

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

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The Black Embodiments Studio

blackembodiments.org

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THIS YEAR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BERETTE S. MACAULAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And what do I mean by that?

For one thing, SEE AND WRITE ABOUT BLACK ART.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Another thing: BUY BLACK ART!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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