CONCORD — Keith Morris Washington is the most traditional of artists. He draws and paints landscapes and portraits. But his works bear the weight of a history of oppression. His painting series “Within Our Gates: Site and Memory in the American Landscape” depicts lynching sites as they are today. He’s been working on that project since 1999.

After Michael Brown’s death at the hands of police in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014, Washington knew he needed to do something more. In the fall of 2016, on sabbatical from Massachusetts College of Art and Design, he took a road trip.

“I decided I’d drive to places where Black folks had been killed by cops,” he said. “I didn’t want to continue to portray them in the role of victims.”
“Black Lives . . .,” an installation and online exhibition at Concord Center for the Visual Arts, features Washington’s larger-than-life-size charcoal portraits of people he met in those communities. He started in Oakland, where transit police held down and shot Oscar Grant, an unarmed black man, in 2009. In Hempstead, Texas, he took pictures of students and staff at Prairie View A&M University, where Sandra Bland was headed when she was pulled over for a minor traffic violation that led to her 2015 death in jail. He visited Los Angeles, Ferguson, Cleveland, and more.

“I put 5,000 miles on the car,” Washington said. “It was more emotionally challenging than I anticipated.”

The people in Washington’s portraits are unnamed. “They’re just ordinary people who continue to live and survive in these places,” he said.

Drawn with a loose hand, with swiveling strokes and smudges, the portraits almost shimmer, and they brim with personality. Women smile and men preen. One young man crosses his arms protectively in front of him and wears a seraphic grin.

Washington has installed the drawings in two groups of four suspended from Concord Art’s 12-foot skylight. Four drawings form a square. Inside each square, the artist has placed an offering. Loose cigarettes honor Eric Garner, who was selling single smokes when he was killed by a Staten Island police officer in 2014. A pack of Skittles and a can of iced tea remember Trayvon Martin, who had bought them the night in 2012 that George Zimmerman killed him in Sanford, Fla.
“These four people are here protecting,” Washington said of the portraits surrounding the tea and Skittles. The installation conveys the scars and resilience of communities contending daily with the grief and terror of white supremacy.

The artist was originally slotted to curate “(un)seen,” a group show about racism, at Concord Art this summer, but COVID-19 squelched it. That exhibition, which was to include Washington’s vibrant and haunting paintings of lynching sites, has been postponed until next summer.

“After George Floyd was killed, all the nonprofits in Concord were talking about how we could promote anti-racism here,” said Concord Art’s executive director, Kate James, pointing to the town’s history of abolitionism. James thought of Washington. “I called him and said, ‘Let’s do something,’” she said. Washington offered up “Black Lives . . .”

“We knew we could do it online, but after we hung it, we said, ‘We have to show these by appointment,’” James said.

The pandemic has changed exhibition schedules everywhere. Four of the “Within Our Gates” paintings can still be seen in “After Spiritualism: Loss and Transcendence in Contemporary Art” at the Fitchburg Art Museum once the museum reopens on July 22. The exhibition has been extended through Sept. 6.
That project came about after the Alfred P. Murrah building was blown up, and the term ‘domestic terrorism’ came in,” Washington said. “Black folks and Native American folks have been victims of domestic terrorism for years.”

The artist is still working on that series. “I still have Emmett Till’s site,” Washington said, but he has no immediate plans to go to Mississippi. The reason is not coronavirus. He took to the road for “Black Lives . . .” before Donald Trump was elected President.

“I don’t feel nearly as safe traveling,” he said. For now, he’ll be staying home.

BLACK LIVES . . .

At Concord Center for the Visual Arts, 37 Lexington Rd., Concord, online and in person by appointment through Aug. 9. www.concordart.org

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter @cmcq.