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State of California Partners with Visual Artist Jessica Wimbley in Launching Dynamic “Masking Series”

***Wimbley’s original artwork highlights importance of wearing a mask
to stop the spread of COVID-19, while honoring African tradition of Masquerade***

By Chet P. Hewitt, president and CEO, The Center at Sierra Health Foundation

African American visual artist [Jessica Wimbley](#) always knew she was destined to be an artist. Growing up, her parents owned an advertising agency and conversations in her household about visual literacy and critical analysis naturally played a part in her life.

Recently, those conversations came full circle, with Wimbley creating video and still photography works called the *Masking Series* to support the State of California’s COVID-19 public awareness campaign. She enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to apply her gift of artistic storytelling to move her community to action to stop the spread of the deadly virus.

The *Masking Series* comes on the heels of the April 15 eligibility date when all California residents aged 16 and over became eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. Getting vaccinated, wearing a mask when appropriate, and watching our distance are critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19.

Wimbley’s background is evident in her artistry, which is multi-layered. It tells the story and celebrates the resilience, strength and endurance of community through what she describes as biomythography—or biography, history and mythology.

This method, a term coined by writer and artist Audre Lorde, is the basis of Wimbley’s work. By employing painting, drawing, photography, collage, and other mediums, she is able to draw on her personal experiences and combine them with history and a sense of mythology as a means to show a more nuanced and intersectional subjectivity.

The goal of the *Masking Series*, created in partnership with the State of California and [The Center at Sierra Health Foundation](#), is to speak directly to Californians who have been hardest hit by COVID-19, including the African American community, through images reflected in Wimbley’s artwork.

In each piece, everyday masks take on a green screen effect, featuring video and still photography projected onto masks worn by people representing California’s diverse

communities. The *Masking Series* includes Wimbley putting on and wearing a mask that depicts video and collaged images of Californians taking action, such as wearing masks and getting vaccinated, to protect one another during the pandemic.

The overlay of images on the masks reference the rich African tradition of Masquerade—performances of masked characters that provide an overview of what has occurred culturally over the last year, teaching lessons and giving advice.

The African style of Masquerade is an outdoor event featuring a performance by masked characters. The characters provide entertainment, define social roles, and communicate religious meaning. The masks take on many forms, with many engraved with designs that tell multi-generational stories using important symbols representing ancestors, spirits or royalty. For example, within Yoruba Gelede Masquerade, which originated in Benin and Nigeria, masks, costumes, music, song and dance are used to evoke and comment upon social and spiritual matters, helping to shape society and those within it in constructive ways.

For Wimbley, this sacred tradition created a real-life parallel when thinking about the meaning and importance of wearing a mask during the pandemic.

She said the tradition evoked her to ask, “What does it mean as a society when we put on masks? What type of transformation are we going through? What are we experiencing culturally? How does the mask reflect and become representative of these shifts that we are experiencing as a society?”

Wimbley’s ability to capture the events and elements from local and national COVID-19 experiences within the mask itself, while seamlessly weaving the answers to these critical questions into the campaign artwork, is emotive and engaging.

The *Masking Series* is featured on LED and mobile billboards, and in print and television ads in English and Spanish in 11 California markets through mid-May. The Sacramento artist’s work is also featured on outdoor signage and indoor digital displays at Sacramento’s [Arden Fair Mall](#). An eye-catching image of a masked Wimbley is featured on a billboard overlooking Sacramento’s Oak Park, an historically Black neighborhood.

“Masks have such a pivotal role in cultural and social expression in many African societies, and it’s been an incredible journey to bring that tradition to help combat COVID-19 in California, my home state,” explains Wimbley.

The Sacramento-based artist’s multi-disciplinary work has been displayed in galleries across the nation, including the Wignall Museum of Contemporary Art, California State University at Long Beach and Ripon College.

To find out more information on COVID-19 vaccines and to make an appointment to be vaccinated, Californians can visit [MyTurn.ca.gov](#) or call 833-422-4255. To see Jessica’s *Masking*

Series, visit toolkit.covid19.ca.gov. You can learn more about Jessica Wimbley and her work by visiting www.jessicawimbley.com.

The Masking Series can be seen in 11 markets across the state through mid-May, including: Los Angeles, Riverside/San Bernardino, Fresno, Monterey/Salinas, Sacramento, Fresno/Visalia, Bakersfield, Palm Springs, San Francisco/Oakland/San Jose, Santa Barbara/Santa Maria/San Luis Obispo, and San Diego. The campaign is presented in partnership by The Center at Sierra Health Foundation and the State of California.

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