Art can be a testimony. It is an opportunity for artists to speak their authentic truths and be heard. The deeply personal testimonies shared by the Kansas City-based African American Artists Collective and received by you embody this powerful reciprocal interaction. Through a range of media, styles, and themes amplified by the artists’ own words in the labels, this exhibition offers perspectives on myriad Black and African American experiences.

The African American Artists Collective (AAAC) grew from a 2014 gathering of local, community-minded artists at Gates Bar-B-Q on Main Street. Since then, the AAAC has increased the visibility of African American and Black artists throughout Kansas City and beyond. Although 35 artists are represented here, AAAC boasts nearly 150 members, many of whom have national and international reputations. Together, they advance professional development, build networks, provide mentorship, and engage in social justice.
TYRONE AIKEN

American, born 1962

“I am somebody! I am the son of parents born into the slave replacement system of sharecropping in South Carolina, who, as a part of the Great Migration, left the South for a better life on Long Island. I am a Black, gay man trained in concert dance forms including ballet, modern, jazz, and Dunham dance techniques. I hope the viewer will think about their origins and how those origins intersect or not with marginalized communities in our society. We have been here before, always on the precipice of change, only to wait…”

TYRONE AIKEN

Dance projection with Winston Dynamite Brown, Latra Wilson, and Hope McIntosh (vocals)

I Want to Testify, 2021

Courtesy of the artist
"Who am I? I believe there is no in-between: right and wrong, good or bad, yes and no. If you see me, you can know me. It is my hope that this work will allow you to understand the struggle that most Black men live every day. Pushing through darkness to get to the light is a human condition, not just a Black man’s condition. What a world it would be if we had shared understanding. All of us, seeing the light on the other side. The light of equal Hope. The light of equal Justice. The light of equal Freedom. The light of Healing."
“I am a Black woman, but if you see beyond my color, I am a woman.

This is an offering to women of all colors. This simply represents joy, free of all the bindings that we wear to be all the things we are expected or asked to be.

The bubbles represent life. The trials, triumphs, lessons, and blessings we as women navigate every day. As they rise into the atmosphere, they become a light that radiates the Solace found when letting go to become who we were designed to be.

Know your value and be joyful.”
“One of my musician friends asked me to create an image inspired by my concepts of Love for her new album titled ‘Love Is.’ When considering what ‘Love Is,’ my first thought was of the Love between a man and a woman. But what I ultimately concluded in my creation was that Love affects all that is life in general. I visualized that all living things have the ultimate responsibility to their kind to survive. Could Love be the feeling that ensures the survival of all life? Who knows what ‘Love Is’?”

CHARLES A. BIBBS
American, born 1948

Love Is, 2020
Acrylic and ink on paper
 Courtesy of the artist
“My mind is focused on ways to stay alive, beyond cancer, Covid, and natural causes. I am acutely aware of things I am not allowed to do. My hair, as it grows from my head, is ‘not professional.’ My earnings are far less than others with similar training and experience. My education and experience are continuously questioned. I can get KILLED for: Having air freshener in my car. Jogging through my neighborhood. Sleeping in my bed. Buying snacks from a convenience store. Going to church. Sitting on my front porch. I’m not angry. I’m tired. I’m tired that these times are like the other times, like the last time. Times don’t change.”
MICHAEL A. BRANTLEY

A Seat at the Table, 2021
Acrylic and oil on canvas
Courtesy of the artist

“Anatomy of progress, visibility, and identity within integrated spaces.”
“This poem reflects how I feel about the world around me and charts where I am in my life’s journey. Some may think it’s brave to identify and call out problems in our society; I see it as an obligation. The true gift and magic to create change lies within us all, and I salute those who have the courage to show the world their light.”
“This offering is about Black identity and the Black experience in America. The patterns represent the deep connection to Africa by way of the Trans-Atlantic slave routes travelled by our ancestors who were taken against their will. The stained-glass window signifies our faith and hope in a higher power, and that change will come one day. The black stars and stripes symbolize resistance against hatred in America. I will not go away, even if I want too. I am Black. I am Female. I am American.”

“The torture of being the unseen object, and the constantly observed subject.” — Amiri Baraka
“This painting is an affirmation of the constant struggle of Black people to possess and maintain our sense of self in spite of outside criticisms focused on race and culture. Our hair is in a state of constant fluctuation, gradually transforming our external identities and our internal selves. In my work, ‘SUP’ stands for ‘Surviving Under Pressure.’”
"Love of a Lifetime celebrates Seteria and my twenty-six-year journey in marriage together. My work is centered in Southern-ness, History, and Folklore, and my mantra has been, ‘Stories untold are stories forgotten.’ I have Seteria at the crossroads with me. I am the potted plant pictured, offering myself to her. One day, I captured this image of Seteria with my phone, and I knew I had to do something with it. We’ve given the best of ourselves to each other, and I gladly share this intimate moment with museum goers.”

You find yourself sitting on a church pew. The internal conflict rises until your story comes pouring out. As you hear the Amens bouncing back at you, you feel the warmth returning, the joy unfurling like a child waking in the morning. With those Amens, we feel a part of something more and then we move, moved by the Amen.”
"Birth of the Blues is part of the Evolution of Jazz series commissioned by the National Park Service. I equate Jazz and Blues in the stream of African American music history. Jazz is recognized as a combination of German-structured and African improvisational music. The sculpture depicts four slaves who have appropriated three brass instruments and a guitar, sitting on cotton bales and mimicking the German sounds wafting out of the various German clubs in New Orleans. The word ‘Jazz,’ derives from the German word Jasse, which means ‘nonsense’ in German."
“Inspired by the horrific George Floyd killing, Be One celebrates the unity of people around the globe in support of Black lives. I felt compelled to say something when I saw people standing up against injustice, not just in the United States but everywhere. With references to the current refrain ‘I can’t breathe’ and historic protest song ‘Strange Fruit’ recorded by Billie Holiday, the lyrics are a call to stand strong, unite as brothers and sisters, and be one to build a better future for our children.”
“Jazz is freedom; a musical expression that comes from the African American experience. It takes courage to be a jazz musician. Most will never know fame or fortune. A musician’s life is often difficult. They don’t choose to play music; the spirit chooses them.

When I photograph musicians, I capture what I call honest musical moments. The tip glass with the dollar bill is fitting. How did musicians survive through the pandemic? I so admire those that live a musician’s life.”
When we were children, we saw shapes and figures in clouds. In the water, I saw musical notes as swirls of colors and shapes as figures marching in line, paying homage to all the lives lost in the flooding. I captured this image employing the reflections from surrounding structures, the water’s movement, and my imagination.”
“Now that my son is eligible to get his driver’s license, I am acutely aware of the danger he faces as a Black, autistic young man. We have had the conversation for when he’s pulled over, that they will see his color, not his autism. The other blue doesn’t care about his blue. At the time of writing this, former police officer Derek Chauvin is on trial for the murder of George Floyd. On April 11, twenty-year-old Daunte Wright was killed by police during a traffic stop. He was unarmed.”
I am a Kansas City native, dancer, instructor, and choreographer. My passion for dance and business acumen moved me to establish Kansas City Metropolitan Dance Theatre. KCMDT is a nonprofit dance education and performing arts center for children in the urban core inspired by the legendary Smith Sisters. Upon their passing, I vowed to give back to the community, continuing to teach dance and instilling life skills. I serve in dance continuously, committing to affordable and quality instruction and positive development of children. Our motto is ‘In, for, and by the community.’
"I wanted to create a work of art that starts a dialogue about subtle things overlooked in the past. *Spiritual Awakening* is about creating beauty out of ordinary materials that represent oppression. Slaves didn’t own clothing with zippers, nor did they accessorize with a variety of beautifully colored buttons that would have signified wealth. I selected copper because of the spiritual power of healing that it carries. Combining these three materials, I feel a faith that recognizes an abundance of beauty through differences."