ELLIOTT, ANNA ABHAU. M.F.A. Field Research. (2022)
Directed by Professor Barbara Campbell Thomas. 65 pp.

In this thesis, I explore my experience creating “Field Research,” my work of scholarship and art making for my graduate degree. My work delved into the archives of the Field Research Program at the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA).

FIELD RESEARCH

by

Anna Abhau Elliott

A Thesis
Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro

2022

Approved by

Professor Barbara Campbell Thomas
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

To my friends who got me through this process: Marlanda Dekine, Jordan Frye, Sara Kalkstein, J Molière, Cody Owens and Aimee Wise.

To my family who made this process possible for me to get through in the first place: Marcy Abhau, Steve Elliott, Jenny Ewing-Elliott and Rich Gibson.

To Bjorn Bates and Jill Hannes: Thank you for assisting me in completing this process.

To the professors, scholars, and artists at UNCG and in life who've spent their time truly advising me. Extra dedications for Jennifer Bonner, Desiree Moore and Robin Schwartzman.

Special thanks to Maggie Murphy for literally so many things.

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Anna Abhau Elliott has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts for all their assistance in this project. Thanks for accepting me off of the waitlist: you're stuck with me now.

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What is important in this image?

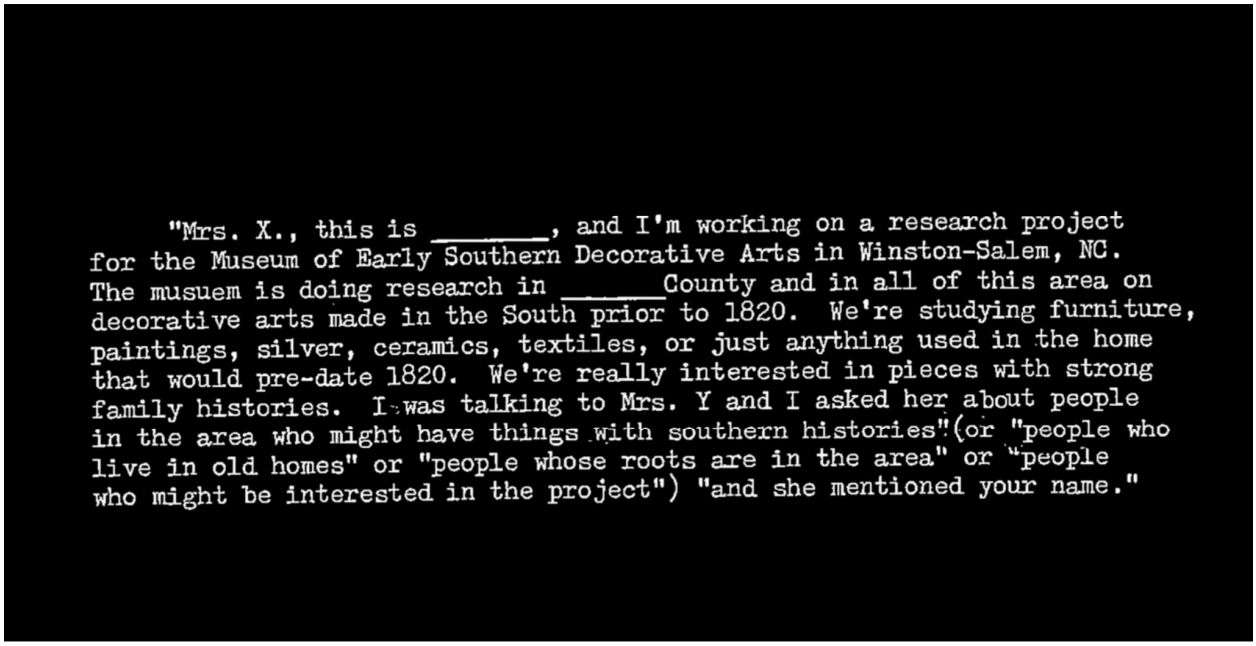
If you made a note about this image, what would it be?

For Mary Tribble, who made the photograph in the early 1980s, as part of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) Field Research Program, her note simply read: "Ladder Back Chair." [2]

[1] All of the archival photos appear courtesy of the Museum of Early Decorative Arts

[2] Tribble, "Untitled (North Carolina) / Ladderback Chair."

Illustration 2. "Manual Excerpt."



"Mrs. X., this is _____, and I'm working on a research project for the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, NC. The musuem is doing research in _____County and in all of this area on decorative arts made in the South prior to 1820. We're studying furniture, paintings, silver, ceramics, textiles, or just anything used in the home that would pre-date 1820. We're really interested in pieces with strong family histories. I was talking to Mrs. Y and I asked her about people in the area who might have things with southern histories"(or "people who live in old homes" or "people whose roots are in the area" or "people who might be interested in the project") "and she mentioned your name."

This sample script is from the "MANUAL for the FIELD RESEARCH PROGRAM," written by Ann Dibble in 1976. [3]

Starting in 1972, the curator of MESDA, Frank Horton, hired seventeen young women (and one man) as field researchers over about ten years. Field researchers were not hired because of their expertise as photographers or decorative arts historians. Instead, they were chosen because Frank Horton believed they could talk their way into peoples' homes. The stewards of Southern Decorative Arts made before 1820 tended to be older white women who lived in rural areas, who were simultaneously suspicious of danger, and hoping to share what they called their treasures. [4]

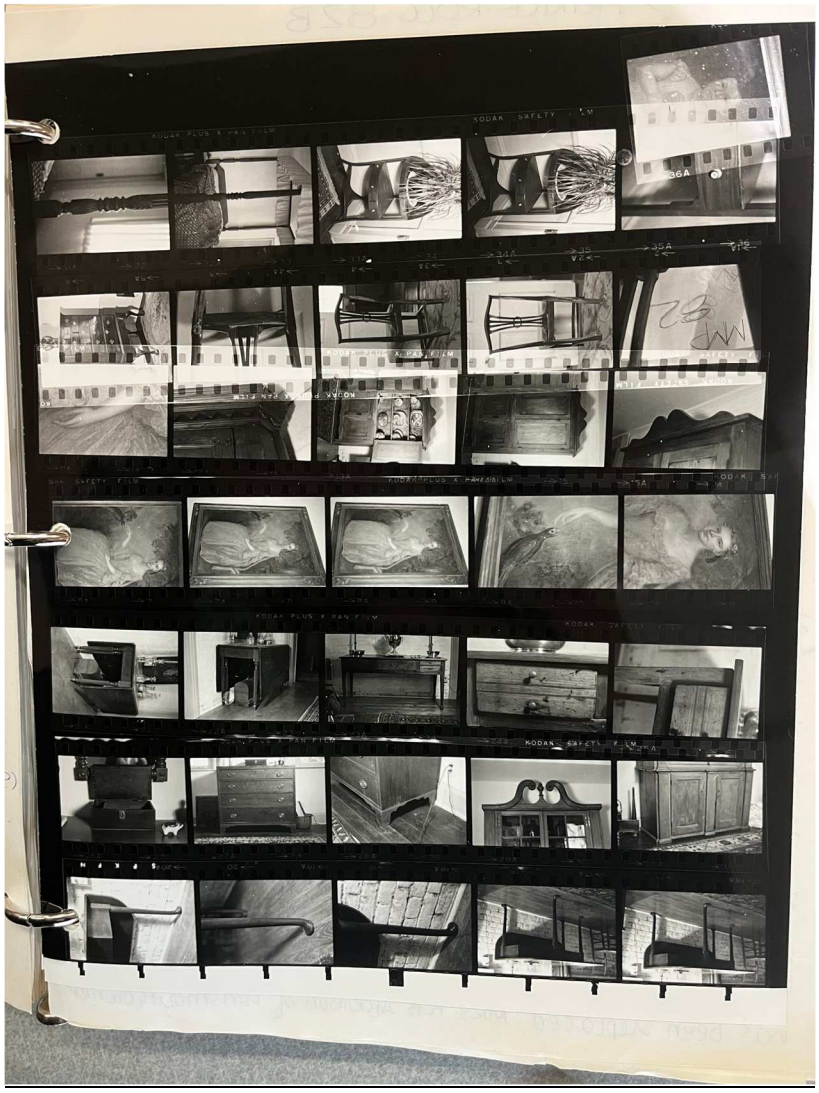
One former field researcher described her training for the job. Along with a crash course in photography and connoisseurship, she was instructed to attend Episcopal church services, and

[3] Dibble, "Manual for MESDA Field Research Program."

[4] Dowd, "Treasure Hunt: Southern Decorative Arts As History."

warned not to have a boyfriend, and tasked to send thank-you notes to *every* person who helped her. [5]

Illustration 3. Contact Sheet Example.[6]



What is important in this image?

I have spent hours in the MESDA archive poring over images like this one: a contact sheet. This is how the field researchers shared their work with Frank Horton, who would assess

[5] Dowd.

[6] Prince, "Untitled (Maryland) / Bird Hand Furniture Duo."

what objects were worthy of re-photographing later, to be added to the MESDA Object Database–a resource that is now digitized and used often by a range of scholars.[7]

That means that, for fifty years, these photographs have existed only as contact sheets, and as negatives. I am here to explore the aesthetic world created by these photographers. The eerie relationships, the alarming flash, the intricate details that speak of mysteries we will never solve.

Illustration 4. Contact Sheet Example: Close-up.

[7] "Chamber."

Illustration 5. Contact Sheet Example: Close-up.

Southern Gothic, not in a work of fiction by Flannery O'Connor,[8] but lived, stewarded, and studied. For my thesis show, I created large, banner-like prints of the images, presenting them in a form that they were never intended to be. These were images that were tools, not images made to be considered for their own existential, aesthetic presence.

Illustration 6. "Untitled (Maryland)."

[8] O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*.

Illustration 7. Photocopy.

I made a video, "Slide Show," combining photocopies I made of a book of colonial American portraits,[9] with my own photographs.

[9] Weekley, *Painters and Paintings in the Early American South*.

Illustration 8. Food Diptych.

I shot 35mm film myself, while I attended the 74th Annual Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum.

Illustration 9. "Contact Sheet." All gallery shots by Grace Clark.

I created an homage to the contact sheet: framing thirty-six images, with some frames painted to resemble the grease pencils often used to identify the “hero shot,” which will be printed on its own.

The hero shot:

Illustration 10. Hero Shot of Keanu Reeves.[10]

Oops, not that one.

[10] Pape, *Français*.

The hero shot:

Illustration 11. “Untitled (North Carolina)”

Illustration 12. Gallery shot of "Untitled (Virginia)" and "Untitled (South Carolina)."

But you know, while it's easy to enjoy the funny juxtapositions, and the eccentric, dare I say "folksy," look into these images and this world, I invite us to push past seeing the Field Research program as a solitary or "weird" event.

Instead, I see this archive as a testament to the methods that WASP[11] Southern American culture uses to create its history. To see that much of this research started happening in response to Northern museums buying Southern decorative interiors. SOURCE I invite you to imagine what many of us, in 2022, usually associate with 1976. I don't usually think of the American Bicentennial. I think of movements looking forward, for Black liberation, Queer liberation, women's liberation.

[11] Zhang, "WASPs."

Illustration 13. Angela Davis.[12]

[12] Gotfryd, "[Angela Davis, Half-Length Portrait, with 'x' Markings That Indicate the Photographer's or Editor's Selection of a Photo for Printing]."

Illustration 14. Close-up of "Untitled (Virginia)."

The MESDA Field Research program fascinates me because it is an example of using white women's intergenerational communication to steward valuable things: corner cupboards, silver services, political power.

I mentioned that the MESDA object database is still in use. The scholars who utilize it are not only interested in re-celebrating wealthy Episcopalian British-American lineages.

Instead, objects can speak in another way: to the skills of enslaved craftspeople, and the maintenance labor of enslaved, indentured, and hired women and men who maintained objects for centuries. [13][14]

Illustration 15. Self-Portrait at 74th Annual Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum.

What is important in this image?

I see "Field Research" as a beginning. I intend to continue my study not of 18th century objects, but of the 20th century women who go to them for meaning, purpose, and power. American museums are still overwhelmingly staffed by white women, although executive positions still tend to go to white men.[15]

I'm graduating with a Master in Fine Arts, a white woman with a terminal degree and a passion for archives, and someone who seems to have the interpersonal manners that was the only skill necessary to get the Field Research job. But I have a different goal.

[13] Gatson and Momon, "Black Craftspeople Digital Archive."

[14] VAN HORN, "The Dark Iconoclast."

[15] Farrell et al., *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums*. Also see Appendix A, in which I explore this topic (and mention relevant contemporary thinkers) in more depth.

Illustration 16. Photograph by the Artist.

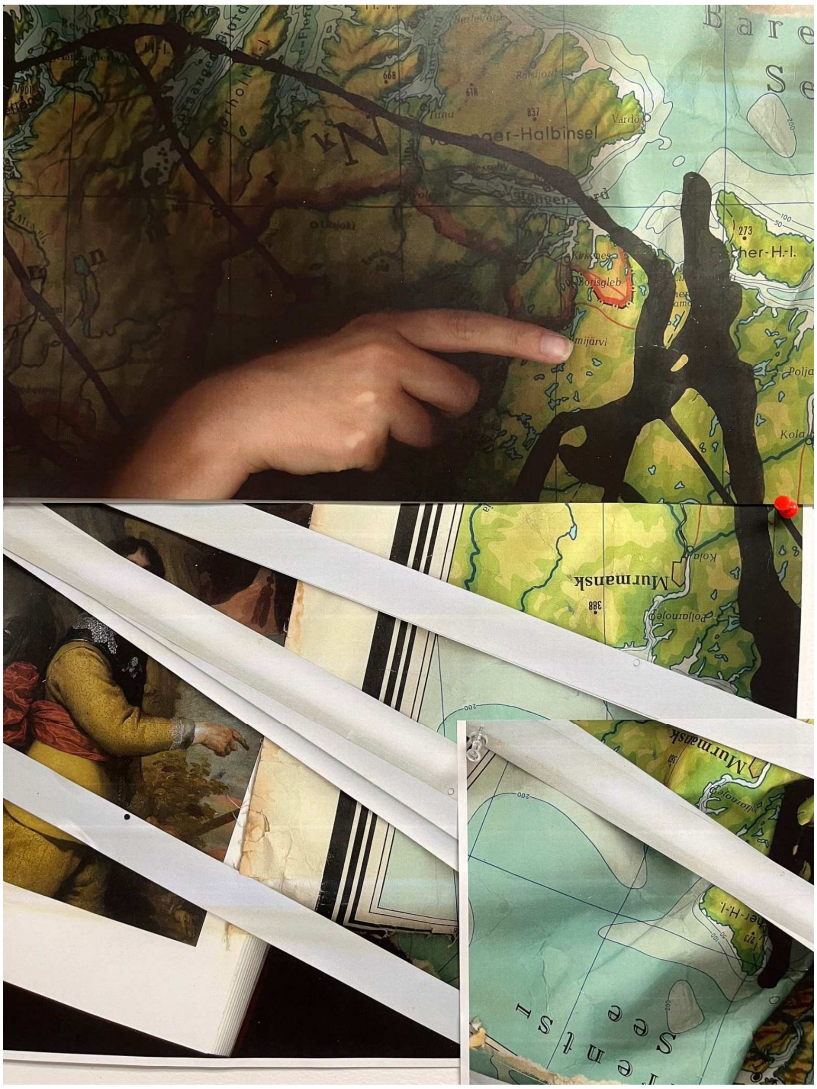
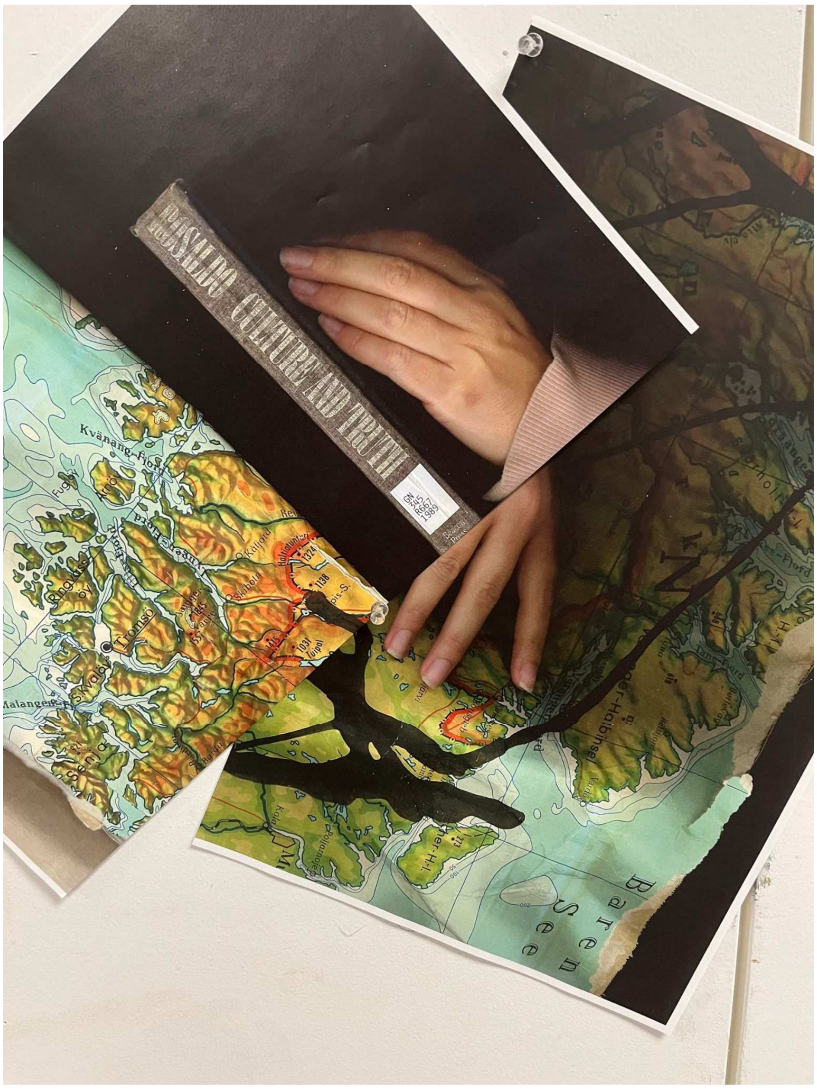


Illustration 17. Photograph by the Artist.



I want to change cultural systems that hoard power like treasure. And I know I'm not by myself.

CHAPTER II: SECOND CYCLE.

1. Dismantle Preservation.

Illustration 18. Self-Portrait at 74th Annual Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum.

What is important in this image?

Today, while I was ostensibly writing this paper, I attended a conference called "Dismantle Preservation," run by Sarah Marsom, and presented at Old Salem Museum and Gardens.[16] I found myself sitting with preservationists, artists, executive directors, administrators, and other scholars and museum professionals who have devoted their careers to preserving buildings, stories, and the job of communicating public history. The people here are also invested, interested, committed to pushing the field towards reforming labor standards, presenting full stories of historic sites, and researching the history of people who are usually marginalized by American historic sites–usually any person who isn't a white Anglo-Saxon protestant cisgender straight man.

[16] Marsom, "#DismantlePreservation."

Topics discussed today included how the CEO of Old Salem, Frank Vagnone, made sure that his contract said he could not be fired for "homosexual activity." Sarah Marsom discussed that the main reason she is campaigning against unpaid internships is that this structure means that the interns are not covered by the same sexual harassment policies that employees are.[17] An archaeologist named Terry gave us updates on the news of the day, which is about the shitshow unfolding at James Madison's Montpelier, where the conservative, white board is retaliating against employees, staff, and members of a committee of descendants of enslaved people, because of a truly wild set of racist actions related to not creating board parity.[18] We visited a contemporary art intervention happening inside a period room at MESDA, where Michael J. Bramwell has curated "House Party," a show[19] that combines contemporary art that focuses on intervention and critique with MESDA's objects, in an homage to Fred Wilson's work at Old Salem[20] in the early 1990s, and also as a re-visit, and a push past, that work to a new space.

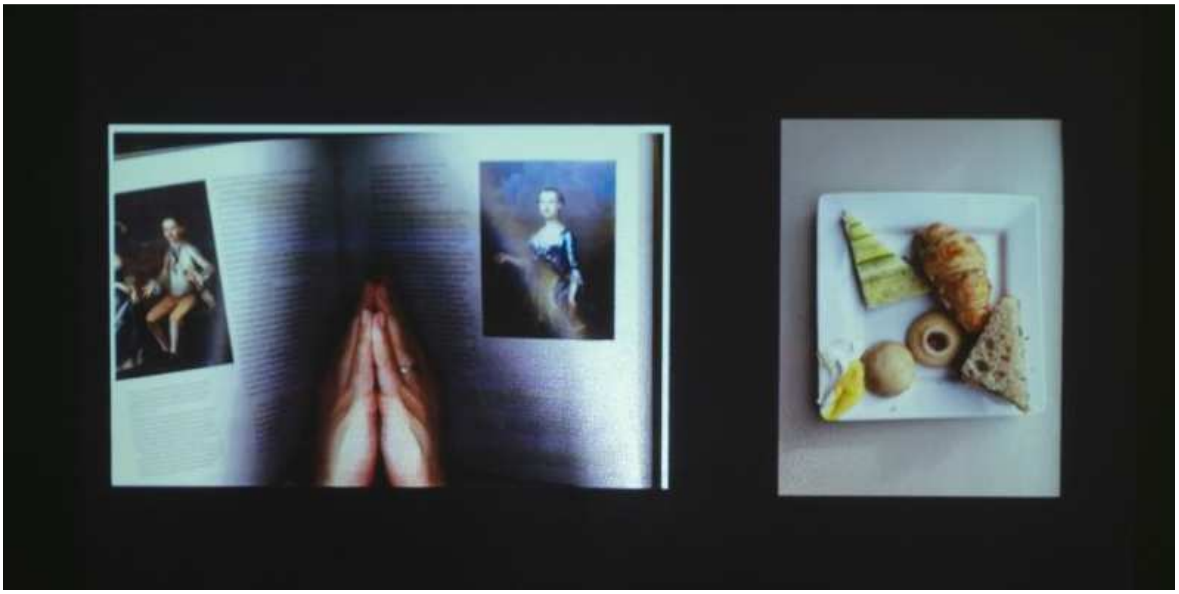
Today, I felt like I was where I was supposed to be. How did I get here?

---

[17] Thompson, "How Unpaid Interns Aren't Protected Against Sexual Harassment."
[18] Wise, "Montpelier Says It's Open to Parity with Slave Descendants. Descendants Call Foul."
[19] Bramwell, "House Party."
[20] Wilson, Fred, *Insight; in Site; in Sight; Incite; Memory; Artist and the Community.*

2. Palimpsest.

Illustration 19. Still from "Slide Show."



A palimpsest is a manuscript that has been incompletely erased and then re-written upon, so that the previous layers are visible along with the latest one. In my practice of artmaking, public history, historiography, scholarship, curation, and photography, I see image-making as an opportunity to observe the palimpsests that build up in culture, images, and even the moments of photographs. In "Slide Show," a video I created, the images cycle through as if they are on an analog slide projector–I edited in the sound effect of the carousel clicking, and added in an under-one-second-long black screen transition on iMovie. I am not interested in disguising the technology, but instead celebrating what happens when a modern projector and speaker plays a clicking sound. I am interested in exposing the interpretive apparatus that we carry in our minds: the distinctive click of the slide carousel still vibrates in many of our minds as a lived memory; but for some of us, especially as time goes on, it's going to fade out of lived experience and start to become a cultural memory, perhaps. I also made it because I've used Google Slides and

PowerPoint for so many of my own presentations in art school, and because I am something of a connoisseur of the Instagram Story, which is a feature that is also a timed sort of slideshow in the virtual world. I often post, annotate, soliloquize, and think through things on my Instagram story.

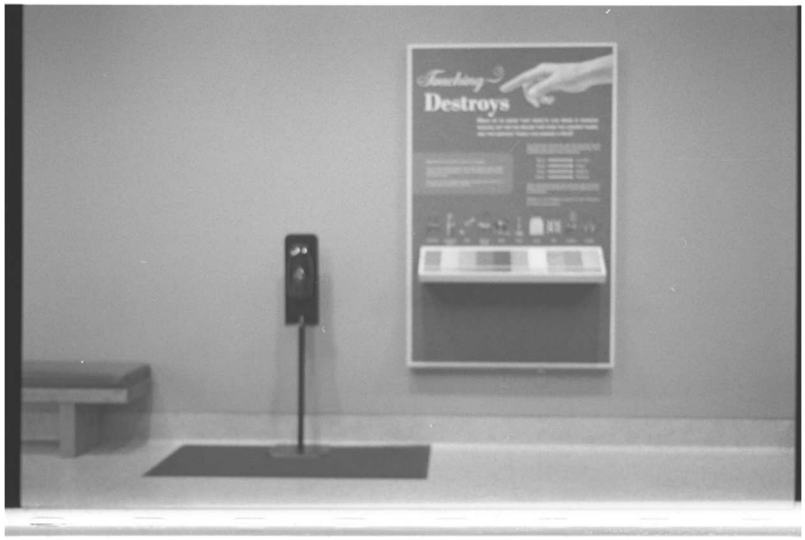
The images in "Slide Show" are a combination of photocopies I created with Carolyn Weekley's book, *Painters and Painting in the Early American South.*[21] This book, published in 2013, explores the aesthetic, life, and history of a wide range of people and objects. It fascinated me because I had met Weekley, an older woman who had worked at MESDA as the painting curator for many years, and she seemed fairly uninterested in innovation. As a student in the Summer Institute at MESDA, we asked her questions about the landscapes and backgrounds of the paintings, and what each of them might represent. She seemed annoyed when we asked for more than a list of the artist, the year, and the biography of the wealthy person in the painting. To me, she seemed like a member of the Decorative Arts "Old Guard:" someone for whom an encyclopedic knowledge and an appreciation of the objects *was* the point of Southern Decorative arts.

So, I checked her book out of the library and I pawed through it; at one point I started at midnight and fell asleep for a few hours with the book. Eventually, I took it down to the photocopier and made a series of photocopies of pages in the book of portraits, usually of women, and my own hands, fingers, and face. I let my hands warp the pages of the book, and I let the glass of the photocopier warp my skin and flesh. I crumpled up my American Eagle cotton shirt and scrunched it onto the glass as well. In this image making, I wanted to push the conventions of art historical image-making that paid homage over and over again to a classical tradition, with billowing fabric and puffy clouds, and gentle contrapposto poses and hands of

[21] Weekley, *Painters and Paintings in the Early American South*.

God reaching out of clouds to breathe life into something. However, I was interested not in elevating a wealthy patron to God-tier, but instead pulling at how these European art historical shapes mutate, distort, and pull at a person's actual material flesh. How a painting of a woman gets dark if it's pulled slightly away from the glass, the human skin changes colors, squishes and stretches. This image-making came after I started investigating the poses I saw in these portraits over and over again, of young European lads and girls pointing to land, to houses, or ships; to a girl posed with a bright red cardinal bird.[22] And that these images are using the poses and tropes of European art to signal the vast material resources and lands that were "given" or "sold" to them by England or the Virginia Company, but today, we would describe as land that was stolen and colonized by these European powers and people.[23][24]

Illustration 20. "Touching Destroys"



In "Slide Show," there appears a sign I saw at Colonial Williamsburg that says "Touching Destroys." I dropped this image into "Slide Show" twice, and I also put it (on a tiny

[22] Unknown, "Evelyn Byrd (1707-1737) – Colonial Virginia Portraits."
[23] Gómez-Barris, Macarena, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*.
[24] Koot, *A Biography of a Map in Motion: Augustine Herrman's Chesapeake*.

scale) in “Contact Sheet,” because I find it very important. This sign, which is about why people shouldn’t touch the artifacts in the museum, speaks to me not just about the natural oils in a human’s skin. “Touching Destroys” also is a phrase that I see in these hands of mine, touching and warping a book.[25] I also made these hand-related images with giant colorful maps, and through photographs I made of myself gesturing to an utterly pointless suburban plot of land that my family owns (but we can’t sell, because a distant relative’s will is stuck in some probate court problem).

Illustration 21. Photo of Land Parcel.

In my hands, I am asking about my power as a WASP woman. When I handle something, point at it, engage with it, witness it, am I destroying it as those aforementioned Anglo-Saxons

[25] Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth*.

did through imperialism? Or is my witnessing a space to tell stories, to bring in more people, to make a new story that I'd rather connect with?

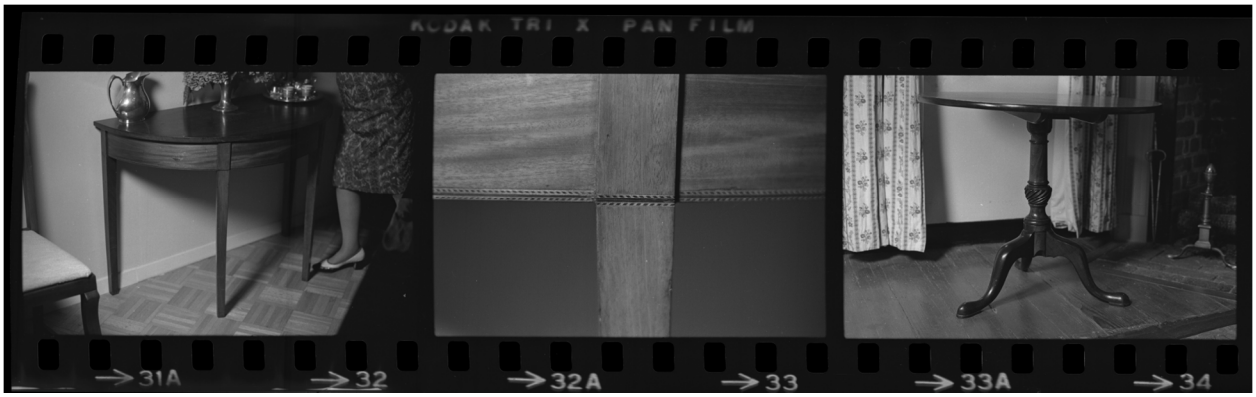
I am doing my best to cast binaries to the wind, so I don't see this as a basic good vs. bad discussion. Instead, I'm holding up the contradictory, friction-full pushing and pulling that I sense when I do my work.

"Slide Show" also contains images I made with my iPhone of the 74th Annual Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum. In this place, I was genuinely confused about whether I was observing this conference like a reporter, whether I was participating in it as an emerging scholar, or totally overwhelmed and in a Christopher Guest film.[26] Making photographs of what I saw, and also of myself, was one strategy I used to attempt to sort out what was happening. At the time, I was reading Dwight Conquergood[27] and Renee Alexander Craft's[28] works about reflexive ethnography. So, here, I was trying on the role of the field researcher. The combination of images of myself, and then the hands and bodies of other people, was key in my investigation: what was important in that image?

[26] Guest, *Best in Show*.
[27] Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics."
[28] Craft, *When The Devil Knocks*.

3. "Untitled (Maryland)."

Illustration 22. "Untitled (Maryland)."



For my thesis exhibition, I scanned and then blew up the images from 35mm negatives. These photographs were made fifty years ago by MESDA Field Researchers. Well, the program started fifty years ago. It ran from 1972 to 1984. In this program, Frank Horton, curator and founder of MESDA, hired young women (and one man, but he didn't last…)[29] usually straight out of college[30] to go on solo sojourns throughout the Southeast on the hunt for decorative arts made in the South before 1820. In my journey of poring over binder after binder of contact sheets and meticulous notes, I came to witness this world where the main characters were pieces of furniture, captured in bright, newspaper-crime-photo flash, and human beings, pets, and plants peeked around the edges. I became devoted to these photographs, where I saw the traces of peoples' homes that I sensed I could never see again. Since the field researcher was making a photograph only for Frank Horton's reference, there was no need to "clean up" the scene. In this, I was thrilled to find images like "*Untitled (Virginia),"* where we see this woman's body, I believe in mid-step, seen in action, entering the frame. In the trio I created, I see this image as

[29] Various, "MESDA Field Research Project Archives."
[30] Dibble, "Manual for MESDA Field Research Program."

three sets of legs, the human, the wooden, and the metal. These three images play against each other, informing one another in changing modes of scale, contrast, energy, and shape. The photographer was unlikely to be contemplating this composition. However, I am observing these photographs not because I think the field researchers were "artists," but because they were thoughtful women making creative choices.

This agency, and presence of women making creative choices, connects me to the greater cultural and conceptual concern for me of "Field Research:" the matrilineal communication structures that Frank Horton leaned on to complete the Field Research Program. In this work, "soft skills" were quite concrete. Horton figured that the keepers of most of these objects were little old ladies living in rural communities. The best people to talk their way into homes and be able to crawl around on the floor and take photographs were young women.

The woman captured in this photograph seems to be the most often-seen type of person in the photographs, aside from children (who are thrilled to pose for the camera) and some photographs of the field researchers. Men do appear, but usually they seem to be in the same advanced age range as the notorious "little old lady."

4. “Untitled (Maryland).”

Illustration 23. “Untitled (Maryland).”

I found an incredible document: A Manual for MESDA Field Research,[31] written by Ann Dibble, a field researcher, in 1976. The document is full of, shall we say, direct communication and advice about how to successfully complete the research. Reading this text in 2022, the binary gender and strict roles scream off of the page. This was first something that felt icky to me. However, the more often I read it and thought about it, the more I thought, well, this isn’t Ann Dibble deciding these things. She’s describing the realities of this job, this world, of the mid-1970s Southern decorative arts home collector scene. She is speaking from experience and

[31] Dibble, “Manual for MESDA Field Research Program.”

giving suggestions for Best Practices. This reminded me of my own, short experience doing a field trip through the MESDA Summer Institute, traveling in the Southern Chesapeake over the summer of 2021. I experienced such a wide array of sophistication, age, goals, and etc. of the people showing our group around historic sites. And that we discussed it later: if someone lets you come into their home and feeds you, are you going to argue with them? Or is the job more about witnessing what's there without a judgment either way? That was the option I chose that summer, telling myself I am not here to change something overnight, but to understand the landscape (in so many ways) first.

I didn't even "see" this photograph until I had already scanned the roll for a different image. I was sitting at the computer scrolling through them, and I gasped out loud. It was as though this person had entered the photo because I was looking at it.

In this image, I was at first blown away by the composition. The concentric square of the mirror echoes the entire photo frame; the woman's legs echo the furniture's legs. The pair of human legs and feet are surrounded by the pair carved legs and paws of the table; those are surrounded by two chairs' other legs. The longer I contemplated the photograph, and the more I looked at it with others, the more I realized there was also the woman's legs framing another inner space: the dark shadow up her skirt, between her legs, beneath her clasped hands.

I discussed this pose with people. What's going on? To most people, this pose felt "modern." We did not assume a woman wearing a dress and low high-heels would ever sit with her legs spread open, leaning forward with her hands between her knees. It looks like someone sitting in a dugout (like I would know…anyway). Is this image, from the mid 1970s, of a field researcher wearing overly conservative clothes? Of a "little old lady" caught in a moment where

she was hot and sitting on a low piece of furniture? Someone caught off guard? Someone who didn't care?

Close looking also showed us a casual swipe of fingers through dust on the bottom of the table. The lack of care here adds another layer of questions. I assume something was there that got moved–but it's another reminder that these objects, even if they are valuable, are not always pristine.

To me, this image is one of the best examples of the concentric layers of artifice falling aside. Sure, we see the ingredients, but they are not functioning as we are used to seeing them. To me, it looks like an actor in a costume, backstage waiting for the next cue. Even if the person in the photo is an authentic "little old lady," even these people do not follow specific cultural behaviors all the time because it's intuitive, or easy. This image tells me about the performance of this culture, gender, and values. I see women who were working hard, whose clothes were costumes as well as clothes, and even though I can't "see" up her skirt, the implied lived experience of having a vulva in the summer is something that no amount of WASP culture can erase.

5. “Untitled (Maryland).”

Illustration 24. Gallery image.

In this image,[32] I found myself comparing a painted woman’s hand to a piece of furniture. These two images are details, only paired together by convenience, next to each other because of time, not meaning. I chose to keep most of the large-printed images in duos and trios, and kept the film sprockets on most of them, as a way to use the form as a question. A photograph is still a magical object to me, which effortlessly exists on multiple valences. Photographs are willing to be scientific miracles, of capturing the light of a moment that will never happen again, as well as carry an indisputable authority that they are somehow true, as well as function as time-travel

[32] Prince, “Untitled (Maryland) / Bird Hand Furniture Duo.”

portals, as well as being intensely beautiful two-dimensional fields of silver crystals on celluloid.[33] Spending time with thousands of images presented as casual contact sheets, sprockets overlapping, meant that my eyeballs saw these numbers, arrows, and sprockets as "framing" tools, as well as records of the time spent between one image and another; the space of the field researcher making her next choice of what to photograph, the conversations and "yes ma'ams" we can fill in.

Field researchers were trained to make close-up photographs of hands in painted portraits because, in the suspicious yet venerated tradition of connoisseurship, some experts claim to be able to identify unsigned portraits by the style that artists painted hands. It was a moment of synchronicity for me, as I had been already photographing my own hands as an homage to art history–now here was art history unfolding and photographing itself with its hands for me. Human hands also appear often in the field research photographs; but there was something exquisitely weird about these close-ups of portraits' hands in these photographs. I was quite grateful. Being able to add this giant hand to the exhibit, especially as it sat at the top of the wall, built out the recurring theme of these hands. Hanging this image up high on the wall also allowed me to suggest the perspective of the field researcher herself taking the photograph of the cupboard that sits next to the hand. Sitting about seven feet off of the ground, the audience looked up at the corner, as the field researcher did.

In one conversation with professor and artist Chris Cassidy, he suggested that I was using the "form as a question." Presenting this archival material on such a variety of scales allowed me to ask questions about looking: how was I seeing these images? About audience: what do you see, even if you don't know what this "is?" About the authors of the photographs: what did she

[33] Kenneally, *Side by Side*. Through this film, I learned more about 35mm film technology.

feel, experience, do when making these photographs? And about the shifting uses and experiences of a photograph–something that we rarely see as a large object like this anymore.

6. "Untitled (Maryland)" and "Untitled "South Carolina).

Illustration 25. Gallery shot of "Untitled (Maryland)" and "Untitled (South Carolina)."

On the wall across from the hand and the furniture corner, I hung two trios on top of each other, allowing the pipe in GPS to intervene on its own. These trios, which I did not see as related, came together for logistical reasons (they were both very long). But when they got together, I saw a new resonance. The top image, three shots of the same leg of a table, but on different exposures and angles, reminded me at first of a quarter note on sheet music. I saw these three images as notes in a measure, presenting a musical rhythm, or some sort of anthropomorphic stepping motion. This was an intuitive "thing."

Now, paired with the second trio, which shows the closeup of an 18th century gun, then a closeup of another gun, and then a third pulled-out shot of the rifle, which is held gently on a carpet by what appears to be an old white man. This series of images is echoed elsewhere in the field research photographs: if there is a photo of a gun, it is held by a man. The recurring fashion tends to be consistent as well–that sort of translucent white button down where you can see his undershirt, the creased slacks, those worn-in brown shoes.

For me, putting these trios in conversation reminded me that the gun and the furniture are both made of trees. It transformed the table leg into a bludgeon, a weapon like the gun; it also became a tree limb, hanging over the gun and the man below it. The gun became wood with a spiraled metal barrel through it. As art historian Nicole Scalissi noted, the word "SAFETY" on these images takes on a new resonance. To me, the word connects to the arguments many white Americans make: that guns keep them safe. I also hear the word "safety" as a word that is a threat. I think of the long tradition, clearly observed in the Era of Reconstruction, in which the very idea of Black people owning guns was enough of a "threat" to embolden white people to violence. [34]

This wall got heavy for me. It was also a moment where I thought "this looks great graphically. But what does it mean to other people?"

I talked to Kelley O'brien, my art professor, and her partner, Marcus Braithwaite, a Black multidisciplinary artist whose day job includes making custom wooden furniture in Winston-Salem, NC. I had talked to him several times about my research, like, in the corner at a party, and when he saw the work, he said he felt it was emotional, and charged, but he wanted to know more about my opinion. When he described this wall to me, he said he saw it as a collection of

[34] Schenk, "Freedmen with Firearms: White Terrorism and Black Disarmament During Reconstruction."

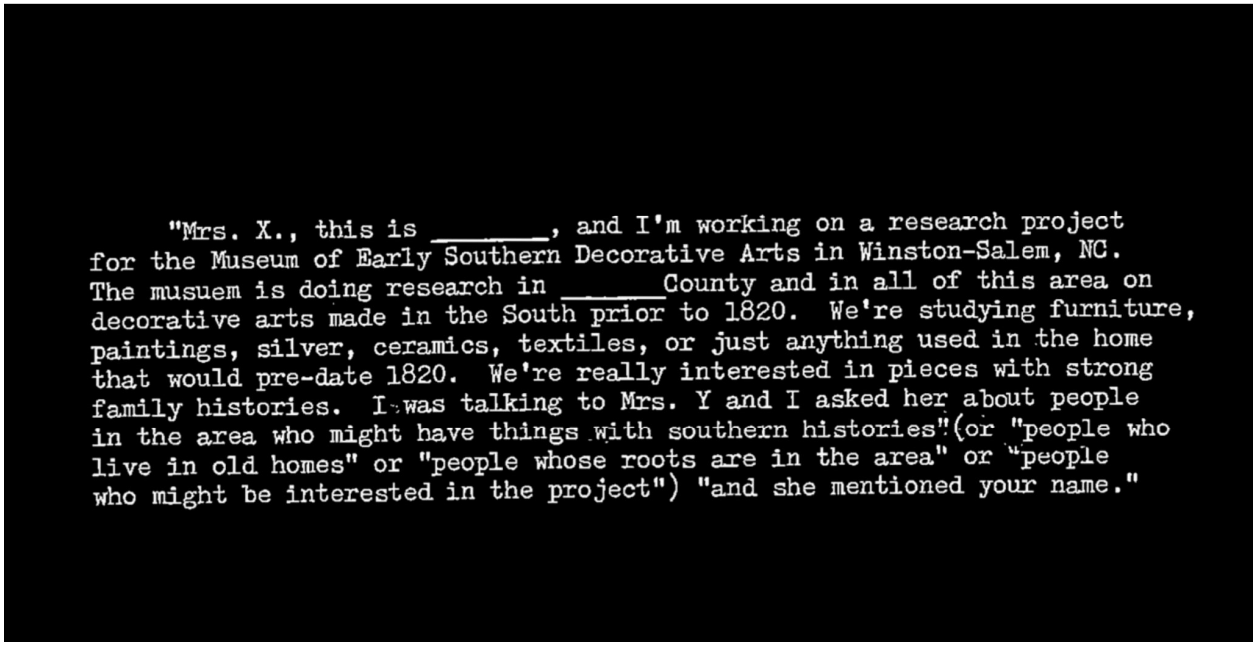
images about how the white South tells itself its own story, how it has created its own archive and its own history. “Yes!” I declared, my arms folded, standing outside of my opening. But then, I was left feeling disturbed. Absolutely, he had *seen* what I had *seen,* too; but he was uncertain about if I was seeing what he was saying; or if I was telling everyone what I had seen. “It’s a great start, but—” he was saying. I felt frustrated with myself. I don’t want to make art that doesn’t actually convey my opinion; I don’t want to hide my beliefs, either. I aim to make work that is ambiguous and subversive: it may appear to mean several things at once. I do not want to make work that is ambivalent: it does not have a clear question.

In response to this feeling, I wrote what is now put in this text as “First Cycle.” Which, while I hope it does clarify my opinion, I still see that passage and manner of writing as its own “piece.” I am constantly re-writing, re-digesting, re-seeing my work, which can get frustrating. I think, will I ever be “done?”

Now I will depart from what I think Marcus thought I thought. The important thing about this anecdote is that I am going to likely constantly be calculating how I create frames–both graphically and conceptually–around the stories that I am sharing. This is a space that is desperately urgent to me, and also one that I am wrestling with this very second. Are subversive tactics working for me right now because it’s the best option, or because they are the ones I have the most experience with?

7. Recordings of the Manual.

Illustration 26. Manual Excerpt.



I spent a lot of time with the Field Guide Manual. I made hours of recordings of different people reading it, which, though I presented this audio in the gallery space, seemed not to connect with audiences (it was a bouncy, noisy space, and I think plenty of people did listen to it, etc.) I regarded this Manual as a document of text, but I also saw it as an object. It was typed on a typewriter, with great typos and some correction fluid, and some of the pages hadn't been fed into the typewriter quite straight. So, I made an excerpted version of the manual, which lived in the gallery space clasped with a bulldog clip.

I recorded this text on a silly night with a group of emerging scholars who are all women at the Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum. I got incredible audio of my friends debating the bias of the manual; its efficacy in 2022; and then veering off into cultural discussions that I couldn't have orchestrated better, such as a discussion of American Girl Dolls. One of us knows

a woman who is now an historian for the American Girl Doll company. Some of us had the dolls as girls. Some of us are from Canada or China, so they did not have the dolls. Some of us could not afford them. Some of us had Molly, Samantha, Addy, *and* Josefina.

I sent the manual to a bunch of my friends and asked them to record it. Only one person responded, my friend Aimee Wise, who has the best manners of pretty much anyone I know. She cracks up a lot while reading it. This text confirms a lot about the world of Spartanburg, South Carolina where she lives. Her low-pitched voice and wide Southern accent make the script really sing. There's a combination of dryness and also frank understanding: this is just how to make it work, y'all.

Then I recorded it with Mathilda Perrill-Estoppey, art historian Dr. Elizabeth Perrill's daughter. This experience made me feel really uncomfortable, because I was asking this girl to read this odd, dated piece of text, with very little context. I heard myself correct her pronunciation of words, clarify confusing bits, and wait hoping for her to laugh at certain parts, and not doing so. Listening to the recording of myself, I sound like a teacher, and I feel disturbed. I think Mathilda is fine, but overhearing the text, Elizabeth's husband muttered, "It's like a guide for the KGB!"

8. “Contact Sheet”

Illustration 27. Gallery Shot of “Contact Sheet.”

In the “Contact Sheet” piece, I presented thirty-six framed images, including photographs that I made at Colonial Williamsburg, archival images, text from the field guide, and recordings of people reading the field guide. In this piece, I saw it as an homage and an exploration of the visual tool of the contact sheet. This is a standard way to look at a roll of 35mm film negatives; the yellow and red frames are spray painted to evoke the grease pencils used to choose the “hero shot” which would then be printed. I chose to do this partly because I spent so much time with contact sheets, and also because I noticed that this seems to be a convention in photography right now.[35] I love them because it, again, is this surprisingly time-based form. While it’s not a flipbook or a movie, it puts our brains into a montage-assessment-space.

[35] Marshall and Selvin, *Jim Marshall*.

Putting this more cacophonous energy onto the wall was a moment to connect the huge banner-like prints with the actually-changing "Slide Show" in the second room; it allowed me to put archival photos in direct conversation with my own 35mm film. It is an accelerated pace compared to the large photos, and a visual break from the huge, overwhelming images. It also balanced and echoed the small postcards that sat diagonally across from them. It was also a moment where I could stitch the images' incarnations to one another. Except for one, which I just liked a lot, the other colored frames signal that those images are indeed "hero shots:" they reappear either as postcards or large prints. Other images in the contact sheets also repeat in the "Slide Show" video. For me, this is not just repeating out of convenience; this is an inner layer of re-presenting the re-presented archival images. This is another moment I took to show how even within this exhibition, images can travel, transform, and re-appear in a variety of ways.

9. The Polar Bear in the Room.

Illustration 28. Gallery Shot of "Untitled (North Carolina)."

For example, there's a photograph[36] of a polar bear with a chair in front of it. This photo I framed in red, because I also printed it as a giant wall-piece, and made postcards from it. This really is a "hero shot," who has done an extraordinary amount of labor for me and this project. I find that this image makes people laugh no matter what, and then they laugh even more when they find out what the note on the photo is: it just says "ladder back chair."

[36] Tribble, "Untitled (North Carolina) / Ladderback Chair."

The polar bear is really doing its best, holding its mouth open in a roar, but still getting upstaged by the proud, but exceedingly tiny, wooden chair in the foreground.

I showed this image to the woman who made it in 1982, Mary Tribble, who immediately burst out laughing, and said she had no memory of making the photo.

This photograph, to me, tells the story very quickly of the absurdity of the whole thing, and of the "polar bear in the room" for me. These photos interest me because, of course, this project was *never* about the objects, but about this hulking creature in the background of humans telling themselves stories that continue cycles of violence.

10. Family Portraits

Illustration 29. "Untitled (South Carolina)."

In my quest throughout my life to understand how the South exists for real, I have gone through the usual steps that Northern intellectuals take: reading literature by Flannery O'Connor,[37] William Faulkner,[38] Tennessee Williams,[39] and John Jeremiah Sullivan;[40] and chatting with gay Southerners that moved to New York to make art and asking them questions about The Civil War; stuff like that.

Then, I did an artist residency in South Carolina in 2015. I saw Southern Gothic first hand. I really thought that those authors had invented the extravagant weirdness. Here I was witnessing sordid small-town melodrama, extreme racial divides, brutal moments of intense violence, profound wisdom of people I met by accident, a nearly feudal division between social classes, and the random occurrence of peacocks.[41]

[37] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*.

[38] Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*.

[39] Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

[40] Sullivan, *Pulphead*.

[41] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*. I'm thinking especially of the first essay, "The King of the Birds," and its whammy of a final image.

Illustration 30. Instagram Post by the Artist.

And as I lived among this world in 2015 rolled into 2016, I had a new understanding of the Southeast and the Northeast. There's an adage from somewhere that the South is just like the rest of America, only more so. I ascribe to this philosophy. Moving to South Carolina allowed me to actually get perspective on where I had come from: Philadelphia and New York, two cities that are only 100 miles apart, but spend a huge amount of time insisting they are one-of-a-kind (and they are their own special brand of crazy). But I had to sit with how small my world was when I lived in Brooklyn. If it was in the Bronx, I wasn't going! I didn't know how to drive. All my friends went to elite colleges, made theatre, were between 21 and 41, childless, and, at best, engaged.

Now I was living in South Carolina and going to my twelve-step programs, meeting a wide range of people. The number of people who were also artists was small enough that I made friends with people who weren't just theatre kids. There also weren't a lot of other people with lots of time on their hands, so I made friends with women turning fifty (we'd go to Zumba together). I made friends with people from different social classes than me; a lot more first-generation college students, for example. I met people whose Southern accents weren't trained out of them in voice and speech classes. One friend I made, Aimee Wise, is my age. She's an artist who trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, but now she's back in Spartanburg, working at the Johnson Collection, a Southern art collection.[42]

One day in the MESDA archives, I was delighted to find the binder of the field researcher's visit to Spartanburg in the early 1980's. I wondered if I would recognize any names or people. Lo and behold, I saw a name that rang a bell, and I asked Aimee about it. Turns out, the field researchers visited Aimee's grandparents, photographing several pieces of furniture, although I don't believe any of them made it into the MESDA Object Database. The field researchers' photos did, however, include a corner of a very distinctive, Rousseauian wall mural painted by Aimee's great-grandmother, which still remains in the house–along with the photographed furniture–today.[43]

[42] "The Johnson Collection - Southern Art in Spartanburg, South Carolina."
[43] Wise, "Aimee Wise Family Photo," 2021.

Illustration 31. "Untitled (South Carolina)"

Illustration 32. Family photo provided by Aimee Wise.

This sort of occurrence, while it may seem sort of obvious (I'm looking at photos of Southern families' homes full of old shit, and I know some old Southern families now) feels like some sort of inner magic world to me, something that comes from a deeper space.

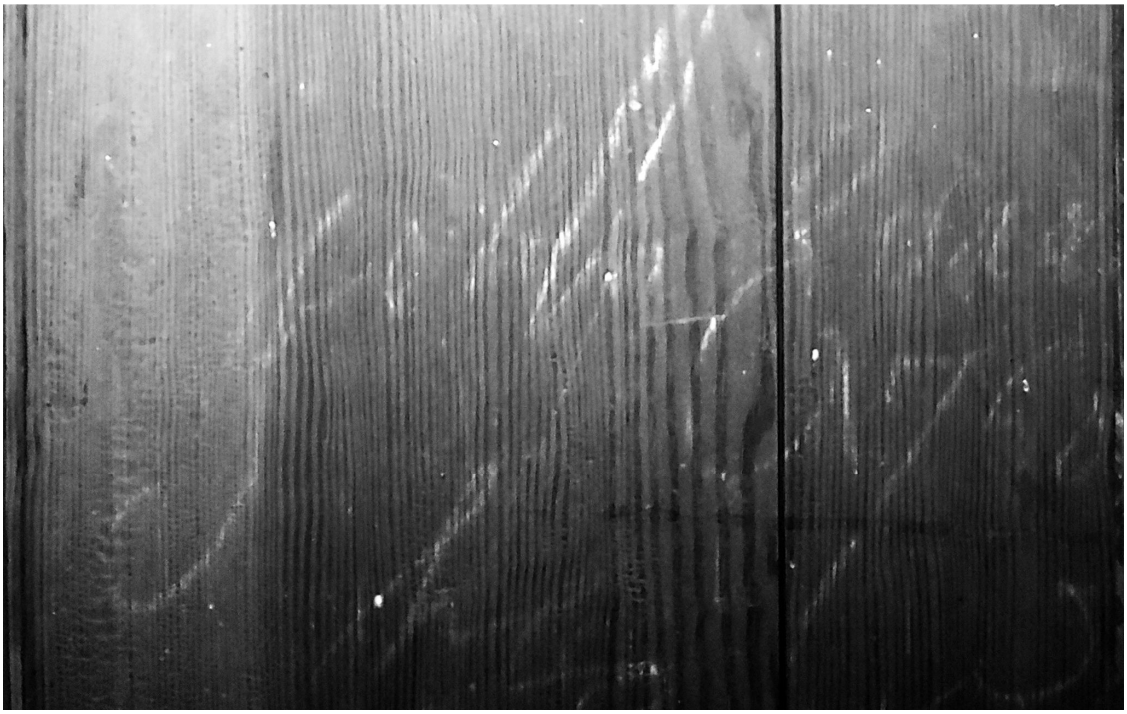
In this[44] photo, which was on the same roll at Aimee's grandparent's house, may or may not be Aimee's family, and family photos. But I chose it not just because I might know some of the people in the photo. I also chose it because it's another one of these recursive portraits: it's a photograph that contains other photographs that are portraits of people, but to me, the real portrait is that someone arranged these photographs of family on top of an 18th century, Southern-made piece of furniture, with a couch shoved up next to it, the furniture seeming

[44] Roe, "Untitled (South Carolina) / Family Portraits."

pleased to be of use, the family still finding purpose, meaning, and continuity through inherited objects.

11. The House at Cherry Grove.

Illustration 33. Chalk Writing from Cherry Grove rooms at MESDA.



It's a bit like this: when I was doing research over the summer at the MESDA summer institute, I focused on a period room from the Eastern Shore of Virginia.[45] I was exploring as many aspects of the room as I could, and sort of…thinking it through as an object, looking at this assemblage of architectural salvage and 1970s carpentry as a kind of post-modern, anachronic time collaboration. On the back of some of the original paneling, there's some chalk scrawling with a few names on it as well as numbers and other notes. It's cool that this chalk has survived

[45] Various, "Cherry Grove: Binder of Various Documents."

since literally the 1760s; it mentions "Burton," the name of the guy who paid for the house. It also says "John Evans," which most people suspect was probably the man who built the house.

There were a handful of Evanses on the Eastern Shore back then, so the scholarship has a few threads.[46] I sent a photo of it to my dad, because he likes puzzling stuff out, and he lives on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. "Well, you remember of course," he said, "That you are an Evans." I had one of those "Whut." moments on the phone. Of course! My dad's great-uncle Clark, a bachelor tobacco farmer in Leonardtown, MD, was Clark Evans. It was not-unlikely that this John Evans who built this house and wrote his name in chalk on this wall in 1760 has some genetic connection to me, looking at the planks in Winston-Salem North Carolina in 2021. It felt unlikely, and also desperately obvious. Why not, really?

[46] "Evans, John."

12. Epigenetics.

Illustration 34. "Untitled (South Carolina)"

A lot of my process in my time at my Master of Fine Arts program has been about attuning to my intuition, and following impulses and nudges from sources I don't always intellectually "get." Before I came to UNCG, I was already making performances and works that

started off on a huge exciting burst of historical research, and eventually would distill down to a deeply personal exploration of how I experience relationships; the vagaries of communicating with someone else; if it's possible to enact change as an individual; and the ways our performances are also our truths.

Over and over again, I came up against a loud question: why are white people like this? How did we get here, in such an obviously horrible situation, where everyone is suffering? I'm from a WASP family of British (and also German) immigrants. We've been pretty middle-class successful for a few generations now. My great-uncle was the mayor of Huntingburg, Indiana. My grandfather was a rear-admiral in the Navy. My second-cousin was H. L. Mencken, an immensely influential in-his-day newspaper reporter and essayist (he covered the Scopes trial, for example) but he's now out of favor for his cynical racism and pro-German stance between the World Wars (yes, fine, one day I'm going to make a performance about Mencken, but not this time).[47]

Anyway, when I contemplate my family, I see these recurring themes of enthusiasm for intellectual engagement, an experience of linear wealth-building, anxiety disorders, smoking a lot of tobacco, a belief in good manners, but a snarky attitude. In the new research coming out about epigenetics, I wonder how I would fit in with these old timers. I feel like, sure, I've thought about how I witness and how I may impact the things around me. But what giant hands are impacting me that I cannot see: stuff that I've inherited from my DNA, and stuff that I've got culturally.[48]

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[47] Vaughan, "The H. L. Mencken Show."

[48] Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*.

Illustration 35. Photo of Land Parcel.

When I'm gesturing at the land in Southern Maryland–the plot I mentioned earlier that my dad inherited but he can't sell because of the death certificate–I'm gesturing at all this. It's hard to see, it's unremarkable, it's unattended to, but it's *there.* I mean, I guess I could go pitch a tent there and sleep in the weeds, surrounded by neighbors who have no clue who I am.

So, when I look at that John Evans signature, I feel that there's some spiritual movement, connection, getting made. But I don't know who the hell these people are, and I'm not sure why I want to find out.

13. "Salacia."

In a synchronous[49] turn of events, I discovered the existence of a film called "Salacia," made by Tourmaline.[50] "Salacia" is a film that explores Saidiya Hartman's term, "critical fabulation," which is a technique she uses to speak for the voices of humans who were prevented from speaking for themselves in the historical record because of oppression and violence.[51][52] Tourmaline's film explores the life of Mary Jones, a Black trans woman in 19th century Manhattan. "Salacia" is about six minutes long, and tells a looping story with a bifurcated ending/beginning. Through largely visual storytelling, we witness Mary Jones' life in Seneca Village–a Black neighborhood razed to build Central Park–where she has friends, a loving partner, and a peaceful home. She is arrested, perhaps for a reason related to sex work or police harassment, and imprisoned. While there, a glowing pool of water spills out a recording of Sylvia Rivera, a pioneering trans woman activist from New York, who encourages Jones to fight on.

She escapes prison (maybe?) and returns to her home. I watched this film on a loop for about an hour, slowly piecing together the dreamlike story which wavered between what felt like inner thoughts and "true" events, and paired a re-enacted moment of the past with archival recording of the "actual" past. I was touched by "Salacia" because of its generosity. It was a story that emphasized beauty, interpersonal care, gentleness, and determination in the face of violence.

I'm taking a class this semester with Daniel Coleman called "Feminist Research Analysis." We are reading many a theoretical text that writes from Black radical feminist and

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[49] Tourmaline, "Tourmaline. Salacia. 2019 | MoMA." See Appendix A for more about the film's executive producer, Keanu Reeves.

[50] Tourmaline.

[51] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

[52] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."

trans epistemologies. Over and over, even when the text has spent dozens of pages listing horrifying violent legislation, cultural tragedy, erasure, and trauma, the conclusion of the texts is rarely defeated, miserable nihilism. It's usually committed, curious, loving, hopeful.[5354] It's often an invitation to get up and try again. Not from a sentimental space, but from a, well, what else is left to try? Sort of space.

I've been contemplating critical fabulation for a while, because I connect with this effort as an audience member, but not currently as an artist. I am still grappling with where I believe I see my own "lane." I am hesitant right now to critically fabulate other people, although I also see no purpose in navel-gazing. So, at the moment, my strategy is joining[55] the subversive task of observing white culture–especially WASP culture–in the same manner that WASPs have "studied" cultures it labeled Other.

[53] Gómez-Barris, Macarena, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*.
[54] Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*.
[55] Fraser, Alberro, and Alberro, *Museum Highlights*.

Illustration 36. "Somebody Come Look At This"[56]

Part of this has been an ever-growing collection of memes and internet videos parodying or naming white culture, especially white women. I am especially concerned with the space that white women hold as people oppressed by patriarchy, and also as perpetrators of unrelenting racial and gendered violence. I am thinking, for example, of Carolyn Bryant Donham, a woman

[56] Lewis, "Somebody Come Look At This."

who testified in court in the 1950's that Emmett Till sexually harassed her. She recently said that she fabricated this story. She has had no legal repercussions yet.[57] There are also the innumerable "Karens" that have been recently named in pop-culture. And I now also think of the Quaker women I was raised and educated to revere as suffragists and abolitionists. How many of them were rooted in community and equality, and how many of them thought they were doing charity work, which to them was "helping" the Other?[58]

One reason I wanted to move to Greensboro was to study the history of white people trying to make social change here. There's Albion Tourgée, an Ohio-born judge who moved here during the Era of Reconstruction. He worked tirelessly for racial equality in the legal system, he argued Plessy v. Ferguson; he wrote a best-selling novel called "A Fool's Errand" based on his experiences in Greensboro. But he was driven out of the South after years of death-threats from the Klan, Northern white people abandoned the agenda of Reconstruction, he lost the argument in Plessy v. Ferguson, and the plot of "A Fool's Errand" was ripped off in "The Leopard's Spots," a novel by Thomas Dixon, a pro-South author. Tourgée died in 1905; that year, Dixon published the next book in his trilogy, "The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan," whose plot would serve as the basis of D. W. Griffith's "Birth of A Nation."[59]

I was also interested in the Greensboro Massacre. In 1979, a multi-racial coalition of Communist textile workers and union organizers held an event called "Death to the Klan!" As families walked in the parade route, filmed by multiple news organizations, the Ku Klux Klan arrived in cars, shot into the crowd, murdering five people, and drove away. The police were not present, even though they were aware of the parade route and had agents in the KKK. After a

[57] Carroll, "Woman at Center of Emmett Till Case Tells Author She Fabricated Testimony."
[58] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.
[59] Elliott, *Color-Blind Justice*.

series of trials, the Klan was acquitted of a hate crime charges because they argued that they were anti-communist, not racist. After all, they had murdered people who were white as well as Black.[60] The City of Greensboro only officially apologized for the Greensboro Police Department's role in the Massacre in 2020.[61] Currently, the Beloved Community Center, helmed by Reverend Nelson Johnson, an activist and organizer who was wounded in the massacre, is organizing another form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—a project that first occurred in 2005, but was not supported by the city.[62]

As extremely depressing as these two stories are, maybe I also am looking for the desperate and vital hope here. Examples of white people who were willing to be rejected by white culture. To be honest, I'm not sure if they were welcomed into other communities–either of Black people, or communists, or something–and I think that's my next step. If I'm looking for ways to subvert or reject dominant WASP culture, how can I see that not as getting rid of the only reality I know–but as welcoming in a world that's more resilient, and more true, than the one I had before.

[60] The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission."

[61] Ebrahimji, "Decades after Klansmen Killed 5 during Protest, a North Carolina City's Apology Comes Too Late for Some."

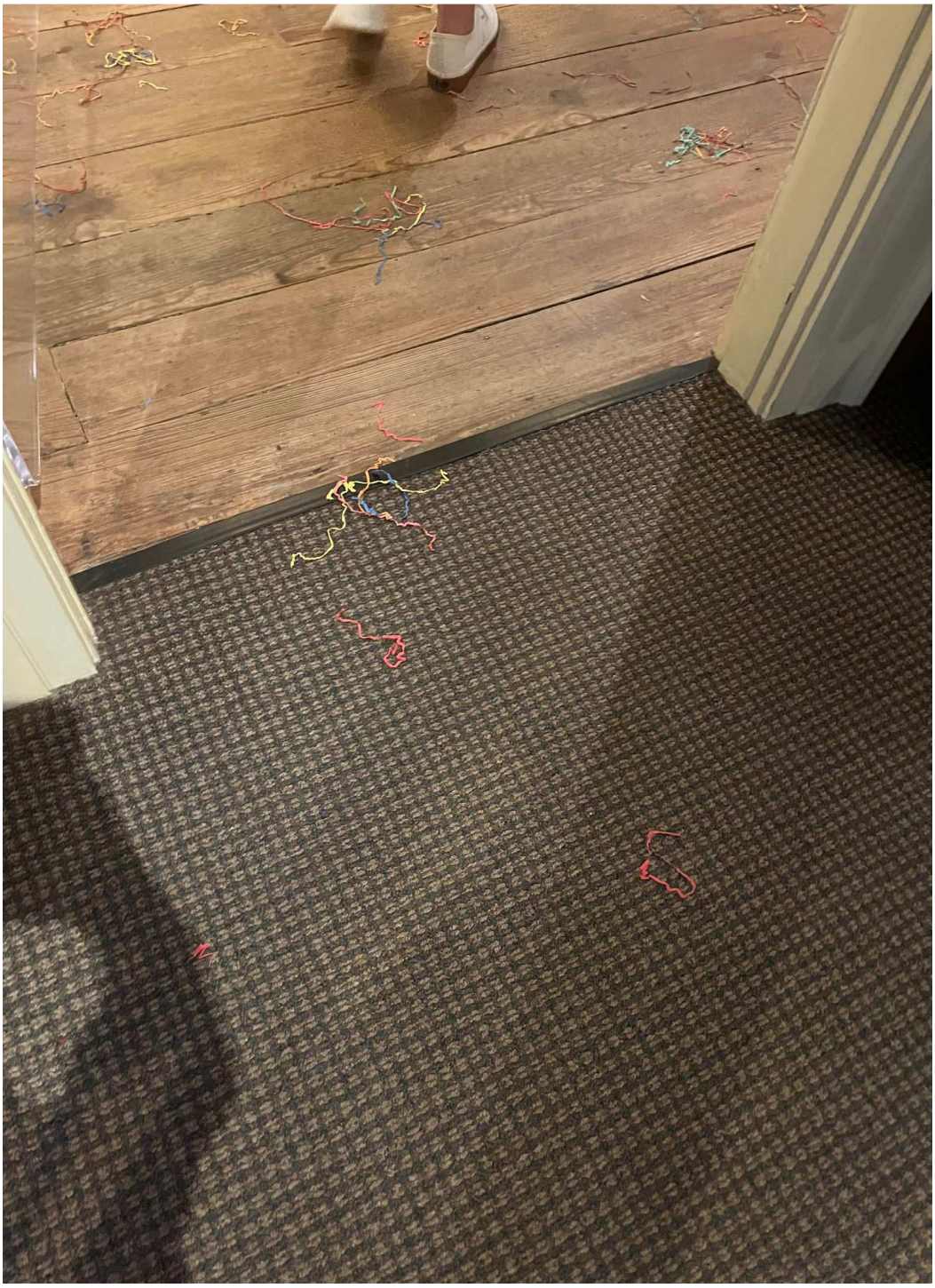
[62] admin, "Truth & Reconciliation."

14. Slight Return.

Illustration 37. Self-Portrait at 74th Annual Colonial Williamsburg Antiques Forum.

Sitting in the Dismantle Preservation workshop again, I realized I was feeling like I was way more "out" as myself than I have been since I was a little kid. I am wearing a completely preposterous outfit, which, if you know me, means it has a lot of different prints, colors, and textures. I was sitting on the floor in a history museum, talking in a circle with a bunch of people. I'm talking about how much I love that Michael Bramwell, the curator, covered the room with multi-colored scraps of confetti. It makes the whole room transform. Suddenly, this festive material is intervening on these very stately objects; suddenly there are clumps of multicolored paper all over the floor which can be secretly–subversively–tracked into all sorts of rooms. The curator says, "Oh, you're an artist, aren't you?" Yes, I say, and I'm excited.

Illustration 38. Confetti Leaving the Floor of "House Party R.S.V.P. B.Y.O.B." at MESDA.



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APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

1. “Salacia” and Keanu Reeves: Appreciation of Keanu Reeves breeds abundance! I have of late been obsessed with Keanu Reeves, at first as a coping mechanism to deal with my painful breakup. Since January, I have discovered that my path of Keanu Studies is an incredibly rich field of study–connecting to cinema, theatre, acting vs. performance, Shakespeare, media, religion, gender performance, transcendence, 1990’s American cyber-punk anxiety about East Asia, and non-toxic masculinity. This has also brought me to the mode of sharing my thoughts, experiences, and film-watching journey. I share these journeys on my Instagram story, which creates an online environment of time-based storytelling, and organically combines images still and moving, film clips, my own images and text, and also creates a space for a responsive audience. For example, in one set of musings, I asked if Keanu Reeves was really the saintly good-guy that he appears to be in media. I alleged that he might be a total sleaze with a good PR team. The response from my fellow artists was to direct me to art projects that Reeves has funded or participated in that align with many of my own artistic passions. Notably, he was the executive producer of Tourmaline’s film, “Salacia.” My subsequent research into this film provided an opportunity for a supervised research trip with Maggie Murphy through UNCG to visit MoMA. I have also booked by first Keanu Reeves related speaking engagement at the Unitarian Church in Spartanburg, SC. My presentation will likely discuss how I see Reeves as a sort of human palimpsest, or contemporary folktale. His persona as a celebrity, as well as his film and TV roles, all seem to influence one another in a nondual fashion.

2. Museums and WASP Women, and my Role: Two museum professionals who have written specifically about white women docents and professionals in the field are Kelli Morgan and

Pablo Helguera. Their thinking and writing has helped clarify some of my own observations, and going forward, I am going to make an argument for a new category of museum person: the WASPWASP: the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Woman Art Semi-Professional. This demographic of person is an essential piece of how many museums function, and I want to discuss it further in my research about the role of the "hostess" in museums.

I hope to contribute to radical change in cultural institutions. I have been particularly interested in history museums and art museums and looking at how they interact with the racial economic structures of their place. The Southeast is rapidly gentrifying, and I see arts organizations re-assessing their role. These organizations seem unclear about whether they should be presenting work about the "difficult" history (to be found anywhere in the USA) or instead emphasizing "welcoming" work to residents. My experience as an artist has shown me that audiences are usually ready for this "difficult" history, as long as it is presented without condescension or moralizing. However, arts administrators don't often see the work they choose to fund. Museums are also notoriously hierarchical spaces that may present daring art work about systemic change, but stubbornly cling to underpaying staff, hiring and promoting white people into decision making jobs, and relying on staff—who are often people of color—to keep the actual space functioning. The problems in museums feel very personal for me, because I am both an artist and a child of artists, so I grew up loving museums. I want them to be healthier, although sometimes I wonder if they should exist at all.

I want to work closely with cultural institutions, since they are often key to creating my art. I am inspired by contemporary artists who create institutional critique, such as Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser. This includes my methods of collaborating artistically with an institution, democratizing the value of objects, and collapsing a traditional timeline into a parfait of time. I

aim to create opportunities for cultural institutions to demonstrate the ways they work in the public trust. Is it possible to facilitate symbiosis between museums and people, creating collaborative community meaning? Or are museums destined to remain, as La Tanya Autry called them, “treasure chests of white supremacy?”

At the Dismantle Preservation workshop, someone asked the facilitators, “So, do you think all the anti-CRT nonsense is headed towards museums like yours next?”

“Of course,” said Frank Vagnone. “We’re in the bullseye.”