

Mequitta Ahuja

***BLACK-WORD***

AICON



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Foreword by Harry Hutchison	7
Letter/s by Mequitta Ahuja	8
Plates	17
Inscribing Black Genealogy into the Canon by Meryem Tew Özel	64
Genealogies of Forgetting and Remembering by Lauren Frances Adams	68
That Fly! by Mequitta Ahuja	72
Ancestral Cues and Ongoing Legacy: Mequitta Ahuja's <i>Black-word</i> Paintings by Berrisford Boothe	74
The Henry Knox Letter with transcription by Mequitta Ahuja	79
About Mequitta Ahuja	88
About Aicon	92
Acknowledgments	98





# Foreword

Harry Hutchison

Mequitta and I had spoken about an ambitious large-scale solo to open in January 2023. It takes around two years to plan an exhibition from inception to opening night, so when we spoke nine months after her last exhibition, *Ma*, finished I was expecting to hear about some sketches, small canvases and perhaps even a large canvas on its way to completion for our self-imposed deadline.

During our conversation, Mequitta excitedly told me that she had transformed into a full-time researcher and writer and unearthed a monumental discovery at the Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College. The discovery was a letter by a Quaker named Aaron White, from 1838, about her ancestors. The letter and history are truly astonishing--you can read the full letter in its entirety at the back of this catalog--and the themes are woven through the artworks themselves. However, as her gallerist at the time, I was extremely nervous, wondering when the pen and library might be swapped for the paintbrush and studio!

Rather than interfere with the creative process, I kept my cool and in my lane. I did not have to worry. The pen was indeed swapped for the brush, and after many early mornings in Connecticut, the body of works that Mequitta created for *Black-word* is awe inspiring. The works are steeped in ancestry, tinged with elements of the art historical canon, then stamped with the authority of Mequitta's masterful brushstrokes. Once again Mequitta is keeping us on our toes, although you can see elements of her previous style coming through in the large canvas titled *Ancestor*; *Cousin* is the first still life she has created; and *Milly is Yet at Aunts Cabin* is her first all text painting to date. Her practice is constantly evolving and this evolution is very much apparent when looking at the set of four self-portraits on paper; her face morphs in front of our very eyes. Regardless of if we are looking back, forward, or evolving in real time, I am honored to host the works and exhibition here at Aicon.

When we have a Mequitta Ahuja opening, the level of engagement from casual 'walk-in' admirers to institutions is always humbling. Since her first solo at Aicon, we have collaborated and placed works with the Whitney Museum of American Art, Grand Rapids Museum, Cleveland Museum, Baltimore Museum of Art, and many other prestigious Private Collections around the United States and the rest of the world.

Naturally, the exhibition process is a collaborative one, and although there is one star, there are many people who we must thank for putting together *Black-Word*: our families, colleagues and many kind collaborators such as the writers in this catalog, Meryem, Lauren and Berrisford. Everyone has played their part with much kindness and enthusiasm.

# Letter/s

Mequitta Ahuja

A *letter* is a collection of *words*; a *word* is a collection of *letters*.

Why is the word for the whole the same as the word for its parts?

## A

Some parts of the story have not been remembered yet. I don't know why Milly Morris is a free person or why 1838 is the year she leaves North Carolina or why, even with David's assistance, her plan to purchase Henry's freedom fails. The letter I've dubbed the Henry Knox Letter tells the story of my great-great-great-great grandparents, but, in answer to some questions, it remains mute. From the archives, Jordan sends me a high-resolution, full-color scan of the letter. Opening my fingers like a mouth, I advance the document until my screen is filled with just one word, then only a letter. I take a bite, cutting the cursive bonds, cropping the letter down to the *letter*. I repeat this, again and again, to twice form the alphabet: capitals and lowercases. This process feels like an odd way to spend my time but also an extension of my daily life. My son is three, and he too is investigating the alphabet. He eats his pretzels segment by segment, holding them up between bites. "This look like an *L*, Mama?" "This look like a *P*?" Filling a slim three-ring binder, I print and save the ABCs according to David White, author of the Henry Knox Letter. Then, I draw it as an alphabet chart, teaching myself David's handwriting.

David, a White Quaker, begins his letter to Aaron White, "Highly Esteemed Cousin I am induced to address thee." David and Aaron are not my relations, but I know far more about them than I will ever know of my Black ancestors. David is both pragmatic and idealistic. From deed to word, he feels accountable. His two most impassioned letters to Aaron are the Henry Knox Letter, in which he appeals to raise money to purchase Henry out of slavery to reunite him with Milly and their seven free children; and second, a missive through which David attempts to thwart Aaron's sister's marriage ("thyself and thine will then be subject to his control," "this man who has come from (I know not where) to Pasquotank...dealing in the profession of love"<sup>2</sup>). That I find no response to either feels fitting because in both cases David failed.

Of Aaron White, I know even more. "You are our Aaron White expert now," Jordan says in a note attached to scanned Aaron White letters,



*Ancestor*, 2022, Oil on canvas  
80 x 84 inches



one batch of a regular supply she shares with me. Before mailing his letters, Aaron copied them into small, hand-bound booklets. They are nearly diaristic in their frequency and detail. I follow along as Aaron's wife Margaret bears and loses one baby after another. "We have had much sickness and affliction in our family, lost all our children but Albert and Marcia."<sup>3</sup> Aaron and Margaret will lose seven of their eleven babes. It's small wonder, then, that he is an anxious man who assumes the worst unless and until he learns otherwise. It's appropriate that his family's surname is White; the story of my Black ancestors is a minor theme in these *white* protagonists' chronicles of their own lives. But I value David and Aaron and invest in their stories too. Often, I'm struck by both the phrasing and the sentiment of their words. At the end of one 1838 letter, Aaron signs off, "Farewell at this time, I hope soon to hear from you, don't be afraid of shocking your white people."<sup>4</sup>

## B



*Study for Ancestor*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 36 x 36 inches

To put a word into a painting is to break a taboo of my art education. Words are the realm of a supposedly lesser art: illustration. I do it anyway. Painting is expansive to me; words are too. Both trigger my imagination visually. I hear the word *prehensile*, and it makes me think of drawing. *How to apply it to an understanding of form?* Before becoming a mother, I crave to know the sensation of breastfeeding a baby, but when I meet my son, I learn about cluster feeding. My newborn wakes every seven minutes to be nursed. I have no milk. The nurse squeezes my breast hard, eking out something golden. *That*, I think, *is nothing*. But the nurse reassures me, "It is everything." She names it *colostrum* and tells me it is nutrient-dense, but my response is garbled gibberish because I cannot stay awake. Nor can I sleep. Every seven minutes, a hungry mouth opens to suckle me. The word *suckle* triggers my imagination. My milk comes in, breasts morph. My body and baby silently converse. I try to interpret the utterances of my newborn. My milk stains his tongue white.



*As They Please*, 2022, Oil on canvas 80 x 72 inches

When I go to paint Milly Malica Morris, I repeat the word *prehensile* as I place and form her breast.

I tell my son, "This is how you draw the lowercase letter *d*," and then catch myself. "No, this is how you write it." I know that in school, he will be taught that there is a correct way to hold a pencil, and it's not his ham-fisted manner. This contradicts the drawing skills I teach him at home: you hold your implement according to the mark you wish to make. His ham-fisted way makes bold black strokes, and I admire his gross-motor mark-making.

"Start at the top," I say. "Drop it down and put a bowl at the back." When teaching a child to write, I've read that you should provide the child with a consistent inner script for each letter; but there's a problem. I, too, am learning to write as I exhume David's letter by embodying his *letters* in my paintings—trying to create a whole by

reassembling its parts. This process restores the revelation I felt when I first learned cursive and discovered handwriting as a signature of the self. My consistency with my son flags. Print no longer interests me; I want to talk about cursive.

In cursive, the rule for *d* is inverted; it starts with making the bowl clockwise, then counterclockwise, then adding the vertical. In David's quick cursive, his bowls rarely close; they gap. The clarity of each of David's letters emerges in context. The *a* in *and*, when separated, might be a *u*, the *d* an eccentric lowercase *c* or *e*. The ascending line of David's *d* rises too high, then bends back over the word, turning the open bowl and arcing backbend flourish into a swirl.

My son finds my alphabet binder. "This for me?"

By the time I fill the binder, it's been over a year since my naming and claiming of the Henry Knox Letter. I'm connecting to it intimately as I repeatedly break and rebuild it. But when the letter first arrives, I'm thrown back, unable to read, unable to assemble the parts into a whole. The words are mere patterns on a page.

## C

I am in the midst of a storm. My grandmother, whom I hardly knew, rises within me in the form of my inner absolutism. She is captain and master. I receive her boxes, her proto-archive: letters, census records, newspaper clippings, hundreds of photographs, obituaries, diplomas, probate records, divorce papers, report cards, napkin poems, and scribbled lines of math. They sit dormant until one day they awaken and beckon me. I search them for an explanation. *Why does my son have blond hair?* The papers answer quick: my mother's paternal grandmother, Mary Elizabeth, blond and categorized by the census taker as *mulatto*. That, plus my husband's blond allele, equals our babe's necessary set. I'm relieved of a burden. My son's appearance is not a manifestation of my personal, *racial*, failing. With the discovery of Mary Elizabeth, my sense of self expands as it merges with the past. I go deeper into the box. *Just looking*, I tell myself. The papers stir slightly at first, then shift, gathering momentum. Suddenly, the shift is inside of me, an ever-widening blizzard. I'm researching at every available moment. I'm no longer myself, then no longer a mere descendant of my ancestors. I am this story. But the story is forgotten. I am engulfed, lost, unsure if I am heading somewhere or wandering in circles.

Searching for my Morris ancestors before 1840 in slave schedules, poll taxes, estate papers, court records, and deeds is like threading a needle in near darkness. My eyes spasm from strain. I need to distinguish fact from an ancestor or census taker's need to fill in a blank. From census records, I calculate three different birth years for Milly. In a family account, I repeatedly read the phrase "It is a known



*Milly is yet at Aunt's Cabin*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches



fact,” but my skepticism turns all statements into questions. *Henry is an overseer? His mother is Cherokee Indian? Milly is proprietor of a roadside eatery? She lives with Quakers not as a slave but as a member of the family?* I take nothing for granted. To believe it, I must prove it. My obsession is an expression of my will, which is a force—thoroughness in my research and the near total giving over of my time. I am not painting. I’m not even thinking about painting. At times I think, *My value rests on proving or disproving the family lore. Get the story straight.* The year 1838 is crossed out and penned over with 1839. Places are named: Elizabeth City, North Carolina; Cambridge City, Indiana. *Who wrote this? How do they know what they claim?*

When documents begin to feel familiar, I know I am making progress. In my research of North Carolina’s Pasquotank County, I repeatedly come across the names of specific Quaker families: Morris, White, Winslow, Newby, and Elliot. These are signposts in the storm. When I see familiar names and locales in an online catalog entry of the Swarthmore Friends Historical Library, I decide to inquire. When I write my query, it’s with a touch of embarrassment: *What a long shot.*

To Special Collections Director Rachel Mattson, I write: “I am looking for help researching my Black ancestors who I believe were relocated from North Carolina to Indiana by Quakers in 1839. If this was the case, I hope to find documentary evidence such as their names in conveyance notes, lists of relocated Black people, travel receipts, court papers, or any account of their migration out of North Carolina.” The exclamation point in Mattson’s reply brings me hope. “Thanks for your inquiry, we’d be delighted to assist you in this research! I’m forwarding your request.” I am not as alone as I feel.

October 4, 2021: Two days after my initial inquiry, I receive an email from Library Curator Jordan Landes. Attached to her email is a black-and-white scan of a letter from the archives. I’m elated and incredulous and desperate to know, *Is this nothing or*—It’s the sudden appearance of a clue that a moment earlier was utterly obscured. From clue to yes, the words find me, black against the white ground. *Was that always there?* After 183 years unclaimed, yes, this letter has been apprehended.

## D

But how to read through tears and time? I’m not crying because a man was enslaved or a family separated. I’m crying because, with one move, I exponentially advance. The relief is, yes, I am getting somewhere, but beneath my elation, a current of panic continues: the all-consuming need to prove the story. This first scan from Jordan is medium resolution. It’s drained of color, drained of the ink and touch of David’s hand. I discern only a smattering of words and phrases. I reach the end but fail to make sense of the whole.



Leaves, 2022, Oil on canvas  
80 x 84 inches

Weeping, I teach myself to read David's letter by writing it. I begin transcribing—copying but also imagining. I relax my eyes and mind, trying on letters by sounding them out. Slowly, the parts begin to form a whole. At first, the word *behalf* is inscrutable. It could say *lechay* or *luhoy*, but it does not. It reads just as I now say, "I am induced to address thee at this time by the request and on behalf of Henry Knox (of colour) of the county of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox of said county." In my transcription, I put brackets around everything of which I am unsure; brackets abound. I zoom in and zoom out. I print sections of text. I imagine. I look away. Then, I go to the archives.

It's a blustery day in November 2021 when I first meet Jordan. She is wearing a tunic of birds, and I am enchanted. Four neat, gray boxes await me at a table: the Aaron White Family Papers. "Is it unusual," I ask, "for descendants of people written about in the archives to come here?" "No," Jordan says, "but this is special." When I meet the Henry Knox Letter, I apprehend its objecthood. The letter is an oversized, warm-toned single page that has been folded, addressed on verso. "This is where the seal was," Jordan says, pointing to a hyperpigmented shape on the page, a circular breach, rimmed in red. The letter has another, more significant tear, around which is a hand-drawn arc. This is David's indication that the tear preceded the letter's writing. This second hole, aperture, mouth of the page, talks to me. I am transfixed. It whispers, tells me there is no loss in the words: *nothing has gone in the gap*.

As I work on my transcription, I encounter *flatters*, *observed*, *line*—familiar words that sound new. ("Henry flatters himself that he can get off fifty dollars less," "I observed that I would pay five hundred dollars for him that he might go with his family, then I addressed a line to his owner"). By transcribing the Henry Knox Letter, I feel confident that I have read it—mastered it word by word.

When I look to the letter for anything approximating my own ancestors' spoken words, what I find is tucked within the letter's opening paragraph. My imagination illuminates a scene: curtains rise to lovers, a clandestine conversation, their ill-fated plan, inevitable heartbreak.

I am induced to address thee at this time by the request and on behalf of Henry Knox (of colour) of the county of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox of said County; his wife Milicent and seven children was removed last spring to thy neighbourhood, he has lately received a letter from her from Cambridge City who states that she is making arrangements to raise money to buy him of his owner. &c &c he requested me to say to her that he hoped for success in that matter, and to inform her that he enjoys good health and wishes to be remembered affectionately to her and her children. and lives in hope that he shall be enabled again to

enjoy their company in this life, in a state of personal freedom

Milly talks with David about Henry on her way to Norfolk, the embarkation point of Milly and her seven children's long journey west. David assures Milly that if he has the chance to buy Henry for 500 dollars, he will do so. Milly takes David's promise with her as she and her children ascend mountains, travel the Cumberland Road, cross Ohio, and arrive in Indiana. Six months after her arrival, David writes the letter that I will one day find and name. He tells me that Henry's enslaver, Thomas Knox, refuses his offer of 500 and counters with a demand for 900. David feels conflicted about asking Milly to make up the difference. "But in the present case he only offers to make sacrifice of one tenth of the price—as I suppose he could obtain one thousand dollars for the slave." David proposes a plan to empower an agent to hire out Milly's sons but makes no secret of the challenge faced by Henry and his family.

I have no doubt but thou art aware of what Ideas are raised in the minds of some who have had prospect of purchasing their freedom and how seldom those Ideas are realized—'hope keeps the heart whole' and leads us sometimes to have faith in things that are not likely to come to pass.

In this appeal for help to finance the purchase of Henry, David presents the gravity of the choice.

whether we shall proceed forward and redeem the individual from slavery and restore him to the bosom of his family, or whether we shall leave him to toil out the remainder of his days in hopeless bondage

## E



*In a Free State*, 2022, Oil on canvas  
80 x 84 inches

In the room where my son sleeps, I keep an archive of every book and magazine in which images of my artwork have been printed, letters from curators, newspaper clippings, photographs of my earliest paintings, 35mm slides, exhibition brochures, announcement cards, and all manner of ephemera.

*Ephemeral.* The word triggers my imagination—makes me think of breath. *What if the words recede in my paintings as if cut out of paper, made not of ink but air? Paint the color of what the scrolls pass over. Bring forward in the shape of each letter: the sky, Henry's sleeve, Milly's hair. Words are sounds, there but not there; they emanate.*

With David as scribe, the word traveled from mouth to paper.

...she is making arrangements to raise money to buy him of his owner. &c &c He requested me to say to her that he hoped for success in that matter, and to inform her that he enjoys good health and wishes to be remembered affectionately to her



and her children. and lives in hope that he shall be enabled again to enjoy their company in this life, in a state of personal freedom

I am the transcriber; I pull words from the past into the present.

I am the painter; I depict the next generation reciting Henry's words.

The child has been reared on the family story. This child knows it by heart.

### Postscript

I read in my grandmother's notes that in Indiana, all seven of Henry and Milly's children learn their letters.

### Henry

In 1866, Henry Knox and Heulda Knox, Henry's second wife, register their marriage with the Pasquotank Freedman's Bureau (the local branch of a post-Civil War Federal agency charged with aiding the formerly enslaved). In 1870, Henry Knox is listed in the census as invalid, age seventy-three. He lives with Heulda and at least one of their sons, Jefferson. They live very near to Henry's sister, Juliet, who, post-emancipation, works for pay as a live-in domestic servant for her former enslavers.

### Milly

...[the intention] is about the same as spring before last to endeavor to lay before the people of color their situation and if possible to persuade them to flee from the wrath to come.<sup>5</sup>  
[1827]

In 1830, North Carolina passes a law to prevent any free person of color who has been absent from the state for more than ninety days from returning—under penalty of paying a bond of 500 dollars (about 15,000 dollars today) or face up to ten years enslavement.<sup>6</sup> This is just one of a series of laws in the decade of the 1830s increasingly restricting the rights of free people of color and preparing paths to their enslavement.<sup>7</sup> North Carolina's free people of color with family members of mixed status, like Milly, have a perennial choice: Do I keep my family together but risk my, or even my children's, freedom, or do I leave and forever divide my family? Milly convinces herself of a third way—purchase Henry's freedom. If, as David says, "Hope keeps the heart whole," when did the heart of that hope collapse? My mind harbors this question. While I have not found a response to the Henry Knox Letter, on December 19, 1838, eight months after her arrival in Indiana, in a letter to his family, Aaron White includes an update about Milly.



*Portrait of Henry, 2022, Oil on canvas  
80 x 72 inches*

Milly is yet at aunts cabins, she gets a pretty good living but I believe she does not lay up much for to purchase her husband, either of her own earnings, or begging for the purpose. Her largest boys seem to do pretty much as they please, and I expect if Henry never gets free until they do it, he will spend the remainder of his days in servitude.<sup>8</sup>

## Acknowledgments

Thank you, Dr. Jordan Landes, Curator, Swarthmore's Friends Historical Library. Thank you, everyone at the Friend's Historical Library, and Director of Special Collections, Dr. Rachel Mattson! Thank you, Madelyn Martin Jefferson, my grandma.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Letter from David White to his cousin Aaron White, 1838, Box 2, Aaron White Family Papers, SFHL-RG5-163, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College. This is the document I call the Henry Knox Letter. All unnumbered quotes are from this letter. A portion of the Aaron White Papers were donated in 1966 to The Swarthmore Friends Historical Library by the widow of Aaron White's great-grandson Paul Furnas. The Henry Knox Letter has been reprinted in this catalog with permission on pages 80-87 accompanied by Mequitta's transcription.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from David White to Elizabeth White by way of Aaron White, 1824, Box 32, Folder 7, Anna S. Cox Brinton family papers, HC.MC-1228, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from Aaron White to his cousin James Stanton, 1828, in Aaron White's letter book of 1827-29, Box 32, Folder 7, Anna S. Cox Brinton Family Papers, HC.MC-1228, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from Aaron White to his brothers Joseph and Alfred White and their wives, 1838, in Aaron White's letter book of 1832-37, Box 2, Aaron White Family Papers, SFHL-RG5-163, Friends Historical Library, Swarthmore College.

<sup>5</sup>Letter from Aaron White to Benjamin & Milea Prichard, 1827, in Aaron White's letter book of 1827-29, Box 32, Folder 7, Anna S. Cox Brinton Family Papers, HC.MC-1228, Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections.

<sup>6</sup>North Carolina [General Assembly?] 1831. *Slaves and Free Persons of Color. An Act Concerning Slaves and Free Persons of Color*, Revised code--No. 105. Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/slavesfree/slavesfree.html>

<sup>7</sup>Warren Eugene Milteer Jr., "The Complications of Liberty: Free People of Color in North Carolina from the Colonial Period through Reconstruction," PhD dissertation (University of North Carolina, 2013).

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Aaron White to his brother Joseph and to Joseph's wife Margaret, 1838, Aaron White letterbook of 1832-1837, Box: 2. Aaron White Family Papers, SFHL-RG5-163 Friends Historical Library of Swarthmore College.

# Mequitta's Maternal Line

Tamer Gaskin and Jeremiah Morris (born circa 1765)

|  
**Milly Malica Morris and Henry [Briggs] Knox**

|  
Sarah Ann Knox and Beverly Tyler

|  
Gertrude Tyler and Percy Couzzins

|  
Zenobia Couzzins and Harry Martin

|  
Madelyn Martin and Floyd [Strader] Jefferson

|  
Sonja Jefferson and Ashok Ahuja

|  
Mequitta Ahuja and Brian Weir

|  
Sule



*Babbling*, 2022, Oil on canvas  
80 x 72 inches



## PLATES







*Relation*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches (203 x 183 cm)



*In a Free State*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84 x 80 inches (213 x 203 cm)





*Babbler*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches (203 x 183 cm)





















*Portrait of Henry*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches (203 x 183 cm)





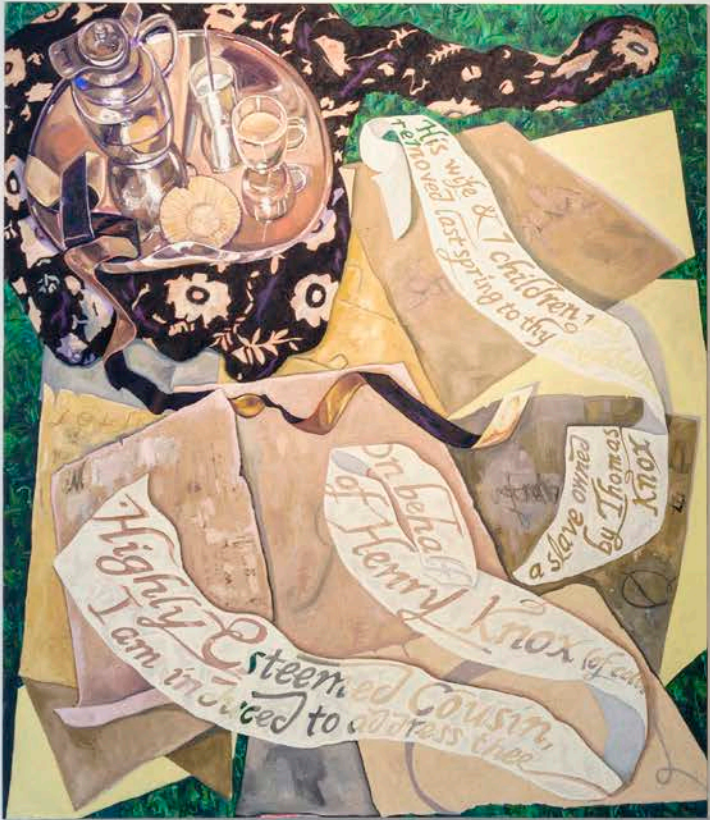










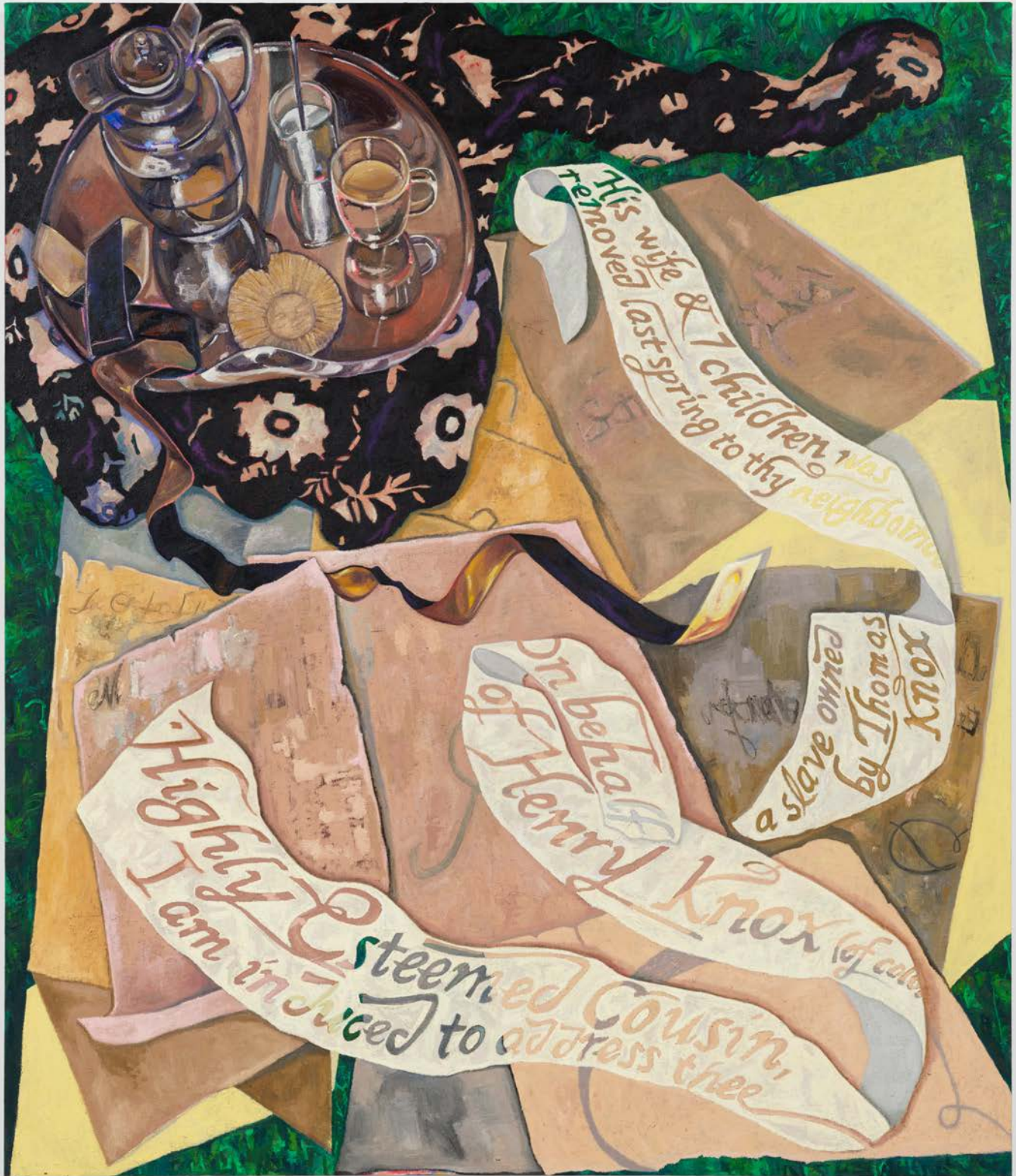






*Cousin*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches (213 x 183 cm)







*As They Please*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches (203 x 183 cm)



*Milly is yet at Aunt's Cabin*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 72 inches (203 x 183 cm)





*Ancestor*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 84 inches (203 x 213 cm)













*Study for Ancestor*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 42 x 30 inches (107 x 76 cm)













Newbury Bridge, Croy. N.E. 11<sup>th</sup> mo. 6<sup>th</sup> 1838  
Highly Esteemed Cousin

I am induced to address thee by the request  
and on behalf of Henry Knox (of colour) of the County  
of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox;  
his wife Milly, and seven children was  
removed last spring to the neighbourhood he has lately  
received a letter from her from Cambridge City who states

she is making arrangements to raise money to buy  
him of his owner &c. &c. he requested me to say to her  
he hoped for success in that matter and to inform her  
he enjoys good health and wishes to be remembered  
affectionately to her and her children and lives in hope  
that he shall be enabled again to enjoy their company  
in this life in a state of personal freedom





*Study for In a Free State*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 42 x 40 inches (107 x 102 cm)





*Leaves*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 80 x 84 inches (203 x 213 cm)



Newbys Bridge Perg. N.C. 11<sup>th</sup> Mo. 6<sup>th</sup> 1838

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I am induced to address thee by the request and on behalf of Henry Knox (of colour) of the County of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox; his wife Milly, and seven children was removed last spring to the neighbourhood he has lately received a letter from her from Cambridge City who states

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Newbys Bridge Perg  
Highly Esteemed Cous

I am induced to adv  
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of Pasquotank, a slave owner  
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removed last spring to this  
received a letter from her mother

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1<sup>st</sup> N.E. 11<sup>th</sup> mo. 6<sup>th</sup> 1838

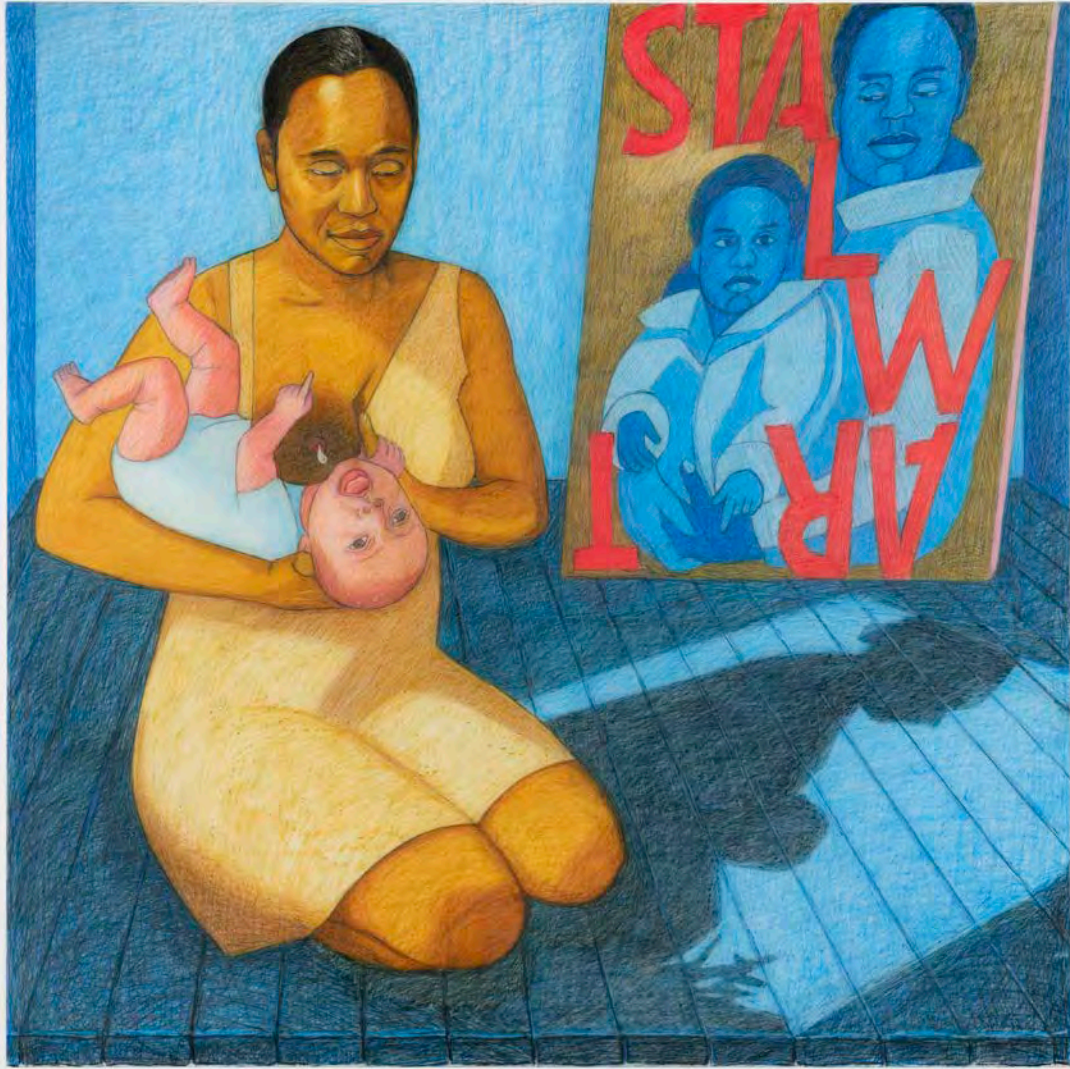
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Cambridge City who states

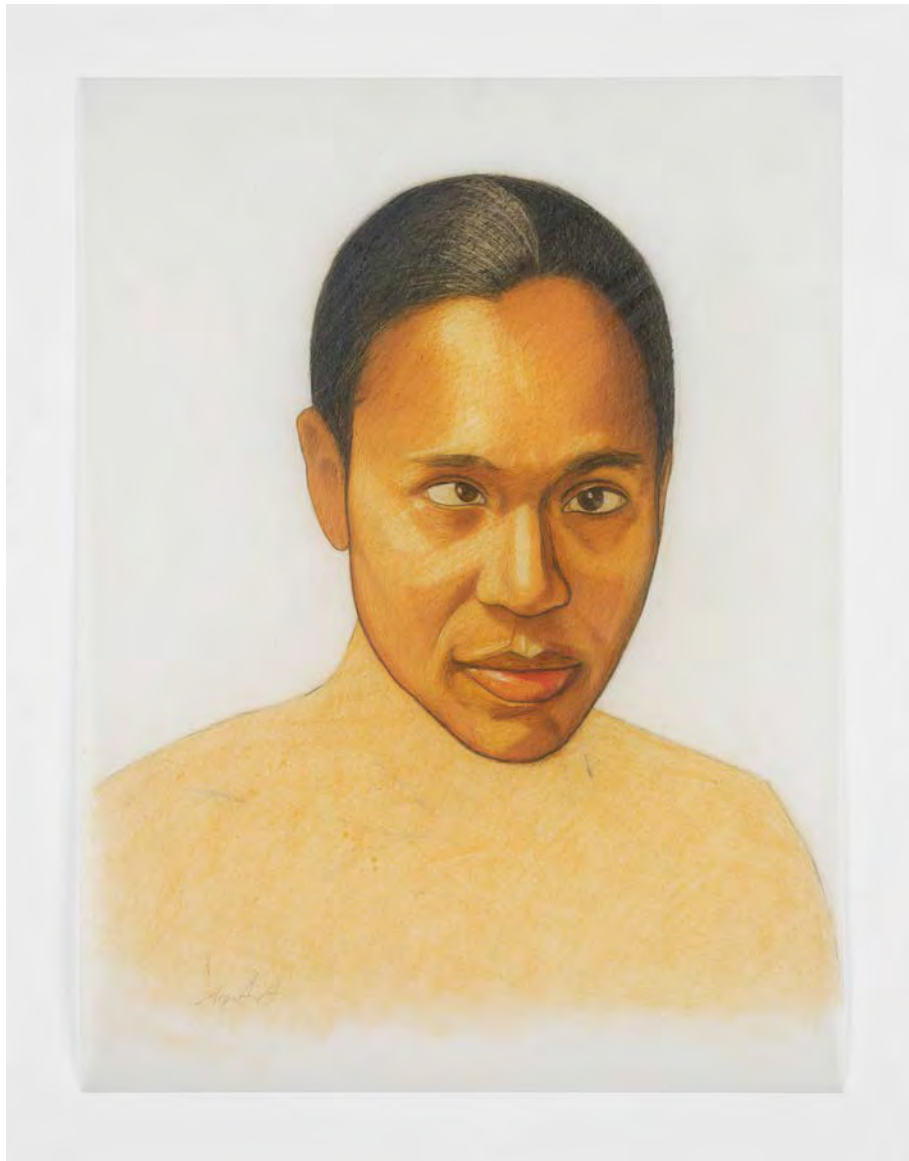
raise money to buy  
quested me to say to her  
to inform her



*Study for Ancestor*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 36 x 36 inches (91 x 91 cm)

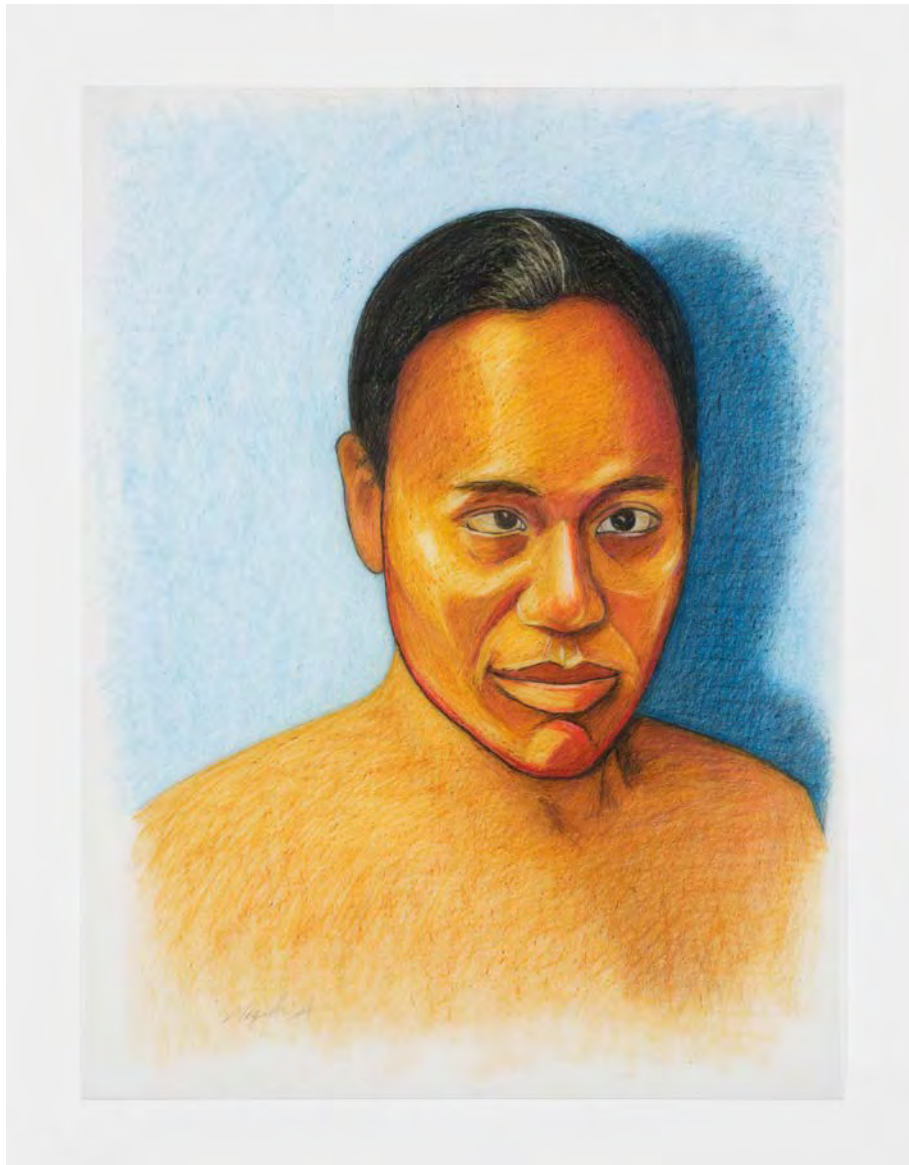




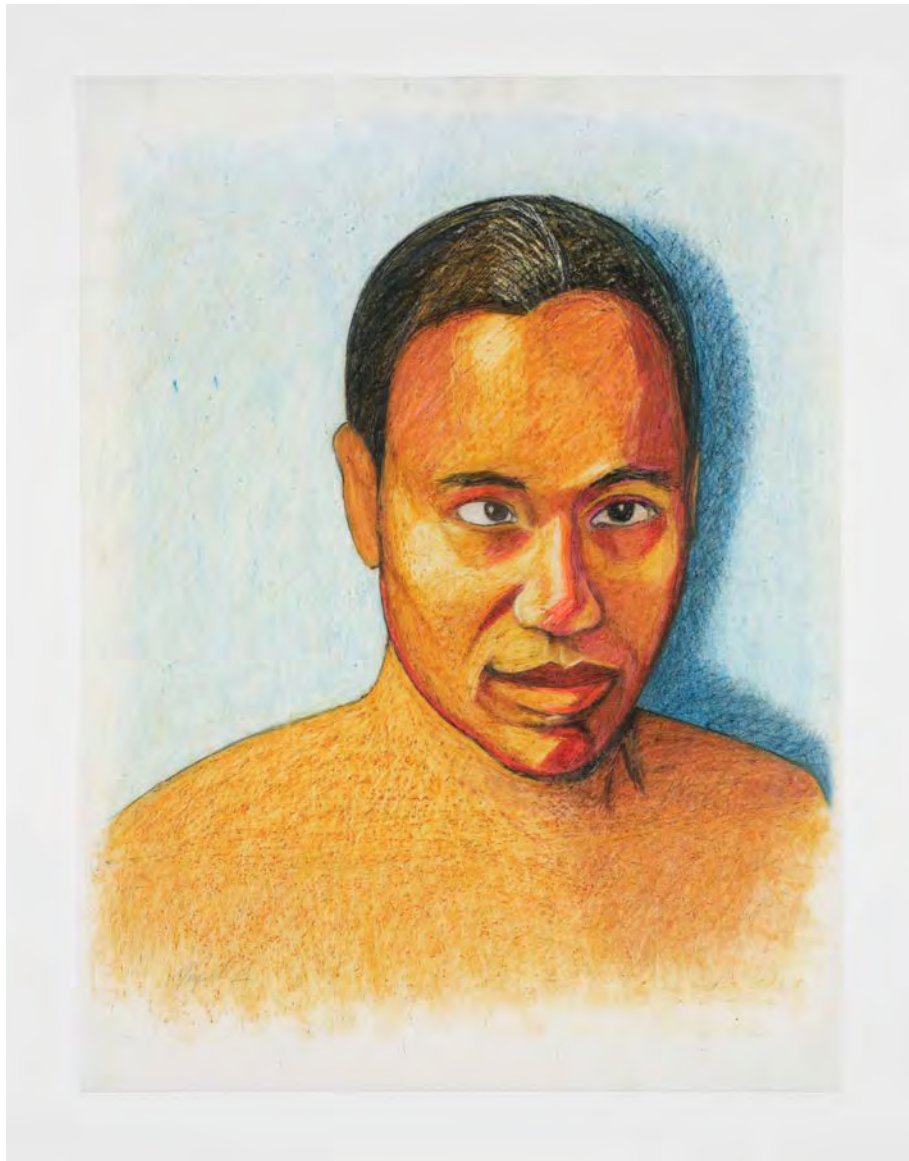


*Portrait Study I*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 46 cm)



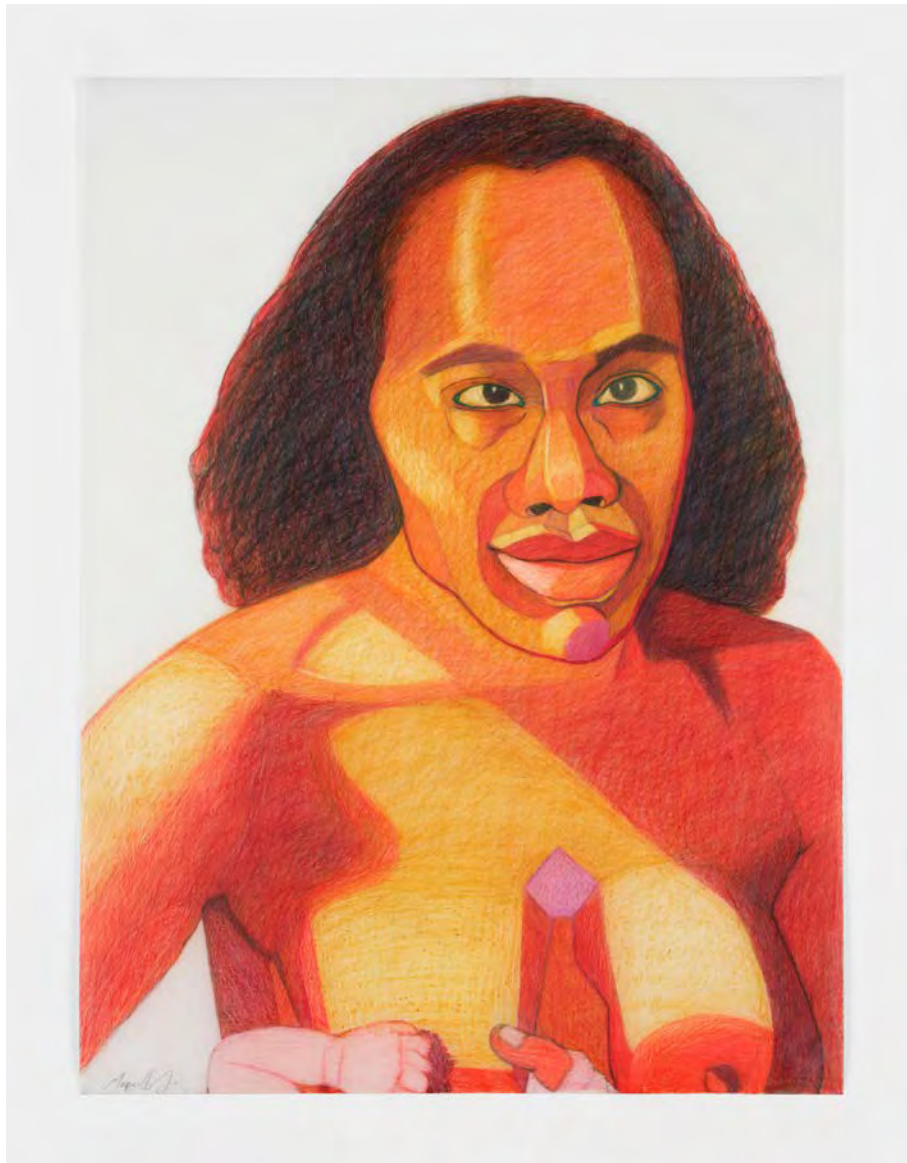


*Portrait Study II*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 46 cm)



*Portrait Study III*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 46 cm)





*Study for Relation*, 2021, Colored pencil on drafting film, 24 x 18 inches (61 x 46 cm)

# Inscribing Black Genealogy into the Canon

Meryem Tew Özel

Mequitta Ahuja takes art history between her hands; turning it over, she examines it, tears it apart, molds, remolds, and grafts it together; she stamps herself upon it, resides within it, rollicks through it, stretches across it. In embracing an approach that is decidedly meta-disciplinary in its attunement to the history of art and adamantly, defiantly, gloriously personal, her work bridges art and life; subject and object; painter and muse; the personal and the political; the mundane and the exalted. With *Black-word*, Ahuja weaves together the art historical and the genealogical in what amounts to a two-pronged gesture: in exploiting her disciplinary inheritance to honor the stories of her Black ancestors, she also addresses, subverts, and amends the art historical canon.

Beginning with a set of drawings titled *Automythography* (2005–13)<sup>1</sup> and extending to her most recent artworks shown in this exhibition, at the heart of Ahuja's oeuvre are questions of identity: how it is constructed, the agency involved in that process, and the possibilities of self-representation and -realization within the constraints of an artwork. Around the mid-2010s, her canvases began to explicitly enact her exploration of identity as a dialogue with art history as Ahuja, parsing and reconfiguring discrete conventions of painting, found ways to inscribe herself and her lived experience as an artist, woman of African-American and Indian descent, daughter, expectant parent, and mother within meticulously crafted self-portraits.

In one of these paintings, *Xpect* (2017), Ahuja paints herself pregnant reclining upon an ultramarine-colored drapery in a pose reminiscent of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538) and Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). With her left hand, Ahuja's likeness angles an ultrasound image for the viewer to see. Her eyes glimmer with pride. This Ahuja, like the real one, is celebrating her pregnancy

following a grueling period of trying and failing to conceive. Behind her hangs a grayscale painting-within-a-painting of abstracted, variously emoting Ahujas painted to resemble the femme fatales in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), Picasso's proto-Cubist rendering of Spanish prostitutes inspired by Iberian, Oceanic, and African forms.<sup>2</sup> The art historian Carol Duncan has called that painting one of the clearest products of the "virility and domination" that marked early twentieth-century male artists' imaging of women. In *Demoiselles*, Picasso conjures forth a Freudian "jungle-brothel" with woman as "whore and deity, decadent and savage, tempting and repelling, awesome and obscene, looming and crouching, masked and naked, threatening and powerless."<sup>3</sup> *Xpect*, vibrant except for the space occupied by the transfigured *Demoiselles*, appears to have absorbed not just the color but the life from its referent, signaling a transfer of authority from Picasso's work to Ahuja's. Yet the more significant accomplishment of *Xpect* is its painterly articulation of a feminine experience marked by affective extremes—Ahuja's story of a difficult conception and then a joyful pregnancy—in the language of the art historical canon, from which such stories are glaringly absent.

*Xpect* lays bare the strategy that runs through her earlier and most recent projects. As syntheses of classical artistic idioms and autobiography, her artworks' very existence implicitly contests the hierarchies normalized by the art historical canon and the broader institution of art of which the canon is part and parcel.<sup>4</sup> The sum of this institution's mechanisms has historically privileged the perspectives of white, male, Christian, and Western artists and thinkers while systematically diminishing the status of women, People of Color, and persons from the Global South and denying agency, esteem, and presence to artists with the latter identity markers.<sup>5</sup> Through her paintings, Ahuja endeavors to shatter this order.



The cultural theorist Stuart Hall, writing on dominant regimes of representation and how to resist them,<sup>6</sup> outlines a strategy of disruption that entails entering a repertoire of representation and capitalizing on the instability of its meaning to subvert it from within.<sup>7</sup> Ahuja enters into the canon and its library of images; takes up its language—its tropes, preoccupations, and techniques; and in reconfiguring these units, in conjuring forth an image of herself in its language, creates new meaning. In turn we are forced to reckon with art's history of diminishing the nonhegemonic "Other"; we also see that Ahuja, recognizing and transcending that history, has wielded the discipline's intellectual inheritance to carve out a space for herself. Her engagement with the canon couples subversion with genuine admiration; it is as much critique as it is a tribute to the discipline's rich heritage.

Indeed, it is possible to read *Black-word* as a celebration of heritage, art historical and familial. *Black-word* grew out of the artist's monthslong research into her maternal family history, which eventually crystalized around a letter from November 1838 that surfaced in the Swarthmore College archives. The letter, authored by a Quaker named David White, offers a glimpse into a key moment in the lives of Ahuja's great-great-great-great-grandparents, Henry Briggs Knox and Milly Malica Morris. Morris, a free woman of color, had with the aid of a circle of Quakers that included White left North Carolina with her seven children in the spring of 1838 for the free state of Indiana, leaving behind her still-enslaved husband,<sup>8</sup> whose freedom she hoped to one day procure. (This would never come to pass. Knox remained in North Carolina for the rest of his life, and both he and Morris remarried and went on to have additional children.) Despite the tragedy of their estrangement, Ahuja credits Morris's decision to resettle in a free state with significantly improving the lives of her children; doing so was an act of parental love and constituted a "turning point" in the longer arc of her maternal family's history.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, text is central to this group of artworks. Fluttering banderoles, or speech scrolls, enwreath the Morris and Knox in every painting in which they feature; in *Cousin* and *Milly is Yet at Aunt's Cabin*, the only

non-figural paintings in the exhibition, they take on their own kind of life. The banderoles, which in Medieval and Renaissance art often transmitted biblical quotations or references,<sup>9</sup> in *Black-word* instead furnish snippets of Morris and Knox's mediated 1838 correspondence. Traveling from 1838 to the present, and from the archives to the fore of Ahuja's canvases, the words resound through time. *I wish to enjoy your company in this life in a state of personal freedom.* Ahuja's repurposing of the banderole and its inherent referentiality pulls her ancestors' story, a piece of unexplored Black American history, into the Western painting tradition. But Ahuja also invokes the banderole on her own terms, as demonstrated by *Babbler*, in which the speech that spills from the baby's mouth ("ma da do do...") breaks historical convention to playfully mimic the burbling of an infant.

Art history reverberates through these paintings in other ways: geometricized, asymmetrical breasts harken back to early twentieth-century avant-gardists' experimentations with human form; the gestural brushstrokes of *Milly is Yet at Aunt's Cabin* bring to mind mid-century "action painting"<sup>10</sup>; the sepia tones for Morris and Knox recall vintage studio photography, perhaps even that of the renowned Harlem portraitist James Van der Zee; and *Cousin* stands firmly within the still-life genre. The second, no less important, theme that flows through these paintings is parental love: we see it in Knox's hands, which protectively wrap around his child in *Portrait of Henry*, and we see it in the near-mirror-image *Madonna lactans* portraits (*As They Please*, *Babbler*, and *Ancestor*) of the artist and her great-great-great-great-grandmother nursing their children. Ahuja's portrayal of her ancestors' parental love works to restore the humanity that slave codes and antebellum society denied them. It also inscribes into the canon a record of a potent intergenerational force that, as *Ancestor* (the artist's self-portrait with her child) demonstrates, lives on in Ahuja.

If in her earlier self-portraits it was the image of Ahuja rendered on canvas who acted as intermediary between the conventions of the painted world and the texture of our lived one, in the new body of artworks comprising *Black-word*,

she shares this role with her ancestors, talismanically embodied in the forms of her great-great-great-grandparents. In incorporating Morris and Knox into her practice of autobiographical portraiture, Ahuja adds genealogical dimension to her critical engagement with the art historical canon, enabling the stories of Morris, Knox, and the generations that stretch between them and Ahuja to comingle with and be amplified by the art historical record—centuries worth of artists’ accumulative efforts to express the human condition. She joins that never-ending, necessarily incomplete project. And if in the past she has worked to carve out space for herself within the art historical canon and the broader institution of art, with *Black-word* she widens that space in an invitation for her ancestors to inhabit the canon alongside her.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these works, as well as Ahuja’s neologism *automythography*, see Katie Geha, “Mequitta Ahuja: Automythography,” *The Georgia Review* 68, no. 4 (2014): 718–724.

<sup>2</sup> Alfred H. Barr, *Picasso: Forty Years of His Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1939), 59–60; John Golding, *Visions of the Modern* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 106–109. For a rich discussion of the African influences in *Demoiselles*, see Suzanne Preston Blier, *Picasso’s Demoiselles: The Untold Origins of a Modern Masterpiece* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Carol Duncan, “Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting,” in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 305.

<sup>4</sup> The artist and theorist Andrea Fraser describes the institution of art as “the entire field of art as a social universe,” comprising everything from the sites where art is produced, displayed, and sold to the spaces in which, and the conduits through which, art discourse is produced and disseminated. Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (2005): 103.

<sup>5</sup> Here I am drawing on the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality working group’s identification of the “white-male-Christian-Western” perspective’s primacy and normalized universality. See Alanna Lockward et al., “Decolonial Aesthetics (I),” *Transnational Decolonial Institute* (blog), May 22, 2011, <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>.

<sup>6</sup> While Hall’s analysis focuses specifically on the imaging of racial stereotypes in popular culture, he notes that it applies to the representation of other “dimensions of difference” as well. Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 225.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> While it seems that Morris and Knox’s marriage was socially recognized, its legal status remains unclear. For an overview of the legal and practical challenges faced by those in mixed-status unions (unions between enslaved and free people of color), see Tera W. Hunter, “Bound in Wedlock: Slave and Free Black Marriage in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Racism in America: A Reader* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 117–129.

<sup>9</sup> Holger Schott Syme, “The Look of Speech,” *Textual Cultures* 2, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 46–55. For a discussion of the banderole in Italian art, see Hayden B. J. Maginnis, *Painting in the Age of Giotto: A Historical Reevaluation*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 154–163. For examples of banderoles appearing across a wealth of media, see Horst Wenzel, Wilfried Seipel, and Gotthart Wunberg, eds., *Die Verschriftlichung der Welt: Bild, Text und Zahl in der Kultur des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The term originated with the New York critic Harold Rosenberg. Rosenberg, “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51, no. 8 (December 1952): 22–23, 48–50.





# Genealogies of Forgetting and Remembering

Lauren Frances Adams

Tell me, oh muses, how to make sense of White people in a White supremacist country. How to remember, rather than to forget.

I began researching my family history a few years ago when my mom shared an artifact with me. The faded papers, written in muted inks and flowery cursive script, suggested links to the farm where my father grew up in North Carolina. Dated 1800, it contained a name I recognized, the ancestral namesake of my father. As I scrutinized the text, words and letters pulsed in and out of recognition, *bequeath*, *plantation*, *pocosin*, like a secret message rendered in invisible ink, breathing to life in front of me.

Studying this document has been a powerful force in my queries about American history, and my motivations as an artist. It details the property in eastern North Carolina that my dad and his siblings inherited after their father's death. This land was apparently bequeathed across generations, beginning with the British land grants system in the Carolina colony. I am still piecing together the exact chain of deed from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Amongst the items my ancestor intended for his descendants, such as a feather bed, books, and farm tools, he names eleven enslaved people to be divided amongst his heirs. These ancestors of mine were enslavers, a fact that has spurred my pursuit of genealogical research, and prompted me to question what it means to be a White person in America seeking out our past.

The cartographies of North Carolina's eastern shores allow me to overlay various maps to pinpoint the progressive spatial encroachment of White settlers on the land. Tracing the peculiar shape of the Pamlico River, early European maps sometimes label this area with variations of the word *Secotan*, designating an indigenous

settlement present in the late 1600s. The 1733 Moseley map conveys a significant erasure, with Secotan rubbed away and replaced with my ancestors' surnames. Described as planters, colonial families, and first families, these 'allied families' crushed native settlements while transforming the pocosin landscape and establishing their dominance, foreclosing the broader possibilities of cross-cultural kinship for centuries.

In conversations with Mequitta about the connections between our genealogical research and our artist practices, we have discussed our shared understanding of how difficult and exciting this work can be: The thrilling mysteries encompassed by document fragments that complicate linearity and require operating on hunches and circumstantial evidence. Regarding the sometimes little interest in this research by family or culture at large, what Mequitta's works elegantly create is a space where the past is sensitively rendered into the present. A great deal of imagination is necessitated, aided by Mequitta's established commitment to self-representation as a form of self-invention. Mequitta's aesthetic inquiry yields rich questions about family documents as visual artifacts. Who is speaking? Who does not speak? What are the consequences of the privileging of speech for some and the denial of speech for others? One method that Mequitta uses in the *Black-word* paintings, of text curving cryptically within her compositions, questions these formations of speech. Her ancestors' conditions and legal status, as mediated through letters between White people, is both tangible and just out of reach. These paintings reinforce the necessity of reading between the lines, or against the grain, harnessing the pictorial power of informational gaps within the complex slippages and fragmentations of family history and art history.



“What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!,” Harriet Jacobs precisely observes in her memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>1</sup> Jacobs was born in the early 1800s in Edenton, N.C., less than 40 miles as the crow flies from where my family was living, and in close proximity to where Mequitta’s ancestors, Milly Morris, Henry Knox, and their seven children lived.

Genealogy is more than establishing a pedigree—for me, it is an opportunity to trace cartographies of privilege and denial, oppression and resistance. My capacities as a visual artist are called on with great depth and even greater obligation. This work is more than DNA tests and familiarity with the typical structures of a probate file, just as painting is more than pre-mixed color charts and rote mechanical facture. This kind of research requires inference, and above all, as Mequitta’s work proves, imagination about how to connect with and emancipate narrative.

Sometimes I am astonished that documents exist that detail my ancestors’ lives, then I pause and reconsider how I came to be desensitized to the close proximity of the past. And the catastrophic reasons why my ancestors have papers, and other families do not. Jacob’s considerations of the White people of her time provide a clue: “Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops—not the blight on their children’s souls.” Twice recently I have encountered documents that show my ancestors, as minor children, being tasked with ‘drawing lots’ to divide chattel slave property amongst their White elders.

If ditches were used to reinforce the boundaries of their private property, what great ditch is carved within us?

*The past isn’t past*—this phrase is a frequent reminder when talking about America. A close rhetorical cousin: Chattel slavery as a stain on American history. As if, with mere scrubbing and the right solvent, the stain will dissolve. If it is a stain, then great effort has been expended to build structures to strategically forget those stains. Entire apparatus have been built within legal and social codes to erase from our collective memories

the unjust foundations and ongoing human rights abuses within the plantation realities of this country. The stain has been papered over, pathologies of silence bequeathed across generations who do not speak of these traumas. Whiteness architected to exclude and mirage the past as a distant and unreachable site, or denial that it happened at all (and that if it did, it wasn’t that bad). This refusal of shame for the “wicked system” continuously precludes actionable abolition and meaningful reparations.

“We know...that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self,” writes James Baldwin in his 1962 essay, *The Creative Process*.<sup>2</sup> Baldwin offers a possible solvent, that the American artist has a particular opportunity in confronting the ‘dangers produced by our history.’ Baldwin clarifies this task while naming the cost, “But the price of this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record.”

If the artist’s responsibility is to wage a lover’s war with society, as Baldwin invokes, then the consequences of failing to reckon with these histories is oblivion. As Mequitta and I step forward to claim our family histories, we hope to yield Baldwin’s charge—towards an inner and outer reconciliation, of oneself within the collective we. In *Black-word*, Mequitta does this by “unburying” her family story. As an artist, my work the past 20 years has developed out of a commitment to the historic decorative arts as a critical site for engagement. The visual language of ornament is often misunderstood or discredited—a disturbance to the established yet dubious symmetries of narrative figuration and abstraction. Where some may see limitations in surface designs like wallpapers and textile patterns, I see the potential to manipulate the aspirational authoritative taste they promote (which I liken to the “what we wish to be” in Baldwin’s essay). Ornament, when widely presumed as patterned background noise, functions as a metaphor for the supposed neutrality and status quo of Whiteness in this country, and for the mythic domestic sphere of innocent White womanhood.

Since antiquity, the artist’s muse has become a

symbol of the divine ignition of pure inspiration. In Greek mythology, Mnemosyne is said to be the mother of the muses, though mythological genealogy, like that of our mortal realm, can be indeterminate. The goddess Mnemosyne represents remembrance and memory. Her daughters with Zeus, the nine muses, were praised in Hesiod's *Theogony*<sup>3</sup> as embodying the *forgetting of misfortunes and the cessation of worries*. In antiquity, Mnemosyne represents the critical role of memory in transference of oral histories. Is this theology of inseparable intergenerational contradictions, such as in the case of the muses and their mother, that of forgetting and of remembering? In *Black-word* Mequitta forces us to look backward, refusing the forces that buried her family story to have the last-word. In striking, monumental paintings, she forces us to linger in the past as we recollect our shared American story. In my family research, and my motivations as an artist, I seek a titan inheritance, making muses out of silenced collective memory, out of American histories of Whiteness and White supremacy. Through genealogical research, I muse on recollected kinship—those ancestors who were enslavers, and those ancestors who, in one will, bequeathed to their survivors, “all the collards in the garden.”

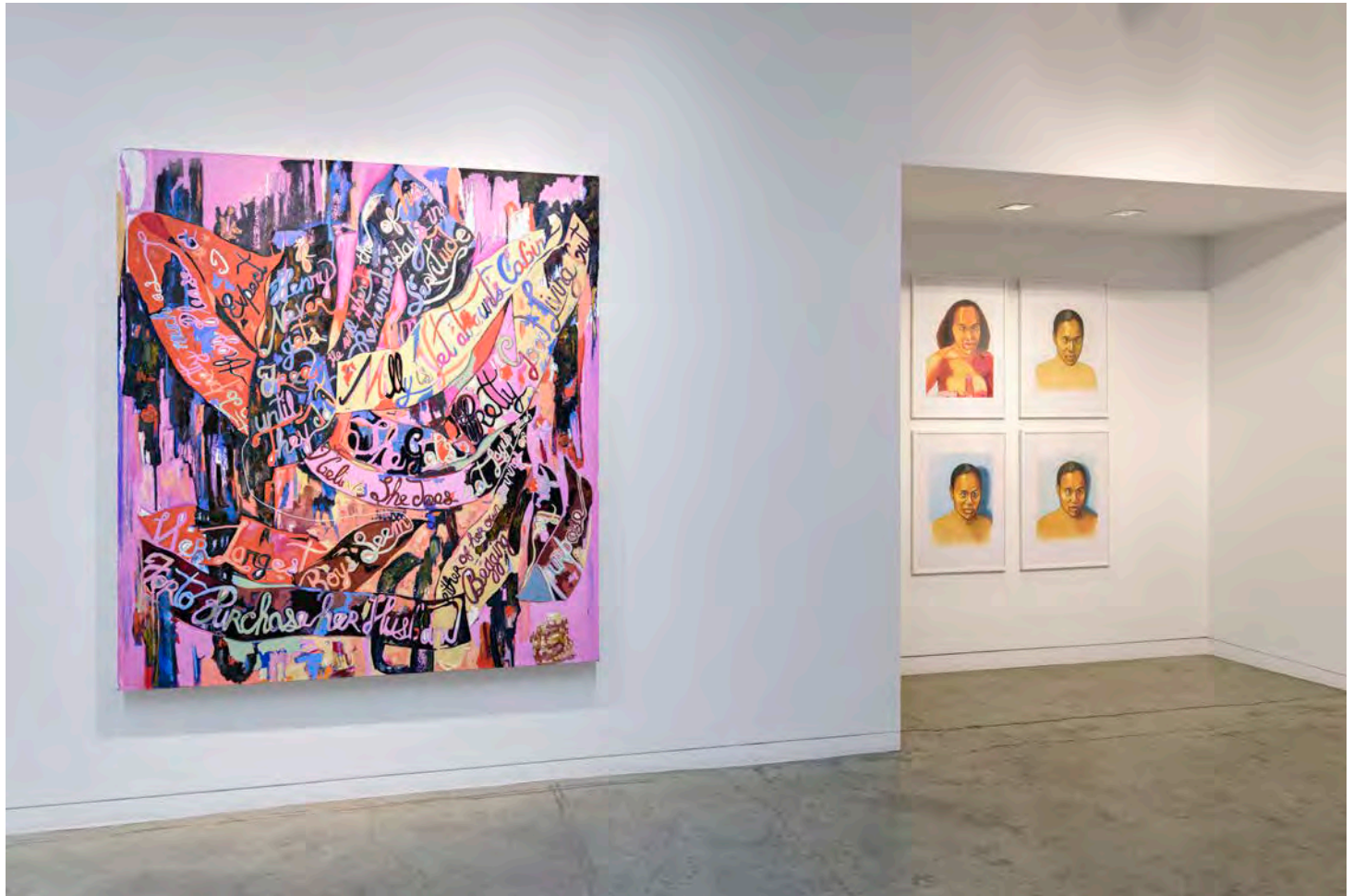
## Notes

1 <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>

2 [https://www.camramirez.com/pdf/P1\\_Week2\\_Baldwin\\_Berger.pdf](https://www.camramirez.com/pdf/P1_Week2_Baldwin_Berger.pdf)

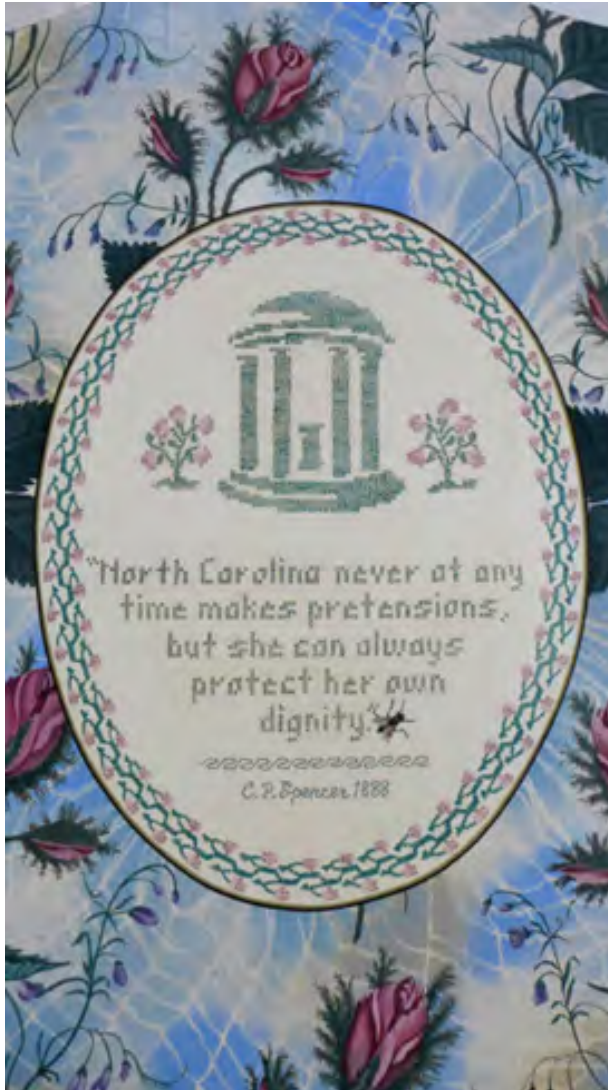
3 <https://chs.harvard.edu/primary-source/hesiod-theogony-sb/>





# That Fly!

Mequitta Ahuja



Lauren Frances Adams, *In Faithful Remembrance of Cornelia Phillips Spencer and to the Truth-Loving People of North Carolina*. A site-specific installation in the former home of Cornelia Phillips Spencer, now the Center for the Study of the American South at The University of North Carolina. Fire screen detail. 2020. Photograph by Denver Dan.

In nineteenth-century home decor, decorative framed paintings were affixed to stands to block from sight the gaping, sooty, black maw at the heart of the house. Liberated from its domestic function, Lauren Frances Adams' fire screen (pictured above) occupies two sub-genres of still-life painting—*trompe l'œil* and *memento mori*—trick of the eye and remember death. The still-life genre is replete with flies. Renaissance and Baroque painters positioned the nasty bugs on everything from ladies' head scarves to the eye sockets of meticulously rendered human skulls. Within the *memento mori* tradition, flies are vivid reminders that flesh is temporary while rot of the soul lasts forever.





*Cousin*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 84 x 72 inches

“That fly!” I exclaimed to Lauren when I first saw her fire screen. “It tells me everything.” What we’re looking at is an allegory, a fact that Lauren makes clear with her medium: paint, not needlepoint, and with that fly, like a blood stain on a white dress. My still-life painting *Cousin* (pictured left) is also an allegory. Both works record a state of tension. In Lauren’s, the friction is between the bug and the needlepoint, the depiction and the medium, and the civil tone of the gendered female speaker on behalf of the gendered female State in tension with the state of moral death the speech aims to protect: slavery and the Lost Cause. This work exemplifies Lauren’s public-facing, history-driven art. It’s also characteristic of the similarities and differences between our two artistic practices. Lauren does not seek herself, yet she obliquely finds and forthrightly implicates herself as southern, White, female-gendered, and the inheritor of privilege gained from chattel slavery.

Early morning—my view of the sky is turning rainbow as the sun rises beyond the carefully articulated line where my grass touches trees. I’m in loungewear, sipping tea from my shining carafe that sits atop a gleaming, Modernist serving tray. Nothing escapes my aestheticizing rule, not my cookie, not even my sinuous stainless-steel stirring spoon. I am researching my family history from my laptop computer. Advancing page by page through probate files is tedious work, but suddenly, in the file of her enslaver, I find my great-great-great-great aunt. It’s as if the words are called out over an auctioneer’s hammer strike: “*Juliet and five children.*” My ears fill with static, and my vision blurs as my and my ancestor’s contrasting spheres collide.

In *Cousin*, I present my ease and sumptuous environs at home and in the archive in contrast to my subject of study—my Black ancestors during slavery. I position my current-day comfort as prefigured by the past. I descend from enslaved people, slaveholders, and Free People of Color who were free decades before national emancipation. While some of my ancestors were enslaved, crucially, my maternal line was free. Though Lauren is a White woman and I am a Woman of Color, we both recognize ourselves as privileged, and each of us views myth-breaking as part of our responsibility. Ours is not a meritocracy; we are products of the past. Lauren and I research the same time and territory—eastern North Carolina during slavery—from two different points of entry. Lauren sought history and found herself. I sought self and found history.

# Ancestral Cues and Ongoing Legacy: Mequitta Ahuja's Black-word Paintings

Berrisford Boothe

Our ancestors walk the earth in our bodies. Those of us willing to, or even capable of looking beyond reflections in the mirror, or the binary racial markers assigned to us in American culture at large, delude ourselves into thinking that we “own” the genetically active traits inside us. What part of your history are you? How much of what came before you do you nurture? As descendants of African peoples and cultures, we were disconnected from lineage in the Americas by force and law. Separation from genealogical fact, leaves most of us wandering aimlessly, untethered to the object legacies and human flow chart of previous lives and narratives that shape everything about us.

*“The thing you think you’re creating, begins to create you.” –MA*

Genealogy is enjoying a contemporary pop-revival. Popular interest has been piqued via investigative entertainment like ‘Finding Your Roots’ where cultural caretakers like Skip Gates or subscriber fueled services like Ancestry.com research, establish and reconnect the dots of ancestral legacy. Genealogical research for a majority of African Americans, even with expert guidance, tends to reach a literal and emotional dead-end when the throughline of archived inquiry settles and frays on documents of enslaved ownership. Historically, early Africans in America only ‘mattered’ in a limited prism of enslaved use. Over time, the critical responsibility for preserving our stories fell on self-elected members of Black and shared-race families. They gathered documents and mementos in hope of a future reconstructing of fractured families. In this latest body of new paintings by Mequitta Ahuja, *Black-word*, we witness the power of ancestral legacy revisited, sampled, and re-contextualized. Everything that undergirds these paintings was gleaned from treasured family documents that were essentially

mute to her for most of her life. Mequitta has activated selected elements from specific letters. She has summoned words threaded with specific meaning for her and conjured ancestral spirit-forms that appear side by side with text statements that mapped their lives. Her intelligent, painterly hand has been guided by time. Known for her continuing series of vivid self-portraits, the *Black-word* paintings reference her early self-portrait figuration and yet they visually and intensely push past those. These are by immediate observation, enhanced, fractured forms that she has chiseled from legacies cast before her birth. The *Black-word* figures are weighted with the history of the African American side of her bi-cultural ancestry. This is compelling, influential contemporary art. These artworks are the beginning of something new.

*“The power of language is also the ability to inform you of how to understand language.” –MA*

These paintings are immutable in their scale. There is a focus on words, and on language. They revisit, and stylistically appropriate letter scrolls from the Renaissance to assist Mequitta in painting narratives about a specific branch of her family tree. The letter scrolls are exquisite compositional devices, but they also equally promote the aesthetics of letters. Painting letters as they appeared in archival documents says the artist, also allows her to focus “on the genealogical letter as a document written from one person to another, but also the letter A, B, C, the letters.” A visual push-pull of—and in between—the letterforms seen in paintings such as *In a Free State, Cousin, As They Please* and *Leaves*, occurs because some letters are opaque, and others are transparent. In each case, letters act as dynamic, tonal directional cues. They punctuate the surfaces of her painted stories. They ‘pop’ as ribbon-like cursive statements, and act as forces of mutual attraction



between their own cursive flow, and the adjacent figures. In the large-scale painting *Leaves*, a painted transcription of the 1838 Henry Knox Letter authored by David White, about her great-great-great-grandparents, Mequitta copies the lilt and gait of the letters in the original document. The words create visual texture and the act of reading for meaning in all these lettered paintings, requires a more prolonged and intimate gaze. It is sobering to accept that these elegant words and lettering the artist taught herself to recreate, are really 'speaking' the heart-wrenching histories of her family's legacy into form.

*"Our identity shifts as we get immersed in different things" -MA*

Time is non-linear. But, as an activating agent for the *Black-word* paintings, it was sequential; Mequitta's pregnancy, her mother's illness, the birth of her son, a reconciling of proximity to her dying mother, her mother's passing, and then the sudden possession of valued family documents. Mequitta paused time and stepped back from self-portraiture as the focal point of her identity. Immersed research led to aesthetic overlaps between two distinct series of paintings and gave her the confidence and content to create the *Black-word* series. The transition from self-portraits to these vibrant new works wasn't immediate. Her sequential path included a series of gestural, line-animated, mostly monochromatic figurative paintings. She also continued with her familiar burnished, brown-skinned self-portrait paintings, some with inlay 'window' shapes in which those gestural forms and re-rendered portraits of the artist-as-child with her mother, were inset.

These gestured paintings examining the transitional, generative nature of time were featured in her previous Aicon gallery exhibition *Ma*. As Mequitta's sense of lived identity shifted, one set of paintings sampled the other to create a painted duality of remixed imagery. The gestural paintings render and configure moments real and imagined from her close relationship to her then critically ailing mother who was also her emotional and spiritual doppelgänger. Her exhibition *Ma* was an act of remembering in the now. It was a visual amalgam of personal dread and the conferring of

shared matriarchal power from one generation to the next. The *Ma* paintings are a powerfully expressive arc away from the artist's earlier self-portrait investigations. Self-portraits before the *Ma* series featured the artist cast against painted representations of family letters, objects, and photographs. Those paintings situated objects compositionally, so they visually referenced her dual African American and sub-continental Indian heritage. Whether meticulously painted with muted tonal color relationships or purer expressionist colors, these earlier paintings transmitted meaning by Mequitta's structured use of inset, and of overlaid articles of family history. Before *Black-word*, Mequitta was already inserting and contributing artifact-objects to establish her bi-racial identity. "I made a transition after the period where you came to my studio, our home in Baltimore. But up until then, including the work that you saw, I was very much drawing (solely) on my combined cultural background." *Black-word* introduces a new and dramatic change in the relationship between figures and the 'artifact-object-voice.'

*"Rather than trying to make a cohesive new body of work, I followed an organic process of development." -MA*

*Black-word* is primarily a tripartite exhibition where identity immersion has led to images of commemoration. First, the paintings *In a Free State* (and *Study for In a Free State*), *Portrait of Henry*, and *As They Please* present us with colossal portraits of her ancestors as she imagines them. Interestingly, they are not wholly fictitious. Mequitta affirms, "I use some of the features of my mother from the drawings of her for the woman in the painting." Yes, the ancestor-woman rendered for *In a Free State* has physical characteristics that are closely sampled from her mother, but clearly because she and her mother were reflections of each other, they're also sampled from her own face. *Black-word* has turned Mequitta into a 'hip-hop genealogist.' But why shouldn't she be? What was proffered earlier in this essay about physiological ancestral genetic traits, grants her permission to appropriate back-and-forth and in reverse. Intra-generational facial features *are* the aesthetic connective tissue we trust. So, as a

hip-hop culturalist, Mequitta selected elements from descriptions of family in letters to imaginatively craft the facets and facial features of ancestors for whom she “did not have photographs.”

Second, there are a set of four colored pencil on drafting film drawings that are themselves iterative conversations. They pinch, overlay, and align features from both her mother’s and her own face. Beyond acting as reminders of her heightened skills as a draftsman, these subtle and crisp studies are portraits of the intangible but obvious intimacy between mother and daughter. “I’ve been drawing my mom’s face for a long time and inventing portraits from those studies.” The *Portrait Studies I, II, III* are Mequitta, but they are ‘fact similar,’ ‘derived’ from an exercise of examining the co-dependent physical traits between them. *Study for Relation* is a transfixing study that renders their shared features on two levels, as ‘mother and daughter’, and as ‘mother and mother.’ It is an aesthetic correspondence between Mequitta and her mother—rendered as her mother.

As stated before, there are overlaps in thought and process on the way to *Black-word*. “I started the portraiture work before I started bringing the genealogy research into the new work, but I already was doing this genealogy research and I knew that I wanted to bring that into the new work in some way. And then I had these color pencil figures that I was already developing that were already a departure from my self-portraiture.” The third set in *Black-word*, are large-scale paintings and their studies, *Ancestor*, *Relation*, and *Babbler*. Anyone familiar with Mequitta’s early self-portrait work, can be excused for a first-glance sense of familiarity. These are not those. *Ancestor* and *Relation* are markers of intent. They predate and forecast the ‘Knox Letter’ text scroll paintings. Saturated with primary colors, they are unapologetic in their lack of muted or mediated hues. *Study for Ancestor* is “an elaborate drawing” that was created—immediately before the—color pencil mash-up self-portrait drawings. More than any other work in the exhibition, it gives an affirming nod to her earlier self-portraits and sets the stage compositionally for the extrapolated themes of matriarchy as ancestral nurturing, present in the ‘Knox Letter’ series. *Study for*

*Ancestor* appears to be the first stage of Mequitta’s distilling of the figure from modeled forms into planes and volumes that will fully emerge in *Study for Relation*. Standing before *Relation* subjects the viewer to Mequitta’s most monumental portrait. Features shared by mother and daughter are fractured and amplified by scale. The figure’s essential planar forms are defined by strong gradations of light that radiate intensity even in shadowed areas. *Ancestor* vibrates with impasto tints of yellow light in conversation with a primary shadow of complementary violet, set against a sea of blue so vivid that the theatricality of dimension is achieved. In *Babbler*, the co-existent duality of faceted figures and rounded, modeled thighs of the child begins. It is also the introduction of the Madonna mother’s breast, as referenced in the gallery text, “appear(ing) to jut out into the viewer’s own space,” as a recurring form.

By taking these three distinct, sometimes overlapping, and generative paths, Mequitta has made it clear that she belongs in all parts of her own history. She has been consciously aware of creating her self-described “auto-mythography.” Collectively, the three styles demonstrate “the ways in which there’s a kind of literal inheritance, genetic inheritance, we are what we are, but we also are self-invented, and that we have agency in that self-invention, and (so) that means we’re like a quilt, we’re piecing ourselves together, and also, we have a lot of agency over how we represent ourselves in the world.”

*“I’ve never before and never since had somebody introduce themselves to me with their family story!” –MA*

When I first met Mequitta and her husband Brian, they were living in Baltimore and I was then the Founding Curator of the Petrucci Foundation Collection of African American Art. My Collection Manager, Devyn Leonor Briggs, brought Mequitta’s art to my attention, and we visited to acquire a work for the collection. I was transfixed. As a Jamaican-born Black American artist whose genealogy contains traces of Ghanaian, Scottish, Sub-continental Indian and Jamaican Maroon, I was immediately drawn to the deliberate honesty of how Mequitta constructed and rendered her



own shared racial and physical identity as self-portraiture.

Circumstances that predate who we see as ourselves as being, our 'self-portraits,' connect us in meaningful ways to permeating forces of identity that endure over time. Stepping inside Mequitta's orbit of ideas and imagery in *Black-word*, seeing how she has converted the unexpected into the previously unimagined is most likely why I introduced myself with my own shared race family story years ago. Game recognizes game. Truth recognizes truth. The most potent forms of artistic expression tell deeply rooted truths about our strengths and our vulnerabilities simultaneously. That's what I saw in Mequitta's work of that time, and I recognize it even more so in *Black-word*. Multiple vectors of genealogical input are transformed into art that is in service of and reinforces the ancestral power of her accrued identity. Input shapes identity and generates form(s). Forms become narratives. The narratives of each artist's truth, if told without remainder, liberates us.

*"I'm trying to give you, the viewer, something of the experience I went through of having to really work to decode the documents and find the message, to find the story that I was seeking." -MA*

There is no way that Mequitta's ancestors, which now includes her beloved mother, could've possibly envisioned, that their life circumstances, intimate exchanges, recorded suffering, resilience, and spirited hope would lead one of their latest genetic iterations, Mequitta Ahuja, to convert the stories she sought and found into the ongoing legacy paintings featured in *Black-word*.

There is a beautiful irony at work here. Hand-written letters that could have easily been lost to history or crumbled without care, have now become undeniably even more potent artifacts. Reconstructed voices embedded in these works create a portal to her family's past and are the foundation for imagery to come. Painterly exuberance and intelligent orchestration of figures and words has turned loss and long-muted voices into monumental statements of inherited and continuing power!

There is always sorrow and loss and transition. And the 'superpower' of every artist is the ability to convert all emotions generated by these states into form. The paintings in *Black-word* are about looking back with guided intent. But perhaps the most important aspect of these paintings and drawings, is their visual promise of continuity. The black words Mequitta took the time to befriend, have created new, longer-lasting narratives. This body of work, rendered solid with intent, has now become a distinct, iconic set of contributions to issues of identity and legacy in Contemporary American Art. *Black-word(s)* is art that will exist and inspire beyond her lifetime, the lifetime of her children, her grandchildren, and so on. She created these paintings as companions for her recently upended, but ongoing life. This exhibition honors those who still walk the earth inside her by vigorously amplifying their stories and allowing their voices to speak again.





## **HENRY KNOX LETTER**

Newbys Bridge Perq<sup>s</sup>. County N.C. 11<sup>th</sup>. month 6<sup>th</sup>, 1838  
Highly Esteemed Cousin

I am induced to address thee at this time by the request and on behalf of Henry Knox (of colour) of the county of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox of said County; his wife Millicent and seven children was removed last spring to thy neighbourhood, he has lately received a letter from her from Cambridge City who states that she is making arrangements to raise money to buy him of his owner. &c &c he requested me to say to her that he hoped for success in that matter, and to inform her that he enjoys good health and wishes to be remembered affectionately to her and her children. and lives in hope that he shall be enabled again to enjoy their company in this life, in a state of personal freedom — —

Perhaps thee may have been informed of the circumstances connected with the case which I will briefly state as follows—When we were seeking out those that had concluded to remove last winter, Millicent was among the number and when I learned that Henry Knox was her husband I observed that I would pay five hundred dollars for him that he might go with his family, then I addressed a line to his owner stating my Views and the nature of the case making him the offer, which was refused and nine hundred dollars asked for him and considered that sum a sacrifice of at least one Hundred dollars

On the way to Norfolk I promised Millicent if I had a chance to buy Henry for \$500 at any time soon that I would do so, or that if she could by any means obtain the balance so as to have no other debt upon the family that I would advance that sum and look to them to repay it to me at some future period—Millicent states in her letter (which I have seen) that her children are hired out for good wages, and that she intended to try and beg some assistance, and seemed to flatter herself and Henry that she should be able by the end of the year with what I promised her, to buy her Husband,



100176380  
Newly Bridge Pers. County N.C. 11<sup>th</sup> month 6<sup>th</sup> 1838  
Highly Esteemed Cousin.

I am induced to address thee at this time by the request and on behalf of Henry Knox (of Coler) of the County of Pasquotank, a slave owned by Thomas Knox of said County; his wife Millicent and seven children was removed last spring to thy neighbourhood, he has lately received a letter from her from Cambridge City who states that she is making arrangements to raise money to buy him of his owner. He has requested me to say to her that he hoped for success in that matter, and to inform her that he enjoys good health and wishes to be reunited affectionately to her and her children. and lives in hope that he shall be enabled again to enjoy their company in this life, in a state of personal freedom.

Perhaps thou may have been informed of the circumstances connected with the case which I will briefly state as follows — When we were seeking out those that had concluded to remove last winter, Millicent was among the number and when I learned that Henry Knox was her husband I observed that I would pay five hundred dollars for him that he might go with his family, then I addressed a line to his owner stating my views and the nature of the case making him the offer, which was refused and nine hundred dollars asked for him and considered that sum a sacrifice of at least one hundred dollars.

On the way to Norfolk I promised Millicent if I had a chance to buy Henry for \$500 at any time soon that I would do so, or that if she could by any means obtain the balance so as to have no other debt upon the family that I would advance that sum and look to them to repay it to me at some future period — Millicent states in her letter (which I have seen) that her children are hired out for good wages, and that she intended to try and by some assistance, and seemed to flatter herself and Henry that she should be able by the end of the year with what I promised her, to buy her husband,

and Henry flatters himself that he can get off fifty dollars less and that gentleman (slave holders) in Pasquotank would give him fifty to One hundred dollars more provided I was to purchase him to send him to his family &c. &c

I have no doubt but thou art aware of what Ideas are raised in the minds of some who have had prospect of purchasing their freedom and how seldom those Ideas are realized—‘hope keeps the heart whole’ and leads us sometimes to have faith in things that are not likely to come to pass. but in regard to this matter I wish to call the attention of thyself, Margaret Morris and others who know Henry personally, and other people of humanity and character feeling and charity, whether we shall proceed foreword and try to raise the money and redeem the individual from slavery and restore him to the bosom of his family, or whether we shall leave him to toil out the remainder of his days in hopeless bondage, and if it should be concluded to buy him and the balance of the price after what I Promised can likely be made up in any way so as to be appropriated by the last of the year and I am assured thereof, I will try my influence with Thomas Knox and make the purchase on the best terms I can and also to obtain donations from Henrys friends. he says W<sup>m</sup> H Davis & Ad Whedbee will each give him five dollars, &c

Will thou please show this letter to Margaret Morris and others that thee may think proper and come to a speedy conclusion what to do in the matter and advise me thereof in turn, if any thing is to be done, that it be done before the close of this year, as it is likely Knox will hire Henry out again as he is unsettled, Henry is about forty years old and has hired two years past for upwards of one hundred and forty dollars a year his taxes & clothing &c

I would further suggest that if it is Concluded to make the purchase that Millicent should make an agent and impower him to hire out her sons (such as can be spared from the support of the family) receive their wages and hold it for the purpose of paying the demands upon them for the purchase, and in that case Knowing it



and Henry Matters himself that he can get off for fifty dollars less, and that Gentlemen (Slave holders) in Passquotank would give him fifty to one hundred dollars more provided I was to purchase him to send him to his family &c. &c.

I have no doubt but that art aware of what Ideas are raised in the Minds of some who have had prospect of purchasing their freedom and how seldom those Ideas are realized - hope keeps the heart whole and leads us sometimes to have faith in things that are not likely to come to pass. but in regard to this matter I wish to call the attention of thyself, Margaret Morris and others who know Henry personally, and other people of humanity and Christian feeling and Charity, whether we shall proceed forward and try to raise the money and redeem the individual from slavery and restore him to the bosom of his family, or whether we shall leave him to toil out the remainder of his days in hopeless bondage, and if it should be concluded to buy him and the balance of the price after what I promised can likely be made up in any way so as to be appropriated by the last of the year and I am assured thereof, I will try my influence with Thomas Knox and make the purchase on the best terms I can and also to obtain donations from Henry's friends. he says Wm H Davis & Ad. Whedden will each give him five dollars. &c.

With thou please show this letter to Margaret Morris and others that they may think proper and come to a speedy conclusion what to do in the matter and advise me thereof in time, if any thing is to be done, that it be done before the close of this year, as it is likely Knox will hire Henry out again as he is unsettled, Henry is about forty years old and has hired two years past for upwards of one hundred and forty dollars a year his taxes & clothing &c.

I would further suggest that if it is concluded to make the purchase that Millicent should make an Agent and empower him to hire out her sons (such as can be spared from the support of the family) receive their wages and hold it for the purpose of paying the demands upon them for the purchase, and in that case knowing it

would be in the power of the family to raise considerable sums of money annually I should not on my part object to then being indebt for the purchase something over what I had told Millicent say \$500. provided some other person will advance it,—but I must confess that I much dislike to pay so high a price for a persons liberty—where sympathy and humanity has induced slave holders on such occasion to take one half of the price they could have obtained in the Market I have not had any conscious scruples of meeting them on that grounds and look to the person redeemed for what I advanced—but in the present case he only offers to make sacrifice of one tenth of the price—as I suppose he could obtain one thousand dollars for the slave

I must now draw to a close and leave the matter to be determined on by thyself and then thee may consult and according to the evident solicitude of Millicent and her sons whether they will choose to pay the cost, be it much or little—but the sum to let me know before the close of the year whether the conclusion be in the affirmative or negative and in plain terms how the matter is to stand.

Miles White, Jephthah White and Tho<sup>s</sup>. Elliott Jr. have all returned home from that country in health &c Aaron Elliot and wife stopped in Guilford and returned home after yearly meeting which is now siting. their horses ran away with the carriage and Rhoda in it broke it considerably and much injured one of Rhodas arms— Nathan Winslow talks of leaving in a few days for Milton with a view of buying pork for speculation but his friends endeavor to put him out of that mind and it is uncertain whether he will go or not.

There has been some cases of swine Bilious fever in our neighbourhood and several deaths of children but no grown up person but one, and that not of thy acquaintance, sister Mary lost two of her children a boy six years old and an infant, a few months, Myself and family have enjoyed pretty good health during two years past, altho we have not been without a few fits of Ague and fever among us.

David White



would be in the power of the family to raise considerable sums of money Annually I should not on my <sup>part</sup> <sup>object</sup> to their being indebted for the purchase something over what I had told Miltrent say \$500. provided some other person will advance it, — but I must Confess that I much dislike to pay so high a price for a persons liberty — Where Sympathy and humanity has induced slave holders on such occasions to take one half of the price they could have obtained in the market I have not had any Conscientious scruples of making them on that ground and look to the person redeemed for what I advanced — but in the present case he only offers to make sacrifice of one tenth of the price — as I suppose he could obtain one thousand dollars for the slave

I must now draw to a close and leave the matter to be determined ~~as~~ by ~~themselves~~ and then the May Congress and according to the evident solicitude of Miltrent and his sons whether <sup>they</sup> will choose to pay the cost, be it much or little — but he seems to let me know before the close of the year whether the conclusion be in the Affirmative or Negative and in plain terms how the matter is to stand.

Miles White, Leplattah White and Tho<sup>s</sup>. Elliott J<sup>r</sup> have all returned home from that country in health &c. Aaron Elliott and wife stopped in Guilford and returned home after nearly 4 months which is now sitting. Their horses ran away with the Carriage and Rhoda in it broke it considerably and much injured one of Rhodas Arms — Nathan Winslow talks of leaving in a few days for Milton with a view of buying porks for speculation but his friends endeavour to put him out of that mind and it is uncertain whether he will go or not.

There has been some cases of severe Bilious fevers in our Neighbourhood and several deaths of Children but no grown up person but one, and that not of thy Acquaintance, Sister Mary lost two of her Children a boy six years old and an Infant a few months, Myself and family have enjoyed pretty good health during two years past, altho we have not been without a few fits of Ague and fever among us.

David White



Newby's Bridge  
N. C. Novemb. 7<sup>th</sup>

Arvon  
M



1 July

25

White  
near Milton  
Wayne County  
Indiana.

David White  
6<sup>th</sup> July 11 mo 1838

# ABOUT

## MEQUITTA AHUJA

Mequitta Ahuja (1976), is a Connecticut-based contemporary feminist painter whose parents hail from Cincinnati and New Delhi. She seeks to redefine self-portraiture as picture-making, rather than an exercise in identity. She describes her earlier work as automythography, a combination of personal narrative with cultural and personal mythology. She received her BA in 1998 from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, and her MFA in 2003 from the University of Illinois, Chicago. Ahuja's works have been widely exhibited, including venues such as the Brooklyn Museum, Studio Museum in Harlem, Saatchi Gallery, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Crystal Bridges, Baltimore Museum of Art and Grand Rapids Art Museum. "Whip-smart and languorous" is how the July 24, 2017 issue of the New Yorker described a work by Mequitta Ahuja then on view at the Asia Society Museum. Ahuja was a 2018 Guggenheim fellow.

### Select Solo Exhibitions

**2023**

*Black-word*, Aicon, New York, NY

**2020**

*Ma*, Aicon, New York, NY

**2018**

*Notations*, Tiwani Contemporary, London, UK

**2014**

*Automythography*, The Dodd Contemporary Art Center, Athens, GA

**2013**

*Mequitta Ahuja*, Thierry Golberg Gallery, New York, NY

**2012**

*Mequitta Ahuja and Robert Pruitt*, Bakersfield Museum of Art, Bakersfield, CA (2-person show)

**2010**

*Trois*, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, France

*Automythography II*, Arthouse, Austin, TX

**2009**

*Automythography I*, BravinLee Programs, New York, NY

**2008**

*Flowback*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX

**2007**

*Encounters*, BravinLee Programs, New York, NY

**2005**

*Dancing on the Hide of Shere Khan*, UBS 12X12, MCA, Chicago, IL

### Select Group Exhibitions

**2023**

*Presence in the Pause: Interiority and its Radical Immanence*, Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, Omaha, NE

**2022**

*A Century of the Artist's Studio 1920-2020*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK

**2021**

*All Due Respect*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD

**2020**

*Picturing Motherhood Now: Images for a New Era*, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH

*Riff and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*, The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC

**2019**

*Intricacies: Fragment and Meaning*, Aicon, New York, NY



*Feminist Histories*, Museum of Sao Paulo, Brazil

*An Essential Presence: The Petrucβci Family Foundation Collection*, Allentown Art Museum, PA

*Eye Contact*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

## **2018**

*About Face*, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa

*For Freedom's 50 States Initiative*, Billboard in Des Moines, IA

*Embodied Politics*, Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, IL

*Infinite Spaces: Rediscovering PAFA's Permanent Collection*, Philadelphia, PA

## **2017**

*The Art World We Want*, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, PA

*A Space for Thought*, Brand New Gallery, Milan, Italy

*American African American*, Phillips, London, UK

*Engender*, Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA

*Lucid Dreams and Distant Visions: South Asian Art in Diaspora*, Asian Society, New York, NY

*Sondheim Exhibition*, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD

*Face to Face*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA

*Shifting: African-American Women and the Power of their Gaze*, David C. Driskell Center, College Park, MD

## **2016**

*Past/Present/Future*, Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI

*Champagne Life*, Saatchi Gallery of Art, London, UK

*Statements: African American Art from the Museum's Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

*State of the Art: Discovering America Art Now*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN & Telfair Museum, Savannah, GA

## **2015**

*Sondheim Finalist Exhibition*, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD

*Mythopoeia*, Tiwani Contemporary, London, UK

## **2014**

*State of the Art*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR

*If You Build It*, No Longer Empty, New York, NY

*Marks of Genius*, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN

*Leaves*, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, NY

*How the Light Gets In*, Glassell School of Art, New York, NY

## **2013**

*Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge*, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

*War Baby/Love Child*, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL

*Mixtopias*, Visarts, Rockville, MD

## **2012**

*The Bearden Project*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

*Portraiture Now: Drawing on the Edge*, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

*In Between*, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Brussels, Belgium

*Sleeping Inside Our Bodies*, Union Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

*The Human Touch*, The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX

*Red*, Maison Particuliere, Brussels, Belgium

## **2011**

*Collected: Ritual*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

*Drawings for the New Century*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN

## **2010**

*Usable Pasts (Artists in Residence Exhibition)*, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY

*Freedom to Expand*, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS

*Body of Work (Women to Watch)*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC

*Art on Paper*, Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC

*Weaving in and Out*, No Longer Empty, New York, NY

*Until Now: Collecting the New (1960- 2010)*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, MN

*New Works for the Collection*, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX

## **2009**

*Undercover*, Spelman College Museum of Fine Arts, Atlanta, GA

*Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition*, Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC

*Anomalies*, Rossi and Rossi Gallery, London, UK

*Wonder What the Others Are Up To*, Gallery OED, Cochin, India

*\$timulus Artadia Awardees Exhibition*, DiverseWorks, Houston, TX

*The Talented Ten*, Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, TX

## **2008**

*Houston Collects*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX

## **2007**

*Global Feminisms*, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY

*Painters and Poets*, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS

## **2006**

*Chimaera*, Tenri Cultural Institute of New York, NY

*New Art Event*, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita, KS

*Spirit and Psyche: The Figure Transformed*, Highland Park Art Center, Highland Park, IL

## **2005**

*d'Afrique d'Asie*, Ethan Cohen Fine Arts, New York, NY

*Representations*, Contemporary Art Workshop, Chicago, IL

## **2004**

*Baltimore/Chicago*, Maryland Institute College of Art, Curated by Kerry James Marshall, Baltimore, MD

## **Awards**

### **2018**

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship

### **2013**

Maryland Individual Artist Award

### **2011**

Louis Comfort Tiffany Award

### **2009**

Joan Mitchell Award

### **2008**

Artadia Award, Houston



Cornelia and Meredith Long Prize, Inaugural Recipient

**2003**

Chicago Civic Arts Foundation, First Place

**2002**

University of Illinois Diversity Fellowship

**Fellowships**

**2018**

John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship

**2015**

Dora Maar House, Artist in Residence, Menerbes, France

**2014**

Siena Art Institute, Artist in Residence, Siena, Italy

**2011-2012**

MICA, Stewart-McMillan Artist in Residence, Baltimore, MD

**2009-2010**

Studio Museum in Harlem, Artist in Residence, New York, NY

**2006-2008**

Core Program, Artist in Residence, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, TX

**Collections**

Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, USA  
Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, USA  
GAE LLC, an affiliate of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, USA  
David C. Driskell Center, College Park, USA  
Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, USA  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India  
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, USA  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, USA  
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, USA  
Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, Asbury, USA  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, USA  
Royal Bank of Canada Wealth Management

Saatchi Gallery, London, UK  
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, USA  
Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita,  
U.S. State Department, Mumbai Consulate, India  
U.S. State Department, New Delhi, India  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA

**Education**

**2003**

MFA, University of Illinois at Chicago, IL

**1998**

BA, Hampshire College, Amherst, MA

# ABOUT

## AICON

At Aicon we specialize in modern and contemporary non-Western art with a special focus on South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The New York gallery provides a vital platform for artists from these regions to show in the United States. Alongside in-depth, focused solo shows, the gallery presents a program of curated group exhibitions that are international in their scope and ambition. The program deliberately links together contemporary art with art made in the latter half of the 20th century to produce unexpected congruences, shed light on multiple modernisms, make complex the designation 'contemporary' and signal a shift away from simple survey exhibitions.

In solo shows, Aicon has shown the work of established 20th century artists such as M. F. Husain, F. N. Souza and S. H. Raza. The gallery has also presented solo shows of senior living artists Victor Ekpuk, Nataraj Sharma, Natvar Bhavsar, Rina Banerjee, Anjolie Ela Menon and Surendran Nair; from the younger generation, we have exhibited solo shows of Salman Toor, Mequitta Ahuja, Khadim Ali and Youdhisthir Maharjan. Group shows have included *Readymade: Contemporary Art from Bangladesh* as well as *Between Line and Matter: Impulse of Minimalism in South Asia and the Middle East*. The gallery has collaborated with museums such as The Art Institute, Chicago; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi; Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; The Jewish Museum, New York; and Louvre Abu Dhabi. Exhibitions have been reviewed and the gallery has been profiled by *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Times of London*, *Art Asia Pacific*, *ArtForum* and the *Financial Times*.

### Selected Solo Exhibitions

#### 2023

Mequitta Ahuja, *Black-word*

Pooja Iranna, *Silently continuing...*

#### 2022

Rasheed Araeen, *Islam & Modernism*

Victor Ekpuk, *I am My Ancestor's Essence*

Natvar Bhavsar, *Part III: Works from 1987 to 2005*

Rachid Koraïchi, *Le Chant de l'Ardent Désir*

#### 2021

Bernardo Siciliano, *American Pastoral*

Youdhisthir Maharjan, *Tender is the Night*

K. S. Kulkarni, *Home & Away*

Anjolie Ela Menon, *By the River*

Saad Qureshi, *Tanabana*

Nataraj Sharma, *Travel Log*

Mequitta Ahuja, *Ma*

#### 2020

Natvar Bhavsar, *Sublime Light*

Rasheed Araeen, *In the Midst of Darkness*

Pooja Iranna, *Silently...a proposed plan for rethinking the urban fabric*

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, *Mixed Lines*

#### 2019

Bernardo Siciliano, *Pigs & Saints*

Sheetal Gattani, *Unmaking Space*

Ghulam Mohammad, *Gunjaan*

Mohammad Omer Khalil, *You Don't Have to Be*



Victor Ekpuk, *Marks and Objects*

Natvar Bhavsar, *Beginnings*  
Ahmed Morsi, *The Flying Poet*

## 2018

Salman Toor, *Time After Time*

Rachid Koraïchi, *Les Sept Stations Célestes*

Rasheed Araeen, *Recent Works*

Jayasri Burman, *Born of Fire: A Tale for Our Times*

Mohammed Kazem, *Ways of Marking*

## 2017

G. R. Iranna, *The Primordial Ash*

Saad Qureshi, *When the Moon Split*

Manisha Parekh Open Studio

Surendran Nair, *Cuckoonebulopolis:  
(Flora and) Fauna*

Anjolie Ela Menon, *A Retrospective*

Ernest Mancoba

## 2016

Rasheed Araeen, *Geometry and Symmetry*

Sunil Gawde, *id - od & Other Dimensions*

Rachid Koraïchi, *Love Side by Side with the Soul*

Rekha Rodwittiya, *The Rituals of Memory*

Bernardo Siciliano, *Panic Attack*

Paresch Maity, *Cityscapes - Part I*

## 2015

Salman Toor, *Resident Alien*

M. F. Husain, *Husain at Hundred: Part II*

M. F. Husain, *Husain at Hundred*

Jamini Roy, *Living Folk*

Sadequain, *Exaltations*

Rasheed Araeen, *Minimalism Then and Now*

## Selected Group Exhibitions

## 2022

Rina Banerjee, Max Colby, Alison Saar, T. Venkanna, Autumn Wallace, Charlie Williams, *Radical Enchantments*, curated by Jason Vartikar

## 2021

Khadim Ali and Sher Ali, *What Now My Friend?*

Rina Banerjee, Jayashree Chakravarty, Nadia Kaabi-Linke Suchitra Mattai, *Fresh Earth*

## 2020

Sonja Ferlov Mancoba & Ernest Mancoba

Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim & Victor Ekpuk, *Vernacular Automatisms*

*Outside the Lines: Secular Vision in South Asian Modernism*

## 2019

Mequitta Ahuja, Peju Alatise, Rina Banerjee, Faiza Butt, Saba Qizilbash, *Intricacies: Fragment and Meaning*

## 2018

Jamini Roy & Hemen Mazumdar, *Two Rebels*

*Timeless India: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography of India*

Shilpa Gupta, Waqas Khan, Ghulam Mohammad, Priya Ravish Mehra, *Pale Sentinels: Metaphors for Dialogues*

## 2017

Peju Alatise, Omar Victor Diop, Hassan Hajjaj, Aisha Khalid, Naiza Khan, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, *Interwoven Dialogues: Contemporary Art from Africa and South Asia*

Janananda Laksiri, Anoli Perera, Dominic Sansoni, Priyantha Udagedara, Jagath Weerasinghe, *Portraits of Intervention: Contemporary Art from Sri Lanka*

*Seed for History and Form – Tebhaga*

*Culture of the Streets*

## **2016**

*Tantric: The Corporeal and the Cosmic*

*Split Visions: Abstraction in Modern Indian Painting*

*Go Figure*, Curated by Salman Toor

*Between Structure and Matter: Other Minimal Futures*

## **2015**

*Approaching Figuration: Modern and Pre-Modern Indian Art and the Figure*

*Approaching Abstraction: Works from the Herwitz Collection*

*Eat Pray Thug*

## **Collections**

Aga Khan Foundation  
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA  
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, USA  
Buffalo AKG Art Museum, Buffalo, USA  
Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, USA  
Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, UAE  
Katara Cultural Museum, Doha, Qatar  
Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India  
Louvre Abu Dhabi, UAE  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA  
MoMA PS1, New York, USA  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA  
Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA  
Tate Britain, London, UK  
Tate Modern, London, UK  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA









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