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Figure 1. Brandan "Bmike" Odums, Studio BE. Photo by Sarah Travis.

BE-ing Here

With Transformative Artist Brandan "Bmike" Odums

Sarah Travis

It was the afternoon of Friday, June 22, 2018, at Studio BE in New Orleans. A small crowd of about 30 people, including myself and my two children, gathered for a tour of the space—a site that has become a prime destination for international art tourists. Just blocks away is where the artist Brandan “Bmike” Odums, who is also giving the tour himself on this day, went to high school—New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. In recent years, Bmike has become one of the most renowned Black contemporary artists in the United States.

This visit is personal and professional, and it resonates with my work as an art educator, an art education researcher, and a parent. I began my career as an art educator in New Orleans Public Schools. My dissertation research focused on the sociocultural factors that shape the identity formation of young artists engaged in an art internship at a contemporary arts center in New Orleans. I am also the (White) mother of two Black children, one of whom is an emerging artist. During this visit, one of the photographs I took was of my daughter, who was 8 years old at the time, standing in front of the mural of a girl that is painted on the exterior of Studio BE (Figure 1), the image provoking messages of beauty and power.

This instructional resource focuses on the work of artist Brandan “Bmike” Odums. Bmike is a Black American “artist, activist, mentor” (Bmike, n.d., sec. 1) from New Orleans whose work provokes transformations of spaces, objects, individuals, and communities. This instructional resource provides descriptive and interpretive explorations of key artistic interventions conceived

and implemented by Bmike, including Project BE, Exhibit BE, and Studio BE, as well as the museum exhibition **NOT** Supposed 2-BE Here. In addition, inspired by Bmike’s artistic interventions, art educators are also offered provocations for guiding their students toward creating art for social transformation.

Project BE

Bmike rose to recognition as an artist with Project BE (2013), created in the abandoned Florida public housing development located in the 9th Ward of New Orleans, an area of the city that was devastated during Hurricane Katrina and sat in decaying ruin in the years that followed. Within these spaces, Bmike spray-painted portraits and quotes of important figures of Black history, including Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Figures 2–4). This intervention marked Bmike’s first large-scale art installation, and although this work was, as Bmike writes on his website, “an illegal art experience” (Bmike, n.d., “Project BE” section), it became a significant work of art that engaged artists and other community members from across New Orleans. While the sites of this artistic intervention were eventually demolished, the impacts propelled Bmike on “this amazing path understanding the transforming power of Art” (Bmike, n.d., “Project BE” section) that has continued to this day.

Exhibit BE

Exhibit BE (2014) was an artistic intervention at DeGaulle Manor, a public housing development located in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans that had been abandoned in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Figure 5). In this work, Bmike began by painting in this space on his own and, as he describes it: “One day while painting, the owner of the property stumbled

Figure 2. Brandan “Bmike” Odums, Project BE. Courtesy of Studio BE. Photo by Patrick Melon.





Figure 3. Brandan "Bmike" Odums, Project BE.
Courtesy of Studio BE. Photo by Patrick Melon.



Figure 4. Brandan "Bmike" Odums,
Project BE. Courtesy of Studio BE.
Photo by Patrick Melon.



Figure 5. Brandan "Bmike" Odums, Exhibit BE. Courtesy of Studio BE. Photo by Sean Ambrose.





Figure 6. Brandon "Bmike" Odums, Exhibit BE. Courtesy of Studio BE. Photo by Sean Ambrose.



Figure 7. Brandon "Bmike" Odums, Exhibit BE. Courtesy of Studio BE. Photo by Sean Ambrose.



Figure 8. Brandon “Bmike” Odums, Studio BE. Photo by Sarah Travis.

upon me, in that exchange I talked my way into permission to temporarily transform the property and invite the public, Exhibit BE was born” (Bmike, n.d., “Exhibit BE” section). Bmike worked collaboratively with 35 street artists to transform the structures into a work of art, with images and text provoking contemplation and action toward social transformation (Figures 6 and 7). Although the structures still stand to this day, they are in complete ruin. Yet in the first 3 months after the work was completed, Exhibit BE attracted over 30,000 visitors (Bmike, n.d.) and helped

establish Bmike as a leader in creating opportunities for collective transformation through art in New Orleans and beyond (NOLA.com, 2014).

Studio BE

Studio BE (2016–ongoing), the third part of the BE trilogy, is located within a 35,000-square-foot warehouse in the Bywater neighborhood in the 9th Ward of New Orleans. Although Bmike had already completed Project BE and Exhibit BE, Studio BE



Figure 9. Brandon "Bmike" Odums, Studio BE. Courtesy of Studio BE.



Figure 10. Brandon "Bmike" Odums, Studio BE. Photo by Sarah Travis.



Figure 11. Installation view of Brandon “Bmike” Odums: *NOT Supposed 2-BE Here*, January 18–December 12, 2020. From left to right: Brandon “Bmike” Odums. Malcolm X 2XL, Sidney Poitier 2XL, Cornel West 2XL, W.E.B. DuBois 4XL, Gordon Parks 4XL, 2005–2006, hand-painted acrylic on cotton shirts; *Family Tree*, 2020, acrylic and spray paint on canvas; *Collectible Item*, 2020, 3d-printed powder; *I Am Because We Are*, 2020, a collaboration with Be Light, acrylic paint on aluminum spray paint cans; assorted collages and sketches, 2016–2019, ink, paper cut outs, gold leaf. Courtesy of Studio BE and Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University. Photo by Jeffery Johnston.

became the site of his “first solo show” (Bmike, n.d., “Studio BE” section): *Ephemeral Eternal*, an exhibition that remains open to this day, with visitors from all over the world touring the space (Figure 8). The show includes remnants and references to Project BE and Exhibit BE, as well as massive portraits of Black Americans—both well-known figures like Malcolm X and everyday people of New Orleans—with accompanying text, such as “I Am My Ancestors’ Wildest Dreams” (Figure 9). Studio BE has become a symbol of the resilience of humanity, as Bmike states in a video for *Visit New Orleans* (2018): “It’s a space the allows large-scale murals all done with spray paint to exist on wall after wall, and it all tells a story [about] what it means to be human” (1:19). Within

the interior of Studio BE, there is an installation framed by the text, “You Are Still Here,” an ode to the resilience of the people of New Orleans who have remained firmly located in the city even after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and other related challenges to survival within the city (Figure 10). Hence, while situated within the local community of New Orleans, the exhibition also serves as a reminder to all who encounter the work that we belong here; each of us is part of a shared human experience.

NOT Supposed 2-BE Here

In 2020, Brandon “Bmike” Odums had his first solo museum exhibition at Newcomb Art Museum at Tulane University, titled *NOT Supposed 2-BE Here*. However, he *is* here. *NOT Supposed 2-BE Here* is a show that builds on Bmike’s previous work to create an exhibition that challenges notions of what is considered acceptable within spaces of an art museum. *Where Do You Belong?* includes a series of painted portraits of Black Americans, dominating the wall space, filling it from the floor to the ceiling as a visual and conceptual reference to the salon-style exhibitions of the 18th-century French Academy (Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane, n.d.), under the graffiti tag, “Why Are You Here?” (Figure 11). *Family Tree* (2020), which features a Black child being carried by his ancestors, is so large that it overlaps the molding on the wall, directly commenting on the limitations of the space and yet still situated within the museum (Figure 12). *The Adventures of Black*

People is an interactive painting modeled after a comic book, where visitors are invited to take photographs with the speech bubbles with various quotes from prominent African Americans, including a quote from the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass: “I prayed for freedom for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs” and “But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright,” a lyric from the song “Alright” by Kendrick Lamar that became an anthem of the Black Lives Matter movement beginning in 2015 (Figure 13). All this work speaks the message: You *are* supposed to be here.

The Artist as Alchemist: Pedagogical Provocations for Transformation Through Art

Brandan “Bmike” Odums has considered his work as “alchemy”—a process of transforming raw materials into gold (The Art Assignment, 2015). The artist, as an alchemist, transforms the forgotten, the neglected, the discarded places, objects, individuals, and communities into works of beauty. In addition to being an artist, Bmike has a deep commitment to art education, acknowledging how educational contexts, while often reinforcing

oppressive forces, also contain potential for liberatory ways of being and acting in the world. Bmike has long been mentoring young and emerging Black artists in New Orleans, and in recent years, he created the nonprofit organization Eternal Seeds. Eternal Seeds offers a variety of forms of support and mentoring, including fellowships for teaching artists and a mentoring program for teen artists. Inspired by Bmike’s commitment to art education and my ideas about how his work might ignite transformation in art education spaces, I offer a series of artistic provocations: Transformation of a Space, Transformation of an Object, Transformation of an Individual, and Transformation of a Community.

Transformation of a Space:

How Can a Space Be Transformed Through Art?

Bmike’s work often involves the transformation of a space, whether it is an abandoned apartment building or a university art museum, through art. Imagine that you have been invited to curate the transformation of a space. What space would you like to transform? What purpose would you like this space to serve? What

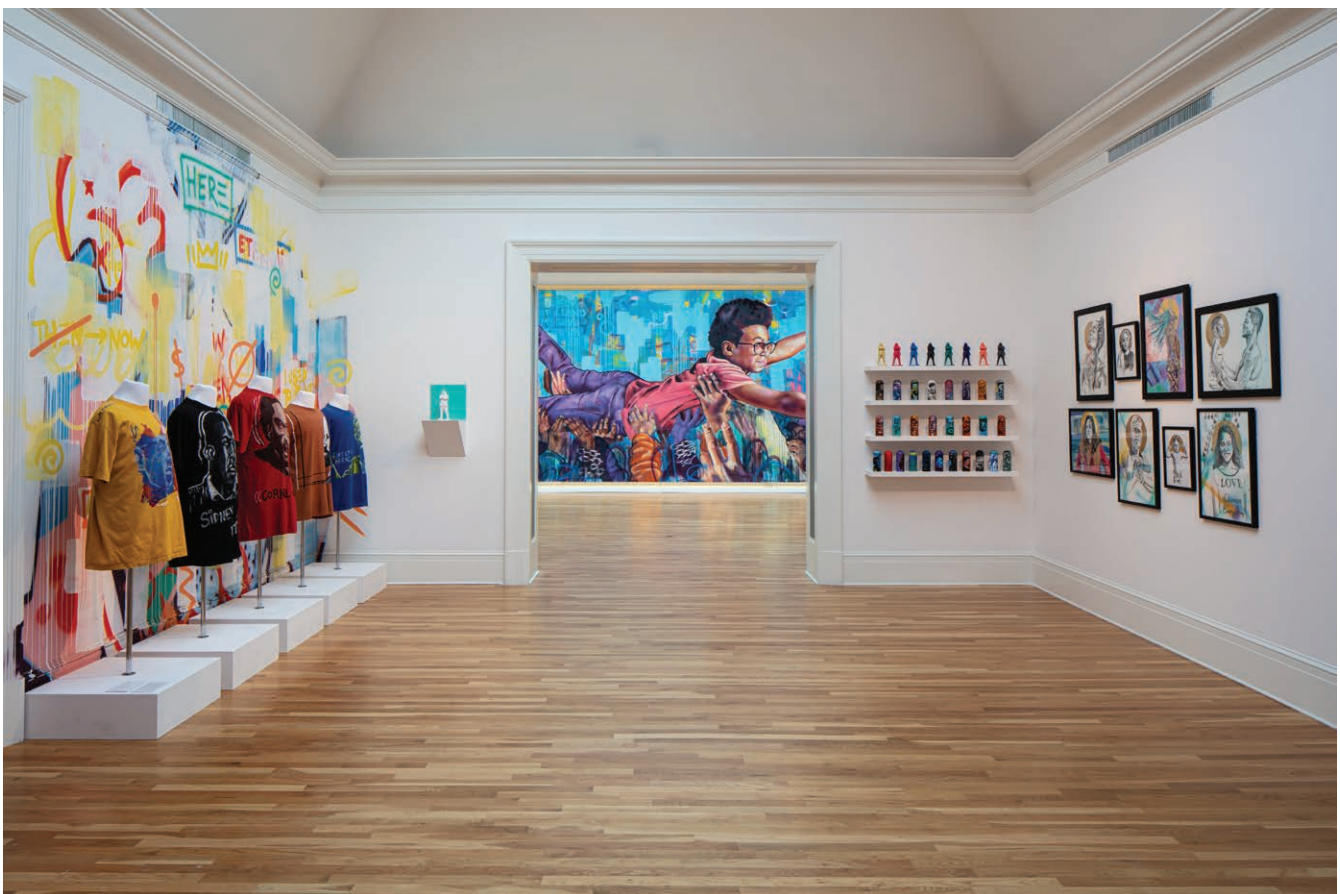


Figure 12. Installation view of Brandan “Bmike” Odums: *NØT Supposed 2-BE Here*, January 18–December 12, 2020. From left to right: Brandan “Bmike” Odums. *Detail of Black Joy*, 2019, diptych, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, artificial flowers; *They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds*, 2020, plaster acrylic, artificial moss and flowers, wood, foam; *Where do you belong?*, 2020, acrylic and spray paint on canvas in custom frames. Courtesy of Studio BE and Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University. Photo by Jeffery Johnston.



THEY CAN MOVE
MOUNTAINS WITH
OUT FLEXING A
BICEP!

BUT IF GOD
GOT US THEN
**WE GON' BE
ALRIGHT!**





Figure 13. Installation view of Brandon "Bmike" Odums: *NOT Supposed 2-Be Here*, January 18–December 12, 2020. From left to right: Brandon "Bmike" Odums. *The Adventures of Black People (When Push Comes to Shove)*, 2020, acrylic and spray paint on canvas, wood; *Land Mines Be Disguised as Welcome Signs*, 2020, mixed media installation with plaster and 3d printed plastic. Courtesy of Studio BE and Newcomb Art Museum of Tulane University. Photo by Jeffery Johnston.



Figure 14. Brandon “Bmike” Odums and Rick Williams, “They Tried to Bury Us, They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds.” Courtesy of Studio BE.

materials and tools would you use to transform this space? What will you do with these materials and tools to transform this space? Who will you invite into this space? What could you do in this newly transformed space?

Transformation of an Object:

How Can an Object Be Transformed Through Art?

Bmike discusses art’s transformative power through a single object’s specificity. In a video for The Art Assignment (2015), he invites us to “be an artistic alchemist to transform an object into

something else” (3:19). He invites us to “think about what that story is behind that object. How did it get in your hands? Where did it start from, and how did it get to where it is now? Or try to think about how you can transform it into something that’s now valuable” (The Art Assignment, 2015, 3:37). Look around you: in your home, in your school, in your neighborhood, and pick up an object that has been neglected, overlooked, or forgotten. How could you transform this object into something special, cared for, and valued?



**Transformation of an Individual:
How Can an Individual Be Transformed Through Art?**

Bmike's work speaks to ever-present questions of identity and how creative work can transform individuals. His work prompts consideration of questions, such as: Who am I? How have my life experiences shaped who I am? How have aspects of my identity informed how I perceive and interact with others? How can I transform myself? How can I, as an individual, transform the

world? How can art help us transform ourselves and our world? Create a work of art representing your own experiences and consider how they have transformed you.

**Transformation of a Community:
How Can a Community Be Transformed Through Art?**

Bmike's work documents the resilience of oppressed people in the local community of New Orleans, and in communities around the world. Think of a community of which you are a part. Where is your community located? Who is part of your community? How do you participate in this community? How does your community make you feel? How can you keep your community strong? You are invited to observe and document this community through a work of art.

Conclusions

Several of Bmike's works of art refer to the quote attributed to the author Dinos Christianopoulos and often taken up by activists against oppression: "They tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds" (Figure 14). Through his work as an "artist, activist, mentor," Bmike (n.d., sec. 1) has emerged as a transformative arts leader whose work inspires action to show how art and art education can transform spaces, objects, individuals, and communities. I invite art educators to embrace Bmike's creative spirit of action and continue to spread these "eternal seeds" so they can continue to grow, blossom, and flourish. ■

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