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### James Maurelle: On-Site

James Maurelle

Odili Donald Odita

Kinaya Hassane

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**JAMES  
MAURELLE**



CUE

137 West 25th Street  
New York, NY 10001  
[cueartfoundation.org](http://cueartfoundation.org)

JAMES MAURELLE

On-Site

Curator-Mentor:  
ODILI DONALD ODITA

September 17 - October 23, 2021





THIS SPREAD AND NEXT DETAIL  
*Aangename Kennismaking (Pleased to Meet You)*, 2020  
wood, adhesive, paint, canvas, and metal  
43.5 x 28 x 14 inches





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*Aangename Kennismaking (Pleased to Meet You)*, 2020  
wood, adhesive, paint, canvas, and metal  
43.5 x 28 x 14 inches







# ON-SITE

## James Maurelle

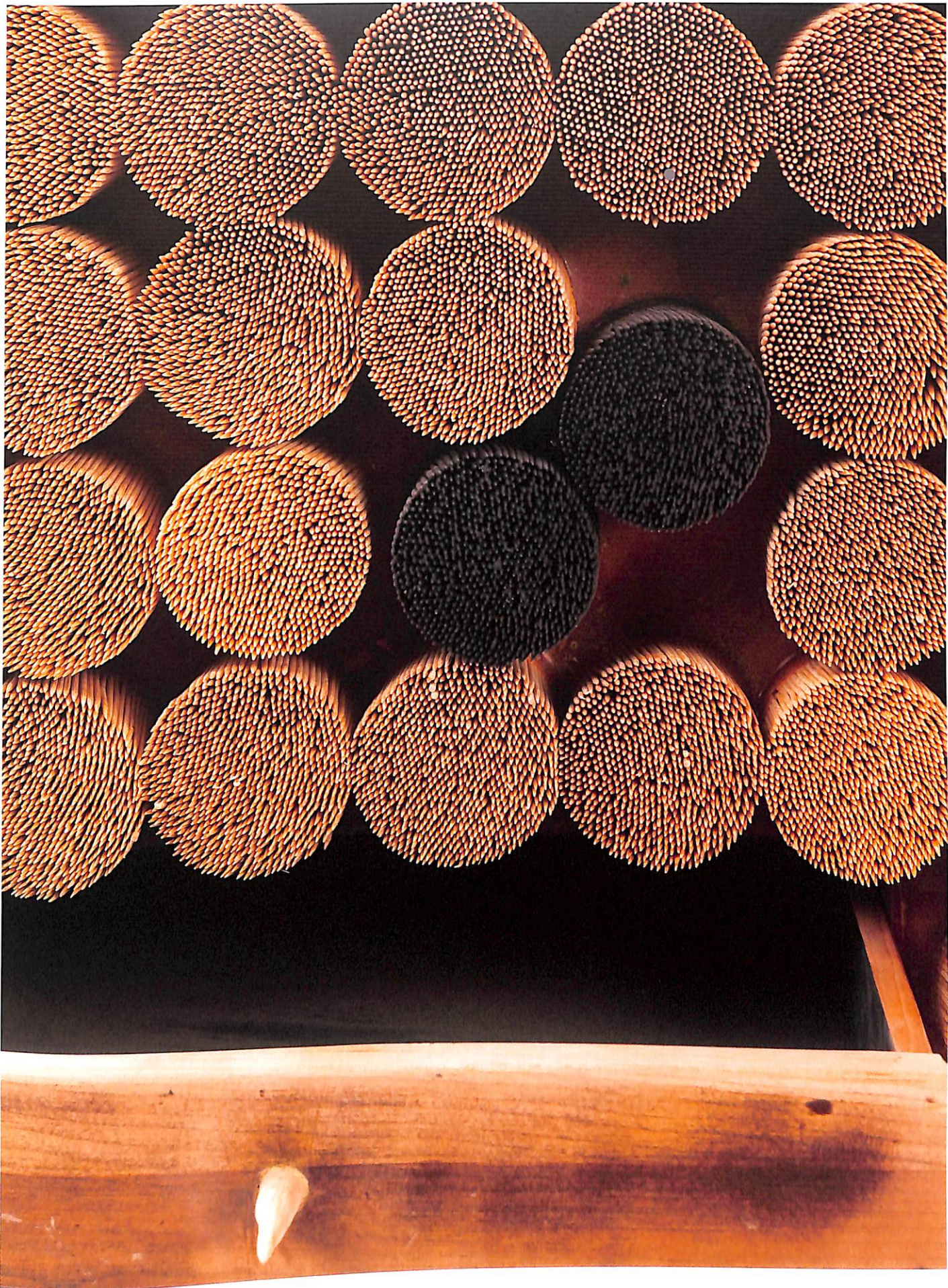
There is a correlation formed between labor and creativity—at the center of this byway is the heart of my practice. Building objects is not unlike creating musical compositions; the accompaniment, i.e., tools and materials, is a call and response to creativity. The rubric to complete any composition is to know one's instrument(s)/tools; the creative process is based on this reciprocal understanding. Jazz is the primer which propels the work; the tone/feel of every composition is in direct association with the culture. Every object I compose is a physical versioning of a historic recording or happening; every tool used is an augmented scale referencing an industrial progression. The materials (wood, metal, plastic, and film) are the staff paper, and every committed strike upon these materials forms a note or chord. The fluidity

connecting mind, hand, and tools is based on the augmented triad which is the cornerstone of my work ethic. The main objective is to continue creating full-bodied compositions—as long as the staff paper flows, I will inscribe upon it.

\*

**James Maurelle** is an interdisciplinary artist—sculpture, video, photography, and sound art are his analog and digital primes. His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in New York, Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Austin, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Richmond, Cincinnati, and San Francisco. Maurelle received his BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and his MFA from the University of Pennsylvania. He was a recipient of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Fellowship in 2015.







# DIVINATION AND THE DIVINE: THE WORK OF JAMES MAURELLE

## Odili Donald Odita, Curator-Mentor

I met James Maurelle in 2015 while he was a resident artist at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, and I was a resident faculty member for the year along with LaToya Ruby Frazier, Neil Goldberg, Michelle Grabner, and Sarah Oppenheimer. James has an impressive presence, and yet he was quiet in his approach. Over the course of nine weeks, James carefully opened up to me and to everyone else at the residency. In this time, I learned about his prior work experience in video, photography, and music as an international DJ. I was equally surprised to learn that James was a student of the late and great artist, Terry Adkins, who was James' mentor and graduate professor in the sculpture program at the University of Pennsylvania.

James' studio at Skowhegan had a distinctive quality to it. It felt well-lived in. His current West Philadelphia studio has very much the same quality. It looks like a

workshop/laboratory with all sorts of objects in various stages of realization laying around the space. There are objects of all kinds made of wood, cloth, and metal, as well as found objects with sawdust—loads of it—sprinkled onto everything and everywhere. His studio has the energy of perpetual work and process in constant motion.

When James speaks about his work, it is often said in sudden bursts of inspired thought. In this process, I get to see a depth of passion and understanding that resides in his awareness of the history of Black people. This truth comes forth and manifests in his determined use of wood, which is coupled with his sound abilities as a master craftsman. James engages a vernacular that derives from local African-American traditions of making along with African traditions of woodworking. In my mind, James is able to bridge traditional aspects of wood



working from Africa to America in a divine sense of continuity and completion. His work ultimately speaks to the poetics of Black people and the Black experience. All this is realized through a refined and painstaking process in which he transforms wood into distinct and graceful objects. The forms that James eventually creates speak to a history of making and of being inasmuch as they address the complexities that exist within our contemporary social sphere, both locally and globally.

It has been a privilege to learn more about James Maurelle while we worked together on his exhibition. What most impresses me about James and his work is the way in which he divines the "soul of an object." I trust in him, and I trust that the viewer will see this and more when they get the opportunity to view James' exhibition at CUE Art Foundation in New York.

**Odili Donald Odita** (b. Enugu, Nigeria; lives and works in Philadelphia) is an abstract painter whose work explores color, both in the figurative historical context and in the sociopolitical sense. He is best known for his large-scale canvases with kaleidoscopic patterns and vibrant hues, which he uses to reflect the human condition. For Odita, color is at once a distinct phenomenon and a vehicle for mirroring the complexity of the world. He has presented exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2021); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (2020-21); Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis (2020); Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2019-21); Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham (2015-17); Savannah College of Art and Design (2012); and the New Orleans Museum of Art (2011), among other institutions. Odita is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



*Passage, 2019*  
blood, wood, adhesive, paint, and seaweed  
14.5 x 22.5 x 17 inches







*B. Natchez, 2019*  
oil, paint, graphite, and soil  
37 x 15 x 4 inches



*Amma*, 2020  
wood, adhesive, and copper  
15 x 10 x 10.5 inches







*Edson, 2020*  
wood, brick, paint, adhesive, glass, soil, metal, and shoe polish  
25 x 13 x 30.5 inches









*Who's Next...*, 2019  
wood, varnish, and adhesive  
17 x 20.5 x 17.5 inches



*Triple Crown:*

*Jeu:* 12-10, 2020  
wood, adhesive, and paint  
31.5 x 11 x 1.75 inches

*Set:* 6-2, 2020  
wood, adhesive, and paint  
31.5 x 11 x 1.75 inches

*Match:* 6-2, 2020  
wood, adhesive, and paint  
32.5 x 11.5 x 1.75 inches





*Sky Hooks*, 2020  
wood, copper, and adhesive  
86 x 8.5 x 1.75 inches







*THEY, 2020*  
wood, ink, paper, adhesive, and graphite  
29.5 x 35 x 30.5 inches





# RETOOLING THE SYSTEMIC

## Kinaya Hassane

James Maurelle's artistic practice eludes categorization. Maurelle, who initially studied filmmaking before embracing sculpture and installation, crosses mediums and subject matter through repurposing ordinary found materials. As a result, each object forms part of a lively ecosystem, resisting the logic of a commercial art market that places outside influence on the singular work of art, particularly in its reactionary embrace of Black artists. Through this wide-ranging oeuvre, Maurelle confers familiar objects with new meanings that express radical visions of Black agency and self-determination.

One could easily draw comparisons between Maurelle's pathbreaking artistry and Audre Lorde's oft-cited lecture, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, which famously argues that it is moot to wield the tools and

language of white supremacist patriarchal structures to deconstruct them. However, the artist is also in conversation with literary theorist Michelle Wright's text, *The Physics of Blackness*. In her monograph, Wright provides a theoretical framework for understanding how Black identity, as it has been defined and redefined throughout history, challenges conventional conceptions of linear space and time. Wright's intervention mirrors the ways that Maurelle's artwork unfurls the status quo and encourages viewers to look at the world with new eyes.

One way Maurelle leads audiences to experience this paradigmatic shift is through his intentional construction of an all-encompassing and self-contained world, an aesthetic choice informed by his familiarity with the plumbing and construction trades, and his



background as a filmmaker. His West Philadelphia studio space is littered with an assemblage of scrap and raw materials, many of which he carried from studio to studio. The ensuing works of art are singular creations but are united through his repetition of themes and motifs that each relate in one way or another to Black cultural histories. Rather than submitting to contemporary exhibition practices that veer toward minimalism and starkness, Maurelle immerses viewers in a wide-ranging constellation of cultural and historical references that evoke a multitude of sensory responses through their materiality.

*FOTF13 (Figures of Thought - Fall 2013)* is a sculpture constructed from scrap metal that once belonged to his late mentor, Terry Adkins. Interlocking copper pipes surround a refashioned horn instrument, which appears to float at the center of the makeshift

cage. Like Adkins, Maurelle draws inspiration from the liberatory potential of sound and cites the ethereal discography of jazz saxophonist John Coltrane as a guiding light. In conversation, Maurelle recounts his belief that Coltrane left behind a trove of "spells" that equip people of African descent with the tools to resist what scholar Christina Sharpe terms "the climate" of anti-Blackness that structures Black people's experience of "the Weather," or their lived environment. *FOTF13*, on one hand, represents the ways that music allows the disenfranchised to defy oppressive structures. Conversely, because of Maurelle's close personal relationship with Adkins and his partial inheritance of his mentor's artistic legacy, the work's cage can be seen as a protective measure against the insidious forces that threaten Black creativity and subjectivity.

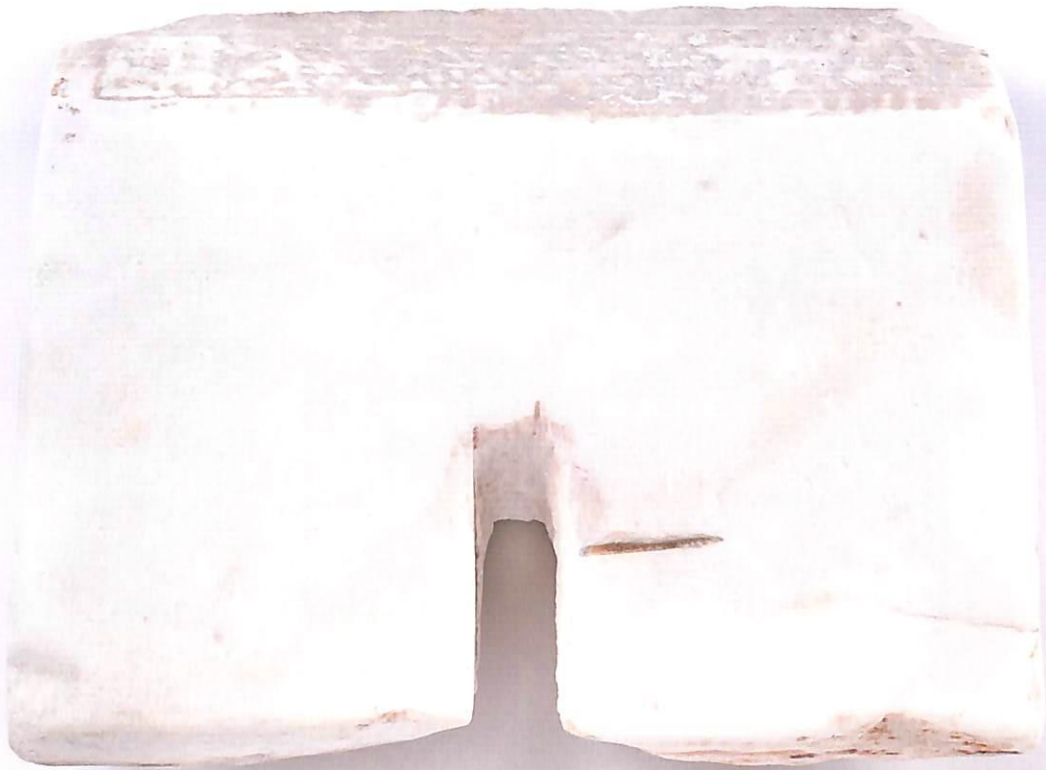
The ways that Black athletes navigate this pervasive climate of antiblackness and subvert its realities are recurrent themes in Maurelle's work. *Friday Night* is a series of works about tennis player Althea Gibson that excavates the ever-relevant history of the public's scrutiny of Black women athletes' physicality. Worn red table tennis paddles reference Gibson's early career, while a set of black and gold vintage hot combs welded onto the handles draw attention to the familiar and intricate ritual of Black hair care. Through their unlikely pairing, the objects allude to the ways that Black women's ascent in public life is often inextricable from their appearance. While *Friday Night* is a reminder of the unfair standards imposed on Black women like Gibson and those who came after her like the Williams sisters and Naomi Osaka, the sculptures also double as tools that users clutch with their fists, thus turning them into potential symbols of strength and agency. Maurelle's conscious summoning of these objects' dual-status as tools of oppression and resistance grounds this series in Audre Lorde's potent discourse on the undoing of unjust systems. Meanwhile, the enduring relevance of these vintage objects across time is a visual manifestation of Michelle Wright's troubling of the concept of linear time in favor of a more disruptive, messy understanding of time that better suits broad conceptualizations of Black history.

*Edson* refers to the early life of another trailblazing Black athlete, Edson Arantes do Nascimento,

better known as Pelé. Before the Brazilian soccer star achieved international fame, he worked as a shoeshine boy to support his family. *Edson* is an assemblage of found wood objects that together, resembles the kind of stand Pelé might have used in the 1940s. A series of white wooden spikes jut out from the top of a repurposed card file cabinet, evoking the pain endemic to all kinds of low-wage manual labor. By conveying this pain, Maurelle points to Pelé's usage of his physicality during his youth and career as an elite athlete to seemingly transcend the constraints of Brazil's racial hierarchy. The various shades of brown that make up the shoeshine stand (which is itself a symbol of power relations) further ground the sculpture in the nuances of Brazil's and other countries' continued struggles with racial and ethnic discrimination.

Maurelle returns to Brazil and its history as the primary destination for enslaved Africans trafficked in the transatlantic slave trade with his sculpture, *Carioca*. Named for the Portuguese word used to denote the city of Rio de Janeiro, the pristine plaster sculpture is a reimagining of colonial-era plantation homes. The smooth white facade of the sculpture is interrupted only by a crack beside the doorway, which reveals strands of sugar cane installed behind the house. *Carioca* disrupts the sculptural tradition of monuments that tend to either obscure or glorify histories of slavery and genocide in the Americas. By using Brazil as a shorthand for the broader diasporic experience,





*Carioca*, 2021  
stone, blood, earth, and sugar cane  
16.5 x 14.5 x 5 inches





*Fred*, 2020  
wood, blood, spit, earth, and graphite  
14 x 15.5 x 16 inches

Maurelle destabilizes longstanding, U.S.-centric notions of Blackness and employs a visual language that encourages solidarity among people of African descent irrespective of borders.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Maurelle makes similar interventions into the historical record. *Fred* draws upon the autopsy report of slain Black Panther Party Chairman Fred Hampton. The original document marks the entry and exit wounds that were inflicted during the Chicago Police Department's raid on his home, and the larger-than-life wooden bust visualizes the sterile and procedural nature of these archives through its replication of the bullet. At the same time that Maurelle foregrounds the callous, matter-of-fact manner in which Black death is accounted for by the state, indentations on the bust marking where the artist shaved down the original material are a reminder of the care and meditation that went into rendering this understated monument to Hampton.

Although Maurelle makes frequent and overt references to the political through his invocation of Black cultural figures and motifs, he rejects the paradigm frequently imposed upon his peers by a white-dominated art world. This paradigm often favors artists who are primed to respond to their continued marginalization by demanding "a seat at the table" and participating in an extractive economy that mines Black creativity to benefit unequal systems and institutions. Maurelle, on the other hand, attempts to reject the terms of these transactional relationships and instead draws viewers into his world, wherein the lines between art and craft, the personal and the political, the abstract and the tangible are tactfully blurred. While virtually no working artist today is exempt from the inequitable principles that govern creative industries in this late capitalist moment, Maurelle's work offers a glimpse into alternative modes of making and living, and lays the groundwork for new possibilities.

This text was written as part of the **Art Critic Mentoring Program**, a partnership between AICA-USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE, which pairs emerging writers with art critic mentors appointed by AICA to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit [aicausa.org](http://aicausa.org) for more information on AICA-USA, or [cueartfoundation.org](http://cueartfoundation.org) to learn how to participate in this program. No part of this essay may be reproduced without prior consent from the author. **Lilly Wei** is AICA's Coordinator for the program this season.

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**Kinaya Hassane** is a writer and curator from Virginia. Previously, she has held positions at the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Brooklyn Museum. She received her BA in Art History from Bowdoin College and is a doctoral student at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

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Mentor **Lee Ann Norman** is a cultural worker who has developed a body of work that highlights her interest in cultivating spaces that allow people to learn about each

other and themselves through the arts. In her work, Lee Ann considers how art objects and experiences are perceived in the marketplace; the politics of culture and aesthetics; the role of conversation and questioning in creative pursuits; and reconsiderations of language as applied to interpreting art objects and experiences. She has worked as an arts administrator and freelance consultant for arts, community-based, and philanthropic organizations as well as higher education institutions, including ArtPlace America, Chicago Park District, Creative Capital, EMC Arts, and Chicago Theological Seminary. She currently serves as Director, Leadership & Learning Programs for the League of American Orchestras. A published art critic and essayist, Lee Ann's writing has appeared in *Art Papers*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *BOMB*, *The Chicago Reader*, *The Studio Museum of Harlem's Studio Magazine*, *JSTOR Daily*, *Newcity*, and *Sixty*, among others. She earned an MFA in Art Criticism & Writing from the School of Visual Arts in New York, an MA in Arts Management from Columbia College Chicago, and a Bachelor of Music Education from Michigan State University.



CUE Art Foundation is a visual arts center dedicated to creating essential career and educational opportunities for artists of all ages. Through exhibitions, arts education, and public programs, CUE provides artists, writers, and audiences with sustaining, meaningful experiences and resources. CUE's exhibition program aims to present new and exceptionally strong work by under-recognized and emerging artists based in the United States, and is committed to exhibiting work of all disciplines.

Exhibiting artists are selected via a hybrid process, featuring solo exhibitions curated by established artists alongside a series of solo and group exhibitions selected by an annual Open Call. In line with CUE's commitment to providing substantive professional development opportunities, curators and Open Call panelists also serve as mentors to the exhibiting artists, providing support throughout the process of developing their exhibition. We are honored to work with the artist Odili Donald Odita as the curator-mentor to James Maurelle.

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