

‘Archives Yet to Come’ at Berkeley Art Center reimagines family legacies

Nora Buchanan | Staff
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Carla Hernández Ramírez | Courtesy

Dust-ridden riflings through family photographs. Your own smile reflected in a portrait frame. As descendents, we are the keepers of phantom memories; the past is both our origin and an imagined place of comfort. “Archives Yet to Come,” curated by Hannah Waiters at the Berkeley Art Center, is a moving exploration of our archive of family history, tucked into sun-dappled canopies at North Berkeley’s Live Oak Park. In this exhibit, seven Bay Area artists invest in process-based art, creating self-identity through community — living or not.

Nneka Kai’s sculptural piece “Braiding Chair II” grounds the entrance to the gallery. In a charred wood seat, a stereotypical “mammy” doll is birthed out of a mass of black synthetic hair. Holes in the chair allow for this piece to become a performance. In a proposed public program, Kai planned to ask audiences to braid her own hair into the piece, weaving the fabric of the body. In this way, sculpture becomes education. “Aeon I” delivers metal film strips out of a radius of Black female hair. “Hair Rug,” adjacent on the floor, appears like tightly woven hair on a woman’s head. Kai’s archive is crowning: Black female history and bodily processes — the traditions of weaving, braiding and creating new physical legacies — are tightly entwined.

Mounted on the right wall of the opening room are “Value Test: Brown Paper,” Mary W.D. Graham’s two radiant oil portraits. Brown paper, once a test tool for racial exclusion, clings to each canvas beneath the painted faces. The two women are varied in age. The older woman may have been alive to face the Jim Crow-era; for the younger woman, such racism is only alive in painful imagination. Graham’s sculptural collection, “Kin,” beams on the back wall, with large oil-painted paper-mache faces of varying complexion and size. Owned by Black collectors around the Bay Area and reunited for this show, the pieces include acne and distinctive wrinkles. In tandem with her

diptych, Graham makes known the importance of the human face in history, family and personal identity.

Lindsey Filowitz uses mixed media to create the viscerally intimate “Cuerpo de Cristo,” an exposition of personal loss and legacy. Her installation crafts the aftermath of a family death through colossal Peruvian candles, communion wafers and pilings of wilted flowers. A photograph of Filowitz and her grandmother laying side-by-side gives way to a live video on the other side of the wall, where caregivers and a sister of the Catholic Church sing over her bed. For Filowitz, rituals and religious symbols assist in expressing the transformation from living with one’s ancestors to continuing their legacy without.

A constellation of family photographs is suspended in Lynse Cooper’s installation, where scattered frames offer homes for images captured while caring for her aging grandparents. “Spaceship,” an orange tree against the Sacramento night sky, anchors the top but alludes to takeoff. “A Dream Far Away” in black and white hints at the impending loss of these elderly relatives. By evoking memories of stars as guidance for uprooted Black Americans, Cooper creates her own family tree where backyard landscape and intimate family portraits serve as a connection to permanence.

Jy Jimmie Flora Gabiola roots his three photographic pieces in depicting photographs themselves. “Yolanda” fans out family pictures, complete with curved edges and multiples.

His work shows how the archive can obscure — with images cut and hidden, reworked through digital tools. The woven images of nature in “Natura” and the neon-edited backgrounds of “Phosphene” illuminate the artist’s personal relationship with cross-continental movement.

In “Gen 2” and “South Migration (Mississippi to Miami),” Qadir Parris layers images of a family’s past and present through underpainting; a separate story rests beneath. “Gen 2’s” background evokes the texture of fabric and the colors of sunlit cyanotype, showing Parris’ investment in experimental modes of representation. Here, he tells a story — one of textiles, Black American movement and his family as they have been and are.

In the curio-cabinet, which opens “Archives Yet to Come,” Charles Lee reworks the furniture of colonialism. Used in 17th century Europe to boast collections of exoticized objects, Lee finds wealth instead in his own family, turning the cabinet vertically and displaying wedding invitations and baseball team pictures. Cowry shells reference a means of currency and spirituality during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. His work seems a grounded representation of this exhibit; processes of collection and historical imagination weave personal weight and individual craft.

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