

Always Been This Way

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by

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Abstract:

Always Been This Way is an exploration of the layers of self that become embedded within the home. My work seeks to explore themes of preservation and how I, as an artist, can document and solidify my personal and familial stories which are often created within the home. For my thesis, I have incorporated a combination of printmaking, textiles, furniture design, and performance as an examination of the generational information found inside the domestic space.



Dedicated to my family, loved ones, and my amazing cohort and department who supported me through this experience. Without you all I would not have the strength to create.

Always Been This Way

As a Black and Queer artist, I believe that my experiences are precious and I aim to convey them with authenticity and candor. There is resistance in being honest about our stories and life's experiences. To achieve this, my practice is influenced by a series of internal questions, which help guide me in being reflective in my work. I consider the tension between my personal experience and universal experience. The personal is represented by portraiture, places, objects, and specific social interactions. The universal is embodied in abstractions that contain a familiar sentiment, rendering them relatable.

Working within the two distinct aesthetics of the representational and the abstract allows me to create both concrete and imaginative imagery. By placing these separate aesthetics together, I offer some of myself and leave room for the viewer to see themselves in the work.

My work seeks to explore themes of preservation and how I, as an artist, can document and solidify my personal and familial stories. Harnessing the nostalgia of woodcut allows me to talk about current issues as they relate to loss and discontinuity. I choose to use woodcut as a medium particularly when discussing change as it invites the viewer to feel those feelings of loss as well. As a third generation Philadelphian, I find that the city is immensely important to me and my family. Every member of my family can map the city by their experiences, the homes they grew up in, the places where they hold precious memories. I aim to preserve these memories and locations by creating prints that depict our homes and document the Philadelphian landscape.

Printmaking, Memory and Preservation

To practice printmaking as a contemporary artist feels like a peculiar position. Printmaking was initially used to create books and pamphlets to disseminate information widely, and now is primarily known as a fine art medium. The rich history of printmaking is what initially drew me to the process. In more modern history, throughout the 1970's Emory Douglas of the Black Panthers created artful woodcut posters for the organization to spread information about programming and protests, as well as articulate the group's political values. It is this lineage of the craft that attracted me to work within the practice as well.

Using the medium of woodcut amplifies the nostalgic nature of a subject. To work within such a traditional technique calls to the past and imbues the work with a sense of sentimentality. This phenomenon is quite powerfully articulated by Glenn Adamson's writing on craft and memory. In the final chapter of the book entitled *Memory*, Adamson explores our emotional responses to craft. He notes, "Craft simultaneously gives shape to our desire for continuity and reminds us of the actual tragic discontinuity of our experience" (184). Adamson skillfully puts into words why certain expressions of craft elicit feelings of nostalgia and melancholy. Craft is an inescapable reminder of the passage of time and the "tragic discontinuity of our experience." The concept of "tragic discontinuity" is something that I grapple with personally and in my work. The phrase exemplifies the fear of loss through the passing of time. I find myself wanting to preserve memories, places, and feelings. Because of the nostalgia embedded within the practice of woodcut, I find it the perfect medium to express these feelings. I aim to harness these elicited emotions to bring light to my own reckoning with the passage of time and change.

Identity, Home, and Loss

To be part of the African Diaspora means to have an inherent relationship with displacement and loss. As an African American my sense of belonging to a large cultural identity is often fraught. I don't often align with being an American, as this country's societal structures do not often privilege people who share my race and gender. While I do have an affinity for other Black people and African Americans broadly, I find that my stronger connections are more regional. This is what prompts my pride in being from a city like Philadelphia which has a strong and thriving African American community. I also believe this is why the concept of the home becomes so important. The home for me becomes a primary site of identity. The home is a monument to some of my earliest and most important bonds: my family.

When conceptualizing the home, it becomes much more than just a structure. It is a place that becomes a container for so many experiences, lessons, changes, and emotions. In a collection of essays by Sarah Robinson and Juhani Pallasma entitled *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Designs*, the authors seek to outline the neurological connections between humans and the structures we create. Pallasma opens their argument by stating, "Buildings do not merely provide physical shelter or facilitate distinct activities. In addition to housing our fragile bodies and actions, they must also house our minds, memories, desires and dreams. Buildings mediate between the world and our consciousness through internalizing the world and externalizing the mind. Structuring and articulating lived existential space and situations of life, architecture constitutes our most important system of externalized order, hierarchy and memory" (52). In this rich passage Pallasma is asserting that buildings have greater meaning than the basic logistical uses we have for them. They are entrenched in our emotional spheres just as much as our physical spheres. Homes in particular can serve as an external mode of processing life's experiences in the way that we construct and personalize

them.

The homes that I've chosen to depict in my work all have an emotional significance in my life as well as that of the rest of my family. The house that I've embedded into the back supports of the *Relief Chair*, one of my central pieces in my thesis, is not only the house that I grew up in, but the one in which my mother grew up as well. That house holds two generations of my family history and therefore it contains innumerable memories, feelings, and milestones. My mother sold the home in 2019, and I've been trying to quantify that loss since then. Losing that house, changing family dynamics, time, and distance all have permanently altered my family's sense of home. How can I preserve this history? How can I solidify these memories?

The Relief Chair becomes a monument of both the home and the interior domestic space and seeks to memorialize these locations and memories. My father is currently living in the house he grew up in. I've chosen to carve this house on the back of the *Relief Chair* to signify its similar importance within my family. I spent a lot of time as a child in that house with my grandparents. I would spend weekends with them while my parents were away or working. I have the distinct memory of being able to sit on the porch with my grandparents as they lounged in their cushioned porch chairs and said hi to their neighbors as they passed by. My grandma often would sit and talk with her good friends at length on that porch. Sometimes she'd talk shit. One summer their street had a block party. This is the only time I remember there being a block party so it was exciting. I had made a friend and my grandma knew their family and allowed me to go over to their house. It was a strange experience from what I remember because I didn't know my new friend very well, but because their family were neighbors my grandparents trusted them. This is the importance of community: trust and safety. Now that neighborhood is changing since Philadelphia is experiencing rapid gentrification, specifically within historically Black neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are losing their foundations, both physically and culturally. As an artist I find myself being called to document our physical spaces so that those stories are not lost. Often, I find myself wondering how to make other people care about gentrification when the typical responses are "it's just the way things are" or "it's making the neighborhoods better and safer." These responses are not only steeped in passive racism but are dismissive of the deeply rooted damage that's being done by gentrification.

Many historically Black and people of color communities around the U.S. are experiencing similar effects of gentrification. This

was highlighted for me when working on a collaborative project in Apalachicola, Florida. In October of 2023, artist Sara Inacio, PhD candidate Adrian Cato, and I ventured to Apalachicola to conduct a research / printmaking project on the history of the Black and Indigenous oystering community in that region. While there, we interviewed Willie Tolliver, professor of Social Work at Hunter College and Apalachicola part-time resident, and discussed the topic of gentrification and erasure at length. I asked Tolliver how gentrification is affecting his hometown, mentioning the kinds of responses I hear when these questions arise. He told me that when people ask him those questions, he responds by saying that gentrification is a means of erasure. If people are uprooted and forcibly removed from their communities, they lose their history and it is just as easy to say they were never there in the first place.



The Hill, photo lithography on gampi, 12”x 8”, 2023

He went on to say that it is imperative that we use our platforms to discuss these issues and sustain our communities so that our presence and contribution to society will not be forgotten.

Apalachicola is located in Northern Florida and is best known for its significant export of oysters. At one point the town provided nearly 10% of oyster the supply for the entire United States. Historically the oysters were harvested and processed by a large Black population in the area.

Today, due to climate change, harvesting is no longer a sustainable method of oyster farming. Instead aquaculture is the main source of production. This requires fishers to lease plots of water to grow their oysters (Hanson). Along with climate change and the shift in industry, Apalachicola's demographics are changing as well. Apalachicola was predominantly an African American town, with most of its population congregating in "The Hill" neighborhood. Today, The Hill is slowly gentrifying, with newly built homes popping up, and some homes left abandoned and reclaimed by nature.

Our project aimed to document the current physical landscape of Apalachicola while also highlighting its very vibrant history. This culminated in a large fabric mural that contained prints of archival photographs as well of shots from our visit. We treated the fabric with natural dyes from native plants and seagrass in the area. Additionally, we made mono-prints from these plants which were used as the basis for screen prints and as ornamentation surrounding the photos. We also created a zine filled with historical facts accompanying the images in the mural, providing context and background information.

Although this project is not included in my thesis, my time there along with my conversation with Tolliver have helped solidify my conviction of the importance of documenting communities. What's happening in Apalachicola is happening in many areas of the U.S. including my hometown. Through this conversation and project, I was ignited with renewed conviction in the importance of my role as an artist. Documentation of space and time is meaningful. When there is proof of life, beauty, and culture these stories cannot be erased.

The Relief Chair

I have been greatly inspired by a long legacy of African American printmakers when it comes to my woodcut practice. Both Elizabeth Catlett and Alison Saar have significantly influenced my woodcut style and were some of my earliest inspirations in pursuing printmaking. Seeing Elizabeth Catlett's *Sharecropper* for the first time instantly drew me to the practice of woodcut and relief printmaking. The mark making, the graphic nature, the expression on the subject's face all made so much sense to me. I was determined to recreate those qualities in my prints and from there became very passionate about woodcut.

Alison Saar's *Washtub Blues* and *Sweeping Beauty* are stunning examples of how color and layering can be so effective in woodcut prints. Allison Saar is someone whose carving style is deliberate and bold. In comparison to Elizabeth Catlett, she doesn't use as many marks to define her subjects. Instead, she takes advantage of flat surfaces and the layering of colors to define her compositions. Additionally, her compositions are not overly complex or tedious and instead her subjects, often black women, take the center stage. I find myself mirroring these sensibilities in my prints, tending to not crowd my compositions and focusing on one main subject. Using the matrix of wood already offers so much information in a print, and I often like to let the medium shine.

While my artistic style is vastly different from both Saar and Catlett, it is their precedent that has allowed me to conceive of woodcut as such a powerful medium. I take inspiration from their direct narrative style and willingness to tackle larger social issues in their prints. The *Relief Chair* becomes my method of communicating larger narratives of home, identity and loss both not only its form but also in its surface design.

The *Relief Chair* Project is an exploration of combining print with furniture and how we can reflect on the generational impact of materiality through the objects we interact with on a daily basis. My initial inspiration for the project came from my desire to emphasize the beauty of the matrix in woodcut printmaking. I began conceiving of the woodblock as an im-



Relief Chair, poplar, 16" x 40" x 18", 2024

portant object which physically holds an archive of marks from the artist. I then imagined what it would mean symbolically for other objects to carry the carved information of a printmaking matrix. Not only would this be visually striking, but it would represent the histories that are embedded within these objects. This led me to consider furniture as an object which holds the stories of those who interact with it. Through the act of sitting and releasing the weight of the body onto the furniture, the structure holds the body and maintains its essence. In the moment of reposing onto the structure it becomes an extension of the body and an exchange of information occurs. The body over time influences the architecture of the chair and in turn the chair teaches the body how to interact with it. The structure accumulates this information and holds histories, memories, and experiences and overtime becomes rich with this data.

To expound upon this idea, I began learning how to build a wooden chair from scratch. My design for the chair was simple. I wanted it to be a standard design and resemble something that could easily be found in a home. I worked closely with Professor Tucker Houlihan to create the chair, having no previous experience in furniture making. We began by going to a lumber yard and picking out the piece of wood which we would fashion into a chair. We decided on poplar, as it is a sturdy wood typically used for furniture, but not so dense that I couldn't hand carve it. I looked through the stacks of poplar planks and decided on a piece that appeared to be in good shape, but had some natural irregularities reminiscent of the tree that it came from. I planned to try and keep some of these details as evidence of the life of the wood before I altered it.

We soon got to work, going over my hand-drawn blueprints and starting to make our initial cuts into the plank. I felt a lot of fear throughout the construction of the chair. As a printmaker, precision, process, and routine are essential in creating a successful edition. I have a familiarity with the tools and equipment I use. In making a chair I entered into a new world of heavy machinery, power tools, and saws. I often had to double- and triple-check with Tucker before even making one cut. I would like to say that with time it got easier (and maybe it did marginally), but the entire process was anxiety inducing.

Once we crafted all of the pieces, sanded them down and prepared the joints, it was time for me to transform the surface of the chair into a woodcut matrix. I spent the summer of 2023 arduously planning the matrix and carving the chair. I used a net as the primary motif on the chair, intersecting lines in both positive and negative space that undulate on the surface. The division between the positive and negative creates the shape

of an ascending slope. I've carved three separate figures within the chair each at differing points in the scaling of the mountain. One resting at the bottom, another scaling the side, and a third waiting at the top. On the two slats on the back of the chair I carved the image of the house in which I grew up. The house is primarily set in front of the intersecting lines and is almost floating in space with a large gap between the top and bottom slats. The space between symbolizes how our memory often operates with forgotten information and how we must imagine to fill in those voids. The house becomes a focal point of the chair as it represents history and lineage.

The figures featured on the *Relief Chair* I often lovingly refer to as “my guys”. These characters are very basic representations of the human figure. They contain no other identifying factors aside from arms, legs, a torso and a head. I use them almost as puppets which can adapt to the different contexts that I place them in.

I use them in many iterations of my work. Sometimes they are ghosts, ancestors, our collective experiences, and sometimes they are myself. I like to keep their identity a mystery so that many meanings can be cast upon them. In the spring of 2023, I created an installation entitled, *Never the Child* where I used the motif of “my guy” throughout the piece to illustrate complex family narratives. The installation involves a variety of materials and techniques associated with domestic spaces which





Never the Child, crochet, found fabric, monotype, embroidery, polyfil, 6'x 3'x 22", 2023
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helps to place the narrative within the home. The figure takes on a multitude of roles, and roles that are everchanging depending on perspective and experience. I also experimented with making “my guy” into a soft sculpture around the size of a child. The result was emotional and thought-provoking.

Similarly to “my guys,” the intersection and overlapping of lines has developed into a primary methodology for my work. Each line represents a life, a soul, an experience, or a journey. When those lines intersect each other, they create an identity. I view myself as being made of the intersection of an infinite number of lines that come from my ancestors, the places I’ve lived, and the people I’ve met in this life. The grid and variations of the motif visualize this complexity. *Always Been This Way* is an exploration of the layers of self that become embedded within the home represented through differing variations of the grid both visually and structurally. This can be illustrated through the surface design of the Relief Chair which becomes a net or web of these intersections undulating behind the images of my childhood homes.

Creating prints from the *Relief Chair* became its own methodology. It was easy to deconstruct the chair because the joints had not been permanently glued yet. I began taking each individual section (the legs, the seat, the back slats), rolling it up with ink, and then either hand printing it or sending it through the press. With time the chair transformed from the natural color of the wood to a color stained by different mixes of inks. As it weathered with each print, the carvings became less and less apparent and the printing process permanently altered the chair.

I then began assembling collage compositions from the prints I made with the chair. The first collage became a way to try and restructure the object on a 2D surface. I printed the two back slats and the seat which, when aligned vertically, recreates the slope of the mountain. I also printed the two back legs framing the slats and seat on either side. In doing this, I became fascinated with the peculiarity of the legs as woodcuts. The long and thin blocks have a particularly strong presence on paper. The second collage I created became an assembly of only the legs. I positioned them to represent a woven structure with four legs positioned vertically intertwined with four legs horizontally. I deliberately glued them in an over and under pattern to recreate the rhythm of weaving.

To push the concept of the chair even further I invited movements artists Matthew Holliday and Kamari Smalls (Digital Media MFA ‘23) to create a choreographed dance with the chair. My goal for the collaboration was for Holliday and Smalls to activate the chair by creating prints using

the weight of their bodies. Working with African American movement artists was imperative for me so that they could narrate their own visual stories in collaboration with the chair. As African Americans we all have a relationship to displacement and have the experience of knowing the fleeting nature of our cultural condition.

Holliday and Smalls created their own choreography to accomplish this task with my guidance in how to best make a print. I taught them how to ink the surface of the chair and best practices in creating relief prints, but the rest of the choreography was their design. They discovered unique movements and strategies to create pressure and weight with their bodies so that the matrix would transfer to their clothing. Additionally, we collaborated with Digital Media artist Catherine Ashley (Digital Media MFA '24), to film the process. Ashley skillfully directed Holliday and Smalls in creating powerful tableaux which displayed the prints and the performers' striking movements. The experiment resulted in a short film, with sound design by Smalls and final editing by Ashley. It felt imperative to have a collaborative aspect of my final thesis work that showcased the potential, necessity, and beauty of community.

Threaded Portraits

Weaving is a process that is created from the basis of the grid and becomes a structural representation of the intersection of lines working harmony to create a unique pattern, or identity. When the warp (vertical lines) and the weft (horizontal lines) intersect in an over and under rhythm, they intertwine to create a fabric. To create a weaving takes time and planning. One must account for where each thread is placed, ensuring they are in perfect order so that the final form is not compromised. The process of dressing the loom becomes like a dance, threading each vertical line to create the warp in perfect succession. Once the loom is dressed the process of weaving can occur. The warp threads are lifted in alternating patterns to run horizontal threads between them. This creates the structure of the fabric. These interlocking movements work in unison through countless intersections and crossings.

Weaving not only incorporates my artistic ideologies, it also becomes a substrate for my prints. In my printmaking practice I often print on fabrics so that they may become like puzzle pieces fitting into larger works or installations. Mending different prints, fabrics, and textiles together feels akin to writing the words of a story. Each piece leads to the next in building out a narrative. This process is very intuitive. I often don't know where each work will fit into the story when I first make it. It's not until I have the rest of the pieces that I understand how they all work together. I like to resolve these compositions with embroidery. Each stitch is evidence of the process of creating these narratives.

Threaded Portraits is an assembly of weavings representing the body within the home. The weavings act as individual portraits each with their own patterns, color palettes and materials representing the changes of the body through time. I use weavings to represent the corporeal because

of our constant contact with fabrics as a part of our daily lives. To create these weavings, I use a combination of found yarns and fabrics which all having had a life before being incorporated into my own work. I use a color palette of pinks, greens, browns, and purples within the weavings since each of these colors represent a facet of my identity. Pink represents the denial of girlhood. As a black child in predominantly white spaces, fragility and femininity is not something I was offered. To use the color in the context of this work now feels like a rewriting or reclamation of something that I could never fully grasp. Green in turn becomes a stand in for the gender I felt best represented me as a child and even now. Green is a more neutral representation of gender, not overtly leaning towards masculine or feminine identity. It also becomes a stand-in for growth and the rebirths I have experienced throughout my life as I've navigated my identities. Purple is a color that often represents black girlhood, and brown is a stand-in for the black body. This soft color palette has developed into my way of knowing and understanding.

As I've explored integrating my prints with textiles, I find myself very drawn to Diedrick Brackens' work both materially and formally. Brackens often works large scale, creating weavings that claim the space of a wall with ease. In his weavings, Brackens uses his own likeness as a black figure which often dominates the piece. Like Saar, his compositions are not complex, but the way they are assembled, the color palette, and the narratives behind his compositions are. Brackens often takes inspiration from his childhood in the South. One of his most iconic series *Heaven is a Muddy Riverbed* depicts his figures interacting with catfish. The catfish image is loaded with many meanings, but most saliently it becomes a euphemism for the black experience. These weavings are inspired by the story of three young black boys who drowned while in police custody in his hometown. I admire how tactfully Brackens alludes to such complex narratives with such coherent and simplistic compositions. The positions of the figure's bodies, how they interact with each other and the catfish is enough to draw in the viewer to decipher the narrative.

In *Threaded Portraits* I use the printed motif of the chain link fence printed on top of the weavings to allude to themes of preservation, protection and memory. The fence mirrors the rhythm of the plaid patterning and becomes an extension of the intersection of lines. Additionally, the fence represents the protection of the "body" by creating a barrier between the interior and the exterior. The inspiration for the use of the chain link fence in *Threaded Portraits* comes from a prior work featured in the RISD 2024 Black Biennial. *Fenced Memories* depicts a screen-printed halftone

photo of me as a child, sewn onto handwoven fabric with the chain link motif printed across. In this work the fence operates as a protection of the child in the photo as well as the memory of that child. The portrait appears on both on the inside and the outside of the fence representing our function of memory and how sometimes we are left with fragments.



Fenced Memories, 12 epi, cotton, screen print, relief, embroidery, 36" x 36", 2024

Always Been This Way

The *Always Been This Way* installation is the culmination of the many facets and layers of meaning embedded within my thesis work. Each of the featured pieces provide as evidence for the body. Upon entering the space, the viewer is invited to start considering the home. The presence of a chair, woven fabrics and printed shirts and pants hung on a clothesline all indicate the existence of people and potentially a family. On the left-hand side of the wall, the *Relief Chair* is positioned on top of the *Threaded Portraits* weavings, which transitions from the lower part of the wall onto the floor and functions as a rug. The chain link pattern travels beyond the weavings and continues to climb up the wall. Mounted above the chair in the corner is a monitor displaying the *Always Been This Way Performance*. To the right hangs the *Relief Chair* paper collages which then leads the viewer to the clothes printed during the *Always Been This Way Performance*, hanging from the clotheslines. The installation becomes an exaggerated almost uncanny home space with elements that push beyond what we expect from our domestic spheres. It is my intention with this installation to ignite reflection and nostalgia within the viewer so that they may consider their own lineages. What experiences, ancestors, homes, and souls create their lines and how do they intersect?

Always Been This Way is an exploration of the layers of self that become embedded within the home. My work seeks to explore themes of preservation and how I, as an artist, can document and solidify my personal and familial stories which are often created within the home. The installation aims to invite the viewer into a curated space which calls upon their own memories and experiences inside the household. The work also serves as a monument to history and displays the generational information that is found in a home. The individual works within the installation work in harmony to demonstrate how we carry our familial histories within ourselves and how these stories are transferred to our surroundings and to each other. *Always Been This Way* will continue to grow and expand alongside myself, with the passage of time and the accumulation of more generational information.

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