

“Forever Young,” an Artist’s Tribute in Colored Pencil to the Pulse Nightclub Shooting Victims

ASHLEY D’SOUZA | FREELANCE WRITER & JOURNALIST



Forever Young, Tylonn Sawyer’s tribute in colored pencil to the Pulse nightclub shooting victims.

TYLONN SAWYER’S WORK REFLECTS SOCIAL ISSUES FROM HIS OWN PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE AS A QUEER BLACK AMERICAN

For his piece, *Forever Young: Pulse Club 49*, Detroit artist Tylonn Sawyer reflected deeply on the tragic shooting in Orlando in 2016, but in his uniquely evocative way—with a set of colored pencils. His drawing, completed at the beginning of this year, contains 49 individual portraits, a tribute to the individuals killed during the Pulse nightclub shooting. To portray each victim authentically, he used reference photos from different news sources and read about their lives. It was a labor of love.



Don't Sleep on These 2024 Mighty Real/Queer Detroit Events

"These are people who were supposed to be in a safe space," he tells *Pride Source*. "The shooting left a mark on my heart and it's still there. I've wanted to do something to commemorate that moment ever since it happened."

Despite the weight of the tragedy, Sawyer deliberately chose to create a joyful dedication, its bright colors resembling those in the Pride flag. The piece was on display as part of "I'll be Your Mirror: Reflections of the Contemporary Queer" at the *Mighty Real/Queer Detroit* exhibition last summer.

"During turmoil, queer folk step out and take care of their own. Tylonn Sawyer's work is a continuation of this attitude," said Patrick Burton, curator of the exhibition. "It's a beautiful piece that will shine in the exhibition."

Much of Sawyer's work is queer-centered and integrates issues of race and politics. In a solo exhibition titled *America Has a Problem*, Tylonn explored social issues from his perspective as a queer Black American. His displayed works included an

oil painting titled *Descent II*, which criticizes the Supreme Court's decisions to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*, end affirmative action, and allow businesses to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people.

"I grew up in a blue-collar town, and as a young Black kid going to grad school, I was trying to see the relevance of this art to my own lived experience," Sawyer says, reflecting on what has shaped him artistically. "My work now is heavily research-based and everything is handmade to the core, just like the blue-collar, get-it-done approach I grew up with."

Surrounded by creativity at a young age, Sawyer grew up in the Greenfield neighborhood of Detroit. Both of his parents drew and encouraged him to create fantasy and sci-fi cartoons and comic books as a kid. He studied drawing and painting at Eastern Michigan University (EMU) as an undergraduate and graduated with an MFA in painting from the New York Academy of Art in 2003. Sawyer also completed an independent study in painting at the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

With the joy and defiance of Pride also comes grief and sadness as we honor those we've lost.



Tylonn Sawyer

While Sawyer ensures that his work meets the intellectual demands of the art world, he prioritizes making it accessible to the average person; his goal is to move them, not “a bunch of art snobs.” He’s constantly thinking of both the scholar and the person down the street, he said, and researching issues that he sees in the world and in Detroit and other local communities.

Sawyer is also passionate about education, and he loves teaching art as much as he loves creating it. He has taught art at EMU as well as at Marygrove College and the College for Creative Studies and is now a professor at Oakland Community College in Royal Oak. He cited one of his first college drawing professors, Richard Washington, as his inspiration for pursuing teaching.

“He was one of the few Black teachers I ever had in my life, much less a college professor who was an artist. It was like seeing an alien to me,” he says. “I fell in love with that man as a teacher and mentor: how charismatic he was, how effectively he taught, and how he was able to live a pretty nice life as an artist.”

In graduate school, Sawyer took classes in pedagogical studies, where he was awe-struck by the intention and science that goes into teaching. He discovered an interest in teaching

through an internship with high school kids and worked as an art director for camps in the mountains in New York. Through it all, he has maintained a focus on the relationship between student and teacher.

“I really pay attention to that relationship and my responsibility as an instructor and mentor,” he said, adding that although it’s “weird” to have students older than him calling him their mentor, he wouldn’t change it.

Next for Sawyer are large-scale equestrian portraits—he has three such paintings in progress now, including an oil painting of Octavia Butler that hails back to the early sci-fi and fantasy influences of his parents. He wanted to explore the idea of putting a (speculatively) queer, female icon on a horse since historically, equestrian portraits were only for the super-rich and elite. He also painted a Dyson sphere reminiscent of a halo on top of her head because he enjoys adding layers of distortion to traditionally romantic styles of art. Sawyer likes to be “enveloped” by large-scale paintings, and this portrait sits at seven-feet tall.

“My work is very labor intensive, so once a piece is done, I’m super happy—like, thank god,” he said. “But at the same time, I’m anxious to work on something else.” ■