

The gentrification of protest

By Callen Harty - Jun 5, 2020



State Street in Madison (Photo by Callen Harty)

Madison, Wisconsin, has had six consecutive days and nights of protests since George Floyd's murder became the latest episode of a black man killed by police. The last several nights have been relatively peaceful. The first several nights saw windows smashed out of 75 or so buildings

on State Street, looting, and other damage. Most of the windows and doors along the entire street are boarded up – many because of damaged windows, some to try to protect from damage.

In the last couple of days, many of the boarded windows have been covered with art, much of it very striking and beautiful. I went to see it myself yesterday and was transfixed by a great deal of it. I ran into a friend, Jenny, and we talked about our feelings about it. There were many African-American artists, particularly women, working on different pieces all along the street, and it was amazing to see the works they were creating. There were also a lot of white folks working on pieces, too. At least a couple of the pieces were done by Latino artists in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. The protests have been a really nice mix of races, ages, and other characteristics, so the mix of artists is perhaps a good representation of the protests and the city as a whole.

At one point my friend said something that struck me. She said all of the beautiful artwork reminded her of gentrification and it blew me away because I was enjoying the art, but also feeling somewhat ambivalent about it and she nailed it for me with that. Many of the boarded windows had signs on them that indicated that the works were commissioned pieces. In some ways, it felt like the gentrification of protest. You're covering up the anger with flowers and rainbows, ignoring the underlying passion and demands. If you hide the harsher, more direct messages and cover the boards with appealing artwork, people may want to come downtown again and do a little shopping. It seemed likely that a lot of the original graffiti was being painted over with lovely images about peace and love. There's nothing wrong with promoting peace and love, but it's also important to hold onto the messages being conveyed by the protesters.



Photo by Callen Harty

I found myself drawn to the boards that were not yet covered with beautiful images, but with the rawer graffiti and tagging, with messages like "Open Your Eyes," "Arrest Matt Kenney," "BLM," "F*ck 12," "I Can't Breathe," "Community Control," "Defund the Police," "Latinos Stand with You," "Cops Kill," "Breonna Taylor," "Justice for Tony Robinson," "Justice for Floyd," "No Cops in Schools," "Change the System," and "Do You Hear Us Now?"

It's great that the city is paying artists, particularly black artists – who tend not to be very valued in this country – to create art in the midst of destruction. It is beautiful and profound and conveys important messages to a hurting city and a hurting nation. But please don't cover all the gut-level feelings and statements that were there first and from those on the front lines. Those messages

are just as important, or more so. Those boards and buildings were marked by the protesters with their own feelings, needs, and desires. They are messages that the protesters are trying to convey to the world and we need to listen.

Callen Harty

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