

AfriCOBRA: Gerald Williams

ISSUE 07 // SPECIAL EDITION

Foreword by Gabrielle Welsh

Selected by Stephanie Cristello

The political atmosphere in 1968 is one of extended scholarly inquiry, Leftist reminiscence, and subtle—if not blatant—similarity to our present world, exactly fifty years later. Chicago was a hub of political organizing up until this point, both of national and community-oriented grassroots campaigns. However, by the end of 1968—with the murder of Malcom X by the Chicago Police Department, the protests and anti-police riots of the 68’ Democratic National Convention, and the overarching repression of the Daley administration on Chicago activists—the feeling was gloom, perhaps a realization that the good would not always prevail.

In the same year, five artists on the south side of Chicago—Gerald Williams, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jae Jarrell, Jeff Donaldson, and Barbara Jones-Hogu—founded AfriCOBRA, the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. Previously exhibiting under the name COBRA (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists), the artists sought to shape the way Black artists interacted with their communities, turning away from the ever-increasing commercialization of the art industry. In their seminal 1970 Manifesto, *Ten in Search of a Nation*, Donaldson writes, “We strive for images inspired by African people—experience and images that African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience. Art for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable.”¹

The artists created works for mass-production—primarily posters and other printed ephemera—though they also exhibited nationally. The artists, though before their collation’s founding, were heavily involved with the creation of the *Wall of Respect*, a seminal mural celebrating Black liberation, located in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago from 1967–71. In their influential reach, AfriCOBRA revolutionized Black aesthetics of the time, paving the Black Arts Movement in Chicago (which was adn still is heavily associated with Harlem). The group met often to discuss contemporary aesthetics and presented their first two group exhibitions with the Studio Museum Harlem (*AfriCOBRA I: Ten in Search of a Nation* in 1970, and *AfriCOBRA II* in 1971).

Founding member Gerald Williams became involved with the artists upon his graduation at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (which Wadsworth and Jae also attended), where he became a teacher in the Chicago Public Schools system. The painter, still a member of AfriCOBRA today, remembers the founding of the group: “AfriCOBRA was aesthetically about capturing the spirit of the age. There was no rioting in our work. A major facet of that age was the concept of black pride—

black is beautiful—and a positive outlook on life. Those aspects really became more important than capturing the demonstrations.”²

Selected especially for THE SEEN Issue 07, this presentation of pointilist works by Williams from 1970–2013, depict a rare pairing of the full-color compositions adjacent to the black and white designs, spanning over forty years of the artist’s career. As such, this edition unfolds as a photographic essay on what Williams terms “mimesis at mid-point,” conveying a vision of harmonies that are simultaneously informed by contemporary urban symbology, Indigenous traditions, personal narrative, and a global perspective. Williams’ work is polyrhythmic, layered, and multi-faceted; flowing between expressive, gestural freedom and meticulous control.

Williams is included in various concurrent exhibitions, including *The Time is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960–1980* at the Smart Museum of Art through December 30, 2018, *The Art and Influence of Dr. Margaret Burroughs* at the DuSable Museum of African American History through March 4, 2019, and an exhibition curated by the artist on the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of the group, *AfriCOBRA 50*, is on view at Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago through November 24, 2018.

- 1 Donaldson, Jeff. “Ten in Search of a Nation.” *Black World*, October 1970, 80–86.
- 2 Barcio, Phillip. “For Gerald Williams, a Co-Founder of AfriCOBRA, Transnational Black Aesthetics Are as Relevant as Ever.” *Hyperallergic*. November 10, 2017. Accessed September 06, 2018.

All Images courtesy of Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago

TITLE PAGE

Gerald Williams, *Untitled*, 1978. Ink on paper, 16 x 20 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Portrait Y*, 1970. Acrylic on linen, 24 x 18 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Two Smiles for Miriam*, 1979. Ink on paper, 19 x 21 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *I Stood as on an Ocean Wave* 1981. Acrylic/collage, 15 x 11 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Soweto*, 1978. Print, 33 x 26 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *For the Children of Soweto*, 1978. Ink on paper, 27 x 20 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Illumination*, 1978. Ink on paper, 20 x 19 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Watchnight 150*, 2013. Acrylic on plexiglass, 26 x 20 x 4 inches.

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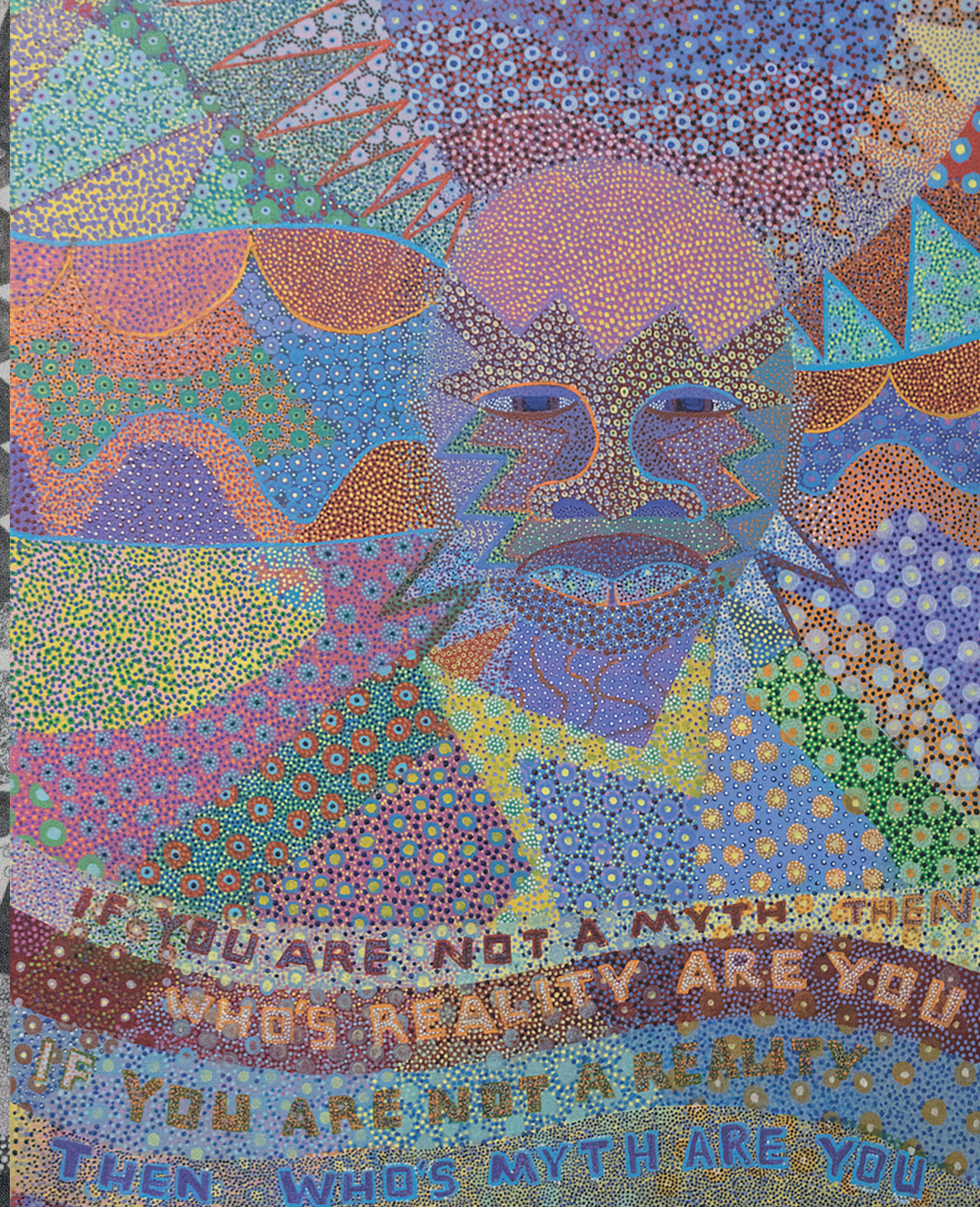
Gerald Williams, *Untitled*, 1978. Ink on paper, 16 x 20 inches.

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Gerald Williams, *Untitled*, 1978. Ink on paper, 16 x 20 inches.

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Gerald Williams, detail of *Message from a Giant – Garvey*, 1976. Acrylic on canvas, 47.5 x 47.5 inches.



IF YOU ARE NOT A MYTH THEN
WHO'S REALITY ARE YOU
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THEN WHO'S MYTH ARE YOU

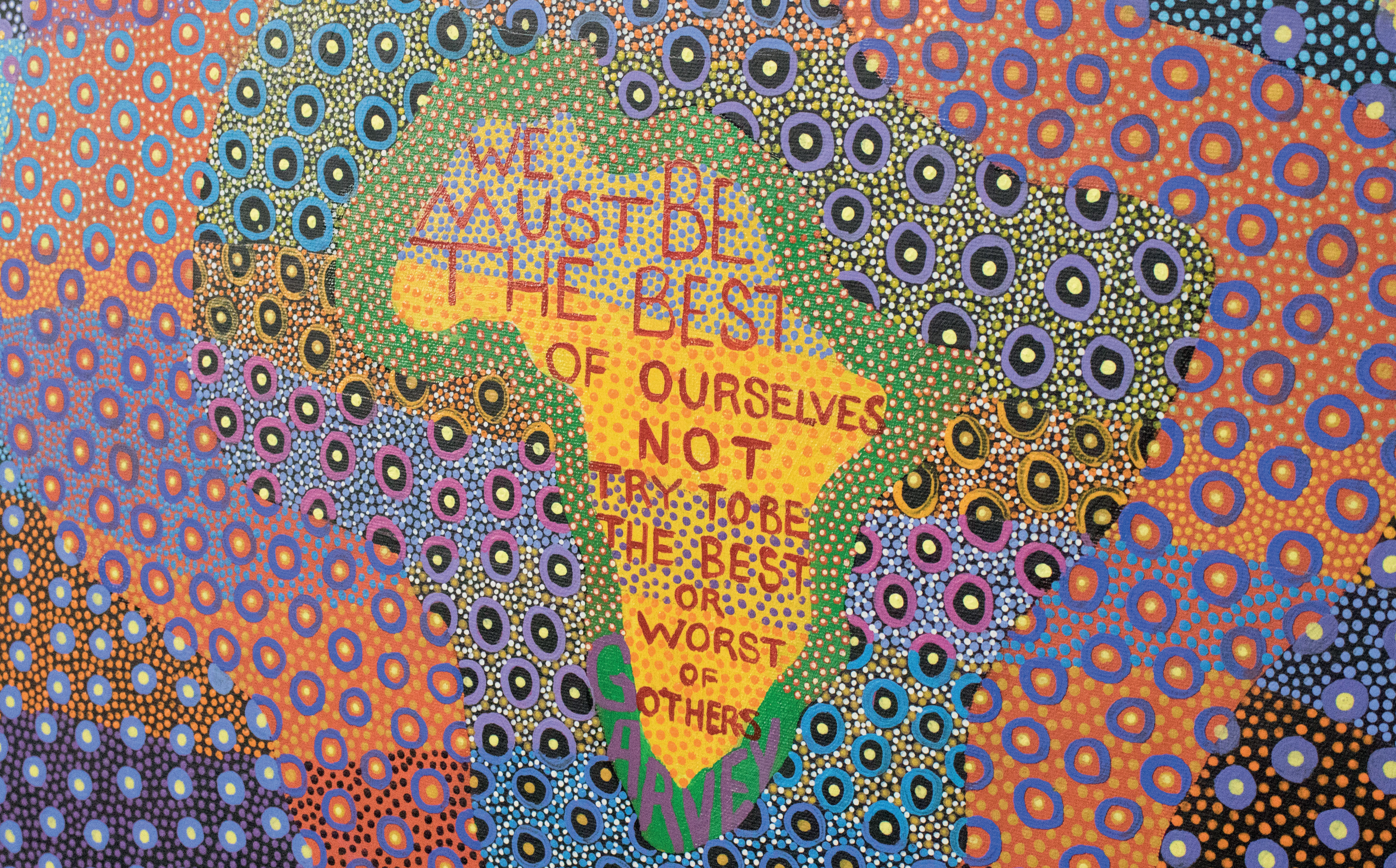


SOWETO





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THE
FREEDOM
IN
YOUR LIFE



WE
MUST BE
THE BEST
OF OURSELVES
NOT
TRY TO BE
THE BEST
OR
WORST
OF
OTHERS

WAVE