

What is a portrait, if not an acknowledgment of a human encounter: an opportunity to imagine the life of another?

After the 2016 presidential election, I collaborated with individuals who felt invisible and un-entitled in this American moment. By telling stories through pose, gesture, and props, the subject asserts their identity and invites encounters with their humanity. I ripped the photographs to express the damage rendered by fear of the "other." Inspired by the Japanese practice of Kintsugi – which repairs broken pottery while highlighting its scars – I restored the torn portraits, underscoring the need to mend our wounds.

My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Dulce.13
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



Some sitters explore feelings of profound vulnerability or helplessness. Some use this experience to assert and express identities increasingly being suppressed by the outside world. Others uncover ferocious strength they did not know they had as they look anger and hatred in the eye.



While the American flag has become a complicated symbol, some of my sitters have reclaimed and re-imagined it to express distress, defiance, and/or respectful hope for the return of democracy.

My Own Witness.Danielle.11
Pigment print; 18" x 24", 28" x 42"; Varied editions



Installation: *Bound Up Together: On the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment*, Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

Curator: Rachel Gugelberger

Image courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photo credit: Etienne Frossard



Billboard: *Art4Equality x Life, Liberty, & The Pursuit of Happiness*, SaveArtSpace and Art4Equality
Curator: Indira Cesarine
McGuinness Blvd and Calyer St, Brooklyn, NY



When the pandemic began, I had to close my portrait studio. Racial injustices rose to the front of our collective consciousness, our political systems teetered on the edge of a failure of democracy, and long-ignored cracks broke into ruptures. It felt as though my brain was exploding and my heart was tearing apart. One day, overwhelmed by the turbulence and in a fit of emotion, I ripped a portrait. And then another. In my destruction, I had given expression to the personal pain and societal wounds I saw around me. Then, inspired by the Japanese practice of Kintsugi – which repairs broken pottery with gold lacquer to highlight scars rather than disguise them – I restored the torn portraits using gold rice paper and thread. The results call attention to the area of repair; they tell us to remember and learn from our violent histories rather than ignore or hide them, underscoring the importance of mending our fractured relationships with ourselves and with each other.

As my co-creators choose to discover, unveil, and reveal through image and text (each sitter writes a short narrative about their portrait), they claim ownership of self and provoke others to viscerally connect with them.

"When we think about people in photographs together, happiness comes to mind. In both of our cases, we used to think we could never attain that same level of 'happiness.' Despite the legalization of same-sex marriage, we still share the lingering fear of 'who can we really trust?' when we meet new people. The thought of having to constantly bear a temporary 'closet' as a married couple or introducing each other as 'friend', just to avoid inciting hatred in the wrong person, is enough to bring us back to thinking that the 'happiness' we thought we finally had is still beyond our reach."

~ Chad Mooney & James Chwalyk

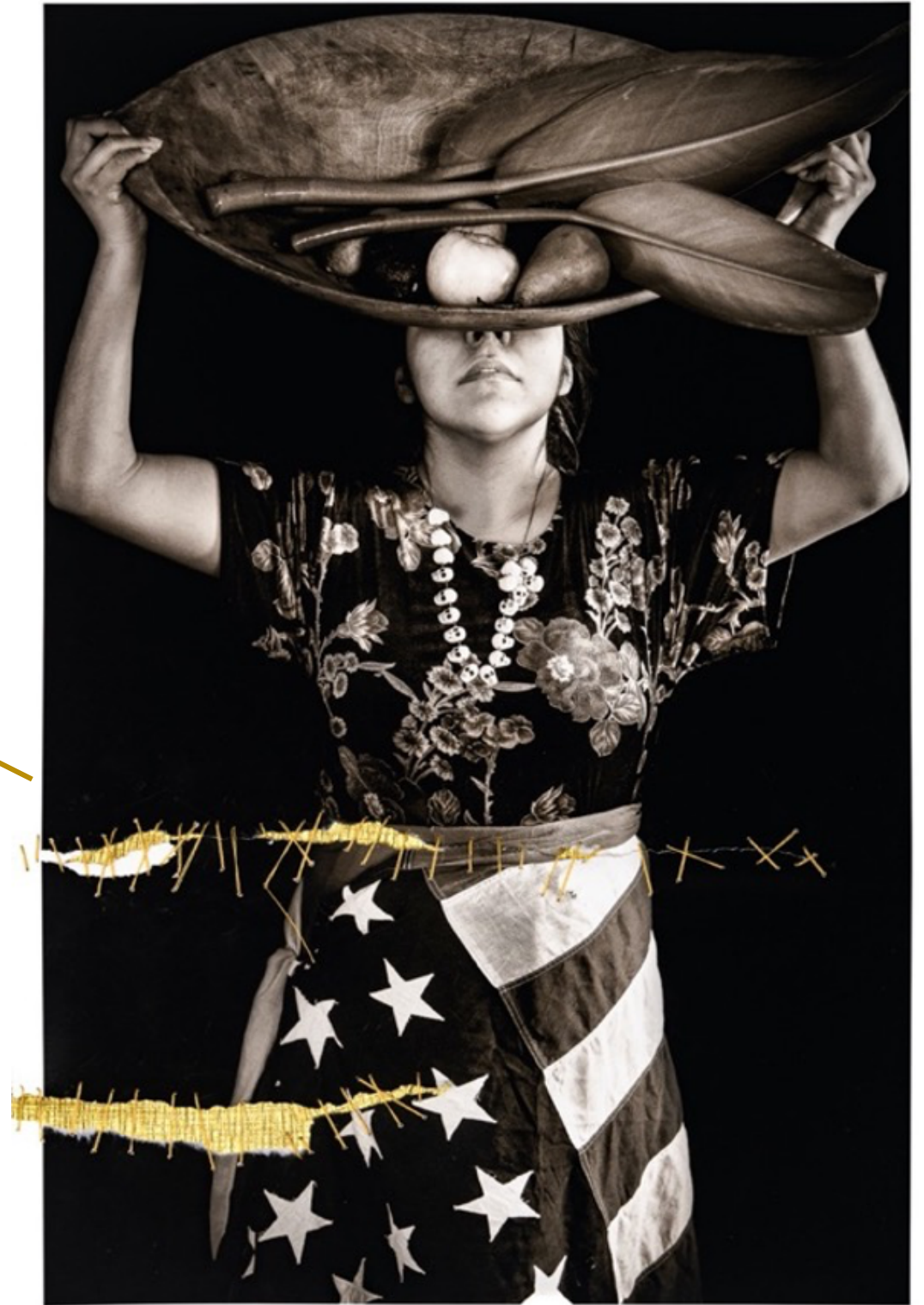


My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Chad and James.9
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19", Unique



"The resulting image reminds me of how a lot of young girls and boys go through the same identity crisis growing up. I'm not seen as an American because of my skin tone and I'm not a Mexican in my family's homeland because I was not born there. I'm proud to be Mexican American; I however long for the day everyone realizes there's only one race with many beliefs."

~ Dulce A. Romero



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair. Dulce.13
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19", Unique



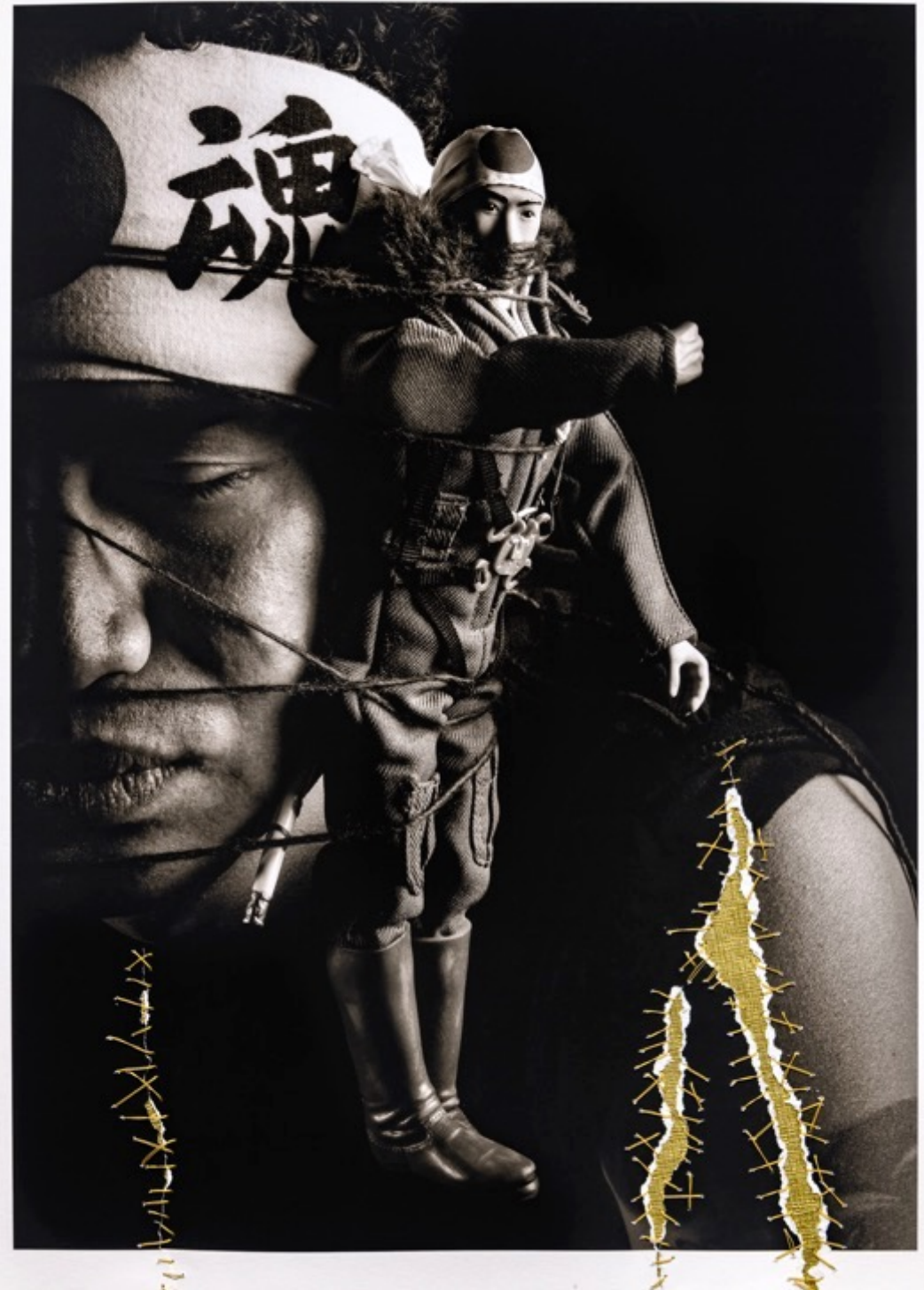
My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Shontel.11
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19", Unique

"My name is Shontel and I love being black. I love everything about being black: the music, our hair and our culture just to name a few. However, it seems like lately America doesn't seem to love black people as much. When we when we try to say our BLACK lives matter--they tell us ALL lives matter. Which is hurtful because, of course, all lives matter, but black lives are the one being lost everyday at the hands of police brutality. I want America to see to black lives are important and to change it to all lives is silencing our voice."

~ Shontel Hunter

"For me the project spoke to what it meant to be of mixed ethnicity in America. From the moment I arrived in this country at 5 years old I was teased relentlessly for not knowing English and for having a foreign name. Growing up I was always connected to being Nicaraguan, being Japanese, being Black, connected to these cultures equally but often I was put in a box. I couldn't be all of these I had to choose or the choice would be made for me. Most of the time I was just a "Spanish" kid or a "Black" kid, I suppose because my physical traits weren't overwhelmingly Asian. I've grown up dealing with racial stereotyping and racial slurs, I've grown up living the Black experience while simultaneously living the Brown experience all while feeling equally Asian. I feel that society has tried to make me choose a side, a culture and even if I were to do so I would never be accepted because I wasn't Hispanic enough or black enough or Asian enough. What I have learned though is I am enough, I am enough of everything I am to be accepted, my people love me and as much as society wants me to choose I will never. I will continue to represent every part of me and I will continue to break out of every box I am put in until they see me for who I am!"

~ J.T.



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.JT.16
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24", Unique

"My name is Devyn and I am a Latino trans man living my truth. I am proud of my gender identity and am grateful for all the amazing and supportive people I've met and been able to work with because of my visibility. I choose to be visible for various reasons, one of the main reasons being that I want other trans folks, especially trans youth, who are struggling with their gender identity to know that they are not alone and can be their true selves - even though our current political climate is trying to take away our basic human rights and protections. I want America to see that we are all just human beings and deserve to be treated with the same kindness and respect as our fellow straight cis humans."

~ Devyn Nunez



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Devyn.9
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Sybil.1
 Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24", Unique

"We can't control what events happen to us, but we can control how we chose to meet them. I was diagnosed with Scleroderma, a rare autoimmune disease, more than 20 years ago and given 5 years to live. Instead of letting the darkness of that diagnosis and its possible outcome rule me, I chose to focus on the present moment. There are times that have been tough and times I did not think I would see tomorrow. But over all my years of dealing with illness, the most important thing I've learned is that you can't let a possible future steal your life, your present moment. Don't let the darkness paralyze you, put one foot in front of the other and you will find the light. You can do it."

~ Sybil Archibald



Detail

"I am 93 years old. My body is falling apart but my mind is strong. I am the last of my personal generation to be alive. My husband and brother both served in WW2. My husband helped to liberate a concentration camp. We believed war would be over at the time and the sacrifices we made would allow for a future better world. Where is this better world, now?"

~ Estelle Bassin



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Estelle.6
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique

*"I am holding in my skirt a bounty of dolls
representing children deprived of childhood and
adults deprived of hope. All gathered in my skirt
seeking safety. I want to protect them from a
world that preys on their vulnerability. But they
are content to be the cushion between me and
the threat to humanity I feel from this precarious
time in which we now live."*

~ Philemona Williamson



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair. Philemona.8
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique



"My message for others is that I won't be erased. I am a gay man living as a man, woman, or whatever I feel like living as; if I feel like a man, then I'm a man – if I feel like a woman, then I'm a woman."

~ Pandy Cruz

My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Pandy.24
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24", Unique



Detail

"As someone who is multiracial who grew up constantly surrounded by cultures outside her own, it was challenging to know which box I fit in. As a woman, I have had barriers constructed specifically to keep me boxed in. Through "My Own Witness," I wanted to challenge the societal and social constructs placed upon me and to enforce the notion of exercising our freedom to liberate ourselves from senseless restrictions."

~ Catherine Collins



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Catherine.7
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique

"Living in America has been a bittersweet experience for me. I hate the lack of opportunities and the lack of freedom here in the U.S. Being a black American Muslim I have experienced many unfair and unjust things- being denied jobs because of my race and religion and being profiled by the police. Every day I fight that struggle, constantly trying to prove to the world and society that I am not the "stereotype". Although it is a tiring battle I refuse to give up the fight. My ancestors before me didn't and neither will I."

~ Sufiyyah Abdul-Baasit



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Sufiyyah.13
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair. Anonymous.15
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



Detail

"When I left my country for the U.S. six years ago for my education, I thought I would be leaving behind the rampant killing of others solely based upon the difference of ethnicity. Unfortunately, the nightmare I experienced back home has become powerfully pervasive here in the U.S. I am looking forward to a future where humans are just seen as human and not diminished or exalted by skin color, religion, gender, or the race they are born into or choose to practice."

~ Anonymous

"My name is Devyn and I am a Latino trans man living my truth. I am proud of my gender identity and am grateful for all the amazing and supportive people I've met and been able to work with because of my visibility. I choose to be visible for various reasons, one of the main reasons being that I want other trans folks, especially trans youth, who are struggling with their gender identity to know that they are not alone and can be their true selves - even though our current political climate is trying to take away our basic human rights and protections. I want America to see that we are all just human beings and deserve to be treated with the same kindness and respect as our fellow straight cis humans."

~ Devyn Nunez



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Devyn.4
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique

"My name is Ron EA Powell; my Jamaican parents gave me those initials as a symbol of you reap what you sow. I feel that I express myself and my emotions through my art. Reflecting on the current events and ongoing tensions in our world today, I believe we need to put aside our ego and admit that something is wrong. It may be an issue so simplistic to the core, yet we need to address it together. My self-portrait oil painting entitled, 'torn' reflects the theme and emotions I feel...resistance."

~ Ron Powell



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Ron.3
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique



"Hi, I am Shino. I moved to America from the other side of world decades ago. I received so much opportunity and love. But at the same time, I see many, many people who do not have the same experience and get treated badly instead. I feel lost in-between these worlds. Now, as a resident of America, I want to continue to spread happiness, kindness and compassion in my daily life."

~ Shino Takeda

My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Shino.12
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24", Unique



Detail

"I am the daughter of Filipino immigrants: my father emigrated in 1928 and waited 22 years for a Filipina- my mom - to arrive in America to marry. Having experienced blatant and nuanced racism, my parents chose not to teach us Tagalog though we learned to celebrate our history and culture through dance, food, music and history. As the first non-white family moving into an inner city blue collar working class neighborhood in Chicago, life was difficult. Now, I am a healer, end of life advocate and a lesbian of color married to a Jewish woman. Together we navigate different world experiences sharing different cultures, religions, skin colors. Though today America is showing many of its more fractured sides, I still maintain that in its messiness, it is still the best place for me (us)."

~ Tacy Silverberg-Urian



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Tacy.5
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24"; Unique

"Knowing that I'm not one of those lucky humans whom the camera seems to 'like,' I wanted to confront my own self-conscious discomfort, by preparing, if necessary, to disrobe completely – to remove anything that could serve as a disguise. I also wanted to include pieces my blown glass – like me, not photogenic, but as priceless as if they were my own children. I was drawn to the black mesh, because, as in a favorite fairy tale, it both covers and reveals – I could become less a person, and more like a three-dimensional graph of a person. By the way, if there is such a thing as reincarnation, I'd like to come back as a geometric theorem."

~ Walter Zimmerman



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Walter.7
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Aya.1
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 18" x 24", Unique

"I was born in Japan and now live in America. One of the things that attracted me to America was the diversity of people and cultures. I think it's a big part of what makes this country great. My hope is for this diversity to continue to inspire us, and those around the world, and show that we are stronger when we're united."

~ Aya Heffner

"I'm a soft-spoken woman; mother of three, educator and self-identified lesbian. An Afro-Cuban, Polish-Jew, Filipino in America. As a visual artist, I choose to explore and connect the intertwining relationships between social justice, equality, human and women's rights, police brutality, femininity, modern day slavery and culture. I use my art as a conduit for bold, fearless, thought-provoking, unapologetic issues. My current body of work is similar to this powerful project. It draws attention to others purposes, journeys and experiences in America. The image conveys a timeless truth; as a woman of color, I feed the nation."

~ Danielle Scott



My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Danielle.11
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique

This series of collaborative portraits was motivated by the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, Judith Butler, and Teju Cole. They see face-to-face encounters as a moral activity to compassionately experience the lives of others.



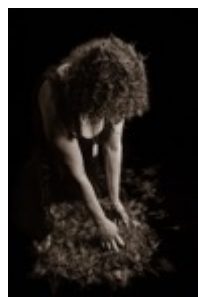
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My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair.Messiah.9
Pigment print, gold rice paper, gold embroidery thread; 13" x 19"; Unique



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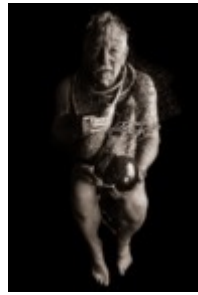
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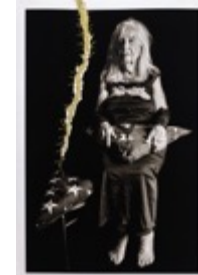
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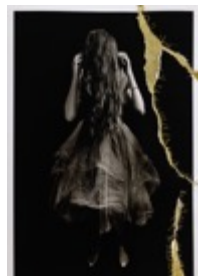
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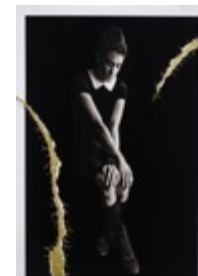
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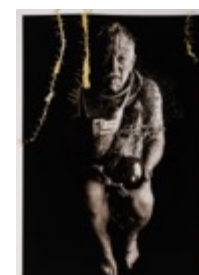
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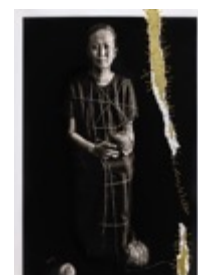
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Notes on Production

My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair is a series based on 20 portraits taken during the years following the 2016 election and produced during the isolation of the pandemic.

Each portrait is layered and printed on Moab Entrada Rag Natural 300 gsm cotton paper. The photograph is ripped and subsequently repaired with golden handmade rice paper and gold-colored thread.

Edition of 3 with 1 AP 18"x 24". Each of the 4 is unique with variations in the ripping and repair.
Edition of 8 with 2 AP 13"x19". Each of the 10 is unique with variations in the ripping and repair.



SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2021

New Jersey Arts Annual: ReVision and Respond, Curator: Muhammad Abdul-Mubdi, Jurors: Kristen J. Owens, Amy Simon Hopwood, The Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ

The Empowering, Curator: Danielle Scott, Pro Arts Jersey City, Jersey City, NJ

Privilege, Power and Everyday Life, Curator: Theda Sandiford, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

2020

Prayers for the Pandemic; Prayers for Progress; Prayers for the Planet; Prayers for the Presidency!, Curator: Anne Trauben, Drawing Rooms, Jersey City, NJ

For Which It Stands, Curators: Eileen Jeng-Lynch, Emily Alesandrini, Natasha Becker, Ford Foundation Gallery and Assembly Room, New York, NY

Exploring Humanity, Curator: Marisa Caichiolo, Los Angeles Center of Photography 5th Annual Fine Art Exhibition, Los Angeles, CA

Curator's Choice, Curators: Anonda Bell, Laura Bonas-Palmer, Virginia Butera, Wilson Duggan, Donna Kessinger, Eileen Jeng-Lynch, Jo-El Lopez, Cheryl and Christopher Mack, Judith Page, Pro Arts Jersey City, Jersey City, NJ

Artists for Social Justice, Curator: Virginia Mallon, Kupferberg Center for the Arts at Queens College, New York, NY; Arc Gallery & Educational Foundation, Chicago, IL

Portrait 2020, Juror: Brandon Thibodeaux, SE Center for Photography, Greenville, SC

Bound Up Together: On the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment, Curator: Rachel Gugelberger, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY

Art4Equality x Life, Liberty, & The Pursuit of Happiness, SaveArtSpace/Art4Equality, Curator: Indira Cesarine, The Untitled Space, New York, NY

Art4Equality x Life, Liberty, & The Pursuit of Happiness, SaveArtSpace, Curator: Indira Cesarine, Billboard at McGuinness Blvd & Calyer St, Brooklyn, NY

Art Off-Screen, Curator: Eileen Jeng-Lynch, Neumeraki, D*FIT Studio, Montclair, NJ

Her Flag, Curator/Project Lead: Marilyn Artus, Old Barracks Museum, Trenton, NJ

2019

Little by Little, Juror: Peter Bugg, Art Intersection, Gilbert, AZ

State of the Art 2019, Curator: Susanna Baker, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

Contemporary Portraiture: To See Each Other, Curator: Kelly Ruffel, Passaic County Arts Center, Hawthorne, NJ

ViewPoints 2019, Juror: Jeanne Brasile, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

2018

Armistice Day 2018, Puffin Cultural Forum and Frontline Arts, Teaneck, NJ

Call & Response: The Art of Listening, Curator: Yvette Lucas, 1978 Maplewood Arts Center, Maplewood, NJ

Natural Encounters, Curator: Fran Forman, N.Y. Photo Curator – Global Photography Awards

Viewpoints 2018, Juror: Gary G. Schneider, Studio Montclair, Montclair, NJ

2017

Art Connections 13, Curator: Andrea Marshall, George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

Street Photography, Curator: Maria Toutoudaki, Blank Wall Gallery, Athens, Greece

2016

Cherry Blossoms in Winter, Curator: Frances Bartkowski, Rutgers-Newark, Branch Brook Park, Newark, NJ

Trois Poissons in a Big See, Curator: Dana Calbi, Sterling Sound, New York, NY

Viewpoints 2016, Juror: Mary Birmingham, Aljira: a Center for Contemporary Art, Newark, NJ

Art Connections 12, Curator: Andrea Marshall, George Segal Gallery, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ

AWARDS AND GRANTS

2021

Individual Artist Fellowship Award, New Jersey State Council on the Arts

2020

First Place, Los Angeles Center of Photography – 5th Annual Juried Exhibition, *Exploring Humanity*
Curator's Choice 2020, Pro Arts Jersey City

2018

Honorable Mention – Segregation and Human Rights, 12th Julia Margaret Cameron Award/Photography Gala Awards
Second Place, *Viewpoints 2018*, Studio Montclair
First Place, *Natural Encounters*, New York Photo Curator – Global Photography Awards

2017

National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis Gradiva Award for *The Mourning After*

2014

Film Grant for *The Mourning After*, Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing

2008

Official Selection - *Leave No Soldier* (Director/Producer. Documentary), Rhode Island International Film Festival, The Big Muddy, New Filmmakers Festival
Best Director, First Glance Film Festival
Merit Award, Accolade Film Festival

2007

Division 39 Section IX Achievement Award, The American Psychological Association

2005

National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis Gradiva Award for Artwork Contributions to Psychoanalysis

2004

Featured Artist of the Month, New Jersey Council of the Arts
Development Grant, Pratt Institute
Roy W. Dean Film & Video Grant Finalist, for *The Mourning After*
Finishing Funds for *Dollhouse*, Experimental Television Center Ltd.

2003

Gold Bell Leadership Award for Contributions to Mental Health Through the Arts, Mental Health Association of New Jersey



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THANK YOU.

Donna Bassin, Ph.D., is an award-winning fine art photographer, installation artist, author, professor, and filmmaker. As an artist heavily influenced by her work as a clinical psychologist and her experiences working with war veterans and at Ground Zero, Donna uses art to explore the creative edge of collective loss, grief, mourning, and transformation. She is known for her documentaries, *Leave No Soldier* and *The Mourning After*, and her photo series *The Afterlife of Dolls* – a solo exhibition at Montclair Art Museum that was featured on PBS' *State of the Arts* and received both a Golden Bell and Gradiva Award. She was selected as a recipient for the 2021 New Jersey Council on the Arts Fellowship in Photography.

Her work has been juried and shown in numerous group exhibitions stretching from New York City to Los Angeles. Her photographs have also been commissioned for book covers and are in private and museum collections.

Donna has contributed portraits from her series, *My Own Witness*, to Smack Mellon Gallery for their exhibition of *Bound Up Together: On the 100th Anniversary of the 19th Amendment*, and to SaveArtSpace and Art4Equality for a billboard installation, both located in Brooklyn, New York. Taking part in the *Her Flag* project (www.herflag.com), she created the stripe for New Jersey, which will be displayed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. on Flag Day of 2021.

Donna's current projects, *My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair* and *Precious Scars*, explore the human desire for reconciliation in the wake of social fractures. *My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair* will be featured in the Newark Museum for the 2021 New Jersey Arts Annual: *ReVision and Respond* and as an upcoming solo exhibition for July 2021 at the Soho Photo Gallery in New York City.