

WHAT THEY
MAY NOT
TELL YOU

A DEEPER LOOK INTO OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS

ALAYNA N. PERNELL

Introduction

In my current, ongoing body of work, *Our Mother's Gardens*, I carry a specific quote by writer and academic, Saidiya Hartman, with me throughout my creative process. On page 4 of her text, *Venus in Two Acts* (2008), she states:

"There is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage... Loss gives rise to longing, and in these circumstances, it would not be far-fetched to consider stories as a form of compensation or even as reparations, perhaps the only kind we will ever receive."

This powerful quote sets up the way I am thinking through my exploration and excavation of the archive.

Throughout history, there has been a unique curiosity to capture and study the Black body. Black bodies have continued to be seen as objects to capitalize on and often times hardly anything beyond that. With these questions and ideas in mind, along with Saidiya Hartman's words, I have spent several months researching the collections at the Art Institute of Chicago as a starting ground.

The title of my work is inspired by the text *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) by Alice Walker, which I fell back in love the summer of 2020. In this text, she talks about her search of the African American woman's suppressed talents and artistic skills that they lost because of slavery and a forced way of living. Her words continue to ring through my mind throughout my entire creative process.

I am also deeply inspired by the way artists, such as Xaviera Simmons, Carrie Mae Weems, and Dr. Deborah Willis, all think about and use the archive to talk about the Black experience, including Black women's experiences. Though her work is not centered around the Black experience, I am also inspired by Filipino-American artist, Stephanie Syjuco's series "Block Out the Sun" (2019), which I did not come to know until 6 months into working on my own body of work.



Work shot of me working in my Chicago home.

My original plan in adding to this lineage, in conversation with the previously mentioned artists, was to try and photograph them in person at the Mary L. and Leigh B. Block Photography Study Room where they are held at the AIC. Due to the coronavirus pandemic that shut places down in 2020, I resorted to intervening with the photographs in the comfort of my home. This turned out to be very serendipitous and made more sense to me logically and emotionally to photograph them in the comfort of my home away from the institution. I am still photographing all of my work for *Our Mothers' Gardens* in my home to this day and will continue to do so.

With the images I have found and researched thus far, depicting the (in)visible violence and exploitation of Black women in visual art, I have excavated them, re-photographed via the intervention of my hands and my body as an added extension of care. I re-captioned and re-contextualized the original works, dominantly created by white men, as a way of protecting the Black women's bodies and their humanity. Going back to the Saidiya Hartman quote at the beginning, storytelling is possibly one of the main forms of reparations that we have. Though with this research I have found it important to not only share their stories, but to also include their names if the information was recorded and publicly accessible.



With Care to You #2, 2020, archival inkjet print, 6 x 6 in.

Behind My Hands

In the 19th century, photographers began creating daguerreotypes, one of the first photographic formats. The images ranged from individual portraits to family portraits regardless of gender, race or class. A very common, yet unsettling subject matter of daguerreotypes was called "nanny portraits". In these portraits, Black women were forced to pose with their slave owner's children and/or Mother. To be clear, the intended subject was not meant to be the Black woman. The intended subject matter was meant to be the white children and/or their Mother. The names of the Black women were not disclosed which makes this all the more daunting. The inclusion of Black women in these photographs signified nothing except being a symbol of wealth and power. This was only for slavers to show other slave-owning families that they could afford a nanny. The Black women's own families, their own children, and their own humanity stripped away. Exploited for their labor. However, the longer I spend time with these images, and the more I stare into the Black women's eyes, I do not see defeat. While the sadness is still present, I also see the lack of smiling and direct eye-contact as a form of resistance. I took my portrait with recreated versions of these images, and in solidarity, refused to smile as well.



Cradling my Ancestral Mother, 2021, inkjet print, 24 x 30 in.



With Care to Ms. Maudelle Bass Weston, 2020, archival
inkjet print, 6 x 6 in.

The beautiful woman shown in the previous image is the late Ms. Maudelle Bass Weston. She was a wonderful dancer and beautiful model who was prominent in the 20th century. She was born in Early County, Georgia in 1908. Though later she relocated to Los Angeles to pursue her career as a concert dancer and model. She did so until her unfortunate passing in 1989. American photographer Edward Weston was, for lack of better words, fascinated by Maudelle. He stated in his journal in 1931 that, "If I had a nude body to work with—a Negress, a black fat Negress, then I could have worked! This desire keeps popping into my mind." It brought chills to my spine reading this during my research. Eight years later, he photographed Maudelle. At this point, Maudelle was 21 years old, Weston, 53. Maudelle looks nothing short of uncomfortable.

Profiting off the Black female body is not a new phenomenon. Neither is hyper-sexualizing the Black body, especially the young Black female body. This has been a recurring theme since before the 19th nineteenth century and present. Similar to Maudelle, Black women taking on jobs to make ends meet often results in receiving criticism. Hardly any criticism is given to exploiters and the capitalist system that enables exploiters. This includes modeling, sex work, or various other jobs. There is a fine line between exploitation and collaboration. The former being the most prevalent in these images of Maudelle captured by Weston.

My *No Longer Peter Cohen's Property* pieces are still a part of *Our Mothers' Gardens*; they are just in a different time frame in history, specifically the mid-late 20th century. After meeting with someone who works for the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago (who I will keep unnamed for privacy purposes) and sharing with them about my current practice, it was offered to me to check out the Peter Cohen collection. I searched it briefly on the internet because I had never heard of his name prior to being informed about him. My curiosity led me further to see if the AIC had his collection as well and they did. There are well over 900 images and I printed out the images of Black women and continued my quest of saving Black women from the archive.

They are smaller vernacular images which is why they are handled in a different way. Spending time with this work made me think about my connection to my own family vernacular images and an experience I had in the summer of 2020 with my Grandmother and Mom looking through our own family images together. The women in these images are someone's mom, someone's sister, daughter, wife, girlfriend or friend. Yet, they are sitting in institutions like the AIC receiving no love at all that they would receive from their own loved ones if they were with them. They are not being reflected on, not being cared for, not being touched. What I noted about these images, and the images in general that were a part of this collection, was that the names of the people in the photographs were not disclosed. We do not know their stories, and the authorship and ownership were incorrectly ascribed. At the time, I could not help but feel like these images should have never belonged to Peter Cohen, or even the Art Institute of Chicago; especially at the expense of having their names and their stories erased.

I was a guest speaker in a Senior Photo Studio Seminar class that was being taught by the chair of the SAIC Photography department at that time, Oliver Sann. It was so heartwarming seeing students interact with and hold the photos and have conversations not only about them but around them.

Though after this experience, I knew I needed to do more than just talk about Peter Cohen's collection and critique it. I also importantly wanted to have an open mind to the "why" behind this collection and the works specifically held at the AIC as well. I was asking myself questions like:

"Why are there so many collected images of women in the nude?"

"Why are there so many images of white people in black face?"

"Why aren't the original photographers or the people presented in the images named?"

So, I wrote him a letter and we are still in conversation to this day. The letters, with the purposeful removal of personal information, are on the following pages.

March 11, 2021
7:00pm

Dear Mr. Peter Cohen:

My name is Alayna N. Pernell and I'm a second-year MFA Photography candidate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I am a Black American artist from Alabama. My interdisciplinary practice is very embedded in examining and analyzing what it means to be a Black person in this American landscape and how we are impacted mentally and physically by the metaphorical and literal spaces we inhabit. I would like to tell you a bit of a story of how I came to become attached to vernacular imagery in this phase of my practice and how I came across your collection.

Last summer, I was feeling quite detached from creating images and hit a patch in my practice where my motivation to create temporarily subsided. This was a direct result of the social unrest and the pandemic. In June, I went back home to Alabama for a couple of months to be with my family and rejuvenate my mind, body, and soul. I spent a lot of time between my Grandmother and my Mom's homes, both of whom I am very close with. We went through photo albums together and loose images hanging around in tubs throughout my Grandmother's home. The conversations we were able to have about the images and our family members were priceless, and I think about those moments every day. It took weeks to go through hundreds of photos dating from the late 19th century to the present. After I finished, I scanned over 800 images and brought them back with me to Chicago after my stay in Alabama. I found it beautiful to see how my family depicted themselves. This experience resulted in my attachment to the language of vernacular images and what it could say about the people in the images. Yet, this moment was also the catalyst to me questioning the stakes of when we are not able to speak for ourselves and when we do not have control over our own narratives or images.

This inquiry of mine has since been guided by two questions: 1) What can visual art tell us about the depiction of Black women throughout history? And 2) How have those negative depictions of Black women led to our lack of mental and physical care? These questions also led to my rescue of Black women from the archive by photographing with my reproduced images of the original works. My intention was not and is not to keep them to myself. My intention is for the original works to be returned back to their respective families so that they may be reflected upon the same way I was able to reflect upon my own family images during the summer with my Grandmother and Mother.

After meeting with curators at a couple of institutions, it was suggested to me to take a look at your collection. I was appalled at the selection of images the Art Institute of Chicago had, yet I went through and reprinted the images of the Black women you had in your collection since that is where my main focus is at. While the images themselves are beautiful, I felt a sense of great sadness because they are not with their families nor are their names (of the ones that I obtained) are visible. My discomfort also comes with knowing that I can't refer to the collection without saying your name instead of theirs. My discomfort also comes with knowing that profit was made and/or exchanged from obtaining these images. While I can't speak for the profit of the collection as a whole, I am in a unique position of understanding the undertones of profiting off of the Black body in any way, even with art and images. Where capitalism is present, care is not always there holding its hand. I acknowledge that you have had Black curators come in and create exhibitions and showings of the images in your collection, though I must insert my opinion that this alone is not enough. Access alone is not enough.

Your collection is only a portion of the larger body of work I am working on which is focusing on making the (in)visible narratives and lives of Black women visible. Though it is still an important aspect of my research, my hope is to have a conversation with you and hopefully discuss ways of possible restitution. If it would be of interest to you, I would be happy to help find the remaining families of the Black women and their families in your collection in order to give them back. I am most willing to be a part of this restitution if you would allow it. I hope to hear from you soon and thank you so generously for listening to my story and considering my sincere request.

All My Best,
Alayna N. Pernell

Letter to Peter Cohen, 2021, inkjet print, 8 x 10 in.

March 15, 2021
4:58pm

Dear Alayna,

Thank you for your thoughtful email. I'm glad to be in touch. I also want to thank you for bringing to my attention an issue with the way that the Art Institute of Chicago has catalogued my gift of vernacular photos. Most museums will list vernacular photos as having an "anonymous" or "unknown" artist or photographer. It's both inaccurate and inappropriate for my name to be listed as the "Artist" of these photos, even if the words "Collected By" follow it. I am reaching out to the curators there to ask that this be changed.

In terms of the photos I've collected - like you I'm also curious about the previous owners of these images and have wondered how they matriculate outside of the family homes. However, in the decades I've been collecting, very few photos have been traceable. By the time the photos get to me, they have gone through multiple cycles of floating around so they're detached from any info. More often than not there's virtually no identifying names or even dates, and the photos arrive in singular form. This can be said for all of the photos in the collection, and is not specific to the Black portraits. The people who might have more info on how the photos circulate are the dealers on eBay, or at the flea market.

Photo collecting is a hobby and passion I have on the side of my main work. I live in NYC and the collection is housed in my apartment where I employ one part-time assistant, Yael Eban, who is also an artist. She helps me to keep things organized in boxes, because the collection is not digitized (aside from what's on the website and Instagram which Yael takes care of - I am not technologically savvy!). My goal over the last 20 years has been to get vernacular photographs recognized by museums because I believe the photos are an important and overlooked part of photographic history, and more widely, of societal history. While I purchase the photos, mainly from eBay, I do not gain a profit of any kind from the museums - I invite curators to come and choose any photos they'd like for their collection to be donated as a gift.

I hope some of this info gives you some context. Over the years a number of artists have borrowed material from the collection and made various projects with the photos. You're more than welcome to come visit and explore any time you are in NYC in the future!

Best regards,
Peter

Initial Response from Peter, 2021, inkjet print, 8 x 10 in.

March 18, 2021
11:39am

Dear Mr. Peter,

I hope you are doing well. Thank you so much for your kind and generous response. I really appreciate the time you took out to respond to my letter and very glad to be in touch with you as well.

Your response definitely cleared up a lot of the questions I had and I'm most thankful for your honest reply. I am remaining hopeful that the AIC curatorial team will correct the matter in time. I would love to know more about that when there is an update if you are interested and/or comfortable.

Vernacular images are a very important part of the photographic world and I share in your curiosity and interest in them as well. I have great respect that you have dedicated many years to highlight its importance. It is a bit saddening that the photos are untraceable and I am very cognizant now that that is not your fault by any means. However, the optimist in me would love the opportunity to try. I'm not sure if that would be of interest to you to allow me to do so, whether with some images from the AIC collection or your own in New York. I would be willing to go to either location and dedicate any amount of time to tracing a selection of images, or even meet you and/or . . . If it's not possible or wanted, I am completely understanding, but as I always tell myself, it doesn't hurt to ask.

Thank you so much for having this dialogue with me and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best,

Alayna N. Pernell

Second Letter to Peter Cohen, 2021, inkjet print, 8 x 10 in.

March 22, 2021
2:54pm

Hi Alayna,

I will certainly keep you posted about the AIC registrar conversation.

In terms of the photos - I would propose this: I'd like to send you a selection of photographs from my collection for you to research and work with as you see fit. I believe it will be much easier and quicker to work together, rather than have you try to go through the AIC curators. The bureaucracy of a museum can be so slow, and I'd rather you didn't have to wait on permission if you're eager to move forward. I have already begun looking for photographs with names or dates on the back so that there's at least a bit of concrete info for you to work with. Let me know what you think, and if this works for you we can put together a package and send it, so please share your address as well if this works for you. And of course you're welcome to visit anytime you're in NYC, but at least this way you can begin working with the photos however you'd like in the meantime.

Best to you,
Peter

3:30pm

P.S. We just got word back from Liz Siegel, a curator at AIC who thanked us for bringing the credit line issue to her attention. She says "This is NOT a decision we made, and you are absolutely correct. It's probably a cataloguing/web site glitch and I will see what we can do to fix it!"

Latest Response from Peter Cohen, 2021, inkjet print, 8 x 10 in.

March 24, 2021
11:55am

Hi Peter,

Thank you so much for writing me back and keeping me in the loop. That's lovely news to hear that AIC corrected the credit line issue.

I'm very fond of your proposal as well and would be happy to work with you on that. This sounds wonderful and I'm looking forward to embarking on this journey. My address is _____, Chicago, IL

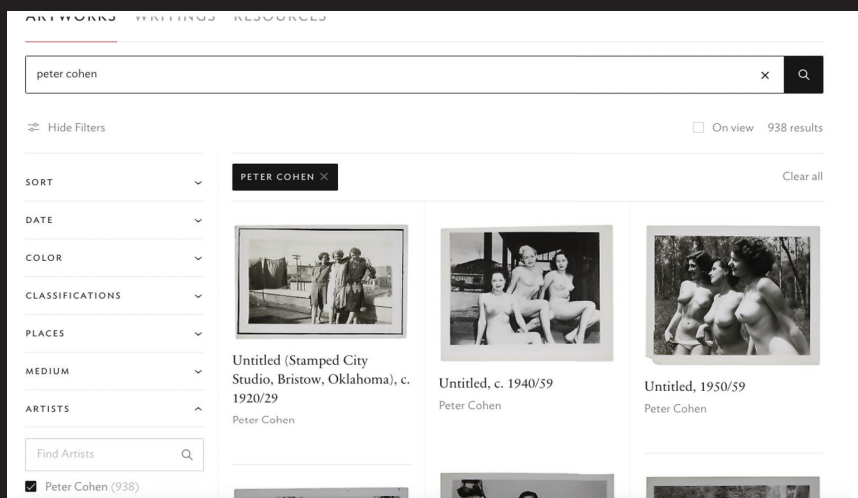
I'll be sure to keep in touch and will reach out when I make the trip to NYC. Thank you again so kindly for your generosity and willingness to work with me. Take care.

Best,
Alayna

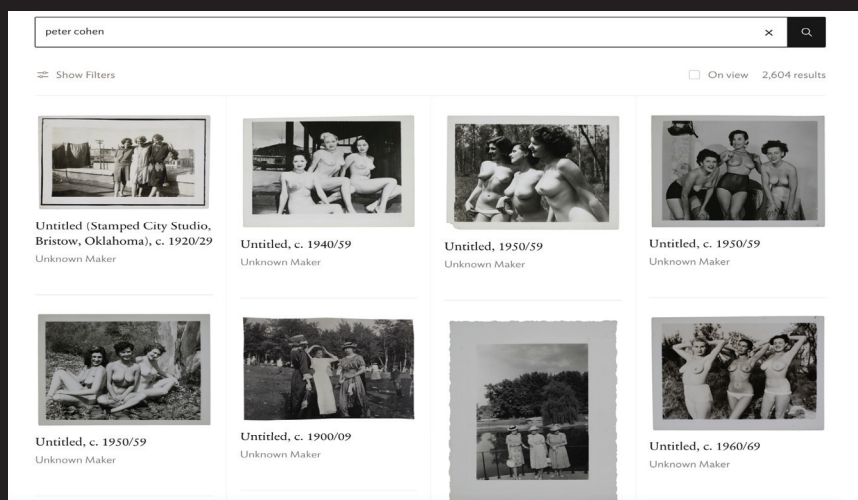
Latest Response from Peter Cohen, 2021, inkjet print, 8 x 10 in.

The changes made by the AIC (from Peter Cohen being listed as the owner/artist of these vernacular to the owner/artist being listed as “Unknown Maker”) are depicted in the following screenshots.

For clarification, the images shown on these screenshots are not included in my own work. The screenshots are only meant to show the changes that were made by the school following my advocacy.



Screenshot, September 2020




Screenshot, March 2021

In My Heart

I feel deeply connected to the women in *Our Mothers' Gardens*. I feel protective over them and a part of them. The primary reason behind that being my own background as a Black woman myself. While I am inspired by the previously mentioned artists and writers, I am also deeply inspired by the women in my own life. My Mother, my Grandmother, my sister, aunts, and best friends. I am also very thankful for my mentors who have supported me throughout this journey both as a Black woman and an artist, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Nia Easley.

Black women's voices matter. Our bodies, our minds, our labor, and our lives— all of our experiences as Black women and as Black people— including mine, my family, friends, the women shown in *Our Mothers' Gardens*, and all around the world. We all matter. We are too often underrepresented, undervalued, unappreciated, and unprotected. We are often judged by our actions and responses to serious life issues, including responses to micro-aggressions, discrimination and various other injustices. Though I am so thankful to be a part of a lineage of Black women artists and writers who highlight our experiences, and reveal what it has meant, and what it still means to be a Black woman in this world. That includes but is not limited to Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, bell hooks, Carrie Mae Weems and so many more.

Visual art only reveals a snapshot of the horror Black women have endured in history. My hope is that we can all, especially my white counterparts, continue to keep this question in mind: What would our world be like if we truly cared for Black women both visually and literally?



THE MARY L. AND LEIGH B. BLOCK
PHOTOGRAPHY STUDY ROOM

Open Tuesday–Thursday

1:30–4:30

By appointment only

Basic Tenant of Common Law Keeping Us From You, 2021, inkjet print, 24 x 30 in.