

INTERTWINED: AKINBOLA, LOCKE, RUBIN

Intertwined: Meditations on Legacy
by Tiffany D. Gaines

There is an intricate poetry to Blackness, to say the least. Blackness is not a monolith, but rather a dynamic flow of intertwined stories that connect us back to our past through shared values. These values transcend moments of survival and struggle, resilience, and righteousness to live at the core of our understanding and purpose. I have been reflecting on the legacy of these stories - particularly as our society is confronted with the ramifications of our violent past and the structures that continue to fail the oppressed and marginalized. I find comfort in the fact that this experience--coming to understand my cultural identity in the face of so much social, political, and economic angst--is not a new narrative for my community.

Gravitating to the ideologies and modes of thought of the Black writers, thinkers and creators who were at the forefront of similar pivotal moments in history, I look back on the ways in which they have used the arts and language as tools for social change, and to make sense of the complicated, beautiful, tormented existence that comes with living a life under the veil of double-consciousness.¹ Specifically, I find myself gravitating towards the Black Power and the Black Arts movement for catharsis; a basis for understanding how one can continue to stand proudly in the reality that our lives do indeed matter, despite all the obstacles continuously presented that try to convince us that they do not.

In coming into this understanding, ***Intertwined: Akinbola, Locke, Rubin***, on view at Rivalry Projects, is a timely reminder of the ways art helps us to confront the realities of our shared history on micro and macro levels.



Above: Steve Locke, *The Guardian (John Lewis)*, 2020, Jacquard woven cotton, 60"x 80", Edition 1/3

This exhibition brings in conversation three contemporary artists: Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola, Steve Locke, and Tammie Rubin, whose practice and process begin to unpack our collective histories around race and identity. In challenging us to confront our past and objects as symbols of this past, the artworks within the exhibit hold a mirror to each of us, reflecting the context of our own lived experiences mapped across well-known cultural symbols. For different people this means different things; for me I see it as an opportunity to center my ancestral legacy in the work that I do and an opportunity to question the structures in place needed to unpack this significant shift of thought. For my community, I see this moment as a call to reconnect with the root by recentering Afrocentric modes of thinking as a starting point to determine what healing looks like on **our** terms.

Tammie Rubin's *Always & Forever (forever ever ever)* series offers cone-shaped, anthropomorphic forms with piercing oculars, reminiscent of eerie white hoods as cultural symbols of terror, fear, and hate. But in spending time with them you can begin to see layers, intricate linear configurations, and bedazzling, subtle variations that give each form its own distinct personality. One might find the figures to signify apparitions, ghosts, or spirits with more welcoming, friendly, or familial demeanors; Rubin's work puts us face to face with our ancestors. For some, *Always & Forever* is a deeply troubling reckoning with a history of white supremacist violence, while for others, the work offers a sense of guidance, comfort, or support. *Always & Forever (forever ever ever)* is a reminder that the legacy of Spirit, whether good or bad, lives on forever. How we contend with that truth is up to us.

Also in the exhibition are Rubin's earthy, organic forms built from slip-cast Texas ball moss, a plant commonly misattributed to being a parasite, sucking resources from its environment. Rubin's work strives to mitigate the misconception; as an epiphyte the plant actually contributes to its ecosystem and thrives seemingly on very little ², making the work an ironic and relevant metaphor. A signifier of conflict and clashes and a metaphor for anxiety for the artist ³, the forms are distorted, beautiful, confusing, haunting, and complex as they once again meet the viewer at eye level.

The ghosts that I am reminded of in Rubin's work make me think about my own connections as a Black woman to Spirit, to life and the worlds beyond it.

Spirituality in the context of the Black experience and as a point of departure for thinking about Black healing pulsates through this exhibition, and it also reflects a similar mode of thought as contemporary Black artists across the coast. A recent visit to the exhibition *Enunciated Life* at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles ⁴ jumps to mind as another exploration of the Black spiritual experience through the lens of contemporary visual art.

Steve Locke's tapestry series offers textiles to *Intertwined* as another vehicle of ancestral connection. With each tapestry commanding the wall space on which it hangs, the work serves as a vessel of homage to some of the Black leaders, activists, and thinkers upon whose shoulders we stand on in the continued struggle for liberation. Utilizing the traditionally labor-intensive Jacquard weaving process, each tapestry contains images of a figure abstracted into mandala-like geometric fields. With individualized monikers like *The Vanguard (Shirley Chisholm)*, *The Teacher (Fred Hampton)*, *The Architect (Ella Baker)*, the works introduce Black pioneers who, despite their prolific contributions to our struggle for freedom, are often unfamiliar names.

For me, the works connect me back to Spirit; a vulnerable, transcendent space that allows me to stand proudly in the legacy of each elder and the doors they opened, which I may now walk through. Connecting to the Spirit is an indescribable feeling - something so intrinsic to us that we often don't know how to put words to it. It's the shiver that ran down my back as Locke spoke during a recent artist talk about Ms. Chisholm and her historic 1972 campaign for the Democratic Party presidential nomination ⁵, or Chairman Fred Hampton, whose natural charisma, leadership and organizing abilities caused him to quickly move up the ranks of the Black Panther Party. ⁶ The melancholy of reality that seeps in as Locke reminds us that Hampton was murdered at the hands of Chicago police, and taken from his community far too soon.

Right: Installation view of "Intertwined"







The intricate compositions of color, which Locke explains would have been almost impossible to complete at this level of detail if such an intensive process was not computerized, makes me think about the legacy of labor. The labor that each elder committed themselves to for the sake of progress. The enslaved labor of the Black bodies on which the foundation of this country was built. The immeasurable contributions from Black communities to social progress and the cutting edge of modernity, and the ways our labor evolves and transforms as we reclaim our radical right to rest ⁷ and self-care.⁸

In the spirit of reclamation, Anthony Olubunmi Akinbola's *Camouflage Study* series incorporates colorful durags composed and theorized as painterly objects, pushing against the cultural and historical evocations of Black bodies in concept and in output. The paintings position durags, a cultural signifier that connects to a long-standing and innovative history of the preservation and maintenance of Black hair, ⁹ a comforting reminder of home that's easily stereotyped to mean "hood," "ghetto," "threat," and so on, to be lauded as an artistic object. Akinbola paints within the predominantly white legacies of Color Field and Action painting, carefully composing fields of color to exhibit an undeniably Black object within a formal arts space. With this act, Akinbola restores a symbol of cultural violence to its natural state as a marker of legacy, ancestral histories, and ritual that both separate, but also offer points of reconnection, between Africa and Black America.

Support for this recentering of Black perspectives as a framework for social, political, and artistic critical thought saw its genesis with the emergence of the Black Arts and Black Power movements.¹⁰ Scholar Larry Neal articulates this formative concept in a 1968 essay, positioning the Black Arts Movement as an aesthetic and spiritual sister to Black Power, with both movements centering the needs, aspirations and nationhood of Black America while re-evaluating the place of Western aesthetics. He writes:

*"The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?"*¹¹

Though this cultural movement was preceded by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, Neal goes on to criticize the effectiveness of a movement that *"did not address itself to the mythology and the life-styles of the Black community. It failed to take roots, to link itself concretely to the struggles of that community, to become its voice and spirit."*¹²

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While Neal's analysis offers this position within an artistic and political framework, simultaneous mobilization on college campuses around the nation saw the creation of Black Studies departments that began to formulate new ways of thinking and analyzing information from a Black perspective.¹³ Locally, mobilization around the creation of the Black Studies Department at the University at Buffalo, and the formation of Black Student Unions on local campuses supported the grassroots community organizing that resulted in a Black Renaissance of institutions that centered Black art in the early 1970s, at the peak of the Black Arts Movement.¹⁴

As more and more Black artists are exhibited, and museums and galleries are being tasked with reckoning with their colonial, imperialist, and Eurocentric grounding ideologies, lifting this framework up feels more important than ever. It also only scratches the surface of the wealth of cultural thought leaders who have long centered the values of their communities across the diaspora as alternative modes of thinking to westernized, Eurocentric ideologies.¹⁵ I see a wealth of Black scholars, thinkers and writers who have yet to be fully integrated into the mainstream art historical canon as a framework of thought; a framework that fosters new and expansive possibilities at the intersections of feminist, queer and othered identities. True change requires a reassessment of whose voices are being centered in the establishment of new parameters.

In terms of community, it becomes important for Black people to have the opportunities to reconnect directly with the wealth of Black artists, writers, poets, philosophers, filmmakers, journalists, curators, and scholars that have always and continue to do the work of sharing these cultural legacies of our past as we think about our future. Amplifying the voices of Black thinkers and creators allows these modes of thinking to permeate into mainstream culture.

As I continue to move through the spaces of our past, while grappling with the possibilities for the contemporary moment, I feel Spirit more than ever. It lives through our visual art, thought, soul, food, hair, skin, style, and on, and on. And through that I see an untapped wealth of growth, knowledge, possibility, and true healing. Our stories are intertwined; one heals, we can all heal. We just have to surrender.

Intertwined: Akinbola, Locke, Rubin is on view from July 16-September 24, 2021 at Rivalry Projects.

Tiffany D. Gaines (b. 1995) is a writer, curator, and multimedia creator. She is interested in highlighting the diverse arts and artists of her community through her curatorial work, content creation, and writing. As an artist and creative, her emerging practice unpacks the intersections of narrative, history, and possibility with exploring her identity as a Black woman in America. Currently she works as the Curatorial and Digital Content Associate at the Burchfield Penney Art Center. She holds a BA in Journalism from SUNY Buffalo State and is currently pursuing her MA in Visual Studies from the University at Buffalo.

¹ W.E.B. DuBois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>

² Kate Kelly, "The misunderstood magic of ball moss," *The Eagle*, November 30, 2018, https://theeagle.com/news/local/the-misunderstood-magic-of-ball-moss/article_3c68da80-04e9-573f-ae23-aba5d446e6a0.html

³ "Intertwined Press Release," *Rivalry Projects*, August 2021

⁴ *Enunciated Life*, Curated by Taylor Renee Aldridge, California African American Museum, March 27 - August 15, 2021, <https://caamuseum.org/exhibitions/2021/enunciated-life>

⁵ *Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed*, directed by Shola Lynch, 2004, Beverly Hills, Calif.: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, https://www.amazon.com/Chisholm-72-Unbought-Unbossed-Shirley/dp/B0006UEVMC/ref=sr_1_1?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1408378006&sr=1-1&keywords=chisholm+%2772

⁶ Tilgon, "Fred Hampton: Vanguard Revolutionary," *Rediscovering Black History*, December 4, 2019, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2019/12/04/fred-hampton-vanguard-revolutionary/>

⁷ Kurt Streeter, "Simone Biles and the Power of 'No,'" *The New York Times*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/28/sports/simone-biles-self-care.html>

⁸ Noelle Toumey Reetz, "Self-Care as an Act of Resistance," *Georgia State University Research Magazine*, <https://news.gsu.edu/research-magazine/self-care-black-women-yoga>

⁹ Laretta Charlton, "John Edmonds's Luminous Images of Men in Do-Rags," *The New Yorker*, March 18, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/john-edmondss-luminous-images-of-men-in-do-rags>

¹⁰ Shantay Robinson, "The Aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement," *Black Art in America*, <https://www.blackartinamerica.com/index.php/2020/08/24/the-aesthetics-of-the-black-arts-movement/>, Accessed

¹¹ Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 4, *Black Theatre (Summer, 1968)*, pp. 28-39, Published by The MIT Press, <http://faculty.gordonstate.edu/lsanders-senu/Neal%20Black%20Arts%20Movement.pdf>

¹² Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 12, No. 4, *Black Theatre (Summer, 1968)*, pp. 28-39, Published by The MIT Press, <http://faculty.gordonstate.edu/lsanders-senu/Neal%20Black%20Arts%20Movement.pdf>

¹³ Dr. Molefi Kete Asante, "Afrocentricity," *Dr. Molefi Kete Asante*, April 13, 2009, <http://www.asante.net/articles/1/afrocentricity/>

¹⁴ Doug Ruffin, "Buffalo's Black Arts Renaissance of the 1970's," *The Buffalo History Channel*, April 11, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eSi1_Bpn98

¹⁵ Mercer Cook & Stephen E. Henderson, *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States*, 1969





Above:

Tammie Rubin, *More*, 2018,
Fired ball moss dipped in pigmented porcelain, underglaze, wire, steel wool, resin, 14" x 14.5" x 14"

Left: Installation view of "Intertwined"