[MUSIC PLAYING]

DARIEN CARR: Hey, everybody.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr, and we are Master of Architecture students at the GSD. The nexus is produced in conjunction with a commitment by the Frances Loeb Library to acquire and create an open-access bibliography of various media suggested by the community on the intersection between race and design.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Thank you for joining us on today's episode. Today we're going to be speaking to Rob "ProBlak" Gibbs. Rob Gibbs is a visual artist and organizer, who has transformed the cultural landscape of Boston through graffiti art since the early '90s. Gibbs grew up in Roxbury, Massachusetts, during the hip hop golden age and was in his teens when he found that the power of graffiti was a powerful form of self-expression.

In 1991, Gibbs co-founded Artists For Humanity, an arts nonprofit that hires and teaches youth creative skills ranging from painting, to screen printing, to 3D model making. For the past 29 years, ProBlak has served in many leadership roles at AFH and currently directs the paint studio. ProBlak has a strong focus on arts education. He has been an adjunct educator for Boston Public Schools, conducted countless workshops, and as a formal and informal mentor to artists who are early and mid-career.

Most recently, Robb served as a guest lecturer at Northeastern University for their foundations of Black Culture Hip Hop course. He curated the 2019 BAMS Fest Rep Your City exhibition and was invited to be one of two artists-in-residence with the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, making his the inaugural residency. Rob, thank you so much for joining us on the show today.

ROB GIBBS: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: We're so excited to have this conversation. You're someone I've been really wanting to have on the show for a while-- ever since I heard about some of your work. So we're just going to jump right into it, and my first question for you is, what is the vision of blackness that you are trying to portray through your work? Is this a focus on the world as you see it or how you would like it to be?

And through this question, I'm really trying to get at two things, right? The first being that if the focus is on the world as you see it, then your work is more of emphasizing or drawing out underrepresented narratives that are already existing. If it's really more of how you would like the world to be, we're almost looking towards the future, and you're sharing your vision for a more just future with us. And, honestly, it can be both of those things. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that with us today?

ROB GIBBS: Yeah, I have no problem with talking about that, and that's such a great question. Because, to support your question, I want to say I do work that highlights the way we exist. To think about the underrepresentation or the future of, I think you have to just talk about what's current. And my work is definitely geared towards the audience in the communities that I've done it in.

People that can look at these murals and call them mirrors, at some point to themselves represented. We have a balancing act to do in the city and just in the culture period. And I feel, to be an advocate in hip hop, I have a responsibility. And with this skill set, that gets a lot of good attention.

I want to be able to break it down to the point that I've recently started thinking about, wow, I've fell into the seat of being a storyteller, almost. And so the stories I'm telling would just be like conversations that I would have with an open end to this narrative, so that people could collaborate and add on to it. Because they may not be able to know the narrative or the details was to the particular pieces of work that I do, but it's open ended for them to always talk about how they felt when they've seen it.

And just a way to be able to add on to those conversations, because they feel just building a morale or a boost to pride and being represented to a large scale extent. Not just like, oh, that's cute, it's at a afterschool or it's temporary. It's like, nah, these are pieces that have permanence in their communities and almost become like landmarks.

It's super cool-- you can Google Map a address and a word pops up. So that just means that, OK, we know what's happening around here, or have an idea or a clue. So I feel like my view of Blackness and its current existence is just showing who's here, who's moving and shaking, and just like the nuances that I play into the pieces.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: So for a lot of your murals you're painting people. Are they based off of real people that you know, or are they an amalgamation of different traits and features from different people? I'm wondering how you come to the imagery that you tend to portray?

ROB GIBBS: The imagery that I've been recently depending on is just that of the innocence of a child and being able to put into the future in a way where young people are going to be able to resonate with seeing something. That there is a little boy or a little girl they probably went to school with or they live around the way with or see themselves in it as. So I feel when that messaging is there or that type of representation is visible it's not based off of anybody specifically.

I don't have models or things of that nature. I'm just, definitely, pulling together references where I Frankenstein images. Where I'm like, OK, if I could exemplify happiness to the utmost without clearly telling you to "don't worry, be happy" or be cliche about it, how could I do that? The expression of feeling, I think words just only limit what you come up with. It's not like a lab that I'm sitting here and I'm trying to cook up, OK, this is who I have, with some type of intention.

If I get your attention with what I'm able to do when it comes down to the messaging, or we want to tell the story, we are adding historical figures or people that are within the culture that you're going to be able tie it to and recognize. I want you to be familiar with the style. Visual language is something that, with me and a crew that I paint with, we've been very intentional about how and what we put out. The palettes and things of that nature that just celebrate emphasize Black culture.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, and related to that point on culture, I wanted to ask how music affected how you are building this worldview-- how you're building these things, and integrate them into your work? You mentioned style and how you're expressing. And I know graffiti is a main part of a lot of the work you do. So I was wondering if you could speak to music in relation to how it relates to your understanding of your identity as a person who's Black and a person as a creative.

ROB GIBBS: Ah, man, music-- you know Black culture and Black people that are archetypes to a lot of music that we rock with, you know what I mean? Hip hop being something that is the metronome to my work. I see a lot of relevance, and it's almost-- for these songs that don't have visuals to them, your imagination will get sparked. Or the encouragement that you would have from it would almost be like the visual, or the music video, or the album cover-- the single album cover-- to these particular tracks or series of tracks.

So just imagine if all the music I listen to, I made into a playlist and in that playlist had a playlist cover. Whatever pieces that I create definitely reflect from the music that drives me to tell some of that narrative. I think some of the stories that we can relate to are embedded in the beat, and I feel when it's delivered in that particular manner, this is just a support to that.

And music has a high influence on what I do, man. I can't live without it. I was bumping beats before we got into this interview just to get my mind right. Because, depending on the artist I'm in the mood to listen to, man, it really gets my mind thinking in a-- whether it's instrumental or vocal.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, reminds me of sampling and just the act of taking stories and recontextualizing them through a medium, whether that be sound or paint. And I was wondering if you could speak to your work in relation to sampling and how the act of bringing together stories is becoming materialized through the way you approach your visual medium?

ROB GIBBS: Such an interesting comparison to sampling. I think with sampling and the things that were created to invent new pieces, you have to give these stories the time that it deserves. Whether you're living with it or you're experiencing it in a way to hit the rest of the world with what I call the "Sankofa spirit." To be able to look back at your past to be able to contribute to a brighter future would be the ultimate way that you could take a saying from something you heard your grandfather say-- your pops would always tell you-- and then put it in a line.

Or you could pull a line from a song and title it as a piece. All this stuff is just a variety of ways of inspiration and how to pull all that stuff together, man. I would say if you look at some of the nuances in the work that I do, whether it's the clothing that the characters are wearing, something that's probably in representation of the album artwork that was out there, anything that can tie the mood to the influence so that people could connect to it and you could build upon that.

These old stories told in just different ways. If you take the responsibility of a griot your responsibility is to pass on those stories so that others could contribute to it. And on a large platform like doing murals or in the artwork that I'm doing, I'm just trying to activate space and conversation so that people could talk to whatever it is that I'm standing them towards or at least feel good in a place.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah. Now, that's definitely a great comparison because it goes into something that I was very interested in asking you about, which is your interest in graffiti and what first drew you to graffiti and making murals? When we think about Basquiat-- Basquiat also had done album covers but he was known for also doing graffiti, Rammellzee as well, and all of that. So I'm curious as to what first drew you to graffiti as a medium? I'm very interested in this idea about the work you're making-- almost becoming this large plastered album cover in a sense.

ROB GIBBS: Oh, man. If I could tell you what sparked my interest in making graffiti happen. I felt, just looking at all the disciplines in the culture, there was something that I had to pick that I can be good at. And I felt like when I'd seen my first piece of graffiti, I'd seen it activated in the space. I was like, wow, this is a play on the alphabet, and the alphabet, regardless of what language you translate it to, is universal.

In the hip hop culture I was like, damn, graffiti is hip hop's alphabet. Now, just imagine the alphabet with accessories and how you could take the words from a DJ that gets cut up and you can put it in an outline of a piece. You can add an accessory to that piece where you see the B-Boys and the B-Girls and which characters that you add on to the piece. That the lyrics that the emcee is rapping-- you can do a whole composition or a whole mural from it.

So I was exposed to graffiti that was from around the world through a book called *Aerosol Art.* And it was from those pages that I was looking at and digesting that I wanted to see myself do graffiti on a higher level. And for these men and women that were in the aerosol art book, I was modeling what I thought was the way, the blueprint, you know what I mean? I even compare it to hieroglyphics to a sense.

Where what the aerosol will put in the marks on the wall where we're highlighting culture. And within graffiti there's the individual that really gets big on their name, but then there's the other graffiti writers that celebrate the culture. And I've been turned on by participating in celebrating the culture by doing these larger mural compositions-- we call them productions, you know what I mean-- and in those productions it's a combination of portraits, characters, letters, background, very scenic, taking up the entire wall space from top to bottom, left to right.

Continuing on that album cover theory-- if you had opened up the album cover and it was a two-page spread or a three-page foldout, these productions mirrored imaging that was continuing that story. Where if you had a picture that was worth a thousand words, but it can't just exist on one picture-- it has to be in a series of pictures, you understand? So I felt in the ways that I was being exposed to graffiti and just seeing it in its large scale or on its massive platform with the trains with the canvas in New York that were moving around the iron worm.

And these guys and girls was risking it all to be represented all over the city. But then you seen these handball courts that had more of permanent setting and just highlighted a style that celebrated the culture that made you feel like when you looked at it you knew what it was. When you posed in front of it you probably had your arms folded, you know what I mean? A compliment to all these pieces is how many footprints you see on the wall because people were posing with it.

So always been turned on talking about knowing that Black and brown people produce these pieces and seeing them in the neighborhoods, these were our heroes, and to want to do that. It was an effort where nobody's going to know who you are. Because when you walk away from it and you see everybody else join it, it was just something that I felt like it was just gratification on another level. Where I did something that everybody can enjoy. I did something that everybody could just stop and take the time to look at as if they was looking at a movie screen or something like that.

You get a certain energy from that, and when you do it one time, it's like a bug-- you got to just keep knocking it out, keep doing it. And you almost feel like you disciplined yourself to create something to finish. So I felt that's what turned me on about graffiti, man, was just the urgency to put it up, walk away from it, and then watch it live.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah. You know, there's so many-- wow, there's so many follow-ups I'm thinking of right now. I'm just going to start spitting them out. So the first one I'm thinking about is I remember when we used to get CDs, and you pull out that little booklet and that's where you see all the lyrics. And they'll have other visuals in there and stuff like that. And those little extra pullouts were what really allowed you to follow along with the music.

So it's really beautiful to me that you're describing these as like a production that allows people to really participate in the work. In taking part and taking photos of themselves there and all of that. So that's already something that I'm-- there's already such an amazing comparison between this audio culture and how we now see it as a visual culture.

The next thing I'm also thinking about is this whole idea of graffiti-- I don't even know how I want to describe it. Almost like, in architecture, we have these things like post occupancy, evaluations, or something like that. Where, afterwards, you kind of determine how successful the building is by how much energy it saves or how people are using it. And it's amazing how, with graffiti, you can tell how successful it is to relating to the community it's part of by the physical artifacts of what's left behind.

It's like, you know, when players are leaving a locker room, and they all will hit a wall or something. And over time, the dents of the different hands that have been there kind of show up on the wall. So it's amazing that the art is creating that sort of culture, where you can literally trace the history of the work, and then the people who have now interacted with the work, which is like a really, really beautiful way of relating.

And it's so interesting, because graffiti and murals are always so tied to their neighborhoods they're in. They're tied to the buildings they're in. Like you said, you know, when people are doing graffiti on the train, it's like it's a moving work of art that gets to travel across the city. But in a neighborhood, it has to speak to the architecture.

So I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. How do you choose your sites for the work that you make? How do you decide where you want to put it, all of that?

Like what do you consider an amazing canvas? Do you ever actually look for a wall that looks almost completely blank? Or do you want a wall that already gets a lot of attention, like near a basketball court, and then you're like, this is where I want to make like almost like a love letter to my neighborhood or my community?

ROB GIBBS: That's such a-- you're right-- we're vibing right now, like you're talking-- you're speaking my language. So I think what's cool about everything that you're saying-- and it's such an amazing question, because what happens when you do the origins of like scoping out a spot, you're definitely taking the responsibility of a curator, right? And a lot of people wouldn't even think that it's like that, but you are, in some way, shape, or form, curating what's happening.

Now, as much as the tag has been downplayed to be vandalism, and all this other stuff-- there's delinquents in the culture, right? But in the same breath, like I felt like an artist just wanted to try something out, and be like, yo, if I had put something right here, I want to see how long it lasts, what it does, and how would it live in this particular space?

Or it might be like you show up at a party, there's other tags on there, and you just kind of add it on to that to let people know like, yo, I've been here. I think once you mature as a graffiti writer, you want more than just put your name up everywhere, right? And you want to be a contributor to wherever you're putting it at to some degree. I think it's just the natural progression.

Like I said, there's writers that really celebrate their name, and they're enthusiasts behind letters. And then there's others that celebrate the culture. And I feel like for something that you don't get taught in school, can't get a degree behind, this is something that's like ground level, it's like grass roots.

You got to know somebody that-- you know what I mean? Like there's not a one on one. There's books and all that other stuff now, and that's cool for like little kids.

But when you wanted to take to this form, you had to really get your chops sharp and finding spots where like-- you know, you're living in neighborhoods that weren't developed yet, before gentrification and all that other stuff. You were hitting spots where like-- were probably active drug houses or anything, or like you know, crack houses, or where fiends just kind of went off, or just buildings where like this wasn't getting no attention, and they were just left there. And you didn't know why it was abandoned. But you know there's some dope walls on the perimeter.

So you went there, and you practiced. You tried to get it sharp. You have your little gallery. You don't got to look over your shoulder. You're in your own neighborhood, so you know what I mean, 9 out of 10 for you to get ran up on. You know the politics of the spot.

But then when you start taking it to places where more people are seeing what you're able to do, you're a little more confident about what you're able to deliver. And then you become intentional with where you put it. And when you travel in and out of your city, you go to other places representing the city with the style, with you craftsmanship, how sharp you lay it down, and your intention.

So the more people get to recognize your skill set, I think the evolution of what you're able to do means you start to develop the same practices that like a studio artist would have, but your studio was on the street. Your gallery is the neighborhood. You know what I mean? And then when you start to go on a larger platform, you start to think, OK, this is the type of work that I've done that's been affecting people this particular way. How or what could I do-- to your point-- leave a love letter, or you know, put a pill in the applesauce, or you know what I'm saying?

Like what I'm doing with my murals, I'm like, I'm trying to raise my daughter in a way that I'm putting messaging in the murals where she's three years old right now. So the things that I could tell her, she might not be able to digest. But when she grows up, and she grows with these pieces, and she looks at them, whether she's with her friends, or other family members, and things of that nature, she's going to be like, oh damn, this is what my dad was trying to tell me. You know what I mean?

And other kids that grow up like her at this time, where like you know, there's beautiful distractions, man. So I just want to make sure that whatever I'm doing to help people know that we're here, and that we exist as the type of artist that I made a choice to be, man. Like my choice of medium isn't one that was celebrated in a way where I could go in a gallery and be like, yeah, I'm a graffiti writer. And you get the stank look.

And it's cool, because like, what makes any other artist calls themselves better than the other? We all manipulated a medium to be able to express ourselves to do something that's going to last through time, you know. Looking at walls and things of that nature, the larger you go, the more you start to pay attention to like little things that could contribute versus take away, you know? Because I have a totally different look on and a view on buildings and places to paint now.

And it's not even about being picky. It's just about making sure that it fits right here, like it works. You know, for it to be like a hot spot that everybody goes to, that just means it's a target for god knows what, you know what I mean? But if it's somewhere where it's like, it's set in its place, it's controlled, it might shed light on that area so that the bad things that would happen around there could change around, and people respect it. That's what it's about, man.

But we also got to be careful as well, because we're put in this priceless artwork on a building, and it's raising its value. And what's happening now, when the artwork on the building, which is one of its kind, is raising the value, it's not an advertisement, it's artwork. It might be raising a rent in some of these buildings, you know what I'm saying, and pushing some of the people that live in there out, unfortunately, because there's this attraction that made the spot that probably didn't have that type of attention something now, you know. So it's a responsibility to pay attention to, nonetheless.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah. That's amazing, because it's something I actually have not thought about. It's like, graffiti, it's such an interesting art form because it's respected sometimes, disrespected other times. And you literally are constantly doing a balancing act between like, you want to speak to your community, if your community doesn't like it, everybody will know, right?

But also, if like, I don't know, the person who owns the building doesn't like it, they'll paint over it. But then, if it starts bringing them good attention, then they'll keep it, right? But then that can also be negative. So it's such a weird act of like, OK, you have to think about literally the people who live there, how is this going to benefit them? How could it hurt them?

You probably get the most instant feedback on your art if it's graffiti, because if people don't like it, someone will just put something else over it. They're like this is so bad. Or people would literally just spray paint next to it, like, this sucks, you know? So like you are literally getting immediate feedback from your audience, versus like in architecture and stuff like that, if a building doesn't work, you might not find out instantly. Or like it's too late, it's expensive. It's there already.

But it's funny that this form of art can accentuate a building. And a question that I actually had for you, which really relates to what we were just talking about, is Basquiat's the exception, where-- and it wasn't even while he was alive, really, it was more so after he died that his work became like, everyone's like, oh my gosh, this is so amazing. This is like high art now, you know, and it's selling for all this sort of money.

But is that something that we want? Do we want graffiti to be fully accepted? Like I feel like if it becomes fully accepted, then it's going to succumb to the art world and the way the art world works, where you know, it'll kind of lose its authenticity. But I liked how you said that graffiti artists themselves are curators. They have their own art style and their own artistic practice that does not really require the sort of folding into the institution of art that already exists through museum spaces and all of that.

But I'm just curious to hear like what are your thoughts? I think it's the most public form of art. And in order for it to stay like a public art form, it has to be accepted so that it's allowed to stay up and not constantly taken down. But once it becomes that form of legitimized, then we run into all the other stuff we've already talked about. I'm curious as to like what some of your thoughts are on that.

ROB GIBBS: Here's some of my thoughts in reference to that question, just thinking about it, because I never really like put it in too much of perspective. Because like if I personally been around the world doing graffiti, then the success of it speaks beyond me. If there are companies that are tailoring paint, specializing spray paint for us to use, to execute the type of styles and work that we do, it's done what it needed to do, man. There's corporate paint companies that make paint specifically for graffiti writers. They celebrate the culture in such a way where like, you know, if you go to like a company called Belton or Molotow, they have an abandoned train on their site, at the site, that they bring graffiti artists from around the world to showcase, you know what I mean, and exhibit.

That crossover from the walls in the street to the gallery is a question of taste. And if you're looking for acceptance, which really doesn't bother me, the way like for this form of art that happens on the street to be called street art now, that's just the world showing, well, we're comfortable, we're calling it this versus that, you know what I mean? So a lot of the street artists who do very well with the medium are graffiti writers, you know what I mean? It's undeniable.

Like we don't want to be grouped into a big melting pot to say whether they're haves and have nots. But I think like for anybody that has reached out to a bigger audience, you know what I mean, I think it's only natural for anybody who was personally pursuing it to dive into what it would probably take to fill a gallery, or to do a show. It doesn't necessarily measure whether you're successful or not, because you could fill a gallery show and nobody buys one piece in there. You know what I'm saying?

It's the same when you've got pieces all over the city, or all over in your neighborhood, and everybody knows you, but like, are you necessarily able to put food on your table? Are you able to live off of your craft, you know what I'm saying? And I think sometimes with such an eat what you kill mentality, I would just say we eat what we kill to protect what we love.

I never would want to exploit the culture in a way where like, you know-- like it's made its crossovers. There's been video games, there's apps, you know what I mean, there's characters that play towards what graffiti does, you know what I mean? I just think it has to debunk the bad boy mentality behind it, you know what I mean, because that's the adolescence in the culture. Like it's a rebellion against something that is guerrilla art that exists, you know what I mean? There's ways of bombing and hitting the trestles and things of that nature. That's all in the come up.

But at what point do you become grown, or you grow old with it and measure your level of success, you know what I mean, or what the successes are? Like if I meet old graff writer and they got their health, they made it to me, you know what I'm saying? Because we're not using a medium that's safe enough to live long, you get what I'm saying, if you're protecting yourself.

But the success of it from being on the street and the gallery, or vice versa, man, it's all to the eyes of the beholder. I'm not too sold on like what the gallery world is, because it's a whole different monster. It is a different set of rules. And it doesn't necessarily make one artist more talented than the other, because whatever the wave is, whatever the gimmick is, whatever is the hot thing, you're going to find a lot of artists that trend or lean towards that practice, you know what I mean?

But I feel like the originality, the representation, the culture, the timelessness of a piece, regardless of what type of artist you are, that audience that you touch, man, is subject to the individual that's checking it out. I would love to be celebrated in all spots, right, but, you know, there's a translation that you have to have in your work that speaks to everybody so it's not look down upon. It's just as celebrated as an older piece from whoever is in that museum, you know what I mean? Does it stand the quality in the hands of time?

And like if you look at the Future Writing exhibit at the MFA, it's a perfect example of that. That body of work, that dynasty was a five-year period, five years, you know? And here it is in an institution where everybody is just breaking their neck to be like, yo, this is a part of our culture. This is American, you know what I mean, like all this good stuff.

It's cool to see like certain artists make that appeal and just influence a whole another generation or group of folks. I just think you can't get caught up in the hearsay. You got to do what feels right and last throughout the time. And that success, I guess, just comes from what your intentions are as living as an artist.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: So you seem to already almost have this kind of foresight since you were a teenager, when you and your friends started Artists for Humanity. You were already thinking about, how can we start basically cultivating our own artistic practice that relates to our own community, that seeks success within our community, but that can also be taken elsewhere. Can you talk a little bit about when you started Artists for Humanity, what you were thinking, and what was the decision behind it?

ROB GIBBS: When we started Artists for Humanity, before we even was calling it Artists for Humanity, just imagine like you had a practicing artist, or executive director now, and you know, she was going to schools fulfilling the need for art, to be in the school system. You know, art wasn't in the school system in the late '80s. It just wasn't a class, it wasn't an elective, none of it. And so you have somebody that's seen a need and brought it.

And we loved how that felt, because we were just all over the place doing all types of things, man, young boys trying to channel that energy, you know what I mean, whether we were rapping, whether we was like hanging out in front of the school, or doing anything that made sense to-- what was the word-- like to represent. Whatever represent meant, you had to do it, right? Yeah, I'm out here, I'm representing. You know, like, yo, I'm keeping it real. I'm representing.

Yo, well, what does that mean, you know what I'm saying? So like, so you got to sit there, just kind of dive into what that is. You get older, and you're like, oh man, we started something with somebody that gave us an opportunity and a chance to not only discover our voice, but to honor a skill set, to honor a practice. We wasn't doing like art for art's sake. We were like helping her with commission, and just knowing that things that would honor a deadline, and knowing the feeling of finishing a project.

And you're doing something that's adding to the world, not taking away from it. Or like the gratification just came from like, yo, we created that. And so I think when it came down to doing these projects and Susan introducing us to this creative lifestyle, this practice, this way where we could practice like being these ill dudes that got a studio, access to a studio, and then we were hopping out on the scenes sharp as a tack, you know what I mean, very, very like-- where are these dudes practicing at? Because when we go on the street, we got like a little routine, but we're not in art school. So what's happening?

And I felt like when we were doing this, we were doing it because it felt good. It felt right. It felt like we were doing something that was like outside of the norm, but we wasn't contributing to being a stereotype, getting ran up on by police, or possibly being locked up for the rest of your young adult life.

We were doing things that the potential of it turned into what we've known to be our life work. And we've always wanted people down with us. We always wanted it to be larger than us, because we just knew that many people.

And the feeling that you have right now, that we're able to give funding to hire teenagers, about close to 400 a year, to give them jobs where they're like contributors to their household, or like you know, it's their first job ever, or we're helping them understand what it's like to honor a commitment. It ain't even about being an artist at the end of the day. It's just about like, yo, how are you developing yourself to be a better human being, not a lazy learner, you know what I'm saying, like somebody that's just active in any way, shape, or form? And not riling them up to do anything to add to a statistic or anything of that nature.

So when we were doing this, not knowing that it was going to unlock into this experience that 30 years later we were still rocking, it just felt good. And it was like our escape from being on the street for four or three hours, or whatever that weekend was, when we were airbrushing shirts and things of that nature. And to earn the hardest thing to do when you're younger, which is like your parents' trust.

So all those practices that mold us into the adults that we are right now was just the reason why what Artists for Humanity has grown into and what it embodied. We stuck to our guns and just went hard for it. And you got the right people that believe in the right opportunities working together to give the city what it needed for its youth. And it felt good to be like in the driver's seat to do that.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: There's a couple of things that are really interesting about that to me. So one thing that I think is very common in general, and especially in communities of color, is like our parents kind of thinking that to be an artist is not a viable way to live, right? So you're already instilling very young that you're like, no, it is possible to be a creative and to sustain yourself off of that in a positive way. So I think that's amazing.

You're also offering teenagers, young people, a living wage, allowing them to contribute. Then you're also-- what you did is-- so what Susan had done for you is kind of now the role you're doing for other people. So my next question is, so Artists for Humanity, when did you guys get your first like physical home? And how did the process of being involved in designing that physical space kind of push the bounds of your own artistic practice?

You already were always engaged with physical space as a graffiti artist. But this kind of took on a different form, where you got to start from the beginning. Were you thinking about murals, and graffiti, and all of that as you were designing the space? What were you really thinking about?

ROB GIBBS: I think we were just thinking about the success of the program through like, you know, that whole sweat equity model, like hard work, and then just keeping it simple. To start in a place that was a studio that was small as a two-car garage, with like seven to eight teenage dudes, you know what I mean, and they're listening to Geto Boys, painting on doors and chairs, and doing everything that could come to our imagination with Susan's support. She gave us the keys to a studio, which was like the illest thing that happened when you're young.

You got keys to some spot other than your house? You understand? It was like getting the keys to a vehicle that we were like, all right, all of us are going to drive this. And we're going to take turns. We're going to make sure that this is kept well and run it, you know what I mean?

And so we've naturally went from that small spot to like 10,000 square feet, you know what I mean? And it was like gracefully rented that spot for real, real decent next-to-nothing rent to continue our practice and expand our program from the 10,000 square feet and went to 30,000 between two floors. And then this trend started to happen with the internet. And so us moving around, it got kind of tiring to always get somewhere and try to claim it or reclaim it as home, you know what I mean?

We're getting the dustiest of spots, painting everything, you know, clean the bathrooms, like you know, these old, old industrial factory spots, man, and so living like true artists. You go somewhere, and you take something that's just not as polished, and you turn it into that done. The cool thing about rocking with Susan as long as we have is that she's had wild ideas to be like, yo, at some point you're going to get tired of bouncing from A to B. Why don't we just own something?

And for the epicenter exist at right now, there was one summer that the paint studio that I ran and got operated out of there. And the one thing that I knew was that like the vibe was real. It was one of the last like horse barns that-- not horse barns, but like the stable where they kept horses that traveled in the streets, over there in Southie, and like in the summertime, when it got hot, it just smelled horrible. You know what I mean, because you can still smell the remnants of what the homeboys left.

So that site that I operated the paint studio out of, and just the vibe that got set there, when it got torn down and built up again, there were different intentions of what the building needed to represent in reference to like how we just existed as people and as an organization. And I knew one thing that she's always talked about with us-- and you know, we young brothers from the hood, man, we're not thinking about the environment. We're not talking about our carbon footprint. You know what I mean, recycling and things of that nature.

And like she had the wild concept of just wanting to build something that's as simple as four walls, like a big box, you get what I'm saying, where it's like a blank canvas for multipurpose, and multiple reasons, and then put some solar panels on top of the building. So we generate our own energy. We're looking like-- I mean, you can only imagine how people were probably looking at her at the time, where it's like, yo, you know, OK, you got somebody that got this hippie concept that's just saving the planet all the time and wanting to do this with the state of an art building, and this, that, and third.

And like believe it or not, when everything was said and done, and the way that the building got built, and just taking everything that was on the inside aesthetically, and making sure that it was done with the artist's integrity of recycling and reclaiming things, you know what I mean-- like the fly ash that was used to make the concrete, or the fact that a building that large had no damn A/C in it for years, and the air system, the solar panels on the top, the police windshields being used as an aesthetic for the mezzanine. And just an open concept, where there was only windows on the north and the south side of the building, because the sun went up on one side and went down on the other. And all the walls are painted white, so wherever the sun was popping in the building, it would reflect off of the white walls, giving them maximum visibility without having a light on, even though we're producing electricity like crazy, sending it back to the companies.

So this concept, all of a sudden, it just made too much sense. And like, the building has been LEED Platinum certified. And it was one of its kind at the time that it was developed. To continue that, and to be Artists for Humanity, it was like holding the program accountable to its title, you know what I mean?

Like here, we're running this beautiful program. We're like raising kids in the city and contributing to just this new school workforce. We're like this segue between high school and college and the rest of the world, you know what I mean? And we're giving different type of life experiences. But we're responsible, you know what I mean?

We're like socially conscious, but on like a global sense, you know what I'm saying, where it was just bigger than what we were doing in the city and playing those politics. It was like nah, here's how we're contributing to the planet. That, to me, just said a whole lot, man.

Like, you know, so being introduced to that way of thinking, you know what I mean, the contribution to the space, like whatever we did just came natural, because it was just like you felt like you were doing the best thing possible. And just being able to talk about that stuff as a dude who wasn't raised to have those ideas, just to share those so that we got like more responsible individuals contributing to that.

So when it came down to like the development of the space, those facts-- I think like, you know, the little dudes and girls like to geek out over like the facts on the things that they got, you know what I'm saying? Like you know, I got these sneakers. They got the 300-thread count of a d-d-d-d-duh, you know, breaking down stuff like that to me was just like, it was just ill, because you found out more other than what's just like put in front of you. Or you're not distracted easily by the things that were put out there to hold us down.

And the most important part, in reference to the space, is having a safe enough space to help create this vibe to contribute to this culture, to have like this practice where like I'm talking to teenagers, and I want them to feel like it was their home away from home. So aesthetically, the building had a responsibility. But on the inside, I felt like it needed to be taken a step further so that when you walk in here, you were like, word, OK, the right people are in here doing the right things.

And so that's just as important. Because you can have a building, and it can be anything that you want it to be. But just to have that culture cultivated in there, and to have that safe enough space for people to grow, be vulnerable-- I mean, you know, you got teenage artists that are doing this for the first time around each other. And they're hard, yo.

Imagine you're 14 years old, and you're doing a self-portrait next to somebody who's like 16 and been doing it for years, or vice versa. You know, like teenagers are ill. Yo, that sucks.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Yeah, yeah. Ruthless.

ROB GIBBS: Ruthless, yo, ruthless. And the craziest amount of honesty, just in a way where they're vulnerable that they do anything and everything to just, as we would say back in the day, keep it real. Yo, and they're keeping it real. And we're giving them a space to do that. So--

TARA OLUWAFEMI: I feel like it makes so much sense too, just like with what we were talking about earlier in the conversation and like the idea of like finding and curating walls as canvases. Because in like architectural traditions, like modernism, sometimes like a wall is just supposed to be plain. And a wall is just a wall, and that's it.

But I'm looking at your work, and I'm like, the wall is never just a wall. The wall is a canvas. The wall is an opportunity to be empathetic, whether that's with a community, or whether that's with the world, and the context of climate, and sustainability, and having the expansion of like that one little surface as an opportunity to be empathetic about people that relate to that surface on different scales.

And I'm thinking about even just like your use of color in the background. I'm like, am I making this up? But it almost seems like I'm looking at the piece you did with the girl with the Roxbury jersey dress on and the key in the background that has like this outer space thing. And I'm like-- it's almost like it just puts a hole in the wall and there's a portal into somewhere else. And it's like so much deeper than a wall, rather than that surface.

And even looking at your other work, sometimes the way you're using colors in the background, that it's like it's never flat, you know? And I was wondering if I'm making that up, or if you could speak-- if that's intentional, or like if you could speak to that a little bit.

ROB GIBBS: You should see me right now. I feel a little like a mad scientist. I'm like, ah, yes, yes. I think what's cool about what you're saying, man, and I'm trying not to cry on this mic, like word, you get it, you know what I mean?

With the keyhole at the school, if there was a visual representation of a Q-Tip's lyric from "Check the Rhyme," when he starts off the verse, like "well if knowledge is the key, well then show me the lock." And I just so happened to be placing the little girl at my alma mater, at the high school I went to. So what better place to highlight that lyric that may not be covered in class at all?

But if not knowledge is the key, then show me the lock, you know what I mean? And she's floating out of this portal, like you said, where like I'm playing with the architecture in a way where it's like, I didn't want to paint the wall left to right, top to bottom in its entirety. I wanted to celebrate the architecture, you know, and just carve a little-- like you know, I had something this big to put something on. Let me give you a piece of where it's coming from, because that imagination to be unlocked, it's timeless.

The same with the piece that you probably would see with the little brother and a sister, you know, it's intentional, like where I stood back and looked at this entire wall, there was a piece that was previously there that like, it stood out, but it went with the area. And so my intention was to make sure that I put down a neutral background to match the buildings to the left and the right of it, come to find out that color is named Patience.

Because there was a color, on the swatch, it was called Patience. I was like, yeah, this is it right here. Let's go. So I was like, am I going to build a manifesto based on colors that I use?

But like I love to play off the environment that the pieces will be in. Because now, what you would naturally do in that white box in the gallery, right, where you got a wall, you have a space, you have way to curate it. I have a piece that's as big as a building, and I have to curate it into the neighborhood that it exists in, you know, the block that it's going to live and breathe on. I have to be intentional, making sure that it complements the area, and it helps people feel like they're going somewhere, or going to it, or living with it, versus, oh, what the hell is that, you know, like it's a neck snap or something crazy. Like nah, this is going to be a backdrop to a lot of things.

I can't tell you what it is. I've just-- but seeing how it's been popping up in a lot of things, or like the protests recently and all that stuff, like I was like damn, I wonder if the march was intentional to go by this particular piece. Or you just can't help but to go by it. It's such a cool observation.

But yet like it's the biggest challenge, because you almost think, when you see a building now, or you see a wall, I look at walls that are blank, I'm like, yo, it's perfect already. Whatever I'm going to do to it has to complement or add on to it. It's a complement. It's a complementary to the architecture, you know what I mean?

My first line is actually the fifth line, because it's four sides of the wall. I could go on for days about what I think about when it comes down to things. But I just be like, listen man, there's something that you do, or there's something magical that happens when you respect and honor what you approach. Because I'm not coming to conquer anything, you know what I'm saying?

And maybe that's what my evolution as a graffiti writer came from, where I was like, yo, I'm out to destroy. I'mma kill everything, like-- and that's only because I done heard it in a documentary where this dude was like, yo, I'mma smash everything moving. Then I was like, nah, I don't want to smash it, because we got to live here, you know what I'm saying?

If it's broke up, we can't celebrate it. We don't have anything else. It's not about, when I walk away from it, no one else could walk up to it. It should continue or be continuous.

So you know, that's definitely like something that is super cool at the end of the day, is when you start look at the bigger picture. And when I say bigger, it's like bigger in the sense where like, you see videos where there's drone shots now of the work, and things of that nature. And you get to see it in context, where like, oh man, just imagine if I was riding a plane, or if I was sitting on the top of that drone, or I was in a building high enough, and I see this in context.

Word, it matches. It goes. It does this. It does that. It's just as intentional as it is when I go out the Caribbean, and it's like summertime, I'm not putting on ski boots and snow pants in the heat. You know what I'm saying? I'm trying to make sure it's all good, man.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: The other question I have, it's not even a question, I'm just like, I'm like, man, there's a portal. Like there's just like a whole world. Like you could just enter into it, you know? That's so dope.

ROB GIBBS: Thanks, man. That's how-- it was what happened not by accident, but because of what the building told me to do, like you know, a sketch, or a composite of what you're planning to create for, it's flat, you know. It's stiff. You're doing it on the computer, or you're doing it on paper. It's 2D.

But then when you start to put it in the space like with the first *Breathe,* like I was like, damn, how am I going to paint this whole building? And I was like, wait a minute, I'll just cut it in half like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, from corner to corner, you know? That's half.

Like so people, they're like, what do you mean? It's not directly down the middle. I was like, no. It's half, like when you buy a flat screen TV, like that's not 54 inches left or right. It's corner to corner. And so I separated the building that way. But the kid blowing into the Nintendo cartridge was him exploding that side of the building going into the Hubble galaxy, you know.

The second time around, it was celebrating what you would probably see in a church, with the stained glass, having some reflection of the universe in that, because in most churches we go to, you look at those stained glasses, those stories that are being depicted about the Bible or the Senate, none of it looks like us, you know what I mean? There's many funerals I've been to and looked at the stained glass, because I don't want to be looking down crying. I look up, and I'm like, all the people in the church don't look like what's going on in the stained glass. What's happening?

So when I have the opportunity to paint across the street from a church, guess what I'm doing? You know what I mean? And then, again, going back to my high school, and looking at this spot that's like-- whenever it was built, it was built at a time when that type of concrete and all that other stuff was crazy. So I was like, what could I do to add on to it?

Let alone, someone in the city gave us permission to reclaim the space in the back so that we can like redirect the activity that was going on back there. And then it built up from there, where like Madison Park now is a mural site. Like people travel there to do tours now, because there's nothing but opportunity.

And it's the same to take these spots or even at the Underground Ink Block, you know, that's under a highway passage. It's a whole exit off of the highway, where under it, all types of activity that was crazy is now different. You got like rock gardens, it's all lit, there's like SoulCycling classes that happen out there now. And it's all curated with artwork that we put and placed around there.

So it's the same as if you had a gallery, and a gallery was your representative. But it's on the street. And your representatives are the people that encounter it. And that's how you're doing it, you know what I mean?

That's when you're going larger than life. That's when you have an exchange. That's when you have a platform, where like people from around the world, you can import artists at this point. You know, if I got my man from Puerto Rico who got something to do, and he needs something larger than life to express his voice, or to inspire everybody that he could speak to on that platform, guess where we're doing it at? Because we got that green light.

So it's cool to see all of it kind of come together, man, and just know that Boston is beautifully small. Having the confidence to go to another city or another part of the world and push up the same work ethic and lay it down for our people, you know what I mean? Make it happen.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: How can we use this platform to help the work that you're doing with Artists for Humanity or anything like that? Is there any plug that you can give us for ways to contribute? Any fundraisers? How can we use where we are to really help out?

ROB GIBBS: Oh man, just continue to check out what we're doing, and put the plug, and just have conversations about what we're doing, man. We have you know, a website, www.afhboston.org. We got social media handles at all afhboston related.

And just check out our kids, man. We do work for hire, you know what I mean? So hire us. We offer a variety of services. We can be damn near a one stop shop for your creative needs. And it's all done and powered by young people.

So you know, we're not asking for anything in reference to detailed information yet. We just need the attention. Hire us, give our kids that experience that they're going to need to change their lives, man. So check us out, www.afhboston.org.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: Thank you. Thank you so much. This has been amazing.

ROB GIBBS: You got it. You got it. And thank you, Tara. Thank you, Darien.

DARIEN CARR: Yeah, thank you.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: I'm Tara Oluwafemi.

DARIEN CARR: And I'm Darien Carr.

TARA OLUWAFEMI: And you've been listening to *The Nexus,* a product of the African American Design Nexus at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Today's episode was produced and edited by Maggie Janik. And we would like to thank DJ Eway for our theme music. To learn more about the African American Design Nexus, visit us online at aadm.gsd.harvard.edu.