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RADICAL DISSONANCE and HAUNTED GESTURES:  
Rupture and Reverence in the Artwork of Aja Mujinga Sherrard

By

AJA MUJINGA SHERRARD

Bachelor of Arts, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY, 2011

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Art  
Conceptual Art

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

June 2016

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**RADICAL DISSONANCE | HAUNTED GESTURES:**  
Rupture and Reverence in the Artwork of Aja Mujinga Sherrard

Thesis paper  
by Aja Mujinga Sherrard

Presented  
May 2016



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## INTRODUCTION

I submit this thesis paper for the completion of a Master's degree in Fine Art from the University of Montana, which I am pursuing in conjunction with an M.A. in Art History and criticism. Though this paper is centered on studio work, the influence of my research in Art History and Critical theory may likely be felt throughout.

This paper serves to establish my studio practice within the framework of conceptual art, touching on the flexible use of media, the subversive or political nature of the work, and its relationship to movements and disciplines such as Feminism and Poststructuralism.

The section entitled "Race and Incoherence" addresses the practice of Radical Dissonance—or the creation of ruptures within commonly accepted concepts and social constructions—through the *Costuming Kinship Series, 13≠12≠12.2 (Genetics Project)*, and *Body Double*. The section entitled "Art, Loss, and the Unspeakable" traces an emotional shift in my work and speaks directly to the pieces comprising the thesis exhibition: , *is repair*.





## OUTWARD FROM IDEAS

Conceptual art focuses on the primacy of ideas—whether theoretical, personal, or some juncture between these—as the driving force in artistic production. In a conceptual practice, medium and aesthetics often become secondary to the intent of the project. As a result, the material choices or arrangements are responsive to each project’s needs.

For my practice, this has meant the development of an intensely flexible use of media.<sup>1</sup> Within the featured work, you will find photography, installation, performance, film, and sculptural objects. Additionally, my practice has identified the subtle strategic mediums of *discomfort*, *meaningful parameters*, *action*, or *gesture* as recurring creative tools.

Erratic as though such variability may seem, consistent aesthetic and conceptual trends knit these various media within a certain logic. Visually, I favor starkness, declarative statements, and the presence of my own body or personal possessions. I believe in “stripping the variables,” leaving only active elements that move the work forward conceptually. Although each project is drawn from an independent idea or question, the majority of these pieces surround a particular conceptual core, which asks: How does one become oneself amid social constructions, especially when these constructions are alienating or violent? Who are the gatekeepers of identity and what is the nature of their authority? What has been lost, and what might there still be to gain?

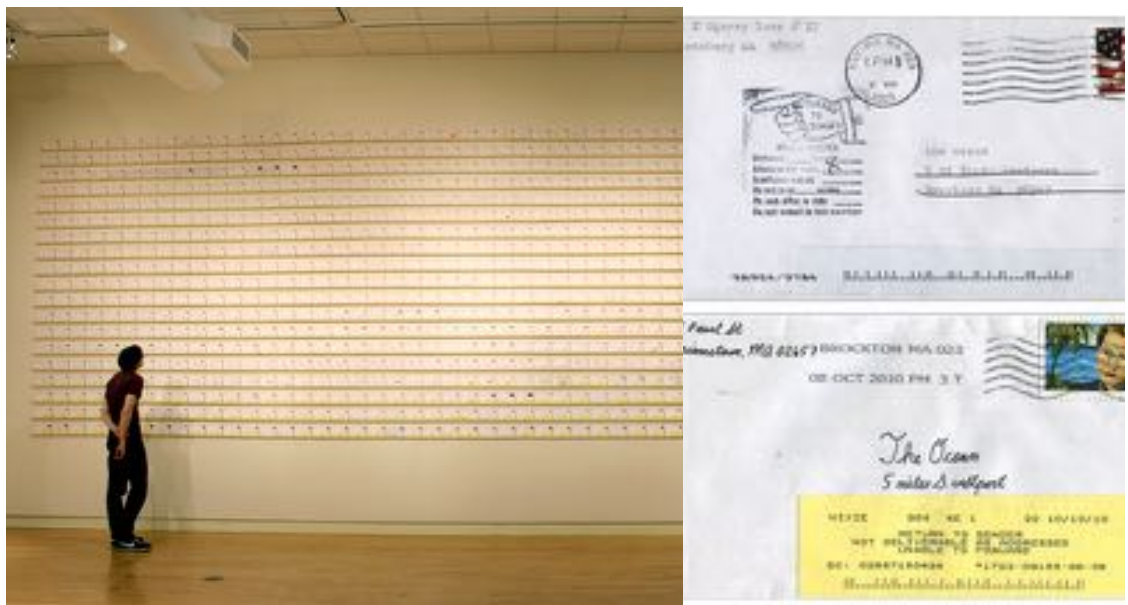
The potency of such starkness can be exemplified in Rachel Khedoori’s 2009 conceptual installation, *Untitled (Iraq Book Project)* (Fig.1). In the project, Khedoori collected all of the news articles regarding the outbreak and progress of the Iraq war published in the U.S between 2003 and 2009 into sixty-six large hand-bound books of bare continuous text, with no line breaks or variations in font. The books sat face-open on simple tables in a bare room, effectively withdrawing any elements from the installation but the *fact* of the books themselves. Faced with the absence of adornment (the aforementioned “stripping of variables,”) the

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<sup>1</sup> One interesting effect of the media-flexible art practice is the sensation of being a perpetual novice: as someone who shifts rapidly between mediums and techniques, I rarely have the opportunity to perfect any skill or develop authority within a specific medium. As a result, my practice requires me to rely heavily on collaboration and trust.



**fig. 1**  
 RACHEL KHEDOORI  
*Untitled (Iraq Book Project) 2009*  
 Installation view: The Box gallery. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen



**fig. 2**  
 JOHN PEÑA  
*Letters to the Ocean. 2003-present*  
 Paper, Envelopes and stamps

overwhelming volume of information and the gravity of its content was unmediated and therefore intensified for its audience.<sup>2</sup>

This phrase: “The fact of,” illustrates a quality particular to conceptual art. Unlike painting and other monumental arts, which may achieve their purpose through illusion or theatricality, conceptual art frequently relies on the essential character of each active element operating as itself in order to create meaning. For example, consider John Peña’s ongoing project, *Letters to the Ocean* (Fig. 2). Here, he displays twelve years’ worth of daily letters addressed to the Ocean and returned by the US postal service.<sup>3</sup> Dedication, futility, ritual, and collection give the piece its resonance—but only through the fact that he performed this daily practice of writing. If the envelopes were empty, or the postal markers falsified, the piece would fail. In short, conceptual projects like this one necessitate deep integrity.

As an emerging scholar of postcolonial theory, my conceptual interests are bracketed to the writings of people like Stuart Hall, Gerardo Mosquera, Olu Oguibe, Judith Butler, Edward W. Said and Michel Foucault—to name a few. Ultimately, though, and in the tradition of Adrian Piper, James Luna, and a number of other subaltern contemporary artists, it is often through the use of my body and personal experience as the site and citation of social constructions such as race or gender that I cull the authority from which to articulate these concepts within my creative work. Through the personal, the visible, the anecdotal, and the sensory, I am able to articulate the presence of identity systems in such a way as to reveal their effects—and their ruptures.

In her essay, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” Judith Butler points towards the subversive qualities of quotation—what she calls “disloyal repetitions.”<sup>4</sup> She frames her argument in an impossibility of choice, meaning that “there is no

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<sup>2</sup> Buckley, Annie. “Rachel Khedoori: Los Angeles, at The Box.” *Art in America: Reviews*. November 13, 2009. Accessed April 10, 2016. <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/rachel-khedoori/>.

<sup>3</sup> Peña, John. “Projects: Letters to the Ocean” *John Peña Art*. 2009. Accessed April 27, 2016. <http://www.johnpena.net/letterstotheocean/>.

<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), p. 166-181. Butler wrote this essay in defense of queer/disempowered quotations of heteronormative architectures within the Ballroom drag scene of the early mid-eighties in New York, where queer black men would mimic the looks and gestures of wealthy white women or build a tradition of insult, called “reading,” into the subculture.

subject prior to its constructions<sup>5</sup>” or no ‘third space’ outside of our existing structures of power and thought. Essentially, she tells us we cannot help but employ the *master’s tools*<sup>6</sup> because there are no others. However, Butler makes it clear that subversion is still possible in a closed space. She writes:

The compulsion to repeat an injury is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat the injury in the same way or to stay fully in the traumatic orbit of that injury...repetitions of hegemonic forms of power which fail to repeat loyally...open possibilities for resignifying the terms of violation against their violating aims.<sup>7</sup>

Here, we are to understand that to retrace or repeat the existing social infrastructure in “unfaithful,” shifted, or inconsistent ways may destabilize its certainty and authority. In my case, articulating the ruptures that emerge at the juncture between my lived experiences and the social infrastructures that strain to frame them can do this subversive work.

When I appropriate racial imagery and language in pieces like *Costuming Kinship* and *13≠12≠12.2 (Genetics Project)*, or when, in the piece: *Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller*, I literally quote misogynistic language, I am not writing a manifesto. I am investigating a fault line—speaking the common languages of race, racism, or misogyny in such a way as to call their coherence into question.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.169.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase, “master’s tools,” refers to the seminal text written by Audre Lorde in 1979: *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House*, where she said exactly the opposite. Lorde asserted that no lasting change could be made within the language of oppressive systems. She suggested, instead, the embracing of the margins, and the creation of an “outside” that Butler doesn’t believe exists—for myself, I do believe that the ‘third space’ is possible, but that it is inevitably built of Butler’s misquotations, recontextualizations, and innovations upon the “Master’s” tools. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*. (Crossing Press, Berkeley CA: 1984), pp. 110-113.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” p. 168

## RUPTURE: ON RACE AND INCOHERENCE

### *Costuming Kinship | 13≠12≠12.2: the Genetics Project | Body Double*

Although the lived experience of race and racial identity is often complex: nuanced, subjective, and even self-contradictory, *race* itself is generally regarded as a stable concept. Whether to exploit or resist it, the majority of American culture<sup>8</sup> is invested in the idea that race is objectively true: consisting of fixed categories with definable qualities and boundaries. In the United States in particular, race is constructed along an aggressive dichotomy between “white” and “not,” where whiteness is absolute, and where the racial other describes any deviation from, or hybridization of, Whiteness.

A number of collective cultural ideas or social infrastructures define the hard line between these absolute categories. For example: the understanding of families as cohesive units of shared identity, tradition, or culture extends into a pervasive sense that race can be made rational through the logic of kinship and blood. Because we believe that the child of a white person will be white, the child of a black person will be black, and so forth, we accept that the division of people into races must be as natural, and rational, as the biological relationships between parents and children.

I created the ongoing series, *Costuming Kinship*, in response to this notion. Currently comprising of three photographs: *Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Father* (Fig. 3), *Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Mother* (Fig. 4), and *Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Grandmother* (Fig. 5), the project interrogates the coherence of race by performing the extent to which race fails to coherently apply within my own multiracial bloodline.

In each photograph, I posed beside a member of my family to whom I am related by blood while wearing acrylic paint and crude costume elements such as a wig, blazer, or dark contacts in order to *appear* to be the same race as they are. The conceptual parameters of the

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<sup>8</sup> I recognize that the use of the word “American” as a concise adjective meaning: “of, or pertaining to, the United States,” is literally inaccurate and/or exclusive of the diverse nations in the larger Americas. However, I will for the sake of clarity (and the lack of alternatives) continue to use “American” in this way for remainder of the essay. Additionally, I name American culture here because I am able to speak of it with authority as a resident of the United States and a researcher of American racial history, but by no means do I want to suggest that other nations are less dependent on the stability of the race as a concept—especially if these are nations and cultures which have been active in, or impacted by, colonialism.



**fig. 3**  
*Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Father.*  
2014  
Mixed media.  
dimensions variable.  
(Missoula, MT). Photo credit: Beth Huhtala



**fig. 4**  
*Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Mother.*  
2014  
Mixed media. dimensions variable.  
(Missoula, MT). Photo credit: Beth Huhtala



**Fig. 5**  
*Costuming Ethnic: The Artist and her Grandmother.* 2015  
Mixed media.  
dimensions variable.  
(Liege, Belgium). Photo credit: Lilliane Evers

project dictated that I must be painted in person with acrylic paint, not digitally altered, and that the family member I was costuming had to be present for the entirety of the shoot. These parameters were purposeful: acrylic paint, with its plastic sheen and masklike quality, emphasized the disconcerting, artificial quality of the images, while the act of sealing my face and neck within this plastic 'false skin' embedded a quality of physical discomfort. Requiring that my family members witness and participate in the physical experience emphasized an emotional or psychological discomfort as well, illustrating the strain that such 'corrective' acts of identification created within our actual relationships. In the photographs where I costume darker than my natural skin tone, chilling echoes of blackface and the violent racial history of caricature, degradation, and appropriation from the era of American Minstrelsy on through contemporary hate crimes and racist parodies<sup>9</sup> imbue the project with a third level of social and historical discomfort.

In short, the images are disturbing: they are eerily false, and politically wrong—even though they propose to be more "true" according to social constructions of race and family in the United States than the reality of our bodies could be. Here, I am treating my body and experiences as a site of incoherence or rupture within those constructions. Calling the system of race into question, the work asks: "How can this be true while I am true?"

Of course, I am not the first artist to articulate problems of race, racial logics, and racism across the citation of their own bodies:

Alaskan<sup>10</sup> artist, Erica Lord's stunning piece: *I Tan To Look More Native* (Fig. 6) addresses the natural variance of her body in the context of racial coding, where dark skin signals an authentic racial identity and light skin signals hybridity, inauthenticity, or even the messy politics of appropriation and passing for white. As a multiracial native woman, Lord directly engages the pressure to perform one's identity authentically in order to preserve her agency and to guard her value in such commodifying fields as the world of Visual Art.

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<sup>9</sup> Take, for example, the widespread reporting of "blackface" or "ghetto" parties on college campuses and in Halloween costumes, as quoted in the 2014 film, *Dear White People*, by director Justin Simien. Justin Simien. *Dear White People*. DVD. Directed by Justin Simien. Los Angeles: Lionsgate Films and Roadside Attractions, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Erica Lord identifies as a Native American woman. She is of Athabascian, Iñupiaq, Finnish, Swedish, English and Japanese heritage. Nancy Marie Mithlo, "Erica Lord," in *New Native art criticism: manifestations*. (Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe NM: 2011). pp. 132–133.





**Fig. 6**  
ERICA LORD,  
*The Tanning Project*, 2005-2007.  
Digital photograph, each 4"x5". Property of the artist



**Fig. 7**  
JAMES LUNA  
*Half Indian /Half Mexican*, 1990.  
Three gelatin silver prints, 30" x 24".



**Fig. 8**  
STACEY TYRELL  
*Fiona, 27yrs. And Maggie, 50yrs.* 2013  
Dimensions variable



**Fig. 9**  
RENÉE COX  
*Hot-En-Tot*, 1994.  
Gelatin Silver Print, 152.4 x 121.9 cm



**Fig. 10**  
COCO FUSCO AND GÓMEZ-PEÑA  
*The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, 1992-1994.  
Performance. 1993 Whitney Biennale

Like Erica Lord, conceptual artist James Luna engages the subtle process of racial coding. In his triptych, *Half Indian/Half Mexican* (Fig. 7), he exploits the way something as simple as a change in hairstyle can lead the audience to project entirely separate racial identities on to him. In profile on the left and right, he appears coherently 'Indian' or coherently 'Mexican,' while the central image displays a humorous juxtaposition of the two. In that central image, Luna creates an impossible signaling: projecting both stereotypes simultaneously and forcing the audience into a kind of stereotype-dissonance.

Stacey Tyrell, in *Fiona, 27yrs. And Maggie, 50 yrs.* from the *Backra Bluid* series (Fig. 8), used racial costuming visually similar to my own, but with a somewhat different purpose. With skillful makeup and staging, Tyrell transformed herself into her white ancestors. Like myself, Tyrell is mixed. Yet, as a visibly dark-skinned woman, she seems to have no claim to her white ancestry. The American system of Hypodescent<sup>11</sup> cannot conceive of her as white, and by extension, cannot imagine her as the descendant of white women. The series is a rebellious one, reclaiming an identity that is unavailable to her in the racial landscape of the United States and critiquing the logic of that landscape.

Renée Cox's Photo, *Venus Hottentot* (Fig. 9), and Coco Fusco's performance, *The Year of the White Bear and Two Undiscovered AmerIndians Visit the West* (Fig. 10), both employ costuming in order to articulate and perform the extremes of racist imagery and stereotypes leveled against them as either a black woman or a South American indigenous woman. Renée Cox's photograph, in which she wears an exaggerated plastic ass and breasts, invokes the dehumanization and hypersexualization of black women's bodies—of which Saartjie Baartman or the "Hottentot Venus"<sup>12</sup> for whom the photograph is named is a chilling example. Coco Fusco reacted to the characterization of South American and indigenous people as exotic,

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<sup>11</sup> *Hypodescent*, more commonly referred to as "the one-drop rule," originated in the United States during the era of slavery in part to protect white property from the mixed children of slaveowners, and was re-entrenched by American apartheid in the era of reconstruction and Jim Crow. It supposes that whiteness is an absolute, "pure" racial category and therefore that any traceable influence of black blood necessarily categorizes someone as black.

<sup>12</sup> Both Historical icon and Historical Figure from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Saartjie, or Sarah, Baartman was an Khoikhoi woman from South Africa stolen from her home and paraded throughout Europe as a sexual curiosity, where audiences, artists, and scientists placed an obsessive and dehumanizing emphasis on the size and shape of her ass and breasts. Her body was kept after her death and displayed in French museums until 1974, when she was finally returned to South Africa. Contemporary critics have linked the treatment of Saartjie Baartman to the media treatment of women like Nikki Minaj and Jennifer Lopez. Sadiya Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Venus Hottentot'," in *History of Science* issue 42 (136): June 2004. pp. 233–257.

primitive, or animalistic by dressing in pseudo-tropical clothing and placing herself and her collaborator, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, in a cage during the 1993 Whitney Biennale. In both cases, the image of Cox as a contemporary Hottentot and the image of Fusco playing the role of an 'undiscovered primitive' on display are presented as hyperbolic, and performed with a defiant sense of irony. However, neither of these clearly hyperbolic images are more extreme than the culture they critique. Cox's image seems tame compared to contemporary hypersexualized portrayals of black women across our media, and a shocking number of Fusco's audience during the Whitney performance of *Two AmerIndians* failed to recognize that this was performance art<sup>13</sup>. Through these projects' head-on engagement with stereotype aggression, Fusco and Cox exposed the pervasiveness of racism and the extreme caricatures still embedded in the Euro-western cultural imagination.

Visibility is a significant factor in the construction of race as a stable concept, but it is not the only factor. As a discipline rooted in objective observations of a concrete universe, the field of Science presumes a sense of concrete authority that carries into its language—and when that scientific language includes racial terms and distinctions, it lends that same presumption of concrete objectivity to the concept of race. I sought to address this association by quoting a contemporary example—the emergence of web-based Genealogy programs—through the piece, *13≠12≠12.2 (Genetics Project)* (Fig. 11).

In this project, I identified the three primary genealogy labs currently operating for the public: 23forme, Ancestry.com, and National geographic. I bought a testing kit from each and, on the same day, mailed in the requested genetic material of saliva or scrapings from the inside of my cheek. Once all three results had been processed, I opened them and displayed them side-by-side. The scientific nature of the process suggests that the results would be absolute—and therefore absolute affirmations of the racial categories they employ. However: when compared side-by side, the results were inconsistent. The project's title, *13≠12≠12.2*, refers to the shifting percentages of African ancestry between the different results—relevant as the detail that categorizes me as "of color" in the dichotomy of the American imagination—but other categories were even more varied. For example, National Geographic claimed that I had

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<sup>13</sup> Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," TDR: Journal of Performance Studies 38, no.1 (Spring 1994), p. 148.

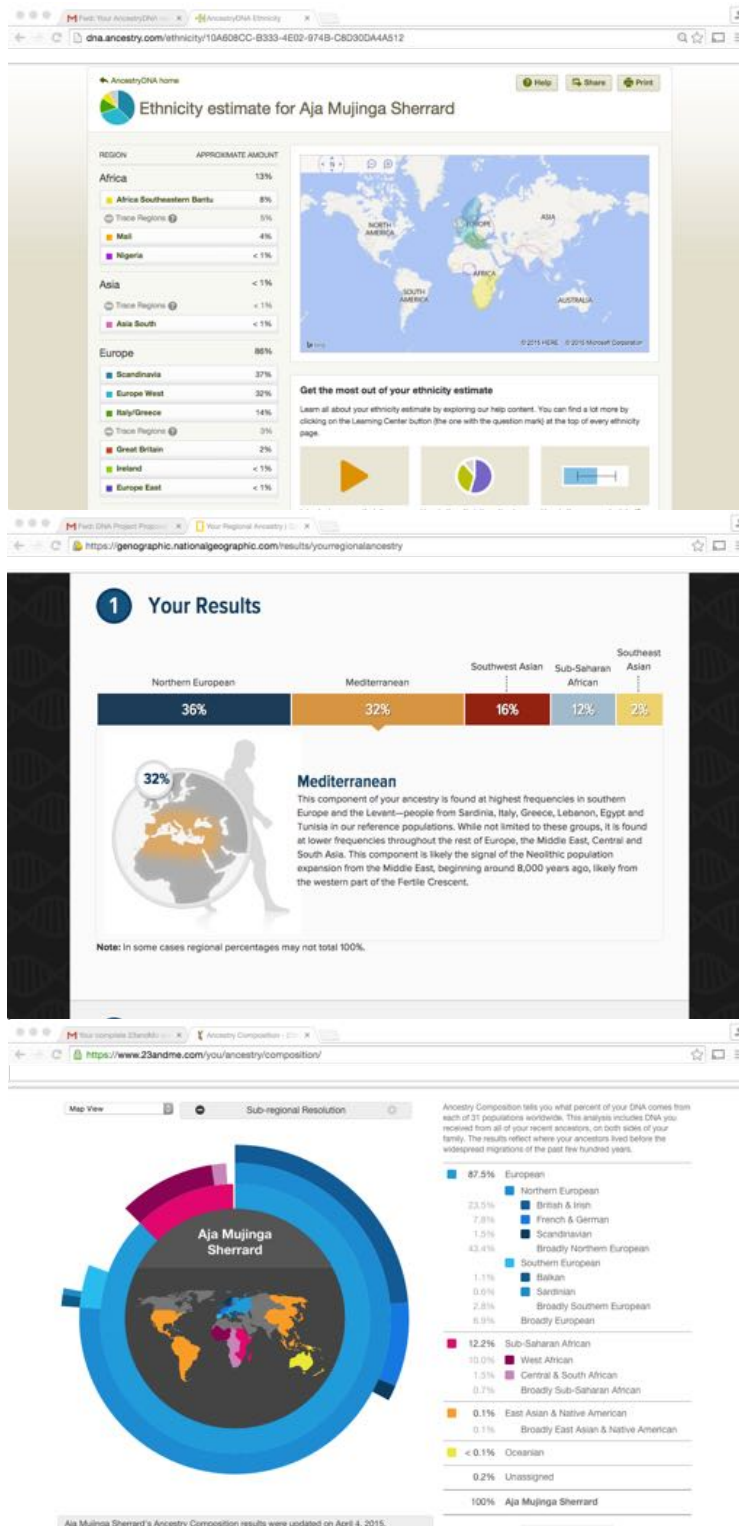


Fig. 11

13 ≠ 12 ≠ 12.2 (Genetics Project). 2015

Screen-captures of official lab results processing the Artist's DNA sample

32% Mediterranean ancestry; Ancestry.com claimed 14% of what they termed “Italy/Greece”, while 23forme reported less than 3% “Broadly southern European.”

The purpose of the project was not to accuse these labs of bad science—or even, really, to accuse Science. The true ethos of scientific reasoning, after all, is one of constant experimentation and responsive theories. Rather, the piece sought to interrogate our dependence on scientific knowledge as a prop for socially constructed racial logics. In the completion of this project, I was interested in further dismantling the presumed coherence of race by exposing the variability and inconsistency of race’s most ‘objective’ pillar.

Though particularly rooted in questions of race and identification, my interest in incoherence has not always been so direct. In the piece, *Body Double* (Fig.12), I explored the possibility of creating a sensation of incoherence through an overabundance of conflicting information. The piece consisted of 365 copies of my birth certificate, each of which were individually falsified with the adjustment of some significant or insignificant details: alternate names my parents may have considered, the insertion of a step-parent in the place of a biological one, an alternate home address, alternate birthing attendant, and so forth. Displayed in a wall-to-wall grid, the potential realities are expansive and seemingly endless.<sup>14</sup> The single ‘true’ birth certificate among them is neither removed nor erased, but rendered meaningless.

The piece points to records and paper trails<sup>15</sup> as supposed confirmations of stable identities and proposed that these, too, have a fragile role in the support of coherent public identities. It references long histories of falsified or erased documentation as a tool of social manipulation across the globe, and it protests the cold and unyielding summary a person into the form of documents. More subtly, the piece was an act of nostalgia—visualizing the disorienting consequences of engaging the proposition, “what if...?”

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<sup>14</sup> That sensation of endlessness at the edge of the grid, or pattern, can be explained by Derrida’s writings on the sublime: In particular, his proposal that the sublime is located at the edge (or *cise*) of an object or image—suggesting that the sublime occurs as a result of our intuitive continuation of the image beyond it’s physical boundaries. Jacques Derrida, “Pareagon” In *The Truth In Painting* (The University of Chicago: 1978), p. 133

<sup>15</sup> Alternatively titled, “*There were two Oswalds*,” the piece stemmed from the question of legitimate paper trails and the incoherence of false alternates posed by a course entitled “Conspiracies as Influential text” with Thomas Sayers Ellis, in consideration of Tom DeLillo’s novel, *Libra*.



**Fig. 12**  
*Body Double* (detail.) 2015.  
Installation at the Off-Center Gallery: 134" x 115"



**Fig. 13**  
*A Successful Artwork*. 2015.  
Film still. Dimensions variable

## REVERANCE: ART, LOSS, AND THE UNSPEAKABLE

### *A Successful Artwork I , is repair*

*A Successful Artwork* (Fig. 13) was the first piece that overtly addressed the emergence of grief as a subject of my work. The fifteen-minute, single-take silent film was rendered in soft gray scale and featured only myself at the center of the frame, facing forward and crying. Triggered by a recording made by my father's students on the week of his death, the act of crying was visceral and without performance. Over this subtle image, I superimposed a static phrase in clean, white, all-capital font: "A SUCCESSFUL ARTWORK IS AN EVASION OF REALITY THAT TELLS A LARGER OR DEEPER TRUTH. TO SUCCEED, THE ARTIST MUST AVOID THE FOLLOWING: BEING TOO LITERAL AND BEING TOO SENTIMENTAL."

By pairing this expression of raw, unchecked emotion with the censoring veil of critical language, the piece articulated a central issue emerging in this moment of my practice: how might I continue to make intelligent work while grieving a sudden and difficult death? While earlier work had cited the personal as the site of broader social issues, it had nonetheless allowed me to regard those issues with a quality of detached, sober lucidity. The newer work, by comparison, drew directly from personal experience not as an example, but as a source—exposing a quality of deeply subjective intensity and vulnerability that seemed to be in direct conflict with the way I had performed my intellectual authority.

My thesis exhibition: *, is repair*, consists of five pieces from this more emotionally driven chapter of my practice. Following the death of my father and the death of my maternal grandmother six months later, the exhibition as a whole sought to give form to the varied faces of loss: *(Our) Baby Blanket* reflected the challenge of mourning two people at once. *Names* spoke to isolation. *Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga, As Read by her Grandchild* addressed the problem of inheritances that have been rendered meaningless by difference and distance. *Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller* articulated the crisis of being left behind with unresolved wounds. The title piece: *, is repair*, manifested the quiet, regular gestures of healing that characterize a period of grief and reveal the surprising ways in which grieving can become a generous act.



Is the work intelligent? Compared to earlier projects, this later chapter in my work is far less researched. Rather than being rooted in theory, it is rooted in intuition; rather than engaging in the larger dialogue of contemporary art, it is an act of solipsism—presuming that the world can be understood only through an understanding of the Self. Rather than discussing overarching social issues and constructions, it embraces only the small radius of the immediate audience. If we decide that this is in fact intelligent work, then its intelligence must be measured by a different metric: intuition, empathy, and personal reflection in the place of empiricism or objectivity.

There are, however, some overarching themes that connect this body of work to my earlier pieces. In particular: the treatment of *action* and *gesture* as creative mediums and the use of significant or 'haunted' materials to create meaning beyond the physical limits of the work.

In the piece, *(Our) Baby Blanket* (fig. 14), I recovered a quilt both my father and I had been wrapped in as infants. The hand-made, fifty-year old blanket was badly torn and in a state of disrepair. Treating this shared heirloom as a representation of my paternal history, I sought to articulate my complicated role in his family through an act of corruptive repair. Although the quilt featured a simple design in pale green and soft floral print, I repaired it with bold and sturdy wax cloth, or *pagne*. The cloth was inherited from my Congolese Grandmother. As such, I associated the fabric to her and to the African character of my maternal family. I also considered it an autobiographical symbol: like myself, the wax cloth is a global hybrid with a complex colonial lineage.<sup>16</sup> Through the disruptive insertion of this cloth into the original pattern, our blanket was both repaired and not repaired. The pattern was destroyed by my contribution, the new fabrics glaring from the docile green material, and the tattered shreds were still visible beneath my timid stitches.

I made this piece before the death of my maternal grandmother, whose fabrics I used in the repair of the blanket, and therefore did not intend for it to articulate the crisis of mourning

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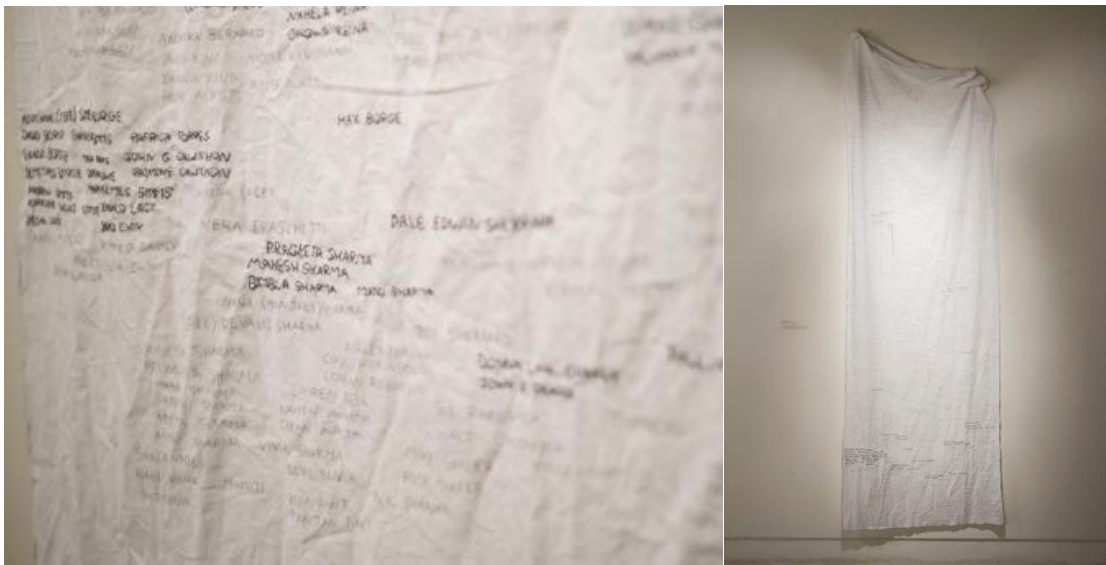
<sup>16</sup> The fabric, as quoted by artist Yinka Shonibare in his brilliant critiques of authenticity and colonial brutality, are in fact Dutch interpretations of Indonesian design produced in Holland and other satellite factories, then distributed almost exclusively to countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Amanda Elizabeth Hicks, *Tailoring Patterns of Perception: Dutch Wax Textiles, Yinka Shonibare and Cultural Brokerage in the Postcolonial Age*. Thesis presented to the Department of Art History and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon. (Eugene: University of Oregon, 2006) p. 3



**Fig. 14**

*(Our) Baby- Blanket. (detail) 2015.*

Quilt made by the artist's paternal great-grandmother and used by her father and herself as infants, Dutch Wax Cloth (purchased in the Congo DRC), Batik cloth (inherited from Indian relatives), thread. Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula MT. Photo credit: Sarah Moore



**Fig. 15**

*Names (detail)/ Names. 2016.*

White cotton, black thread, graphite, names.

Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula MT. Photo credit: Sarah Moore

two different people at once. Returning to the piece after her death, however, this new meaning was impossible to dislodge. In the context of my thesis exhibition, *(Our) Baby Blanket* has become first and foremost about irreconcilable histories conjoined by loss; the anxiety that one is better mourned than the other; and the inevitability of their juncture, however unharmonious, in the tender and intimate body of the quilt.

The *Names* (fig. 15) piece emerged from the potency of stitching as a meditative or symbolic process. This is an ongoing project: I plan to hand-stitch the names of everyone I know, and who knows me, in a continuously expanding stretch of white cotton fabric. In the context of grief, the piece explores my sense of isolation in the face of loss by making a tangible record of the struggle to remember, and better understand, my remaining relationships. Through the quiet act of stitching, I address each relationship that has shaped me—however immensely or tangentially, though a small and focused moment of labor. The project also represents my fascination with the material quality of names.<sup>17</sup> In particular: the conflicting qualities of resonance<sup>18</sup> and fragility that they embody when written.

A beautiful reflection of stitching as a reverent or symbolic gesture, Beili Liu's piece, *The Mending Project* (Fig. 16), is also a strong example of the use of action and gesture as a medium. For the duration of the piece, Liu sat at a solitary table beneath a threatening mass of traditional sewing shears hanging from the ceiling. She slowly stitched together fragments of white cloth that audience members had been encouraged to cut from a sheet outside of the gallery and hand to her. In the space of the gallery, the act of stitching developed a ritual significance. The image of a lone woman performing this reparative action beneath the threat of shears spoke of anxiety and looming global or personal dangers—and the futility, or bravery, of working beneath them. However, for the audience, whose role as the providers of these fragments drew them directly into Liu's work, the gesture became personal: a generous act of bravery, repair, or unity on their behalf.

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<sup>17</sup> *Of Such Gain* consisted of a business suit sewn from cloth that had been printed with the names of each person I knew and who knew me as a comment on the American concept of self-made success.

<sup>18</sup> In mythology and magic, there are recurring incidents of written or uttered names as powerful materials. From the folktale of Rumpelstiltskin, to the chanted names of divine figures ranging from Shiva to the Virgin Mary, to the use of handwritten names in spell-work from Vodun tradition (Zora Neal Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*) to the unspeakable name of Voldemort in the bestselling Harry Potter franchise—our collective human culture is full of this association between names and power.



**Fig. 16**  
BEILI LIU  
*The Mending Project* 2011  
Installation/ Performance

The loss of my maternal grandmother significantly changed the landscape of my family. With her death, our generation lost its footing in the complex territory of cultural identity and memory. Among her fifteen grandchildren, I was fortunate to be the only one who ever traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo with her and who was able to meet the extended family she had been forced to leave behind. Perhaps, it was for this reason that I was the one to inherit the stack of letters featured in the performance piece: *Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga, as read by her grandchild* (fig. 17). These were one half of a correspondence dating back approximately fifty years between Mujinga and her uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, and their children—and the majority of them were written in my grandmother’s natal language of Tshiluba, which I can neither speak nor understand.

Performing, *Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga*, I addressed these letters as a representation of both the loss of my grandmother and the parallel loss of language, history, and belonging. Placing myself at a small table in an anonymous parking lot<sup>19</sup>, I read the letters aloud for a period of eight hours. This was an act of mourning, reverence, and closure. Yet, the fractured strain in my voice as I stumbled through handwritten Tshiluba with uncertainty and increasing exhaustion also signaled the void left by her death, my distance, and our colonial displacement.

Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts for my thesis exhibition, this secondary version of *Lettres* (fig. 18) removed my physical presence from the work. In its place, the disembodied sound of my voice emerged from within the stack of letters at a low, intimate volume. The empty chair gave the piece a haunted feeling, while the darkness surrounding the table and chair reproduced the sense of exposure and vulnerability the piece conveyed when initially performed outside. Finally, the subtleness of the sound forced the audience to stand directly above the desk and was designed to create an additional sense of intimacy and vertigo.

*Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller* (fig. 19) may be the exhibit’s most emotionally difficult piece. The installation deals with the persistence of interpersonal wounds after a death and does so without directly incorporating elements of repair or resolution. In particular, the

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<sup>19</sup> The intention was to bring the performance outside, in a mundane public setting, in order to create a quality of vulnerability, exposure, and isolation in the piece. In the parking lot, I was able to “rent” the public space for the duration of the day by continuously feeding the meter. Spontaneously, members of the audience stepped forward to contribute coins and feed the meter on my behalf, allowing me to remain seated and performing throughout.



**Fig. 17**  
*Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga, As Read by her Grandchild* 2015.  
Film Stills, Performance: Missoula, MT.  
Video/Image credit: Karl Schwiesow



**Fig. 18**  
*Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga, As Read By Her Grandchild* 2015.  
Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula MT.  
Photo credit: Sarah Moore



**Fig. 19**  
*Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller*. 2016.  
Multimedia Installation: *Inherited Mirror, Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller, Journal cuttings, resin.  
Dimensions variable Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula MT. Photo credit: Sarah Moore

piece deals with the way societal violence—such as misogyny—may interrupt our relationships and hinder the process of mourning.

In journals from my father's mid twenties, he describes himself as a nearly fanatical admirer of the author, Henry Miller. He was rumored to have painted Miller's face on the back of his favorite jacket and his journals from the period emulate Miller's wit and Miller's language. In the year following my father's death, I mourned him in part by retracing his steps through the literature he had loved while he was alive. This brought me to Henry Miller's autobiographical novel: *Tropic of Cancer*. Though I knew enough to anticipate some misogyny, some racism, and some expatriate arrogance, what I encountered in the text was intolerable.<sup>20</sup> The resulting question was compulsive: How can someone have idolized this language and also have, or love, an adult multiracial daughter?

In the creation of *Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller*, I consolidated the effect of Henry Miller's misogynistic language by cutting every incident of the word "cunt," "bitch," "whore," or "wench" from the body of *Tropic of Cancer*. When the misogyny represented itself in other concise phrases, such as "...if rape is the order of the day, then rape I will, and with a vengeance.." or, "...You can pinch her ass if you like..." I cut and collected those as well. In order to represent the connection I saw between Henry Miller and my father, I also included handwritten cuttings of similar phrases from a journal my father had kept in his mid-twenties. The total collection of misogynistic clippings was then resin-cast<sup>21</sup> over the reflective surface of a full-length mirror. A common symbol of self-perception or the internalized gaze<sup>22</sup>, the use of *this* mirror in particular was significant in that it had been a gift from my father to myself. Therefore, it represented not only my perception of myself, but also his contribution to this self-perception.

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<sup>20</sup> However, I want to be careful here that my characterization of the work as intolerable is not a negation of the book's literary importance or confused with impulse towards censorship. I believe very strongly that all literature should be able to exist and be read, even if it should trigger responses of heartbreak or outrage.

<sup>21</sup> Although the resin was transparent enough to allow the audience to read the clippings of text, the resin gave the mirror a distorted, watery quality not unlike the effect of trying to see through tears.

<sup>22</sup> See John Berger's discussion of the split female consciousness (akin to W.E.B. Dubois' description of Double Consciousness) as it fractures into both the *surveyor* and the *surveyed*. John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. (London, England: British Broadcasting Corporation: Penguin Books, 1973), Chapter 3, pp. 45-64.





**Fig. 20**

*,is repair.* 2016.

Performance Installation. Installation view.

Installed at the Gallery of Visual Arts, Missoula MT. Photo credit: Sarah Moore

The unrelenting pain or anger that make this piece so difficult are the same elements that ultimately lend the following project its strength. Not because this project perpetuates these qualities, but because it addresses and absolves them.

The heart of my thesis collection was the performance-installation from which the exhibit takes its title: *,is repair* (fig. 20). The installation featured over three hundred handmade ceramic plates shaped to resemble notebook pages, which were installed in two grids on either side of a freestanding, perpetually running sink. Across the first grid, each plate was inscribed with handwritten text featuring some fragment of a narrative dealing with loss, anxiety, fear, shame, or some other emotional burden. A number of these narratives were mine—describing the trauma and heartbreak of having experienced my father’s last days, or the memories, fears, and regrets surrounding his and my grandmother’s loss. The remainder of the narratives were contributed anonymously by members of the local community over the course of several preliminary events. Displayed together, the variety of handwritings, writing styles, and even the occasional variance of language created an interesting effect: like the overabundance of possibilities had rendered my original birth certificate meaningless in *Body Double*, the abundance of voices transformed each individual incident of raw vulnerability into a collective act of openness.

For the duration of the exhibit, I performed the piece by washing the inscribed plates clean for an hour each day that the gallery was open. As I performed, the second grid filled with these washed ceramic pages. Visitors were encouraged to take these from the wall and write their contributions on them at an adjacent table, before replacing them in the inscribed grid.<sup>23</sup> This allowed the piece to inhabit the gallery as a living project, and to signal the open cycle of healing and loss.

*, is repair* originated very simply as a narrative piece. It told the story of my year in mourning, and the fact that throughout that year I found myself compulsively doing dishes. This mundane, emotionally and intellectually silent gesture enabled me to perform a small act

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<sup>23</sup> In the exhibition, I preserved the anonymity of each contribution by situating my back toward the table in the layout of the installation and intentionally averting my gaze when someone placed their plate on the wall. I also honored my implicit accountability to whatever they may have shared by washing all the remaining plates after the show closed, so they would be stored blank (though stained).

of repair: returning a messy, dysfunctional object to a state of wholeness, resolution, and readiness. Washing became a private, insular act of healing by metaphor when the actual dysfunction seemed insurmountable. Over the course of the year, however, I discovered that just as Liu's solitary gesture in *Mending* had the potential to be expansive, so did my compulsive, private act create space for healing beyond my own.

Despite its simplicity and sentimentality, this piece was uniquely successful—eliciting strong and positive responses from the audience. Many visitors contributed to the project throughout its duration, and several of them have reached out to me personally to communicate how much they connected with the piece or how their participation helped them recover from their own stories.

## AFTERWARD: ACCUMULATIONS AND HAUNTED MATERIALS

In the piece: *,is repair*, the act of washing erased the narratives from each plate. However, the plates accumulated residual marks and graphite stains over time. Each sponge I used to scrub the plates eroded beyond use by the end of the day, creating a worn and shredded collection over the course of the performance. Because the running water of the sink was designed to recycle itself, all the graphite and shredded sponge material from the performance accumulated in the system. These details contributed to a second tier in the work: beneath the promise of a continuous, open cycle of emotional absorption and repair, the material residue of graphite stains and shredded sponges revealed the lingering presence of anonymous sorrow and the human cost of accepting those burdens.

As a conceptual artist, I am familiar with the notion of significant or symbolic materials. The quilt from *(Our) Baby Blanket*, the mirror from *Me: Your Daughter, Him: Your Miller*, and the letters from *Lettres Pour Yaya Mujinga* each carried new levels of significance into their respective projects through their particular histories. However, the residual graphite and sponge material from *,is repair* seemed inextricably bound to the vulnerability and human presence that created it, not through symbolism or transposition so much as through an intangible kind of haunting. Though it bore no recognizable connection to its source, the *fact* of it suggested a peculiar resonance.

This treatment of materials recalls the haunted collages of contemporary artist, Dario Robleto. For example, in pieces like *A Century of November* (fig. 21), the forlorn, nostalgic, and somewhat dated aesthetic reemerges with a vibrant resonance when taken alongside its wall text:

DARIO ROBLETO, *A Century of November*, 2005.

Child's mourning dress made with homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), carved bone buttons, hair flowers braided by a Civil War widows, mourning dress fabric and lace, silk, velvet, ribbon, WWII surgical suture

thread, Mahogany, glass. 38" x 38", collection of Nancy and Stanley Singer.<sup>24</sup>

Though invisible in the face of the work, the story of these materials is loaded with emotion and meaning that clings, almost supernaturally, to the form. By making us aware of these histories through the nearly poetic use of wall text, Robleto forces his audience to return to the object with a sense of reverence.

Captivated by the possibilities of this intuitive or irrational transference between meaning and material, I began a set of experiments. *The Accumulation of Grief and Remnants: Vials and Sponges* (Fig. 22) involved straining the graphite and sponge residue through a pillowcase and displaying it stitched into the bare, formal form of a white frame; collecting remaining graphite and sponge materials into vials; and stitching the eroded bodies of the used sponges into a fragile line. Though still unresolved, these experiments represent an exciting new direction in my work characterized by exploration, intuition, and a renewed investment in these alternate forms of intelligence.

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<sup>24</sup>Elizabeth Dunbar. "Dario Robleto: Alloy of Love." Tang Museum at Skidmore, Past Exhibitions, 2008. Accessed April 11, 2016. <https://tang.skidmore.edu/exhibitions/116-dario-robleto-alloy-of-love>.



**Fig. 21**

DARIO ROBLETO

*A Century of November*. 2005.

child's mourning dress made with homemade paper (pulp made from sweetheart letters written by soldiers who did not return from various wars, ink retrieved from letters, sepia, bone dust from every bone in the body), carved bone buttons, hair flowers braided by a Civil War widows, mourning dress fabric and lace, silk, velvet, ribbon, WWII surgical suture thread, Mahogany, glass, 38X38 inches, Collection of Nancy and Stanley Singer



**Fig. 22**

Experiments: *Accumulation of Grief / Remnants: vials and Sponges*, 2016

Graphite from the cumulative stories of loss, shame, fear, and grief offered by strangers and the artist, material from the sponges used to wash these stories clean, pillowcase, glass vials, thread.



## CONCLUSION: WHERE AND WHEN I ENTER

It is impossible to consider my work without crediting the influence of the Feminist art movement—and not simply because I have made work about misogyny. In hand with postmodernist and postcolonial critiques of Fine Art, Feminism asserts that the personal is political. Which is to say, the personal is of fundamental interest. From the assertion that ‘universality’ as a concept is the product of Eurocentric or patriarchal limitations, comes a demand for new systems of value that represent the extent to which all human experiences are subjective. From Feminist and Postcolonial writings, too, comes a critique of objectivity or empiricism as the markers of intellectual authority—making room for the alternate forms of intelligence I explored in my thesis work. Finally, the inclusion of domestic forms and gestures, such as stitching and washing, into a Fine Art world still weaning itself from a fixation with the monumental, owes much to Feminist Artists and Critics.

Although I am comfortable identifying myself as a Feminist and a Postcolonial critic, my artwork is best aligned with the practice of postcolonial and deconstructionist thinkers. The assertion, “I am not writing a manifesto. I am investigating a fault line,” affirms this association. Looking to the writings of poststructuralists like Derrida and Foucault, we see philosophers whose ambitions were not revolution, but understanding. Their writings served to map the complex networks of power and reason, and to identify the fault lines embedded in those networks. I feel very strongly that deconstruction is not destruction, but an act of profound, subversive, and prodding analysis.

As I move forward, developing a studio practice that runs parallel to my academic work in art history and criticism, I intend to continue the practice of subversive quotations, conceptual exploration, and systemic critique firmly rooted in the sincerity of my subjective experience.



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