Welcome Home

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

Expressionists used emotions to portray their work instead of relying on reality. In this movement, artists were able to challenge what art could look like. Through Expressionism came Neo Expressionism which was then broken down further into Black Abstraction. A big theme of my work relied on the physical responses and emotions that aroused from a person when viewing my work. Expressionism was first developed in Germany after reaction to the dehumanization effect of the industrialization and growth of cities. The work of expressionists have always been connected to the reflection of society.

Welcome Home started to become my reflection of society. As I dealt with Graduate school, an explosive breakup, and a pivot in self identity. Through my art I was able to connect with myself on a more spiritual level. Eventually, my art practice became my spiritual practice. To work through the emotions I was going through, I used art as a form of communication to express my heartache. Throughout *Welcome Home*, my heartache involved my confusion on my gender identity and the love hate relationship of my ex and I. Due to me healing from the harmful actions of my ex, my wellbeing influenced my work, as I completely evolved not only within my identity and Blackness, but within my art practice as well.

INTRODUCTION



In April 2023, I thought that I had finally discovered the type of artist I am. I was a sculpture artist with an interest in performance art. The topic of my work featured events from my life, whether it was places I visited or experiences I had. Due to wanting to spend more time crafting my performance art practice, I decided to continue my studies. What I expected to get out of Graduate school was not what I got. Homesickness, a controlling exgirlfriend, depression, and anxiety had me spiraling on a regular basis, the worst of it existing between May 2023 to January 2024. As I was navigating this new life, there were slivers of hope that made me think that maybe things would not be bad forever. Not only was I able to reignite my love for photography with my Power series (See Figure

One), but I was able to become the painter I desired to be when I was younger.

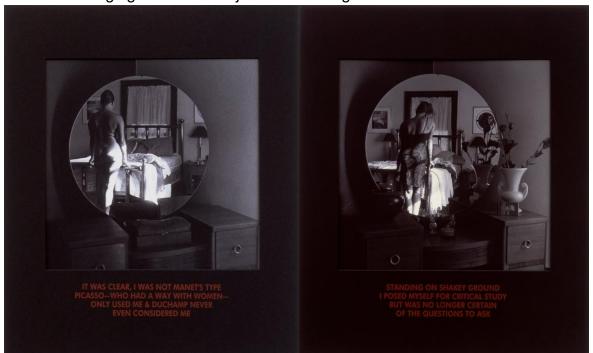
My optimism died when my ex continued to sink her claws into my life. She became my main priority, as I was just a blip in the sky in her life. Despite me knowing how she would always consider me a friend, even though we crossed that line many times after our initial breakup, I still thought I could win her back. Providing for her became so much of my focus that a toxic sense of masculinity became my identity. I needed her to see how strong I was and how I'd take care of her in any scenario I could. This went unnoticed.

What finally pulled me out of my ex stupor was my connection to spirituality, therapy, and the echoing words of a previous therapist claiming that she was "concerned for me." With her words ringing in my head daily and my self love growing, my art practice became my spiritual practice. My desire to heal became bigger than my desire to keep my ex in my life. Healing involved checking in with myself, preventing people pleasing, conducting tarot card reading for others and myself, talking through issues with my therapist, and creating art. My art was now coming directly from my life and my place in the world. I was able to fully connect with my identity and reflected it in the work I was creating. By identifying as Black and nonbinary, it is important to me that I speak of my experience in the world. My identity socially has forced others to feel threatened just for existing. With my work connecting with my identity, it has given me time to reflect on what's important to me and who I am at my core.

INFLUENCES AND CONTEXT

My work can be traced back to Expressionism. First developed as an avant garde style before the First World War. The typical trait of Expressionism has been presenting the world from a subjective perspective, distorting it for emotional effect. Emphasis is made more on the emotional experience rather than the physical reality. A subculture of Expressionism that has a connection with my own work is Black Abstraction. Black Abstraction focused on celebrating Black artists who created nonrepresentational work. Due to the mass amount of Black Abstraction artists, their experiences as well as views on empowerment differ from artist to artist.

A Black Abstraction artist I have connected with has been Carrie Mae Weems. In her piece, *Not Manet's Type, Weems d*iscussed race and how it was regarded in the eyes of modern beauty ideologies. In the five-photograph series (See Figure Two to Six), Weems was the subject matter as the viewer looked at her in a square format through a round mirror. With the setting being in the bedroom, it offered the viewer an insight into a private moment, but it also felt like we were peaking in on a private moment. As Weems fought to empower herself in the images, the text showed the true vulnerability she felt. This forced the viewer to think about the image of a Black woman while also bringing the Black subject to the fore ground.



Historically, Africans in European countries were fetishized, as their counterparts appropriated their culture, motifs, and traditions. According to Winiarski, "When a particular group of people becomes fetishized, there becomes an imbalance of power between them and the fetishizers; the fetishizers can view this group as subhuman (Page 264)." Due to the imbalance of power, fetishizers felt as though the people they had a fetish for were less than human. This ideal only continued as the femininity and

sexuality of a Black woman came into question. Due to Black femininity being constructed through the lens of White femininity, black femininity and sexuality became scrutinized, denying Black women the right to be feminine or sexual. Winiarski also states that, "North American and British scientists of the nineteenth-century described black sexuality as lascivious and apelike, marked by a 'voluptuousness' and 'degree of lascivity' unknown in Europe (Page 264)." During the nineteenth century, black beauty was defined as being lustful and apelike. People were able to seek them out quickly due to their voluptuousness and degree of lust, which apparently did not exist in Europe. People shone the golden light of abstinence over White women, while sending doom and gloom to Black women who were viewed as nothing more than demons of lust.

Although I identified as nonbinary, I still felt a connection in saying I was a Black woman. It was how I was raised and how I saw myself for the majority of my life so far. Throughout history and still to this day, Black women have been attacked, whether it be physical or verbal. It took a while for me to see through it all and recognize how resilient and strong they were. The Black women in my family became my mentors. They made me feel more connected to my Blackness as a whole. With that being said, Winiarski guoted, "Denied femininity and sexuality, Black women earned respect for their physical and emotional strength, domestic talent, and public activism through occupying multiple roles such as homemakers, mothers, wageworkers, and community leaders (Page 264)." I mentioned before about how resilient Black women were and they were but more out of necessity. Due to them not being able to claim being sexual and feminine, Black women had to look to other outlets to prove themselves and gain respect, usually through physical and emotional strength and taking space as multiple roles. Black women then and Black women now must exist in a world where they are constantly proving themselves. Knowing how frowned upon it was for a black woman to appreciate her body and be confident in herself, I wanted to embrace it. With everything that has been said in society about what we could not be, I wanted to prove them wrong. In a sense, all the work I created expressing my newly founded appreciation for my identity has been a way for me to heal my inner child.

Black Abstraction art, like any art movement, had their fair share of artists that were considered controversial due to the work they were creating. Controversial works have been a culture I have only skimmed the surface of, but the discourse around them has always interested me. There was always an argument happening, especially in Black Abstraction, on if a piece of work was aiding or harming the community. With the project, Chickenbones and Watermelon Seeds: The African American Experience as Abstract Art (See Figure Seven), Rashid Johnson created a controversial series that focused on stereotypical African American food culture. Using chicken bones, watermelon seeds, and black eyed peas, Johnson placed the object on photosensitive paper that is then exposed to light. This created abstract images of the objects that left their imprint on the paper. Johnson was looked at as a stranger for creating abstract



work, which was considered a "white" idea. Black artists belonging to the Black Arts Movement criticized his work for not engaging that aligned with their political agenda.

There have been distinct moments in my life where I recalled moments of not feeling Black enough. Not only has this affected me socially, but within my art practice as well. While not feeling Black enough, I have also been confronted with the fact of me sometimes being the only Black representation in the room. Although my work has stemmed from my life experiences, not every piece I have created should just be looked through the lens of my race. This has

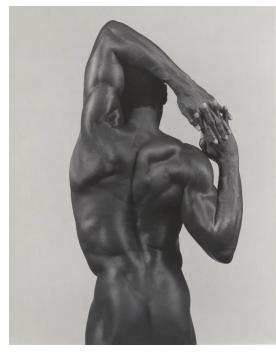
been known to create a sense of tokenism. Tokenism can be described as the social practice of making a symbolic effort towards equitable inclusion. An example of tokenism would be singling out a person of color to represent their entire community. I am an Black individual, but I know my experience has been different from the start as I had the privilege to go to private schools.

Tokenism has been a part of the Black experience. Where there has been tokenism, exploitation also had the potential of showing up. Blaxification, black exploitation, was a movie genre that started out as independently produced movies created by Black crews for Black audiences. The films mainly took place in poor urban neighbourhoods and were bold in their statements. Violence, sex, and drug trafficking are featured to provoke the viewer. Black protagonists overcoming



powers of authority or emblems of the white majority that oppresses the black community have been portrayed in these films. Racial tropes and stereotypes associated with Black characters were flipped in Blaxification movies. Pimps, drug dealers, and sex workers were placed at the center of the narrative, making them heroes for the first time. Some found Blaxification as a way to reclaim their powers, while others felt like they were perpetuating racist stereotypes.

An artist whose work has been known to align with the controversy of Blaxification, has been Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe was an American photographer known for his black and white portraits. His work included celebrity



portraits, male and female nudes, self portraits, and still life images. In 1986, Mapplethorpe had a solo exhibition entitled Black Males.

It was followed with Mapplethrope's *The Black Book*, a collection of ninety-six stylized erotic nude of Black men. It has been argued that due to the power dynamic that is created between subject and photographer, the photographer has the power to control the representation and interpretation. The Black men were a visual spectacle instead of individuals with agency and complexity. Derek Murray author of the book, *Queering Post-Black Art: Artists Transforming African-American Identity After Civil Rights* and co-editor of *Visual Studies,* said,

"Mapplethorpe's photographs of African-American men generated such ire among the black intelligentsia—especially by black queer artists and intellectuals—that it inspired an entire generation of artists, and a vibrant critical discourse, that was aggressively engaged in a project of self-representation and image resuscitation (Rappaport, Page 3)." Mapplethorpe's work was exploitative, but due to it, black queer artists were inspired to change the narrative. Black artists were committed to telling their story their way.

An artist that transformed Mapplethorpe's exploitation into expansive approaches of exploring their identity through photographic portraiture was Zanele Muholi. Muholi was a visual activist and developed their work as a photographer as an advocate for LGBTQ issues in South Africa. They have proclaimed that their mission has been to rewrite a "Black queer and trans visual history of South Africa for the world to know of our resistance and existence at the height of hate crimes in SA and beyond (Richardson, Page One)." Mapplethorne's photography on Black male nudes opened the door for other artists to create dialogues around the histories of representation. Black artists were now able to contextualise Mapplethorpe's images in a larger cultural discussion about race and sexuality.



Muholi was one of the artists that were included in the *Implicit Tensions* exhibition at the Guggenheim. The exhibition was split into two different parts. Part one included Mapplethorpe's early polaroids, classicizing photos of female and male nudes, floral still life, portraits of celebrities, depictions of New York's underground S&M scene,

and self portraits. The second part featured artists like Glenn Ligon, Catherine Opie, and Lyle Ashton Harris amongst others. From the power dynamics of Mapplethorpe's work, the second part of the exhibition offered how artists claimed and diverged from his work. This provided more nuanced perspectives about identity and difference. These artists created work that was a direct counterpoint that challenged and reframed Mapplethorpe's practice. They took photographic experimentation into their own hands and created new meanings and possibilities. Some of the strategies demonstrated included the construction of self identity through portraiture, affirmation of community, and art as a vehicle for social advocacy.

My interjection within the conversation of self portraiture has been focused on the idea of Black Joy. Black Joy is a term to describe the celebration of Black culture and identity. It focused on finding joy and resilience without ignoring the hardships faced. America has a history of collecting Black individuals within racist memorabilia and advertisements for food and household items. We can't disregard the past, but Black Joy has been focused on holding the pain and joy in tension. It can be found in the smallest moments, like during dinner or listening to music. I consider Black Joy as an act of resistance. Despite the pain and suffering, I still decided to find joy in the face of oppression. I know oppression is something I am going to have to deal with the rest of my life. As I learned in therapy, I can only control the way I feel and think. That has been my focus ever since the complete separation from my ex. Instead of letting myself be controlled by negative feelings about my Blackness, I have decided to reclaim it and celebrate not only myself, but the music, culture, and traditions of my Blackness.



A piece of media that has helped me

reflect on my own Blackness and the connectedness of it to my identity, has been *Moonlight. Moonlight* was a 2016 film based on the play, In *Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by Alvin McCraney. Following three stages of Chiron's life, the film explored the difficulties Chiron faced with his homosexuality and identity as a Black homosexual man. Being nonbinary has placed me in an interesting place regarding black masculinity. McCraney argued that communities without privilege or power seeked it in other areas. One way of achieving that was by enhancing their masculine identity. Hypermasculinity in black males has been associated with peer acceptance and community. Being gay in the Black community was seen as being weak and effeminate.



As I was dealing with my own placement in masculinity, I

ended up on the toxic side of it. Being queer in general already made me feel small, but adding my Blackness on top of it made me shrink even more. I thought that if I appeared more masculine, I could get the attention I craved in my femininity. Much like how Chiron embraced the stereotypical black male by becoming a muscular drug dealer



in his adult life to avoid abuse and homophobia.

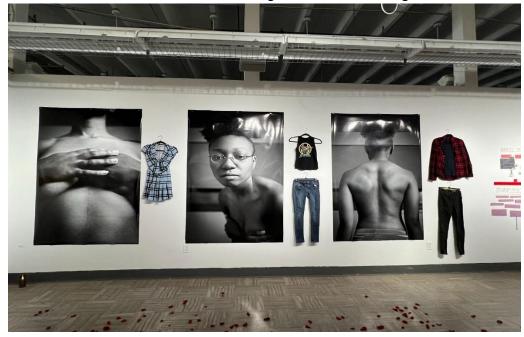
Throughout the film, whenever Chiron was under the moonlight he was at his most vulnerable. Chiron's mentor, Juan, told him of a story about a stranger that told him, "In moonlight, black boys look blue." Black and blue have been used throughout the film to highlight the dichotomy of toughness and vulnerability with the Black body hovered in between the two. In American society, the black body is seen as vulnerable and must be tough in order to survive. Much like other Black Abstractionists, I had a desire to change the narrative. My true strength comes from my vulnerability, which has continued to be the basis of my work. I have been the one to decide what my identity was and what I created from it.

FEMALE VS. ME VS. MALE

I struggled with my gender identity during June 2023 to January 2024. I grew up aligning with masculine energy. I never struggled with my masculinity, until I dated my ex. Early in the relationship, I realized I was taking the more masculine role. It did not bother me, since I was used to it and preferred it that way. But there was a shift after we broke up. It felt as though I needed to prove myself to her. I provided for her as much as I could, supported her, and offered myself as a beacon of stability. And when it did not work, I went harder. I disregarded my responsibilities, as I needed to put on a facade to show how "tough" I was. This masculinity showed up differently in my body. I remember it feeling like black smoke consuming me. But I continued despite not knowing what my gender was rooted in.

Much like my work in other mediums, I highlighted personal struggles I had experienced. As I needed a new subject to focus on for photography, I thought back to the self-portrait work I previously made, which was inspired by Robert Mapplethorpe. This new project was where I first developed the photos for *Female vs Me vs Male* (See Figure Fifteen).

Since these photos were taken during the time I was actively struggling with my gender identity, it only felt right to include them in my thesis. However, I wanted to display them differently than I previously had. To highlight the foreboding feelings about my gender, I thought it would be best to have the images be life sized. I wanted to highlight which poses made me feel feminine, masculine, and/or a blend of both with the traditional colors of masculine and feminine: pink and blue. Instead of having them framed, I wanted to do something to accent the stark differences between how masculinity, femininity, and the blend of them felt for me. For the viewer to get a better idea of how I looked while feeling masculine, feminine, and both at once, I included



outfits that would coincide with what gender I was feeling in each of the three.

I needed to include this piece, because I had to learn to reframe what gender meant to me during that time. Although I never had a problem with my gender identity, my ex came into my life and shifted everything for me. It took a while for me to discover how everything changed for me. Getting out of the relationship with my ex and falling back into my own dynamic helped, but what threw it over the edge was the relationship I had after my ex.

March 2024 was when I started the beginning of a new relationship with someone. And yet again while in a relationship, the way I expressed my gender changed. This time in a more positive light. Because I was used to feeling this masculine role, I still wanted to show up that way, but being with them opened the door for me to find my femininity within my masculinity, which I will further explain when talking about Evolution.

TAME THE BEAR



Distorting features for dramatic effect is a common theme within Black Abstraction. I wanted to capture the crazed feeling I felt during my relationship with my ex. Oftentimes when I was going through my head about what was happening between us, I tried to stay objective in my thoughts. This led to me imagining the entirety of our relationship in a conspiratorial way. Taking on themes of crime scene investigations, *Tame The Bear* (See Figure Sixteen) was an installation piece involving a timeline of my relationship with my ex. It also featured other players in the game involving another ex and a new dating partner. The piece itself covers the entire wall, creating the foreboding feeling I felt inside. Marking everything that led up to the final separation, *Tame The Bear* stood as the context of what caused me to lose myself during the time of my relationship with my ex.

BOUNDARIES

As I spent time in therapy to work through my emotions about what to do regarding my ex, whether it was better to keep her in my life or not, I realized that I put other people's needs before my own. It always caused me to stress out and I no longer wanted to feel like everything was on my shoulders. I quickly realized that I needed to establish boundaries. If I was tired of being stretched too thin by people, I could limit how many people had access to me. This allowed me to reevaluate what my priorities were. I was focused on graduating, having fun with friends, getting homework done, and going to work. As my responsibilities shifted, so did my view of having my ex in my life. We were no longer aligning, and I was already halfway out the door mentally. From this point on, I put myself first, which I have carried with me since that day forth.

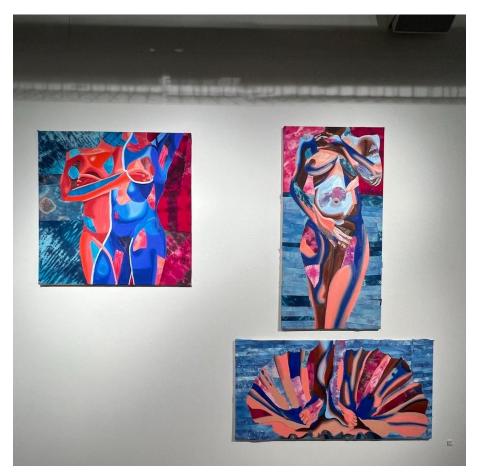


Boundaries (See Figure

Seventeen) was an important piece to make for not only myself but the journey everyone goes through in life. The sculpture I created highlighted how many signs we see daily that are also boundaries to keep us safe. Sometimes, to create a boundary one has to be crossed. This was something that I wanted to capture in the way I presented this piece. Every viewer is able to interact with it however they please due to the limitless outcomes that could occur. The viewer is free to cross the boundary to look at the other boundaries, cross the boundary to add another boundary of their own, or just look at the piece and how everyone else interacts with it. Much like life, there have been different ways people approached boundaries and how important it was to them.

EVOLUTION

What started out as a singular piece grew to become a two part piece. *Evolution* (See Figure Eighteen) started as a painting to highlight me finding my Divine Masculine as well as my Divine Femininity. Divine Masculine and Feminine are archetypes to describe people but does not have to be connected to their gender. Those who take on a more masculine role can be protective, stable, and confident. While someone who has a feminine archetype would be more nurturing, vulnerable, and creative.



As mentioned, when talking about the piece Female vs Me vs Male, my partner at the time helped me define it all. We only dated for three months, but I still think back to that time fondly. I was still feeling a lot more masculine than feminine when our relationship first started. This was only amplified when I took up a more dominant role within our relationship. Even though I took the more dominant role outwardly, between

us, they felt more of a stable provider, which allowed me to be more vulnerable and nurturing. This was further encouraged as I started to present myself in a more feminine way and it felt less performative to me from when I wanted to feel more feminine around my ex. I was finally able to experience and know how my body felt in terms of being within my Divine Feminine and my Divine Masculine.

Not only did I want to show the change from how I felt about my gender in *Female vs Me vs Male*, but I also wanted to show the change I made within my art practice. When I was a kid, I always had a drive to become a painter, but the images never appeared the way that I wanted to. Acrylic was what I had access to at the time, but once I was in art school, I used oils for the first time. I had more success with oils

than I did with acrylic. Although I was more confident with oils, I could not figure out what to paint. I knew I liked painting flowers and was always happy with the outcome, but I felt like I was supposed to be a realistic portrait painter, mostly from societal pressure and learning from the artists before me.

One of the last paintings I made during that time was a monochromatic abstract painting of the student center (See Figure Nineteen). Due to the positive feedback I received, I thought about the possibility of creating abstract work. But then I avoided painting for three years. While I also used unnatural colors, my subject went to the human figure. I was always drawn to the figure due to the immense number of shapes that could be created. From this point forward, I created figure work with unnatural colors in my paintings.





As my painting practice evolved, I introduced textiles into my work. To add color and texture, I began to collage and sew fabric that I dyed into the surfaces of my paintings. So, I wanted to not only highlight the gender journey, but my artistic journey as well. With Welcome Home being

purely about rebirth, it felt only right to have myself pose like Venus in *The Birth of Venus* (See Figure Twenty) as I melted the colors of pink and blue together.

The accompanying painting in Evolution was a play on a previous painting of mine, Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang focused on the figure of me and my ex fusing together as one much like a yin and yang sign. Due to our favorite colors being opposite, it only highlighted how opposite we were in my head. This motivated me to paint my own figure in red and hers in green. Even though they were color opposites,

their opposition made them brighter when put together, which was an identical feeling I had when being with my ex.

The new rendition of Yin and Yang featured two figures intertwined in pink and blue, combined with fabrics. It stood as a declaration of the new peace I had within my femininity and masculinity. Each figure was a different view of my own form and weaved together in a way where there was a constant intermix of gender, which was replicated in how I felt in my body.

RESURRECTION

Welcome Home was created under the pretense of "a home coming back to my body." The relationship with my ex caused me to lose my sense of being. I questioned myself and my identity on a daily basis. As I did not know where I stood in my own gender, I did not know when I stood in my own life. Once I realized that healing started with self love, I knew that I had to let go of my ex. It was important to me to finalize the end of that era of myself. I learned a lot from my past self and I am thankful for them; however I have grown from them and have needed to move forward.

Resurrection (See Figure Twenty-One) was a sculpture that embodied the end of an era. Built from wood, *Resurrection* was a coffin piece adorned with cushions and fabrics. On the outside it was decorated with two crows, Odin's triangle, and lion door knockers. Prior to *Resurrection*, I had an instant of working with the Norse god, Odin. Ever since then I kept a close connection with Odin, as I even adorned a necklace of his shield on a daily basis. The mirror serves as a stand in for myself that gave the viewer a more confronting view of staring death in the face. *Resurrection* confirms the death of my people pleasing old self, into someone who was secure within their identity.



CONCLUSION

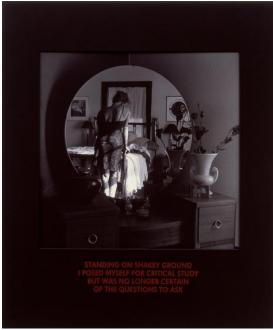
As an Expressionist artist, it has been important to me to remain authentic. As I have grown as an artist, and so has my art practice. What was once just a fleeting career plan has now been the main central point of my identity. Who I am has been an important theme to me. As a minority, I knew I could not get around the oppression that has been built in the early beginnings of America. So, as an artist, I found it important to reclaim the negative effects of oppression and reestablish my placement in the world. Due to what occured during my time during Graduate school, I had to learn how to take care of myself. In part of taking care of myself, I had to trust my intuition. My art practice has become my spiritual practice. As I continued to nurture my art practice, I mentally evolved and had a stronger sense of identity. Growing is just a factor of life and I have been determined to not only raise the bar for myself but to grow alongside it.

ILLUSTRATIONS FIGURE ONE



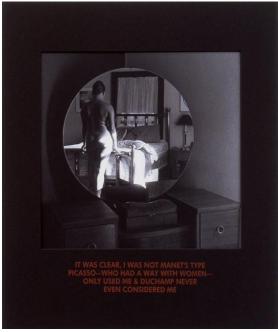
McNeil, Reflect, 2022, from the Power series, Photography Print, 13x19"

FIGURE TWO



Weems, Untitled, from Not Manet's Type, 1993, Silver gelatin print 25x21x1 1/2"

FIGURE THREE



Weems, Untitled, from Not Manet's Type, 1993, Silver gelatin print 25x21x1 1/2"

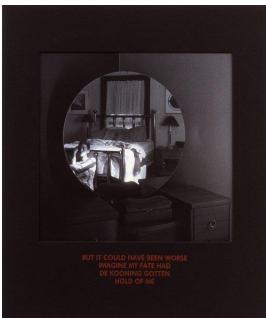
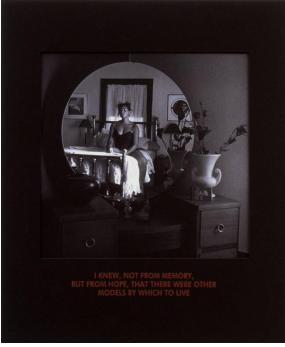


FIGURE FOUR

Weems, Untitled, from Not Manet's Type, 1993, Silver gelatin print 25x21x1 1/2"

FIGURE FIVE



Weems, Untitled, from Not Manet's Type, 1993, Silver gelatin print 25x21x1 1/2"

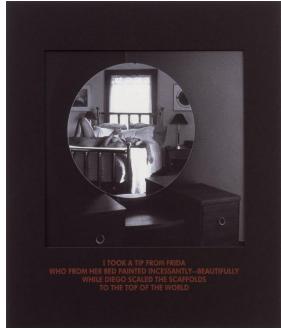


FIGURE SIX

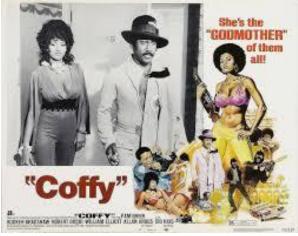
Weems, Untitled, from Not Manet's Type, 1993, Silver gelatin print 25x21x1 ½"

FIGURE SEVEN



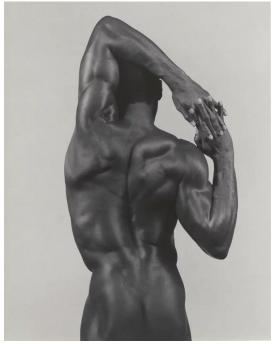
Johnson, Our House, 2001, Vandyke print 132 cm x 119 cm

FIGURE EIGHT



Hill, Coffy, 1973, Film, 1 hour, 31 minutes

FIGURE NINE



Mapplethorpe, Derrick Cross, 1983, Silver gelatin print, 19 1/10x15"

FIGURE ELEVEN



Muholi, Qiniso, The Sails, Durban, 2019, Silver gelatin print, 39.9 x 26cm

FIGURE TWELVE



Jenkins, Moonlight, 2016, Film, 1 hour, 51 minutes

FIGURE THIRTEEN



Jenkins, Moonlight, 2016, Film, 1 hour, 51 minutes

FIGURE FOURTEEN



Jenkins, Moonlight, 2016, Film, 1 hour, 51 minutes

FIGURE FIFTEEN



McNeil, Prayer Shrine, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE SIXTEEN



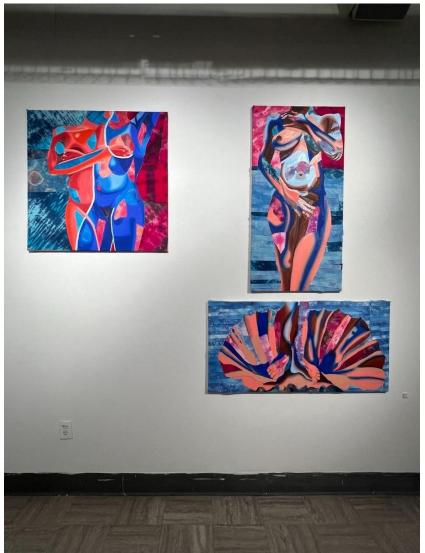
McNeil, Tame the Bear, Construction Paper, Embroidery Thread, and Double Sided Tape, 2025

FIGURE SEVENTEEN



McNeil, Boundaries, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE EIGHTEEN



McNeil, Evolution, Oil Paint and Fabric, 2025

FIGURE NINETEEN



McNeil, Student Center, 2019, Oil Paint on gessoed wood panel, 24x24"

FIGURE TWENTY



Botticelli, Birth of Venus, 1485 ca., Tempera on canvas, 172.5x278.5 cm

FIGURE TWENTY-ONE



McNeil, Resurrection, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE TWENTY-TWO



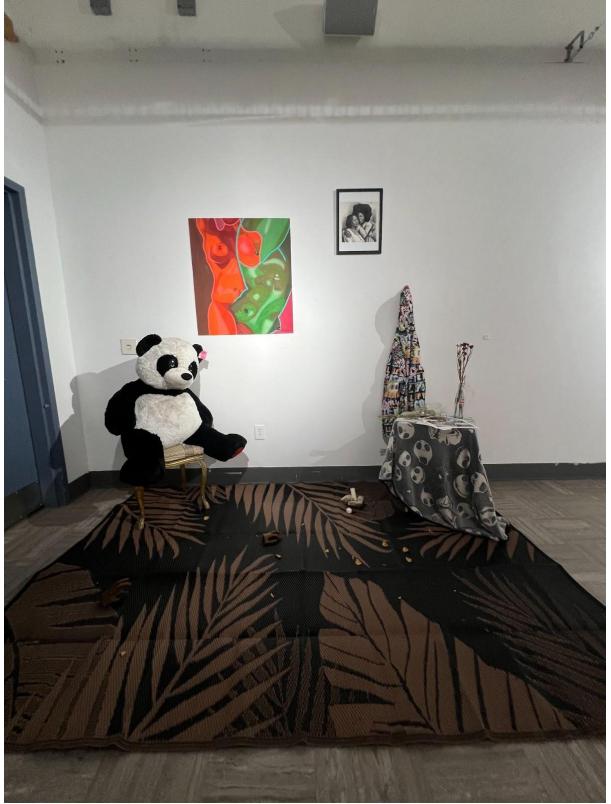
McNeil, The Ecosystem of Daija, Textiles and Foam, 2025

FIGURE TWENTY-THREE



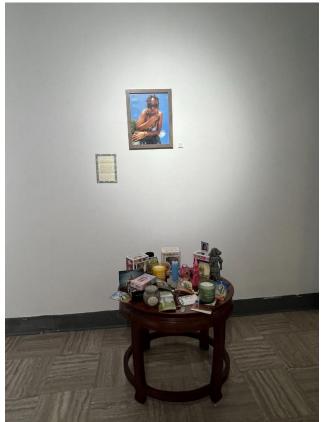
McNeil, The Roadmap of Daija, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE TWENTY-FOUR



McNeil, What Remains, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE TWENTY-FIVE



McNeil, Prayer Shrine, Mixed Media, 2025

FIGURE TWENTY-SIX



McNeil, Daija's Final Moments, Video, 2025

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