been used in the underground railroad, but then also to create my own patterns that are inspired by the lives and deaths of these people. The first one is story of [Emmett Till](#) [a black 14-year-old killed in 1955 after flirting with a white woman], so there’s a stylised barn house, and a cotton gin fan, barbed wire.”



Imnopi's Freedom. Photograph: Dumbo



Imnopi: "This is just one in a series of paintings I've been making since August, when Mike Brown died. I'm a street artist, so primarily I've been making work on paper and wheatpasting it in doorways in Brooklyn. Interestingly, my practice has brought me to the actual people whose kids I've been painting. They've found me and then I've connected with those families, and it's been really meaningful to me to connect with them."

Hands Up, Don't Shoot!, **Joseph DeLappe**, 2014



Hands Up Don't Shoot. Photograph: handsupsdontshoot.tumblr.com/participate

De Lappe: "I was touched by the situation in [Ferguson](#), and in New York. A bunch of my work deals with violence, more often military violence. I had created a [rubber stamp this fall of a drone](#). I saw the bills have [this empty sky](#) and I always have drones on the brain. So I have 700 of those stamps in circulation.

"I just imagined people protesting in front of the White House on the \$20 bill. And it seemed like a way to carry on the sensibility of intervening on the money, and looking at how the economic system is wrapped up in all of this. I launched the "Hands Up" stamp project 8 December, and there are about a 100 of them out there. It's not illegal - I looked into that before starting. As long as you're not destroying the currency, you're OK. I like the sense of it as an entry-level activism gesture, people can do this screwball thing, and who knows what it will lead to.

"So, the connection between the drone and the 'Hands Up': the whole military doctrine of using overwhelming force has been carried over into our police departments. You look at the militarisation of our police forces by the Pentagon. Drones are becoming more used by our police forces for surveillance. I think it's all tied together."

● Respond is open at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn until 22 February.

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