

2024 RESIDENT FACULTY LECTURE, June 14, 2024

Dana DeGiulio ['Oozing Between: Transgressive Material Realities' displayed on screen behind podium] Hi, thanks for coming. I'm super excited for Nicole Awai's lecture, my name is Dana DeGiulio, I'm resident faculty this summer at Skowhegan. Nicole and I have been friends for eight days. [laughter] Nevertheless I, I wrote something.

Haraway asks, with whose blood were my eyes crafted? Oldenburg observed abandoned boxes tied like pharaohs, who can bare such equivalence. Maybe the work is waiting, teaching is walking, responding, pointing out, drawing is a way to love if not prove. Perception cannot be known in advance, but can be hoped for. I have arrived eager with a map at your house, maybe newer than you need, but we all are. One day, the sadness will end.

There are two hurt feet, and one of them will not admit it. A left and a right, but from where I am, I can't tell if they belong to the same person. An algebra that strips and gives up nothing, like a blister which under thin tissue contains its own luminous salve, or doesn't.

Nicole Awai is a multimedia painter who was born in Trinidad and lives and works in New York. She earned her master's degree in multimedia art from the University of South Florida in 1996, and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1997. Awai was awarded the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors grant in 2011, an Art Matters grant in 2012, and was an awardee of the inaugural Colene Brown Art Prize in 2019.

Awai has been awarded several artist residencies since the 1990s. Some of these residencies include the Studio Museum in Harlem, 1999 – 2000. She was the Arts and Industry Artist-in-Residence at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in 2008. She participated in the Smack Mellon Residency in 2010, 2011, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Process Space Residency, 2015, the BRIC Workspace Residency in Brooklyn, New York, 2017, the Joan Mitchell Center Residency in New Orleans in 2018, and Pioneer Works at Governor's Island in 2019. Awai was the spring 2022 artist-in-residence at Material for the Arts, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City.

Her work has been included in several seminal exhibitions, including the first *Greater New York* at PS 1 MOMA, in 2000, the Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art in 2003, *Infinite Island; Contemporary Caribbean Art* in 2007, and *Open House*, 2004, both at the Brooklyn Museum, and the Busan Biennale in Korea in 20, in 2008.

Awai was a featured artist in the initial public offering series at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, [laughter] 2005. [laughs] I'm dying up here! [laughter] You wrote it! You wrote it. [laughter] [laughing] You wrote it!

Nicole Awai I just sent you something that was on the computer that was –

DeGiulio But these are your, these are your gorgeous accomplishments. I'm doing the whole thing. We got plenty of tape. [laughter] Plen, plenty of tape.

Alright, many, many other accomplishments. [clears throat; laughter] Fuck. [laughing] This is the worst. Awai's work has been featured in *Bomb*, *New York Arts*, the *International Review of African-American Arts*, *Callaloo*, *Small Axe: A Journal of Caribbean Criticism, Literature and Art of the Americas*, *Black Renaissance and Noir*, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, *Artnet*, *ArtForum*, *Hyperallergic*, and the *New York Times* newspaper.

Awai was a visiting assistant professor and critic at the Yale School of Art from 2008 to 2015, she was an associate professor of painting and drawing in the Department of Art and Art History, College of Fine Arts at the university of Texas at Austin, from 2015 to 2023. Awai is currently associate professor of painting and drawing in the Department of Art and Music at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the City University of New York.

It is a joy to welcome Nicole Awai. [laughter, applause, cheering]

Awai Oh my god. Thank you, Dana, that was delightful. [laughter] Let this be a lesson to you guys. Don't be lazy, and when they ask you for the bio, don't send it in the middle of the night, the one that you can find on the desktop, and not look at it. So, [laughter] I didn't realize all that crap was in there. [laughter] Okay. Well, you know what I'm saying. Okay. Alright. [clears throat]

You know, it's interesting that this has taken me so long to prepare, and, you know, I do this on a, you know, a couple of times, maybe, a year, and I wondered to myself, why was this taking me so long to prepare? It's only cause I really cared, I realize. How special being a participant twenty-seven years ago, at this, at Skowhegan was to me, and to my life, and to my art practice, and I want it to be that way for all of you too. You are joining something very special, we are starting something very special together, and that's why maybe this was such a pain in the ass. [laughter] Okay.

I've got my notes, I'm not gonna be reading reading from them, but there are a couple of things that I probably need, need to read. So, first I wanted to say is *Oozing Between: Transgressive Material Realities* was actually the title of the, the talk that I gave in 2021 at the Feminist Art Project, at CAA, and I think it really still applies, and that's why it's here again. Yeah, let me see. So I'm gonna read this for you.

I have lived a life of in between. In between countries and cultures, Trinidad and complexity of the US. In between generations in a way that was less definable, and did not quite fit the category. I am the very beginning of generation X, in the US context, and in Trinidad the generation after the one that achieved independence from our colonial masters. So in Trinidad, that would be Great Britain. Okay. It's like, [clears throat] speaking of the generation, we are the bridge, the mediators, and facilitators, we are the maintainers, recorders of knowledge and histories, and we also pioneer or introduce new ideas at a time before they could be fully recognized and accepted.

Hmm. Hmmm. I am not making work about identity; it is responding to, I'm responding to life experiences. [sighs] Once you are a person of color, or an immigrant, then you are made to do identity justification.

[changes slide] I also said I was not gonna bore you through twenty-seven plus years of art stuff, so I was thinking about where to start. And I think I'll start this way. So, talking about living between two places, or two cultures, and two countries, actually, my parents lived in the US from 1958 to 1964, they went to college in Canada and lived in New York, so they're, you know, that generation of folks. They returned to Trinidad in '64. My oldest sister was born here in 1966. I was born in Trinidad; in 1968, when I was two, we returned to New York. I lived in Flushing, Queens, near Corona Park. My dad worked for, at the United Nations. We were here I think until about '74, I was six and a half. He finally got a posting, international posting. Everybody else got posted in Europe, and, you know, these cushy places, and they wanted to send my dad to Bangladesh in the middle of the Indo-Pakistani War, where he couldn't take his family, so my mother said, 'We are going home,' and we returned to Trinidad, and I completed growing up there, and then came back up here as an adult for university, in Florida. So my life is very much interwoven between these two places and cultures.

Thinking of where to start, kind of around 2000, but looking back a little bit, at this point, because I had just finished the, my, the residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and I was digesting all of that. And as I said, spending, I think I spent about ten years – yeah, '87 to '97, in Florida, in Tampa, Florida, mainly. And that part of my life was very much about, or me realizing that I was having to perform identity for people. I was understanding that things were being always projected onto me, there were expectations as a Caribbean body that I should, yes, behave in certain ways, let's just say that. And having to deal with that. (00:09:57) As I said, sort of ID, identity and justification would be the best way to sort of put it.

As a result of that, whether, you know, whether, it wasn't always malicious or anything like that, it's just multiple perspectives. So I think that what I'm saying is, that experience taught me about multiple perspectives, and that one thing could be many things to different people. Yes?

So this is the Angostura rum bottle, and actually comes from Trinidad, it's a rum company, Angostura, they also make the bitters, Angostura bitters. Yes. And I grew up with these things in my household, they would be in, you know, the family bar, at home. Everybody would have one. But I did not acquire these from there. I did not bring any with me. Actually, in my ten years in Florida, different disparate American associates and friends gifted these to me. They thought I wanted them. I think they got them in different antique and secondhand stores. I think by the time I got to New York, I had about three or four of them. I held onto them. I started, at that point, too, to use things that these people were offering and giving to me, things that were given to me, or things that I would find. And when I was artist-in-residence at Studio Museum, this actually was very prominent in the

things that I was doing. I'm not gonna show you that work, but I'm gonna show you starting from this.

So, so this is my bedroom at the time, in Williamsburg. It was painted red, it was not my choice. It was interesting, though, because in that space, I really started to realize that time was taking on a different quality for me. Time felt elastic. The present and the past was sort of becoming one for me. And I started to create these bed landscapes, and photograph them. And he's in it.

[switches slide] Thinking about the bed landscape, so this is still on that bed, and being two places in my head at the same time, I don't know if it's mainly too because after finishing that, well, not, during that residency, and I had been in the States for quite a while, folks in Trinidad were starting to be aware of me being at that residency, and were starting to get in contact with me. Which is something I really wanted, because I really wanted to reconnect to artists there, and what was happening. But that put my, put me back in sort of this place of being in two places. But the two places that I were thinking about was not necessarily contemp, my contemporary – it was not necessarily contemporary experience there, but my years growing up there.

So, this space shifting, time shifting thing was going on, and I decided, cause I was thinking about it a lot, to make a replica of my favorite bikini, from when I was five years old. It's the only time, I think, I wore a bikini. And when I wore this orange and white polka dot bikini, I felt so empowered, I remember that. I just felt so comfortable in my skin. And I think, I think women up to the age of about five, we feel very comfortable in our skins, and then the world jumps in, and we no longer feel that comfort. We no longer have that wisdom, we no longer have that self-assurance, etcetera. But I was thinking about that time very much. So I decided to recreate the bathing suit, and in the crotch and in the lining, the bra lining and the crotch lining of the bathing suit, I stitched in these photographs of me wearing that bikini on beaches, some of my favorite beaches in Trinidad. [switches slide] Yeah.

I wasn't satisfied with what happened in terms of it on the bed, so, you know, this sat for a while. And I'm gonna be jumping back and forth for a bit, you know, to this, so, eventually, in 2006, I was able to go home, and was able to complete this project in the way I thought it should be completed, because the question was about time and space, right? And what is more real, especially in the Caribbean diaspora experience, right? Is it the location? Is it headspace? What actually makes you Caribbean, what actually makes that experience what it is? So I thought I needed to go back and put these things into that space, and see how those two sort of shifting times played together. So, this is *Bikini Beach: Maracas*, which is a beach in north Trinidad. [switches slide] And this is my favorite of that series, which is *Bikini Beach: Balandra*. And I felt with this one I kind of got that sense of those shifting times, spaces, and, you know, and places. What's more real, this moment or that moment? Was the question.

And, you know, and this really isn't, you know, occasionally I do this kind of thing, I haven't done it for a while, but, you know, I felt like needing to talk to you about it, because

in ways, it gives you a sense of my where my head was, and how I got to the next thing, right?

[switches slide] So, where is this? Oh yeah. Where to start with this one? Okay. So, actually, this is work that was in something called the Biennial of Ceramics in Contemporary Art in 2003. But I did a sort of related iteration of this smaller one previous, in I think around 2001. But I also kind of wanted to scale them up. So, I was invited to this, this biennial, which was interesting, because what this biennial was, it only had, I think it only ran for three, three times, there were three editions. But what this was was where seven international curators would pick three or four artists, contemporary artists to, you know, to go this location, on the Ligurian coast, like the northern, you know, Italian Rivera side, and, Riviera side, and they wanted to sort of restart the tradition in the early twentieth century, where modern artists used to go to these locations and work with the ceramic factories there. So Picasso would go work with these factories, Wilfredo Lam would work with these factories, Fontana would work with these factories, so they were start, they wanted to have that start again, at, you know, the beginning of sort of the twenty-first century.

And it was really interesting, because it was, you know, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Vasif Kortun, and Nelson Herrera Ysla, you know, I was selected by Olu Oguibe, who's, you know, really interesting. El Anatsui was in it, Trisha Donnelly, Sylvie Fleury, Yona Friedman, who when I went there – so we had to go, so over a year period, you know, groups of us would go there, and when I went there I went there with Olu, and, and the people he selected, which was Billy Bijoku [?] from Cameroon, and Andre Espothe [?] from South Africa, and actually Yona Friedman was there, and that was really lovely, cause he had such wonderful history about the time that he was in New York in the '50s – anyway, and made these things, but it was interesting, before, y'all have to remember, this was the time before we were online as much, etcetera, and people were still faxing things to folks, so the master ceramicist that I was working with, he asked me to fax him, you know, some drawings of what I wanted to do, and so I faxed him some drawings.

And here, let me move forward [switches slides] – oh, that's me making it there. So I faxed him these drawings. And it was just natural impulse for me, because if you ask me to fax you drawings where you have to figure out what I'm doing, I go back to my high school technical drawing days and give you something in isometric projection, etcetera. With measurements. It's crazy, it's still in my head, I, I can still do it, I'm just amazed. So I sent him these things, and I was thinking, once again, of that, the rum bottle, that shifting room space, that shifting bikini situation, and realized that what was happening was I creating some sort of understanding of a parallel world. And slowly but surely, the words, the combination of words local and ephemera were coming into my head. And these things were these occupants of that place [switches slides] – right, and what they were, they were sort of tropes from, you know, sort of, tropes from, from this world, that in the next world, they come together as amalgams that really sort of hold the history of those interactions together, so it's very, bringing these cultural tropes together in an interplay, a moment of flux that addresses colonial and neocolonial powers, coopting and distorting cultures for commercial gains. (00:20:05)

So, you know, I found, so I had the rum bottle, and I found the Disney Tarzan action figure, I think on the ground in Brooklyn, I don't know, it's probably from a Happy Meal or something, and, you know, all of a sudden, I kinda knew, I was like, ooh! Cause I already had stuff that started oozing, this thing has to be in the ooze. And so this is called *Oozing Red, White, and Blue*. And I think the blue one was a blue incursion, I think the white one was a white infraction – I can't quite remember what the red one was. They were about three and a half to four feet tall. [switches slide] That's us making it. That young lady [switches slide] was assisting me. [switches slides]

And it showed at this, it was me, it was, we were in [WORD UNCLEAR], but it showed at the museum, museum in Corona, and I wish I had pictures of what was opposite of it, because it was just this interesting conversation between it and the medieval altar, painted altar situation, on the other side of the room, and I wish I had taken a picture of that. [switches slide]

Anyway, moving on. Okay. Ev, you know, it's funny, everybody loved those drawings. And, and while I was there, people were asking me for copies of the drawings, and I was like, oh, okay, but these were just drawings so that he would know what I wanted to make. But the more that I looked at it myself, and thinking about all of these things, the drawings started to become something for me. And so I kinda went with it. Going back to that technical drawing format, using that as the basis for this, you know, at this point in time, I was understanding completely this parallel world of local ephemera; local ephemera is the world of in between. So I was thinking of local, in the sense of that, of here, or wherever we find ourselves, and ephemera, a thing of short-lived usefulness. But in this world, they really take on this life, so these were huge, these were like, these were drawings that were like six feet, fifty-something inches wide, by six feet tall, and I made the first set of them when I was at the Jamaica Arts, when I was artist-in-residence at the Jamaica Arts Center of Arts and Learning, yeah, in Queens. I did a whole show of these. But this one [switches slide] and this one were in the *Open House* show at the Brooklyn Museum. Yeah.

And [switches slide] this in the, the kind of map legend of colors I call the sensation code, and it contains all of these nail polish colors. And at this point, I wasn't quite sure what that meant for me. I knew I kind of wanted to sort of have sort of a symbol, sort of map legends symbol system, but it wasn't quite clear yet, but it was getting there, and I was using all of this technical drawing language, the universal symbol for, it was tension spring, screws, etcetera.

[switches slides] Okay. And I think why things were at that scale, too, for me, it's because in 2000 – yes, in 2000, I was one of twenty-five artists who sort of created the Sol LeWitt show at the Whitney, and I say created because you know that Sol gives you instructions, yes, and he hands it over to other artist to realize it, and we had three weeks to complete this whole thing where the previous location, I can't remember if it was, I think it was in LA, or was it in San Francisco, they had six weeks, we had three weeks. So, and that was such an important experience for me. I think that's why, you know, I think that's why I started those drawings at that scale, and not being afraid of that scale, this experience

really made me think about the interaction of color, simultaneous contrast effects of things, and also proportion, scale in relation to the body.

[switches slide] And I [switches slide] worked in every one of these rooms, [switches slide] and in this one in particular, yeah, [laughs] they're, yeah, I won't get into this, there was a great fight between two people about whether this had exactly the simultaneous contrast effects that Sol wanted. And since Sol asked me, I was in the fight, asked me what I thought, and I said, 'Well, you know, Sol, if you want us to do it again, I'll do it again.' This was crazy, but he's like, 'You think it works?' I'm like, 'Yeah, I think it works.' And he walked up to the two of them and he said, 'It works, it's done.'

[switches slide] I went on the next year to be, have the privilege of being one of his assistants for another project as well. You know, and Sol just modeled to me, and I sort of completely identified with him, what I wanted to be as an artist. You know, I was coming up with a generation of folks who, you know, and here, this is not to discredit them, or anything, but, you know, they were very much sort of wanting a certain amount of, you know, attention that would sort of equate artists to rock star, and I wasn't interested in that. I love that you were, nobody would notice Sol in a room, but everybody knew his work. And really that's what I wanted for myself. Anyway, yeah, so that was a blessing.

Anyway, I got to do one of these things at the Queens Museum, in a show that, in 2003, in a show called *637 Running Feet: Black on White Wall Drawings by 14 Artists*. [laughs] And that was, oh my god, that was amazing, because it was a time that, you know, that I met Chitra Ganesh, and Ellen Harvey, and Joan Linder, and Nickyy Nodjoumi was in the show, it was, and Rajkahan, ah, Rajkamal Kahlon was in the show, all these people who were going to become, you know, my community, and we, it was the dead of winter, we had a month to do this, it's, throughout the, the museum, we would trek out to Corona Park, in the snow, you know, it was, it was a wonderful sort of curative experience, you know, with 9/11 still ringing for us, and in a way, and why I wanted to show you, too, this space, because this, this place is actually sort of precious to me. When I was, once again, when I was living in the States as a child, I would go see the pan, what's called the panorama of the city of New York, which is now in the Queens Museum. I don't think, I don't think the Queens Museum was actually configured with it at the point, at that point in time when I was a child, but it became part of it afterwards. And it was, it was my favorite thing, it's just, you all have to go see it if you haven't seen it, anyway. It's, it's, it's this, this map of the city of New York with all the buildings and everything, it's just, it's amazing, and I remembered it as a child, and I came, after Skowhegan, when I moved to New York, I went to see it, and was so delighted because it was exactly the way I remembered it. It was so good. It's still so good. And when September 11th, 2001, when, you know, that happened, it was interesting cause my mind kept going back to there. And this is the thought in my head, as it's dealing with trauma, as I knew my friend Michael Richards was dead, while other friends were looking for him, and I, I couldn't say anything, I just knew he was. I kept thinking to myself, they're gonna have to take down the Twin Towers at the panorama city of New York. Oh. When are they gonna do that? I'm gonna have to go see that. It was the strangest thing that that was the thing that I focused on.

So, you know, so doing this in 2003, and going up there, and being able to go into the, you know, into the, into it every day, if I wanted to, really had this curative effect on me. Yeah, just wanted to share that.

[switches slides] So this, oh yeah, so I did this, and it was front and back of this wall. [switches slide] So when you were coming in you'll get one side, going out you get the other side.

[switches slide] So, these drawings continued. I kind of really wanted to stop them, because, you know, I, I get impatient, sometimes, you know, at that point, like, you know, once I've hashed out an idea for a bit, I'm done. But then, you know, curators and other people was telling me, 'Nicole, no, please, you know, continue with this, push this even some more.' Okay. Anyway. Anyhow, so another friend gave me, she had this box of items from somebody else had given her. I think she didn't feel comfortable having them, they were a box that had, you know, sort of these, I guess what, what some people would think of derogatory items towards African-Americans. (00:30:09) One of those items was a Topsy-Turvy doll, which I had never seen in my life before, actually. And it was an antebellum era one, so therefore, there's plantation mistress on one side, and you flip it and the other side would be plantation mammy.

The thing I'm always careful with when I use something, I feel like you have to understand what the cultural, the cultural implications are for it, and you have to use it responsibly. And I made the decision to use it in that context. I didn't know exactly – let me see – well, no, I decided to use it complete in its context. To relate to that history with this. Because it seemed to me that this crazy item actually was exactly what I was thinking about for the items in *Local Ephemera*. It's nuts. [laughs] It's also the first time that there's any oozing blackness – oh yeah, this a *Specimen From Local Ephemera*. They're all specimens from local ephemera. *Resistance with Black Ooze*.

Oh, the other thing I should tell you guys: I thought of these as painted drawings, because I wanted them to sit with the viewer as a drawing first, even though I made, I would make these paintings and cut them up, and collage them into this thing, like a crazy person, these huge paintings. And I, those decorative elements, which actually were little girl's birthday tiaras that you buy in the ninety-nine cent store, reminded me of sort of the fret work in sort of Caribbean architecture, and, yeah, so married those things together. But really wanted you to stay in the place of the drawing.

[switches slide] Did more of them, and started to understand that that map legend was really part of the language that I wanted to have in there. I started to really use the names of the nail polish colors that I was finding. What I was noticing is that the nail, the companies, the cosmetic companies, were really starting to be aware of sort of, or, you know, what was going on in the metropolitan areas of this country at the time. And I, I started to realize what we were having was the effects of the presence of immigrant populations actually being, you know, acknowledged in these spaces, so that the names were really indicating sort of, like, sort of, you know, sort of the way that urban spaces were becoming so diversified as well. I decided to use that language in these things, but

more as a misdirection. All of this was a misdirection at the time, you know, this idea that once we see something, that we think we know how to read it, we pay attention, you know, and I was really wanting the viewer to take responsibility for the fact that you bring your own history to things. And you're going to interpret this the way you want to interpret it. Anyway, yeah.

[switches slide] So I did these three, which was this one. [switches slide] This was *Pinpoint Black*, which was the name of a nail polish color, forward. I was making, you know, combination, using sort of those technical drawing elements that are on the back of packaging, so this would be like for a closet rod, right? Mixing them with this thing. [switches slide] This is it, you know, *Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, *Specimen From Local Ephemera*, *Pinpoint Black (Backward)*.

[switches slide] This is *Drab Hanger*, so drab was the name of the color, and this is of course a concrete hanger, so therefore this is *Drab Hanger*. [switches slide] And this will give you a sense of, of the colors, of the nail polish colors and sensation code, right? So yeah, you're getting things like drama queen, you know, so they were really, yeah, they were really sort of looking at that ethnographic kind of development around metropolitan and urban spaces. I thought that was, you know, really interesting, to put into this. And I called it *The Sensation Code*.

[switches slide] *Castle Nut*, which is a locking device, and *Drama Queen*, which is a nail polish color. [switches slide] Okay. *Go Go Green Compression with Black Ooze*, the ooze is coming into this. And I think this is the last one I did for a while.

[switches slide] Alright, so we jumping ahead to this. As I said, I'm showing you guys some things, not everything, a lot of other things are going on at the same time. But in 2008, I was making works called the, I think it was *Culturally*, no, *Culturally Unspecific* series, something like that. Anyway, and I also got the, the, the Kohler residency, so you know the Kohler residency is the Kohler, you know, factory in Cheboygan, Michigan, where they're making toilet bowls, sinks, etcetera. And they have a residency which is now in its fiftieth year, and actually this work that I'm showing you is actually on view right now in their fiftieth year anniversary show at the John Michael Kohler Center, right now. But anyway. So, actually, this was, I ended up doing something different than what I proposed. So at the time that I was going to this residency, and doing this series of works, a friend of mine was living in Japan, and around Christmastime she sent me a little, you know, box with stuff in it, and this incense was in it, and, you know, she'd send me things, you know, she'd make me, think that I would laugh, or find interesting, and she's like, 'Nicky, this thing is so popular here in Japan.' Like, okay, that's interesting. And you know, you think of that time – god, I'm like, from 2000 to now, so much has happened in the shift in our society. At that point in time, I think here, they, you know, if, if a company was putting this out here in the US< at that time, so we're talking about 2007, 2008, they probably would not have called it Black Love. Right? We were kind of on the upswing of awareness a bit. Right? This is why the nail polish colors were so sexy, etcetera, right? Yeah, okay. But, in places in Asia, that seemed like they were going through a moment of sort of re-processing sort of things in Black culture, but doing it in this compressed way, so it was almost like they were

compressing, they're, like, an awareness of '70s Blaxploitation stuff, with hip-hop culture from the '90s and the early 2000s. And, yeah, it was kind of, so they were in that moment. Interesting.

So what I decided to do when I was at the Kohler residency is, and, you know, we're getting all the, I went, you remember we're getting all that anime stuff, and all this stuff, anyway – and, you know, Hello Kitty, and everybody was collecting, you know, people were collecting that stuff and all of that. So I thought this, I would propose for this company, I did this painting, I did the painting, actually, the front and the back of the painting, so I think this was called, I called it *Fantasy Garden: Black Love*. This side was *Knowledge*, the back side, which you don't see in this, was *Information*, which, you know, the back side cracked me up because, you know, there would be all the languages, you know, European languages, and then they'll stick [makes adhesive sound effect] big sticker on the back of it with all the Asian languages covering it up. Anyway, so I did a painting of that.

But I decided that I was going to make a series of collectible items that, you know, sort of fictitiously for this company. And wrote them this letter, you know, I can't find the letter now, where I was proposing they make, you know, these collectible items, and the first item that they should make were these incense holders. So the idea with these incense holders [switches slide] was that – oops, hold on. Move forward for a second. [switches through slides] The idea with these incense holders is that you can keep the incense sticks in the bottom, right, and you can use the top as a burner for the cones and the sticks. And I did show this once with incense, it stunk to high heaven. Oh, and by the way, supposedly Black Love smells like orange spice and musk. [laughter] If you need to know.

But [laughs] this, this piece really kind of recalls another work, but here, I'm gonna back up for a second, because here, this is *Cascading Black Love*, in black. [switches through slides] And this is *Cascading Black Love* in white. And it's sort of recalling [switches through slides] me, this work that I did in 2000 in the Studio Museum, this was interesting, cause this is sort of like carried over from my Florida days. So, you know that around mid-century, a little earlier, when they were figuring out the highway system, another way to disenfranchise Black population was to decide to run highways through their prosperous business areas. So in Tampa, Florida, the breakoff from 75, which was 275, was built right through this prosperous Black community. [00:40:09] Very few businesses survived, and a few of them were able to move into downtown. Well, one of them that moved into downtown in the mid, this was like mid-'90s, was finally closing down, and a friend of mine gave me these wig heads from, from the business. Thought, he thought I'd be interested in them. Once again, giving me something. But actually, this time I was, because these wig heads, you know, in, back then, nobody was making wig heads for the Black population, so what they would do is they would paint them to look like Black folks. So it was one of these painted one. So what I did with this was I, you know, cast these – it's really two, it's a boy one and it's a girl one. I cast them, in just a ceramic, it's just a simple press mold, actually, and painted one, the white version, and one the Black version. And at that exhibition, nobody believed that these were the same pair of things.

So we go back to [switches through slides] this, this is why, you know, looking again at the way we perceive things, right, looking at the history of porcelain things, the way, and color, and the way that we perceive things being one color, right? So, you know, how do you take in *Cascading Black Love* in black, [switches through slides] and how do you take in *Cascading Black Love* in white? Okay.

[switches through slides] Oh, and by the way, you know, at Kohler, you can do are, you can either work in ceramics, you learn to make wonderful slip cast molds, and, or you can work in the metal foundry, but I was working in ceramics. [switches slide] And why I had these things here [switches slide] is because actually part of that whole *Culturally Inspecific* series that I was doing, and also kind of brought me to the point of those things is that, could not believe that in 2007, at the time, and I had to, you know, before I cast blame on anybody, I have to double-check things, so I went around to a couple of these dollar stores in Harlem, in the Bronx, in Manhattan – well, not really Manhattan, cause they really didn't have those dollar stores – in Brooklyn, in, over in New Jersey, and found that I was correct. So, you'd find these little tchotchkes with Black and white babies, right? And all the Black babies were on these very phallic eggplant things, right? And all the white babies were on little wooden, you know, wooden, innocent, wooden, you know, blocks with the letters and numbers on it. And I just really had to check and make sure that, you know, I just, to make sure that that's what was going on. It seems that's what was going on. And then I realized too that this is a, you know, [switches slide] tradition from, you know, way back, Jim Crow era, of these little figurines of Black children in jeopardy being chased down and eaten by alligators, etcetera. And, you know, lots of people had them in their households. Yeah, it was just kind of connected to all of this, [switches through slides] and all of this stuff.

Okay. Also, when I was there, this happened, somebody left their slip pump on, and Fourth of July weekend, this happened [laughs] in the factory. And, you, you know, with this sort of vitreous china, you're not supposed to pick up anything from the ground and try to fire it, but this thing seemed so like an active, like, ooze, that, you know, I, I, I took a flatbed thing up there and scraped it up and brought it to my studio, and worked with it. [switches slide] And actually, it came out, it fired.

So this is *Cracked Black Love*, wait, *Cracked Black Love Ooze*, yeah. Yeah, and I wanted something that sat between giving me a sort of watercolor effect, but also giving me some, some viscous, viscous oozing effect as well. And I was very fortunate when I was there, because I was working with the very last group of guys, before they retired, who had taken those jobs in those factories just after the Vietnam War, and they were masters at, oh, Jesus, just ask them anything. Glazing, anything, they're like, 'Nicole, do this, do that,' and actually I scored major Brownie points with them because they were convinced this would blow up in the kiln, and it did not, and they were like, 'Ah, okay. [laughter] That's our girl.' Then I could ask them anything, and they would tell me.

[switches slide] You know, so, really, here, moving, moving into, I'm starting to understand, for me, that this whole connection between materiality and narrative is, you know, an inextricable kind of connection that is really important to me. I had long wanted

to make, and especially after that experience, I had long wanted to make a painting that paints itself. And for a long time, I was thinking, is that like having, like, something be hot wax, and maybe it could change all the time, you know, and make some kind of mechanism for it, or whatever. It's like, nah, that's a pain in the ass, how in the hell are you gonna really do that? You know. And I just start banging my head, banging my head. And then, you know, one night, I was really late for the train, and they were fixing the line, and you know you're gonna wait an hour for the train, because this, that side of the line is, you know, being fixed, and the guys were, you know, they were fixing something, and on the far wall, they were leaning their hands, and I mean it's, like, massively dirty, and they were leaving these finger, you know, prints on the subway tile, on that side. And it, and it hit me, and I was like, oh, I know what I could do.

So, you know, that subway tile's a four inch by four inch, and decided to get black ones, and applied a very light dusting of gray flocking. And, you know, didn't have any intention of showing this or anything. But in my very dusty studio in Williamsburg at the time, this was high up on the wall for, like, four to five years. So there's four to five years of dust on this thing. So it is a painting that keeps painting itself. [switches slide] See, it accumulated quite a bit. [switches slide] Yeah. Love it, probably never ever show it, but, there it is.

[switches through slides] What is this now. Yeah, so, here, by this time, I'm really sick of the whole *Local Ephemera* drawing series. But can't seem to get it off my back, and, you know, it started to morph into different things, and it, you know, had an opportunity, at the Biennial of the Caribbean, in Aruba, to do a wall drawing, and decided to do this, which was related to it. With the two doubled figures again. You know, and at this point in time, those figures, for me, you know, did not – I stopped, I stopped using the, you know, I, I started using myself on both ends. I never wanted to color in these things, because they weren't about a person specifically. By this time, this was really just an abstraction that would have existed in this world anyway. So, yeah, it wasn't really about – I was just a convenient model for this.

[switches slide] But, you know, I kinda wanted to share this one with you, because I, you know, I, I did a, I did one of the *Local Ephemera* drawings for it, and this is only a small piece of it, but, you know, I was looking at the curtain rod diagram on the back, and the way these hands were holding this thing, and then that's how I got to [switches slide] that thing. Right? Which, I thought, you know, [switches through slides] was interesting.

But then, you know, I had the opportunity, it was at Arts Westchester, to do this. So this was in this show *SHE*, you know, and I'm also wary of some of these shows, you know, it was Women's History Month, [sighs] but you know, it was, you know – but what I liked about the show, I liked the curator, and the show was intergenera, generational, so therefore, you know Nancy Davidson's lovely corseted balloon sculptures were in there, I can't help but like those. Or Marcy B. Freedman did her, you know, *You are what you wear* performance, so, you know, how can I say no. And then some of the younger artists were doing really interesting things, warping sort of classical sculptures digitally. It was like, what the hell, right?

And there was this curved room wall in this place, and all of a sudden I saw her on there, and this whole thing came into my head. This actually, and the fabric that she's wrapped in, I, is a bathing suit, one, like a sarong wrap that I would wear in my bathing suit, growing up in Trinidad, I would wrap myself in, and I had one for years. And the other thing I'm really attached to and have a love for are these, the leatherback turtles, sea turtles, that are, you know, when I was growing up in Trinidad, we would go for midnight picnics to see them come up on the shores and lay their eggs. Now you can't do that in Trinidad, you know, well, they had to protect them, because, you know, it was dangerous for them, and, you know, they go by instinct, they would travel all around the world and find themselves back on the beaches in north Trinidad. (00:50:04) So, you know, there's a law now that when that's happening, you can't be on the beach between I think it's six and six, right? Six – yeah.

And, but, this fabric had the turtle motif on it, and I thought, you know, having her hanging precariously, and then having this window right there, and I had this curtain, I has this reproduced as this curtain, and actually on the top of the curtain, that's the size, really, of the pattern, you know? And as you go down, it gets larger and larger, so that it's almost the size of one of the leatherback turtles. And they, they're these dinosaur things, they're huge, you know, they'll be like six feet long. So this is *Prevail: I am Not a Tourist*. And it takes its name from a nail polish color, I am not a tourist. Don't you love the attitude in that? It's, fuck you, I'm not a tourist. By a company called Prevail, and so this is *Prevail: I'm Not a Tourist*.

[switches through slides] More oozing, oozing oozing. And I thought I'd stick this in. This was much earlier, this was in 2001. When I was invited down, just after the Studio Museum, to do this residency in Trinidad. It was a collaboration between a now defunct organization called Caribbean Contemporary Arts and a Triangle, what's it, the Triangle Trust, what is it, the Triangle Trust, what is it, the Triangle, do the residencies, I can't remember. And so they invited, you know, I think it was, was it like six, or it was twelve people all together, half were international artists, half were local artists, and I felt very, very pleased that they included me as one of the local artists. I felt like my people were embracing me. Anyway, and the residency was on a beach in the north of Trinidad, we stayed in this lovely, you know, little hotel villa place. We worked right on the beach, and it was a season of the te, the turtles, so they were coming up on the beach, laying eggs. So I wanted to do this piece where, you know, I, I, I put paper pulp into the impression of where the turtle, you know, was sitting, laying her eggs. Yeah. It was interesting. [laughs]

[switches slide] But yeah, I think that really stuck with me, that whole idea of, once again, this material and narrative. And dug, went to some site close by and dug clay out of the side of the mountain, and made these little things. Because at the time, I was using, I was using the, the choking Charlie doll, you know, that does the Heimlich maneuver, using sort of that as a symbol of, you know, imperialism, and colonialism, and the other one with the crown was King Houdini, who was Calypsonian, at the turn of the previous century, the twentieth century, and I always liked the idea that he was not necessarily the best, but he was the one that was here in New York, and RCA Records just, you know, wanted to

capitalize on that new sound, so it wasn't like he was the best of the Trinidadian calypsonians, but he was there. Just like I couldn't say I was necessarily the best [laughs] but I was there.

[switches slide] So what I thought would be the last of these, I made in 2011, I think when I was at Smack Mellon, I'm not even sure now. And I think this was one *Specimens from Local Ephemera: Compression of Black Ooze Mixed Media*, had this one. But then, I was asked by the folks from the Vilcek Foundation, the Vilcek Foundation is very interesting, they, they promote and celebrate the achievements of immigrant artists to American culture, arts and culture and science. And they once offered me a show, which, you know, I was very pleased about. And I was thinking to myself, what do I want to do for this show? I don't want to do any more of these damn drawings, I'm done. But it hit me, with this one, what I wanted to do, was like, oh. The problem with this was, in my practice, I kinda move between what is two-dimensional and three-dimensional, all the time. Right? And I was thinking to myself that it's time for it to move off the wall, and in, back into our world and our space.

[switches slide] So I started making these works, the idea of the drawings being pulled off the wall, releasing their detritus, and coming back into our world. So this is *Go Go Gone*, and actually it takes its name from a paint called a go go green, I mean, a nail polish color.

[switches slide] And I actually started to use nail polish as paint medium. I loved the way it sort of chemically reacted with some of the resins I was using, and so this is the point where it became paint material. [switches slide] Oh, I never trust, I never trust anything that I draw that ends up looking exactly like what I drew, so for quite a while, I didn't trust this, but okay.

[switches slide] But this was also in the show, this was *Haul*, I think I was thinking of means of conveyance around industry and materials in the Americas, and those materials are also Black and brown and yellow bodies.

[switches slide] This piece was crazy, you know, completely decided I wanted to make this massive paper thing that I sprayed, you know, got the compressor, sprayed this wire with – it, it was crazy, but I think this was named after two nail polish colors, and I can't remember which two right now, but I, in the show, instead of it having signage, the names of the nail polish colors that related to the works were next to it.

[switches slide] This is *I Vant to be An Alone Star*. The nail polish name was I vant to be an alone star, it was, I poured some of it in there. And it's such an, it was to me such an interesting piece, because I felt like it spoke to sort of abstraction, but also to sort of Caribbean space, and how that space was being industrialized, and then coopted as well. And it also spoke to the immigrant experience of the previous century, where the eastern Europeans were the exotics, and seen as dangerous, right? So they, you know, they were all Marlena Dietrich-sounding, or at least the idea of Hollywood, but they were the villains at the time. *I Vant to be An Alone Star*.

[switches through slides] Also, what I was thinking too, cause I love, you know, screwing with people's perceptions of things, these are floor paintings. That bothered people. This is a floor painting. It could be on the floor, it could be on the wall. But it was originally configured as a floor painting. It's shown [switches through slides] in other places. So this is in the show *Splotch*, which is another interesting show that was based on Sol LeWitt's *Splotch* pieces, and it was on the wall this time.

[switches slide] Yeah, so, and really amazing show that I called my art godmother and godfather, so godfather is Sol, godmother is Lynda Benglis, so they were in the show, too, and David Reed, and it was a really good show. [switches slide] And that's my piece down there, and there's Sol's. And I don't have a picture, but that's Lynda Benglis' pour piece, on that side.

[switches slide] This is *Dream On - Happy Ending*, that's been on the floor and the wall. And you know [PHRASE UNCLEAR] because they have been in so many different shows, just out of, say, two bodies of work that, you know, I can't, can't even remember. So this was originally in that Vilcek show, but it's been in many shows, and the last time it traveled around [switches slide] was with *Relational Undercurrents*. [switches slide] Yeah, so, you know, *Dream On - Happy Ending*. [switches slide] That's on the wall. [switches slide] And this is it in *Relational Undercurrents*.

So *Relational Undercurrents* was a show that was part of the second iteration of *Pacific Standard Time, LA/LA*, and it traveled around, it was a work of contemporary Caribbean art. And that's another thing, you know, it's like, I've been involved in some way form or fashion with every Caribbean show that they've had in the last fifteen years. Some good, some better. Better than none, I guess. Yeah.

[switches slide] Really getting to the [WORD UNCLEAR] now, and I have to hurry, because I think, I really don't want to keep us that long. Geez, okay. I knew this was gonna be this way. Oh well. Anyway, so around, was it 2012? I was thinking about, well, why am I, like, now settled on this ooze immateriality and it's all, it's always black, and I want to stay black. And why is this? And I was thinking about it, and we were preparing for a panel at CAA, for 2013, in 2012, that Anna Kunz had initiated, on people like myself who they were starting to call expansive painters. So we were gonna do a panel, and we were doing a reading, it was, I think it was three of us, it was me, Anna, and Dannielle Tegeder. We were reading some essay called "Painting as Performance." It wasn't a great essay, but I think in, in, it mentioned Lynda Benglis talking about oil slicks on the bayou, and it made me wonder, hmm, I wonder if for me, the pitch lake in Trinidad might be something that, some influence from my childhood that I'm not remembering. (01:00:46) Anyway, long story short, I get a, I got an Art Matters grant, and I go down there to investigate. I thought I had gone there as a child on one of those field trips, and realized I had not been, and when I got there, I was really kind of blown away, because everything that I was talking about in terms of that ooze, I was talking about the way that time is elastic and suspended, the way there's this sense of inertia and barely perceptible movement, etcetera, everything was in that space.

So, [switches slide] this is actually, that picture is actually – and that's my foot over there, is just right, that little section that's not as big as my foot, that, to me, spoke to everything that that space felt like, and brought to mind for me. [switches slide] And I call this *Pitch Pot*. And I think I felt all of our history there, I felt, I felt all our, all our Indigenous technologies and storytelling, you know, everything in this, this image, [switches through slides] and I was there also as artist-in-residence, and new residents, well, it wasn't, you know, it was a couple years by then, but, called Alice Yard, and at that space, I used, this is the bitumen black paint that is made from the asphalt there. Oh and by the way, the asphalt there is the highest-grade asphalt in the world, and the factory right next to it makes this, and this seals all boats in industry, your sidewalks, everything, all over the world. It's interesting, you know, that asphaltum is on the road in front of the White House, in front [laughing] of Buckingham Palace, [laughing] interest, interesting.

[switches slide] And I just want to make this piece, this installation where I used the paint, along with acrylic paint, and other things, and some nail polish, and it's small little box space [switches slide] and I wanted to make this, this environment that you close the door and you're in there, you're just pummeled with this, the smell of it. And I called it *Asphaltum Glance*, and asphaltum glance is the term for that highest-grade asphalt.

[switches slide] So, following that, and actually I did make this one just before I went there, sort of anticipating experiences when I started this series of works, called *Vistas*. And the vistas were meant to be sort of these, like the sensation and the feeling that I had in the space, because, you know, and even that little photograph of that little section, I felt if I turned my head and I looked back, it would be gone. So I wanted to make these things that felt like they were in transition, they would slip away, you'd turn your head back and it will be gone, and I called them *Vistas*, thinking about sort of the secondary definition of a vista, you know, sort of like this idea of future or past memory. Yeah. So it's something that was transient, and ephemeral. So this is, this one was *Vista 1*, first one, *Curling*.

[switches slide] This was a couple of years after, when I was able to sort of put a lot of them together as an installation at Lesley Heller. So this is an installation shot. [switches slide] This one is named after two nail polish colors, now you see me, and pounce. [switches slide] This one is just *Reach*. [switches slide] This is, there was a sub-series of *Vista 7s*. I think this was *Vista 7.2: Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't (To Haiti with Love)*. [switches slide] This is, this one is *No Refuge, No Recourse*. [switches slide] *My Empire, My Rules*, which is another nail polish, I think it's that goldish-looking nail polish in the middle. [switches through slides] Going through quickly.

And those two were actually in many shows, but it was *Circles and Circuits*, which was another show from *Pacific Standard Time*, so it was like three shows in the same time, with some of these works. But why I wanted to show you this slide, and it's really a bad slide, I'm sorry, because in 2017, out of, all of a sudden, talking about justification of identity, all of a sudden, people realized that I was Afro-Asian. And I laughed, and it's like, well, I thought the last name would cue you into that, but, no, and I thought it, and I said to a friend, it's like, you know, if I was white with that name, what would you have thought?

And they're like, 'Nicole. You're right. We would have known you're Eurasian. Yeah.' But anyhow, so this was a show where people found out that Magdalena Campos Pons had that heritage, Albert Chong had that heritage, it's not just Wifredo Lam. [laughs] Yeah, it's interesting, but it, yeah, really great show that, you know, brought to light some luminaries from, you know, the Caribbean of that heritage that, well overdue. Through, I love, too, that it was the whole Caribbean, it was, you know, it was Latin Caribbean, French Caribbean, Anglophone Caribbean.

[switches slide] Oh, these were works that were, that I talked about in that feminist conference thing, anyhow, this is *No Es, No Escape Hatch*, I think this was 3, *No Escape Hatch* in parentheses, and just thinking about those islands that are going to be underwater right now, and the fifty islands worldwide that people don't know about, that have these nefarious colonial histories or are being used for research, or military installations, etcetera, but yeah, that's that.

[switches slide] And this is, I think, *No Escape Hatch 4*, you know, it's, it's comin', we can't stop it, might as well stop and drink a nice cold carob, and be happy. [switches slide] Yeah. [switches slide] This is *P.S. (Simultaneity)*, and I made this for *Circles and Circuits 1*, at the California African-American Museum, part of all of that thing, and it's, it is sort of that exact postscript to the previous year's work, and I was just trying to really think through all of those things. Mmhmm.

[switches through slides] I'm going fast now, cause I'm getting tired. [laughs] Oh, good god, yeah, I have to talk about – yeah, I guess I have to talk about this monument stuff. So, which is kind of important, so, in 2018, I was asked to be in this show *Alchemy* at BRICK, really good show, it's women artists, but, you know, we were, the emphasis is that we were all these women that were making art out of these, you know, usual materials, etcetera, talking about the environment, the body, etcetera. You know, and alchemy being that medieval science, well, pseudoscience, you know. And wanted, you know, trying to figure out what I wanted to make, and I was, you know, just listening to maybe too much NRP anyhow, and, you know, the whole, that whole conversation around removal of monuments, blah blah blah, and what is it, the Unite the Right rally and all that stuff.

Anyhow. So, you know, at the top of Prospect Park is this monument, the sailors and soldiers monument, and how many times have I walked under there and just not even noticed, but just this one day in January, I looked up and saw him. This African-American figure. And he wasn't in chains, and, you know, he wasn't subservient, and I'm like, who is that? And this configuration is in tribute to the Union forces in the Civil War, and it turns out that, you know, he was most likely one of their scouts who would go, you know, ahead, and check out the action. And [switches slide] he stuck with me, and what I ended up making was sort of this, thinking about sort of our collect, all of our, all of our, throughout the Americas, we all have these creation myths and stories, all our Indigenous cultures, everything, and when you think about it, they're not just, you know, folklore, they're actually, at the time, what people could do with the technologies they had to explain the world. And I thought that he was actually really sort of could be my alchemist through this sort of idea around creation myths, and the source of things, and I had identified the ooze

as a site of destruction and creation all at once at the same time. All correct, collective memories, histories, you know, the idea of this kind of materiality, the same materials under our feet, whether it be oil, asphalt, whatever it might be, you know, it's just an accumulation of us, compressed, and we will join it eventually. So this is sort of that ooze of existence. (01:10:00) So he is [switches slide] on these double – so it's kind of like the idea of like the phoenix, you know, we all have these, the, those, the sort of these mythological kind of creatures who are kind of created in this sort of mythological bird creatures with two heads, right, rising from the, the ooze.

[switches slide] You know, and because alchemy, you know, was also, had this, you know, sort of magical incantations etcetera, so these symbols of, you know, incantation, and [switches slide] and other things. [switches slide] Is that the – let me hit – oops. Okay. [video plays 01:10:50 – 01:11:19] And I just thought you should kinda see this live. It's still one of the, my favorite things that I've ever made, I would love to do this again somewhere and expand it, I would love it to ooze out of two corners, and have a wall in the middle. Yeah. Still one of my favorite things. Okay.

[switches slide] And just as that show was finishing, folks in the *New York Times* asked me to do this thing where they were gonna do an op-ed that they called an op-art, you know, sort of because of the anniversary of the Unite the Right rally, etcetera, and the removal of monuments, and wanted us to propose things for these things, these empty plinths. And, you know, there were six of us. [laughs] And you know so they'll give us, they sent us photographs that they wanted us to work with, and I thought to myself, oh my god, this looks so familiar, but I can't figure out why. Ha. Well, here's the thing: while I worked at the University of Texas-Austin, I never spent summers there, so I wasn't there. But apparently the summer before, in the dead of night, they quietly took away some Confederate monument from the lawn there. And that's why this thing was so familiar. And for a second, I kinda had pause, and wanted to tell them, no, I would not do this, because I was thinking to myself, I only have one job right now, and I really don't want to lose it. [laughter] I don't know if they're gonna like this. And then I said, you know what, to hell with it, you know? And decided to do it anyway.

So this - oh, and I didn't tell you what the name of that thing was. [switches slide] This was *Persistent Resistance of the Liquid Land*. [switches slide] So this thing is called *The Spirit of Persistence, Persistent Resistance of the Liquid Land*, and I thought to myself I would use him, and I thought of a mythological kind of monument that spoke to the history, sort of, of, you know, of African-American sort of retelling around escaping slavery through flight, which was really through death. The idea of the flight and escaping, and that he can alight anywhere, and transform any monument. Right? And I love that, you know, his transformation can also be something corrosive, to take away something that's terrible.

[switches slide] So yeah, that was it. [switches slide] And I like where it ended up. It was the six of us, our works were included in this show called *Citizenship: A Practice of Society*. Really great work in there, including Pope.L, I'm so sad that he's gone, Pope.L's *Flint Water* project, as well. Amazing little catalogue. So it felt right that it ended up there.

[switches slide] Let's see if I could run through these quick. [switches slide] And right after that, I was asked to do another project that was just like it. [switches through slides] I thought it was the same thing, and at first I told them no, but then when they came back and they said okay. So the Highline was doing this, this network with other urban reuse spaces throughout the United States, and one in Canada, and they wanted to do this show, you know, they call it, I think it was *New Monuments for New Cities*. And I thought it was the same thing, and for a while I thought about it, and realized, like, no, this is a poster image, a poster image should be something that is sort of declarative in itself, and it operates in a different way, and it made me think of, back to 1995, when I was in grad school, and I spent a semester here in New York, working at the Caribbean Cultural Center and Diaspora Institute, I was the assistant to the curator of special projects, curator of exhibitions and special projects, [NAME UJNCLEAR], and she was, we were putting together the seminal show *Transforming the Crown*, what is it, *African, Caribbean, and Asian Art in Great Britain, 1966 – 1996*. That was our main thing that we were doing. But that was such an amazing fall, because, you know, these posters were up, you know, we didn't, we worked on Columbus Day, in protest. You had the, what's his face, who just died, case of the century, what's his face, sports guy –

Audience member O.J.!

Awai O.J., yeah. The O.J. thing was going on, all of this stuff was going on at the same time. I just remembered these posters, and then I knew what I wanted to make. Most monuments are above our heads. Most monuments are like an adulation of, like, whoever, who probably doesn't deserve it. Right? Christopher Columbus included. So I decided I wanted to make an at your foot, at your feet monument, [switches slide] and did this. So, I was walking downtown Austin, and, you know, by the new library, there's these, you know, what are these, they call them, these, they're metal things for this, and it said 'reclaimed water' on it. And I did this. So this is, yeah. And for a couple of months after, people kept asking me, where was this on the Highline? And I had to keep explaining, it's a poster. It's going around to different sites, [switches slide] it's a poster. In Houston it was like this, right? [switches slide] But on the Highline, eventually, where it ended its run, it was just posters. But they were looking for it. So it maybe it should have been something that was actually on the Highline. Anyway. [switches slide]

Yeah, I'm just gonna run through this quick. So, yeah, I had one last sensation code strip left over, never knew what to do with it. And then, for my show *Envisioning the Liquid Land*, this was in fall of 2019, [switches slide] I finally decided that [switches slide] I would use it. [switches slide] And put it into this, actually it's sort of a diptych presentation, this is called *All the White Stuff*, after the Sally Hansen color. Nail polish color. [switches slide] And the figure is flipped upside down, there's an ooze, and it's *Tarred and Feathered*, and you can see the ships and the crosses and stuff. [switches slide] Right?

So this gives you a sense of all the white stuff, white whip, all of these, in make-up industry terms, would be called neutrals, or white light colors, right? [switches slide] These things, god, these things are so full of stuff stuck onto it, it's crazy. The other thing, too, even through this whole period – and I think that period of the really great nail polish colors

came to an end around 2017, when we were back on our conservative upswing, and, yeah, the names got boring again. Anyway, that period, though, the only color that I could find that was a dark color, like within the black family, that had a positive name, and wasn't something negative, was called invincible, so this one is *Invincible*, and for me [switches slide] these two are my [switches slide] history paintings. [switches slide] Straight up history paintings, and they're a diptych that go together. And for the first time, I was using my body as my body, you know, I wanted it, you know, my body is this Afro-Asian body that I think very much speaks to [switches slide] the people [switches slide] of the Americas. So, that's my [switches through slides] history paintings.

This was *Reflection Pool*. This was another monument thing that I noticed that really goes with [switches slide] this thing here. Downtown Brooklyn, Cadman Plaza, there's the Beecher monument, who was, you know, abolitionist, but what I had noticed on this monument, and, you know, because of all this stuff, I had never paid attention, there's, there's this African-American girl figure who looked very specific. So on one side of this thing - [switches slide] I don't know if I have the picture of it [switches through slides] I don't think I do. On one side of the monument, there's two little, a boy and a girl climbing up, and they look very sort of generic. But she looked very specific, and I thought to myself, she's one of those people who were probably involved, and part of all of that, but, you know, has been written out of history, so this is called *Abstrahere*, for the Latin verb, which means to be, to draw away. So I think in the sense it really talks about the way that she's been abstracted out of history. So I wanted to bring her back, and she's the one getting the adulation, and I could kind of see, you know, in these figures, you know, you can't tell whether she's coming or she's dissolving. [switches through slides] (01:19:59)

And I'm just gonna finish up with the things that I'm thinking about right now. I broke my hip year before last, in the fall, so I really, last year I really fell out art-wise, so I'm really in this place of 2022, when I was artist-in-residence at Materials for the Arts, which is an amazing residency. So, Materials for the Arts is part of, is part of the Department of Cultural Affairs in the City of New York, and it's basically this place where people donate stuff, and if you are an arts organization or educational organization in New York City, you can go there and get stuff, shop for things, I mean, and it's, I mean, the time that I was there, the whole set of some show called *Bull*, that got cancelled, was just deposited there. [laughs] It was like, it would be, crazy things you wouldn't even believe. You know, anyway, but, so, there, you have a studio there, and I get the whole place to myself, and I could take anything I want, and anything I don't use I put back on the floor. So you know I had a ball, so I [switches slide] started making these works, it was called *Feared and Revered*, and I was thinking back to a folklore figure from my childhood that has kind of visited me throughout my life, in my twenties, actually, when I was in grad school, I had done some research sort of around African visual production stuff, and kind of equated and realized that the soucouyant, who is supposed to be this older woman, well, she's supposed to be like middle aged or older, at night she turns into a ball of fire, she sheds her skin and she turns into a ball of fire, and of course, you know, she can go anywhere, and suck anybody's blood, and she's supposed to be evil and scary, and I never thought she was evil and scary, I thought she was amazingly empowered, was not afraid of her, but, you know, of course, remember, a year before last, our rights as women were yanked away from us, even though

some of us are sleepwalking with that still. And I was very upset she came back to me, and it's interesting, because now I'm, I'm her [laughs]. So she inspired my show *Feared and Revered*. And I'm not so much illustrating her as that I'm sort of channeling her energy and power in sort of more form of abstraction. So this is *Conjuring Abstraction 1*. [switches slide] I think this was 2 or 3. [switches slide] And it just, I mean, you wouldn't believe the things I'm finding and putting in this stuff. [switches slide] I know this is *Conjuring Abstraction 5*, and I think I'm really here in this place. [switches slide] This one was *Monumental Fall*, I wish I had better slides for you, this thing is gorgeous, the resins, the beads, the stuff, mmm [blows two kisses]. But *Monumental Fall* I think really speaks to the moment we find ourselves in.

[switches slide] And lastly, this here, which I think is appropriately called, what is it, *Yet To Be Entitled*, or *Not Yet Entitled*. Where I'm leaving you off with this. My diptych. There's like metal fencing in there, all sorts of crazy stuff. And so, this is where I am, this is where I'm continuing from, thank you for listening, I hope I wasn't too long. [applause, cheering]

Oh, let's go have something to drink, please. [laughter] Come on. Oh, do I have to? Okay, alright, hi, yeah, questions and answers. Take, I could take a few questions to answer. Mmhmm. I think they want to give you a mic or something, or just speak up. Yeah.

Audience member Thank you. Thank you so much for this incredible talk. Something that I was thinking about throughout, but especially in the beginning, was how – I'm an immigrant, as well, and there's so much language around the narrative of immigration that has to do with loss, or with binary, I guess, or the two places not meeting.

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member And I really appreciated the language of oozing.

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member As a way of, as a way of dealing with the in betweenness, I suppose. Other metaphors could be used; oozing was so specific. I guess something that stood out to me in the work was that there also seemed to be a lot of visual language of fusing.

Awai Of what?

Audience member Fusing –

Awai Fusing, mmhmm.

Audience member -- like things kind of fusing together –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- but also, like, hybrid --

Awai Mmhmm!

Audience member -- maybe, and chimera, and, and some of these visually kind of kept coming up, and maybe I was noticing them because that was on my mind. So it's interesting, then, that we end on a diptych [Awai laughs], you know, on these two distinct planes –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- and I guess I'm curious to hear how you negotiate that, maybe. I guess it's more of a comment, but I, I would love to hear you talk about those a bit more.

Awai Yeah, and you know, I'm sorry, because I was rushing there at the end, because I'm tired of talking, and I'm sure everybody else is tired of listening to me. Actually, this piece is really one. This is one frame that I broke into two parts. This is her day and night, in a way, right? Her night existence, and her day existence, you know, and there's this fleshy, on this side there's this fleshy sort of leather-like material, in her, you know, that's there, on her day existence. And her nighttime, she's, you know, so it really, it is the two sides of one thing. So, you know, so yeah, that's why it's a diptych, and they're not separate, why it's really two parts of one thing. Mmhmm. Yeah.

Audience member I have a question. I bet you get this all the time, but it was really interesting how you had this affinity towards nail polish throughout the entirety of your career. Is there a specific reason for that? And do you pick the colors based on the name –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- or do you pick the colors first –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- and then they just so happen to have an interesting name?

Awai Well, you know, [NAME UNCLEAR], great curator, very early 2000s, you know, that's when I got, like, you know, she was saying to somebody, 'Nicole started doing that, like, 2001. So anybody else coming with the nail polish afterwards could step off.' I'm sure there [laughter] are good people doing it too, right? I think, here, I was, here, I was using it, and I think I started, there was a series of paintings I did not show you where I was sort of looking back on this idea of, especially for women of African descent, of this codification that we go through, you know, you codify yourself, in a sense. But also, you know, wanting to see Blackness as, in a single monolith way, and I'm Afro-Asian, and, and it's funny,

because I didn't really need it in the '90s, I had flawless skin, so I don't even know why I was looking, but you would go to these make-up counters, and these would be lines like Flori Roberts, and everything was like, had this brick red stuff undertone to it, and you know, it's nothing, and you know, they try to make you up, and you go out of there, you know, looking like you were wearing a mask. [laughs] You know.

So it just kind of made me focus on that issue, and I was like, you know, this is, once again, for women, it's nothing we think about, but it's, even further back from that, you know, my mom, the first make-up and quite smart of her, she had this artist child, the first thing she let me have was nail polish. And let me tell you, before now, they do up nails, listen, in my teens, I had decorations, I'd do friends' nails, and paint all kinds of stuff, and just, you know, yeah. So that was sort of this, you know, that was sort of from early on understanding the way that we presented ourselves to the world, and the way it felt like protection, you know? Sort of complete presentation. So, yeah, so, after putting the make-up in there, I put make-up, I, I did the same sensation codes, and put make-up, and I'm like, no, that's too transient, I can't, I'm not gonna be able to fix that. Then I just left the nail polish.

And at first it was just the idea of the nail polish. And it's then I started recognizing sort of the way things were being named at that time. You know, we moved from being just Autumn Red to, you know, things like I'm not a tourist, mi papi, [laughs] you know, mi papi was the [PHRASE UNCLEAR], and [laughing] you know, I mean, it, right? So, all of a sudden, that, it just was sort of generative, you know, just, you know. And then it's also this great, it'd be this great painting material for me, too. I actually did a couple of paintings, they were small, difficult to paint full paintings in nail polish, but I did that too. So it was, you know, it was more of a versatile thing, and it really went well, too, with the resins, whether it was putting it into the wet resins, and how it would disperse itself, or pouring it onto dryer resin, you know. Yeah, just, it, it just kept getting more and more interesting.

I don't know if I need to use it anymore. I'm, I think I did my thing with it, you know? (01:29:56) But I'm probably the only artist in the world that knows that all the Revlon nail polish colors [laughter] will, they get, they eventually start to create, have this chemical reaction where they get like this foggy looking mildewy thing. And I like it in the prints that way, cause it kind of like draws you out of, because everything seems to be clean, and then all of a sudden, why is that thing there, and I kind of like that. But, you know, I'm probably the only one who knows that, be, and it's like, how toxic, therefore, is that, nai [blows raspberry] and I mean, it's not supposed to stay on us that long, but still, right? Only one that does that. So that's probably the most toxic one. Even though I have on a Revlon lipstick right now. [laughs] Cause it stays in place and I love that, you know. Mmhmm. Okay.

Don't worry, don't have to. Okay, I guess so. One more.

Audience member Nicole, thanks for the great talk. I also have a question about the, or, yeah, about the ooziness, or --

Awai Mmhmm. The oozing.

Audience member -- and particularly about that sort of, seems to me, that liquidity, that actually it's slow –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- and I want to ask about the speed of that. I feel that, it seems to be that the things are kind of transforming –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- or coming together, or melting together, seem to have a certain kind of durational kind of –

Awai Yeah!

Audience member -- not fastness.

Awai Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Audience member And how much that kind of relates to the rest of the acumen of your work that fuses metaphors and actual material –

Awai Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Audience member -- and colors, and whatever. If you can talk about that, that kind of particular –

Awai No, you're right about the slow, you know, as I said, the one thing when I was at the pitch lake in Trinidad was that sense of [sighs] time, but all time. You know, I remember standing there, and there was like, there was like a, there was like a can top, because, you know, there will always be some dirty fool throwing some crap away, right? Like, four feet away from me. But then, on the other side, there was like this palm frond, and this bone thing, and that could be from four hundred years ago, and this was, could be from last night. You know? And this idea of time becoming either elastic, suspended, or not mattering, right? And that this idea also of like, imperceptible movement, almost imperceptible movement, right.

At the pitch lake, you know, there's these trucks that come onto the pitch lake. And there's a guy on the truck, his job is just to tell them when to move. They could only stay in the same position ten minutes tops, it starts to sink. Right? You know. But at first it looks like it's going to be really solid, but it starts to sink, so it's this idea of barely imperceptible kind of movement that I also think has to do with this idea of transmutation, and transition. Things becoming one thing, or another thing. So, yeah, you're right, that's very, the speed, the speed is very important.

Audience member Just to follow up that question, and also, through your whole presentation, there are a lot of juxtapositions, as she mentioned, as, like, there is a time, and encountering new materials, different times, and the materials' own time, right?

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member Where they belong in this history, right?

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member And so, more practically, when do you encounter different kinds of materials, and, that have their own history, and their own kind of like hierarchy [?]. How you, then you make art about them, right? So like then you, you have the chance to recontextualize, or re[WORD UNCLEAR] those materials.

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member So, could you guide us through the process where – when you are putting so many things on top of things, right?

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member There is, there is something that makes sense to you that not necessarily is obedient of the history of the materials.

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member So, can you?

Awai Hmm. No, that's an interesting question. Here. I, I'll answer this way: the reason, I work with a, a certain kind of polyurethane resin that I have, I think, fourteen minutes to work with, before it hardens, right? And what I like about that, too, is that I, I have, there is, there's chance in that. All of this is, pffft, listen, all of this work is just the chance up, right? Where this thing falls, how this thing dries, how this thing incorporates, some of it works, some of it fails, yeah? And some of it just surprises me, you know?

So, there is this risk and chance that, I think, thank you for the question, because I think that's something important to say. There is a risk and a chance involved in this. None of this I can really prescribe in that way, and I think that's very important. I think what it has taught me is I have learned the skill of being prepared for whatever. And responding to whatever. Yeah. But no, it's a good question, and it's gonna leave me thinking. Mmhmm. Yeah.

Okay, mmhmm. [CROSSTALK]

Audience member I just wanna piggyback a little bit off of that, and I, I guess, I was wondering, do you think your experiences within life also, like, furthermore, like, kinda tie into this risk and chance, or –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- is it a part of your personality, like, what kind of also allows you to have this risk and chance with your work, and not –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- try to control, or –

Awai Mmhmm.

Audience member -- anything else?

Awai Mmhmm. Hmm. I think I must like the risk and chance. I think I must. But maybe it is sort of reflective of the life we lead as people of color, in general. I think we have to be prepared for everything, and not overreact to things, [laughs] you know? So maybe that's why it kinda like, you know, I throw myself yet into another precarious situation, oh, let's see what we could do! Okay. This is what we can do. This is what happens. And sometimes it's good and sometimes it's not, okay, well, how do I fix it, how do I adjust, what do I do next, you know. So yeah, I think it's just that, we're in that modality all the time, I don't, mm, we don't get to think about, you know what I mean? We don't get to really think about it. Yeah. It's interesting. Mmhmm.

Oh, there's one in the back.

Audience member That was excellent, I really appreciate it. You know, for a, for a little while I was using that Rustoleum silver paint, [Awai laughs] which is really amazing, because it's like mostly like this opaque silver, like, almost like five eighths of it, and then at the very top of it, there's this gray, like, translucent –

Awai Yes.

Audience member -- and it does all these funky things, you know, right at the top. And if I shake that can, it's all silver, you know, you lose kind of the magic of that real top layer. So, you know, I really, I appreciate the fluidity of your work, and how, you know, honest and real it is, while still being kind of like fluid and like looking around, so I guess it's more of a comment than, than anything, but, you know, I really appreciate it.

Awai Hmm. Thank you.

Well, we'll see how fluid it, it – you know, I really don't know where it's going next, I really don't know. I think every time I've had any long period and have to start again, I go

through this whole process of, do I still know how to do this? Is this gonna be any good? Was that the best thing I ever made and that's it? So, [laughter] yeah, I'm trying to get myself out of that right now. Mmhmm. Okay. Can we go drink now? Alright! [applause, cheering] Woohoo!

END OF RECORDING