Edgehill is one of Nashville’s oldest neighborhoods. Over the years, the neighborhood has been reshaped again and again, yet through it all runs a common thread of perseverance. In the face of natural disasters, urban renewal, and the continual encroachment on neighborhood boundaries, the residents of Edgehill have maintained solidarity and a strong neighborhood identity. As a result, Edgehill is one of Nashville’s most vocal and active communities.

—Nashville Civic Design Center, 2003
This exhibition provides a brief glimpse into the rich history and cultural influence of the Edgehill neighborhood and glances at its future in the context of our city’s struggle to manage the problems that come with gentrification. The display includes imagery inspired by the neighborhood, works by past and present Edgehill artists, and pieces from artists outside of Nashville who address relevant concepts such as the boundaries that constrain communities and the utopian impulse that can form new communities.

In a neighborhood pulsing with constant changes, shifts, and evolution, we might ask what an Edgehill utopia would look like. What inspires us from its past? What should we keep and what should we leave behind? These are just a few of the questions that *Edgehill Muses* challenges us to consider.
The earliest Edgehill artist to be recognized for his craft is harmonica virtuoso DeFord Bailey (1899–1982). Bailey became country music’s first African American star and “the only African American in his day to perform regularly on an equal basis with white performers before white audiences in Dixie and elsewhere.”

By 1918, Bailey was living in Nashville where he was “exposed to a smorgasbord of musical styles and sources.” Soon Bailey and his family had rented houses in Edgehill large enough to accommodate his wife and three daughters and to take in renters. Bailey also opened a shoeshine shop in the back of his house in an effort to “fill the time on his hands during the weekdays.” After leaving the Opry, Bailey seamlessly continued to play his harmonica for family, friends, and customers, and both the shoeshine shop and his rooming house were truly integrated businesses. When the Nashville Housing Authority bought and bulldozed houses and buildings in Edgehill—including Bailey’s home and shoeshine shop, Bailey moved into the federally subsidized high-rise for the elderly at Edgehill and 12th Avenue. The exhibit includes haunting photographs of Bailey in front of boarded-up storefronts in the neighborhood.

As a musician, Bailey “was especially attracted to the medicine shows that customarily set up in a big tent on South Street in the Edgehill district.” He became known for “stylizing and adapting these songs to tailor them to the large, wide-based radio audience.” The song “Fox Chase,” musicologists note, “reflects deep roots in both its subject matter and performing style,” and Bailey’s performance of “Fox Chase” reflects his relentless practice of and experimentation with traditional technique.

For his two “train songs,” “Pan American Blues” and “Dixie Flyer Blues,” Bailey told Morton he “worked on my train for years, getting that train down right.” In the end, the sound was so “right” it influenced the name change of WSM’s Barn Dance radio hour. On the radio schedule, Barn Dance followed The Music Appreciation Hour, whose host one evening described the country radio opera as a genre that has “no place for realism.” Hearing this, Barn Dance radio host George D. “Judge” Hay chose to open his show with Bailey playing “Pan American Blues.” As Bailey finished the song, Judge Hay proclaimed: “For the past hour, we have been listening to music largely from Grand Opera, but from now on, we will present The Grand Ole Opry.”
In the 1930s, Bailey toured with WSM’s Artists’ Service Bureau; artists “traveled thousands of miles and performed in hundreds of cities, always going by car, on narrow state highways, always having to get back to Nashville on Saturday night to make the broadcast.” As the only African American artist, Bailey was subjected to the inequalities of the segregated nation. He frequently had to rely on his fellow artists to purchase food for him because the restaurants wouldn’t serve him or sell to him. He often slept in the car when others slept in rented rooms. In the end, Bailey’s career couldn’t overcome the restrictions NBC, owner of WSM, placed on what songs Bailey could perform because of their royalties battle with ASCAP, and DeFord Bailey’s long run on the Opry ended.

2. Ibid., 36.
3. Ibid., 133.
4. Ibid., 36.
5. Ibid., 69.
6. Ibid., 72.
7. Ibid., 78.
8. Ibid., 49.
9. Ibid., 94.
Another of the most celebrated figures from the neighborhood’s past is sculptor William Edmondson (1874–1951). Edmondson’s influence extends into the consciousness and culture of today, not only in the Edgehill neighborhood and the greater city of Nashville, but also on a national level.

In what he described as an act of divine intervention, at age 57, Edmondson began working with limestone using a hammer and a chisel. “I was out in the driveway with some old pieces of stone when I heard a voice telling me to pick up my tools and start to work on a tombstone,” Edmondson told Nashville Tennessean reporter John Thompson in 1941. “I looked up in the sky and right there in the noon day light he hung a tombstone out for me to make.”

Edmondson had an intimate connection to his community and its traditions. Influenced by his Christian faith and his church membership, he carved figures of biblical characters, nude figures, animals, and celebrities of the day who were important to the African American community. He also depicted neighborhood figures—the majority of them women—representative of strong, hard-working people. One such example is Bess and Joe, an affectionate rendering of a couple from the neighborhood sitting together on a bench. In carving portraits and memorials for his community, he transformed otherwise forgotten folks into timeless figures of monumental significance.

Edmondson’s art was “discovered” by a neighbor, Sidney Hirsch, and his friends Alfred and Elizabeth Starr, who became enthusiastic patrons and supporters of his work. They introduced Edmondson to other artists, including prominent New York City photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe. Dahl-Wolfe took dozens of photographs of Edmondson at work in his backyard shop in Edgehill, including close-ups of Edmondson’s hammer, chisel, and tools, and images of numerous sculptures in situ in Edmondson’s yard. She later brought Edmondson’s work to the attention of Alfred Barr, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. From this connection, Edmondson became the first African-American—indeed, the first Tennessean of any race—to earn a solo exhibition at the museum in 1937.

Alan LeQuire and Scott Wise

On a local scale, Edmondson’s influence can be seen in the neighborhood’s continued dedication to community and faith and in the work of contemporary artists. One such artist is acclaimed Nashville sculptor Alan LeQuire, who came to know Edmondson’s sculpture as a child. LeQuire’s parents were friends, advocates, and patrons of Edmondson’s work, which led LeQuire to acquire a number of Edmondson’s pieces, including his grindstone. (The grindstone on display originally had a wooden stand and crank, all of which had rotted away by the 1980s). Also on loan from LeQuire’s collection is Crappie, a carving of a fish made by colleague and Nashville artist Scott Wise; Edmondson’s influence is apparent in its minimalist style and execution.

Like Edmondson’s, LeQuire’s first mature work involved the use of found materials, which required only slight modification to suggest a representational form. In F.E.C., LeQuire channels Edmondson through a spirit of primitivism, allowing the material itself to determine its final form. By doing so, he hoped to evoke a similar “living presence.” LeQuire notes in his artist statement how “[i]n the background of my consciousness remains the figure of Edmondson, who had no artistic training of any kind and who carved stone (by his own account) according to divine inspiration alone.” LeQuire’s words ring true in his most widely known work, his commissioned public sculpture Musica, at the top of Music Row. Meant to provide a visual icon for the area and the city as a whole, the sculpture of the dancing figures not only references Nashville’s identity as “Music City,” but also celebrates the act of artistic creativity itself. “An artistic idea often seems to miraculously and spontaneously burst forth,” explains LeQuire. “This is what happens in the sculpture, and the title ‘Musica’ suggests this since it refers to all the art of the muses.”
John Baeder

Muses appear in many forms, and, for Nashville artist John Baeder, they come from the quirky and unique imagery of a place and time. In his photograph *Polar Bears*, Baeder captures this spirit of the Edgehill neighborhood. If you ask anyone familiar with Nashville and the Edgehill community what single image first comes to mind, you’ll likely hear the same affectionate answer: “The polar bears throwing snowballs!”

Those beloved plaster figures have floated around the neighborhood for more than 70 years, originating as storefront advertisements for the Polar Bear Custard Shop on West End Avenue. After the shop closed following World War II, Edgehill resident Reverend Zema Hill rescued the homeless figures and took them to his home at 1408 Edgehill where they sat for more than sixty years and became a staple of the community. Kids would climb on them, paint them, and play around them, and on snow days they would post up and have snowball fights with the bears.

As a testament to their place in the community, when Reverend Hill’s property was sold in 2002 and the new owners didn’t want to keep the lawn ornaments, the Metropolitan Nashville Development and Housing Authority and community residents joined forces to give the bears a special home in the neighborhood. In 2005, the bears were restored and placed in the Polar Bear Plaza at Edgehill and 12th Avenue South where they remain today as a gateway to this Nashville community.

The polar bears serve as a poignant symbol of the neighborhood. Although their portrayal is endearing and playful, polar bears are fierce and strong animals that have become endangered due to the pressures of human growth. As figures that serve as gateway markers to a neighborhood facing the growing pains of gentrification and displacement, they’re particularly apt considering their placement in front of Gernert Studio/Carleen Waller Senior Living Center, a building and a population with an unknown future as the neighborhood continues to develop.
James R. Threalkill

The precarious state of the Edgehill community is captured by artist James Threalkill's painting, View from the Neighborhood, a portrait of a local youth gazing through a chain link fence. A long time community activist and educator, Threalkill served as the Community Services and Arts Director for the Edgehill Community Center. Threalkill recalls that, on one “particular day, as we were setting up outside for our annual community street festival, I noticed this child watching us through the fence that surrounded Edgehill Center’s playground.” In the same vein as Edmondson’s Bess and Joe, Threalkill’s portrayal gives timeless, empowering significance to a member of the community. It captures a moment in time in which a young student, rather than relaxed and engaged in play, stares thoughtfully inward toward the Edgehill Center and outward toward an uncertain future.

James Threalkill, View from the Playground (1992), Lithograph.
In thinking about gentrification of a community, where do both the physical and psychological boundaries lie? How will these boundaries change as the neighborhood grows? Such questions are addressed in the work of local artist Jodi Hays, whose colorful paintings of buildings (*Untitled 1* and *Untitled 2*) delineated by imagery of flags, fences, and grids, demarcate borders of built environments. Hays notes that “[f]ences and walls stand as permeable exits rather than solid barriers, grid. They are mis-steps, try-outs, attempts, and repairs. The repairs end up being much more satisfying than perfection—the aesthetics of the broke-down.”

Hays describes her artistic process as a “negotiation of restraint and abandon.” Her abstractions, which also serve as “accounts of events and spaces,” demonstrate how effective painting results from exercising such restraint, similar to the way that good architecture bends and works within our complex landscapes and cultural matrix.
Recent Edgehill resident artist Courtney Adair Johnson documents the neighborhood in transition through her abstract renderings of *The Edgehill Map Conversation* with color-coded markings that suggest what she describes as “key areas, topics of construction, historical significance, outdoor and recreational areas, as well as mixed income and affordable housing.” In addition to bringing attention to these “key areas,” as a reuse artist, Johnson sources material as inspiration and bases for awareness. “In looking at what is around us, at what is not being used correctly or unnecessarily discarded,” she notes, “I aim to create art that opens up conversations about our community.”
Macon St. Hilaire

Macon St. Hilaire’s series of cranes dotting the Nashville skyline has quickly become a signifying image of our city. In this time of change, it’s interesting to consider what factors have brought us to this point and in which direction we’d like to head. What, if anything, does the population explosion of Nashville say about larger cultural desires?
Andrew O’Brien

Artist Andrew O’Brien explores this question in his series of photographs from *Talking Talking House*. As a recent transplant to Tennessee from New York City, O’Brien documents the transition of moving to a new city and the feelings of nostalgia and desire that arise from experiencing new landscapes.

His photographs, based on laser prints of photographs from the site of the deck he constructed in his back yard over the summer using a DIY website, present *The Deck* as a symbol of the American Dream. “The deck is merely an outpost [between the indoors and outdoors],” O’Brien observes. “In positioning these two elements within the same context, I hope to investigate what are essentially mirror images of desire orbiting a conversation centered on access and value in contemporary domestic life.”
Throughout her life, artist Skye Gilkerson has moved to many cities (including Nashville). She has attended numerous artist residencies, including Byrdcliffe Colony in upstate New York, which inspired her to consider which elements of different landscapes make up her ideal place.

In \textit{Try to Try and Try an Experiment (in Yves Klein Blue)}, Gilkerson took rubbings from the raised surface of a sign that sits at the base of a winding road to Byrdcliffe Colony, the oldest operating arts and crafts colony in America founded in 1902 as “an experiment in utopian living.” Being in the setting of this history got her thinking about her own efforts at utopia, her attempts to create the perfect life, and our collective experiments in urban development. As Gilkerson sees it, being part of a community means being part of a collective attempt to make it a more and more perfect place.

“I’m continually evaluating what aspects of each experience I want to replicate and what to leave behind,” says Gilkerson. “Sometimes, all of these efforts seem futile, like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a hill forever. Will I eventually create the perfect life?” Gilkerson points out that the “etymology of utopia literally means ‘no place.’ By definition, utopia can never be. In this sense, the labor toward utopia is a constant experiment, always evolving, never arriving.”
Curated by Rachel Bubis

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