

Fish Dreams

by

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In my family, when women dream of fish, it symbolizes that a family member or close friend is pregnant. Based on our cultural background as African Americans, our interpretation of our dreams is how we share and pass down stories within our traditions. My aim for this research and creative activity is to bring my voice as an African American woman into the conversation of dream research, which at times is not only dominated by a white male perspective but a white male perspective occupying space in the discussion of African American dream analysis. This series of artwork contains sculptural assemblages and woven textiles that express different imagery of the fish dream. The artworks are based on interviews with the matriarchs of my family that have experienced fish dreams: Sirena Manuel (mother), Elecia Satterfield (aunt), and Bernice Graves (grandmother). Interviewing my family, allows me to document the oral history of their experiences with the fish dream.

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Starting at the age of two, everyone in my family is taught how to fish and receives their first fishing rod and kit. After some practice in our backyards, we travel with the adults in our family to different ponds and lakes throughout North Carolina to learn how to fish. Based on past experience, first-time fishermen and pregnant women always catch the most fish on a good day. Along with my family's tradition of fishing, the women in my family share symbolic dreams about fish and pregnancy. When the women of my family dream of catching or seeing a fish, it symbolizes that a friend or family member is pregnant.

I have experienced many fish dreams that have predicted pregnancies in my family, which has led to my desire to better understand my family's connection to this dream and the similarities and differences between them. I also wanted to find the origin from where the meaning of the fish dream came. By interviewing my mother, grandmother, and aunt, I was able to gather information about the significance of the fish dreams we have experienced and shared.

The fish dream has been passed down verbally through family elders, specifically the matriarchs of the family. When the family would get together and share their fish dreams, someone we knew would always be pregnant. The fish in the dream does not have to be a specific type of fish, but it must have the qualities and characteristics of a fish such as scales and fins. The fish in the dream can either be seen or caught. Sometimes the number of fish the dreamer sees symbolizes how many people in my family or friends are pregnant, but this is not always the case. Talking and sharing these details of our dreams is a way for my family to communicate and grow closer. This communal exchange of sharing the fish dream is a way for us to approach a subject we may not have approached on our own, providing us a way to talk

with each other and to other family members and friends that we might not have talked to in a while. When the pregnancy of a family member or friend is confirmed, we gather with them for a baby shower or send them gifts to help with the incoming child. Dreaming about fish, finding out who is pregnant, and celebrating that person's pregnancy has become a connected tradition of sharing within my family.

TRADITIONAL PSYCHOLOGY OF DREAMING

Philosophers and psychoanalysts throughout history have tried to understand why we dream and what our dreams mean. Aristotle, a Greek philosopher, wrote the *Parva Naturalia* in 350 BCE. In the excerpt "On Dreams", Aristotle concludes that during sleep we have an absence of external stimulation; when we close our eyes, we do not see anything so we cannot perceive anything. Due to this, our dreams come from leftover movements from our sensory organs (Aristotle 349-371). Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, found dreams to be a representation of our unconscious desires or wish fulfilments (Freud 33-44). In his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud described dreams as holding manifest content, the imagery presented in the dreams, and latent content, the hidden psychological meaning of the dream (Freud 44-73, 174-175). His theory was that what we see in our dreams is a metaphor for what we desire in real life. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, thought dreams to be more central to the individual. In his book, *The Undiscovered Self: With Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams*, Jung's theory described dreams as a way to help us develop our personalities and that dreaming can communicate to us how we are truly feeling (Jung 71-106). Although Aristotle, Freud, and Jung aid in understanding why we dream, their theories and research of dreams are based on a white Eurocentric scientific perspective.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FOLKLORE

The way that my family and I understand and respond to dreams, specifically the fish dream, is based on our perspective as African Americans. While Freud, Jung, and Aristotle are operating from a position of psychology and philosophy, the African American perspective of dreams argues that they are a way of connecting with others and understanding life moments. Specifically, dreams are a way to connect a group of people with a common history or culture, such as the shared history of slavery in the African American community.

The foundation of dream analysis and its symbolism in African American culture stems from the oral tradition of sharing folklore. African American folktales have been passed down and retold since African people were enslaved in America during the 1700s. Enslaved Africans brought with them their oral traditions of storytelling; sharing stories that preserved parts of their African roots, explaining how and why things in the world are the way they are, and giving hope during the hardships of enslavement. Enslaved Africans not only shared stories but also their dreams.

A number of ex-slaves who contributed to the genre of nineteenth and twentieth-century slave narratives have provided insightful accounts of their community's experience with dreams as a sort of life roadmap intended to prevent and reveal certain occurrences or to decipher that which was not completely understood in the conscious state (Archer)

Jermaine Archer, Assistant Professor of American Studies History at the State University of New York-Old Westbury College, explains in this quote the relationship between dreams and

how enslaved Africans would use them to understand different events in their lives. This relates to how my family interacts with the fish dream. When the fish is present in a dream it reveals the occurrence of pregnancy that is within our family or our friendship circles. The imagery of the fish dream is understood as a relationship to pregnancy. Archer also explains how this understanding of dreams translates into African American folklore:

While the meaning and corresponding signs of dreams in the African American folk tradition have varied from locality to locality, they have consistently served as a channel of self-divination through which the dreamer is able to grasp a fuller meaning of his or her life. It has been a long standing belief in the black community that dreams are a critical tool for unlocking the door to the future (Archer)

Archer's understanding of African American beliefs in relation to dreaming is how my family believes in our dreams. When we process our dreams together it helps us to understand critical moments in our own lives and in each other's lives. The symbolism of the fish within a dream is a tool that we use to connect to the moment of a relative's or friend's pregnancy.

Three authors that have explored the meanings of folklore and dreams in African American culture are Nancy J. Fairley, Newbell Puckett, and Anthony Shafton. These authors contend that the way to understand dreams from an African American perspective is through qualitative research. It is important to make note that both Puckett and Shafton are white men. While the representation within their books is appreciated, there still needs to be more discussion of African American dream meanings from African American authors themselves like the research contributed by Fairley, an African American woman.

In the book, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, published in 1926, Puckett collected folklore stories and superstitions from African American colleges in every state of the south. The

majority of Puckett's collected information came from Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. Puckett saw that it was important to collect folktale stories from African Americans because the history and knowledge of these stories were disappearing. The older generations of African Americans, who shared and told lore, were passing away. With 10,000 folktales collected, Puckett finds that two-thirds of the stories are duplicates, 3,500 are retained, a third of them were personally collected, and almost 2,400 of these stories had never been published (Puckett viii). Puckett discusses the collected folktales and superstitions by comparing their meanings, similarities, and differences with their foundations. He is also comparing the collected folktales to white European folklore. Puckett's discussion on dream signs notes several beliefs connecting with dreaming in general and different dream omens. The fish dream is present in Puckett's collected research, and he argues that "a dream of fish indicates an increase in the family though some limit this sign to fish seen in clear water, or to catfish seen in muddy water" (Puckett 501). He also mentions that dream meanings usually are not the same in different locations but certain meanings like the fish equating to abundance or pregnancy are shared not only by location in African American culture but in European folklore as well; "In Scotland a dream of fresh fish means the arrival of children into the world" (Puckett 501-502).

Shafton, in his book *Dream Singers: The African American Way with Dreams*, interviews African American and White American individuals about a variety of dream symbolisms, ranging from ancestral visitation, number, predictive, and the spiritual connection and religious connection to dreaming. Shafton began his research after realizing that there was a lack of presentation of African American people at conferences he was attending with researchers, instructors, and authors who were interested in the topic of dreams. Unlike Puckett's specific research of African American folklore across the Southern states, Shafton chose to find

interviewers of different ages and occupations. This process led him to interviewing 116 African Americans and 80 white Americans (Shafton 6). He also collected 25 answered questionnaires from African American male inmates in American prisons and eight interviews from young individuals in Chicago's Cabrini Green housing project (Shafton 2). With the collected interviews, he discusses the similarities and differences in dream beliefs between the African American and white-American interviewees. The beliefs that Shafton finds are related to African beliefs of dreaming, African American culture, and African American literature. Shafton notes that fish symbolism in dream content was reported by 45 percent of African American individuals he interviewed, compared to eight percent of white individuals (Shafton 59). Majority of the white individuals interviewed by Shafton only knew about the fish dream meaning through their African American peers.

In her journal article, *Dreaming Ancestors in Eastern Carolina*, Fairley collected information about dreams during the summers of 1994, 1995, and 1997. Fairley interviewed 20 African American adults including twelve women and eight men, from the ages of 28 to 75 (Fairley 546). All the individuals interviewed resided in two towns in eastern North Carolina, one of which was Fairley's hometown. Similar to my process, Fairley's research began from her interest in her family's relationship to dreams and the role they have within African American culture. Fairley's article is focused on the connection between ancestral dreams and ancestral veneration within the African American community. Fairley discusses the roots of ancestor veneration in African American culture based on the enslavement of African people, the relationships of deceased family members or ancestors in dreams, and the connection of family and kinship within the African American community that creates the framework of dreams and

their meanings. Although ancestor veneration in dreams is the focus of Fairley's research, she does mention the fish dream.

According to people in eastern Carolina, the dreams that we are unable to shake have serious ramifications for the living. They bring us important news either through specific symbols or the deceased. Dreams' symbols have specific meaning that most adults can interpret. For instance, a dream of fish indicates that someone is pregnant. Or a dream of one's teeth falling out foretells of death (Fairley 554).

Out of the three authors' research, Fairley's collected research about dreams relates closely to my family's relationship to dreams. Our combined research discovers that a fish in a dream is a specific symbol known to African American communities in North Carolina.

In African American culture and folklore, the sharing of stories, traditions, and dreams has been passed down since the enslavement of African people. While Aristotle, Freud, and Jung give insight into the psychological and philosophical realm of dreams, their studies are centered around a white Eurocentric scientific framework that does not always translate into the African American experience. Fairley, Puckett, and Shafton, however, discuss dreams as a shared cultural experience of beliefs among African Americans which is apparent in my own family as we continue to share our fish dreams and connect with each other through their meaning.

INFLUENCES

The artists that influence my work are African American women and women of color whose work is focused on the use of collecting and repurposing objects, specifically, Chakaia Booker, Kennedy Yanko, Beyte Saar, and Vanessa German. Booker and Yanko both utilize repurposed materials in abstract and expressionist models of creation. Booker works by collecting tires off the streets of New Jersey and attaches the manipulated tires to steel frames to produce abstract indoor and outdoor sculpture installations. Yanko is a sculptor and artist whose work utilizes found metal and paint skin. Her work is about the duality and intertwining relationship of material. Both artists' works have shown me how to utilize the forms that are present within an object and push its materiality further by manipulating it or combining it with other items. Saar and German utilize repurposed materials as visual storytellers. German is a self-taught artist who creates sculptural assemblages and installations that are focused on the framework of African American spirituality, power, freedom, feminism, and mysticism. Saar creates collages and sculptural assemblages that reflect themes of race, family, feminism, and spiritual practices within African culture. Saar has been known to create assemblages that contain imagery of Aunt Jemima, a fictitious character of an African American woman that represented a "mammy archetype". Both artists' works have influenced how I visually create the narrative of my family's fish dream by repurposing materials. These four artists repurpose objects that have served their purpose and reframe them in liberating contexts.

PROCESS

The way that my family describes the moment when they see or catch a fish in a dream is in an odd yet recognizable environment. My goal was to work with a multitude of repurposed materials in tandem with traditional sculpture processes and textiles to recreate my family's experience of the fish dream.

My introduction to creating sculptural assemblages began in high school. With low budgets for materials, my instructors would save and collect items, placing them on shelves for students to search through and utilize for different assignments. As an undergraduate student, I continued collecting and repurposing material by taking items off the street or diving into the school's dumpsters. The scraps of material or household items that people would throw away turned into my own treasure pieces to explore different uses and ideas for them. Over time I established a set of goals for the materials I collected so that I would not bring everything into the studio. The collected items have completed their original purpose, can be manipulated past their original use, and can be positioned in a multitude of ways. These items must fit within the framework of a specific idea, movement, or texture that are needed to complete an artwork. Once all the materials are gathered, I manipulate their compositions by distorting and painting them. This allows me to combine different materials and processes together to complete the idea. The sculptural assemblages use this set of goals to depict moments where fish are seen or caught in a dream.

Beginning this series of work, my focus was on creating dream fish to present to a viewer as I see them within my dreams. Since the fish in the dream does not have to be a specific type of fish (only the qualities of a real fish), I repurposed carbon fiber constructions into the dream fish

form. The carbon fiber constructions are manipulated and painted with scales. Each of the carbon fiber forms in *Dream Fish*, *Dream Fish II*, and *Fish Pool* are dream fish composed flowing within or from different sources of water to showcase themselves to the viewer. After learning more about my family's individual fish dreams, I took a different approach to depict the dream fish. I went to a local pond in Greenville, NC, and caught a large Blackfish. Casting this fish in alginate allowed me to make multiples of it. The fish castings are in the sculptural assemblages that portray my matriarch's individual fish dream descriptions. The fish castings in *Fish Table: Who's Pregnant?* reiterate the tradition of fishing shared with my family and the connection we have to each other through dreaming about the fish and finding out who is pregnant.

I combine the sculptural assemblages based on keeping a balance between hard and soft materials. Seeing the collective works of Kennedy Yanko, Vanessa German, and Betye Saar informs my process of working this way. Looking at Yanko's recycled metal and paint skin combinations inspires the way I make and choose objects with different textures to come together as one piece. The paint skins that she makes intertwine themselves throughout the metal forms she collects and manipulates from scrap yards.



Figure 1: Kennedy Yanko, *Sleuth*, 11.5" x 17.3" x 16", Paint Skin, Metal, 2019

Looking at German's and Saar's figurative sculptures inspires the way I position different materials and objects together to represent my family's narrative of the fish dream. German works with recycled textiles and objects to talk about different narratives present in African American culture. Saar does a similar thing to German but by repurposing the images of Aunt Jemima to talk about her shared experience being an African American woman.



Figure 2: Vanessa German, *Joy Machine #3, Kick Push, Ring The Alarm, Fly*, 2019. Mixed-media assemblage, 54 x 94 x 22 in.



Figure 3: Betye Saar, *Sock it to 'Em*, 2011 (left) / *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972 (right)

The balance of softness and hardness can be seen throughout the artist's material choices and forms. I continuously reference these artists' bodies of work to aid in my process of pushing the aesthetic and formality of the materials I choose to work with.

The hard materials in the sculptural assemblages are repurposed metal, carbon fiber, resin, and plexiglass. The soft materials in the sculptural assemblages are spray foam, and tufted textiles. Tufted textiles, created with the use of a tufting gun, are popularly used for rug making. I use the tufting gun as a tool to create softer elements in the sculptural assemblages. In *My Grandmother's Fish Dream II*, the tufted textiles mimic a grassy area of a pond bank. In *Fish Pool* and *My Mother's Fish Dream*, they are used to mimic the flow of water. The tufted textiles add a desired soft and fuzzy texture that aids in recreating the environment of a fish dream that is odd yet recognizable.

Working with the tufting gun sparked my interest in working with textiles. I was looking for more soft elements to include with the sculptural assemblages that would have the ability to showcase detailed imagery of my family's fish dreams. The opportunity to work with the Thread Controller 2 Jacquard Loom (TC2) allowed me to accomplish this goal of work. Instead of physically collaging material to create a moment of a fish dream, with the TC2 I am able to hand weave a detailed dream environment from digitally collaged imagery. Using my family's images in the digital collages allows me to situate them and myself in environments that resemble dreams or the state of dreaming. Each piece is hand woven with black and white cotton thread to create the gray area, an undefined yet recognizable space, of falling asleep and entering into the place of dreams. Each woven textile includes an original pattern I designed using procreate and adobe capture software, titled *Womb Water*. *Womb Water* is based on the rippling effect of water. It is composed in each weaving to reiterate the connectedness between my family

and our dreams. This design is also printed on fabric and made as a tufted floor in the *Dream Womb*. The *Dream Womb* is an installation that is created with repurposed tires. Working with the tires as a material was influenced by the artworks of Chakaia Booker. Like Booker, I made a steel frame in the form of a womb to situate the tires onto.



Figure 4: Installation view: "Chakaia Booker: The Observance" at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami. 2021

I chose the tires as the outer structure because of their durability, flexibility, and texture. The tires are a representation of travel. Although the tires can no longer be used on a car to take people to their destinations, they are now being used to allow a viewer to travel into a patterned environment. Placing the *Womb Water* design in the woven textiles and the *Dream Womb* is how I aimed to show the viewer the connection of dreaming between my family. As the viewer steps within the *Dream Womb*, it will physically bring them into my family's connection of dreaming and allow them to process their own dreams as well. While inside they will be able to grab a fishing bobber from the plexiglass bowl, that will have a piece of writing or poetry to give them something to sit or stand with in the womb and take with them when they leave.

The combination of the sculptural assemblages, the woven textiles, and the *Dream Womb* installation represents my family's experience with the fish dream. My goal is to showcase different elements of our dreams and moments within our dreams to an audience so that they can understand the fish symbolism in relation to dreaming. Also, after having the chance to look at and be within the artwork, I hope that viewers are left with the desire to consider what their dreams might mean to them.

CONCLUSION

As a result of my investigation, I have achieved my aim for this research and creative activity. I have brought my voice as an African American woman into the conversation of dream analysis. This process has opened my eyes to the inadequacies of documented knowledge specific to African American folklore and dream symbolism. It has inspired me to continue investigating the oral histories that are shared in African American culture.

ARTIST STATEMENTS AND IMAGES

Dream Fish

Fish Pool

Dream Fish II

Dreaming of Fish (II)

My Grandmother's Dream Catch

My Grandmother's Dream Catch II

Mama's Fish Dream

Aunt Elecia's Fish Dream

Fish Table: Who's Pregnant?

Caviar

Dream Womb

Fish Dream



Plate 1: *Dream Fish*, 48" x 18' x 18", repurposed metal, repurposed carbon fiber, spray foam, paint, 2021

Dream Fish, Dream Fish II, and Fish Pool are sculptural assemblages that depict different iterations of a dream fish. The dream fish as described by the family does not have to be a specific type of fish. The dream fish must have qualities and characteristics of a fish, such as scales and fins. Each fish is repurposed from a carbon fiber construction. The carbon fiber is painted to mimic a pattern of scales that a dream fish could have. The dream fish are presented in a way to be recognized and seen as the viewer might come across them within a dream.



Plate 2: *Fish Pool*, 14" x 38" x 75", repurposed carbon fiber, paint, tufted yarn, plaster, 2021



Plate 3: *Dream Fish II*, 35" x 15" x 66", repurposed carbon fiber, repurposed metal, paint, plaster, 2022



Plate 4: *Dreaming of Fish (II)*, 32" x 40", Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023

This weaving is a self-portrait depicting myself sleeping and entering into a fish dream. As I lay sleeping, fish are swimming around my body. The fish in this portrait are ones that my family usually catches on a fishing trip, catfish, brim, and crappie.



Plate 5: *Dreaming of Fish (II)* (Detail), 32" x 40", Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023



Plate 6: *My Grandmother's Dream Catch*, 32" x 40" Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023

My grandmother describes her fish dreams as an environment where she is either on a boat or on the edge of a pond bank. During her dreams, she is continuously pulling fish in with a single rod one after the other. The woven textile is a collaged photo of my grandmother with a large bass she caught on a fishing trip. In one of her fish dreams, she specifically remembered catching two large fish along with many more regular-sized ones. In this dream, she was with her sister in a boat fishing. Her sister had a similar dream and they found out they were pregnant at the same time. In another dream, my grandmother was on a pond bank catching more fish than usual with a bamboo pole. She would cast the rod in the water and pull out a fish as soon as she could place the fishing line into the water. She pulled fish out continuously, one right after the other. After having this dream, she found out my mother was pregnant with me.

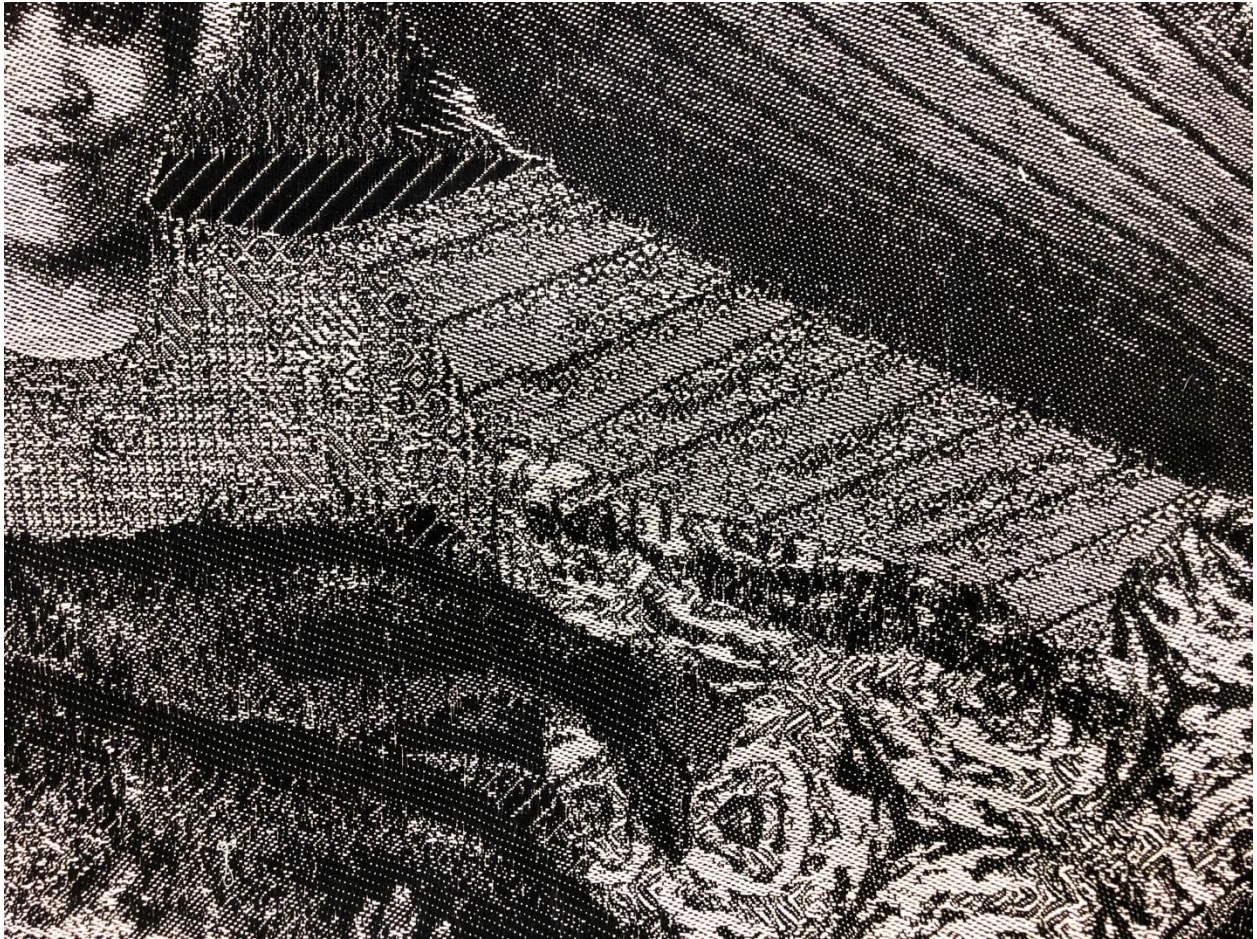


Plate 7: *My Grandmother's Dream Catch* (Detail), 32" x 40" Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023



Plate 8: *My Grandmother's Dream Catch II*, 40" x 25" x 29.5", plexiglass, spray foam, tufted yarn, fish stringer, 2022

Alongside the weaving of my grandmother, this sculptural assemblage is a physical representation of her dream catches. The fish are laid across the edge of the pond into a body of water on a fish stringer. To keep the fish fresh when we go on a long fishing trip, we will slide them onto a fish stringer. The pointed end of the string is a stake that sticks into the ground, the fish are slung into the pond until it is time to take them home.



Plate 9: *Mama's Fish Dream*, 20.5" x 21.5" x 44", repurposed steel, tufted yarn, spray foam, paint, 2022

My mother shared a fish dream where she saw fish swimming in a mattress. After she had this dream, she discovered that one of her friends was pregnant. She remembered there being two fish in the dream but her friend was only pregnant with one child. The mattress is created with tufted yarn to depict the rippling movement of water as fish swim within it.



Plate 10: *Aunt Elecia's Fish Dream* (Top View), 8"x 17.5" x 31", Plexiglass, spray foam, resin, 2022

My Aunt Elecia shared a fish dream where she remembered walking into a bathroom-like space. In this space, she saw a fish swimming in a bathtub. After having this dream, she discovered that my mother was pregnant with me. The bathtub form is made with plexiglass, encasing two fish castings in resin to depict her fish dream imagery.



Plate 11: *Aunt Elicia's Fish Dream* (Side View), 8"x 17.5" x 31", Plexiglass, spray foam, resin, 2022



Plate 12: *Fish Table: Who's Pregnant?*, 42.5" x 44.5" x 53", Plexiglass, fishing bobbers, resin, repurposed steel, spray foam castings, 2022

This assemblage is a representation of the moment when the women in my family have a fish dream. After one of has this dream, we call or text each other to figure out who is pregnant. The fishing bobbers represent the individuals who have had a fish dream. The bobbers are floating on top of the water, waiting for the fish to take its bait, just as my family does in figuring out who is pregnant. The fish jumping out of the water represents the moment a fish becomes present to the dreamer and the moment that my family finds out who is pregnant.

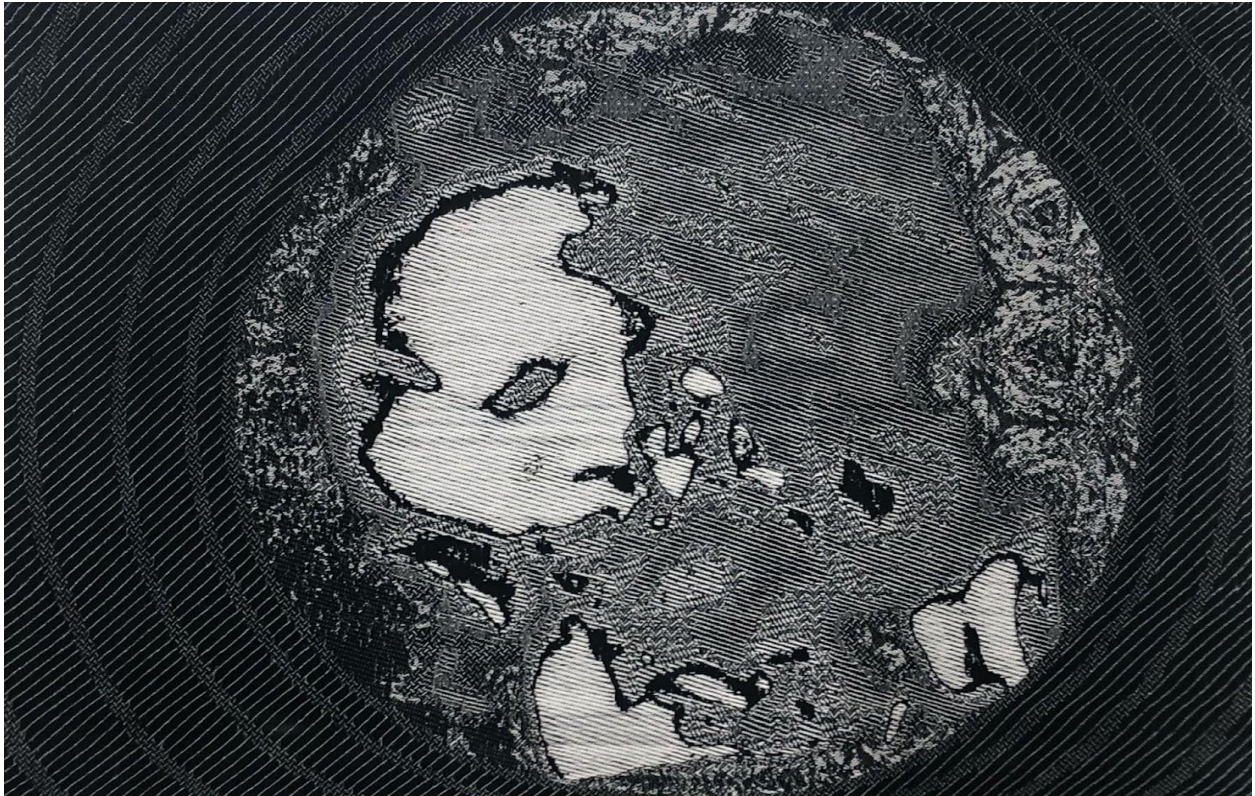


Plate 13: *Caviar*, 30" x 42", Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023

The woven textile is a collage of one of my family members' ultrasound photos. In this collage, they are placed into the shape of a fish egg to represent the relationship between the fish's dream and pregnancy.

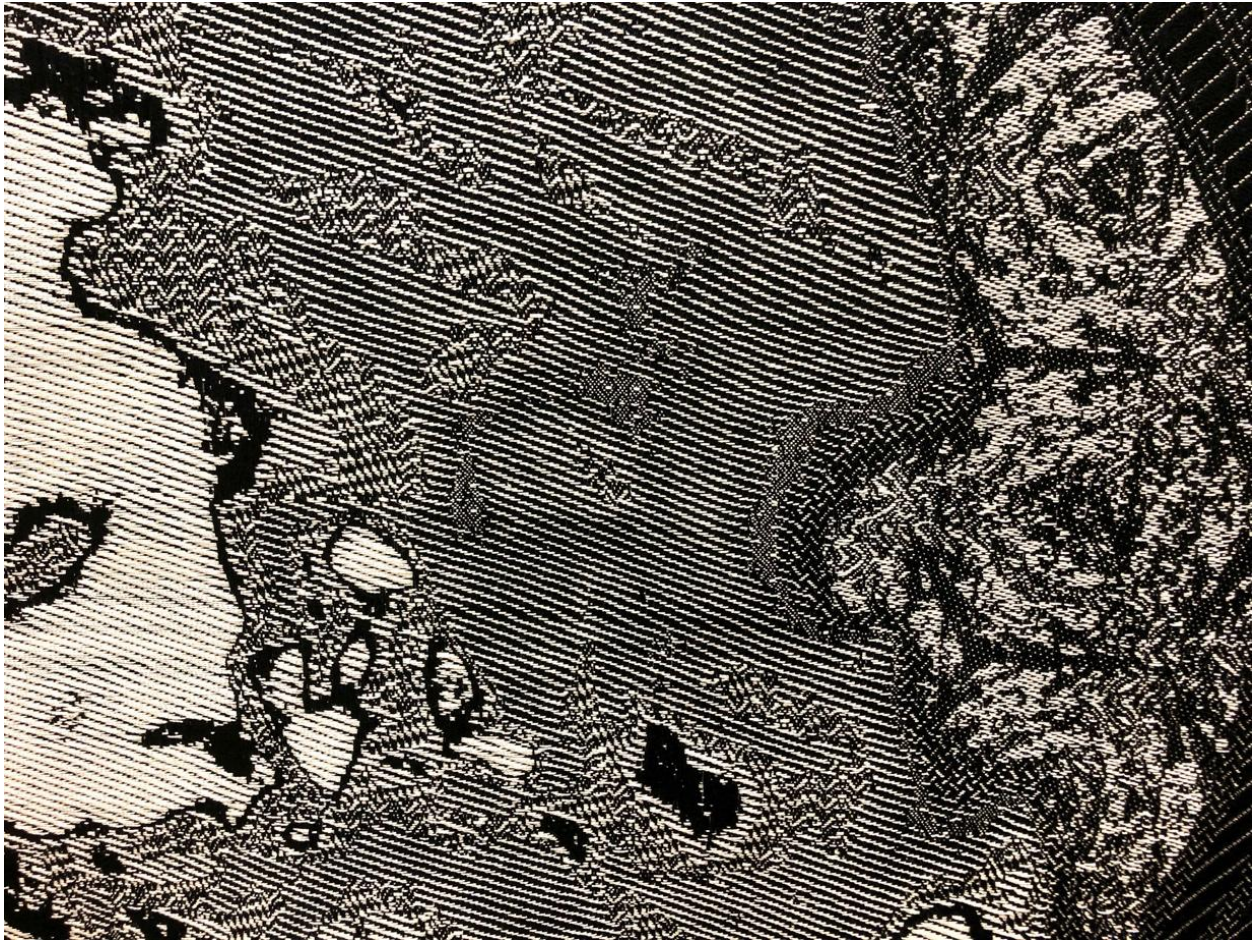


Plate 14: *Caviar* (Detail), 30" x 42", Handwoven on TC2 Loom, Cotton, 2023



Plate 15: *Dream Womb*, 74" x 64"x 60", repurposed tires, steel, printed fabric, tufted rug, plexiglass, fishing bobbers, paint, 2022

The Dream womb is a sculpture installation depicting a large womb form space for an audience member to step inside. The repurposed tires create the womb form as a soft yet strong structure. The tires are a representation of travel. Although the tires can no longer be used on a car to take individuals to a destination, they are now being used to allow a viewer to travel into a patterned environment. The pattern

repeated inside the form is an original design titled *Womb Water*. It is inspired by the movement of water as it ripples. The patterned interior allows audience members to sit or stand for a moment to meditate and process their dreams. While inside the patterned interior, the audience will be able to grab a fishing bobber from the plexiglass bowl. Each fishing bobber has a piece of writing or poetry to give them something to sit or stand with in the womb and take with them when they leave.



Plate 16: *Dream Womb* (View II), 74" x 64"x 60", repurposed tires, steel, printed fabric, tufted rug, plexiglass, fishing bobbers, paint, 2023



Plate 17: *Dream Womb (Detail I)*, 74" x 64"x 60", repurposed tires, steel, printed fabric, tufted rug, plexiglass, fishing bobbers, paint, 2023



Plate 18: *Dream Womb (Detail II)*, 74" x 64"x 60", repurposed tires, steel, printed fabric, tufted rug, plexiglass, fishing bobbers, paint, 2023



Plate 19: *Fish Dream (Outdoor Sculpture)*, recycled steel, paint, Collaborative poem with Kyra Pattillo, 74", 43.5" x 32", 2021

This sculpture is an outdoor representation of a dream fish. The poem on the side of the fish is there to give the viewer context of the fish's symbolism.

Fish Dance and Bend
Around the River Flow
And Somewhere Near
A Belly Starts to Grow

So Catch One There to Find the Seed
And Dream of What the Future Will Be

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