

Breathe by Fawn Douglas

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Guests begin to fill the room as artist Sapira Cheuk is presenting the Passion Planners workshop at the Womxn of Color Arts Festival. It is one of the busiest events at the first annual Womxn of Color Arts Festival with organizers scrambling to find more tables and chairs to accommodate the overflow of attendees for Sapira's workshop. The room is filled with chatter, excitement and laughter. The energy is soothing to my soul like lit sage prayer offerings. The same vibrance of healing energy radiates from and within every sister I see. The first exercise begins setting the Passion Roadmap: we write down our lifetime goals, share our dreams, and clap and holler at our sisters' hopes for the future.

I stand to read mine aloud. Now, I feel I must recognize that words are powerful, anything spoken into the air can build or divide. Words can heal or break your heart. Once the words leave my tongue, there is no retraction, *I want to have my own community center, business, gallery, artist residencies!*

My hopes and dreams pierce an invocation into the room, lifted by the women that are present. After Grad school, of course, I think to myself. This still makes me laugh as I recall unleashing this dream that the Creator would move into fruition. This was the genesis to creating a monumental space.

Passion Planning was one of many events that our team had scheduled during what would be the last Festival of 2020 in Las Vegas before the pandemic. The WOCAF took shape on Thursday March 5 with an exhibition I curated, *Art of Us*, featuring work by UNLV Department of Art faculty and some BFA students, and WOCAF ended with a forum of Womxn of Color in the Arts at the Vegas Theatre on Sunday March 8, 2020.

Many of us were energized at the possibilities and connections that we were building around Womxn connecting through spoken word, storytelling, dance, forums, talking circles and other workshops in the arts. Why don't we do this more often?! We left the weekend full of gratitude to allies that opened their doors to this monumental experience. Soothing to my soul.

On March 12, 2020, Governor Sisolak declared a State of Emergency, as the COVID 19 pandemic reached the City of Las Vegas. The City shut down on March 17. We held our breath and our loved ones close as we faced the unknown. Masks became the new normal. Prayers were not only for the thousands of lives taken by the disease around the World, but for those close to home. Time had stopped and we were pushed to look within and rethink our daily lives, our places in time. It was also a time of civil unrest as the racist *Protagonist-in-Chief* was fueling hate groups across the nation with rhetoric of division amongst Americans.

During this tumultuous time, eight minutes and forty-six seconds would further change our world. On May 25, 2020, Officer Derek Chauvin held his knee down on a man's neck in

Minneapolis, Minnesota. The choke hold crushed his ability to breathe, eventually killing George Floyd. You could not look away. I could not look away but minutes into the video I held my breath, tears billow and I hit stop.

"I can't breathe...Please, Please, Please." cries George Floyd, pleading for his mother in his last breaths. A cry that every mother felt in her chest. "...Mom, love you. Love you. Tell my kids I love them. I'm dead."

Words have power, they can build or divide. Words are powerful and these last words breathed out shifted the World. They were the words of heartbreak. A recognition of what was at stake, as our communities across the world mourned the murder of not one but many people of color. Black and Brown bodies have been treated like they do not matter. We wiped our tears and rose with fists in the air to collectively say, No more! Black Lives Matter!

Protests against the injustices took place in every major city in America, and then around the World. Monuments that served as symbols of white supremacy were defaced and pulled down. Monuments that have honored the American legacy of murder, rape, and slavery are on the decline. Some of the monuments around the nation removed after George Floyd's murder include (but are not limited to) Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Christopher Columbus, and the UNLV "Indian Killer" Frontiersman mascot *Hey Reb*. These were just a few symbols that had been taken from public view. The Confederate Soldier mascot, Beauregard Wolf, was also removed from the floorboards of the Marjorie Barrick Museum of Fine Art at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Hundreds of monuments across the country have been removed to date. 2020 has been a test, a test of moral strength as we fight against two pandemics: COVID 19 and racism. Both are killers in our communities as we question our survival and how to build a better tomorrow.

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This year, we rebuild, facing challenges head on and building a solution to a just and equitable future in the arts. As monuments come down that honor white supremacy, what monuments will honor an equitable future for our communities? Monuments have power and can be a part of our cultural landscape. My arts advocacy has been directed towards protecting these types of cultural monuments like Gold Butte or Basin & Range and, most recently, the protection of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge which was granted protection from future military action on December 4th, 2020.

The words I breathed into space during the Womxn of Color Arts Festival moved into place like river water that could not be stopped. My partner and I have been working daily to create a space for our communities that strengthen cultural knowledge and identity through the arts and education as we seek other activist creatives who have been involved in social justice, community engagement, and wish to educate and uplift. We see a different way, we have agency, and are moving forward to decolonize at the cultural arts center that we create. What does a just and equitable future look like? We will be a model for it through the arts and

education. I am hopeful about the future, a future where we can breathe in a monumental space. A place of healing and renewal as we open our doors and hearts to another chapter of our collective story.

Fawn Douglas is an Indigenous American artist and enrolled member of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe. She also has roots in the Moapa Paiute, Southern Cheyenne, Creek and Pawnee tribes. She is dedicated to the intersections of art, activism, community, education, culture, identity, place and sovereignty. Within her art-making and activism, she tells stories in order to remember the past and also to ensure that the stories of Indigenous peoples are heard in the present. Her studio practice includes painting, weaving, sculpture, performance, activist art and humor. She is currently working on her Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). Through the MFA program, she serves as a graduate assistant and co-curates with an artist team, the Vegas Institute for Contemporary Engagement (V.I.C.E), which has been the catalyst for exhibitions, podcasts, interviews, performances and experimentation that makes space for marginalized artists in the Las Vegas community.

“My art draws me closer to my Nuwu (Nuwuvi) culture and identity. I have learned much through the lessons of our tribal elders and traveling to visit our ancestral lands and sacred sites in Southern Nevada. . .My art translates these oral traditions for the viewer. Many pieces operate as a filter that keeps the integrity of sacred information that my people hold dear, while allowing Nuwuvi culture to be shared with a broader audience.”

Fawn is a dedicated advocate for environmental conservation, including the designation of Nevada’s Gold Butte as a historic national monument and her participation in the #NoDAPL protests at the Standing Rock Sioux reservation. Notable actions also include (but are not limited to) the fight for tribal and rural communities to retain their water rights, Red Rock anti-desecration efforts, and protection of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.

As a survivor of sexual assault, Fawn's experience has given her the fire to speak up about women's rights and she has been a vocal advocate for #MMIW (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women). She continues to speak up for her sisters and is an active supporter of Our Bodies, Our Lands - the movement that recognizes the connection between protecting land, water and Indigenous people.