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To the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize Selection Committee,

It is with great pride and admiration that I nominate Lorelle Whittingham's work, *Higher Self-Portrait*, for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. This breathtaking 6-foot by 4-foot mosaic, created with ceramic on a wood panel, was prominently featured at the *5 Artists I Love* exhibition from January 20 to March 3, 2024, at the Art Gallery of Alberta. Due to its overwhelming reception, the exhibition was extended to April 7, 2024. As the founder and curator of *5 Artists I Love*, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of *Higher Self-Portrait* on both the exhibition's audience and the broader Edmonton arts scene. Since its inception in 2007, *5 Artists I Love* has evolved from a modest art show into a grand celebration of visual arts, music, and performance, attracting remarkable attendance each February. Initially hosted at the TU Gallery, the event has expanded to prestigious venues such as the Art Gallery of Alberta and the Winspear Theatre. This cultural showcase highlights the diversity and richness of Edmonton's Black community, providing a vital platform for collaborative creativity and mutual appreciation. The mission of *5 Artists I Love* has always been clear: if representation doesn't exist, create it. Through art, this event continues to inspire, unite, and elevate Edmonton's creative spirit. It is within this ethos that I nominate Lorelle Whittingham's *Higher Self-Portrait* for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. This extraordinary work has profoundly impacted Edmonton's art scene and community.

Lorelle Whittingham is a multidisciplinary artist with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus (2013). Originally from Calgary, Lorelle has made Edmonton her home, becoming a prominent voice in the city's art community. She has been a vocal advocate for greater representation of Black artists, particularly during the BLM movement in 2020, and has used her platform to challenge historical narratives that focus solely on trauma and oppression. Lorelle's artistic practice embodies resilience, empowerment, and reclamation—themes central in her mosaic, *Higher Self-Portrait*.

During the show there were about four pieces that the public appeared to be drawn to. Two of the pieces were actually by Lorelle. "Higher Self-Portrait" is one of those pieces that seemed to resonate with so many that night and throughout the duration of the exhibit. When you first see the piece it's really quite captivating. It's a monumental 6' x 4' mosaic, composed of 400 ceramic pieces, mixed media, and a wood panel base. Weighing more than 100 pounds, the artwork combines technical mastery with profound storytelling. It draws inspiration from religious frescos, presenting Lorelle as a modern-day deity of self-love and resilience. Despite being completed just weeks before the exhibition opening, its craftsmanship and emotional depth are unparalleled.

I asked Lorelle how one might describe this beautiful and almost imposing work. She said that it's core, the mosaic explores identity, self-love, and liberation. The mosaic features 84 tiles with 24-karat gold accents created through a luster firing process. Surrounded in gold there are eight positive affirmations serving as mantras to anchor viewers in empowerment and hope. The background is adorned with floral motifs in soft pastel tones, creating a harmonious contrast to the bold central figure. The central figure, Lorelle herself, is depicted wearing a traditional East Indian sari, referencing her Mauritian heritage, while her bubble-braided hair, adorned with

golden clasps, celebrates the richness of Black beauty and pays homage to her Jamaican heritage. She explained how intricate interplay of diasporic identities reflects her journey as a first-generation Canadian growing up in Alberta.

In the mosaic, a crown of cotton plants rests on Lorelle's head, symbolizing both the suffering of her ancestors and the resilience of reclaiming such a symbol. Above the crown, the affirmations "*I am Worthy*," "*I am Powerful*," and "*I am Loved*" emphasize empowerment, healing, and transcendence. Lorelle's right wrist is handcuffed referencing the issues that the Black community is experiencing with police brutality and wrongful convictions. Subtly however her hand signals a peace sign and the handcuff that should be on her left wrist is in fact open symbolizing liberation and the ongoing fight for freedom. The positive affirmations "*I am Safe*" and "*My Differences Matter*" echoing the sentiment. In her left hand, Lorelle holds a noose and a KKK hood engulfed in flames. She describes this powerful imagery as representing defiance against historical and contemporary forces of white supremacy, transforming symbols of hate into instruments of self-determination and self-reclamation. Fire, often associated with destruction, is transformed here into a purifying force—destroying symbols of hate and allowing space for healing and renewal. Surrounding these elements are affirmations "*I am Deserving of a Good Life*," "*I Belong*," and "*I am Enough*" which reinforce the work's message of hope and self-compassion.

The *Higher Self-Portrait* was not only a centerpiece of the 5 Artists 1 Love exhibition but also a catalyst for critical conversations during Black History Month. During her artist talk at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Lorelle shared her vision of depicting herself as a higher entity, drawing inspiration from Byzantine mosaics to create a piece with a sense of permanence—one that belongs within institutional spaces and built into the walls of history. This act of self-representation challenges systemic erasure and asserts the presence and contributions of Black artists within the visual arts landscape.

The impact of *Higher Self-Portrait* extends beyond its aesthetic and symbolic richness. The mosaic resonated deeply with viewers, as evidenced by the record-breaking attendance and extended exhibition run. Articles in local publications such as *The Gateway* and *Info Edmonton* highlighted the work's emotional and cultural significance. One reviewer noted, "Whittingham's *Higher Self-Portrait* acknowledges issues plaguing Black communities such as mass incarceration and anti-Black racism while grounding the viewer in the power of self-affirmation."

This piece has a rather personal connection to me and my 5 Artists 1 love Organization. This is our 19th year doing 5 Artists, 1 love. In that time we have displayed our exhibit at the AGA over the last 14 years. Each year we are graciously given what is known as the Community Gallery. It's a beautiful space but as one friend pointed out several years in, it's in the basement. A thought that never crossed my mind but has never left it since. I had been more than content with our corner in this architecturally magnificent venue for the arts. That is until that thought had been planted in my head like a seed. During our 15th anniversary as COVID restrictions were just beginning to lift. The AGA accommodated a retrospective for 15 Artists that had been in the show in previous years. For the first time we were out of the basement and on the second floor where they built and crafted an amazing space for us. In spite of the limitations of the time the show was quite a success. Unfortunately we were relegated back to our usual space the following year. The next two years saw two major anti racist exhibits on the top floor gallery. Both unrelated exhibits had life size depictions of KKK members. Again the exhibits were anti racist

but in a viral video a local citizen depicted the contrast between the potentially distressing exhibits displayed upstairs for Black History Month vs the Joyous display in the basement. This act sparked conversations that I believe moved the needle forward in our plea to hold space on the main floor. 2025 sees 5 Artists 1 Love exhibiting on the main floor in a customized Gallery for the second year in a row. That story is part of the inspiration behind "Higher Self Portrait and the citizen that shot that video was Lorelle.

The exposure from this exhibition led to meaningful opportunities for Lorelle, including an invitation to lead a masterclass at Victoria School of the Arts. Her Identity Self-Portrait project with Grade 12 students has empowered the young artists to explore their own cultural narratives and identities through the medium of mosaic art. Additionally, Lorelle's work continues to inspire through her roles as an art instructor at the Art Gallery of St. Albert and as a lead artist in the ceramic studio at the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts, where she mentors artists with developmental disabilities.

Lorelle is a dedicated educator who believes in the transformative power of art. Their teaching philosophy incorporates trauma-informed practices, emphasizing safety, inclusion, and self-expression. Through her mentorship, Lorelle creates safe spaces where students can explore their creativity and connect with their inner selves. Lorelle's artistry, teaching, and community leadership make them an exceptional candidate for this recognition. Their work not only honors the history of mosaic art but also reimagines it as a medium for modern self-expression and healing.

Higher Self-Portrait situates itself within a tradition of Canadian art that interrogates identity and history. Its mosaic medium references ancient art forms while addressing contemporary issues of race, resilience, and self-empowerment. The work stands as a beacon of representation for Edmonton's diverse population, celebrating the richness of cultural hybridity and the strength of diasporic identities. Lorelle Whittingham's *Higher Self-Portrait* exemplifies the transformative power of art to confront historical trauma, inspire self-love, and foster community engagement. It is a profound and necessary contribution to the Edmonton arts scene, embodying the values of representation, resilience, and reclamation that are central to 5 Artists 1 Love and to the broader cultural landscape of our city.

I am honored to nominate this extraordinary work for the Eldon + Anne Foote Edmonton Visual Arts Prize. Lorelle's mosaic not only captures the essence of artistic excellence but also leaves an indelible impact on all who encounter it.

Sincerely,

Darren Jordan

Founder, Producer, and Curator

5 Artists 1 Love

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Darren Jordan', with a stylized, overlapping flourish at the end.