

SLB: Other dimensions of meaning in the work are evoked through the title. How do you approach titling the works, and how do you think about language in relationship to the experience of your installations?

EM: I actually believe that titling is almost half the work. Titling is so important because it really sets out the concepts and the constructs of the exhibition and enriches it, providing necessary clues for interpretation.

How Sweet It Would Be If I Found I Could Fly, I'd Soar To The Sun And Look Down At The Sea, Then Maybe I'll Know What It Feels To Be Free

This language was specifically taken and altered from a Nina Simone song. Nina Simone has been one of my largest inspirations for many of my works. The arms of the girl are in the shape of wings. It becomes kind of ironic to say, “how sweet it would be if I found I could fly” while she's gazing upwards at the freedom of the butterflies who are actually in flight above her in the gallery.

I knew I wanted to do a full-scale figurative sculpture, and at first I thought she was going to be white Shea butter. But then I started to think about intentionally using color in more impactful ways and using the language of color. To me, thinking through materiality is one of the more fun parts of making a sculpture because there are infinite materials you can do so much with.

I thought a lot about this idea of memory and nostalgia and memory through scent, which is why we used the Shea butter. Then I thought there has to be another material that I can bring in that will be evocative of memory. This is when the charred bones came into play. It's beautiful, materially speaking, but also carries this idea that through the transatlantic slave trade a lot of slaves were identified by their teeth and their bones after their death.

Trauma exists within our bones and is carried on generation to generation. This all led me to focus on the idea of shared, collective, generational trauma, but also the idea of nostalgia through scent. That's how I arrived at the charred bone Shea butter.

I always knew I wanted the fence to be steel, but I was struggling with the color. To decide this, I went back through the work that I did in my Master's thesis where I focused on the intangibility of Blackness, focusing on Blackness and whiteness as colors.



In second grade a kid came up to me in class and said, “My dad said that your family is going to hell because you're Black.” I was like, “I'm not Black, I'm brown.” I never even conceptualized this idea of Blackness at age six. My initial response as a child was to check the dictionary. I was in the library and all the associations and connotations were negative: that of deceit, that of harm, that of fear. In the dictionary, these negative terms were accompanied by a text that haunted me: “. . . that of people of African descent.”

Following that, it read: “opposite of white.” When I looked up white, it listed innocence, purity, and “. . . that of people of Caucasian descent.” I remember struggling with that mentally as a child.

Playing with this idea of whiteness as innocence, as peaceful, as softness . . . The fence will look like that at first, but then upon closer inspection, people will start to put the clues together that this is actually harmful.



On view Sep. 14, 2024–Feb. 16, 2025

COMPLEX DREAMS

A CONVERSATION
WITH ARTIST
ESMAA MOHAMOUD

Esmaa Mohamoud's groundbreaking exhibition *COMPLEX DREAMS* places the experiences of young Black girlhood center stage, offering a refreshing and uplifting perspective on the power of Black women today.

COMPLEX DREAMS is the inaugural exhibition in the museum's new Signature Commission Series, an initiative inviting internationally respected artists to respond directly to the iconic architecture of the Julie and Edward Minskoff Gallery.

The following is a conversation between Signature Commission artist Esmaa Mohamoud (EM) and Steven L. Bridges (SLB), Interim Director & Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs.



The beauty of the dandelion is its strength and resilience, much like Black people. North America views dandelions as weeds despite them actually being flowers. I felt a parallel to this when thinking of Black people in America. I felt that we were being labeled as weeds to be eradicated.

This inspired me to make a field of dandelions for Black people to have some space from the constant reminder of the fact that we're Black, a space apart from all the injustices and trauma, to make a safe space—a space of peace.

SLB: To create this new work and have it on display here at MSU, responding to the architecture of Zaha Hadid, what does this opportunity mean to you at this point in your career?

EM: I've always loved Zaha Hadid's architecture and design work, so when you presented this opportunity, I was thrilled. Honestly, I've had such a fun time making this, and it's not often that you get to make site-specific work. I love the challenge and excitement around having to consider making for this particular space . . .

Most of my work is heavily research-based, so that was a very natural start for me. It was important for me to roam around the museum—both inside and out—to understand why Zaha Hadid made certain architectural choices around the building.

When I was super depressed, one of the things I did was watch one of my favorite comfort movies, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). In the movie, there is this really peaceful moment where, ironically, Dorothy in a poppy field. When she's walking through the flowers, she falls asleep. It looked to me like the most tranquil place to be, almost as if it wasn't a wicked spell, but a gift.

EM: This work was developed out of my response to the tragic killings of George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks in June 2020. A lot of my Black friends and I were pretty depressed as a result of all the brutal police killings of Black people during that moment and the media coverage of it. And because we were in lockdown as a result of COVID, we didn't really have the ability to grieve in community.

Darkness Doesn't Rise To The Sun, But We Do

SLB: Is there anything specific from the museum's architecture or the gallery space itself that informed your process?

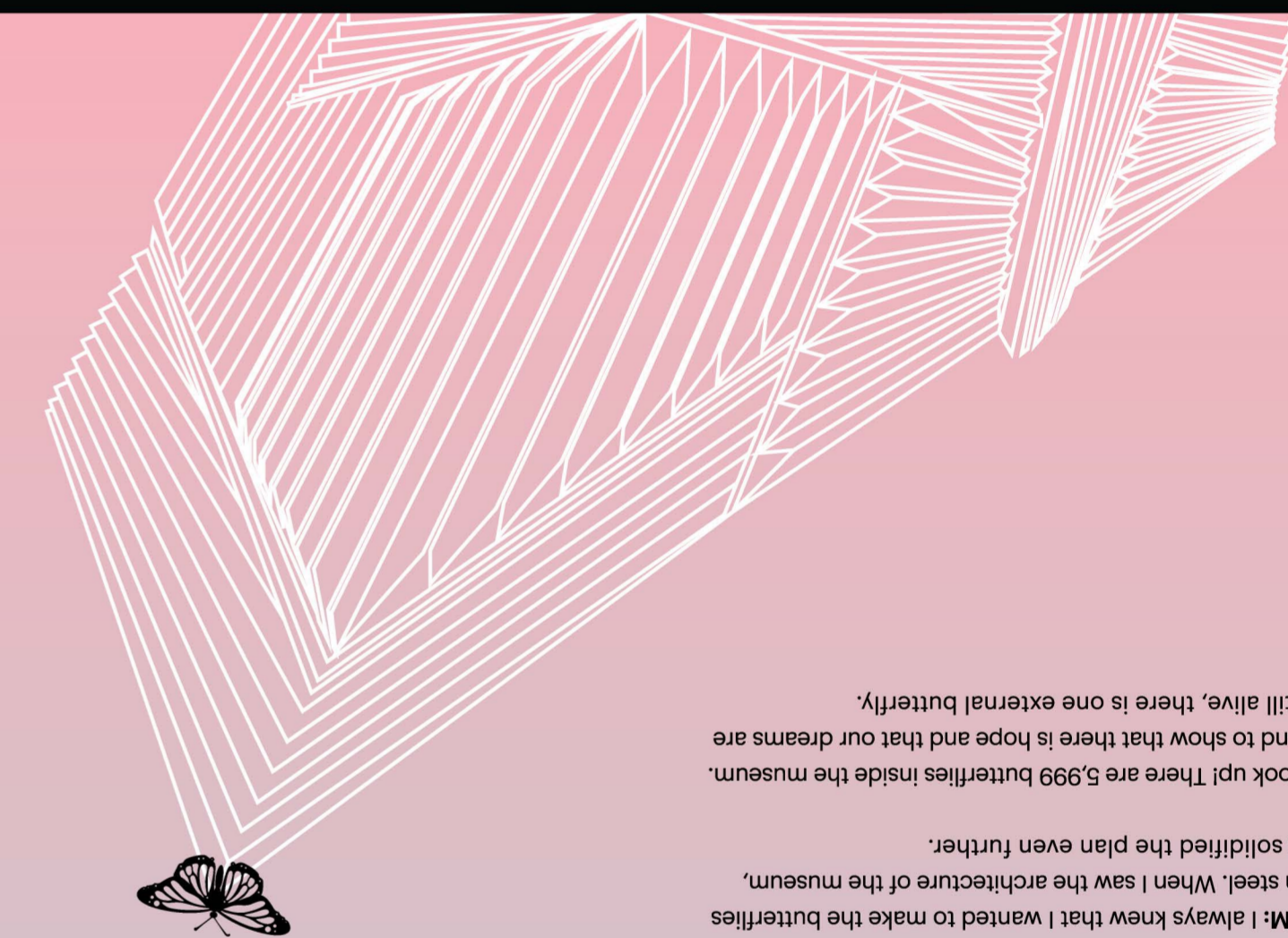
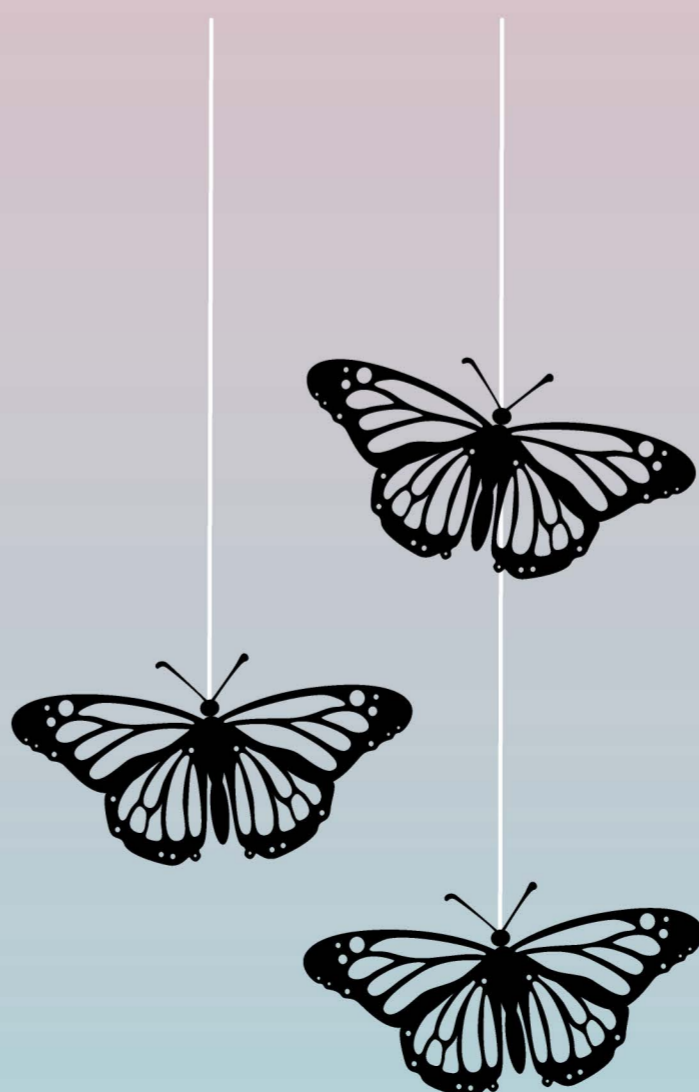
EM: I wanted to embrace the large window instead of pretending it doesn't exist. That is what elicited all the ideas around the butterflies and the notion of freedom that runs through the work.

The two balconies on the second floor also intrigued me. Their presence really informed the height of the butterflies and how close they can be viewed at balcony level.



EM: When I was a kid, I was always the only Black kid in my classes. It was a bit hard to make friends sometimes. I went to a public school and the entire property of the school is enclosed by a chain link fence. The interesting part about this fence was that it was shared with a historic forest. All the other kids would be playing soccer and baseball, but I'd just be at the fence, collecting caterpillars so that I could take care of them during their cocoon phase in hopes of seeing them transform into butterflies. The majority of the caterpillars and butterflies that exist there are monarch butterflies, and I've always felt a connection to them specifically.

SLB: Can you talk about the monarch itself, why that specific type of butterfly?



SLB: How did the vision for *COMPLEX DREAMS* come together?

EM: It doesn't actually come together all at once in the way that you may hope! Recently, the focus of my work has been heading towards ideas of Black nostalgia and Black experiences of childhood. Those interests are really at the heart of this project. I grew up in a subsidized housing complex and we were barred in with fences. For me, fences signal attempts to keep you both in and out.

I had this vision for this monolithic feeling that is so powerful and strong in your mind that you actually can't get over it. What I really wanted to focus on was this thought that when you grow up in a subsidized housing complex and you grow up poor, you assume that will be the trajectory of your life.

EM: I always knew that I wanted to make the butterflies in steel. When I saw the architecture of the museum, it solidified the plan even further.

SLB: I always knew that there is hope and that our dreams are still alive, there is one external butterfly.

However, despite being boxed in my whole life, I was still able to exceed. Now those fences don't exist physically, but they do exist mentally. And I think that is an experience that a lot of Black people have and carry with them throughout life.

I also want to note the type of fence that I chose to use and the idea of a white picket fence. What does the white picket fence symbolize? That question is a large reason why I decided to paint the fence a white cream color, which is meant to appear as soft, alluring and peaceful. But peaceful to who? And so instead of using the form of a picket fence, I chose to use a chain link fence, which not only represents the subsidized housing complex of my youth, but also reflects the prison industrial complex and other spaces that Black people have been boxed in by fences and barbed wire.



COMPLETE DREAMS