

Q/A between Essence Harden and Erica Deeman, August 2020

Essence: Can you bring us along to the beginnings of this series? How did space (both physical and mental) and access (to time and technology) at the Headlands residency guide this process?

Erica: The initial thinking began, as always, with a series of questions, the most important centered on what more could a photograph be? Within its fixed state and presentation, could I add dimension? In adding dimension could it transcend between literal and abstracted visions of the portrait? I sat in my studio in San Francisco and thought for a long time about this journey and what I had access to in terms of resources. I craved the fluidity of working with other mediums, so I learned how to use the kiln and gained access to a 3D printer in the studio complex.

At the time, I didn't have the completed vision. Each tool felt so separate—the camera, the 3D printer, and the clay—and yet I knew intuitively that something interesting could happen.

There's a quiet space and a grounding that I was granted during my time at the residency. I found a place in my mind that felt clearer. I could listen and hear my body and tap into the universal energy. The proximity to the land was a rare experience, also the isolation from everyday life. It was a moment to reflect. I felt ready, and still do, to turn the camera on myself. During the past two years, I understood a need to see myself directly and not purely through the portraiture collaborations I have made previously. I think that is because I recognize a huge shift in my person, from the person who came to the States nine years ago. In the quiet of my Headlands studio, with the backdrop of nature, there was safety in making the images. I was open to seeing the person I was becoming. I could reflect on my personal journey and growth and how this could appear in a photograph. It was a space I could self-determine, without the noise of everyday life. The images are a meditation on myself.

I had a very large studio space, allowing me to work on three projects at a time and also have space to create photographs. With space, I had the creative bandwidth to create more, explore, experiment. It was like a melting pot that I could pour all my ideas into and see what the end results were.

The portraits and processes were refined in the Headlands, the work for the show was made in the isolation and quarantine in my home. There is a parallel in my mind, that there is a space, time and headspace unique to the final output of the project.

I love this notion of what lies between abstraction and accuracy/truth as being a rich site for building a portrait. That in fact a play in material is a way to sculpt an image and offer a type of depth that operates from a place of seeing and unseeing, a space between conceptual and literalism. I'm also struck by how the land, Miwok land, offered a grounding space for you and how land and blackness is

wrapped in both motion/imperence and belonging/home for black subjects. In this it seems geography and architecture are paramount to this series. It's as if the grooves and roads which provide the layers in each piece are maps themselves. Can you speak more to how land and liminality are operating (if they are operating) in these works?

I am so happy that you reference the Miwok land. In its reference we remind ourselves of the temporality of our existence here: we live on stolen land. Our ancestors were taken from their lands and made home on indigenous land. I ask myself, how do we find home based on our diasporic history? One answer, for me, is in the layers of the work, in the layers built by the 3D printer, so methodically, of my own image. I'm definitely attempting to create space, an offering to answer the question.

The title of the exhibition is borrowed from the cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall's 2017 autobiography *Familiar Stranger A Life Between Two Islands*. How does Hall/his theories appear in your pieces?

I love Stuart Hall's articulations of identity and cultural theory as his non fixed notions of definition. There is an in-between-ness, hybridity, and liminal state of being. We never really arrive at who we are, we are in this continual state of becoming. I think a lot about my grandparents and my mum moving to the U.K. from Jamaica and the experiences they faced. They thrived and found joy in what I know was a difficult transition for them. They made a journey, physical and through time to a different identity. They are very much of Hall's writings. As a first-generation, dual heritage, Black British person I have chosen to move and live in an alternative land to my birth. There have definitely been complex problems of identity through this movement, yet it's given rise to creative possibilities. There's definitely a parallel in our family experiences.

For example, in the work, there is an inconsistency in the rendition of each piece. There is a unifying color, but no two are the same. There is a collective theme to the pieces in the way that Hall discusses the Black diaspora as unified by "one true self." Though there are points of similarity, there are also points of difference. It could come in my application of pressure for each piece or the different 3D print settings I made for each mold, a different amount of detail, scale, contrast and depth. Removing the boundary of the square or rectangle offers uniqueness in each shape and this difference for me ties into Hall's non fixed interpretations and fluidity.

There is a becoming to the pieces and notions of hybridity. A mixture of presences that talks to Hall's "conception of 'identity.'" There is reinvention to the work by the mixing of technology and process. There is a multiplicity of process and material that is recognizable as a photograph but also distinctly different to one. The ultimate results challenge true definitions.

A decalage of sorts. A positioning rather than resolution. If we understand these images as a type of artifact then you are locating yourself as a

historical matter and future subject, marking time and place as a peculiar and particular thing. What positions of/on blackness are taken up here, what do these heirlooms offer its surveyors?

Indeed, when written like that, it marks this time and my life as important; and as a present-day reminder that we have always existed and always will.

There's a relationship here between artifact, material, and technology that I find intriguing. The use of Cassius Obsidian clay as the material, the 3D printer as the mode of achieving the print and the object itself, a sculpted photograph. Can you speak to your turn towards this rich black clay and this form of printing in relation to a type of cultural preservation (e.g. the making of an artifact)?

I wanted to feel a different tangibility to my work—to feel my hand within it so to speak. In using my body weight to make the imprints the impressions leave a deeper and more physical sense of belonging. The Cassius Obsidian clay acts as a unifier between my body and the land. Through the visible imprint/reliefs made, there's a different type of permanence to the light-exposed paper, the laying of ink on paper, and the digital world. I was drawn to it thinking about the museum, the artifact, the Black body, and permanence. As a culture I ask, what will we leave to be remembered by? It was something that struck me as I stood in front of the items I photographed for the [1619 Project](#). In the history of the Black diaspora that we share, we find remnants of ourselves, an historical presence. The paper objects we worked with for the shoot were so sensitive to the light that we were not only restricted by touch but also by time under the lights. It reminded me of the fragility of the material and concerns of preservation. Notions of fragility, and the body also pulsed through my being during this moment, and the immense resistance and reliance and joy we have shown as a people to survive. I had toyed with an element of touch for the pieces; an idea of intimacy, but being unable to touch any of the artifacts in the *1619 Project* reminded me of the power and permissions granted or not for our black bodies. I didn't want to grant universal access.

To see the pieces reflect layers of tonal range and cast shadow and contrast to my face any monolithic notion of identity and blackness is transcended. Though it is not a naturally formed clay, it is made in California and it's the place I have lived in for the duration of my time in the States.

Technology has allowed us to create different forms of expression, the photograph is one of them. I was intrigued to see how using technology I could create a different and unexpected type of permanence.

There is also a time element to the process, to the printing of the molds, the drying of the clay and the firing of the pieces that challenges our culture of immediacy.

I love this question of what we are to be remembered by. I wonder how your previous series *Silhouettes* and *Brown* along with the 1619 project where you photographed tools and objects of slavery and images of the enslaved informed this series entanglement with memory?

Time in photography is something we're almost forgotten about, that in creating works using a film process there is the time between the creation of the images and seeing them. I've found this time is valuable to the process, that something unexpected and unseen can reveal itself. Adding to the layers of time with the 3D printing and two time firing of the clay I see a duality of existence; to see oneself in and as more than one entity/existence. I think this process speaks to a closeness and distance all at the same time.

Your photography work has a vested interest in blackness, diaspora, and “ways of seeing” (to borrow from Berger). After photographing black womxn and men what does self-portraiture offer you in terms of these cross-sections?

In many ways I see myself in all of the work I create. In *Silhouettes* and the *Brown* series, there are creative decisions and a collaborative process that speak to that. For the *Brown* series, the backdrop is close to my skin tone, and *Silhouettes* I myself am a Black woman. Both projects have been sources of community building and personal growth. Yet, I am seeing myself indirectly. The self-portraits allow me to center myself to see who I am becoming as an individual and within the diaspora. I also get to experience a different view and intimacy in the making of a portrait. There is a care that I have found, accepting and giving permission to be seen. It's something I don't take for granted. The camera may not always render you the manner that you see yourself, and that's okay; it can only allude to the complexity of existence and being.

EH: This question of abstraction and truth comes back into mind here under the photographing of others and the photographing of self. I'm interested in how cameras are aimed to “tell truths” while the technology itself is bound to a history of imaging both anti blackness and black autonomy. That the camera is an unreliable narrator and the photograph is, what you name, a type of allusionary frame capable of suggesting dynamism but not necessarily encapsulating the fullness of the subject itself. I say all this to ask a pretty basic question, why photography? And how does that in-betweenness in both matter and diaspora function for you in relationship to this complicated tool of capture?

I love that idea of the photograph as an unreliable narrator, like a memory that you recall over time, never consistent, moving and changing in interpretation, like how we interpret our lives to our inner selves.

I keep returning to photography because it has historically been the medium that brought me into the art world. It has challenged and changed me in every way—yet here I am, making sculptures and thinking outside of its realms. I'm beginning to get more comfortable with incomplete states because we can never reach completeness in our lives. There is a freedom and acceptance in releasing that expectation.