



‘Let It All Out’: Westmoreland exhibition brings outsiders in for intimate portraits



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“Break Down and Let It All Out,” an exhibition by Pittsburgh artist and photographer Gavin Benjamin, looks like no other show at the [Westmoreland Museum of American Art](#) in Greensburg.

The series of portraits are displayed in two circa 1750 paneled rooms that were donated to the museum by Cordelia Scaife May and Richard M. Scaife in 1966. It looks more like someone’s home than a gallery, and that’s intentional.

Benjamin, who was born in South America and raised in Brooklyn, has reimagined the space as the home of a fictional Black family who have lived there for 250 years and several generations.

The artist initially planned to photograph only members of the Black community but added immigrants, first-generation Americans and Greensburg's less visible citizens. He felt his subjects shared the same sense of otherness with newcomers, especially those from non-European countries.

Benjamin now considers Pittsburgh home, but he knows what it feels like to be an outsider.

He wanted to literally bring these images and people into the museum and give them a place among the things of value found there. Today they are a unique part of the museum.

“As the inaugural project of the museum's new series of paneled room projects, [‘Break Down and Let It All Out’](#) acknowledges the museum's complex past, visualizes possibilities for the present and gestures towards a more equitable future,” said chief curator Jeremiah William McCarthy.

The exhibition, which opened in October, has been extended through May 14.

“We pulled the strongest 17 portraits for the walls and used the others for the wallpaper,” explained Benjamin.

In the smaller room, a film runs on a loop with the artist explaining how several paintings from the museum's collection inspired his photographic portraits, which were all taken in the museum.

For example, a painting of a group of miners is reinterpreted by Benjamin in a photograph of members of Living Word Congregational Church in Jeannette.

“Manjushree, Simone, Subhasish, North Huntingdon, PA,” which shows an Indian family sitting around a kitchen table, was inspired by a museum painting of three girls drinking Coca-Cola. Each family member has a bottle of Coke in Benjamin's photo, which was taken in the museum's small paneled room.

The people who posed understood the mission of the show.

“They got it,” confirmed Benjamin, who used a liaison to connect to people interested in participating. They all wore their own clothes keeping it

authentic.

In the film, the artist explains that he wants Black kids to see themselves in this exhibition.

“I want young people, old people to see themselves within this white space,” Benjamin says.

“You belong here. That is what I want from this project.”

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