

Black in Place - Curatorial Statement

Black in Place is a holding space for invocation, re-memory, and unbridled Black expression. Remedying erasure that historically fueled what esteemed African-American collectors Bernard and Shirley Kinsey refer to as the “myth of absence,” artworks in this exhibition dispel the notion that what is unseen does not exist. The paradox of existing while being rendered invisible is an ongoing reality for the Black Diaspora, particularly in the West. This exhibition interrogates the living contradictions of existing while Black, invokes ancestral and indigenous wisdom, and explores how Black artists cultivate dreaming through making.

The artists presented are Leslie Adkins, Adeola Davies-Aiyeloja, Denise ‘deLaSNP’ Coke, Dea Jenkins, Steven Anthony Johnson II, Kandy G. Lopez, Rosalyn Myles, Cheyann Washington, and Fallon Williams. Their art practices reflect journeys of cultural enunciation and recontextualization of Black expression, particularly in white-dominated spaces. Through audio, portraiture, painting, digital/Augmented Reality, fiber art, poetry, drawing, and installation, the artworks engage with these guiding questions:

- How does the act of archiving unveil hidden narratives to sow existence?
- How can indigenous and ancestral wisdom enrich and guide the Black sojourner?
- How can Black people live out their fullest expression through making and dreaming?

Living Contradiction

In the revelations of 18th-century enslaved African poet Phillis Wheatley, Blackness was often either demonized or underestimated, with her poetic abilities met with disbelief due to her race. Wheatley's *On Being Black Brought from Africa to America* (1773) encapsulates the erasure of Black people during enslavement, leading to a subconscious “doublemindedness,” a concept later defined by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Doublemindedness describes the split between one’s public performance to accommodate whiteness and the internal self, creating a sense of disconnection and otherness that resonates for many marginalized groups today.

Kandy G. Lopez (b. New Jersey) addresses the internal and external negotiations of cultural duality in *Los Dos Kandys* (2024), drawing from Frida Kahlo’s *Las Dos Fridas* (1939). As a first-generation Afro-Caribbean American, Lopez explores the paradox of visibility and invisibility, navigating the tension between her intersecting identities and reflecting on how we assert our presence in spaces where we have often been erased.

Steven Anthony Johnson II (b. Baltimore, 1993) interrogates the theme of double-mindedness in *Dear Beautiful Black Baby* (2020-present), using intimate portraits and interviews to explore the complexities of Black familial relationships. Their work examines the duality of love and survival within the Black community, shaped by socio-economic disenfranchisement and displacement, while shedding light on the resilience and wisdom of chosen and genetic family bonds across the African diaspora.

Rosalyn Myles (b. 1962, Los Angeles) transforms personal history into poetic form in her installation *Daisy Lee Hightower* (2022), a tribute to her grandmother. Using a dining table and architectural elements, Myles creates a sculptural timeline that reflects her grandmother's life across different eras, elevating everyday objects to artifacts of memory and existence, while mapping the evolution of domestic spaces as a metaphor for both lived experience and identity.

Through their practice, Lopez, Johnson, and Myles confront the complexities of Black life, exploring the push-and-pull of self-actualization and performance, and how these can contradict one another within a society that often demands conformity.

Power of Enunciation

With an understanding of the Black experience as a living contradiction, reclamation and memory become powerful conduits to cement our existence.

Myles and Johnson's archival installations are transitory pieces to this subject and connect well to the words of Robert Kendrick,

“The ‘otherness’ of African Americans was absolute. They remained at the margins of Colonial culture, without a cultural identity or a voice to express it. The rupture caused by their abduction and subsequent enslavement left African Americans with a cultural past which could not address the culture of their present and a present culture which denied the legitimacy of the culture of their past.” (Kendrick, R., 1996).

The dissolution of “otherness” begins with the reclamation of culture. In indigenous African knowledge systems, this was achieved through “insurgent memory,” an oral tradition wherein “new knowledge is produced in the actual lived context of enunciation” (Zegeye, A., & Vambe, M., 2006).

Adeola Davies-Aiyeloja (b. Nigeria) explores this reclamation of culture in *ECHOES OF THE ELDERS* (2023), an intuitive painting inspired by her visit to a former slave castle in Ghana. Through a color palette referencing the castle and surrounding rock, Davies-Aiyeloja channels a message from her ancestors, urging, “Hear our story, Tell our story... Make sure the next generation knows.” Flanked by her *ORISA IBILE* sculptures (2015), the piece serves as a potent reminder to honor the past and protect the future.

Fallon Williams (b. Los Angeles, CA) engages memory through *Act of Remembrance* (2024), an installation of shattered mirrors and changing light that reflects fragmented images of the viewer and others. This disjointed reflection prompts contemplation of how memory is embedded in our bodies and histories, echoing Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's query, “What else did we once know that has now been disremembered?”

Dea Jenkins (b. Houston, TX) delves into Black identity and inheritance across multiple works, including *Recollective Memory* (2023), *From Whence You Came* (2023), and *Blk Halos Project* (2019). Through the use of West African materials and interdisciplinary dialogue, Jenkins examines how ancestral knowledge anchors and guides contemporary Black experience, urging a re-engagement with inherited legacies while forging new paths forward.

Together, these artists—Davies-Aiyeloja, Williams, and Jenkins—utilize the power of enunciation to reclaim cultural memory and reflect on the generational knowledge that continues to shape Black identity and existence.

Dreaming while Black, making while Black

To dream and make while Black is an act of resistance and reclamation, pushing back against oppression by bringing the Black imagination into the forefront. Afro-surrealism, as articulated by D. Scot Miller, proposes that beyond the visible world, there exists an invisible realm striving to manifest, one that Black artists have the power to uncover. This work becomes a portal to explore new realities, where the act of creating while Black is both a defiance of historical erasure and a radical act of self-actualization.

Steven Anthony Johnson II (b. Baltimore, Maryland) presents a living archive through their installation that imagines what they would say to a biological child, one untouched by the colonial gaze. Their exploration of the Black Imagination, Queer/Trans dream cultivation, and Afro-Futurism reflects their desire for mothering through a Transfemme experience, creating a space for unfiltered self-expression and the reimagination of kinship, love, and identity outside of traditional frameworks.

Afro-caribbean artist, Denise ‘deLaSNP’ Coke (b. New York City) brings her vibrant, impressionistic paintings to life through animation and augmented reality. In *Bodega (Just Another Day)* (2022), she evokes the nostalgia of a New York summer day, blending memories of her hometown with a sense of loss, while *Where We Stand* (2022) embodies the strength of Black womanhood and divine femininity. Through color, sound, and immersive experience, Coke invites viewers into a world of confident self-expression and cultural pride.

Cheyann Washington (b. Los Angeles, CA) uses natural pigments on silk and homemade paper to explore the intersection of human behavior, nature, and the nurturing bonds that connect us all. Her work merges biology, ethnobotany, and personal experience, reflecting on the balance and imbalance within nature and the human body.

Leslie Adkins explores themes of mythology, nostalgia, and collective consciousness in her paintings. *Lilith and her Bird* (2024) reimagines the story of Lilith as a symbol of freedom and wisdom, portrayed alongside an owl that represents seeing beyond illusion. *Future Legends* (2024) pays tribute to her father, blending nostalgia with wonder through a painting inspired by a childhood photograph of him riding a white horse. In *Hive Mind* (2024), Adkins reflects on collective consciousness and the healing power of bees, weaving together themes of community, interconnectedness, and the wisdom of nature.

Through these artists' works—Johnson, Coke, Washington, and Adkins—the Black imagination is not only reclaimed but celebrated, offering a profound vision of possibility, freedom, and self-expression.

Conclusion

Black in Place affirms the vibrancy and complexity of Black identity, challenging cultural erasure and reclaiming space for Black expression. Through themes of ancestral wisdom, memory, and the contradictions of Black existence, the exhibition dismantles the myth of absence. The featured artists explore how making and dreaming can resist oppression, reimagine kinship, and reflect on generational legacies. Their work celebrates the power of the Black imagination, offering a vision of empowerment and cultural renewal.

Bibliography

- Bodunrin, P. O. 1981. "The Question of African Philosophy." *Philosophy* 56 (216): 161–79.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3750739>.
- "BrowZine." 2025. Browzine.com. 2025.
<https://browzine.com/libraries/2495/journals/1450/issues/470601045>.
- Bryant-Davis, Dr. Thema. 2022. *Homecoming : Overcome Fear and Trauma to Reclaim Your Whole, Authentic Self*. New York, New York: Tarcherperigee.
- Diggs Colbert, Soyica. 2017. *Black Movements*. Rutgers University Press.
- Drew, Kimberly, and Jenna Wortham. 2020. *Black Futures*. New York: One World.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.
- Gwendolyn, Dubois Shaw. 2024. *The Art of Remembering*. Duke University Press.
- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass. Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Milkweed Editions.
- Kinsey, Bernard, and Shirley Kinsey. 2013. *The Kinsey Collection : Shared Treasures of Bernard and Shirley Kinsey : Where Art and History Intersect*. Pacific Palisades, Ca: Bernard and Shirley Kinsey Foundation for Arts and Education.
- Maurizio Lazzarato. 2023. *The Intolerable Present, the Urgency of Revolution*. MIT Press.
- Mercer, Valerie J, Mora J BeauchampByrd, MaryAnn Wilkinson, Stephanie James, Nancy Sojka, and Courtney J Martin. 2012. "Diversity of Contemporary African American Art." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 86 (1/4): 88–123.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/43492327>.
- Miller, D. Scot. 2009. "Afrosurreal Manifesto - FoundSF." [Www.foundsf.org](http://www.foundsf.org). 2009.
https://www.foundsf.org/index.php?title=Afrosurreal_Manifesto.
- Resmaa, Menakem. 2022. *The Quaking of America : An Embodied Guide to Navigating Our Nation's Upheaval and Racial Reckoning*. Las Vegas, Nevada: Central Recovery Press.
- Sanders, Chad. 2021. *Black Magic : What Black Leaders Learned from Trauma and Triumph*. New York, Ny: Simon & Schuster.
- Shearer, Wendy. 2021. *African and Caribbean Folktales, Myths and Legends*. London: Scholastic.

Wheatley, Phillis, and Vincent Carretta. 2011. *Complete Writings*. Paw Prints.

Zegeye, Abebe, and Maurice Vambe. 2006. "African Indigenous Knowledge Systems." *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 29 (4): 329–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40241671>.