vanessa german

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the slowdown

vanessa german on Art as a Way of Life and Love as a "Human Technology"

The Asheville-based artist shares her long, bold path to creating her latest public work, a temporary memorial on the National Mall.

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vanessa german. (Photo: AJ Mitchell Photography. Courtesy Kasmin, New York)

When the artist, performer, and poet vanessa german was selected to design a temporary memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., as part of the "Beyond Granite: Pulling Together" exhibition (on view from Aug. 18 through Sept. 18), she quickly found herself turning to a catalytic moment in American culture: the contralto opera singer Marian Anderson's 1939 Easter Sunday concert at the Lincoln Memorial. Attended by 75,000 people in the then segregated U.S. capitol, with millions more listening on the radio, the event put Anderson—who was Black and had been refused an indoor concert by white organizers—in the nation's spotlight. It was, and remains, a beacon moment in U.S. civil rights history.

german's statue, titled "Of Thee We Sing" and presented at Lincoln Memorial Plaza, is an abstract figurative form depicting Anderson held up by the hands of the 1939 event's attendees (collected by german from historical images). On August 19, german will also present "The Blue Walk," a live performance involving song and movement, with german walking along the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool in a custom gown. As with much of her work, "Of Thee We Sing" functions as both a memorial and an altar. "I wanted to make a monument to the human heart," she says. The artwork is also an unabashed tribute to love: "I'm really always thinking about love as a human technology."

I recently spoke with german, via Zoom from her home in Asheville, North Carolina, in a conversation during which she shared how she's been thinking about memorialization practically her entire life (she grew up in Los Angeles within the dual contexts of gang violence and the 1980s HIV/AIDS epidemic); why she recently relocated from Pittsburgh, her longtime home and base, to Asheville; and some of the enduring lessons her mother taught her about art and creativity. It is, without question, among the most kaleidoscopic, heart-filled interviews I've ever had. Here, a condensed and edited version of our conversation.

Rendering of "Of Thee We Sing" (2023) by vanessa german. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

What is a memorial to you? Let's start there.

Just even hearing the word *memorial* makes me think about the living in reflection of the dead. It's a way for the living to hold space in many different shapes for the dead.

With that definition in mind, what was your approach to conceiving and creating "Of Thee We Sing?"

I was given the prompt "What's missing?" What's missing from the National Mall? What stories, what people, what representation is missing?

For me, the Mall is not always a place I've felt welcome. There are ways that the Mall feels really cold. The memorials for wars.... There's such a contrast for me between recognizing and having these exquisitely sculpted monumental structures to the accumulation of death. I'm always wondering, how do you honor people? What's the opposite of a war memorial? How do we make space for peace? How are we cultivating a way to be able to be in community with each other and through conflict that is not accumulating death?

The idea that humans can go through conflict and not accumulate death is not new. But where is that in relation to monumental structures, to what they call "the sacrifice" of these, a lot of times, young male humans? I always think the best way to honor is to not put them in that situation again. Where is the effort? Where is the energy? Where is the monumental momentum toward not putting large populations of young humans in positions to be murdered or to become murderers? That's something about the National Mall that makes me feel very sad.

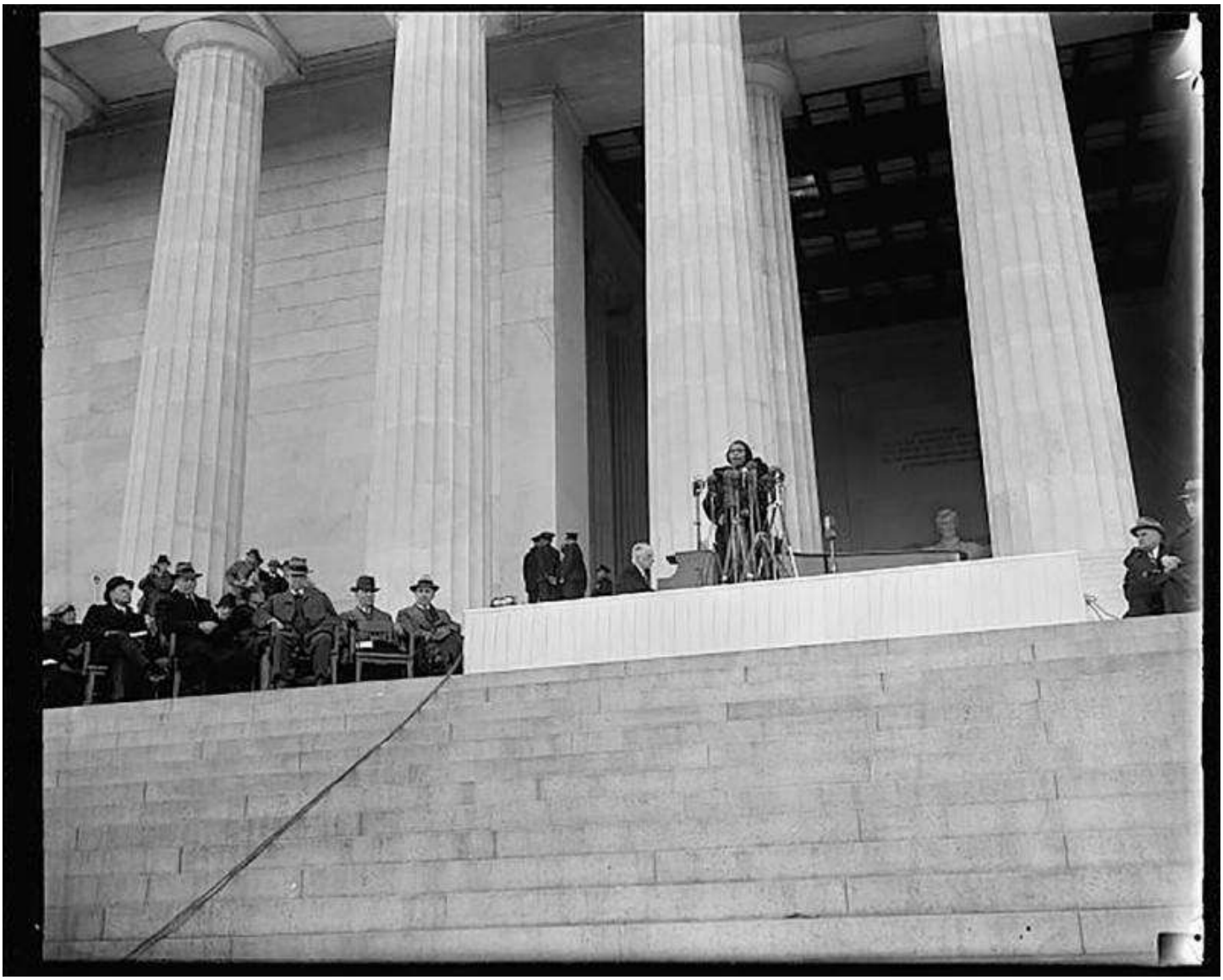
Every place I go, one of the weights I have is just the constant PTSD of being a Black person in America. When I'm in D.C., I'm like, "What did Black people build that we did not get credit for, that we built under duress and under the threat of brutality to our bodies?" I want to go and honor that, because there's no plaque that says enslaved people built half of the Washington Monument *and* the White House *and* that little cabin that's on that corner. There's nothing that says you're looking up to something that was built by human beings who did not have liberty, which is the soul's right to breathe.

The National Mall for me is very complicated and heavy. [With "Of Thee We Sing,"] I was not thinking about making a memorial. I was thinking about what's missing and why it's missing. That prompt came alive for me given that there was also the resource of Marian Anderson's 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

german (front) with other performers during a presentation of “The Blue Walk.” (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

Yes, “Of Thee We Sing” pays tribute to Marian Anderson. I was fascinated to learn that your mother grew up listening to Black opera, so this was a subject that—

Yeah! I was aware [of Black opera] as a little girl. I knew who Leontyne Price was. I knew who Jessye Norman was. I knew who Marian Anderson was. I was not shocked that there were Black opera singers. I *knew* that they were extremely special. My mom was a fan. My mom would cry at opera, and I didn’t understand why. I didn’t understand crying-because-art-moved-you when I was 6. It would embarrass me. It would scare me that she would be so moved by somebody’s voice.



Marian Anderson singing at her 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial. (Courtesy the Library of Congress)

Were you seeking to capture some operatic sense of that in this work?

I had done some research about the 1939 concert—which wasn't the focus of the Marian Anderson I knew. Marian Anderson was already an older woman when I was a child. I was interested in entering into that "What's missing?" prompt by something that had been so present at the Mall. Seventy-five thousand people looking at one Black female body, looking at one hundred twenty-five pounds of woman. Seventy-five thousand people just focusing on *one* Black woman in 1939, when it still wasn't a crime to rape a Black woman. No white man went to jail for raping a Black woman until the late sixties. This was somebody whose body could be brutalized and no justice done. This is a woman with an incredible voice whose body was turned away from Constitution Hall—three thousand people can fit in there, maybe.

What really stood out to me was that, at the National Mall, there are no monuments to love. A memorial for dead soldiers is not actually a monument to love. For me, I'm really always thinking about love as a human technology. One of the reasons why the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so difficult for my father, who was a vet, to be around is only because he *loved* the

soldiers that he was with. He was so *young*. My dad was 19, and had already lost so many of these guys they knew. They clung together so tight. What makes it so alive for him is that he loved them. I wanted to make a monument to the human heart.

I saw this one picture of the Easter Sunday crowd [at Anderson's 1939 concert]. It was an old white man who looked like he was from the "American Gothic" painting. He looked like a farmer from a dusty place in Idaho. And his body is crammed next to this little Black boy with a flat cap on in his Easter Sunday best. And he's crammed next to this Black woman. It's very tight. I was like, "Y'all don't seem to care as long as you can hear the Black woman sing." I imagine that's the vision that King had when he said he saw the "beloved community." *This* is the beloved community.

In 1939, even with segregation, they just wanted to be there. That told me a story about the human heart, about all this bullshit that falls away when you're standing before something miraculous, or you're in a place of wonder and your singular focus is to bear witness. I was like, "I don't have to construct some highly fabricated monument to the human heart that's conceptual. It's enough for us to be confronted with the images of the crowd of the Easter Sunday concert." Because there was a whole bunch of stuff that was not important to that crowd, and one thing that was very important. The things that fell away were the chaff. It was not important that you're next to a little Black boy. It was not important that all these white women are next to the Sunday grandma, Black Baptist church women. It didn't matter.

For me, especially at a time when.... I have never felt threatened in America because I'm a Black person or because I'm a queer person—until last year. I've had issues with the police, treating me certain ways, doing shit to me. But just white men at the grocery store—I had never felt like a target until last year. So 1939 to 2022, to be an artist—as Marian Anderson is an artist—in a Black body.... There's a wound. There's this national wound that you think it has closed up, but it's so infected under the surface that, as soon as something nicks it, the toxic sickness of the infection comes out.

It's 2023, but I can look at this image of the chaff having fallen away from the eyes and the hearts of people in the crowd of this concert. So that became my monument to the human heart, just the vision of the crowd. But also, it's an abstract figuration of her, the body of a Black woman, in Washington, D.C., where so many presidents of the United States either suckled from a Black woman's breast—they were wet-nursed by a Black woman; they were nannied by a Black woman—or they raped Black women, as T.J. did. Black women were some of the real foundations to the people we call the "founding fathers."

I wanted to physically represent that Black woman who was the sole focus of seventy-five thousand people. And it's not lost on me that the white women, who said her operatic voice with the Black body could not perform at Constitution Hall, that they ended up being there in that group of seventy-five thousand people, watching her sing. That, to me, is its own story about what fell away from their eyes.

View of the audience at Marian Anderson's 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial. (Courtesy the National Archives Catalog)

I don't know if you'd be open to speaking about this, but why did things change for you last year?

I'm not working in Pittsburgh anymore. I'm now working in North Carolina. I needed to find a place where I could work again. I had been stalked. My address in Pittsburgh is so public—people would be outside of my house. I felt so unsafe that it was actually paralyzing.

I think the only way I can survive in my life is to make art, and I don't want that to sound corny or romantic, because I always get this sort of reflection from "professional" adults when I say that if I didn't make art, I couldn't live—that that's somehow a flimsiness or a weakness of my character. But it is actually a real, fine-tuned understanding that I have about why I'm alive as a human being. This reflection is connected to the way that white supremacy separated people from their humanity, separated your humanity from your purposeful contribution to community and turned it into a form of labor. We live in a country that actively knows minimum wage is not living wage. What does that mean when your country, "liberty and justice for all," *knows* you can't make it with what forty-five percent of these companies are paying service workers? We are not our labor. My existence *is* about creativity. It *is* about transformation. So I do not want to diminish that.

But I was not able to work there. So I came to North Carolina, to Asheville, where I knew it was a community that voted to give their Black and Indigenous citizens reparations. I knew it was a really gay place. Even though I lived in the hood in Pittsburgh, the amount of homophobia I experienced from Black people, it was so stupefying and so stupid at the same time. The older Black people who'd be like, "Bulldagger!" "She's a carpet muncher!" I would be like, "Is it 1929? Where did you learn homophobia from? Nobody uses the word *bulldagger*. Only you know what that means, because you were born in 1929, and you need to stop." So I also moved to not experience homophobia, just to have some softness.

But it's still North Carolina. So the real estate agent, when I was looking at places, she said, "Could you drive past this property during daylight and let me know just how you feel?" I was like, "That's weird. Why are you saying that?" There was a guy named Madison Cawthorn, a rep from North Carolina. He was really, really extreme [against gay rights]. She goes, "I don't feel safe over there as a white queer woman. Before we go into the house, just drive through the community." I was like, "If *you* don't feel safe, I'm not even going to do that."

What happened was, I'm a Black body, and I've been threatened by white men here. The white men with pickup trucks and the American flags off the back. I could pull up text messages that I got from the carpenter who worked on something for my kitchen, who sent me a text message to tell me why Black people should be thankful to white people for slavery and why Black people owe white people reparations. I was like, "I'm not going to deal with this. I don't want to work with you anymore." Then he started to send me threatening messages.

I bought three and a half acres of land five miles outside of Asheville, but it's the place where the North Carolina K.K.K. people had that rally. One person was like, "Yo, be careful. That's the K.K.K. place." I didn't think anything of it. I was like, "I'm done being afraid of white people. I'm done being afraid of white men"—I don't want to do that anymore. Until the people who live across the road barbed-wired this section of my property off so that I could not cross over. This section is the size of a sidewalk—four feet—and they barbed-wired it to prevent me from crossing over to the road. That was such an aggressive act. But they're QAnon people. They're January 6 people.

I've had five different experiences with white men here that I'm like, "Oh, it's different [in North Carolina]." I left Pittsburgh to have an experience of safety, but I still have to be vigilant. It's just sad. I worry when I go to the grocery store that that carpenter will be there. These angry white men, they're angry at the government, and they have this version of me in their imaginations.

And then also being gay.... I've never had a problem being a lesbian until this year—people just saying things that are so ignorant and so hateful and so violent. I can't even. They're full-grown adults. I do not engage my energy in educating them. I just have to be like, Wow, this is so strange that you were fine with me in my art the last fifteen years, but *now*, all of a sudden.... I can say something about loving women, and I'll get messages about how I'm forcing people to accept my sexuality and that I keep putting it in their faces. This is so weird. But that started to happen this year.

Honestly, I'm hoping that the Marian Anderson figure is safe in D.C. because I saw what happened to Tschabalala Self's work overseas, how they painted that Black figure white with spray paint. I'm just holding the space for the fact that it's the National Mall. Nobody's watching that sculpture at night. I just hope that it's okay. I hope people respect it.

I appreciate you answering my question in that way. You just listed multiple harrowing, heartbreaking instances in which it's been so incredibly hard for you to be a queer Black woman in America. Do you think, in some ways, your art-making is your savior from all of that?

Well, I remember coming across the Toni Morrison quote where she said to Black artists, “Be wary of spending your creative energy in your life trying to tackle racism and white supremacy.” She said “It’s a very violent distraction. Do not allow yourself to be distracted." So when I heard that, and I thought about how consuming things were in my mind, I was like, “She’s right. I’m not doing this.” People are always like, “Oh, vanessa german, she’s an artist and an *activist*.” I was like, “Yo, white mainstream politics is going to see anything that a Black person does to take up space as an act of ‘activism.’”

Yeah, that’s so true.

Then they’re going to say that you’re “brave.” You only experience that because you hold a space of limitation. The white imagination has so much limitation around Black life and Black bodies and Black creativity and Black joy. People find out that I have artwork in museums, and they go, “*Wow!”* I’m like, “That’s you. That’s your imagination of who I am, and what the possibilities are and how expansive my life may or not be. That should not blow your mind. It should also not blow your mind that I own property, that I have land and a house.” But you know what also blows people’s mind about me? That I do not have children. It’s just unfathomable that I’m a Black woman with breasts and I’ve never breastfed another human being.

The reality of “what is the savior of my life?” is that I found out why I am alive. It took me almost dying to find out why I instinctively move the way that I move. I can chase back to my youth the things that fascinated me, that kept me up at night, and they are absolutely critical engines to my practice to this day. I’m like, *Oh*, I get it. I have *always* been this person. I have *always* been an artist. And that’s where I came to the understanding that being an artist is a complete human identity. It is not merely a vocation. It actually isn’t even a practice. It is a way of being alive as a human being. So yes, my survival is here, my existence is here, but also my *insistence* is here. My *resistance* is here. My medicine is here. That is a wholeness.

View of “Reckoning: Grief and Light” (2022) by vanessa german as seen at the Frick in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

When I was preparing for this interview, I was thinking about how the first work I ever saw of yours in person was “Reckoning: Grief and Light” at the Frick in Pittsburgh, a piece that acts at once as a memorial, an altarpiece, and an elegy to all this police violence—George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Elijah McClain. Other works of yours come to mind here, too: “sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies,” from 2017, and “A Love Poem to Nia Wilson,” from 2018. You’ve been thinking about memorialization for some time.

Well, it’s been a part of my whole life. I grew up in the eighties in Los Angeles when this unknown illness became HIV/AIDS. I watched my neighbors disappear. AIDS was such an enormous part of my childhood because people were disappearing and we were not discussing their deaths. People wouldn’t say that a person died of AIDS; they would say they died from “The Big C.” It didn’t sit right with me as a child that I was not experiencing, in my world, a reckoning with these deaths. They were public deaths, and there was no place or time to honor some of our neighbors. So, when I was a kid, I started doing my own memorials for people who died.

View of “sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies” (2017) by vanessa german. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

Wow.

There were these two girls whose mom had sent them—in L.A., liquor stores are a big thing. You call them “liquor stores.” They have alcohol, but they also have Now and Later candy and so on. So she sent her daughters to the liquor store to get milk. I’ll never forget it. They got killed in a drive-by shooting. Two little girls, two small bodies, laying in front of the liquor store, and the milk running with the blood. As a kid, it scared me so much that they didn’t know they were going to die. I couldn’t process the complete sudden coldness of death as a kid. So I started doing these little rituals.

I made sure that I listened to the news and that I knew their names. Then I found the article in the *Los Angeles Times* the next day, and I took the article, and I cut it out and I folded it up in an old tin can. I dug a hole in the backyard. I don’t know where I came up with this. I took a piece of my little-kid jewelry, and I put it in there. I had to have a way to honor their life.

I did the same thing for Ryan White, a kid who had hemophilia, who died of AIDS. As a kid, I understood that it was very special to be alive. I understood as a kid how momentous it was to have all this energy in human form. I also had this big feeling that I would honor my own life by honoring the deaths of people in my community. I started having secret memorials.

View of “A Love Poem to Nia Wilson” (2018) by vanessa german. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

Death, you see it in my work. That Nia Wilson piece, what’s a trip about that is I was in California when she got killed, a horrific public death on the [Bay Area Rapid Transit] train. But she was with her sister. There was a newsreel I was watching hours after she got killed, and it was still an active crime scene. In the newsreel, you can hear, over the sound of the reporter, her sister screaming, and all she keeps screaming is: “My sister! My sister! My sister!” The reporter is distracted by the sound of this girl’s grief. It just slammed into me, the devastation of the sudden horror and the violence of the death of this person.

One of the things I recognize is we only grieve because we have loved, but we are not honoring the technology of our love in ways that are commensurate with how we will grieve. I want to bring those things closer together. You saw the “Reckoning” piece. “Grief and Light” is part of the title, which is why there’s a bench. You can sit down in that installation and you hear the opera—it’s called “Requiem for Rice.” And do you know the story about rice in America, in the South?

Mm-hmm. Actually, I spoke about this very subject recently with the culinary historian Jessica B. Harris on our Time Sensitive podcast.

My friend Dr. Edda Fields-Black has written books about rice culture and how you could keep enslaved people alive longer if you fed them the same food.

You also hear, over the whole soundtrack—I don't know if you remember this—the sound of me counting one second at a time: ten minutes and thirty-six seconds. That's the amount of time that that police officer kneeled on George Floyd's neck. To sit there and to take it in and out of your body with breath—there are only so many ways that things come into your body. You inhale it, and then you're letting it process and then come back out.

Thinking further about your childhood and your upbringing, I wanted to touch on the fact that your mom was a fiber artist and quilter and costume maker. You and your siblings grew up making your own clothes and books and toys. Can you reflect on how you view the creative atmosphere you grew up in the context of your work today?

My mom was a technical genius. She had a really, really high I.Q. She went to college when she was 16 years old, but she also was a light-skinned Black woman who grew up in Jim Crow. She could have passed, but chose not to pass and was an activist. What's interesting to me about the way we grew up is that I could have had one of those Black mothers who was like, "You will go to college. You will get a master's degree or a Ph.D. Education is the way. You have to get good grades. I'm not going to stand for any of this stuff." But my mother didn't do that. My mother raised us to be artists. She raised us to be creative people.

I have to reflect on what my mother learned about life to then have five Black children in whom she instilled the absolute foundational power of creativity. We were my *mother's* children. I grew up in a two-parent household, but we were our mother's. My father left the house and drove to Long Beach every day, there and back. So we didn't see him a lot. We were hers, and she made us in her image.

She was also a genius. She could speak four languages, she could do all this stuff. But she didn't put us on that path. I often reflect on how smart, wise my mother was, and what she knew about life. That the most important thing she could give us was the capacity to be creative and brave at the same time. I grew up feeling something magical happening to me when I would make things. Making our own clothes, my mother taught us to read the back of patterns. You would have to pick your fabric out, lay out the pattern. You'd cut your own back-to-school clothes. But something would always shift when we would enter into the process *together*. That creative industry in the house.... We got to know each other as siblings in a different way. But I also make a connection to that energy of this industrious creativity *for your life*. We were making clothes *for your life*. We were making a chair *for your life*.

“MOTHER, MOTHER” (2020) by vanessa german. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

My mother didn’t know if we would survive our childhood, and she wanted to give us the absolutely most important things that we would need for our whole life the whole time, which was to be creative and brave. My mother forced us to be brave when we were kids, and sometimes it was terrifying. My mother was violent. If we had an issue at school, we would *have* to go to the principal and speak up and she would come. We would *have* to go to the Los Angeles Board of Education and take those three minutes standing in front of all those adults and say, “This is what we need. This is how we feel.” We would *have* to go to protests: “U.S. out of El Salvador!”

My mother didn’t know if we would survive the world, and she gave us the tools that she felt that we would need to survive as early as she could, and just ran it over and over and over again. “Be creative and brave.” She would always say, “Figure it out. Figure it out. Figure it out. Figure it out.” I would watch on television these sorts of mainstream media representations of mothers who were doing so much for their kids. They were cooking and cleaning and doing all this stuff. My mother was like, “You cook it. This is how you cook. This is how you wash clothes.” Now, mind you, she had five of us. But we were never flimsy kids. We were never like, “Mommy, do this for us.” Partially because we were afraid of her, but also because she made sure we could take care of ourselves internally, in our hearts and in our minds.

I grew up in a house that had a big library in it, too. My mother taught us to read before we all went to school. I learned to read before preschool. There's an old *Los Angeles Times* article with my mother homeschooling us in the sunroom of our house before we were enrolled in public school.

It keeps revealing itself to me, the power of imagination. I don't go to the think tank and be like, "Oh, my God, what should we do about this? I got these neighbors, they're crazy as hell. They barbed-wired this shit up." I don't do that. I work creatively inside myself to continually activate an ecosystem where I can be whole and safe. That's what she gave us. She gave us the understanding that to be alive is to be creative.

"INNER FIRE AND JUBLICANCE" (2022) by vanessa german. (Courtesy the artist and Kasmin, New York)

When did collecting objects become a part of your creative process?

Without shame, I think it was after this whole [period of], "I'm going to die. I'm going to kill myself in six months. I'm going to see what happens, and I'm going to give myself full permission to do what feels right." What really felt right was to pick up stuff off of the ground, to be in a vacant lot. It would make me feel high. I didn't use cannabis until I was 40-something years

old. Using that plant medicine is a feeling that is so similar, in my physiological body, to what it was like for me to pick up wood out of vacant lots. I felt that, somehow, the very best art supplies were these free scattered pieces of old houses. I felt like I was playing hooky on adulthood.

I would bring pieces of wood home. For a while, I would just look at the wood. It would sometimes make me feel like I was going to cry. I would be like, “I have this wood. That means anything is possible. I could build anything from this.” Before then, I felt like I had this different understanding of what it was to be an artist. It was a sort of “clean” thing sanctioned by…. My friend was a professor at Carnegie Mellon, and I visited this M.F.A. crit, and I spiraled into a depression after it. I was like, “Oh, this is a major institution, and they’re training people to be artists and to work in museums.” But the class fought with each other. People cried. Men cried. These were adults, and they cried and there was anger and they had to stop the class. I was like, “Shit, they’re training people to do what I think I want to do, but I’m not experiencing what they’re experiencing. I don’t understand why they’re so mean to each other. Is this a world that I can be in? Could I bear this kind of vitriol? Maybe I’m not an artist, if this is how they’re shaping people to be artists.” I stopped calling myself an artist because that did not align with what I saw, how the world was saying, “This is what art is.”

I had shame about the ways that I…. Man, I would drive by things on trash day, and I’d be like, “Oh, my God, that chair gives me such a *feeling*." Being a weird Black kid in an all-Black neighborhood, the amount of times people are like, “Are you doing voodoo?" That’s a real thing. It’s just this weird Black-people-collecting-stuff-is-voodoo thing.

Bill Clinton said that to me, too. Bill Clinton didn’t say it in a bad way. He was just like, “Me and Hillary went to Haiti for our wedding honeymoon, and I see your little voodoo dolls, vanessa. I saw those in Haiti, too."

Wait a second, when did you connect with Bill Clinton?

I was asked by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art to speak before him at the [“Insights From a Changing America”] Summit [in 2014]. The White House gets in touch with you, and they say, “This is how you introduce a president.” There’s all this language. I had to memorize this thing. But I gave my talk before Bill Clinton gave the keynote. It was wild as hell. It was me in a room with Deepak Chopra, Maya Lin, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Quentin Tarantino. I go on stage, it’s the weakest clap, and I start giving my talk—and it became the most amazing talk. Somebody from the Secret Service came up to me in the green room, and they were like, “We’re going to need you to vamp. Just keep talking. Somebody will come into the room and hold up their hand. When this guy from the Secret Service holds up their hand, stop talking and introduce the president.”

So I’m giving the talk, it’s going great, a Secret Service guy comes in, holds up his hand, and then I see Bill Clinton come in, and I’m literally in the middle of a poem and I can’t just stop. So I finish the poem, and I’m like, “And welcoming the forty-second President of the United States of America, William Jefferson—” And I do it, but the audience is doing an ovation for me. President Clinton is walking down the aisle. He walks up to me, I step off the stage, and he has a speech in his hands. He looks at me and rolls it up and he goes, “Alice [Walton] has asked me to do a lot of difficult things in my life, but I don’t know if anything’s going to be as hard as following vanessa german."

Oh, wow.

Then I started to walk away to get water because it was so intense, and he goes, “You know, vanessa, Hillary and I went to Haiti on our honeymoon and I saw your little voodoo dolls in the collection….” I was like, “Oh, you’re fucking kidding me. The

president just did the voodoo-doll thing." Then he said, "I was going to give this speech, but given everything you said, I can't give this speech now. I'm just going to talk." So he just talked, and he talked to me. He looked at me, and I stood and just looked at him. It's on video—you can see it.

So, walking through the hood of Pittsburgh, I'd get Black church-y adults being like, "Aren't you the carpet muncher who makes voodoo dolls?" I'd be like, "Aren't you the Christian that's supposed to love first?" But, whatever.

Shifting gears, writing and poetry are such a big part of your process. The titles of your artworks are practically poems unto themselves. How do you think about the role of poetry and language and words in your work?

I recognized early on in my practice that what you see in the object is a small percentage of the material. I wanted to find a way to include the invisible in the work, so I would put it in the media. Those first works, the works that literally brought me out of poverty—I was just squatting in a place—I recognized that while people would see that assemblage, what they didn't know is that it had saved my life. What they didn't know is that that taught me what love was. I have a living understanding and recognition for the technology of my own self of what love is. So it allowed me to bring the invisible and make it visible in the work. But it also allowed me to put things in the work that I was told to keep out of the work, because it would make mostly European white audiences uncomfortable. Things about anger and rage.

In my material descriptions, I would just include: "Oh, the police stopped me today." It would be like, "Wood, fiber, blue pigment, the police stopped me today and threatened to handcuff me because I said something about the old man on the corner," followed by "white paint." I would just insert things that happened while the police killed somebody in the alleyway outside my studio. That's in the material list, too, because it has impacted the ecosystem that then impacted the object.

To this day, I'll talk about art and love and still have.... I had a talk at the McNay [Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas] a month ago. Last question in the Q&A was a white man telling me that he feels like my artwork is so angry, even though I just gave a talk about art and love. "Could you address the anger in your work?" he asked. The way that I have been confronted by mostly white men feeling threatened by anything racially or gender-related or confrontational in my work and that it doesn't belong there! Don't I want to be nice? Don't I want to make pretty things? Don't I want to make people happy? He was like, "Are you going to talk about this?" It was really upsetting to other people in the audience, but I didn't want to have to negotiate my wholeness in the work.

In 2003, I was thinking about going to the Bush-Kerry election, and I wrote this poem ["The Patriot Act"]. I won this national slam poetry competition called "Slam Bush," and I got to perform with The Roots. But people started to write me letters because that [poem] became public. People didn't want me to have anything to say about America that wasn't, "I'm so grateful to not be in Africa and to be in a civilized country." "You should be more grateful about this." "The Second Amendment exists so you can protect yourself." I talked about guns and health care in it. One of the ways I found to not have to negotiate my experience as a Black person was to put it in the material list for my artworks, and then people can negotiate that themselves. I also wanted to make space for the reality that it's not just physical. I want the work to be in a conversation about what it is to be human.

Considering and looking at your art, it strikes me that there's so much thinking underlying it—your material list, for example—but then it's also mostly about *feeling*. The thinking almost disappears.

I'm so glad you said that.

Your art speaks so simply and strongly in terms of the feeling embedded in it. I was hoping we would close this conversation by discussing this *felt* aspect of your work.

There was a major American curator—I'm not going to say their name. They were doing a studio visit with me, and I said it was really important to me to make space for people to *feel*. I said, "Feeling, I think, is the most important thing that we do as human beings." And she goes, "Well, thinking is up there, too." I said, "But do you realize that you feel about what you think?" This is a really academic person. She's got a couple Ph.D.s. But I was like, "You *feel* these things."

I started to language an experience I was having, what I call "an epidemic of feel-lessness." There were all these sorts of major things that would happen to all of us culturally, and there would be this sort of immediate intellectual space made to process it, but not a space made for the expansiveness of feeling that can come with it. I even think about when Kobe Bryant died. I've had this feeling since I was a kid, this whole thing about people not publicly processing these deaths. Kobe Bryant was really special to me. I was in L.A., he was drafted, he was young, he was cute, he was Black. I expressed that, and people were DMing me, "Well, he was also a rapist." [*Editor's note: In 2003, Bryant was accused of sexual assault by a 19-year-old hotel employee in Vail, Colorado. In the end, there was no verdict, and the case was dropped.*] I was like, "We can also feel many different things." This idea that you can only feel one thing for a certain amount of time and it might not even be okay for you to feel that….

I felt like I was in environments that were really compromised because there was all of this policing of feeling. Even the man at the McNay talk being like, "I feel like your work is really angry." Then he said, "Are *you* angry?" I was just silent on the stage. We had just talked about love and children and creativity, and he wanted me to justify any anger that I've felt. He said, "Well, are you going to answer the question?" I said, "First thing I'm going to do is just let you see how beautiful I am," and I walked back and forth at the foot of the stage. In my mind, what I wanted to ask him is: "Why is you asking 'Are you angry?' important?" I said, "I have anger when I'm angry. Don't you have anger when you're angry?" What was interesting to me is—and that he didn't recognize—is the judgment that's placed on anger. Anger is the emotional expression of injustice. Anger is a feeling, and it's not actually a stopping place. We have so little cultural understanding about holding human emotions.

I became a hospice volunteer when I was 21 because I wanted to learn more about how we were doing death in our culture. I went through all this death training to be with people when they had a loved one that was dying. To me, it was so clear, all the shit that didn't matter. It really was like, "I want you to be close to me." I would see families going through the ravages of grief at the end of life. I had this one family who bought the largest bed that they could buy so they could all just sleep together with their loved one who was dying. They would all just get in the bed. All people wanted was the closeness. All they wanted, really, that they could identify, that mattered, was to be inside their love, loving. And that love was big enough to hold when people would freak the fuck out. And they would be angry: Why does this 9 year old have this weird fucking tumor? Why is he dying? But the love held. Love really is all we have.

Steve Jobs's last fucking words before he died were, "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow." Reentering the human technology of holding feeling and being in a living relationship with wonder and love, that's all we have. I don't actually trust voting. I don't trust the government. I don't believe that there's policy and legislation that's going to bring us back to ourselves. Only we can do that. And we have to be able to feel where we are to be there.

I was just thinking of the Rilke quote "No feeling is final."

Wasn't Rilke so magical and wild with what came out of him? Yes. No feeling is final.

The Washington Post

Move Over, Monuments: The Mall Gets First Curated Multi-Artist Exhibit

"Beyond Granite: Pulling Together," an installation of six artists' works on the National Mall, will be on view from Aug. 18 to Sept. 18

MARK JENKINS
AUGUST 12, 2023

Vanessa German created a collage-statue of singer Marian Anderson's 1939 concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. (AJ Mitchell Photography/Trust for the National Mall)

[EXCERPT]

The National Mall is a place of imposing monuments, but also of memories of monumental events — Marian Anderson's 1939 concert after being barred from Constitution Hall because of her race, the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the 1986 display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

It is the fleeting sort of monument that inspired "Beyond Granite: Pulling Together," an installation of six artists' works on the Mall. Organized by the Trust for the National Mall, the project will be on view from Aug. 18 to Sept. 18.

The phrase “pulling together” comes from educator and activist Mary McLeod Bethune’s account of how Anderson’s concert “told a story of hope for tomorrow — a story of triumph — a story of pulling together, a story of splendor and real democracy.”

“Over time, artists have come to us on an ad hoc basis,” says Teresa Durkin, executive vice president of the Trust for the National Mall. So the trust decided to undertake a pilot program to place temporary artworks on the Mall, the first time a curated multi-artist program has been exhibited there. The goal, Durkin says, was to try “to learn everything that we can by actually installing six different pieces across the whole length of the National Mall, all at once, in a curated exhibit.”

The idea began with the National Capital Planning Commission, which has long wrestled with the demand to place new landmarks on the Mall’s increasingly crowded 700 acres. NCPC and the trust agreed to experiment with a solution, Durkin says, “for this problem of ultimately not having enough land, if we continue to build permanent memorials on the National Mall.” The two organizations together applied for a $4.5 million Mellon Foundation grant to fund the undertaking.

To curate the project, the trust selected the Monument Lab, a Philadelphia nonprofit organization whose director is Paul M. Farber, also a senior research scholar at the University of Pennsylvania. As co-curator, he enlisted Salamishah Tillet, a professor and administrator at Rutgers University Newark and a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic-at-large for the New York Times.

“This was an opportunity to think about artists from a variety of practices, a variety of backgrounds,” Farber says, “who would answer the question that is at the center of this project — what stories remain untold on the National Mall? — in distinct but complementary ways.”

In choosing sites for the installations, the curators had to follow National Park Service guidelines and yield to practical considerations. All but one of the artworks will be on a hard, flat surface that can handle installation machinery, but several pieces will be placed near existing Mall features to which they respond.

Artist Vanessa German took on the subject of Anderson’s concert with a statue titled “Of Thee We Sing.” The other artists are Derrick Adams, Tiffany Chung, Ashon T. Crawley, Paul Ramírez Jonas and Wendy Red Star.

[...]

While Adams’s piece turns on a single photo, German’s collage-statue of Anderson features many, including multiple views of the singer’s face and scenes of the diverse crowd at her 1939 concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Also incorporated are images of Sandhof lilies, which flower occasionally in a small area of Africa; hanging blue bottles like those the artist says were used by enslaved Africans on the Gullah “to capture evil spirits”; and a bodice trimmed with the notes to one of the songs Anderson performed, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.”

The assemblage, German says, embodies “that sense of fight and spirit and love and just grit that makes you want to keep going.”

Of all the artists, German was the least impressed by her initial experience of the Mall. “Very cold,” she recalls. “A lot about war and men.”

[...]

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Monuments to Overlooked Histories Are Coming to Washington, DC's National Mall

This year, we're going big with a list of memorable shows from around the world, seen and loved by our editors and contributors.

CLAIRE VOON
JULY 24, 2023

Rendering of vanessa german's Of Thee We Sing (2023) in Lincoln Memorial Plaza. Courtesy the artist and Monument Lab.

[EXCERPT]

Visitors who descend on the National Mall in Washington, DC, later this summer will encounter several new artworks that engage with histories of the United States unacknowledged in the marbled monuments around them. Made by artists including Wendy Red Star, vanessa german and Derrick Adams, the six contemporary installations are part of *Pulling*

Together, an exhibition curated by the Philadelphia-based nonprofit Monument Lab intended to raise questions about public memory, historical records and the role of civic spaces.

Opening 18 August, the month-long exhibition will place artworks across the two-mile expanse of the Mall, the country's most visited national park. At one end, by the bustling Smithsonian metro stop, will stand Paul Ramírez Jonas's Let Freedom Ring (2023), an arching bell tower that visitors can play. On the other end, by the Lincoln Memorial Plaza, will rise a statue of the famed contralto Marian Anderson by vanessa german. Scattered in between will be a memorial to the Aids crisis by Ashon T. Crawley; a monument to Apsáalooke nation chiefs by Wendy Red Star; an interactive playground by Derrick Adams that reflects on desegregation; and an outsize map by Tiffany Chung that honours the journeys of Southeast Asian immigrants, which will lie next to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

[...]

A core inspiration for *Pulling Together* is the 1939 Easter concert by Marian Anderson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a momentous occasion that drew a crowd of around 75,000 but to this date has no historical marker at the site. Anderson, a Black classical singer, had been barred from performing at Constitution Hall because of her race; she instead sang outdoors before an integrated audience.

For her contribution german, who grew up with a mother devoted to Black opera singers and remembers watching Anderson on public television, chose to fully chronicle this history through her sculpture. Titled Of Thee We Sing (2023), it portrays a singing Anderson made of found glass bottles, surrounded by flowers and raised arms. Below her is a cutout of an archival photograph of the crowd, positioned to gaze at the sculpture's viewers."The images of the crowd of the Easter Sunday concert are fascinating," german says. "You would see a little Black boy with a flat cap next to an old weathered-faced white man who looks like he's from American Gothic, crammed next to two Black women wearing Sunday church hats, crammed next to an old fat Black man who looks like he's doing the best he can to keep standing, crammed next to three white women and their children. It was really a picture of America in such close proximity and focused—focused on this Black figure and on her song."

She adds, "For me, the story that was missing was a story of love—the original thread of human technology. That concert, if you want to see what a reckoning is, what reconciliation is, it's that story."

[...]

Citing the recent racist vandalism of Tschabalala Self's sculpture of a Black woman in England, german said that she was "a little scared" about the fate of her work, adding, "I'm aware of how the Black body in present public spaces is assaulted in different ways." But she noted that the curators have planned for what she calls "a full museumification" of the space, with comprehensive security throughout the day. "It's about public trust, right? For me, the work is always about what is the most loving. Can this institution be loving? Can this be a loving space? Is there space for love on the National Mall?"

To broaden the conversation beyond the site of the nation's capital, Monument Lab is in the process of arranging for the works to be restaged elsewhere after the exhibition closes on 18 September. The sculpture by german already has a confirmed next stop after the Lincoln Memorial, at the Frick Pittsburgh, as has Wendy Red Star's The Soil You See... (2023), at Tippet Rise Art Center in Stillwater County, Montana.

SURFACE

Devon Turnbull's Listening Room Hits the Right Notes in London, and Other News

Our daily look at the world through the lens of design.

THE EDITORS
JULY 25, 2023

"Of Thee We Sing" (2023) by vanessa german in Lincoln Memorial Plaza. Rendering courtesy of the artist and Monument Lab

[EXCERPT]

The Design Dispatch offers expertly written and essential news from the design world crafted by our dedicated team. Think of it as your cheat sheet for the day in design delivered to your inbox before you've had your coffee.

[...]

The National Mall will soon host an exhibition of art addressing overlooked histories.

This summer, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., will showcase a series of new artworks in “Pulling Together,” an exhibition organized by Monument Lab, a Philadelphia nonprofit. These contemporary installations, created by artists like Wendy Red Star, vanessa german, and Derrick Adams, aim to address overlooked histories of the United States that are absent in the existing monuments. Running from Aug. 18, the show features works like Paul Ramírez Jonas’s Let Freedom Ring, an interactive bell tower, and a statue of Marian Anderson by vanessa german that commemorates the 1939 Easter concert on the Lincoln Memorial steps.

[...]

Galerie

This New Hamptons Exhibition Spotlights Female Collectors Shaping the Art World

Founding co-chair Simone Levinson shares the inspiring story behind the Southampton Arts Center's latest show

LUCY REES
JULY 24, 2023

Vanessa German, *Hammer Head Rage Machine Agony Machine Baptism*, 2019. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CHRISTINE MACK

[EXCERPT]

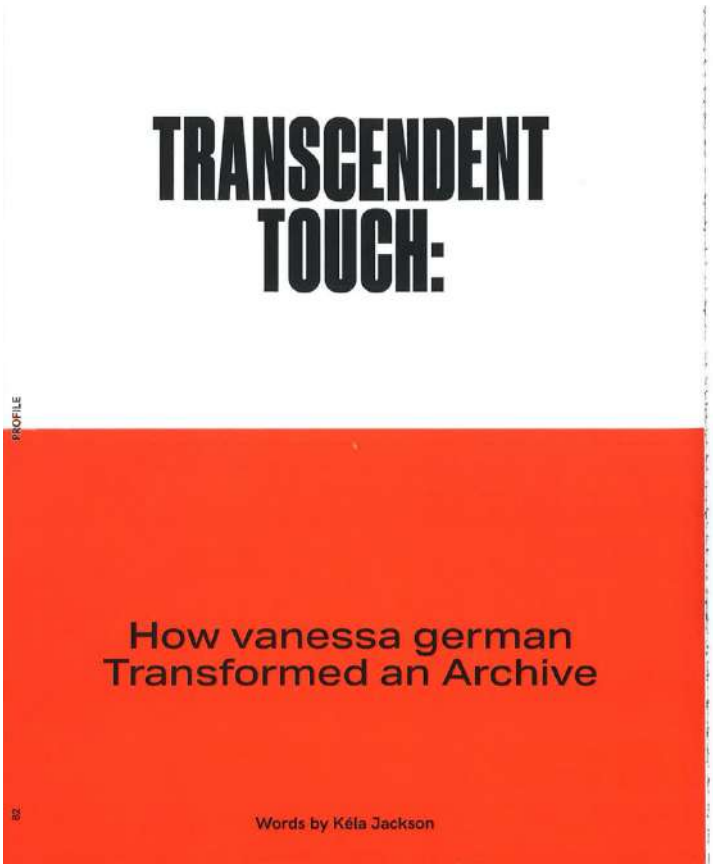
In celebration of its tenth anniversary, the Southampton Arts Center is gearing up for an exhibition with a rather unique concept: to spotlight a group of powerful female arts patrons that are making waves in the art world. Collectors of course are an integral part of museum exhibitions—often generously lending their treasured artworks to make sure the curatorial concept can come to fruition.

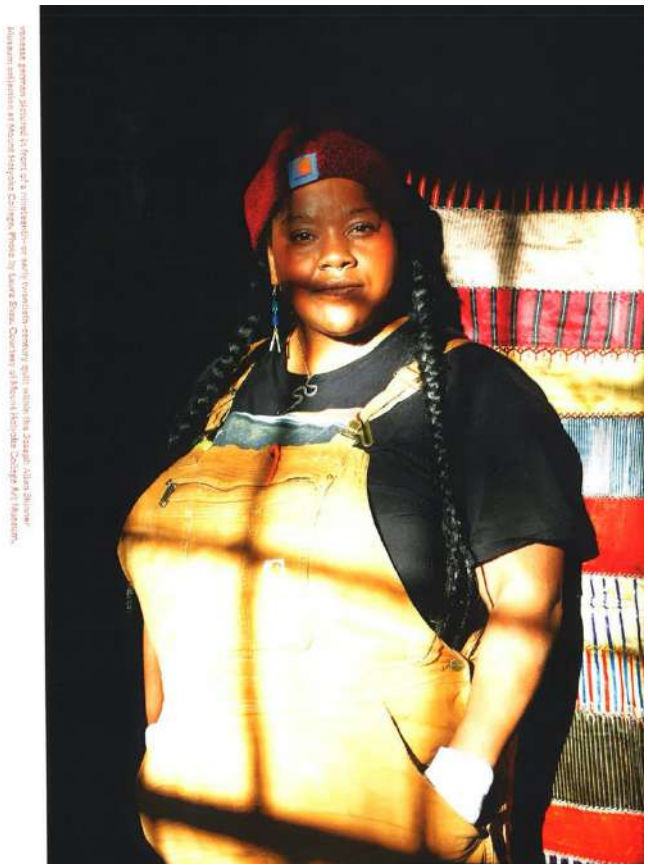
An installation view of the exhibition. PHOTO: ROB RICH/SOCIETYALLURE.COM

BOSTON – ART REVIEW

Transcendent Touch: How vanessa german Transformed an Archive

KÉLA JACKSON
SPRING/SUMMER, 2023





Trinkets, porcelain figures, and ceramic treasures become ritualistic power figures in the hands of artist vanessa german. Born in Milwaukee, raised primarily in Los Angeles, and based in Pittsburgh for two decades before her recent move to rural North Carolina, german works at the intersection of the aesthetic and the political as a self-described "citizen-artist." Known for her ornate power figures that parallel the highly charged emotional resonances of Congolese Nkisi sculptures, german moves between sculpture, performance, and installation. Her practice is rooted in activism yet also indebted to Indigenous and West African folk art-making as well as material undercurrents of Black feminist art movements of the second half of the twentieth century.

german's work has been shown in museums across the country, including the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley, Massachusetts, where her solo exhibition "THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH" opened in September of 2022. It's one of two exhibitions the college mounted to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Joseph Allen Skinner's historic bequest of his cabinet of curiosities, a collection of approximately 7,000 objects housed in a former church on campus. Recent efforts to foster a space of inclusion led the college to open up Skinner's collection to reinterpretation by inviting german and artist Lenka Clayton to present their respective conceptual responses to the objects. In back-to-back exhibitions that challenged notions of preservation, rarity, and value, each artist found ways to address the violent history of collecting, of which the Skinner Museum was born, through juxtapositions and alternative narratives that allow us to see the objects anew. In March, german and I spoke over the phone to talk about her approach to the project and her relationship to materials, found objects, collective healing, and touch.

With a tally counter in hand, german made her way through approx. 7,000 objects in the collection. Photo by Laura Shea. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

In casting herself as the rarest Black woman on earth, german turns our attention to the violence of rarity that originally fueled Skinner's collection of human and animal specimens. She takes on a persona she calls "RAREST" through touch that animates, yet she acknowledges the rarest Black woman before her—Saartjie Baartman, exhibited as the "Hottentot Venus"—for whom touch denigrated and desecrated. Stolen from the Eastern Cape of South Africa and displayed forcibly on the European theater circuit, Baartman's body became an object of exploitation and the colonial gaze. Rarity then becomes a function of colonization that must be undone. german considers rarity in objects that are often cast aside. She transforms the 7,000 objects in the Skinner collection through touch that is reciprocal. A large blue text that greets visitors at the entry point to the exhibition reads, "The rarest black woman on planet earth touched and is touched." In this regard, touch becomes central to the energetic force of german's sculptural figures and installations.

german's emotionally and physically labor-intensive process transfigured the staid collection to reveal the mutability of archives and history. She entered the collection with the intention to possess it—the objects, the narratives, the power—through touch. By communing with the objects and collaborating with the Mount Holyoke community on a new body of work that focuses on emancipation, german destabilized hierarchies in making and collecting. This renegotiation of power is most evident in german's generative collisions of materials, temporalities, and localities. Cowrie shells in german's power figures are in dialogue with cowrie shells from the Skinner collection, materializing emancipation inside an institutional narrative. The exhibition marks a counter-practice of collecting that seeks to shift narratives and power structures that render certain individuals dispossessed.

Speaking to the tenets of her life as a maker, german noted the influence of her mother. As a child, german watched her mother, artist Sandra Keat German, construct elaborate quilts. "The way my mother lived [showed me] that you can be in communication with everything," she reflected. She also observed how her grandmother found a visual language to express herself through homemaking. German leaned into her reverence for materials "without any kind of hierarchy" as she sought to take ownership of the Skinner collection.

As she moved through the collection—counting and connecting with each object through the touch of her gloved hand—german reclaimed the objects through stillness and listening. "One of the things I experienced in touching all of these objects was this strange sense of object loneliness," german noted of her roughly twenty-four hours spent in the collection space. "How it hurts [these objects] to be stolen and taken away from their places where they were buried or where they were in the context of their lived experience. I believe that everything has animacy, but not everything has awareness."

german places her hand on the handle of the door to the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, which is housed inside a Congregational church Skinner acquired in 1929 and had moved from Prescott, MA, to the college campus in South Hadley, MA. Photo by Laura Shea. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Art Museum.

Skinner's method of building a cabinet of curiosity contradicts german's own ethos, which attends to "the sensorial shifts and energetic pricklings" of an object. The opposing perspectives provide an important friction that forces the viewer to reckon with different forms of archive building. "I am inside the 'technologies of being' as an artist, so I am accessing this particular tool of listening to objects, listening to frequencies," german revealed about her intuitive engagement with materials. german mobilizes the term "technologies of being" to describe the mechanism by which we make sense of the world through connecting, listening, and feeling. The reciprocity of touch is central to not only this exhibition but also german's entire oeuvre, which lends to the tenderness of pieces and her insistence on emancipation through making.

Collaborating extensively with the Mount Holyoke community, german crafted a portion of the installation entitled *MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS* that gives form and space to feelings

"One of the things I experienced in touching all of these objects was this strange sense of object loneliness," german noted of her roughly twenty-four hours spent in the collection space.

Installation view, "vanessa germain—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH," Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2022–2023. Photo by Laura Shea.

Installation view, "vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH," Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2022–2023. Photo by Laura Shea.

of longing, grief, and desire through sculptures composed of semiprecious and ubiquitous objects. She collaborated with two Holyoke students, Cortnei Edwards '22 and Domenica Guaman '22, to pose questions to the community that would facilitate a sense of awakening and emancipation similar to that engendered by touch. In response, individuals within the community donated cherished items and offered personal confessions. In turn, german transformed the confessions into densely bound ligaments and the material donations into sacred adornments for her installation and power figures. The connection fostered through sharing—thoughts, secrets, things—has long been evident in her approach to art-making, yet it took on new form against the backdrop of Mount Holyoke College and the Skinner collection.

A pair of figures—*TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSMUTE DEEP SORROW AND DEPRESSION* (2022) and *TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSMUTE RAGE* (2022)—embody the deeply affective sensibilities of german's response to the Skinner collection. The roughly two-foot monochromatic sculptures emphasize german's attention to the technologies of being embedded within objects. Various materials, such as a shoe, a hammer, and gloves, possess powerful meanings from their past lives. A shoe that has traversed unknown or challenging terrain, a hammer that built a home, and the glove that protected a hand during a harsh day of labor channel the energy of the human body and emerge from assemblages of tassels, flowers, shells, hair, or porcelain cups. Turning the static sculptures into kinetic powerhouses, german returns us to the primal forms of connection and healing that she considers "human technologies." These technologies found within us ground german's intervention as a citizen-artist whose sculptures offer restoration in the face of rage, sorrow, and depression. german endeavors to remedy the disconnection and compartmentalization wrought by white supremacy through an invitation for viewers to connect across the political, personal, cultural, and spiritual spaces in our lives. "White supremacy suffocates to death in spaces where people are connecting their spiritual and political lives," german asserted in discussing the importance of intimacy and vulnerability in her process.

A masterful performer, german contextualizes her intervention in a ten-minute digital film that plays on a monitor situated against a wall that is covered with a photo of the Skinner collection. The video captures german's quaking as she touched the objects and was moved, changed, affected by their animacy. For german, this process transformed the objects into living specimens. This gesture is a leveling ground for german to consider herself a living artifact in dialogue with the archival materials. She is gaining as much as she is giving. The intimacy and awakening that german's object arouses within us, then, fundamentally privileges touch and connection. An encounter with german's work requires an openness to being touched and transformed as she forces us to connect our deepest selves with the world around us.

The video operates in a similar fashion as her live performances in which german recites her often exhaustive material lists. When discussing her relationship with materials, emotions and energies are at the fore. "One of the ways that I made space for the distinct reality I was experiencing in the process was to bring everything into my material lists that would be a part of the sort of energetic and material ecosystem of my work," she reflected. For german, this process allows for viewers to engage with the work more intimately. "That is why love is always an ingredient, grief is always a material, the color blue—the sorrow—is a material."

By making viewers aware of such unseeable components, german provides them with access points. "[They have] permission to be in the space with their love, their sorrow, their grief, their joy, their kink, and it shifts their practice of seeing and being in spaces with the work." The mirrors that line the walls and adorn her figures likewise engage viewers in a process of self-reflection as their images become part of the work. A prominent motif within german's material lexicon, mirrors appear here engraved with various sentiments for meditation, such as "You Are Whole the Whole Time," "Trust Your Instincts," and "Be Here." They suggest one answer to the exhibition's central question—*How do we decolonize a thing, a museum, a collection?*—is to first decolonize the spaces within ourselves. //

***Kéla Jackson** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Harvard University.*

Installation view, "vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH," Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, 2022–2023. Photo by Laura Shea.

HYPERALLERGIC

10 Art Shows to See in New York This June

This month: Highlights from El Museo del Barrio's collection, artworks on book covers, Chinese bird-and-flower paintings, and more.

HRAG VARTANIAN
JUNE 06, 2023

vanessa german's "Can I Love You Without Capitalism? How?" (2020) at the Montclair Art Museum (photo Hrag Vartanian/*Hyperallergic*)

[EXCERPT]

Female power figures dominate artist vanessa german's solo exhibition. In her visions of accumulation, german appears to borrow from the long history of altarpieces, toys, dioramas, American commercialism, as well as West African folk practices and the contemporary Black Arts movements. She's a polymath, and each work demonstrates her sweeping interests and the material universe she finds herself immersed.

The large “LaQuisha Washington Crosses the Day Aware” (2018) is a standout piece, playing with the well-known 19th-century “Washington Crossing the Delaware” (1851) painting and updating it in a manner that would be familiar to lovers of Betye Saar’s art. If you attend, check out “Can I Love You Without Capitalism? How?” (2020), a personal favorite as it demonstrates how she can create wonderful silhouettes with her sculptures, while surprising you through color, material, or form. She is stupendously talented at finding a way to connect what might appear to be very disparate and unrelated objects, and it is that care and sensitivity that makes her work so powerful.

vanessa german – The Rarest Black Woman on the Planet Earth

CHAD SCOTT
OCTOBER 8, 2022

Photo courtesy of THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH.

A new exhibition, vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH, will be on view at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum in South Hadley, MA from October 13, 2022 through May 28, 2023. Featuring video and sculpture by the artist, activist, performer, and poet vanessa german, who prefers the spelling of her name to be in all lowercase letters, the exhibition navigates ancestral memory and the contemporary landscapes of race, politics, and the pandemic with a uniquely powerful and profound approach.

The genesis of the exhibition is german's response to the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, an early 20th-century cabinet of curiosities at Mount Holyoke College. The collection—ranging from Lakota Sioux beadwork and a merchant ship's carved figurehead, to 19th-century folk art portraits, dinosaur tracks, and Samurai swords—is an impressive and unwieldy trove of over 7,000 fascinating objects. Skinner, a local silk magnate and philanthropist who spent a lifetime acquiring objects from around the world, left his museum and collection to Mount Holyoke in a 1946 bequest.

The Video

german began with a question: “How do we decolonize a thing, a museum, a collection?” Her answer – captured in a moving video titled vanessa german is THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH – turned into an emancipatory endeavor: to touch every object in the Skinner collection. In this way, the artist felt that the story of the Skinner Museum could be reanimated and retold.

The artist explains that through her touching every Skinner object, “I own the story of the Skinner Museum. We own the truth that more than one thing is happening at the same time, in the same place. And, then into the future of future past—all points in space and time are connected. Everything is touched.”

Through this process, she discovered that holding some of the objects created profound feelings: when she held pieces of Stonehenge and the Great Pyramid of Giza, she was moved to tears and began to shake as if the objects were offering her a spiritual message.

The Installation

Inspired by the Skinner collection, german decided to create her own museum, a sacred space of healing. First, german invited the Mount Holyoke community to join her in the creation of a body of work that would focus on the topic of emancipation. With MHCAM student interns, german created a series of prompts and calls for materials on campus. Thought-provoking questions were asked, such as “What do you need forgiveness for?” and “What are you currently learning and un-learning?”

Posters and collection stations were installed across campus to gather written responses and personal objects and clothing, which resulted in an outpouring of words and belongings. german then incorporated the anonymous written responses and objects – including boots, figurines and jewelry – to create all the artworks for the exhibition. The result is her mixed-media installation titled “MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS,” which includes more than a dozen of the artist’s iconic power figures and other assemblages.

vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH also features photographs taken by Laura Shea, the Museum’s photographer, who documented the artist’s progress, capturing meaningful moments of german with many of the objects she encountered. In addition, visitors are each invited to take home a small offering from the artist, a piece of rose quartz—a mineral associated with unconditional love and healing.

Opening events with the artist will be held on Thursday, October 13, 2022. Artist Talk: The Concert will be presented from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., followed by a procession to the opening reception, which will be held from 6:30 to 8 p.m. The exhibition commemorates the 75th anniversary of the 1946 Skinner bequest to Mount Holyoke College.

“We first invited vanessa in 2017 to develop a show for this 75th anniversary, but due to Covid, we had to postpone the exhibition. That’s when german switched course to her extraordinary idea of touching every object in the Skinner Museum,” Tricia Y. Paik, Florence Finch Abbott Director, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, said. Her conceptual project is a remarkable radical act, and has now become a powerful chapter in both the history and future of the Skinner Museum.”

About vanessa german

vanessa german (American, b. 1976) is an artist working across sculpture, performance, installation, and photography, in order to repair and reshape disrupted systems, spaces, and connections. The artist's practice proposes new models for social healing, utilizing creativity and tenderness as vital forces to reckon with the historical and ongoing catastrophes of structural racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, resource extraction, and misogynoir.

A visual storyteller, german utilizes assemblage and mixed media, combining locally found objects to build protective ritualistic structures known as her power figures or tar babies. Modeled on Congolese Nkisi sculptures and drawing on folk art practices, they are embellished with materials including beading, glass, fabric, and sculpted wood, and come into existence at the axis on which Black power, spirituality, mysticism and feminism converge.

Based in Homewood, Pittsburgh, german's artistic practice is intertwined with and inextricable from her dedicated role in activism and community leadership. In 2011, german founded the Love Front Porch, an arts initiative for the women, children, and families of the local neighborhood that began after she moved her studio practice onto the front steps of her home. Three years later, in 2014, german opened the ARThouse, which combines a community studio, a large garden, an outdoor theatre, and an artist residency.

Upholding artmaking as an act of restorative justice, german confronts and begins to dismantle the emotional and spiritual weight imposed by the multi-generational oppression of African American communities. As a queer Black woman living in the United States, german has described this as a deeply necessary process of adventuring into the wild freedom that the inhabitation of such identities demands. This activist instinct emerges in german's work to postulate powerful narratives of freedom and love. german has been awarded the 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, the 2017 Jacob Lawrence Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the 2018 United States Artist Grant and, most recently, the 2018 Don Tyson Prize from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

ARTSY

Vanessa german's Magical Sculptures Reflect the Enchantment of Black Life

AYANNA DOZIER
SEPTEMBER 29, 2022

Portrait of vanessa german for the Heinz Awards by Joshua Franzos, 2022. © vanessa german. Courtesy of Kasmin, New York.

vanessa german describes herself as an artist working from the studio of her soul, carefully observing and honoring the mystery of life that she then transfers into "portrait sculptures," as she calls them. Amalgams of Black culture cobbled together through found objects like jeans and quilts, german's evocative, bulbous, life-sized figures are dressed in clothes that extend and morph their shape, size, and appearance. These wood sculptures are not idle objects, but are imbued with all the intentionality and emotions that german carried while crafting them.

german was born in Milwaukee, but spent most of her formative youth in Los Angeles before eventually relocating to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she is currently based. Her upbringing in 1980s L.A. was the inspiration behind her current solo exhibition "Sad Rapper," on view at Kasmin in New York through October 22nd. The show is centered around a massive eponymous sculpture that features over 75 pounds of recycled denim amassing a height of 78 inches.

"Sad Rapper" opened just prior to german receiving the prestigious Heinz Award for the Arts, which will allot $250,000 of unrestricted funds to the artist. Additionally, german's second solo exhibition of the year, "THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH," will open at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum next month and remain on view through May 2023.

Installation view "vanessa german: Sad Rapper," at Kasmin, New York. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

german's institutional success matches the excitement surrounding her primary market. Kasmin sold 15 of german's mixed-media sculptures in the range of $30,000–$45,000 at Independent Art Fair this past spring. And in Kasmin's group presentation at The Armory Show earlier this month, one of german's larger sculptures sold for $65,000. To say that german is having a moment would be a gross understatement; she is the moment.

Amid this whirlwind of accomplishments, german moved to a cabin, a change she described making to become more in touch with nature and wildlife. This recalibration felt necessary following the laborious six-month production for "Sad Rapper," where she worked at the gallery until opening night. The last sculpture was completed a mere five hours before doors opened to the public.

"My practice, I recognize, is not just the work of object-making, but one of restoration from being raised in systems that were incredibly violent and disempowering," she told Artsy. "My practice is deeply restorative to the technology of me as a human being." german's self-taught practice is more holistic than those of artists who undergo the ritual of pursuing an MFA. Her figures both reflect and salve the wounds of systemic racial and sexual oppression.

german's sculptures are partially informed by the tradition of Congolese minkisi, vessels that function as spiritual figures of healing rather than agentless objects. german was made aware of this history by a professor at Carnegie Mellon during a studio visit. She describes her practice as possessing an intuitive rhyme with the history and culture of minkisi. "Something inside of me brought me to this material that was not new at all, but new to me," she said.

Some ideas might need years to germinate whereas others need to be completed immediately. As someone who constantly works with her hands, german expressed the importance of remaining open to new information so her work does not become insular. "Everything is available through the power of making," german expressed. "Everything!"

Forever invested in seeking what's inside of herself, german constantly sketches and keeps a notebook of ideas with her at all times. It allows her to connect to time and people across time, while honoring that inspiration comes from

the ground up. This earth-to-body movement of knowledge rejects the top-down intellectual flow of the Cartesian method that german associates with oppressive systems that indoctrinate many to reject their relationship with their ancestors and the earth.

vanessa german, installation view of "Sad Rapper" at Kasmin, New York, 2022. Photo by Diego Flores. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

The sculptures for "Sad Rapper" were culled from a well of german's memories from the last three decades and feature a traumatic witnessing of a young man being killed; Kanye West crying onstage over the death of his mother; the death of Eazy-E in 1995; and the infamous slap at the 2022 Academy Awards that led Will Smith to stammer through tears, "I don't know why I'm crying," during his acceptance speech for best actor.

These fleeting snapshots and moments rose "from the studio of [her] soul and onto the sketchpad" to create the emblem of a sad rapper, as german conveyed. Once those images were realized, the materials for the sculptures appeared to german as clear as day while she assembled the sculptures without the aid of studio assistants.

Despite the much-due recognition, german still grapples with honoring her instinct and practice in a landscape where formal, academic artistic training and language are regurgitated and prioritized. "What I feel like I still have to kick against is the shame of being a self-taught artist, of needing to know everything," she said. Hence, she advocates for collectors and curators to seek art beyond the institution and to continue to "make investments that are bold, loving, and courageous in artists and artist communities," as she put it.

german further concluded, "I desire to be bolder in revealing this way of working with magic, mystery, and seeking connection to places that have been ruptured by the same systems that would seek to continue to rupture my existence in the here and now."

ARTFORUM

Cauleen Smith and vanessa german Win $250,000 Heinz Award for The Arts

SEPTEMBER 22, 2022

vanessa german and Cauleen Smith. Photo: Joshua Franzos.

[EXTRACT]

Cauleen Smith and vanessa german have been named the 2022 recipients of the Heinz Award for the Arts. The unrestricted $250,000 cash prize, given annually by the Pittsburgh-based Heinz Family Foundation to "honor individuals whose work and accomplishments are producing an impact that endures," is one of the world's largest. Past awardees include Conceptual artist Sanford Biggers, cartoonist Roz Chast, Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Rita Dove, and interdisciplinary artist Ralph Lemon, among others.

"This year's recipients are engaging the arts as a tool for healing," founder Teresa Heinz said about the winners, who also include individuals who have made significant contributions to the fields of the Economy and the Environment. "We honor them for their courage and resilience, and for the example they set in showing us what individuals can achieve for the betterment of our world."

The North Carolina-based vanessa german is a visual and performance artist as well as the founder of ARThouse, a space for children to learn artmaking, gardening, reading, theater and play which was open in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh until it was badly damaged in a 2021 fire. (A GoFundMe page has since raised the money

to restore it). According to the Heinz Award website, german's assemblage sculptures, installations, and spoken word works "confront racism, violence, homophobia and hate, while also expressing hope for healing." Her show "Sad Rapper" is currently on view at Kasmin Gallery in New York City through October 22.

[…]

ARTnews

vanessa german and Cauleen Smith Win One of World's Largest Art Prizes, $250,000 Heinz Art Awards

ALEX GREENBERGER
SEPTEMBER 22, 2022

vanessa german and Cauleen Smith. PHOTO JOSHUA FRANZOS (2)

[EXTRACT]

Artists vanessa german and Cauleen Smith have won one of the largest art prizes in the world, the Heinz Award for the Arts. Each will now take home $250,000.

german often creates sculptures that are adorned with beads, fabrics, cowrie shells, glass, and more. Often, these works are intended to serve a restorative purpose and seem imbued with ritualistic power. Past works have involved the creation of altar-like spaces for victims of racist police killings, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

On view now at New York's Kasmin gallery is a show by german that includes a new set of works in this vein. According to the artist, they take their inspiration from West African folk art and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

Teresa Heinz, chairman of the Heinz Family Foundation, said in a statement, “vanessa’s bold, thought-provoking sculptures, together with her community-based programs, clearly reflect that spirit, demonstrating not only a commitment to artistic excellence, but also to work that enfolds viewers into an experience that is both confronting and healing.”

[…]

artnet news

13 Buzzy Back-to-School Gallery Shows to See During Armory Week, From a Red-Hot Group Show to Rick Lowe's Gagosian Debut

It's "back to school" for the art world—here's a guide to the best openings on tap this week.

SARAH CASCONE
SEPTEMBER 06, 2022

vanessa german, Sad Rapper (2022), detail. Photo courtesy of Kasmin, New York.

[EXTRACT]

The start of September has always meant "back to school" for the art world. Now, with the Armory Show settled into its fall slot, there are more gallery shows than ever to check out during this busy fair week. Here a just a few openings worth slotting into your schedule.

[...]

"vanessa german: Sad Rapper" at Kasmin

Assemblage artist vanessa german employs all manner of unusual materials in her richly decorated works that speak to issues of racial oppression and structural violence. Her latest series of sculptures is inspired by neighborhood figures from when she was growing up in Los Angeles in the 1980s.

The New York Times

An Elegant Return to Form at Independent Art Fair

Back to its TriBeCa home, the fair offers a reliable menu of visual pleasures.

WILL HEINRICH
MAY 5, 2022

View of vanessa german's sculptures at Kasmin. From left, "She Almost Disappeared Entirely: a Super Power," 2022; "Love Poem for Lil Kim," 2022; "The Burden on the Body is Great/ or, A Blatant Refusal to Disappear," 2022; and "The Work Boots/Black Bird," 2021.Credit...Vanessa German, Kasmin and Independent New York; Alexa Hoyer

[EXCERPT]

The Pittsburgh-based assemblage artist vanessa german combines sculpted plaster heads, miscellaneous found objects and Caucasian doll hands painted black to make exceptionally striking tabletop figures, evocative of Betye Saar though a little more commercial, that will likely be the hit of the fair. One blue and white duo, covered in beads, cowrie shells and little bottles, splits the difference between Nick Cave and central African power figures. A limited series of works by german also appears with Wave Pool, a Cincinnati-based nonprofit art center.

Art Fairs

WILL HEINRICH | ART FAIR REVIEW

An Elegant Return to Form and Its Home

The stylish fair offers a reliable menu of visual pleasures.

INDEPENDENT ART FAIR is back and in fine form. Returning to TriBeCa's stylish Spring Studios after a brief dalliance farther downtown, this year's edition of the modestly scaled but elegantly curated art fair features 17 new exhibitors, out of 67 in total, spread over four floors. Though its overall vibe is still more reassuring than revolutionary, an exciting, unsettled energy runs through its exhibits, and I found it more difficult than usual to make this standout list of only 10 picks.

FIRST FLOOR

Chris Sharp

It's a cliché to call small paintings "jewel-like," but it's hard to resist with four little delights created by the painter Altoon Sultan, who debuted at Marlborough Gallery in the 1970s and now lives in Groton, Vt. Painted with egg tempera on calfskin parchment, they show close-ups of agricultural machinery in near primary colors. Precise but not fussy, geometric but anchored in figuration, they appear drenched with sunlight even with no sightline to a window.

Helena Anrather

It's hard to make out the tone of the photographs in an incisive two-artist presentation from this gallery on Bowery. Done by Olivia Reavey in gauzy, appealing black and white, they feature unusually frank depictions of male nudity. Three bright green bronzes by Oren Pinhassi, which look something like ironing boards with birds' legs and include a few plastic shower curtain rings and two panes of glass, are similarly disconcerting.

Nina Johnson

The former dancer Martine Barrat has an eye for detail. Each of her captivating, 1980s-era photographs of Harlem and the South Bronx is tied together by one discreet but well-observed moment. For one small boy extending his arms in a sudden rainstorm, it's the sharp white of a lollipop poking out of his mouth like a cowboy's cigarette; for a tired drummer with his eyes shut, it's the fingers that gently pinch the bridge of his nose.

URAN, NICOLA VASSELL GALLERY AND INDEPENDENT NEW Y

Two recent works by Uman, a Somali-born artist, at the Nicola Vassell booth. From left: "Blue Painting No 1," (2022); and "Matthew Higgs Planted Some Seeds," (2022).

VANESSA GERMAN, KASMIN AND INDEPENDENT NEW YORK; ALEXA HOYER

A view of Vanessa German's sculptures at Kasmin. From left, "She Almost Disappeared Entirely: a Super Power," 2022; "Love Poem for Lil Kim," 2022; "The Burden on the Body is Great/ or, A Blatant Refusal to Disappear," 2022; and "The Work Boots/Black Bird," 2021.

FIFTH FLOOR

Off Paradise

This TriBeCa gallery's graceful presentation, in a curious corner booth with a partially curved floor, pairs what appear to be two dark blue monochrome paintings by Maximilian Schubert with large narrative canvases by Peter Nadin. Though Nadin's pieces are rendered with much brio, it's Schubert's pieces that hold the real surprise: They're cast urethane resin — the only paint is on their trompe l'oeil canvas sides.

SIXTH FLOOR

Kasmin

The Pittsburgh-based assemblage artist Vanessa German combines sculpted plaster heads, miscellaneous found objects and Caucasian doll hands painted black to make exceptionally striking tabletop figures, evocative of Betye Saar though a little more commercial, that will likely be the hit of the fair. One blue and white duo, covered in beads, cowrie shells and little bottles, splits the difference between Nick Cave and central African power figures. A limited series of works by German also appears with Wave Pool, a Cincinnati-based nonprofit art center.

Nicola Vassell

There's so much going on in three large canvases by the Somalian-born artist Uman — multicolored sunspots, eye-blistering yellows, a low tree listing under an enormous white boulder, a tall, many-armed figure growing out of a giant eyeball lettered MH (for Matthew Higgs, who gave her her first show at White Columns) — that you might need to schedule a few extra hours just to take it all in. Four handsome abstract canvases by Pam Evelyn, presented by the nearby booth, the Approach, make a wonderful complement.

Ricco/Maresca

According to the gallerist Frank Maresca, the Indigenous Australian painter Paddy

Independent Art Fair

Friday to Sunday, Spring Studios, 5 Street, Manhattan, independentnc

Bedford, who died in 2007, is t sider artist in the world to have raisonné. But a group of gouach bulging, spider-like or riverine f liant yellow, turquoise and och syncratically balanced agains white space, is his first work eve New York.

Matthew Brown

It takes time to appreciate the and wonder of these carefull paintings by Kent O'Connor, an Angeles. Still lifes, landscapes a mounted in chunky wooden might strike you at first as ea mure. But notice the weird pe the table in one still life; consid ture size of a bunch of green g portrait; and wonder about sively wrinkled paper bag.

Mrs.

Meghan Brady produces exu tially collaged abstractions th "paper paintings" in a former in Maine — one which, when sti was attended by Louise Ne pieces shown by this gallery Queens, though done with oil expand on Brady's vocabulary not-quite-figurative shapes i seaside purples and pinks.

SEVENTH FLOOR

Maxwell Graham / Essex Stree

This Lower East Side gallery's of work by three artists' arti John Miller's aggressively ban renditions of ordinary pedest surprisingly emotional const winsome detritus by Sarah SoiL Thornton's found piece o studded with found photograph

CULTURED

At Independent Art Fair, Young Artists Explore Heritage, Identity and Healing

Open to the public today, Independent Art Fair's 13th edition in New York brought together over 65 exhibitors in a snapshot of contemporary art today.

ANNABEL KEENAN
MAY 6, 2022

vanessa german. Photography courtesy of Kasmin Gallery and Independent.

[EXCERPT]

Healing Through Art

Artist, poet, and activist vanessa german is no stranger to art as a form of personal and social healing. She often uses her art to challenge the effects of historic and current injustices, racism and sexism. In her works on display in Kasmin's booth, german presents small, figural sculptures made of miscellaneous found objects and materials including shells, earrings, braids,and keys.

artnet news

Looking for the Next Big Thing? Here Are 5 Rising Artists to Know From New York Art Week 2022

A guide to who's hot, why you should pay attention, and where to get your hands on their work (or at least try).

EILEEN KINSELLA
MAY 9, 2022

vanessa german, *She Almost Disappeared Entirely: a Super Power* (2022). Image courtesy of the artist and Kasmin New York.

[EXTRACT]

The first-ever New York Art Week is officially in the books. The fresh branding accompanies the confluence of a number of fairs focused on new art, including NADA, Independent, and Future Fair. (TEFAF was going on too, but that one is less for spotting fresh talent than for gorging on oysters and blue-chip art.)

The Artnet News Pro team scoured the fairs to bring you five artists who look poised to reach the next stage in their careers in short order. Here's everything you need to know about them.

[…]

vanessa german

Who: A self-taught, multidisciplinary artist, german works across sculpture, performance, communal rituals, immersive installation, and photography. She mixes found objects with beads, glass, fabric, and sculpted wood to create her "power figures," which draw on Congolese Nkisi sculptures and folk art practices. In 2018, german won the 2018 Don Tyson Prize, a biannual $200,000 award from the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Based in: Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Showing at: Kasmin (Independent)

Prices: Eleven works sold during the run of the fair (nine on preview day) for prices ranging from $30,000 to $45,000.

Why You Should Pay Attention: There is a reason why visitors were gravitating toward—and lingering in—Kasmin's booth: roughly a dozen arresting sculptural installations by german were installed on individual white plinths roughly at eye level. They immediately draw you in.

The titles and descriptions of each piece are also integral. Take the above example, titled *She Almost Disappeared Entirely: a Super Power* (2022). Per german, its materials include: "cloth, foam, made in japan candle handle, bamboo earrings, love, rage, the impossibility of a Black Girl ever being the victim of anything because she is strong and Black don't crack and not even little Black girls deserve protecting because she is a monster she is always a monster, this is a monstrous thing, red, yarn, hair grease, my old hair braids, by 'my' this means they are the old hair braids of the artist, the artist IS a Black Girl and sometimes a monster and she quite enjoys that, wood, astroturf, a miraculous healing, vintage kitchen fabric, red beads, red beaded trim, stop light, blind spot mirror, rage, hate, spittle, a reason to be gentle, flight."

Fun Fact: The artist's practice is closely linked to her role as an activist and community leader. In 2011, after moving her studio practice onto the front steps of her home, german founded the Love Front Porch, an arts initiative for the women, children, and families in her Pittsburgh neighborhood.

Up Next: A solo show at Kasmin opens in New York in September.

the slowdown

vanessa german's Collaged Sculptures Are Ornate Icons of Healing and Protection

CHANICE HUGHES-GREENBERG
MAY 4, 2022

Black Girl on Skateboard Going Where She's Got to Go to Do What She's Got To Do and It Might Not Have Anything to Do With You, Ever, (2022), by vanessa german. (Courtesy vanessa german and Kasmin)

To speak with self-described "citizen artist" vanessa german about her creative practice is to talk with her about art as a means of revitalization and protection. Particularly for the Black community.

The self-taught sculptor, poet, and performer lives and works in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, a predominantly African American area that has long struggled with poverty and gun violence. There, she handcrafts

sculptures out of locally found objects that she embellishes with materials including beads, glass, fabric, and wood to create what she calls "power figures": large, often human-shaped forms that draw inspiration from the Kongo people's *minkisi n'kondi*, protective charms believed to hold spiritual energy. Through these forms, german offers gateways to collective healing, and confronts the historical and day-to-day forces of structural racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and misogynoir.

german's output extends out of her ongoing activism. In 2011, after moving her studio outside of her home, her new space began to regularly attract young, curious onlookers, whom german in turn gave art materials and encouraged to make works of their own. From there, she founded Love Front Porch, an art-making initiative for Homewood's women, children, and families. Three years after that, the effort became part of ARTHouse, a grassroots community center german created where anyone can visit and create. "I'm literally watching people around me wake back up to their creative capacity," she says. "Every work of art that I make has work to do."

The insights and energy german receives from the community around her play a crucial role in her own art-making, and helped inform her new body of work filling the Kasmin gallery booth at this week's Independent Art Fair (May 5–8) in New York City. The sculptures, which are presented in dialogue with pieces from german's 2021 series "The Artist Channels 33 Intimate Technologies of Soul," explore the physical and metaphysical phenomena that can affect the heart. Less tangible items appear in the long, unconventional list of materials that comprise each piece. One figure, titled "Love Poem for Lil Kim" (2022), for example, combines pink tennis shoe key rings and bamboo earrings with "shame and its opposite," "love and resistance," and "the death of several of your friends and no real way to process it in the public."

For those who come in contact with them, german wants her sculptures to encourage self-awareness. Often, she has watched people interact with her figures through personal memories—a lard can or an old radio can speak to them, awakening something inside, and opening doors to curiosity and an expansion of the mind. "I'm interested not necessarily in what people think about my work, but in what they *feel* when they're in proximity to it," she says. "I'm interested in the feeling languages and technologies that people experience, because that's how the work is active for me."

The artist's frequent use of mirrors and shoes make it easy for viewers to see themselves in her work, and to identify with the individual pieces that give each figure life. One recent sculpture, "Black Girl on Skateboard Going Where She's Got to Go to Do What She's Got To Do and It Might Not Have Anything to Do With You, Ever" (2022), consists of a full-bodied Black child in the midst of skating, with her left arm outstretched for balance and her braids trailing behind her. "The form recognizes the engine of joy, the engine of deciding for oneself to own," german says, "and to live, and to *move*, within the heart and the language of your own joy." Like all of her figures, it exists to help us center ourselves back into consciousness.

CULTURED

Artist vanessa german Lets Ancestral Wisdom Guide Her

The spiritual force of artist vanessa german's "Power Figures" refuses to be articulated. Ahead of german's solo New York presentation with Kasmin, Camille Bacon takes a deep dive.

CAMILLE BACON
MAY 2, 2022

vanessa german photographed at Temple University campus where she is an artist mentor for "Disclosure: The Whiteness of Glass," a project initiated by Related Tactics. Photography by Jon Henry.

In one of her poems, artist vanessa german writes, "I come to do a violence to the lie." The lie, which german seeks to destroy with her sculptures, performances and community activism, is the perceived separation of people, places, and things. This is evidenced by projects such as "Love Front Porch," where she paints and sculpts on her home's porch and invites neighborhood kids to find refuge there. So, this poetic "violence" is in fact a generous reminder of what we might call the law of oneness: a primordial truth that all living entities, seen or unseen, are intrinsically connected.

In allowing the unnamable dimensions of being, such as ancestral wisdom, to guide her, german's work rescues our collective psyche from the white supremacist myth that we, as humans, can separate and control the happenings of our everyday lives. In particular, german's "power figures," sculptures of beings whose bodies are composed of a variety of found objects, point at the artist's capacity to move through the world as an instrument of social healing.

Crediting her practice for restoring her will to live, german began making artwork as a recuperative action after leaving a terrible job. Over a six-month period, she took her dog out on long strolls, carrying bags with her to collect objects found along the way. Further reflecting on the meditative nature of this time, german says, "My mind changes when I'm looking for stuff. Things open up in a way and I'm always looking for things that I've never seen before, which invites another open door." She describes these moments of gathering as an "incremental turning-up

of the volume of something inside of myself," which helped her resensitize her body and open it to feeling again. "Finding a certain thing on the ground let me know that life was possible," she says.

Trans Sister Power Figure, 2021. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

After accumulating a sizable volume of wood from her walks, she began stacking it in her basement until she arrived at a composition that, as she puts it, "felt so right." She then asked herself what about it electrified her, and spent time listening for answers. This sort of spiritual inquiry made her feel excited to wake up in the morning again, recalling the infinite wisdom of Audre Lorde, whose essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" reminds us that our sense of what "feels right" is a key ingredient in building a habitable life. To this end, german muses, "The magic of stacking wood—that's how I found a place to be."

From here, the artist brought additional degrees of complexity to her "power figures" by adorning them with other objects she found on her strolls, including shards of glass, bottles, charms, fabric, shells and mirrors. While these figures assume shapes that resemble the human form, they are not meant to represent specific individuals. Rather, german is interested in crafting an energetic impulse that affects the viewer, even if their particular meanings or purposes cannot be discerned. In the past, german has remarked that these figures are meant to serve as protectors of Black people against violence, and as celebrations of freedom and unbridled creativity.

The Dreamer: Power figure into the joy of Dreaming, 2021. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

When we spoke, german noted that despite there being a void of human guidance in her life, to teach her she could "shape a life that I can live inside of by my own rules," she intuitively knew from a young age that aliveness is a sacred experience, one to be molded and honored at one's own volition. Considering german's development—like everyone's—was largely shaped by the material and ideological aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, which seduces Black women into forgetting our sanctity and autonomy, her dual commitments to "working through the objects and materials I have" and to "always give myself the best options," become all the more salient.

For the artist, the "power figures" exist as "active technologies of the soul that touch the vast history that exists in the spiral of our DNA." german's sculptures do not demand that we "figure them out" and, instead, beckon us towards a reversal of the belief that everything exists to be known or understood. In their presence, we are encouraged to remove the intellectual burden of defining connections, and to accept that there are things which lie beyond our capacity to name, define and categorize. Ultimately, german's work reminds us to be diligent students of the nonphysical realm, a space that can be deeply felt, but not necessarily articulated or pinned down.

Left: *Endurance is a love story,* 2016. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.
Right: Close up of *Endurance is a love story,* 2016. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

At the Frick Pittsburgh for the 2021 Blue Walk, german wore what she calls "The Grief Hoodie," consisting of 300 blue satin ribbon roses. Like grief, it is heavy. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

BARRON'S

Independent Art Fair is Bringing Underrepresented Artists to New York's Attention

ABBY SCHULTZ
APRIL 21, 2022

Vanessa German, *Black Girl on Skateboard Going Where She's Got to Go to Do What she's Got To Do and It Might Not Have Anything to Do With You, Ever*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist, Kasmin, and the Independent. Photograph by Jordan Whitten.

[EXTRACT]

The Independent art fair is returning to its Spring Studios location in Manhattan's Tribeca neighborhood in May with a full slate of galleries that in many cases are offering solo and duo presentations of artists yet to be widely known.

The four-day fair, which begins with an invitation-only viewing on Thursday, May 5, is at a different time of year than its former spot in March, but it will be in the company of three other arts fairs and other arts events taking place across the city.

Spearheaded by the Independent, several institutions—including fairs, museums, auction houses, and non-profit arts groups—formed New York Art Week, creating an interactive map of what's happening at more than 20 organizations across the city May 5-12. The other fairs include TEFAF, the New Art Dealers Alliance, or NADA, and Future Fair.

"That resource will engender a centralized place for programming, a centralized place for people to participate more," says Elizabeth Dee, co-founder and director of the Independent.

The Independent last held a fair only eight months earlier at the Battery Maritime Building in lower Manhattan, which was timed to coincide with the Armory Show, which had until last year been in March. Independent 2021 included just over 40 galleries—instead of its usual 60 or more—in a venue with a large outdoor terrace because of various issues related to the pandemic.

Back up to full scale, the May fair will include 67 galleries and five nonprofits that will be exhibiting artists representing a range of compelling themes—from Indigenous art, to art of the African diaspora, to historical genres. Nonfungible tokens, or NFTs, will also play a role, notably in an exhibition of London-based artist Kenny Schachter's work by Allouche Benias gallery from Athens, Greece.

[…]

At the fair Kasmin gallery in New York will announce their representation of Pittsburgh-based artist vanessa German, who is "using found materials as vernacular to narrate on American race and class," Dee says, but bases it on the Central African tradition of Congolese Nkisi sculptures. The pieces are covered with beads and other objects and sit on pedestals.

"People often stop in their tracks when they see them and say, 'whoa, what is this,'" Dee says.

Galerie

Creative Mind: vanessa german

The Pittsburgh artist's experimental practice combines assemblage, mixed media, and performance art to foster change in her community

JACQUELINE TERREBONNE
MARCH 18, 2022

vanessa german at her 2016 Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art exhibition, "Matrix 174: I Come to Do a Violence to the Lie" (2016) with her piece *RED.RED.RED for the Rage, Blood and Desire* (2016). Photo: Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum Museum Of Art, Courtesy Of Kasmin, New York

Artist vanessa german's diverse practice comes from an internal place of healing. Whether it's sculpture, performance, or installation, there's something much deeper in play. "It's not just a studio practice," german explains. "It's a way I found to be alive that's therapeutic, restorative, and regenerative."

Using assemblage and mixed media, she crafts artworks she calls "Power Figures," which emerged from a period of darkness in her life 17 years ago, when she felt "a real dissonance in the world." During that time, she gave herself "permission to be with my own ideas without anxiety and feel my life, my body." Out of that experiment came these beautiful, otherworldly figures she made using materials found around the rowhouses where she'd been squatting in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Homewood. "I would do really labor-intensive handwork," she explains. "Fully committing myself to those objects saved my life."

Left: *Endurance is a love story*, 2016. Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Kasmin, New York
Right: *The Blood & The Animals, The Mirror & The Sky; An ode to the un-language-able truth of is-ness.*, 2017. Photo: Courtesy Of The Artist And Kasmin, New York

Included in an exhibition at the Carnegie Museum of Art, those original "Power Figures" earned her a gallery show; her career has steadily built from there. Last year, german signed with Kasmin, which is planning a gallery debut for her in the fall. Even with her new level of recognition, she remains deeply rooted in her community of Black, queer women, buying houses in Homewood to host an artist-in-residence program and kids' art workshop. Next, german plans to transform the local funeral home into a center for art and wellness, the Museum of Resilience.

CULTURED

Tomorrow's Stars Are on Display at Art Basel Miami Beach 2021

Opportunities for discovery abound at the 2021 edition of the art fair, back and better than ever in Miami.

JACOBA URIST
DECEMBER 3, 2021

vanessa german, Yellow Chair, 2021. Photography courtesy of the artist and Kasmin, New York.

[EXCERPT]

In the constellation of American fairs, Art Basel Miami Beach stands alone for its sheer star power and breadth. There's gravitational pull like no other event: major artists, celebrities and collectors descend upon the Miami Beach Convention Center for an invite-only preview experience of an encyclopedia of artworks. From 20th-century masters

like Lucio Fontana and Louise Bourgeois, to 21st-century standard-bearers like Ai Weiwei, Lynda Benglis and Urs Fischer, to contemporary geniuses like Jacqueline Humphries, Jeffrey Gibson and Titus Kaphar, it is an unparalleled opportunity to absorb the most important artists of the age.

But Basel is also famous for showcasing talents on the rise, painters and sculptors the world's leading museums will be surveying tomorrow. This year's edition is no exception. Herewith, discover the artists of the future at Art Basel Miami Beach 2021.

[…]

vanessa german
Kasmin Gallery
New York

vanessa german gathers all sorts of objects—vintage brooches, blue glass bottles, doll shoes, wedding dress scraps—to build ritualistic power figures and tar babies. Drawing on Congolese *nkisi nkondi* sculpture and folk-art practice, german (whose name is styled in all lowercase letters) embellishes her mystical and feminist artworks with beading and clear quartz to evoke a distinct tenderness. Yet the result is seductive and fierce, as german confronts the spiritual weight of multi-generational oppression endured by African American communities.

The New York Times

The Much-Vaunted American Melting Pot, Cracks and All

Columbus, the Middle Passage, the Mayflower. A thought-provoking exhibition, "Arrivals," grapples with the myths and origin stories of how everyone set foot in this country.

JILLIAN STEINHAUER
JANUARY 16, 2022

Vanessa German's "2 ships passing in the night, or i take my soul with me everywhere i go, thank you" (2014), in which two Black girls created from found objects carry model ships on their heads.Credit...Vanessa German and Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art.

[EXTRACT]

The United States has a vexed relationship with immigration. A core narrative of our country is that it is a melting pot, even though our government has excluded different groups of migrants for centuries. The much-vaunted

nickname “nation of immigrants” leaves out those who were here before colonization (Native peoples) and those who were brought here against their will (enslaved Africans). There’s a gap, in other words, between the romantic image of America many of us learn about as children and its grittier realities. “Arrivals,” a thought-provoking exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art, uses historical and contemporary art to probe that gap.

Curated by the art historian Heather Ewing, the show considers how newcomers to this land have shaped it and been received. Notably, the exhibition dispenses with the word “immigration” in favor of something more capacious: “Arrivals” includes those who may not fit official terminology. In its own way, the show still upholds the idea of the United States as a rare melting pot of peoples and ideas — except it’s not starry-eyed about it.

[…]

In Vanessa German’s sculpture, “2 ships passing in the night, or I take my soul with me everywhere i go, thank you” (2014), two Black girls created from found objects carry model ships on their heads. Rather than appearing weighted down, they glide on a skateboard. It seems that the Middle Passage has evolved from solely a burden into an essential part of who they are.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Handmade tales: collage, textile and assemblage pieces abound at Art Basel in Miami Beach

NFTs may be the newest thing but physical objects still hold a warm place in the art world's heart

DANIEL CASSADY
NOVEMBER 30, 2021

vanessa german, Footnote: (2021), Kasmin, New York. Photo by Eric Thayer

[EXCERPT]

The Philadelphia-based artist vanessa german is a storyteller. Every piece of this assemblage sculpture feels like it had a history of its own before it was gathered to form this intricately detailed bust. Found fabrics, vintage hand-blown glass beads, ceramics and Danbury porcelain bells come together to form this work, which, according to the wall text, also includes more poetic materials like “old love”, “new love” and “a lost mind come to find its own self”. german sees art as a way to promote social healing for Black communities in the US, and in her work tries to prioritise creativity and tenderness as a way to reckon with the tragedy of structural racism. This sculpture, priced at $40,000, is one of three on view

Galerie

6 Thought-Provoking Public Art Projects Transforming New York in 2020

From whimsical wunderkammers at Rockefeller Center to a historic recreation on Park Avenue, these projects are sure to cause a stir

DREW CLAYTON
JANUARY 21, 2020

Vanessa German's The Holiest Wilderness Is Freedom installation at Rockefeller Center.
PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ART PRODUCTION FUND

[EXTRACT]

1. Art Production Fund
"Vanessa German: The Holiest Wilderness Is Freedom"
When: Through April 4
Where: Rockefeller Center

For its second consecutive year, New York's Art Production Fund continues its Art in Focus program, which invites artists to create site-specific public works throughout Rockefeller Center that are inspired by and respond to the city.

First up, Pittsburgh-based artist Vanessa German has conceived a series of “cabinets of wonder” that will be displayed in vitrines at 45 Rockefeller Plaza. The Technicolor vignettes encapsulate abstract concepts such as love, imagination, beauty, and nature. Utilizing a variety of recurring materials such as sequins, textiles, crystals, gems, 14K-gold leaf, and found objects, German’s captivating works lure the viewer into the fantastical worlds she creates. In other locations throughout the center are a series of empowering photographs that depict her neighbors as superhero-like figures, with the same conceptual rigor and visual complexity of her three-dimensional works. Titled *The Holiest Wilderness Is Freedom,* it will remain on view through March 5 and will be followed by new projects by Ryan Flores, , Genevieve Gaignard and Sanford Biggers.

shondaland

The Future of Work: The 'Citizen Artist' Bringing Hope to Pittsburgh's Homewood

Vanessa German saved her own life by making art — and breathed new life into her neighborhood by inviting local kids to make it, too.

MAGGIE BULLOCK
APRIL 17, 2019

Courtesy of Wheaton Arts and Cultural Center

Think-tank like festivals can be hit or miss, but I jumped at the chance to attend last week's eighth annual Tom Tom Summit & Festival in Charlottesville, Virginia, and it didn't disappoint. Some 5,000 people showed up for a week of engaging thought-leadership on creativity, urban problem solving, and how to build a "creative ecosystem." Here's one of three women I was lucky enough to snag a private audience with.

When Vanessa German strides onto the stage of Charlottesville's Jefferson Theater, the first thing you notice is her swishing skirt. Stiff and hand-painted in bright cobalt, red, and yellow, its design features a scattering of oversize, unblinking eyes. They peer out at the audience as if to say, "Yes, I am watching you." German is a self-described "Citizen Artist" and, as such, it's true that her gaze — attuned to systemic hypocrisy as well as the both the personal, individual promise and the piercing need within her community — misses little. She's here to deliver one of the festival's keynote speeches but, she informs the audience, what's about to happen is unlikely to resemble any keynote

they've seen before. Underscoring this point, she starts by silently plucking the petals from a clutch of long-stemmed red roses, casting them across the stairs that lead up to the stage she dominates. "Someone's coming up here on the stage," she says, in a tone that is part invitation, part warning, "and I'm doing this now so you can start thinking about if it should be you." Then she walks to center stage, throws back her head, and proceeds to sing — no, blast — a poem into the air. For those who came to this theater expecting to hear a TED-style talk by an influential female fine artist, this powerful, melodic incantation is completely unexpected. The sound is stunning. The audience is rapt.

German is a sculptor, painter, writer, activist, performer, and poet. As a visual artist, she's best known for her sculptural assemblages: Mad, riotously detailed African American "Power Figures" often made of materials found in abandoned buildings and lots. As a "fat, queer, black, wanting-to-be-joyful human being," she credits the making of these figures with keeping her alive. They've also earned her a place on art's main stage, including, in 2018, the prestigious Don Tyson Prize from the Crystal Bridges Museum, worth $200,000.

But as an activist, her success is much closer to home. Growing up, German lived in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Cincinnati. In adulthood she chose to carve out a life for herself in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, where the high rate of gang- and drug-related violence often overshadows a rich artistic and cultural past — and, until a recent boom in gentrification, houses were often foreclosed upon or abandoned. A decade or so ago, German built sculptures in her Homewood basement. But then her pieces got so big, they had to be dismantled in order to be taken out of the house, a process she found heartbreaking. So she started making her art on the front porch, in full view of the curious neighborhood kids. Soon children were dropping by daily, asking questions, watching her work. German got them art supplies. Then their families started coming too. Now there was a community that wanted to make art all the time, rain or shine. A front porch wasn't enough.

Eventually German made ARTHouse official: She bought her first house in Homewood for $3,495, including closing costs. Today she owns two rowhouses, side by side — she lives in one apartment, works in another, and has dedicated one to ARTHouse. Nearly every inch of the building's sky-blue exterior is adorned, with a mosaic of multi-color stars stretching over most of the front stoop and a sweeping sign that reads, "We are all here together." The place is a beacon of light and life in neighborhood that desperately needed one, and a constantly-open space (funded mostly by German herself), where kids, women, and families gather to make art.

As she described this on the stage at Tom Tom, the slide behind her reads, "I believe in the power of art." Listening to her story, it's hard not to agree. (Fun fact: German's cousin, actress Kelly McCreary, has played Dr. Maggie Pierce on *Grey's Anatomy* since 2014).

MAGGIE BULLOCK: What is a citizen artist?

VANESSA GERMAN: When I started calling myself that, I didn't know that anybody else called themselves that. After I started the ARThouse, I needed to find a way to say, "This is the center of my life, and I'm asking you to do everything possible." That sounds romantic, but that's what I'm going to do: Inhabit my citizenship as your neighbor, as a human, as a black person, as a gay person, as an American, as much as I can. People just didn't understand. [They wanted to know] who told me that I could do what I'm doing? "Who said you can just buy a house, put out art

supplies, and then open the door and say anybody can come in? Who says that that's okay? Who funds it? Who did you get the idea from?" It was like I had to explain the permission that I gave myself, so that I could say to people, "You can decide too. As a human citizen, you can decide all by yourself."

MB: Why do you think they were distrustful?

VG: Well, I think that racism and white supremacy are marvelous thieves. We know now about how trauma affects the body. In the most amazing line from the movie *Dark Girls*, about colorism, a white psychologist says, "Do whatever you can in your lifetime to heal the trauma that you have, because you will pass it on to your children." So, in my neighborhood in Homewood that's populated by black people, single mothers, mostly women-led households, it's not a surprise to me that they would say, "Who said you could do this?" Because that question at one point was a matter of life or death.

MB: Your mother was a fiber artist. How did her artistry shape yours?

VG: My mother had a really clear, brilliant creative mind. I think that it was hard for her, even though she loved us and loved having kids, to not have more of her own creative time. One of the ways she raised us to be whole people — and also to make sure that she had her own time — is she'd make us make things. We would choose the fabric for our own clothes, and then lay the pattern out, and cut out our own clothes. We'd make scrunchies for our hair. We'd make our own stuffed animals. She would just set stuff all over the dining room table and be like, "Here."

MB: And your father?

VG: My father, in Milwaukee, worked for Schlitz. He always had these ideas at the plant. He'd say, "You know, if you moved that part over here, you would cut down the time." So he rose up through the ranks. Eventually he got a job at Toyota in Terminal Island in Long Beach, California. My dad, no college degree, loving math and getting into computers, was one of the people who designed the import software for Toyota parts. My dad went to work wearing a suit and smelling like cologne, and my mom stayed home with us.

MB: Sounds pretty traditional.

VG: My mother was also an activist. She was one of the students at the University of Wisconsin who got put in the U-Haul van when the black students took over during the Civil Rights Movement. I remember being afraid of my mother's friends, I could tell that they weren't flaky women, because I'd been around women who were flaky. I remember as a little girl, recognizing that there were different ways that women moved through the world, different ways that women expressed themselves to get what they wanted.

These activists were so strong. They would look me in my eye like they could see through me. I remember being able to play with certain adults, and thinking, "I can't play with these women." My mother spoke a lot of different languages, and she had friends from all over the world, and they would come to the house have these intense conversations. Sometimes they would quilt together. I remember being outside the door of my mother's sewing

room, listening to the sound of their voices, and recognizing that this was serious women's work. And that they were also sort of feeding each other.

Vanessa German, *A Love Poem to Nia Wilson #2*, 2018, mixed-media assemblage
Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art

MB: Growing up, you lived in Milwaukee, L.A, and then Cincinnati. How did you end up in Homewood, which at one point was called the most dangerous neighborhood in America?

VG: In Los Angeles, one of the schools I went to had to physically move its location because there was so much violence around it. In Homewood, five boys were once killed in one weekend. The youngest died of a leg wound. People heard shots, didn't see anything outside. [But] somebody had shot a kid in a vacant lot. The grass was so high that he fell, and nobody saw his body for days, and he bled and died. I remember thinking, "This sounds familiar, like Los Angeles in the '80s and early '90s. Why is it happening in Pittsburgh?" But that doesn't happen every day. It doesn't happen every week. Most people aren't shooting each other. Most people are not running drugs. It's a very small percentage of the population who are engaging in really extreme activities. John Edgar Wideman, who wrote a series of books called *The Homewood Trilogy*, lived in Homewood. Lena Horne hung out in Homewood. Dinah Washington's aunt lived across the street. There were these great basement hip-hop producers in Homewood. There was all this black creativity and black imagination bubbling up — which is not nearly as sensational as 'five little boys got shot and killed in one weekend,' right? All this historical energy is still moving. You can call upon that energy, and use it as an ingredient. I knew that it mattered to be an artist, and to be a part of the fabric of the community, like

how everybody in the neighborhood knows who the teachers are: "Oh, that's Ms. Stevens, she teaches over there." It mattered to be,"She's an artist in this community."

Vanessa German performing in Aetna Theater, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, 2016 Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum

MB: When did you realize that your front porch was more than a neighborhood hangout?

VG: I was making art on the front porch and eventually, you know, kids would make art on the front porch. It wasn't just kids: their parents would come, grandmothers would come, and they'd be like, "This is amazing. We can just sit here and make art. The kids are having a great time, and I can stick this on my wall." Some kids were making crazy beautiful stuff. One boy was obsessed with painting the night sky with stars. He had moved to Pittsburgh from Georgia, and he was trying to replicate the night sky in Georgia, obsessively. It was so powerful to witness.

MB: But awful things kept happening right outside of the ARThouse.

VG: I made "Stop shooting, we love you" signs, and one man that put one in his front yard, somebody went to his door and shot him. Nobody knows why. The news [crew] came to my house after Mr. Jeff was killed. They're like,

"How does it feel to have somebody die in front of this sign?" Over that time, the August Wilson Center for African American culture went into foreclosure, and there was this horrible series of articles in the newspaper that said the people running it didn't have the financial wherewithal to keep this ship afloat. I was like, "You know what? Nobody's going to be able to take that house from me. I'm going to buy a space. I'm going to buy it in cash." It'll function as my studio and I'll keep opening the front door. There will never be an article in the newspaper like, "They couldn't handle it, they couldn't keep it a float." I bought two houses next to each other. And one of them is the ARThouse.

Vanessa German, *A Love Poem to Nia Wilson #2*, 2018, mixed-media assemblage.
Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art

MB: How has your own depression informed your trajectory as an artist?

VG: I grew up making art. Before I necessarily called myself an artist, I was a teaching artist in school programs whose mission was, like, "Heal communities of color through engagement." But that wasn't present inside of some of the programs. I watched people taking advantage of children, taking money from programs for children, all while saying they were doing something good, giving themselves pats on the back. That pain piled up inside of me, on top of recognizing all around me that as neighbors and communities, we were not able to be with each other: We were losing eye contact, and unable to hear each other's stories. There's a lot of fear around saying what you saw, saying what you feel about it. Fear of being found to have feelings about a thing. I couldn't really figure out how to keep myself inside of the energy that it took to hustle so hard, to keep the lights on. I was like, "Is this what being alive is going to be?" I had the kind of depression that I hated mornings, because it meant there was a whole day ahead.

MB: During your Tom Tom keynote, you said there was a six-month period where you were living in a basement apartment that had no running water, just trying to keep yourself alive. How did you do that?

VG: I stopped working for anybody else. I was like, "I'm going to see what's possible. I'm going to do whatever I want." I picked up stuff off the ground — free art supplies in the vacant lot. Free art supplies in the partially fallen-down hall. That's literally where I got the first wood I worked with: banisters from stairs. I pulled the nails out of other things. And the morning changed for me, because I thought, "What am I going to find today?" I was making stuff. I didn't call it art until a dealer came to my house and was like, "I can sell these." I figured if he's paying me

$3,000 for that thing I made in my basement, I wonder how much he's selling it to somebody else for? I thought, this can sustain my life. This sustained my soul. I am healthier than I was when I started this. And, I could do this every day.

MB: Last year, you won a big art award. How does $200,000 change things?

VG: The money doesn't so much change the day to day, because I have an active work life as an artist. When I won, I called my accountant. She goes, "You know that's not $200,000 right?" She was like, "Your tax rate is click, click, click, click [mimes punching a calculator]. What you won was $123,000." One of the things that was important about that prize was that I had absolutely no idea it was happening. I don't live in New York or Los Angeles. The work is alive in the world. When the man called to tell me I won, I said, "Who nominated me?" He said, "Vanessa several people nominated you." As a self-taught artist, people were literally like, "Well, Vanessa, you'll be a certain kind of artist. You can do those great summer festivals by rivers and you'll be able to sell your stuff." And I was like, "Oh, OK. I'll be a certain kind of artist." One person literally said, "You'll be the kind of artist who will have to ask people if they will show your work." It was really important for me to have people from outside of the world that I came up in look at my work, and look at my life, and say, "That's good, that's important. It's right. It's right for now."

Vanessa German, *sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies.*, 2017, mixed-media installation. Courtesy of The Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA. Currently on view at The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia through July 7, 2019. Photograph by Tom Little

Los Angeles Times

Review: Black, female and strong: Vanessa German's sculptures voice their power without sound

LEAH OLLMAN
APRIL 13, 2019

If you've seen "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983," the electrifying show at the Broad museum, you may sense a vibrant, relevant thread reaching toward Gavlak gallery, where the sculptures of Vanessa German in her first L.A. show are holding forth with commanding presence.

German was raised in L.A. and now lives in Pittsburgh, where her commitment to resilience and renewal manifests in her practice not only as a visual artist but also a poet, performer and community activist. At Gavlak, the radiant stars of the show are five figures that stand a bit smaller than human height but which possess outsize energy, thanks to their declarative stance and the materials of their composition. Their bodies and features are baroque accretions of the everyday and the emblematic: shells, bottles, keys, stuffed fabric pouches, string, beads, rhinestones.

As in the Central African tradition of nkisi, these are power figures composed of empowered objects and intended to heal, protect and ward off evil. They stand on platforms made of skateboards and concrete blocks, as if specially designed to combat the particular perils of contemporary urban life.

"A Physical History of Grace" descends directly from Betye Saar's armed and able Mammy figures. Pouches of stuffed ticking encircling her neck allude to domestic labor; the white baby doll cradled beneath one conical clay breast suggests another way that she serves with her body. But like Saar, German bestows this character with dynamic self-possession. A "No Admittance" sign hangs on her back; a reflective red light dangles between her legs. She stands as an icon of reclaimed control over her person, her fate.

"Been here the whole time," begins a text painted across two walls. "I wasn't waiting for you to ___ me before I could ___ myself. I have been here the whole time." Beneath this all-caps, fill-in-the-blanks mantra of self-sufficiency hang more than a dozen tennis rackets painted with black women's faces and embellished with ornate braids and jewels. One wears gem-encrusted brass knuckles as a crown. Others have hair spiked with feathers and rusty nails.

Though less formidable than the free-standing pieces, these too render the assemblage tradition itself something to pick up, turn over and use as needed. German's work brings to mind not only Saar but also Joyce Scott and Shinique Smith. Strength — physical and spiritual — exudes from her work as if audibly, a proud shout.

"A Physical History of Grace," 2019, by Vanessa German. Mixed media assemblage, 46 inches by 46 inches by 16 inches. (Gavlak)

Detail of "A Physical History of Grace." (Leah Ollman)

HYPERALLERGIC

#BlackGirlMagic Takes Form In Vanessa German's Sculptures

German's commitment to dynamic and sometimes riotous formal strategies expresses an amalgamation of Black femme iconography, including shrines to Serena and Venus Williams with butterflies.

ALEXANDRA M. THOMAS
DECEMBER 11, 2019

Vanessa German, "More than one thing is happening at the same time" (2019), wood with plaster figures, 35 x 59 x 13 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

If there is anyone in the contemporary art world whose oeuvre expresses the aesthetics of #BlackGirlMagic, then that would undoubtedly be Vanessa German. Her sculptural assemblages and collages — currently on view at Fort Gansevoort— express her unabashed commitment to honoring, representing, and stewarding the beautiful and frightening chaos of Black life. The vibrancy of German's sculptures features formal qualities such as shine, glitter, and a wide range of colors. In their energetic production, these works are indicative of German's commitment to dynamic and sometimes riotous formal strategies that express an amalgamation of Black femme iconography, including shrines to Serena and Venus Williams with butterflies, and flowers adorning Black women's hair.

I knew upon entering TRAMPOLINE that German considers her sculptures to be power figures, therefore, I approached them as such, reckoning with their magic, power, and associations with African spirituality and Black

kinship networks. It is rather uncanny — the same Western art markets that once removed the raffia and nails from so-called African "fetishes" now have a taste for the African diasporic aesthetics of power objects.

Vanessa German, "Venus Madonna Of Tenderness To Tender the Touch and the Sight and the Knowing Upon This Earth" (2019), mixed media collage on New York Times magazine, 42.5 x 24 x 9 inches

German is not the first Black woman artist to grapple with African power objects: in 1988, Renee Stout appropriated the form of Central African *Minkisi* figures in her self-portrait, "Fetish #2." In African art history, power figures are generally vessels through which higher powers can influence everyday life: power figures protect, punish, and heal. Whether it is a Nkisi figure from the modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, or a Fon Bocio figure from modern-day Benin, African power figures are assemblages of various materials and are often used within ritual contexts. Popular traditional accoutrements, such as textiles and cowrie shells, are also present in German's sculptures. Other materials in German's sculptures include: butterflies, neon letters, black hair, and sneakers.

Like traditional African power figures, German's sculptures have textile pouches and containers that remind me of traditional medicine packs that hold materials intended to fill the object with power. Thus, German draws on African spirituality in order to turn everyday materials into ones that exude #BlackGirlMagic through ancestral modes.

While *TRAMPOLINE* is a solo exhibition, German's sculptures resist individualism and univocality through her political and aesthetic commitment to mutability, assemblage, ancestral memory, and collective being. For example, "More than one thing is happening at the same time" (2019) comprises an oceanic scene with three Black figures among waves energetically painted in several blue hues. I read this sculptural installation as German's exploration of collectivity, or what the late Black studies scholar Cedric Robinson would call "ontological totality." The work evokes the gruesome history of Africans who were thrown overboard during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as well as those who jumped overboard in rebellion against their enslavement.

This work's monumentality honors the collective ancestral trauma of racial slavery and the Middle Passage while also assembling a Black collective — Black kinship networks — born from trans-oceanic migration. German's sculptures

reckon with violence and trauma inflicted on racialized and gendered people while simultaneously marking their resilience.

Vanessa German, "Hyper Sensitive Feeling Machine Body.Soul.Emotion. Volume Control" (2019), mixed media assemblage, 55 x 30 x 17 inches (courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

"You Will Have to do Your Best to Fly Away From Them Hands That Come to Take You Outta Your Own Soul" (2019) is another sculpture that functions as an altar, enshrining Black girlhood and resistance into its formal and political qualities. It is grandiose, consisting of a baroque chandelier, butterflies, intricately beaded lizard, and flowers. The neon "JUMP" narrates the action of the figure, presumably a Black girl, who has leaped from the grasp of white hands attempting to grab her, amid the street sign which warns, "DANGER UNSAFE AREA." German's work illustrates Black women's and girls' insistence upon freedom despite their compounded vulnerability as they navigate interlocked systems of oppression.

A true alchemist, German's mixed media sculptures and collages combine both mundane and eccentric materials, yielding portrayals of figures that honor, protect, and empower black girls, women, and their communities. To navigate *TRAMPOLINE: Resilience & Black Body & Soul* is to wander into three floors of #BlackGirlMagic, accompanied by a vast range of material, narratives, and experiments with the aesthetics of Black diasporic collectivity and spirituality. German's persistent reckoning with empowerment and adoration offers a welcome counter in the face of racism and sexism.

Vanessa German, "You Will Have to do Your Best to Fly Away From Them Hands That Come to Take You Outta Your Own Soul" (2019), mixed media assemblage, 96 x 48 x 14.5 inches (courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort and Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, New York)

East Village Magazine

“Miracles and Glory Abound”: Artwork of Vanessa German at FIA through April 20

HAROLD C. FORD
JANUARY 30TH, 2019

Vanessa German (Photo provided by Flint Institute of Arts)

“The future belongs to the human beings who have the creativity and the courage to live inside the truth.” …Vanessa German, 2017

Vanessa German discovered the transforming power of art when she escaped a particularly dreadful phase of her life by collecting things as she walked her dog to find relief from the gloom. “I would pick up little objects and things from vacant lots, from around abandoned houses in my neighborhood,” she told a Pittsburgh audience in 2017. She took the objects—shards of glass, buttons, cans, swatches of fabric, glass bottles, scraps of paper—to the basement of her Pittsburgh home and put them together to create works of art.

“A shard of glass looks worthless, “said German. “But when you put those shards together you can create an entirely new picture.”

"I found that when I was in the process of creating these figures something happened to me. Something came over me so holy, and truly, and completely, that I was changed by the process…I could contend with the despair."

ARTISTIC STYLE ROOTED IN CHILDHOOD

Creativity was bred into her during her childhood as the middle child of five siblings raised in Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s.

"I was really influenced by my mom (a quilter) who basically kept us safe and kept us alive by keeping us in the house," German said. "She would make us make stuff. She would put art supplies all over the table and we would have to make our own lives."

"We made our own clothes, toys, books, recordings, plays, "she recalled. "So I really grew up my whole life understanding that I did not have to outsource my own fun (or) creativity. I could make the things of my life."

"I never experienced the great music or arts school, "she said. "I always felt like I was an artist and could always do whatever I wanted to do."

ASSEMBLAGE ART

According to Hilary Robinson, professor of feminism, art, and theory at England's Loughborough University, German's style, dubbed "assemblage art" by the art community, is "part of an aesthetic tradition that has a strong thread within art by African American artists."

Robinson's comments are contained in an new 63-page book, *Miracles and Glory Abound,* produced by the FIA and meant to complement the exhibit of the same name. Many assemblage artists, according to Robinson, "have marginalized cultural and political identities, or (are) from sexualities that have been regarded as deviant and criminalized." Thus, Robinson continues, "the strength of assemblage as a mode of art-making amongst African American artists is striking."

John Henry, FIA executive director, explained in the foreword to the companion book that he saw German's work at the Pavel Zoubok Gallery in New York City in 2016. "I knew at that moment that not only did a work of hers need to be in the FIA permanent collection, but that such an assembly of sculptures would make for a fantastic exhibition." Prior to installation of the current exhibit, German conducted workshops with young people at the Berston Field House, the Boys and Girls Club, and in the Flint Cultural Center in July 2018. On the weekend of the exhibition opening, she visited with students and educators at Mott Community College and the Flint Public Library.

MIRACLES AND GLORY ABOUND

The centerpiece of German's FIA exhibit is a mixed-media installation titled *Miracles and Glory Abound* (2018), a life-sized representation of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1851), the iconic painting by Emanuel Leutze. Leutze's painting is a representation of a foundational story about the birth of America. It is the visual narrative of George Washington leading Continental soldiers across the Delaware River in 1776. German's *Miracles and Glory Abound* challenges the Leutze narrative.

"Who gets to shape-shift that story?" German asked her FIA audience. "Who gets to create the images for those stories of American greatness?" German's take on the Leutze painting is reminiscent of Robert Colescott's painting, *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975), in that all the human figures are obviously African American.

"*Miracles and Glory Abound* with its boat full of figurative sculptures, functions as both a continuation of and a disruption of the canon," according to Holly Bass, a writer and performance artist.

Miracles and Glory Abound, Vanessa German (2018)

"She (German) inserts and asserts her Blackness, her womanness, her multivalent queerness, into this ongoing American narrative and asks us to consider the birth of this nation, a mythology of chopped cherry trees and founding fathers lying through wooden teeth."

"The political meets the spiritual meets the cultural," German said of *Miracles and Glory Abound*. "They meet in a way of my understanding of rightness."

POWER, COLOR, INTENTION

German's artwork frequently includes female figures that she calls "power figures." Pittsburgh Post-Gazette writer Diana Nelson Jones described them in this way:

"Festooned with buttons, beads, shells, toys and other objects, each is a personified experience, the persona centered in a head painted black with objects on top of it or shooting from it."

In addition to those assembled aboard the boat on *Miracles and Glory Abound*, German's "power figures" are ever present in the artist's other pieces chosen for the FIA exhibit including: *oh for the healing of the blues* (2016); *imagine then, seeing your own face, outside of your own face, for the very first time* (2018); and *we are the animals are us* (2017).

"oh for the healing of the blues" (2016) Vanessa German (Photo by Harold C. Ford)

"This is my neighborhood," German said of her artistic personages during the FIA walk-through. "I created a family that is looking."

The color palette of German's neighborhood is dominated by red, white, black, blue, and gold. Colors, as well as objects, are the lexicon that guide her collection of objects that may become incorporated into her art.

"There are other colors too," Bass writes,"…yellow, pink, bits of orange and green, the faceted brown-black of African masks and dark skin."

"Everything is intentional," German said. "You'll always see birds because birds, in my lexicon, stand for true liberty…Everything means something."

AFRICAN INSPIRATION

Discerning makers of art familiar with German's work detect a style inspired by Africa. Artist and poet Daniel Simmons writes: "German's works are that of a modern magical diviner, drawing power from accumulated objects from personal history, community, and the society in which she resides and creates. Like the traditional makers of nkisi, who used various materials available to them, such as bones, nails, pieces of mirrors, and herbal potions to infuse magic into the objects…"

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Nkisi are spirits, or an object that a spirit inhabits. The term is frequently applied to objects found in the Congo Basin in Central Africa.

GERMAN'S FLINT CONNECTEDNESS

German may feel kinship with a city whose public perception is that of a beleaguered urban center wracked by crime, poverty, and infrastructure failures. Homewood, her adopted neighborhood in easternmost Pittsburgh, was described as "the most dangerous neighborhood in America" by MSNBC journalist Rachel Maddow.

Reminding her audience that she is a native of Pennsylvania "fracking country," she said she understands the importance of clean, safe, drinking water. "We have to think politically about water," she said during her visit to the FIA. She stood with Native Americans at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation to oppose the construction of oil pipelines under natural waterways.

Humanness is likely the only commonality that German needs to find connectedness. She told a 2017 audience: "We are earthling siblings, gravity-bound, oxygen-breathing, creatures of carbon star-shine, and dust. We are 99 to 99.9 percent genetically identical."

c-ville

Restorative justice: Vanessa German's art celebrates black lives

RAENNAH LORNE
FEBRUARY 20, 2019

"There's an incredible well of creativity that it takes to endure your humanity when it feels like you're not in the right skin." Vanessa German in Avery Court, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, 2016. Photo: Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum.

Vanessa German grew up in Los Angeles in a creative household, wearing clothes her artist mother made, writing stories, and crafting creations from the scrap materials her mom laid out on the dining room table for her and her siblings. "We were makers as a way of life," says German, the 2018 recipient of the $200,000 Don Tyson Prize, which recognizes "significant achievements in the field of American art."

"My earliest memories of joy and knowing and understanding a sense of euphoria in being alive was through making things—the joy of gluing lace to cardboard and realizing I could make a separate reality in a story different than what existed in living reality. That is the way we came to know ourselves."

She speaks on the phone from an artist residency in Mexico, where she is preparing a new body of work for a solo show, opening in Los Angeles in March. This new work is her special baby, she says, because it will be installed in the city "where I came to love the feeling of making art, the process of being in materials—being in a relationship with them and activating that relationship with intention."

The as-yet-untitled new work is a series of sculptures and wall works constructed inside the frames of tennis rackets. "There is a point of classical mechanics," German says, "that talks about the moment of inertia, the torque that it takes to bring something back to center." The tennis rackets represent her experience of growing up black in L.A. "when hip-hop became hip-hop and AIDS became AIDS," she says. Like her previous work, it reckons with mortality. But it also explores what it meant "to be alive in a culture of celebrity," she says, in which Leonardo DiCaprio and other child stars were among her classmates and she learned to play tennis in Compton where Venus and Serena Williams practiced.

It's about "what it was to be black in that environment and creative and sort of wild…how you make yourself as a black person…and what that is to find your center, the force of motion." After her exhibition opens in Los Angeles, German will come to Charlottesville for a week-long residency at The Fralin Museum of Art at UVA, where her sculpture and sound installation, "sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies," opens this week.

She created this work, which premiered in 2017 at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh—where she has lived since 2001 —in response to the "ongoing deaths" and unsolved murders of black women and girls in Pittsburgh. "I think of it as an act of restorative justice, a healing ceremony by sight," she says. Some of the sculptures in the installation are heads without bodies, solemn faces, and closed eyes, adorned with headpieces made of found objects, from tree branches to ceramic figurines. Other sculptures are vivaciously dressed bodies without heads, their expressive fingers pointing, flipping the bird, or forming fists.

She found some of the materials that compose the sculptures in her neighborhood of Homewood—in the alleyway near her house, on the street, in dumpsters—and some items people left on her porch. Once, a person left an entire box of shoes—large, glittery, funny, and beautiful shoes, she says, that were likely used in a drag performance. She is particularly moved by the lives of black transgender women, and notes the prevalence of violence against them. "There's an incredible well of creativity that it takes to endure your humanity when it feels like you're not in the right skin," German says.

"sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies" can be read in two ways. The first is the experience of someone whose loved one has been murdered in the street and she cannot go to her because the body is cordoned off by police tape. The second is the interiority of trauma itself and the dissociation a person may experience from her own body in order to survive the experience.

"As a descendant of enslaved Africans," German says, "the soul of my culture, the soul of my people, is you attend to a body in a very special way in the space they have died. The ways bodies are tended to in a Western capitalist, patriarchal culture contributes to the trauma."

She recalls how the body of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, lay uncovered in the street. "This continued the horror, for his body to be treated like he wasn't a person, like he wasn't a boy just an hour before," she says. Yet there is something of triumph and celebration in her installation. With its vibrant colors and the sound of dance music and uplifting voices mixed among whispers, it is, German says,

“a force that can galvanize the sense of terror and tragedy and simultaneously connect that tragedy with the beauty and miracle it was that our people lived and were whole, miraculous, stunning human beings.”

Vanessa German, American, b. 1976. “sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies.”, 2017.
Mixed-media installation. Image courtesy of the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA. Photographed by Tom Little.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Vanessa German marries art, activism

TONY NORMAN
JANUARY 16, 2018

Haley Nelson/Post-Gazette

Vanessa German, an artist known for her citizen activism through art, was walking her dog in Frick Park in November when she got a call from a Chicago area code. United States Artists, a philanthropic arts organization that has awarded more than $22 million to artists since 2006, was calling with good news: Ms. German, 41, had been selected as a recipient of a $50,000 USA Fellowship along with Pittsburgh multidisciplinary artist Bill Shannon and 43 others from across the country. Mr. Shannon won in the dance category and Ms. German in the visual arts category.

“It’s an award that someone in the art world nominated me for,” Ms. German said of the group of anonymous scholars, critics and artists across nine disciplines chosen by USA Artists to do the initial round of nominations. In past years, she had been invited to nominate others for the prize. Despite national and international acclaim for her art in recent years, Ms. German didn’t expect to win the grant. She is self-taught with no earned academic credentials despite a long list of universities where she has lectured over the years.

Winners can use the $50,000 however they want. Past winners have used it for everything from furthering an artistic project to paying outstanding medical bills.
In March, Ms. German will go to Chicago for a Fellows Assembly that will bring this year's winners together. She has had a good run lately. Last year, she won the American Academy of Arts and Letters Jacob Lawrence Award and a single artist Matrix exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. She has hilarious and sobering tales about a trip to the Czech Republic last year.

In recent weeks, she has been putting together an exhibition for Concept Art Gallery in Regent Square. It's called "The incredibly true sometimes humorous often horrific adventures of a wacky black girl, or, a visual ritual into the power of the black imagination."

Ms. German's "power figures" are playful, totemic sculptures exuding equal amounts of joy and trauma. She depicts women, most of them black, in various stages of self-discovery, confrontation or defying annihilation.
"I'm mining the cells of my body for information," she said. She refers to the "technology of my soul" — a process of surrendering her whole self to the mystery of creating. Her use of found objects and material in her work is an instinctive, revelatory process. "I'm making power figures from a place of being a black person — a female person," she said. "Power figures are meant to protect, feel and articulate without words."

If Ms. German's work were parts of speech, they would all be verbs, even the ones that appear quiet in repose. Their features are exaggerated and their bodies are contorted, yet graceful. They carry the weight of found objects and commercial detritus with goddess-like grace.

"I can create a sense of movement, urgency, horror, disgust inside a sculpture," she said. "I'm making art to shape-shift the reality. Making art is a matter of life and death. In my work, everything means something — every element."
"Vanessa was particularly impressive," said Deana Haggag, president and CEO of United States Artists. "Our panel was eager to fund her work. We were immediately drawn to the caliber of her sculpture and her citizen [artistry]."
She noted how Ms. German marries art and activism. In addition to creating majestic sculptures that art lovers find so arresting, she teaches children how to create art at her ARThouse project in Homewood.

"[Vanessa] creates work that sits at the intersection of contemporary practice, social change and human rights," Ms. Haggag said. "All of her work is beautiful and compelling. She's wonderful." Previous local winners of the USA Fellowships include poet Terrance Hayes (2011), now poetry editor of The New York Times, Rust Belt photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier (2014) and Jasiri X (2015), a hip-hop artist who is reconnecting rap to its activist roots while mentoring the next generation of media savvy young people through the "1 Hood" initiative.

In addition to the Concept Art Gallery exhibit, Ms. German has several pieces currently on display as part of the Mattress Factory's 40th anniversary exhibition. The prolific artist has created hundreds of paintings, drawings and sculpture pieces. During an interview, she sketches on the white surface of a pedestal. "I make art in order to survive the next 365 days," she said. "Art is my way of answering: What do I have to do?"

"Souvenir of Our Trip," a sculpture by Vanessa German

Vanessa German's mixed media installation "sometimes we. cannot be. with. our. bodies." Is included in the exhibition "New Installations: 40th year" at the Mattress Factory museum on the North Side."

BOMB

There Is Life and Death in the Power of the Tongue: Vanessa German

"I gave myself this education on my own eye and on my own instincts. I was trying to find a place of resonance."

JESSICA LANAY
APRIL 18, 2018

Vanessa German, *Delia Quilt I,* 2015. Silkscreen on found quilt. 44 x 30 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York.

When interdisciplinary artist Vanessa German talks about infusing loving-power into her artwork, she uses a language of dispersal. Her metamorphic power figures are vehicles and sculptural activists in the world, charged

with intention. For German, creativity is an act of self-love that is meant to make viewers complicit, through looking and hearing, in questioning what is possible. German's work was recently featured in the exhibition *New Installations* at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh and is currently on view at Pavel Zoubok Gallery as part of the group show *Piecework*. In the interview that follows, German attests to the artistic process of self-exploration through attending to one's own ideas and imaginative world. She asks: What would we do if we could do anything? What if we only tried?
—Jessica Lanay

Jessica Lanay If you could speak a brief manifesto for being a citizen-artist, what would you say?

Vanessa German
First is to stand outside the jar of racism and to breath in the authority of your human citizenship, that you are an earthling—carbon, literally star shine. Then, living in active communication with nature, because you are nature. A citizen-artist is, for me, that I center the idea that I believe that all human beings deserve and have the right to be as dimensionally, safely human as they can dare to be. Standing at the center of that and turning dimensionally in the sphere to say: I have one life; I will die; and what is the best way, the most thorough way, the most selfishly compassionate way—because compassion is a circle—that I can inhabit the living actions I believe all humans deserve?

JL
What do you hope to exchange between yourself, your art, and the community?

VG
Before I answer the question about giving to other people, I am selfish. I want to be with my ideas; I want to do whatever I want to do. I center myself. I center my joy. I enjoy people. I ask people: What would you do if you could do whatever you want to do? They might say they would spend their first three days sleeping in. But what after that? What would you do with your legs? What would you do with your ideas? That's actually something I think is a matter of survival. To really start asking human beings—"If you could design your life and your day, what would you do?"—it probably just sounds crazy, elitist, and full of shit for an artist like me to ask this. But I think it is important to connect to that earthling and human place on behalf of the earth. What is possible? We have repeated old, violent ideas for a long time. We could do different things.

JL
What is the connection between your creative practice and your will to live?

VG
I feel like it is hard to be alive sometimes. It is hard to feel things. I found that it behooves me to center the things I love and that bring me joy. This is a good way to be alive—to live with deep nourishment from the substance of your own ideas. I wish I could live for two hundred years and do that. Creativity and the will to live is the space of being in communication with the mysteries of my own humanity, the mystery of dreaming. I have been in mental health situations when they ask those questions: "Do you think of harming yourself? Do you see things?" I wanted to see

what happens, so I said, "Yeah, I see things." Everything just stopped. And she says, "What do you see?" And I said, "Sometimes I see a sculpture I am supposed to make crossing the street or in the shadow of a place." And she says, "And you make it?" And I said, "Yeah, I make it." Then she goes, "But you know that's not real, right?" And I felt bad for her. I was like, I pity this human. It is so interesting to me, listening to my ideas, and calling on my ancestors, and trusting my instincts—that's so fascinating. If I have to pretend like I have it all together—then I don't ever want to have it together.

Vanessa German, *sometimes. we. cannot. be. with. our. bodies*. 2017.
Mixed-media installation at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Image courtesy of the Mattress Factory.

JL

I listened to a poem of yours where you talk a lot about making listeners complicit in healing. Can you talk about that?

VG

I do that in my sculptures, too. I had this experience where I very quickly learned that you could set intention inside of the act itself: complicity in listening and complicity in sight; looking at art and being complicit in whatever secret purpose or riddle is inside of it just by sight. I wrote the poem experiencing how much love I could put into this poem. How do I know it is love? Just thinking about all of the different cultures and civilizations and the writers and the poets who have had a phrase for the idea that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. I thought, let me see if there is life in it. I started to think about the field of sound, how sound is physical, how sound waves touch, how certain frequencies of sound do things. I thought to myself that this sound with this intention coming through my biology and touching the skin of people who are listening will cause this intention to ride the sound wave. It touches the skin, and the skin is an organ, and it is going to do this to the brain, and everybody in this room is making the same prayer with me.

JL

Can you tell me more about your power figures?

VG

Most of the time now I am not working at a small scale. I am not working at a doll-size scale. I am constructing with building materials: concrete, plaster. I am making hands. All the faces are made by hand. People see how productive I am, and they think I have a factory. They are all hand-fashioned; there is a space-saver behind it made of Styrofoam or a ball of taped-up newspaper from which I build out. One of the things that shifts is when the work shows in different spaces. I had to learn to make things modularly to get them out of the house. Making heads and making features are very important to me; I feel like I am making somebody's face.

JL

When I look at the power figures I see Gelede masks, I see Congolese *nkisi*, I see Malian animal headdress, I see all of these influences. How intentional are these inclusions?

VG

I feel like it was Sam Black—it might have been Sam—who said: "You are doing that thing they do in the Congo, this thing with these nails"; and I responded that I had no idea what he meant. And I remember him saying that I needed to do research. He was saying that it is a part of me. I did a little bit of research, and I started looking at pictures of tribal art. I met Renee Stout, and I saw her work, and I showed her what I was creating. She said that a lot of women are afraid to make things that aren't pretty—don't ever be afraid of that. I understood that it doesn't have to be pretty; I don't have to render the Black figure like a Black Barbie doll, like a Black plastic poured into a White mold. I don't have to do that; I am going to do whatever I want to do. That's when I said that I am going to give myself permission to trust the feeling of yes; this is going to get me closer to that place that is the source of these ideas, these remnants of ancient things—I want to be in connection with that place. I would just look at pictures, and I would look through them fast. I wanted to turn the volume up on that feeling of rightness. I gave myself this education on my own eye and on my own instincts. I was trying to find a place of resonance.

JL

You are a photographer, a performer, a sculptor, a painter, a collagist; you do assemblage. How did you come to recognize and then use all of your capacities?

VG

Because on the other side of it was death—that's how. When you're faced with that, oh, it is not forever. I want to be with my ideas, and I want to do these things, and I can't afford to go to school and have somebody teach me stuff. So, I am going to put myself in close proximity to the people that are doing it; I am going to ask questions, ask if I can help; I am going to ask what your tricks are; and I am going to listen to your stories. That's how I want to be alive. It really came down to how I want to be alive. It came down to: Do I want to be alive? It felt like it hurt to wake up and step out into the world. Then it was like—this is a way to make a life. What is hard is that the world is telling you who can make a life this way and how they can make a life as an artist. Oh, they spent $600,000 at Yale to do that? So, you see these veins of possibility, and you ask if you fit into it.

Vanessa German, *i come to do a violence to the lies of ugly*, 2016. Mixed-media assemblage.
78 x 32 x 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York.

JL

Do you consider your practice of creation to be a form of worship? Is there a spiritual connection?

VG

It is very spiritual. My studio is an intellectual and a spiritual space. There is balance to that. I find that there is a diminishing to spiritual places. I visited an MFA crit class at Carnegie Mellon University, and when the students would ask me to respond to their work, I would begin with the phrase: I feel. One of the students asked me, why are you telling us what you feel? I realized that this is not something they are being trained to recognize is valuable—to be in conversation with I think, I see, I feel. There is a devaluing of this mysterious place and this place of emotional urgency. There is a devaluing of something deeply powerful that happens to the human body during the act of creation—it is really potent. I center a different way of thinking about what an artist is and what an artist can be in the places where artists are making and the proximity that the artist has to the people. Making transforms.

Vanessa German, *I am armed. I am an army,* 2016. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Pavel Zoubok Gallery, New York.

JL

If you could say anything to anyone right now about your work, what is it?

VG

I would like to say to Barack and Michelle that as you are preparing the new library I have several works that would just—I am sure as the architecture is coming together—can be just stellar additions to the building and to the spirit and to the spirit of human community and connection that you are working with. I am sustained by my art, but whatever you want you can have—it would be an honor to have work in either the foundation building or the library. Barack and Michelle Obama—thank you.

ARTnews

Vanessa German Wins $200,000 Don Tyson Prize

CLAIRE SELVIN
DECEMBER 18, 2018

Vanessa German in Avery Court at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.
ALLEN PHILLIPS/COURTESY WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

German is a Pittsburgh-based sculptor, painter, writer, activist, performer, and poet. She is the founder of Art House, a space in the city's Homewood neighborhood where women, children, and families can create art. A selection of her sculptures of African-American "power figures," which she builds with found objects, figured in the 2014 exhibition "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now" at Crystal Bridges. German will appear in a PBS documentary called *State of the Art*, which premieres in April 2019.

German said in a statement, "Art has been transformational in my life, particularly in confronting and contending with the dimensional violence of racism. I create art works, experiences and spaces of social healing, connection, and

expression. This award not only allows me to deepen my studio practice and anchor the Art House, but it also provides an opportunity to pay it forward and continue the work of my mother, Sandra German, who affirmed the lives, activism, and creative power of those around her."

The Don Tyson Prize, named for former Tyson Foods CEO and chairman Don Tyson, was established in 2012 when Crystal Bridges received a $5 million endowment from the Tyson family and Tyson Foods, Inc. The museum's Tyson Scholars of American Art program was also launched that year. Since its inception, the prize has been endowed with an additional $5 million from the family and company. The inaugural award was given to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., in 2016.

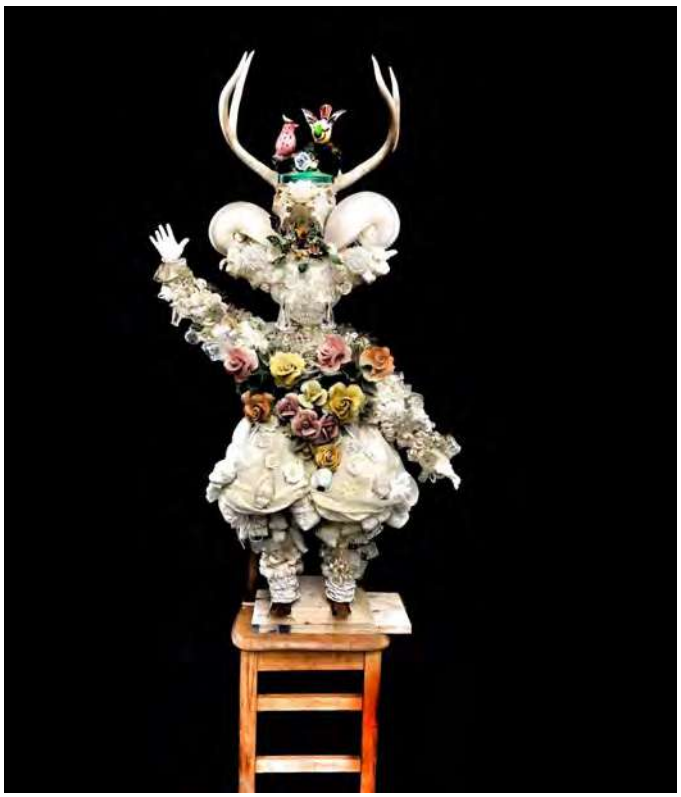
Art & object

Vanessa German Recognizes How Society Fails Black Girls

ANITA BATEMAN
SEPTEMBER 13, 2018

Vanessa German, *Things Are Not Always What They Seem: Spirit Creature for the Afterlife of Little Black Girls (detail)*, 2018. Carl Hammer Gallery, VANESSA GERMAN / *Things Are Not Always What They Seem: A Phenomenology of Black Girlhood*

Pittsburgh-based visual and performance artist Vanessa German, known for her activism as well sculptures incorporating found objects and female figurines, considers the experience of a vulnerable, underserved, and criminalized segment of America in the exhibition, *Things Are Not Always What They Seem: A Phenomenology of Black Girlhood*. Recalling a foundation of artists who use mixed-media assemblage to relay messages about social issues affecting the black community (see Betye Saar, Renee Stout, and Kahlil Robert Irving), German's work combines diasporic consciousness and African religious traditions—specifically referencing minkisi, or spiritual effigies of the Kongo people. German represents the accumulative trauma enacted upon the black body in subtle ways, such as including chilled lead shot bags in *She Missed—Without Knowing What She Missed* and alluding to the violent murder of Nia Wilson, a Bay Area teenager, by a white supremacist in *A Love Poem to Nia Wilson #2*. Each work stands on its own platform in the gallery, forming a squad of silent witnesses to the precarious circumstances that reflect systemic injustices.



Vanessa German, *Things Are Not Always What They Seem: Spirit Creature for the Afterlife of Little Black Girls*, 2018.

Clocks, mirrors, birds, and other tchotchkes are repeating motifs throughout this body of work, perhaps symbolizing the delicacy of a childhood denied—or lost time—as black girls are perceived as being older and less innocent than their white counterparts. German's intervention evokes the idea of protection—how it is denied and how it extends from self—by virtue of the power icons she references. According to Pavel Zoubok Fine Art, the representing gallery, "[these] figures stand united and in formation to show the ways in which black girls save their own lives, create their own paths and contend with their power and pain to triumph in a hostile environment." True, Black girls, like nkisi nkondi are containers of infinite power, vast worlds, and secret lives. However, resilience is often used as a conciliatory admiration in the face of egregious maltreatment. Triumphing in spite of has become an ongoing predicament.

Installation view, Carl Hammer Gallery, *VANESSA GERMAN / Things Are Not Always What They Seem: A Phenomenology of Black Girlhood*

SYRACUSE NEWTIMES

Found Objects Create Fine Artworks At Everson

CARL MELLOR
APRIL 19, 2017

Vanessa German Everson gallery explores race, identity, mass culture.

Vanessa German's artworks include paintings on tissue paper or toilet paper, altarpieces reminiscent of Byzantine icons, and mixed-media sculptures made from tar, plaster and various found objects.

Now she's showing her work at the Everson Museum of Art in the format of a solo exhibition, *de.structive dis.tillation*, which explores notions of race, identity, mass culture. It also documents German's stock in trade: her ability to challenge viewers, to integrate diverse influences, to recycle everyday items.

The exhibit begins in the museum's Sculpture Court with 20 of her sculptures, best described as protectors or power figures. Each has its own face and hairstyle; each stands on a wooden box or table usually topped by a bicycle or skateboard. Each is equipped with "armor," objects ranging from watches and keys to coffee packets, from images of the Virgin Mary to toys depicting an elephant or bird.

There's no template for these sculptures. In one instance, German works with a bevy of cowrie shells. In another, she's placed small African sculptures on the protector's head. In a third, the figure holds a doll with African-American features and has purses wrapped around her. A fourth power figure is decorated with a clock, lantern, whisk brooms, and a small female figure inside a cage.

The sculptures are called female warriors but don't wield weapons such as a rifle or sword. Instead, they are supposed to communicate spiritual energy and help communities deal with conflict and discord. Indeed, German has referred to them as an army of healers, an army of weepers.

They are dressed with objects that the artist and her helpers typically find on curbs in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh: mirrors and nails, glass bottles and electrical sockets. Those familiar items appear in a different visual context, influencing viewers to consider both their role in a specific sculpture and the concept of what's commonplace.

To make that connection, the sculptures have to fully engage the viewers. German has no problem reaching out to an audience. She's made vivid, sometimes eye-popping artworks, each of which has its own personality. In addition, the pieces generate an illusion of movement; it's easy to imagine them thrusting forward. The exhibit also presents six additional power figures in the Robineau Gallery, in the same room as four photographs and 22 adorned paddles created by German. The six figures, all with some form of red color, further document the artist's imagination. One figure rides a tricycle and has a medium-sized African sculpture on her head.

In the Wampler Gallery, there's a selection of German's black Madonnas, 45 small paintings of African-American women. Each is positioned on a page cut from *Black Beauty*, a well-known book first published in 1877. Beyond that, three altarpieces, decorated with rhinestones, hang on the gallery's wall. The most interesting of the trio combines disparate objects: shells, tiny dishes, campaign buttons for Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy, small lids for containers of pressing oil, an image of God the Father as might be seen in an Ethiopian church. It's a fine piece.

The exhibition continues what is a very productive time for Vanessa German. She exhibits her work not only in her hometown of Pittsburgh but also at venues like the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. She has a track record of activism, as demonstrated by her involvement in anti-violence campaigns and her founding of ARThouse, an after-school site for children in her Homewood neighborhood. Lastly, her artworks are influenced by her social concerns, her profound interest in icons, and her commitment to doing work that's drastically different.

Hartford Courant

Wadsworth Atheneum Exhibit Confronts Violence Against African-Americans

SUSAN DUNNE
JUNE 14, 2016

One of 31 sculptures by Vanessa German on display at the Wadsworth-Atheneum. (Mark Mirko / mmirko@courant.com)

There's an army on the march inside the MATRIX Gallery at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford. Its mission is "to do a violence to the lie."

Vanessa German created 31 life-size figures of females, dressed and head-dressed in a heavily symbolic, vividly colored array of fabrics and found objects. They have been placed in military-style formation inside the darkened contemporary-art gallery. With one entrance to the room closed off, visitors must enter face-to-face with the women warriors who are poised to confront "the lie": that African-Americans are lesser members of the human family and that their trials and tribulations needn't concern people of other races.

"The lie is what I consider the big human lie, that we are not all connected," German said. "For me it's a matter of life and death if I do not do violence to the lie. It's the reason that I have lungs."

German is a warrior herself. She wrote in a poem "I am a cannon I will go in at it with my teeth and I have seen the bodies and I have called out the night sky let loose the military of my soul."

Artist Vanessa German stands reflected in the hand mirror of one of her 31 sculptures. (Mark Mirko / mmirko@courant.com)

She lives in "the hood," the Homewood section of Pittsburgh. The drugs, crime and violence that devastate that neighborhood affects its residents with day-to-day fear and anxiety. "The trauma just accumulates," German said. But the violence is ignored by the world outside, which is more interested in reading about crimes against Caucasians. "You wouldn't waste wealth. You wouldn't cast pearls out. But you'd do that to people," she says.

German's fierce females are contemporary variations on traditional West African Nkisi "power figures," which are believed to have magical abilities to bestow protection, fertility, forgiveness, etc. Traditional Nkisi are male or female, but German chose women. "I love the power of women, the secret, unlanguageable, deep connection power women have," she said. "Most of the healers I know are women, in a world of men eagerly warring and communicating death."

CREATING HER WARRIORS

German begins by coating plaster onto baby-doll heads and then painting them with tar, using cowrie shells for lips. She creates clothes from her own wardrobe and from cast-off fabrics she finds. Each color has meaning. Blue symbolizes literally "the blues" and "the cumulative grief, trauma and despair" of the Middle Passage, the stage of the "triangular trade" shipping routes in which slaves were kidnapped, shipped and sold. White symbolizes ghosts, the presence of ancestors, as well as cotton, which many slaves picked. Red symbolizes blood, desire and rage.

"You ought to be outraged. There is a great disparity. There's asbestos in these kids' school, but not asbestos in the school down the street," she said. "I'm not going to shame your rage."

German covers her figures with found objects in thick layers. One figure is draped with medicine bottles, another with buttons, another with bags of coffee, another with nails, another with keys, another with gold ornaments. "I like the accumulation. They're power figures. As an element accumulates, they accumulate that power," she said. Food is a recurring theme: flour bags, coffee bags, biscuit boxes and tins, salt shakers. "My grandmother was a domestic," German said. "I think about the things grandma would have touched to make somebody else's life livable." Birds, too, are a recurring theme, symbols of liberty.

The military formation is inspired by the discovery, in 1974, of an army of terracotta figures in China. The dark-painted walls and low lighting create a cavernous atmosphere, accentuated by an echoey audio track playing on a 15-minute continuous loop, of voices of children, flowing water, vehicles and Sam Cooke's "Change is Gonna Come." At the head of the army a warrior wears a skirt made of leather handbags, her head surrounded by flowers. She carries a baby in one hand and a stop sign in the other, a statement against "the collective cultural shrug against black death. ... She's actively saying the simplest thing: STOP."

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Artist Vanessa German displays her love for Homewood in NYC Walkabout

DIANA NELSON JONES
NOVEMBER 4, 2013

At first glance, Vanessa German's sculptures appear playful. Festooned with buttons, beads, shells, toys and other objects, each is a personified experience, the persona centered in a head painted black with objects on top of it or shooting from it.

The first of her sculptures I ever saw was "The Queen of Homewood," the focus two years ago of a show called "Home" at the Homewood Coliseum. It was the debut of the Warhol Museum's Homewood Artist Residency project. Her piece was part of a habitat she created with artist Tina Brewer.

The figure riveted my attention. She held a tea cup. Her mouth was a sea shell. She was adorned from head to foot by found objects, those of everyday life including bottle caps, spoons and a lighter. It struck me that the head was painted not the brown of skin but the black of pitch or coal.

After inspecting 20 of her works during a recent visit to the Pavel Zoubok Gallery at 531 W. 26th St. in New York City, an expression came to me unbidden: "Exuberant sadness." I tried it out on Ms. German during a visit to the Art House, a studio space where she works with children making art on Hamilton Avenue. She considered the phrase for some time.

"I feel a lot of energy in the word" exuberant, she said. "There's a power in that." Sadness not so much. Her descriptions of her works list materials that went into them, both tangible and intangible, none passive the way sadness is.

Along with buttons, keys, yarn, cloth, toy guns, doll pieces and figurines, ingredients include "the names of all the dead boys that I know," "the spirit of cleansing out the rage," "the shape of sorrow come down the mountain like a rollin' fog," "tears," "sick and tired of having to act like I'm not outraged when something happens that is so clearly outrageous and some everyday anger."

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Fighting the world view that "nobody cares"

DIANA NELSON JONES
OCTOBER 13, 2013

Vanessa German has been called an activist. Thinking just of her artistic merit and her ability to redirect the thinking of her audience, she is that. But outsiders easily ascribe that word to people who make efforts that would be much less remarked upon in a "safe" neighborhood.

The performance artist and sculptor will be performing Friday at the Pavel Zoubok Gallery, 531 W. 26th St., in New York, where her show "Homewood" has been up since mid October. It closes on Nov. 9.

The photos here are of two pieces, *"Self Portrait of the Artist with Physicalized Soul,"* left, and *"Defiance,"* below.

Her activism is what the mainstream would consider quiet. She is an educator. One of her projects is the Art House, a city-owned building in which she oversees children who come after school to make art several doors from her own house in Homewood. She cleans illicit detritus from around it before anyone shows up. Her art is not quiet if you spend time with it. It is laden with the stuff of every day life and the stuff of everyday life where she lives, including intangibles. Her description of "Self Portrait" goes like this:

"Old masted model ship, oil tin, tar, black pigment, white pigment, blue spray paint, cell phones, twine, wire, toy alligators, toy guns, toy hand cuffs, toy boats, pistol key chains, in honor of the ocean, blue iron, 3 birds as thought caught and killed, 2 ceramic horses, blue beads, blue bottles, wooden ashtray feet, my mother's mother was Cherokee, my father's mother's mother was Native American -- her name was Hattie McWoodson, carved wood souvenir head of little girl from Africa, no conclusions to be drawn, porcelain doll heads from bombed out doll

factory in Germany, souvenir clock brought back from Versailles in France, hearts, beads, buttons, twine, keys, the sense of drowning, the fight to stay afloat, tears, blue cloth, wire, wood, plaster, wood glue, wooden stand."
When I interviewed her recently for my Walkabout column, which is scheduled to run in the Post-Gazette next Tuesday on page 2, she talked about her campaign to prove kids wrong when they say "Nobody cares."
In talking to and instructing children, she hears that mantra often: "They say, 'Nobody cares,'" apropos of nothing and everything, she said.

She is trying to prove to the Westinghouse High School Band that people do care. The band had raised about $6,000 of $20,000 it needs to stay afloat. The indiegogo campaign at http://www.indiegogo.com/ projects/help-the-westinghouse-bulldogs has just a few days to go.
She is actively promoting the campaign to help the band buy instruments and uniforms by offering art and performances to people who donate.

"I will make you a handmade, hand painted dress if you donate $150 to the Westinghouse Bulldog Band indiegogo campaign," she wrote on Facebook.

"Would you like this sculpture?" she wrote in another post. "I am gifting this new sculpture to some generous soul who donates to the Westinghouse Bulldogs Band indiegogo campaign. This sculpture is called 'stop crying already, sing a song.'"

She had 22 names in the hat and one person's name in it 10 times in a drawing for the sculpture.

If the band fails to raise the money, it wouldn't prove that nobody cares. Lots of organizations for which people have cared greatly in the past are experiencing the affects of frugality these days. But it would be fodder for an already pretty intransigent world view.

"It hurts my heart," she said. "I think about that in Homewood as a whole. I see so many kids who are hard, kids who think that whatever people think about Homewood is true of them too."

Photos courtesy of the Pavel Zoubok Gallery.