

# Preserving Plywood Protest Art: Minneapolis and Saint Paul after George Floyd

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### Abstract

Since 25 May 2020, George Floyd's death at the hands of the Minneapolis police has sparked civil uprisings throughout Minnesota. In the context of this intense crisis, street art transforms urban space and fosters a sustained political dialogue, reaching a wide audience and making change possible, as seen in art throughout the Twin Cities and eventually the world. For example, the mural depicting George Floyd painted by local artists on the sidewall of Cup Foods at 38th St and Chicago in Minneapolis initially transformed a location that was a tragic marker of an extrajudicial anti-Black murder into an important community space for memorialization, organizing, fellowship, and healing, but it also became a site of conflict and negotiation. Graffiti was spray-painted onto plywood-covered store windows, which business owners put up in fear of riots. Images of anger and hope covered those boards. Our research discusses what will happen to art such as this, who wants to preserve it and why, how it could be used in the future, and what that means for anti-racism efforts in the Twin Cities.

**Keywords:** Physical preservation, Collecting, Non-Profit Organizations, Social Justice, Anti-racist Street Art

On 25 May 2020, police officers murdered George Floyd on a busy street corner in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Video of this horrendous act of racial violence spread quickly throughout the world by way of social media. Although the state of Minnesota was under stay-at-home orders due to the Covid-19 pandemic, people took to the streets in Minneapolis and St. Paul, demanding that justice be served. Minneapolis and St. Paul are metropolitan areas with active creative scenes, but perhaps due to many months of inclement weather, it is not known for its street art scene. However, when Twin Cities businesses boarded up their windows to fend off potential property damage from riots, unintentionally supplying canvases, artists and graffiti writers seized the opportunity. The plywood panels were temporary fixtures and the art on them can be erased quickly. For those of us interested in street art, many questions arise: what will happen to these boards when they

are eventually removed? Who will take care of them? And most importantly, who ultimately controls the narrative of protest art in the wake of George Floyd's murder?

Knowing these irreplaceable canvases have a short lifespan, activists began to come up with ways of preserving them and the stories they represent.<sup>1</sup> Our Urban Art Mapping research team based at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul responded by creating a digital archive: the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database.<sup>2</sup>

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1 - Kristi Belcamino, "Advocates want to preserve George Floyd street art," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.grandforksherald.com/news/government-and-politics/6527442-Advocates-want-to-preserve-George-Floyd-street-art>

2 - <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net>

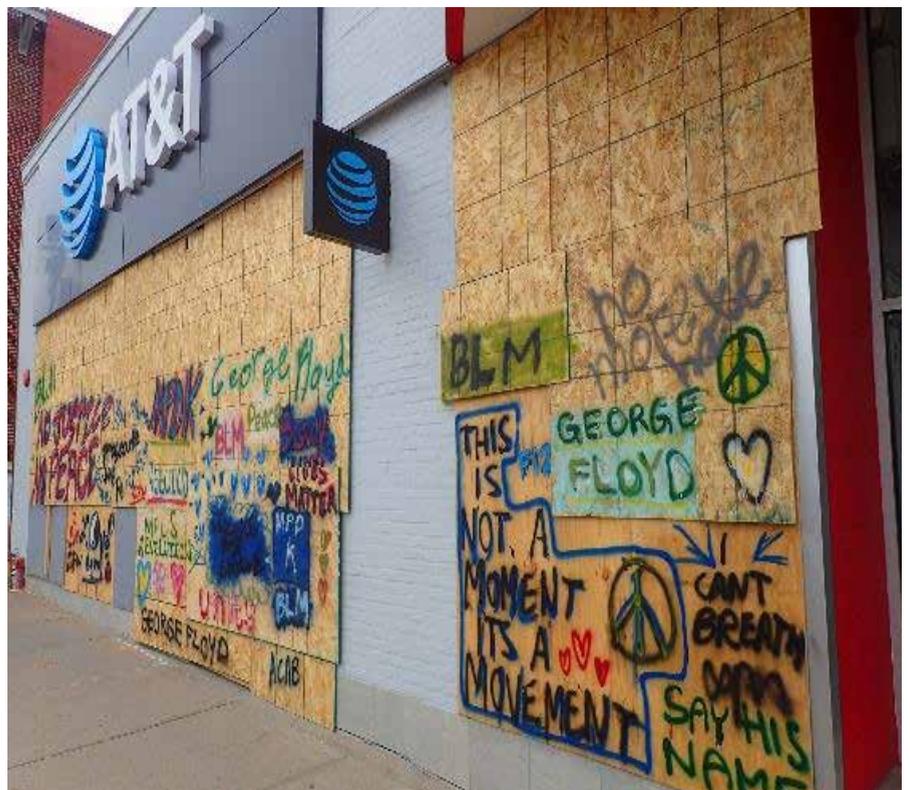
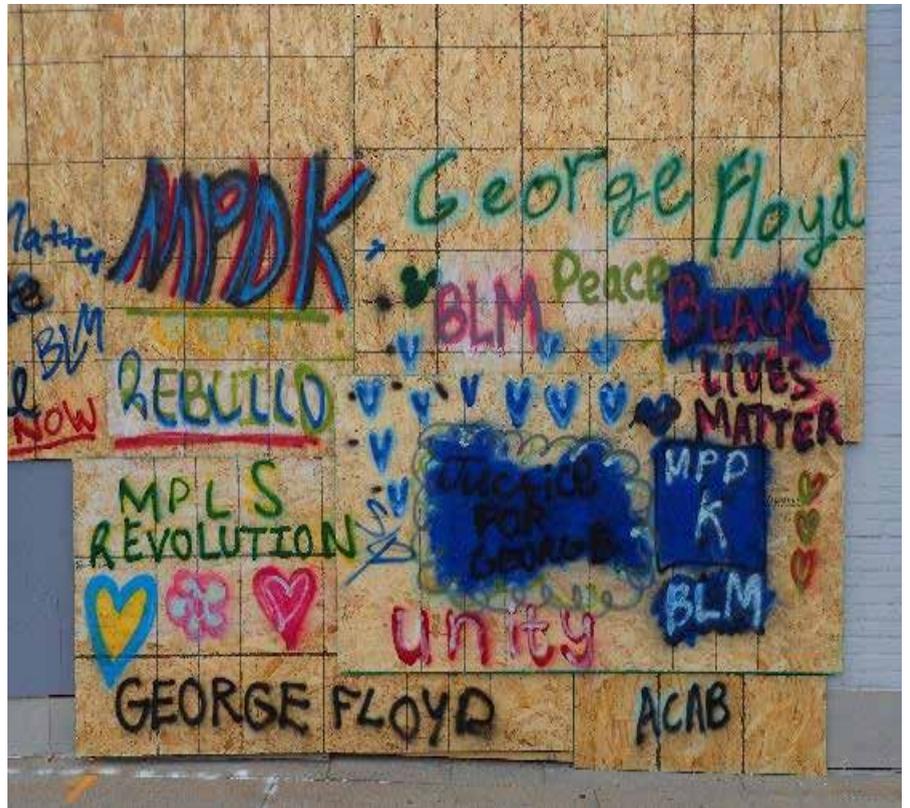


Fig 1 & Fig 2- "Bomb of Tags."  
 George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street  
 Art. Accessed October 28, 2020.  
<https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1091>.



Fig.3- Lisa Hey Skildum, "Lion HeART: See Me. Hear Me. Believe Me.," *George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1089>. This was documented on June 7, 2020 on a boarded-up ALDI in Minneapolis, MN.

Because the works on plywood would be temporary, we knew digital preservation was important. We determined we would not play a role in the collection and preservation of physical objects for a few reasons. First, we observed that works on plywood were changing quickly as graffiti was written over multiple times and sometimes concealed by new messages and paintings. Second, many works appeared on surfaces such as pavement, stone, glass, and fixed signs, and were therefore unsuitable for collection. Instead, we created an archive with images and metadata to provide open access to the art for anyone with an internet connection. As for physical preservation, other groups stepped up to the challenge.

Knowing these irreplaceable canvases have a short lifespan, activists began to come up with ways of preserving them and the stories they represent.<sup>3</sup> Our Urban Art Mapping research team based at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul responded by creating a digital archive: the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database.<sup>4</sup> Because the works on plywood would be temporary, we knew digital preservation was important. We determined we would not play a role in the collection and preservation of physical objects for a few reasons. First, we observed that works on plywood were changing quickly as graffiti was written over

3 - Kristi Belcamino, "Advocates want to preserve George Floyd street art," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.grandforksherald.com/news/government-and-politics/6527442-Advocates-want-to-preserve-George-Floyd-street-art>

4 - <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net>



Fig.4- "America Is Wack As Fuck - I Agree," *George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art*, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1180>. This work was documented on July 16, 2020 on the Martin Olav Saboo Bridge in Minneapolis, MN. Unlike plywood-based works, there is no way to physically remove this work from its original context.

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In the Twin Cities, this tremendous production of plywood art is unprecedented. These protest messages need to be preserved and amplified. Yet there are no equivalent examples for us to look back on for guidance on how to preserve and tell the stories shown on the boards. Who should take care of the art? Who gets a say in what happens? Community members rose to address these needs and questions, and we will highlight some of this work here. A note about wording: we will refer to the art on plywood panels as "the boards," and "community" refers specifically to the Black community in the Twin Cities.

One example of physical preservation comes from Save the Boards and Memorialize the Movement, two groups that combined to become Save the Boards to Memorialize the Movement, or StB2MtM. Spearheaded by Leesa Kelly and

Kenda Zellner-Smith, StB2MtM is determined to keep the boards in the hands of the communities that created them. This includes preventing both the sale of boards by business owners and the collection of boards by any traditionally white-centric institutions, such as prominent art museums.<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> StB2MtM isn't excluding potential partnerships with local institutions, though. It is working with the Black-owned Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery to exhibit some of the boards in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

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5 - Gotlieb, Nate. "Preserving the murals made during the uprising." *Southwest Journal*. July 1, 2020. <https://www.southwestjournal.com/news/2020/06/preserving-the-murals-made-during-the-uprising/>

6 - Deena Zaru and Arielle Mitropoulos, "As Black Lives Matter murals are disposed of or defaced, Minneapolis activists launch effort to preserve the art," *ABC News*, August 9, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/black-lives-matter-murals-disposed-defaced-minneapolis-activists/story?id=71788741>

7 - *Memorialize the Movement*, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/view/memorializethemovement/home>.

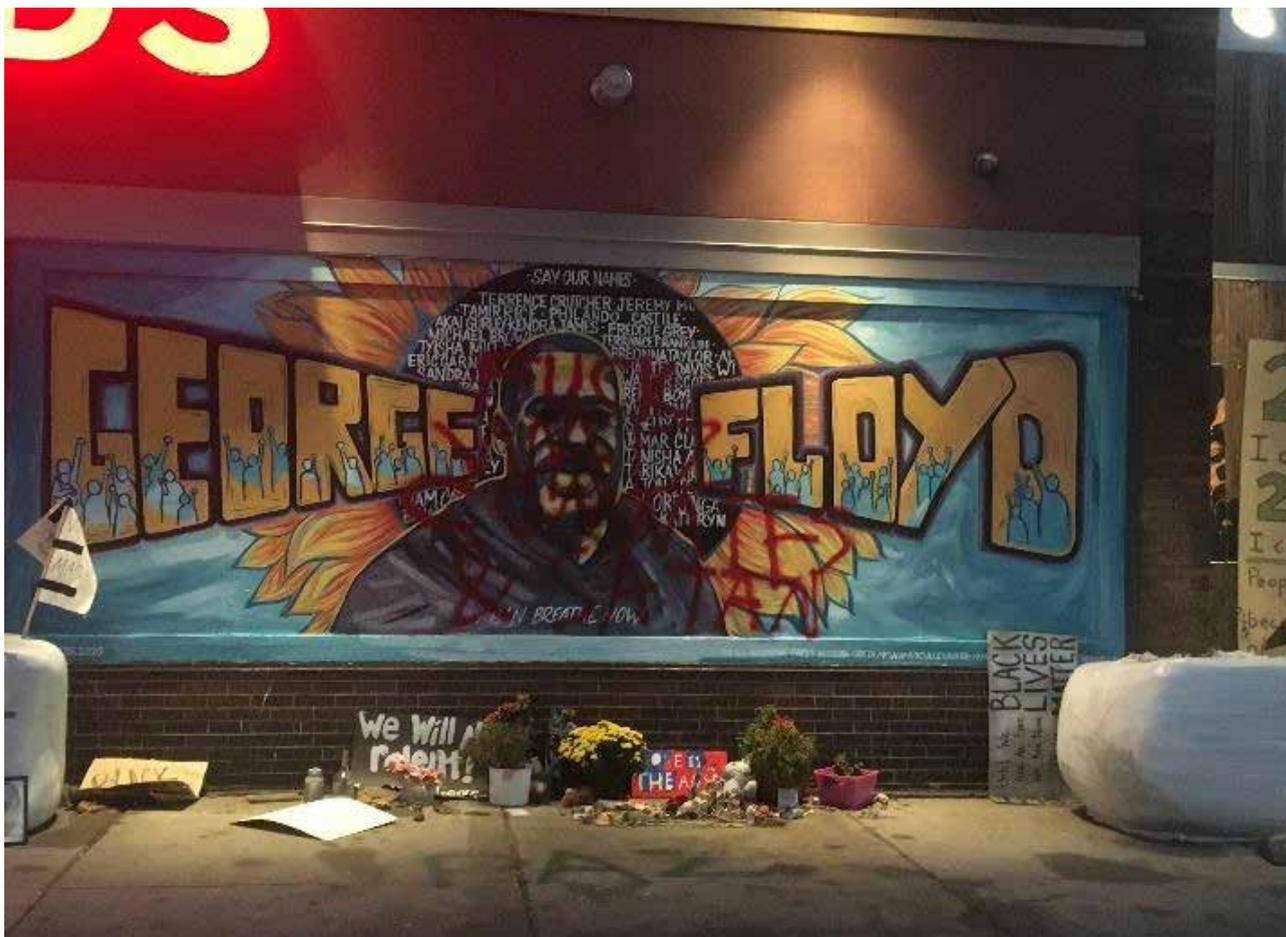


Fig-5 Xena Goldman; Cadex Herrera; Greta McLain with Maria Javier; Niko Alexander; Pablo Helm Hernandez; Rachel Breen, "George Floyd Mural (defaced)," *George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art*, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1594>.

Organizations like StB2MtM seeking to preserve plywood panels face many challenges. Sometimes business owners want the boards removed quickly with little notice. The logistical challenges of organizing removal and storage are high. Documentation of works in context is often not possible. Plywood breaks down and some works are defaced. Additionally, Minnesota's winters are freezing and wet, with temperature changes that could ruin any art, let alone plywood boards. All these challenges can be overwhelming for any group, especially non-profits with few resources. Unfortunately, this mural has been defaced twice as of November 4, 2020. This second defacement reads "Fuck Walz Commies & Satan." It refers to Governor Walz of Minnesota, likely due to measures he instated surrounding Covid-19. George Floyd's eyes have also been blackened out.

Grassroots efforts and groups that center BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, & People of Color) often lack external support from other institutions, adequate budgets and fundraising, and have trouble finding volunteers to engage in long-term transformative work. The fight for change is never-ending and volunteers and activists receive little immediate compensation. This can lead to a lack of continued investment and emotional strength regarding anti-racism efforts. What will happen to the preserved boards in the future? From what we have observed, the vast array of suggestions can be broken down into two main categories: repurposing, and public installation. Some have proposed repurposing the art for public use: turning them into picnic tables, benches, or little libraries.<sup>8</sup>

8 - SAVETHEBOARDS, @savetheboards\_mpls, August 17, 2020, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CD\\_-dxnFUG/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CD_-dxnFUG/)



Fig 6 & Fig 7- SAVETHEBOARDS, @ savetheboards\_mpls, September 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CE4msQ4HvJW/>; DAESK, ““We” Painted Panel,” *George Floyd & Anti-Racist Street Art*, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://georgefloydstreetart.omeka.net/items/show/1047>. These boards in Minneapolis, MN were defaced in early September.

This rejects the traditional preservation approach preferred by most collectors, specifically museums. Collecting institutions prefer to maintain the object's state of being at the time of collection and don't consider reshaping it for another use. This proposal also puts the art front-and-center in the community; making it accessible and tangibly useful, rather than in storage or behind a "Do Not Touch" sign. It ensures the community will have continued access to the art. There will be inevitable wear and tear, and likely vandalism, but it keeps the narrative of the art in the community's hands.

The second proposal is for permanent or semi-permanent installation. With the art in the hands of those who created it and have the most intimate relationship with it, it is less likely to be displayed out of context. StB2MtM is collaborating with the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery to ensure that Black Minnesotans control the exhibit and narrative. Luckily, traditionally colonialist institutions in the Twin Cities have stated they will not be looking to collect any of the boards.<sup>9</sup>

What does the future hold for the Twin Cities' protest art? The initiative taken by community members with vision and drive is key to making sure the momentum is not lost. As collectors small and large work to preserve these freeze frames of conflict and strife, particular detail should be focused on preserving the variety of voices and pieces sparked in the wake of the revolution-from the hopeful to the cynical critiques.

The conversation of who controls the narrative is ongoing. Keeping the art in the hands of the community prevents the further whitewashing of history. In the future, BIPOC communities having full control of the art created in and by their communities means they can use the art as tools for civic engagement, calling for institutional reform and accountability. This is the next step to lasting change.

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