


**A  
YEAR IN  
BLACK  
ART**



**The Black  
Embodiments  
Studio**

**2020-2021**



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# A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Before the pandemic, I would begin our Arts Writing Incubator sessions by asking for updates on recent Black art exhibitions everyone had seen. The pandemic stopped all of that. We stayed indoors and moved online and I began to prompt our communion with a different kind of question: “What Black aesthetic experience have you had since we’ve last seen each other?”

This question reflects The Black Embodiments Studio’s dedication to dismantling the assumption that arts writing is an exclusive domain, open only to those who have specialized training to see, understand, and respond to art. What Black aesthetic experience have you had since we’ve last seen each other”? reminds us that the force and resonance of Black creative practices do not have to be relegated to formal museum spaces or interpreted by people with degrees and credentials. Black aesthetic experiences infuse everyday life; we encounter Black aesthetic experiences whether we are looking for them or not, whether we are intending to publish about them or not.

“What Black aesthetic experience have you had since we’ve last seen each other”? opened us up to watch B.A.P.S. just as seriously as standing before a Wangechi Mutu sculpture, to feel the joy watching Black teenagers laughing together just as intensely as sitting before a Kerry James Marshall painting, to feel the bass in a passing car’s music resonate just as deeply as watching Ligia Lewis perform.

During the pandemic, BES subtly reframed the conditions of our convening—no longer simply surveying the Black art that we’d seen in formal, institutional spaces, but marking time as reveling in the myriad Black aesthetic experiences that infuse everyday life—and this shift reflects just one way that BES fosters space where people can generate new networks of intentionality in their own practice and amongst other people.

We also redoubled our commitments to building discourse around contemporary Black artists by launching the Artist + Writer Initiative, which created funded partnerships between Black artists and arts writers. We supported new and ongoing work from artists Ilana Harris-Babou, LaJuné McMillian, and Carolyn Lazard, and we commissioned Jessica Lynne, Ashley Stull Meyers, and Amber Rose Johnson to write about them. You’ll find this writing in the pages of A Year in Black Art, and additional writing will appear in other art publications that the writers select.

Their writing is surrounded by the brilliant insights of the 2020-2021 BES Arts Writing Incubator cohort, a group of people who have managed to unlock their analytic brains and poetic voices during one of the most challenging years on record. This iteration of A Year in Black Art is a documentation of how—amidst and in spite of their social isolation—people find ways to connect to and through Black art.

This year’s journal is a call keep supporting Black art, BES’ mantra, and to do so in whatever way feels intimate and generative for you.

Kemi Adeyemi

Director, The Black Embodiments Studio

# BIOS

## **ADETOLA ABATAN**

Is a collage artist who primarily works with paper and fabric. She holds a PhD in Chemical Engineering from the University of Pittsburgh and is currently earning an MFA in Arts Leadership at Seattle University.

## **ZAKKIYAH NAJEEBAH DUMAS-O'NEAL**

Is a Chicago based visual artist, arts educator, and independent arts organizer. Within her projects there's an overlying theme of trying to make sense of, and complicating what and who she belongs to across time, location, and space

## **CHARI GLOGOVAC- SMITH**

Is a composer, vocalist, instrumentalist, and mixed media artist. Using an evolving mixture of traditional and experimental techniques, Chari is dynamically exploring and illustrating various counterpoints between human experience and society.

## **QUINN MCNICHOL**

Makes art that wonders how their experiences affect their white/pink body/mind as they move through space to interact with plants and other humans. They recently earned an MFA in painting + drawing at University of Washington School of Art + Art History + Design

## **SAM PRUDENTE**

Sam Prudente grew up in Guam, Papua New Guinea & the Philippines bringing lenses from the Black Pacific to his MA in Cultural Studies. He credits his elementary school teachers for early exposure to world art & poetry which have fueled his own forays into these twin passions, and now often finding expression in interdisciplinary performance. He is currently worrying @ (but not worrying about) how to decolonize his name.

## **AMBER ROSE JOHNSON**

Is a writer and performer from Providence, RI based in Philadelphia. Across her interdisciplinary practice, she explores experimental poetics as a critical method for reconfiguring the world as it's been imagined. Grounded in Black Diasporic critical thinking, her inquiries into the mechanisms of Relation are anchored in close attention to language and embodiment. Johnson is the curator of the conversation and workshop series Mess + Process, and the coordinator of the Black Cultural Studies Collective. She is the co-editor of Colored People Time (Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia) and her writing has been featured in BOMB Literary Magazine, Bookforum, and Jacket2. Johnson is a PhD Candidate in English and Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

## **SARINA SHANE**

Is a designer, artist, and writer interested in inspiring others to be present and listen to their senses.

## **JESSICA LYNNE**

Is a founding editor of ARTS.BLACK, an online journal of art criticism from Black perspectives.

Her writing has been featured in publications such as Art in America, The Believer, BOMB Magazine, The Nation, Frieze, and elsewhere. She is the recipient of a 2020 Graham Foundation Research and Development award and is currently at work on a collection of essays about love, faith, art, and the U.S. South.

## **AURORA SAN MIGUEL**

Is an artist, writer, and filmmaker working in Seattle, WA.

## **BRITTNEY FRANTECE**

Is an art and academic writer, visual artist, educator, and a PhD candidate in the English department at University of Washington. Her work explores speculative fiction and art, Black feminism, and queer theories.

## **CAMILLE BACON**

Is an arts writer who graduated from Smith College and is crafting a “sweet Black writing life,” as inspired by the words of poet Nikky Finney. “Must read” text that I encountered this year: *Burning All Illusion: Abstraction, Black Life, and the Unmaking of White Supremacy* by Leigh Raidford.

## **MESHELL STURGIS**

Is an interdisciplinary scholar, mixed media artist, and critic currently living south of Seattle.

## **RASHEENA FOUNTAIN**

Is a poet and essayist whose work focuses on Black environmental memory. She has been published in *Hobart Pulp*, *P'enumbra*, *Mountaineer Magazine*, *The Roadrunner Review* and more. She has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Washington Seattle, where she will be pursuing a PhD in English starting Fall 2021.

## **ASHLEY STULL MEYERS**

Is a writer, editor, and culture worker. She has curated exhibitions and public programming for a diverse set of arts institutions along the west coast, including those in San Francisco, CA, Oakland, CA, Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR. She has been in academic residency at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art (Omaha, NE) and the Banff Centre (Banff, Alberta). She has served as Northwest Editor for *Art Practical* and has contributed writing to *Bomb Magazine*, *Rhizome*, *Arts. Black* and *SFAQ/NYAQ*. In 2017 Stull Meyers was named Director and Curator of The Art Gym and Belluschi Pavilion at Marylhurst University, and the following year was made co-curator of the 2019 Portland Biennial. Currently, she is Program Director for the Multicultural Resource Center at Reed College, and contracting as an Independent Curator.

## **ANANYA SIKAND**

Is an artist-writer-curator and PhD student in the Division of Art History at the University of Washington. She researches feminist and performative practice in India from the 1980-90s to the present.

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# **The Cutting Edge**

**Sam Prudente**



The week the bombs fell again on Gaza, I walked downtown's deserted streets from the Seattle Public Library to the Seattle Art Museum.

Most visitors were heading for *The American Struggle*, a reunion of Jacob Lawrence's 30 modernist panels ending May 23. I headed for the Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence & Jacob Lawrence Gallery where Barbara Earl Thomas' exhibit runs through January 2. In *The Geography of Innocence* her portraits of Black children place them amidst objects that act as a compass to their passions.

Thomas' cut paper technique layers black paper over palettes of hand-printed backing paper, which she cuts into with surgical precision. She angles her slice and swipes through the upper layers to reveal the multi-color textures underneath. It is a process of skimming surfaces, where deftness is key, and indecision comes at a price. These layered meditations line the hallway to the gallery like paned-glass windows; they also lead away from it, emptying into a far, dark hall.

Within the gallery, light limns the walls and exudes from a monolith at its center, a mesmerizing spectacle. In this inner sanctum, the cut-outs are made on floor-to-ceiling sheaths of off-white Tyvek and then backlit in white. Falling bodies twist around the surface of this centerpiece, pulled downward from casual, neoclassical poses by the grip of a vortex. Budding from their open palms, smaller figures, perhaps children, are being held, grasped, becoming entangled with bugs amidst a garden of nature. Because of the materiality of the Tyvek, I perceived the images differently. What struck me most: the flattening of distance.

Smaller, humanoid figures as sprouting from open palms—perhaps children, loosened, or lost, and now in the process of being retrieved, rebirthed. I wondered at this private Eden, where serpents, iguanas, rattlesnakes, yellow bells and hummingbirds flit and float with children. Walking counter-clockwise around the space, the centrifugal drama is countered by the stillness of the Tyvek walls, recalling discreet dressing screens of lace and doily openwork. Three memorials are set within the walls of the room, for Ama, for Balleh, and for the Flower's Boys, each adorned with glass roses. Are these altars meant to preserve the lives of these children, or to commemorate them? Talismans for protection, for memory, maybe both?

Leaving the gallery, the corridor walls are lined portraits, as of saints. Gradients of color whorl in portraits of wide-eyed, smiling Black children. Their smiles color, shadow and uplift their profiles. As within the gallery space and their altarpieces, the portraits here reverence innocence. These children care, and what is more significant, in their portraits they are surrounded by the things they care about: bio-medicine, health, sibling joy, walking in the dark. The corridor is dimly lit in contrast to the white light in the gallery, and our eyes are forced to refocus, dilate. We see in greater detail how light is enfolded within the cuts of paper. My eyes are drawn to the light falling into the cuts and creases around eyes, and lashes, lips; how chins stay up, how dreadlock waves curl. This same skill in cutting paper attests to the glorious celebration of light in cat fur and whiskers, on carnations, dragonflies and forked tongues, petals and pistils, feathers and beaks.

May 20 I get a call from Israel: proof of life. A friend who works there says they run to bomb shelters, capturing the hail of counter strikes on their cell phone cameras; such is life. The very next day, a colleague presents ethnographic stories of her grandmother's exile from Palestine. On May 26 the *New York Times* runs photos of the children killed in Gaza. Regret is in the headline: They were just children. Whatever happened to the presumption of innocence?

*On Grief,  
Joy and  
New Directions*

*Adetola Abatan*

I moved to Seattle, WA from Houston, TX in the middle of the pandemic. By the time I joined The Black Embodiments Studio in Winter 2021, I was still new to the city and filled with excitement about my new career direction and my West Seattle neighborhood.

But alongside that joy and excitement was a quiet grief of starting over in my 40s while missing my family and friends; of being in a new city where people are nice but not necessarily friendly; of being afraid for my elderly parents and grandmother even as the COVID-19 death toll mounted, and vaccines were not yet available. How could I explain two extreme emotions co-existing in me at the same time?

Then I watched a virtual screening of *Sarogua Mourning* (2011), a performance piece by Zina Saro-Wiwa and a recent acquisition by the National Museum of African Art. The artist is the daughter of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian activist who was imprisoned and executed by the state government in the 1980s. In the video, Zina Saro-Wiwa attempts, for the first time, to cry for her father.

This is a private mourning made public that straddles the line between voyeurism and performance. She manages her pain through this choreography and invites the audience to join in her tearful catharsis. The video begins with Saro-Wiwa facing the camera, her body framed by a background of crimson red panels that remind one of blood. Her hair has been cut short and she wears no jewelry. Her shoulders are bare as well, intimating the naked pain of grief. She stares at the camera and slowly her eyes brim and the tears fall until her body is shaking with full-fledged sobs. *Sarogua Mourning* is a short film at just under 12 minutes, however I found myself turning away at several points in the viewing as though I should not be privy to such an intense moment. And yet, isn't that what it means to have empathy? To sit with another and bear witness to their pain without judgement or offering useless platitudes?

Saro-wiwa initially tries not to speak—and for minutes she does not, looking away and then almost forcing her eyes back to the lens to hold our gaze. But after a while, the words flow as she wonders if past failed relationships mirror her family's pain and loss. And as she talks, the tears become interspersed with laughter until they grow to deep belly laughs. It is as though she also acknowledges she will not be in this place of pain and separation forever.

In the interview that followed the screening, Saro-Wiwa said her art is often about giving herself permission to go to that deep, emotionally intimate place. In *Sarogua Mourning* she allowed the audience to come along to that place with all its honesty and uncomfortable beauty. And, in a way, this gave me permission as well as I put down roots in this city. There is more joy than pain these days, but to grieve is to honestly acknowledge the importance of those past spaces, even as one looks forward in joyful anticipation to all the future holds.

“Loss leaves in its wake an experience so private yet so universal”

- Maria Popova

# LaJuné McMillian and the Treachery of Motion Capture

Ashley Stull Meyers

In 1994, Carmen Hermsillo (known by many screen names, but cited most widely as, “Hum Dog”) authored the essay “Pandora’s Vox: On Community in Cyberspace”. Hermsillo parses that human interaction in digital space has little in common with 1960s era utopian proposals to eschew hierarchies. Rather, this lawless new frontier solidifies the abilities of profit-seeking entities to slyly commodify, repackage, and cannibalize the vulnerability user communities provide digital platforms. An early user of Second Life, Hermsillo and her essays foreshadowed a culture wherein communities most in need of and eager for the kinds of connection, access, and “democracy” the internet provides would, ultimately, have their contributions leveraged to profitable ends. Hermsillo ultimately died under complex circumstances, having suffered under the psychological weight of the performance-of-self in digital space—a suffering that is now common far beyond the point of her timely 1990s writings.

Artist and programmer LaJuné McMillian thinks through the theory and politics of digital media and virtual realities, acutely aware of the stakes particular to appropriating Blackness. In the past two decades, this particular mode of appropriation has been entangled with the speed and agility of global social media platforms and gaming systems. What originates as enactments of movement, humor, and colloquial language within Black communities is quickly meme-ified, repurposed, and rebranded for commercialized (non-Black) consumption. A new form of celebrity – catalysed by platforms for pithy, abbreviated video content like Tiktok and its predecessor Vine – relies heavily on the repackaging of Black cultural ephemera with little to no historical framework or attribution left intact. A growing collective of (often white) teenagers builds brands advertising a neatly packaged view of contemporary youth, but formed from the specificity of the dances, language, and music of Black youth. McMillian’s practice interrogates the processes through which the images, movements, and cultural artifacts of Blackness are re-created and disseminated for cross-cultural usage.

McMillian’s projects run the gamut of digital archiving, cataloging, re-constructive rendering, and the building of new worlds. Together, these efforts apply a magnifying glass to the structural misdeeds of a digital plane that were constructed well before ethical protocols for establishing a truly equitable system of content-sharing.

In two foundational projects, *Black Movement Library* and *Antidote*, McMillian is concerned with establishing community norms toward care and liberation in extended reality (XR) communities, drawing on Performance Theory and Glitch feminisms to mark how Black bodies and Black labors have been commodified and absorbed toward pop cultural ends. McMillian seeks to be as dutiful toward history and ancestral connection as they are toward an optimism for an ethical digital future – a balance that many thinkers struggle to maintain, and often do so with less clarity and grace than McMillian provides. In the artful mimicry of “user agreements,” *Antidote* asks that, through the course of engagement with the webpage, its users acquiesce to several behavioral experiments in mindfulness. *Antidote* asks that we each relinquish attachment to the binary, relinquish the roles we occupy within oppressive practices, relinquish colonial hierarchies, and relinquish white supremacist gazes and delusions, among other potentially harmful codings for the ways we may show up in virtual environments.

“*Antidote* is an offering and prayer. It’s an interruption, hacking, a portal, a medicine. A ritual response and physical undoing, of the lie that we are not our own, that we are not free.”

Global video game and XR franchises like the ever popular *Fortnite* (originally launched in 2017) have become quintessential examples of a culture of what Lauren Michele Jackson names “Digital Blackface” and misattribution. *Fortnite* users are able to move their avatars through a number of catalogued “dances” and meme-able gestures that were largely popularized by Black teenagers on platforms like *TikTok*. For the purposes of the game, the names of these gestures and their creators have been altered or omitted. Users are also able to purchase rare or luxury avatar options, called “skins”—2021 saw *Fortnite* users flood the webstore to purchase and download Black American rapper *Travis Scott*’s skin.



The politics of the purchase, download, and roleplay of a Black male body and persona by non-white members of the XR community is contentious, and being closely examined by few outside of McMillian and their contemporaries. McMillian's Black Movement Library is a flexible database of motion capture tools used to render variable bodies, and it is painstakingly aware of skin tones, a diversity of shapes, and de-gendered representations. The Library operates as a partial response to fellow artists and programmers appropriating non-white likenesses and haphazardly animating them. Alongside the creation of new tools and strategies for these modes of rendering, Black Movement Library takes up the necessary labor of cataloging the histories that Black cultural producers carry within their movement labor – naming the origins of certain dance, worship, or feats of athleticism, and attributing them to the Black individuals or communities from which they are borrowed.

Digital space is rife for a culture of “borrowing” and remaking. Files are seamlessly shared between users for editing, adding to, or making anonymous a labor for which authorial recognition is intentionally complicated. But what happens in the pop-cultural imagination when we divorce the thoughts and labors of Black creatives from the bodies that were foundational to how said labors were born and meant to be experienced? Tap dancer Savion Glover is most visible, to an audience who may not be educated in dance, as a penguin. The 2006 animated film, *Happy Feet*, features the dancer and choreographer as a premier example of joy, pain, artistry, and courage through the motions of his body – through the form of tap. But this rendered body, visually not his own but that of an animated character, appropriates the movement and history of Black dance, instrumentalizing it instead to anthropomorphize the journey of a community of flightless birds. Though evidence of his contribution is not hard to find for those who look, he is merely credited on IMDB as “additional crew.” The movement that gives life, culture, spirit, and purpose to a technically lifeless rendering, is profoundly Black. It is the legacy of African percussion – it is the history of resilience, jive, the Nicholas Brothers, and a community who supported the studies of Savion Glover.

LaJuné McMillian not only dreams of a space wherein such names are known, and where Black culture is valued on the terms of its originators, but is constructing the actual tools through which this knowing can take place.

# Sun Soldier I (2021), Rain

Camille Bacon



Virginia-based artist Rain Spann gives form to the sublime. The aesthetic dimensions of the artist's work point to the indispensable role that inscrutability and opacity play in the ceremony of bringing about the worlds we wish to inhabit. This gesture is achieved, in part, through elusive interplays between media—as seen, for example, in the artist's mixed media collage on paper, *Sun Soldier I* (2021), presented most recently in *COLLIDE & SCOPE* at Knowhere Gallery in Oaks Bluffs, MA. What emerges from the artist's particular bringing-together-of-things is an enigmatic coalescence, one that coaxes the viewer closer, closer, and closer still while refusing to position *Sun Soldier I* as an entity available to be “understood.”

Measuring 20" X 30", *Sun Soldier I* is Spann's own kind of surreal portrait: a technicolor bust — refracted. Enveloped by a blaze of orange and purple acrylic paint, *Sun Soldier I*'s face is turned up to the sky. Wide brush strokes of acrylic paint merge to render the figure's serene profile, spilling a tranquil blue hue over her smooth forehead, parted lips and chin and bringing an electric violent and green gradient to her nose. Delicate dustings of black and white spray paint weave amidst layers of darkened construction paper to sculpt the petal shaped formations that protrude triumphantly from the crown of *Sun Soldier I*'s head.

The figures' eyes are invisible to us, obscured by a mélange of inky hues evoking, at once, a black hole and the entire cosmos. Perhaps her eyes are closed in a moment of contemplation. Maybe she is daydreaming of what it will take for us to remain — here. The important thing is we do not know. In sum, Spann's choice to obscure *Sun Soldier I*'s eyes points to the mechanisms forged for posterity, and in order to skirt the constricting nature of conjecture.

Relatedly, upon first glance, the collage appears to be two-dimensional, but Spann knows something about the futurity embedded in the act of fooling the eye. As one follows the line from the figure's lifted chin to their angular neck and back up again to the rounded edges of their regal coiffure, swaths of acrylic paint transition seamlessly into construction paper, and then again into airy brushes of spray paint. Considering the meeting points of the myriad media employed are low-relief, we may consider that *Sun Soldier I*'s dimensions (both literal and metaphorical) are revealed only to those who take care enough to linger.

By obscuring where *Sun Soldier I*'s various qualities begin and end, Spann creates a possibility in which the figure depicted (and by extension, each of us who encounter the work) can exceed one-dimensional or flat apprehensions. After all, to apprehend *Sun Soldier I* in its inalienable totality, we must step forward, quiet down and commit to forging an interpretive frame capacious enough to circumnavigate reduction.



# Remove What the Body Cant Hold

Brittney Frantece

In Wangechi Mutu's multimedia collage, *All the Way Up, All the Way Out* (2012), a figure with swirls of white, pink, orange flesh stands on a black mound, dressed in fishnet hosiery being ripped apart by bird-like creatures with emerald bodies and yellow wings. The birds, upon closer look, resemble otherworldly insects with long strings for antennas and pearl clusters for heads. Similarly, the profile of the figure's head is a collage of yellow and blue eyes on both sides of the face, and clusters of gold and pearls line the mouth and forehead. Their body leans forward in the midst of a violent regurgitation that makes them appear unstable, with crooked legs and feet ready to fall off the mound. Their arms draw over their back and their fingers curled up in opaque, blackened claws. The figure spews hair in massive quantities from its small mouth, and this seems to cause the awkward, seemingly painful position of the body. The hair falls into the background and onto the mound, taking up most of the left side of the frame. There seems to be more hair than what the figure's mouth can hold, what any one body can hold, yet still there is curly black hair that falls all the way down the figure's back.

*All the Way Up, All the Way Out* was part of the *Plural Possibilities & the Female Body* exhibit at the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. This show brought together contemporary and mid- to late-20th century artists whose works think about the process of feminization. The show offers works that also considers the act of embodying (and forcing others to embody) an idea of womanhood. This show contemplates and critiques how bodies are feminized by outward gazes, celebrates how people have embraced identities such as womanhood, and queries how some have distorted them. When I come to Mutu's work, I think about emptying oneself of that which cannot fit or does not belong. What a transformative act that is. Who do I transform into through this rejection? Perhaps something, someone totally unrecognizable to trained, normative eyes. Through this violent, urgent emptying, does the body become otherworldly?

Under Mutu's influence, I think about what distorting normative expectations of Blackness and femininity can offer for Black Studies in a world where both these categories are always under scrutiny and contention. What happens when Blackness is conceptualized, thought about, and embodied in another world? The figure takes on the look of the bird-like creatures that pull at their fishnet hosiery; the same pearl clusters that make up the bird-like creatures' faces also frame the figure's mouth and forehead.

Perhaps through this violent emptying, the figure transforms into an otherworldly being and becomes another creature similar to the fantastical bird-like creatures. Ultimately, this figure seems to transform into something that would be hard to consider “human” in Western notions of the concept. Mutu’s collage doesn’t offer any resolve as to whether this other form of being is welcomed or pleasant—sure the transformation seems like it would feel painful...but also freeing.

I didn’t walk away from Mutu’s work thinking about what Blackness can be transformed into, I walked away thinking that a painful letting go must happen in order for transformation to occur. Mutu’s distortions reject normative expectations of how Black womanhood should present itself as an identity, and, importantly, the work doesn’t impose another identity in their place. I see this rejection of form and embrace of unknowability materialize in the regurgitation of the black, messy, hair the unidentifiable figure produces. The regurgitation suggests that what is placed upon and within this figure may not enter nor stay. And I, as a viewer, am not welcomed to the figure’s truer inner worlds and being.

# UNRAVELING Alice in Parts

## Chari Glogovac-Smith

It's unraveling...

It starts before you know that it's happening, and then you're in the middle of it, trying to figure out why and what and where to go next. This is what Anastacia-Reneé's 2021 solo exhibition (*Don't Be Absurd*) *Alice in Parts* feels like when you enter; threads in every direction, all connected somehow, and also all coming apart. I visited the exhibition during its opening week at the Frye Museum in Seattle without expectation. The pandemic has made the quest of experiencing art in public feel like an insurmountable achievement locked inside of a fortress. When I arrived, I paused outside to appreciate the fresh air. I was outside of my home, a home that was starting to feel like a prison. A home that, unbeknownst to me, I would soon be forced out of as the city's eviction moratorium was lifted.

After a TSA-level check-in experience, I reached the exhibition. I arrived at the home of Alice Metropolis. This is not one of those occasions when you casually enter a person's home, sit and chat for a minute, and then make up an excuse to leave 15 minutes later. Alice's home is an investment. Alice is a whole person, an experience.

The space is filled with overlapping chatter from the sound of Alice's voice being projected from various sources. Up close, the audio-visual moments are intimate displays of the ways in which Alice sees the world, her understanding of how the world sees her, and her mental proximity to both. Each one reads like a journal entry, disclosing a bit more about the fragility of Alice's existence with each iteration. Alice tells me that she is alright and is doing her best to "keep it moving." Here is where the unraveling begins.

The audio-visual moments are flanked by the inclusion of weighty objects. Unopened presents, clothes lines with blooded shirts, scattered baby dolls, and an empty bed sectioned off with tape. Alice's objects are filled with sharp chaotic imagery that, juxtapositioned with Alice's journal-like entries, imply that things are far from alright with Alice. Her vocal cadence quickens, her body movements are repetitive, and her words and mannerisms become disjointed.

In the center of the house there is an altar set up for the Lorde—Audre Lorde. It's a reprieve, a break from the unraveling that is Alice's home and existence. Standing at the altar sorting through what I have gathered thus far, I am cognizant that in Alice's favorite phrase, there are redactions. "Keep it moving" is a placeholder for:

[Alice has depression]

[Alice has cancer]

[Alice used to struggle with self-harm]

[Alice is fighting for her identity ]

[Alice's life is a]

The last interaction I have with Alice could be the entire exhibition. Alice, exposed and owning her wholeness, says NO repeatedly before leaving the frame one last time. Behind me there is red tape in the center of the floor. Ahead of me, there is a door that says "stolen." Red lines remind me of history, and the word stolen also reminds me of history, but what has been stolen here?

Anastacia-Reneé says that "this exhibition offers a rageful meditation on the gentrification of neighborhoods and its insidious effects on the body." This reads literally but poetically, if we view the body as a metaphorical home, then Alice's fight to keep herself intact also connects to themes of gentrification. Alice is a symbol of a dying existence against one's will.

[It starts before you know that it's happening]

[And then you're in the middle of it.]

[Trying to figure out why...]

[And what...]

[And where to go next.]

# Feeling Intertwined in Seattle's Central District

Rasheena Fountain

Today, I am on a mission, my daughter in tow. I scan the changing landscape in the Seattle Central District and look beyond the construction cranes on 23rd and Union Street because I want to find the Hank Willis Thomas and Intisar Abioto *Intertwined* exhibit. The installation, in partnership with Wa Na Wari and the Seattle Art Museum, is a series of nine, four-foot tall banners, Thomas's text-based series *I AM A MAN*, and Abioto's images, all hung along 23rd Avenue, Jackson Street, Union Street and Martin Luther King Jr. Way until April 15, 2022.

My daughter and I have only been here almost five years—enough time to notice the change in the Central District. I am an outsider and can remember a time when Uncle Ikes's signage didn't prominently tower over Union and 23rd, where the Black memories of a Black past stay locked in some time. We are outsiders—not to Blackness but to the memories that only Black Seattleites know of community, resilience, history, and more in the Central District. Our first stop on 23rd and Union is to get Tacos Chukis. We are hungry. A crane towers and threatens above the taco shop in the tall building. A group of people appear as a white wall eating tacos in the outdoor dining area. I wonder about the semiotics of this space—in between—in transition: the clinks and clashes of the cranes, footprints making silent imprints in the changing pavement, the sounds of Black joy sifting through the noise...I reflect on what it means to be an outsider—an outsider watching diminishing Black spaces in this space and time. I am not an outsider to displacement, the shadow that follows me and haunts my lineage.

We eat our tacos in an empty parking lot and then walk around, scanning the landscapes for any banners with Black images on it. We cross the streets, looking from the four corners of 23rd and Union to no avail. I am instead drawn to an A-frame sign for Rooted 23rd advertising incense, body oils, sage, jewelry and African Crystals, and a Black woman stands in an entrance of the building. Towering above the me is a sign that reads, "Raised Doughnuts: Doughnut Worry Be Happy." Then, I see it. On a telephone pole near East Spring St. is one of Abioto's images framed by Thomas's text.

Image: A Black man carrying a child, his hand wrapped around the child's legs as the child leans on one of his shoulders. The child looks at the camera squinting and the Black man smiles, heavily, captured in joy...

## I AM AMEN

I see another banner across the street on Union.

Image: A Black woman smirks, exposing her side profile as a child with cornrows and balls in her hair sits comfortably on the woman's back. The child rests her chin on the woman's shoulder.

## I AM MANY

You could miss many of the banners if you aren't looking. We almost missed them even though we were looking. My daughter is relieved when we find the banners but complains that the signs should be bigger, even more prominent so people wouldn't miss them.

"Maybe that's the point," I tell her. "You should feel frustrated."

The Intertwined installation originally began in Portland: the messages on them are inspired by Ernest c. Withers' photograph of a group during the 1968 Memphis Sanitation Worker's Strike holding a sign that read "I AM A Man". I think about the proximity of the artists in collaboration—that feelings, images, and words travel across geography and through time. There is nothing linear about my connection to this space, though diasporic displacement connects many Black people. Portland, Seattle, Chicago, Mississippi...I AM Many, and I Am, Amen.

**On  
Carolyn  
Lazard's  
Pain  
Scale**



Carolyn Lazard's *Pain Scale* is a formally contained piece: installed at eye-level (in relation to the artist's stature) are six identical, equally spaced smiley face icons composed of two white circles and black dots for eyes; a small, half-circle nose; and a wide, single line smile on tawny brown skin.

The work references a common pictorial tool utilized in hospitals, clinics, and medical offices, especially those that provide care for children: a pain scale is a short-hand index to measure and communicate someone's levels of pain. In its common form, a pain scale has six faces that change from smiling to crying and that correspond to a numbered color gradient that changes from green to red. In *Pain Scale*, though, the facial expression of the graphic representing level one, "no pain," is indistinguishable from the graphic representing level six,

"worst possible," "very severe," or "unimaginable/unspeakable pain."

The brown faces smile, unwavering, all the same.

*My two sisters and I smile into the camera. The subtle differences in the shape of our faces and the style of our hair make us distinguishable. We have three similar smiles. My father points to my oldest sister's face and asks, Do you see a difference? Looking closer, the corners of her smile are flattened. Her smile edges a grimace.*

*Haunted, my father retells me the story of the too-manyth time that my sister was left alone in an emergency room. in excruciating pain. begging for relief. for attention. for care. for help. My father tells me. about the doctors and nurses. who came to the room. and asked her. to describe. her pain. as she screams. cries. groans. doubled over. mopping the floor with the ill-fitting hospital gown. arranged to allow immediate access. to her body. by health workers. who were denying the severity of her discomfort. My father remembers. my sister. leaning onto the IV stand. walking. then crawling. then dragging. into the halls. trying to make herself. more. visible. in desperate need of relief.*



Magnified to the scale of a human face and installed approximately five feet off the ground, the faces function as an uncanny, unresponsive mirror. The longer the gaze is held and returned, the more jarring, disconcerting, then alarming the blank uniformity becomes. Where the reductive nature of language falls short of capturing deeply complex experiences of pain, health care systems' turn toward the presumed dynamism of the visual field is rendered here as ongoing failure. That failure is exacerbated in relation to Black people, for whom experiences of pain are not only illegible in these settings, but often conceptually impossible amidst the present configurations of an anti-Black world; one shaped in the afterlife of slavery and it's deeply ingrained, globally exported conception of Black people as non-human, non-feeling objects.

*My father remembers. doctors and nurses. walking around my sister. crumbled on the floor. as if her roaring body. were a merely stone. to be passed. just enough room. around its edges. to pass by. and relieve the system. As if she were an unexpected mound. that a cunning swerve could negotiate. As if she simply weren't there at all. When I asked my father, what did you do? Why didn't you help? He tells me he remembers. fifteen years prior. Standing in another emergency room, across town. with his Black and Indigenous father. who was in excruciating pain. He tells me. that when he saw his father. being ignored. he shouted. demanded help. relief. demanded. that someone. take his pain. seriously. only to be removed. from the hospital. by police. Refusing. to leave his daughter. my father tells me. he stood over her. silently. refusing. to leave her side. determined. to stay. to witness. All I could do was witness, he said. Witness. and stay.*

By reformatting and recontextualizing the pain scale, Lazard stages an encounter between the viewer and the static faces wherein the uneven distribution of power activated by the physical space of the medical facility is suspended. In the gallery or museum, this encounter calls into question not just the faulty utility of such a ubiquitous tool, but the complicit violence of the larger medical industrial complex that perpetuates harm, even and especially in moments of severe distress. The work, like others in Lazard's oeuvre, is imbued with the not-distant histories of involuntary medical experimentation conducted upon Black people and the resulting legacies of harm that continue to ripple into the contours of the present.

*by her side. then. silently, pick her up. gather the  
IV stand. collect her belongings. and take her to  
another hospital.*

*Smile. Keep smiling.*

*I can't hear you when you cry.  
I can't hear you when you yell.  
I can't hear you with your face turned up like that.  
I can't hear you in that tone.  
I can't hear you when you demand.  
I can't hear you when you curse.  
What is the real reason you are here?*

One aspect of that harm is the leveling of Black affective landscapes, made visible in the collapsed distance between face one and face six, between no pain and inexplicable pain. The faces, like Dunbar's mask, are synecdoche for the disciplinary regimes that surveil, constrain, and criminalize (pained) Black bodily comportment. Health workers' expectations for a particular manner of communicating pain are too often wielded as manipulative prerequisites for access to care, or justification for substandard care or medical neglect.

The faces mirror and distort. They mock and wait. They refuse and are refused.

*I ask my sister how many times she has been to  
the hospital.*

*this month? or this year? She asks, in return.*

*When she is quiet, sweating, shaking, I place my  
hand, gentle, on her stomach. Silent. I breathe.*

*She breathes.*



# On Ilana Harris-Babou

**Jessica Lynne**

In certain circles that I am part of, there is a joke that often recurs whenever health or wellness knowledge is shared by a particular person who is, ostensibly, the furthest removed from the daily work of health and wellness care. That is, in a room full of Black people, there might be an anecdote shared about an ailment, an ache, a cough, or a condition causing much somatic trouble. As various rounds of hypothesizing ensue, there is typically one person (who shall remain unnamed) who renounces the suggestions for western medical treatment. Soon after, without fail, the room erupts in a particular kind of chaos — not an argument per se nor does the scene become pure comedy. With a mixed mood of gravitas and levity, the group brainstorming continues while this person is met with humorous accusations of being a know-it-all, a knowing nothing at all, or — and this is when the room really erupts — listening to too much Dr. Sebi.

The late Dr. Sebi, born Alfredo Darrington Bowmann, was a self-described alternative healer and caretaker. For Black folks he has become a multi-valiant signifier representing both a skepticism of western medicine traditions and calculated conman who capitalizes from the very mistrust he sows. The tease— you're listening to too much Dr. Sebi —is meant as a dagger: I can't believe he's gotten to you. You know that man is a scammer. We Black folks are only judging but so hard, I suppose, because even if some of us believe Dr. Sebi is the embodiment of the ultimate scam, we have also whispered our own mistrusts of institutionalized medical infrastructure. There is a record, and we carry this record in and on our bodies.

Last fall, amidst the toughest bouts of COVID-19 in the US, the desire for healing abounded as I kept trying to make sense of the disproportionate hospitalization and death rates communities of color faced, and the broken promises we have been juggling long before anyone could make sense of the novel coronavirus. Living in the moment of a severe public health crisis (I keep writing these words, keep thinking about the consequences of crisis), I keep thinking about what has been promised to me by the systems of care in which I am encouraged to believe. I keep thinking about the gaps between this promise and the material reality of support received. I keep thinking about what lives in this wide gap, in the failures of capitalism: racism, sexism, misogyny and the like.

This sentiment struck me intensely as I began to learn about Ilana Harris-Babou's multi-channel video installation, *Long Con* (2020). Harris-Babou has a knack for identifying the absurdist qualities within the capitalistic industries that purport care, health and wellness, and luxury living. *Long Con* positions Dr. Sebi and perhaps an even more recognizable figure, Miss Cleo (born Youree Dell Harris in Los Angeles), as avatars of this scheme. Taken together, the duo anchor Harris-Babou's satirical critique of an absurd money-making machine that has only intensified in our moment of social and medical catastrophe. In *Long Con*, archival footage of Dr. Sebi interviews and old television advertisements from Miss Cleo are interspersed with images of tarot cards, clips of eager studio audiences, and even a soundbite of the late rapper Nipsey Hussle discussing Dr. Sebi's death — the rapper was an ardent Sebi devotee. Proclamations from Sebi about the ills of "Caucasian food" or declarations of Miss Cleo's "amazing abilities" are scored by a meditative track that evokes a generic, lingering calm, seemingly emblematic of the promises of self-care as marketed by corporate entities. *Long Con* is funny — reflective of Harris-Babou's signature style of dry humor and sarcasm — and will likely have viewers reflecting on their own encounters with the once ubiquitous "mysticism" of Miss Cleo, for instance, and their own patterns of wellness consumption.

Indeed, so much of contemporary wellness work and services that are (re)packaged and sold to consumers rely on a consumption of Black, native, often non-western, spiritual, and medicinal traditions. Devoid of context and community within the marketplace, practices such as tarot, for example, become bland commodities readily devoured or, at times, mocked for a sellable kookiness.

However, as I spent more time thinking about this video and, ultimately, the whole of Harris-Babou's eponymously titled exhibition at the Jacob Lawrence Gallery in Seattle, I also began to think about what a long con means in a moment of catastrophe. Should we read schemes of packaged spirituality or commodified herbalism as anything more than a response to perpetual systemic failure? How absurd are such performances in the wake of mass medical disenfranchisement that still disproportionately affects Black communities?

So, when my friend is quick to dispense a knowledge located somewhere between blood memory and conspiracy theory, the room laughs, of course. And then a pause settles, a quiet acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of exploitation in spite of remedies far less easily obtained.



**Q U E R  
I M A G I N A T I O N S**

quinn menichol

*Queer Imaginations* is a group show curated by Brittney Frantece that includes works by Berette S Macaulay, August Oaks, Meshell Sturgis, Nanya Jhingran and Rasheena Fountain alongside relics of Frantece's own work and research for this project. Frantece carefully considers each room of the Jacob Lawrence Gallery (Seattle, WA), grounding the space with temple-like central structuring, experimental lighting and arrangements that physically and theoretically offer alternatives to the violence of sexist, racist, and repressive world structural systems. Visitors are welcomed into a balanced and pleasantly hazy space to view art, hear poetry, and engage with readings about Black, queer, and femme dreams of visibility and belonging.

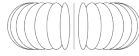
In the first gallery, an altar-like assemblage of repeating square shapes and small relics whispers of burning structures and quietly, creatively rebuilding them (August Oaks' *HUMAN FORCE*). On either side of this centrally placed arrangement are two pairs of worn photographed faces suspended in gel medium (Berette S Macaulay's *Fissured Series*), who seem to stare into viewer's eyes, and then gaze across the room at Meshell Sturgis' contemplations on capturing Black liquidity: menstrual blood encased in resin, and a charcoal drawing of a headless sculpture of a black body. The adjacent wall is activated by three intentionally placed off-kilter frames, each containing a small magazine-paper collage that twist articles and advertisements into dreamy rearrangements (Nanya Jhingran's *Outtakes from Late Capitalism*).

Pull a curtain back and enter into the second room, which is painted inky-dark blue, lit by hanging bulbs like that of an angler fish, illuminating select sections of the wall that hold five patterned drawings and one flowing photograph. We stand beneath the sounds of words spoken by Rasheena Fountain and Jhingran, which weave in and out of one's internal dialogue as we move through this underwater feeling space. The voices from above relate their imaginings of bodies of color living in cityscapes and ecstatically shifting on dance floors. That way of moving and dancing is echoed in the photographed figure, who is draped in fabric and moves with the wind, sand and air that surrounds them (Macaulay's *il/legible presences 20*), and in the freedom with which Sturgis repeats ink patterns on paper, and our own bodies, slipping into the subliminal feeling of flowing through this deep watery space; Erykah Badu croons from a spinning record in a side room.

This third, smaller, dimmer room in the gallery smells like dried flowers, oils and incense. It is a sitting kind of space, full of the information which becomes *Queer Imaginations*. Two chairs and a coffee table sitting opposite a video projection of a static stream allow us space to sit and digest the information inside. A collection of records by Badu, Nina Simone, and Earth Wind & Fire scatter the floor. On one wall are a glittered painting and a lino block print, one of the actual blocks themselves hanging on the adjacent wall. We experience both the thing used to make the art, and the art itself living in the same space suggesting that the experience of making art is equal to the art itself. The many notes taken, drawings made, alter offerings, and books read (Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Octavia Butler's *Blood Child* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*) connect us with the active mind and body of the curator, a Black femme scholar who ponders what ways new worlds can be built through reshaping current realities through radical queer imaginations.

# “A Way To Come Home To My Image”

zakkiyah najeebah dumas-o'neal



Watching *Synonyms of Orange* (2020) from a projector at home, I saw an amalgamation of self-portraiture, a found video of poet June Jordan reciting “Song of the Law Abiding Citizen,” flashing images of street lights, and footage of buildings, outdoor plants, and domestic space. I saw kelechi agwuncha’s video work for the first time—during an online screening event hosted by Chicago-based independent project space, Midwaste Space Peoples—in May of 2020, basically at the height of the pandemic. The work, mostly taken on a shaky, handheld VHS camcorder, ultimately concludes with kelechi’s own image inside their home. It felt both disorienting and familiar. kelechi’s work draws on the nature of “being” through their own childhood memories of play, body movement, the cosmic, interior selfhood, athletic performance, surveillance, and techno inspired bass heavy sounds that, they tell me, “mimic heartbeats.”

Although this work wasn’t a direct jab at the pandemic, they shared with me that the film was “a way to come home to my image”—literally visualizing the transition from outside to inside (the home) by way of a VHS camcorder. The candid home video is a method of thinking through transcendence; or, as kelechi puts it, a means to “push out a memory of feeling embodied.” We see an instance of this in *Synonyms of Orange* where kelechi is oscillating their body, mimicking the movement of a tether ball outside, and later on in the film when kelechi reappears more visibly inside their home, their reflection appearing and reappearing amidst flashes of light in the bathroom mirror.

The form and technique of the VHS method further obscures our sense of time and place because it appears as if we could be in the ‘90s or early 2000s, when handheld VHS cameras were used more widely to create home videos. kelechi repurposes the “home video” as a tool to render and locate their own body as not only moving in service to the mundane but reorienting their image into a transcendent state.



What can be learned from constant movement without resolution? Can we stabilize ourselves—come home to our image—without arrival?

Kelechi's interest in personal myth-making is a deliberate action to remove binaries of the "gaze," and is a reference to Adrian Piper's *The Mythic Being* (1973-75), a black and white photo series of Piper's male alter ego who appeared in performances, newspaper ads, and drawings. kelechi's form is most often obscured through plays of light and shadow and by sharp editing—we don't see their full face until the last half of the film. This authoring of illegibility within their own image does away with hegemonic modes of seeing, and kelechi reimagines how their own Blackness and queerness exist beyond the confines of time and space.

kelechi describes it best here:

"Seeing the body as a language, it's a spiritual feeling, It's like church. you really can't explain the spiritual embodiment, you just have to experience it for yourself..."

Whether I'm engaging kelechi's films, live video DJing, sound explorations, community making, or even their Instagram feed, I often experience a lasting hyper awareness of my own body, a sensation that kelechi is actively trying to produce within their work.

When I haven't run into kelechi through mutual friends and social spaces (limited because of covid), our conversations have mostly happened over Zoom, where they have queried "What propels Blackness to move?" and "What is the rebel to the image?" kelechi's relationship to movement, informed by their own athleticism, and embrace of rebellion agitates my own desire to engage with, and find faith in error. That error can be a space in which we (Black and queer folks) can be infinite, evolving so rapidly that I also find myself constantly trying to keep up.

kelechi's practice reveals to us that Black bodies can collapse time, glitching your own image can bring you closer to truth, and that a queer way of "doing things" is how we transcend.

i find myself always wanting to be there.



# SCREEN / STAGE

Aurora San Miguel

*deader than dead is a video performance lamenting cycles of tragedy.*

Held too long in a stasis, the body atrophies. To avoid this natural wasting, one must maintain base-level movement and a will to keep going—caught in a state of inactivity, the body may do nothing besides give in to its inevitable collapse. A procession of masked figures begin their danse macabre.

Austyn Rich stares directly into the camera lens, scraping black Nikes across a chartreuse-soaked floor while two folded torsos loom in the background. A verbal “OFF” from Rich initiates a non-diegetic baroque symphony, breaking from the stillness of our slumped performers into a slow series of thuds, slaps, and convulsions. Jasmine Orpilla now locks eyes with the fourth wall and breaks out Guillaume de Machaut’s “Complainte: Tels rit au main qui au soir pleure” (c. 1340) in a mournful soprano before, yet again, falling under the weight of her own body.

Ligia Lewis’ latest *deader than dead* is a production modified for the frame. Shifting from a highly experiential mode, the work makes use of cinematic techniques to reinforce the same referential and spirited rhythm found in her live choreographies. Here, Lewis and her collaborators model a lesson in object permanence: flesh impacts the walls or itself, it either sticks to a surface or is defeated by impenetrability.

Orpilla continues, now hugging the back wall while reciting Ian McKellen’s description of Macbeth’s final soliloquy, where the titular protagonist reflects on his apathetic response to death. The words “total blackness and total despair, that life is finite...” reverberate as Lewis and Rich twirl around the room, flailing their limbs in an incessant sequence of seemingly illogical movements. “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” remarks on a place that lies somewhere outside of traceable time, where Life and its twin sister Death cycle ad infinitum. The reference to not only Shakespeare’s famous lines but their powerful representational qualities as observed by McKellen insist on the ways in which repetition, especially that of tragedy, begets an embodied response. How much terror can be absorbed until total collapse?

The sonic landscape quickly morphs yet again, layering cacophonous vocal distortions over mimed cradling, hipsways, and stomping until an abrupt stop. Until now, the screen has been divided into ever-evolving variations on the quadrant, a composition that provokes the eyes to wander from square to square without distracting cutaways. The move to a single overhead shot coupled with dance beats marks another major shift in the performance. As the dancers continue dragging and rearranging each other's incapacitated bodies, Jasper Marsalis appears in the corner of the now sickly green room to introduce his auto-tuned voice. The camera fixates on Rich, slowed down with a higher frame rate, effectively punctuating each of his low shuffles and alternate toe touches. A reanimated trio emerges following in a short, synchronized line, clapping and stepping to the rhythm of the score's crescendo. It is dark in the room and the fluorescent tubes that once lit the space evenly, have started their own program of gestures.

When all of the lights come back on, a force possesses each performer into their own world of schizo-chatter. Their visible upper faces dilate in an exaggerated, theatrical manner, muttering a nearly indecipherable script. Under a mask, hyper-expression is the default and everyone must become an expert of laconic delivery. A few lines are perceptible amongst combatting voices: "don't work for free," "self checkout," "hello," "that's how they get you," "I just fill up my basket." This relentless noise coupled with shrieks and zombie-like crawling ceases once the three reach the back wall, where soft murmurs take its place.

Throughout *deader than dead*, it feels almost impossible to separate aesthetics from their production. The purposefully pared-down masked ensemble performing for a camera operates with another layer of value than one with the intent of being performed in person to a responsive audience. A certain nostalgia for breathy microphone mumbles and sweat-induced pheromone-scented rooms underlines the work, but the video as an artifact proves a useful and seductive tool for Lewis' future performances. The last shot offers a brief moment of repose, as the video cuts to the ensemble lying on the ground, forming a quiet tableau, while Marsalis' haunting imperative, "fix our surfaces" signals both the specificity of its time and tragic continuation.

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*can there be?*

*I meditated on Antidote for a week or two. Starting each morning with a fritter and this guided meditation. Art is made to be lived with too.*

*Below I hope to tap into the world I've inhabited for a minute now. A world where the only thing certain is uncertainty and change. My adaptability feels protected and appreciated. This is a snapshot into my working diary.*

### **May 27: Untitled**

The birds sound louder. They actually respond to cars and the wind. I consider going but quit while I'm ahead. My attention span is shorter today. or is my focus sharper?

"I agree to allow myself to have an awake, engaged, unfixed gaze."

Anyway, there are things to do!

places to be(?)...

What do I need to do to feel ready for the day?

## March 19: Untitled

“Antidote is an offering and prayer. It’s an interruption, hacking, a portal, a medicine. A ritual response and physical undoing, of the lie that we are not our own, that we are not free...”

You know stained glass? I’ve always wondered what’s happening in-between the panes. Maybe I should wash my eyes so I can be a proper witness. How do you even wash your eyes though?

When a rainbow happens it’s really just a cause-and-effect thing, timing. so maybe if i open my senses it will happen. The rainbow moment. The cleansing.

Here I go...

Breathe in. Push the air to each area.

Any difference?

...There’s still this steep breath in my chest, I wish it was in my belly, easier to stomach/live with.

But I’ve always been a sensitive person. Right now I’m obsessed with the idea of blooming and radiating from within. there’s this yellow/orange-ish light inside of me and it fills the center of me. The fastest activation is M.I.A. with her fast, vivid dynamic sounds. OR slow and extremely bright, wavy, music like Toro y Moi. The depth is hard to maintain.

I guess Antidote provides another access point to the surface, like fire to the glass and glaze.

Its a method to reference when decolonizing one’s imagination and subsequently interrogating one’s own definition of freedom

Close your eyes. You see Black with waves of light, right? Well waves of light are cool and I feel at peace here. Sometimes I wonder if this is the closest I’ll get to freedom without fear. I wonder what it feels like to walk with freedom all day everyday.

The without fear part is key here.

## May 28: the internet and people share a few things in common

The creation of decolonized space and its subsequent intentions and community in Antidote, co-stewarded by Marguerite Hemmings and LaJuné McMillian, is why I revisit this web ritual.

Accountability and vulnerability can coexist. Consent is negotiated as you continue to scroll down the page. There's confusion when presence is lacking, appropriately cutting the conversation. The borders are clear, the feedback loop is closed. Conversation is shared with equal contributions.

As a viewer, you control the pace of absorption. This work is personal and accommodating. Enjoying the site with others or alone makes a difference. A group may consider establishing an intention at the beginning. Do you want to watch the whole thing? On one shared screen or individually, will you talk after? The first few minutes are spent reading and preferably reciting the amendments out loud. There's a different level of comprehension achieved from reading aloud.

In the end, the viewers leave with an appreciation for the internet along with a different view on its artistic possibilities. Can the internet(we) be grid-less? Will it (I) be free from container galleries?

...I can't help but compare my life to that of the internet. Maybe because we are so close in age???

June 12: The antidote is *decolonized space*.

The antidote is *decolonized space*.

After actively surrendering what did not serve me, I felt soft again.

Sensitivity is a blessing. *Antidote* provides no answer, only a space to explore what decolonization could mean for *you*. Though technical, the spiritual accessibility of *Antidote* is a wanderlust reminder that, again, *art is made to be lived with too*.



# **Black Refractions: Holed Up and Held Down**

**Meshell Sturgis**

I have had a thing with Black holes lately. I know I'm not the only one enraptured by their gravitational pull. No lick, finger, or fist will do. Give me one I can step in, sink, and swim into whole. Press past the point until the slightest shift gives way. And after slick constrictions of all the muscle I can muster, I'd like to find myself exhausted and somewhere else.

I been bumpin' my gums, saying too confidently what it is that I want meanwhile hardened to its actual possibility. That changed after fighting my way into a COVID-restricted Frye Art Museum on opening day of *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem*, curated by Connie H. Choi, the Associate Curator of The Studio Museum. That day I felt the feeling of falling free while simultaneously finding my feet firm on a different ground. A joyous nausea.

Covering an immense span of artwork made by those of African descent, the Emerald (read: white) City of Seattle is where the nationally renowned exhibition comes to a close. It opens with Glenn Ligon's neon sign entitled *Give Us a Poem* (2007) set against a deep royal blue gallery wall. With the word "ME" stacked symmetrically above "WE," Ligon's work illuminates the meaning of refraction: reflection bent by change.

I've been had a thing with lines. Following along, reading between, lip, and eye. Again, I'm not the only one. In this coast-to-coast exhibition, there are various vectors or axes over which Blackness is refracted. From the invisible crease that separates Ligon's white glowing words to the undetectable threshold established by two foundational painters in the following room, this show activates that which is otherwise imperceptible. On the right is Jacob Lawrence's *The Architect* (1959) and across the space on the opposing wall is Norman Lewis' *Blue and Boogie* (1974). These pieces—one small and figurative, the other large and abstract—stabilize such that a chasm opens in between, brimming with all that I desire.



The Architect shows a man with blueprints spread before a gaping window. Outside, black steel beams are being craned into a formation that frames a blue blob at the center of an otherwise muted gray sky. The vibrant skyline of a little city rests beneath a particularly prominent beam textured like wood. Although the cubism lends to predictable relationships between all the objects in the painting, Lawrence masterfully navigates the subtleties of depth and weight. The light blue paper at the forefront lifts effortlessly in the formidable architect's hand. A massive cerulean cloud far off in the distance mirrors the shape of the paper, yet it hangs heavy and wet. What draws these planes of difference together are repetitive horizontal and oblique lines that build a pathway from what's close to what's seemingly unimaginable. Across the gallery way, Lewis' jazz inspired oil painting is anchored by similar shapes and tones. Notably darker, the work churns with indigo and cobalt swatches while constricting and expanding. Thick black brush strokes traced by faint white-lines swirl with and jut horizontally across the top and bottom.

I be forgettin' that Black holes are actually blue. Embodying a similar state, it's easy to get lost in the dichromatic apparatus that magically (read: mechanically) appears between these two paintings. Nevertheless, visitors must pass through this contraption to begin their viewing venture. And, lost I became indeed. Arriving only an hour before the museum closed, I found myself holed up and held down in the first few rooms only to discover that there were several more, close to 100 works in total, filling the Frye.

I will have been one of those touched by this almost indiscernible device. It's like the physics of Al Loving's *Variations on a Six Sided Object* (1967). A dynamic and dense geometric painting in which delineated surface planes (un)fold along solid or perforated lines. If the Lawrence and Lewis paintings are two black holes in themselves, then what happens when one steps into that liminal space tautly drawn between? Or rather, do I in passing (through) become the Black hole instead?

# How/What LaJuné McMillian's Antidote Makes Me Think

Ananya Sikand

At the thirteen-minute mark, familiar imagery floods my screen.

The blue-purple-pink avatars(?) seem to be immersed in water(?), splashing their faces and bodies in a manner that is rife with religious connotations to my mind clouded with anxiety about the precarity of non-upper caste and class Hindu identities. In my own mixed heritage, my parents hail from two regions of India that are worlds apart, half of my family's Muslim religious-cultural world view is being increasingly narrowed, commandeered, and manipulated by the Modi-led Hindu nationalist government to define "otherness."

My mind races to sites, some that I have been to, and others that I have only encountered through photographs and video clips. Amongst them are the ghats or embankments in Benares in Northern India. At such places, imbued with religious sentiment and fervor, devotees swarm to the waters to submerge themselves. They seem to think that by making the proverbial dip they are physically cleansed but perhaps also literally absolved of their sins (which sounds like a pretty convenient excuse).

Cleansing and purification  
Cleansing and purification?!?!?  
CLEANSING AND PURIFICATION!!!

This is where my mind goes.  
To religion and caste.  
No different from the virus-caused pandemic we are now experiencing, caste permeates everything!  
Name, custom, culture  
Where you live  
What you eat  
What you do  
And perhaps more importantly,  
What you cannot do  
What you cannot eat  
Where you cannot live  
Whom you cannot interact with  
Caste controls, organizes and dictates life and space.  
Like an invisible hand that guides, caste pervades and permeates everything.  
Caste is everywhere.

In the context of the carnage in India, where the COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged billions of lives and the Modi-led central government has stood by and done nothing in the best case, and in the worst, they have brought forward religious Hindu festivals such as the Kumbh Mela where these cleansing dips take place on an unimaginably large scale thus turning into super-spreader events. While many thousands are dying every day, many others are unable to secure beds at hospitals or have access to oxygen, and others still do not even have basic medical facilities anywhere near them. The central government's divisive agenda in promoting Hindu nationalism and thereby caste has and continues to take precedence. They think their holy dips will absolve and save them.

As I read aloud LaJuné McMillian's agreements as part of their website and video work *Antidote* ([www.antidote.space](http://www.antidote.space)), I feel the contours of my reality being extended. Antidote transports me to sites that I know and those that I do not; to places far, far away from the reality I live in day in and day out in this moment. The violent realities of a physical place I am far removed from. Yet the organic nature and the pulsating, rhythmic movements of the blue-purple-pink hues that rise and ripple across my screen renew. I listen to the voices telling me of this restorative space. I breathe deeply, just like the voices tell me to, and feel it reverberate across my body. My eyes well up when the voices suggest I drop my sorrows to the ground. Maybe the dip that Antidote suggests I take is different. Different in the sense that it does not absolve me of anything, but rather brings me hope. It lightens the anger, anguish, fear, terror, and guilt, and instead highlights and underscores the potentiality for different futures. Antidote shapes and makes a new world and lets me know that what is to come will be different. As after all, there is a sweetness to knowing that eventually, as poet and scholar Ather Zia notes, all empires crumble.