

ROBERT
O'NEAL

OPEN TO ALL

April 28 – September 24, 2023

Level 2, Lower

Robert O'Neal: Open to All

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.

Ask Yourself

- 1 What does it mean to be a socially-engaged artist? How did O'Neal exemplify these values before socially-engaged artists were more well-known?

- 2 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?

- 3 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?

- 4 Jazz had an undeniable influence on O'Neal's work. Where do you see that influence? How would you describe it?



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Inside image: Robert O'Neal, *All Jazz*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 22 x 30 x 0.75 inches. Courtesy of the Robert O'Neal Multicultural Arts Center.