Welcome!

Dear Educators,

We are thankful for you to join us, as the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) brings you the work of local artist and icon, Robert O’Neal on the lower second floor gallery from April 28, 2023 – September 24, 2023.

Born across the river in Covington, “The Mayor of OTR” came to prominence during the civil rights era where he made his mark as a local activist and man of the people. O’Neal focused his political career on advocating for equitable services and legislation for people with disabilities and the homeless, in addition to the ongoing fight for civil rights and fair housing issues that affected the Black Cincinnati community. While he had a reputation as a teaching artist, the depth and breadth of his artistic talent wasn’t fully recognized until after his death. As the first major survey on the artist, the pieces in the exhibit are a small fraction of over 300 works on canvas and hundreds more sketches on loose paper, still in the process of being recorded and archived.

We hope that with the support of the connections and lessons in this guide that you can be inspired by the collaborative spirits of community and love that is celebrated in O’Neal’s artwork and legacy.

Enjoy!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGES</th>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 3 - 4 | Introduction to Robert O’Neal  
  - About the artist  
  - About the work  
  - Quotes |
| 5     | Vocabulary and Themes |
| 6 - 8 | CAC Overview & Tour Policy  
  - About the CAC  
  - About the building  
  - Rules and Guidelines  
  - Accessibility Information |
| 9 - 10 | Discussion Ideas |
| 11 - 12 | Lesson Plan Ideas |
| 13 - 28 | Artwork and information |
| 29 - 32 | Resources |
| 33     | Learning standards |
About the Artist: Robert O’Neal

- Alumni of Withrow High School. As a junior studying photography, he earned a scholarship to the Art Academy of Cincinnati.
- A photographer and visual artist who graduated from the William Gebhardt School of Commercial Art and Photography, which later became Antonelli College, located downtown at 124 E. Seventh St.
- An artist and community activist who headed the Culture and Recreation Task Force of the Model Cities Program in Cincinnati, part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty.
- Owned and operated the New American Art Gallery at 1432 Main Street in Over-the-Rhine, starting in September 1968. In 1969, Cincinnati Mayor Eugene Ruehlmann proclaimed the week of May 11th as “United Self Expressionist Week” in honor of O’Neal’s “US” (United Self Expressionists) group which provided exhibitions, support, and free children’s art classes out of the gallery.
- One of the founders of the Arts Consortium of Cincinnati (1972), a now-closed West End community center.
- For a time, he taught art classes at Nast Trinity United Methodist Church (1203 Vine Street) in Over-the-Rhine, opening them to anyone who walked in the door, including the homeless and those suffering from mental disabilities.
- Died: Dec. 20, 2018, at age 78.

About O’Neal’s Work

- This show is the first major survey on the artist. The gallery features an array of paintings, drawings, prints, and photographs produced between the 1960s-2010s, in addition to archival materials. This is a long overdue retrospective examining “The Over-the-Rhine Mayor” Robert O’Neal’s critical contributions to Cincinnati.
- “For as long as I can remember, Todd [brother] and Robert have been out there ministering to people,” says Rosetta Allison of Corryville, a volunteer at Robert’s studio. “Todd’s just come from the pulpit. Robert’s pulpit is his art.” (Inspiring lives, one or two at a time, July 29, 1995, Cincinnati Enquirer)
Quotes

“I had to give up my apartment in Avondale because of urban renewal. So instead of opening a studio, I called it a gallery.” (Cincinnati Enquirer, 1968)

“The more you get people involved, the more you get people together.” (Cincinnati Enquirer, 1968)

“My concern is art, not color.” (Cincinnati Enquirer, 1968)

“The only way to build a community is to stabilize a community. The only way is to have people live here who love it here.”

“Giving is a part of my art. There’s art in communicating with people. To be able to get people together, that’s art to me.”

“I work with the arts, and I work in the community. And art is, after all, the feelings and emotions of the community.”

“We need a whole lot of little efforts. We need centers like these in all the neighborhoods. We need people who aren’t looking for big budgets, big staff...We’re still better off than most of the cities, but we have to work harder. Our young people need jobs. They need training. In the evening, what’s available for kids in the inner city? In other neighborhoods, they’ve got air conditioning, they’ve got lawns to sit on. In the city, they’ve got nothing.” (Cincinnati Enquirer, 1995)

My dad loved to paint faces and became known as The Master Face Painter and professionalized it so much so that he employed people who would paint faces at parties, festivals, or local events. They would get paid anywhere from $25 - $100 an hour to paint faces. He hated glitter, didn’t like templates, and wouldn’t allow his painters to look at photos or reference images while they painted. He said he wanted to help people see who they were on the inside. - Toilynn O’Neal Turner, Artist Talk, Contemporary Arts Center, 5.18.2023

His activism was very direct. He wanted people to have resources to take care of themselves. His Vine Street center was “undercover” because conversations that happened during the art making gave him information he needed to get them resources. SNCC and the Black Panthers met at his first gallery on Main Street. The art was just the door. - Toilynn O’Neal Turner, Artist Talk, Contemporary Arts Center, 5.18.2023
Themes

*Role of the artist*: Consider what roles the artist plays—activist, communicator, storyteller, historian,

*Path of the artist*: Consider the artist’s styles and modes of expression, experimentation and choices

*Celebration of Black culture*: O’Neal focused on inclusion and belonging and also celebrated the joy and beauty found in Black culture

*Activism and advocacy*: O’Neal focused strongly on the community and was an advocate for the marginalized (Blacks, unhoused, those with disabilities), worked against gentrification and for artists and expression
ABOUT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

In 1939, Betty Pollak Rauh, Peggy Frank Crawford and Rita Rentschler Cushman took the advice of Edward M.M. Warburg, the founding father of the American Ballet and a founder of the Museum of Modern Art. He suggested that rather than stress about finding non-existent art jobs in New York, “Why not starting something in Cincinnati? Plenty of room there. If you decide to try, come and see me and I’ll help you.”

By August of that year, Peggy Frank Crawford, Betty Pollack and Rita Rentschler raised $5000 (about $93,000 today) and created the Modern Art Society (MAS). For almost a year their “office” consisted of a letter file and a portable typewriter set up in one or another living room. Within a few years, the MAS had exhibited Renoir, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Beckman, Klee and many more in the lower levels of the Cincinnati Art Museum. In 1952, the MAS changed their name to the Contemporary Arts Center and in 1964 they earned a space of their own in downtown Cincinnati. In 2003, the CAC moved into the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The NY Times called the structure, “the best new building since the Cold War.”

The Contemporary Arts Center is a non-collecting institution, meaning there is no permanent collection. All exhibitions are borrowed from artists, collectors and other art galleries and institutions. We strive to create exhibitions that allow visitors to “open their minds” to the arts, and to the dialogue that can be had when viewing contemporary art. We believe that art and the creative process belong to all people and that contemporary artists are an important part of how we see and interact with our world today.

ABOUT THE LOIS & RICHARD ROSENTHAL CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY ARTS

In the late 1990s, after acquiring the lot on which the Contemporary Arts Center now sits, a committee narrowed a field of over 300 architects chose to design the building—first to 97, then to 12 and finally 3 of the most exciting designers working in the world today. From them, a unanimous choice emerged: Baghdad-born, London-trained Zaha Hadid.

The decision was in keeping with the CAC’s 60-year history of promoting the new. Though Hadid had been the subject of adulation, study and controversy, her work exhibited at major museums with international critical acclaim, she had only
completed two freestanding structures during her career. As a largely untested inventor, a woman and an Arabic Muslim, Hadid had not found the construction world easy to enter. This renowned building is Hadid’s first American building, and is the first American museum building designed by a woman. Groundbreaking took place in May 2001 and the new Center opened to rave reviews on May 31, 2003. The seven-story, 82,265 square-foot Contemporary Arts Center is named the Lois & Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art after the CAC’s former Chairman of the Board and the most generous contributor to the new building. It sits on a narrow 11,000-square-foot footprint, and includes a 2,366-square-foot black box performance space.

Born in Iraq in 1950, Hadid received her degree in mathematics from the American University in Beirut and studied at the Architectural Association in London where she won the Diploma Prize in 1977. Upon graduation, Hadid became a partner at the Office of Metropolitan Architecture where she worked with influential architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis. Establishing her own practice in London in 1979, she soon gained international attention with her groundbreaking plan for the Peak International Design Competition for Hong Kong in 1983. In 2004, she became the first female recipient of the Pritzker Architecture Prize, which is the equivalent to the Nobel Prize for Architecture. In 2008, she was listed as one of Forbes Magazine’s “100 Most Powerful Women,” and in 2010, Time Magazine named her one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World,” and UNESCO Artist for Peace. She was awarded the Stirling Prize for Architecture in 2010 and 2011. In 2012, Hadid was awarded Damehood by Queen Elizabeth II. And, in 2015, she received the Royal Gold Medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects. Hadid died in 2016.
RULES AND GUIDELINES

• Visitor admission and school tours are free at the Contemporary Arts Center.
• We require that must be a chaperone for every 5 students under the age of 18 for self-guided groups. For docent-led tours, the required ratio is 1 to 10 for students through grade 5 and 1 to 15 for students grades 6-12.
• No backpacks, coats or lunches are permitted in the galleries, but personal belongings may be stored in the large bins or lockers we have available. Instructors may keep any emergency bags and purses with them.
• Currently photography is permitted in all areas of the museum. The CAC encourages you to post photos to various social media sites using @CincyCAC and #CincyCAC.
• Pens are not permitted in the gallery spaces. Pencils are available for use at the front desk.
• Walk throughout all galleries—no running, climbing, or roughhousing. If visiting with students under 18 please provide guidance and supervision.

ACCESSIBILITY INFORMATION

• Our facility is ADA compliant and we will make every effort to provide accommodations when requested.
• Hearing protection is available upon request.
• Fidgets are available upon request.
• Sensory maps and social stories are available upon request.
• Large text is available upon request.
• Two quiet spaces are available—the Lower Level Lobby and on the 6th floor.
• For further inquiries or requests, please contact Shawnee Turner at sturner@cincycac.org
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These discussions are recommended prior to viewing:

• Who are we and how are we connected to our neighborhood? To our world?

• What role does our community have in shaping our identity? How would you define community? Where do you find your community? Is it where you were born or somewhere else?
  o How do you make a community? What do you need?
  o What parts of a community can you see? Is there a part of community that you can’t see?
  o What communities are you a part of?

• What is the role of the artist in society?

• What does it mean to be a socially-engaged artist?

• What does the word “activism” mean to you? When you hear the word “activist,” what do you think it means? What types of images do you associate with these words?

• Have you done anything considered “activist” in your life? What did you do and what obstacles or challenges did you face during the process?

• Can artwork (or music, or a film, or a piece of writing) be considered “activist” if activism was not the artist’s intent?

These discussions are recommended during or after viewing:

• How does the artist communicate his/her identity through the artwork?

• How did O’Neal exemplify these values before socially-engaged artists were more well-known?

• As humans, we are biologically drawn to create connections to faces. What connections can you make to the people O’Neal paints? What can you learn about them?

• As you move through the exhibition and learn more about O’Neal’s career, what impressions do you get about how his style changed and why?

• Jazz had an undeniable influence on O’Neal’s work. Where do you see that influence? How would you describe it?
• How is protest a kind of performance and what is the role of photography during these protests and afterward?

• Local artist Cedric Cox says of O'Neal’s legacy, “It’s not just about the art making; it’s that making the art brings people together,” What values does O'Neal’s work invite us to think about? Are they your values? Are the values shared by your family? School? Community?

• In what ways are the issues and conversations in O'Neal’s art and activism alive today?

• Thinking about the themes and ideas expressed in O'Neal's artwork and activism, ask students to complete the following sentences: I used to think _______, but now I think____.
LESSON PLAN PROMPTS

Using a shared map of Cincinnati or your school’s city, students will participate in a one-on-one interview activity with each other, then turn the outcomes of that conversation into a piece of visual art that reflects the connections they discover between people, places, and perhaps other countries within their city. Use the following steps to guide the exercise:

- Provide a shared map: Provide each student with a map of the city that they can use for the interview activity. The map should have clear markings of different areas and landmarks.
- Instruct the interviews: Ask the students to pair up and interview each other about their lives. They can ask questions about their background, family, experiences, and any connections to other countries. Encourage them to have a conversation and take notes during the interview.
- Respond using the map: After the interviews, instruct the students to use the map to respond to the information they gathered. They can mark or highlight areas on the map that have significance to their interview partner’s life, such as places they have lived or visited, or places that have cultural or historical importance.
- Identify connections: Encourage the students to identify people or places on the map that have ties to other countries. For example, they might mark areas with a high immigrant population or landmarks that represent different cultures. This step aims to create an awareness of how connected their city is to the rest of the world.
- Create visual art: Now, ask the students to use their map and the information they gathered to create a visual art outcome. They can choose various art mediums, such as drawing, painting, collage, or digital art, to depict the connections they discovered. For example, they might create a colorful collage that showcases the diversity of their city or a painting that represents the different cultures present.
- Present and discuss: Once the students have completed their visual art, provide an opportunity for them to present and discuss their work with the class. This allows for sharing and learning from each other’s perspectives and interpretations.
- To go deeper, encourage students to find and visit sites of important Black history and art in the community using the app or interactive website for Cincinnati Sites & Stories created by the Cincinnati Preservation Association. Examples of potential experiences include the Black Lives Matter mural and crosswalk in front of City Hall, Revelation Baptist Church, or the King Records Building.
Choose a civic issue and make a piece of visual art to deepen a viewer’s understanding of the topic. Remember, the goal is to communicate the issue and its impact visually, so make sure your artwork is engaging and meaningful to your audience.

- A civic issue means a problem or concern related to the community or society. It could be something like pollution, homelessness, education, or any other issue that affects people’s lives.
- Once you have chosen your civic issue, you need to do some research to find numeric data. Numeric data refers to information that can be measured or counted, like statistics, percentages, or numbers related to your chosen issue. This data will help you understand the problem better and provide evidence for your artwork.
- Visual art can include drawings, paintings, infographics, or any other creative representation that uses images, colors, and shapes to convey a message.
- An example: a student chooses the civic issue of homelessness. They research and find data about the number of homeless people in your city over the past five years. They discover that the numbers have been increasing steadily. Using this data, they create a creative infographic that shows a line graph with the years on one axis and the number of homeless people on the other axis. The graph visually represents the increasing trend, making it easier for people to understand the seriousness of the issue.

It was said that Robert O’Neal did not like abstract art, and that his series of abstract paintings came about because he didn’t want to waste any paint! Lead students in a guided blind contour drawing exercise. Begin by having students close their eyes and draw what comes to mind, either with a series of spoken prompts or music. Afterward, encourage students to find connections in their local surroundings to the lines and shapes that come out of the drawing. Lastly, using upcycled and leftover resources, fill in the drawings with color.

- To extend the activity, have students create a sensory poem inspired by the layered architectural histories of their home, neighborhood, and their own memories (see template below). Sensory words are descriptive—they describe how we experience the world: how we smell, see, hear, feel or taste something. Students can combine lines to create a single sentence or construct a poem made up of several short sentences or phrases.
  - **Sensory Poem Template:**
    
    *Line 1: Tell what color an emotion or idea looks like to you.*
    *Line 2: Tell what the emotion or idea tastes like (real or imagined)*
    *Line 3: Tell what the emotion or idea sounds like.*
    *Line 4: Tell what emotion or idea smells like.*
    *Line 5: Tell what the emotion or idea looks like.*
    *Line 6: Tell how the emotion or idea make you feel.*
As a life-long resident of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, Robert O’Neal (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH) used his work to document the people he came across throughout his life, representing the joys, struggles, and rich histories that pervade Black culture. Many of his works commemorate local activists alongside notable figures like Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, bridging a gap between the past and the present, the national and the local, to build connections across vast times and spaces. As the first major survey on the artist, Robert O’Neal: Open to All features paintings, drawings, and photographs that he produced between the 1960s-2010s, along with a collection of archival materials.

O’Neal also focused on community practice throughout his lifetime, making him a fixture of the region’s local arts community. Merging art with activism, his socially-engaged practice and grassroots organizing worked to support Black artists, fight for disability rights, and advocate for the unhoused. In 1968—a pivotal time in the fight for civil rights and racial justice—he founded the New American Art Gallery, one of the first creative spaces on Main Street, and United Self-Expression, a local artist collective that made significant contributions to the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. He also established the Arts Consortium, a community center that provided accessible arts education and programming to the West End neighborhood for more than thirty years. His lifelong dedication to the city of Cincinnati earned him the honorary title of “The Over-the-Rhine Mayor.” This long overdue retrospective highlights O’Neal’s critical contributions to the city of Cincinnati and the larger art world. We celebrate the collaborative spirit of community artist Robert O’Neal, whose artwork has inspired regional poets to interpret it through their unique poetic styles. In a beautiful tribute to his legacy, we invite you to scan the QR codes throughout the exhibition and listen to their words as they connect with his artwork and bring it to life in new and inspiring ways.

Organized by Stephanie Kang, independent curator and assistant professor at Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design, Denver.

Robert O’Neal: Open to All is generously supported by DaSci Consulting Group, Eric & Jan Michele Kearney, Morse and Betty Johnson Family Foundation, Barbara Myers, Emily Hanako Momohara and Shawn Newman, The Warrington Family: Warrington Foundation (Fran and Dan Bailey), Jens Rosenkrantz & Kay Hurley, and Drew Gores & George Warrington.
For the People

Robert O’Neal was an artist who was not only community-centered, but people-centered. As he once stated, “I work with the arts, and I work in the community. And art is, after all, the feelings and emotions of the community.” His inherent love for his family members, collaborators, and friends is reflected in his large body of portraits. From his beginnings as an artist in the 1960s to his later developments in the 1990s, O’Neal sought to represent the diversity of his human subjects. His paintings often used bright colors and loose brushwork to allow elements of abstraction to enter his representational works. He also experimented with the possibilities of photography to document an array of faces. For one series, he arranged unconventional materials—like wire, beads, and even a hair clip—onto photographic paper and exposed them to light. Through this photographic process, these images (called photograms) resulted in abstract assemblages that allude to the human visage.

From left to right:

*We the People Are…*, 1998
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Self-Portrait*, 1970
Acrylic on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Jazz Queen*, 1998
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Face Study*, no date
Mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
One Thousand Faces Series #10, 1996
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center

From left to right:

**Robert O’Neal** (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)
*Self-Portrait on Denim*, 1980
Cyanotype on denim
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Mask 2*, 1987
*Found Object Study*, 1987
*Portrait with Wire Mask*, 1987
*Wire Mask*, 1987
All photographs
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Self-Portrait of Robert O’Neal*, 1969
Acrylic on board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
From left to right:

**Robert O'Neal** *(b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)*  
*Color Portrait: Baker Hunt, 1977*  
Acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Model Drawing: Baker Hunt, 1977*  
Acrylic on canvas  
Courtesy of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Male Portrait: Baker Hunt, no date*  
Acrylic on canvas board  
Courtesy of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center
Commemorating Black History and Culture

Robert O’Neal used his work to reflect on and commemorate the rich histories of Black culture. Many of his paintings memorialize Black abolitionists and civil rights leaders, like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. He places these historical figures alongside nameless members of the global Black diaspora, forming ancestral connections across time and space. The ship is a recurring theme throughout many of his works. While this image serves as a reminder to the painful histories of enslavement, O’Neal recontextualizes it as the ship of Zion, a reference to a Christian hymn that spoke of a ship that would provide a means of liberation to enslaved people. Therefore, while many of his paintings capture a sense of stoic resiliency, he also depicts the spirit of hope that is rooted in Black arts and culture. The painting *All Jazz*, which includes four musicians playing their instruments in front of a large sign that reads “JAZZ,” also represents how music serves as a source of joy within Black communities. The figures are situated within large swaths of blue paint that have dabs of yellow and red highlights interspersed throughout the canvas. O’Neal’s stylistic depiction of this scene captures the lyrical, improvisational, and dynamic energy of this musical genre.

From left to right:

*Sisters in Water and Fire*, 1990
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Been to the Mountain*, 1990
Acrylic on board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Fire: Tribute to Baba Curt Standifer*, 2000
Digital print
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
Warrior Kings and Queens, 1996
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Left to right:

All Jazz, 1980
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Portrait of Frederick Douglass I, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Portrait of Frederick Douglass II, 2012
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

The Faces He’s Seen

Up until the last few years of his life, Robert O’Neal always kept himself busy as an actively engaged member of the local arts community. He continued to teach free art courses into his sixties at youth centers, churches, and senior centers. He also became an avid face painter, volunteering at community events to bring joy to people of all ages. However, his overlapping identities as an artist and an activist at times limited his ability to work in the studio. “I hope to
take more time and do more painting of my own,” he said, “Because I need more art in my life.” Quick drawings and sketches became a means for him to continue to build upon his body of work outside of the traditional studio space. Using whatever materials were immediately available to him—a scrap piece of paper or even an old envelope or shopping bag—he allowed his hand to float across the surface of his makeshift canvas, creating an intricate assemblage of line work that morphed into abstract faces. Through his series of portrait drawings, O’Neal continued to explore his fascination with the human face, developing a signature style that spanned across his artistic career.

From left to right:

*Eye in Motion*, 1970
Pen and ink on foam board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*All Present*, 1970
Pen and ink on foam board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Eyes Everywhere*, 1970
Pen and ink on foam board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
Insanity, 1989
Ink on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

She is Listening, no date
Ink and Face Drawing, no date
Connected Lines, 1977
[Not titled], 1978
[Not titled], 1978
[Not titled], 1978
All pen, pencil, or marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Together, 1976
Ink on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

McAlpin’s Department Store, 1976
Marker on paper bag
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Evolve, 1976
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

[Not titled], no date
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

[Abstract and contour drawing], 1971
Pencil on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Meeting Note Study #1, 1976
Meeting Note Study #2, 1976
Meeting Note Study #3, 1976
Meeting Note Study #4, 1976
Meeting Note Study #5, 1976
All marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

The Village, 2002
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Modern Pharaoh’s Thoughts, 1982
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Color Study with Lines, 2006
Ink and acrylic on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

[Not titled], no date
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

**Embracing Pure Abstraction**

In the early 2000s, Robert O’Neal strayed from representational painting, one of the predominant threads that existed throughout his body of work up until that point in time. Using a vibrant palette of reds, yellows, greens, and blues, he played with line and shape to create dynamic compositions. Triangles, rectangles, and circles overlap and entangle with one another, documenting O’Neal’s playful and intuitive process as a painter. Many of the geometric lines throughout the paintings are further emphasized with puffy paint, adding a sense of dimensionality to the flat surfaces of the canvases. This abstract series of works
demonstrates O’Neal’s desire to continually evolve as a painter. He experimented with the possibilities of painting even as a mature, prodigious artist, refusing to remain stagnant in his forms, materials, and interests.

Left to right:

*Reflection of Color I*, 2000
Mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Reflection of Color II*, no date
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

*Reflection of Color III*, 2011
Mixed media on canvas
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

**The Over-the-Rhine Mayor**

“The only way to build a community is to stabilize a community. The only way is to have people live here who love it here.”

Throughout his lifetime, Robert O’Neal was dedicated to serving his community as an artist and an activist. “Giving is a part of my art,” said O’Neal. “There’s art in communicating with people. To be able to get people together, that’s art to me.” He was particularly passionate about serving the city’s most vulnerable and marginalized populations, and his ongoing work earned him the honorary title of “The Over-the-Rhine Mayor.” This exhibition includes a timeline of his
biography, highlighting his many achievements as a socially-engaged artist and community member.

Robert O’Neal (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)
*Portrait of Robert Harris*, 1970
Oil on canvas board
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Robert O’Neal (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)
*Buddy Grey*, 1997
Mixed media collage
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Robert O’Neal (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)
[Certificate of Award], 1997
Pen on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Robert O’Neal (b. 1940, Covington, KY; d. 2018, Cincinnati, OH)
[New American Gallery logo], no date
Marker on paper
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

“Art Group Helping Deprived Tots”
*Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 1, 1968
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
“Studio-Gallery Open to All for Art’s Sake”
The Cincinnati Post/Times-Star, December 5, 1968
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

“O’Neal Testifies in Washington”
Voices, publication date unknown
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Facsimile of Over-the-Rhine Community Council leadership roster, 1971
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Facsimile of a letter of recommendation from Fred F. Bond, 1979
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

Facsimile of an exhibition postcard for Robert O’Neal: Paintings, Drawings, Sculpture at the Arts Consortium, date unknown
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center

“Model Cities Citizen’s Group Fighting Hard for its Life”
Cincinnati Enquirer, June 19, 1975
Courtesy of the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center
New American Gallery and the United Self-Expressionists

With the rise of social movements in the 1960s, O’Neal saw the need for greater support and advocacy for Black artists in Cincinnati, leading him to found one of the first galleries on Main Street, New American Art Gallery. The site became a center for local activism, where civil rights leaders and artists organized events that addressed issues of racial inequity in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. He was also a primary organizer of the United Self-Expressionists (US), a Cincinnati-based artist collective, between 1968 and 1975. It included fifteen artists who created works about their experiences in the community.

Model Cities Program and the Arts Consortium

In response to high poverty rates in the United States, O’Neal served on Cincinnati’s Model Cities Program and became the head of its Culture and Recreation Task Force. In his role, he helped create the Arts Consortium of Cincinnati, a community center located in the West End neighborhood. Founded in 1972, it celebrated, advanced, and preserved Black culture and achievement in the city. It also offered a variety of classes, providing accessible arts education to the city’s youths. Serving as a teacher and advocate of the Arts Consortium for thirty-seven years, O’Neal mentored hundreds of young Black artists in the city.

Advocate for Disability Rights and the Unhoused

As a local leader, O’Neal fought for disability rights and advocated for the unhoused, leaving a long-lasting impression on the community. He suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for most of his life, which led him to participate in a march on Washington for disability rights in the 1960s. Years later, he served on the Ohio Arts Council’s Disabilities Advisory Committee. In 1985, he also founded the Christ Emmanuel Art Center, a safe, creative space in Over-the-Rhine, where unhoused people of all ages could participate in art-making classes and experiences. The center was in operation for over fifteen years, eventually closing in 2001. His ongoing work to support the city’s most vulnerable and marginalized populations him the honorary title of “The Over-the-Rhine Mayor.”
1940

Robert O'Neal was born in Covington, just across the river that separates Ohio from Kentucky, but he lived in Cincinnati for most of his life. As the oldest of thirteen children, he grew up alongside his seven brothers and four sisters. He discovered his passion for the creative arts at an early age thanks to ongoing support and encouragement from his family.

1959

In his junior year of high school, O'Neal's talents were rewarded when he received a scholarship to attend the Art Academy of Cincinnati. He later graduated from the Williams Gebhardt Commercial Arts School, later known as Antonelli College.

1968

With the rise of social movements in the 1960s, O'Neal saw the need for greater support and advocacy for Black artists in Cincinnati, leading him to establish the New American Art Gallery. As one of the first galleries on Main Street, the site became a center for local activism, where civil rights leaders and artists organized events that addressed issues of racial inequity in the Over-the-Rhine neighborhood. Between 1968-1975, he was also a founding member of United Self-Expression (known commonly as US), a Cincinnati-based collective that included fifteen artists who created works about their experiences in the community.

1971

O'Neal served as the president of the Over-the-Rhine Community Council for two years. As a part of his duties, he traveled to Washington, DC in 1971 to testify against President Nixon’s Reorganization Plan, which proposed to combine government-led volunteer programs under one agency. O'Neal feared that this initiative would limit federal funds for local programming in Cincinnati, taking away opportunities from already underserved communities. His work through the Over-the-Rhine Community Council helped to redirect government funding back into the neighborhood. Throughout his lifetime, he continued to be an active contributor to the cause, documenting individuals and activist groups who worked to preserve and protect Over-the-Rhine.
1972

O’Neal became the head of Cincinnati’s Culture and Recreation Task Force as a part of the Model Cities Program. In his role, he helped to develop new community-centered programming that provided aid to those who were experiencing poverty in Cincinnati. His greatest achievement through this initiative was the Arts Consortium of Cincinnati, a community center located in the West End neighborhood that celebrated, advanced, and preserved Black culture and achievement in the city. It offered a variety of classes, providing accessible arts education to the city’s youth. Serving as a teacher and advocate of the Arts Consortium for thirty-seven years, O’Neal mentored hundreds of young Black artists in the city.

1977

O’Neal suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for most of his life, which inspired him to become a local leader in the disability justice movement. In the 1970s, O’Neal traveled to the U.S. capital to participate in a march that demanded the enforcement of disability rights legislation. He often collaborated with his close friend Robert Harris to create positive social change. Throughout their friendship, they worked together on local initiatives that addressed the physical and social barriers that people with disabilities faced. They also served on several committees together, like the Ohio Arts Council’s Disabilities Advisory Council.

1985

With the support of Pastor Bruce Hinckley of Nast Trinity United Methodist Church, O’Neal founded the Christ Emmanuel Art Center, a safe, creative space in Over-the-Rhine. There, people of all ages who were experiencing homelessness or economic precarity could participate in art-making classes. In collaboration with community activist Buddy Grey, O’Neal built long-lasting relationships with the center’s attendees by advocating for their needs and providing them with critical social services. The center was in operation for over fifteen years, eventually closing in 2001.

1990s-2010s

While O’Neal received many accolades for his art and advocacy throughout his lifetime, he started to gain wider recognition in his later career. In 1994, he received Applause! Magazine’s Imagemakers Award, and WCIN Radio named him one of Cincinnati’s most influential African Americans in 2003. O’Neal’s last solo exhibition Retrospective of a Grassroot Griot took place at the Cincinnati Museum Center in 2013. The exhibition highlighted his vast body of work while also capturing the influence that he had on an entire generation of artists.
During this time, he continued to provide new opportunities for local artists. Known as a “master face painter,” he utilized his skills to establish a small face painting business known as The O’Neal Face Painters. Working with nearly fifty artists over a span of three decades, he trained them to create complex and intricate designs. By giving them with the knowledge and tools to become professional face painters, he helped them to establish themselves as working artists. His team brought joy to people of all ages at events and festivals throughout the city of Cincinnati.

2018

O’Neal passed away in December 2018, leaving behind a long-lasting legacy. To continue his work in arts advocacy, his daughter, Toilynn O’Neal Turner, founded the Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center. Commonly known as the ROMAC, it is a hub and information center for Black arts and culture in Cincinnati. Through its programs, events, and services, it provides the space for artists and community members to thrive. The ROMAC is currently in the process of renovating the historic Regal Theater in the West End so that it can become the organization’s new permanent site.
RESOURCES

Robert O’Neal Multicultural Arts Center https://theromac.org/


The Voice of Black Cincinnati https://thevoiceofblackcincinnati.com/

Sites of Black History via Cincinnati Preservation Association https://cincinnatipreservation.org/resources/sites-of-black-history/

African American Experience in Ohio (visual database) via Ohio History Connection https://ohiomemory.org/digital/collection/p16007coll98

Read


Segregated Cincinnati: Why 1 in 3 people live in predominantly Black or white neighborhoods via Center for Community Resilience https://ccr.publichealth.gwu.edu/segregated-cincinnati

Listen

West End Stories Project via The Cincinnati Public Library (Podcast) https://chpl.org/podcasts/

The West End Stories Project is an award-winning podcast capturing the experiences of individuals who lived in the neighborhood in the late 1900’s. It’s for anyone who wants to learn more about the neighborhood’s history and transformation.
PRIMARY SOURCES

Thank you to Cierra Earl, Local History Staff at the Kenton County Public Library (Covington) for her research support and assistance.

Robert lived at 210 E. 10th Street in Covington, Kentucky as a child. It’s located in Eastside. Unfortunately, the house has been demolished and is now an empty lot. This image from Faces and Places is probably the clearest shot of the neighborhood it’s from 1984: https://facesandplaces.kentonlibrary.org/viewimage.php?i=di123538

The following pages show yearbook photos from Withrow High School in 1956 and 1960, the beginning and end of O’Neal’s high school career.
Eighth Grade

P. Long
W. Loss
D. Lorenz
V. Lott
D. Lovett
P. Lowry
P. Lykins
D. Luggs
B. MacAllister
D. Maddox
H. Manifield
S. Manske
S. Minter
C. Manning
M. Manning
L. Mansfield
J. Markley
C. Mauer
P. Marshall
D. Martin
S. Martin
W. Martin
L. Mason
R. Mason
R. Maye
McBride
B. McCall
J. McCaul
T. McClure
J. McConnell
N. McGuffin
K. McGinhey
P. McCoy
S. McGinnis
E. McGinnis
H. McGinnis
D. McGough
P. McNeeley
R. McQuan
J. Meek
J. Meek
T. Meinhardt
B. Menfis
C. Meyer
K. Michael
O. Miller
J. Miller
L. Miller
W. Miller
V. Miller
G. Moore
L. Moseman
A. Moss
R. Nasser
L. Nayer
D. Myers
F. Myers
P. Nagel
S. Nagle
J. Nichols
C. Noel
G. Nofeat
J. Nogent
J. Oliver
P. Oliver
R. O’Neal
J. Otto
R. Padgett
L. Panaske
C. Parker
A. Patterson
J. Patterson
D. Paul
D. Pfeiffer
G. Pinkey
J. Perry
C. Peterson
B. Petry
L. Pierce
H. Posey
P. Prevette
W. Pampelly
ROW 1
Munson, Richard Fred "Dick": Shape Protection Crew 1, 2, 3; Phi Beta Gamma 2, 3, 4.
Moyer, Lois Loraine: Glee Troup 1, 2; Junior Choir 1; Girls' Glee Club 2; Senior Choir 3, 4; Minutemen 2, 3, 4; Annual Rep. 2.
Murray, Herbert.

ROW 2
Mayers, Donna Jeanne "Spook": Glee Troup 1, 2; Spanish Club 4; GAA 1, 2, 3, 4; Baseball 1, 2, 3, 4; Basketball 1, 2, 3, 4; Hockey 1, 2, 3, 4; Indiv. Sports 1; 4; Annual Staff 2; Tower News Staff 1.
Nispal, Sandra June: French Club 3, 4; GAA 1, 2, 3, 4; Basketball 1, 2, 3, 4; Baseball 1, 2, 3, 4; Dance Club 1, 2, 3, 4; Hockey 1, 2, 3, 4; Volleyball 1, 2, 3, 4; Minutemen 2, 3; Student Council 2, 3; Tower News 1, 2, Rep. 6; Alumna 2, 3; Chorus, Secy. 4.
Napls, Fred Alexander: Physics Club; Spanish Club 1, 2; Bowling Club 1; Tennis 1, 2, 3, 4; Student Council 1, 2, 3; Monitor 4; Pep Club 4; Interfraternity Council; Beta Sigma Pi 2, 3, Pres. 4.

ROW 3
Neal, Rodney.
Noblett, Bob.
Noss, Alfred Kurt.

ROW 4
Nichols, Judy Louise "Hickie": French Club 3, 4; Glee Troup 1, 2, 3, 4; Baseball 1, 2, 3, 4; Basketball 1, 2, 4; Dolphin Club 2; Tennis 1, 2, 3, 4; Volleyball 1, 2, 3, 4; Minutemen 1, 2, 3, 4; Tower News 1, 2, 3, 4; Pep Club 4; Alumna 3, 3; Ept.-Art. 3; Area 4.
Norwood, Eddie.
Northcutt, Gill Anne: FMA 4; Glee Troup 1, 2, 5; GAA 1, 2, 3; Basketball 2; Hockey 2, 3; Volleyball 2, 3; Monitor 3; Office 3.

SENIORS

ROW 5
Oliver, Fred Williams: German Club 3, 4; Physics Club 3; Student Council 1, 2, 4; Annual Lit. Staff 3; Annual Rep. 1.
Oliver, Paulanna.
O'Neal, B. Lee: Basketball 2, 3; Cross-Country 3.

ROW 6
Ockman, Susan Charlotte: French Club 3, 4; Glee Troup 1, 2; History Club 2, 4; GAA 1, 2, 3, 4; Baseball 4, 4; Basketball 4, 4; Mer. 1, 2, 3; Basketball 1, 2, 3, 4; Dolphin Club 1, 2, 3, 4; Tennis 3, 4; Hockey 1, 2, 3, 4; Indiv. Sports 1, 2, 3, 4; Volleyball 1, 2, 3, 4; Minutemen 3, 4; Student Council 4; Pep Club 4; Tower News Rep. 2; Tower News Reporter 1, 2; Ass't. Bus. Mgr. 3; Business Mgr. 4; Quill and Scroll 3, 4; Alumna 2, 3; Chorus, Secy. 4.
Owens, Margaret Anna: Entered Withrow in junior year from Evanston Township High School, Illinois. Alpha Y'Teens 4; Pep Club 4.
Pedick, Donald Wilson: YFC 2; Phi Beta Gamma 3, Chap. 4.

ROW 7
Purham, Beatrice.
Purham, Charles Alexander: Basketball 2, 3, 4; Cross-Country 2, 3, 4; Track 2, 3, 4; Protection Crew 2, 3, 4.
Parker, Charles.
LEARNING STANDARDS

Common Core Standards

http://www.corestandards.org/

Ohio Common Core Links

http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/OLS-Graphic-Sections/Learning-Standards

http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Standards

Kentucky Common Core Links

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Pages/default.aspx

https://education.ky.gov/curriculum/standards/kyacadstand/Documents/Kentucky_Academic_Standards_Arts_and_Humanities.pdf

Indiana Standards Links

https://www.doe.in.gov/standards

https://www.doe.in.gov/standards/fine-arts-dance-music-theatre-visual-arts

Aesthetic Perspectives: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change

http://www.animatingdemocracy.org/aesthetic-perspectives

Art & Aesthetics - Project Zero: Harvard Graduate School of Education

https://pz.harvard.edu/topics/arts-aesthetics