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Forget Us, Not

by

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Washington University in St. Louis

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Chair, Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Is This All of Me?.....	3
Body: Crucifixion.....	10
The New Testament.....	13
The Father, The Son, The Holy Spirit.....	17
Mama I Made It	31
Take Us Home: Conclusion.....	33
Appendix.....	35
Bibliography.....	57
Notes.....	60

IS THIS ALL OF ME?

How do we mourn? Is it based on cultural traditions? Our religious beliefs? I believe it is the way we were raised. I am currently investigating these questions personally in my studio practice, and in the process, I have learned that there is no one way to celebrate or mourn. Raised Baptist in a semi-conservative Black family in Notasulga, Alabama, I am not religious—rather, I do not believe in institutionalized religion. Yet, all things considered, I should be a Southern Baptist belle because I have been baptized in the spirit of Jesus and attended the churches and services of both my Black and white friends in search of some understanding of what it means to exist and leave a footprint of memory and hope within a family and community.

I consider myself spiritual, and thus more interested in investigating the history of what it means to be Black and in search of something holy; and in my own navigation of loss this need has become more evident. Annually, since 2016, I have had major losses within my family and attended several funerals due to violence or poor health. Each funeral was orchestrated differently depending on who we were celebrating. Each had the essential and the familiar: lavish caskets, floral arrangements, and spirituals that filled the church with sounds of mourners, beckoned by a preacher that gave comforting and assuring words, married to practices as far back as ancient Egyptian and West African traditions and Christian rituals. Those who linger at the end celebrate; we share in song and food. The living in repass. These elements culminate in aspects of an African American Homegoing, a celebration of life.

Diaspora suggests a removal, a disconnection from home and origin. In my practice, I explore various African forms of mourning as a way of orienting myself within a familial trajectory—any direct connection to specific regions and practices, stolen from me by hundreds of years of colonization. Through my practice, I seek to explore this robbed identity. Create something out of the missing pieces.

In my studio practice, I use clay and paint to create art. Through working with these materials, I meditate, pray, navigate, and ask questions. The works that exist culminate into a visual puzzle of answers. I want to utilize my creativity to pay tribute to a family or community member who is no longer here. Doing so, I claim them as my Ancestors. As part of the African American Diaspora, we have narratives and stories that are lost, white-washed, or erased. I pay homage to these facts and traditions as I investigate this rich content in my body of work.

Storytelling has influenced my studio practice methods since my early understandings of artmaking. I have spent a large amount of time looking at paintings through a Western lens. I covet the realism found in Manifest Destiny, the Dutch Masters, and genres of Orientalism. I am intrigued by the allegories of the Christian Church. I see these works of opulence and luxury, and I am compelled to leverage that visual language to uplift an African American Diasporic lens.

One of my favorite paintings is *Bashi-Bazouk*, by Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1868-1869, a small portrait of a soldier draped in elaborate lush fabrics, an embellished headdress, and equipped with weaponry. I stared at this piece with wonder because, at the time, it was rare that I encountered a person of color as the focal point of any painting. I would wander the galleries and count the number of times I saw a Black person within Western works of the fifteenth to early nineteenth centuries. People of Color (POC) were always a part of the background, depicted as

slaves or servants. That is why, when I launched a series of narrative paintings, the Black figures were central, commanding, and held a place of hierarchy in the picture plane equal to Christian religious allegories.



Figure 1. Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Bashi-Bazouk*, 1868-69, oil on canvas, 31.75 x 26 inches.

I wanted to see myself and my culture in the art, especially the genres of paintings that heightened my interest in becoming an artist. I began my research into African American art and African art. I found that many cultures do not concern themselves with the outward representational form but focus primarily on identity, lore, and tradition. Art is used by a community in ceremonies, not just admired; the art aids in the power of the narrative and ensures the community is uplifted.

I became interested in the work of Henry O. Tanner and actually mistook him for a white painter because of the genre of his paintings. Later when I discovered he was Black, my idea of Black art shifted. Before then, I thought all Black art was folk art. Now, I see Black artists in fine

art galleries and museums and not sequestered to the basement or a room for folk art and African artifacts.

I began to encounter works by Hale Woodruff, the print-maker Elizabeth Catlett, the sculptor Augusta Savage, and the illustrator Frank Morrison. Inspired by their successes, I realized they were part of a once small group that paved the way for me and other Black artists. In 2021, I started asking what gaps do I want to fill in the realm of art making? How can I add something new in the narrative of painting--not just Black figures inserted into Western themes? How do I portray our worlds, real or imagined?

I began to look at this issue in my ceramics as well. The coveted porcelain ware of Josiah Wedgwood became a source of inspiration. I started by making bas relief platters and vessels while incorporating the history of the Edgefield potters, most notably David Drake. Within both mediums of painting and clay, I wanted to fight what the ideas of opulence and luxury looked like.

Considered the father of English fine wares, Wedgwood was also an abolitionist. I started to ask if he had opportunities to teach freedmen and what their work would look like. In my search for Black ceramicists, I came across David Drake and the South Carolina Edgefield Potters. Influenced by the styles from Wedgwood, the Edgefield face jugs, and Drake's use of language, I created a fusion that paid tribute to all three while exploring the idea of what freedman slave potters could have made if able to express freely within the medium of clay. David Drake's work especially stood out to me because he is known to have signed and inscribed his work; this during a time when literacy was illegal. Research suggests that Drake and the Edgefield Potters harbored influence from Central Africa's Congo. 1



Figure 2. Josiah Wedgwood, *Jasperware*, 1890.



Figure 3. Edgefield Potters, *Face Jug*, 1861-1864.



Figure 4. David Drake, *LM May 3rd*, 1862.



Figure 5. Jamie Harris, *Whitey on The Moon*, 2021, ceramic, 12 x 9.5 inches.



Figure 6. Jamie Harris, *Skin Once Bartered*, 2021, ceramic, 16 x 16 inches.

With both my still lifes and my ceramicware, I create a visual commentary on the African American food experience with harmful imagery that addresses the stereotypes of Black peoples in servitude. I began collecting cast iron Black Americana that would be included in the composition of my oil still-life paintings. I wanted to see myself and my culture in the genres of paintings that were so upheld in American and Western culture. I did this with the works *Jemima and Kin*, 2021, *Trotters*, 2021, *Spilled Molasses*, 2022, and *Who Are the Money Eaters*, 2022 (see figure 47,48,51). These works featured items like pig feet, corn meal, and tough greens. These food items are now staples in Black household cooking and grace popular menus, yet slavers once discarded them from their kitchens.

My ceramic works (Figures 5–6) also seek to exalt a Diasporic voice. *Whitey on the Moon* takes from the history of the face jug while migrating away from the often loose, gestural sculpting of the Edgefield Potters. Their jugs are reminiscent of Congolese face masks and

ceramics, thought to be ugly enough to ward off evil spirits and let the buried souls escape to heaven. These objects were not only used to store grain and alcohol, but also as grave markers.² I wanted to move away from the devilish aesthetic often attributed to classic face jugs and make something more representational and humanistic. I also reference David Drake's use of poetry to aid in the narrative of these objects. On my face jug, I quote a part of Gil Scott Herron's "Whitey on the Moon." The vessel was made during the billionaire space race of 2021.³

BODY: CRUCIFIXION

I started with a focus on the men of the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male” (USPHS Syphilis Study at Tuskegee). This group was unknowingly taken advantage of by the United States government and Big Pharma to monitor the effects of syphilis on the Black body untreated. I grew up within walking distance of the church where the participants of the syphilis trials were transported for their injections: Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church of Notasulga, Alabama. Placated with promises of hot meals, free rides in a government issued car, medical/mental healthcare, and stipends to the bereaved family, these men were subjected to decades of experimentation to falsely cure “Bad Blood.”⁴ From 1932 to 1977, a group of 600 men underwent treatment; 201 were given placebos, the other 399 exposed to syphilis. The physical effects were beyond crippling, leading many of the men to early graves. Unaware of their infection, the men inadvertently passed the disease to wives, partners, and offspring. Though the uneducated and naive men took part in this medical procedure, they saw it as a source of income and a means of survival. Proper treatment plans were not administered even after the discovery of penicillin as a viable cure. Instead, the men received temporary relief in the form of spinal taps and pain medication.⁵

My oil painting *The Creation of Medical Mistrust*, 2021, depicts a young Black man, around his early twenties, atop a wooden lectern. The figure challenges the viewer’s gaze, his arms relaxed, resting on the knees of his body. He is open and approachable, his expression suspicious and resigned. He stands as the martyr for all 399 men left scarred.

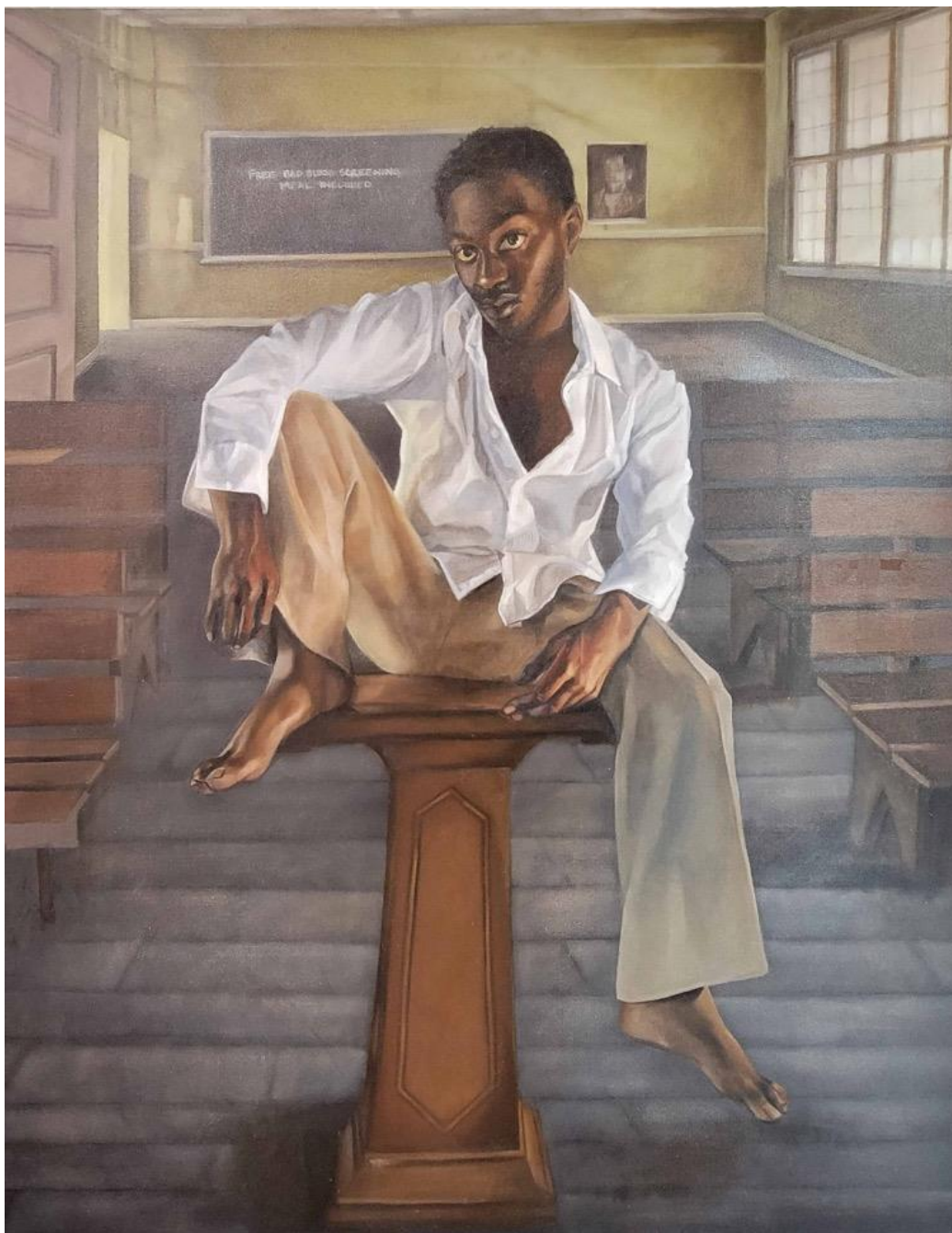


Figure 7. Jamie Harris, *Creation of Medical Mistrust*, 2021, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.

The interior of the painting is of the Rosenwald School, a place where they are familiar, comfortable. The schoolhouse, brightly lit, is reminiscent of a church; old pews fill the background in preparation for the start of Sunday school. In the background, “Free Bad Blood Screenings”⁶ and a free meal are written across a blackboard, wiped out as if to hide the history of this unforgiveable experimentation. In the background, an image of Booker T. Washington graces the furthest wall. These religious and cultural cues symbolize the amount of trust put into these 600 male community members. These men were fooled to take part in an experiment that would send ripples of anguish for generations biologically and through fear. The references for this painting were collected before the debate of Covid vaccines and the debate amongst colored folk about whether to receive them.⁷

In the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, the Black church was used like an instrument in the navigation of the African American community, used as a place of solace, as a mechanism for guidance, and, in this instance, tragically as a tool for manipulation. The Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church of Notasulga has a long spiritual history that has now become a historical site tied to a horrendous act against humanity. Its marred history now overshadows the fact that it is also home to one of the first Rosenwald Schools for Black children.⁸

My anger is directed to the loss of this history for more than thirty-plus years. It should not be hidden from the greater American memory. It compels me to create more work dedicated to hidden Black American History. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment tragically used the Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church of Notasulga as a tool for manipulation. Within the African American community, the Black church is seen as a place of solace, a haven for spiritual guidance, and, in this instance, the house of God was disgraced and disrespected.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

By 2022, my next series of work would depart from the central themes of the Black minstrel show and medical horrors to focus on my nuclear family and the investigation of Black Girlhood. I used the imagery of my own upbringing and those who played the biggest roles during that time in my life. In *I Will Find a Way or Make One*, 2022, I painted my sister, two cousins, and myself in brightly colored dresses to separate us from the dated and macabre background. The dull browns and stale environment symbolize a place staunch with traditional roles, a place where gender roles and societal rules could not be broken. Though violence is not depicted, I am trying to convey the act of separating the girls from old expectations. Missing is the girls' own potential and agency of dreams, symbolized by the brown, flat sky captured in the mirror. Brightly colored dresses signal that they are spirited, eager, and hopeful, each wielding dreams beyond the environment they sit within.

Due to time constraints, I am missing four ceramic boxes that I intended to make. The boxes each had removable lids that would contain elements of each girl's story. The elements within hint at dreams, individual choices, and life events. They culminate in creating a story of resilience against life's setbacks, ill health, and domestic situations. We were meant to become teachers, nurses, lawyers, or doctors. I became an artist; the three others will be amongst the less than one percent of America's female African American pilots.⁹



Figure 8. Jamie Harris, *I'll Find a Way or Make One*, 2022, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches.

I continued the investigation of Black womanhood in my next work, *We Herald Her as Saint*, 2022. I created a series focused on my and other family members' journeys through early womanhood; specifically, I pay homage to my aunt, Sharon, who was killed in 2019 due to fratricide. She was murdered during the height of her nursing career; she was an Emergency and Ambulatory Director on the way to be trained as the first woman of color in a major administrative role within the East Alabama Medical Center. I depict her in two stages of her youth. In the foreground, a depiction from a photograph shows her at about eighteen years old. She has just been crowned for homecoming. Enveloping her purple satin and sequined gown are lilies, signifying her role within our family. In the background is a photo of Sharon and her twin

brother at around four years old. The two are framed twice on either side of the archway; within the frames is evidence of my gestures to abstract her assailant's image, my attempt to erase him from memory.

We Herald Her as Saint is inspired by the patron Saint Maria Goretti, who is the patron saint of rape victims, girls, and women who have experienced domestic violence. Saint Maria Goretti notoriously became martyred for her forgiveness of her murderer. I ponder if Sharon would forgive this person, her twin, for this act of unforgivable and tragic violence. I struggle depicting him at any stage of his life, so I choose to scrape him back. We, my family, no longer know this person. In this way, and through my use of historically influential genres of painting and ceramics, I seek to claim some agency over a violent past.

As I look back, I realize I had already started to venture into my next body of research: the allegory. I considered the allegories of Cain and Abel and the story of Saint Maria Goretti for *We Herald Her as Saint*. As I created *I'll Find a Way or Make One*, I remembered Caleb and the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. These became paintings about finding one's path.



Figure 9. Jamie Harris, *We Herald Her as Saint*, 2022, oil and silverleaf on canvas, 36 x 24 inches.

THE FATHER, THE SON, THE HOLY SPIRIT

My love of art began with the allegory—with grand encounters with the altars, religious art, and stained glass of religious sanctuaries. My introduction to art began in donated books at a very small library at a rural high school in Alabama. At the age of ten or eleven, I consumed imagery from Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo as if they were the only artists to ever exist. I envisioned heaven as it was portrayed in *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1483-1486). The bible consisted of fair skinned angels with fat babies in landscapes so different than the flat county town in which I lived. My escape was there, in the glowing wings of Gabriel and lush drapery of Mary's garment (Figure 11); my first impressions of fine art did not include people who looked like my surroundings, at least for another five years.



Figure 10. Leonardo da Vinci, *The Virgin of the Rocks*, 1483-1486, oil on panel, 6 feet, 3 inches x 3 feet, 11 inches.



Figure 11. Leonardo da Vinci, Andrea Verrocchio, *Annunciation*, 1472, tempera and oil, 3 feet, 3 inches x 7 feet, 11 inches.

The analysis of allegory, according to Angus Fletcher, is that it presents itself as one thing, but means another. In the realm of painting, it is a theatrical representation of lore, parables of lesson, sin, and encoded spiritual or moral meaning.¹⁰

My experiences in various churches and my admiration for religious artworks have led me to create a web of symbolism in my work. As I navigate finding my means of spirituality away from institutionalized religion, I research the practices taken away from my Ancestors and pay homage to all regions of Africa's influence on African American religious practices.

The History of Black Church Beginnings: Long Hidden Realities of The First Years by Henry H. Mitchell details how Christianity made its appearance within the Enslaved Diaspora in the late 1600s. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, thousands of stolen peoples began to lose many of their customs as Christianity became a way to domesticate the enslaved, to deter them from rebellion. Adaptations of Western religions were a means of survival; burial practices began to change while still holding on to the most important aspects of those traditions, many of which are still used today without questions of specific origin due to mass separations of African nations. The enslaved began to pick up traits from varying dominions to ensure safety for their young (Baptist), to solidify marital unions (Catholicism), and for permissions for reading and writing (Methodist).¹¹

The history of the Homegoing service¹² begins with misconceived ideas centered on Black gatherings. When the African Enslaved arrived at the shores of their masters in foreign lands, they were often separated from their families and made to create new ways of communication, survival, and celebration. Slave owners were fearful of Black rebellion and loss of property. To subdue their captives, an introduction of Western religion was made, used as a

tool for control and to implement fear. The promise to go home to Africa, meet our Ancestors, or be with Jesus cemented a time for celebration for being freed from a world of torment and pain.¹³

The masters told the enslaved that if they were practicing Christians, their souls would be freed but not their bodies from bondage.¹⁴ Unable to congregate and perform burial services in the rituals of their homes, many enslaved were buried in unmarked graves, without the care once used in their homeland. Now tasked with learning Christian burial practices, the enslaved were left to prepare the corpses of their captors and create feasts for each deceased's family.¹⁵ Unbeknownst to their captors, these oppressed peoples resonated with the bible and the tales of Moses and his people. This led to the Homegoing becoming a harmonious mixture of rigid Christian funerary practices fused with Ancestral music, dance, and food.

The Ancestral rituals were viewed as "hedonistic," provincial practices by colonizers; labeled voodooism, it took 200 years to become something recognizable as Christianity.¹⁶ Ritualistic dancing and drums were outlawed because they were seen as communicating messages without slave masters being aware. This loss resulted in rhythmic clapping and foot stomping to replace the percussion in music, still familiar in churches today.

Another part of African culture that is not lost is its connection to water. Water has such a cultural influence in the way we navigate stages of life. It holds layers of symbolic meaning from our Middle Passage¹⁷ through the Atlantic.

The Middle Passage was a three-month journey across the Atlantic in slave ships that kept tens of hundreds of African peoples chained at the base of cargo holdings. 12.4 million living, breathing, feeling property were transported in droves, piled atop of one another with

little food or water. They were forced into tight, dark, compartments that spread disease and death. An estimated fifteen percent are thought to have perished through this journey from malnutrition, disease, suicide, and revolt.

For slavers, the deaths of the enslaved were nearly as profitable as their lives, due to the enslaved and the ships being insured. Infamously, Captain Luke Collingwood massacred over fifty of the 470 enslaved on a ship, *The Zong*,¹⁸ of 1781. Collingwood's proprietors tried to claim these deaths as natural causes to collect money from the ship's guarantors. This fraud began a courtcase that would change the trajectory of shipping the enslaved across the globe. As recently as 2015, Great Britain finally finished paying its debt from the abolition of slavery from 1833.¹⁹ It is estimated that just over 25 million dollars was paid out at the implementation of The Slave Trade Act, nearly 21.3 billion in today's economy.

Water is a powerful element—it forces us to let go of control, cleanses the soul, or wears down the immovable. Water has a connection to birth and the Baptism as the offering of one's soul to God in the act of immersing yourself in cleansed waters. My mother was released this way. Her ashes were placed in a vessel I created from the sands of the beach she frequented and released in waters where the Gullah Geechee people resided for centuries.²⁰

Working with clay, I am consistently aware of water's presence or absence in my material; as I shape earth and water, I am immersed in these ideas of birth, passage, and rebirth through material metaphor. When I came across Calida Garcia Rowel's²¹ paintings in Berlin, I felt a kindred consideration of the element. In Calida's work, she honors water's ability to preserve memory. She is also heavily influenced by the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Jim

Crow Laws, and religion. She places importance on the act of swimming and the baptism based on their links to life and death.

In the making of *We Cried When the Ancestors Called You Home*, 2022, I fabricated a table out of driftwood. This structure appeared to bend beneath the weight of the water-filled vitrine, which contained a recreation of my mother's unfired urn. The work sat atop a mound of sand, surrounded by twenty-five glossy black urns, representative of my family welcoming the deceased to the other side. The legs of the wooden structure resembled the movements of the dancing pallbearers²² and an artwork by Choe U-Ram, *The Round Table*. ²³

During my family's funeral for my mother, her urn was never fired; her remains joined the sediment of the sea floor as the vessel sank. In this installation, as the unfired vessel slowly disintegrated in the water, the viewer witnessed a symbolic recreation of my mother's urn release as it occurred beneath the waves of the Atlantic. The scent of the ocean permeated the room. Every time I show an iteration of this work, I will repeat the cycle: remake her urn, create the altar, and release the vessel.



Figure 12. Jamie Harris, *We Cried When the Ancestors Called You Home*, 2022, ceramic, greenware, glass, sand, drift wood, shell, water, 35 x 58 inches.

My studio practice involves the history of craft, mark making, and spiritual expression. I pay homage to traditions and artforms that I encounter throughout my research. I contextualize these ideas in clay and paint, both labored with patient hands and forged in fire. The objects are often in the form of an urn, a taboo choice for African families that use the funeral as a place for those closest to the deceased to say final farewells in grand form.²⁴ My painting, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023, commemorates that ritual. The urn is used as a mode of transportation to Glory, to be within God's presence, heaven, while also representing the body as a vessel that contains a complicated life full of stories. The painting depicts both sorrow and joy during this celebration; it is a replacement for the use of memorial T-shirts, programs, and church fans often seen during deaths in the African American community.

I am inspired by late Renaissance religious works like Titian's *Pentecost* from fifteenth century Italy, Niccolo Paganelli's *St. Martin and the Beggar* (1600), and Caravaggio's *The Conversion of Saint Paul* (1600). Most share themes constructed within the arch, used to signify transportation between the worlds of old and new, rebirth, or transition: a portal for the divine. The altar pieces of masters like Duccio (Figure 15) and Mathias Grunewald (Figure 16) inspired the use of the predella for my work.

In *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, I have constructed an altar piece where the scene is pulled from various sites of memory. This image sets people who attended my father's Alabama funeral into the main interior of the Saint Louis First Baptist Church. Symbolically, the predella becomes an altar for objects of memory. The urns replace the casket in the scene; the casket is more recognizably European in style, while the terracotta urns are replicas of Bura Nigerian grave markers. The gilded frames of late-fifteenth-century works are

now replaced with raffia—a textile often used as a building material, for weaving, and for clothing—shells collected from the beach of my mother’s home, and Raku tile. The Raku is a nod to the material use of African ceramicists like David Drake and the South Carolina Edgefield Potters. I aimed to recontextualize the allegory without placing Black figures in a recreation of the religious work we are familiar with, instead creating a space of memory and familiarity within which viewers could see themselves (Figure 17).

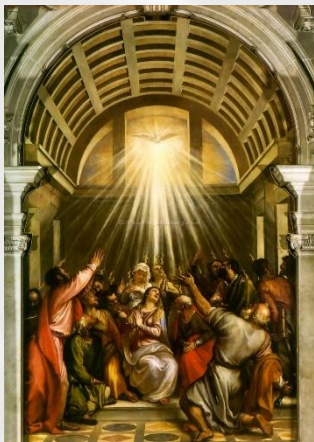


Figure 13. Titian, *Pentecost*, 1545, oil on canvas.



Figure 14. Niccolo Paganelli, *St. Martin and the Beggar*, sixteenth century, oil on canvas.



Figure 15. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Maestra*, 1308-1311, gold, tempera, wood, 7 x 13 feet.



Figure 16. Mathias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, 1512-1516, oil paint, panel, wood sculpture, 8 feet, 9 inches x 10 feet.

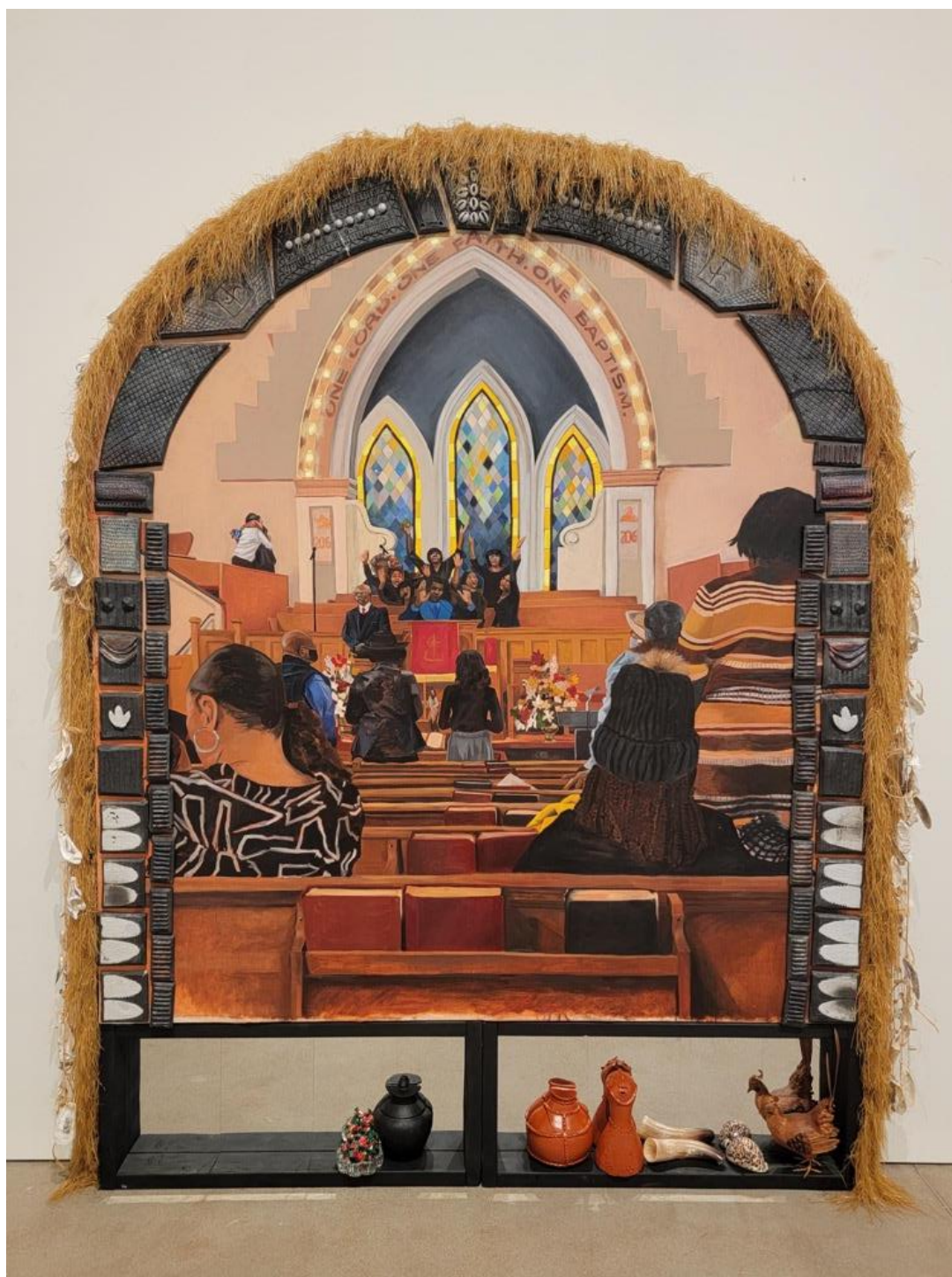


Figure 17. Jamie Harris, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023, oil on wood, raku tile, shell, mirror, faux raffia, horn, strawberry candy, 8 x 6 x 4.25 feet.

I find the use of clay, water, and fire to be representative of that life cycle. That is why I prefer to use the term “create” versus “make.” I feel as though it holds more symbolic importance. I create because I mourn, to seek comfort in the knowing and sharing of lesser-known histories, and to find joy in the rediscovering of lost stories. I create the vessel, which, for me, is akin to the human body. The vessel is a form containing memories, wisdom, and a soul. It is a mode of transport.

In my vessel, *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023, I have recreated the form of a Nigerian water jug, which also resembles an urn in this piece. I employ some Western practices as tools to create height; most African ceramic vessels are not footed, but here I am using it to help the vessel reach the height of seventy-three inches. I have made the structure in the height of my mother.

In considering water as a conduit for voyage and change as well as a vessel of both containment and transportation, I created this sculpture to depict a final journey home. *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma* is a symbolic transport for my mother to the afterlife, which also references her motherhood. As we are left here to help in the transitions of our loved ones, who are those who welcome us on the other side? Maame Wata is a water deity, a mermaid, and the Ancestor I have chosen to aid in my mother’s journey to peace. The Bamum Mask at the base of the work is a symbol of the next role that is bequeathed onto the children of the deceased. The belly of the large vessel contains a figure that is representative of an Ancestor who is the harbinger of transition and the navigator to the afterlife. This figure is modeled after me. I reside in the belly of the vessel, in my mother’s belly one last time.

Bamum Masks are traditionally worn by the children of the deceased and are used in the ritual of adulthood. Traditionally, the mask is worn atop the head with a veil and worn during a ceremonial dance by both male and female persons. In my work, the mask rests at the base of the sculpture, waiting for its recipient. Many in my family have lost their mothers at young ages. The next generation is currently healing, trying to navigate a life without them here, inheriting the mantle left in the wake of tragedy.





Figure 18. Jamie Harris, *Maame Wata Awaits For You, Ma*, 2023, ceramic, bronze glaze, black stain, terracotta, sand, terracotta pigment, wood, 73 x 31 x 31 inches.

I hope to continue these ideas with a more concise thematic gumption for future work. I want to embrace ideas of the allegory, such as Titian's *The Assumption of the Virgin Mary*, 1438-47, Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, 1450, or Duccio's *Maesta*, 1308-1311. I want these works to influence my painting language while encompassing values within my family's religious experience in the same manner that Christianity has influenced African American religious practice due to the Middle Passage into a largely Christian dominion. Our traditions morphed and changed to include white religious values, but we held on to some aspects of our heritage. *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake* is my merging of these ideas while exploring a mode of having both my painting and ceramics coexist in one work. Themes of life, birth, death, morality, and humanity are the most utilized. The Gothic arch, often gilded, is one of the most recognizable features within an allegory frame; it is now replaced with materials related to craft.

In thinking of the recontextualization or acculturation ²⁵ of the Western allegory, I am considering texts like *Flash of the Spirit*, 1984, by Robert Farris Thompson. In his text, African cultures are portrayed as flourishing in carpentry, farming, masonry, and craft. It still surprises me that Africa, being considered the birth mother of civilization, is looked down upon as savage or primitive. Africa has some of the oldest known civilizations and is historically one of the richest nations in natural resources.²⁶

The references to markets, carpenters, and craftsmen mirror the descriptions of Rome during biblical times. I approach the allegory in the same manner. Instead of the usual metaphors the allegory serves, I replace its Western sensibilities with the symbols and visual language of Africa and the cultures silenced in the kidnapping across the Atlantic. I pay homage to the deities

lost in the adoption of Christianity. I pay tribute to Obatala, the Yoruba Orisha of creativity, Babalu-Aye, the Yoruba Orisha of healing, and Mbombo, the Yoruba Orisha of transition.²⁷

We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake takes features from the historical Western allegory and becomes something new of its own. Exalted art's historical cues of the arch and elaborate framing are replaced with humble materials like clay tile, raffia, and shells. A predella serves as an altar piece for memory. I want to think of this piece as an assemblage, inspired by Bette Saar's *Black Girl Window*, 1969. The painting is structured more like a sculpture, using items of memory and symbolism to create a frame for a religious-inspired painting composition. Instead of using the painting as religious mythology, it is used as a fixture to celebrate those who celebrate us: the community that exists to uphold the memories left behind. I include influences from Augusta Savage's and Simone Yvette Leigh's practices and their usages of clay for structural ceramics. Accompanied by a large water vessel, I treat the vessel as a metaphor for travel and the human body. It is also a vessel for memory, wisdom, and love.

MAMA I MADE IT

See! I will Not Forget You.
I have carved you in the palm of my hand.
— Isaiah 49:15-16

In Saidiya Hartman's work *Lose Your Mother*, she describes her otherness, or feelings of displacement, as a stain. She exudes non-descript features; no place of origin can be found across her face. Hartman represents the spoils of slavery. The forcing of different nations and families to be separated from one another created the fading of shared languages, traditions, and physical characteristics that were familiars of home. Even within the markets of Ghana that contained an array of peoples, she was Stranger.²⁸

With my piece, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, I am trying to bridge a gap from memory while also trying to find something that feels like home—Sanctuary. When I was about ten or eleven, I was the only girl of color at a summer camp for horseback riding in Georgia. I did not see myself in the faces of the campers or the supervisors. When I was not in a riding course, I found solace in riding the trails. On one trail, I would visit an old, enslaved burial site on the grounds. Broken pots and weathered stones functioned as grave markers. The site was easily missed, as it was overgrown, full of moss and dead pine needles. One of the instructors pointed it out on our first trail ride. As a kid, I thought nothing of it, and yet it became a strange core memory. It stuck out as much as the time one of my bullies at the camp was sprayed by a skunk. When I missed home, I went there. I rode Einstein, my favorite horse, along the tree line

until I reached a clearing that led up to it. I picked wildflowers along the way and left them before riding back to camp—my ritual, my way of honoring those who might otherwise be forgotten.

According to Hartman's account of her conversations in Ghana, witchcraft, potions, and ritual were erased to distance the enslaved from traces of home. Captors broke families apart, whipped native tongue from memory, and took fractions of nations on long harsh journeys to the Golden Coast in order to cause a displacement of memory, of home.²⁹ Slavery was not just violence but an erasure of identity. Many Africans look down on Americans for searching for just that. In America, we are told to forget the past, although it still echoes in our existence within a society that claims to no longer uphold that past. In Africa, it seems they would rather put emphasis on upholding the memory of revolutionaries. There is shame associated with slavery for many Africans. This is why I want to put emphasis on the importance of memory in my work—it keeps us connected to the places and people that have become far removed from us.³⁰

TAKE US HOME³¹

The act of making is my Eulogy, for words never seem to suffice. Labor, sweat, tears, and materials replace hugs and farewells. I speak to my loved ones through this arrangement, creating pictures of mourning, peace, and community shrouded in a history of making and tradition from a land of people lost to us through time and pain. I pay tribute to my Ancestors of both present and past in these works. I create a visual representation for their journeys into the next phase. These works and the objects that adorn them stand as memories. They tower for those who cannot physically be here any longer.

I want to continue to create works that evoke multi-sensory experiences of memory. Waves of emotions tied to the smallest items or moments have some of the most impact: overlooked gestures, smells, and food. I want the viewer to scan these works and find something familiar, a piece of home. Whether it is a hug in a corner, the echoes of a choir's song, or the embrace of a mother's kiss to a child's forehead, I believe that expressions of love and loss can be universal. Memory is both the thing that shapes us and keeps us tied to the ones we love. It keeps those lost to us—be they individuals or cultures—alive.

APPENDIX

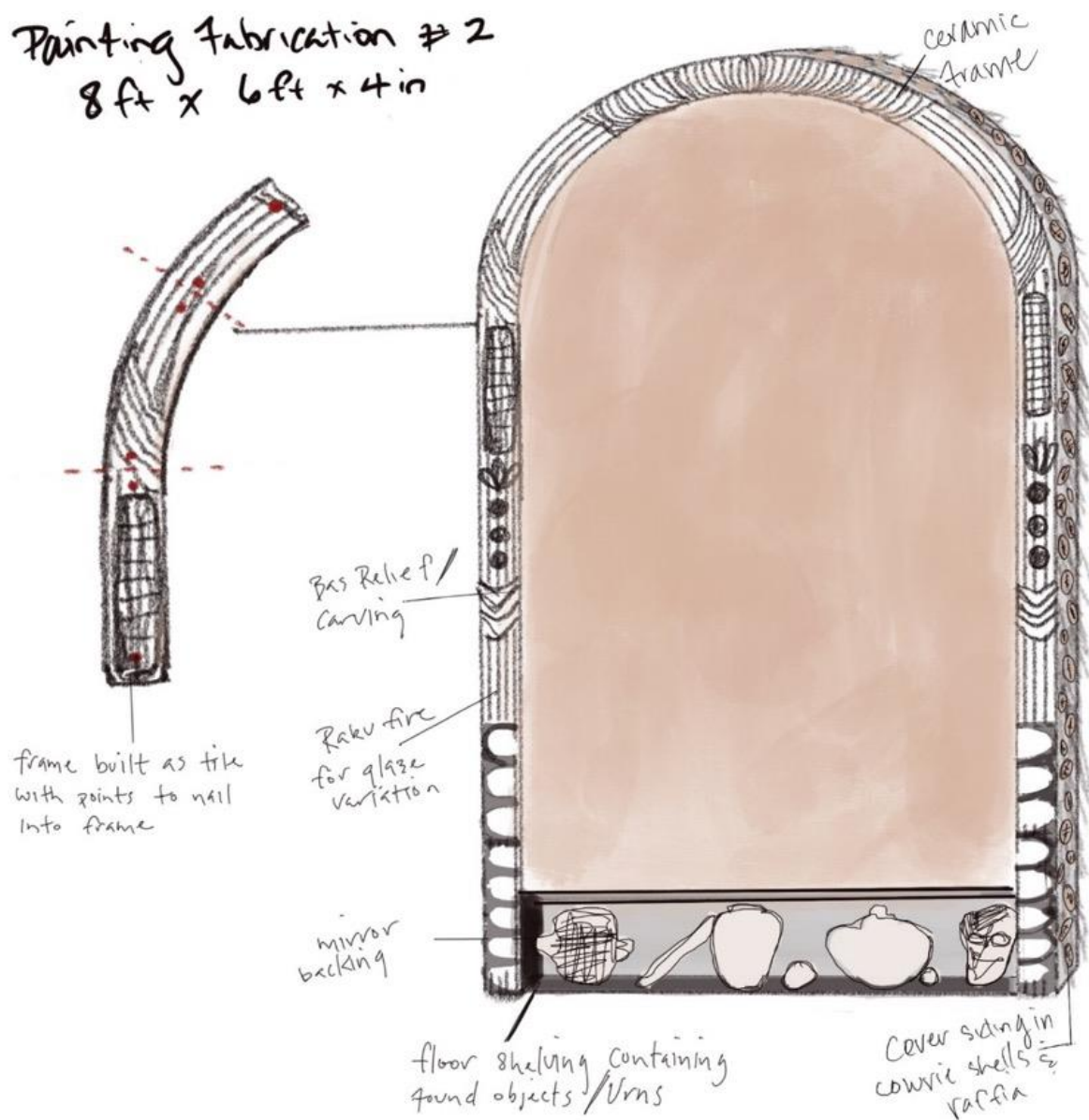


Figure 19. Jamie Harris, draft sketch of *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 20. Jamie Harris, foundation frame for *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 21. Jamie Harris, in-progress view of *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 22. Jamie Harris, tiled arch for painting, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 23. Jamie Harris, in-progress Raku firing for tile on painting, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 24. Jamie Harris, in-progress Raku firing for tile on painting, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 25. Jamie Harris, in-progress Raku tile for painting, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.



Figure 26. Jamie Harris, detail of *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.





Figures 27–32. Jamie Harris, details of *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.

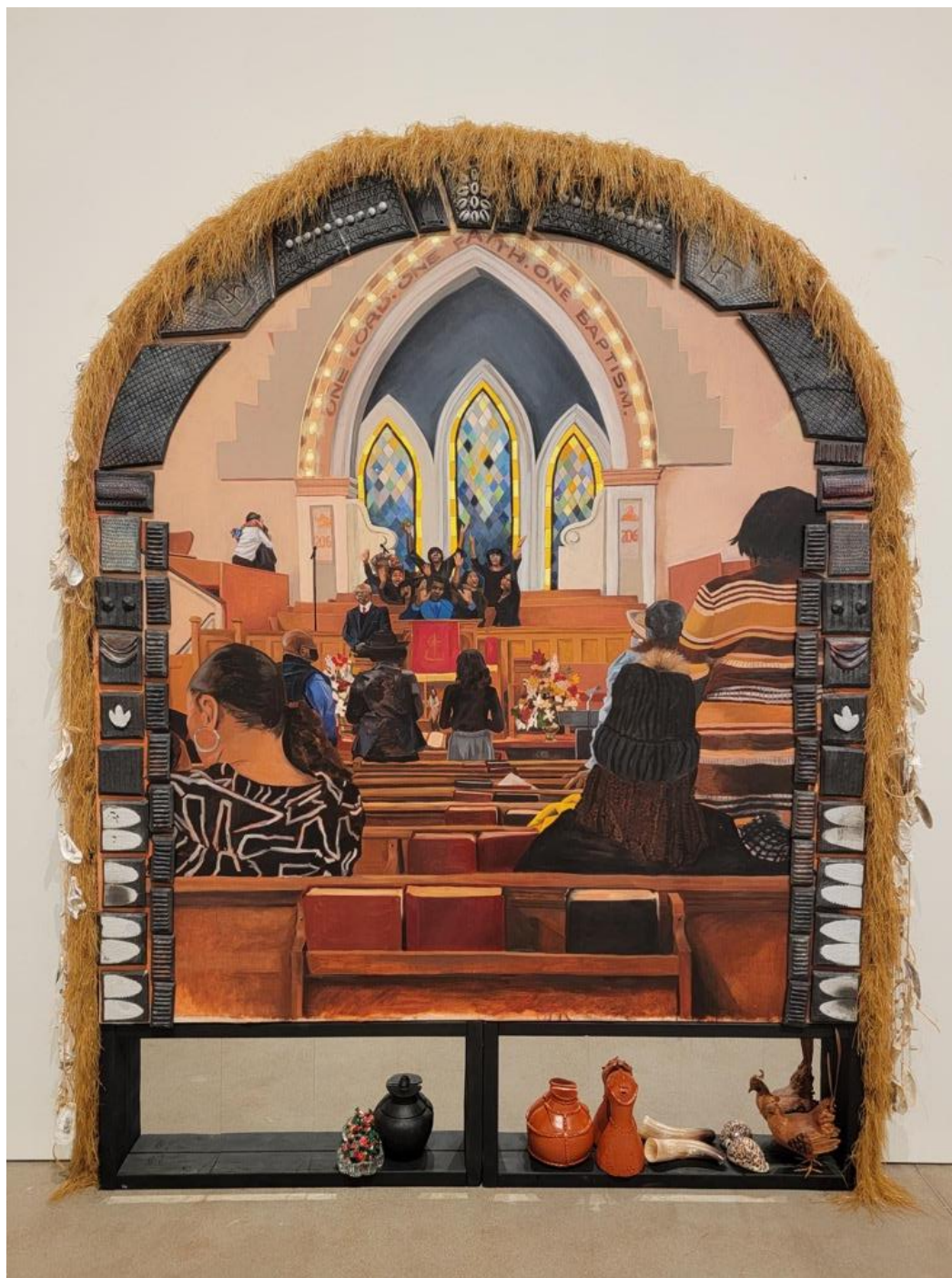


Figure 33. Jamie Harris, *We Sing, We Wail, We Wake, For Homegoing's Sake*, 2023.

Sculpture
73 inches x 38 inches

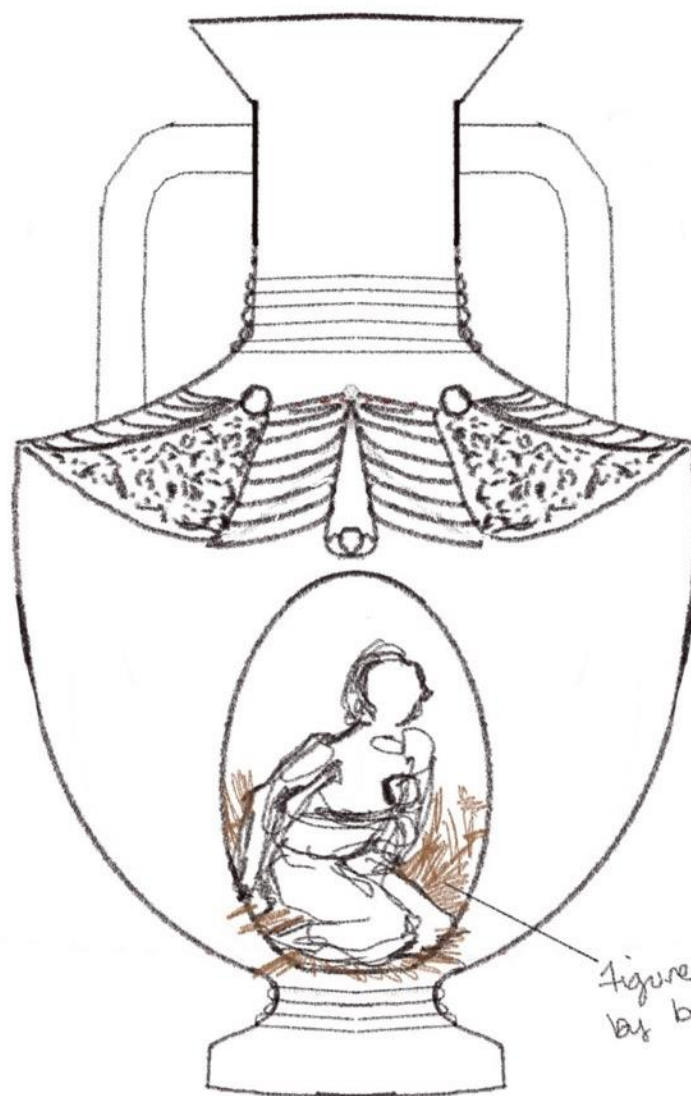


Figure within surrounded
by branches / twigs etc

Figure 34. Jamie Harris, draft sketch for *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2022.



Figure 35. Jamie Harris, in progress for *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2022.

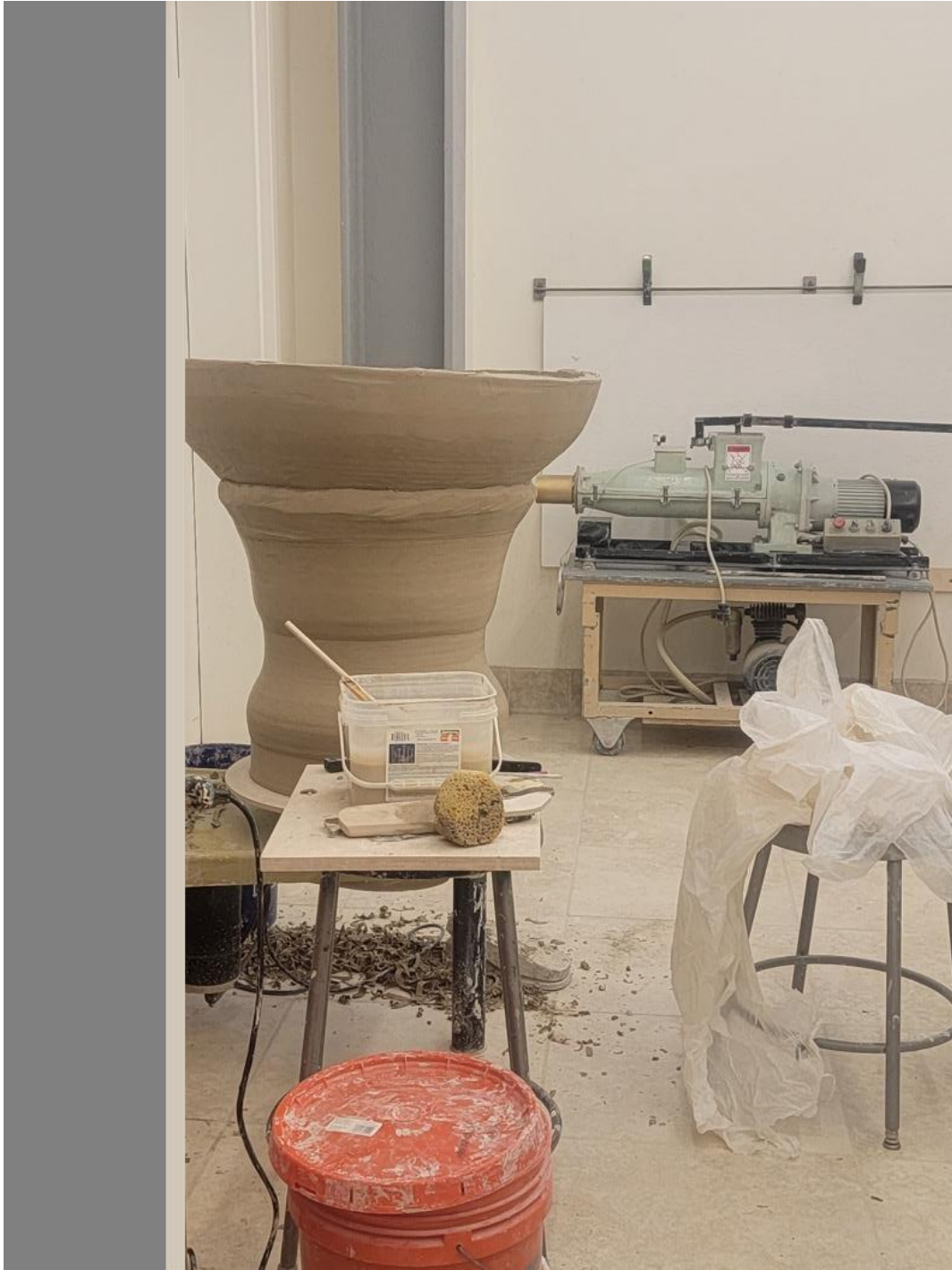


Figure 36. Jamie Harris, in-progress detail of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2022.



Figure 37. Jamie Harris, in-progress view of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023.



Figures 38–39. Jamie Harris, in-progress view of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023.



Figures 40–41. Jamie Harris, in-progress view of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023.



Figure 42. Jamie Harris, in-progress view of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023.



Figure 43. Jamie Harris, detail of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023, ceramic, bronze glaze, black stain, terracotta, sand, terracotta pigment, wood, 73 x 31 inches.



Figures 44–45. Jamie Harris, detail of *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023, ceramic, bronze glaze, black stain, terracotta, sand, terracotta pigment, wood, 73 x 31 inches.



Figure 46. Jamie Harris, *Maame Wata Awaits for You, Ma*, 2023, ceramic, bronze glaze, black stain, terracotta, sand, terracotta pigment, wood, 73 x 31 inches.

Figure 47. Jamie Harris, *Jemima and Kin*, 2021, oil on masonite, 16 x 11 inches.



Figure 48. Jamie Harris, *Trotters*, 2021, oil on masonite, 24 x 36 inches.



Figure 49. Jamie Harris, *Who Doesn't Love Watermelon*, 2021, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 inches.



Figure 50. Jamie Harris, *Jezebel's Conquest of Goliath*, 2021,
charcoal on butcher paper, 44 x 32 inches.



Figure 51. Jmaie Harris, *Who Are The Real Money Eaters*, 2022,
oil on canvas and cameo frames, 36 x 24 inches



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2 Sydney Luther, “The History of Ugly Face Jugs,” Saskatchewan Craft Council, January 29, 2014, <https://saskcraftcouncil.org/category/face-jugs/>.

3 “A rat done bit my sister Nell.

(with Whitey on the moon)

Her face and arms began to swell.

(and Whitey's on the moon)

I can't pay no doctor bill.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

Ten years from now I'll be payin' still.

(while Whitey's on the moon)

The man jus' upped my rent las' night.

('cause Whitey's on the moon)

No hot water, no toilets, no lights.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

I wonder why he's uppi' me?

('cause Whitey's on the moon?)

I was already payin' 'im fifty a week.

(with Whitey on the moon)

Taxes takin' my whole damn check,

Junkies makin' me a nervous wreck,

The price of food is goin' up,

An' as if all that shit wasn't enough

A rat done bit my sister Nell.

(with Whitey on the moon)

Her face an' arm began to swell.

(but Whitey's on the moon)

Was all that money I made las' year

(for Whitey on the moon?)

How come there ain't no money here?

(Hm! Whitey's on the moon)

Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill

(of Whitey on the moon)

I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,

Airmail special

(to Whitey on the moon)”

Gil Scott-Heron, “Whitey on the Moon,” 1970.

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5 Ibid.

6 Ada McVean, “40 Years of Human Experimentation in America: The Tuskegee Study,” McGill Office for Science and Society, January 25, 2019, www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history/40-years-human-experimentation-america-tuskegee-study#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9CTuskegee%20Study%20of%20Untreated%20Syphilis%20in%20the.

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10 “An allegorical mode of expression characterizes a quite extraordinary variety of literary kinds: chivalric or picaresque romances and their modern equivalent, the ‘western’, utopian

political satires, quasi-philosophical anatomies, personal attacks in epigrammatic form, pastorals of all sorts, apocalyptic visions, encyclopedic epics containing summas of true and false learning, naturalistic muck-racking novels whose aim is to propagandize social change, or imaginary voyages like Lucian's *The True History*, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*, or Henri Michaux's *Voyage en Grande Garabagne*, detective stories in both the genteel whodunit and the hard-boiled Hammett-Chandler styles, fairy tales (many of which are cautionary tales), debate poems like the anonymous medieval 'The Owl and the Nightingale' and Yeats's 'Dialog of Self and Soul', complaints like Alain de Lillie's *De Planctu Nature* and Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (incongruous as the juxtaposition may seem). All these and more, with one genre sometimes merging into one another, may be termed allegorical or partly allegorical works—by which we mean primarily that as they go along, they are usually saying one thing in order to mean something beyond that one thing," Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of Symbolic Mode* (Cornell University Press, 1964).

11 Iulia O. Basu-Zharku, "Slavery and Religion in the Antebellum South," *Inquiries Journal* 3, no. 1 (2011).

12 Funerary ceremony; the end of the life cycle is a return to home, heaven, or a seat at the palace of God.

13 Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings: Long Hidden Realities of the First Years* (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004).

14 Carter G. Woodson, *The History of The Negro Church* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1972), 6, 8.

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20 Although my family has no known Ancestral connection to the Gullah Geechee Nation, the location where my mother's ashes were released is in a part of South Carolina where these people settled after receiving their freedom.

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24 Rodney Muhumuza, “Africa slowly turning to cremations, though long taboo,” *AP News*, May 26, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/uganda-ap-top-news-africa-international-news-kampala-e4d90cb84d2d95e74e357f2b8c16>.

25 Acculturation is a process through which a person or group from one culture comes to adopt the practices and values of another culture while still retaining their own distinct culture.

26 “What I saw disabused my mind of many errors in regard to...Africa. The city extends along the bank of the Ogun for nearly six miles and has a population approximately 200,000...instead of being lazy, naked savages, living on the spontaneous productions of earth, they were dressed and were industrious, providing everything that their physical comfort required. The men are builders, blacksmiths, iron-smelters, carpenters, cala-bash carvers, weavers, basket-makers, hat-makers, mat-makers, traders, barbers, tanners, tailors, farmers, and workers in leather and Morocco...they make razors, swords, knives, hoes, billhooks, axes, arrowheads, stirrups... women...most diligently follow the pursuits which custom has allotted to them. They spin, weave trade, cook, and dye cotton fabrics. They also make soap, dyes, palm oil, nut-oil, all the native earthenware, and many other things used in the country,” R. H. Stone, *Africa’s Forest, and Jungle: Or Six Years Among the Yorubans* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899).

27 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of The Spirit* (First Vintage Books, 1984), 11,17, 87.

28 “The Most Universal Definition of the slave is stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one’s country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outcast, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage. Contrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners, barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society, in order to betray your race, you had to first imagine yourself as one. The language of race developed in the modern period and in the context of the slave trade,” Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 5.

29 Ibid.

30 “Every part of West Africa that trafficked in slaves possessed its own Lethe, rivers and streams whose water made slaves forget their pasts, dense groves that trapped old memories in the webs of leaves, rocks that obstructed entrance to the past, amulets that deafened a man to his mother tongue, and shrines that pared and pruned time so that only today was left. Traditional healers devised herbal concoctions that could make the most devout husband forget his wife in the blink of an eye, marabouts applied potions and dispensed talismans that erased the trail home, priests forced captives to vow oaths of allegiance to their captors, sorcerers tamed recalcitrants with the powers of the left hand. European traders, too, employed occultists to pacify and entrance slaves with medicinal plants,” Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 156.

31 “Take us home” is a colloquial phrase used by Black Preachers to mean “in conclusion.”