

## Syrus Marcus Ware Interview Transcript

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank you so very much for meeting us Syrus.

**Syrus:** Thanks for meeting me.

**Interviewer:** So, we are so excited to talk to you about your mural project. We've seen them in the Village for how many years now? Since when?

**Syrus:** Since 2014, 13/14.

**Interviewer:** Amazing. And there's eleven of them?

**Syrus:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Amazing, they're beautiful.

**Syrus:** Twelve.

**Interviewer:** Yeah?

**Syrus:** I think twelve.

**Interviewer:** So before you sort of tell us more about the content of the murals and the sort of experience of it we wanted to hear more about the process. Can you sort of tell us about the sort of process of collaboratively creating this series of murals where so many artists were involved?

**Syrus:** Yeah, so it started with, Counsellor Wong-Tan & James Fowler and I put out a call for submissions and the idea was to create a series of murals that would tell the stories of the Village, we were particularly interested in telling the stories of those who are sometimes marginalized from mainstream narratives of queer history. So I was certainly looking out for that when I was looking through the submissions. We actually got 68 submissions, which, sometimes we say was 69 because it sounds funnier and more àpropos, but actually we got 68. And then we had a team of reviewers, Elizabeth Sweeney, John Rubino, Remy Huberdeau who reviewed all of the submissions and then we widdled it down to a selection of people. The way that we did that process, was sort of thinking about artistic merit, thinking about political content and sort of history working in the community and we were able to make this decision that sort of short-listed it down to maybe 25. Then those 25 people we had an open town hall meeting, we had invited a bunch of community members, elders, activists who had been organizing in the city and around the city for in total maybe 40 or 50 years, was maybe the person who had been doing organizing for the longest and people who had been organizing for a day. Everybody came together and we got people to tell stories about what they thought was significant about what had happened in the neighbourhood. So like Monica Forrester told stories about Maitland and about this particular organizing that they had done, you know in the late 1980s. Billy Merasty told stories about you know the rally after the bathhouse raids and him going up to the doors of the legislature, stories about two-spirited people of the First Nations, organizers talked about Desh Pardesh there was people just telling all these different stories. All of the artists were present at this meeting, all the 25 short-listed artists and we invited them to take as many notes as they could, ask a lot of questions, take in the stories, engage with the stories and then come back a week later with designs based on what they heard. So they all came back, we invited all of the elders and community members back and the artists on the second day presented their proposals. So there was 25 proposals for 25 options, 25 murals, that told a variety of different

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stories that the artists had heard and so they presented their work, some were stronger than others, some were more reflective or contemplative of the stories and the histories that had been shared so there was a variety of different things that made each proposal stronger or weaker and we had a really tough decision. We had to figure out from that 25 how we were going to get it down to the final 11. So we took feedback from the elders and the community members and they helped to make the decision and then we were able to ultimately select 11 artists teams. I am suddenly blanking on whether it was 11 or 12 but let's say 11. Most people worked solo, but there were a couple of collaborations, like Red Dress Productions worked together, Nadijah Robinson & Elixir Elliot worked together, so that's what we did. The next step was to get all the homeowners and property owners on board so we did a lot of consultation with the building owners, probably 6 or 7 months, that was a big, big part of the work, was getting the permits and getting walls and getting all of that stuff sorted. And then the artists began working, they created these 11 murals and together they really do tell a story that isn't always told about the Church-Wellesley Village.

**Interviewer:** Amazing. Thank you. Can you describe the content of a few of your favourite murals that were made by and represent QTBIPOC lives and histories?

**Syrus:** Absolutely, my favourite, I really connect with something different in each of the murals. I think that all of the artists tell a bit of QTBIPOC history, some more explicitly than others but certainly the things that stand out, I mean I love the work that Nadijah Robinson & Elixir Elliot did together. It was Nadijah's design and Elixir helped with execution, and it told the stories of artists of colour and performers of colour from the 1950s until today and it was a really beautiful mural, it's a beautiful concept and they are sort of floating in this blue-like sky, but it's significant because that particular mural is on the outside facade of Crews & Tangos and that was an area, that was a bar that had had a controversy in the early 2000s where there was a ban on music by artists of colour or music that was perceived to be attractive to communities of colour like hip-hop or reggae. So it was significant to have that particular mural in that site and that specific space. Meera Sethi's mural, which is at the corner of Church & Wellesley it's, sort of, that intersection is so significant, people have strong claims on that intersection and her mural is inspired by South-Asian textiles and references specifically the history of Desh Pardesh and being sort of central to organizing in the 90s and early 2000s of QTBIPOC history in Toronto. So to have that at Church & Wellesley is important, and it's beautiful it takes up the whole building, the south facade of the Novak pharmacy. And then Natalie Wood's piece which is just in the alley just around the corner, that involved two stages, getting people to come together to kiss, and she photographed them. And then doing a whole bunch of research into the books by lesbians of colour and queer people of colour that had significantly impacted the people who were kissing's sort of journey and life and understanding of the world and then she references this Gran Fury poster that says "Queers are here. Get used to it." and there were these people kissing, there was maybe four sets of people and in this mural that Natalie has created she also has these silhouettes of people kissing, very reminiscent of that Gran Fury poster, but their silhouettes are filled in with the book covers of all these books that were so significant to people. You know, like Carol Campers Miscegenation blues and Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and other books like that, very important at this time, especially when there's so few queer bookstores and independent bookstores and how that role of places, like the Toronto Women's Bookstore, the This Ain't the Rosedale Library, the Sister Vision Press played such an important role in queer history here. I really love those three, but as I say there is something in all of them that, Red Dress Productions, theirs is a mosaic and it specifically references a story that Monica Forester was telling about trans women of colour and sex worker activism and their character they call Ella and she's standing with her fist in the air and she's holding a red umbrella and it's a really

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beautiful mural, it's actually on the facade of the women's specific or women's only Toronto community housing building which is south of College. It's great.

**Interviewer:** One thing we were talking about before, was we were wondering about in getting those permits, did the owners have any sort of say in what the content of the murals were or did they sort of hand over the rights to the ?

**Syrus:** Most of the owners didn't have any interest in giving curatorial feedback or like content-based suggestions, except for Crews & Tangos, because they love blue and blue was a big part of their colour scheme so they were like ok if you're going to do blue as a background, could you do this particular blue, this royal blue because it's our colour. And then Novack's pharmacy, there was, we had to negotiate a little bit around scale because it's such a huge mural and how much of the brick do you paint and how much do you leave?

**Interviewer:** Right, ok. But otherwise in terms of content you didn't have any feedback?

**Syrus:** No, but the 519 mural, which was the last mural to go up, they gave, feedback. They wanted to make sure that the mural reflected a really wide age diversity because of who uses the 519 and because they have everything from infant programs to seniors programs. For them it was very important to have a really wide age split in the people who were reflected in John Kuna's mural.

**Interviewer:** you had mentioned earlier, in another interview, about racist and homophobic backlash from a couple of the murals, can you tell us some of those stories?

**Syrus:** Yeah, I mean the artists, really put themselves out there because they were creating these very political works, in public space in real time, they were on scaffolding, making in some cases really explicitly messaged or text heavy works that were about queer liberation and queer justice, so there were things that happened. So on the mural that Alex Flores worked on, just south of Carlton, off of Church, she experienced a lot of problems from some of the residents of the building who felt that having a queer mural that said, one part of her mural it had said something like "Happy Pride" or "Queer pride" or something like that, that they didn't want that on the building, even though it actually wasn't their say, the building had already approved the mural, there were some concerns because it got a little bit heated and she's up on the scaffolding, it was a bit of a dangerous situation. So that was hard, it was negotiated, we figured it out, but it was challenging. The other thing was that after Meera Sethi's pieces was completed, after there was 11 of the murals, 10 of them were completed at the same time. As I said the 519 was the last one, it was done a season later. But when they were all, you know the first batch were all being completed in November/December of 2013, when Meera Sethi's mural was completed and the scaffolding came down. There was, I think there was a letter to the editor in Xtra and there was a lot some posts on Facebook by white cis gay men who were very upset that the mural at the intersection told the story of Desh Pardesh and told the story about queer South Asians because they were sort of suggesting this was not actually the core of the community and that the majority of the community was them and their story should have been the one that was at the intersection. Which is of course, we weren't surprised by, which is why we had intentionally done it that way. Yeah, so that was quite challenging and it's unfortunate, right because this is the kind of implicit and deeply rooted racism that has really affected a lot of the organizing. There's reasons why Desh Pardesh is not around, there are reasons why so many of these things that we had been celebrating kind of came and went. Part of it is because of the stress and the challenge with working with an explicitly racist community.

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**Interviewer:** We were just talking before, can you remind us about that mural? Meera's mural? It's based on textiles?

**Syrus:** Yes, South Asian textiles. It has very elaborate, very bold and bright geometric designs that go in diagonals up and down the side of the mural. There's also mirror-like or mirrored pieces that go up and down that are also reminiscent of the mirrors that are often sewn into particular fabrics. It is, there is sort of in Meera Sethi's style in very, very bright, almost neon, super-saturated colours.

**Interviewer:** And specifically, a commemoration or a gesture towards...

**Syrus:** Desh Pardesh, yeah and I suppose although Desh Pardesh was a really big, specific reference I think that you could also say it's also referencing Funk Asia at the Red Spot it's also referencing Besharam all of the sort of significant art-based organizing that queer South Asian folks have done in the city.

**Interviewer:** Thank you. Can you tell us a bit about stakeholders, and funders and sort of sponsors involved in the project? I feel like oftentimes with these sort of projects we take on public sponsors, private sponsors, I am just wondering what that experience was like, whether you felt any tension or negotiation that had to happen?

**Syrus:** Yeah, we were funded mostly, primarily through the City of Toronto, Street Art Toronto, which has funding for large-scale art projects that are sort of seen as a graffiti transformation. It actually used to be called the Graffiti Transformation project, so creating these beautiful public art pieces is a way of discouraging people from tagging buildings, which I don't really agree with because I think there is a real value in using walls as a message space. But anyways, that's where a lot of our funding is from. We had a donation from Dulux paints, they donated all of the paint and then we had funding from the Bank of Montreal and of course the City of Toronto. So those were the funders and it was, you know, negotiating, it was a lot of negotiation because I think if, there wasn't any curatorial feedback from any of the funders, there was no interest in changing any of the messaging or changing our process, but it is still a, I think if there had been more of a push by residents against Alex Flores' mural or if there had been more of a pushback around Meera Sethi's mural I wonder if there, you know, that's the moment you get to see how much in ally-ship you actually are with these folks who are funding your thing, but it didn't come to that.

**Interviewer:** I wanted to sort of ask about, specifically because I went on a walking tour by Kristyn Wong-Tam that was about beautification of the Village before the Pan-Am games. I felt like on that walking tour some of the things that were celebrated felt kind of questionable to me, so for example, getting rid of seating space because, and it was sort of implied on that tour that, you know because things are happening on those benches that you know weren't just regular family activities and there were a lot of euphemisms for essentially displacing undesirable activity in the neighbourhood because for the Pan-Am games we need to put our best face forward. So I just wanted to ask you about your mural project because from earlier conversations I had the impression that you felt the mural project served sort of dual purposes and so I wanted to ask you how you felt about that.

**Syrus:** Yeah, I mean it's like one of those things where, we all had very different reasons for doing it. So my personal reasons were to try to use this moment to change the trajectory and do

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something that could be really beneficial in terms of archiving queer of colour history. I think that, you know, the city had very different reasons for doing it that probably had everything to do with gentrification and making sure that the ward looked fancy and pretty. The artists would have had their reasons for doing it, so we all had probably very different reasons for doing what we did. And I think that there are little moments of a lot of subversion that you can find, so like Lily Butterland's mural, which was the VIP Church, which is in the alley. She chose to do her mural in this alley where a lot of people, including people that she hung with while she was doing the mural use drugs, she had specifically done a mural about hustlers and party people in the Village that was frantically being scrubbed away in preparation for the games and just in preparation in general for the neo-liberal swing that the Village is in full thrust of. So she, I think there are moments like that, moments of subversion. Where her mural is just like "oh, yeah, this is the thing that you are trying to scrub away, I am just going to make a 50 ft. mural that has people from again 1952 you know in a grimy, dirty club, in the back room, in the toilet all the way through the front door of the club which is the front of the mural. Which is sort of the present." So I think I was happy with moments where we could intervene even knowing that the mural project was going to be used in all these different ways. You can really see it in the 519 mural, which kind of tells a very neoliberal story. You know, so you couldn't get two more different.

**Interviewer:** How would you say the 519 mural tells a neoliberal story?

**Syrus:** Yeah, there's very particular imagery of you know AIDS action, yes and also, women's health, womens' hands marching in the 1st pride parade which was very significant. But then some white cis, maybe cis, we're not really sure, gay men who are getting married. You, know, there is a variety of, a tableau if you will, of these images that tell a certain progress narrative perhaps that is homo-nationalism. That is just the way that mural went and it's very different, than this one (Butterland's) that is in the alley that people are literally partying with the artist while she is making this tribute to party people. So, and she sort of termed party people meaning people who are living on or near the street who are engaging in the nightlife, the very nightlife that is making not family friendly things happen on benches. Right, they were moving the benches to get rid of. So, I feel like it's very complicated, and each of the murals has more or less of that push and pull. You know? Like the pin button project which has all of these beautiful buttons from all of this different activism, you know really important activism that the slogans and minutia of which, you know a lot of which is lost, but on the other hand it is totally a tribute to the work of the lesbian and gay archives that have this pin button collection that really isn't, the archives is known for not being very reflective of the diversity of queer and trans people in Toronto. So all of the murals have this tense, kind of push and pull. Yeah, it's all complicated.

**Interviewer:** It's incredible admits all of that, you know some of the murals that you talked about at the beginning, like Nadiyah's and Meera's mural and the red umbrella productions, what is it called?

**Syrus:** Red Dress Productions

**Interviewer:** There is still this ability through this moment to bring that to the Village and that's going to be there for a very long time. And just speaking about how this project was used for different purposes, after that, a couple of years later there this summer there was a mural that went up to honour the police and their relationship with the LGBT community. And once that was unveiled there was definitely a lot of controversy about it, a lot of push back, a lot of people in the community that felt that it was really dishonest. Do you want to speak to that a little bit?

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**Syrus:** Yeah, that mural is dreadful and it is on the north wall of the building that has Hair of the Dog and it is one of the walls that we had requested for the mural project. And we were not able to get that mural, that wall space because we were told that it was too complicated because there were all these different stakeholders because it faces the school. Right, so it wasn't as simple as some of the other walls which didn't have as many stakeholders and had easier access for scaffolding and all of that kind of stuff. So it was very interesting that that wall was chosen for this. That mural project had no community consultation, they hired an artist, who doesn't appear to self-identify in any way as being connected to the community. And the mural content is designed to tell a particular story that celebrates the police and that sort of tells a very distorted version of the past. The mural makes very little sense in terms of its iconography. So if you were to look at it from an artistic perspective, even putting the politics aside for a minute, the mural makes very little sense. There's black & white, there's colour, there's sort of symbolism and references to things that most people wouldn't get, there's these feathers that are on the side that according to the police website reference the eagle feathers and are supposed to reference Indigenous history, but of course the feathers that are painted are pigeon feathers or another kind of bird, they're not eagle feathers. There's a weird rose, there's, the main image is of a trans person's arm whose skin is being peeled off and unzipped by a zipper that the zipper pull on the zipper is a bar of soap that says Operation Soap which was the name of the boathouse raid. So the soap raid is actually pulling the skin off of this trans person's arm and we know that it's a trans person because they have a tattoo that says 'transitioning' and their skin has hair all the way up to the wrist in a way that is not quite human. And then inside the skin that is being peeled off you see the, on the one side police pants, so on the inside of the person's skin is actually the seam of the police pants and on the other side there is this reference to this white bowtie campaign which was a very small, very unknown, trans online campaign started by a white trans guy here where people would wear white bowties to support trans people. But it's actually a campaign that most people don't know about, most trans people don't know about, so they just did some very loose, very sloppy internet research found something and said oh, this is something that is gonna be an image that everyone knows what it means, but no-one knows what it means, everyone thinks it's underwear. And then coming out of the arm is this clock tower on Yonge street which there was a bar underneath that's quite famous and part of the banner from Enough is Enough which was held during the rally following the raid, but because of the way the artist has painted it it doesn't say "enough is enough" it says "eh is enough". Which is probably very symbolic of this terrible, terrible mural. So from an artistic perspective it doesn't make any sense. From a political perspective it's actually super offensive, it's very transphobic and actually totally not reflective of what actually happened with the bath raid. I mean if you were to tell, even in their acknowledgement of the raid because they didn't actually apologize, it was cited as an apology, but they didn't actually apologize they just said "we acknowledge that this happened and we probably shouldn't have done that", but they actually didn't say they were sorry. But in that, even in that acknowledgement that something had happened in 1981, it doesn't in any way relate to the content of the mural. Why it's focused on trans or so much on the trans body and the trans body of colour doesn't make any sense in relation to even sort of main stream or not main stream narratives of what happened during the raid. It's a very bizarre mural and then of course during the launch of it we did a protest at the press conference. The police chief was there, he hadn't been able to show up to tent city, he hasn't met with Black Lives Matter for the six months that we have been asking to meet with him, but he did come to this mural launch. And that sort of, one of the first, I think, the first time when the crowd screamed "All lives matter" back at us. So it's a very specific thing and then right after that press conference they actually came back with the artist with a police protection, like a police group and they actually vaselined the wall. So there's a graffiti-be-gone thing that you can put on murals which we had to coat the other murals with that will allow you to wash off anything

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else that goes on the surface other than what is sealed underneath and that works really well. But then the most ultimate, actually old-school graffiti style way to cover a mural and make sure that no-one can ever paint over it, is Vaseline. And that's what they coated it with. We just watched it, watched them coat the whole thing with Vaseline.

**Interviewer:** I was just asking before, I was asking, I'm surprised nobody has defaced that thing yet .

**Interviewer:** So that's really interesting, they can co-opt a strategy of a community mural project and archiving that was done with so much integrity and participation from community and artists and like the whole process you outlined and then they can come back a year later to kind of co-opt that and do it totally the wrong way and put up this awful piece. Have they responded since, there's been no...?

**Syrus:** They haven't and then right across the street from that, so that's up from the north wall of Hair of the Dog and if you were to go across the street, through the intersection across Carlton then you would see Troy Brooks' (and Christiano De Araujo's) mural which was on the south wall of now The Marquis as today, but it was The Barn. And it also is a mural about the bath raids and tells a very different story and the police, yeah, it just tells a very different story than the police mural.

**Interviewer:** That is for sure. That sort of interruption of that press conference, that was,.. hosted by black lives matter, correct?

**Syrus:** Well, yeah. And it built on an earlier protest in 2011 or 2010 where there was a big police recruitment and corrections, and prison guard recruitment fair that happened at the 519. And a bunch of organizers had created a "no private policing" campaign and we had sort of had a big rally at the 519 and sort of drew on that, and just there are so many intimate ways that the police and corrections are deeply embedded in sort of pink-washing and making themselves seem great and very open and supportive and progressive. And even at this press conference they had a police officer who identified as a lesbian who told the story about how hard it was for her to come out and how supportive her... Anyways, it's just like this, a particular story over and over.

**Interviewer:** Should we, so to sort of close things and to give you an opportunity to talk about anything that you might of missed. What is your dream vision for public art that reflects and builds upon QTBIPOC communities?

**Syrus:** Well, in Philadelphia they actually have city funding to do a 100 new murals a year and every year they create a 100 new murals. And in that city if you go, especially in Center City in the downtown every building has a mural on it, every building has a mural on it. Some are really small, some are really big so it depends on the size of the wall. And I think that we should definitely be, I think that there there's a city full of walls that you can post complaints on most of them, but there is a whole bunch that you can do when you have that kind of platform to create a variety of different messages. So I think it would be really great, and the city does have that with those electrical boxes on every street corner, they always paint those, those are through the city. The same city fund that we applied to, but I think large-scale murals really do tell a story about the city and I think that they can be really helpful for situating our activism. So I think in my ideal world there would be more murals, and I think that they're, you know having community invested in developing the content makes the most sense because it's very easy to create these sort of corporate things that actually look like community, they're very good and savvy at doing that now.

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You know, like the hip hop mural in Harlem that is actually paid for by Chevy or whatever. That stuff happens all the time, and they use the tools and strategies of street art to reference and suggest like coolness or like a hipness that then adds to this corporate brand. And I think that instead, having community-driven projects that are based on the stories and histories of community members and painted by artists from those communities are the way that things should go. I think that perhaps that's one of the things that stands out so significantly about this police mural is that not only is it just a really poorly painted mural with sort of a bad composition and terrible politics it also is something that's placed into the community and nobody knows the artist and nobody knows the story because it's not coming in any way from our people.

**Interviewer:** Great, thank you. Thanks Syrus, is there anything else you wanted to add?

**Syrus:** I guess just like, that one of the things, the artists that really inspires me is Emory Douglas and he created work, he was identified as a revolutionary artist for the Black Panther party and one of the things that he did, was he made these wood cuts for the newspaper every week, right, but then he would also paint, post, really large versions of them and he would paste them all over in different neighbourhoods. And it was a way of making, using the wall space to tell stories and to make these particular messages around mostly around anti-poverty activism and getting people to sort of rise up against them, excuse me, slum landlords and stuff, but what was really interesting was that he wrote on the bottom of every one of them what materials he used to make it and how he made it. And it was a way of inspiring other people or making accessible to other people the tools and means of production that everybody actually could actually learn how to do it and do it. And I think that that would be another really ideal thing would be to try to, the goals, my goal I guess with doing something like this would be that it would actually encourage more people to want to take to the walls and tell our stories in whatever means necessary.

**Interviewer:** That's great. Thank you. Thank you very much.

**Syrus:** Any time