

Why Won't This Country Love Me Back? Sean Maxwell at Granny's Chandelier

Sean Maxwell in conversation with Ashley Cook

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Why Won't This Country Love Me Back? © Sean Maxwell

For those who are aware and conscious, this is not a new conversation. The title of this exhibition by Sean Maxwell at Granny's Chandelier (October 16th - November 10th) points unapologetically to a discourse that is fundamental to the development of the "free world" that we call the USA; this discourse I am talking about is one that has been sustained by and for the voices of those who believe we can do better, for centuries. Despite this discourse remaining consistent, being continuously expanded by a broad range of activists including protesters, philosophers, educators, artists, writers, thinkers, theorists, historians, it has always remained in the periphery, with those who felt inconvenienced by it able to just turn the page, change the channel, look the other way. The title of this exhibition rings a particular bell though, of a new phenomenon of our American reality, where this discourse has made its way into popular culture, consumer capitalism and the sports arena. This confrontation prevents the blind eye, and overtime it is possible that those not looking will look, and as they look, they may begin to see.

"I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually."¹

While intentionally referencing this quote by James Baldwin, the title of this exhibition also unintentionally mimics the words of Doc Rivers in a recent post-game interview as he responds to the police shooting of Jacob Blake:

"You know, what stands out to me is just watching the Republican Convention and they're spewing this fear, right? Like, you hear Donald Trump and all of them talking about fear...[but] we're the ones getting killed, we're the ones getting shot. We're the ones that were denied to live in certain communities. We've been hung, we've been shot, and all you do is keep hearing about fear. It's amazing why we keep loving this country, and this country does not love us back."²

This complex problem did not begin with Donald Trump though, and will definitely not end with the election of Joe Biden. As Black Lives Matter continues to seep into the blood of our everyday lifestyles, entertainment sources and consumer goods, complacency will become more and more difficult to sustain, and with passion on either side of the aisle, some will prefer to fall back into the violent history of our ancestors while others will strive to move forward towards imagining a new kind of world. To move forward though, we must reckon with the realities of the past and present, and talk openly about them.



Why Won't This Country Love Me Back? © Sean Maxwell

Reflecting on the realities of our history and contemporary life, there are infinite depths to reach as we work to unpack *why* and *how* the oppression of the Black voice and culture has been sustained through generations for hundreds of years in this country. Perhaps it is rooted in the “purification” and “indoctrination” process that began in the early 1900’s by the European Colonialists of the United States. After all, they did go to great lengths to break the Native American people from their native heritage and “civilize” them. It is a fact that the modern colonialist attitude was strict and unforgiving; indoctrinate or be challenged. And this coin is multifaceted as this “indoctrination” effort was and still is continually forced through the incessant vetting of anything “other” than Euro-American White culture.

It is obvious that White Supremacy has never actually truly come to terms with the fact that Black folks are no longer property to manipulate or control. It is as if it still hasn’t gotten over the fact that after the abolition of slavery in 1865, freed slaves did not naturally assume the culture of the White population, and instead, began to build and develop their own way of praying, dressing, speaking, singing, etc...Could it be that this very offense is a conscious or unconscious reason why White power continues to try and force the Black-American population to present themselves as if they were also White?

We all certainly have witnessed some sad attempts to dictate every facet of their lives and bodies, from trying to enforce how they cut and style their hair, to forcing them to wear certain kinds of clothes and not others, speak a certain way, walk a certain way, with the non-compliant reliably being pushed into the margins.³⁻⁴ This attempt is upheld by the incessant invention of meaning behind the symbols of Black culture, implemented by those at the top, or in the media, who, in most cases, misunderstand and misrepresent these symbols and the cultures the symbols belong to.

We need to stop this practice of obscuring the meaning of symbols that do not belong to us; this practice is killing the people to which those symbols belong. Offering platforms to speak about the history of various cultural symbols spoken from the mouths of those who inherited them from their ancestors is a start. We can in turn learn directly from the source in order to set these symbols free again, allowing them to be accepted and appreciated as important details to the lives of so many people.



Self Portrait 2020 Digital Art, Charcoal, Water Color, Coffee, Hair
© Sean Maxwell



Self Portrait 2020 (Detail) Digital Art, Charcoal, Water Color, Coffee, Hair
© Sean Maxwell

Why Won't This Country Love Me Back? presents a body of work that was created after the artist returned from an extended stay in Southeast Asia from 2017-2018. "Leaving the country and returning back highlighted the urgency of many social issues, including the climate crisis, it's connection to environmental racism and how it is used to keep marginalized communities oppressed. Returning home was also a blunt reminder of the Black and Brown experience here in the USA as it contrasted to what I experienced in these other places around the world."

Maxwell had chosen to incorporate many different materials, utilizing what was around him to communicate his perspective, thoughts and feelings about the issues of race in the US. With the central component of the show being the durag, the works bring up the conversation about the widespread oppression and control of symbols that represent Black culture in the United States.

"There have been many moments over the past couple of decades when the durag has been not-welcomed, misconstrued and demonized. One example I can think of is with the NBA dress code that started being implemented in 2005 when 'NBA commissioner David Stern spoke out for the first time on the specifics of the league's new off-the-court dress code...which, among other things, require injured players seated on the bench to wear a sports jacket and outlaw chains, pendants or medallions over the player's clothes while on team or league business'. This dress code also banned durags on and off the court."^{5,6}

"From the outside, we hear that the durag is seen to be 'unprofessional', associated with 'Hip-Hop' and a 'thug-lifestyle', when in reality, to us, it is a garment meant to empower us and also to preserve and maintain our crown, to keep our braids in place, to get those 360s on point, to keep our hair from knotting while we sleep. It has even come to be a fashion accessory for a night-out. It is a delicate soft cloth that has been ingrained into Black American culture since 1979 when it was invented by Mr. Dowdy as part of a hair grooming kit."^{7,8}



Climbing To... Durags, Concrete © Sean Maxwell



Climbing To... (Detail) Durags, Concrete © Sean Maxwell

To touch on this issue, the artist uses concrete poured into the durag, seamlessly joining the historical relevance of the two to create a new symbol. In conversation with the artist, they point out the relevance of concrete as “a representation of the toughness of the streets, the urban jungle, while also highlighting the fact that concrete is true sign of colonization which always leads to the implementation of imperialism on countries of lesser power, and the country’s people...As a Black man in this country, it is impossible to ignore the efforts of White power to place rules and regulations on the cultures of marginalized people, pushing them into the shadows through the invention of meaning that skews the perception of reality for those outside as well as inside of the target.”

Specifically choosing the colors black, red and blue, these sculptures reflect the country’s flag and are installed in three different ways throughout the exhibition space: with the domes of the durags hanging upside down, laying in a pile on the ground, and stacked almost totemically in the corner, facing upwards, some even seeming as if they are floating.



Climbing To... (Detail) Durags, Concrete © Sean Maxwell



Weight Detail Durags, Concrete © Sean Maxwell

While some accentuate the heaviness of these lifeless sculptural bodies through the pulling down, or the piling up, the other stacked/floating forms allow the viewer to study more closely the details of the dome, as if looking at actual skulls, scalps or brains. Visually, they mimic the tops of heads, brains with veins, as the thinness of the durag is overtaken by the concrete, thin like skin or outer layer of brain tissue.



Weight (Detail) Durags, Concrete © Sean Maxwell



Protector Durags, Concrete, Letter to my Older Self © Sean Maxwell

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Sean Maxwell at Granny's Chandelier

Protector hides a letter underneath, a letter that the artist wrote to his future self, “not as a manifestation, but as a checking-in with my future self, wishing my future self well.” Perhaps unintentionally, the act of writing a letter to our future selves calls us to recognize the mortality of our physical presence here. It seems to be an automatic assumption that we will indeed live a nice long life, that one day in the distant future, we will be able to open the letter that we wrote today. As we have seen however, this is not a guarantee to many of us, particularly those who exist in the margins. As we witness the unnecessary and way too early death of so many Black Americans by the choices of those in power, whether through direct brutality or incessant neglect, we begin to realize that for them, life is so much more precious, and vulnerable.



Growth Screen Print on White Tee © Sean Maxwell

The image present on the flyer is represented in the show on a t-shirt surrounded by a black frame. In an effort to deconstruct the image, one cannot look past the presence of the foot at the bottom right side of the composition, attached to a person who is laying in the garden. Given the nature of the rest of the work, the visibility of just the foot may also trigger thoughts of a lifeless body, even serving as a memorial to the countless Black Americans that have been lynched or in other ways have fallen victim to police violence, systemic racism and White Supremacy. Contrasting with the beautiful lively flowers, there is a grim reality setting the stage, one that seems to overlook the pain and struggles, and asks us to instead, just smell the roses. The blue and red durag sculptures make an appearance as well in this image, piled on the ground like the organs of the body just before it. This image successfully sets the tone of the show for the viewer to walk into, doing well to prepare them to consume the work with a hint of guidance.

“This is a garden I grew and maintained over the summer. Back in March, when Covid-19 first came and changed our lives forever, and the economy shut down, I was furloughed from my job with no answers. This beautiful garden was where I spent a decent part of my day, and certainly every morning during the furlough. Coffee, thinking, reading, meditation, listening to birds, making art, it all constantly took place in this garden during the pandemic. I can confidently say it guided me through some of the darker days...I chose to put this image on a white t-shirt because the shirt, as well as the image, symbolize growth for me. For almost 3 years, I only wore white t-shirts. For me, at the time, it was about cutting down on my own consumerist behaviors. Thinking about the ‘wants’ versus the ‘needs’ in my life. So with that, fashion was the first to go and I started wearing white t-shirts everyday. It almost became part of my identity, and eventually I became uncomfortable with that too.”



Growth Screen Print on White Tee © Sean Maxwell

“In terms of the white t hanging over the black picture frame, I was experimenting with ideas of framing objects, and what that even means...there are many reasons to frame something, probably the most common is to preserve. In contrast with *Self Portrait 2020* which was installed directly across the gallery, I wanted these pieces to talk to each other; a coffee stained, tattered, and frameless, next to it, a ‘refined’ image of the same portrait in an elegant gold frame, and across the gallery, the white T titled *Growth*. You see it hanging proud, naturally waving outside of the black frame, assuming its own sense of freedom, gently blowing in the wind as the gallery door opens and closes.”

Sean Maxwell is a Detroit based sculptor whose work often times reflects themes of unrest. He received his Bachelor Degree in Fine Art from College for Creative Studies in 2014. During the day he is employed at General Motors as a creative clay sculptor in Cadillac design studio. Sean is also invested in movement orgs such as the Black and Brown Alliance and Sunrise Movement. Both organizations work to combat social injustices and environmental racism.

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