

*Pearl*, 2019 by Elaina Michalski  
Artist's Statement

"Pearl" is a life-size sculpture of a female lying down, based on a homeless youth and appearing to find rest outdoors. With soft, iridescent surface colors that reflect both concrete and precious stone, the figure blends in with the environment and appears simultaneously present and overlooked, vulnerable and precious.

Historically, figurative sculpture and portraiture were used to honor powerful and esteemed members of society. My focus is to combine traditional portraiture with subjects that are mostly invisible or marginalized in modern society. By recognizing them in sculpture, the work takes on new meaning that both honors the neglected and challenges traditional ideals of importance and value. Public art is intriguing because it has the ability to reach such a large audience. My goal is that the sculpture will personalize this issue and bring more attention to the needs of youth, in particular the vulnerable and at-risk. This piece will include discreet informational signage for viewers and resources for youth who may be unaccompanied themselves.



It is estimated that each night in the greater Kansas City area, there are more than 2,000 unaccompanied youth who are living without a safe, permanent home – couch surfing, sleeping in cars, or living on the streets. Some have run away or were forced out of their home with no other arrangements for care or shelter, and some may have exited foster care or the juvenile justice system. They are hard to recognize because they blend in with others and often do not want to stand out.

Several years ago, I created "Exit", a temporary installation of two life-size sculptures of homeless youth. Made of unfired clay, they were left outside for two weeks in winter in a downtown Kansas City park. The figures were extremely vulnerable to the harsh weather conditions and to public interaction, similar to what real persons would experience in those conditions. The purpose was to bring attention to the difficult subject of youth homelessness and those youth exiting or aging out of foster care. For Exit, I partnered with Synergy Services, a local youth shelter, to get more information and included personal stories they provided on an informational sign near the sculptures. The Monday morning following a Friday evening installation, the Downtown Council received numerous calls from concerned workers in the office buildings surrounding the park who thought that the figures were real people. Other viewers placed blankets on the figures to protect them from the snow and frigid temperatures. My sculpture "Pearl" is a way for me to continue what began with "Exit", an image of which is included in this application.

(Some informational sources: Synergy Services, reStart, Youth.gov, The Child Welfare League of America, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the National Alliance to End Homelessness.)