

Biography

Bethel Derege is a sophomore majoring in history and theater, with an interest in visual storytelling through film, theater, and photography. Derege uses art to express emotions and experiences that are often difficult to put into words. As a Black student in higher education, Derege is constantly navigating spaces where she feels visible yet misunderstood.

Title

Power

Artist Statement

This photograph connects to the theme of Blackness in higher education by exploring how power shapes Black identity as something scrutinized, judged, and diminished. The central figure covers their face, symbolizing exhaustion, pressure, and the emotional toll of constantly being evaluated. Surrounding hands point inward, representing how institutions, peers, and systems of power place blame, expectations, and stereotypes onto Black students. The word “POWER” behind the subject highlights a contradiction. Although Blackness is powerful, that power is often overshadowed or suppressed by those who control academic and social spaces.

I was inspired to create this piece after reflecting on moments when I felt overwhelmed by assumptions about my intelligence, behavior, or worth. In higher education, Black students are often expected to prove themselves repeatedly, while carrying the weight of representation. This work explores the tension between internal strength and external pressure, and questions why Blackness is so often framed as a problem instead of a presence.

I chose photography because it allows viewers to immediately feel emotion without explanation. The visual language of gesture and body positioning communicates stress, isolation, and resistance all at once. Creating this piece left me wondering how long Black students are expected to endure these pressures quietly, and what it would look like for institutions to truly recognize and support Black humanity.

This work brought up feelings of frustration, vulnerability, and honesty for me. At the same time, it reaffirmed that naming these experiences is a form of power in itself.

With Melanin,
Bethel Derege