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### Cliffhanger

Micah Mickles  
m.a.mickles@wustl.edu

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Cliffhanger

by

Micah Mickles

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
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  
Lisa Bulawsky

Thesis Text Advisor  
Meghan Kirkwood

Faculty Mentor  
Meghan Kirkwood

Thesis Committee  
Meghan Kirkwood  
Jack Risley  
Sage Dawson

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## **Abstract**

I am Micah Mickles, a mixed-media visual artist in St. Louis, Missouri. My artwork is deeply rooted in my personal experiences and serves as a memorial and monument to counteract the enduring effects of grief and loss. What sets my work apart is the transformative impact of my everyday encounters, inspired by my 14 years of experience working at Trader Joe's. These encounters have led me to reflect on my profound connections with diverse communities. By delving into the hidden narratives of mundane materials encountered in the workplace, I prompt a reexamination of convenience and supply chain origins. Inspired by the iconic artwork of Andy Warhol, my artistic evolution led to a deeper exploration of food as case studies, unraveling stories of history and exploitation. Ultimately, my artwork bridges past and present, drawing from childhood memories of frozen homes and abandoned spaces to evoke themes of nostalgia, time, and memory. My abstract works invite viewers to contemplate the intersection of personal narrative, community connection, and artistic expression in exploring memory and identity.

## Introduction: Hidden Legacies



Figure 1. Photo of Artist Micah Mickles at two years of age c.1988.

My journey began in 1986 in St. Louis, Missouri, where I was raised in the suburbs by a father who was an entrepreneur and a mother who was an early childhood schoolteacher (fig. 1). Their career aspirations shaped my upbringing and ignited my passion to pursue a fulfilling and creative path in life. This drive, combined with my creative and community service interests, forms the foundation of my art practice. I use my art to subvert the retail industry's language, signage, and symbols, addressing critical issues such as labor exploitation, economic disparities, and the effects of globalization and industrialization, which is why I consider legacy and inheritance in my work. I think about the archives and material culture passed down to me. They reinforce my responsibility of preserving the vernacular that ties Black life to the more well-known stories of American and world history.



Figure 2. Micah Mickles, Rachel Raydo, and Aaliyah Fondell working through a pallet of Chiquita Bananas at a Store in Brentwood, MO.

I am a grocer at Trader Joe's, a role that seamlessly merges with my artistic endeavors. Here, I sell quality food products and actively participate in reducing waste through recycling programs and donating food supplies to the less fortunate in my community. This decade-long experience in a bustling grocery store has deepened my connection to humanity, fueling my passion for exploring the stories behind objects and people and a recurring theme in my art (fig. 2).

My connection to large portions of the population cultivated over years of interacting with customers in a retail environment deepened my understanding of the human condition and influences my artistic perspective. I am drawn to outsider art for its transformative power in redefining the meaning of material objects and their secondary uses. Additionally, I am reconnecting with my ancestral roots of the African diaspora, finding inspiration in artists like Betye Saar, who continuously draw from the collective African ancestry and the complex history of Black Americans.

My artistic expression is distinctly contemporary and encompasses a range of mediums, including sculpture, installation, and mixed media. I felt compelled to explore themes of ancestry, memory, and the passage of time, effectively bridging the gap between past and present. After experiencing the tragic event of the passing of my father, I found solace in my art practice. Through my work, I encourage viewers to reflect upon the interconnectedness of human experience, transcending various cultures and civilizations. My artwork celebrates Black Americans' cultural heritage, resilience, and creativity by incorporating aspects of both vernacular and funerary traditions. Furthermore, I delve into broader themes of identity, spirituality, and the timeless power of art to transcend time and space. My art practice has become a way to process my grief and channel my emotions into something beautiful and meaningful.

My interest in capitalism and mass production, a direct result of my experience in the grocery industry, intersects with my emotional attachment to everyday objects. This emotional attachment, reminiscent of artists like Robert Rauschenberg, is deeply rooted in my experiences. For instance, Andy Warhol's fascination with fame resonates with my memories of my father's limousine service, which transported prominent figures who visited St. Louis during the 1990s

and early 2000s. These personal experiences, intertwined with my artistic practice, create a unique perspective that I bring to my work.



Figure 3. Micah Mickles, Times Sq., 2011, Scan of color positive film, 7.25 x 2.25.

My journey into the arts has taken me from the retail industry to the fast-paced fashion world of New York City, where I worked as a freelance photography assistant. This experience was a turning point. My time in New York exposed me to the fusion of art, design, technology, and various building materials, significantly influencing my aesthetic preferences. During this phase of my journey, I was exposed to the contrasting lifestyles of the rich and famous and the impoverished people living on the city streets. This experience changed my perspective and shifted my focus from the glitz and glamour to urban life's gritty, realistic texture. I started using the Holga, an inexpensive and imprecise medium format film camera, to capture this unique perspective. The camera's unique features, such as light leaks and vignetting, added depth and emotion to my urban landscape photographs (fig. 3). Through this medium, I was able to capture the true essence of urban landscapes and restore my connection with the people who inspire me as an artist. As a St. Louis native, I now find my hometown a fertile ground driving my artistic practice. I aspire to find a meaningful career where I can continue my father's legacy.



## Chapter 1: The Treasure of Trashiness

I was always skeptical about the honesty of products. I recall sitting in class at age 13 and watching airplanes strike the towers on 9/11/2001 live on TV. The constant chanting of whistle-blowers saying, "9/11 was an inside job" during the protests was particularly common among my generation. It's no wonder our collective distrust of our governing systems is at the forefront of our minds and pushing. I have questioned various commonly held beliefs and government policies and regulations. I am overwhelmed by the number of products marketed to me as an American consumer, and I wonder about the networks behind each industry.

One book that I found particularly helpful in shedding light on these networks is Naomi Klein's *No Logo*. In her book, Klein spoke about the connections between various industries and how these connections impact our daily lives:

This assault on choice is taking place on several different fronts at once. It is happening structurally, with mergers, buyouts and corporate synergies. It is happening locally, with a handful of super brands using their huge cash reserves to force out small and independent businesses. And it is happening on the legal front, with entertainment and consumer goods companies using libel and trademark suits to hound anyone who puts an unwanted spin on a pop-cultural product. And so we live in a double world: carnival on the surface, consolidation underneath, where it counts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, Naomi, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*. Picador, 2002, p.130.

Reading her book has made me more aware of the power dynamics at play and has emphasized the need to be critical of the products and brands that we consume



Figure 4. United Fruit Company's trade network in 1909.

#### Split Between Two Worlds

In 2022, I became more interested in the supply chain system and food's domestic and global transportation. I was particularly disturbed by inhumane labor practices and the lack of proper oversight from regulatory bodies like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)<sup>2</sup> and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).<sup>3</sup> I started researching the history of Banana

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<sup>2</sup> The FDA is a regulatory agency within the United States Department of Health and Human Services. The FDA is responsible for protecting and promoting public health by regulating and supervising food safety, dietary supplements, prescription and over-the-counter pharmaceutical drugs (medications), vaccines, biopharmaceuticals, blood transfusions, medical devices, electromagnetic radiation emitting devices (such as cell phones), veterinary products, and cosmetics. The agency evaluates the safety and efficacy of these products before they can be marketed and monitors their continued safety and effectiveness once they are in use.

<sup>3</sup> The USDA is a federal executive department responsible for developing and executing federal laws related to farming, forestry, rural economic development, and food. The USDA's mission includes promoting agricultural trade, ensuring food safety, managing conservation efforts,

Republics.<sup>4</sup> As an American citizen who has always loved bananas, it was challenging to come to terms with the cruel disregard for the workers' fundamental human rights happening in other parts of the world where bananas are grown. As I learned more, I felt responsible for those who suffer from their labor in service of our desires for things like bananas in the US.

Author Benjamin Lorr's book *The Secret Life of Groceries* sheds light on the often-obscured realities of the modern grocery industry and has shaped my view of the company I work for. I gather leftover materials from my workplace and use them to create art. While I work, I reflect on the connection between my role as a worker and the farm-to-table practices that make convenience possible. After reading about it, I feel grateful for the labor of others, and I want to acknowledge their hard work through my art. I intend to remind viewers of our unchecked privilege. A privilege that enables me to discover, experiment, and share stories about the hardworking individuals we don't usually see as consumers.

Trader Joe's has perfected the ability to project integrity while simultaneously offering a very similar class of mass-produced goods that its competitors offer. It is no accident that the real dynamite deals at TJ's have always been in the frozen aisle, or the canned goods, the jar of cookie dough spread, or the bacon-cheddar-flavored popcorn, those hyper-packaged exemplars of mass consumption that achieve the most special aura of all by appearing on Joe's shelf: decency. A side effect of this is an image of him as CEO that many of his rivals, and a few of his successors, have bought into: that of a rube blindly pawing his way forward, stumbling and getting lucky, perhaps not so different from the way you or I might do it if we inherited our uncle's grocery store chain and decided to make a go of it, operating less from some strategic master plan, more out of our own

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providing nutrition assistance programs, conducting agricultural research, and supporting farmers and ranchers through various programs and services.

<sup>4</sup> The term "banana republic" was coined by the American writer O. Henry (pen name of William Sydney Porter) in his 1904 book "Cabbages and Kings." He used it to describe the fictional country of Anchuria, which was heavily influenced by the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita Brands International) and other American corporations that exploited the region's resources, particularly bananas.

image and sense of delight. And yet it is clear, once you get under the hood, this is exactly wrong.<sup>5</sup>

When working in the grocery store, I often feel attracted to all the colorful labels on products on our store shelves. An aisle of them together is a color field of discarded packaging, beverage cans, and produce bag netting on our store shelves or inside a garbage can. There is such an accumulation that my eyes cannot rest. It takes me on a scavenger hunt. These materials' bold and saturated hues are color-coded and specific to the produce supply chain. As an artist, I find myself captivated by unconventional marvels, and I am often drawn to abandoned objects that spark my imagination. I have taken on the role of a searcher, scouring for misplaced and forgotten items and exploring the locations where they are situated. I have been looking at how much of our waste goes to landfills across the U.S. and what goes back to where the crops and packaging initially came from. It is a global social issue, and there are no plausible solutions to eradicate this commercial monstrosity.

From my interaction with these abandoned materials, I created a new visual language by drawing from the design aesthetic of my memory of materials belonging to or associated with the grocery store where I work. Grocery customers do not use a company to buy their daily bananas through the shipping box. The consumer only has access to the branding and advertising that exists in the mainstream. By bringing these symbols and materials out of the storeroom, I see myself and the employee base as a bridge between these two worlds — a cog in the expansive capitalist machine.

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Lorr, *The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket* (New York: Avery, 2020), 21.



Figure 5. Micah Mickles, Cutouts taken from the defacing of cardboard. 2021.

### Flags And My Wavering Faith

My family's history of serving in the armed forces bred this cultural adherence in me early on. However, I am now critical of American greed and use the spangled banner to challenge those who unquestioningly glorify it. As a Black man, I find it ironic to have such allegiance, so I imbue and augment potent objects such as the American flag and cross-breed patriotic symbolism with remote labor that has historically undergirded and strengthened our contemporary culture. This work aimed to give visibility and encourage viewers to look past the surface and view the complex world I see through the lens of my identity. I manipulate its imagery to experiment with graphic communication and explore color and scale.

My practice revolves around printmaking, which combines my interests in computer art and sculpture. I prefer to create unexpected results by working beyond the scale limitations of the printing press. However, I always have a warm spot for bold graphic images. It may come with being surrounded by brands throughout my life. There is something magical about pulling a print and witnessing a real-time dimensionality transformation in material experimentation. Packaging

design often includes attractive patterns and colors that drive customer purchases based on visual appeal.



Figure 6. Micah Mickles, *Retail Banner #3*, 2022, 7' x 8' Silkscreen and lithograph on polyethylene, muslin, and vinyl.

I created a tapestry called *Retail Banners #3* (fig. 6), based on a work by Robert Rauschenberg called *Mirage* (fig. 7), using a bright orange sheet of recycled plastic, transparent vinyl, and muslin. I sewed the materials together to create a quilt and discovered a new way of seeing and synthesizing disparate materials. This helped me to express my love for things at the end of their lives. I found working with textiles more satisfying than paper and printing, allowing me to work on a larger scale and be more hands-on. Printing on top of found textile materials also allowed me to create a more tactile and unique product.



Figure 7. Robert Rauschenberg, *Mirage (Jammer)*, sewn fabric, and translucent silk, 1975.

As soon as I looked at the ordinary textiles, I could not help but wonder about the dimensions beyond their physical appearance and beauty. I was eager to document and describe the world I saw behind the veil of materiality. Then, I stumbled upon the works of Rauschenberg, who had traveled extensively and observed the colors, patterns, and uses of daily life's materials from different parts of the world. He united them in his works, creating a stunning color field of red, translucent white, and yellow. The amalgamation of these materials was a sight to behold.

Although I have yet to travel as extensively as Rauschenberg, I was determined to create a similar impact by highlighting the common materials that come to my workplace. I wanted to showcase their unique qualities and bring out their beauty in a way that had never been done before.

My work involves collecting and redefining found and store-bought materials, which reflects the world's complexity and interconnectedness. This process of accumulation and redefinition resonates with me and echoes the values my family instilled in me: a habit of collecting ephemera. When I arrive at work, one of the first things I see are stacks of recognizable Chiquita boxes. In my subsequent work, *Where The Pirates Found Their Gold* (fig. 9), I collected plastic sheets with breathing holes that protect the produce from spoiling. I sewed them into a two-sided flag. As a child growing up in the '90s, I remember reciting the Pledge of Allegiance with my right hand over my heart. The American flag is a well-known symbol that conveys a powerful message worldwide. I have experienced this symbol as both a source of pride and oppression. That's why I look for opportunities to change the meaning of this symbol by shaping it around alternative views.

Bananas have taken on new meaning to me, through my work at Trader Joe's. During my research, I stumbled upon the story of Great White Fleet <sup>6</sup>(fig. 8), which significantly impacted my views regarding corporations such as Chiquita, one of the most famous banana companies in the world. The American flag served as the foundation for the fleet's production, creating a link

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<sup>6</sup> The Great White Fleet was a group of 16 United States Navy battleships that embarked on a world tour from December 1907 to February 1909. The fleet, painted white to symbolize peace, covered over 43,000 nautical miles visiting ports in South America, Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands. The voyage was initiated by President Theodore Roosevelt to promote American military power and showcase the country's emergence as a global naval force. The journey was significant in strengthening diplomatic ties with various nations and promoting American interests abroad.



to the pallet—a wooden frame used to transport goods in large quantities.



Figure 8. Great White Fleet: There the Pirates Hid Their Gold, Vintage Print Ad, 1915.

In creating *Where the Pirates Found Their Gold* (fig. 9), I aimed to challenge the well-known tagline, “Where the Pirates Hid Their Gold.” As I delved deeper into my research, I learned of the fleet’s transformation into a luxury cruise line that offered the wealthy an opportunity to visit exotic destinations in Central and South America, created through deals made without the consent of the native populations, all in favor of the United Fruit Company's needs in addition to the fleet's military prowess. By manipulating and redesigning the banana box, I hoped to provide a glimpse into a topic regarding one of the world's most prominent

commonalities. The flags' poles symbolize spears, while the draped flags resemble banana plants.



Figure 9. Micah Mickles, *Where The Pirates Found Their Gold*, 2023. 108" x 120" x 132" Silkscreen on wood, fabric on wood, fabric on wood, stereolithography, galvanized steel, zip ties, and soil. Installation view.



Figure 10. Micah Mickles, (Detail) *Where The Pirates Found Their Gold*, 2023. 108" x 120" x 132" Silkscreen on wood, fabric on wood, fabric on wood, stereolithography, galvanized steel, zip ties, and soil.



Figure 11. Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987); Brillo Boxes; 1964; Screenprint and ink on wood; Each: 17 × 17 × 14 inches (43.2 × 43.2 × 35.6 cm).

Using printmaking techniques, I created a 6' x 2' x 4' facsimile of the box inspired by Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes (fig. 11), produced initially in 1964. I wanted to create art inspired by the mass-produced and ordinary objects in the average American home. These products support capitalism and the traditional way of life in America. As a member of this generation still feeling Andy Warhol's influence from the 1960s, I am negotiating between my timeline and his, questioning the legacy I am upholding. Another commonplace material I recognize in my workplace is the wooden pallet. I made a red, white, and blue pallet with 50 white star-head screws resembling the 50 states. The merging of pirate culture with consumer capitalist strategies, exemplified in Trader Joe's marketing techniques, highlights the power of popular culture in influencing consumer behavior. By masking product contents behind clever marketing, companies hook unsuspecting users, perpetuating consumerism. I believe consumers must be aware of these tactics and make conscious purchasing decisions.

## Chapter 2 New World New Ways

Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to find a support group or strategy that can assist me in dealing with the pain and sorrow I am still experiencing after my father's passing over two decades ago. It appears that I must bear this agony alone and move forward without any aid. My father's possessions are a physical reminder of his strong work ethic but also emphasize the gap created by his absence.

When I contemplate my father's life, I cannot help but notice the impact of his unhealthy ambition on his health over time. While I respect his determination, it is clear that his pursuit of success came at a significant cost. I also paid a substantial price by missing out on half of my life with him. If there is any possibility of resolving my pain, focusing on my work is the only way to get through it.

In 2023, my sister's house was flooded, and unfortunately, all of my father's memories were stored in the basement of her house. A few months later, I discovered that my sister had thrown away my father's memorabilia because of the disaster. This incident devastated me, and I became angry with my family, eventually withdrawing myself from everyone. I was lost and confused and needed to start the healing process. Suddenly, everything left over from my father's collection became vital to me. For a while, I felt like I was the only family member who truly cared about what he had fought so hard for. It has been twenty years since his passing, but people still talk about how my dad's office was decorated with framed photographs, trophies, and plaques, all now somewhere in a landfill.

In bell hooks' writing "In Our Glory," she reflects on how much is lost and destroyed in communities and how piecing together new realities from a handed-down material culture feels personal. Hooks writes:

Creating pictorial genealogies was the means by which one could ensure against the losses of the past. Such genealogies were a way to sustain ties. As children, we learned who our ancestors were by listening to endless narratives as we stood in front of these pictures. In many black homes, photographs-especially snapshots-were also central to the creation of "altars." These commemorative places paid homage to absent loved ones. Snapshots or professional portraits were placed in specific settings so that a relationship with the dead could be continued."<sup>7</sup>

I'm committed to protecting our legacy and identifying the constraints that stifle creativity and individuality in the Black experience in America. Black families and towns have been destroyed by forced relocation, and our legacies and stories were erased from our memories of participating in the American Dream. As someone interested in preserving my family's history, I found inspiration in the work of Crystal Z. Campbell, an artist and filmmaker (fig. 12). Campbell's art piece is a massive 110-foot-long V-shaped structure featuring mixed media works on paper and old black and white and sepia-toned photographs. The collages are visually engaging and provide an imagined landscape using materials and imagery that speak to the class, status, and luxury of the residents of the predominantly Black neighborhood. Seeing Campbell's work gave me insight into how I could connect myself with my family legacy while still being part of the rich history of self-determination in Black America.

An instance of the larger installation is shown in Notes from Black Wall Street which reignited my interest in college (fig. 12). This work helps me draw a connection to an archive of lost and forgotten histories that were buried by time. Since beginning this project, I have had a

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<sup>7</sup> bell hooks, *In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

yearning to find a way to carry out my father's beliefs toward the community to promote an equitable society.



Figure 12. Crystal Z. Campbell, Notes From Black Wall Street: Upon a Century (2021). Mixed Media Paintings on Archival Paper. Each work on paper is 8.5 x 11 or 11 x 8.5 inches. 100 works on a custom-built structure measuring 110 feet x 5 feet x 2.5 feet fabricate by Jeff Sellers.



Figure 13. Figure 13: Crystal Z. Campbell, Notes From Black Wall Street: Infinity Doesn't Interest Me, 2021 Acrylic paint, ink, fired clay, archival photograph on wood panel 60 x 36 inches (152.4 x 91.4 cm).



Figure 14. Betye Saar, *Sanctuary Awaits*, 1996, Wood, glass bottles, metal wire, palm fronds, compass, sheet tin, screws, and nails. 228.4 × 152.2 × 152.2 cm.

Betye Saar's art is an evolutionary approach that challenges traditional narratives. She re-contextualizes history using found objects loaded with stereotypical, fictional, and sometimes even appalling imagery. Her practice of recycling, remixing, and recreating is a powerful tool that helps decolonize archives and reshape personal and societal narratives, especially within the Black community. Her art is empowering and thought-provoking, encouraging us to question our preconceived notions and biases.

I too found new ways to tell stories using old things in my work. I am interested in nature, symbolism, and spirituality. I often think about the history of objects, who used them before, and how they were made. As technology advances, some industrial practices become outdated. The things we accumulate in our homes have a useful lifespan, but eventually become unnecessary. As I get older, I feel nostalgic about the products that have influenced our lives. I

think about the people who made them, the materials they used, how they were used, and what they were for.

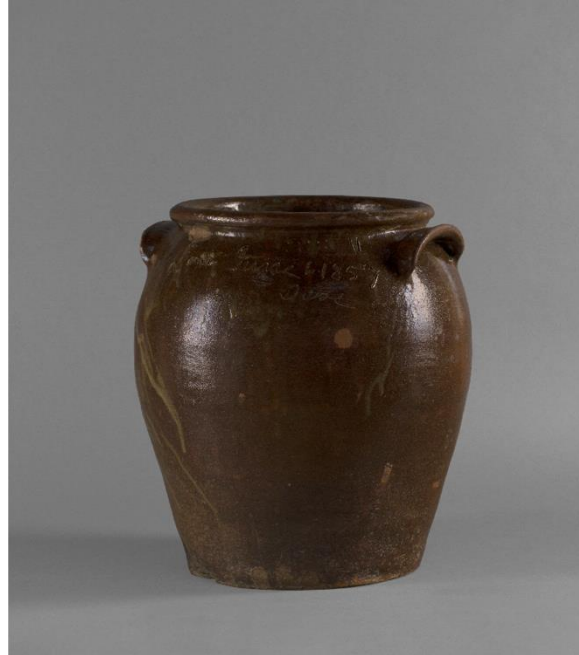


Figure 15. David Drake, American, c.1801–after 1870, stoneware vessel made at Stony Bluff Manufactory, Edgefield District, South Carolina, June 6, 1857, alkaline-glazed stoneware, South Carolina, United States, North and Central America, ceramics, containers.

One piece that particularly resonated with me was a ceramic work by David Drake, an enslaved potter who inscribed his name on his creations despite the fact that it was illegal for enslaved people to be literate (fig. 15). This act of boldness and authorship inspires me, and I have been attempting to find a means of expressing my feelings about grief, loss, and the unraveling of my family.

This work was significant for me in many ways. Firstly, it connected me to my ancestral roots in the Mississippi delta, a powerful experience. Additionally, it allowed me to expand my material interests. Although my childhood home is still in the family, it has been vacant for some time. However, the materials left behind from our past are still in the house, preserving our



memories. Creating my *Untitled Memory Jug* (fig. 16) allowed me to confront my pain through a tradition of making that felt cathartic and helped me open up a door to healing.



Figure 16. Micah Mickles, *Untitled Memory Jug*, 2024, 12 x 4 x 4, clay and found objects.

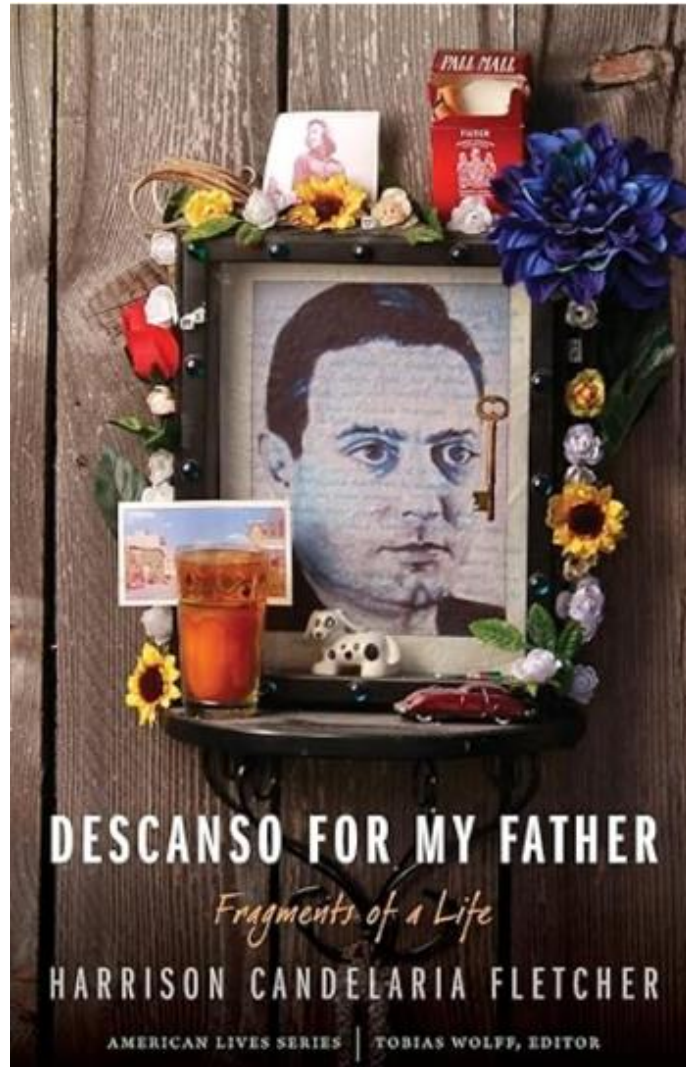


Figure 17. Harrison Candelaria Fletcher's Exploring familial bonds: 'Descanso For My Father: Fragments Of A Life' delves into the intricate tapestry of family history and personal identity, offering poignant insights into the complexities of the American experience.

During the making and grieving process, I read *Descanso for my Father* by Harrison Candelaria Fletcher (fig. 17); I was struck by his writing about his experience of living a significant portion of his life without his father. He brings a particular light and power to these stories as he describes his relationship with his family throughout the years without his father present, focusing on how he experienced his life in his father's absence. This unveiling of his late father's materials, always remembered as items in a closet, inspired his mother to create a series

of "Descanso." My encounter with this reading was a nudge and affirmation that I could rely on these abandoned materials to help me close the circle of family pain that keeps reopening.

Over the past few months, I have visited my childhood home several times. During one of my visits, I found a silver bracelet in my parents' bedroom drawer that my father never wore. I started wearing it, and it became a part of me. On another visit, I found one of his medals from the Vietnam War on the windowsill. I also found his marksman pin and police badge on separate occasions. I kept these items for myself even though I thought they would never serve any purpose. I was fascinated with collecting these objects, which reminded me of Okwui Enwezor's essay on Archive Fever: "Today, classifying information, data, or knowledge a pervasive method of regulatory control of the archive. This control over the flow of information is strengthened by other networks of archival manipulation or data generation."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Enwezor, Okwui. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008.

### Chapter 3: Echoes of Afterlife



Figure 18. Micah Mickles, Memory Cloth, 2024, Mixed Media Assemblage made from found fiber materials. Installation view. Dimensions vary according to installation.

In my artwork entitled "Memory Cloth" (figure 18), I came across a collection of items that had been forgotten over the years. These items, which included blankets, sheets, and towels, had been stored in trash bags in my family's shared home for decades. As I was working with these materials, I felt a sense of nostalgia and longing for the past. So, I decided to create a new archive by quilting these materials together, forming a security blanket that would remind me of the strong connection I share with my family and the memories we have created together.

I was excited to create modular abstract paintings using these materials while blending my artistic vision with personal memories. The process was both artistic and personal, as I combined memories of my family with my own creative ideas.

Artists such as Sam Gilliam and Sanford Biggers have inspired me tremendously, encouraging me to experiment with more extensive fiber materials. Sam Gilliam's paintings fascinated me mainly because of his abstract compositions that go beyond traditional framing. *Double Merge* was my first encounter with color field painting (fig. 19). Through his mastery of color and form, Gilliam invites viewers into a dynamic interplay of space and movement. His canvases without frames dance with lyrical grace, creating a symphony of hues that evoke a visceral response in me. To fully appreciate his work, one must explore his suspended pieces by peeking underneath and around them for shifts in color and formal content. Gilliam's creations exude a profound sense of musicality and expressiveness, drawing me into a world where color becomes sound, and form becomes melody in the mind. These early impressions made me consider how a viewer might experience various colors and forms. Similarly, I was moved by Sanford Biggers' artwork, with its varied cultural references and visual motifs. His exploration of modularity and variability in painting resonates with me, particularly in his tribute to African American quilt-making traditions (fig. 20). He uses code to transform traditional patterns into a language of liberation that evokes the stories of escape and freedom embedded in Black folk art and storytelling traditions in America. Inspired by his work, I decided to delve deeper into finding other traditions to help me express my experience of twenty years of bottled-up grief using found materials.

I am captivated by immersive artworks that guide me through physical spaces, while modularity uniquely appeals to me. I consider the manipulation of space in my work, causing the viewer to move around, crane their neck, and discover intimate little moments in unsuspecting locales. By pushing the boundaries of material, scale, and color, I slowed down the momentum of life as we know it.



Figure 19. Sam Gilliam, *Double Merge*, 1968, acrylic on canvas. Installation view, Día Beacon, NY, 2019. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio.



Figure 20. Sanford Biggers, *Khemestry*, 2017, Antique quilt, birch plywood, gold leaf 70 x 97 x 24 inches 177.8 x 243.8 x 61 cm.

My father led a diverse and complex life, and to honor his journey and express my love for him, I turned to an ancient form of art called memory jug-making. This art form has its roots in Congo cultures and was introduced to the American South during the 18th and 19th centuries. Inspired by the famous David Drake, who used his pottery to immortalize his experiences, I wanted to do the same for my father. Although he has passed away, I believe in second chances and want to begin to reverse the damage done to my family and community through my art.



Figure 21. Micah Mickles, *Rayfield's Chamber*, 2024, Mixed media Assemblage, wood, found materials, 152.4 cm x 213.36 cm x 121.92 cm.

My artwork, titled *Rayfield's Chamber* (fig. 21), aims to capture the essence of my journey marked by loss, grief, and the dissolution of family bonds. As the youngest and most disconnected from family, I am in the process of healing from this loss. Though I initially started this process as a personal healing, I now see it as a way to bring our family closer together and heal our collective wounds. The heaviness I felt urged me to put this into my work. Through the work, I am processing and engaging in dialogue with him on many levels, to fill the gap that I never was left open by my father while he was alive. The work is not only a means of sublimating my pain of loss but a catharsis by pressing random materials, which makes me feel more directly connected with him.



As an example of this meaningful communication with my late father, I created a wooden-framed structure that combines the ideas of a cabinet of curiosities with home elements. The structure measures more than 7' x 5' x 4'. I adorned the interior with 31 personalized jugs, each made of various materials that reference his personality, achievements, and battles with health. It is elevated with bulbous furniture legs and rustic antique casters; various multicolored vessels of all shapes, colors, heights, and scales are inside the chamber. Each uniquely shaped jug is encrusted with random assortments of objects ranging from broken cell phone parts and emerald beads to telephone wiring and car fuses. These seemingly random objects have no purpose now; they have become obsolete. Housing the vessels with a hand-built wooden frame metaphorically encapsulates these memories, caging them in while keeping observers at a distance. It is a room of a home with removed walls, reminding me of the vacant home we once lived in.

As a child, my father used to take me to different amusement parks and playgrounds. These outings are very close to my heart because they sparked my interest in combining landscape architecture with mosaics. I discovered the beauty of jewel-like materials and their incorporation into the built environment, which provided me with a direct connection to *Rayfield's Chamber*.



Figure 22. Simon Rodia, Detail of a section of mosaics in the Watts Towers, 1921-54.

One artist who captured my imagination is Simon Rodia (fig. 22), who created the *Watts Towers*. The project began in Watts, California, in 1921 and was completed in 1954. Its magnificent handmade structure contains found materials such as broken glass and plates pressed into cement, covering a welded metal framework. The towering sculptures stand at ninety-nine and a half feet tall and are a testament to the transformative power of art despite being made from humble materials. Simon collected plates from anywhere he could find them to create these impressive structures that transcend their origins and offer a glimpse into the artist's spiritual connection with the world. Piecing things together, sampling and remixing from the old, making something new, and mending the problem areas express my desire to put my hands in my work, thinking about built environments and ways of activating public and architectural spaces with unconventional building materials such as I created in *Rayfield's Chamber*.



Figure 23. Bob and Gail Cassilly, Floor Grand Staircase St. Louis City Museum.

My first experience with immersive art and large-scale mosaic work was at the City Museum in downtown St. Louis. Bob and Gail Cassilly, the creative couple behind this architectural masterpiece, collaborated on every aspect of the museum, creating a breathtaking sensory journey for visitors to explore (fig. 23). From the Ferris wheel on the rooftop to the full-scale yellow school bus suspended in mid-air, the museum exemplifies the power of imagination. As a result, my memory jug-making in *Rayfield's Chamber* feels appropriate for my heartfelt sentiments toward creating a space for processing grief. I can tell compelling stories about those we love using what I have gathered.

## **Conclusion: Saga Continuum**

In my artistic journey, the theme of second chances and the wisdom gleaned from others' experiences reverberates throughout my work. 'Second chances' represent more than mere redemption; they signify the chance to rewrite our narratives and redefine our identities. I perceive humanity as a tapestry of encounters, each person contributing to our evolving sense of self. By infusing my art with narratives rich in backstory, often sourced from overlooked archives, I aim to illuminate the intricate tapestry of individual life stories and the cherished connections formed along the way.

Art is a medium of expression that holds immense transformative power for the artist and the viewer alike. For me, it serves as a sanctuary of solace, a place where I can navigate grief and honor the memories of my ancestors and departed loved ones. Their enduring impact serves as an anchor, grounding me amidst the uncertainties of life.

As I create, I am driven by a deep-seated desire to unearth and preserve history. I infuse my work with the resonance of inherited materials, such as the contents of my memory jugs, connecting me to my past and the broader human narrative. Through this process, I find solace and meaning in the face of loss.

Despite the challenges I have faced, my longing for connection and my journey to transcend personal tragedies propel me forward. In sharing my art with others, I hope to inspire hope and resilience, helping others find their own transformative power through creative expression.

My commitment lies in exploring themes of memory, loss, and resilience, focusing on honoring the legacy of Black America. Drawing from my father's entrepreneurial spirit and the

strength of my predecessors, I aspire to cultivate empathy and understanding through shared narratives of love, loss, and transformation. My art is my testament, my healing journey, and my means of navigating the complexities of the world—a world I choose to engage with despite its challenges.

As I forge ahead, I aim to reconstruct and reinterpret the family archive, a journey filled with nostalgia and a deep connection. I strive to ensure that future generations will not face the same uncertainty about their heritage. Through works like *Rayfield's Chamber* and *Memory Cloth*, I find resolve and hope, seeking to impart a spirit of love and peace to those who engage with my art. These stories remind me of the divine whispers guiding me, reassuring me that as long as I remember my roots, everything will be alright.

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