

**A YEAR IN
BLACK
ART 2019-2020**

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The Black Embodiments Studio

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THIS YEAR

Like many arts organizations, The Black Embodiments Studio (BES) had to go through some abrupt changes in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Many if not most arts institutions rushed to devise ways of living online, providing many important ways for people to connect to and through art: hosting online exhibitions, scheduling Zoom conversations with cultural workers, hosting screenings that help us feel connected, etc.

BES didn't do any of that. I didn't convene the writing residency this spring. I didn't continually update the Black Art in Seattle calendar on the BES website with relevant online engagements. I didn't transform Ilana Harris-Babou's planned talk at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery into a Zoom conversation—I just paid her to make work over the summer and left her alone. I took the opportunity to simply slow down and I also encouraged the writers collected in this journal to slow down.

BES refused the seeming imperative that we keep producing, producing, *producing* in the face of a health crisis and continual reminders of the violence of the police state. We refused to see the multiple and overlapping "crises" experienced spring/summer 2020

as “opportunities” to plan more, look at more, write more, post more, watch more, *do* more.

BES is made up of people (and hopefully hails people) who understand that this moment is not in fact a crisis. What we have been experiencing is simply the entrenchment of what we already know: racial capitalism wreaks havoc on non-white life; “art” is inextricable from “capitalism” is inextricable from “whiteness”; the function of governing bodies, be they national organizations or museum boards, is to secure and manage capital, in all its forms, for an elite few; and that what we experience as hyperlocal injustices are stitched together through a global matrix of capitalist exploitation.

All praise to minoritarian folks across the spectrum of gender and sexuality who *been* talking about and activating around these issues. BES was only able to slow down and chill because those people stay grinding.

To this end, this edition of *A Year in Black Art* largely reflects writing that a diverse crew of people did before their art writing residency was cut short by COVID-19. They come from within and beyond the University of Washington and have varied experiences thinking with and writing about art: some are artists themselves, others had rarely set foot in a museum or gallery. The volume also includes reflections by three people whose perspectives on and experiences surrounding black art and artists in Seattle are invaluable: artist Jite Agbro; director of Wa Na Wari, Elisheba Johnson; and Dr. Jasmine

Mahmoud, Assistant Professor of Arts Leadership at Seattle. Together, their writing reflects on an incredible constellation of visual and performing arts staged by black artists in Seattle through much of 2019-2020 (and I'm happy to say that there was so much more black art shown that is not captured here).

BES brings these diverse voices and skillsets together in order to push against the logic and expectation of mastery that often circumscribes arts writing. We want arts writing that feels rushed, incomplete, like a thought-in-process that you can't quite land right now and that you're excited to keep sitting with for hours, days, weeks, a lifetime. This energy enlivens research-based creative practices like arts writing and it matches the rich formal and conceptual labor of black artists we strive to think alongside of—artists who are often under-resourced, under-theorized, and simply under-appreciated in the broader arts-academic complex. We want you to read the writing, we want you to think with the writing, and we want you to share the writing.

BES took a pause this spring and summer but we'll be back this fall. Head to blackembodiments.org to find information on the 2020-2021 residency, to sign up for our mailing list, to read past issues of *A Year in Black Art*. You can also find videos of artist talks we've hosted and get information on upcoming artist talks, including a November 2020 conversation between artist Ilana Harris-Babou and arts writer Jessica Lynne.

Until then, desegregate your local arts institution, pay arts workers a *lot* more, and keep supporting black art.

RASHEENA FOUNTAIN

WHAT DOES BEING UP FROM THE TABLE LOOK LIKE?

Dear Seattle Youth Victims of the School-to-Prison Pipeline,

You heard of Nina Simone? Well, she said, “You must learn to leave the table when love is no longer being served.”

The tables—the policies, the laws, the police, the courtrooms, and the schools—ain’t been serving y’all what y’all need. All that “Zero Tolerance” bullshit they got in the schools turns out to be code words for locking poor, brown, and black kids in jail. The *South Seattle Emerald* been talking about it, *The Seattle Times*, ACLU, and a whole bunch of others. But y’all are there instead of home. So, your community thought it was time to get up from that table and get creative for your justice.

So, what does being up from the table look like?

It could look like the *Creative Justice: Up From the Table* Exhibit your community had in a small room of the Hedreen Gallery?

Word on your streets and on that black wall at the *Creative Justice: Up From the Table* exhibit entrance is that you been victim to the school-to-prison pipeline. I saw that they even put y'all in solitary confinement 15 times illegally in 2018. We was told a lot of shit in that room—that room in the Hedreen on Seattle University campus that Creative Justice occupied from September 28 to November 24, 2019. Creative Justice Youth, who could've been locked up like you, but they took they second chance the alternative justice program gave them. In the program they used art to tell us about your pain and the impact of your incarceration on community.

You ain't in the shadows. Your community put your stories in art displays on black walls, white books, hoodies, portraits, and slide shows in the Hedreen. All that donated material from the mid-family dinner at Washington Hall was used to create art in that room to re-imagine what justice is for y'all. They even put a TV on a wall in the room and named it "Window" because it was the only window for people like the man who donated it after returning home after 20 years in that joint. And because you are locked away, your community spoke up for you. They was led by Creative Justice—Dan Paz, Le'Ecia Farmer, Ashley Tiedeman, Olisa Enrico—and program directors Aaron Counts and Nikkita Oliver. You already know that they try to silence black, brown, and poor voices on the outside too, so anybody that visited that room in the Hedreen was invited to join in and speak through messages written with Sharpie markers on top of colorful sticky notes.

As you prolly heard, that \$232 million youth jail went up, but they talking about a \$4 million plan for "Zero Youth Detention." Nikkita, and Aaron Counts, and Creative Justice and nem reflected the contradictions of Seattle's actions on a black wall where the building plan for that luxurious new youth jail to lock more of y'all away hung. You know that shit look and feel like cotton fields because they using black bodies as capital, and your community correctly labeled it as such for you in Sharpie on top of Seattle Youth jail's master plan. They wrote on one room on that building plan, "This is where people die, This is where our youth die."

And surrounding that plan, on them black walls, they asked, "What frees you?"

Your community wrote on sticky notes that what frees you is, "Love +Support, musical notes, my family, school, community, human connection."

But will they listen, or will they continue to just cage you?

So they asked in white block letters, "What cages you?"

The community answered in Sharpie, "Age, judgement, racial capitalism, debt, that damn school-to-prison pipeline, and Police Lies/Deceit..."

Near that black wall, it was good to hear your voice, but it was sad that you was speaking through a phone. Creative Justice Youth

named this “Visitation” because they had set up this exhibit to look like a prison phone during a visit. The exhibit had two sides with the same material on both sides with chairs pulled up to the wooden table. They used black handcuffs as the phone cradles that attached to a box. The box was connected to a mirror with messages written in green sharpie: “What frees you?” on one side and “What Cages you?” on the other side. That mirror was attached to wood table with a blue, red, and black target painted on it.

Through the phone y’all was telling us about your struggles—about you needing support and not needing to be locked up. Some of y’all ain’t know your family growing up and some of y’all from a long line of incarceration. Mass incarceration is a cycle that has locked up your uncles, aunts, cousins, brothers, and sisters. Through the phone, you said you understood that you made mistakes but, “Fuck that God damn punishment; it’s inhumane.”

And, apparently that shit starts early—that indoctrination, the microaggressions, the whitewashing of your history, and attacking your worth in the schools. I learned about how you feel in the “Curriculum for the School to Prison Pipeline” display. White books with black letters of all them subliminal messages the schools be giving y’all was put on white shelves. I saw the hidden messages they wrote in black on those white books the schools gave you. They said “You Ain’t Shit” and “I’m Calling 911” and other shit I am sure you know they be saying and thinking about us.

But I guess that's some "Hood Shit." And that's what Creative Justice Youth called a project they made out of a quilted hoodie, cotton bandana, and prison issued sneakers. Y'all know the Black Moses and nem used a code called the Underground Railroad Quilt Code to escape slavery? They put hidden messages in the quilt as roadmaps of how to escape north and what tools were needed. And that's what they did in that "Hood Shit" exhibit; they put hidden messages in hoodies—brown, green, blue, and red patterns. I am sure you might recognize some of the messages. The hoodie was supposed to represent hidden messages in the school to prison to deportation pipeline.

Creative Justice youth was also showing how the struggle at the Southern US border ain't much different than what y'all go through in Seattle in the "Point Blank" exhibit. They too know what it is like to be over-policed at the border. No More Deaths, an organization who helps out people in Southern Arizona, even if they ain't citizens donated the material for this exhibit and the "Strong Medicine" exhibit. "Point Blank" had a gavel painted in American flag decor, going through the bullseye of a wooden board with a red, black, and blue target on it. The gavel had a piece of camouflage pants between it and the wood. And there was non-reflective water bottles that they use at the border to keep Border Patrol from taking they shit. The bottle was surrounded by print-masking carpet swatches and a leather black boot with red on the top of it.

I will be honest. At first, I wasn't feeling that art in the exhibit; I hated seeing mass incarceration and y'all struggles represented so

beautifully. I saw smiling community faces in that “Up from the Table” portrait series. The printed digital photos of community were on a large white wall; it was the biggest exhibit in the room. I wondered why your community in the photos ain’t look angry for what happened to y’all and why it was the biggest display in that room. But I realized that this is the point: showing your community not broken but resorting to creative justice. Creative justice is re-imagining of what should and could be for y’all.

Creative Justice Up From the Table was about what happens when your community comes through for you—a display to remind everybody that you ain’t forgotten. It is about the “Collateral Consequences,” as they named a digital video exhibit that showed community portraits on a flat screen television followed by a display of the same portraits with someone missing.

So, I ask again, what does being up from the table look like?

Being up from the table might look like creative justice, community, and the notion that you are not the sum of your mistakes. You got caught up in that school-to-prison pipeline—a monster targeting people who are poor and us black and brown people. And although the system don’t value your potential or your worth, your community showed that they are less whole when you ain’t here. That’s *Creative Justice Up from the Table*

Love,

Rasheena Fountain

BRITTNEY FRANTECE

OJIH ODUTOLA'S *BIRMINGHAM* (2014)

Using mediums that give way to precision, like ballpoint pens and lithography, Toyin Ojih Odutola scripts, or writes, new narratives of Black embodiment onto the flesh of her subjects in her (re)imaginative portraitures. Portraiture as (re)creation is an investigative process that calls for speculative, alternative ways of understanding people and what we remember and know about them. Artist and art critic Dell Hamilton has said about Ojih Odutola's work, "there's a whole world conjured up in these images" that is at tension with common narratives (written by racial, patriarchal, colonial ways of understanding) imposed onto Black flesh in the public eye.¹

In this essay I'm particularly interested in the "in-between spaces" that Ojih Odutola alludes to in *Birmingham* (2014), a work of four

¹ Kimberly Juanita Brown, Cheryl Dunye, and Dell M. Hamilton, "Toyin Ojih Odutola's Art Practice as a Technology of the Skin," *Catalyst Journal* 2, no. 2 (2016), n.p.

portraits of her brother from four different perspectives.² This series was on view at The Frye Art Museum's *Recent Acquisitions Series* in Seattle 2019. The portraits in *Birmingham* are lithographs, a printmaking medium known for its precision. My eyes can follow each of the individual fine, detailed lines that are stroked in clusters. The clustered lines create textures as they move in different directions, not just on the flesh, but also the hair, accessories, clothing, and shadows. The vertical lines of the white tank shirt contrast the woven patterns of the skin. The pattern of the cluster black lines on the skin go under and over each other. The skin pattern flows into the soft swirls of his hair. The different textures of the body are visually brought to the forefront with the contrast of the shadows behind him. His shadows are blotchy lines, but are still distinct in their swoop-like movements.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the woven skin texture, seeing the lines move above and below his epidermis, seeing the light shine in different directions indicating the top of the curve before they flow back underneath the skin. In her statements, Ojih Odutola indicates that the marks map onto the skin a terrain that is being discovered as the artist creates them.³ As if, her brother tells her a story of who he is, and Ojih Odutola listens to that story while making the marks, the script, accordingly. The story of her brother appears woven-like which helps me understand a tension at play between stories.

² "Toyin Ojih Odutola," Tamarind Institute, <https://tamarind.unm.edu/artist/toyin-ojih-odutola/>.

³ Kristen Farr, "Toyin Ojih Odutola: Infinite Possibility," *Juxtapoz* (Sept 29, 2017), <https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/magazine/features/behind-the-cover-toyin-ojih-odutola/>.

Woven lines have dips and arches. The arches, indicated by the lines of white light, are the highly visible stories. The dips, indicated by the flow of the lines going underneath the skin or flowing underneath the climax of another cluster, allude to the “in-between space” where another narrative of her brother can be discovered.

The woven pattern makes it seem like these narratives are opposing (or interacting) with each other. These movements do reveal a complex persona. Of this series, Ojih Odutola explains:

What I am creating is literally black portraiture with ball point pen ink. I’m looking for that in-between state in an individual where the overarching definition is lost. Skin as a geography is the terrain I expand by emphasizing the specificity of blackness. From there the possibilities of portraying a fully-fledged person are endless.⁴

Within the act of (re)creating a narrative, which is to say the act of portraiture, Ojih Odutola moves beyond overarching definitions, defying that legibility by exploring the gaps that create a whole new narrative. She looks into the “in-between spaces” for a narrative that is hidden within the depths of model or person and by creating a new map on the skin to be explored, by traveling the terrains, we can see expanded possibilities of a fuller, more complex person.

My main inquiry that I take away from Ojih Odutola’s technique in *Birmingham* is asking to myself to (re)consider how I’m

⁴ Ibid

understanding people from afar and to understand that, with a closer look, the story about who I think they are would appear more complex. I would also have to reckon with knowing that there are some details about a person's story that are off limits but still contribute to their complexity. I think about this in how Ojih Odutola has to reckon with this tension even with familial ties. She says, "skin is a bit of a puzzle I'm trying to solve."⁵ In this re-remembering of her brother there is undoubtedly speculative fiction incorporated in the rewriting of her story of her brother. Understanding that there's more to a person than we know of them, despite how close we may feel to that person, gives way to speculative possibilities of all who they could be. She doesn't tell us an answer of who he is in recreating the image of her brother. However, she creates a fiction. Ojih Odutola writes,

Incorporating the fictive is what allowed me to expand not only the definition of blackness, but to expand what blackness can contain, what blackness can reveal, and where it can go. It's no longer flattened nor monolithic. It's not stuck in some loop that is only binary to whiteness. No one wants to have the cyclical conversation anymore.⁶

The statement to back up Ojih Odutola's work is especially important for Seattle, which seems to crave Black art that culls the guilt of the white-liberal-imaginary by only allowing space for Black artists to re-

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Interview with Payton Turner, *Girls at Library* (Feb 8 2018), <https://www.girlsatlibrary.com/interviews/toyin-ojih-odutola>

create common narratives of blackness and black pain. It's also important because it interrupts the field of portraiture. By reimagining the image of a person in obscure ways, we are opening up possibilities of them to become known.

AURORA SAN MIGUEL

MAKING PRESENCE: ZANELE MUHOLI AT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

HAIL THE DARK LIONESSE is a series of photographs that appears, on the surface, as a collection of uniform self portraiture, but beyond that first glance lies something that works in and at the periphery of signification.

The 1900 Paris Exposition was the site where W.E.B. Du Bois presented "The American Negro Exhibit." The show posited data visualizations challenging the historically racist image machine by pairing a collection of hundreds of photographs portraying African-American life with hand drawn graphs and charts mapping out information on the descendants of former enslaved people in the United States. Selections from the renowned exhibition will live at the Portland Art Museum until February 2020.

Traveling north of the Columbia river, another exhibition has recently taken place at the Seattle Art Museum, one that in many ways echoes the design and sentiment of Du Bois' memorialized showcase. In the solo show, *Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness*, Johannesburg-based visual activist Zanele Muholi presents a series spanning three years and several continents that acts as a "response to a number of ongoing racisms and politics of exclusion." Muholi's work is often put into conversation with Du Bois' as a subversion of viewing habits by deploying the format of the exhibition as a site where repetition and accumulation generate affirmative practices. In her laborious use of self-portraiture, Muholi invites an abundant mode of representation that makes a case for the presence of black life, documenting what is well known, but which demands re-encountering.

The sheer volume of works in the exhibition is but an entry point for bearing witness to a specific and ubiquitous black experience, which poses further inquiry about the exhibition's context. How does locality shift or enhance the meaning of work? What does "making presence" with blackness mean in the setting of the Pacific Northwest Region?

In approaching the SAM's exhibit from the south end of the 2nd floor, you are immediately confronted with Muholi's presence. From either side of the hallway leading into the Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Gallery, large-scale, high-contrast, black and white photographs of the artist in different wardrobe configurations cover from floor to ceiling. Portraits vary on matte and semi-gloss

papers, framed and unframed, medium prints to 10-foot-tall wall transfers. At first glance these intimately stylized photographs might seem casually constructed but in the slow walkthrough you begin to notice the peculiarities of each embellishment. Clothes pins, sponges, cash, wool, latex gloves—all used to create elegant compositions of hair and costume—uniquely situate every image. Furthermore, each photograph is given a geographic citation. From South Africa, to North Carolina, to Japan, Muholi is quite literally everywhere and the series acts as a record of being in these spaces.

Of the overwhelming number of images, the portrait *Bukhosi II Parktown, 2016*, taken in Parktown, South Africa was a particular focal point during my visit. Here, Muholi wears a crown of feathers, a shawl of dream catchers, and white eyeliner. Light captured on swipes of makeup, feathers, and beads achieve short moments of high tonal contrast registering some of the most minimal shadow information of any image in the exhibition. Another standout element is Muholi's position. *Bukhosi II, Parktown* is one of the few photographs where Muholi's eyes are closed, head tilted towards the sky, body square with camera, reading as blissful or reserved as opposed to the confronting gaze consistent throughout the series.

At the center of the gallery lies an ordinary short table holding printed interviews and writings on Muholi's practice. In their words, Muholi reiterates that the work focuses on political investments of race, gender and sexuality, especially amongst LGBTQTI peoples of South Africa. It is revealed that many of the images in *Somnyama*

Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness were taken at times of personal turmoil, in the aftermath of a “conflict with various forces and place.” Muholi makes clear the persistence and ubiquity of violence against black queer women in all cultures spanning across each continent while maintaining the specificity of their own experience. What is seen in the exhibition is a culmination of those processes and, like Du Bois in 1900, the form of presentation further substantiates that reality for a consuming public.

I could not help but speculate how the experience of the show read to the family on vacation, the group of middle schoolers on a field trip, the white man with hip-length blonde dreadlocks in the gallery during my visit. City museums, as a generalization, are sources of predominant tourist attractions. Traveling shows, even smaller ones, are often a big draw for crowds and capital. What strikes me about Muholi’s series and curation by Renée Mussai is the ability to transverse locale, accommodate the corridors of the institution, and still work strategically to occupy that space with their presence.

Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness becomes an aesthetic of density, compacting as much information into each image as possible then multiplying that thickness through repetition, history, personal affect, and cultural signifiers, all while situating black experiences at the foreground of the work.

SADIQUA IMAN

BARNETTE EXPLORES THE SPARKLE OF THE MUNDANE AND THE BEAUTY IN THE PAIN

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story.”

Maya Angelou

This is the wall text to introduce you to the work of the artists of *In Plain Site* at the Henry Art Gallery (November 23, 2019- June 28, 2020). Lead curator Shamim M. Momim decided to have you enter the show with a bang by featuring the sparkly home mecca created by Sadie Barnette. Oakland-born Barnette has permanent collections at the Guggenheim Museum and the Brooklyn Art Museum. She has used her work to reflect traditional African American life through the lens of spectacular hope. Her work is a unique mix of interior

design, collage, and found items saturated with metal flake and hues of pink, gold, and silver. Barnette describes her work as “abstraction in service of everyday magic and survival in America.” This everyday America that she speaks of is unapologetically black and undeniably fabulous.

When you enter the installation/room, delightfully named “Room to Live In,” you are transported to an explosion of glitter walls, furniture, and household items situated like a 1950’s living room. To the right of the entrance the wall is adorned with a wallpaper that has a pattern of ancient hand carved African combs or what we would consider today “afro picks.” The combs face different directions that create familiar geometric patterns on the wall. Each comb is decorated with a pink ribbon around the handle and shadowed in a way that feels like they are floating off the wall almost as if you could grab one and use it right then and there. Centered on the wallpapered wall is a large black and white photo of a black woman lounging on a couch similar to the one it hangs above. The exhibited couch, however, is covered in a futuristic silver iridescent fabric that picks up the life of the bright pink dominating throughout the space. You then find this futuristic pop of joy in all of the pieces strategically placed throughout the space like crushed glittery soda cans discarded or an old television memorialized in sparkles.

On the other side of the room, enlarged, heavily redacted F.B.I. reports are centered on a bright pink, metal-flecked wall. The reports concern Barnette’s father, Rodney Barnette, who founded the Oakland chapter of the Black Panthers in 1968. In each report,

collectively titled "Untitled (Agitator Index)," redacted information has been spray-painted with neon pinks and purples in ways that reflect the innocence of the names the paint is covering. Here one must acknowledge the personal as political, while facing a jarring discomfort in the space, Barnett's space, during opening night: white patrons standing in amusement and merriment at the whimsy of the right side of the room looked to the other side perplexed and quickly removed themselves as they began to comprehend what was being displayed.

The bright colors and sparkly surfaces of both pieces of Barnett's installation can be appreciated on different levels depending on your relationship with the subject matter. Some people will see the space as a kaleidoscope of colors and textures that show American life from a child's point of view while others may see their own childhood reimagined through the hopeful eyes of Barnette. Is it afro-futurism? Is it pop art? Categorizing Barnette's work as either of these would be a misunderstanding of her admiration of the beauty of the resiliency of blackness in America.

BRIAN EVANS

SHARON NYREE WILLIAMS' *DARE TO CLAIM THE SKY*: A CONVERSATION

Pop-Pop-Popcorn — it's dark, and lights are about to go up in the ACT Theatre in downtown Seattle, WA. *Dare to Claim the Sky*, directed by Christine Sumption with music direction by Joe Kye, is about to jump off as Sharon Nyree Williams keeps us in the dark, literally and figuratively, for the first five minutes as we listen to "Freedom", a track off of Williams' third album *SHOOK*.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn — *Dare to Claim the Sky* is a quintessential work featured as part of ACT LAB Solo Fest 2020. Williams' creation is performed, sung, cried, shouted, laughed, acted, and spoken as she addresses childhood memories, a religious upbringing, gun violence, love, heartbreak, depression, Black joy, and myriad of trials and tribulations that have brought this moment into being.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn — In its third iteration *Dare to Claim the Sky* was scheduled to be performed at the LA Women's Theatre Festival in North Hollywood, CA, on Saturday, March 28, 2020. Williams took some time to sit down and have a conversation with me in February 2020 to discuss her work. Williams addresses what it means to use her art as a means of improving herself and bringing her truth to a world that would dare to compromise her artistic visions and endeavors.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn — we meet at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Institute in the second-floor commons room linking several organizations, one of which is Central District Forum for Arts & Ideas, where she serves as the Executive Director. She tells me midway through our conversation that "[j]ust telling the truth of the story is what makes it powerful!" and *Dare to Claim the Sky* tells moments upon moments of truth and revelation.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn — it all started in church. Williams speaks to the social skills that she inadvertently learns through the church. A church that now takes issue with the explicit language on her albums and the language we now witness on the stage in this current work of multi-disciplined brilliance. Williams seamlessly weaves spoken and sung lyrics off her albums, text from her spoken word pieces, clearly crafted theatrical monologues, and movement into a thick and meaty serving of authentic humanity.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn – within a 15x15 ft black box and a handful of feet separating the audience from performer, Williams brings us into her home, her living room. We are part of the family. We get to hear the secrets that no one knows, and no one knows to ask about it. Oh, and if we did ask about it, well, we would all get the look! "You know the look I'm talking about?" Williams gives a mischievous smile and then hits us with a look that would wither the devil on his best day.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn – WHY ARE THEY SHOOTING? I don't know. I wish I had the answer because then I wouldn't have to see this beauty of being cry on the floor and realize she does it night after night. *Pause, breath-in, exhale*, is the process for getting through most harrowing experiences. Sometimes there isn't a pause; sometimes, there isn't any more room to inhale; sometimes, I wish we had access to a blowhole so our mouths didn't need to participate in our existence. We are here in the living room with freshly made popcorn drizzled with warm salty nostalgia. Nothing but a great story and the rest of the night. Nothing but each other. Nothing but a vague memory of the days we didn't know any better and yet still knew better than most. Nothing but the "be kind, rewind" sticker bestowed upon our foreheads, and yet we still need another lifetime to understand what just happened in the last hour? Why *are* they shooting, and why do these bullets shatter into art and ricochet viscera? It's one of the secrets that Williams holds just behind her heart, hidden in the librettos of a lost Maya Angelou poem. The heart songs that only one or two of us know and that has made all the difference as oral traditions made manifest on this

stage of stages, life, and we be, but the players in Nintendo dreams and yet the shots were still fired.

Pop-Pop-Popcorn – we conclude our time together with a hug, a few laughs, and my final question of what she hopes her work *Dare to Claim the Sky* will do for audiences. She takes a moment to respond and says thoughtfully, “[w]e can overcome any of this pain, but we have to do it together!” Sharon Nyree Williams dares to claim her piece of the sky and invites us to shine bright like the stars she knows us to be. I am a little brighter having been warmed by Williams phosphorous glow.

MATTHEW HOWARD

HIAWATHA D.'S ICONIC BLACK WOMAN: AIN'T I A WOMAN

I don't know what to make of Hiawatha D.'s Iconic Black Women: Ain't I a Woman exhibit at the Northwest African American Museum (October 2019 - March 2020). The title suggests that the pieces display black women as icons. Hiawatha D. connects the metonymy of what the black women stood and stand for; his incorporation of quotes from these women further cements their legacies. Some of the most memorable names in black personhood are on display, from Maya Angelou to Michelle Obama to Serena Williams. The late Toni Morrison. The artist uses such a powerful adjective to (hopefully) steer his audience toward reverence of these black women. But what is an icon? What makes someone iconic? And is this a good thing to be an icon—especially for a community that is often painted (no pun intended) as representative of their lowest

common denominators: their bodies, their attitudes, their strength, their skin even? If these women are iconic, what are they iconic of?

The space beckons us to stroll through a cache of black history's women both on the center stage and on the outskirts. The vertices and corners of the room have triangles painted into them, brown, orange, teal, and burnt orange. Obelisk tips that monumentalize the subjects that sit between them. Glass display cases with glazed and painted plates interrupt the walkable flow of the room. The title and description, set on a wall tilted to the left, presents Sojourner Truth as the first icon. Lips, nose, glasses, but no eyes to gaze back at us. Get used to such an interpretation of icons.

To your immediate right are three painted plates in glass display cases. The figures on the first plate are four women clad in dashikis, shorts, and pants who dance and play drums. The next plate depicts three black women waiting for a bus near shops. In the foreground is one figure with a bright red shopping bag or purse. The last plate has a black woman looking backward at the viewer.

Like a church foyer, there's a quiet dignity as you proceed through the exhibit. I say that tongue-in-cheek because a pew is set in front of the first portrait, *10:22 AM*, for viewers to sit in while they take in the full gravity of the Four Little Girls who were killed in 1960s Birmingham, Alabama. *10:22 AM* sets the tone for how to read Hiawatha D.'s convoluted heuristic of iconic-ness. This whole corner is painted burnt orange, offsetting the aquamarines and blues of the portrait's backgrounds. The undertones of four little girls' skin are

yellowish orange. As a result, the girls seem to materialize from the wall behind the canvas with clothes on. Like so many other portraits, these girls do not have facial features. Just hair and a blank face that somehow stares back at the viewer. Erasing their faces creates an eerie effect if you do not know who they are—I myself was not privy to this particular story of Civil Rights Violence. A cursory read of the exhibit's description reveals that KKK members planted bombs under the stairs of a church and when it exploded, these four girls were killed. This portrait is (assumedly) in their memory but they are not remembered for how they looked before their grisly murders. Rather, they are memorialized as icons in the quest for black people's civil rights. The validity of this gesture seems questionable because no viewer would match a name with a face but rather see another tragedy where nameless and faceless black women and girls are victimized in the pursuit of justice.

To the left of *10:22 AM* are portraits of anonymous black folk. *Loretta's Love*, *Cindy and Caleb*, *Jewel's Justice*, *Kelle's Truth*, *Black Family*, and *Adam and Eve* are all portraits of black women (as well as children and one man in the last one) sans faces. Only *Adam and Eve* shakes this motif. To the left of these paintings (offset by a triangular vertex in the corner) are portraits of Simone Biles, and Michelle, Sasha, and Malia Obama. On the opposite wall from the anonymous icons are portraits of Beyoncé, Serena Williams, Lupita N'yongo, Tarana Burke, and Oprah Winfrey. Only Tarana Burke has eyes, a nose, a mouth—a face. Is it because Tarana is presumably lesser known that we need some hint at her icon status? What does that say of her inclusion in this curated selection of important black

women? The others pose in ways that are no doubt iconic: Michelle balances on her left back foot, a stance I've seen her strike so many times, while Serena lunges toward a ball, and Beyoncé has what looks like her hairstyle from the "Countdown" music video. The homage to Oprah was painted 2019 yet she is much younger than she is now and sans face. She's thinner and curvy, dressed in what looks like church garb. A pink skirt suit that shows her hourglass figure and topped with a bonnet with a feather nearly as large as her head. Easter/Sunday's best. This anachronism strikes me as pointed.

I don't criticize Hiawatha D.'s expertise with the medium. The portraits in and of themselves are gorgeous and thoughtful works. The brush strokes so evidently give life to black skin. I've seen few acrylic paint portraits of black skin that don't somehow caricature the intricacies of melanin and dermis stretched, folded, or sat on the bodies they cover. There's care here. Hiawatha D. attention to lighting and how it hits and reflects off of black skin is refreshing. Even if he does use similar shades of brown to depict women on vastly different sides of the melanin spectrum, there's a spectrum of brown that corresponds to how light actually hits their skin. A burnt caramel where light is the most evident for Beyoncé. A punchier hue where an eye should be, as if a hint at eyes, make Sojourner really pop. A smoky grayish chocolate where darkness hides for Cecily Tyson. At times it seems as if Hiawatha D. knows and acknowledges hyperpigmentation so common in black skin and yet forgotten. I love it. Even texture is played with in the people's hair. The dimension and sheen added with reds, blues, yellows, and green paints make dreadlocks come alive.

However, the show's title paints an altogether less-than-iconic picture. These portraits act like placeholders for the women's metonymic greatness, their lowest common denominators being the imagery and words they have come to both embody. I like what the show gestures to but think there is something missing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an icon as "an image, figure, or representation." If these are icons, true icons, I think the artist risks making these powerful black women becoming mundane and boring. For example, the lack of variation in each figure's skin color—a fact that haunts black people's existence day to day, lest they be mistaken for some other black person with different skin tone and traits—repeats the cycle under which black women have become subalterns and diminishes their significance. If Hiawatha D. wanted to create icons, he did just that, in that these portraits are not actually representative portraits, for example, but short-hand icons meant to gesture to but never fully inhabit the real thing. I don't know if this is the wisest choice because the specificity of each women's iconicity could be lost if his audience is not familiar with the women in question, reducing them instead to mere conceptual stand-ins for movements, ideas, and/or success. In the process, the artist risks further creating caricatures of black women, a move that has become a mainstay in American and global discourse about black women's social value. It even could undercut the iconic nature of the successes these women have come to embody. What I see in this exhibit is a kind of social death.

But ain't they women too? Hiawatha D. doesn't place a question mark after this inquiry that serves as the show's title, riffing off of

Sojourner Truth's original, iconic inquiry that was meant to highlight her specificity within a universalized definition of woman that was categorically white. I think that's a pointed move because making black women stand in as representations of the things they are presumed or assumed to do/be rather than who they are as full human beings—a battle black women have waged for centuries—could just repeat the same cycle of discursive violence to which the people in the U.S. are accustomed. As a black man, I know that my positionality is not the center in such a conversation, but this show offers two potentially contradictory interpretations for black women and ultimately opens the door for more erasure than reverence.

SAVITA KRISHNAMOORTHY

(IN)VISIBLE PRESENCE REMEMBRANCE | RESISTANCE

i

*the endemic and systemic policing policing / surveillance surveillance
fist bumping, high fiving*

*policing / surveillance
of bodies*

black bodies, brown bodies, marginalized bodies

of minds

of thoughts

of words

of the imagination

*of how the world views the othered body indeed...of how the
other(ed) is "allowed" to see and...*

be seen.

ii

Flashing and morphing in timed intervals into jewel colors of a Mardi Gras bead green, a Bombay Sapphire blue, and a tempting claret red, the words **Education should be free!** throb in a rhythmic, psychedelic dance. This is an installation by Andrea

Bowers and it follows me as I gingerly descend into the bowels of the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, the site of *In Plain Sight* (November 23, 2019 – April 26, 2020). It is a potent reminder that education is a civil rights issue, with its nuances of access, racial equity, and privilege. As I make my way down, the smells of tacos, grilled cheese, and the acrid, toasted smell of coffee being churned urgently from the whirring coffee machine in the Henry's café assault my senses. I enter the last installation of the exhibit and I am once again confronted with pink, an entire wall of it, but this time it is a different pink from the bubblegum/candy floss pink of Sadie Barnette's *Room to Live*, also a part of the exhibition. Here, Jamaican artist Ebony Patterson creates this white and pink polka dotted textured wall as the backdrop for 2016's mixed media project *...he was only 12... (...when they grow up...)* where a myriad bling of colors, sounds, and smells doused in Carnavalesque zeitgeist jostle with each other for space, a makeshift altar paying homage to the abrupt ending of lives, of black lives, of colored lives, to violence; altars as sites of traditions, of faith and of sanctity.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines **Altar** as:
noun, often attributive

al·tar | \ 'ol-tər \

a usually raised structure or place on which sacrifices are offered or incense is burned in worship — often used figuratively to describe a thing given great or undue precedence or value especially at the cost of something else.

How does an object serving a very specific utilitarian function then operate as a vehicle for artistic expression? How does it morph into an entry point to go beyond the normative gaze and initiate discourse on representation and resistance, on positionality and protest, on inclusion and visibility?

Patterson challenges us to (re)think/decode an altar in a more fluid sense, beyond a cemetery, and inside a corner of a gallery, a very public space but one that can be transformed into a place of meditation and grace. A recognition of a certain sense of homage and respect for those that no longer walk beside us on this earthly plane, but perhaps guide us from a metaphysical one.

The project is the artist's visual document through these altars, these containers, gathering chronicles of trauma and tribute; the lens to comprehend, or valiantly attempt to comprehend, the often incomprehensible politics of racialized violence and dehumanizing ideologies. Patterson aims "to elevate those who have been deemed invisible/unvisible as a result inherited colonial social structures, by incorporating their words, thoughts, dress, and pageantry as a tactic to memorialize them. It is a way to say: I am here, and you cannot deny me."¹

The unnerving and unsettling, almost totemic, installation of children's funeral caskets decorated ostentatiously with beads,

¹ August 15, 2018 conversation between Ebony Patterson and T. Cole Rachel for The Creative Independent.

tassels, lace, mirrors, metallic chains, and glass hearts echo the butterflies and balloons Patterson installed on a nearby wall, juxtaposing metaphorically the ephemerality of our existence. It is hard to escape the dichotomy of churning, paradoxical emotions that bubble to the surface at the site of the installation; the finality of what resides within the container, and the cycle of life happening on the surface of its embellished exterior.

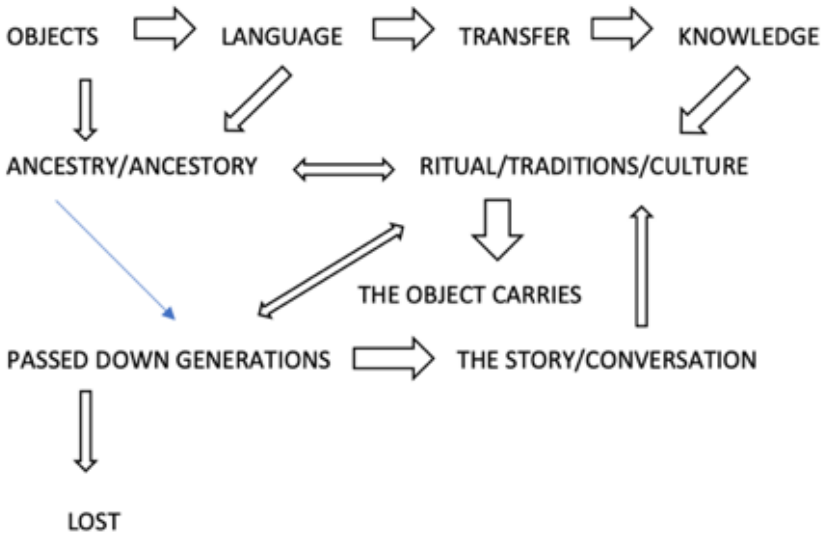
The works are poignant despite the playful tone set by the colors and the bling—or does the hyper-colorization in fact accentuate the trauma??—an embodied narrative on the loss of unrealized potential, compelling us to ponder over and over again...

What could have been???

KHAIRAT SALUM

WEBS

"Welcome to Christopher Shaw's *Algorithm: Archetypes*, an exhibition that explores the relationship between created objects and the messages they convey" (Northwest African American Museum, 2019).



In the solo show *Algorithm: Archetype* (Northwest African American Museum), Christopher Shaw's works create this spiritual awareness and connection of the lost, the new and the future knowledge, understandings carried within the objects, and each individual reading. Speaking in a language individualized by oneself, Shaw's works intersects notions of history and culture exploring concepts of

erasure and birth of “intentionally or unintentionally relationship with objects,” as the exhibition wall text explains. Asking us to think deeply about the object’s relationship with space and time as well as the significance objects carries.

This is most clear in two related pieces. “Heaven (Hallowed Ground) No. 1,” an 8”x 8”x 12” black rectangular-shaped block of “stabilized soil,” or I would formally describe as black charcoal, sitting on loose black fabric, all encased in a clear stainless box. Sparkling with “gold leaf” covering one side. Exhibited opposite of this is “Heaven (Ginen), another stabilized soil object, but this one covered with a thick slab of white paint running along its top and broad sides.

Shaw diverges the two similarly shaped objects in their technical appearance, where with one you get this heavenly sense with the sparkled gold and, in contrast, the black and white of “Heaven (Ginen)” gives a more organic, everyday reference of a street—visual cues that highlight the contrast between the aesthetic presentation of the objects and Shaw’s playing around with the words and associations of their titles.

In his introduction of *Algorithm Archetype*, Shaw wrote that “I see the objects we design and create as the beginning of our story. This body of work grew out of ideas and questions surrounding the way culture is coded into the objects we encounter in everyday life” (2019). Through differences in texture, layout, shape, cut, appearance, and technique, each object that Shaw created unveils its own set of codes and cultural understandings. Hanging on the

gallery's black painted wall, "Untitled Vessels" are three long 12" x 4" x 4" sand colored "stoneware" cylinders with long curly green "flora" veins coming out. "Untitled Vessels" is one of those objects where my friend and I came to understand it based on our cultural history and background as African American women who grew up seeing our grandmas using a similar-looking vessel as a ceremonial wedding piece, and as an instrument to clean and dance with, as they sang and told stories passed down generations.

In conclusion, Christopher Shaw's exhibit *Algorithm: Archetype* is a conversation between the objects and the viewer. Playing on presentation and titles, Shaw shows how our everyday interaction with objects holds and births significant understanding that shapes how we come to understand our lives. By exploring the relationship between objects and the messages they convey, "[w]e are surrounded by rhythms of shape and motif that hold and guide the context we understand for our lives" (Shaw, 2019).

SARAH GRACE FAULK

FLESH AND BLOOD AND PERFORMANCE

On October 17, 2019, I attended the Community Opening for *Flesh & Blood: Italian Masterpieces from the Capodimonte Museum*, the new show at the Seattle Art Museum on view through January 27th, 2020. What struck me most about this event was the performance by Mikhail Calliste and Michele Dooley from Spectrum Theatre, framed by SAM as the dancers embodying the exhibition “by creating living representations of works on view and performing solos in response to the exhibition.”

The performance started casually, without fanfare. The performers—both black, a man and a woman—quietly glided in, looking at the art on the walls together. Their status as performers was signaled immediately by their lack of shoes and by their identical outfits. They moved together, facing the walls, into poses that were reminiscent of ballet. The crowd was indifferent to their presence at first, only a few noticing and whispering to each other “ah, this is a performance.” The performers continued to move through the crowd, to different paintings, sometimes stopping and moving and posing. They were creating Renaissance-esque poses, mirroring the hands of the figures in the paintings and the rules of composition.

In the next room, staff cleared the crowd to create a large circular expanse, with one of the bigger paintings in the exhibition at the top

of the circle. The performers moved into the circle, and music started on a small amp, dollied around by a staff member. The movement was still slow, then suddenly Dooley moved away, and there was only Calliste. The slowness was broken. Now Calliste danced across the circle to the choral music playing on the tiny amp. Moving swiftly and fully across the expanse, commanding the full attention of the room.

The space that was cleared and the structure of the room created something of an area. In the middle, a circle and a dance, in the edges, spectators, on the walls and lurching above, *Flesh & Blood*. This specifically took place in the room with the famous Artemisia Gentileschi painting, *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (1612-1613). The layers of movement between the dancer, the paintings, the audience, reanimated the exhibition. Calliste frequently moved at the edges of the circle, inches from the audience, making them visibly nervous. At one point, six people flinched in unison as the dancer struck his chest with his fist, a Catholic motion of repentance (self-flagellation). The paintings swirled too, not just a backdrop but part of the conversation created by the dancer.

Calliste swished his feet across the circle as he moved back and forth. The choral music became strange and distorted. He twisted his body up and around. A kneeling in motion at one point. No longer looking to the paintings or mirroring their poses, but responding very directly to the Catholic holy religious air in the room, the direct content of the work on the wall. An energy transference between dancer and painting. The audience was

caught in between, and it seemed everyone could feel the electricity buzzing through their bodies.

The performance was subtle, and then it wasn't—the space, setting, and tone of the exhibition were all reflected and expanded by performance. Two black dancers in white tunics, without shoes, slowly reflected Renaissance composition back to the paintings. Then, one dancer alone, dancing quickly to choral music, at the center of the exhibition. This performance based response changed the experience of the exhibition; it made the powerful and violent energy of the paintings extend viscerally toward the audience as a unified whole. This event demonstrated the ability of performance to expand or release the energy in an exhibition. It unfolded as a reflection, a shift in attention, and an expansion of energy trapped in the paintings, let out by the motion of dancers.

KYM LITTLEFIELD

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE FIT IN AMERICA

Media is interesting to me for the same two reasons every time; and whether I like it or not makes no difference to the interest I'm describing. Across the board, music, film, visual art, dance, fashion are not the objects, routines, pieces in a vacuum but rather things tied to a people and a moment. The forces of attraction and repulsion are where my interests pique in my experience of art. For this reason, I return to the feelings that began stirring me at Autumn Knight's *M_ _ _ ER*. For us in attendance that night, "m" was for mother. Knight's intimate performance at On the Boards (October 2019) drew in an audience you might expect for an art event in Seattle proper. Many people who live in the houses they own nearby came and entered the black box theater unaware that the performance had begun already—the performer playing spades in the lobby with a few BES residents is the solo performer who will treat them like children later. Knight, who I will refer to from this point on as mother, began the show in darkness where she lay on her back making sounds with the microphone and a cardboard paper towel tube. If you grew up with cousins who got ignored after they got whoopings and kept crying until the cry transformed them, then you could recognize the exasperated low-end of the guttural sounds mother was producing in the dark. Otherwise, the sound object might not have carried meaning. Or rather, there is no meaning that I could identify or articulate other than getting a

whooping you deserved and getting what comes after an exhausting cry.

You were not told to say sorry if you were in the audience, one of mother's children, when she asked why you forgot her birthday, but to provide a reason. She'd call you by name, a name that was yours and it rang true. There is an art to how mother names things. The name itself emerges as a true sound that labels the energy that person is wrapped in, exuding. That is why the name isn't lost when mother returns to another of her children on the other side of the room, having asked yet another one to provide their reason for forgetting. There's always a reason a mother's harping and I never want to forget that instinct for favor of my own. So I have to wonder now, as a duty, why was mother harping about her forgotten birthday? There were dozens of us there and how did we all forget? What of all these golden letter balloons we're holding by the strings and what of all this fanfare?

Why was the focus on the origin of our origin so important to our mother and why did it hurt some of us to be honest? I was one of mother's children and it hurt to be asked why I have forgotten. Before that night, my mother died a decade earlier and to have the opportunity to be in the presence of her spirit and my negligence of it was to be honest with my pain. I had my notebook and feverishly jotted notes to which I am not referring right now. My notes became a ledger of sort and mother asked me to read some of the things I had written. I remember detailing one of our siblings' disobedience, the difficulty he took to look at mom, the difficulty he couldn't

overcome to be still and listen and the difficulty he had accepting that he had forgotten about mother's birthday. He had no reason to forget that he could report in earnest, got short tempered, turned red. Mother laid one of us down and asked us what we were talking to the therapist about and our sister told her. Mother gave me frozen yogurt that I didn't like but ate and needed. Mother listened to another one of our siblings' reasons for forgetting her birthday and lamented that her child was faced with a type of traumatic, isolating aggression. One of our brothers protested when mother assigned some of us with the chores of rolling down a bunch of butcher paper. She told him to continue but he just kept pulling it slowly at his own pace. Mother wanted the paper to make sound, I think. I think our brother thought he knew what was best for the environment, but he doesn't know what mother had planned.

The art of motherhood, I am reminded, is a polarizing one like any other. The original medium of life, the mother brought someone into the world, named them and they emerged from out of the mother into a name that came from the same place. She is not forgotten because she is life itself and forgetting the origin of life is tantamount to death. But the western world treats art differently than do other cultures and lifestyles. They kidnap it and place it in museums. We sample it and remember it in a song fifty years later. From nothing I was entertained because of my mother. Her mind was worlds-rich; we didn't have many shoes but we always kept boxes to make dioramas out of stories we read over the summer. My mom would want to see what we were reading. I could imagine the threat an artist of this sort might present in the western world. In fact,

I don't have to imagine. In the power and presence of Mother, I could weep where my brothers could not but lash out. I felt the home I cannot return to and returned to. Some of my siblings felt like they could charm their way out of the question "why?" They didn't know that was the whole art. The appearance of readiness is not a prerequisite in the discipline of motherhood I was raised in. Preparation was already taken care of as my mother was ready to be unprepared; ready to teach on the go.

MESHELL STURGIS

A TITHE FOR EARTH PEARL'S SOVEREIGN: GOING TO CHURCH, COMING TO PAIN

In early January, Earth Pearl's Black Queer One Womyn Festival took place at 18th & Union: An Arts Space in Seattle. *Sovereign* featured performances and artwork from folks such as Aishe Keita, Aviona Rodriguez Brown, and Naa Akua. I found the festival to be in conversation with portrait artist Jeremy Bell who defines *Utopian Blackness*, concurrently on display at the Northwest African American Museum, as "sovereign." As Bell suggests that utopic discourses of Blackness are the source of power, the solo performers of *Sovereign* demonstrated the embodiment of that ultimate power. Each show was a gem gleaming amidst the humdrum of Seattle's dreary art scene in the dark and gray winter. Friday, January 11, 2019 marked a double feature from the collective including "Lessons from the Pulpit," a Burlesque performance by Ms. Briq House, and "Good Grief," an acapella performance by Patience Sings. Rae Akino's paintings lined the lobby along with libations and swag, leading up to the brick-walled theater, seating about fifty people. A tall mirror, candelabra, and couch set the stage for Ms. Briq House to begin her sermon.

Reading from the "Book of Briq," she begins with a proverb about hair as the stairway to heaven, recounting her various encounters with pastors who denounced women for not having long enough

hair, who deemed women disobedient for having bodies that were “too sexual.” In a somewhat flippant manner, Briq mimics the internalized mentality of those who believe that every good Christian wife listens dutifully to her God and husband. What starts out as a feminist biblical parody of traditional Black Christian values quickly unravels (along with Briq’s long braided hair) into a story of coming to know oneself in spite of past pains. Each month Briq runs the Sunday Night Shuga Shaq, an all-POC burlesque review at The Theater Off Jackson in Seattle, in addition to several other community events and gatherings. She’s prolific in the Seattle Black and queer sex-positive kink scene and was a parade announcer at the 2019 Seattle Pride. But this evening, even with the beginning humor, as Briq reads from her tome, she sets a more serious tone than the usual Shuga Shaq shenanigans.

After disrobing her choir gown in an alluring Burlesque performance, Briq steps out of the clothes that used to constrain her body. Facing the audience, she faces herself, proclaiming “every part of you is worth acknowledgement, praise, and worship.” In a flip on the traditional evangelical movement to collect ten percent of your earned income, Briq walks the room and touches each person in the space asking them to give to themselves in new ways. Many in the audience did indeed give money; if only I’d had mine ready when she came around I might have had my chance to “come to Jesus.” Flooded with cringe-worthy childhood memories of religion, witnessing Briq’s journey led me to the pain of my own.

Rae Akino's stunning artwork series "Reclaiming Ourselves" captivated the audience during a short intermission. Just enough time for me to wipe my sweaty palms. Bright yellows, golds, aquas, and violets fleshed out the mostly nude figures adorned in jewelry, set against dark black backgrounds. Cast in shadows, the figures look like they are emerging in their queerness, whatever it may be: Lesbian lovers in a warm embrace, dancers with long flowing limbs, an electric blue woman whose hands are spreading her ass cheeks to reveal the deep black abyss between her legs. I snap a photo of someone standing way too close to this last work, peering so deeply they look like one of J. Marion Sims' assistants. With my mind buzzing, I return to my seat for the second half of the show, trying to notice in the low light any of the other artists who performed nights prior, or those yet to come.

The sermon continues with Patience Sings perched on a stool, dressed in a fabulous high-neck black dress, a feather in one ear and a long gold pendant hanging from her neck. Part of the musical duo BOOMscat, Jennifer Patience Rowe's sultry and sweet voice reveals the good in grief. Following Briq's lesson on how to worship ourselves and heal from past pains, Patience demonstrates what that worship looks like, singing her sorrows from the heart, praising her own unique process, and calling people to awaken to their interior process. Her vocals carry the audience through a tear-wrenching story—white hipsters sobbing into their tissues, the rest of us tearing up too. Except for me, my wells already emptied by Briq. Patience's coming to grips with the loss of a loved one drips from her lips like molasses. Taking us through the death of her mother she croons

over and over, “I don’t know what it looks like, what it feels like, what it is. But I know when I get there, when I get it, it’s for me.”

These two performers tried getting me there. No doubt I was tired by the end. Guttled of the many conflicting emotions I experience in my body daily; they wore me out. I sleep better that way. But, I can’t say I got there. Wherever “there” is, it seemed to evade me that evening.

As a collective, Earth Pearl is making space in a gentrified Seattle to acknowledge queer Black womyn, to praise our creative labor and to worship our enduring spirits. *Sovereign’s* performers confirm the waxy truth of Bell’s utopic figures. To be divinely autonomous is to practice an introspection that takes even the most calcified and limited avenues of articulation as inroads to ourselves. For cinematographer and writer Arthur Jafa, this desire for sovereignty is precisely the conundrum of being Black. Jafa writes, “by destroying the binds that define we will cease to be, but this is the good death.”¹ In a world where Blackness reigns, Black womyn are the gems set in gold like the crown on the sweatshirts for sale in the lobby. Jafa’s provocation, like Bell’s, is utopic. To get there one must continually navigate the fleshy bridge between that realm and this one. That night, two femme performers sashayed across time and space with regal grace. Unlike Bell and Jafa who appear unpragmatic in their cool distance and pessimism, Briq House and Patience

¹ Arthur Jafa, “My Black Death,” in *On the Blackness of BLACKNUSS*, edited by Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts. Zine (Hudson, NY: Publication Studio Hudson, 2015), 19.

Sings demonstrated a practice and orientation for getting there; one that prioritizes the intersectionality of a queer Black womyn's experience.

For a short period that night, Earth Pearl opened the portal to a better place, but I was too afraid to follow after them. Flooded with memories and washed with fatigue I was worried I wouldn't survive the flight alone despite the performers' testimonies. Nevertheless, experiencing just a portion of *Sovereign* was worth more than the sliding scale ticket pricing. The two solo performances were worth more than the dope black hoodie I purchased during intermission. Briq House and Patience Sings, along with their talents, are worth more than a palmed ten percent of my monthly earnings.

Going to church that night was unexpected, but it helped me see the value in coming to pain (theirs, mine, ours)—a process of reckoning with the petrified past. Yet I'll admit I'm not convinced that we need to be coming to pain, rather, we should be coming for pleasure. Patience Sings, "nothing is linear, nothing but time." In that case Briq, I hope you'll accept this writing instead as my tithe.

JITE AGBRO

THE THING ABOUT HAIR

I'm standing in what was once the only black neighborhood in Seattle walking through a black-owned gallery viewing an art exhibition that features 3 black artists, each sharing their own point of view about decidedly black subject matters.

Wa Na Wari operates out of a converted house in the Central District, just blocks from where I grew up. Currently on display is a group show that centers around hair. Jamal Hasef, Elise Peterson, and Lavett Ballard are showing in the upstairs galleries. Showing in the main gallery downstairs is Lisa Jarrett, whose recent work "examines "hair care beauty regimes within black femme culture." Admittedly, I find myself troubled as I read the artist's statement. The words Black, femme, and culture seem to leap off the page and surround me. I have reservations around using these types of descriptive terms when discussing art. I find they threaten to highlight the differences between what I'm looking at and "mainstream" art. The terms provide a frame that can overshadow the substance of the work. It feels like I'm describing a subset of "mainstream art," whatever that is. Additionally, using such broad terms to depict so many varying points of view puts the artist and viewer at risk of running into gross misunderstandings.

That being stated I do realize the absurdity that lives in those reservations. The plain truth is that the work I'm looking at is unmistakably black. Not only because the artist is black, but because the experience the work is referencing is also black and femme. In fact, the experience I am having observing this work is, inherently, a black woman's experience.

I'm looking at a piece called *Migration Studies (No. 8)*. From a distance, it looks like sunflower hearts or large daisies. Up close the flowers reveal themselves to be shower caps. Immediately I have the memory of a tying shower cap to my head to avoid getting just one drop of water on my relaxed hair. Of going to the swimming pool and obsessively tying nylon stockings around my bright blue shower cap to seal off my edges.

Another piece called *Migration Studies (No. 13)* features long strands of hair that look as though they're sprouting out of yellow earth. Each strand happy to be growing naturally without disruption. I think, *Why did it take me so long to grow dreadlocks anyway?* And why do I feel a little bit of shame even expressing this quiet thought to myself?

I grew up in Seattle in the 80s. My mother was from Chicago and my father from Nigeria's Delta State. My childhood memories reference everything from the West African experiences to the American immigrant's experiences to the unique experience of growing up black in a city that was 92% not black.

For me, the core experience of being black has to do with making peace with struggle. Understanding you are navigating the impossible and processing the absurd all the time. Many people manage to be exceptional under this kind of pressure. Zadie Smith in her essay collection *Feel Free* (2018) described this exceptionalism as “Camp: doing more than what’s necessary with less than what’s needed” (182). Like, for example, the ladies in my neighborhood would spend all weekend in the salon to achieve elaborate hairstyles for the sole purpose of walking down the street and knowing you look good. The basic need to simply enjoy your own hair becomes an extraordinary journey and statement rather than a right to be taken for granted.

Now I remember why it took me a while to grow dreadlocks. It’s because I did not feel I had the privilege to do so. Changing my hair meant disengaging from an environment that I understood even if I felt alienated from it. The backlash from older community members and peers was a threat. Not to mention the possibility of my hair making everything harder—harder to find a job, harder to be taken seriously, harder to be seen as attractive and feminine.

I find myself staring at another piece, called *Migration Studies* (No. 14), which features 32 hairnets placed on a grid, and they almost appear to be moving randomly like single-celled organisms. Each hairnet is limited by the parameters that encompass them. I remember women in my neighborhood walking around with stretched hairnets over bright pink rollers. I remember men with Jerry curls wearing black hairnets that shaped their hair into a

cartoonish helmet. I remember the considerable cost and wasted effort involved in trying and conform to a foreign beauty standard. The reward was so inadequate. In return for giving up the right to show up as exactly who you are you are granted acceptance for now.

Looking at these pieces I'm forced to think about being black and my black experience. About how it often feels like being forever on trial. How it can feel like a never-ending parade of judgments that others can, at any point, use as excuses to deprive you of everything from decent housing to common civility. Absurd things like what you choose to do to your hair can be used as evidence against you.

Migration Studies (No.2) has six hair nets that look as though they are jumping into or out of a long thin polyamide. Each organism on a journey perhaps to escape the structure or to join others inside the structure. I consider the struggles that connect me to others. There is pride in being part of the continuing fight. I consider the decisions that have separated me from others. Growing is painful but I'm not the only one who abandoned a meaningless effort to be accepted.

I am a black femme woman who shares a culture of hair care and beauty rituals with other black femmes. Perhaps the fear that these terms define me and not the other way around is unfounded. Perhaps the fear that others will fail to instinctively connect the dots between a black woman's struggle to show up exactly as who she is and the human struggle to do the same is not my problem.

ELISHEBA JOHNSON

ON EBONY G. PATTERSON

While the uber rich can't take their spoils with them when they die, the unnoticed can make a make an opulent statement about the value of their lives upon death. Capitalism requires that we ignore the most vulnerable in our society. And the myth of meritocracy says that their lives are of their own design. As I sit in the middle of 2020, looking back at the most impactful Black art I have seen in in the last year, I can stop seeing the totemic sculptures by Ebony G. Patterson that were on display during the Henry Art Gallery's *In Plain Sight* exhibition. I sit here while cities across the country fight not only for the rights and visibility of Black people, but also while these protests ask for a radical restructuring of systems that have created a vast rich/poor disparity in America. That disparity, not new to Jamaica either, is at the heart of Patterson's "Bling Funeral"-inspired caskets that are draped in Dancehall visual culture.

Donna P Hope, PhD, Professor of culture, gender and society at The University of the West Indies explains the class disparities in Jamaica that reveal themselves in Dancehall culture.

"Dancehall — which continues to emanate like steam from the crucible within which the most dispossessed mass of Jamaicans have existed since the turn of the socially harsh, politically explosive, and economically turbulent 1980s — reflects, reinforces, and celebrates the often necessary way

of life of many very ordinary and often very poor Jamaicans.

Here, at the base of Jamaica's rigid and very tightly bound class structure, many who have been left out of the "sharing-up of the pie" find a way to make meaning of, revalue and sometimes break out of their straitened situations."

This research took me to the history of Dancehall, an inherently Black expression that refuses to assimilate to the White colonial presence on the Island.

"In a racially divided society, where European culture was still held to higher regard, and African culture stigmatised, the dance hall acted as place of solidarity and solace for the marginalised in society. The dance hall was inner city, working class culture: a voice for the voiceless."¹

Patterson uses an object of death to show the incredible beauty of people's lives. Each casket is colorful, ornate and loud. She also purposely juxtaposes the political expression of Dancehall culture as a way of reminding us that "the voice of the voiceless" is undeniable. As I walked around the sculptures in the gallery, in no way did I feel sorrow or death. I actually could only feel immense joy. I can't help but think of the duality of feelings that caskets

¹ The Gryphon, "Dancehall: A History" (April 28, 2017), n.p.

remind us of. Those feelings are ones of mourning for those we have lost but also feelings of celebration for the lives we loved. This is what Patterson has accomplished so powerfully; a personal and political public mourning to those who are ignored but deserved to be revered. A public reckoning to the people that turn away to the stark injustice, and a revelatory act of taking up space for those that lived full and true lives.

JASMINE MAHMOUD

WAKING UP TO BLACK ART: WA NA WARI, MURALS, AND ART AT HOME

In mid-June, I receive a work of Black art at home. A square black envelope arrives in the mail with stamps depicting Jimi Hendrix and Nella Larsen. Despite its angular borders, the envelope resembles an EP, centered by a yellow circle with thin gold circles radiating outwards, reflecting where the needle amplifies sound. Inside is a square black booklet accented only with gold ink. The cover depicts a Zoom meeting between Sade, Stevie Wonder, Bill Withers, Prince, and Sir Mix-A-Lot in a 4x3 grid. Under this grid, text includes “Aligned with Wa Na Wari house’s mission and in honor of Juneteenth, WAK releases their new single ‘Lovely Day,’ alongside oldies from their archive.” Oregon-based artist Sharita Towne made and mailed this limited edition songbook, which accompanied the virtual karaoke event she co-hosted with Wa Na Wari. Towne is part of WAK (Weird Allan Kaprow), a “post-colonial karaoke collaborative” that rewrites popular song lyrics with radical reimagination.

Despite my RSVP that I would attend, I didn’t because of exhaustion. Nevertheless, I imagined (Black) people singing together exuberantly and virtually to re-lyricized Black music in their homes. As many of us are home with social distancing, I keep thinking about

home. Where is home for Black people and art in Seattle? It's not a singular question but singular forces like restrictive covenants and redlining in the 20th century, and city-sponsored commercial development in the 21st have geographically dispossessed Black Seattleites, often quite far away from their longtime homes. Writing this, I stare at a *Seattle Times* article about Central District gentrification where Black former residents—who were 70% of the neighborhood in 1970, and less than 14% today—often greet each other with “Where’d you go?”

Wa Na Wari is a home—co-founder Inye Wokoma’s grandmother’s home, in fact. With grey-painted horizontal siding, the two-story house sits on 24th Avenue near Marion and was transformed into an art space in April 2019 by Wokoma and another Black artist, Elisheba Johnson, and two white artists, Jill Friedberg and Rachel Kessler. The founders describe it as “The House that Fights Displacement with Art.”

In October 2019, I walk a mile east from Seattle University, where I work, to Wa Na Wari as part of a field trip with my students. Downstairs in the living room Chantal Gibson’s black ink neatly smudges the white pages of her redaction poetry of racist Canadian children’s books, and models the DIY blackout poetry station in the adjacent dining room. Upstairs, collage unites the three other artists. One bedroom holds endless colors (orange, burgundy, navy, yellow), textures, and shapes on vertical fabric strips cohered together into textural, mesmerizing quilts by Seattle-based fiber artist Brenetta Ward. Next door is starkly devoid of most color; here

mostly black and white colors—through paper, paint splashes, tape, and other media—orient works by Seattle-based Moses Sun. Across the hall is another colorful quilt, part of *Home of Good: A Black Seattle Story Quilt*, by Seattle-based Storme Webber in collaboration with Dr. Maxine Mimms.

Weeks later, Johnson guest lectures in my “Fundamentals of the Art Sector class” where she shares an arts institution typology. Museums are defined by their *permanent collections*, galleries by their *commercial circulation* of artist work, and project spaces (like Wa Na Wari) by *non-commercial curatorship*. These lines often cross and crumble but, mentally, I keep returning to this.

I return to this at the Frye Art Museum in October 2019, seated on the floor with others around a raised platform where a black woman and white man dressed simply in form-fitting white shirts and black pants dance to instrumental jazz music. They move with delicate, angular motions in a duet, where knees bend toward the ground and arms extend diagonally upwards. These performances take place regularly across the run of *Donald Byrd: America That Is To Be*. In December 2019 at the Seattle Art Museum, Black people’s faces shine on 20 feet tall lightbox/altars, immersed metal and fabric at the opening of *Aaron Fowler: Into Existence*. Will they collect this work of Black movement and light into their permanent collection? (In that “Fundamentals” class we read a Form 990, the nonprofit annual tax form, from which I know that SAM has over \$325 million in assets, about \$6,000 for each of Seattle’s 50,000 Black residents.)

I return to those crossing lines in July 2020, after walking with my face mask on from my house to Nepantla Cultural Arts Gallery, a Latinx cultural center owned by Jake Prendez and Julia Avitia-Gonzalez in White Center. The *Social Justice in the Time of Covid* group show features myriad small-scale paintings. One depicts George Floyd, another is emblazoned with “Chicanxs for Black Lives.” I buy a work and talk with Jake a bit; he draws his dreams for a Latinx art community hub.

There are of course visual art practices that exceed this schemata of permanent collections, commercial circulation, and non-commercial curatorship that shapes much of contemporary art markets. In June 2020 I make my way to CHOP. I am here to look at the Black Lives Matter mural on Pine between 10th and 11th. Organized by Takiyah Ward, the mural features different local artists painting one of the sixteen letters. Up close, I stand facing Kimisha Turner’s “B” vibrant with purple paint with splashes of electric green, red, and orange. Under each letter, bits of black asphalt crumble through. I find this collaborative work energizing and enchanting. It thematically echoes this past year of Black art in Seattle, delineated by texture, anti-racist politics, a color-rich/stark dichotomy, and collaboration, if not with other artists, at least with other media.

Home remains a central question as I look at the mural and think Seattle, Black, and art together—the stakes of this question are certainly amplified at CHOP, where questions of settlement, occupation, and rights to the city are (successfully and not) staged through the prism of Black life. I first viewed the BLM mural digitally

at home and, as I stand physically with it—seeing detail, feeling warmth, hearing nearby conversation—I try to find some meaning among these two different modes of being at home with art. A tent city has emerged a block north of the mural. Just 7% of Seattle’s residents are Black yet Black people make up an estimated 40% of the 12,000 people experiencing homelessness. As I walk from the “B” to “L” and “A” and engage imagery of butterflies (Perry Porter) and plant life (Angelina Villalobos), I think about the Black art those tent city residents—and we all—wake up to.

BERETTE S. MACAULAY

ON OUR OWN TERMS: A RECKONING OF VALUE FOR BLACK ARTS, CURATION, AND CRITICISM IN SEATTLE

We are on a continuous journey that unfolds as a series of questions that require clear and full agency in the answers.

What does it mean when the value of social justice vocabularies like representation, inclusion, and diversity become intellectual and progressive trends?

Cédric Fauq offers quite simply: “There are many ghosts to give up: universalism in the first instance.”¹ So, what is blackness exactly, and how does it trouble or untangle the contemporary use of the word diaspora? Does either descriptor include the interrogations of individual interiority? Do they bridge historical knowledges to imaginative tools of community resistance and survival - to continue being quite simply, human?²

¹ Cédric Fauq, “Curating for the Age of Blackness,” *Mousse Magazine* 66 (Winter 2019)

² All italicized sections of this braided text are from my curatorial essay accompanying the installation of *Exploring Passages within the Black Diaspora* at Photographic Center Northwest, January 16th – March 19th, 2020. It has also been reprinted in the *MFOIN in Seattle 2020* catalogue.

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So I did this thing, a thing that taught me far more about institutional inequities along racial lines than I thought I already knew. And while this thing did what it was designed to do (that is, privilege work and invite meaningful engagement around Black diasporic photographers), it took 2+ years to organize and curate, and it hurt like hell to get it done. And it shouldn't have.

MFON in Seattle (Nov 2019 - March 2020) was a program I organized comprising two consecutive exhibitions and an artist panel, where I collaborated with Adama Delphine Fawundu and Laylah Amatullah Barrayn—founders/publishers of *MFON Women Photographers of the African Diaspora*, Negarra A. Kudumu at Frye Art Museum, Terry Novak of Photographic Center Northwest (PCNW), and Emily Zimmerman of Jacob Lawrence Gallery at University of Washington. The last show in the program, *Exploring Passages Within the Black Diaspora* closed a week early in March due to the Covid-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place orders, with cancellations of events that were scheduled to launch the publication of our catalogue.

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Our exhibition asserts the authority of subjective knowledges by interrogating the interiority of black diasporic peoples, to engage the performances of transcultural identities, and celebrate actions of reinvention. The Pacific Northwest is as hungry for such discourses as any corner of the world populated by Afro-descendent peoples, who are creating and discovering empowering ways of archiving

themselves, of researching lost histories, discarding fantasies of Pan-African nobilities, and rejecting colonial spiritual practices to root themselves anew.

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Often I've observed that shows featuring black artists seem to engender novel wonder. Why is black contemporary art so exotic or heralded as particularly worthy when engaging the spectacle of pain? Elizabeth Alexander elucidated such ponderings beautifully in the *New Yorker*, "Black creativity emerges from long lines of innovative responses to the death and violence that plague our communities, [...] and I am interested in creative emergences from that ineluctable fact."³ Same here. I yearn always for a more nuanced entry into visual narratives of black life, especially in Washington state where representations of black multiplicity can be hard to come by.

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The artists in this show weave singular yet interconnected subjectivities of their lives that transverse any static time or prescriptive aesthetics. They are not being radical, but rather, they invite us to radically reconsider our read of traditional and imaginative gestures emblemized across the world. From Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean, their witnessing asks us to examine our own selective views, to question our prior knowledges of and entitlements to land and bodies, our ideas of paradise and commodity, the climactic effects of our touristic play, our expectation of poise in the face of

³ Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *The New Yorker* (June 22, 2020).

social injustice, our denial of right to place and resources despite invested and embodied histories, our discriminatory values of beauty ascribed to skin and gender.

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Under the best of circumstances, curating requires spartan effort. It is a heavy academic, emotional, intellectual, parental, physical, strategic work. Doing so when your pitch is to privilege black artists turns what should be a fulfilling birthing into a burden—and in real time you experience the very crux of why the fight exists to even try. It is maddening.

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There is a collective honoring here, each carefully researched or personally relived to produce the visual stories we engage on these walls. And while they perform important knowledges, we are only guests. There is no appeal for our approval. These stories are only theirs; while we can witness, we must also accountably consider our own.

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Here we sit now amidst unprecedented times of upheavals and renewed BLM demands due to ongoing violent erasures and exploitations of black persons, and I find myself spinning with rage and sporadic crazy-making tinges of hope. Similar expressions strewn across my social media-scrolls by fellow practitioners strikes cruelly at the heart. This is a human crisis. Indeed, redressing this with institutional mandates of inclusion and representation mean nothing if those mandates do not effect deep, holistically discursive,

rather than surface, engagements with diasporic peoples. And, those engagements must include foundational developments of livable and sustainable economies around black art and cultural production; not charity.

And what do I mean by that?

For one thing, SEE AND WRITE ABOUT BLACK ART.

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We live in a world in which we are accustomed to the narrative of blackness being a disembodied state to be appropriated, commodified, contracted, endured, emancipated, erased, fetishized, liberated, saved, sexualized, survived, or transformed - as free. What does it mean, then, to transform the making and curating of blackness, by choosing the right to opacity without reproducing these violently flattening overtures of anthropological gazes? For a start, it is to recognize how progressiveness of universalism renders the complexity of transcultural blackness as invisible; and then, - create space for stories that sing.

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There continues to be a scarcity of critical engagement and archival scholarship about black artists in Seattle. This BES journal is a black-owned literary space that endeavors to fill this void alongside writers at larger local publications, but why don't we have more dedicated and resourced spaces to engage more work by black and brown people? And I don't mean just brief pieces or press copy. I mean critical and curious examinations that invite both practical and

theoretical public discourses across a broader readership. Is it because listings are more affordable than paying writers to do deep dives about works shown in their communities?

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What is it to recall the past in service of transversing static narratives, to create new yet fluid futures?

This visual conversation intentionally privileges subjective histories and archival actions of storytelling, by interrogating and confronting ideas of transcultural and transnational decoloniality, identity, memory, meaning-making, and self-(re)invention.

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Where are the discourses that put Deborah Jack's memorial journey of cinematic Transatlantic narratives following the ancestral embodiment of a little girl in ...*the water between us remembers* with Maureen Douabou's *Atolve: the water godmothers*, a video performance that "remembers" through chapters of Afro-spiritual rites of cleansing and care with water deities?

Where were the questions of what it means to memorialize the social justice and journalism work of Valda Nogueira, who suddenly died a month before the *ALTAR: Prayer, Ritual, Offering* opening at Jacob Lawrence Gallery, with her *Porto* series celebrating her birthland, quilombo cultures, Candomblé/Yoruba traditions and fishing practices in Sepetiba, Brazil? Or questions about her *Azul* altar, placing text with blooming and decaying white flowers in every room, creating an olfactory life carried by auditory hauntings

throughout the gallery? Her words “the ancestors never failed to put us together” keep asserting deeper meaning in these connections.

Considering prayers, Petrona Morrison offered trance-like meditations on the cyclical continuum of body, earth, and mind in *Presence*, juxtaposed across three screens with her *Sanctuary Space* and *Altarpiece I & II*, spanning 30 years of work. These called upon the drumming and nyabinghi chanting of Jamaican Rastafarians in Tiffany Smith’s *Panic Room*, enclosed and tending to the losses of African American mothers’ sons. Their gaze from the collectable cards laid out on altars in the room evaded capture somehow, the way LeLeita McKILL’s works *Enny* and *She, herself* (in *Exploring Passages* at PCNW) exist ontologically without acknowledging the gaze of enslavement histories.

Abstracting beyond the narrative form, Di-Andre Caprice Davis entranced visitors with *put together*, a psychedelic patterning of soundless shapeshifting images as uncategorizable, challenging our own perceptions. Jamila Clarke’s collection of photographs each performed like short films, rich in familiar yet unknown characters; two-dimensional in form yet multidimensional in alternative surrealities. Marilù Mapengo Namoda’s *Águas de Março* presented an experimental rite of exorcism from the colonial nightmare through a dreamlike rebirthing in a bathtub, with an abrupt gaze reversal and unanswered question from a woman in the streets.

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In Living A Feminist Life, Sarah Ahmed says “Protest and punishment share the same terms”, so then, the right to a manifesto, an exhibition, that imagines alternative destinies and pursues them, defines new terms for legacy infused with love, the activism of pleasure, and the power of vulnerability, - thereby transcending mere performance of self-determined futures.

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Did anyone notice Tiffany Smith was the only artist to bridge both shows, shifting geographies and discourses to the tropical gaze of Caribbean life with self-portrait selections from *For Tropical Girls Who Have Considered Ethnogenesis When the Native Sun is Remote?* In her video *Bahama Blues*, we become the tourist with her, witnessing the misappropriative commodity of black hairstyling markets in her father’s homeland of the Bahamas.

Hair is a contested part of black women’s bodies, personal space, and artistic style with historic coding of adornment, as defended by Mia K McNeal’s *Do Not Touch*. Did anyone notice relational traditions in coded vocabularies from McNeal’s beaded and braided portraits to the complex costuming in Abigail Hadeed’s ethnographic mas carnival study of the Trinidadian Black Indian band *Warriors of Hurraacan?*

Nadia Alexis’s *Woman In White* imaginatively conjures ghostly memory as a passage of remaking, much the way Miatta Kawinzi’s video work *sweat/tears/sea* plays with temporal disruptions of displacement and environment. And, similarly still, to how

suspended stories of water pollution animate a cleansing and playful rebirth of black boyhood in Nadia Huggin's series' of *Circa no Future*. How *Circa no Future* conspires with powers of locational reinvention in Courtney Morris' *Sugar House Road* and Ricky Weaver's narratives of transcendence in *Parables of Light*. That Zoraida Lopez's video juxtaposition, *These Are the Times*, featuring black male portraiture, along with Thomas Paine's essay "The American Crisis", demands we reckon with Intisar Abioto's portraits of her Memphis and Mississippi Delta family migration roots while seeking out disconnected black refugee communities in Portland.

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Another thing: BUY BLACK ART!

Artists have normal bills to pay like everyone else, and their practices to sustain; exhibiting their work merely for the exchange of exposure is at the very least insulting and, in pragmatic terms, a missionary performance at most. Simply contact artists directly and/or their galleries (if they're represented) to buy their work. To alleviate additional anxieties, be transparent in the process to reduce coercive pressures.

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Around the world, we see a daily tectonic shift in power structures that demand both the real and semiotic dismantling of global coloniality. Exploring Passages Within the Black Diaspora signals a

continuum of a people mapping both traditional and traumatic histories to future autonomous assertions of a communal body.

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A sustainable economy of inclusion means that institutions MUST reject the bullshit of easy funding for white shows while bemoaning the struggle of underfunded black shows. Let me tell you people, mounting exhibitions are not cheap, especially if you are featuring artists from different regions. Without adequate resources you are forced to make compromises to defray costs, which includes appealing to our communities for free or low honorarium services. An extractive system such as this will always demand complicity in the same exploitive circumstances that we also are being bled by. Oppressive and erasure tactics are a social technology of invisible power and status designed to reenact and reinforce itself, period. Gatekeeping then becomes a way of survival in a world designed to have us believe there isn't enough space for excellence to be shared by more of us. It's an ecology of scarce spoils and benefits. Of course BIPOC folx comprehend the work we must do—not just to survive but to thrive, in love, in joy, in fully expressed personhood—yet we continue to operate in isolated silos of complicity that colonialism created for us. I have Negarra A. Kudumu to thank in securing funding to host the MFON panel around which additional programming could be planned. Despite resource restrictions that both Terry Novak and Emily Zimmerman face institutionally, thankfully they were both transparent in this while helping to alleviate participatory expenses for the artists, offering honorariums for *ALTAR*

and facilitating options of sale in *Exploring Passages*. Needless to say, this is not common.

Bringing about a *real* epistemic and quantitative shift from trending terms of “inclusivity” and “solidarity” means we have to be equally represented not only on walls and websites, but on directorial branches of institutions; and we have to be sustained in the marketplace with less obstructions to developing our own art spaces too. That said, invite more curators in to truly diversify programming, and pay them properly. Create an economy of hiring gallery photographers to archive shows—also with proper pay.

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I petition you to follow all 19 artists in *MFON in Seattle* —all of whom are active practitioners exhibiting their works in galleries and museums across this country and the world, taking up space with their subjective stories on *their* terms.

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I petition more writers to engage the particular histories and inventive actions in all their work.

I petition you to invest in our archive by purchasing the catalogue, supported by critical and lyrical reflections by nine writers—all of whom are due better honorariums for their efforts.⁴

⁴ *MFON in Seattle* catalogue is available for digital and print purchase directly at magcloud.com/browse/issue/1754387. Pending post-pandemic reopening phases and circumstances so far unknown, it may also be available in print from our program partners.

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In a recent interview for *Artforum* Saidiya Hartman asks, “how does one bring a minor revolution into view?” As an artist and curator, my hope is multidirectional:

- ° for artists to keep making whatever we want without being required to prove our humanity or perform ‘blackness’;
- ° for white institutions to radically evolve beyond the optics of performative solidarity;
- ° for more intersectional black institutions to form and thrive with real funding and visibility;
- ° and for the writers and young people protesting in the streets to keep refreshing our raging demands until they are met.

Using our magic while institutions make the money and swell their exclusive cultural archives is not inclusion, it’s a harmful continuance of exploitation, and we all know much better now for this not to change.

