

77%

My Ancestral Narrative

by

Tamla Boone

December 2024

Director of Thesis: Jim Tisnado

Major Department: School of Art and Design

ABSTRACT

Reflecting on my visits to sculptural exhibitions worldwide, I often observe a portrayal of a specific population characterized by features like pointed noses, straight hair, and predominantly pink or beige skin tones. While undeniably lovely, I question whether there exists a broader spectrum of beauty that could be showcased in these displays—a form of Non-traditional Beauty. My concept of beauty transcends conventional norms and embraces what is typically viewed as different, unattractive, or even awkward by societal standards—the "Uns." I challenge the perception that pink skin is the epitome of beauty and ponder why unique characteristics like

crooked teeth, distinctive scars, colored skin, and unconventional body shapes are not celebrated in art. True artistry lies in the willingness to take risks and explore the unconventional. In my thesis, I cultivate a space where diverse forms of beauty are celebrated through a dynamic allure of authenticity and especially children, should see themselves reflected in museum settings. I hope to awaken a deeper appreciation for the multifaceted beauty that exists in every individual—the awakening of true beauty in the eye of the beholder.

77%
My Ancestral Narrative

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Art and Design
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

by
Tamla Boone
December 2024

Director of Thesis: Jim Tisnado, MFA

Thesis Committee Members:
Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA, MLIS
Angela Wells, MFA

© Tamla Boone, 2024

DEDICATION

Yah,... you're all I got

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank all those who have helped me along my journey.

God, my favorite artist

Jim Tisnado, MFA Ceramics

Lisa Beth Robinson, MFA Graphics, MLIS

Angela Wells, MFA Photography

Jeb Hedgecock

Studio Mates: Tansy, Hailey, Sina, Nick, Liam, and the sweetest group of undergrads.

Miles, Ramsee, and Canon

Sidney

My parents

My students

My Ancestors

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
LIST OF PLATES	vii
77%	1
MY PROCESS.....	9
PLATES	11
CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY	27
APPENDIX	30

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Cristina Cordova.....	21
Figure 2: Lucca Tripaldi	23
Figure 3: Faith Ringgold	25

LIST OF PLATES

Plate 1: DNA Chart	12
Plate 2: Ida	13
Plate 3: Nancy	14
Plate 4: Betty	15
Plate 5: Danielle	16
Plate 6: Kelyn	17
Plate 7: Frank	18
Plate 8: Linda	19

"What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels and hast crowned him with glory
and honor." *Psalms 8:4*

77%

My Ancestral Narrative

Seventy-seven percent is a thesis show celebrating my profound passion for African American history and its significant contributions to Modern Art. My heritage story was tragically disrupted during the Transatlantic Slave Trade when African families were captured on the coast and shipped to America to serve as slaves. The knowledge of my legacy was tossed into the Atlantic Ocean, buried, but not forever. This exhibition exposes a heritage lost and speaks of a rich narrative about discovery, recognition, and revival.

As a ceramic artist, I create clay figures, quilts, and jewelry inspired by ancient West African culture. At the heart of my series lies the concept of treasure. Africans have material wealth, which we often think of in terms of gold and diamonds; they also an invaluable legacy of intelligence and talent in their people. This treasure encompasses their stories, traditions, ceremonies, and art that have endured through

adversity. Though the physical ties to their homeland were severed, their spirit has persisted, manifesting in the creativity of their descendants.

A significant aspect of my identity is reflected in 77% of my DNA, representing the six countries of the westernmost region of Africa. This percentage is not just a statistic but a testament to the legacy of who I am. My research highlights their tribal expressions, specifically the intricate beauty of their hair, jewelry, and facial features.

My thesis exhibition is a visual narrative highlighting ceramic figures with adornments and clay quilts, an interwoven tale honoring the past while celebrating contemporary interpretations. It is my family history. This research is for my children and grandchildren; they will be able to reflect on their identity within my work. This allows them to connect with the rituals, ceremonies, and traditions that define our lineage. Hopefully, every viewer finds a personal connection in my art, uncovering fragments of my history and resonating with their own. This exhibition is an expression of my heritage and an invitation for you to get to know me.

While studying art history in some of the most prestigious museums in the world, I was captivated by the marble sculptures, mesmerized by the gold wreaths, and intrigued by the depictions of foreign gods. After perusing two floors of a museum, I am frustrated. There seems to be an intentional misrepresentation of black experiences within the historical timelines and regions. Each art center curates from diverse cultures, yet I could not help but notice the absence of Afrocentric features in

the figurative works. As I wandered through the Vatican, I found myself asking, "Where are the brown people?" The same question echoed at the Acropolis in Greece: "Where are we?" Even amidst the corridors and stacks of white marble statues in the Uffizi, I searched intently, yet I did not see a representation of myself in the museums. "Where are the people who look like me in the museums?"

The Uffizi Gallery promised an encounter with art that would inspire everlasting wonder, but do the curators wonder about me? Neither the Uffizi, the Academia Gallery, nor the International Museum of Ceramics showcases figures with brown or black skin. These esteemed institutions, guardians of global treasures, overlook humanity's rich, diverse tapestry. There was a glaring absence—no representations of braids, broad noses, thick lips, or voluptuous hips—elements that display the stories of my people. Where are the pieces that illuminate the history and culture of those who look like me? Surely, somewhere, there must be reflections of Africa's beauty among their vast collections. Does the world value the beauty of individuals who share my heritage? This question hangs in the air, a poignant reminder of the disconnect between my identity and the art in the museums surrounding me. ¶

I longed to see people of color in the museum; maybe the curator couldn't find any black art. I decided to make some of them and created conceptual figurative pieces featuring black women. My research seeks to understand these lost treasures of beauty and restore them to contemporary art. My main muses are my people. My

daughter is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen; her facial features are alluring. I once studied her lips and wondered how God must have built up the flesh and then pressed in the upper lip towards her nose. My family has these gorgeous features that I love to study and render in clay. They have high cheekbones, broad foreheads, thick lips, big eyes, curly hair, and many skin tones. It is such a thrilling experience to form figures using these characteristics. And then, there's that moment when you smooth away clay and realize someone is looking back at you, and the stare is familiar.

Beneath my desire to encounter art that resonates with me lies a more profound, silent question: "Who am I?" What ethnicity, heritage, or culture am I hoping to see in the museum? Standing at this crossroads, I am uncertain about myself and the foundations that ground me. The quest for representation in art transcends mere aesthetics; I long to reclaim pieces of my identity. I want to understand the stories and experiences overlooked and obscured, such as chronicles that should have been passed down. They were hidden away behind layers of displacement and painful memories.

I am curious about my ancestry, cultural traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. Returning to the question: Who am I? What is the art of my people? How does the jewelry from each of these nations portray and symbolize their culture? What kind of

materials did my ancestors use to make this jewelry? There are so many questions about undiscovered heritage.

To learn about my identity, I used an AncestryDNA® kit to discover my origins. Seventy-seven percent of my genetic makeup comes from the Ivory Coast. My roots trace back to Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, Ghana, Senegal, and Benin. I am African, born and bred in America, African American, a descendant of a group of people who were raptured cataclysmically from their homes and forced into slavery, one of the most horrific tragedies in human history. The Transatlantic Slave Trade induced the loss and erasure of African spirit and history. Learning about my genetics helped streamline my research about my origins and how I might include this knowledge in my art.

The story behind my quilt-making journey is anything but conventional. It all started on a sweltering, humid day in a valley in Downtown Nashville, Tennessee, where I found myself immersed in a unique experience as a reenactor. My family was portraying slaves making soap at the Bicentennial Mall. We took on the roles of house slaves from 1776, sharing our crafts and selling the historic soap we created on the site.

As the day unfolded, an older Black gentleman approached our booth, his presence commanding our attention. He raised his voice, demanding, "Why don't you have your quilts out?" I stood there momentarily bewildered, unsure how to

respond to his unexpected inquiry. He shared a powerful narrative about the role of quilts in enslaved people's lives. He told me that when Black individuals were out in the city performing everyday tasks like soap making and laundry, they would hang quilts in a specific manner to communicate vital information to others. These quilts were not merely decorative; they were imbued with meaning, containing intricate codes and symbols that mapped a pathway to freedom in the North, the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was a secret network of people who helped enslaved African Americans escape to freedom in the United States and Canada. These slaves gained their freedom by escaping bondage, following specific pathways. According to legend, particular patterns on a quilt hanging from a clothesline or windowsill often indicated the Underground Railroad.

These quilts were embedded with a code so that by reading the shapes and motifs sewn into the design, an enslaved person on the run could know the area's immediate dangers or even where to head next. The designs could indicate safe houses, warn of dangers, or provide encouragement. The quilts signified a tapestry of stories woven from those who yearned for freedom.

As he spoke, I felt a connection to the legacy of my ancestors. His words, rich oral traditions revealed a secret way to communicate with art. At that moment, I knew I wanted to carry these heirlooms in my art and share oral traditions with clay. I approached my quilt-making with a newfound purpose. Each quilt became a ceramic

canvas for storytelling. My quilts transformed into a celebration of culture, a means of connecting with my roots, and a way to share the untold stories of those who fought for their freedom.

While studying abroad in Korea, I visited the Jeju Island African Art Museum. It was here that I made a life-changing discovery. The curator featured the homes and lifestyles of various tribes from West Africa. Walking through this museum, which featured brown-skinned people, I noticed familiar patterns on the homes of the West African people. A more intense study of the exhibition revealed that the patterns were the same as the codes used on the Underground Railroad. I said, "Wait, this is art from my ancestors." I thought the Quakers made and taught the slaves about these patterns. This was their ritual, to paint these symbols on their homes.

According to the textile display curated in the Jeju Island African Museum, the African artists brought these symbols from home and used them to escape to freedom. I want my art to reflect the same intelligence and creativity as my progenitors'. These codes, messages, and symbols are used in my designs as a dedication to my ancestors. Three patterns consistently emerge in my work: the bowtie, the flying geese, and the wagon wheel. For my show, the bowtie is featured in Danielle's choker. Aunt Nancy has the flying geese in her scarification. Aunty Betty wears a necklace designed with wagon wheels.

My MFA Exhibition is an immersive experience where 77% of my DNA is manifested through seven aunties. These women narrate a tale of the beauty, wealth, and cultural heritage of the seven countries represented in my DNA. The central figure, the storyteller, holds a quilt symbolizing the oral traditions of my ancestors.

MY PROCESS

The aunties started as simple mannequins to display my African-inspired jewelry. Since my original designs were self-portraits, the person looking back at me looked like my aunties. My mannequins turned into self-portrait figures.

The figures were coil-built with a paper clay recipe consisting of seventy percent Starworks Grogeewemee and thirty percent cellulose. The building process includes two steps: building and heating. Ten coils are added to the base, and intense heat is applied to accelerate the drying process. Each sculpture is built up to the shoulders, closed, and dried slowly overnight. I then roll a ten-by-ten-inch slab into a cylinder score and slip it to the shoulders to create a neck. Another fourteen-by-fourteen slab is coiled together to create a cylinder for the head. The head is placed on the neck. The nose, mouth, and forehead are formed, compressed with a paddle, and left overnight to dry. During the last stage, noses, lips, and hair are stylized to create an Afrocentric personality. I used Amaco black velvet underglaze to add a wash to the figures.

Due to the size of the figures, they were dried and fired very slowly. They dry in the studio for at least a week before being placed in the kiln. I used Bailey, our rolling door gas kiln, to fire this series. It is large enough to fire multiple figures at a time. My kiln schedule was set to fire slowly up to 500 degrees over 3 days. The kiln was then

fired to a cone 08 reduction and heated to cone 4 with an end body reduction. The cone 08 reduction created a metallic sheen on the bodies.

A large amount of the jewelry was created with Limoges clay from France. This clay provides the appropriate plasticity for small elements. Surface details, such as crystalline glazes, sand additive, and alum beads, were added using processes I learned from study abroad workshops. The large beads on Aunt Nancy were slip-cast. All the jewelry was fired in an electric kiln. Copper and bronze elements were bought and forged to attach ornaments for wearables.

PLATES

Africa Ethnicity Estimate

● Nigeria	25%
● Mali	18%
● Cameroon	17%
● Ghana	12%
● Senegal	3%
● Benin	1%

Total

77%

Plate 1: DNA Chart

This DNA Chart shows the DNA percentage for each country of my origins.

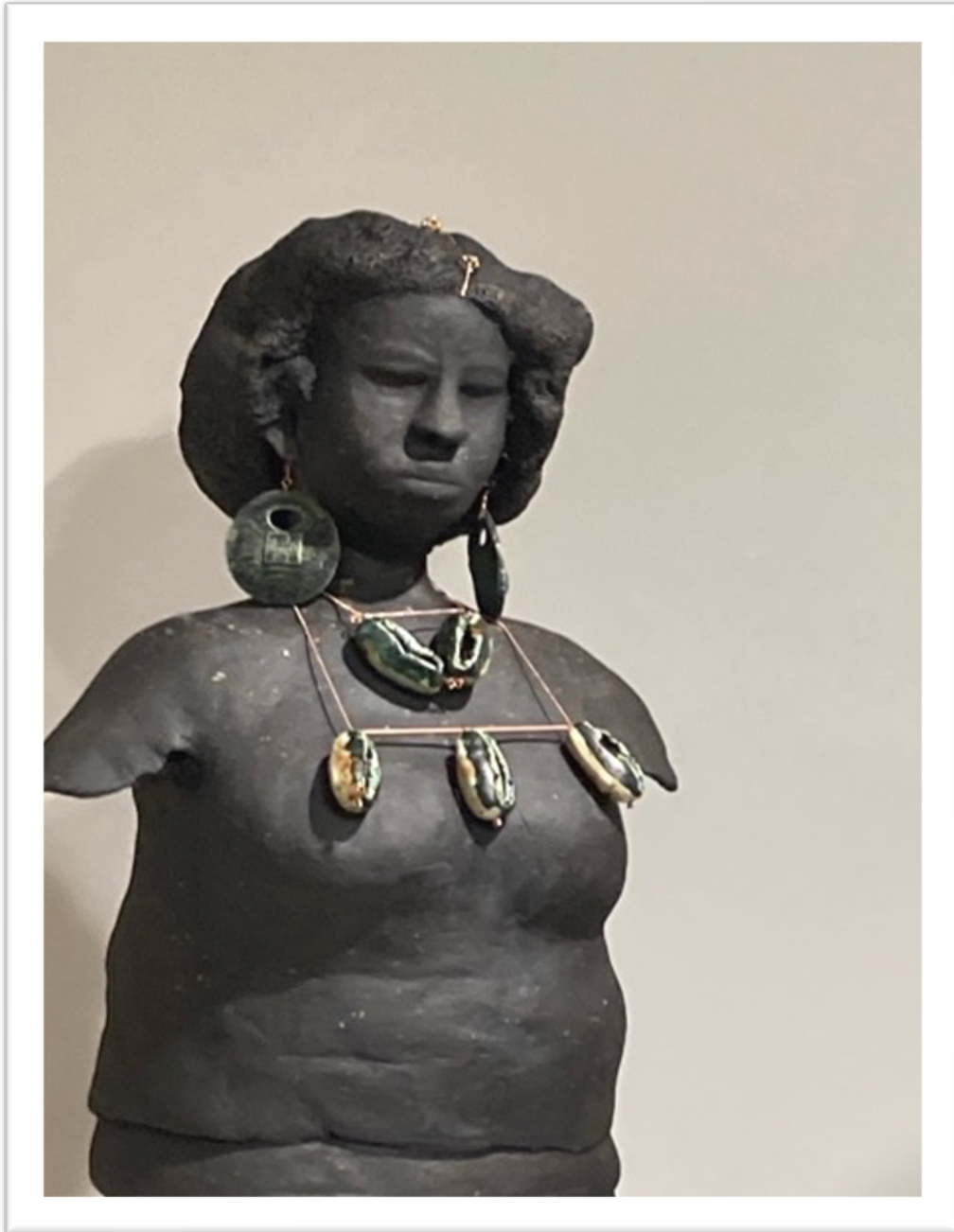


Plate 2: Ida

Aunt Ida is from Cameroon, which accounts for 17% of my DNA. She is my mother's sister, always kind and gentle. To represent her tribe, Aunt Ida wears cowrie shells.

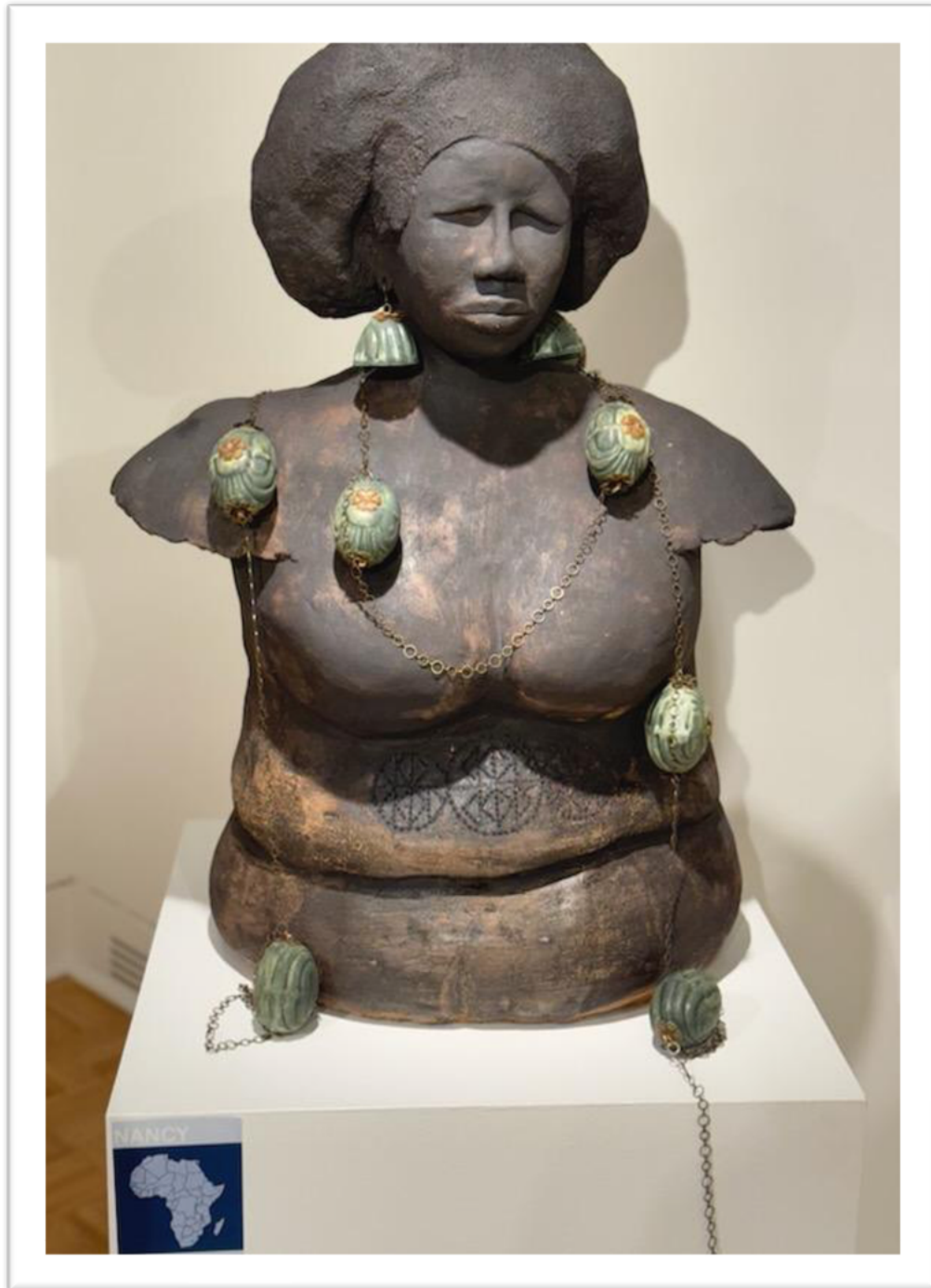


Plate 3: Nancy

Aunt Nancy is from Senegal; she represents 3% of my DNA. She is my mother's sister, always loud, loving, and happy. Aunt Nancy wears large beads and scarification to represent her tribe.

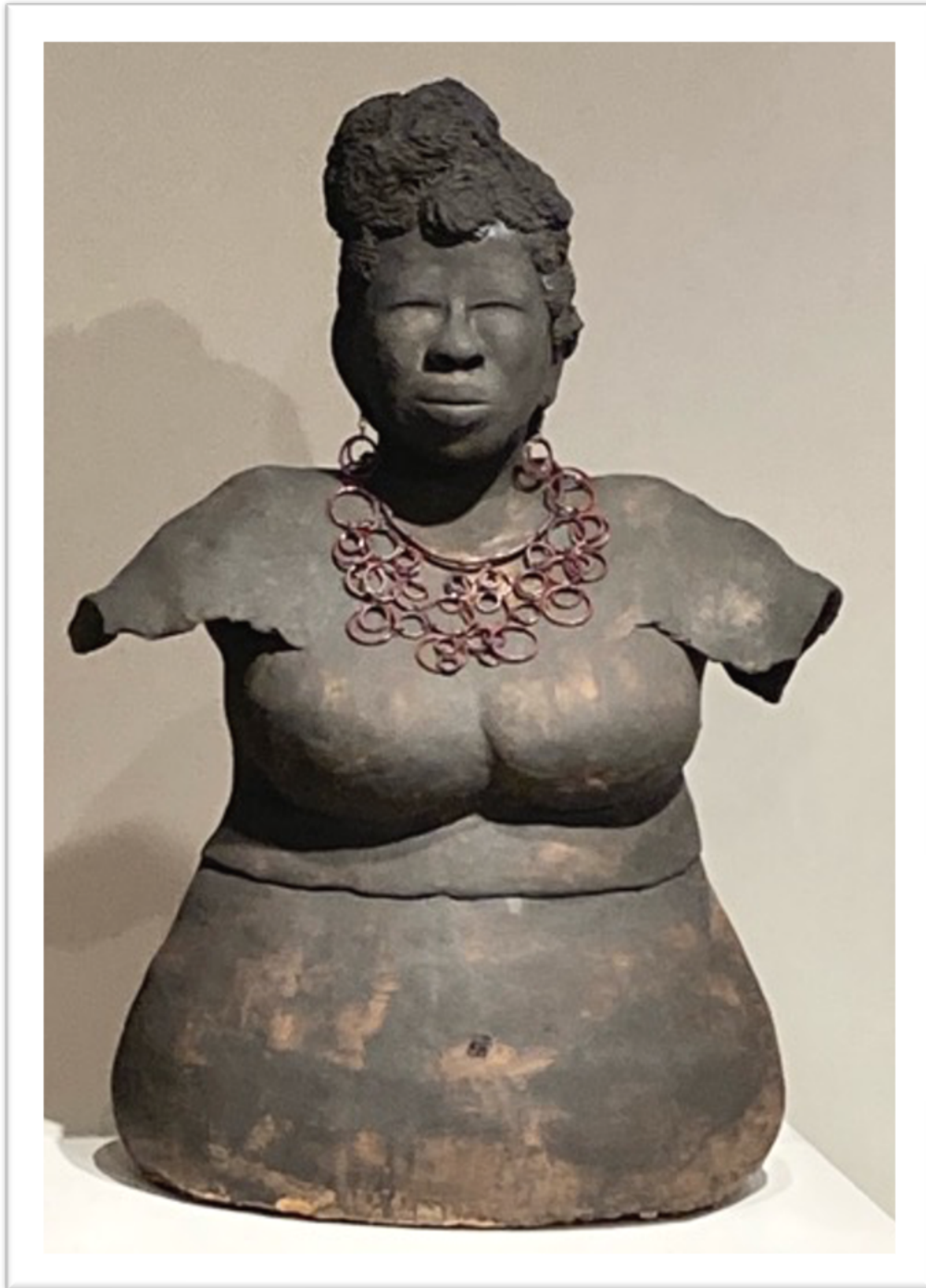


Plate 4: Betty

Aunt Betty is from Mali; she represents 18% of my DNA. She is my mother, always stern and pensive. Aunt Betty wears wagon wheel elements and coded braids to represent her tribe.



Plate 5: Danielle

Auntie Danielle is from Benin; she represents 1% of my DNA. She is my father's niece, patient, beautiful, and godly. Auntie Danielle wears a hair crown charm and charm quilt beads to represent her tribe.



Plate 6: Kelyn

Aunt Kelyn is from Ghana; she represents 12% of my DNA. She is my father's sister, who has been forgotten, wise and maternal. Aunt Kelyn wears a warrior and shell beads to represent her tribe.



Plate 7:

Aunt Frank is from Nigeria; she represents 25% of my DNA. She is my mother's sister, proud, independent, and strong. Aunt Frank wears warrior plates to represent her tribe.



Plate 8: Linda

Aunt Linda, the storyteller, is from Nigeria; she represents 25% of my DNA. She is my mother's sister, kind, loving, and happy. Aunt Linda wears shell beads and a coded quilt bracelet to represent her tribe.

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES



Figure 1: Cristina Cordova

Cristina Cordova focuses on expressive, emotional, and sometimes fantastical human figural sculptures. They are inspired by her heritage, gender, politics, and the complexities of human relationships with their surroundings. ¹Cristina provided my first “Black Art” experience. Her permanent installation at the Mint Museum in Charlotte featured black people. She is not afraid to promote her heritage in her

¹ Home. (n.d.). CRISTINA CORDOVA. <https://www.cristinacordova.com/home>

work. Her figurative art features curlier hair and dark skin tones. Cristina's courage inspires the progressive abstract figurative designs in my work.



Figure 2:

Lucca Tripaldi is a sculptor who makes jewelry. His jewels are in black or white porcelain, decorated with ceramic transfers. He prefers unglazed or partially glazed surfaces and uses crystalline and dry glazes to develop strong contrasts.² I admire the

² *luca tripaldi* - *LucaTripaldi.com*. (2020, August 8). *LucaTripaldi.com*.

https://lucatripaldi.com/s/en/luca-tripaldi_en/

simplicity, elegance, and depth of Lucca's work; he inspires me to add layers to my jewelry. Lucca works and creates a pathway to personal fulfillment, finding joy and purpose in his endeavors. I love how he immerses himself in various projects and activities, which not only showcases his creativity but also acts as a safeguard against boredom. His commitment to staying engaged in meaningful work reflects a deep appreciation for the process of creation, allowing him to explore new ideas and express himself fully. By consistently seeking out opportunities to create, Lucca not only enriches his own life but also inspires those around him to embrace their passions and avoid the stagnation that can come from idleness.



Figure 3

Faith Ringgold was a pioneering painter, mixed media sculptor, performance artist, author, teacher, and activist whose powerful works address issues of race, gender, and social justice. Ringgold's innovative use of quilting and storytelling techniques revolutionized the art world by bridging the gap between fine art and craft traditions. Faith's strength and pride in her ethnicity serve as a powerful source of inspiration for

me as a black artist. Her confidence in embracing her identity not only highlights the beauty and richness of our culture but also encourages me to celebrate my own heritage.³ Witnessing her assertiveness motivates me to express my experiences and perspectives through my art, reminding me of the importance of representation and authenticity in creative work. Faith's journey reinforces the idea that our backgrounds can be a source of strength, fueling our creativity and helping us connect with others who share similar stories.

³ *Windows of the Wedding #14: Fathers, 1974* – Faith Ringgold. (2024). Faithringgold.com.

<https://www.faithringgold.com/portfolio/windows-of-the-wedding-14-fathers/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A, J. (2022, May 5). Africa - The history of jewelry around the world. My Jewelry Repair. <https://myjewelryrepair.com/2022/05/african-jewelry-history/>

Albaret-Dakar, A. (2014). Dakar (Sénégal)–Wolof women [Femmes Ouolofs].

The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/650363>

African art Yoruba beaded Ibeji twins Yoruba Shango bag. (2015).

Tribalartasia.com.

http://www.tribalartasia.com/Tribal%20Art%20Asia%20African%20Yoruba/African_Art_Yoruba_Ibeji.html

AFRICAN TEXTILES AND FIBER ART FROM CAMEROON, MALI, NIGERIA AND

THE CONGO. (2023, April 17). Issuu.

<https://issuu.com/andresmoragatextileart/docs/africantextiles2022>

Corbett, S. (2020, July 8). Mansa Musa - Ethnic jewels magazine. Ethnic Jewels

Magazine. <https://www.ethnicjewelsmagazine.co.uk/articles-mansa-musa/>

Femme Ouolof du Cayor (Sénégal). (1914). Masson & Cie. Schomburg Center

for Research in Black Culture; Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and

Reference Division. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31814760>

Fulani. (1960s). Blanket [Wool and goat hair]. Saint Louis Art Museum. Gift of Thomas Alexander and Laura Rogers.

<https://jstor.org/stable/community.14729536>

Good as gold: Fashioning Senegalese women. (n.d.). Mining gold's past: Trade and techniques. Africa.si.edu.

<https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/good-as-gold-fashioning-senegalese-women/good-as-gold-fashioning-senegalese-womenmining-golds-past-trade-and-techniques/>

Jewelry in Ghana and the Ashanti Empire. (n.d.). MOJ.

<https://store.museumofjewelry.com/blogs/news/african-jewelry-history-in-ghana-and-the-ashanti-empire>

Kingdom of Ghana. (2019). UShistory.org.

<https://www.ushistory.org/civ/7a.asp>

LaGamma, A. (2009). The essential art of African textiles: Design without end.

African Arts, 42(1), 88-99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447939>

Neaher, N. C. (1981). Igbo carved doors. African Arts, 15(1), 49-88.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3336006>

Ogunwale, T. A. (1972). Traditional hairdressing in Nigeria. African Arts, 5(3),

44-45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334568>

Samuel, I. (n.d.). Cloth in African history: The manufacture, patterning, and embroidering of Africa's signature textiles. African History Extra.

<https://www.africanhistoryextra.com/p/cloth-in-african-history-the-manufacture>

SERER PEOPLE: Beautiful, intellectual and highly spiritual ancient people of Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania. (n.d.). Kwekudee Trip Down

Memory Lane. <https://kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2014/01/serer-people-beautiful-intellectual-and.html>

Swahili Modern. (2017, January 12). Malian jewelry in pop culture. Swahili

Modern. <https://www.swahilimodern.com/blogs/news/spotted-malian-jewelry-in-pop-culture>

U.S. Department of the Interior. (n.d.). What is the Underground Railroad?

National Parks Service.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/undergroundrailroad/what-is-the-underground-railroad.htm>

Underground Railroad. (2024, November 14). In Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railroad

APPENDIX

My story: a little prose

When the opportunity arises to put my legacy on canvas, it creates a conversation between the eyes and the mind. The eyes ask the mind, "What is this we are seeing" and the mind answers back with a sigh. "It will take work to understand" the mind says and starts a search through archives to collect harmonious stories. Digging deep, looking for old tales or secrets, finally answering back to the eyes. "It's her history!" The eyes say, I've never seen this before. The mind replies, "It's from other cultures. Shhh, let's see what it has to say." But the eyes felt restless, unsteady and questioned the mind persistently. Eyes asked, each piece tells a story, the art tells secrets about her culture? "Yes," says mind, they called it oral traditions? The eyes and the mind couldn't rest from the canvas and the quiet traditions that spoke volumes. The volumes emanated a melodious hertz that awakened the soul. The soul yawns, "Who's secrets are we uncovering?" The eye and the mind answer back, "Hers!" The oral traditions displayed in my art are a collaboration of secrets, of the lost and found legacy that is now treasured.

