Cultural Equity

Trends and Suggestions for the Arts Sector

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Emerging Arts Professionals San Francisco,
Cohort XIV, 2025

June 2025

Image: Charlena Wynn, Untitled (2018), paint, historical records, and candle wax on wood, 2018.

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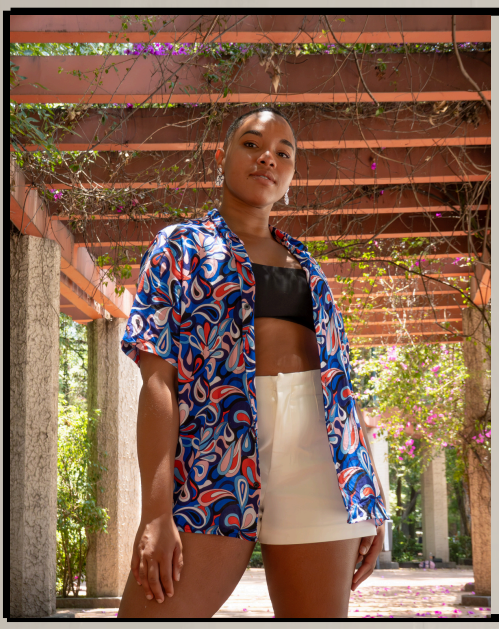

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ARTIST, EDUCATOR, HISTORIAN, AND CO-CONSPIRATOR

Is a Black, queer Southern visual artist and nonprofit professional who is deeply commitment the cultural practices of African Dispora artmaking and dismantling the carceral practices of the US Education system. They have dedicated many years to youth and transitional age youth development as a classroom teacher, teaching artist, and program manager in several cities across the county.

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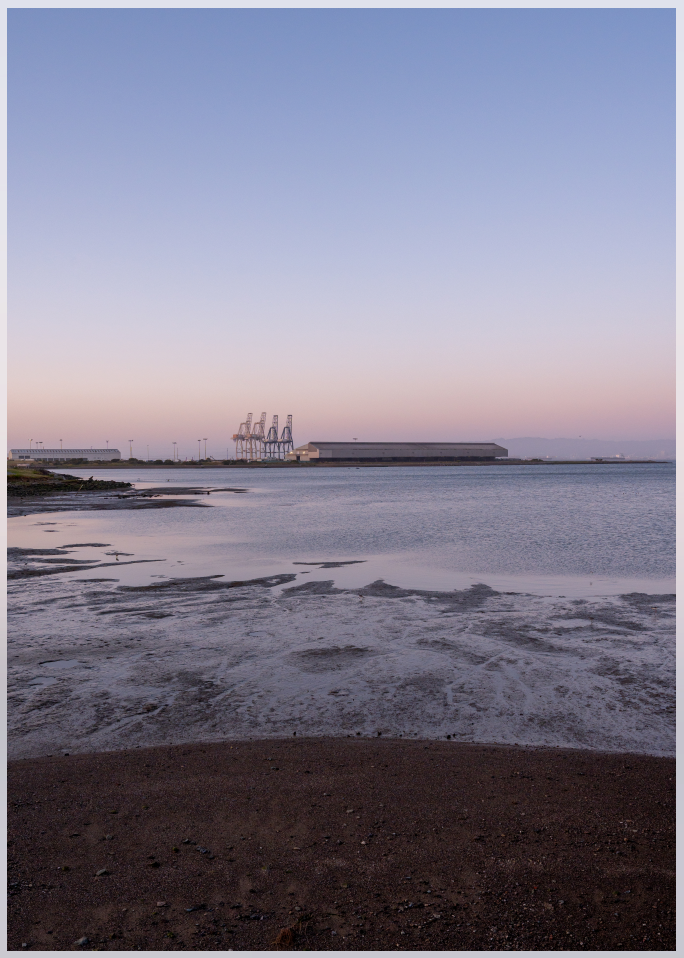
Presence as Power: Reclaiming Art & Space

-- Conni McKenzie

Who Is Beauty For?

The colonization of beauty in the Western world stems from a historical and ongoing exclusion of Black people from art and natural spaces. The psychological implications of this exclusion have taught our culture that Black people don't belong in beautiful spaces.
The issue runs so deep that even when efforts are made to make these spaces "accessible," the problem persists. This is due in part to the presence of anti-Blackness in both white and non-Black POC communities.



Photograph by Conni McKenzie, part of the Forbidden Marina series

As a race, we've internalized messages of unworthiness due to this ongoing colonization.

A clear example is the India Basin Waterfront Park. After over 40 years, the waterfront was reopened to the public. Yet, despite being open for more than six months, the presence of Black and local communities remains minimal. Many residents who live within a mile of the park have never visited.

Even more troubling, plans are underway for a new development near the park that may further alienate and displace local residents, deepening the sense that they do not belong

Beautification often coincides with displacement—
not with meaningful community investment.

Why Creative and Spatial Equity Matter

We've long understood that access to nature provides tangible physical and psychological benefits, including increased serotonin levels, vitamin D exposure, and reduced stress and anxiety. Getting outdoors also supports healthier lifestyles, promoting people to incorporate more movement, fresher food, and deepening breathing patterns in their day-to day-lives.
Creative practice brings similar benefits. Art allows us to expand our worldview, digest the world in a way that feels palatable and empowering, and express our experiences and desires to others.

For marginalized Black residents in Bayview-Hunters Point, these benefits are not just nice-to-haves, but essentials for radicalized justice in San Francisco. They represent the first steps in a powerful internal shift: the realization that our existence and our voices matter, and that we belong in this world simply as we are.

The Power of Culturally Rooted Programming

What do we know about how people begin to feel like they belong? First and foremost, culturally relevant programming is key to welcoming people into unfamiliar spaces.

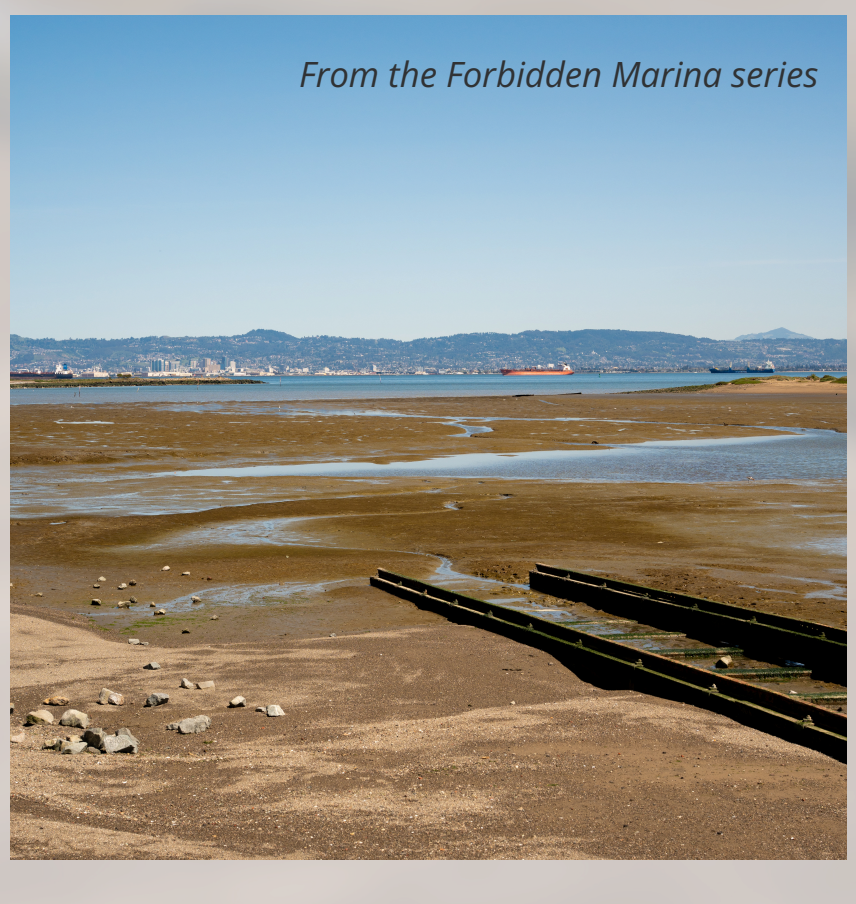
People generally avoid spaces they perceive as unsafe. But what if the danger is
n't the environment itself, but the reception people receive? What if danger looks like a Black mom bringing her kids to a park and facing racism from other visitors? Or teens having the police called on them for playing music at a reasonable time of day?

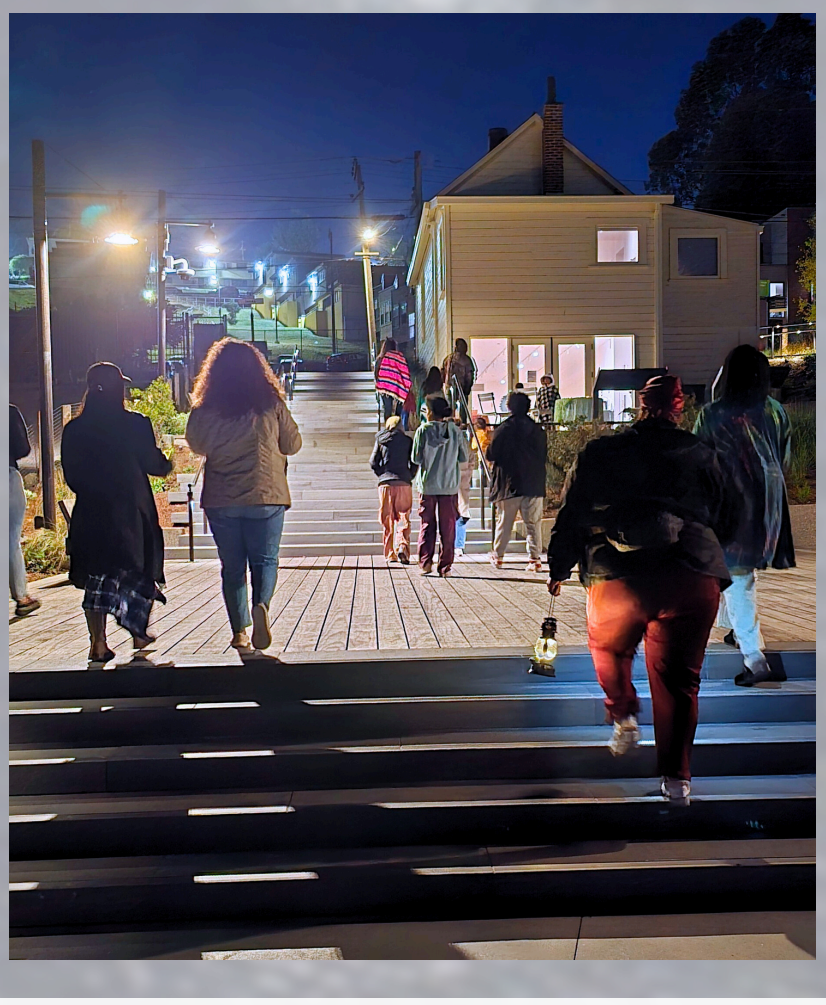
We rarely examine how the "typical" behavior of regular park-goers threatens the safety of marginalized communities, and often before those communities even get the chance to experience the benefits of public space.

Exclusion runs deep. Reparations must run deeper.

Gatherings that involve leadership or facilitation from local residents are a strong starting point. Any organization and stakeholder of a public space must both fiscally and structurally support and trust local wisdom, allowing the community to shape experiences rooted in their lived realities.

These engagements must also be consistent, not one-off events. People need time to build familiarity with a place and its people before they feel safe attending independently or inviting others.


From the Forbidden Marina series



Tossie Long & Red Clay Sound House, local to the Bayview-Hunter's Point neighborhood lead a Moonrise Ritual at India Basin Waterfront Park with residents from the community

Reframing What Belonging Looks Like

Here's a hard truth: Black people move through the world differently, just like children, neurodivergent people, or elders may move differently than the dominant norm. We must stop acting like Black culture is inherently disruptive or dangerous.

If someone plays music on a sunny afternoon, is that truly more inappropriate than calling the cops on a person causing no harm?

There may be times and places for enforcing social norms, but cultural equity begins by meeting people where they are.

The presence of Black people in natural or cultural spaces may "look and feel different" than what some are used to. That difference is not a threat, but rather part of an important process of building trust.

The Importance of Representation and Imagination

People need to see themselves reflected in the spaces they enter.

As a Black and Afro-Latinx artist working in the so-called cultural hub that is San Francisco, I rarely see Black artists uplifted unless our work is focused on racial trauma. While it is crucial to have space to speak to those experiences, it's just as vital to have space to explore everything else.

Afrofuturism invites us to imagine a world beyond racism. Who would we be? How would we feel? What would joy, empowerment, and beauty look like if they weren't filtered through the lens of survival?

In my new photo series, The Forbidden Marina, I explore how we see the world—as well as how we've been excluded from it. Even well-intentioned attempts at inclusion often carry the residue of past harm. This series is a reclamation of the beauty that has always existed before us.

When a community endures so much change in so little time, as Black San Franciscans have within the past century, we begin to forget how deeply joy and inclusion can shape our sense of self and possibility.

Deliberate efforts must be made to restore that sense of possibility.

Playing the Long Game for Equity

Fixing systemic racism is not a short-term project. It will take lifetimes, and only after we've decided, collectively, that true equity is worth the effort.

One thing I've learned is this: preventing further displacement requires both foresight and political engagement.

Blooming

Photograph by Conni McKenzie, part of the Forbidden Marina series

For marginalized communities, the first step in any justice movement is belonging. Because when we feel we belong, we feel responsible. And that sense of responsibility cannot be faked or forced.

If people don't believe the city cares for them or that a space was made with them in mind, why should they invest in it? Why would they vote? Join a public committee? Show up?
We need civic engagement from people who believe in the places they inhabit. But first, they must feel like they belong there.

We must belong. We must know our existence matters. We must feel worthy of access to what nourishes us.

That's the only way forward. That's what makes an equitable future worth building.

Grito

-- Eduardo Nasi

And now I saw the best minds of our generation exhausted, working six or seven
    days a week
In a supermarket, a drugstore, delivering food
Or in a warehouse
Packaging goods – anything from A to Z and beyond
Driving cars that self-drive themselves
Waiting to be replaced by AIs or robots or drones
Or the next person who desperately will do it for a penny to make it through
    the end of the month
In what other people call ~ this crazy economy ~ although it doesn't seem so crazy
    since it still looks like what has been going on for centuries

We want them to go to our beautiful museums to get involved in what curators seldom
    consider the most provocative artworks ever achieved or even a breakthrough
    in the limits of arts or whatever
But people are tired
And if they have any energy left in a sunny Sunday morning
They'd rather go to the zoo
With their families
Have you ever seen the pink kangaroo from Tasmania?
The Amazonian Green Jaguar, almost extinct?
The Golden Wolf of the Kilimanjaro Desert?
Wow, I've never heard of a desert in Kilimanjaro... Is that were they take the Himalayan
    pink salt from?
Geography and biology are not my forte
I've seen it on TikTok
They are very trendy animals and we should go see them before they go extinct
(We should go to the Amazon before it ends, dear. They are cutting down all the trees,
    I've seen it on TV, it is reaching a tipping point)

Who can blame an exhausted worker that still has the strength to reunite his whole family
And go to the zoo or the aquarium
To see some colored fishes and jellyfishes
All nature that has been locked up in cages

The poor orcas that wouldn't thrive in the ocean
The poor peacocks that wouldn't thrive wherever peacocks come from
Last year the exhausted best minds of our generation went to Bampfa and saw works about the slavery

This year the exhausted best minds of our generation went to SFMoma and they could appreciate AI robots of unslaved Black people – it was good, it was for free, I like and wanted to buy the 75 dollars hoody but I couldn't afford, but the moving sculptures were really great, although the old witch that predicts the future is now broken (I follow you, dear…) and don't spit out the future anymore
It all makes sense, I can see the metaphors clearly now
And I, as one of the exhausted best minds of my generation, can see the connection between racism, colonialism, xenophobia, arts & capital & cultural equity
The exhausted and exploited best minds of our generation have seen videos on YouTube and TikTok
They read the books
They make their zines
They know that the zoo is a prison for animals
And ok, they also know everything about the global warming
They try to buy less plastic and wanted to become vegan for the sake of the environment but the supermarket is built on pillars of packaged dead animals
They wished they could have afforded an electric car but now ~ in this crazy economy ~ they kind of are relieved that they don't have one
They hope the great mind of their great grandchildren generation will be ashamed of us
How could you?, they will ask us, if they ever come to be
And then, maybe, with all the problems solved, we can go to the museum together.

This parody of Allen Ginsberg's Howl sums up the results of months of research about the intersection of Arts & Capital and Cultural Equity in which we found out that, given the option, low income workers prefer free zoo and aquarium tickets instead of art museums.
Sorry, Allen, you didn't deserve another parody, but at the same time I don't think we can have a proper zine without a Howl parody.

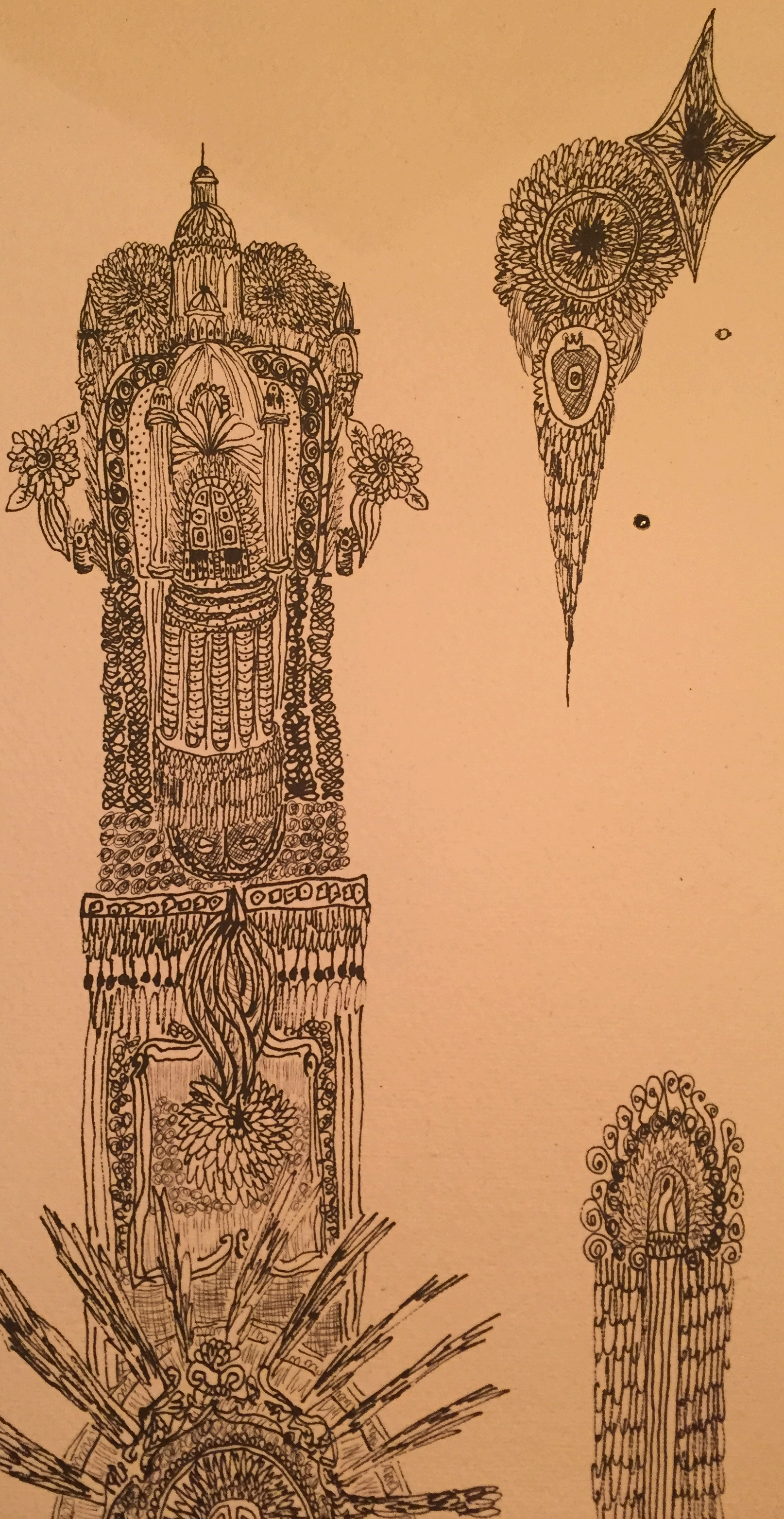


Image by Eduardo Nasi

"Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. "I generally define Afrofuturism as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens," -Ingrid LaFleur, an art curator and Afrofuturist.

Images (top to bottom): Charlena Wynn, *Untitled (Drexciya)*, mixed media collage on board, 2018. Charlena Wynn, *Untitled*, red clay and paint on canvas, 2018.

The Case for Afrofuturist Teaching: A Cultural Equity Strategy

Charlena M. Wynn

Question: How might arts education look if Black educators and Afro-Indigenous knowledge were at the center? What would a liberated education look like? What would equity look like in learning spaces if Black teaching artists had resources to support emerging creatives?

Cultural Inequity

As one would assume, teaching artists, like most educators and professional artists are severely underpaid and often work as contract workers without benefits such as health insurance and sick leave. Due to the lack of living wages (not even thriving wages), many teaching artists take on multiple gigs to survive. And wages on average tend to be less for Black and other artists, arts admin, and educators of color. In a 2021 study by Cobi Krieger looking at entry-level arts administrative workers in LA County, “BIPOC respondents earned only $32,027 on average, while their White counterparts earned $43,437 or 35% more. Further, regardless of their education level, White respondents still earned.” This is not sustainable for anyone and leads to burnout, (Atkins, et al, 2018). That’s what happened to me as a classroom teacher and teaching artist.

In addition to navigating the legality of being a contract worker, I had no time to develop my own practice because I was overloaded with various gigs to make ends meet. Combined with racism and ableism many Black educators deal with, that has left a dearth of Black teaching artists in this field. Now, as an arts leader, I want to bring more awareness to the inequities that Black teaching artists face when it comes to compensation but also the erasure of our value to the culture of arts education. I strongly believe in an Afrofuturist approach to arts education and the arts classroom is critical to resistance, liberation, and recognizing the importance of Black teaching artists. Thus, employing these types of strategies that center and are led by the work of Black creatives, can help us be more thoughtful about sustainability in arts education.

Some ways to create a sustainable arts education future and include Black teaching artists in the narrative include but are not limited to:

- Foundations should invest in teaching artists by giving direct funds. The Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI) did this by giving unrestricted funds of up to $2,000 to East Bay Artists for several years.

- Transparent salary scale. Several nonprofits are following this trend including Los Fotos Project, which is applied to all positions. Additionally including clear ways to move up salary bands and yearly salary increases are impotant.
- Nonprofits and CBOs (community-based organizations) should prioritize paying teaching artists living wages by including salaries in their proposals for grants and partnerships.
- Eliminate unpaid or volunteer work at arts organizations

Investing in the knowledge and intellectual labor of Black teaching artists through adequate compensation thus increasing our visibility in the classroom, and citing our work and listening to us as experts is imperative to rejecting white supremacist, capitalist modes of education. Increasing divestment from arts and education continues to push out Black teaching artists as we seek jobs and careers that can better compensate us for our labor.

What is Afrofuturism?

Afrofturism is many things. Most will cite Mark Dery's essay, "Black to the Future" in which he coins the term Afrofuturism. He defines Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future." While this is a part of the canon of Afrofuturism, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the work and imagination of enslaved ancestors in the formulation of Afrofuturist thought. Afrofuturism utilizes the imagination to position Black people not only in the future but the present. "While a distinctly 20th-century term, Afrofuturism's conceptual roots as a platform for the ideas, expressions, and themes of abolitionist and anti-racist works of Black intellectuals trace back to the country's origins," (The National Museum of African American History and Culture's exhibition on Afrofuturism). Honoring and acknowledging the work of those who came before us, is essential to liberatory practices; and using a Pan-Africanist ("Pan-Africanism's long legacy as a framework for ending colonialism and advancing peace, people-based democracy, and human rights remains as vital as ever for reclaiming citizen agency, (Nantulya, 2024) framework such as Afrofuturism.

Why Black Teaching Artists? Why Afrofuturism?

Due to these unsustainable practices, Black educators make up less than 7% of teachers in the United States. That number is even less for teaching artists (professional artists who facilitate arts programs in schools, community-based organizations, etc.) states Melissa Parke in her essay series "Black Bodies in Alternative Spaces". Parke's Black Teaching Artist Lab (BTAL) and Creative Generation collaborated in 2020 and examined Black voices in teaching artistry. Of the 115 surveyed, they found that: 93% felt it was important to teach
about Black culture and art, 86% said that Black culture influences how they teach and 91% felt it was important to have specific teaching strategies for Black and brown students.

Utilizing an Afrofuturist framework means decentering whiteness in your teaching pedagogy and opening a door for liberatory practices for learners and yourself as an educator. Dr. Joni Acuff asserts that, “[Afrofuturism] can help reimagine art discourses and develop counterpractices that decenter Whiteness and transform the way Black students speak themselves into existence in the future [art] world,” (Acuff 2020). I go further and believe that the systems of knowledge that come from Afrofuturism not only allows Black learners to imagine themselves in the future but also acknowledges the canon of African-centered creativity and the ways in which we, as Black people, have resisted attempts to disappear us and be a part of the present.

Additionally, this can help inform how teachers develop lessons surrounding Black arts and culture. “For teachers, this allows for lessons to explore the past and present conditions of African peoples through multi-genre platforms including science fiction, technoculture, play, and the arts,” (Brown 2023).
As well as incorporating a multidisciplinary lens when working in the arts classroom which will illuminate the ways that liberation requires multiple methods and tools.

What is an Afrofuturist Teaching Artist?

As an Afrofuturist teaching artist, one should understand the ways that our current education and art curricula in the United States prioritizes whiteness thus renders Black persons invisible. It is more than representational resources and lesson planning. Utilizing an Afrofuturist framework means decentering whiteness in your teaching pedagogy and opening a door for liberatory practices for learners and yourself as an educator. Dr. Joni Acuff asserts that, “[Afrofuturism] can help reimagine art discourses and develop counterpractices that decenter Whiteness and transform the way Black students speak themselves into existence in the future [art] world,” (Acuff 2020). I go further and believe that the systems of knowledge that come from Afrofuturism not only allows Black learners to imagine themselves in the future but also acknowledges the canon of African-centered creativity and the ways in which we, as Black people, have resisted attempts to disappear us and be a part of the present.

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An Afrofuturist teaching artist not only focuses on academics or the final deliverables, but on the whole learner and their experiences.. It emphasizes community, resilience, social-emotional learning, and inclusivity. They are able to pivot and think collaboratively about solutions. Also, Black educators are able to show up fully as themselves, respect and learn from learners, and reject the white Euro-American myth of teacher as the holder of knowledge.

Strategies and Methods

Below are some different strategies for incorporating Afrofuturism into the classroom. This list is not exhaustive and one can work on using these one at a time.

Centering Play and Joy for All

Many early childhood educators have heard the phrase “learning through play” and that’s because children do learn through play and imagination. But what if we extended that thinking to all learners regardless of their age? Play and joy can help motivate educators to think about the experiences of their learners and the quality of the curriculum. In a world that associates Blackness with pain, sadness, and ugliness, center joy in your teaching praxis through Afrofuturism rejects those definitions.

Failure as Learning

Mistakes and failure are important components of the learning process. However, learners learn early on that mistakes are to be avoided and come with shame. But what if we encouraged mistakes and used these opportunities for curiosity rather than carceral reactions? Learners would then have a different relationship with the idea of success as well as failure and mistakes. Failure and mistakes are a chance to think of innovative solutions, work collaboratively, and develop a sense of resilience.

Learner Voice

Collaboration in the classroom should not only come in the form of group projects but also in what is and how are lessons taught. The learning process includes input from learners and working alongside educators. Not only does this type of teaching method help learners develop a sense of responsibility and accountability for their learning, it also does the same for educators to ensure what is taught is representative of what is important to their class. By doing so, educators encourage a radical sense of self which is critical to community building and a liberatory tool kit.

Other examples you may or may not have considered:

- Collaborative community agreements
- Provide tools for anonymous feedback
- Create spaces for after-care
- Provide multiple means of expression and teaching methods
- Rethink discipline and classroom management strategies that are gendered and racialized
- Pivot to make time for reflecting on current events locally and globally

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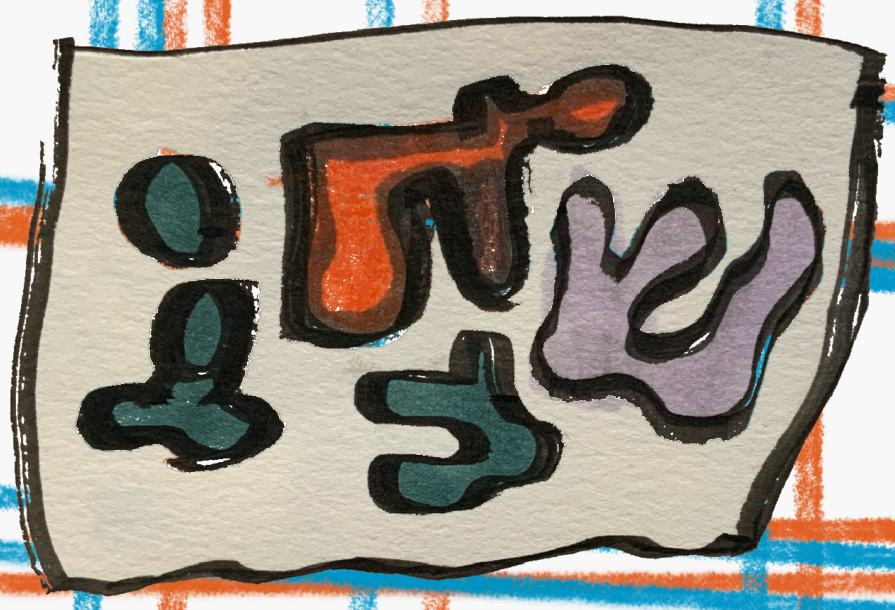
Decolonizing the Museum: Making Space for New Stories

Digital Mixed-media Collage, Jacob Adams 2025

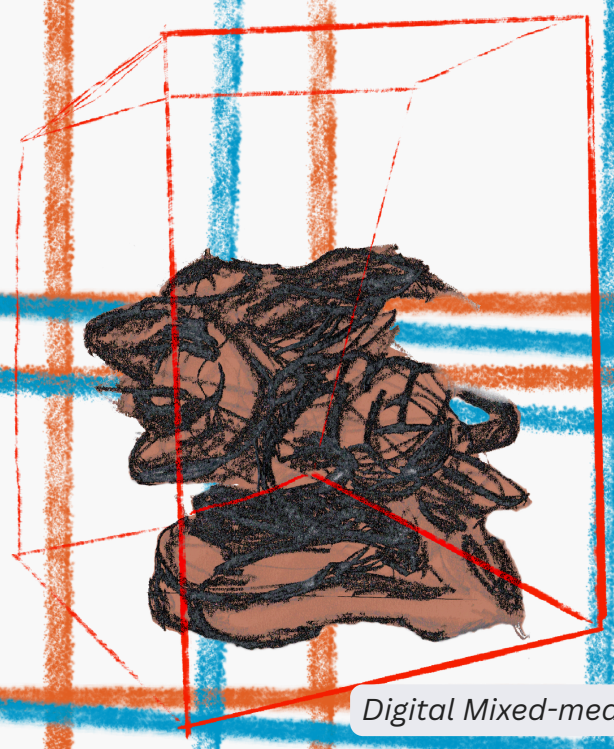


Digital Mixed-media Collage, Jacob Adams 2025

Museums have long presented themselves as neutral keepers of knowledge—but who gets to decide what stories are told, and who is left out? Traditional exhibition spaces often reinforce Eurocentric values, timelines, and aesthetics, framing cultural narratives through a colonial lens. As Caitlin Pambid argues in Death to the Museum (As We Know It), it's time for museums to shift from institutions of control to places of community co-creation. Cultural equity means more than diversity in programming—it requires rethinking the very structure of exhibitions, from curatorial authority to spatial design.

Across the country, a growing number of exhibitions are rejecting outdated museum norms and instead centering the voices, histories, and creativity of marginalized communities. Exhibits like Calli: The Art of Xicanx Peoples at the Oakland Museum of California and Africa Fashion at the V&A highlight the power of artists to reclaim their heritage and define their own visual languages. These spaces often incorporate Indigenous languages, resist colonial borders, and invite community members to co-curate and reflect. The Unsettled exhibit at the Nevada Museum of Art, for instance, collapses the idea of rigid national boundaries, emphasizing fluid, place-based identities of the Greater West.

Decolonial practices aren't just about who is represented. They're also about how visitors interact with the space. Multi-sensory, accessible experiences—like those seen in Edges of Ailey or Into the Brightness—offer touch, sound, even scent, expanding access for disabled and neurodivergent visitors. Many of these exhibitions also make room for viewers to create and respond: stamping postcards, writing letters, or building altars. These acts invite people not just to witness culture, but to participate in it, making the museum feel like a living, evolving commons. Moreover, the inclusion of free food and garden education programs as an addition to regular and special exhibition considerations will allow for people who are food un-stable or are price-adverse to visit without obstacles.



Digital Mixed-media Collage, Jacob Adams 2025

If museums want to be relevant to the communities they serve, they must embrace decolonization not as a buzzword but as a practice. That means sharing power, telling hard histories with honesty, and making space—literally and metaphorically—for those who have been excluded. Cultural equity starts with the understanding that there is no single story of civilization, art, or history and it ends in the creation of a new system of museum creation that acknowledges its lineage and takes accountability for the role cultural institutions hold in our society.

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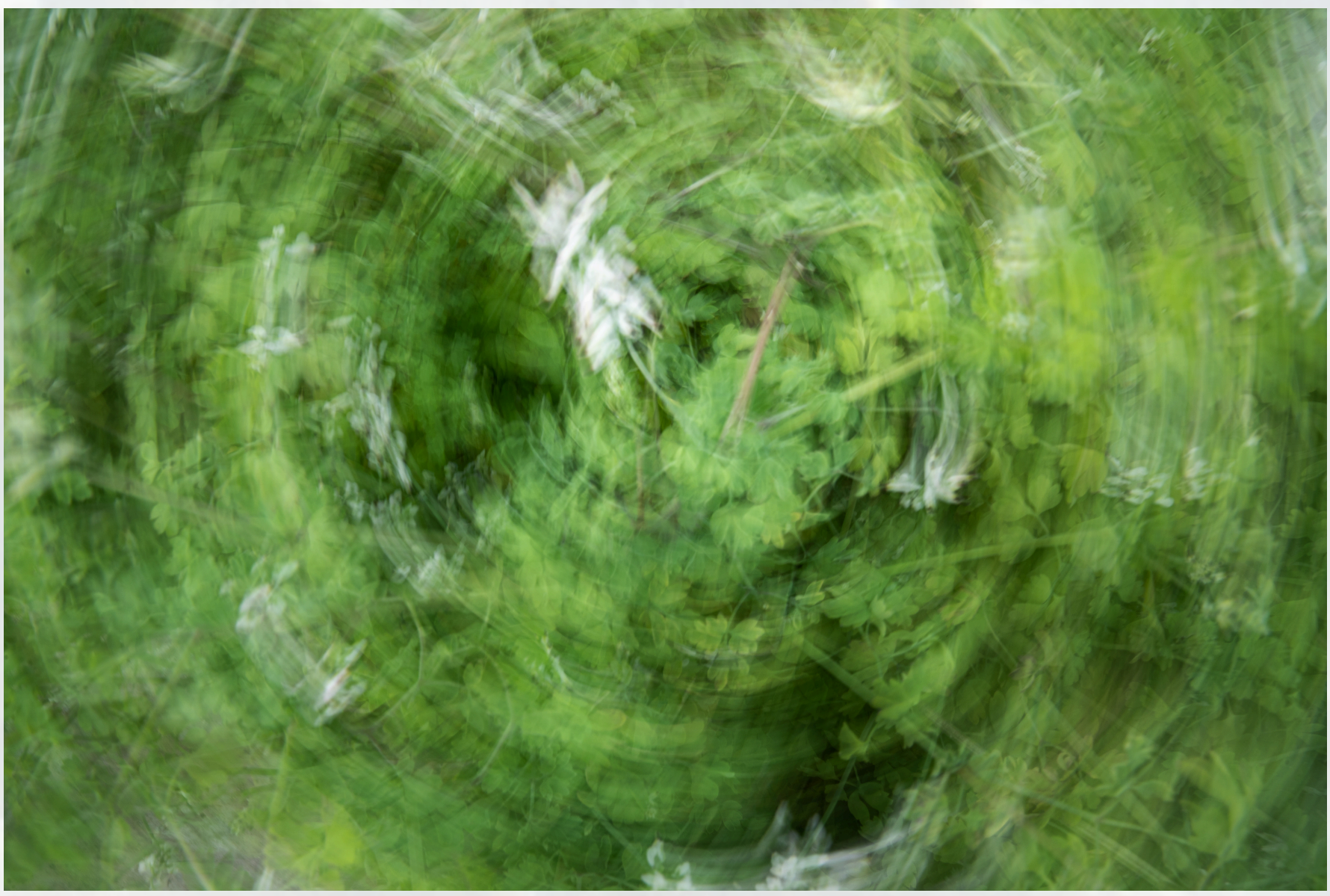
The Decolonized Exhibition Space
By Jacob Adams

We can't save the planet without uplifting its people.

— Leah Thomas



Photographs by Conni McKenzie

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