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MSU Broad Art Museum's Exhibition Shares Story About the US Carceral System, Solitary Confinement, and Death Row

East Lansing, MI – The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University's (MSU Broad Art Museum) exhibition *DIGEST* tells a story about the inhumanity of the US carceral system through art, music, and video. Now on view through July 9, 2023, the exhibition is an interactive suspended sculpture created by sculptor Mia Pearlman, jazz pianist and composer Albert Marquès, and Keith LaMar, a writer, poet, and activist who has spent almost 30 years in solitary confinement on death row in Ohio for a crime he says he did not commit.

"I've been in solitary confinement going on three decades now and by some miracle I've been able to survive. I think it's through music and through reading, expanding my understanding of what I'm going through. Knowledge is power," says LaMar.

The exhibition grows out of LaMar's experiences and his metaphor for the prison industrial complex as a digestive system designed to consume people and break them down. In the center of the gallery hangs an enormous abstract sculpture that evokes a brick building, both crushing its contents and itself in the process. Faceted with materials found in the carceral system like metal wire mesh, zip tie handcuffs, prison blankets, and prison uniforms from the Ohio State Penitentiary, *DIGEST* conceals hidden video screens and audio speakers.

DIGEST acts as a musical instrument played by the motion of viewers' bodies: As visitors enter the space and move around the work, they trigger videos of LaMar performing original poetry about his personal evolution over three decades in solitary confinement and audio of Marquès' piano composition in 5 separate tracks. As more people fill the gallery, these audio tracks come together to form a haunting, rhythmic groove. As viewers leave, the sculpture goes silent, leaving LaMar alone once again.

"Keith is a dear friend who I got to know as he and my husband Albert were making *FREEDOM FIRST*, the first album in history featuring an artist from death row," recounts Pearlman. "We had fascinating, powerful, and often hilarious phone calls about endless topics. I was deeply struck by his metaphor of the prison industrial complex as a digestive system designed to break people down so they can't fight back . . . and if they leave prison, they're so damaged by its cruelty and violence they will likely wind up back there. Keith's metaphor was both so visceral and visual, I sat on my couch for days, staring into space while constructing *DIGEST* in my mind. Like the album, it is a platform for Keith to tell his own story while he fights for his life."

LaMar was convicted of murder and sentenced to death in the wake of the Lucasville Prison Uprising in 1993. Jazz, books, writing, and contemplation have helped LaMar to find self-liberation within the most difficult of circumstances. The State of Ohio has scheduled LaMar's execution for Nov. 16, 2023, but he and his supporters continue to fight for a new trial to defend his innocence in court.

"The power of art, music, and the spoken word come together in this incredible exhibition to draw attention to the experience of Keith LaMar, and so many others whose experiences and stories we do not yet know," says Steven L. Bridges, Interim Director & Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs at the MSU Broad Art Museum. "As the museum continues to explore key issues in our society, we are moved to work with such incredible artists who help illuminate the world for us, offering us and our many audiences new ways of grappling with and understanding the issues of our day."

For those interested in hearing directly from the artists, an artist talk will be held on Monday, Apr. 10 from 5–7pm at the MSU Broad Art Museum. Pearlman, Marquès, and LaMar will join Bridges for a round table discussion, including an opportunity for audience members to engage directly with the artists and delve deeper into the making of *DIGEST*. Tickets are free and the event is open to the public. Please RSVP at broadmuseum.msu.edu/events.

Following the artist talk on Apr. 10, the kickoff concert of the FREEDOM FIRST tour will be held at the MSU College of Music's Murray Hall. The FREEDOM FIRST concert series was created in 2020 by Keith LaMar and Albert Marquès. In this unprecedented collaboration LaMar performs live with Marquès and a rotating group of musicians, drawing attention to the role jazz has played in his life and his ongoing fight for freedom. This event is in partnership with the MSU College of Music. Doors to Murray Hall open at 7pm, and the concert will begin at 7:30pm. Tickets are free but required (recommended \$25 donation). Please visit music.msu.edu/event-listing to reserve your seat.

DIGEST (on view Mar. 4–July 9, 2023) is organized by the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University as part of the Artist Project Series and curated by Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs Steven L. Bridges, with assistance from Curatorial Assistant Dalina A. Perdomo Álvarez. Support for this series is provided by the MSU Federal Credit Union.

The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (MSU Broad Art Museum) connects people with art through experiences that inspire curiosity and inquiry. Presenting exhibitions and programs that engage diverse communities around issues of local relevance and global significance, the MSU Broad Art Museum advances the university values of quality, inclusion, and connectivity. Opened on November 10, 2012, the museum was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid and named in honor of Eli and Edythe Broad, longtime supporters of the university who provided the lead gift for its creation.

Michigan State University has been working to advance the common good in uncommon ways for more than 150 years. One of the top research universities in the world, MSU focuses its vast resources on creating solutions to some of the world's most pressing challenges, while providing life-changing opportunities to a diverse and inclusive academic community through more than 200 programs of study in 17 degree-granting colleges.

Image: *DIGEST* installation view at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, 2023. Photo: Mia Pearlman.

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MSU Broad Art Museum representatives are available for interview.

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