

Devan Shimoyama

MIGHTY MIGHTY

THE BARBERSHOP PROJECT

Presented by CulturalDC

Hosted by Building Bridges Across the River
at Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus,
Washington, D.C.

CREATING A SPACE FOR CELEBRATION: THE BARBERSHOP PROJECT

WASHINGTON, DC

As the centerpiece of CulturalDC's 20th Anniversary, The Barbershop Project is a multidisciplinary arts activation inspired by the art of hair, performance of styling and the cultural institution that is the barbershop. At the heart of the project is *Mighty Mighty*: a collaboration between artist Devan Shimoyama, Barber of Hell's Bottom owner Kelly Gorsuch and designer/furniture maker Caleb Woodard. They transformed CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery into an immersive art installation and fully functional barbershop that offers free haircuts to the surrounding community.

In *Mighty Mighty*, Shimoyama's paintings come to life, springing forth from the canvas into a brightly colored, bedazzled and undeniably queer retro shop inspired by aspects of his childhood. The wood paneling is reminiscent of Devan's grandparents' basement where he used to receive haircuts from his uncle. For Shimoyama, the barbershop was a hypermasculine space where he did not always feel safe or welcome. For The Barbershop Project, Devan has created a space in which individuals can engage in dialogue about how to evolve from said stereotypes of such performed hypermasculinity in shops and how to cultivate a safe, welcome environment for all.

A haircut has the potential to be life-changing, especially for those who identify as LGBTQIA+. In a heavily gendered society, a few inches can mean the difference between 'passing' and being targeted. There are plenty of stories highlighting the sad truth of people being denied something as simple as a haircut. If basic hygiene and style is the lowest point, one can imagine the discrimination at higher levels of society.

When CulturalDC established the Mobile Art Gallery, it was designed to be a space that could travel across DC fostering diverse communities with each new exhibit. Barbershops have historically been places in which a community could come together to rally and figure out how we — individuals, organizations, society-at-large — move forward. The goal of The Barbershop Project was to offer an updated, more tolerant version of that gathering space.

Mighty Mighty will mean different things to the wide spectrum of people who visit: a space for challenging beliefs to a safe place for queer celebration to a 'cool' art exhibit to just another barbershop to shape up. The crucial aspect is that the environment that has been created in the Mobile Art Gallery is one that allows all of those views to spill into each other and co-exist.

The Barbershop Project presented by CulturalDC runs May 4–August 24, 2019.

Mighty Mighty Gallery Hours: Tuesdays–Fridays, 11–7 pm and Saturdays, 10–8pm. Barber Hours: Tuesday–Saturdays, 3–7 pm; subject to change. Located at THEARC, 1901 Mississippi Ave SE, Washington, DC. Admission and haircuts are free.



Installation views of *Mighty Mighty* (The Barbershop Project presented by CulturalDC), THEARC, Washington, DC, 2019



Clockwise from top left: *Mighty Mighty Style Guide (Children)*; *Mighty Mighty Style Guide (Gentlemen)*; *Mighty Mighty Style Guide (Ladies)* and detail, 2019, Silkscreen collage with glitter and rhinestones on paper, each 40 x 30 inches

Clockwise from top left: *Stand, Barber's Pole, and Chairs*, Caleb Woodard, with embellishments by Devan Shimoyama, 2019



Bobby, 2019, Oil, acrylic, color pencil, collage, glitter, feathers and jewelry on canvas stretched over panel, 48 x 36 inches



Gabi, 2019, Oil, acrylic, color pencil, collage, sequins, glitter and jewelry on canvas stretched over panel, 48 x 36 inches

Mighty Mighty in some ways has come full circle back to a previous body of work entitled *Sweet* from 2017, which debuted at De Buck Gallery in New York. That solo exhibition had seven portrait paintings depicting various Black boys and men receiving haircuts in my own fantastical fictional barbershop setting.

Sweet alludes to the derogatory term for gay or effeminate male. I remember being called “sweet” when I was in grade school and understanding it more as just something that other boys weren’t, and later truly understanding the term. From my understanding of the Black barbershop, men come together to decompress and be candid with one another in a safe space. This space isn’t quite the same for LGBTQIA-identifying people of color. Queer-identifying people of color feel the need to perform gender in specific ways in certain settings. For example, gay Black men feel the need to limit their interactions with other Black men in the barbershop. After some conversations with other individuals who share these sentiments, I realized many of us find ways to mask our queerness in this setting regardless to how out and proud we are in our personal lives. We mute ourselves, close our eyes, and in those paintings, and even in this new iteration as a full installation, these individuals are

reimagined in a much more celebratory, femme, colorfully queer setting.

The title *Mighty Mighty* refers to two songs which I remember hearing around the house growing up quite a bit: *Brick House* by the Commodores and *Mighty Mighty* by Earth, Wind and Fire. The first song has a multitude of lyrics that are arguably more familiar to barbershop “shop talk” in their use of language which could now be viewed as inappropriate or misogynistic in the way that “mighty mighty” is used to sexualize the female body. The latter song uses the same term to celebrate one’s inner strength and finding the truth, which will inevitably set you free. In *Mighty Mighty*, my paintings come to life in a fully immersive installation of a functioning barbershop.

The possibilities of such a space was something that I had wanted the potential of the paintings to have; to actually engage individuals in a dialogue about how to evolve from said stereotypes of such performed hypermasculinity in barbershops and how to cultivate a safe and welcome environment for all of us.

—Devan Shimoyama



Activated installation views of *Mighty Mighty* (The Barbershop Project presented by CulturalDC), THEARC, Washington, DC, 2019

ABOUT DEVAN SHIMOYAMA

Devan Shimoyama is a visual artist working primarily in self-portraiture and narratives inspired from classical mythology and allegory. The work of Devan Shimoyama showcases the relationship between celebration and silence in queer culture and sexuality. Shimoyama's compositions are often inspired by Caribbean folklore, science fiction, and the masters Caravaggio and Goya, though adding a more contemporary expression and sensuality. With the usage of various materials: splattered paint, stencils, glitter, rhinestones, and sequins, Shimoyama creates works that celebrate the Black body as both of magic and mystery.

Shimoyama was born in 1989 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and graduated from Penn State University in 2011 with a BFA in Drawing/Painting before obtaining his MFA at Yale University School of Art in 2014. He is represented by Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago and De Buck Gallery in New York. He is currently based in Pittsburgh, PA.

ABOUT KELLY GORSUCH & BARBER OF HELL'S BOTTOM

Kelly grew up in a hairdressing family. He has spent over two decades in all aspects of the industry, including coloring, cutting, barbering, runway, editorial, platform, teaching, managing, owning, and speaking. Kelly currently owns two luxury salons (Immortal Beloved) and four luxury men's grooming salons (Barber of Hell's Bottom) in Washington, DC and Richmond, VA. Kelly designs and builds all of his salons and barbershops. Those environments are steeped in what Kelly calls an Americanized version of Wabi Sabi that lends a natural and mysterious feel to the spaces.

ABOUT CALEB WOODARD

Caleb Woodard (born in 1979) is a designer and second-generation furniture maker. In 2005 he founded his original studio in Washington, DC. In 2013 he moved his studio to the historic district of his hometown in Springfield, Tennessee. In 2015, he began designing and creating a series of functional, yet sculptural lighting pieces. In 2017, a new gallery space was added to the studio, allowing visitors the opportunity to have a personal interaction with his work. His designs continually push the boundaries of form and function with a passion for the organic. He works in wood, metal, stone, and glass. He personally designs and creates each piece with his small team.

ABOUT CULTURALDC, "WE MAKE SPACE FOR ART"

CulturalDC (www.culturaldc.org) celebrates its 20th year of creating affordable, sustainable artist spaces in the Washington, DC, area. Since 1998, CulturalDC has brokered more than 300,000 square feet of artist space, including: the Arts Walk at Monroe Street Market, Atlas Performing Arts Center, GALA Hispanic Theatre, Source Theatre and Woolly Mammoth Theatre. In addition to providing space, we facilitate opportunities for and present innovative visual, performing and multidisciplinary artists.

CulturalDC's Mobile Art Gallery is DC's first moveable artspace and a commitment to use art as a catalyst to build community. Each year, CulturalDC serves more than 1,000 artists and welcomes 40,000 audience members and participants who patron local businesses and contribute an estimated \$1 million to the local economy.

ABOUT BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS THE RIVER

Building Bridges Across the River improves the quality of life for children and adults who reside east of the Anacostia River by providing leadership, management and financial oversight of the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC), 11th Street Bridge Park, THEARC Farm, THEARC Theater & Skyland Workforce Center. Through these projects, BBAR uses a multi-sector approach to address significant social, health, environmental & economic disparities that exist in DC.

SUPPORT

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Images courtesy of Devan Shimoyama and Kavi Gupta, Chicago.
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Cover: Installation views of *Mighty Mighty*, centerpiece of The Barbershop Project presented by CulturalDC, THEARC, Washington, DC, 2019