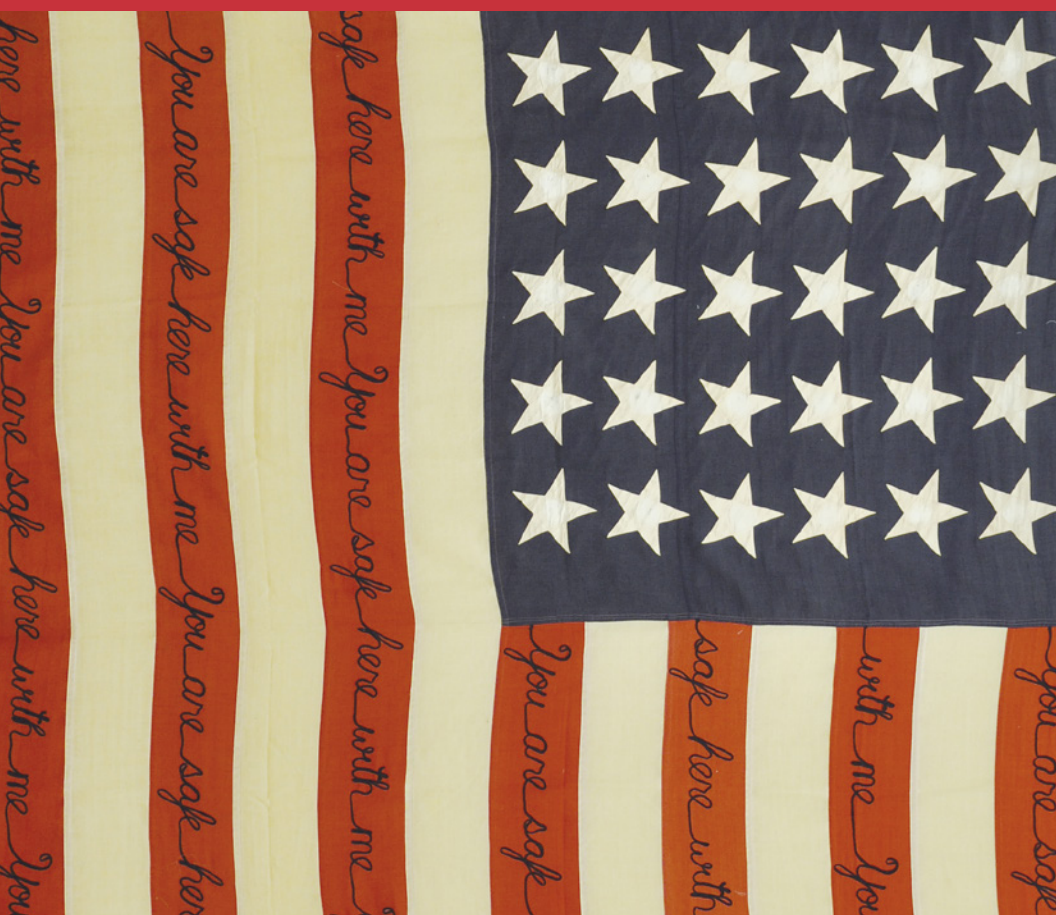


August 22, 2026–March 14, 2027

We are this land

**MEDITATIONS ON THE
GREAT AMERICAN EXPERIMENT**



Introduction

A GUIDE TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Rachel Winter, Ph.D.

Assistant Curator, MSU Broad Art Museum

The word “civics” immediately conjures artist Rayyane Tabet’s intervention *100 Civics Questions*, which the artist re-formulated this year for MSU as *128 Civics Questions*.

I first encountered Tabet’s project in New York at the Whitney Museum of American Art in May 2022. When I entered the museum elevator, I was alone and found myself face to face with the question “What does the Constitution do?” I didn’t see a label or immediately realize this was an artistic intervention—Tabet’s *100 Civics Questions*. Perplexed, I didn’t know how to answer the question, or to interpret this arbitrary text in the elevator.

I later learned that, as of 2022, this question was one of 100 on the study guide for the US Citizenship Exam. As of 2025, there are 128 questions on the study guide, with topics ranging from history to structures of governance.

While working with the artist to bring his project to MSU, I began thinking more about the relationship between knowledge, conduct, and rights. To me, there’s an interesting logic around this exam and its role in the citizenship process: Earning citizenship requires being “civic,” meaning in part, an engaged member of a society; when working toward citizenship, whether or not one is “civic” is partially defined by the possession of factual knowledge gained through rote memorization; failure to acquire this knowledge makes one “uncivic,” a word that feels all too close to “uncivilized,” and therefore, deemed ineligible for certain benefits and privileges.

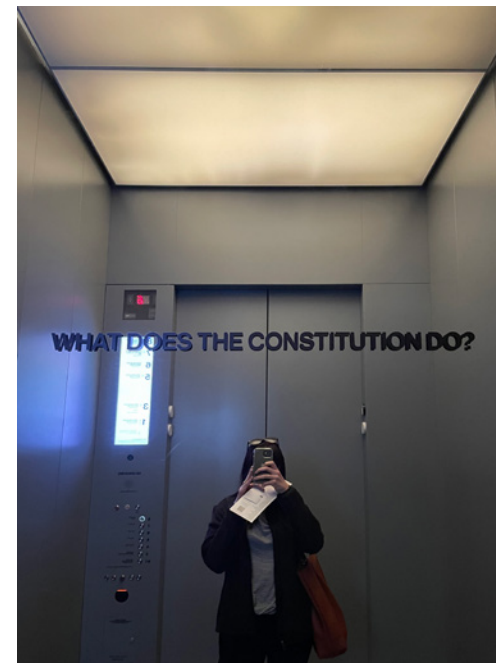


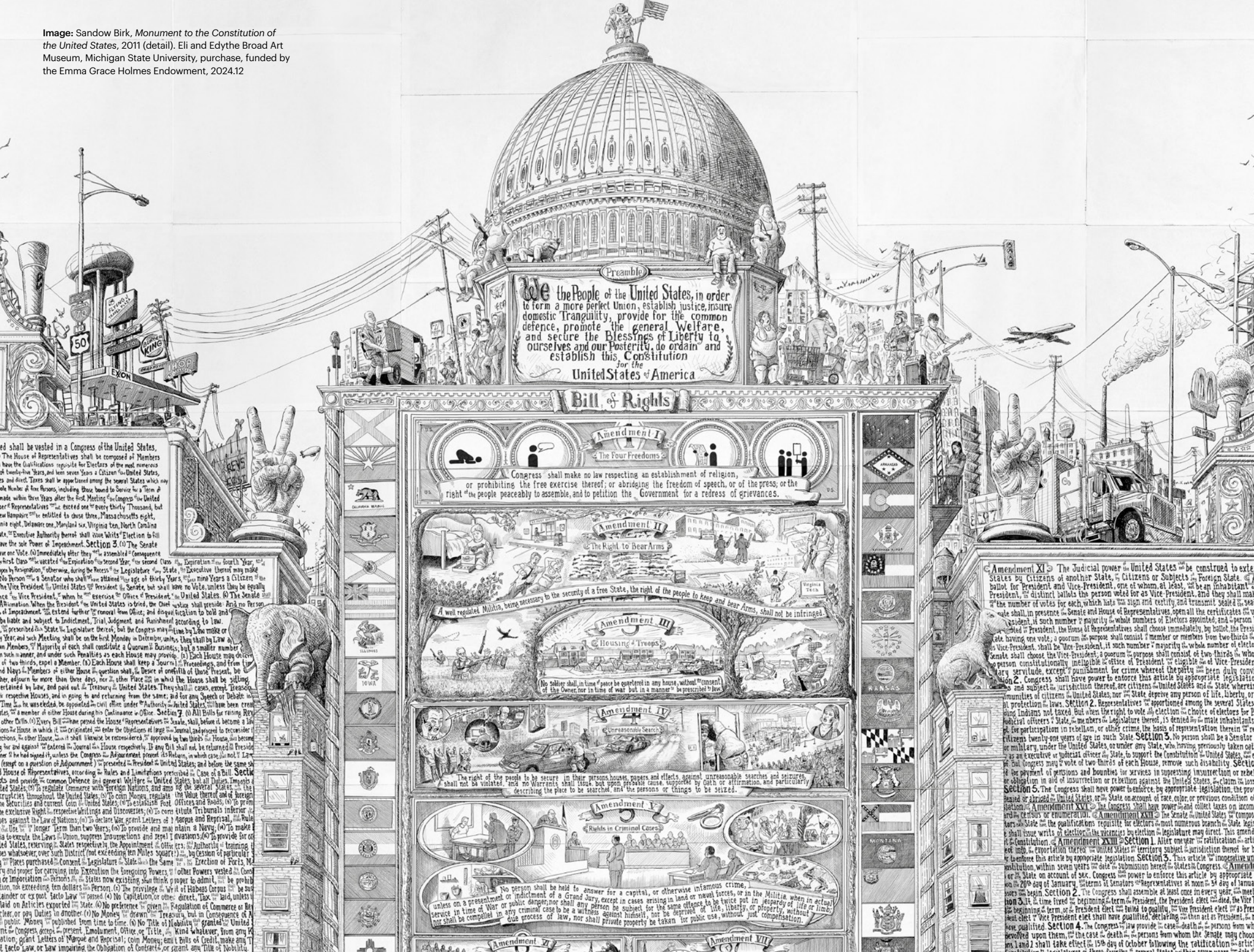
Image: Rachel Winter

The possession of knowledge as a defining characteristic of what it means to be civic, however, often has no relationship to one’s conduct; one can be “civic” by being knowledgeable, but simultaneously disengaged and ambivalent to society’s wellbeing.

As someone who was born in the US, I’ve rarely had to think about these 128 questions; my capacity to be civic is assumed or taken for granted based on my birthplace. While developing the project *128 Civics Questions* with Tabet, I’ve now read the study guide more times than I can count in the last year, but I am still shocked at how many answers I don’t know. I imagine I’m not alone in that experience.

To this day, I’m still not sure I know what the Constitution does. Perhaps that makes me “uncivic.” Or, on the occasion of America’s 250th anniversary, which happens to coincide with an election year, maybe reckoning with what knowledge we take for granted creates an opportunity to rethink what it means to be civic and civically engaged in order to learn from the past and imagine brighter futures.

Image: Sandow Birk, Monument to the Constitution of the United States, 2011 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2024.12



WHY JULY 4TH?

Jordan Cash, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, James Madison College, MSU



WASHINGTON'S RECEPTION BY THE LADIES, ON PASSING THE BRIDGE AT TRENTON, N. J., APRIL 1789.
ON HIS WAY TO NEW YORK TO BE INAUGURATED FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

Image: Currier & Ives, *Washington's Reception by the Ladies, on Passing the Bridge at Trenton, N.J., April 1789, on His Way to Be Inaugurated First President of the United States*, 1845. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of John, Paul, and Perry Howland, 89.29.2

When was the United States of America founded? This may seem to be an odd question as the obvious answer—the one which we celebrate every year as Independence Day—is July 4, 1776.

Yet there are other candidates. One could point to 1607, when the British established Virginia as their first permanent North American colony. The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville asserted the origins of America could be traced to 1620 and the arrival of the Pilgrims. John Adams predicted July 2, 1776, not July 4th, would be hailed as Independence Day, as that was when the Second Continental Congress unanimously passed the resolution for independence. More recently, some commentators have insisted that the arrival of the first African slaves in 1619 constitutes America's true founding.

What of the Constitution? The founding could be marked from when "We the People" acted "to form a more perfect Union," and established the government under which we still live. In such case, for the proper birthdate of the United States we might select September 17, 1787, when the Constitution was finished, June 21, 1788, when the Constitution was ratified, or March 4, 1789, when the new government went into operation.

Despite all these contenders, Americans for the last 250 years have identified our founding moment, the defining instant at which we became a self-governing people, as synonymous with the promulgation of a single document: the Declaration of Independence.

As a practical political document, the Declaration does what one might expect. It declares Americans to no longer be bound to Britain based on 27 grievances against King George III, concluding that he is "a Tyrant" who "is unfit to be the ruler of a free people."

The Declaration, however, does more than that.

Thomas Jefferson, the Declaration's primary author, later wrote that "the object of the Declaration of Independence" was to provide "an expression of the American mind."

That expression is succinctly contained in the most famous sentence in American history: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

This sentence, asserting in clear and unqualified language that all human beings have natural rights to liberty and equality, has reverberated through the centuries in America and across the world. It elevated the Declaration from a mere political statement into a philosophic assertion to which all people could appeal.

And many have appealed to it. While some have sought to narrow its application, the universality and applicability of the Declaration's language has been evident to those seeking liberty and equality. Abolitionists pointed to its words as incompatible with the abomination of slavery; women's rights activists adapted it to protest the inequality imposed on them; and during the Civil Rights Movement Martin Luther King, Jr. declared it "a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."

Across the world its language has served as a beacon and an example, being paraphrased and cited in national declarations from France, Venezuela, Liberia, Vietnam, India, and Pakistan, among others, as well as acting as a model for the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

None of this is to say the ideals of the Declaration have been completely fulfilled or even gone unchallenged. In the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln meditated on the Declaration, famously noting that while the United States was "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal," in the midst of the Civil War it was an open question "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure."

For 250 years this nation, grounded in the Declaration's revolutionary assertion of liberty and equality, has endured and prospered. Now it is left for us to live up to its promise and ensure that its principles persist for another 250 years.

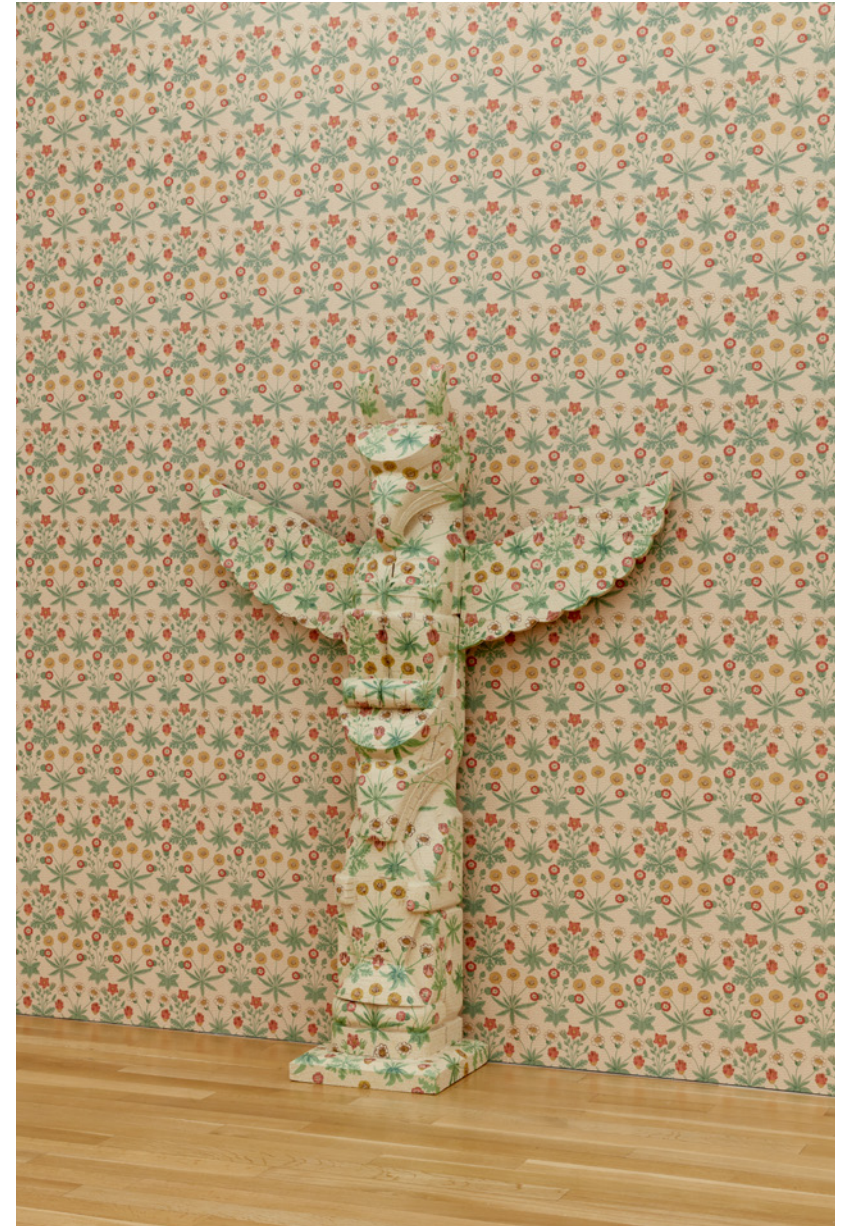
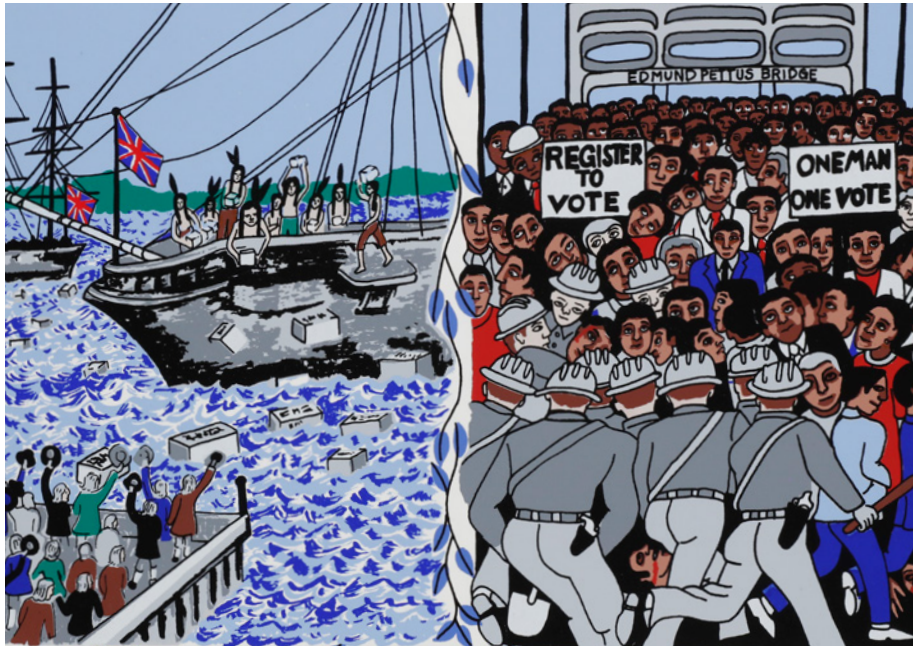


Image: Nicholas Galanin, *The Imaginary Indian (Garden)*, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York



CIVIC CONVERSATIONS

Art can help us practice civic conversations. Imagine talking about this artwork with...

SOMEONE WITH
A BACKGROUND
DIFFERENT FROM YOURS

SOMEONE A GENERATION
OLDER THAN YOU

SOMEONE A GENERATION
YOUNGER THAN YOU

Image: Faith Ringgold, *Taxes on Us Without our Consent*, from the portfolio *Declaration of Freedom and Independence*, 2009 (detail). ACA Galleries, New York. © 2026 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

WHAT MIGHT EACH OF YOU
LEARN FROM THE OTHER?

WHAT MIGHT EACH
OF YOU NOTICE?

547 E Circle Dr
East Lansing, MI 48824
broadmuseum.msu.edu

Always free + open to all

Cover image: Sara Rahbar, *you are safe here with me*, from the series *Flags*, 2008 (detail).
Courtesy the artist



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MEDITATIONS ON THE
GREAT AMERICAN EXPERIMENT



Introduction

Steven L. Bridges

Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs, MSU Broad Art Museum

Like the arts, history is a practice steeped in perspective-taking, personal experience, and attempts to come to grips with the complexities of human society and, ultimately, existence. No small matter. But a worthy endeavor and one that never ceases to provide new ways of seeing and knowing the world—past, present, and into the future. Artists, like historians, often have their minds trained on multiple vantage points at once. And underscoring their various and varied efforts, some big questions continue to loom: How do we learn from history, and how do these learnings influence and shape the future?

The truth is: we explore these questions every day of our lives. Perhaps not on the grand scales of capital “H” history, but in the realms of our individual lives. We are writing history now, in this very moment. We are living history in the making.

But even in the context of our own lives, history can be a difficult subject to pin down, to settle. You and I may encounter the same work of art, or be present for the same event, but experience it in entirely different ways. Its meaning and significance will be different for each of us, and that’s a beautiful thing, especially if curiosity and a willingness to connect across difference can still unite us in exploring these spaces in between. MSU assistant professor Chamara Jewel Kwakye evokes this in her following contribution to the brochure. But rather than difference she asks us to live with the “contradictions.” Can something be good and bad at the same time? Can an act be harmful and helpful in one fell swoop? It depends on who you ask, and both views likely have their own validity.

These are some of the lessons that history has taught us, and which we must return to time and again, always with an open mind and the possibility to understand anew.



Image: Theresa Shellcroft, *By My Hand* / "Dilemma and destiny . . . Justice for all", 2011. Michigan State University Museum, 2014.55.72

...him away or he will be dealt
law direct.
JOHN FREEMAN, Sheriff.
520—6m.
TA NEWSPER
This is to give Notice,
om it may concern, not to harbor,
or Employ my negro man PHILIP,
himself, Philip Johnson, as I am
to put the law in force against all
in contempt of this notice, shall vi-
me.
JOSHUA ENNISS.
d4t

...County (Virginia) August 11, 1761.
from away from a Plantation of the Subcri-
ant, on *Dogee-Run in Fairfax*, on Sunday
5 or 40 Years of Age, a well-set Fellow,
5 feet 8 inches high, yellowish Com-
plexion with a very full round Face, and full
lips, his Speech is something flow and
not in so great a Degree as to render
unclear. He had on when he went away
a purple Cloth Coat, a white Linnen Wait-
Breeches and white Stockings.

NOTICE.
...mitted to the Jail of Washington
County, in the District of Columbia, as
a Negro Woman named CH. R-
about nineteen years of age, five
feet five inches high. She says she is
the property of Lewis St. John, near Little
Tavern, Frederick county, Virginia.
The owner is requested to come and pay
charges and take her away.
DANIEL C. BRENT,
Marshall of the District of Columbia.
302. eptf

He died contented.
...mitted to the jail of
...county, a Negro Man who says he
...Mrs. Ragland in the county of Louisa,
Green Springs, and that he was hired
...Mr. Miller at the Iron Works over the
...The owner is requested to prove prop-
erty charges and take him away, or he will
...with as the law directs
THOS. WILLS, Jun.
1804.
Junior Allemarle county.

...récompense—Parti marron de chez
le soussigné à la Nlle-Orléans, dans la
matinée du 10 courant, le jeune mulâtre Ruehen,
d'environ 5 pieds 6 ou 7 pouces 1-2 de taille, un peu
mince mais bien pris et à très bonne mine. Il a-
vait quand il est parti un pantalon de toile blanche,
un gilet de nankin bleu et un très bon capeau noir,
mais comme il a emporté avec lui un paquet de har-
des il peut les avoir changés. Quand il vous parle
il a l'air timide et les yeux baissés, et lorsqu'il mar-
che il se penche un peu, il est âgé d'environ 22 a-
23 ans; il a sur le devant une petite touffe de che-
veux blancs ainsi qu'une cicatrice au front qu'il dit
être occasionnée par un coup de pied de cheval. Il
a été amené de Louisville Kentucky, par Mr. Hol-
ly vers le 25 de Février dernier et vendu au soussi-
gné. On presume qu'il s'est procuré un passage à
bord du bateau à vapeur Helen McGrégor ou Pucha
hontas, expédié pour Louisville. Il dit avoir un frere
qui demeure avec Mr. Allen qui tient une auberge
à Louisville. Les capitaines de bateaux à vapeur
sont avertis de ne pas donner azile audit esclave
sous peine des loix les plus sévères. L'on accorde-
ra la susdite récompense avec tous frais raisonna-
bles pour la remettre à la Nlle Orléans, ou de ma-
nière à ce que le soussigné puisse le ravo-
ir.
13 mai.
John Hewlett.

WAY!
MATILDA,
dark complex-
She form-
-esville, Fla.
l for her delivery.

RAN away from Henry Heth, living
in Washington County, on the M-
nagahela, about the latter end of June
last, a large, ugly negro fellow, named
SA, supposed to be between 35 and 40
years of age, and has a remarkable wide
mouth. He had on and took with him
a hat, a light colored lagahy coat, a
country made shirt, two pair of bree-
ches made of wool and tow, and dyed
purple, a pair of black yarn stockings,
and leather for shoe-packs; but as he is
a notorious thief, it is highly probable
he may have got other clothes: He is of
such a cowardly disposition, that notwith-
standing his size, and blustering manner,
a boy of firmness may take him. Hav-
ing lately purchased said negro as he
runs, I do promise that the above reward
and reasonable charges, shall be paid to
any person on delivering him well secu-
red to col. A. Fannehill, in Pittsburgh,
capt. Andrew Heth Clarksville, or maj.
Croghan in Louisville at the falls of
Ohio.
August 10, 1780. **WILLIAM HETH.**

THREE DOLLARS REWARD
OVER and above what the Law allows for
securing Isaac a run away negroe of mine,
and delivering him to me on my plantation at the
Falls, he is a small pale coloured fellow, hook
nosed, and has lost the toes off one of his feet,
very artfull insinuating and impudent, if he is ta-
ken out of this County I will give an allowance
for the distance, he has been gone since the 24th
of January. All persons are forbid to harbour him.
JOHN CAMPBELL
Jefferson March 1 1788 P 32

NOTICE. Was committed on the 7th day of Janu-
ary, 1824, to the jail of Baltimore county, as a runa-
way, a black negro boy by the name of PHILIP CALD-
WELL, who says he is free—he is about five feet five
inches high, about twenty-one years of age—had on
when committed, a blue old cloth coat, pantaloons,
cosrse hat, coarse shoes and stockings—he has lost one
of his eyes. The owner of the above described negro is
desired to come forward, prove property, pay charges,
and take him away, or he will otherwise be discharged
according to law.
SHEPPARD C. LEAKIN, Sh'ff.
jan 26—4t
of Baltimore county.

Stop Thief—\$100 Reward.
RANAWAY from the subscriber, at by a high
Deadman's Bay, on the 31st July preser-
last, a negro boy named **ANDEDSON**,
about fourteen years of age, but rather
small for his age. He is intelligent and a
quick spoken, has a scar on one of his thighs from
a burn, and a scar from a cut near the top of one
foot. I am apprehensive he has been enticed away
by a white man who was known to be lurking in the
neighborhood. I will give ten dollars for the re-
covery of the boy if taken in the neigh-

son a negro man by the name of "TOM,"
(calls himself Thomas), is about 28 to 30 years old,
slim build, about 5 ft. 10 in. high, weighs about 130
to 140 pounds. Complexion very black; white
of his eyes, red; has rather a small and trim
hand and foot for a negro. When walking in-
clines a little forward. He is a boy that has
traveled with me some, particularly in East
Florida in going by the way of Alligator, New-
nansville, Wacahoota and Stafford Pond to a
place I have on the Wacassassee. He is usually
very polite and passable when spoken to, but
a most artful scamp; if he thought it to his
advantage might deny belonging to, or know-
ing me, and even change his name. The last
account had of him was in Columbia County,
where he told I had sold him and was on his
way to Jacksonville—he may be aiming for Sa-
vannah or Charleston, as he has been at both
these places. I think it not improbable, how-
ever, he may have been tampered with by some
white person; if so, I will give one hun-
dred dollars for apprehension and such
information as will lead to the conviction
of such person, or I will give fifty dol-
lars for the delivery of said negro to me
on my plantation in Jefferson county; or
twenty-five dollars for having him
lodged in any safe Jail so that I can get him.
Feb 19—12t **JOHN FINLAYSON.**

NOTICE.
Was taken up in Bertie county North Carolina on
the 10th of August 1844 a negro man who says
his name is Jim, and says he belongs to Mrs. Eliza
Parke who lives in the State of Ohio and she left
him in the possession of Thomas Joiner of North-
ampton county North Carolina her agent. The
owner is requested to come forward, prove his title,
pay expenses and take him away or he will be dealt
with as the law directs.
JOHN FREEMAN, Sheriff.
520—6m.
Oct. 2, 1844.

\$10 Reward
WILL be paid for apprehending and delivering to
us, or \$5 for his being so secured that we get
him again.
JAMES M. H. BRUNET,
an indentured apprentice to the printing business, who
absconded from our service on Tuesday morning, 26th
instant, and is supposed to be lurking about the neigh-
borhood, waiting an opportunity to escape to Peters-
burg, on his way to some relations in Jackson, Tenne-
see.
Said Brunet was raised in this town; is about four-
teen years of age, about five feet high, of light com-
plexion, and light hair closely trimmed, black eye-
prominent forehead, and of an active movement. He
is a boy of sprightly mind, lively disposition, and very
confident manners, and by his plausibility will easily
elude detection. He had on, when he absconded, a
dark mixed cassinet jacket and pantaloons, a black
macco cap, and took with him some other articles
of clothing.
Masters of steamboats and all other persons, are
cautioned against conveying away, harboring, employ-
ing, or giving any countenance or support to said run-
away apprentice, as we are determined to prosecute,
to the extent of the law, all who may offend.
SHELDON & ASHBURN.
Beason Office, Norfolk, April 23.
may 3—5t

DETAINED IN JAIL.
WAS brought to the Jail of the Parish of St.
James, on the 19th August, 1828, an Amer-
ican negro, who speaks English only, who calls him-
self George, and says he belongs to Mr. John
Humphreys' plantation about 30 miles above New
Orleans; said negro is aged about 22 to 25 years, 5
feet 6 inches high English measure; had on a pair
of pantaloons and shirt of coarse drilling, and a
black hat, handsome face, and black. The owner is
requested to come forward, prove his title, pay ex-
penses and take him away or he will be dealt with
as the law directs.
may 3—5t

TAKEN UP AND COMMITTED
The possession of the undersigned Sheriff of
Ellis county, Texas, on the 28th day of May.
A. D. 1856, a slave who says his name is Henry,
and further says he belongs to John McCoy, who
lives on Bayou Black, in the State of Louisiana.
said slave is of a black complexion, 5 feet 10
inches high: said negro has whiskers, some of
sence from recitations, even for a few days only, occasions
a much greater injury to the student, than is commonly
supposed. (Jan. 28. No. 58.) **H. B. KINNEY.**

NOTICE.
COMMITTED to the Jail of Washington
County, in the District of Columbia, as
a Runaway, a Negro Woman named CH. R-
LOT E, about nineteen years of age, five
feet four or five inches high. She says she is
the property of Lewis St. John, near Little
Tavern, Frederick county, Virginia.
The owner is requested to come and pay
charges and take her away.
DANIEL C. BRENT,
Marshall of the District of Columbia.
Feb. 5, 1802. eptf

NOTICE.
Was taken up in Bertie county North Carolina on
the 10th of August 1844 a negro man who says
his name is Jim, and says he belongs to Mrs. Eliza
Parke who lives in the State of Ohio and she left
him in the possession of Thomas Joiner of North-
ampton county North Carolina her agent. The
owner is requested to come forward, prove his title,
pay expenses and take him away or he will be dealt
with as the law directs.
JOHN FREEMAN, Sheriff.
520—6m.
Oct. 2, 1844.

Runaway in Jail.
WAS committed to the jail in Henry coun-
ty, Va. as a runaway on the 28th day of
May last, a negro man, who says he is free, and
calls himself John Logan: he is about 30 years
old, 5 feet 7 1/2 inches high, wears his hair long be-
fore—has a scar across his left eye brow, has a
peculiar stiffness in his walk, occasioned (as he
says) by a fall from a horse—had on when com-
mitted to jail, a blue cloth coat, and copperas col-
oured vest and pantaloons, of domestic cloth-
—says he was raised by Charles Sallad, of Notto-
way county, and is acquainted in the counties of
Prince Edward and Amelia, formerly drove a
wagon for a man named Watson, in Prince Ed-
ward—has lived in Georgia, and in the neigh-
borhood of Camden, with a man named Burge,
with whom he left his free papers. The owner
of said slave is requested to come forward, prove
property, pay charges and take him away, else
he will be disposed of as the law directs.
JAMES M. SMITH, Jailor
Of Henry county.
aug. 10—3m

\$20 DE récompense—Parti marron de chez
le soussigné à la Nlle-Orléans, dans la
matinée du 10 courant, le jeune mulâtre Ruehen,
d'environ 5 pieds 6 ou 7 pouces 1-2 de taille, un peu
mince mais bien pris et à très bonne mine. Il a-
vait quand il est parti un pantalon de toile blanche,
un gilet de nankin bleu et un très bon capeau noir,
mais comme il a emporté avec lui un paquet de har-
des il peut les avoir changés. Quand il vous parle
il a l'air timide et les yeux baissés, et lorsqu'il mar-
che il se penche un peu, il est âgé d'environ 22 a-
23 ans; il a sur le devant une petite touffe de che-
veux blancs ainsi qu'une cicatrice au front qu'il dit
être occasionnée par un coup de pied de cheval. Il
a été amené de Louisville Kentucky, par Mr. Hol-
ly vers le 25 de Février dernier et vendu au soussi-
gné. On presume qu'il s'est procuré un passage à
bord du bateau à vapeur Helen McGrégor ou Pucha
hontas, expédié pour Louisville. Il dit avoir un frere
qui demeure avec Mr. Allen qui tient une auberge
à Louisville. Les capitaines de bateaux à vapeur
sont avertis de ne pas donner azile audit esclave
sous peine des loix les plus sévères. L'on accorde-
ra la susdite récompense avec tous frais raisonna-
bles pour la remettre à la Nlle Orléans, ou de ma-
nière à ce que le soussigné puisse le ravo-
ir.
13 mai.
John Hewlett.

This is to give Notice,
To all whom it may concern, not to harbor,
secrete or Employ my negro man PHILIP,
or as he calls himself, Philip Johnson, as I am
determined to put the law in force against all
those who, in contempt of this notice, shall vi-
olate the same.
JOSHUA ENNISS.
may 5 d4t

RUNAWAY.
WAS committed to the jail of Wash-
ington County, in the District of Columbia, as
a Runaway, a Negro Woman named CH. R-
LOT E, about nineteen years of age, five
feet four or five inches high. She says she is
the property of Lewis St. John, near Little
Tavern, Frederick county, Virginia.
The owner is requested to come and pay
charges and take her away.
DANIEL C. BRENT,
Marshall of the District of Columbia.
Feb. 5, 1802. eptf

STOP THIEF—\$100 Reward.
RANAWAY from the subscriber, at
Deadman's Bay, on the 31st July
last, a negro boy named **ANDEDSON**,
about fourteen years of age, but rather
small for his age. He is intelligent and
quick spoken, has a scar on one of his thighs from
a burn, and a scar from a cut near the top of one
foot. I am apprehensive he has been enticed away
by a white man who was known to be lurking
about the neighborhood. I will give ten dollars
for the recovery of the boy if taken in the neigh-
borhood, and fifty dollars if taken out of it, and
secured in some gail, so I get him again. And a
hundred dollars for the recovery of the boy and
proof to convict any white man who may have en-
ticed him away.
Address me at Tallahassee.
aug 27—4t **GRANDISON BOYSTER.**

\$5 REWARD.—Ran away, a
negro woman named **LUCY**, the property of
the subscriber. She is black, and has a stiff
finger on her left hand. The above reward
will be paid to whoever will bring the said
slave to the subscriber's residence, or lodge her in any
jail in this city.
CHAS. MEYER,
corner of Circus and Julia sts.

\$100
Ran away from
in Travis, Austin
Dec. inst., a very likely n-
about 35 years old, 6 feet
preacher; had on when he
No. 12 Russet shoes. He
I will give the above rewa-
\$50 to any person lodgin-
Dec 22 18—3m

FOUR

BRoke o
Intt. a
is small a
has lost the
ry talkativ
he was late
Campbell
merly belo
Lincoln, w
of this pla
the neighb
and secure
gets him,

Danville, 3

WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE 4TH OF JULY:

A BLACK GIRL'S REFLECTION ON 250 YEARS OF AMERICA

Chamara Jewel Kwakye, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, College of Arts and Letters, MSU

My most poignant 4th of July memory is in 1992 after the Los Angeles Uprisings. I was 12 years old, it was a Saturday, and I decided to walk to Leimert Park Plaza in Los Angeles. It was only a few blocks from my house, and it was a place where you could happen upon chess games, drum circles, men from the Nation of Islam hawking *Final Call* newspapers and bean pies, and Black people of all ages outside in community with each other. I wasn't looking for fireworks or a party but more so to be stimulated by people watching. The plaza did not disappoint. When I arrived, there was a man reciting Frederick Douglas's speech that came to be known by its most pointed question, "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" Delivered by Douglas on July 5th, 1852, to the Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society his question and speech captured my youthful attention. The line that enthralled me most, "There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour...". I turned that line over and over in my mind as I remembered the smoke that hung in the sky for what seemed like forever after the Uprisings. That line danced along with visions of grainy footage of fists, batons, and feet raining down on Rodney King's body. Images seen by people around the world. I saw the hollowed-out buildings from the fires of the uprisings that still lined Crenshaw Blvd and other streets that made up my neighborhood. Almost 140 years to the day of Douglas's speech and 215 years to the day that the United States of America celebrated their freedom, I, a Black girl in Los Angeles, and so many others like me in the United States and around the world, were still not free.

Of course, the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments had granted a kind of freedom to my matrilineal ancestors, but still, I wonder as I reflect on the 250th anniversary of America (three days and 161 years after the very first Juneteenth) will we ever live up to the promise of liberty and justice for all. By definition, I am a quintessential American. Born here with many matrilineal generations calling the American South and later California home and a patrilineal side leaving Ghana and the continent of Africa to seek fortune and prosperity in a new country, I am the American dream the United States has been selling since 1777 or maybe 1865, but, my queer, Black, fat, working class self is still not reflected in policy or polity of this country. So, what to my Black girl self does it mean to think about the Great American experiment 250 years later? It means what I hope you see in this exhibit; looking and living with the contradictions; knowing and remembering that real freedom ain't free. It means making change for the whole not just a few and creating a freer and more just world that you or I may never live in but as Douglas said and intimated in his speech that future generations of little Black girls and children everywhere can *gather in plazas celebrating pathways over and under the sea, as well as on the earth that walled cities and empires have become unfashionable.*

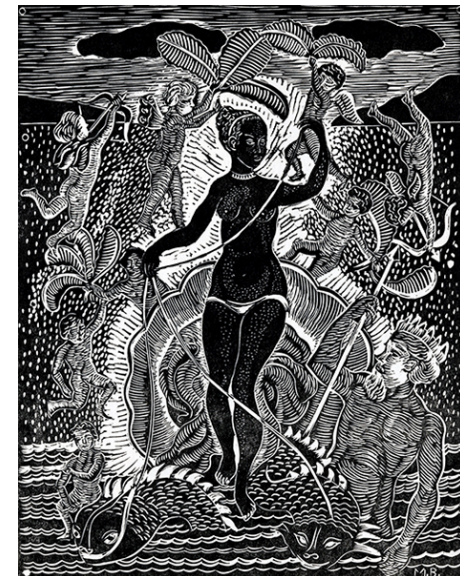


Image: Margaret Burroughs, *Black Venus*, 1957. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by Dr. Samuel S. Mandel by exchange, 2000.34



HOLDING CONTRADICTIONS

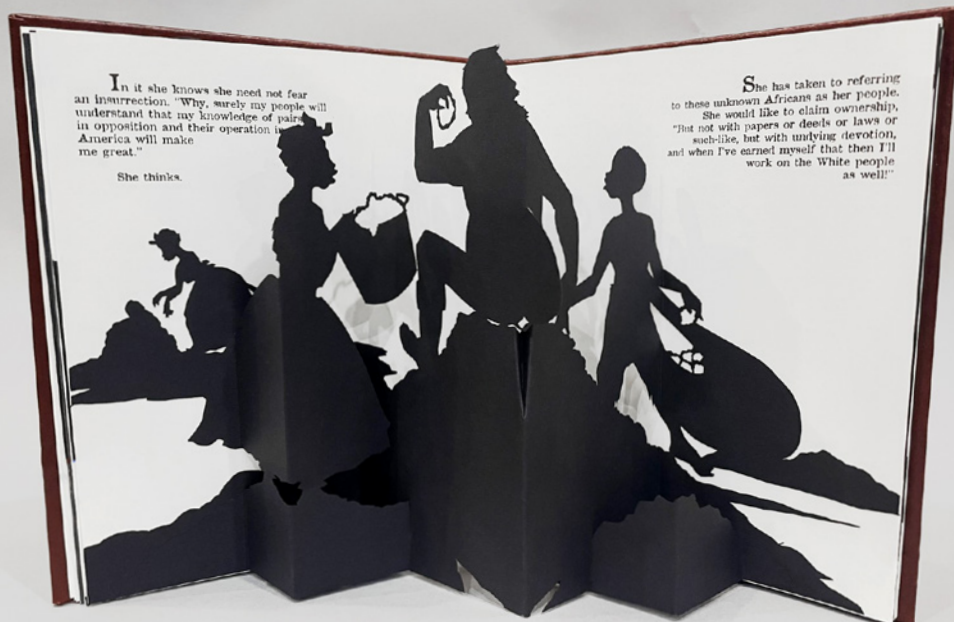
Art can make us feel many things at once. History can too.

LOOK CLOSELY AT THIS ARTWORK.

WHAT DO YOU NOTICE, FEEL, AND WONDER?

YOU MIGHT EXPERIENCE MORE THAN ONE EMOTION.

Image: Kara Walker, *Freedom: A Fable: A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times, with Illustrations*, 1997. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Jacquelyn Baas, class of 1971, 2023.14.9



WHAT TENSIONS,
CONTRADICTIONS,
OR COMPLEXITIES DOES
THIS ARTWORK ASK
US TO SIT WITH?

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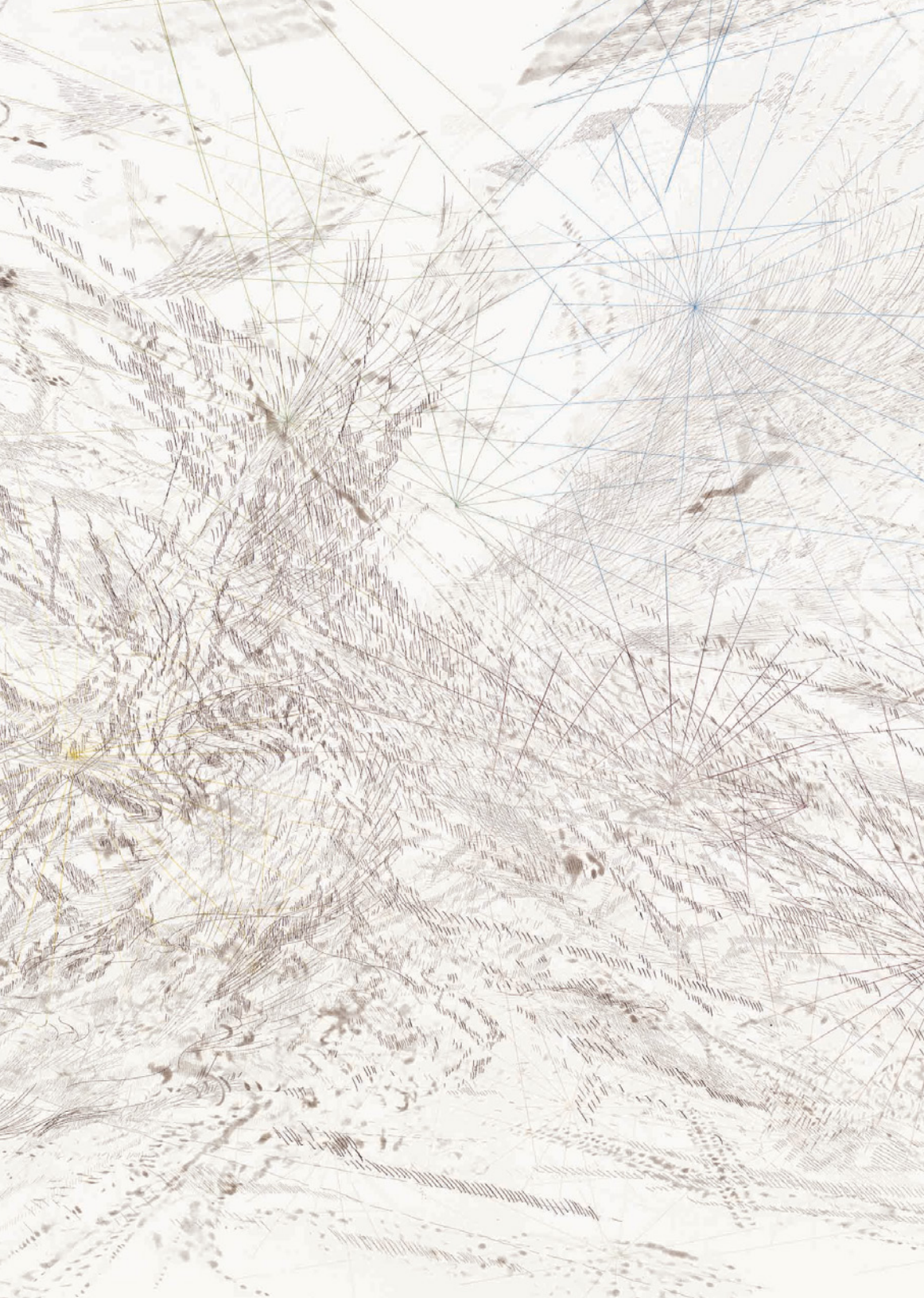
Cover image: Alison Saar, *Mutiny of the Sable Venus*, 2024 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Alan and Rebecca Ross, 2025.12



August 22, 2026–March 14, 2027

We are this land
MEDITATIONS ON THE
GREAT AMERICAN EXPERIMENT





Introduction

Steven L. Bridges

Senior Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs,
MSU Broad Art Museum

I have long been fascinated by map projections, the mathematical transformations created to represent the three-dimensional curved shape of our planet in two-dimensional space. Although for much of my life I was relatively unaware of the seeming infinitude of map projections that are possible. A simple search online for the “standard” map projection will direct you to the Web Mercator projection (also known as the Spherical Mercator). You will likely recognize it immediately. But it is far from the only one, and even in being designated as the standard, it is clearly imperfect. The Web Mercator distorts the size of landmasses the further they are from the equator, enlarging and stretching them. This proportionality thus introduces a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding about the planet we all inhabit. This adversely affects equatorial countries and continents. Recently, the African Union backed an international campaign to replace the Mercator map, citing its egregious suggestion that Greenland and Africa are presented as roughly the same size (they are not, not even close).

By invoking the notion of a Map Room in the museum’s galleries, the expectation is of course to encounter various maps, whose study and collection are a common stay on university campuses. But here we encounter something different. Yes, there are plenty of maps. However, taken up as an artistic practice or cartographic methodology, these maps communicate in rather unexpected ways. What map projections and their endless permutations have come to reveal to us is that with each projection comes a specific way of seeing and representing the world, and these representations are anything but objective. As MSU alumna Nat

Image: Julie Mehretu, *Unclosed*, 2007 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of the artist, 2008.25

Swartz writes in the following text, maps are always encoded with the subjective biases of their makers. This is not a judgement, but rather a helpful reminder that also allows us to engage with maps a bit deeper, below their surface, so to speak.

In the end, it is confirmed: How we represent the world matters, both to us—as individuals, community members, people of a certain cultural heritage, and so on—and to others. And artists have an especially engaging knack at laying all these complexities bare for us to wrestle with.

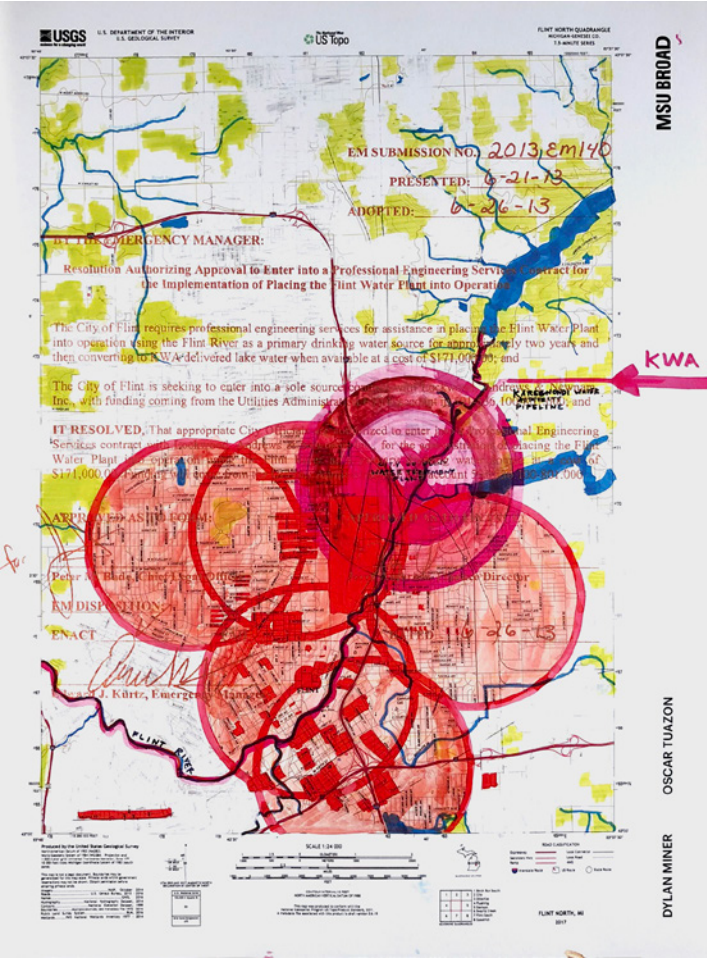


Image: Dylan AT Miner and Oscar Tuazon, *Water Map (Flint North)*, 2018. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, 2019.14



Image: Evan Roth, *Skyscapes: East Lansing*, 2026. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2026.14

ON C(ART)OGRAPHY

Nat Swartz

MSU '25, graduate student at Stockholm University

To map a place is to claim it—to make assertions on the importance of and relationships between people and the land. In the early days of exploration, prior to the development of cartography as a science, mapmakers were artists translating distant cultures to their patrons who often hung maps as decorations, valuing their artistic mastery equal to their geographic knowledge. As technologies for accurate surveying and mass reproduction evolved throughout the centuries, the relationship between individuals and cartography shifted towards practical, navigational uses. In the years of Manifest Destiny (1845–53), or the period when settlers expanded across the American west in line with the belief that the seizure of land was divinely ordained, maps like John Farmer's (on view) were produced by the thousands, allowing settlers to survey the land they would claim before setting foot across the Missouri River. What they saw on the page was a vast expanse, a cartographic fiction that deliberately erased Indigenous homes, trade routes, and sacred sites. These maps were used to rewrite the history of the land, forming a blank slate (or *tabula rasa*) for the expansion of the American empire. Today, the individual is even further away from critical engagement with space and place, as maps reinforcing dominant narratives are commonplace, and the extent of most people's interaction with maps are strictly navigational.

Contemporary artists reclaim cartography as a critical artistic process by using both different research methods and materials to emphasize what practical or "scientific" and "objective" maps cannot. Where scientific maps measure, direct, and analyze quantifiable aspects of the relationship between people and land, and present opportunities for how to traverse these terrains, artists illuminate the immeasurable human dimensions of place,

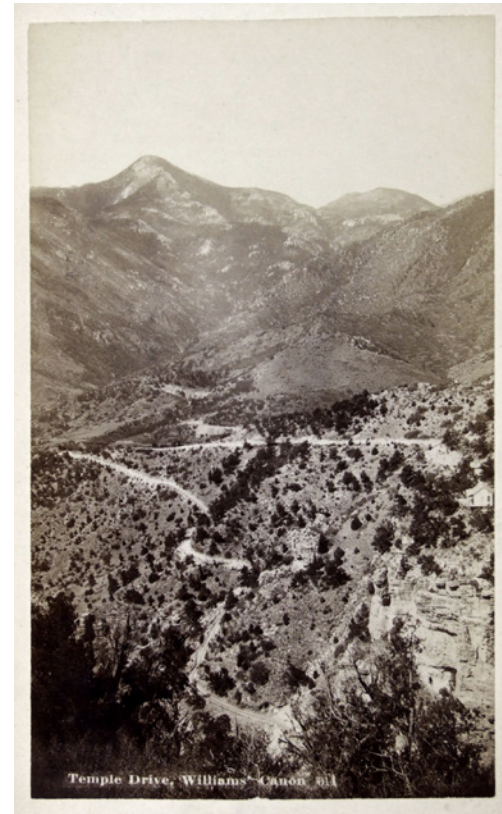


Image: W. E. Hook, *Temple Drive, Williams Canyon 614*, ca. 1880s. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, 89.16.9



Image: W. E. Hook, *108 Gateway, Garden of the Gods*, ca. 1880s. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, 89.16.14

like memory, resistance, and care. They are able to bring aesthetic value, critical perspectives, and cultural references back into maps. For example, John Halaka's series *Landscapes of Resistance* (on view) emphasizes the labor done by activists and philosophers related to land rights by overlaying their portraits on maps produced by the American Automobile Association. In turn, this practice sheds light on the landscapes crafted to accommodate settlers throughout the evolution of America's settler-colonial project. Halaka gestures toward the idea of a moral roadmap through the work of these figures who guide us in the direction of individual and collective responsibility in decolonial movements. He emphasizes these movements to dismantle imperial structures and reclaim self-determination and sovereignty through his cartographic portraiture. These connections are most possible at the intersection of artistic inspiration and cartography; there are no coordinates or surveys that account for imagination.

If the artists in this exhibition have reclaimed mapmaking as a critically artistic endeavor, how might we share that reclamation? How can we build spaces where alternative geographies tied to acts of thought, philosophy, and care, are both seen and felt? This question drew me to the intersection of human geography and curatorial practice. In a way, curating is a kind of geography that arranges space, guides connections, and emphasizes movement between eras or locations, which joins these two areas of study in ways I am only beginning to realize. We must witness, question, imagine, and build spaces for others to do the same. The artist's intervention allows for that space to be created, and where the digital map directs, the artistic map invites. And where my own education in geography taught me to measure, I now look to witness, to encourage more ways of relating to the land, to each other, and to the stories and myths which bind the two together.

Image: John Halaka, *Spirits that Guide Us—Gerald Vizenor*, from the series *Landscapes of Resistance*, 2020 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Nellie M. Loomis Endowment in memory of Martha Jane Loomis, 2025.36.3



MAP WHAT MATTERS

Maps often show borders, roads, and place names.

THIS ARTWORK INVITES US TO NOTICE SOMETHING MORE.

Instead of asking **WHERE IS THIS PLACE?** ask:

Who cares for this place?

Who is connected to this place?

Add your own connections to the map.



Image: John Halaka, *Hands that Feed Us—1 Year*, from the series *Landscapes of Resistance*, 2022. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Nellie M. Loomis Endowment in memory of Martha Jane Loomis, 2025.36.4

What stories does this place hold?

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Cover image: Albert Bierstadt, *Clouds*, ca. 1871–73 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, anonymous gift, 73.6



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We are this land

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The Family Room is both a space and an idea. As its name suggests, it is a place for us to consider the notion of family. But the room also has a life of its own. More than just a container, the family room grows, changes, gets old, renews, and in its own ways marks the passage of time. It is an interior space, and unlike the more public dimensions of our lives, the family room is a stand-in for all the intimacy, the vulnerability, and the private moments that we hold so dear and that often help us to see, feel, and understand ourselves amidst all the complexity and chaos of the world around us.

Within the larger exhibition *We Are This Land*, this space and these ideas invite visitors in and offer glimpses to the many interior worlds that exist in this country. The gallery is not all encompassing—how could it be? With roughly 150 million homes in the United States, the interior worlds are seemingly infinite. But The Family Room does ask us to slow down. Take a beat. Pause and linger for a moment longer in conversation with the works of art and others who gather in this place together.

Perhaps more so than ever before, family and kinship are for us to define. There will always be the biological dimensions of how we understand family, but that is not the only measure. For some of us, we may belong to many families. These can be delineated through relations that revolve around friendship, professional affiliations, fraternal orders, clubs or groups, military service, or a myriad other considerations. But cutting across them all is a way to feel at home, to feel seen and heard, and, dare I say, loved.



Image: Dorothea Lange, *Mother and Two Children on the Road*, 1939, printed 1987 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, 87.16.2



Image: Jess Dugan, *JD and Steve*, from the portfolio *EVERY BREATH WE DREW*, 2020. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment, 2024.25.3



Image: Jess Dugan, *Shira and Sarah*, from the portfolio *EVERY BREATH WE DREW*, 2020. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment, 2024.25.6

EXCERPT FROM *LOOK AT ME LIKE YOU LOVE ME*

Jess T. Dugan
Artist

One moment you're twenty-five and kissing in the car, beginning the intoxicating dance of falling in love, and suddenly, ten years go by, and you're raising a child and reckoning with the knowledge that, this is it, this is what you chose, this is your life.

And then you realize how lucky you are, and how fragile it all is, this existence we find ourselves in. All of the small things—gestures of attention, of caring, of presence—emerge to you as the significant things they have always been. Love was hiding in the shadow of the everyday, there all along, waiting for your eyes to adjust.

It is being the first call, the last stop.

It is showing up, making the choice to be present, to stay when things are hard. It is a commitment to looking inward and learning how to be more vulnerable, less reactive. It is an accumulation of memories, a holding of history.

The thing about love, though, is that it is not the same as desire. The newness fades, the mystery evolves into a deep knowing. A series of everyday, banal moments—interspersed with exceptional ones, both joyful and difficult—add up to something much larger than the sum of their parts.

Image: Jess Dugan, *Tulips*, from the portfolio *EVERY BREATH WE DREW*, 2020. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment, 2024.25.8





Image: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea and Zion at the Badawest Restaurant on Corunna Road, Flint, Michigan, 2016-17* (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2023.1.1

PICTURE YOUR PEOPLE

The artworks in The Family Room remind us that family can take many forms. Our many families help shape who we are and how we care for one another.

WHO MAKES YOU FEEL SEEN, HEARD, AND AT HOME?

FILL THE EMPTY FRAMES WITH THE PEOPLE, GROUPS, AND COMMUNITIES THAT HELP YOU BELONG.

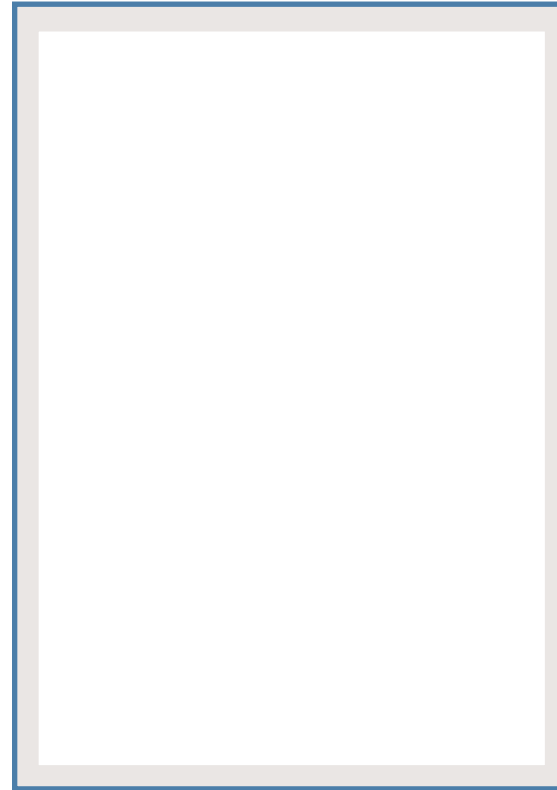


Image: Bruce Davidson, *East 100th Street (Couple dance to jukebox)*, 1966. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of the Adamsky Family, 2025.5.16

Image: Arthur Rothstein, *Sign, Birmingham, Alabama*, 1937, printed 1987. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, 88.2.1

Image: LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mr. Smiley Standing with His Daughter Shea and His Granddaughter Zion on Their Freshwater Spring, Newton, Mississippi*, from the series *Flint Is Family In Three Acts*, 2017–19. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2023.1.3



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Cover image: Tyree Guyton, *Lunch Break*,
from the series *Birdcage*, 1994. Eli and Edythe
Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University,
purchase, funded by the Office of the Vice
President for Research and Graduate Studies,
2002.2.1



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Humans have inhabited North America for over 23,000 years. This still-developing research into human history on the continent is supported by many archaeological findings. It was only in 2009 that ancient footprints left in the now dry lakebeds of White Sands National Park in New Mexico were discovered and rewrote our understanding of humanity's timeline on this land. Taking this history in, and reflecting on the present anniversary year of the United States of America, how do we measure and understand the significance of 250 years in comparison to tens of thousands of years? What new or re-oriented perspectives does this grappling with time provide us?

In many Native American traditions, there is a saying that the first peoples of this land have been here since time immemorial. This is time beyond the limits of memory and recorded history. In the following poem by US Poet Laureate Joy Harjo, the author also asks us to consider the notion of memory from the land's perspective. The memory of this land, to which we are all connected, extends much deeper into the past. These are measures of time that are difficult to comprehend, yet the landscapes that give shape to and provide the contours of our lives are themselves the result of this deep, geological time and memory.

This section of the exhibition ruminates on these different questions and perspectives. Ultimately, it is rooted in an exploration of different ways of understanding and experiencing our connections to the land, and how the land also defines us, brings us together. Interwoven with the other galleries in the exhibition, conversations around the environment, community, family, and civic responsibility all come to the fore here, too.

Turning a familiar phrase on its head—through Harjo's words and the works in this gallery—what would it mean for us to shift from "this land is ours" to "we are this land"?



Image: Phillip Lindsay Mason,
The Family Tree, 1986 (detail).
Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum,
Michigan State University,
purchase, funded by the United
Blacks of Wonders Hall, 86.9



Image: Claire Pentecost, soil-erg. *Sketches for Money Notes: Teachers of Gaia-SOJA = MUERTE*, slogan of the Argentinian peasants defending biodiversity and subsistence farming against the invasion of Monsanto's genetically modified soy monoculture., 2012. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, partial gift of the artist and partial purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2021.5.15

Image: Claire Pentecost, soil-erg. *Sketches for Money Notes: Teachers of Gaia - Waiting for the sun, with a dinosaur (iguansaurus, represented in a model outside the Ottoneum entrance).*, 2012. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, partial gift of the artist and partial purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2021.5.23

Image: Claire Pentecost, soil-erg. *Sketches for Money Notes: Teachers of Gaia - Bee*, 2012. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, partial gift of the artist and partial purchase, funded by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment, 2021.5.10



BLESS THIS LAND

Joy Harjo

23rd Poet Laureate of the United States (2019–22)

Bless this land from the top of its head to the bottom of its feet

From the arctic old white head to the brown feet of tropical rain

Bless the eyes of this land, for they witness cruelty and kindness in this land

From sunrise light upright to falling down on your knees night

Bless the ears of this land, for they hear cries of heartbreak and shouts of celebration in this land

Once we heard no gunshot on these lands; the trees and stones can be heard singing

Bless the mouth, lips and speech of this land, for the land is a speaker, a singer, a keeper of all that happens here, on this land

Luminous forests, oceans, and rock cliff sold for the trash glut of gold, uranium, or oil bust rush yet there are new stories to be made, little ones coming up over the horizon

Bless the arms and hands of this land, for they remake and restore beauty in this land

We were held in the circle around these lands by song, and reminded by the knowers that not one is over the other, no human above the bird, no bird above the insect, no wind above the grass

Bless the heart of this land on its knees planting food beneath the eternal circle of breathing, swimming and walking this land

The heart is a poetry maker. There is one heart, said the poetry maker, one body and all poems make one poem and we do not use words to make war on this land

Bless the gut labyrinth of this land, for it is
the center of unknowing in this land

Bless the femaleness and maleness of this land, for each holds the fluent power of becoming in this land

When it was decided to be in this manner here in this place, this land, all the birds made a birdly racket from indigo sky holds

Bless the two legs and two feet of this land, for the sacred always walks beside the profane in this land

These words walk the backbone of this land, massaging the tissue around the cord of life, which is the tree of life, upon which this land stands

Bless the destruction of this land, for new shoots will rise up from fire, floods, earthquakes and fierce winds to make new this land

We are land on turtle's back—when the weight of greed overturns us, who will recall the upright song of this land

Bless the creation of new land, for out of chaos we will be compelled to remember to bless this land

The smallest one remembered, the most humble one, the one whose voice you'd have to lean in a thousand years to hear—we will begin there

Bless us, these lands, said the rememberer. These lands aren't our lands. These lands aren't your lands. We are this land.

And the blessing began a graceful moving through the grasses of time, from the beginning, to the circling around place of time, always moving, always

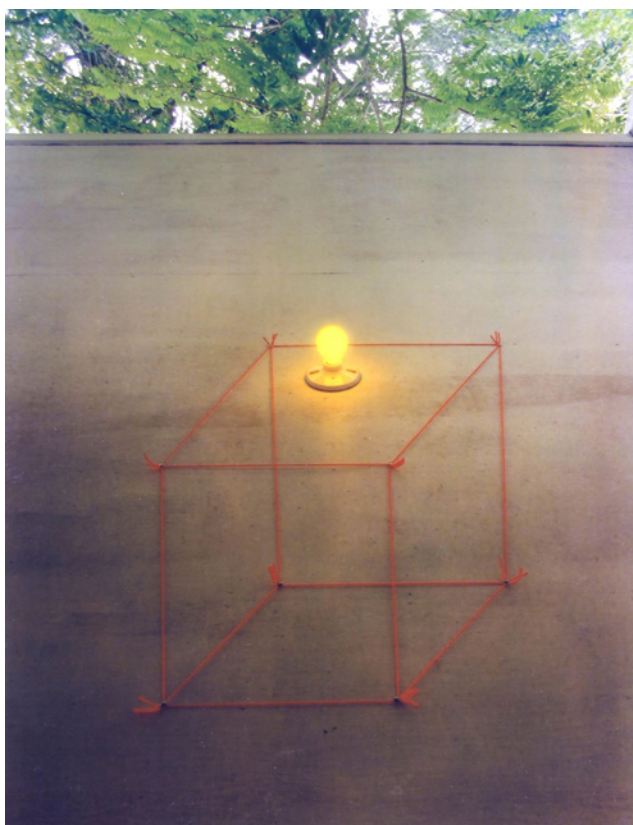
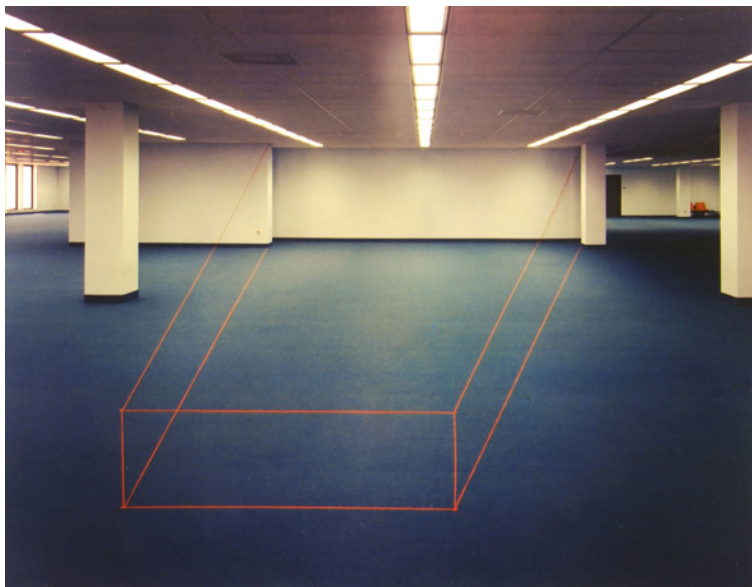


Image: John Pfahl, *Library Projection*, Tampa, Florida, from the portfolio *Altered Landscapes*, 1977, printed 1981. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Elson, 86.2.7

Image: John Pfahl, *Necker Cube*, Penland, North Carolina, from the portfolio *Altered Landscapes*, 1975, printed 1981. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Elson, 86.2.8

Image: John Pfahl, *Red Right Angle*, Buffalo, New York, from the portfolio *Altered Landscapes*, 1975, printed 1981. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Elson, 86.2.5

Image: John Pfahl, *Blue Right Angle*, Buffalo, New York, from the portfolio *Altered Landscapes*, 1975, printed 1981. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin Elson, 86.2.6

LOOKING ACROSS TIME

This ice holds a story much older than us.

Image: Camille Seaman, *Children of B15-A II, Ross Sea, Antarctica*, from the series *The Last Iceberg*, 2007. Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, Michigan State University, purchase, funded by the Office of the Vice President for Research and Graduate Studies, 2007.20



**“I UNDERSTAND THAT I AM
INTERCONNECTED WITH EVERYONE
AND EVERYTHING IN THE WORLD.”**

—CAMILLE SEAMAN

A horizontal timeline arrow with three vertical tick marks, pointing to the right.

BEFORE THIS MOMENT...	TODAY...	AFTER THIS MOMENT...	WHAT DOES THIS PLACE ASK OF US?
What stories might this place hold?	What do you notice?	What do you hope future generations will know?	

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Cover image: Claire Pentecost, *soil-erg*.
Sketches for Money Notes: Teachers of Gaia
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deep well), 2012 (detail). Eli and Edythe Broad
Art Museum, Michigan State University, partial
gift of the artist and partial purchase, funded
by the Emma Grace Holmes Endowment,
2021.5.28