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CITY GALLERY'S WOKE IS AN EYE-OPENING EXPLORATION OF THE
CITY'S AFRICAN-AMERICAN BURIAL GROUNDS

By David Travis Bland, April 4, 2018



Leonard Freed, a Brooklyn born photographer, is best known for his photos of Jewish communities throughout the world and for his depictions of the Civil Rights Movement. But two different kinds of photographs of Freed's stand out to Linda Dennis, program manager for A Backpack Journalist, an organization that provides journalism experiences for students across the Lowcountry.

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"They tell the story of an African-American Gullah funeral on Johns Island," says Dennis of Freed's images, which she acquired from Freed's wife, Brigitte. "They tell the story of the Christmas Eve Gullah tradition that they do at a church and they sing and clap with or without music and they wait for the birth of Christ at midnight."

Freed's photos are part of WOKE: Rattling Bones, Conversations, Sacred Rites and Holy Places. The new exhibition at City Gallery looks to "serve as a learning laboratory to share information and documentation about newly recognized and at-risk cultural heritage sites."

Dr. Ade Ofunniyin, executive director of the Gullah Society and project director of the Gullah Society Sacred Burial Ground Project, curated WOKE with the help of Dennis and A Backpack Journalist.

The at-risk cultural heritage sites referenced in the exhibit's description include the Zion Olivett African Burial Ground on Monrovia Street and the New First Missionary Baptist Church Burial Grounds at Edisto Island. But the event that put black burial grounds in the forefront of Charleston — at least through media coverage — was the 2013 unearthing of 36 sets of bones from African Americans buried in the mid to late 1700s. Those bones were discovered near Anson Street during renovations to the Gaillard Center.

"The reinterment of the bones at the Gaillard Center is a critical representation of the displacement of African burial sites," Ofunniyin says. "It's also indicative of the displacement of people generally. That displacement results from development that doesn't take into consideration communities of people that have been in these places that have been gentrified for centuries."

In the wake of discovering the built-over graves, Ofunniyin began the Anson Street Burial Project — an initiative to engage community stakeholders and the city in coming up with ways that the remains can be humanized and interred once again.

Currently the remains of those bodies found buried near Anson Street are resting in a city facility while the discussions about the burial and a proper memorial at the Anson Street site are ongoing.

WOKE is meant to provoke people's thoughts about the individuals who were discovered in the ground near Anson Street: who were these people, how did they come to be buried there, and what are their stories? Methods of answering these questions are being worked out by the Anson Street Burial project's partners: DNA will determine what part of Africa those remains might have come from; Howard University will examine the genetic material to see if any diseases were present; Ofunniyin has even partnered with National Geographic to see if any living relatives of the dead can be found.

"The exhibit and the process is intended to wake up the community," Ofunniyin says, "to not only think about burial grounds but to think about a lot of things, including gentrification, how to empower [communities], how to deal with the effects of gentrification. ... People don't have places to live because they can't afford to live here anymore."

Those lessons still need to be taught in Ofunniyin's mind. The disrespect of black burial grounds continues. It's not just the dead that development is overlooking — it's the living as well.

"Awareness has not been created yet," Ofunniyin says. "Developers are single mindedly committed to developing and getting a check. Part of this process is not to stop development, because it's going to occur, but to create a type of

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development that's more sensitive to the needs of communities that are being developed and include the concerns of those people that are being displaced."

If WOKE could accomplish just one task, for Ofunniyin it'd be this — "Being woke would mean that you would be concerned with your fellow man."