

# TOWARD BECOMING

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This is a vibe shift. Charged with the autonomy of mobility, *It's time for me to go* resolutely declares an expansive possibility. The statement cracks open the space between where you are and where you're going. This is an interlude—the eternal farewell that never ceases in the condition of being unbound. *It's time for me to go* addresses a blackness that forms and unforms itself through various states of subjugation, loss, transformation, tradition, belonging, and unbelonging. The artists in this exhibition, Cameron Granger, Jacob Mason-Macklin, and Qualeasha Wood, lay bare the results of their making—in coming up for air, their release breathes life into the space of the gallery as if to turn it inside out. *It's time for me to go* takes on the certainty of change with a bravery and self-direction that comes from a life of being thwarted. Through the artists' work, the embrace and shedding of past selves produces a yearning to reach forward.

This exhibition, like its title, is a provocation nestled within a place of familiarity—compelling for its relatability and at once uncomplicated and conceptually weighted. Though figurative in nature, the works in *It's time for me to go* refuse the limitations of subjectivity. Instead, the artists subvert Black figuration by challenging the notion of blackness as a singular entity, revealing the complex histories, memories, and cultural resonances that inform Black becoming. By unfurling the individual intimacies of the “everyday,” the artists grapple with the consciousness and unrelenting publicness of the Black subject. As with the work of the exhibition, its title phrase is amorphous—the “me” changes with the aperture of the reader. As such, the phrase sets the tone for a collective departure that begs the question: What imaginary might be uncovered in the wake?

Qualeasha Wood brings together a body of work that integrates craft, technology, and fine art. Utilizing computational, digital, and dexterous modes of creating, Wood pays homage to the Black women in her family and across history who remain a prevalent part of technological advancement and proliferation. From the Black women who were hired in the early 1950s to work as human computers to the long lineage of Black seamstresses and quilters across a diasporic history, Wood's practice contends with the role of Black women in technology, the subjugation of their labor, and of blackness as a technology itself.<sup>1</sup> In her tapestry works, Wood's Photoshopped photographic collages are woven by a digitized Jacquard loom,<sup>2</sup> and adorned through a meticulous method of hand beading in a process that makes use of the body as technology and

the machine as crafter. The pixelization, data erosion, and texture of the mechanized weave disrupts readership of the image by glitching the Black femme body. Wood proposes that the tapestries and tuftings “[serve] as tasks and processes dedicated to trials of potential failure and success of sending information back to the OS [or body].” In effect, they become tools by which Wood attempts to make sense of “the non-ontological Black Femme body aka Ebony.ONLINE.”<sup>3</sup>

In her tuftings, Wood alludes to the body by engaging a tufting machine that automates the threading of the yarn as she guides it across the work's surface. The process is a physically demanding mechanized approach to making that challenges boundaries of craft making, painting, and technology by bringing them all into play at once. Throughout these works, the artist uses self-portraiture to examine Black femmehood as mediated through digital and physical realities of subjugation. In *to infinity and beyond (and back again)* (2022), white cartoonish eyes with large black pupils protrude from the outline of a girl's silhouette, increasing in scale as they stretch out from her face. This exaggeration of the figure's eyes builds on the emphasis of the gaze in Wood's practice, throughout which she interrogates the act of looking. This recurring character in her tufted works acts as an avatar of her younger self rendered in total blackness, save for the whites of her eyes. In these ominous tableaux, the subject's stare returns the gaze back to the ever-present but barely visible opposing white figure, evoking both the discomfort and violation in being seen and the power of looking back.

Wood's work is, however, multiplicitous in its examination of looking and its function. Her tapestries take on visibility as a source of self-regard, and through them, Wood finds sovereignty in reclaiming her image as she etches herself into form. Here, Wood resists the commodification of Black femmes on the internet and embraces the expansive possibilities of a Black cyborgian existence by subverting who is doing the looking and being unapologetically direct in her gaze. *Error404* (2022), which features screenshots of Photo Booth selfies spliced together with religious iconography and modified Microsoft error messages that read “Warning, can't load fetishization. Please, try again in 30 seconds,” takes on the memeification of Black women and proposes a new kind of worship that exalts her own Black femme body. As Octavia Butler reminds us: “Self shapes. Self adapts. Self invents its own reasons for being. To shape God, shape Self.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, by imaging herself, Wood engages in a radical act of self-love and devotion. In depicting herself as “holy,” her face enshrined by a gold halo, Wood challenges canonical ideas of reverence and refuses the proposition of her selfhood as reliant on or respondent to another's gaze.

Similarly, Jacob Mason-Macklin explores painting as a tool for seeing. In his new body of work, Mason-Macklin brings forth the sensations of a Harlem streetscape. Drawing from memory, found imagery, iPhone snapshots, and the embodied experience of walking down the street, Mason-Macklin creates imagined scenes of people in public space that evoke the complexities and contrasts of human conditions on display throughout Harlem. These paintings take inspiration from the artist's observations of the collapse of public and private space that takes place in a neighborhood where the architecture of community spills out into the parks, bus stops, and streets. With gestural layering of paint and close attention to color, these paintings evoke not only the artist's gaze but also

<sup>1</sup> In “The Lenny Interview: Kimberly Drew, aka @MuseumMammy,” Drew said “Blackness is a technology in and of itself.” Hairston, Lenny Letter, December 5, 2017, [lennyletter.com/story/the-lenny-interview-kimberly-drew-aka-museummammy](http://lennyletter.com/story/the-lenny-interview-kimberly-drew-aka-museummammy).

<sup>2</sup> The Jacquard loom, invented in 1804/05, used a punched card process that would eventually be used to input data into computers in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation with Qualeasha Wood, July 21, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (London: Headline, 2019).

his hand. Mason-Macklin's approach to painting explores what it means to look as a way to contend with his own otherness in an environment to which he is knowingly just a visitor. Born and raised in Ohio, Mason-Macklin finds inspiration in Harlem Renaissance poet Jean Toomer's transplanted perspective of this community and his ability to portray Harlem through texts that are neither romantic nor deleterious. Toomer writes, "There is no such thing as happiness. Life blends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness in such a way that no one may isolate them."<sup>5</sup> Mason-Macklin's paintings seek to illustrate this sticky middle space and the serpentine intricacies of this blending.

Mason-Macklin suffuses the paintings with moments of intimate exchange—talking to a neighbor, or stealing a look at a stranger—that ask the viewer to examine their own relationship to looking. Underlying this duality of seeing and being seen, these paintings also activate the tensions of existing in a police state and the hypervisibility of being in a Black body. Throughout this body of work, the presence of technology and the environmental architectures of surveillance that restrict Black mobility provide visual cues that allude to the industrialization of contemporaneous mechanisms of seeing. With this inclusion, Mason-Macklin engages with the history of painting as a tool for imaging and thus an extension of a surveillance state. In this way, the very act of producing this work engages a careful balance between the voyeurism of looking and the reparative act of transcribing what has been seen.

However, in recognition of the fragmented existence present in a Du Boisian Black identity, Mason-Macklin's figures avert the viewer's gaze, refusing legibility as if to exist in a liminal space between this doubling. In *SpringPiston XC-gen-C (Khadijah's Dilemma)* (2022), a woman looks off into the distance, a sinuous web of vibrant piping encroaches through the landscape around her. In works such as this, the artist imagines his subjects' likeness can resist legibility. He fiercely guards their personhood while calling into question the audience's inevitable presence as active onlookers—his subjects have an infinite gaze, their attention ungraspable, and they remain unaware and unaffected by their own visibility.

Layering video, sculpture, and text-based prints, Cameron Granger's immersive installation considers the physical traces of memory. Granger examines the multiplicity of "home," as it's tied to the Black experience, by recalling how systemic prejudices work to displace and immobilize Black communities. For Granger, the physical space of the home represents the dualities of safety and restriction, shelter and vulnerability, caretaker and burden. Deconstructed crossword puzzles screenprinted on fabric suggest a floor plan of a house, or the cartography of a memory. As Granger excavates what is lost and reckons with how to remember, the prompts in this work allude to intimate references that are left intentionally opaque in their readership.

Building on a history of Black ancestral archiving, his practice is driven by a sense of gathering. In *Heavy as Heaven*, Granger contends with what remains after a loved one passes by returning to the site of his late grandmother's home. If we consider the body as a container for the spirit, when one passes, their memory lives on through the objects, spaces, and architectures of one's life, and thus the home becomes what Granger refers to as "the archive of our souls." As Toni Morrison recalled after losing her mother and father, "these people are my access to me, they are

my entrance to my own interior life ... the remains, so to speak, at the archeological site ... I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth."<sup>6</sup> Following a long tradition of storytelling, autobiography, and memoir present in the lineage of Black archival practice, which recognizes the importance of inscribing oneself into history, Granger builds a narrative of his grandmother's home that intertwines fact and fiction as a way to reckon with Black transience, the weight of his own loss, and the discovery of his becoming.

Across his practice, Granger engages a communal approach to creating that often brings other artists, friends, and family into the work directly. *Heirloom* (2022), a locket containing a photograph of the artist with his grandmother that hangs from a wooden beam, and a stack of books available for the audience to thumb through, are extensions of Granger's citational practice. In the videos *Heavy as Heaven*, *Before I Let Go*, and *Titan* (all 2022), Granger continues this practice of collectivizing through collaboration. Through these works, Granger tells the story of an apocalyptic invasion of Titan-humanoid monsters and the aftermath of their occupation to explore how a house functions not just as shelter but as a place for confronting histories and nurturing selves. The Titans—who serve as an allegory for systems of colonial oppression, natural disasters, and human-made catastrophic events that have disproportionately affected Black communities—test the resilience of the house in protecting the people and stories it holds. Throughout this work, an anthropomorphized home voices the memories held within its weathered wood, cracked tiles, and broken stairs, calling attention to the precarity of our lives. Situated within fractured wood edifices, this installation of film and form creates a sonic and somatic experience of memory as a tender site of discovery and reckoning.

The artists of this exhibition find themselves squarely within the space of unknowing, wherein arrives an invitation for a closer looking and a recognition that the excavation of our past and present realities allows for the proposition of our future. *It's time for me to go* suggests a radical abolition of self as a way to undo and remake, as a means to discover. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore reflects, "abolition is not *absence*, it is *presence*. What the world will become already exists in fragments and pieces, experiments and possibilities."<sup>7</sup> With a title that suggests an ending, these artists begin with a departure that cracks open an ever-evolving blackness. A blackness that bends and shifts, breaks and morphs, through and beyond the technologies of making, remembering, and becoming.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 95.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, interview by Léopold Lambert, "Making Abolition Geography in California's Central Valley," *The Funambulist*, published December 20, 2018, [thefunambulist.net/magazine/21-space-activism/interview-making-abolition-geography-california-central-valley-ruth-wilson-gilmore](https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/21-space-activism/interview-making-abolition-geography-california-central-valley-ruth-wilson-gilmore)