

# ARTFORUM

November 10, 2020

PASSAGES

## FREDERICK WESTON (1946–2020)

November 10, 2020 • Pamela Sneed



Frederick Weston. Photo: Olya Vysotskaya.

**BEFORE I CAN PEN ANY TRIBUTE**, or remembrance, for and to my friend and artistic colleague, the visual artist, fashion designer, and poet Frederick Weston, I have to say I did not expect him to die. I was unprepared to receive the news of his demise from a private battle he fought with cancer. I was shocked in ways and still am. Just days before his death, he was on Instagram and had viewed a story I posted, so I imagined him as my all-seeing brother, always there. He was a tall, brown-skinned, handsome, and distinguished Black gay man with a personality and soul that was larger than life. If life were a metaphorical cup, he filled it up everywhere he went: galleries, readings, events. . . It's hard to imagine him gone as I am writing this on the eve of this historic battle and election where the soul of America is at stake. Fred's was a spirit of generosity, kindness, and humanity which this planet so desperately needs at this time.

Though Fred was older than me, I imagined a future with him as I did so many of my Black Gay male peers of the late 1980s and early '90s before they succumbed to AIDS. I imagined a future where we would all grow old together on that great literary farm of our dreams. Audre Lorde would be there, as would James Baldwin, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, Joe Beam, and Ntozake Shange would be nodding her head in agreement with Fred's poetic work "For Colored Boys..." titled after hers.

But such is not the case, and I have to get used to him being gone. So after my initial shock, my first instinct was to make a cake in his honor. Not the kind of cake made with eggs and flour, and not the gluten-free kind with ingredients I don't know, but an artist's cake, made with some kind of synthetic white child's clay, because this cake is how I will always remember Fred.

During a studio visit at his apartment in Chelsea sometime at the beginning of 2020, he showed me a cake he was creating from white clay. The cake pans served as a mold for each layer and he had baked it or let it dry with some sort of aluminum on top so it glistened, and the only job left was to paint it. I loved it, and we talked at length about the materials you could use for sculpture as this is my area of interest too.

I had gone over to Fred's as we were friends and I wanted to know more about his large-scale collages and art-making. I'd begun in the last few years working as a visual artist in addition to my work as a poet. Fred's home was filled with racks of clothes and fashion and art. I had hoped he would bestow some of his great artistic knowledge and experience. Instead, he said: "I don't believe in that. We're equals. Let's just have a conversation." We spent the afternoon eating cheese and grapes while Fred read my tarot and we talked about the healing power of music. The day ended with Fred imparting to me how I was already a part of his heart.

Before that day, Fred and I had performed together as part of various spoken word programs. I remember two years ago he and I were on a panel at a CAA conference on the topic of Black Gay poets and artists felled by aids during the late '80s and early '90s. Fred wept through my presentation. He knew those men as I did. We were all kindred spirits.

A few months later, I performed on another program at Gordon Robichaux gallery in honor of Fred's first solo show. Artist Nayland Blake read too. Fred read poetry and sang. I seem to recall he sang Larry Graham's soul classic, "One in a Million You." Fred was the type of performer who brought his whole self to the moment. If he hit a wrong key, he kept it in, along with the tears, never shying away from his feelings or pretending. He was unafraid to share his gifts. He touched everyone around him. Everyone in the audience that day cried, and I remember I left feeling like the performances reminded me of old-school New York: raw, unpretentious, and moving.

I'm not sure if, before his death, Fred finished the cake he was making, or if it will be displayed in his upcoming show with Ortuzar Projects in collaboration with Gordon Robichaux, but I choose this memory of the cake because it tells you something very significant about Fred. No matter what his challenges were—HIV, cancer—he lived in JOY and celebration. That's what I will keep closest to me. To continue his legacy, I know in the coming months or years in my home studio art practice, I will make a cake of white clay and paint it, in Fred's honor.

*Pamela Sneed is a New York-based poet, writer, performer and visual artist. Her poetry and prose manuscript, Funeral Diva, was published by City Lights last month.*