

UNITED

**Faheem  
Majeed**

# Majeed Cares

Steven L. Bridges

The work of Chicago-based artist Faheem Majeed (American, b. 1976) is affective in nature. Beyond its formal and conceptual dimensions, there is also an emotive force that drives his many endeavors and reaches out to touch the many people who encounter or are part of his work. To do this, Majeed purposefully blurs categorical boundaries to create greater awareness around social and political issues, stir discussion and debate, and promote diverse perspectives. His work runs the gamut from opening up space for congregation and conversation to directing a storied and historic art center in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> In turn, his multivalent roles make him an important figure in discussions around the work of art as affective labor, or “the creation and manipulation of affects” to produce “social networks, forms of community, biopower”<sup>2</sup>—the value and meaning of which are closely tied to the social and political efficacy of what it means to care.

Majeed acknowledges that his parents and upbringing greatly influence his approach to art and his understanding of its relationship to society. In a way, their work has become his work, too. His mother was a social worker who went on to become the executive director of a chemical abuse rehabilitation center in Minnesota (where Majeed spent his teenage years), while his father was a respected politician and businessman in North Carolina—the artist’s childhood home. As a boy, Majeed recalls, he “grew up in a city where every other yard had a ‘Majeed Cares’ campaign sign in it.”<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps a natural extension that much of his work engages social, economic, and political issues, and that the artist often finds himself mentoring young adults.

These observations point to how interdisciplinarity is an intrinsic quality of Majeed’s practice, wherein material explorations, aesthetics, and the mining of cultural history become interwoven with social and political awareness, community activism, and the belief that art can act as a catalyst for change. For Majeed, and in the words of art historian Patricia Phillips: “Interdisciplinarity is not simply an indiscriminate amalgamation of conventions from different fields, but a faceted way of looking at the formation of knowledge and the public realm . . . a way to think critically and act publicly.”<sup>4</sup> Oscillating between the material and the immaterial, the artist continues to build both literal and metaphorical spaces for the exploration of what it means to be an active, engaged citizen. This approach recalls the notion put forth by theorist and critic Jan Verwoert that the ways in which we perform—daily, publicly, individually, and collectively—both reflect and “create the values that our society is supposed to be based on today.”<sup>5</sup> This is an important reminder that it is not just a matter of what work is performed, but how it

1 From 2005–11, Majeed was executive director and curator at the South Side Community Art Center. Located in Bronzeville, it is the oldest African American art center in the country.

2 Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 96.

3 Faheem Majeed, “my Work Should Grow on You,” *Art21 Blog* (accessed December 29, 2014), <http://blog.art21.org/2013/04/02/my-work-should-grow-on-you-faheem-majeed/#.VKHc3sAKA>.

4 Patricia C. Phillips, “(Inter)Disciplinary Actions,” *Public Art Review* 15, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2003): 12.

5 Jan Verwoert, “I Can, I Can’t, Who Cares?” *Open* no. 17 (2009): 41.

is performed, and for whom. Such considerations are fundamental to Majeed’s methodology and influence the direction of his otherwise open-ended projects.

For *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Faheem Majeed*, his first solo museum exhibition, the artist weaves the notion of “publicly domestic” as the thread of inquiry throughout. A seemingly contradictory term—the domestic traditionally connotes a private, intimate space—it is exactly this confrontation of different modes of existence that the artist intends to explore. The term “domestic” is also often related to manual labor and craftwork, and this connotation can be either positive or negative, depending on the context. Furthermore, Majeed is interested in how space becomes place, and what it means to feel “at home.” The MCA—a public institution, and thus a form of public space—becomes the armature for the artist’s exploration through the presentation of sculptural works and a room-sized installation. As part of this, Majeed invites collaborators to inhabit the space along with him, periodically activating the installation and overall exhibition. His work also reaches beyond the museum’s galleries and across the city to partner with other organizations—namely, the South Side Community Art Center and Harold Washington College—which further evince Majeed’s catalytic force as an artist. Often, the initiation of one project begets another, ad continuum.

On display in this exhibition are a number of new works, which dovetail with the notion of the publicly domestic and evince Majeed’s interdisciplinarity. As part of his studio practice, the artist transforms commonplace materials—such as particleboard, scrap metal and wood, discarded signs, and billboard remnants—breathing new life into these often overlooked and devalued materials. Their selection is purposeful: they allude to the physical and psychological make-up of the South Shore neighborhood in Chicago where the artist lives. An area of the city that has been plagued by economic disenfranchisement and the lingering effects of politically motivated and racist practices like “red-lining,”<sup>6</sup> many of the area’s now closed businesses employ particleboard or other cheap building materials to deter break-ins and illegal occupation. These materials, then, become a form of camouflage, and their ubiquitous use allows them to recede into the visual landscape—along with the social issues they symbolically mask.

Of particular note in the exhibition is the sculpture *Majeed Cares* (2014), whose title is borrowed for this essay and which alludes to the aforementioned campaign slogan. Physically labored over, it reveals the hand of the artist; its imperfections directing attention to its human touch. Carved into large sheets of particleboard, the message appears to be simultaneously emerging and receding. In a recent conversation,



“Vote for Majeed”  
Campaign sign  
Photo: Nathan Keay © MCA Chicago

6 For more on this practice, see: [encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1050.html](http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/1050.html).





the artist described this piece as a kind of self-portrait. It points to his familial roots and to the neighborhood in which he currently lives: a nod to the ways that both exert influence upon the artist's current station and perspective in life. The mash-up of message and materials, though, opens up a number of questions, complicating both references without offering any clear answers. Over the years, some local politicians in Chicago have disserved neighborhoods like South Shore; there is an absence, a lack of care for the future of these communities, or the maintenance of the social fabric that binds them. But still, hope remains. There are many community leaders throughout the city who do care and who work to galvanize people to foster ever-stronger and more meaningful bonds. Majeed is one such individual, and his sculptures speak to the complexity inherent in making the invisible visible—whether marginalized, underserved communities, or the social, economic, and political forces that shape and create such divisions within society. The artist resists setting up an “us versus them” scenario, however, and the critical analysis and provocations embodied in his work are not one-directional. Of himself and others who have the power to enact change, he asks: “are we being responsible with what power we do have?”<sup>7</sup>

In the adjacent gallery, the artist transforms the blank, white space with a new iteration of his installation: *Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden* (2015). This title, as well as the use of stained cedar paneling, alludes to the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC)—a place Majeed has called his artistic and professional home for many years. His experiences there, under the influence of founding member, artist, and activist Margaret Burroughs, continue to ground much of his

Faheem Majeed  
*Majeed Cares*, 2014  
 Particleboard; two parts, each: 84 × 36 in. (213.4 × 91.4 cm)  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 Photo: Nathan Keay © MCA Chicago

7 Correspondence with author, February 4, 2015.  
 8 Anna M. Tyler, “Planting and Maintaining a ‘Perennial Garden,’ Chicago’s South Side Community Art Center,” *International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 4 (1994): 31–37.

thinking around the power of art and community. Majeed’s title for the installation is borrowed from an essay on the SSCAC of the same name by artist and critic Anna M. Tyler, who adopted the metaphor to express how caring for an artist-run space requires constant upkeep and, at times, necessitates getting one’s hands dirty. Tyler also asserts the meaning and value of nurture, cultivation, and care.<sup>8</sup>

The installation’s stained wood panels are similar to those that line the Margaret Burroughs Gallery at SSCAC and serve to create a place within the space of the gallery—a room within a room, an intervention that disrupts the cultural and sociopolitical coding of the exhibition space. Early on, Majeed expressed his desire to “brown the white cube,” and this act takes on both literal and metaphorical meanings. On the one hand, the rich wooden panels become an experience in and of themselves, and the artist invites visitors to enter this place and explore it on their own terms—the rough hew of the panels, the lingering scent of cedar, and so forth. On the other hand, Majeed comments on the social constructions of the gallery space and museum culture more broadly. Diversity in the arts—specifically racial diversity—has become an increasingly contentious point of discourse (contentious too for its lack of public debate). Again, Majeed opens up space for discussion, penetrating the supposed neutrality of the public space and raising a number of questions: Who is this space for? Who is welcome here? Who feels at home in this place? What real or imagined barriers exist to prevent a sense of belonging? And where did such barriers come from, for what purpose, and to what end?

Taking on the role of host, Majeed has invited a number of collaborators to join him in investigating these questions and the publicly domestic more broadly. The installation thus becomes a platform for expression that is activated through performances and other happenings. An important aspect of his larger practice, the artist often turns over the opportunities offered to him to other artists or organizations who may not receive the visibility or recognition they deserve. In the context of this exhibition, these include Donda’s House; the Chicago Home Theater Festival; Avery R. Young; and Kara Franco and Lamar Gayles, in collaboration with the South Side Community Art Center and Thēarē

Group (for the full list of events and collaborators, please see page 7). These individuals and organizations will present a program within the MCA installation, and, after each, they will leave something behind to live on as part of the installation. In doing so, the work becomes a place for shared memories and experiences between the artist, his collaborators, visitors, and participants. The installation, then, is accumulative—its meaning develops and grows over the course of the



Faheem Majeed  
*Planting and Maintaining a Perennial Garden*, 2012  
 Hyde Park Art Center  
 Photo: Tony Smith  
 Courtesy of the artist

exhibition. In this way, the gallery becomes a place for the meeting of people and minds, and through the transference of ideas, emotions, and subjectivities to the physical structure—affectively altering its form and function—this place might also become a kind of home, even if only temporarily.

In his 2011 essay, “Take Care,” curator and writer Anthony Huberman proposes the following perspective with regard to how exhibitions of contemporary art are conceived, framed, and experienced:

... objects, images, and ideas have lives to live, and instead of conceiving of an exhibition as a way to reign them in and use them to carefully prove a point, an exhibition could be something much riskier: a way to discover, along with the audience, how that point will behave as it lives its life. In this sense, the opening of an exhibition could mark the beginning of a curatorial idea, not its end.<sup>9</sup>

This same spirit lies at the heart of *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Faheem Majeed*. The exhibition will be on view for twenty-three weeks, and throughout that span it will grow and evolve, the relationships and meanings it contains ever-changing. It is important to remember that the exhibition does not exist in a vacuum. It is part of the world in which we live and subject to the same laws of nature. Like the objects and experiences it supports, and the processes its mechanisms set in motion, the exhibition also has its own life to live, and from this current vantage point there remain many unknowns. But therein lies both the risk and great potential.

To be affective requires human contact and proximity.<sup>10</sup> To speak when no one is there to listen is to not speak at all. It is neutered speech; empty action. Likewise, to open up space for congregation and conversation is not the same as congregating and conversing. The artist cannot accomplish these things on his own. It is our hope, then, that those who can will return, time and again, and in doing so contribute to and further bear witness to the ways that Majeed’s affective labor has the potential to create forms of community, sociality, and cultivate collective subjectivities. Even if only for an evening or the length of a discussion, this very possibility points to something else, a different mode of existence that is perhaps more embodied, more (self-)aware. These potentialities extend from the exhibition to the museum as a whole. Implicated along with the artist, collaborators, participants, and audience members, the MCA is also asked to consider its own power and role as a public, civic institution. What is the relationship of the MCA to the neighborhood of South Shore? How might the MCA approach and engage new audiences that currently do not register the museum as a place that exists for them? Is the work of the MCA also a kind of affective labor? Again, how and for whom? There are no straightforward answers to these questions, but certainly that is the point. And to consider them deeply, meaningfully, first one must care.

9 Anthony Huberman, “Take Care,” in *Circular Facts*, ed. Mai Abu ElDahab, Binna Choi, and Emily Pethick (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 11–12.  
10 Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor,” *boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 98.

## Related Programs

**MCA Talk: Faheem Majeed**  
**Tue, Mar 10, 6 pm**  
**Free with museum admission;**  
**Tuesdays are free**  
**for Illinois residents**  
Faheem Majeed discusses his *Chicago Works* exhibition with MCA Curatorial Assistant Steven L. Bridges.

**MCA Live: Donda’s House**  
**Tue, Apr 7, 6 pm**  
**Free with museum admission;**  
**Tuesdays are free**  
**for Illinois residents**  
Lovingly named for prominent educator and late mother of Kanye West, Dr. Donda West, Donda’s House is a not-for-profit organization focused on providing underserved youth access to premium arts and music instruction. For the MCA program current students and alumni of Donda’s House will engage the space and the audience through spoken word, rapping, call and response exercises, and performative beat-making.

**MCA Live: Chicago Home Theater Festival**  
**Tue, May 5, 6 pm**  
**Free with museum admission;**  
**Tuesdays are free**  
**for Illinois residents**  
The Chicago Home Theater Festival (CHTF) is a hyperlocal response to a national crisis: cultural segregation and social isolation. CHTF aims to disrupt these realities by inviting strangers to share an intimate meal, experience transformative art, and engage in courageous dialogue in the heart of our city—our homes and our neighborhoods. For its MCA program, CHTF occupies the divide between the domestic and the institutional. Beginning with a series of tours to the MCA from the south, west, and north sides of the city, participants are invited to bring along neighborhood stories, collections, and cultures to be shared at the museum.

**MCA Live: Avery R. Young, race | music**  
**Tue, May 26, 6 pm**  
**Free with museum admission;**  
**Tuesdays are free**  
**for Illinois residents**  
Examining the consumption of

black American music in both of its capacities as commodity and culture, multidisciplinary artist Avery R. Young investigates the role race plays in the creating, marketing, and presentation of this great American export. Citing this music—from the work song of the slave to the recolonization of contemporary hip hop—this instructive lecture-style performance combines song, storytelling, and digital and visual art forms inside a sculpture designed by Faheem Majeed.

**21Minus: Kara Franco and Lamar Gayles**  
**Sat, May 30, 1 pm**  
**Free with museum admission**  
21Minus is an annual festival of art and experiences created by people under twenty-one years old, hosted by the MCA’s Teen Creative Agency (TCA). Kara Franco and Lamar Gayles, TCA alumni and curators of an exhibition to be on display at the South Side Community Art Center, will lead interactive conversations about place-making for and with young artists in Chicago.

**MCA Studio: Thëarë Group**  
**Fri, Jun 12, All day**  
**Free with museum admission**  
Thëarë Group is a collaboration between businesses and community-minded artists. Their goal is to affect social change by providing guidance to young visionaries and entrepreneurs. The group provides a network of professional and artistic mentors. They operate upon shared values of self-awareness, self-expression, economic awareness, financial self-sustainability, family retention, and social justice. Their Thëarë (theory): art changes the world.

**MCA Talk: LaShana Jackson and Faheem Majeed**  
**Sun, Aug 16, 3 pm**  
**Free with museum admission**  
Prompted by the many late night conversations between husband (Faheem Majeed) and wife (LaShana Jackson), this discussion will provide the public with a view into the intimate dialogue that occurs around Majeed’s work outside of the typical art/artist conversation.

# Chicago Works II

BMO Harris Bank

**Museum of  
Contemporary Art  
Chicago**

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**Faheem Majeed** (American, b. 1976) blends his unique experience as a nonprofit administrator, curator, and artist to create works that focus on institutional critique and exhibitions that leverage collaboration to engage his immediate, and the broader community, in meaningful dialogue. From 2005–11, Majeed served as executive director and curator for the South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC). He was also selected as the inaugural artist in residence for University of Chicago's Arts in Public Life Initiative (2012), MANA Contemporary Chicago (2014), and Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (2015). Majeed received his BFA from Howard University and his MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: Faheem Majeed*, presented from March 10 to August 16, 2015, in the Sternberg Family Gallery and Robin Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and curated by Steven L. Bridges, Curatorial Assistant.

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**Faheem Majeed**  
*UNITED* (detail), 2014  
Found particle board and oil paint  
36 × 84 in. (91.4 × 213.4 cm)  
Courtesy of the artist  
Photo: Nathan Keay  
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