In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

A CHAIR IS STILL A CHAIR

By

Jaelyn “Yaya” Hill

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Printmaking

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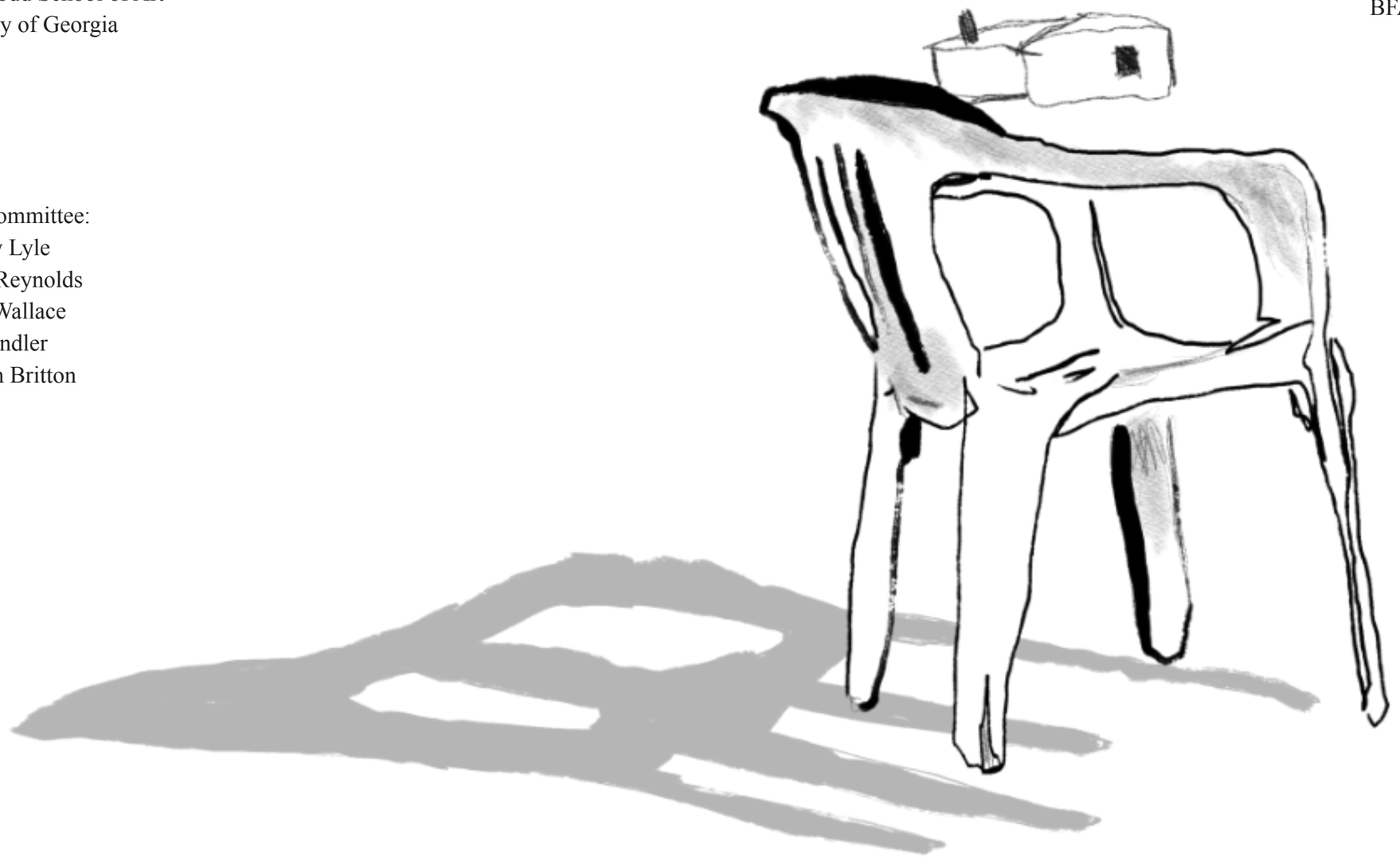
2026



Thesis Committee:
Kimberly Lyle
Lindsey Reynolds
Isabelle Wallace
John Swindler
Benjamin Britton

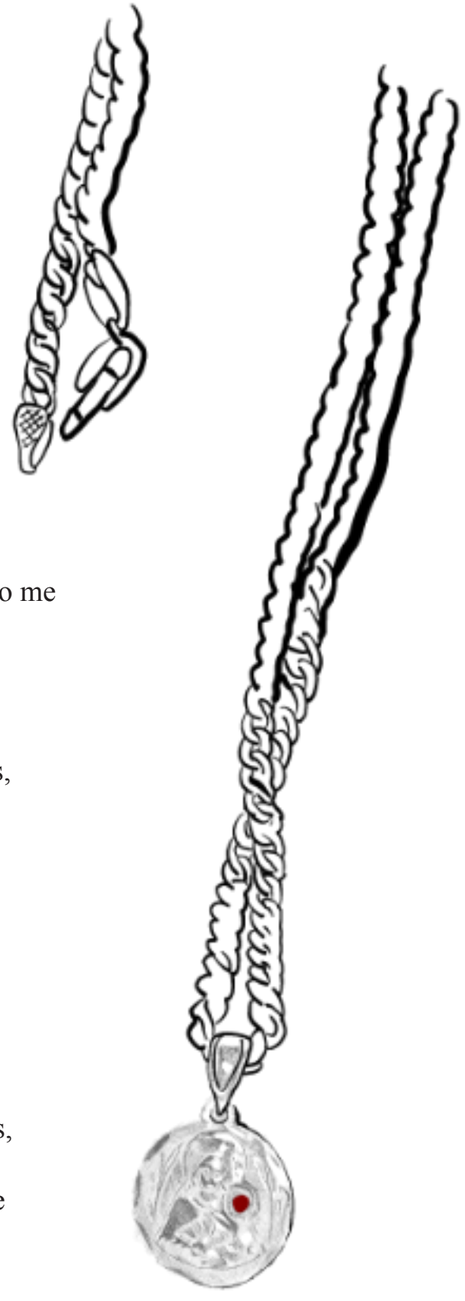
Gratitude

I want to thank my family and community for being the foundation of everything I do. To my parents, Demetrius and Conney, for their endless love, patience, and strength. For teaching me how to move through the world with care and intention. To my mentor, Lauren, whose guidance has shaped how I think and make. To my Kim, for believing in my practice and helping me find clarity in my voice. To my community, for helping me become a true product of my environment. And to my lovely cohort, my new lifelong friends, Harper, Jana, Jordan, Larissa, and Hannah for holding space, sharing laughter, and creating a home through our collective trauma bonding. I couldn't have done this without you all.

Coily Relic
Akilah Toney

Born on a sticky Sunday evening,
I fought into my birth with no promised trust or clan
under my name.
My grandmother's bountiful smile,
cowrie anklet, a starry silver gumbo pot,
and a handful of harvested superstitions willed itself to me
without borrowed shame or fine print.
Heirlooms roll off the tongues of my elders
who've re-built cities with their mouths.
At their feet,
I mended together a quilt of hand-me-down memories,
patched every story I collected when I asked of
the New Orleans they loved before the storm,
I tucked this quilt behind the browns of my eyes
where no flood or developer could reach it.

A coily relic I am.
Re-earthing all that the water took,
through fertile mud, buckjump step, and poem.
I used to envy daughters in the movies,
where their mothers saved them their wedding dresses,
but I remembered,
this land conspired to remain no other shape but home
so that I might inherit her,
and I am all the more richer.



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The title of this thesis, *A Chair Is Still a Chair*, references *A House Is Not a Home* by Luther Vandross. I often draw from iconic Black songs when titling my work, using them as a point of connection to culture and memory. This title reflects my interest in how objects hold the presence of people over time.

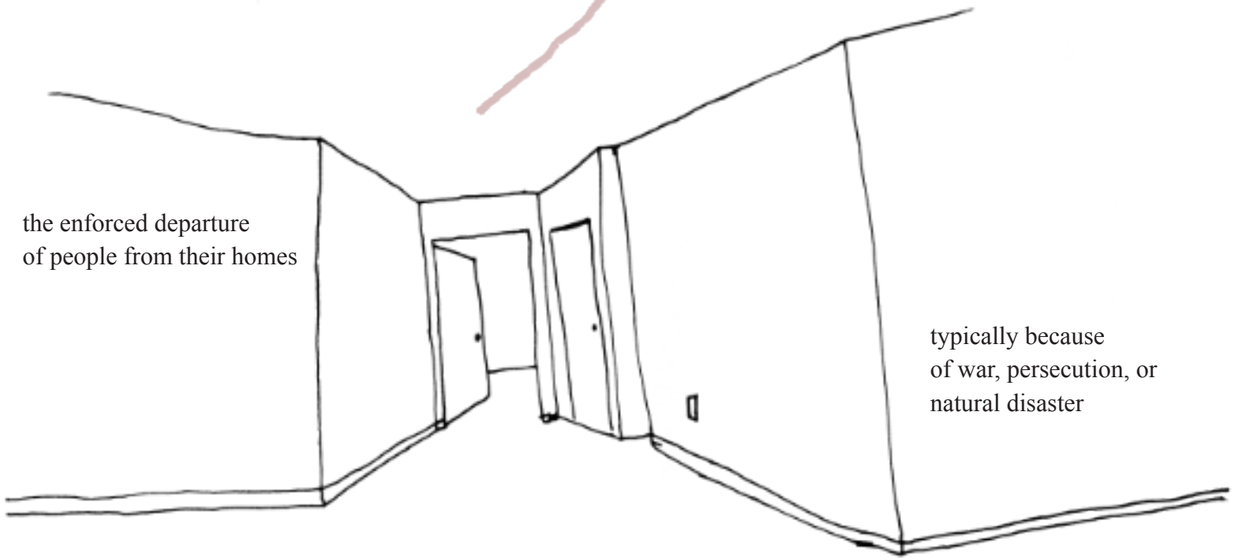
INTRO

My first memory is sitting in the back seat of my parents' car, not knowing where we were going—and not caring. We were driving from New Orleans to Ohio, to live in an apartment sponsored by the Underground Railroad, a program that helped families evacuate safely after Hurricane Katrina. That moment, though I didn't understand it then, shaped how I think about movement, memory, and the spaces we call home.

Growing up in New Orleans, I've always been surrounded by things that speak. The city's homes and streets carry layers of memory, revealing how communities build meaning through what they keep close. My practice reflects on this relationship between people and their environments, exploring how memory lives within material.

Through printmaking, ceramics, painting, and sculpture, I translate photographs and observations into tactile forms. These shifts between image and object allow me to think about what remains, what is rebuilt, and what is carried forward. This thesis continues that exploration as an offering to the everyday, to the lives embedded within it, and to the ways art can keep those memories alive.

I want to start with a story.



the enforced departure
of people from their homes

typically because
of war, persecution, or
natural disaster

Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. I was four years old. Old enough to recognize when something was wrong, but too young to understand how wrong. I didn’t know what eighty percent of a city being underwater meant. I didn’t know what displacement meant. I didn't know that over 1,800 people would lose their lives. I only knew that I woke up somewhere else.

Memory at that age isn’t linear. It’s sensory. I remember the walls. I remember the noise. I remember play. The smell, the feel, the growth. To not really know, but still living and remembering.

Sometime after Katrina, we took a family trip back to our old neighborhood to collect our damaged belongings from the house. A nearby street, where the neighborhood school sat, was still flooded. You cannot drive too fast. You cannot drive too slow. This was lesson number one — seeing the water seeping into the car at our feet.

We made it. Even then, I noticed that the walls were damaged but still standing. They held onto something. Even after all the water. Even after people left. Even after furniture floated. They remained.

Displacement rearranges what feels permanent. It exposes how fragile home can be. But it also reveals what lingers. The physical remnants. The objects that absorb touch. The materials that live through the test of time.

In the years since Katrina, I’ve returned to this question repeatedly in my studio: What holds memory when people are forced to leave? Is this even about force? Will?

My practice begins there.

Personal Background

My background and experiences shape the way I understand community, my memories, and the spaces people inhabit. Growing up, I moved through very different environments that each left their own mark on how I see the world and how I approach my work.

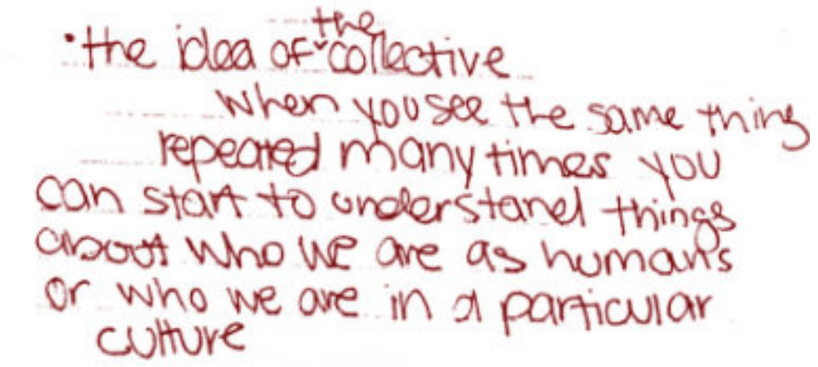
I went to a historically Black high school where resources were limited and learning felt secondary to survival. I remember classmates trying to sell weed while I walked to the restroom, or gang fights breaking out in the hallway whenever we left the cafeteria to get to our next class. Our school library had no more than a hundred and fifty books. We had staff members who were frequently placed on leave for inappropriate behavior with students because they thought it was cute to have a “juvie”. My education always felt like it was up in the air, but it was also a place where I witnessed the complexity of the community around me.

At the same time, I spent half of every school day at the city's arts school. Leaving my academic high school at lunchtime, I traveled across New Orleans to an art school where I was often one of only three Black students in class. That environment introduced me to a completely different point of view. It was where I first learned the foundations of art and where I began experimenting with different mediums. There was even a professional artist working in a warehouse across the street, someone whose presence made the possibility of becoming an artist feel real.

Moving between these environments taught me to adapt and observe. I learned to find connections between spaces that might otherwise seem separate.

This understanding influences the way I approach my work. My practice reflects the belief that identity is not formed alone. It grows out of relationships and shared experiences.

I am the person that I am because I am a product of my community. The work I make is a reflection of that truth. It is because we are that I am.



My work is built on presence and absence. It's about who is allowed to be seen and which histories we decide are worth keeping. I’m drawn to the surfaces and spaces that traditional archives ignore. These are physical evidence of care, labor, and a specific kind of resilience that history books usually leave out.

Every object carries a weight. A plastic lawn chair is the site of a birthday party, a long afternoon of porch talk, or the focused silence of a hair-braiding session. It could be the thing that reminds you of the long drawn-out story that your favorite uncle told during that one random Tuesday. That's the weight. That's the heirloom. I’m not trying to find one objective truth. Instead, I’m inviting people to sit with the histories already living inside of these materials.

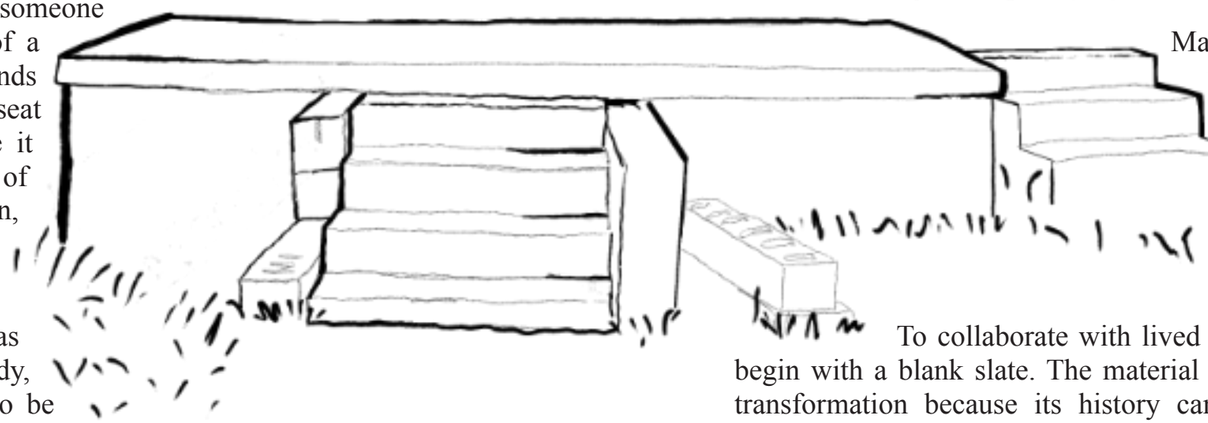
Representation is messy. I look for the worn edges of a home or the rhythmic routines that keep us going. Our communities survive displacement and change through these tiny, repeated acts of creativity and resistance. By working with found materials, I feel like I’m joining that ongoing labor.

This work is for the people in my community who have been told that they do not deserve nice things or that their lives will not last long enough to matter. It is for those of us who have been locked out of systems and jobs because of the color of our skin. We buy things for function, but we end up filling those objects with days of stories. An object is a witness. It was there to hear the conversation.

Before I (Let) Go
17 in. x 23 in.
stone lithography on BFK
Oct. 2024

Material as Archive

An object stops being purely functional the moment it begins to absorb more than its intended use. Function is about purpose. Archive is about accumulation. A chair is designed to hold a body, but over time it starts to hold posture, habit, routine. The slight lean in its back might record the way someone always sat to one side. The worn edge of a wooden armrest might reflect years of hands gripping it during conversation. A plastic seat faded from sun exposure tells you where it lived and how often it was needed. None of these details were part of its original design, but now it's inseparable. The object is the evidence.



Toni Morrison writes about rememory as something that exists outside of the body, something that lives in space and waits to be encountered again. I don’t think memory is confined to the mind. It doesn't only belong to the person who experienced it. I think it lingers in places. It settles into structures. It can be stumbled upon. An object can hold onto something that outlasts the person who used it.This idea clarifies how an object transforms into an archive. It becomes a site where experience rests. You might not know the full story, but you feel that something has happened there.

This is where function gives way to archive. An object designed for utility becomes marked by duration. Its surface registers wear. Its structure reflects adaptation. Even subtle changes, fading, slight warping, layered paint, are forms of evidence. These alterations show traces of contact and labor. The object becomes inseparable from the environment in which it existed. It holds not only its original purpose but the history of how that purpose was enacted.

Material culture studies remind us that objects participate in social life and don’t just reflect it. They mediate relationships. They structure behavior. They organize space. When a material has already been embedded within a home or community space, it has already participated in those dynamics. Its been part of systems of care, labor, and daily ritual.

To collaborate with lived materials is to acknowledge that the artist does not begin with a blank slate. The material brings its own temporal weight. It resists complete transformation because its history cannot be fully erased. Working with it requires a negotiation rather than domination. Decisions are shaped by what the material allows and what it carries forward. Domestic spaces end up becoming important sites of historical memory. The marks left on floors, tables, and walls document gestures and rituals that shape community life. They record moments that might otherwise disappear: a table moved to the side for dominoes, chairs sliding across the room during a family gathering, feet shifting during long church meetings.

Psychoanalysis

Material culture explains how objects hold memory, but psychoanalysis helps show why they feel alive to us. Sometimes a surface, a smell, or a texture can bring back a memory we didn’t even know was there. Walking into a familiar house, hearing the boards creak, or touching a worn countertop can trigger an emotion before the mind has a chance to catch up.

For a long time I didn't think psychoanalysis was real. A part of me still doesn't, but it makes more sense when I connect it to the work that I make.

Memory exists in our bodies and in the spaces we inhabit. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that memories are tucked into sensory experiences, what we see, hear, touch, or smell, instead of a clear, organized narrative. That’s why a burned spot on a kitchen floor or a little water stain on a wall can make a house feel familiar even if decades have passed.

In a way, these materials are collaborators. They carry the weight of what came before and invite whoever interacts with them to encounter those past lives, to feel them, and maybe even carry them forward. Memory becomes something active, something shared, something that exists beyond just thinking about it. It lives in the objects, the surfaces, the spaces, and in us.

Sigmund Freud, in A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing-Pad,” describes memory as layered rather than something erased. He uses a writing surface where marks disappear from view but remain impressed beneath— like using pressure while writing on a sheet of paper and then erasing it away. For him, experience isn't lost. It stays embedded, even when it is no longer visible.

I think about materials in the same way. Scratches, stains, and wear are traces that remain and build over time. This way of understanding memory becomes more visible within domestic spaces, where floors, walls, and furniture hold the accumulation of everyday life.

Material culture

Material culture

Material culture

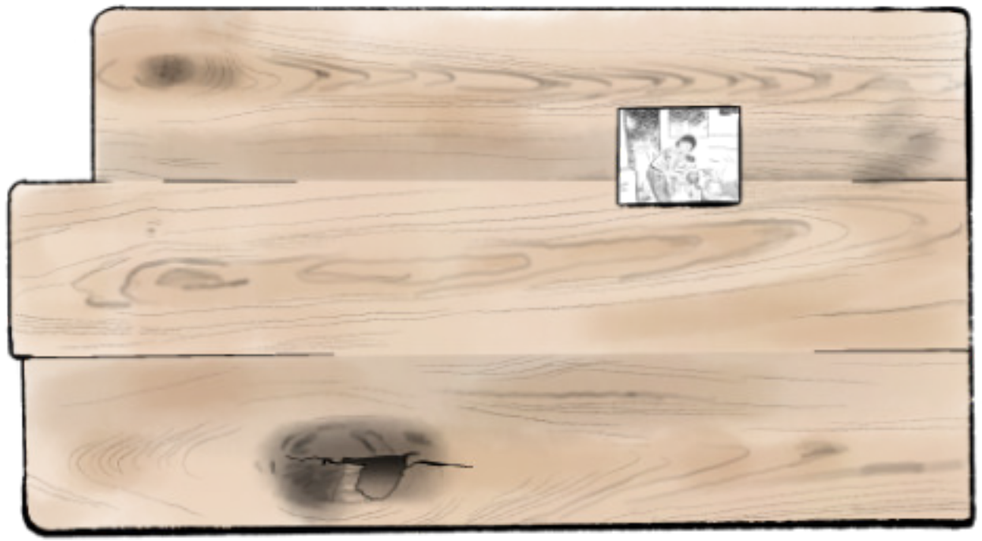
Material culture

Material culture

Material culture

Material culture

Material culture shapes the foundation of my practice because it offers a way to understand how people create meaning through the objects they live with. Rather than existing as passive reminders of the past, objects can act as participants in remembering. In Memory and Material Culture, Andrew Jones argues that memory is produced through interaction with material environments. Objects don't just reflect memory. They help generate and sustain it through repeated use and engagement.



Old Floor
wood, screenprint, plexi
2025

A neighborhood altar or memorial is the best way I can demonstrate this process. These sites begin with a few objects placed in response to loss, but they gradually expand as people return to leave new items. Stuffed animals, photographs, candles, handwritten notes, and small artworks accumulate over time. Each addition reshapes how the space is experienced and how the person being remembered is understood. The altar becomes less about a single moment of mourning and more about an ongoing relationship between the community and the memory of the individual.

Domestic environments operate in a similar way. In many Southern Black households, churches, and community spaces, worn wooden floors carry visible traces of everyday life. These surfaces are shaped through years of movement and activity. Scratches appear from sliding dining tables during gatherings. Burn marks become permanent where hot pans were set down in moments of convenience. Water stains mark the memory of storms or flooding. Even the repeated path of a dog moving through the house can slowly wear a line across the floor.

Over time, these marks accumulate into a physical record of daily life. The grooves left by footsteps, dancing, worship, and labor form a history of movement across the space. For many families, the experience of walking across those floors becomes inseparable from their understanding of home. The creaking of the boards or the smoothness created by years of sweeping can immediately bring back the atmosphere of that environment.

This piece is made from two scrap floorboards that I glued together and stood on while the glue dried. Embedded in the wood is a small screenprint of a family photograph showing my great aunt Diane feeding my father and his cousin Tanya in the kitchen.

I made this work while thinking about the role women play as caregivers in my family and community. The women often made sure everyone was fed and had a place to sleep, whether they were family or not. The photograph is set into the floorboards so the wood functions as both the floor and the frame, holding the memory within the material.

Home as Vessel

Home as Vessel

This piece begins with a found wooden door. The surface is worn and marked from years of use. I poured concrete across the lower half of the door, creating a heavy slab that interrupts its original function. Inside the concrete is a small recessed space that holds a photograph protected by plexi.

The slab is installed above a patch of grass on the gallery floor. This arrangement references what remained of many homes after Hurricane Katrina. In parts of New Orleans, entire houses were washed away, leaving only the concrete foundation and the front steps leading to a door that no longer existed. Some people would say that they resembled a city-sized grave site or tombstone.

The concrete poured across the door represents that remaining slab. The photograph embedded in the surface becomes a fragment of memory held within the structure. Together, the materials reflect the home as a vessel of memory and the traces that remain after a place disappears.

I went back home with my camera to take a picture of a plot of land that only held a large concrete foundation and a small set of gray concrete steps. I walked by this empty space everyday, either walking to the candy lady or my school's bus stop. But I guess it didn't exist any more. I decided to stop looking for it after hours of driving in circles around my childhood neighborhood. I assume the family finally came back to rebuild their lives.

The idea of the home as a vessel of memory can be understood through both lived experience and writing on space. In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard describes the home as a space shaped by the experiences that happen within it, where memory becomes tied to rooms, surfaces, and everyday life. This idea expands through Toni Morrison's concept of rememory, where the past doesn't disappear but will remain embedded in place, waiting to be encountered again. Together, these ideas suggest that memory isn't contained within the individual but held within the spaces people inhabit. Even when a home is no longer physically present, what happened inside it continues to exist in the space it once occupied, carried through both material traces and lived experiences.

It Aint My Fault
stone lithography
24 in x 36 in
2024

Gathering is where the work comes into focus. The objects, surfaces, and spaces I use are shaped by what happens when people come together. What stays with me are the moments that pass through a space and settle into it over time.

I think about gathering in two parts:

what happens in the moment and what remains after

People move through a room, pulling chairs closer, shifting tables, finding their place. There's conversation, music, long pauses, overlapping voices. Then everyone leaves. What remains feels subtle but specific. Chairs sit slightly out of alignment. The floor holds marks from constant movement. The room feels different, even when it looks the same.

In the environments I draw from, especially within Southern Black communities, gathering is a form of care that shows up in everyday ways. It doesn't always need planning. A front porch fills up. A living room stretches to make space. A backyard holds people way longer than expected. These moments repeat over time, and that repetition becomes a record.

Gathering has long been necessary within Black life. After emancipation, shared spaces and informal networks of care created more room for communities to support one another when access to resources was limited. Homes became places where people could gather, share food, and remain connected.

The objects in these spaces carry that history. A chair reflects how it has been used. It holds the weight of someone leaning back, shifting forward, staying longer than expected. When the chairs are stacked or pushed aside, they still hold the presence of what just happened.

Absence is part of this. There are moments when someone should be there and isn't. That gap becomes noticeable. An empty chair can point to someone who is no longer present, someone who couldn't make it, or someone who has moved on.

Over the course of grad school, my focus has shifted across different parts of the community. I began by paying attention to how youth express themselves through gesture and movement. I then turned to the role of women, especially as caregivers who make gathering possible by feeding people, opening their homes, and holding space for others. This expanded into thinking about the community as a whole and how creativity moves through it. Each person plays a very important role.

All of these observations return to the home. It's where these relationships begin and where they come back together. The home holds what each person contributes and what they leave behind. Gathering brings these roles into the same space, and that moment continues to shape the work.

Doris Salcedo works with domestic objects to hold the presence of people who are no longer there. Her sculptures often render furniture immobile, encasing chairs, tables, and dressers in materials like concrete so they can no longer function. These objects become markers of absence, holding the weight of loss and memory.

I'm drawn to similar materials, but I approach them differently. The objects in my work are not sealed or fixed. They still show signs of use, movement, and repetition. A chair, a floor, or a wall carries the trace of what has happened, but it remains open. It continues to hold new moments rather than being tied to a single one.

This becomes clearer in a piece based on a childhood nightstand. The form comes from the way I used to treat my drawer, constantly opening it, filling it, leaving things half-organized. In this work, I poured concrete into the bottom of the drawer, but instead of sealing it completely, grass grows along the edges. The drawer can still be opened. It still suggests use, even as it holds something permanent.

Where Salcedo's work often fixes the object in a moment of loss, my work allows the object to continue changing. The concrete introduces weight and permanence, but the grass pushes against that, suggesting growth, continuation, and time passing. The piece holds memory, but it does not close it off.

Both approaches treat objects as carriers of memory. The difference is in how that memory is held. Her work fixes it in place. Mine allows it to move.

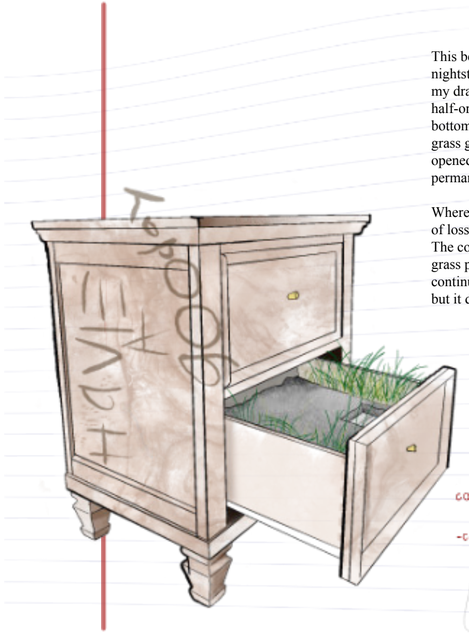
Her work holds what has been lost. My work holds what continues.

Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958)
Untitled, 1995
wood, metal, concrete

Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958)
Untitled, 1992
wood, metal, concrete

Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958)
Untitled, 1992
wood, metal, concrete

Doris Salcedo (Colombian, b. 1958)
Untitled, 1997
wood, metal, concrete



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con-
-Latin prefix meaning "with" or "together"
-crete (from crescere)
-Latin root meaning "to grow"

Process

This practice initially began out of necessity. I use found materials that were scratched, sanded, bruised, or broken because they're more easily affordable. Over time, the damage became the point. These objects lived full lives before they could ever reach my studio. When I add paint or texture, I am adding another chapter to a story that started long ago.

My process feels like improvisation. My work is shaped by what I learn while making the previous piece. Each work becomes a rehearsal for the next, a space to experiment, respond, or listen. Musicians call this "call and response".

Raymond Saunders describes this approach as continuation. He writes that “recycling is process,” and connects it to the act of “blowing a hard note.” The work isn't about visual effect or polish. It comes from feeling. Materials are placed, removed, and adjusted based on what the work demands in the moment.

> "-it's almost as though you need to blow a hard note. Your'e not doing it for the pleasantries, you're not doing it just for the visual effect. You're doing it because you feel something."

I feel this at my core. Decisions aren't always planned. Something gets added, something gets covered, something gets taken away. The work builds through response. What matters is recognizing when something feels right and allowing that to guide the next move.

Raymond Saunders

American Dream

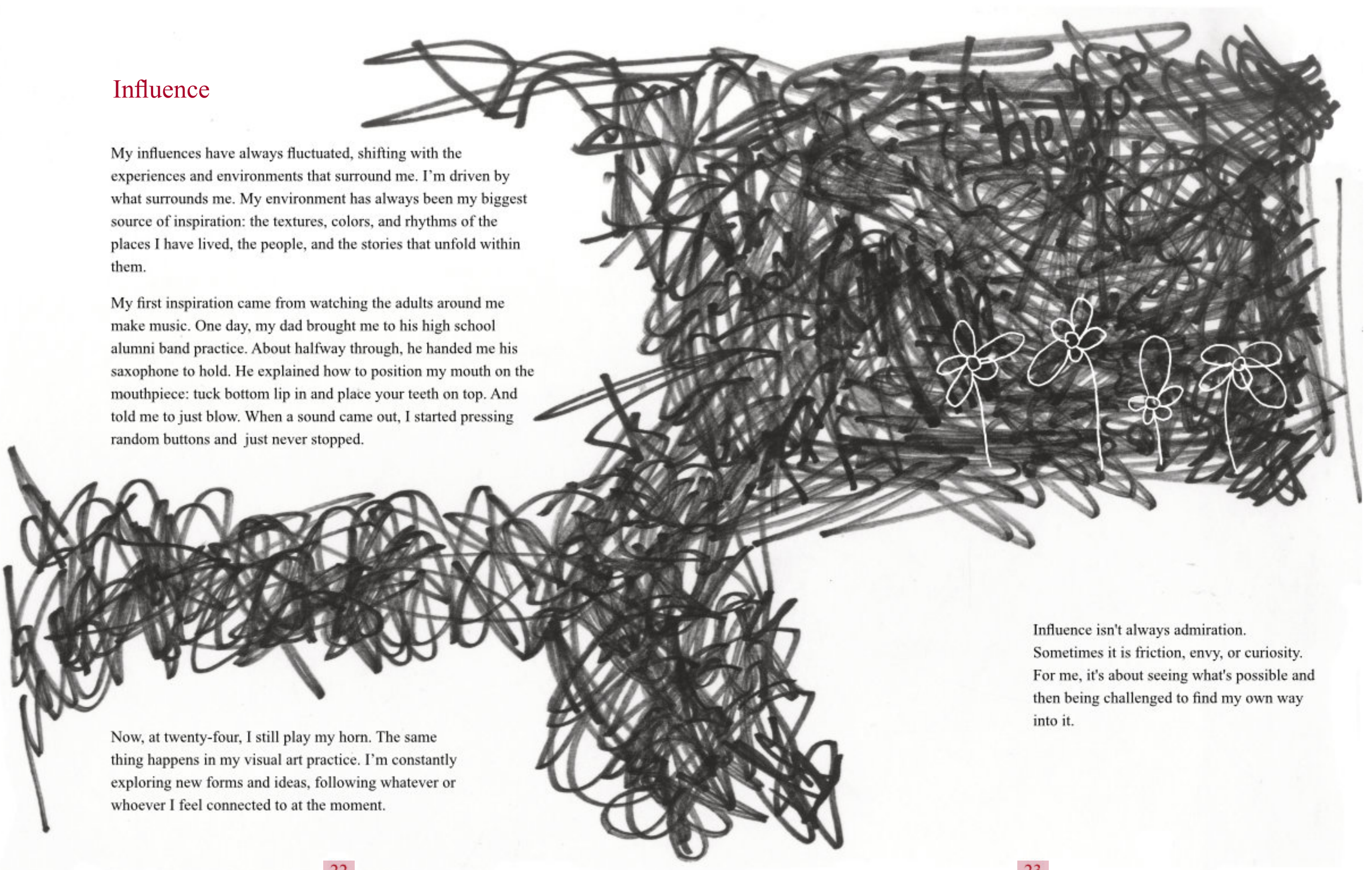
Oil and collage on canvas

1968

Influence

My influences have always fluctuated, shifting with the experiences and environments that surround me. I'm driven by what surrounds me. My environment has always been my biggest source of inspiration: the textures, colors, and rhythms of the places I have lived, the people, and the stories that unfold within them.

My first inspiration came from watching the adults around me make music. One day, my dad brought me to his high school alumni band practice. About halfway through, he handed me his saxophone to hold. He explained how to position my mouth on the mouthpiece: tuck bottom lip in and place your teeth on top. And told me to just blow. When a sound came out, I started pressing random buttons and just never stopped.



Now, at twenty-four, I still play my horn. The same thing happens in my visual art practice. I'm constantly exploring new forms and ideas, following whatever or whoever I feel connected to at the moment.

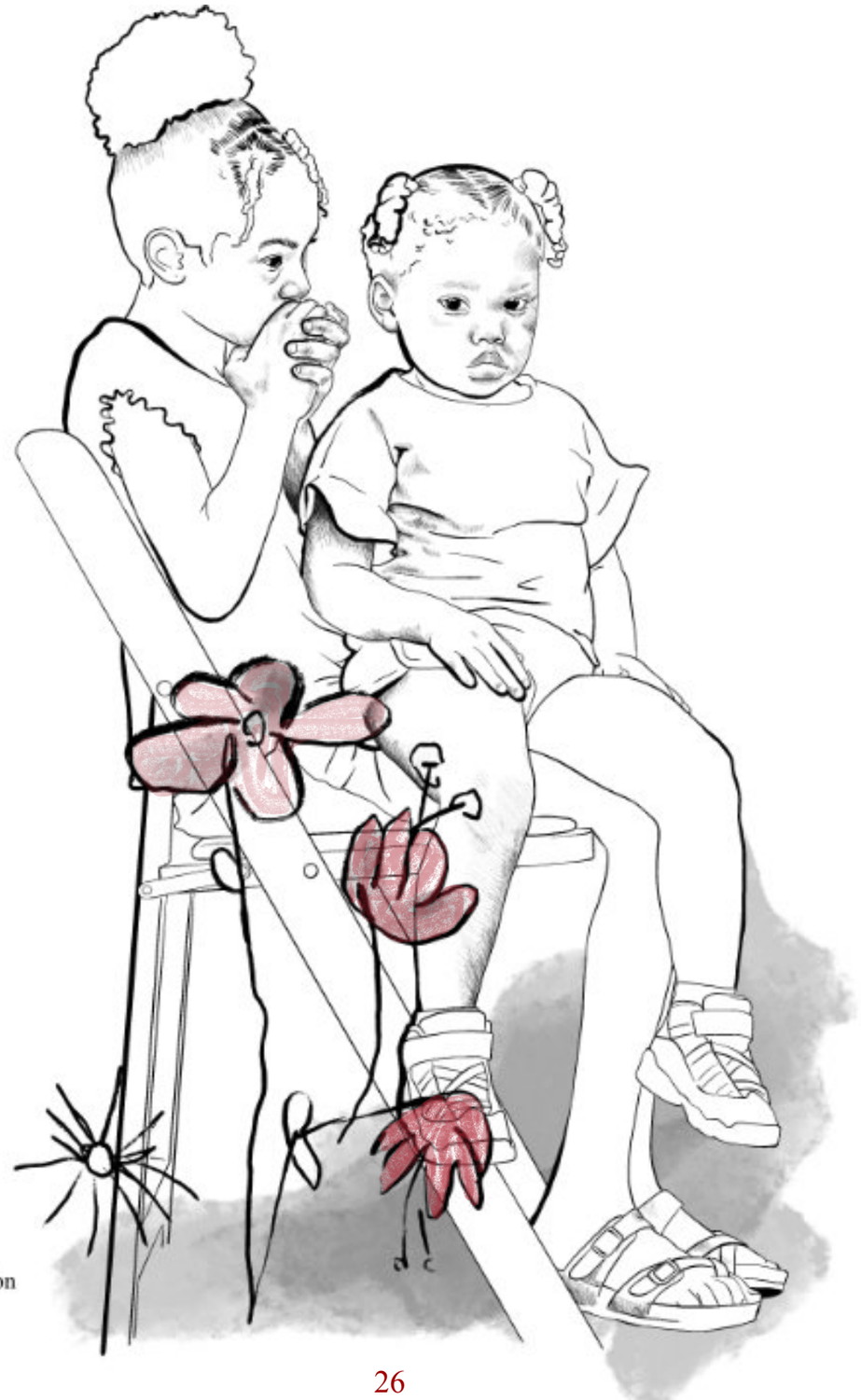
Influence isn't always admiration.
Sometimes it is friction, envy, or curiosity.
For me, it's about seeing what's possible and then being challenged to find my own way into it.

This way of working aligns with what anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss describes as bricolage, a process of making from what is already at hand. The bricoleur doesn't begin with ideal materials or a fixed plan, but works through what is available, allowing the materials themselves to shape the outcome.

Fred Moten describes this appoach as a way of living within constraint. In his writing, improvisation is a condition of moving through the world. It emerges from the need to to respond in real time, and to continue within systems that were not built to support you.

Moten is interested in how something can be made without complete control, how form can develop through adjustment rather than planning. He writes about working through what is available, allowing things to remain open, unresolved, and in motion. That openness is kind of structure that comes from listening, and from being attentive to what is happening as it unfolds. It resists the idea that a work must arrive at a fixed or polished end.

I see my process in a similar way. The materials I use come with their own histories and possibilities. Instead of forcing them into something new, I work with what they offer, responding to their condition and allowing the piece to develop through that exchange.



Namesake pt. 2
Digital Illustration
2025

Photography

During times when I don’t have access to studio facilities, photography becomes a way to continue working. I photograph the homes, objects, and and people in the spaces around me. These images keep me attentive to the environments and materials that inform my work.

Even though I’m constantly taking photographs, I hesitate to call myself a photographer. The camera functions more like a tool for immortalizing observations.

Looking Rahim Fortune's work helped me think about photography differently. His images document communities, landscapes, and everyday moments with a certain patience and care. The photographs I take operate in a similar way, forming a small archive of the environments that influence my work.

At the same time, I have a tension with photography. A camera is an instrument. It takes the same technical awareness and quick decision making. You have to balance the shutter speed and aperture in the moment,in the same way you respond to key and time signatures.

The problem is that music can be prepared for. A moment cannot. The visual moments I'm drawn to pass quickly. I have to recognize them as they are happening and respond immediately. If I miss it, it's gone.

Making Do

In a way, I like to think of my work as a record of survival. By bringing the "bricolage" of the neighborhood into the studio, I'm documenting the kind of thinking required to exist in a system that wasn't built for us. Every improvised fix and every salvaged material is a testament to a community that knows how to create beauty out of necessity. This is the same rhythm I found in my music: you take the breath you have and you make a sound. You take the wood, the grit, and the stains you find and you make a history. I think back to the homes after Hurricane Katrina, where entire structures were gone and what remained was a slab, a set of stairs, or a surface marked by what once stood there. Those spaces held memory even in their absence. That way of holding on, of making something out of what is left, continues to shape how I work. In the end, my practice is an act of staying. It's acknowledging the labor, the creativity, and the resistance that allow our communities to flourish despite everything we've been through. I'm inviting people to sit with these objects and recognize them as witnesses. Every mark is a way of saying that we were here, we are here, and the traces we leave behind matter.

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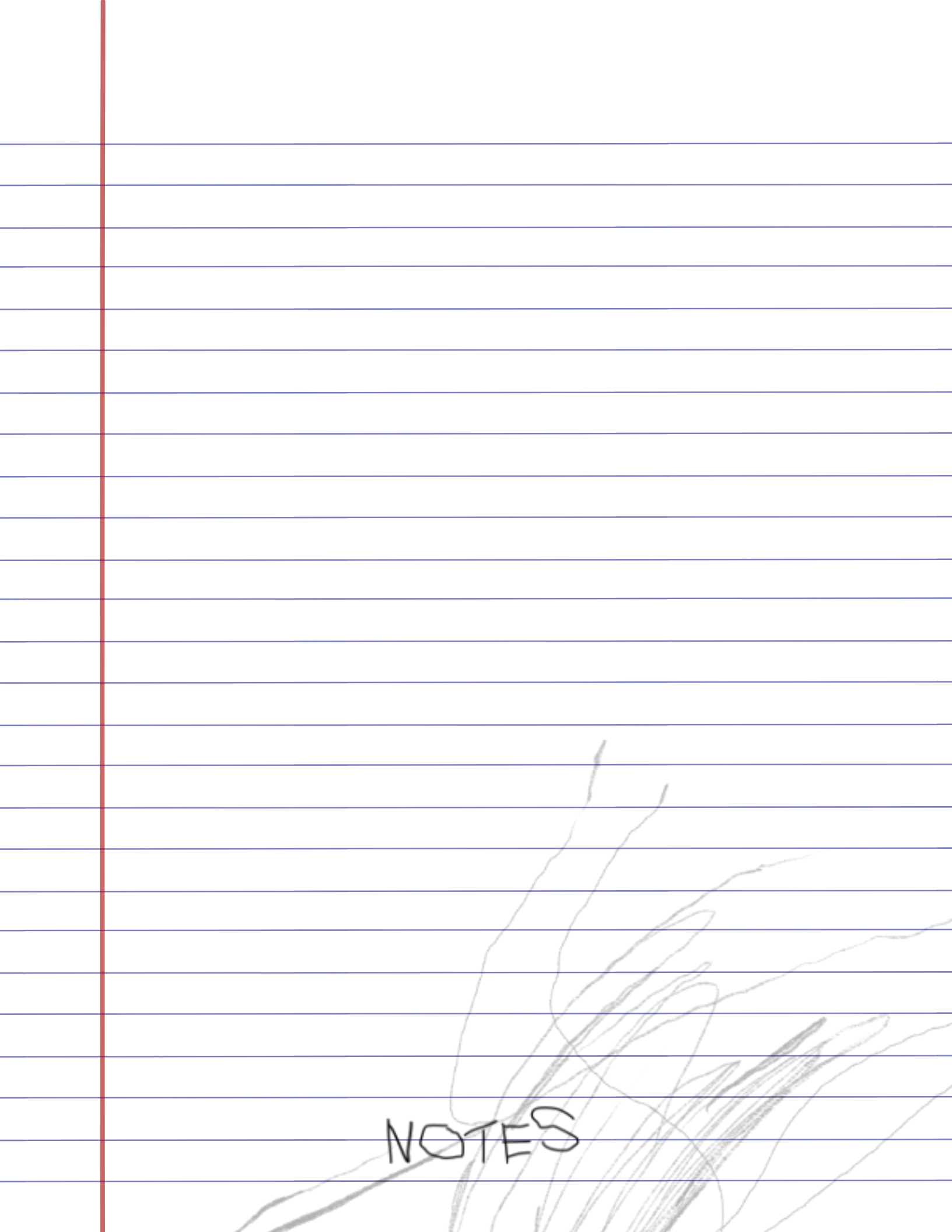
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