



Shanequa
Gay

carry the wait

Community Folk Art Center
02.12.22-04.29.22

Curator's Statement

Now in its 50th year, The Community Folk Art Center (CFAC) is proud to present “carry the wait”¹ by Shanequa Gay, a distinguished, multidisciplinary artist. In the exhibition titled “carry the wait,” Gay combines photography, painting, and large-scale installation with bold imagery, storytelling, and fantasy to honor the spirit of African-Ascendant Womyn!² This exhibition converges with the celebration of Black History Month and Women’s History Month, and it is part of the short film documentary Black Arts Speak (BAS), a series that I founded to share Black lives and voices through art.

Throughout this exhibition, you will see the melding of body figures, strong prints, and animals into vibrant works of art. Gay’s pieces create a space for stories occupied by Black womyn and beautifully combat stereotypes around Black femininity, turning elements of oppression into pieces of power and elegance. “I see the Black womyn as an imposing figure, as something Divine—a being that should be celebrated,” said Gay during her BAS interview. Gay also explains, “In a nation where a lot of times Black womyn are seen as second tiers to others, using language that says ‘you are the most important person in this narrative’ is critical. I think it is also important to continually put us in a space where our stories matter, not just to us, but as a part of the fabric of this nation.”

The collages in many of the pieces in the “carry the wait” exhibition allowed Gay to detach meaning through juxtaposition and create a more profound visual language for womyn. To her, collage serves as the language of the subversive, the mystical, the nonsensical, and the feminine. I ask Gay to elaborate more about this medium to which she posits, “Collage is not concrete, which makes for a great space for world-building and enables me to tell many stories at once.” In this exhibition, Gay mainly focuses on telling stories about African Americans’ experiences in the South. The Atlanta native also integrates recognizable symbols and references to her hometown to create a place she calls Atlannahland.

Gay is documenting, re-telling, and making up stories occupied by Black girls who “get to shapeshift, rock gold chains links, haloed door knocker earrings and see themselves as divine.” Consequently, the exhibition furthers the larger conversation of Black womyn in wellness, promoting elements of healing, community, and positive self-image, while also filling some of the gaps historical oppression and division creates in Black communities. I see Shanequa’s work as part of a continuing practice of Black womyn artists facilitating healing and wellness for themselves and others within their respective communities through the vehicle of art and artmaking. This exhibition serves as a platform for Black womyn’s visibility and demonstrates Gay’s belief that “The highest love is to be able to tell someone that you see them.”

Gay credits her pursuit of being a professional artist to her family and close friends who have encouraged her over the years. Her work incorporates these bonds, and the bonds of the African Diaspora, in the way she uses community and heritage as a focal point in her pieces. Much of her exhibition features collections of womyn in supportive stances, lending their strength to those around them or engaged in community rituals.

“I am speaking for the—meaning for Black people,” said Gay. “I call upon my ancestors and the deep well of southern Black traditions found in my home place of Atlanta.” Gay hopes that viewers of her exhibition at CFAC can see themselves in her work and understand how their stories impact those around them. CFAC is proud to present this series and facilitate an experience where viewers can explore powerful visual narratives that center on womyn and the African Diaspora.

Tanisha M Jackson

Tanisha M Jackson, Ph.D.

Executive Director, Community Folk Art Center
Assistant Professor, African American Studies

¹The artist requests that the title of her works and sometimes the spelling of her name be in lower-case as an homage to the stylistic and theoretical practice of scholar, bell hooks.

²Womyn is the nonstandard spelling of “women” adopted by some feminists in order to avoid the word ending -men. D. Hatton. “Womyn and the ‘L’: A Study of the Relationship between Communication Apprehension, Gender, and Bulletin Boards”, *Education Resources Information Center*, 1995.

*The artist uses this throughout her written narratives about her work.



Isadora Pennington

About Artist Shanequa Gay

Shanequa Gay holds a B.A. from the Savannah College of Art and Design and an MFA from Georgia State University. She lives and works in her native city of Atlanta, GA and is an active member of the Atlanta art community. Her accomplishments include selection for OFF THE WALL, a city-wide Civil Rights and Social Justice Mural initiative led by the Atlanta Super Bowl Host Committee (2019). Her recent exhibitions include *Atlanta Biennial*, Atlanta Contemporary (2021); *Le Monde Bossale*, Art-Mur Gallery, Montreal, Canada, (2021); *Adorned*, Mccoll Center for Arts and Innovation, Charlotte (2020); *Holding Space For Nobility: A Memorial For Breonna Taylor*, Ackland Museum, Chapel Hill North Carolina (2020); and *Lit Without Sherman*, Hammonds House Museum, Atlanta (2019).

Gay exhibits her works and procures residencies within the United States, Japan, and South Africa. She is a Do Good Fellow recipient and an Emory University Arts and Social Justice Fellow, 2020. Gay is also a participant in the European Cultural Centre’s 2022 exhibition presented within the context of the 59th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.

Gay hopes that viewers of her exhibition at CFAC are able to see themselves in her work and understand how their stories impact those around them.

Review of Shanequa Gay's "carry the wait" exhibit The Community Folk Art Center

by Carl Mellor

Shanequa Gay's solo exhibition, "carry the wait," at the Community Folk Art Center, provides a vivid introduction to the work of an artist whose collages tell multiple stories, develop counter-narratives, and integrate notions of ritual and memory.

Viewers will encounter murals painted by Gay on site at the gallery as well as 11 other pieces, each a study for figures appearing in the murals. In her collages, the artist begins with photo images of African American girls and young women, then adds layers such as watercolor, paint, gold leaf and other elements.

Beyond that, the works include items referencing Gay's ties to Atlanta, a city where she was born, raised and currently resides. These include a sign for a Waffle House restaurant, a jar of Tappley's hot sauce, a container of Blue Magic Coconut Oil. Gay has spoken of growing up in the city and of her desire to express what's magical about Atlanta.

And yet, the collages communicate both joy and pain. Gay was a little girl when Atlanta was plagued by a horrific series of murders from 1979 to 1981. At least 28 children, adolescents, and adults were killed. The artist commemorates a community's grief and trauma by inserting an eerie motif into many of the collages at the Folk Art Center: images of eyes. They belong to people who were killed and those who knew them.

That motif is just one aspect of Gay's visual idiom. In the study for "carry the wait," the subject wears a headdress filled with watermelon, peaches, coconut oil, and a person seen in profile, from the shoulders up.

"Door Knocker Saint," meanwhile, depicts a female figure with a Church's shirt, flowery skirt, and a mask.

And there's the study for "Playing in Front of Miss Johnston's House." It both portrays two girls and seems to refer to Gay's 2016 tribute to Kathryn Johnson, a 96-year-old woman killed by police during a botched, no-knock drug raid. After the officers broke down the door to her residence, she fired one shot over their heads, and they responded by firing a volley of 39 shots. The officers tried to argue that marijuana and cocaine were sold from the residence; that claim was totally rejected by the courts. Ultimately, they were convicted of manslaughter and submitting false evidence.

Another artwork, the study for "I Am My Own Temple" combines a female figure, a pencil drawing of a church, and greenish patterns.

The study for "Atlannah" exemplifies Gay's ability to handle different narratives in the same artwork. On one hand, it depicts a young girl who's in a joyous moment and wears a gold-leaf crown. On the other, her glasses have lens replaced with images of eyes from the years of 1979-1981.

These and other collages at CFAC reflect Gay's interest in Black girls and women in a time of wonderment, when many things seem possible. In addition, the works build on the artist's embrace of mythology, her comfort with story telling that encompasses fantasy and contemporary themes.

Consider another of her projects, "Devout Griot: Emotional Keeper." There she worked with video, paintings, 10-foot high sculptural figures best described as hybrids. Each had a human body and the head of a raven, bull, vulture, or other creature.

In addition, Gay's portfolio includes a variety of other exhibition such as "Holding Grace for Nobility: A Memorial for Breonna Taylor" and "Lit without Sherman: A Love Letter to the West Side." The latter show pays homage to an Atlanta neighborhood.

While she's Atlanta based, Gay has shown her artworks around the United States and abroad. This spring, she will take part in the 59th Venice Biennial which begins April 23 and has a roster of artists from across the globe. It's often called Olympics for artists.

Finally, her work has appeared in "Addicted," a 2014 film released by Lions Gate, and in the BET series "Zoe."

Given that resume, her current exhibit at CFAC has a dual appeal: on its own merits and as an opportunity to see Gay's pieces at a local venue. Among other things, the CFAC show has site-specific work, the murals she painted at the gallery. They further document the scope of her imagination and artistic ambition.

About the Author: Carl Mellor covered visual arts for the *Syracuse New Times* from 1994 through 2019. He continues to cover exhibitions and artists in the Syracuse area.



*playin in front of miss
johnson's house (study)*
2021

Collage, flashe, gold leaf,
graphite, and water color
on paper
30" h x 23" w

Shanequa Gay: A Black Gaze Unleashed

Niama Safia Sandy

Shanequa Gay's work is striking, and deeply healing.

In her work across disciplines, the aesthetic is at once, of and for Atlanta, and yet striving toward the universal. For Gay, Black people are subject, not object. Her gaze frames Black people—often Black women especially—and their bodies as effervescent, essential, experiencing the fullness of life and all its fruit. Harkening to the East African Mursi ethnic group who often use ephemera of their lived environment to adorn themselves, we find Gay's figures often marked with the cultural landscape of her native city and by extension the American South.

Gay is a dreamweaver, one who casts the Black body toward a mythic and monumental status and proportions. It seems Gay is asking us to reconsider the notion of who our people are and what they can do. *Who deserves to be seen and how?* Both in the mise en scène of her performance work, and in the tableaux of her mixed media collage and paintings, the artist fashions many of her figures with outsize antlers, and black-and-gold-stripes reminiscent of a zebra. I find the zebra reference particularly illustrative. In the classic 1940 Disney animated film, *Fantasia*, the segment on Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony features Black female zebra-like centaur figures who appear as ladies in waiting catering to the whims of the Bacchus, who perhaps not incidentally is the Roman god of wine and pleasure. In the scene, they fan him, refill his goblet with copious amounts of wine, and disappear. There are other traditional centaurs in the procession during the segment. They are free to frolic, dance, be coy with the god figure, as the brown-skinned zebra centaurs vanish from view. It's not about likening Black bodies to those of animals, but rather within these choices Gay creates space for Black largesse, pleasure, splendor, and wonder.

She is a carrier of memory, a keeper of culture. We find figures crowned with swirls of orange and pink watercolor fashioning the famous Georgia peach, the precise shades of the greens of the rind of a watermelon. Their heads are adorned in beads—an age old signifier of care and beauty, crowns of door knockers. Their hair is carefully festooned in gold leaf; some figures' hair is dipped in the starry blue-black of the cosmos referencing the commonly held idea among Black Atlantans that the city is the cultural and economic center of the known universe. From OutKast and the Southern Rap revolution they led, to the city being a beacon of Black academic and economic prosperity and upward mobility for the better part of the last century, I can't say I blame them. I like to think she and many people imagine Atlanta as free of America and the limits of its...America-ness in some ways, until it isn't.

One of the key notes of Gay's "Atlannahland" series is the reference to the Atlanta Child Murders. I first learned of the Atlanta Child Murders roughly three years ago. Between 1979

and 1981, dozens of Black people in Atlanta went missing and approximately 28 were later found murdered—a number of them were Black children. Many of them were from families who did the best they could with the means available. Atlanta of the late 70s and early 80s was in the midst of a massive economic surge forward, many of the families affected were those whose financial fortunes had not changed. At one point, a new missing person was found every week. A curfew was instated. Often children's remains were found in wooded areas around the city, and in and around the Chattahoochee and South Rivers. For nearly the first full-year, the city government failed to thoroughly investigate the serial nature of the murders.

Both now and then, I am completely gobsmacked by the immensity of the ongoing, outrageous and obscene losses, and sheer terror experienced by these families, and the Black community at-large in Atlanta. The archival photographs and videos belie the incredible stress of the situation placed on everyone, especially the parents of the missing children. Looking at the footage and images even now, the sorrow practically spills from the eyes of the family members. These people were not treated like grieving mothers and fathers in the public eye, but instead like fodder for ratings. Objects not, decidedly not subjects, used in the ongoing spectacle of Black suffering in this country. This remains as great a tragedy as the murder of their children.

For "Atlannahland," Gay turned her gaze to those photographs, meticulously hand-drawing the eyes of the subjects in black and white and capturing the intense emotional tenor of the moment. She unleashes their gaze again, this time for the hollows of their grief and loss to be witnessed and fully acknowledged, not merely exhibited for public consumption. The specificity of deployment of her hand to do so feels more powerful. It required a sustained act of witnessing; a conjuring of memory beyond merely parsing the archive. In the subsequent mixed media collage works, Gay collages the eyes of the families from the archives with full-color watercolor paintings of young children bedecked in her signature fantastic flourishes. Sourced from photographs captured in Atlanta's Perkerson Park, the artist's local childhood park, the children revel with joy and the vivacity of childhood. These children know a level of agency, freedom, play and pleasure unfathomable 40 years ago for a generation of Atlantans, including Gay herself. Through the gesture of juxtapositioning and collapsing these delicate realities, she creates a framework toward something resembling restitution for the trauma faced by the families of the missing and murdered, and city of Atlanta itself. It is a provocation toward the fullness of life—holding space for us to live fiercely and openly, holding space for both the kind of pain that could tear a person apart, and the joy that can propel us forward.

Left page:

retros and rollers (study)

2021

Mixed media on paper
30" h x 23" w

Right page:

**door knocker saint, ii
(study)**

2021

Collage, flashe, gold leaf,
graphite, and water color
on paper
41.5" h x 30" w





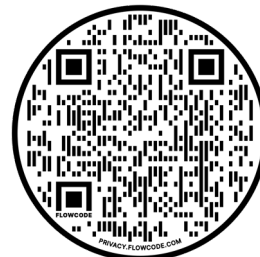
Artist's Statement

My work is about ritual and personal memory, storytelling and fantasy. I call upon my ancestors and the deep well of southern black traditions found in my home place of Atlanta. My fodder is play, indigenous belief systems and the spirit of African-Ascendant Womyn and girls finding God in self. I am invested in counter narratives, mythology, and the expansion of the black imaginary. I engage in this practice through installations, paintings, performance, photography, video, and monumental sculptural figures.

On Collage

Collage is a form of hybridity it allows artist most especially women to create their own language it allows me to detach meaning through juxtaposition. It is a language of the subversive, the mystical, the nonsensical and the feminine. Collage is not concrete which makes for a great space of world building. Collage breaks up repetition and becomes performative it is coding, ambiguity, and secrets. It opens up breaches it reveals power structures. Collage helps me to relay the unlimited performance of how my world is viewed through mixed identities, memory, and the space that I occupy, as the many and as the I am. Collage allows me to tell many stories all at once. It is the language of world building and play. The combination of the human and the animal is an ancient process. We have all looked in awe at a creature and wanted to be connected to it's power, elegance, speed and bravery. In this place I call Atlannahland, I am documenting, re-telling and making up stories occupied by black girls who get to shape shift, rock gold chains links, haloed door knocker earrings and see themselves as divine. In this world they are Divine, they are revered they are centered and they are visible. When you are a young girl, you still have magical thinking, you are unbridled, courageous, graceful, and stealth.

**To Learn more about the artist and this exhibition
watch the latest episode of Black Arts Speak:**





Founded in 1972, Community Folk Art Center, Inc. is a vibrant cultural and artistic hub committed to the promotion and development of artists of the African Diaspora. Our mission is to exalt cultural and artistic pluralism by collecting, exhibiting, teaching and interpreting the visual and expressive arts. Public programming includes exhibitions, film screenings, gallery talks, workshops and courses in the studio arts, including dance and ceramics. A proud unit of the Department of African American Studies, College of Arts & Sciences at Syracuse University, CFAC is a beacon of artistry, creativity and cultural expression within the Syracuse community, the region and the world.

Community Folk Art Center
805 East Genesee Street
Syracuse, NY 13210
315.442.2230
communityfolkartcenter.org

S Syracuse University
College of Arts & Sciences

African American Studies

i am my own temple (study)
2021
Collage, flashe, graphite, gold leaf,
and water color on paper
30" h x 23" w

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