



UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE
NATIONAL AGENDA 2021
REFLECTING AMERICA

“Power of Art”
with Nikkolos Smith

HOSTED BY

University of Delaware
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Nikkolas Smith

A native of Houston, Texas, Nikkolos is an "artist," children's book author, and a Hollywood film illustrator. He is the illustrator of **The 1619 Project: Born on the Water**, a new children's book written by Nikole Hannah-Jones and Renée Watson. He is the author/illustrator of **The Golden Girls of Rio** (nominated for an NAACP Image Award) and **My Hair Is Poofy And That's Okay**. As an illustrator of color, Nikkolos is focused on creating captivating art that can spark important conversations around social justice in today's world and inspire meaningful change. Many of his viral sketches are included in his book *Sunday Sketch: The Art of Nikkolos*. His works have been featured in *TIME Magazine*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, BuzzFeed, the Academy of Motion Pictures, *The Guardian*, ABC, NBC, KCET and many more. Nikkolos also speaks at conferences, workplaces, and schools all over the country, and leads workshops in digital painting, character and movie poster design. He lives in Los Angeles, California.

Transcript of Event

Date:

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Place:

Mitchell Hall and Webinar
Newark, DE



[Musical interlude to 0:00:34.3]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:

Please welcome your host for this evening, Dr. Lindsay Hoffman.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Good evening everyone. Thank you so much for being here. And for those of you who are watching online, this is the final event of our 11th Annual National Agenda Speaker Series. It's hard to believe. We're here thanks to the University of Delaware's Center for Political Communication with support from the Office of the Provost, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Division for Student Life. This year's theme, "Reflecting America", as we look into the metaphorical mirror, think about that. As Americans if we look into the mirror what and who do we see here in 2021? How are political polarization, social movements, economic upheavals not to mention a global pandemic redefining who we are as Americans? We find ourselves in increasingly narrow echo chamber with access to more information than ever before. We, it seems like we can't even agree on basic facts much less listen to different viewpoints. But that's what we do here at National Agenda; we learn from each other how to communicate effectively across differences, how to disagree without being disagreeable, and how to talk, turn talk into action. We've already heard from some amazing speakers this season: David Joy, a Appalachian novelist from North Carolina with Asma Khalid a Muslim journalist who covers the White House for NPR; two friends since middle school, Bernie Jacques and Justin Pierre who are sons of Haitian immigrants who are friends but have found themselves on complete opposite ends of the ideological spectrum; Eric Michael Garcia who



spoke to us from the perspective of a person with, on the autism spectrum about what its like to be on the autism spectrum and engage with others as a journalist; and Sarah McBride was our most recent speaker who is the first openly state transgender senator in America's history. We will be inviting your participation tonight both here in the audience and online. To ask a question here in the theater you'll see there are two microphones setup – I'm just checking that they're there – and when I open it up for Q and A you're just going to raise your hand; I'll have two of my students who will help escort you to the microphone and back to your seat. Please keep your mask on. To submit a question online just type your question into the Q and A box at the bottom of your Zoom window and it may be selected as part of our Q and A. So, tonight, we've; Nikkolas Smith, a native of Houston, Texas is a self-described activist – activist and artist – a children's book author and a Hollywood film illustrator. As an illustrator of color, Nikkolas is focused on creating captivating art that can spark important conversations around social justice in today's world and inspire meaningful change. Many of his viral sketches are included in his book **Sunday Sketch: The Art of Nikkolas**. His works have been featured in Time Magazine, The New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN. Buzzfeed, and many more. And he's also the illustrator of the book just released yesterday, The 19, **The 1619 Project: Born on the Water**, a new picture book written by Nicole Hannah-Jones and Rene Watson. Signed copies will be available in the lobby for purchase after tonight's talk. We have a great presentation scheduled. You're going to see lots of Nikkolas' art. It's very exciting. I'm excited to bring him here. Please join me in giving a big Blue Hen welcome to Nikkolas Smith.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: How's everybody doing? Thank you for having me. I am very appreciative. I would like to kind of give you guys just a little rundown on the power of art. Art is very powerful. As we know this is me. This is me as a child. And I'm going to talk a little bit from the very beginning when I was just making art of myself and all of these interesting things that whatever would come to mind I would make art. I was talking to the students a little bit earlier about the art that I made when I was young. I didn't really fill up books with art because I was afraid of it being perfect. So, I just want to start by telling everybody you are all creative. Don't worry about if the art that you might make is not perfect. Just make art. Everybody can make art. I do artist therapy and I'll talk about that in a second. So, once I went to college at Hampton University a little bit south of here I studied architecture. I found out about a company called Walt Disney Imagineering and I became a Disney Imagineer for 11 years designing theme parks. And at the same time, I realized that I did not want to be an architect [chuckle] because I realized that art is my passion and art is what is I should be all the time. And so, I [chuckle] decided, you know what, I'm going to become a fulltime artist. I now do concept art still for Disney sometimes. I write and illustrate children's books. I have a new book called **Born on the Water** that I will talk to you about later. I create movie posters. I do concept art for films – Judas and the Black Messiah and Space Jam are two of my recent ones. And, I'll just say real quickly concerning Space Jam, like, this was the type of thing where and all concept art that I do for films I'm, I have a, a script with just the words and somebody says can you add visuals to this? Can you explain visually what would it look like if LeBron James got sucked into a computer and then met cartoon characters [chuckle] in an animated world. So, things like that I do a lot

of that. And that's part of what I just feel like the importance of concept art is just trying to visualize what's not there. So, I do that a lot. Another thing, I teach traditional art. I teach digital art. I have a skill share class. If you want to check that out. Really just about the power of activism and what activism actually is. Part of that in essence has to do with last summer which was insane if you remember. There was, there was a pandemic. There was a, a national protest regarding Black Lives Matter. At one point Converse reached out to me and asked me to put my art on billboards all over Los Angeles and I said yes. And that was just an unbelievable moment where I could have people actually, like, almost like walk city, a, a city walk through, through my Instagram explaining to people who I am as a black artist. Why it's important to recognize that black lives should be recognized as important. Things that you, I did not ever think that I would ever have to explain but we, here we are you know? Another thing I do is I, I make art about the world, this world that is broken, that needs to be fixed, all the broken bones of the world that need to be fixed. This is Watts and Watts, there are parts that need to be developed and one of the things that I try to do with the young folks there is just explain to them that through concept art, you know, you can actually envision what you want to see. There are, there are so many things with, with art that, you know, there's so many broken things that you wish were working better. And visually we can say, okay, well maybe you guys can grow your own vegetables; maybe you guys can have your own, like, tech stations that explain to you all of the lessons that aren't learning in school that you should be learning. Also, this place right here is literally ten minutes away from SpaceX. And I was going to [chuckle] a SpaceX tour one day after leaving this place and I realized there should be like busloads of kids going to SpaceX.

Like, why, why is there a disconnect there? And, and so some of the art is, is also, some art that I make is just like showing these kids like you could be in space one day. I mean, there's, there's literally a black man floating in space right now – that guy on the bottom right – is floating in space right now. Like, just creating visuals to show young folks and, and, and the generations coming up that you can do incredible things and sometimes it's just a matter of like getting them to see themselves, you know, even if its just through art. Getting them to see themselves in a manner that they haven't seen and opening their eyes to what's possible. A lot of times in presentations I like to say that as you may notice I am a black man.

DR. HOFFMAN: Hum [chuckle].

NIKKOLAS SMITH: The reason that I was born in America and say not in central west Africa is because many, many years ago European colonizers were very afraid of the people that they came in contact with, and they enslaved them. And American slavery happened for 250 years. And then segregation happened for 90 years after that. And then there's little green portion where we've been trying to undo all of the crazy stuff that happened before that and so that's part of the reason why I do activism. It's, it's essentially art and activism. And like I said, it's like finding that broken bone. Like, what is happening in this world that you wish you could climb the highest mountain and tell everybody this is not working right, how can I fix this? And so, that's what I, I try to do. I try to inspire people to make a positive change and fix that broken bone after they see the art that I've created. And it, it's really, it was all based off of Nina Simone's quote that says, "it's an artist's duty to reflect the times." Like, I, I could not, I was, I was literally working at Disney. You know, some weekends I would make, you know, art

about rollercoasters and churros and Disneyland and at the same time all of these crazy things were happening. If you turn on the news it was like I, there were so many things that you just could not ignore, and I was like I need to make some art that reflects what's happening. At the same time, you know, this was, I would say, you know, years ago – 2010 – you know, I was going through a divorce. It was the hardest time of my life and I really just used art as therapy to, to get myself out of that low point. And I said, I'm going to make art piece every Sunday and I'm just going to post it on the internet, and it really turned into my Sunday sketch series, and it's been eight years of, you know, making art like week after week. I have every topic that I could think of. There is mass incarceration, immigration, there is mass shooting tragedies,. community outreach, suicide prevention, wildlife conservation, environmentalism, racial injustice which is one of the biggest topics that I touch because it is so close to me and it's one of, you know, it's one of the biggest broken bones in America. It's, it's, it's one of the things that we don't really talk about in this country as much as we should. And, you know, some, some things that are just as simple as this is my great, great, great, great grandparents. My great, great, great, great grandma and grandpa. I want to, I want people to be able to see them as human beings. This is kind of a depiction of, you know, might what they have felt like on Juneteenth when, you know, in Galveston, Texas and they found out that they don't have to be enslaved anymore; that this country will no longer recognize them as three-fifths human but five-fifths human. Like the joy that they might have felt. Like a lot of the, a lot of the I would say, well, basically the portraits, like, I, I do a lot of portraits and I want them to be looking at you directly in the face so that you can see their humanity. So that you can see, you know, for a

second, just like, to put you in their shoes. To say, these are humans, these are people who are struggling with very real issues and why can't we all just understand that in some way we're all the same and that we, we should all really be rooting for each other rather than tearing each other apart. Now I don't know why [chuckle] this type of thing can be misconstrued as divisive and tearing people apart when it's all about bringing people together. But we'll get into that later. Global health, last year, the pandemic, we all saw, there are so many points and people ask me a lot of times, like, do you ever, are you ever like unsure of what to make this week for your Sunday sketch? And I'm like, there's just so many things; like, there; I can open up Twitter and find something new every week that, like, how can this be happening? How can, how can we be in a pandemic and there's nurses in New York who have to use trash bags and we're the greatest nation in the country. How can we have a guy named Jesus in the middle here who is in Houston, Texas who is an essential worker under threat of deportation when this is the only country that he's ever known and he's a, you know, a DACA recipient? All these types of things were, you know, the, the art that I create I just want it to open people's eyes in that way and ask those questions. Like, why does it have to be this way? I also like to create superheroes. Superheroes re one of my favorite things to do. But, on my, on my end I feel like I need to create superheroes of, of people who they don't get talked about a whole lot. So, this is Robert Smalls. He was born enslaved in 1839. He stole a Confederate ship. He disguised himself as captain; used secret hand signals to pass Confederate ships and he rescued more slave, more, more enslaved people. He escaped to freedom and then he ran for Congress, and he became a Congressman, like, this is real life. This actually happened and

I'm like, well why didn't I learn about things like this? Like, I definitely remember learning about Davy Crockett and the Alamo – I grew up in Texas. I learned about the Alamo. I learned about this guy. I feel like I should have learned about this guy before that other guy. But things like that, that we'll get into in a second. Chadwick Boseman, another favorite superhero of mine. I had the opportunity to work on Black Panther, well the sequel, and also be on set for the first film and just this guy's heart for people was something that I, it, it was incredible, and it was such a shock when he passed. And I just wanted to create something to kind of extend his legacy and this ended up being, you know, one of my most famous pieces because I, I feel like it just touched people and, and, and was a reminder of like the huge heart that he had. I'm very grateful that, you know, were able to display in Disneyland for a while and now it's at Children's Hospital Los Angeles which I'm very happy about. I was talking to some kids in Atlanta through Zoom the other day about my new book and I was telling them, well, for one, this kid who's reading a book is a superhero to me. It, it's amazing to see how many young kids are able to learn so quickly and understand what's going on in the world. And so, for us today to have any kind of conversation to say that kids are too young to understand race or what's going on, I mean, as for me growing up in Texas as a black man, like, as a little black child, like, I, I was given lessons about race that no kid should have. Like, kids of color are taught about race very early and it's usually not a friendly lesson. And so, we had some good talks the other day and kids are amazing and smart. And so, I'm really, I'm really, really, really excited that I was able to be a part of this project, Born on the Water, the 1619 Project. It is, I feel like, one of the most important broken bones that we have in this country and something that we deal with constantly. And

until we actually have that deep conversation about how this country was formed we're never going to really go anywhere. It's going to keep being conflict and issues and all of the things that you see right now. So, I will show a few slides from the book. These are me of my favorite. A lot of what I, what a, I was happy to do was to be able to depict what was life like before the whips and chains and before American slavery ever even happened. There was, there was so much joy in the Kingdom of Ndongo. There was, there were, you know, amazing cultures amazing people who were, who were ripped from central West Africa and there were not slaves that were taken from central West Africa, they were, they were ingenious engineers, they were people who knew how to work the land, they were incredible people. And the reason why they were stolen was because they were, you know, so good at doing so many things. And, so, it, it goes into all of that in the book and I can't wait for you all to, to check it out. This is one of my favorite spreads which is "And They Dance" and there's so much joy in that. And one of the things Nicole and I were talking about was you have to understand how much, how much joy was in these cultures. You have to understand how much, just for centuries the, the craftsmanship and the, you know, the ingenuity and everything that was infused in these people to understand how devastating it was that they were taken. And, it was, it was very tragic, and it became, you know, a huge task for [chuckle] me to turn it into a children – like, like here, visualize what that was like and make it a book that kids will be able to digest. So, it is heavy, but it takes you through all of that and then after that moment it takes you into the resistance and, and just everything that went into what it took year after year to fight and fight and get your freedom back. It was a lot and after that point you get into, you know, the legacy, you know, the

amazing people that were born from this moment; the poets and the activists and the doctors and the preachers and all of these people that came from that moment. And it really is, it's a miraculous thing that it even happened. But that was, that was just another great thing to be able to, to illustrate that point. What I want to get into really quickly is some of the research that I, that I did. Just to be able to, to infuse this book with so much culture, a lot of it like really wanted to pull from the African practice of scarification. There are so many stories that can be told, and a lot of those stories are actually told right on the faces of Africans and, you know, tribes like Frafra and the Nuer and Nsoromma tribe where you, you know, they might have these like parallel diagonal scars that, that explain where they came from or where they are, or what type of person they are. There, there might be wavy patterns, there might be all these different like dotted patterns. All these things and I wanted to kind of even before you get into the book really just like take that idea and tell the story of the book. And this is, these are the endpapers at the beginning and end of the book, and it is one of my favorite parts because it really, it, it is the story of the book. There, there are motifs in the book that have to do with life, death and rebirth and life – life on the left, death, rebirth – and I just wanted to kind of try, try to visually explain to, especially young folks, so explain like, you know, what is that, what is that symbol that you might look for at any point in the book if you see, if you see any markings that, that show kind of like a unified front where the symbol here on the, on the left side, like a unified, a unified symbol of, you know, people working together, no lines being crossed. Just unity. Like, what would that look like and how can I incorporate that into all the people? What does it look like in the middle there? What does it look like to be, you know, double-crossed? What

does it look like to have a solid line of culture that's been going for generations and then another line just coming right through it? Like, to be taken. Like everything that you know just be destroyed in, in one motion. And there's a lot of that. You'll see, you'll see a slave ship at the top, some people on it. You see Africa on the left side. Days and days of just marking, marking the days that you might see at the bottom. And then, you know, what is it like, on the right side, just to, to build something from absolutely nothing. When everything's been taken from you, and you don't know really what to do except just keep living. Just like keep moving forward and it's not a perfect straight line but it is a symbol of rebirth. It is a symbol of, you know, we have to, we have to just keep moving forward. We have to keep living because if we stop now our whole existence is going to die. And I'm grateful for my ancestors who did not die, who decided to keep living because if they didn't I wouldn't be here. So, I'm really excited for you guys to, to just sit and look at that for a little bit. And so, this is "And They Dance." I'm just going to read it real quick. "And the people moved their feet, moved their whole bodies to the melody of horns and stringed instruments, marimbas and drums. They danced to celebrate, to mourn, they dance as a way of worship to offer thanks. Their bodies a song under open sky and bright sun. Their bodies a swaying testament to the beauty of creation." This is a, a little bit of reference from when I was just trying construct that, that spread I went back to my childhood and there were so many masks on the wall and so many little artifacts and instruments from when my parents had, you know, gone to Africa. So many things that I, as I started researching for this book I realized, oh, that's a Chackwoy (sp?) mask, that's from, that's from Togo; that's from Ghana, all these different places that I never learned about in school but, you know, I'm just

realizing just now, oh, these, these are central West African tribes. I have to put them into the book. And so, there, yeah, there's just so many different things that I – I couldn't fit everything in there, but I tried to fit as much as I could. And so, I'll give you a quick little rundown of how it went. I wanted to make it less green because Africa is very lush. I did a quick speed sketch of okay I think there's going to be some people here and here and I sent it to them to, to say like this is the direction. This, this is one of the ladies. Her name is Gaia (sp?). She has a huhu which I think is from Cameroon, if I believe, yes. That was a, the, some earlier research that I found this instrument called the huhu which has this like bulb and it's kind of like a flute. And then I worked on a lot of different adornment. I put in a lot of dances, a lot of instruments. There's, there's so many dances I can't even put it all together. But I, I put as much as I could into the scene to show that, for one, there were, there were like scores of tribes that kind of picked, like, in enslavers just grabbed from all over the place and picked so many different people and put them on these ships. And I wanted to, to kind of show, like, there, there's a lot of, there's a lot of different cultures here. And I'll, and it, it, it kind of explains in the book, you know, a lot of, you know, the people who and found themselves chained next to each other on these ships they didn't know each other. They, they were from all over the place. Some of them, you know, might have just, you know, some of them might have, you know, worshipped this way or more in this way or had been, might have had a totally different religion and they were all, you know, instantly put together and forced to become a new people. And that's kind of why the book says that we were born on the water. It's, this is, this is not necessarily of Africa, of America; people were born on the water and then we had to start new here in America. And so,

that's one of the issues that black people deal with a lot in America. It's like this duality of like how African am I, how American am I? Sometimes it feels like you're in between like your whole life and it's for that reason that again I'm just, I'm just grateful that – I, I tell them all the time, like, ya'll, ya'll picked me to illustrate this. Like, I'm, I'm so grateful that I can take something of such magnitude and put it into a book for the world. And like I always say, it's, for me I feel like it's a, it's a book for all ages like five to 105. It's for everybody. So, we'll, we will get into that a little bit later but that was pretty much my recap of [chuckle] the art that I've created and, and why I feel like, you know, you know, the visual image has so much power and I'm going to keep making it. So, let's talk about some stuff. [Chuckle.] Thank you guys.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Thank you.

DR. HOFFMAN: Thankyou so much, Nikkolas. And –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Indiscernible.]

DR. HOFFMAN: – thanks again to those who are joining us online. So, let's start with this image.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Oh [chuckle].

DR. HOFFMAN: You posted this yesterday I think. It was this image of Times Square. What was that like seeing your illustrations in such an iconic location?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: I'm still pinching myself. Like I, [chuckle] I can't believe like that's Time Square. Well, I did have, that was the, the second time that my art was in Times Square and the first time was, was my image, my portrait of George Floyd. And I still, every time I see something like that I'm like how did



this happen? Like, [chuckle] I was, I was designing like magical bathroom details in Disneyland –

AUDIENCE: [Chuckle]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – a couple of years ago [chuckle] and now it's this. And I don't know it's just, its, it's amazing.

DR. HOFFMAN: Can I ask what makes a bathroom magical?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Oh, there, there's pixie dust –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: There is [chuckle] – specifically for that one there was Rapunzel's Tower connected to it [chuckle] so, yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: It, it was like she could –

DR. HOFFMAN: – different –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – come down it at any time and –

DR. HOFFMAN: Ooh.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah. And –

DR. HOFFMAN: Okay. That's aa little –

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

DR. HOFFMAN: – invasive.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, so.

AUDIENCE: [Murmuring.]

DR. HOFFMAN: So, let's, let's talk a little bit more about the book.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Which of the illustrations in the book was the most difficult to conceive because –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – this wasn't written by you. This was written by Nicole Hannah-Jones and Rene Watson.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: The illustrations as I read through it so clearly reflect great attention to the story being told and the poems. Can you walk us through the process of creating the art to best fit the text?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, that was, I, I would probably have to say that the legacy slide with all of the great legends who you see standing in the water at the end – well the first thing is when I saw all of the like the entire poem that's on that, on those two pages I was thinking like I need ten pages [chuckle]. I need ten pages to reflect all that they just said. But you have that one spread and so I was, you know, I immediately just thought okay, well, I need to have some of the most iconic African American figures that have ever, you know, walked this land like front and center, just staring at you.

DR. HOFFMAN: And, who, name some of those people that you [indiscernible] –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: So, Frederick Douglas; Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglas – I'm sorry, Crispus Attucks, Frederick Douglas, you have Billie Holliday. You have a Tuskegee Airman – it could be any Tuskegee Airman. And then you have like his plane going across. There is modern day BLM activist that could be any BLM activist. You have Tommy Smith, who, you know, with the iconic like fist raised from the Olympics. And Shirley Chisolm who is one of the greatest politicians in American history who ran for president. There are so many, so many that – I, I couldn't really put all of them in there, but they start to kind of like

go back layer after layer like Basquiat is kind of in the background. I just wanted to like fill it as much, as much as possible to say like, you know, some amazing things happened, like, almost like directly after slavery or in slavery. I mean, like, Frederick Douglas escaped slavery and then wrote a book about it. Like, how do, how do you do that? Like taught himself how to write and read. Like, unbelievable things, you know? And it's, it's just hard to kind of visualize all of that in the span of two pages, like, one spread. But it's, you know, that was, that was a challenge. And then all of the things that they did like literally like constructing the U.S. Capitol. It doesn't get talked about that a lot because [chuckle] obviously I think it all should be talked about, but it doesn't get talked about. You know, the, the statue at the top of the, at the U.S. Capitol that nobody knew how to, you know, nobody knew how to put that together except an African and they got the African that they needed, and they did it. And it's, it's terrible that that any of them were forced to do these things but again they were stolen from their land because they were good at what they do. And so, just trying to visualize like that entire scene of the fact that, you know, like I said, like, black lives built America and just trying to get people to digest that one sentence but through that amazing poem.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, I, I'd be remiss if I didn't address the elephant in the room that –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – when you say black lives built America and when we say black lives matter there are a lot of people in this country right now who are attending school board meetings –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – who are upset that critical race theory is being taught in classrooms and a lot of that concern stems from the original publication of the 1619 Project –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – in the New York Times by Nicole Hannah-Jones and, and other colleagues. How do you respond to someone who says that's not true; that's not our country,; that's not who we are.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum. That [indiscernible]; it's, it's, it's funny to hear people say that's not who we are when if we're just going factually through history year by year that is who we are. That's, that's who America has been. Now the whole point of this and the reason why I say this is one of the most patriotic books ever made I feel, the 1619 Project book and Born on the Water, is because books like this are, are trying to hold America's feet to the fire to say like if we're going to say with liberty and justice for all then we have to actually hold America to that. Like, if we're going to make kids say the Pledge of Allegiance every morning and sing and these songs and do all these things and then talk to them about George Washington [chuckle] and leave out the people that he owned and all these other things and Abraham Lincoln and there's whole chapter of things that I could say about Abraham Lincoln that I wasn't taught. You know, these things happened. It just, they, they just happened. So, its like what, what are you omitting and if you're omitting all of the amazing things that my ancestors di but you're keeping all of the amazing things that your ancestors did what does that say to a young black child, you know, in school? Like, why can't we just tell the whole story? Like, just tell everything. Like, put it out there. Like, this happened.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, it's not about omitting history about George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, it's about adding a more robust –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – vision of, of what has happened in our history?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, and like, I'm, I'm, I'm literally not proposing that we go to kindergarten and tell, tell the little kids that George Washington enslaved people. I'm not, I'm not saying that. But like, can we talk about central West Africa. Can we, can we tell them that no, it wasn't workers [chuckle] who, it wasn't just like workers from Africa [chuckle] like a lot of the textbooks say, that we're here just happily working, you know [chuckle]. It was, there was more to that. Like, can we include like some very important details, like, that should be. And, you know, books like this are, are getting to that and it, and I love that, you know, *Born on the Water* doesn't really sugarcoat a lot of things. Its just, it's just this happened, like, let's talk about it. And let's look at the points where you can be proud about, you can be, if you're a little black kid you can be proud about your ancestry. You can be proud about the people who became, black people who became African Americans, you know?

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, that's one thing I found really compelling about the book because it starts and ends with a little black girl who was asked to –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – do a report on her heritage and I think for a lot of white students and, and people in this crowd if you had that assignment when you were a kid you go back and you look at your ancestors but for a lot of black folks they can only go back three generations –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and they have no idea what came before that. And there's sort of a, a disconcerting element to that. So, I think that –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – part of the story is actually very hopeful for black kids who can say, you know what, I can't trace back –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – but this idea that we were a unique people who were born on that transition –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – from West Africa to the United States –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – is, is something powerful in and of itself.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: It's, it really is. And it's just, I don't know, when I, even when I first read the poems I just got chills because it was like, you know, this is, this is something that, you know, I wish I had when I was a little kid. I wish I, I could have seen something like this that, you know, that I could point to, to say oh this is, this is how everything went down and, you know, these are, these are my ancestors. They actually did way more than the textbooks are giving credit for. And I can be proud of that. So –

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, let me switch to the experience that I had with my students. So, for those of you, of you in the audience, National Agenda is also a class of students in political science and communication and public policy, and I walked into my class this past Monday – just two days ago – with your book in hand –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and I thought why don't I just read this aloud to my students because I, I know having a young child that reading to people is really powerful and particularly as a group it, it sort of brings people together in a way. So, I told my students, I was like, I'm sorry this is a little unorthodox but I, I, I read it out loud – and first of all I want to say just this that –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: I love it.

DR. HOFFMAN: – even college students still enjoy being read aloud to [chuckle].

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: My students confirmed that they enjoyed this. But after I read it aloud I asked them if they'd ever been taught anything like what's in the book when they were in school. Most of them shook their heads no. And several of them recalled assignments that they think of now as being somewhat problematic and ever perhaps racist. And one student even said that he learned about the Tulsa Race Massacre from a show, Watchmen. He learned about the assassination of Fred Hampton from the movie you worked on, Judas and the Black Messiah. Neither of these events were taught to him throughout school.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, what do you want adults to get out of this book?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, well, the first thing I try to try to tell all adults is that it's for you. Like, it's for every human being. I call it a picture book. I, I don't really call it a children's book. And it's really deep. Like, it's very deep. And so, even if you don't have kids, like, you should get it not because I illustrated it, but you should –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle.]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – get it.

AUDIENCE: [Chuckles.]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: It's, its amazing. And its, its literally written in verse [chuckle] like, it has, I did not hold back on any of my illustrations. Like, I didn't try to make anything kiddie you know? It's, it's, I, I tell people like it's, it's just as good as a coffee book, a coffee table book, you know? On anybody's table as it is, you know, a story time book. And I love that it was a story time book for your class [chuckle] like, it should be a – I love that. It should be a story time book for every class.

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Classes of all ages.

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah, it was, it was a very cool experience. I'm going to skip over this next slide and go to, here are some various works of art that you've done. In an NPR interview last summer in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of a police officer you said, the piece on the far left there, right –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – has George Floyd staring directly at you with a little bit of concern in his eyes. I feel like he's questioning what is going on? Why did this happen to me? I want my art to show the, the world that this was human being who should still be living on this earth. You've also created illustrations of Breonna Taylor and Amad, Ahmaud Arbery –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Why is it important for you to illustrate these people and, and if you can also talk a little bit about the fact that for a lot of these portraits you leave the paintings or, or pieces of art somewhat unfinished.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum. Well, first I just, I just feel like I think this was part of, like I was saying during the time when, you know; I can create any type of art but if I see like, like terrible injustices that are taking place, like, I have to stop and you know try to in some way create a tribute, because I, I feel like they, they really help to kind of just show the humanity of people. And I'm, I'm hoping that somewhere along the way, like, if we can continue to get people to see the humanity and people who are, have been historically dehumanized, then we are going to get where we want to be. And so, if my art can do that in any way I'm going to, I'm going to show it. And so, all, already, like, my, my art is very, is very sketchy, it's typically unfinished but especially when there's, when these, these very traumatic violent moments what, you know, concerning a life that's been cut short, somebody who should still be here. I want to make the piece even that much more just kind of like almost chaotic in a way but also just unfinished to, to go right back to the fact that they should still be here. But there's so much, there's, a, a lot of times there's so much anger and frustration surrounding the moment and for me, like, I'm literally just like going through it like everybody else, just grieving and trying to figure out why this happened. But for me using this as artist therapy – which it started off as – that's how it is now for, for these pieces. I just, I just want to, it's really a therapeutic thing for me and, and it's so great that people now write me and say, like, I was able to cry about this situation. A lot of times families of the, the victims will, will contact me and say, like, I was able to cry about this in a way that I hadn't until I saw the art piece. Or some, you know, sometimes it's conservative people who, people who come from conservative families who say I was able to talk about this to my conservative family in a way that I hadn't. Or I was able to just share this, and I don't have all the words to

say, and I want to be an ally and I don't know what to say but I was able to, to share the, the art. Its', that's something about art where it's just like it can say the words that you don't have, you know? And, so, I'm very, very grateful that the art can do that.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, and that's another question that I had from one of my students, Ben asked do you think your artwork has the ability to spark positive discourse and honest discussion of people on different sides of the political aisle?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: In other words, how can art enable people to be on somewhat of a level playing ground where we can, might be able –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – to have a conversation that we might not be able to if, if I just say, hey –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – I endorse critical race theory, or I like the 1619 Project. But –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – if we show an image like the, the one we just saw on the, on the previous screen – oops, and now I just moved up another one; hang on.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, [indiscernible] –

DR. HOFFMAN: Now I can't go back now.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: With –

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle] –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – with George Floyd, yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah, so, like how can art separate from civil discourse and civil dialogue because we spend a lot of time this semester talking about how do we have these conversations.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: What's unique about art that can –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – connect people?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Well, hopefully if it's, if it's doing its job then for me I want my art to speak to humanity and I want it to kind of showcase the humanity of people. [Coughing.] Excuse me. Um, so, sorry. Forgive my throat. [Coughing.] And so, like, the piece with, with Rosa who was an immigrant at the border; well, she was seeking asylum and what I would say was like can you just look at Rosa in the face and tell me that like you've always said that you would, you would do anything for your child. Like, she had like three kids. And whatever was behind her was so terrible that she would risk everything to come to the border of America and try to find a better life. And everybody says that they would do anything for their kid and when you see this art piece of her it's almost like you can't, you can't tell me anything else than yes you would do anything. So, then how can you turn around and say that, you know, this person deserves to have tear gas thrown in her face and deserves whatever is coming to her because she left her home. And so, a lot of times I'm trying to just really show the humanity in people and that's why a, a lot of times the, the portraits are looking at you right in the eyes to say like look at this person in the face. Like, tell me you, you, you can't not tell me that this person is not human like you. Like they are. And so, a lot of times I feel like art has a power to just like, you know, reach everyone in

that way. And if, if you're honest with yourself, you know, you will see that. Like, I mean, you can, you can stick to your political position all you want but there's some things that like art is just going to, just cut through. So.

DR. HOFFMAN: Here's a water for you by the way.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Oh, thank you.

DR. HOFFMAN: [Indiscernible]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Appreciate it.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, let me jump to this next slide. I don't know why this is not working. There we go.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yes.

DR. HOFFMAN: This is a photo of, by Dai Sugano . This is a photo –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yes.

DR. HOFFMAN: – this was taken at a, a George Floyd protest in San Jose and [indiscernible] sometimes you take an existing photograph –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – or a well-recognized figure and create something new out of it. And I mean –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – the, the similarities between that photo and your painting are, are, your art is just so fascinating.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: But there is something different about it. You added sort of different elements to the artwork. So, I was wondering if you can first explain why you chose this picture and sort of why you adapted –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – the art to, to convey something slightly different?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Well, it was, I felt like it was one of the, the best representations encapsulations of all that was happening last summer. And because honestly the majority of the protesting that was going on was peaceful. And I, at the time I was living in Korea Town in Los Angeles, and I could literally hear the protests that were taking place. I was also, I also had, like, a, a baby who was just born. And so like,, I'm like I'm not leaving my house. I have a newborn and there's a pandemic but I can literally hear – well, first of all I can see the cop cars like going by and I can hear everything that's happening and I feel like that was a perfect representation of what was happening because amid all, amidst all the peaceful protesting there was also like an unbelievable overreached that I felt was happening with all these police departments that had millions of dollars of like SWAT gear and grenades and like all these SWAT trucks and all those things and I was like why, how can this happen? Like, why is this even happening? Like, there's literally hundreds of thousands of, or people with no homes in the streets and ya'll had millions of dollars to do this against people who are literally marching for black lives or whatever was happening, you know? There's, it didn't make any sense. And so, I just, this, this piece was so powerful and but what I, what I wanted to do was kind of have her holding up a mirror to say like do you see yourself? Like, I, I also wrote a poem called Reflect about what was happening and just to say like do, do you see what you've become; like, can you see what you have become. Like, it's, its ridiculous and it, it should not ever be like this. And so, yeah, that was, that was I think, that's one of the, a, another one of those moments where it's like, I don't even know if it was

a Sunday, but I was like I have to make this as kind of like part of my Sunday Sketch series. And, and kind of reflect what was happening in, in the moment.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, part of the reason I selected it was because our theme is Reflecting America and I thought –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Perfect.

DR. HOFFMAN: – it was very interesting to think –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – about, you know, I think we're, we're all; this past couple of years has been so hard for so many reasons that I think we're all kind of wondering what happens when we put that mirror up? Who do we see? Who are we as –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – Americans in this, you know, fairly long-term experiment of democracy and you know, we're, we continue to face struggles and, and I just, I liked the image of, of a mirror sort of demonstrating like okay who are we?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: And if we're honest with ourselves, you know, we don't like what we see especially when we look back to the 1700's, 1600's which is why our textbooks look the way that they do.

DR. HOFFMAN: Um-hum.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: So –

DR. HOFFMAN: It's hard to look in the mirror –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – sometimes. Right?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: So, you can, you can own it and help us move forward and be honest or you can continue to hide it, you know?

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, I'm going to wrap up before we have the Q and A and I'm going to ask as I wrap-up my last question here if people in our audience have questions be ready to raise your hand and one of our student mike marshals will motion you to one of these microphones by the stage. Please keep your masks on as regulated in UD COVID policy for indoor campus buildings. And then if you're online please consider dropping a question into that Q and A and it could be asked here tonight. So, I want to switch gears a little bit to this image which I find –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – very joyful. It's another image –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – of yours. First of all, remind us about who this is, what this scene is –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – in the popular children's show. What –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Indiscernible]

DR. HOFFMAN: – what is this depicting? Does anyone recognize this –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Anybody know who that is?

DR. HOFFMAN: – image? Yeah.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: yeah, that's Mr. Rogers who I, I, I put him in the list of like when, usually when I'm talking about the superheroes that I draw, like, Mr. Rogers is a superhero. And also, Officer Clemens. But like Mr. Rogers did this on his show during a time when, you know, there were certain racist white people who were literally pouring bleach into pools where black kids were swimming. And you know, Mr. Rogers like, here's Officer Clemens, he's a black guy. I'm

going to share a pool, a kiddie pool with him and show you all that black people don't have cooties. And it's just like, thank you. Like, I don't know why you had to, you know, it's sad that you had to do that but that was a pretty cool moment on the show. And so, I wanted to show that police officer. And that was also one of the ones that was, was on a, you know, billboards last summer in Los Angeles. So, that was pretty cool to just put that out there and that was one if the ones that people like the most because it's kind of –

DR. HOFFMAN: Yeah. So, this was what 197–

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah –

DR. HOFFMAN: – something.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: About, probably early 70's.

DR. HOFFMAN: And so, there's an African American man who played the police officer in Mr. Rogers neighborhood –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and it was a hot and so Mr. Rogers invited him to cool his feet in, in the pool. And that wasn't that long ago, and it was very, pretty controversial at the time.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, I think some things that our students don't always understand is that change happens oftentimes very slowly. And I think what we're seeing now when I mention things about the school board meetings and critical race theory is that there are folks who are showing up who were not taught the history that you're suggesting –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.



DR. HOFFMAN: – some of our students and young people need to be taught, who resent that for, because its not what they were taught. And you know, I've said this before, you know, if we don't reckon with our history we're, we're bound to repeat it. I'm not the first person to say that. I'm not going to be taking credit for that. But –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Chuckle]

DR. HOFFMAN: – I think that it really is important to understand the full picture of our history.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, it's about time for audience Q and A. So, I'll start first with someone from the audience. Does anyone have a question that they'd like to ask of the speaker? Thank you, I'm sorry, Sarah and Trey are going to be helping us out with the student, with the questions. Yeah, right over here. Let's start with you. Please come up to the microphone. Thank you.

ABBY: I can't resist. I ask one every time, but. Hi, my name is Abby.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hi.

ABBY: Nice to have you. Thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Thank you.

ABBY: So, I'm from North Carolina so I don't know how they got all of us southerners up here to Delaware but so I'm from Greensboro. It's a very – I don't know if you've heard – a very like rich civil rights history, a few HBCU's. It's a big –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

ABBY: – centerpiece for that kind of thing including the Woolworth's lunch counter which had the historic sit-ins started like this whole thing. And so, we have that lunch counter and it's a very, like, the international civil rights museum and now in the street, which they shut down all the time like and people are always walking around. There's a beautiful like Black Lives Matter mural that goes down the whole street and –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

ABBY: – it's like this beautiful show of history. I think it's great. But of course, there's plenty of people in our city and surrounding in all the rural areas that are very upset about that. They think –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Chuckle]

ABBY: – what are they writing in our streets. And it's this whole, you know, it, its honestly makes me mad how angry it makes people. So, I was just wondering if you ever had any piece of art specifically that made people very angry and how –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Laughter.]

ABBY: – that made you feel? Like, how you're obviously trying to do so much really awesome stuff and how that makes you feel, like, to be responded to with that kind of hate in return?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, I would definitely say 2013 the piece that I created of Martin Luther King, Jr. in a hoody [chuckle] which was I think – so, so that was when Travon Martin's killer was found not guilty. There was a hoody movement and that piece – oh my goodness. It was like tweeted by Ben Jones and then I

ended up going on, on CNN to talk about it. And it made it around like the FOX News and other circles and there's like a group of people who, like, only know of Dr. King as the "I have a dream" speech guy. And, and to them it's like, oh you're, you're making Dr. King look like a thug, and like, why would you – they, they really don't even care about the piece. They really don't understand anything about Dr. King's legacy. They have no idea that he was arrested over 20 times and an amazing activist, a fiery activist. But if you're, you know, that, that piece was just something that it infuriated a lot of people because what they're really saying is they don't want, they don't want their, like, crisp, perfect image of America to change in any way because they don't really want progress [laughter.] And so, it's sad but it's like that's, that's just how it is. And so, I love that activism can, can kind of shake people in that way. I always say, like, I want, I want my art to like kind of shake people and wake them up sometimes. Or like, kind of paint a picture of what we could be and, you know, be hopeful. But sometimes it has to just like shake people. And, so, there's been like numerous times after that where people have been upset by the art but like the Colin Kaepernick kneeling and, you know, I end up getting blocked by Trump on Twitter. All that, all that good stuff. Art like that that again people who don't want to change and don't really want progress will be very upset by art that talks about justice and equality. [Laughter.] Go figure. Justice for all is not a thing that they like to see.

DR. HOFFMAN: Also retweeted by Rhianna though.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Retweeted by –

DR. HOFFMAN: And Michelle Obama.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yes. I will take a Rhianna retweet over a Trump block any day.

ABBY: [Indiscernible] that she [indiscernible] .

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Chuckle] yes, all of them.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Can you take us back though to, I mean the image is striking. I hope that you all look it up and Nikkolas' website is just Nikkolas dot –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Dot –

DR. HOFFMAN: – com?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – art.

DR. HOFFMAN: Dot art.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Nikkolas dot art.

DR. HOFFMAN: Dot art. Okay.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum, um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: It's profound because were accustomed to seeing Martin Luther King, Jr. in a suit and a tie and –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and this image has him in a hoody. And –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – I mean, can you explain sort of, other than Travon Martin being the motivation for that, Travon Martin famously was wearing a hoody which was what George Zimmerman feel that he was a threat to him.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Was there, what other message were you trying send by, by putting –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – this specific historical figure in that contemporary piece of clothing?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, that was, it was really kind of just speaking to Dr. King's dream of like not wanting anybody to be judged for their outward appearance [chuckle]. And literally that's what [chuckle] happened. It was kind of like a litmus test to see [chuckle] like you know what do you , what is your reaction when you see Dr. King [chuckle] in a hoody? Is it, is it negative? Like, you know, did you understand his life at all [chuckle] ? Like do you realize why he was fighting. But, yeah, that was, that was kind of the, the point and just it really, you know, it did what, exactly what it was supposed to do. Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: And I, I think though that for a lot of Americans they, you know, they're taught a certain history, there's a lot of patriotism and pride in, in who we are as Americans and it's hard to look at images like that and sort of try –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and comprehend well that's not who I thought Martin Luther King, Jr. was.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Um –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: There you go.

DR. HOFFMAN: Oh, hey, thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: That's the one.

DR. HOFFMAN: That's the one.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Chuckle]

DR. HOFFMAN: And so –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: I literally changed nothing about his face. This is a, this is a photo from 1964 maybe. I literally only put a hoody on him [chuckle] and then kind of like add a little texture on top. One of the easiest photoshop pieces that I [chuckle] tried and maybe the most controversial.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, what, what do you say to someone who is disturbed by this image? Like, how do you encourage them to say –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – maybe look at it in a new light or in a new way, instead –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – of having this – I often talk to my students as sort of visceral emotional reaction that we have –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – like “that doesn’t make sense” like –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – I don’t want to see it. But art I think historically has always been like why don’t we look at it this way? Let’s –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – literally flip it on its head.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: Salvador Dali, your Pablo Picasso. Like, here’s a totally new way of looking at this.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, what do you –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Well –

DR. HOFFMAN: – what do you say to someone who says to you like I don’t –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – like that. I don't accept that. What do you encourage them

–

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um.

DR. HOFFMAN: – how do you encourage them to view it maybe in a different way?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: I mean, part of it is I just, I, I always, I always want to ask them the question, like, do you realize that, I mean, the reason why Trevon Martin is no longer alive partially is because he was walking through his own neighborhood with that hoody on. And this like rent-a-cop guy who wanted to be a gunslinger hero ended up killing him and if Mark Zuckerberg was wearing that same hoody in that same neighborhood he would never be shot and killed. Like, and so, it's just, can we ask ourselves why, you know, why do we continue to hold these stereotypes especially of black me being dangerous and fearful literally just because of their skin color, you know? And why can't we literally understand Dr. King's dream, like, don't judge a book by its cover by, by what they're wearing, by what skin they have on them, like any of that.

DR. HOFFMAN: By the content of their character.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah. And so, we're, we're going to learn one day I, I guess. We'll, we'll figure it out but it's, it's clearly still a challenge for [chuckle] people around their minds around. I don't know.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well, I'd like to invite again questions from our online audience. If you just go to the Q and A at the bottom of your Zoom window. But while I'm waiting for some of those questions to queue up here let's take another question from the audience. There's someone over on this side perhaps.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Huh?

DR. HOFFMAN: Oh, there is one on the screen, thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Oh.

DR. HOFFMAN: Woo. Okay. What was the timetable for the George Floyd portrait? I'm curious how long it took to sit with the injustice of his murder before turning it into powerful art.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: If you could talk a little about your speed, what did –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – you call it? Speed –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Speed painting.

DR. HOFFMAN: – painting as –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um –

DR. HOFFMAN: – well with this I think that would be really interesting.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah. So, for the George Floyd piece – I'm trying to think – I mean, for a lot of the, the art that I make that is like, you know, dealing with very traumatic moments a lot of them I tell myself like 20 times I'm not going to make any art about this because I'm just literally like too hurt and too angry about what's happening. It was like that for Elijah McClain; it took a couple of days to, before I even made anything. For the George Floyd one I didn't even watch the whole video of his murder and I still haven't seen the whole thing. But I think it was a, it was, it was a good day or two or three of just like I'm very, very upset and I'm not going to do anything. But then I, I always go back to the computer and say I've got to make something. Like, I have to try to create some sort of

tribute for this person. And then, once I decide to do it it's like it, it takes about, um, an hour or two of just like speed painting.

DR. HOFFMAN: And explain what that, that speed painting process is.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: So, its, it's just like, I have a [indiscernible] tablet and a pen and my laptop and just literally, usually I have like a couple of photo references of the person and I try to make it look as much like the person as possible because actually a lot of times the families of the victims end up, you know, reaching out and saying, like, can we like this, this painting has helped us. Like, can we put this in our home, like Atatiana Jefferson's family or Chadwick Boseman. But it's just like, you know, trying to be honestly like put all of that energy and anger and, and hurt into a very quick painting that, you know, I'm just like, it's like drawing on the iPad pretty much. And, after about an hour or two usually I have something that I'm like, okay, this is, this tells what I want to, what I wanted to say. I was talking; I was telling the students about how, like, I don't ever like have anything perfect where I'm like, you know, it, this has to be perfect and it just, I need to get every little detail right. Like, I just get to the point where I'm like, okay, people know my, I'm going to get my point across with the way that it looks right now and just like post it. And, you know, let it be in the world and do what it does and then things happen where like Michelle Obama shares it and then like how did that, like, how? And, yeah, and then, you know, just, just let it, let people take it and like I was saying, like, even if they don't have the words to say, like, just share it in whatever way that they –

DR. HOFFMAN: Um-hum.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – would like to.

DR. HOFFMAN: And I think that's what's kind of unique about art just going off of the previous point about how is that different from like let's engage in conversation, let's talk across differences. Sometimes you don't have to say anything at all.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: It's just let's both look at this image together.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Let's take it in and –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – you don't have to have an opinion about it. We don't have to make a conclusion about it. We don't have to judge it. We can just sort of observe –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – and take it in. Right?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: Okay, let's take a question from the audience over on – actually we've got someone in the back here. If you want to come up to this microphone over here. Thank you.

AVA: Hi, I'm –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hello.

AVA: – Ava. I really appreciate your art because I feel like you, I get the sense that you make a lot of art for yourself –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

AVA: – and not for other people's judgment.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

AVA: Could you touch on that and also how you use art for therapy?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum. Absolutely. Yeah, it, and I guess it all kind of, both of those questions kind of blend and go back to that moment where I was, you know, doing architecture as my day job and then I would come home and just like, okay, I just have to make something for myself. Like, I just need to make, you know, anything. And especially, during the time when I was going through a divorce, the lowest point in my life, like, you know, that was the moment where it's like, okay, I'm going to – like, artists therapy, it wasn't like just a conceptual thing. It was like [chuckle] I need to make some art to help pull me out of this point or else, like, I'm packing up and I'm moving back to Texas. Like I'm, my, my life as I know it is over. And so, it really just became that idea of like, I'm just going to create any, anything, whatever I'm feeling and just do a digital sketch and put it out there. And that's something that I, I encourage everyone to do who, even if you don't consider yourself an artist, like, you are creative. Like, just throw some paint on a canvas and it's, there's something therapeutic about that. I don't know; it's just like, just make something, put pen to paper or whatever and just make something. And so, it became that weekly I'm going to just make something, whatever I want. And it grew so much that I was like I need to, for one, I, I realize, okay, art is actually my passion. This is what I should be doing. But also, I need to quit my engineering architecture [chuckle] job and do this fulltime which was a couple of years ago. So, yeah, that's – it's just – and again, I encourage everybody just make some art. Just do it and like whatever, whatever your – it doesn't; that's the thing, you know, like it doesn't have – and that's why digital painting helped me a lot because I realized it

doesn't have to be perfect, it doesn't have to be, you know, the best thing that I've ever seen. But, if it comes from right here then it's just like people will connect with it -

DR. HOFFMAN: Right.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – I, I feel like. And I think that's why it works for me because it's just, it's just whatever I'm feeling. Even when I was doing the Born on the Water artwork it's like I'm going to read these poems and I'm just going to sketch whatever I'm feeling and then a lot of the final pieces from the book ended up, you know, looking very similar to the original sketches because it's, like, it's, it's all for me. It's all a speed painting process because I cannot sit in front of a computer for like eight hours and do one piece like this. I can't do it. It's like the ADD or something. I don't know.

AUDIENCE: [Laughter.]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah. Thank you

DR. HOFFMAN: Thank you. Do we have any questions from our Zoom audience? Yes. What is one goal that you have for your artwork?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um, one goal. Well, I would say a major goal is that honestly that I would not have to make anymore of that artwork [chuckle]. Like, it's, it would be great if like I didn't have to make any more tributes of, you know, people who were killed by the police or whatever. And didn't have to encourage people to, to fix the planet because it's being fixed, you know, and it's not getting stalled in Washington, D.C. because of politics or, you know, all these types of things. Like, like it would be wonderful if –

DR. HOFFMAN: So, so all those problems are solved –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – what art are you creating do you think?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum. I probably would be, I would probably go back to just doing abstract stuff, like, totally abstract. Like, I do semi-abstract now, but you get that it has a message that it's something we're trying to fix. I think it would be just totally abstract. It's kind of like, I was talking to Nicole Hannah-Jones on, on a Zoom presentation yesterday and she was like, she was basically saying like if I didn't have all this work that I had to do I would like, you know, I would be doing something totally different, like interior design or something like that where she, she's just, she just feels like she has to do the activism stuff like now. And I kind of feel that way too. Like, I, I just, it has to be this right now. It might just be abstract art in a perfect world [chuckle.]

DR. HOFFMAN: Do you resent that you are sort of put in a position where this is what you have to do right now?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: No, because it's, it's just, at the end of the day I realize, like it, it's just so important and obviously, you know, it's not like in the next 10 years or 100 years [chuckle] it's going to be a utopia, a perfect world. So, you know, it's something I'll always do but I think that I feel like that's part of the, the beauty of it all is realizing that, like, I have to keep, like, fighting this good fight. Like, I just have to keep going with it.

DR. HOFFMAN: Well so, for, for those non-artists and non-activists and non-activists in –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – the audience, what are some ways you suggest that they might get involved –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.



DR. HOFFMAN: – if this is an issue that they're passionate about?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah, and I think that that's part of the beauty of the activism that I do is that, like, even, you know, it, it's fine if, if, you know, if you don't necessarily have this that you're doing day to day – um, hold on. Because here comes the coughing [indiscernible].

DR. HOFFMAN: [Chuckle] Thank goodness we have the water now.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Coughing.] I'm –

DR. HOFFMAN: You're not used to –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: – healthy, I promise.

DR. HOFFMAN: You're not used to this dry –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: I know.

DR. HOFFMAN: – air. [Chuckle]

NIKKOLAS SMITH: [Coughing.] I just love that the activism a lot of times it just helps direct people and especially people who are like, you know, they might say that they don't have a ton of time or like they're, they're not going to devote their whole every day to activism. But you can actually like, oh, this is an amazing art piece and then in the comment like I'll always add a comment underneath. A lot of times I'll say like, and you just saw this but also you can sign your name to this petition if you click this link or you can text justice to 55156 and you can contact your district attorney, you can help, like, take concrete steps to solve this problem. And it's like, you know, I think that's helpful too. Like, it doesn't have to be like I'm going to quit my job and become a full-time activist. I mean, that would be awesome if you wanted to do that. But, you don't have to necessarily, you know, so. I just thought that activism can, can be that, you know, kind of director for anyone, you know, who can, who is not sure exactly what to do and

may not have like, you know, a ton of energy to put into it but it's like, okay, what can I do right now to, to make this change?

DR. HOFFMAN: What, I think, you know, what, what we've been hearing all semester through this year's program and previous year's programming is there are so many ways you can get engaged no matter your ideology, your party, or interests, the policies that you care about –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: – whether its art, or comedy, or activism, or journalism there are so many ways that, that young people in particular can, can really make a difference –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Yeah.

DR. HOFFMAN: – in this world. All right, do we have one more question from over on this side? Would you mind – [indiscernible] you can go over there I guess if you want. It's a little easier for you to get over to that microphone.

Thank you.

GINA: Hi, my name is Gina.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hello.

GINA: So, you touched on your art being really personal and touching for you. In making that conscious decision of posting it on social media which is full of people trying to criticize how does the criticism feel to you and like, does it get to you ever?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum. I mean, I'm, I'm kind of a, di feel like I'm kind of a, a [indiscernible] in the sense that like, like when I started, like, especially even like with the MLK artwork and stuff, like, I was just like taking on all the comments and like firing back at like everyone. I don't do that as much but at this point I'm

like, it, the comments don't really get to me. It's just like I know they're, they're going to be there. I mean, they're literally like typing them right now really, regarding Born on the Water and 1619 Project [chuckle]. Like it's happening right now. And I know it's going to happen because like I said, it's like there are sadly still a ton of people in this country who don't want to see progress and they will vote for politicians that don't want to see progress in the way that I want to see progress. And the way I want to see progress has to do with justice for all, like, everyone. And so, you know, yeah, they, they always show up but it's like, you know, I can't really do much about it. But the, clearly they are, they are affected in some way by the artwork and, you know, in that sense I'm like, well, you know, in, in that sense my, I feel like my art has, has done its job but it's always going to be there. Like, kind of like punching you in the gut with the truth, so [chuckle]. You know? Keep talking.

GINA: Thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Thank you.

DR. HOFFMAN: Thank you so much for that question. Well, I think we're going to wrap-up here in a little bit but I, I do want to point to some of the other initiatives that we're doing at the Center for Political Communication.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: One of them being – I'm just making sure the right slide is up – speaking of different ways of being active or expressing your viewpoints –and Trey and, and Sarah you can sit down if you'd like. I don't mean to keep you standing. Thank you for your assistance.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Hum-hum.



DR. HOFFMAN: We have been doing this audio essay contest since I believe 2017 and it's a great way for students to express their opinions about a different theme. Each year we have a different theme. And this year, it's why is everyone so angry [chuckle], right? It just seems like everyone's so angry about everything. And, we do have prizes for, for – this is an audio essay contest. You can win prizes. The deadline is December 10th, so that's coming up pretty soon. Go to cpc.udel.edu/voices and you'll find more information. It's a great opportunity to have your voice heard. It's a, also a great opportunity to have something you can put on your resume. And you know, who doesn't like some extra money in their pocket, right?

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: So, please consider submitting to that contest. I also want to ask people to be alert to an initiative we've been doing for a couple of years now on UD's campus which is "Free Intelligent Conversation", and this is an initiative where I have students out on the Green, on Main Street and other areas on campus holding signs that say, "Free Intelligent Conversation". And they're engaging with students, with people on the university campus not about who you voted for or who your, what your political ideology is or what your religious background is; it's just simple things like what's – what was the question that was at your table this evening? Do you remember? I'm trying to remember.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Ah, like what, what political show –

DR. HOFFMAN: Oh, yeah, what political like entertainment show influenced your understanding about, about politics and –

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Um-hum.

DR. HOFFMAN: The question at my table was what did you want to be when you were little? What did you wasn't to grow up to be? And these are conversations that help us tap into that humanity that you're talking about where it's like we all have the same kinds of fears and hopes and worried about getting, being embarrassed and whatever. It's like, you know, we're all still – like I said, I met, I read that, your book – which is going to be for sale after this event, signed copies out in the lobby – I think there's, there's a child in all of us that wants to be read to [chuckle], and that wants to be heard, and that wants to just be asked like what do you think? What do you care about? And so, I'm doing a lot of these initiatives over the next year. Please, for those of you who are on campus and those of you on Zoom, if you are wandering around UD's campus please be on the lookout for students asking these kinds of questions. And again, I will emphasize that the book is, is, is beautifully illustrated, it's profound. It's not something I ever read as a child, anything like anything I would have read as a child. I read it to my own daughter who is 11 and it was, it was a profound experience. And I know, I've already put some books on reserve that I'm going purchase for her school. And there's quite a few copies out there so make sure you get out there early, get your copy. And this is the last of our speaker series this year. Next year will be our 12th season which is pretty exciting. We will bring in lots more speakers from across the ideological spectrum from all different walks of life to give you an experience where you're hearing from people you might not have heard from in another situation. So, I want to thank Nikkolas for being here.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Thank you for having me.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]



DR. HOFFMAN: Thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Appreciate it. Thank you all.

DR. HOFFMAN: And thank you to all of you who are our loyal supporters coming to our speaker series both in person and virtually. Have a wonderful rest of your 2021. Thank you.

NIKKOLAS SMITH: Thank you.

AUDIENCE: [Applause.]

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