

The “experience of the pandemic has made me more aware that it comes down to capitalism”

Impact of COVID-19 and George Floyd killing on artistic life: An interview with a young artist-actor in Brooklyn, New York

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Artist and actor Bamoozie (his artist moniker), age 30, spoke recently with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the impact of the pandemic on his economic situation, artistic work and political perspective, as well as his thoughts on the police murder of George Floyd.

Bamoozie has lived in Brooklyn since 2017 when he moved from Oakland, California to pursue greater artistic opportunities. He grew up in Toledo, Ohio, where his mother continues to work as a nurse. In May 2020, he completed a two-year program at the Tom Todoroff Studio in acting and playwriting. His paintings have been exhibited in group shows at M.A.D. Gallery and Viridian Gallery in New York, among other venues.

(The following interview has been slightly edited.)

In regard to the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the artist explained: “Prior to the pandemic, close to none of my income came from my creative work. Once in a blue moon, I might sell a piece, but due to being in school, I haven’t been doing as much art with the intent to sell it. To support myself, I worked full-time as a server in a casual dining pizza restaurant on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. Technically, I’m still employed, but the restaurant has been closed since mid-March. I put in for unemployment on March 24, but only just got my first unemployment on May 5.

“To get by, I’ve just been living at the bare minimum. I did receive the \$1,200 stimulus check, which is how I’ve paid my rent. What was left over went to buy food, and, frankly, my mom has helped a lot by sending me \$50 here and there. I should be able to last for the next four months on unemployment. But I still haven’t received my back

pay from the restaurant.

“I just got an email that the restaurant is planning to reopen in mid-June. But I’m concerned about health conditions on the job. Will it just be take-out? And there’s the health risk of getting back and forth to work—I don’t want to be taking the subway again. They’re saying they are going to open things up, but the scientists say it’s too soon. Workers are being told, ‘You get back to work even if you get sick and die, or you starve.’ It’s being framed as if it is for everyone’s safety, but this is a lie. It’s like genocide and slavery together!

“I don’t have health insurance. I wanted to get it through my job, but they said I might as well go on Medicaid. So I especially don’t want to get sick. But I feel pressure to get back to work even if things aren’t safe. I’m worried. Where am I going to be in September/October?

“My creative work is the only thing that has been getting me through with everything shut down. It’s crazy, but inspiring in a way. Without the day-to-day pressure to make money, I can express what I want to express. I’ve been going to the studio and doing a playwriting lab with others from school reading each other’s scripts via Zoom.

“Capitalism isn’t going to allow us to take the necessary precautions. And in the current system, you are always dependent on someone else to give you an opportunity.

“The quarantine has also been affecting my work because I have more time and space, I don’t have to rush. It’s been a while since I’ve had a clear vision of what I wanted to paint, but now I do. The pandemic has helped

me to sit with myself and put it on canvas. I'm not looking to create work specifically about COVID, with everyone wearing masks or something like that, but something deeper. I do art to be expressive, not impressive."

Bamoozie attended the Socialist Equality Party May Day Online Rally. "The rally really opened my eyes, hearing from all the speakers made me realize that this is happening all over the world. The big capitalist corporations are forcing the working class to risk their lives to keep their fortunes safe. Their agenda is not to protect the masses, and they aren't even trying to address this. The fact that the stimulus will be paid for by workers for generations to come, made me think—wow! It's so inhumane, the ruling class really doesn't care. Billions of dollars in debt will have to be paid for by the workers all the rest of their lives, and their children's, and grandchildren's lives.

"At first I just felt sad, hopeless. I had to take a walk to think about it. I thought about my grandparents, my parents, they were all blue-collar workers. They worked their whole lives, and I ask myself, 'What is this American Dream they thought they would reach?' It's not right, not fair. For my generation, a certain quality of life is just not realistic. So much of my check just goes for rent. As an artist I am more individualistic, but I consider myself working class, and this whole experience of the pandemic has made me more aware that it comes down to capitalism.

"Listening [at the rally] to where the money is going, to the military, to the big corporations, and what the ruling class is really preparing, I thought it's mad, this world we're living in, it's so wrong. There is money, resources out there. But it's hard to accept, we act like we don't know. It reminded me of Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*.

"'Though the truth of it stands off as gross,
As black and white, my eye will scarcely see it.'

"The May Day Rally really opened my eyes. Since then I've started reading the *World Socialist Web Site* and it has given me an understanding of the pandemic, that the longer the pandemic lasts, the richer they get. They want to create such dire circumstances that the workers will take it no matter how bad because they have no choice. It's become clear who's who, and what's going on. We can see who the enemy is, not *who*, but *what*.

"The working class has been kept divided, in the dark. But there is strength in numbers, so many more of us are being affected. The WSWS needs more exposure; it highlights what the real problem here is. Not race or

gender, yes, that exists but they are by-products. It is the global problem of capitalism.

"We are living in historic times, it's very exciting. When I do decide to make work about COVID, this is what it will be about."

The artist spoke about the killing of George Floyd and what has followed:

"To tell you the truth, I haven't been able to watch the [original] video. I saw some of it, but when he [George Floyd] started calling for his mother, you could tell he knew he was about to die. I'm very close to my mother, and to hear him calling like that ... I couldn't keep watching. For someone to be killed like that by the police in front of people, it was so inhumane!

"The police are the ones inciting the riots. There is a bigger agenda going on. They *want* a race war. It's not about protecting people, it's about getting people fired up, to distract us. You know there is something going on—the political, the financial situation, people are angry and upset all over the country. This is going on in all the major cities, not just Minneapolis—Brooklyn, Oakland, L.A., Washington, Chicago, all over.

"The people are coming out because they want to mourn, to show solidarity. They are unarmed. But you see the police, locked and loaded, with shields, semi-automatic weapons. They are not here to protect and serve, they are hostile, they are the ones bringing violence to the situation and inciting riots. They may be shooting rubber bullets now, but they're starting this so they can take it to the next level, and then they'll be shooting real bullets. They've already mobilized the National Guard, they're imposing curfews, they're going for martial law.

"I feel like every month another human right has been taken away, first the lockdown for COVID, then food shortages, now curfews. It's crazy, it's scary. The working class has to have some type of leadership and voice so that we can defend ourselves against this state repression."



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