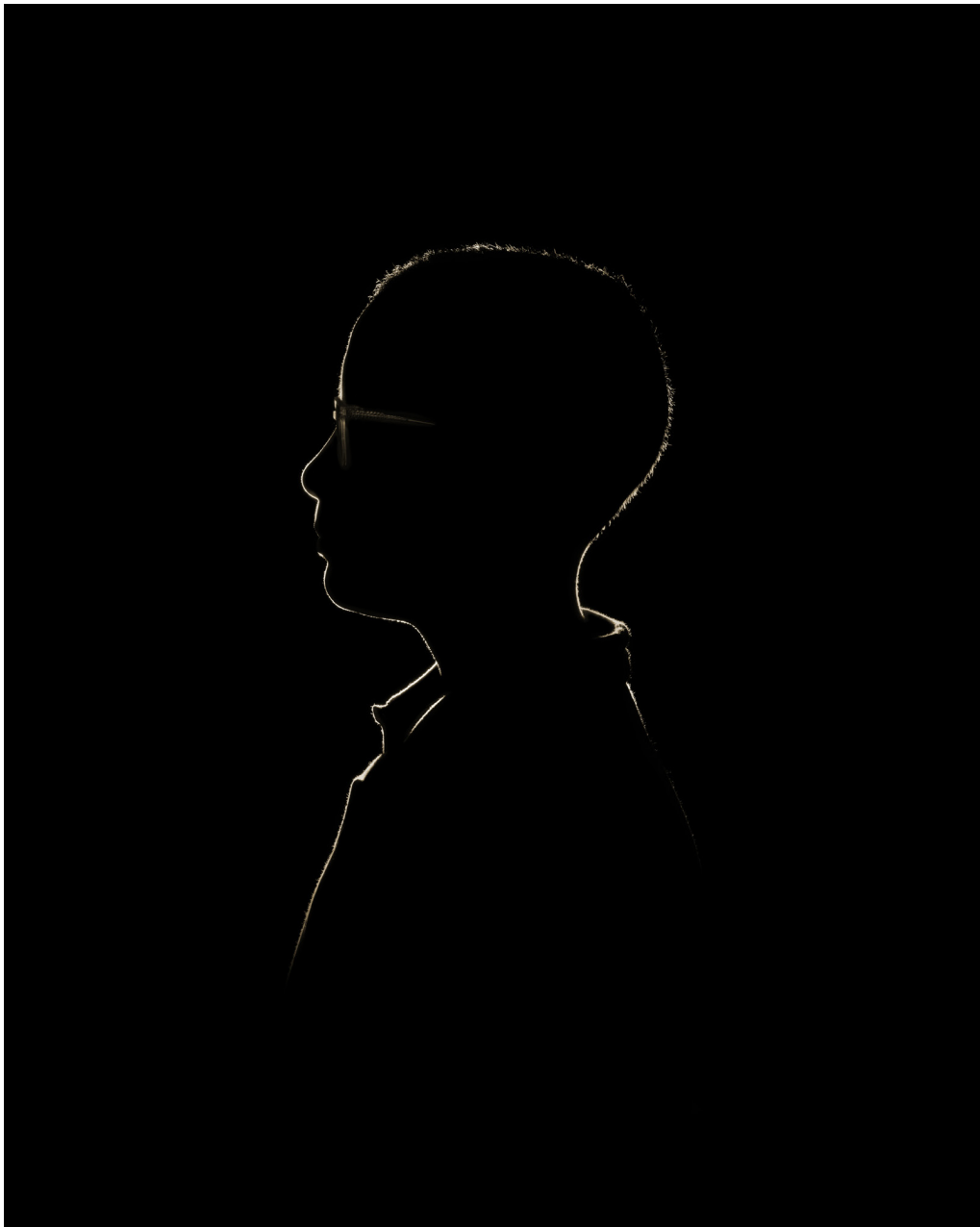


# DYLAN YARBROUGH

## I AM AN ECLIPSE



**DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES**

July 5–August 4, 2023

# I AM AN ECLIPSE

---

*I Am An Eclipse* is a socially engaged art project led by photographer Dylan Yarbrough and poet Marcela Ossa in conjunction with Centro Romero, a long-standing nonprofit organization supporting the immigrant and refugee community of Chicago. In the creation of this work, members of the Centro Romero community were prompted to write a short composition of creative nonfiction and to sit for a portrait. The resulting artwork is presented as diptychs, with the participant's written composition displayed on the left panel and a silhouette portrait on the right panel. The written pieces encompass a range of styles, including poetry, short stories, testimonials, and reflections centered on the theme of "Eclipse." The photographs, captured from a side view, utilize striking lighting to create a silhouette effect. The silhouette acts as an eclipse, simultaneously revealing and concealing the identity of the subject. The artwork invites viewers to reflect on themes of immigration, community, the power of testimony, and the forces of light and dark.

# DYLAN YARBROUGH

---

**Dylan Yarbrough** is a photographer, designer, artist, and educator based in Chicago. He received his MFA in photography from Columbia College Chicago. He currently teaches photography at Columbia College Chicago and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His artwork investigates themes of identity, community, place, and well-being. Dylan is the '22-'23 recipient of the Diane Dammeyer Fellowship.

**Website:** <https://www.dylanyarbrough.com/>



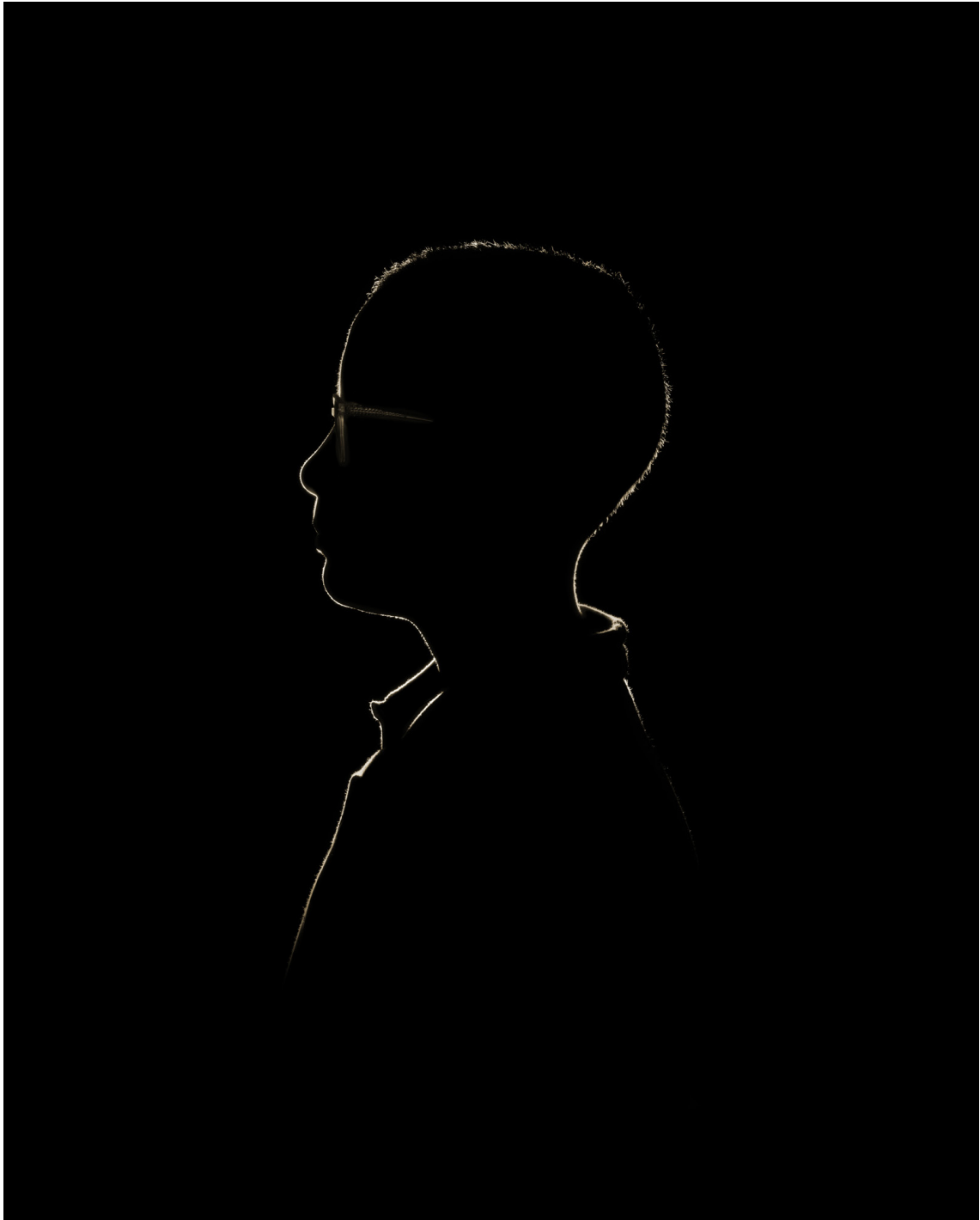
*It's A Free Country, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*



*They Call Me Chino, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*



*Agridulce, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*

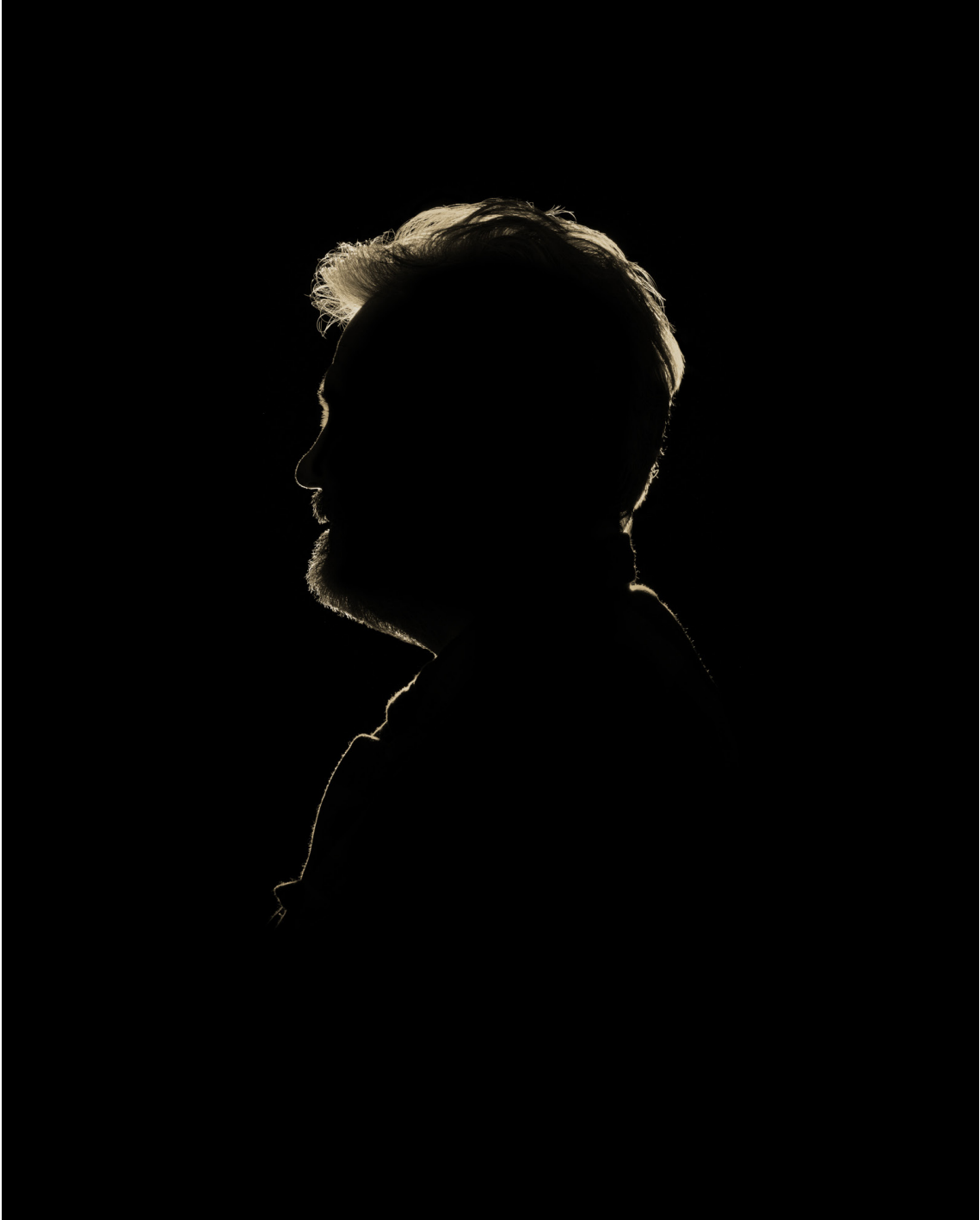


*I Love My Xbox, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*



*Stop the Cycle, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*





*The Shadow Has Remained, Chicago, 2023, Panel B, archival inkjet print, 8" x 10"*

# INTERVIEW WITH DYLAN YARBROUGH

Conducted by Rachel Manlubatan

---

**Rachel Manlubatan:** How did this project come about?

**Dylan Yarbrough:** This project began when I received the 22' - 23' [Diane Dammeyer Fellowship](#). This fellowship provides an opportunity for a socially engaged photographer to produce a body of work that sheds light on human rights and social issues. [Centro Romero](#) was chosen as the community partner for this year's grant cycle. They are a non-profit organization that has served the immigrant and refugee community in Chicago for over 35 years. We were paired together to create an art project that showcases and celebrates their vibrant community.

Initially, I started this project alone, adopting a traditional documentary approach. I frequented Centro Romero's facilities, observed the ongoing activities, and attempted to document their operations. However, it soon became clear that this approach was not going to work. Centro Romero's bustling environment, filled with staff, volunteers, and new arrivals, demanded a different approach. Due to safety concerns, I couldn't simply enter a room and start making photographs. I had to introduce myself and seek verbal consent from everyone present. This not only posed challenges for me, but it also disrupted the organization's programming.

Given the subject matter's sensitivity and the need for consent, collaboration, and co-authorship, I began brainstorming ways to organize individual portrait sessions, collaborate with other artists, and create a platform for participants to tell their own stories. Once I joined forces with my collaborator, Marcela Ossa, the project underwent a remarkable transformation. With her invaluable contribution and collaboration with participants, the project grew into something greater than I could achieve on my own.

**RM:** What did you learn about the immigrant and refugee communities of Chicago through this portfolio?

**DY:** Chicago's immigrant and refugee communities are currently facing urgent needs. Since last August, over 10,000 individuals have arrived in Chicago, primarily due to Texas Governor Greg Abbott's decision to transport asylum seekers to sanctuary cities in a derisive protest against immigration policies. This increase in need has strained the city's resources, leaving many without a place to stay. Some are forced to seek shelter in police station lobbies and airports while awaiting assistance.

The overwhelmed shelter system has compelled city officials to declare the situation a humanitarian crisis. However, the limited financial aid received from state and federal authorities has made it challenging to accommodate the sudden increase of individuals who often arrive with minimal possessions. Despite the designation of this crisis and the request for assistance, Chicago officials continue to face significant obstacles in obtaining substantial funding.

Organizations like Centro Romero work tirelessly to provide comprehensive care to these individuals. I have been profoundly moved by the unwavering dedication of their staff and volunteers, who demonstrate remarkable acts of compassion. However, they cannot tackle this immense task alone. Until substantial federal or state aid is granted, it falls upon us — the people — to contribute in whatever capacity we can. Centro Romero needs donations, volunteers, non-perishable food, clothing, and more. I urge you to consider how you can contribute and take action.

## INTERVIEW CONTINUED

---

**RM:** Why did you want to use the theme of “Eclipse” with this series of photos?

**DY:** The theme of “Eclipse” emerged organically. The portraits needed a certain level of anonymity, prompting me to experiment with different lighting conditions. Through discussions with Marcela, stakeholders, and community members, we arrived at the lighting style that you see now. It was during one of our project meetings that Marcela and I noticed that the glowing silhouette resembled an eclipse.

Immediately, we acknowledged that the word “eclipse” carries profound metaphoric significance and could serve as a central theme for the project. Throughout art and literature, eclipses have evoked powerful emotions and served as enduring icons. Metaphors function by equating one thing with another, not because they are literally identical, but for the sake of symbolism.

An eclipse is a breathtaking spectacle that compels us to question our place in the vastness of the universe. Our perception of an eclipse and its significance depends on our point of view. When we witness an eclipse, we cannot help but contemplate the relationship between light and dark. In Western culture, we often perceive phenomena in binary terms: light and dark, night and day, male and female, success and suffering, American and “other.”

However, many of the things that we perceive to be fixed are, in fact, fluid. Our identities, like the perpetual movement of the sun and moon, are often in a state of flux. By embracing the theme of “Eclipse,” we invite viewers to explore ideas about the gradient between light and dark, the fluidity of our identities and communities, and the interplay between our individual perspectives and the grand tapestry of the universe.

**RM:** How do the dramatic lights and darks, and the anonymity of each subject, allow viewers to

**DY:** Vulnerability is a challenging feat for most people. It’s difficult to radically accept and embrace our truth without the fear of being rejected or judged. We describe our portrait sessions as a ritual of release. The participants engage in quiet mindfulness while the portrait is made. Afterward, they privately express their feelings and share their stories. These stories vary from expressions of gratitude to accounts of trauma and everything in between. Regardless of the content shared, the anonymity provided by the portraits creates a safe space for people to practice vulnerability.

What intrigues me the most about the lighting style is its ability to simultaneously conceal and reveal the subject. When we make a profile portrait, it uncovers a unique silhouette and likeness of the individual. It’s recognizable enough for community members to identify their close friends and colleagues – the participants are aware of this. However, for someone that has no relationship with the participant or the community, it becomes quite challenging to identify them. Some participants didn’t even recognize themselves.

The lighting also creates a halo-like effect, enveloping the participant in a radiant golden glow. I drew inspiration from portraits and altarpieces commissioned during the Renaissance. During that period, the church was the primary patron of artists and the commissioned portraits often portrayed religious figures, influential individuals, and the wealthy. The demand for divine subjects provided the perfect backdrop for the use of luminous gold — a pigment that symbolized heavenly light. It was rare to see ordinary people depicted with such honor and reverence. By intentionally referencing and

## INTERVIEW CONTINUED

---

incorporating this gold pigment, the artwork evokes a sense of preciousness.

**RM:** What added impacts do your photos have through the incorporation of poetry, short stories, and testimonies?

**DY:** Photographs possess an incredible ability to capture and depict the world around us – to describe people, places, and things. We often say that *“a photograph is worth a thousand words”* or that they have the power to *“tell stories”* and convey *“narratives.”* To some extent, these statements hold true. A portrait, for instance, can make you feel seen, respected, and celebrated. It is empowering to witness yourself and your community as the subjects of art. However, photographs also have their limitations. More often than not, they fail to convey the complete story.

I also recognized that attempting to portray this community as a single author would be problematic. While I had confidence in my artistic abilities, I accepted that I was an outsider to both the community itself and the various challenges it faced. The phrase *“giving people a voice”* is commonly used among socially engaged artists, but I think this phrase is flawed. It has good intentions, but it’s condescending. These individuals already had voices and stories that were far more powerful than anything I could express on my own. I wanted people to be able to speak for themselves.

Recently, my dear friend Marcela Ossa published a book titled [“Cilantro Y Café.”](#) In this book, Marcela shares a part of their personal journey as a Colombian-American. The book is a collection of poems and short vignettes that are approachable and digestible. It delves into themes of heartbreak, depression, cultural identity, introspection, and social awareness. Marcela’s writing, filled with poetic vulnerability

and bravery, inspired me deeply. I thought it would also inspire others. So, I invited Marcela to collaborate with me and provide guidance to our participants.

**RM:** Did your ideas for this project shift as you got to know your subjects and read their writings?

**DY:** Absolutely. This project has made me realize the immense power of storytelling. Storytelling is one of the most influential, educational, and inspiring ways to connect with others. It creates bonds between people and ideas, conveying the shared experiences, values, cultures, and histories that unite us. Whether it’s within our families, communities, or countries, the stories we hold in common play a vital role in strengthening our connections.

While storytelling is universally important, it carries a special significance for those who have difficult stories to share. Trauma, grief, and adversity can create psychological and emotional barriers that hinder our ability to connect with others. Vulnerability becomes the antidote to these barriers. It takes great courage to open up and share. When we share our stories with others and they respond with empathy and compassion, it breaks down these barriers and creates space for learning, growth, and healing.

Sharing a story of struggle is not only healing for the one telling it – these stories become a catalyst for healing in the lives of others. There is an emotional identification that occurs when we hear a story of adversity that is similar to our own. Listening to stories that resonate with our own experience erases feelings of isolation and difference. It allows us to recognize our inherent worthiness and belonging. It assures us that we are not alone.

## INTERVIEW CONTINUED

---

**RM:** What audiences do you hope to reach with this exhibition?

**DY:** We aim to connect with a range of audiences through this project. Our primary focus is on the Centro Romero community itself. We strongly believe in making the artwork accessible to our participants, as well as their friends, family, and colleagues. It is equally, if not more important, that the stories being shared reach the people who interact with the participants on a daily basis. We also aspire to expand our reach beyond Centro Romero, branching out to the broader communities of Roger's Park, Greater Chicago, the United States, and beyond.

One question that often arises when discussing socially engaged work is, *"By exhibiting art about social issues in galleries and museums, aren't you primarily reaching an audience that is already aware of these issues?"* In other words, some wonder if we are merely *"preaching to the choir."* I believe there are valid concerns about the impact and scope of Socially Engaged Art. To address these concerns, we are committed to publishing and exhibiting our work in various contexts.

We want engagement within the traditional art world, including museums and galleries. However, we also aim to activate non-traditional spaces and incorporate public art installations. Ultimately, when we feel the project has reached its full potential, we envision publishing a book. A book would provide an ideal medium to widely share our photographs and stories. Additionally, we have launched a [website](#) and [social media presence](#) to further amplify our message and connect with a broader audience.



## THE DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on

select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community. The DEPS Artist Profile Series and graphic design is managed by DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Rachel Manlubatan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

**Learn more at:** [colum.edu/deps](http://colum.edu/deps)

**Contact information:** Mark Porter, [mporter@colum.edu](mailto:mporter@colum.edu) / 312.369.6643

Follow us on [Instagram!](#)

Like us on [Facebook!](#)

**Glass Curtain Gallery:** 1104 S Wabash Ave, First Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

**Gallery Hours:** Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.