



**kNOw JORDAN**  
**Spaces WEBER**



# Jordan Weber: Meditations on Safety

Essay by Nicole J. Caruth

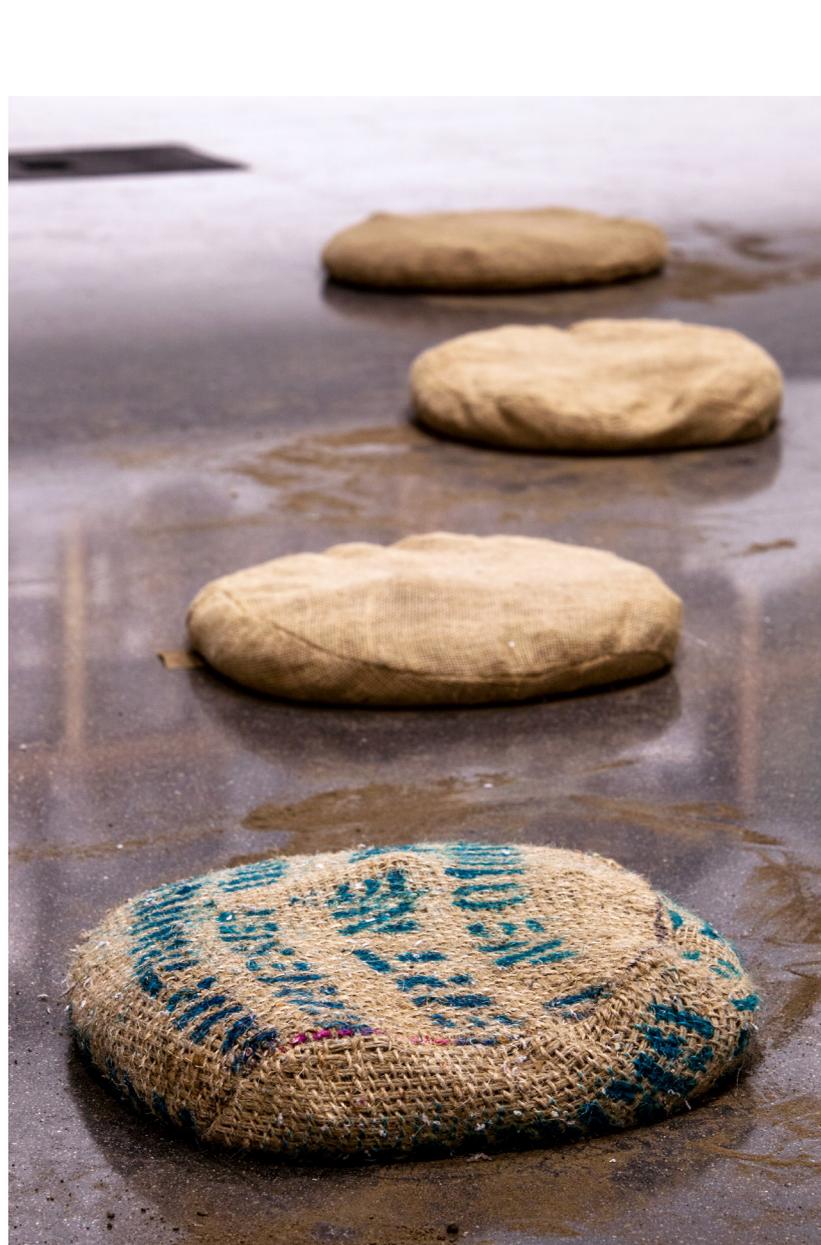
Breathing fully and freely is the birthright of all human beings and yet “that essential act of life...is often constrained or denied to people of color.”<sup>1</sup> Across the United States, communities of color are treated as dumping grounds for toxic waste that sickens and kills the people who live there. Studies repeatedly confirm the unequal burden of environmental hazards: In 1983, multiple organizations, including the U.S. General Accounting Office, concluded that “race was so strong a statistical predictor of where hazardous waste facilities could be found that there was only a one-in-10,000 chance of racial distribution of such sites occurring randomly.”<sup>2</sup> Some ten years later, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reported that toxic waste facilities were more likely to be sited in Black communities nationwide.<sup>3</sup> And earlier this year, as the Trump Administration worked to reverse policies created to reduce these inequities, the EPA reported that people of color, especially those living on low incomes, “are much more likely to live near polluters and breathe polluted air.”<sup>4</sup> Communities of color are not only over-exposed to particulate matter, but also to poverty, police brutality, and other forms of environmental violence.<sup>5</sup> It’s for these reasons that Eric Garner’s final words became a rally cry: “I can’t breathe” signifies his death at the hands of police as much as the larger systematic chokehold—the gross scheme of social, economic, and ecological oppression under which people of color live in the United States.

Where can people of color be safe? Where can we go to just breathe? These questions seem to continually motivate artist and activist Jordan Weber who explores environmental racism and creative forms of resistance through painting, sculpture, installation, and performance. In his solo exhibition *kNOw Spaces*, Weber offers a bird’s-eye view of the environment that encompasses its racial, social, and economic dimensions. In doing so, he connects sundry forms and concepts, from soil and plant remediation, to breath and meditation, to sport hunting and prison architecture, to legacies of political protest. Here, we see the artist’s social practice of the last few years begin to inform his work in a formal setting. Weber’s growing appetite for facilitating direct action, for building functional public spaces and “giving a community long-term sustainable tools to do their own work,”<sup>6</sup> is evident at the Law Warschaw Gallery where he attempts to strip away the boundaries of the white cube, creating a fluid exchange between his work outside and his work inside, linking different cities and social climates. This exhibition signals a turning point for Weber whose approach is, for the first time, scientific in that he produces a controlled environment that mimics his idea for a public artwork—a repurposed deer blind that he calls the “kNOw Space”—and then uses this controlled environment to explore how people might respond with the work and what actions it might elicit. Ultimately, Weber transforms the gallery into a living lab, a space for inquiry and active engagement, and every visitor is part of the experience, or experiment.

## MEDITATION SPACE

Weber has divided the gallery into two separate but related spaces, turning one side into a performance and collective reflection space similar to a meditation room. Twenty Zafus (meditation cushions) are placed on the floor and each is filled with earth from Black-owned farms in Iowa and Minnesota. Meditation is deeply important to Weber, who began doing Zen meditation, or *zazen*, during his junior year of high school to help him cope with traumatic family and social experiences. To help me understand his spiritual practice, Weber points me to the nearly fifty-year-old text *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice* by Shunryu Suzuki. In skimming the pages, I read about proper posture and breathing and selflessness and compassion in a world where all beings are interdependent. For the sake of brevity, I will summarize *zazen* as a method for calming the mind by concentrating on the breath and remaining present in the moment. However, this ancient practice is rooted in a complex philosophy, a system of beliefs and prescribed actions with power much greater (and less pretentious) than media would have us believe in this era of pop psychology. Meditation has proven to heal communities and this is where Weber's interests lie. He directs me to two recent studies, one on meditation programs in prisons and mindfulness as treatment for drug and alcohol addiction, and another on the role of mindfulness in reducing the adverse effects of childhood stress and trauma.<sup>7</sup> The second study advocates for meditation as intervention, as a form of medicine, citing evidence of its ability to combat the "cumulative toxic effect" of traumatic stress on the body.

Weber invites us to reflect on the parallels between remediating the self, expelling toxicity through conscious breath, and the process of remediating natural resources. The artist Mel Chin refers to the latter as an "invisible aesthetic" in which "the material being approached is unseen and the tools [are] biochemistry and agriculture."<sup>8</sup> (Chin created the renowned *Revival Field* project on the Pig's Eye Landfill in St. Paul, Minnesota.) If we apply this same thinking





to Weber's work, meditation and breath are the tools that he suggests to help us mitigate environmental racism, to exorcise its trauma from the body and mind to the greatest degree possible. The artist believes that meditation can empower "communities of color to spark something in their own psyche," noting that it's a strategy to improve quality of life that is "different from what we're typically taught." This side of the gallery offers space for reflection as much as for the exchange of art and ideas. Among other activities, Weber has organized performances by the guzheng player Jarrelle Barton and, at the time of this writing, is seeking partners to lead Zen meditation classes and lectures for student groups. In the *Zafus*, earth and breath practically collapse one on top of the other, suggesting their mutual dependence in the ecosystem of life.

Other "earth works" in this space deal directly with, as the artist says, "trauma on the land or controlling the body through land." Weber is known for repurposing car parts or entire vehicles and filling them with organic matter, most notably, soil collected from places where racially-motivated murders have occurred. For example, the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where Dylan Roof opened fire on the congregation, leaving nine people dead; and the area of Ferguson, Missouri, where the police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot 18-year-old Michael Brown. In Weber's work, topsoil is a substrate for memory, a porous surface that absorbs the brutal acts human beings inflict on one another. Soil then is similar to DNA, which not only carries memories of our life experiences, but also those of our ancestors, including the trauma of racial oppression.<sup>9</sup> Like molecules in the body, a small amount of earth may hold generations of suffering. At the same time, healthy topsoil is a regenerative and life-sustaining force—the cornerstone of all existence. Weber addressed the multidimensionality of soil in his 2015 installation *American Dreamers (Phase 2)*, which consisted of a gutted police car that overflowed with the soil from Ferguson, as well as fruit plants, cacti, palm fronds, and ripe tomatoes—all signifying the persistence of life within, as Weber said, "a concrete oppressive system that isn't retracting itself from our communities anytime soon."<sup>10</sup>

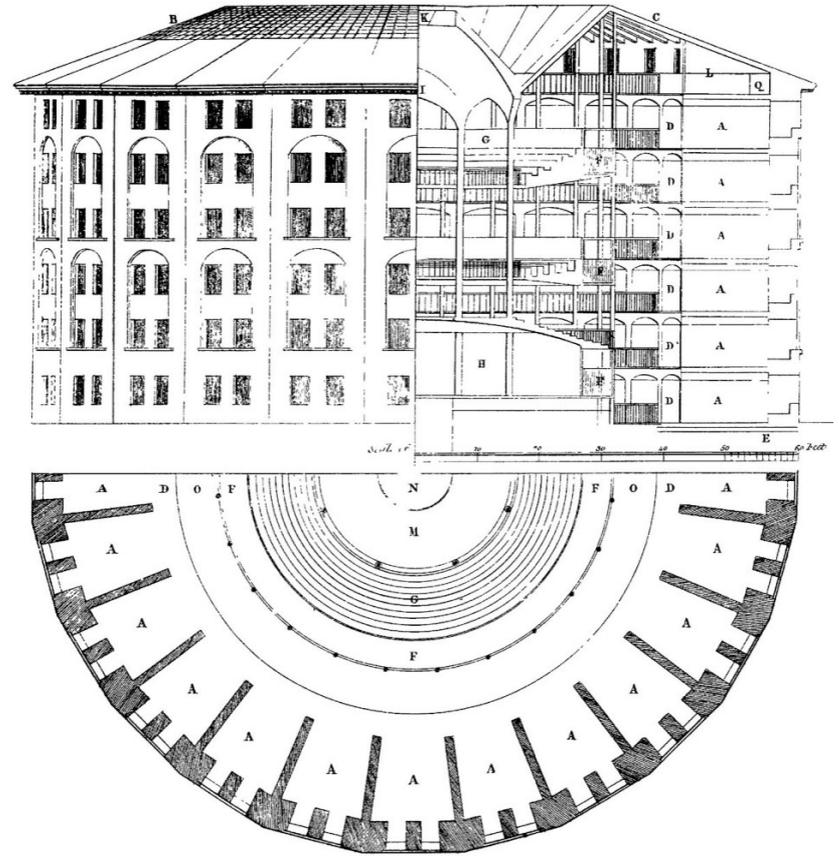




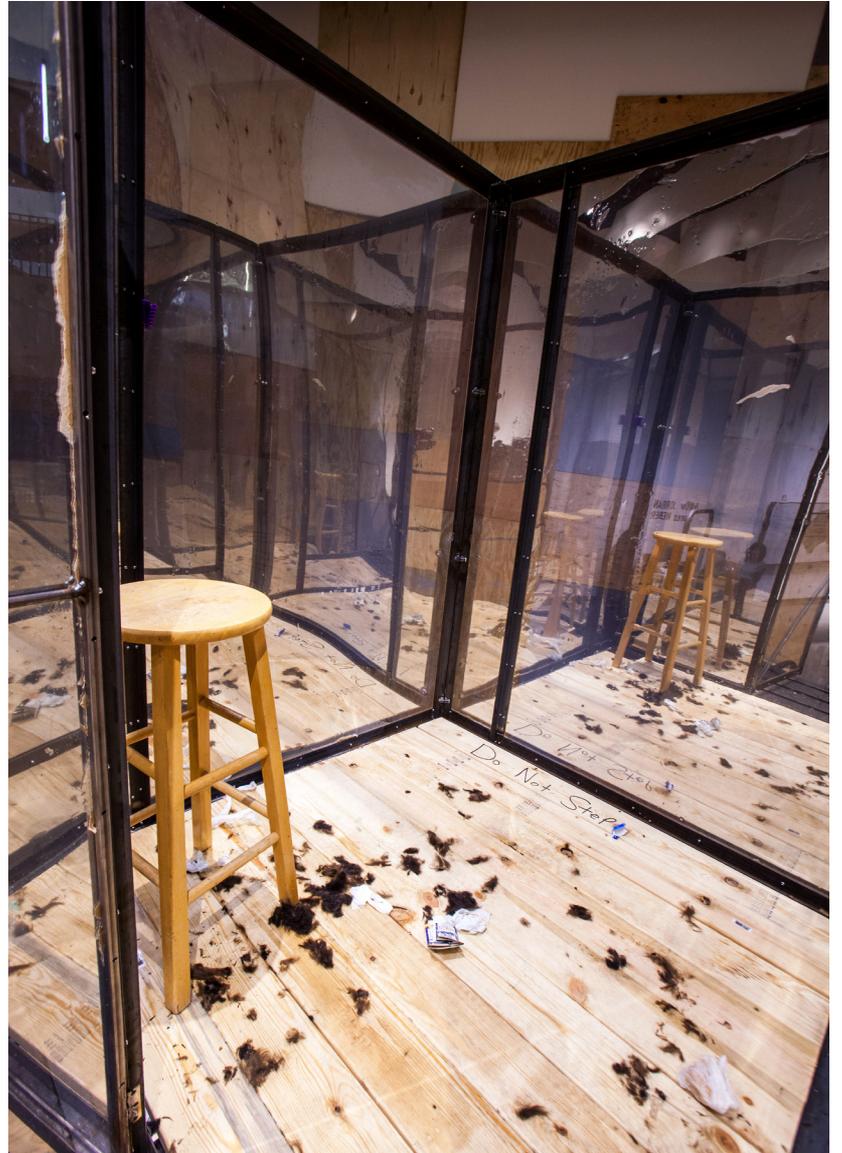
## SAFE SPACE

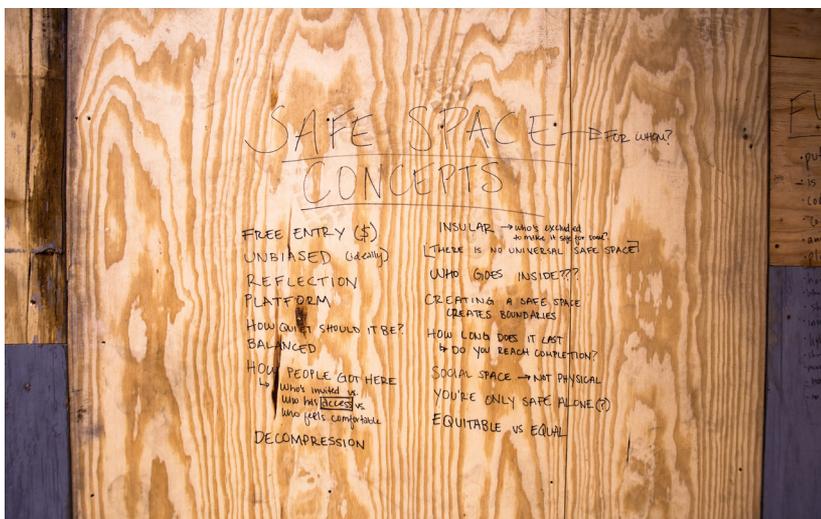
In examining environmental racism, we not only confront assaults by weapons of toxicity, but also the suffocating atmosphere of aggressive policing in communities of color. “Police violence and toxic exposure—these different forms of physical vulnerability—both live together,” says Lindsey Dillon, the University of California professor who, along with her colleague Julie Sze, examined anti-Black police violence in the context of environmental justice. Take, for example, Freddie Gray, who suffered a fatal spinal cord injury while in the custody of Baltimore police. Gray has come to represent the potential long-term effects of childhood lead-poisoning, a common ailment in Black and low-income areas, which has been linked to cognitive impairment, reduced earning potential, erratic behavior, and violent crime in adulthood.<sup>11</sup> No one can say for sure if the lead-poisoning in Gray’s youth determined his life trajectory, but if one thing is evident, it’s that toxic living conditions are part of a sadistic cycle of violence.

On the other side of the Law Warschaw Gallery, Weber addresses the relationship between nature and the criminal justice system. This time his work takes the form of an elevated deer blind, what the artist calls a “kNOw Space.” Commonly seen in the Midwest, the deer blind was designed to give hunters cover and reduce the chance of detection by the hunted. The structure tends to be associated with white men killing for sport and profit and, by extension, colonial rule over people and land. Derogatory terms like “coon hunting,” meaning to lay in wait looking for a Black person to victimize or assault, also come to mind. For Weber, the deer blind signifies “control of the body” and is comparable to a panopticon, an architectural system attributed to the British philosopher, social reformer, and animal rights advocate Jeremy Bentham. In 1791, Bentham published *Panopticon*, a series of letters promoting his brother’s design for a factory, a sort of Great Eye created to increase efficiency by making workers feel they were under constant surveillance. In *Panopticon*, Bentham applies this model to prisons, hospitals, sanitariums, and schools,



believing that the design would force inmates or inhabitants to regulate their own behavior. Bentham’s writings influenced prison architecture around the world and even Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello. Weber flips this design inside out, creating an “inverse panopticon” in which those inside can look out but cannot be looked at. This reversal is reinforced by mirrored glass that covers the structure and reflects back the viewer’s gaze.





Mirrors conjure all sorts of art historical symbolism. However, they pale in comparison to Weber's intended associations, such as Paulo Freire's teachings on the importance of "reflecting one's own community." Weber also draws inspiration from Resurrection City, a temporary encampment erected on the National Mall during the 1968 Poor People's Campaign, which is signified by the plywood sheets that cover the gallery walls around the deer blind. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary since the Campaign activists camped out in A-frame plywood huts, held marches and rallies on Washington and lobbied congress to end poverty in the United States. Weber's installation honors this history and the spirit of grassroots organizing. College students and the larger community are invited to program the deer blind and the space around it with lectures, demonstrations, events, and conversations, with "priority given to proposals that compliment exhibition themes and emphasize voices of color." The plywood walls will serve as a sort of white board to support the generative exchange of ideas. Weber is interested in "what the deer blind can do long-term to empower the body," and how community input can help him "improve



upon the *kNOw Space* concept before it goes into public space." The artist has organized some of his own programming, ranging from workshops on plant remediation and ways to purify dorm-room air, to free haircuts on opening night by his sometimes collaborator Gawolo Irving. Launching the exhibition by recreating the collective space of the Black barbershop speaks to one of Weber's larger goals: "to make this space as comfortable as possible for young Black men" and women.

In conversation, Weber shares with me that *kNOw Spaces* was inspired in part by his college experience and the desire to create "safe space for Black students in a white environment." I push back, expressing skepticism about the gallery context and questioning what steps have been taken to ensure that Black or non-white bodies will actually be safe in this space. It's become commonplace for art institutions to claim that everyone is welcome and safe inside their walls, as if they can know what safety looks like for everyone, as if art can protect all people from physical or psychological harm, as if the systems of white su-

premiacy that exist in society are not the very foundation on which white cubes are built. “Safe space” is a trite slogan in a dangerous world. What makes *kNOw Spaces* different? Weber tells me that he and the curator Jehra Patrick have spent six months doing intentional outreach to students coalitions and professors of color and developing a process for co-creation. I would argue that *kNOw Spaces* is not a safe space, but a space to *meditate* on ideas of safety, to take a deeper look at the world around us, at the ground we walk on, and consider the actions necessary to create healthy interior and exterior spaces to resist and survive the status quo. Meditation is no solution for environmental racism, but in a society where people must proclaim that Black lives matter, where communities of color literally can’t breathe, and where the American President threatens violence if constituents vote against tightening the noose of bigotry, self-care and self-preservation are, as the poet Audre Lorde said, acts of political warfare.

*Nicole J. Caruth is a curator and writer whose work examines place and identity and often focuses on the necessities of life—such as food, shelter, and health—and the relationships that help human beings to thrive. She works with contemporary artists in gallery contexts and public spaces, organizing exhibitions such as: The Grace Jones Project; Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection; Fallen Fruit: Power of People, Power of Place; Derrick Adams: Crossroad—A Social Sculpture; and Build Better Tables, commissioned by Metro Arts: Nashville Office of Arts and Culture. She has written for the Joan Mitchell Foundation and The Studio Museum in Harlem, and her writing has been published in ARTnews; C Magazine; Gastronomica; Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art; Public Art Review; and Vitamin Green, a Phaidon Press volume.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, “Police Power and Particulate Matters: Environmental Justice and the Spatialities of In/Securities in U.S. Cities,” *English Language Notes*, 54.2 Fall/Winter 2016, p. 13–23.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, Liveright Publishing Corporation (New York, NY), p. 55.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- <sup>4</sup> Vann R. Newkirk, “Trump’s EPA Concludes Environmental Racism Is Real,” *The Atlantic*, February 28, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/02/the-trump-administration-finds-that-environmental-racism-is-real/554315/>
- <sup>5</sup> See Brentin Mock “How Environmental Injustice Connects to Police Violence,” *CityLab*, July 21, 2016. <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2016/07/how-environmental-injustice-connects-to-police-violence/492053/>; and Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze, “Police Power and Particulate Matters: Environmental Justice and the Spatialities of In/Securities in U.S. Cities,” *English Language Notes*, 54.2 Fall/Winter 2016, p. 13–23.
- <sup>6</sup> All quotes from the artist are from conversations between Weber and the writer on July 26, 2018 at the Malcolm X Foundation in Omaha, NE, and via phone on Friday August 31, 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas Lyons, Ph.D. and Wm. Dustin Cantrell, Ph.D., “Prison Meditation Movements and Mass Incarceration,” *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, May 4, 2015. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4633398>. And Ortiz, Robin, and Erica M. Sibinga. “The Role of Mindfulness in Reducing the Adverse Effects of Childhood Stress and Trauma.” Ed. Hilary McClafferty. *Children* 4.3 (2017): 16. PMC. Web. 27 Aug. 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5368427/>
- <sup>8</sup> Barry Schwabsky, “Lamentations and Revivals,” *The Nation*. August 2, 2018. Accessed at <https://www.thenation.com/article/lamentations-and-revivals/>
- <sup>9</sup> Psychologist Ingrid Ross Cockhren at the panel discussion “Our Bodies, Our Babies, Our Communities,” Lentz Public Health Center, Nashville, TN, May 31, 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> “Jordan Weber on Police, Art & Lost Basketball Dreams,” *Art for Amnesty*, July 8, 2015. <https://artforamnestyus.tumblr.com/post/123565502158/jordan-weber-on-police-art-lost-basketball>
- <sup>11</sup> Terrence McCoy, “Freddie Gray’s life a study on the effects of lead paint on poor blacks,” *Washington Post*, April 29, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/freddie-grays-life-a-study-in-the-sad-effects-of-lead-paint-on-poor-blacks/2015/04/29/0be898e6-eea8-11e4-8abc-d6aa3bad79dd\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.894f84d3432a](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/freddie-grays-life-a-study-in-the-sad-effects-of-lead-paint-on-poor-blacks/2015/04/29/0be898e6-eea8-11e4-8abc-d6aa3bad79dd_story.html?utm_term=.894f84d3432a)

Cover: *kNOw Space*. 2018. Fabricated deer blind, mirrored mylar, plywood

p. 2: *kNOw Spaces* exhibition view. Photo credit: Craig Bares

p. 4: Zafus, cushions used for Zen meditation, were created using coffee bags and soil from black-owned farms in Iowa. Photo credit: Craig Bares

p. 5: (left to right) Gawolo Irving (with son) gave haircuts in the *kNOw Space* during the opening reception; Jarrelle Barton with guzheng; the artist, Jordan Weber. Photo credit: Jehra Patrick

p. 6: *kNOw Spaces* exhibition view. Phytoremediative plants, like ferns, were incorporated throughout the exhibition as a functional and metaphorical effort to cleanse the air in the gallery. Musician Jarrelle Barton performed the guzheng during the opening reception. Photo credit: Jehra Patrick

p. 7: (left) *Soil Sample (38° 44' 18.49" N, 90° 16' 25.93" W)*. 2014–2017. Giganotosaurus tooth, soil samples from Ferguson, MO, Palestine, Jerusalem, Wounded Knee, Malcolm X’s birthplace, alloy wheel, canvas, wood; (right) *Untitled*. 2018. Neon, plywood, screen-printing. Photo credits: Craig Bares

p. 8: Elevation, section and plan of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon penitentiary, drawn by Willey Reveley, 1791

p. 9: *kNOw Space* exterior and interior views. The interior shows hair trimmings from the free haircuts by Gawolo Irving given to attendees at the exhibition’s opening reception. Photo credit: Craig Bares

p. 10: (left) Macalester students discussed the concept of a “safe space” with Weber and recorded their notes in the exhibition. Photo credit: Craig Bares; (right) Photo credit: “Resurrection City Washington D.C. 1968” by Groupuscule (uploaded 2012) is licensed by CC BY 2.0

Back cover: (top) *Chapels*. 2017. Marble, soil from black-owned farms in Iowa, wood, plastic packaging, resin; (bottom) Weber hosted conversations with classes at Macalester, who were invited to record their conversations on the gallery’s walls. Photo credit: Craig Bares

