

Other Hues of Blue: A Pandemic-Era Biennial in Atlanta

By Tenley Bick

The 2021 Atlanta Biennial, “Of Care and Destruction,” is framed by curator Jordan Amirkhani with a question via Toni Morrison: “...perhaps art is just all our care in extensive form?”¹ The question hints at a more capacious purview for the pandemic-era Biennial than the exhibition description, which describes it as a “a snapshot of contemporary art in a time of great grief, loss, isolation, and struggle.”² At the Atlanta Contemporary—safely distanced through timed ticketing—the show gives us a picture of contemporary work in the Southeast that extends beyond the frame of the exhibition (and physical limits of the gallery) to do the work of care in a time of isolation and injustice.

In comparison to the two preceding Biennials since the exhibition’s 2016 relaunch, this iteration is larger in

scope (30 artists to 2019’s twenty-one) and distinct in its definition of the Southeast. While its precedents exclusively included artists living in the region’s “ten states,” the 2021 installation highlights the region’s multiethnicity and multiculturalism as related to migration and diasporic histories by including artists from or based in the Southeast, as well as those who exhibit in or address it through their practices. It includes artists born in the culturally (and colonially) connected regions of South America (Lucha Rodríguez, Jesse Pratt López) and the Caribbean (Lillian Blades, Yanique Norman, Hasani Sahlehe)—the latter a point shared by the 2016 edition, though on a smaller scale—as well as those whose personal narratives refuse the limited convention of geographical identification (see the wonderful work of Davion Alston, a self-described

Gallery view, 2021 Atlanta Biennial, “Of Care and Destruction,” curated by Jordan Amirkhani, Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA. The first main gallery included works, from left, by Nekisha Durrett, L. Kasimu Harris, Marianne Desmarais, Eleanor Neal, Donté K. Hayes (two works on pedestals), and Michelle Lisa Polissaint. Photograph by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.





Gallery view, 2021 Atlanta Biennial, "Of Care and Destruction," curated by Jordan Amirkhani, Atlanta Contemporary, Atlanta, GA. The second main gallery included works, from left, by Hasani Sahlehe, Melissa Vandenberg, Regina Agu, Myra Greene (wall), Katie Hargrave and Meredith Lynn (tent and floor decal), Michi Meko, William Downs, and Yanique Norman. Photograph by the author.

"German-born, Atlantan transplant, and Georgia native").³ It also includes artists of color from major Black metropolitan centers of the U.S. who show in the region or address it through their work.

Stated issues of confrontation, reckoning, belief, and desire get to the difficult relational work of artistic practice at the intersection of the pandemic and racial injustice. Art has the potential to be a "guide for how to live and think in fraught times"; much of that guiding is felt viscerally in this show. Destruction is not mentioned directly but instead comes in waves in the five gallery spaces. (See Ashley Teamer's *Is Our Fear Beautiful?* from 2019, one of four works from *What Editions* collective in New Orleans.)

An emphasis on craft clearly enunciates the varied work of process—of making, of care, of *processing* what

has happened in both recent and distant pasts. The first gallery is especially strong in this regard. It presents Nekisha Durrett's 2020–2021 trio of magnolia leaves, collected from a cemetery in the artist's Washington, D.C. neighborhood, perforated with the names Atatiana [Jefferson], Alexia [Christian], and Kathryn [Johnston]: "individual Black women murdered by law enforcement in Atlanta, Georgia in the recent past."⁴ Presented in wall-mounted lightboxes, the works invite us to contemplate the absence of these women by shining light through the holes that make up the letters of their names, punctured through material grounds—magnolia leaves—that are known in the South for their difficulty to be cleared. A sculptural drawing by Eleanor Neal (*Transcending Ambiguity*, 2020) accompanied by the sound work *Solitude* (2021, linked by



Davion Alston, *Once again... Two Seas on Both Sides Without and Within*, 2021, mixed media, newsprint, and photographic material, dimensions variable. Photograph by the Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.

Zipporah Camille Thompson, *boo hag blue, casting stars into swaddle cloth*, 2021, mixed media, dimensions variable. Photograph by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.

QR code) on the history of the women of Gullah Geechee, is an energetic snarl of hair-like lines in indelible media that stains the paper.

Two black sculptural objects by Donté K. Hayes—*Fade* and *Lantern*, both 2020—are highlights. Their dark matte color makes it difficult to see textured surfaces that seem covered in woven thread or hair but are ceramic with black clay bodies. They both compel and defy visual perception as a way to know the world, as do three black quilted objects that conceal found objects in synthetic rubber—Marianne Desmarais' *anti-form* series. A photograph of two women engaged in hair braiding (a 2015 work from Michelle Lisa Polissant's *If Home Was Home* series, the show's earliest work) accompanies the wonderful *Hair Flip* (2019) from the same series, celebrating the care and joy of Black femininity—or the potential for that joy, as the series' conditional title suggests. Across the gallery is another pair of photographs about community and loss, from L. Kasimu Harris's *The Vanishing Black Bars & Lounges* series (2018, 2020).

Other works in the second main gallery extend the concentration on process as care, beginning with two adjacent mnemonic tableaux: they visualize spaces of memory and memorialization. Davion Alston's window-traversing tripartite *Once again... Two Seas on Both Sides Without and Within* (2021) is a diasporic network of images and materials. On the left side of the work, a four-part chromogenic print—featuring a single photographic image, framed by a white border, quartered and framed so that the border surrounds the set—captures some of the objects that appear across the installation in the gallery space. At center, in the window space, dried painted flowers and prisms of



glass hang from thread, casting dappled light and color on folded paper doilies (made of plain paper and folded architectural plans for “designs for living,” which span the work), and long-neck gourds arranged below. At right hangs a mudcloth-covered bulletin board, featuring personal photographs, pictures of West African sculpture interspersed with snapshots of Black subjects (in one painful image, a person is vomiting), a print advertisement for Beefeater Gin (in this context, an allusion to the British Empire), and a photograph of police surveillance, all traversed by thread and out-of-order numbers. The work seems to index histories of its own material elements; it seems to be engaged in remembering itself. Showing some elements to viewers “once again,” Alston underscores the temporal and spatial correspondences that structure this work.

Zipporah Camille Thompson's *boo hag blue, casting stars into swaddle cloth* (2021) invokes the flying, skin-shedding

witch of Gullah culture who preys on sleeping dreamers. Plastic floral barrettes and other small, amulet-like objects are attached to woven nets of hair extensions, lavender ribbons, and raffia, surrounding a set of ceramic vessels (the center one notably marked “Breonna”). Both index the intimate but potentially expansive work of such constructions. Others still draw upon histories of fabric-making and quilting (Shanequa Gay’s wall painting and Lillian Blades’ hanging glass and found-object mosaic curtains in the lobby) or are installed to highlight procedural affinities and shared conceptual landscapes. Katie Hargrave’s and Meredith Lynn’s floor decal and tent-with-no-entrance, *Cumberland Island (Sea Camp)* (2021), is made of panels of inkjet-printed ripstop nylon that feature found photographs of tourists camping on the Georgia island. The cut-and-sewn material, a point highlighted by its juxtaposition with Myra Greene’s quilted textile *Piecework #49*, stitches together images as well, screening white desire for adventure in colonized “public” land, while teaching us that there are federal definitions of such “wilderness.”

Two works were especially powerful. Le’Andra LeSeur’s video and sound installation, *There are other hues of blue* (2019/21), abstracts livestreamed footage captured by Sean Reed on Facebook Live at the time that he was gunned down by police in Indianapolis in May 2020. The blue sky captured as Reed was dying spans five ceiling-mounted screens positioned above a sixth screen on the floor, which shows us LeSeur in silhouette, all accompanied by their poetic, autobiographical spoken narrative. It is devastatingly powerful. Originally done as a perfor-

mance, the artist modified the work after Reed’s death to create a tender space for reflection.⁵ The strength of LeSeur’s work was also found in Danielle Deadwyler’s durational performance and installation, *FOR(E)RUNNER* (2020–2021), that excavates the history of Black labor for the Atlanta Beltway, in the most compelling of four project spaces (entitled *Virtual Remains*) curated by T.K. Smith.

Some works may have benefited from different framings. Tori Tinsley’s *Island with Two Lava Pits and Water Table* (2020), featured prominently in press images and printed material, is juxtaposed with the chromatic abstraction of Hasani Sahlehe’s *Won’t Have to Cry No More* (2020), whose pooled clear acrylic medium reads like puddles of tears. When I asked her to tell me more about the work, Amirkhani highlighted caregiving in Tinsley’s practice: “Tori’s topological ‘island,’ made of papier-mâché and plaster is reminiscent of her young son’s toy car tracks as well as her earlier paintings where the physical tug of the medium points to the physical pull between loved ones extended into three-dimensional form [...].”⁶ While other works in the gallery allude to islands (existential and topographical) and bodies of water, the work as installed edges toward the saccharine in a way that I expect it wouldn’t have in a different setting.

Thoughtfully curated by Amirkhani, this Biennial tries to do a lot—and maybe that’s the point. The exhibition is dedicated in the introductory description in the gallery and on its accompanying website to the “legacies and labor of Stacey Abrams, Helen Butler, Felicia Davis, and Nsé Ufot”—that is, to the work of Black women in Democrat-

Le’Andra LeSeur, *There are other hues of blue*, 2019/2021, six-channel video installation (01:03:17). Photograph by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.



ic coalition-building in Georgia credited with turning the state blue in the 2020 (and 2021) elections.

On my drive home, I passed a chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans in southwestern Georgia, marked by an enormous Confederate flag at its entrance. I had driven by it on my way up to Atlanta. But on my return, in that moment, looking up at the blue sky, I thought of all the work I had seen, all the work of making those works, and all the work those works continue to do. "Of Care and Destruction" overwhelms with its extensive care. It is highly recommended for all of us. ■

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Footnotes:

- 1 Toni Morrison, "Circles of Glory and Sorrow: A Talk Given to the Combined Women's Studies Sections, The Symposium on Love (1981)," unpublished paper, Toni Morrison Papers (C1491), Princeton University Library. My thanks to Amirkhani for sharing the source of Morrison's quote. Amirkhani, email correspondence with the author, March 2, 2021.
- 2 Jordan Amirkhani and Atlanta Contemporary, exhibition description, "Of Care and Destruction": <https://atlantacontemporary.org/exhibitions/2021-atlanta-biennial>.
- 3 Davion Alston, "Bio," artist's website: <https://www.davionalston.com/cv-bio>.
- 4 Extended object label for Nekisha Durrett's Magnolia | Atatiana, Magnolia | Alexia, and Magnolia | Kathryn in "Of Care and Destruction."
- 5 My sincere thanks to Le'Andra LeSeur for commenting on their work. Conversation with the author, Atlanta Contemporary, February 21, 2021.
- 6 Amirkhani, email correspondence with the author, March 2, 2021.



Danielle Deadwyler, *FOR(E)RUNNER*, 2020–2021, multimedia installation (with excavated materials, floating easements, and rail anchors), durational performance and single-channel video (00:04:21), digital, created in collaboration with Brandon Williams (editor), Chrissy Brimage (animation), Munir Zakee (sound composition). Photograph by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary. Collaborators listed in the exhibition label and checklist.

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Front Cover: Gary Justis, Rosetta, 2013, digital photograph of projected light, 48 x 34 inches or dimensions variable. © Gary Justis 2013. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Back Cover: Gary Justis, Distal Splainer, digital photograph of projected light, 48 x 32 inches. Photo courtesy of the artist

Vol. 35, No. 3, 2021. Compilation of January/February/March online articles and reviews.

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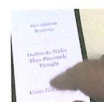
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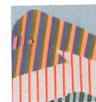
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