

Biography

Isaac Bevin Boakye is a Ghanaian multidisciplinary artist and a senior at Vanderbilt University. His work explores African identities, memory, migration, and the politics of space. As an international student, he is deeply interested in how institutions both physical and academic shape belonging. His practice often investigates how Black histories are preserved, displayed, or contested within public spaces.

Title

From Kings Queens to Presidents. 2023

Artist Statement

I encountered this mural in Montgomery, Alabama, along the road toward Selma and the Edmund Pettus Bridge where marchers risked their lives demanding voting rights. It reads, “From Kings Queens to Presidents,” positioned beside a portrait of Barack Obama and the words, “Hands that picked cotton also picked a president.” The scene struck me because it compresses centuries of Black history into a single visual declaration of transformation.

In the context of higher education, this photograph reflects the tension between a long lineage of people and the limitations and oppression they have faced. Universities often teach curated, sanitized versions of history, yet traveling through Montgomery on an educational trip, I felt the raw emotional and psychological weight of history. The industrial backdrop, which is ordinary, weathered, working-class, alongside the bold purple bus, complicates the mural’s royal language. This contrast mirrors the experience of Black students in higher education, carrying ancestral brilliance while navigating institutions not originally built for them. The bus also parallels the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the long walk across the bridge. It suggests the migration, progress, and collective travel of Black people as they fought access to education and voting rights. Photography allows me to document moments like this and gives me and my viewers enough room for introspection. This particular shot leaves me wondering how we can continue to take control of the narrative inside academic spaces. At a time when Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives and Black Studies are under attack, it is crucial to remember who we are and what we are capable of.