

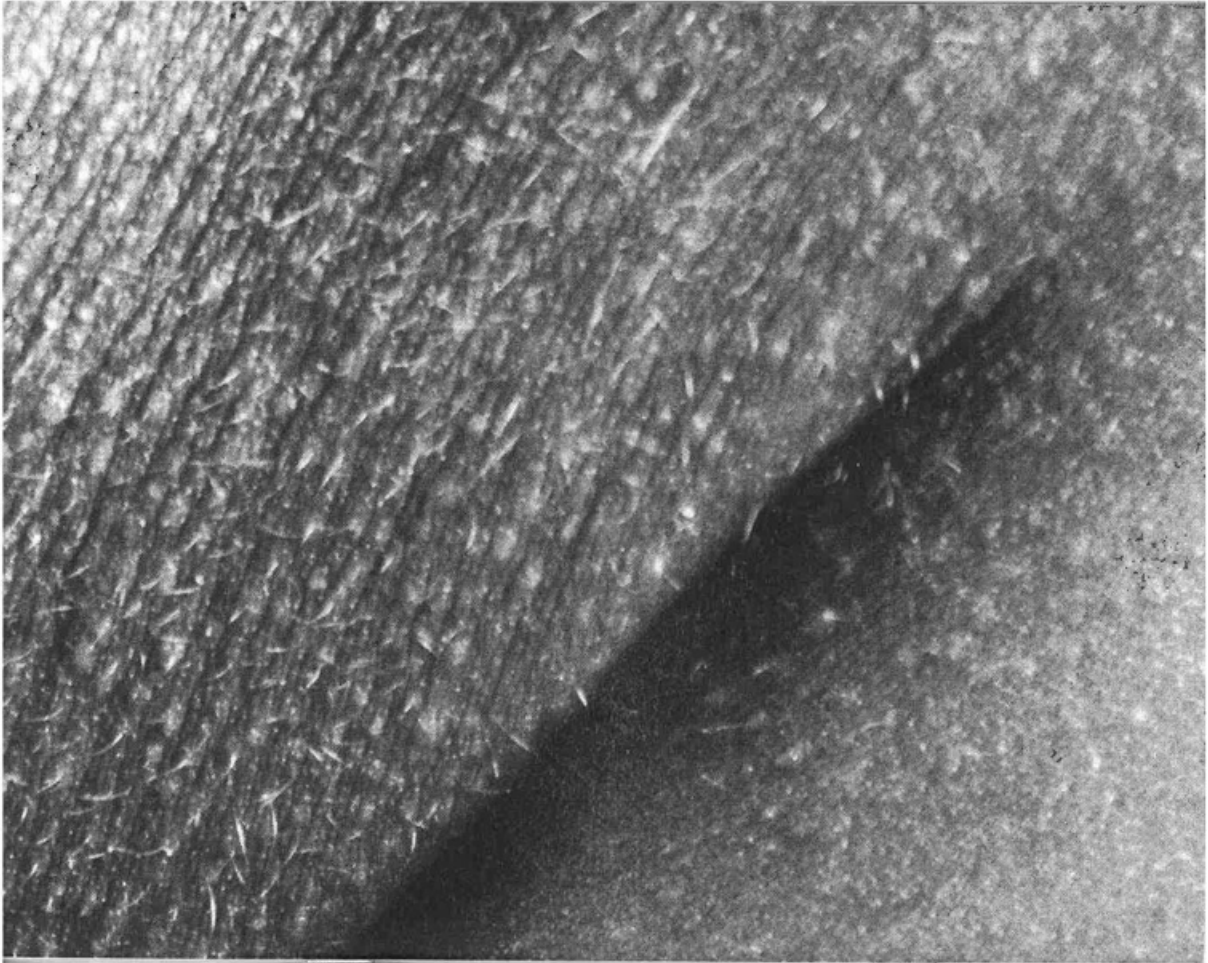


**ALLANA
CLARKE**

**A PAR-
TICULAR
FANTASY**

**USDAN GALLERY
BENNINGTON COLLEGE**

ART OMI





ALLANA CLARKE: A PARTICULAR FANTASY

Usdan Gallery at Bennington College,
September 13–December 10, 2022

Art Omi, Ghent, NY, October 8, 2022–January 8, 2023

Allana Clarke's first institutional solo exhibition, *A Particular Fantasy*, is a collaboration between Usdan Gallery, at Bennington College, and Art Omi, in Ghent, New York, with complementary installations across venues. A Trinidadian-American artist, Clarke is known for her inventive use of materials such as sugar, cocoa butter, hair extensions and hair-bonding glue to confront histories of colonialism and Western standards of beauty. While her photographs and videos look closely at bodies, including her own, her sculptures repurpose products designed for use on bodies. Often her process begins with her pouring large, thick quantities of hair-bonding glue onto a flat surface to create a "skin," which she stretches, pushes, pulls, pleats and molds over a period of days using her hands and feet. Through this somatic technique, she transubstantiates a toxic substance into stunning objects that ripple, curl, shimmer, twist and glisten.

Covering the artist's practice over the past ten years, *A Particular Fantasy* takes its title from groundbreaking theorist, activist and poet Audre Lorde's essay "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger" (1984). In it, she describes her anger as a "molten pond at the core of me." The essay argues for new womanist understandings of self to emerge, generated by and through relationships between Black women as a critical way to extricate themselves from the "racist sexist cauldron" of American history. Clarke quotes the Lorde essay in her video *Of My Longing & My Lack* (2019), in which the narrator describes struggling to overcome internalized, generational hatred "because I am not some particular fantasy of a Black woman."

In dialogue with the poured latex works of Lynda Benglis and the stretched pantyhose of Senga Nengudi's R.S.V.P. series, Clarke's hair-bonding glue works examine the erotics and possibilities afforded by mutating a substance that binds into new, pliant formations. Embracing the messy, lubricious nature of the glue, Clarke's resulting forms appear like the "molten ponds" described in Lorde's essay, writhing, morphing and metabolizing on the wall and floor. Defying the practices governing this material's traditional use, Clarke proposes its radical reincarnation, underscoring Lorde's proposition that "it is out of Chaos that new worlds

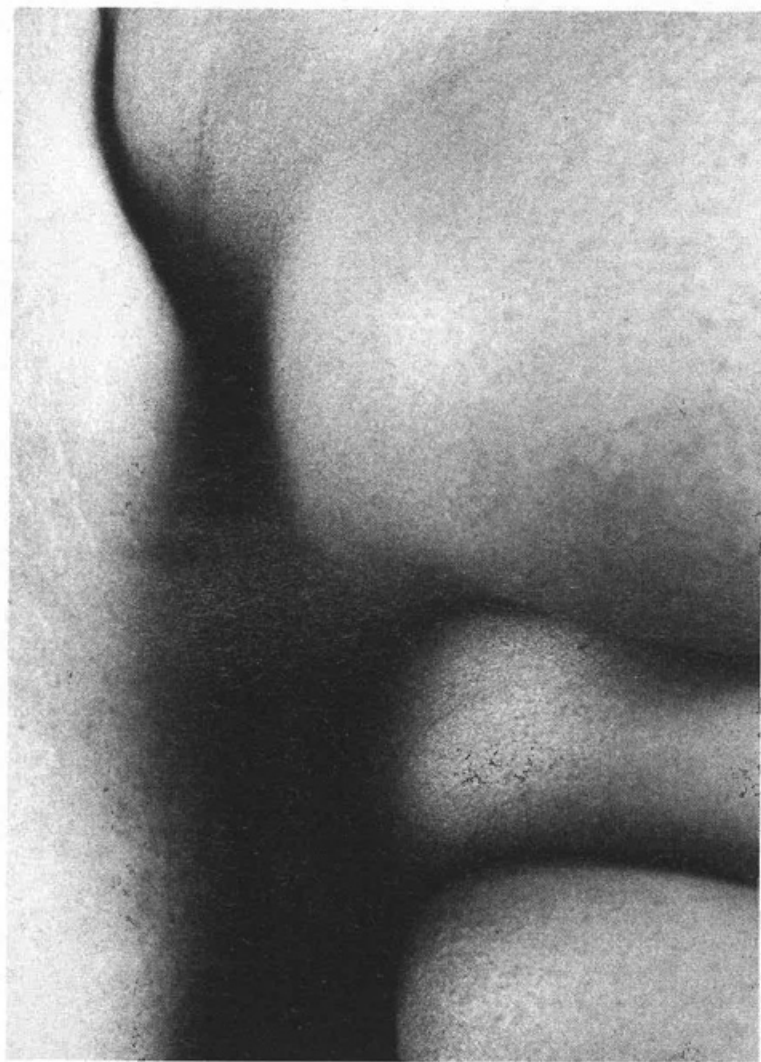
are born." The artist experiences her methods as freeing her materials from their traumatic origins and, in turn, offering a metaphor to free herself from the violent compartmentalization of Black identity.

Usdan Gallery programming foregrounds the ideas of process so central to Clarke's practice, with four performance videos and, early in the show, a stage-like area for the artist to construct a 25-foot-long hair-bonding glue sculpture—her largest piece to date and the first oriented completely on the floor. During a three-week residency at Bennington, Clarke has support from student assistants and her work overlaps with gallery hours, making her process part of the exhibition and integrating it with teaching. A film of Clarke making the sculpture, by artist Cori Spencer, will join the exhibition once the sculpture is complete. *A Particular Fantasy* has particular relevance within the history of Bennington, which in 1952 presented the first retrospective of Jackson Pollock and in 1958 was one of three hosts for the first U.S. exhibition of the Japanese Gutai group. As Clarke's embodied work operates within mid-century ideas of "action painting" connected to both Pollock and the Gutai, the Usdan site underscores her conversation with modernist traditions of abstraction and performative use of materials.

The concurrent display at Art Omi presents a selection of Clarke's celebrated wall-hung sculptures as well as large-format photographs that depict fragmented frames of the artist's body and the U.S. premier of the photographic triptych, *A Return to the Point of Entanglement* (2016/2022). The triptych's title references Afro-Caribbean writer, philosopher, and poet Édouard Glissant, who examined the rhizomatic pathways for new cultural production to emerge in a world inextricably shaped by colonialism. Embracing the fragments left in the wake of colonial violence, Glissant argues that the fragments together constitute a rich bricolage that will refuse any fixed system or notion of linear continuity. A video on view in both locations, *Weaving De/Construction* (2012), provides a conceptual link between the two sites.

—Sara O'Keefe, Art Omi senior curator, and Anne Thompson, Usdan Gallery director and curator







**A Constellation of
Considerations:
A Formal, Historical and
Spiritual Engagement of
Allana Clarke's Practice**

BY STEPHANIE E. GOODALLE





When you look into a mirror, you don't see yourself. You see a reflection, a representation of yourself. You never really know what you look like, however you can gain some sort of perspective through mirrors, images and the insights of others to learn more about your appearance and well-being. This principle may also be applied to a community. A person's values and opinions are shaped by—are reflections of—those they spend the most time with. In her book *All About Love*, bell hooks shares these thoughts on the essential importance of an individual's first communities:

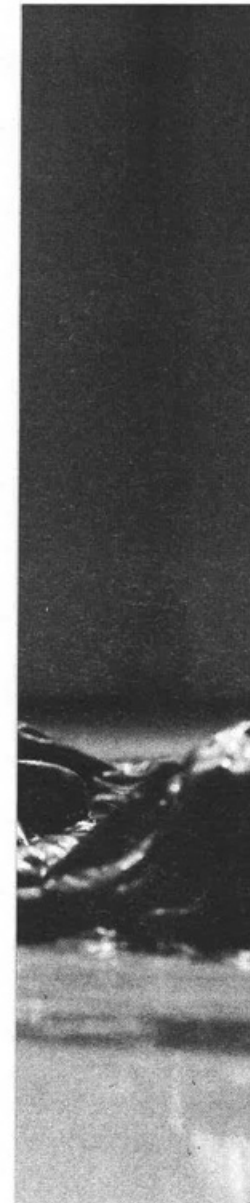
We are all born into the world of community. Rarely if ever does a child come into the world in isolation, with only one or two onlookers. Children are born into a world surrounded by the possibility of communities. Family, doctors, nurses, midwives, and even admiring strangers comprise this field of connection, some more intimate than others.⁽¹⁾

I use hooks's framework of community because it is rooted in an ethos of love that encourages respect, accountability, nurture and growth. At its healthiest, a community exemplifies and cultivates ideas such as self-esteem and self-love that enrich everyone in its orbit. Yet the community can also reflect negative ideologies. hooks reminds us that capitalism and patriarchy are tools of domination and, when coupled, they're destructive.⁽¹⁾ While she initially applies this to the nuclear family, forceful submission of any person or group that does not directly benefit from capitalism and patriarchy falls victim to systemic, daily, historicized violence.

For several months, I've been musing on Allana Clarke's first institutional solo exhibition, *A Particular Fantasy*. Works included from the past ten years demonstrate Clarke's exploration of Black female subjectivity through the primary lens of her own body. By using a variety of materials such as hair-bonding glue, hair extensions, sugar, cocoa butter and even her own skin, she analyzes Black women's relationships to the power structures that mold society. These materials somatically condition Clarke and shape how she is read, desired and received. Through performance, video, sculpture and photography, Clarke detangles and unravels traumas and histories that have been passed down to her. The artist's dual Trinidadian and American heritage—combined with her womanhood—is a liminal space: she has been left feeling unhomed, never Trinidadian enough, never American enough, never black enough, never enough. Black womanhood and girlhood are tender and vulnerable and will always be read in opposition to patriarchy. As a result, Black womanhood, both in body and existence, is a threat.⁽¹⁾ There is no place to retreat, so one must go within.

An individual can neither control nor agree to what pain is passed down through the generations. It is a personal responsibility to process it. If we don't, hatred, anger and resentment will fester in the body. That shit will kill you. Allana Clarke's multidisciplinary practice utilizes the distinct visual paradoxes of figuration and abstraction to bare realities of indoctrinated violence, more specifically misogynoir. These modes of working afford Clarke the liberty to critique structures of racism and misogyny and to create realities that affirm her being and, by extension, those of other Black women.

One example can be found in the way Clarke engages with the figure in *Of My Longing & My Lack* (2019). This performance, a monologue of mourning, shifts the gaze of the viewer from herself to a group. In the 11-minute video, five women of color, barefoot and dressed in gray, are dancing liturgically. The primary female subject is a Black woman playing with loose, long, natural straightened hair. One of the first phrases said by the narrator—"My appearance was of particular annoyance to her"—succinctly embodies the transfer of ideologies from one generation to the next. At two minutes, thirty-seven seconds into the video, the women are sitting down and awash in red light; shortly afterward, they all turn their heads and glance at the camera directly to engage with the viewer. Still later come the phrases "Because I am not some particular fantasy of a Black woman" and "I mourn for the acts of lovelessness that she will have to endure." Clarke's combination of gesture and





dialogue is critical, indirectly sharing the emotional depth of the issue.

In her sculptural work, Clarke tackles her distorted enculturation masterfully through her engagement with materials including hair-bonding glue, a tacky, goopy substance used to temporarily adhere hair extensions to the scalp. The glue is applied to the track on a hair weft and then repeatedly to sections along the contours of the person's scalp until the process is complete. With consistent wear, the chemicals seep into the scalp and, when the extensions are improperly removed, the result can be hair loss. When appropriated as an artistic tool, however, the glue lends Clarke's work a materiality that is clever, chaotic and fuscous. Her sculptures are slick, shiny and wrinkly and, even when installed, convey an odd odor. To make these objects, Clarke pours out bottles of hair-bonding glue onto a plastic-and-mesh surface laid flat on the floor, allows the glue to cure into a "skin" and then manipulates the skin with her hands and feet. The glue takes days to dry, which gives Clarke time to pinch, fold, twist and squeeze the solidifying material. When you see the completed sculptures, the undeniably black, the literal and coded, stands out from all else. If you don't look at each work closely, you lose the opportunity to transport yourself. *Achingly* (2021) has a form akin to a piece of worn coral found on the beach. It is compact, a bit porous and wet looking. Clarke manages to transform the glue into a substance that fully defies its original consistency, making objects that speak on multiple levels while containing a critique of the glue's toxic yet everyday condition. I can't believe this shit is used on a person's head. After all these years I understand, but I don't. It is a lie that beauty must come with a price. Short term appeal has never been the cost for holistic wellness. This is not chastisement but an appeal for accountability. People can only teach what they themselves have been taught and for that we must hold grace. It takes courage to retrain your thoughts.

Clarke is aptly situated in a lineage of artists, particularly Black women, working with alternative materials. Many of these predecessors were included in the 2011 exhibition *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists*, at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History and Culture, in Baltimore. Curated by Michelle Joan Wilkinson, the program featured Chakaia Booker, Maya Freelon Asante, Maren Hassinger, Martha Jackson Jarvis, Joyce J. Scott and Renée Stout. Each of these artists manipulates materials to make objects with a keen eye for aesthetic harmony; each has a practice influenced by the creativity within their own communities. (iv) Among this generation, Hassinger (b. 1947, Los Angeles) is of particular

interest in relationship to Clarke, because of the way her multidisciplinary practice tethers a line of engagement with her environment—the natural, the manufactured, people, community, and the interactions among them. In her work, Hassinger has emphasized a praxis of ecological wellness: as living beings on the earth, we are to care for and nurture one another. We are meant to be in communion with one another, and the lack of communion has caused disharmony in the world. In Hassinger's monograph ... *Dreaming*, she shares, "I don't know where I came from and I don't know where I'm going. This is the life I share with everyone. We are equal in this predicament. We are all passing through. From this untenable place, I make things."^(v) Hassinger's objectivity democratizes how we think we interact with one another. All living things are connected to one another, and these connections are indelible and undeniable. Since the 1960s, Hassinger has expressed her sentiments and reflections on the natural world through her sculptures, performances, videos and installations. After her graduation from Bennington College in 1969, she moved back to her native Los Angeles where she obtained an MFA in fiber sculpture from UCLA. Collaboration has been a key thread in her practice, working with artists such as Houston Conwill, Ulysses Jenkins, Franklin Parker, David Hammons and her longest collaborator, Senga Nengudi, participating in performances such as *Ceremony for Freeway Fetes* (1980) to engage with local architecture, ecological issues and cultural history. Hassinger utilizes materials such as newspapers, wire rope, leaves, branches, and more to craft her works. Sculptural installations such as *Leaning* (1980) become a part of the landscape as metal tendrils pierce the air, allowing the artist to tinker with multiplicity and scale.

Looking closely at Clarke and Hassinger's practices reveals how they both engage in a praxis of motion employed in different capacities. Focus on how each artist uses her hands in processes that emphasize varying forms of women's work. In Hassinger's performance *Women's Work*, the artist enlists audience participants to tear newspaper into thick strips, which then are twisted into threads, tied together to resemble an umbilical cord and bunched into a ball. Clarke, in producing her sculptures on the ground, uses her entire body to manipulate the slow-curing glue over time, leaving her literal imprint on the surface. Early in the process, she stands barefoot in a sea of sticky slime and slathers it around on the ground. A spilled beauty product typically causes dread. For Clarke, it becomes a site of questioning and reckoning, an opportunity in which she focuses on the curing epidermis of the glue to form the initial shapes of her sculptures. (vi) Besides pinching, pushing and pleating with





her hands and feet, Clarke deploys methods that include consideration of the tiny bottles that contain the glue. She cleverly creates peaks in the work by standing the bottles upside down; as the material around the tip dries, the bottle when removed creates a new layer in the work similar to tephra. (In a new body of work in her Detroit studio, Clarke cuts open the used bottles, peels away the glue residue inside and rolls it into tiny balls which she affixes to canvas.) The underlayers of the skin stay malleable for a long time, and Clarke occasionally uses her fingers and toes to poke the glue in a way similar to focaccia, leaving deep imprints. When the entire form is solidified enough, she molds the skin to its ultimate presentation, most often hung on the wall but in some of her recent work flowing from the wall onto the floor. In the end, Clarke achieves a reversal of roles regarding her material: she uses her body to control the glue in service of art production, opposed to the glue's intended use to control the appearance of the body in ways potentially harmful. The women's work of hair care has suddenly been made redemptive.

It's taken a painstakingly long time to write this essay. It's embarrassing to say, but it's true. There is a particular difficulty when choosing to discuss an inherited pain. Here is the lesson from this: the only way to begin progress for the community is to look at oneself. The moments and habits that produce ease should be noticed just as much as those that intend to disturb your day. These should be noticed and adjusted. Adjustment does not happen in isolation from a community striving to improve its wellness. Combating violence without support and strategy is self-sabotage. As "we" look inward, "we" discover what "they" were afraid of: the intergenerational effort for improving communal health. What Clarke has demonstrated through the past ten years of her practice is that progress can and is being made. Art without vulnerability is mechanics. The

ENDNOTES

(i) bell hooks, *All About Love*, (HarperCollins, New York, 2001) pgs.129-130

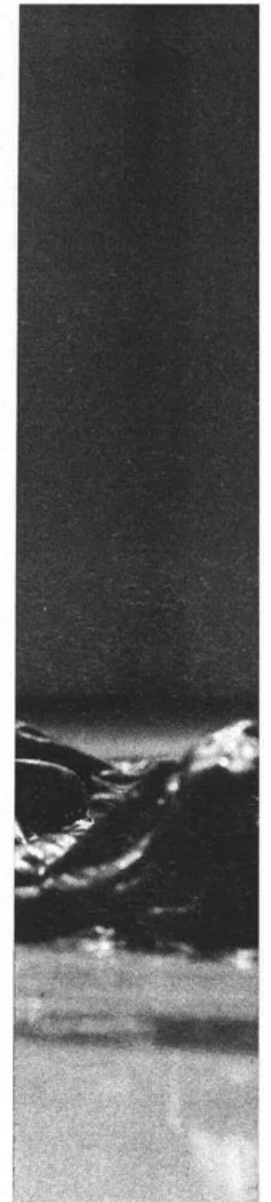
(ii) *Ibid*

(iii) M. NourbeSe Philip, "Displace—The Space Between," In *A Genealogy of Resistance: And Other Essays*, (Mercury Press, Toronto, 1997) pg. 75.

(iv) Michelle Wilkinson, "Of Material Importance" in *Material Girls: Contemporary Black Women Artists*, (Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History & Culture, Baltimore, 2011) pgs. 15-16

(v) Maren Hassinger, "Passing Through," in *...Dreaming*, by Hassinger, Kellie Jones, Anne Collins Smith, and Andrea Barnwell Brownlee (Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, 2016) pg. 17

(vi) James Cohan Gallery, "NXTHVN: Allana Clarke," 2021, <https://vimeo.com/574009827>. Accessed August 27, 2022.









ON VIEW AT USDAN GALLERY

Untitled floor sculpture,
produced inside Usdan Gallery,
Sept. 14–Oct. 3, 2022
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
Approximately 25 x 10 feet

On My Life, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
41 x 40 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi
Gupta, Chicago. Collection of
Stephen Reily, Louisville, Kentucky.

Weaving De/Construction, 2012
Video, color; 17:31 minutes
Courtesy of the artist

Performing Histories: Sugar,
performance for video, 2012
Video, color; 13:55 minutes
Courtesy of the artist.

*You Belong to Nothing & Nothing
Belongs to You*, 2017
HD video, color; 7:30 minutes
Courtesy of the artist.

Of My Longing & My Lack, HD video,
wall projection, 2019
HD video, color; 10:50 minutes
Courtesy of the artist.

Untitled film by Cori Spencer,
HD video
Filmed inside Usdan Gallery,
Sept. 21–24, 2022

ON VIEW AT ART OMI

*A Return to the Point of
Entanglement*, 2016/2022
Chromogenic prints mounted
on aluminum
50 x 60 inches each
Courtesy of the artist and
Kavi Gupta, Chicago.

Achingly, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
29 x 48 x 12 in
Courtesy of the artist. Collection of
Sam Shikhar, New York.

Aftermaths, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex, black carbon dye)
43 x 34 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi
Gupta, Chicago. Collection of
Dr. Charles Boyd.

Carried Across Tightly, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second Super Hair
Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
31 x 34 x 3 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Kavi
Gupta, Chicago. Collection of Bill and
Christy Gautreaux, Kansas City,
Missouri.

Of My Telling, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second Super Hair
Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
47 x 34 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist. Collection of
Phillip and Tracey Riese, New York.

Of Radial Will, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second Super Hair
Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
60 x 36 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist.
Private collection.

Sovereign, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
41 x 39 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist. Collection of
James Keith Brown &
Eric Diefenbach, New York.

Swallow, Swallow, 2021
Salon Pro 30 Second
Super Hair Bond Glue
(Rubber latex and black carbon dye)
48 x 42 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist. Collection of
Dan Nguyen, MD, New Jersey.

Untitled, 2020
Chromogenic print mounted on
aluminum
24 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Kavi Gupta, Chicago.

Untitled, 2020
Chromogenic print mounted on
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Untitled, 2020
Chromogenic print mounted
on aluminum
24 x 20 inches
Courtesy of the artist and
Kavi Gupta, Chicago.

Weaving De/Construction, 2012
Video, color; 17:31 min
Courtesy of the artist.

ALLANA CLARKE

Allana Clarke (b. 1987) received a BFA in photography from New Jersey City University in 2011 and an MFA in Interdisciplinary Practice from MICA's Mount Royal School of Art in 2014. She is an assistant professor at Wayne State University in Detroit. Clarke has been an artist in residence at the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture, the Vermont Studio Center, Lighthouse Works and Yaddo. She recently completed a 2020-21 NXTHVN fellowship, a mentorship program co-founded by artist Titus Kaphar, and one of her large-scale sculptures was included in the 2022 FRONT Cleveland Triennial. She has received grants including the Toby Devan Lewis Fellowship, Franklin Furnace Fund, and a Puffin Foundation Grant. Her work has been screened and performed at Gibney Dance, New York; Invisible Export, New York; the New School Glassbox Studio, New York; FRAC, Nantes, France; and SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; and was featured in the Bauhaus Centennial publication *Bauhaus Now: Is Modernity an Attitude*. Clarke is represented by Galerie Thomas Zander in Cologne and Kavi Gupta Gallery in Chicago.

STEPHANIE E. GOODALLE

Stephanie E. Goodalle is an art editor and advisor who focuses on the experiences of the Black diaspora. Her essays and interviews have appeared in publications including *Art Papers*, *BOMB*, *Burnaway* and the monograph *Kenturah Davis: Everything That Cannot Be Known* (SCAD Museum of Art, 2020). She is also the creator and host of DSCNNCTD, a series on IGTV that highlights the aesthetic and formal ingenuity of emerging Black and POC artists. Programming and exhibitions include *A Flexible Form*, at SCAD; *Synesthesia: Sound, Color and Iconography in Free to Be* at Jenkins Johnson Projects; and *Click, Click: Conversations on Black Photography and Other Articulations of the Real*, at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College. As *BOMB*'s 2018 Oral History Fellow, she co-organized interviews, events and panels with artists including Linda Goode Bryant, Janet Olivia Henry, Sana Musasama and Dindga McCannon. Goodalle received her BA from Spelman College, in Atlanta, and an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.

ABOUT USDAN GALLERY

Free and open to the public, the 4,000-square-foot Suzanne Lemberg Usdan Gallery is part of the Helen Frankenthaler Visual and Performing Arts (VAPA) complex at Bennington College. Exhibits, events, publications and commissioned projects feature contemporary artists and new perspectives, advancing a lineage of groundbreaking exhibition-making at the college since its founding in 1932. Programming supports and is enriched by teaching at the College across the liberal arts.

ABOUT ART OMI

Since its founding in 1992, Art Omi has supported international artists across disciplines, serving as a lab space that nurtures forward-thinking projects in nascent stages of development and catalyzes expanded contexts for significant works due for critical reappraisal. A non-profit arts organization in Ghent, NY in the Hudson Valley, Art Omi features a 120-acre Sculpture & Architecture Park with more than sixty works in a bucolic setting of rolling farmlands, wetlands, and wooded grounds, and residency programs for international artists, writers, musicians, architects, and dancers. In 2008, Art Omi opened the Charles B. Benenson Visitors Center, a LEED-certified building with a green roof and a 1,500-square foot gallery. Art Omi is free to all, and our grounds are open from dawn to dusk every day.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Usdan Gallery wishes to thank its 2022-23 Bennington student workers, who support gallery maintenance and administration: Jade Baratta, Hazel Bordagaray, Vic Coronel, Luciana Figliulo, Walter Greene, Sofian Holden, Ximena Maldonado Mayans, Marta Shoharbakova and Jenna Taus. We also thank the following students who assisted Allana Clarke with sculpture production and Cori Spencer with film production: Rafaella Binder-Gavito, Bowman, Vic Coronel, Juan Lopez, Jake Mazzaferro, Sophia Paez, Joe Scott and Jenna Taus. Many thanks to John Crowe for help with all things tech and to Liza Charbonneau for her admin excellence. And gratitude, as ever, to John Umphlett for his ingenuity and steadfast support with gallery exhibitions and operations.

Art Omi extends its deepest thanks to the exhibitions team for all of their hard work to make this project possible—Nicole Hayes, Kelsey Sloane, and Jordan Rosenow. Huge thanks to Nancy Welsh and Katie Bishop in our Communications Department for spreading word about the exhibition. And tremendous thanks to Ruth Adams, Executive Director, whose vision encourages us to present exhibitions that take risks and experiment with artists, which is central to the institution's mission.

ALLANA CLARKE: A PARTICULAR FANTASY

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