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Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks

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Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks

by
Sam Modder

A thesis presented to the
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Introduction

I am a Nigerian-Sri Lankan artist that works figuratively in pen, collage, and digital media to portray larger-than-life Black, female characters taking up space in real and imagined worlds. In my recent series of mural installations, I present a subjective Black woman's fairytale to process interlocking structures of oppression. Centered in the speculative practice of the Black imaginary, I use large, digitally manipulated, ballpoint pen drawings to tell the story of a Black woman who escapes into a world made up of only herself, her hair, and the clothes she wears. This text is centered on a chapter of this ongoing narrative, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, a mural installation designed for the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis.

I am a storyteller, and so this text and its endnotes are filled with personal anecdotes and reflections from my childhood growing up Nigerian and Sri Lankan in Southern Asia, and life thereafter as an international student and artist in the US. I hope by sharing a bit of my real and imagined worlds, I could offer a space I was looking for and found in the making of this work – a space of possibility, critique, and wonder.



Figure 1 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Ariaan Modder

On a dull Monday morning in Massachusetts,
a Black woman awoke to find she had grown a person out of her hair.

This annoyed her greatly.

Her coworkers barely understood shrinkage, let alone a spontaneous life force.

“Care to go away for a whhhile?” the hair whispered.

“You know a place?”

“I doo,” it said emphatically. *“One made up of just you and all you bring in.”*

“Just me, huh?” Between a pandemic, a burning planet, and her Pilates instructor learning that racism was still a thing, she was so done with other people.

“A clean slllate,” the hair said, pointing toward her fridge, which now opened to a gaping white void. *“What will you take with you?”*

The woman looked down at her oversized nightdress and striped socks.

“Just me,” she decided. “Less chance of messing things up.”

And with that, she stepped out. Leaving all this behind.¹

Backstory

I came to this work because I was hurting. Drowning in news of the pandemic, climate change and a global racial reckoning—I found in my drawing a desire to escape. In it, I stood face-to-face with a reflection grown right out of my hair, staring intently at me across a blank void.



Figure 2: Sam Modder, *Portrait in Quarantine*, 2020, ballpoint pen, 24 in. x 24 in., Image courtesy of the artist

Why are you here? I asked. She felt like a beginning. Many stories begin with a call, a herald whose appearance beckons a hero to a place of adventure². *Was this my call? And if so, where to?* A “place of sanctuary” perhaps, where I could process all that was happening “around and within me”³. A place of healing, of possibility, of childhood—of theorizing⁴, in and through

the imaginary. In the summer of 2020, living alone in Massachusetts, *Portrait in Quarantine, 2020*, became my herald to this body of work.

In subsequent drawings I began to answer questions. What extended below the portrait? What would their bodies do and wear? If the woman wanted to escape, would the hair want to stay? Where would the woman go and how would she get there? Maybe the hair knew. Maybe that's why it had come. In *Planning My Escape, 2020*, I considered these thoughts, fully realizing the characters' bodies to suggest their possible intentions.



Figure 3 Sam Modder, *Planning My Escape, 2020*, digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawing, 75 in. x 56 in., Image courtesy of the artist

Wearing an amorphous black nightdress and striped knee-high socks, (based loosely on my pajamas of choice), the woman steps backwards into a non-descript grey rectangle. Still attached to the hair person, she looks up tentatively, even as the hair bends conspiratorially above her, a finger raised urging silence or caution.

In *Fall*, 2020, I began to repeat my hero in varying sizes to capture the motion of her descent down this long portal. I felt the need to duplicate her again in *Group Flight*, 2021, multiplying her joy as swarms of her rode on large hairballs. I realized how important this repetition was to the narrative I was forming. My protagonist had not fallen into just any empty void, but one that could multiply all she brought in. There was her body, yes, but also hair, and clothing. There were things I couldn't see, her joy and pain, strength and weakness, ways of knowing so ingrained she wouldn't even recognize them.



Figure 4 Sam Modder, *Fall*, 2020, print on matte paper, 112 in. x 20 in., Image courtesy of the artist

There was much to uncover. And so, I decided some of her duplicates needed to become characters in their own right to represent aspects of all that was possible within her. Hair, both formally in its self-determined shapes and conceptually as the story's herald, became an obvious character to push the narrative forward.

In *Attack of the Hair Monster*, 2021, a swarming mass of hair tentacles wrestles with one of the duplicates. Another duplicate curls fetus-like resigned to her fate while a third flees on a flying hairball. Physically, it felt important to display this drawing as interacting with the architectural environment. I wanted this imagined space to feel viable. Engaging enough, that it could pull someone around a wall to see what was on the other side. To do this, I combined *Attack of the Hair Monster*, 2021 and *Group Flight*, 2021 into one continuous image broken up by the wrapping around of the wall. This would come to be a guiding practice in my displaying of this work.



Figure 5 Sam Modder, *Attack of the Hair Monster and Group Flight*, 2021, digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 30 in. x 125 in., Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 6 Sam Modder, *Attack of the Hair Monster and Group Flight*, 2021, print of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 30 in. x 125 in., Image courtesy of the artist

Again, as they tend to do, questions arose. From what, or from *whom*, did the hair monsters originate? And if it was indeed a whom, how big would she need to be given the scale of my existing drawings? I had felt my way through this narrative to the Source of All Hair—a character that would need to be much larger than all the duplicates I had drawn so far. Larger than myself, in fact, if she was to have the presence and gravitas she needed and deserved. This scale shift pushed the work into the territory of murals and installations, and once there it found its natural place.



Figure 7 Sam Modder, *The Duplicates Harvesting the Source of All Hair*, 2021, prints of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 104 in. x 155 in., Image courtesy of the artist

Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks

In fairytales, the villain is usually easy to find. Evil is conveniently located in a single, othered, entity. She is identifiable and once removed all damage is reversed. Unfortunately, life isn't so simple. Evil intermingles in systems and status quos. It is reasoned, taught, and internalized. In my installation, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks, 2022*, a Black woman escapes from everything but herself, and yet the world she and her duplicates create soon mimics the one she left behind. There is no other here, no easy-to-locate oppressor, just systems and greed, rupture and hope. This Black-centered imaginary is less utopia and more speculative test lab. A way to decenter whiteness and broken realities and focus instead on Black people, and how our imagination can help us understand and reimagine an oppressive system.

Like a storybook made into a mural, my installation consists of multiple scenes that wrap around the walls of an interior space. The digital prints on adhesive paper appear to be ballpoint pen drawings composing a circular chapter in an ongoing narrative. In a particular iteration, designed for the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis, the mural wraps a free-standing twelve-foot-high L-shaped wall, the longer side spanning twenty feet while the shorter spans ten. You can walk around the walls to see every side, each depicting one of three scenes: The Wearer of All Socks, The Duplicates Harvesting the Source of All Hair, and The Sock Factory. Each scene flows into the other forming a circular, continuous narrative: *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks, 2022*.

When you enter the space, you first encounter the Wearer of All Socks, a large, alluring figure who looks down from her massive height. She wears a striped *gele* or head tie that covers her hair, a single striped sock hangs around her neck, as she sits leaning to the right. Half

beckoning you with one hand, the other rests lazily over her skirt, a skirt commanding of your attention. It is a swirling mass of socks and knots that pour down the wall and onto the floor, breaking out from the wall's plane. The adhesive paper is cut so this section of the mural drapes unto the floor, furthering the illusion that the Wearer is stepping out of the narrative so she can pull you in. Her pupils are white, seer-like or blind, her gaze is at once intense but opaque.



Figure 8 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

To the left of the Wearer is a large sock being pulled, with much difficulty, by three tiny figures. Following the imagery around the wall, you find the sock is worn by another impressive figure, the Source of All Hair. Eyes closed, she lies flat and spread out on her back, as crowds of

tiny figures busily swarm her. Everyone, from the Source to the tiny duplicates, is dressed in the same clothing, a loose, almost amorphous, black nightdress and knee-high striped socks. The tiny duplicates engage in all manner of activity—climbing, leaping, fighting, foraging, and resting on the Source’s bodily terrain. Many wrestle each other for socks, others cling or cry after this prized possession. Some duplicates drown in masses of curly hair flowing from the Source which takes on a life of its own as it covers much of the left side of the wall. The hair wraps around the corner and out of sight, encouraging you to follow it.

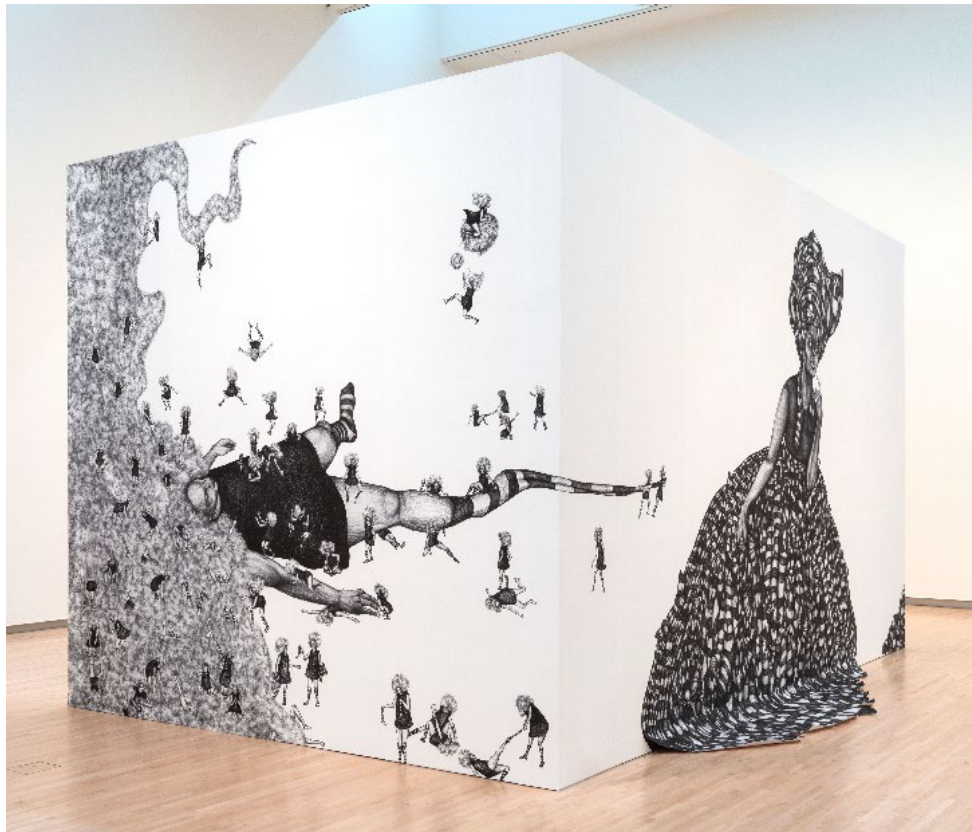


Figure 9 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

Another turn, and the hair climaxes into a tidal wave pointing towards the final scene, The Sock Factory. Our protagonist has been duplicated a few times over to create an almost

mirrored assembly line of workers who pull striped socks off a row of human feet. Their expressions are passive as they focus on their work. Their black, oversized nightdresses feel more like uniforms, as their tied-up hair merges together. To the right of the assembly line, one worker begins to turn away from the others and towards the hair. In this moment, she is interrupted, a sock cradled in her hand, her expression open. The circularity of the installation completes itself with a pile of socks from The Sock Factory spilling back around to the wall showing the Wearer of All Socks.



Figure 10 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks, 2022 presents two forms of power: socks and hair. In this world, socks are scarce. Since they cannot be produced but only pulled off other inhabitants, they become a prized commodity—one that is bargained, fought, and systematically

harvested. To accumulate socks is to accumulate power, The Wearer of All Socks being the ultimate manifestation of this.

While the socks are visually heavy and literally grounded in most scenes, hair, by contrast, is light, and gravity-defying. Sprawling out from a seemingly passive, lying-down figure, the giving of hair does not require the same labor as the taking of socks. In this world, Black hair is alive, a creative force that sprawls and enters spaces of possible confrontation and rupture. The meeting of the hair and a sock factory worker alludes to a possible break in the never-ending cycle of the piece. Although just a chapter in a larger narrative, the circularity of the installation is a nod to many myths and fairytales that are circular in form, beginning with a call to adventure and ending with a return after victory is won and a lesson learned⁵.



Figure 11 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Whitney Curtis

Scale is central to this work. The characters have a larger-than-life presence, demanding attention from both near and far. To view the work, you must step back to take in the enormity of the scenes and move in close to observe the intricate markings of the pen. Its interaction with the gallery's architecture, both in its central location and how the scenes wrap around the walls, builds anticipation and surprise, encouraging you to move through the space, immersed in the story.

But most important, the scale makes you feel small. When you're a kid, everything feels so big. People and everyday things tower above you. The world is strange and scary, but also filled with curious things to explore and learn. Some of us have long stopped reading fairytales, but here, in this work, I hope you will step back into a space of childhood, wonder and possibility, that you would, in the best of ways, feel small and open, ready and willing to hear one more story.



Figure 12 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Whitney Curtis



Figure 13 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Whitney Curtis



Figure 14 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

Allegory and Fairytales

I often turn to stories to explain, entertain, and create meaning. When life proves difficult, unjust or confusing, stories can allow for moments of relief, pleasure and “imaginary breakthrough”, offering hope that reality too might one day imitate narrative.⁶ Some stories speak to life more directly than others. These are often allegorical, containing hidden lessons of moral or political relevance to contemporary society. Allegories resonate more than blanket statements about what we should or shouldn't do because they are participatory. Instead of telling, allegories show, allowing us to go on a narrative journey that leads to a thought we make together as storyteller and listener.

Children's fairytales do the work of allegory particularly well. Because they are written by adults, they often contain critical observations and subconscious frustrations with contemporary society. But because they are written for children, they provide comfort, magic and whimsy that dissociate us from reality long enough to take in and even enjoy these critical observations.

Consider for example Lewis Carol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* where a bored girl falls down a rabbit hole into a curious world filled with talking animals and magical food. None of this bothers Alice, who quickly accepts that something strange will happen around every corner.⁷ What *does* bother her is the topsy-turvy logic of Wonderland's stubborn residents who insist on rules and procedures that make little sense. The Hatter and the Hare declare “no room” at a table that has more than enough space, while a self-involved ruler solves all her problems by threatening death to her subjects and holding rigged trials.⁸ The “wonder” in Wonderland is not

the talking animals or the magical food but how much it reflects the worst of the adult world Alice leaves behind.

Through Alice's eyes, we see how ridiculous and frustrating the grownup world can be, filled with bureaucracy, violence, classism, ego, and abused power. Even so, we can only make these observations through Alice, whose childhood innocence, imagination, and moral sensibilities allow her to enter, observe, critique, and even influence Wonderland. Alice's childhood, and thereby innocence, allows her entry into a world that we as adults cannot go. This observation takes a dark turn, when we recognize that, like most children's fairytales, *Alice in Wonderland* is written by an adult who constructs the image of a child for his own purposes.

As Jacqueline Rose notes in her book "A Case for Peter Pan":

Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver) ... It will not be the issue here of what the child wants, but of the adult desire – desires in the very act of constructing the child as the object of its speech.⁹

Rose argues, since the adult writes and determines what it is to be a child in a fairytale, innocence is less a "property of childhood" than a projection of "adult desire" onto the child.¹⁰ At its worst, (as Rose asserts *is* the case in Peter Pan), this projection could be one of a repressed, pedophilic desire. But even with the best of intentions, this projection endorses a strange power dynamic and deception between the adult storyteller and child listener, the former falsely speaking for the latter through a central protagonist that is neither child nor adult. In other words, there is a gap between the adult's projected child and the child herself. In this gap, the adult's subjective desires, frustrations, and critiques, hide under the guise of objective childhood innocence.¹¹

In *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, I reference three fairytales: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 1865, by Lewis Carol, *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726, by Jonathan Swift and *The Lorax*, 1971, by Dr. Seuss. These stories are allegorical, providing acute criticisms of the societies within which the authors operate. As earlier mentioned, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* pokes fun at grownup bureaucracies and politics. *Gulliver's Travels* in its opening chapters has a shipwrecked Gulliver taken prisoner by the Lilliputians—a tiny race of people who are self-obsessed, divided over trivialities, and prone to petty display of powers.¹² In *The Lorax*, an entrepreneurial Once-ler tells a young boy how he ruined the environment to produce his multi-purposed, sock-like, Thneeds.¹³ In each story there is neutral character—Alice, Gulliver, the unnamed boy who listens—who observes the ills of society projected unto othered fairytale creatures. These authors, notably all white men, choose to hide their criticism behind an objective childlike lens, even as the stories' less-human characters are weighed down by societal flaws. The authors themselves are unimplicated in their critiques, even though, as time has shown, there is much to be questioned in Swift's colonialist impulses and racialized essentialism¹⁴, Carrol's grooming tendencies¹⁵, and Dr. Seuss's inclination to racist imagery¹⁶.

It is in this context that I ask, what it would mean for someone like me – a storyteller and Black woman – to tell my own fairytale. No projections of innocence, no guise of childhood, but instead a tangible hold on both the wonders and downfalls of an imagined and lived reality. A subjective Black woman's fairytale could be one that does not project its desires and frustrations onto another body or likeness, but claims all of it, the good, the bad, and the ugly as her own.

This is what I aim to do in *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022. Even as I reference these stories, I do so by using one body for all my characters, one that shares my identity as a Black woman storyteller. I recognize all possibilities—bravery and cowardice,

selfishness and sacrifice, hero and villain—as my own. Projecting nothing onto the other, scapegoating no one, I give complete subjectivity to the story’s only character, a Black woman in striped socks. In this way, I avoid projecting onto another body and hiding my subjective viewpoint implicit in the narrative.

Claims of objectivity aside, there is so much visual richness to draw from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *Gulliver’s Travels* and *The Lorax*. Each of these works has iconic imagery, easily recognizable by a variety of audiences both in and beyond a Western gaze. This is largely due to how they have been adapted from their original illustrations—most notably for the big screen by the likes of Disney, 20th Century Fox and Universal Studios. However, much of my inspiration comes from the original books.

My use of ballpoint pen speaks to the original engravings done by John Tenniel and J. G. Thomson in the first editions of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. In mark-making and black and white imagery, there is a return to drawing that implies but does not fully render these strange new worlds, leaving room for the reader’s imagination to fill in what is not explicitly depicted. This is even more striking now than in Carol’s and Swift’s lifetimes, considering how increasingly conditioned audiences have become to seeing realistic animation and special effects. If full color is commonplace, then a return to black and white drawing might be a way to recapture an overstimulated imagination.



Figure 15 John Tenniel, "Alice with the Duchess and a flamingo," 1950, engraving, in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, Paris: Edmund S. Wood, 1950, page 132



Figure 16 J. G. Thomson, "I lay all this while in great uneasiness," 1726, engraving, in *Gulliver's Travels into Several Remote Regions of the World* by Jonathan Swift, Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & CO., Publishers, 1900, chapter 1

Other visual references in my work include entering a new dimension through a long, seemingly endless fall, and an all-powerful queen-like figure—not-so-subtle nods to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. More obviously perhaps, *The Duplicates Harvesting the Source of All Hair* references the opening chapter in *Gulliver's Travels*. Even worse than the Lilliputians, the tiny Duplicates are so caught up in their little lives, that they literally miss the bigger picture—the world they live on is a person just like them, albeit on a much bigger scale.



Figure 17 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

And finally, the striped socks in *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022 function much in the same ways as the Thneeds-that-everybody-needs in *The Lorax* —a sock, scarf, pant-like contraption, made from Truffula trees and used for every job imaginable.¹⁷ Like the Thneeds

in *The Lorax*, striped socks, a seemingly trivial almost humorous commodity, are brought right into the center of the narrative as an object of devastating consequence.

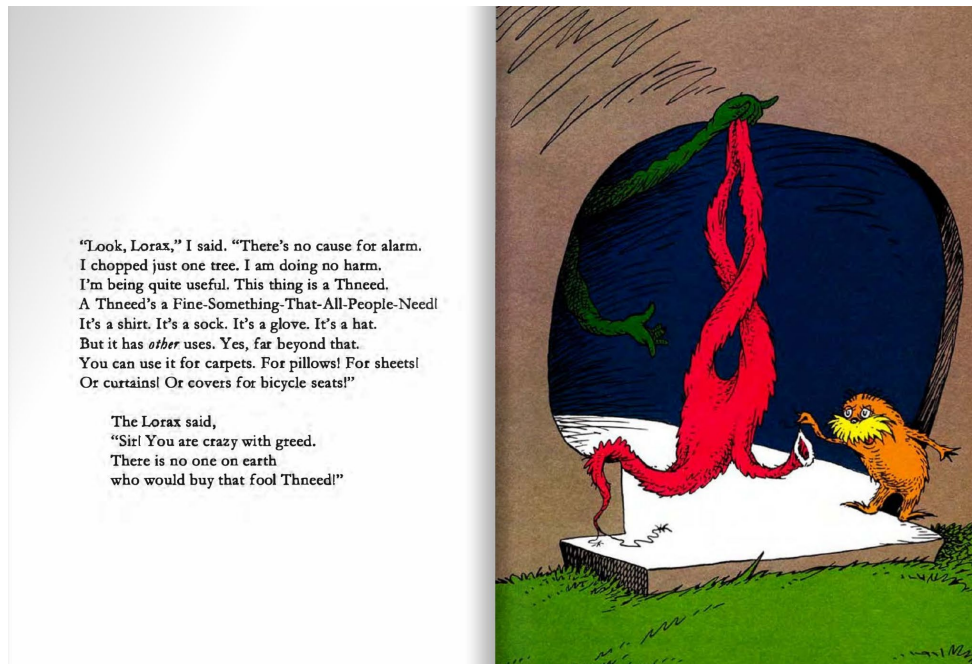


Figure 18 Theodore Seuss, "This thing is a Thneed," 1971, illustration, in *The Lorax: Dr. Seuss Collector's Edition* by Theodore Seuss, New York, NY: Random House, 1971, pages 30-31

While these three stories have inspired this installation in particular, children's storybooks in general have been an important reference in my work. Like many storybooks, I adopt a whimsical, illustrative style and a strong use of bold pattern. My figures have clear silhouettes, often taking on exaggerated poses to help convey their intentions.¹⁸ Storybooks often uses negative space within illustrations to make room for text. While I don't incorporate text directly into my work, negative space is still just as important in my compositions, allowing for moments of pause and reflection, or to build up anticipation and tension.

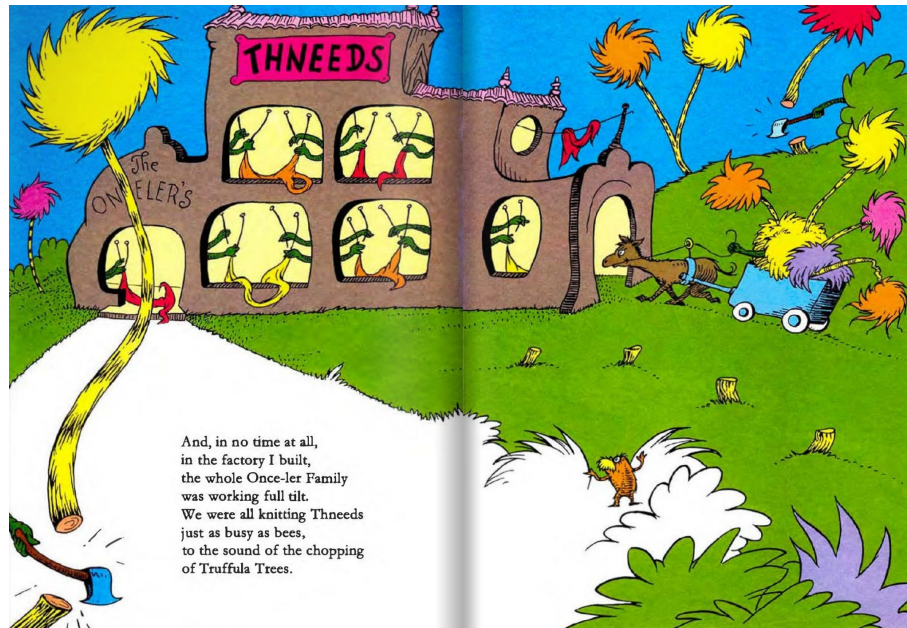


Figure 19 Theodore Seuss, "Thneed Factory," 1971, illustration, in *The Lorax: Dr. Seuss Collector's Edition* by Theodore Seuss, New York, NY: Random House, 1971, pages 36-37



Figure 20 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Richard Sprengeler

The Black Imaginary and Creation of Space

The Black imaginary is a form of speculative practice that centers Black people’s dreams, fantasies, and creativity to devise alternate spaces where they can exist free from oppressive histories, structures, and indeed people, that have sought to define and constrict their lived experience.¹⁹ Even if, for now, this freedom is only possible in those quiet moments between “what ifs” and “if only's” — this fantasy still can have power.²⁰ Power to escape and uplift, question and reimagine, and at times, even resist.

For me, the Black imaginary is primarily about creating space—spaces of freedom that remove Black people from an oppressive reality and allow for multiple possibilities. I confess my partiality here, since “taking up space” has been a grounding phrase in my artistic practice. From my earliest reflections on taking up space as a Black person growing up in Southern Asia (*Balaji Dosai*, 2019), to installations that engage with public architecture (*Ten Paper Ladies in a Box*, 2020), space—particularly space changed and claimed by a Black female presence—has long been a preoccupation of mine. Perhaps it isn’t surprising then that, in my viewing, references to the Black imaginary are often interwoven with discussions about creating space.



Figure 21 Sam Modder, *Balaji Dosai*, 2019, sharpie marker, photography, digital drawing, 30 in. x 20 in., Image courtesy of the artist



Figure 22 Sam Modder, *Ten Paper Ladies in a Box*, 2020, digital prints, window box installation, 93 in. x 146 in. x 25 in., Image courtesy of the artist

Consider Sharita Towne and Lisa Bates' *This is a Black Spatial Imaginary*, 2017, a collaborative project in Portland, Oregon that brought together "installation, video, print media, and public intervention" to explore "new forms of practice at the intersection of art, collaboration, historical record, urban planning, collaboration and creative exchange."²¹ One such intervention brought community members into art spaces, surrounded by prints like the one shown below, to reimagine what Black neighborhoods in Portland could be. Instead of focusing on answers, participants were encouraged to ask questions, collectively employing the Black imaginary to rethink real spaces:

Why don't we take ownership of gentrified space? How can we re-appropriate spaces? How much anger do we have to swallow to think we deserve these spaces? How much permission do we need to have to create these spaces for ourselves?²²

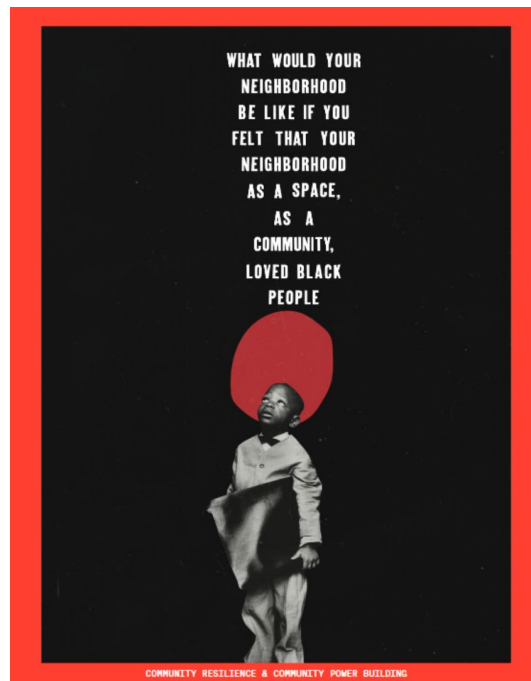


Figure 23 Unknown, "Community Resilience & Community Power Building," 2017, digital print, in *PAALF People's Plan* by Imagine Black, Accessed April 28, 2022. https://issuu.com/paalf/docs/paalf_peoples_plan_2017, page 16

Other examples of the Black imaginary prioritizing a creation of new spaces²³ are Afrofuturist film and jazz song of the same name *Space is the Place*, 1974, where artist Sun Ra seeks to relocate Black people to Saturn,²⁴ and Marvel's *Black Panther*, 2018, which presents Wakanda onscreen—a technological Black utopia hidden from the ravages of colonialism.²⁵ So deep run the wounds of Black exploitation and dehumanization across our entire world, that it is not enough to reimagine new attitudes, resources, or circumstances—a physical relocation of Blackness into an entirely new space is necessary. As enslaved peoples once shared stories of flying back to a lost homeland²⁶ and Marcus Garvey championed a return to Africa²⁷, the Black imaginary posits a similar thought: Where can we as Black people go to be truly free, and what would it mean if such a space did exist? What would it allow? What mistakes might we repeat?

If the Black imaginary creates spaces of freedom, then what will we do with that space? This, I think, depends on those who imagine, allowing for multiple possibilities. Spaces of revision, rupture, or relief, of both mourning and joy. Spaces that celebrate Black potential in myriad utopias, and spaces that interrogate and reimagine oppressive systems. All of this and more is possible, and it is these different spaces generated by a Black imaginary that I seek to produce and explore in my work.

The Black Imaginary as rupture and relief, revision and joy

In the final scene of Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, 2017, Chris, a Black man crawls away from his white attackers who lay dead or injured, when a police car pulls up in the driveway. And then, his friend steps out, Rod, a Black TSA agent, as described by Yohanda Desta in *Vanity Fair*:

The power of the ending Peele eventually chose for the film hinges on the fact that once viewers see cop-car lights, they immediately know what will probably happen to Chris. The prevalence of police brutality toward unarmed black people is an unspoken terror that hangs in the air in those final moments—before Rod steps out of the car and crushes

the tension. “The ending needed to transform into something that gives us a hero, that gives us an escape, that gives us a positive feeling,” Peele says. “There’s nothing more satisfying than seeing the audience go crazy when Rod shows up.”²⁸

That’s what rupture in the imaginary can feel like. Of all the times this scene has played out over and over—a Black man, a police car—in this one moment, there is a breakthrough, and the relief is palpable. In examples like these, whether sudden as in *Get Out* or gradual as in *The Black Panther’s* Wakanda, there is a revision of societal expectations. Writer Ashley Stull Meyers so masterfully describes this speculative work, “[The Black imaginary] is a global, cultural amendment. It is a consideration of the innumerable spaces lost and stolen...spaces some of us still see in our dreams.”²⁹ In these spaces, it is possible for a Black man to be presumed innocent before guilty, and for an African country to fully benefit from its resources. An artist I admire who works in these imaginary spaces of revision and relief is Benji Reid.

In his photographs Reid shows the Black body as weightless, floating to form striking compositions. In *Icon*, 2020, his body floats effortlessly caught in an undescriptive environment, while in *The Man who Escaped His Own Mind*, 2020, everyday objects are strapped together to form contraptions of flight. In most of his work, Reid wears hip-hop street wear, a significant decision as he himself explains “it offers a reimagining of where [these clothes] can sit in space. So, I’m still speaking to the B-Boys, the hip-hoppers, but I’m also going, ‘Where else can we be? Where else can we occupy space?’”³⁰.

By repositioning people and items that are associated with a particular reality in a space that exists only in the imaginary, Reid challenges where Black people could be in the future. In both Reid’s work and mine, the Black body is no longer earth-bound. Even as Reid overcomes gravity through contraptions and his mind, my characters can choose to fly through the creative force of Black hair. If we no longer assume gravity as restricting the Black body, what else might

we assume? What else might we overcome? In weightlessness, the Black body is set free from all oppression committed against it. In flight, it is somewhere new, a space that has not yet existed but is possible in the Black imaginary.



Figure 24 Benji Reid, *Icon*, 2020, photograph, Image courtesy of the artist's website, accessed 14 May 2021, <https://www.benjireid.com/new-index>



Figure 25 Benji Reid, *The Man who Escaped His Own Mind*, 2020, photograph, Image courtesy of the artist's website, accessed 14 May 2021, <https://www.benjireid.com/new-index>



Figure 26 Sam Modder, *Hairballs*, 2021, digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawing, 22 in. x 30 in., Image courtesy of the artist

The Black imaginary as speculative test lab

I have long felt a strong connection to Toyin Ojih Odutola's practice³¹. From my first introduction to her ballpoint pen drawings that reflected my own affinity to the medium, to our parental connection to Nigerian Yoruba culture. But more and more, what draws me to her work is her use of the imaginary to create alternate worlds and histories for Black people. In Toyin's words:

The speculative can be a bridge and the process of creating it an emancipatory act. Instead of fighting with the same extreme language that aims to eradicate and erode ... [it] is meant to connect, not exclude ... a place of return, not escape, even if it is fiction. To offer something quiet, something intimate and interior, that feels known yet also shared can be a space for freedom.³²

Toyin is not interested in utopias.³³ Instead, she satisfies a Black desire to see ourselves in power while implicating us in the very systems that might allow for this privilege. It is a challenging world she presents. One where problems aren't solved by the removal of a white, male oppressor, but instead interrogates systems and cycles of power and exploitation. Toyin does this work best in *A Countervailing Theory*, 2020.

Set in an ancient and advanced civilization in Nigeria, the exhibition chronicles an alternate reality where social hierarchy is flipped. Black women in same-sex relationships are the norm, holding all political and social power. They are miners unsustainably harvesting the land for economic growth. Men, or cyborg-like creatures, are created for labor by the women ruling classes, enslaved at birth. Each class is separate, having different languages and customs, forbidden from interacting. In intricate, textured, line drawings on a black ground you follow two protagonists, one privileged and the other enslaved, and how their relationship challenges and eventually destroys this civilization.



Figure 27 Toyin Ojih Odutola, *To the Next Outpost*, 2019, charcoal and pastel drawing, Image courtesy of the Curve, Barbican Centre, London, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/toyin-ojih-odutola>

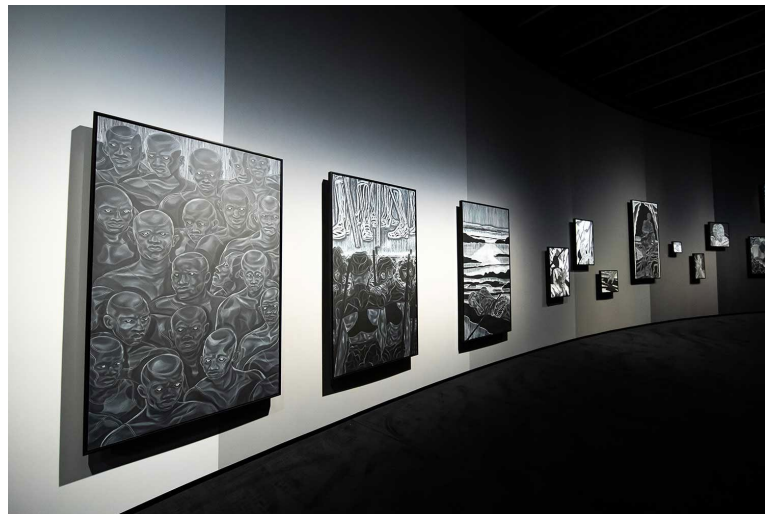


Figure 28 Toyin Ojih Odutola, *A Countervailing Theory*, 2019, drawing and sound installation, Image courtesy of the Curve, Barbican Centre, London, accessed November 21, 2020, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/blog/toyin-ojih-odutola>

“To countervail a system or ideology is to create an opposite or simply a differing equivalent”³⁴ and this is what Toyin does, switching up what we expect of power and oppression while confronting us with our own implicit biases. As Toyin says about the work:

The story you experience in *A Countervailing Theory* is not fair, it's not utopic, it's a mining – it's a means to bring up questions that are often buried, ignored, and lied about to avoid a nation's discomfort around its global power... The world you see on the walls of The Curve gallery is rather similar to ours, where those who believe they have a right to what they have will do anything in their power to perpetuate that right, even if it is a lie. I'm simply asking: what do we do with this knowledge?³⁵

Toyin uses the Black imaginary to test what we know about power and privilege. To cast familiar characters in new roles and settings and see what happens. To me, it is a speculative test lab. One that allows for investigation into societal structures, and what it would really take to end oppressive systems. This is especially important today, where it can be tempting to think that simply having instances of marginalized people in power can fundamentally change a system that is built to overwhelmingly oppress a portion of the population. In the Black imaginary, we can create spaces of theorizing that test our assumptions, even as we imagine new systems that move beyond the limits of what currently exists.

This is the work I am most interested in doing. Like Toyin, I am not creating Black utopias. In *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, it is the same Black woman who takes and is taken from. The Wearer of All Socks is shown in all her abundance, confident and powerful, even as the Sock Factory workers pull off socks from faceless victims. The Wearer's power, gained by the hoarding of socks, comes at the price of those exploited. There is no Wearer without the Sock Factory. And so, we are caught. It is in these moments, that the Black imaginary can challenge, pushing and guiding us through discomfort to new ways of understanding.



Figure 29 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawing, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of the artist

I am Not My Hair, but My Hair is Me

On my second trip to Nigeria, it was suggested that, like many little Black girls before me, I relax my hair. Straight hair would be easy to maintain, less of a spectacle back home in Sri Lanka where no one knew what to make of an African Southern Asian. When the chemicals washed off and my hair lay flat, I was inconsolable. How would anyone know I was Black now? As a brown girl living among other brown people, it was my hair that anchored me most firmly to Black. Blackness was mum's dark skin and tight curls, I hadn't inherited the first and now, in less than an hour, I had lost the latter.

I would eventually get over this loss. Cooped by oohs and ahs of friends and relatives both in Nigeria and Sri Lanka. My hair was so much neater, my teachers said, very professional. And so, it stayed, along with the ritual of mum applying and washing off pink soapy suds before the chemicals burned my scalp. I liked straight hair, or at least I think I did. I remember broken combs and frizzed edges, and stepping away mid-conversation, to adjust and readjust the little bumps of curly undergrowth that would fight their way to the surface.

Fight is what my hair and I continued to do throughout my teens. I would win some days, and it would take others. Good hair and bad hair, determined by moisture content, chemicals, and opiated aunties. It wasn't until I moved to the US for college that we finally stopped fighting. Surrounded for the first time by other Black women, who graced billboards, magazines, streets and classrooms, I began to believe I could be fully me, and fully Black, regardless of how I wore my hair. My move coincided with a natural hair movement that seemed to sweep across continents, from my cousins in Nigeria embracing their natural hair, to YouTube tutorials and hair products I would trade with American friends in school. I was learning to love my hair alongside so many other Black women. It didn't matter I had grown up in Asia, and they in the

US, Caribbean, or Africa. We all fought with our hair, and we were all ready to make peace. In other Black women I found a shared gaze of recognition, as bell hooks describes:

Looking at one another, staring in mirrors, they appear completely focused on their encounter with black femaleness. How they see themselves is most important, not how they will be stared at by others. They display [themselves] not for a voyeuristic colonizing gaze but for that look of recognition that affirms their subjectivity—that constitutes them as spectators.³⁶

In all my work, I view Black women as my spectators and subjects. They are central and present, pushing narratives forward in existing and imagined realities. Black hair serves as a creative force. In soft curls and defiant shapes, it both comforts and confronts. In the gaze of my Black sisters, hair is a point of connection, a way of saying “I see you; I am you. We are both here and now.” In the gaze of others, however, hair is often political because it is the easiest racialized feature to change or conceal.

When discussing the Supreme Court case, *Rogers v. American Airlines* (1981) that upheld an employer’s right to prohibit braided hairstyles in the workplace³⁷, Paulette Caldwell describes the unique position hair holds as a racialized physical feature:

Unlike skin color and other physical manifestations of race...Hair can be cut off, straightened out, curled up, or covered over either in the exercise of individual preference or to comply with the tastes or preferences of others. The uniqueness of hair...lies not only in the ability of its true nature to be disguised, but also in its susceptibility to external control...the choice by blacks either to make no change or to do so in ways that do not reflect the characteristics and appearance of the hair of whites, represents an assertion of the self that is in direct conflict with the assumptions that underlie the existing social order.³⁸

Black hair then is framed as a choice—either resist or conform to a world built on the assumption of white supremacy. In my work, I make my choice, choosing to draw Black hair that is expansive, free, and ever evolving.

While I have long stopped fighting my hair, I want to address the privileges my presentation of Blackness, as a light-skinned, multiracial, cis-woman, has afforded me and the consequences this has had on my work. For one, it has tied a lot of my racial identity to my hair. As Michaela Angela Davis describes in her coming-of-age article, “Cutting my hair was my first revolutionary act”:

An afro, *my* afro, would also serve as a talisman of acceptance—indisputable evidence that, no matter my light-skinned flesh nor the thousand shades of blond in my thick hair, I was Black. My mighty afro would mark my militancy.³⁹

There is a bias then, when I prioritize hair in my depictions of Black woman. There is also a privilege, because I can choose to change my hair to better fit in or to stand out, in ways that I couldn't do if my skin was darker. My mostly 3C⁴⁰ longish curls are often seen as “good Black hair” and so is represented more in popular media. Representations that have helped me in my journey to love and self-acceptance of this hair. Representations that are fewer for my darker skinned and thicker textured sisters. This is colorism, plain and simple, something that has afforded me much privilege. I struggle with this, especially because my work is centered on self-portraiture. I am depicting my presentation of Blackness, a subgroup of hair, skin and body type that is often chosen to be celebrated in visual culture. Am I contributing to these one-sided depictions of Black women through my own drawings?

I try to work against this by choosing how I draw my hair and skin. While my hair takes on a range of textures depending on its moisture content, I choose to draw it at its driest, biggest, frizziest, at-least-a-week-away-from-wash-day form. In scale and shape, this form best fits what I am conceptually trying to do with hair in my work, and I hope, rejects the idea of “good Black hair”. One of the reasons why I prefer working in black and white is because attention is taken away from skin colour. As writer Liza Wemekor observes in Rebecca Hall's 2021 film *Passing*

that stars two light-skin Black women, “The black-and-white lens of the camera functions ... to render abstract the racial characteristics we use to code each other.”⁴¹ I hope that in my monotone pen markings, where much is implied but not fully shown, some of the colorist codings that have been so ingrained and hurtful within the Black community are softened or abstracted, if not completely erased.

I am fortunate that my practice of centering Black hair exists within a broader contemporary context of artists like Lorna Simpson, Mickalene Thomas, and Alison Saar, but in this text, I want to highlight Sonya Clark. Clark uses hair both formally and conceptually to grapple with complex histories and identities, inserting Black hair into US symbols like the flag in *Octoroon*, 2018 and the five-dollar bill in *Afro Abe Progression*, 2008. For Clark, Black hair and generational hair care practices—and thereby Black people and their creativity—make up the fabric of American history. Blackness is not only part of, but integral to. This fact is so obvious, so loud, that it almost becomes humorous in *Afro Abe Progression*, 2008, where Lincoln’s pasted on afro is seen progressively growing over a series of bills.

Clark emphasizes the formal qualities of Black hair to reinforce her conceptual stand. Black hair grows, expanding to fill and be noticed. Its presence will not be ignored. In braids, it weaves in and out of history, it tangles and complicates. It is an act of labor, particularly Black female labor, that has built the US nation. To say that Clark’s work is about Black women’s hair is correct, but to leave it there is an oversimplification. Black Hair both is and represents. It is adaptable, present, creative, playful, resilient, beautiful, giving. It is possibility.



Figure 30 Sonya Clark, *Afro Abe Progression*, 2008, five-dollar bills, thread, 36.5 x 12.5 inches framed, Image courtesy of Lisa Sette Gallery, Phoenix, AZ, accessed April 26, 2022, <https://lisasettegallery.com/artist/sonya-clark/>



Figure 31 Sonya Clark, *Octoroon* 2018, canvas and thread, 83 x 38.25 inches, Image courtesy of Lisa Sette Gallery, Phoenix, AZ, accessed April 26, 2022, <https://lisasettegallery.com/artist/sonya-clark/>

Material, Process, and Presence

Growing up, my dad always carried two pens in his shirt pocket. When necessary, he would retrieve a replacement from his study, tucked carefully away in his desk's second drawer, in a tidy, repurposed gold watch box, reaching in and pulling out, the prized instrument. I learned of his stash in the seventh grade, when most students in the Sri Lankan education system are finally considered mature enough to ditch the timid pencil of their youth for a more appropriate writing tool. No matter how many pens I lost, borrowed or stole, the stash and shirt pocket, remained full. Ever accessible, as my marks grew bolder.

Accessibility allowed my practice to grow. Where cheap paintbrushes came apart, and wrong paper caused paintings to crinkle, the pen never let me down. It was so familiar, so every day, and yet precious in its application. Working through a scribbling exercise in a high school art class, something clicked in my practice. Pressure, gesture, mark making, direction, allowed for a richness of texture far beyond what I had realized was possible.

Almost twenty years later, and pen is still my material of choice. I enjoy that it is an art material that is humble, and unexpected, especially at the scale I choose. I often get a reaction when people first see my work, they lean in and ask, *is that...pen?* Incredulous that something so familiar could surprise them. This unexpectedness feels to me, in some small way, a form of activism inherent in my material. Something confined to the literal margins of sketchbooks and notepads, now center stage and celebrated.



Figure 32 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Whitney Curtis

I make larger-than-life, digitally manipulated, figurative ballpoint pen drawings that I print and mount on the wall.

I begin with the figure, often using my body as reference. I photograph myself in different poses, taking on the personalities of characters in my narratives. These photographs are my thumbnail sketches. In them I work through multiple iterations of a figurative form, paying particular attention to the expression and negative space of each pose. I rely on clear silhouette and exaggeration of characters' poses to convey meaning.

Next, I move to the floor, rolling out and taping down large sheets of paper. Here I begin to sketch the figure, often drawing at a scale slightly larger than life. At this stage, like in much of my process, I rely on collage. I often cut, paste, and move parts of my drawings. Nothing is precious since I don't view these drawings as a final image, but parts of a whole that I later can compose together. Because of this a drawing might have multiple versions of a face or hand right

next to each other on the same piece of paper, or an element in different configurations that I can repeat digitally to create a pattern or form.

Then I move to the pen. Ballpoint is responsive to pressure variations and allows for multiple line values and weights. I rely on this control, using not only crosshatching and line, but shading with the side of the pen like a soft pencil. This allows for a rich buildup of texture, where stronger marks sit on top of a softer gradient. When drawing Black hair, I use all the patience I have spent detangling my own, each circular movement building up a soft, textured surface, a key motif in my work.

I start with the part of the figure that instinctively gets the most attention — the eyes. I tend to leave them lighter, choosing to outline and lightly shade in the pupil, or leaving them completely blank. Seer, blind, or perhaps even possessed, there is something almost mask-like, or far-off about my figures. If the age-old adage holds any truth that the eye is the window to the soul, then I want to protect this access. In a history that too often has placed the Black female body as something to be consumed and owned, this protection feels important to me. The ambiguity this treatment of the eye gives, and the lack of saturation at a natural focus point enables the viewer to roam around the rest of the drawing easily.

I scan my drawings, digitally isolating each figure and element in Photoshop. I compose parts of pieces together, making use of repetition, enlargement and warping to manipulate the final drawing. In certain places, I go back into the drawing with digital strokes in shades of black to white that mimic pen. This allows for another layer of mark making that I could not achieve by working additively with pen alone. If needed, I go back to pen and paper, drawing, scanning, and composing again until I am satisfied with the outcome. When I am ready, I divide the image into overlapping panels that I print and mount to make my wall installations.

Working digitally allows me to push the limitations of the pen medium. Repetition, enlargement, and composing out of parts, means that I can produce intricate pen drawings at a monumental scale. As digital prints, the work can exist in different settings, providing a reach that pen alone could not achieve. Ballpoint pen is inherently not a good archival material, but through my digital catalogue, I can save, replicate and edit bodies of work over time.



Figure 33 Sam Modder, studio view, 2021, Image courtesy of the artist

I design each mural installation for a specific space, paying attention to the work's presence. For me, presence is more than being seen, but rather, having a definite impact on your surroundings. It is the ability to change a space or situation. Presence can be a big, loud, statement or a quiet, insidious moment that you cannot shake.

When I think about presence, I think about how the work will be experienced in a particular space. Scale is always felt in context, and so I constantly ask how my work is responding to the architecture around it? Do I as the viewer, look up, down, around? Step back and then move closer? Are there moments of rupture and surprise where the image breaks the boundary of the wall? Are there visual pointers within the work that encourages a particular movement in the space? Moments of rest and clutter, build up and release?

For this I look to artists like Kara Walker, particularly her installations where black cut-out silhouettes take over large white walls, immersing you in intricate, yet horrifying scenes of the worst of slavery. The work encourages me to move in and step back, to walk along one way, and then retrace my steps to see characters anew. Or Jose Orozco's *Epic of American Civilization*, 1934, located in the basement of Dartmouth College's library—a monumental mural covering nearly 3,200 square feet, that presents the linear American narrative of colonization as a cyclical epic of destruction and creation through the viewpoint of those exploited and displaced.⁴² I've spent hours in that basement, looking up at the characters that towered above me. The work felt important, monumental even, in a way that kept calling me back to look and learn from it. It is this feeling that I hope to replicate in my work.



Figure 34 José Clemente Orozco, *The Epic of American Civilization*, 1934, fresco, Image courtesy of Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.



Figure 35 Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole" (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause*, 1997, cut paper on wall, 144 in. x 1,020 in., Image courtesy of Hammer Museum, LA. photo by Joshua White.

Conclusion and Future Chapters

I began this work by asking a question of a drawing and two years later I am only beginning to understand why a Black woman in striped socks decided to listen to her hair and step into the unknown. *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022 is a chapter in a larger story. An early chapter, in fact. One that only begins to set the scene in this alternate world. I imagine a confrontation is imminent. I am unclear if any victories will be won. All I know for now, is that in this installation, what intrigues me most is the possible break in the cycle—the moment when a worker turns, sock in hand, towards the approaching hair. It seems like a choice. One I have begun to consider in *Sock Fist*, 2021 and *Sock Hero*, 2021. In both these drawings, there is a direct, but partially hidden, gaze—the first character still emerging from the floor, the second disguised behind an almost superhero like mask. I am intrigued by this masked hero, why she embraces both hair and sock and chooses to hide.



Figure 36 Sam Modder, *Sock Fist and Sock Hero*, 2021, digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawing, dimensions variable, Image courtesy of the artist

When I step into the quiet space of my own imaginary, I see this work stretching far—filling mazes of walls to create new spaces. Spaces I hope to share with you soon.



Figure 37 Sam Modder, *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, prints on adhesive paper of digitally manipulated ballpoint pen drawings, 12 ft. x 20 ft. x 12 ft., Image courtesy of Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, photo by Whitney Curtis

Notes

¹ This text exists as a written prelude to *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022 and was shown as wall text introducing the work in the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis.

² Joseph Campbell, “The Call to Adventure,” in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 51.

³ bell hooks, “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 59-61.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Joseph Campbell, “The Hero and the God,” in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), p. 30.

⁶ Richard Kearney, “Where Do Stories Come From?,” in *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 3-9.

⁷ In Carol and Tenniel’s depictions of Alice, both in word and image, I am drawn to Alice’s calm in the face of strange circumstances. It makes me, as a viewer, question if what I am seeing is strange, or perhaps if what I view as strange, is the thing that is strange. There is a level of buy-in and acceptance that can be conveyed, when the story’s characters aren’t alarmed by the givens in a new reality, helping the audience condition themselves to accepting and immersing themselves in a new norm. I use this calm in my own visual narratives by avoiding extreme facial expressions in my largest characters and conveying only mild surprise in my protagonist in *Source of All Hair, Wearer of All Socks*, 2022, wall text: “On a dull Monday morning in Massachusetts, a Black woman awoke to find she had grown a person out of her hair. This annoyed her greatly.”

⁸ Lewis Carroll and John Tenniel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: By Lewis Carroll ; with Forty-Two Illustrations by John Tenniel* (Paris: Edmund S. Wood, 1950).

⁹ Jacqueline Rose, “Introduction,” in *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 1-3.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels Into Several Remote Regions of the World*, ed. Thomas M. Balliet (Boston, MA: D.C. HEATH & CO., PUBLISHERS, 1900).

¹³ Theodore Seuss, *The Lorax: Dr. Seuss Collector's Edition* (New York, NY: Random House, 1971).

¹⁴ Anthony Stewart, “The Yahoo and the Discourse of Racialism in Gulliver's Travels,” *Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 12 (1993): p. 35, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012577ar>.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Rose, “Introduction,” in *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994), p. 3.

¹⁶ Mark Pratt, “Six Dr. Seuss Books Will Stop Being Published Because of Racist Imagery,” PBS (Public Broadcasting Service, March 2, 2021), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/6-dr-seuss-books-will-stop-being-published-because-of-racist-imagery>.

¹⁷ Theodore Seuss, *The Lorax: Dr. Seuss Collector's Edition* (New York, NY: Random House, 1971).

¹⁸ I must mention that along with children’s storybook illustrations, figurative Black female artists, Kara Walker and Wangechi Mutu, are also key influences in my characters’ exaggerated silhouettes and dynamic poses. Notably both artists imply narrative and reference popular imagery in their work.

¹⁹ While no one formal definition exists for the Black imaginary, it is a term that has been referenced by numerous Black artists, authors, filmmakers, musicians, and other creatives working in speculative or revisionist ways. It is mentioned in discussions around Afrofuturism, Black performance, Black futures and Black spatial imaginaries. In this text, I argue for a definition that is tied to the creation of spaces for and by Black people.

²⁰ Zadie Smith, “What Would We Be Like If Racism Never Existed,” in *Toyin Ojih Odutola - The UmuEze Amara Clan and the House of Obafemi* (New York, NY: Rizzola Electa, 2021), pp. 14-16.

²¹ PCC Paragon Gallery, “This Is a Black Spatial Imaginary,” Portland Community College, September 1, 2017, <https://www.pcc.edu/galleries/2017/09/01/this-is-a-black-spatial-imaginary/>.

²² Imagine Black, accessed April 28, 2022, https://issuu.com/paalf/docs/paalf_peoples_plan_2017.

²³ Further examples of the Black imaginary creating spaces include, Hebru Brantley’s *Nevermore Park*, 2020, in Chicago an immersive, spatial art experience that consists of multiple, interactive installations that explore the origin and world of Brantley’s most popular characters Flyboy and Lil Mama, and Drexciya, a modern myth that tells of an underwater Black nation descended from the offspring of pregnant, enslaved women cast into the sea.

²⁴ *Space Is the Place*, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyMAu1goIMU&ab_channel=Icy10K.

²⁵ *Black Panther* (Marvel Studios, Walt Disney Pictures, 2018).

²⁶ In the years during and after the transatlantic slave trade, stories took root among enslaved populations of flying Africans returning to their homeland.

²⁷ Marcus Garvey was a Black nationalist and leader of the Pan-Africanist movement in the early 1920s. He championed a Back-to-Africa movement that encouraged African Americans to relocate to Africa and create spaces of economic independence and sovereignty.

²⁸ Yohana Desta, “Jordan Peele's *Get out* Almost Had an Impossibly Bleak Ending,” *Vanity Fair* (Vanity Fair, March 3, 2017), <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/jordan-peeel-get-out-ending>.

²⁹ Ashley Stull Meyers, Lisa Bates, and Sharita Towne, “This Is a Black Spatial Imaginary,” *Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations*, 2017, <https://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/36617>.

³⁰ “Beyond This Space: The Transcendent Choreo-Photolist, The Art of Benji Reid,” *Trebuchet Magazine*, 2020, pp. 124-135.

³¹ Further thoughts on Toyin Ojih Odutola’s exhibition *To Wander Determined*, 2017:

I first saw Toyin Ojih Odutola’s work in person at the Whitney in 2017. Earlier that year I had graduated from my undergraduate studio art program and was now visiting another classmate in New York. We both identified as young, African, female artists. (Perhaps still a bit tentative on the latter). After a day of walking Manhattan’s cold November streets and its most well-known art halls, we had seen few people like us, let alone their work. Toyin Ojih Odutola, a Yoruba name like my aunty, on the first floor of the Whitney, free and open to the public, felt like the warmest of embraces.

“To Wander Determined”, Toyin’s first solo show in New York, is an important work for me because it first introduced me to the use of speculative narratives in contemporary image making. The work centers on the lives of two aristocratic Nigerian families brought together by the marriage of their sons. It is an imaginary account. One based in a Nigeria that never went through the horrors of colonialism and where Black wealth and queer love is unremarkable. The Black people in Toyin’s portraits are wealthy, but more than that they are unbothered, free from any need for performance, reaction, or activism. Their poses demonstrate comfort with privilege and lives that are occupied solely with self and inter-personal pursuits, knowing no system that is anything but completely for them.

Toyin uses wall text to position the work as a cross-cultural loan from an aristocratic African family to an American institution. She helps to place this imaginary narrative in the real by decentralizing her role as creator, signing the wall text with her name and title, not as an artist, but the “Deputy Private Secretary” of the Udoka House, Lagos. Moves like this make Toyin’s imagined life of ease, abundance, and self-determination for two queer African men and their families feel so real and tenable. It is a revisionist claim of history, one that imagines what could have been possible, and indeed what was lost, by the exploitation of colonialism.

While I have said much about the revisionist work these depictions allow, it is still a world grounded in elitism and social hierarchy. The drawings tell us nothing about what life is like for other people outside of this family. In our world, exploitation is often necessary for such wealth and privilege to exist, why would things be different in this one simply because those on top are Black? I believe Toyin begins to better confront these questions in her subsequent exhibition *A Countervailing Theory*, 2019, which I choose to elaborate on in the main text.

³² Toyin Ojih Odutola, “Taking Up Heirs,” in *Toyin Ojih Odutola - The UmuEze Amara Clan and the House of Obafemi* (New York, NY: Rizzola Electa, 2021), pp. 10-13.

³³ Amah-Rose Abrams, “Features: Craft/Work: Utopias Are Traps: Toyin Ojih Odutola on a Countervailing Theory,” *The Quietus* (The Quietus, November 7, 2020), <https://thequietus.com/articles/29188-toyin-ojih-odutola-a-countervailing-theory-interview>.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ bell hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), p. 130.

³⁷ It should be noted here that CROWN Act, passed by Congress in March 2022 aims to rectify this omission of hair as a racialized feature that can be discriminated against in employment. The bill categorically protects against biases against natural and protective hairstyles, including braids.

³⁸ Paulette M. Caldwell, “A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender,” *Duke Law Journal* 1991, no. 2 (1991): pp. 383-384, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1372731>.

³⁹ Michaela Angela Davis, “Cutting My Hair Was My First Revolutionary Act,” *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, April 4, 2022), <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2022/03/black-hair-and-revolution-soul-scissors/622952/>.

⁴⁰ 3C is a part of a numbering system that aims to classify different hair textures ranging from 1A to 4C. 3C refers to an S-shaped curl pattern that is a mid-range curly texture between looser waves and tighter coils.

⁴¹ Liza Wemekor, “Notes on Mermaids and Passing as Human,” *Luna Station Quarterly*, January 5, 2022,

⁴² “Orozco’s Epic,” Hood Museum (Hood Museum at Dartmouth, April 25, 2022), <https://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu/explore/collection/featured-collections/orozcos-epic>.

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