

Conversation between Storefront Window Artist Shelby Head and artist educator Jean Blackburn.



Shelby Head (pronouns fluid) is a sculptor known for their ability to incorporate social content into their accomplished forms. They constantly experiment and challenge themselves to create new work using varied materials to expand their visual vocabulary and scope. Head has worked in public art and exhibited widely in galleries, alternative spaces, and art fairs. They have received several professional awards, residencies, and fellowships, including the Tulsa Artist Fellowship 2020-22, the TAF Integrated Arts Award 2022-23, the THRIVE Powerhouse Grant in partnership with The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts 2022, and the Creative Projects Grant from the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition in Head lives

and works in Providence, RI.

About the Dirt Palace Window Installation



It's a Girl! is a collection of mixed media works assembled from decorative and domestic objects commonly associated with the "feminine". Materials and mediums, through personal association, evoke memory and emotion. The series is not a memorial but rather moves with the subject of misogyny and the questions of gender. The work is both a product of the changing worlds around it and an element of interaction with these worlds. The objects of the work are the objects of the worlds with which it is concerned. By incorporating materials of lived experience – cookware, appliances, and décor – the work challenges a purist aesthetic hierarchy that privileges one set of materials over another based on gender association. This series is a collection of history, politics, and lived life.

Shelby was in the Dirt Palace Storefront Window Gallery this December - January. Below is a conversation between them and artist Jean Blackburn.

Jean: A contested concept of home, which is very much alive in your work, has tremendous relevance today, given the multitude of war zones, racism, floods of immigrants, rising fascism, ecological instability, global pandemic, etc. Your installation pieces evoke a privileged-laden dining table, evocative of Thanksgiving. Clearly, the evils of racism poison victims and perpetrators alike. How has your research of inherited documents showing your family's active participation in slavery and the disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples changed your notion of home and how you understand your family or even the idea of family?

Shelby: My research into my ancestral family documents and North America's colonization has occurred over the past three years in Tulsa, Oklahoma. During this time, I collaborated with a group of politically active BIPOC and white artists and art workers on a visual and sound exhibition titled *Beyond the Whitewash*. The collection of mixed media works explores the legacy and implications of white supremacy, privilege, and silence in the United States. The collaboration allowed me to visit community spaces usually off limits to white people, communities whose spiritual practices are embedded in the culture and ways of living and being.



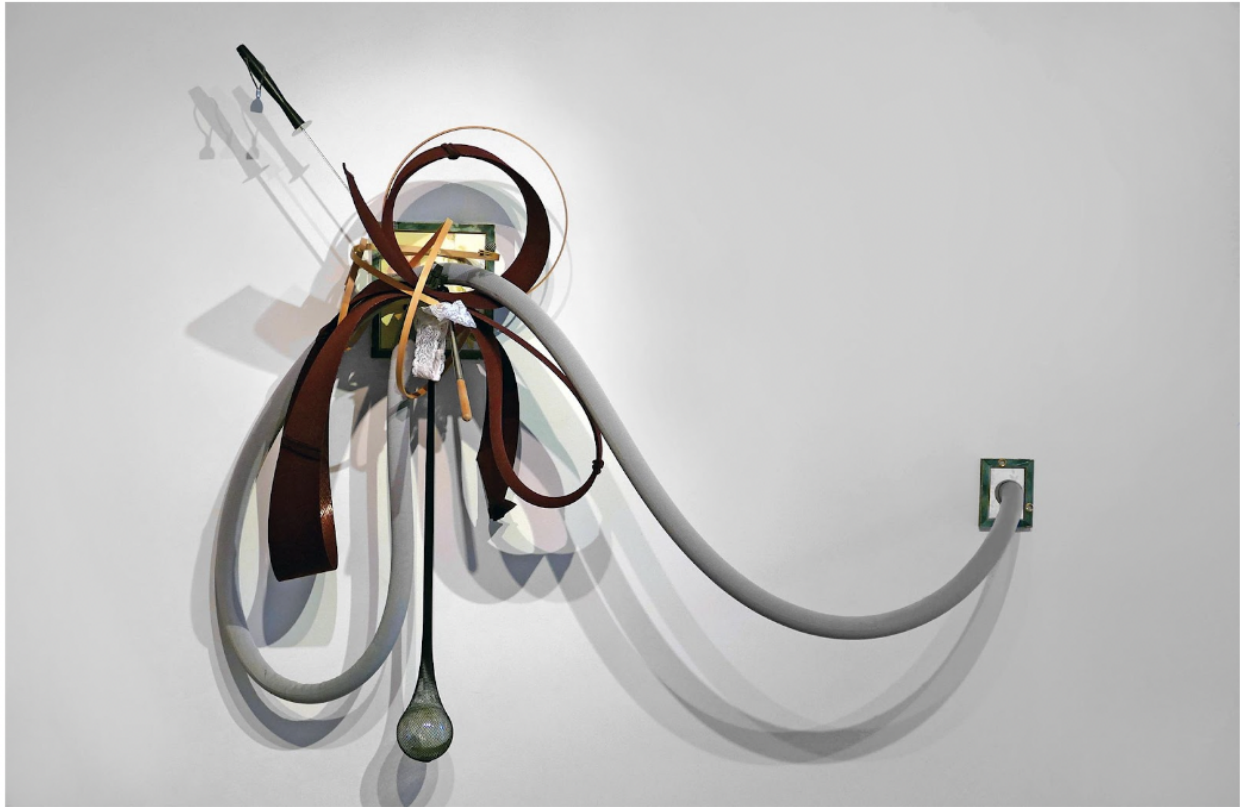
Superiority Complex, living room installation, Shelby Head; The Wall, Shelby Head

My experience in Tulsa had a profound effect on me. When I moved to Providence last summer, I committed to bringing anti-racist habits into my home, family, and community. I'm actively searching for venues to exhibit *Beyond the Whitewash* to publicly hold my ancestors and me accountable for our complicity in white supremacy. I've also begun to ask questions about forgiveness, which I will explore in my next series.

JB: The three pieces from your series "it's a girl", installed in the Dirt Palace Windows are beautiful, powerful and evocative. There is such a deeply considered tension struck with your use of gendered materials, between their fluidity and imposed constraints. Can you elaborate on your inspiration for these pieces?

SH: The inspiration for my 2017 series *It's a Girl!* can't be divorced from the politics of the time when a known sexual predator was elected president of the United States. Coinciding with the election was a comment from my then-gallerist during a studio visit. He told me he couldn't show my work in his gallery because the materials I used were

considered feminine, so the work was not real art. After his comment, I returned to my studio and began working on *It's a Girl!* using materials associated with the "feminine" to create sculptures on the subject of misogyny, rape, abortion, and women's work.



Woman's Work, 52"x 60"x 14", frame, table vise, pipe insulation, aluminum flashing, buttons, wallpaper, vacuum cleaner hose cover, stockings, kitchenware, needlepoint frames, thong, 2015-17

JB: To follow up on that, during your residency in Tulsa, you wrote:

Elasticity is one of the fundamental characteristics of queer; its very nature is fluid. Thus, this series of artwork is faulty, even pointless, in its endeavor to exact queerness through form.

How has this concept of fluidity changed or influenced your work and the materials you use?

SH: I began my research into Queer theory six years ago when my son came out as a transgender woman, challenging my beliefs about gender as binary. While the concept of fluidity has been present in my art practice for most of my adult life, it was difficult, even painful, to apply elasticity to my understanding of gender. The sculptures critically examine the pressures and assumptions I had around gender, showing my struggle,

flaws, misconceptions, acceptance, and, in the end, personal freedom. The collection is not only a visual diary of my exploration of Queer, but it also provided me with the vocabulary necessary for me own my identity as genderqueer.

JB: Research is an integral part of your work. In addition to the use of personal letters and documents from your family, it has also included video recordings of community members with a diversity of viewpoints. How do you see yourself navigating the territory between public and private? Is there a boundary? How much do you wish to shape the message the viewer receives? What audience do you intend your work for?

SH: My work is biographical and often a psychological exploration into my life experiences. My research and art-making often take several years of solitary work where, from time to time, I invite trusted friends to challenge, critique, and discuss the work. When a series is complete, the private and personal become public through collaborations and exhibitions.

My target audience is those of us who support authoritarian, classist, and gender binary thinking, in particular, my community of white women and men who see themselves as victims and participants of patriarchal power.



Structural Damage, Shelby Head

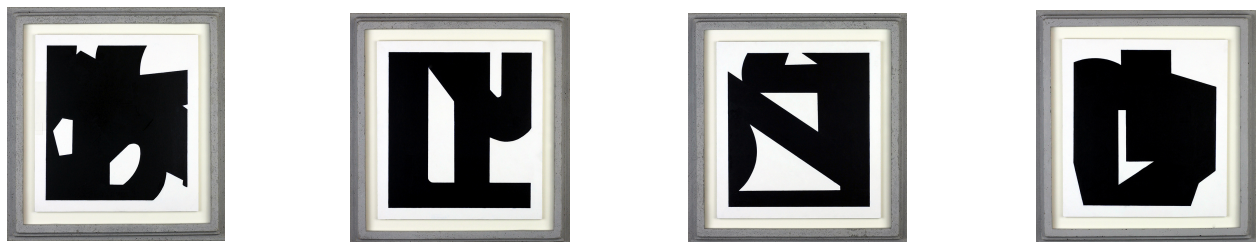
The point is not to lay blame but to give white people (and others) an opportunity to look closely at U.S. laws, policies, mistakes, ideologies, social constructs, and abuses and imagine new possibilities and different understandings of our past and present - to see our shared humanity as deserving of dignity, rights, knowledge, social projects, and equity for all. The viewer is offered a platform where diverse voices can be heard and represented, a powerful reminder that we are all connected. Our collective stories show, *not tell*—and move the viewer to make powerful connections with their own life stories.

JB: What are the biggest influences on you? On your work?

SH: I'm interested in craftsmanship and works of art that create an elegant and intricate balance between depth and simplicity, whether in the visual arts, dance, architecture, writing, theater, or music. Each of my series comes with its own set of influences, and my current interests include religion and spirituality, installations, soundscapes, and collaboration with other artists.

The group of artists and art workers that have had a profound effect on my personal life and art practice in recent years include collaborators Welana Fields Quetoh, - Curator/Writer, Osage/Muscogee/Cherokee Nations; Nathan Young - Multidisciplinary Sound Artist, The Delaware Tribe of Indians/Pawnee Nation/Kiowa Tribe; Warren Realrider – Multidisciplinary Sound Artist, Pawnee/Crow; Bobby Martin – Native Visual Artist, Mvskoke Creek Nation; M. Florine Démosthène – Black Visual Artist; Phetote Mshairi – Black Entrepreneur; Poet; Author; Publisher; Performing Artist; Teaching Artist; Poetry Slam Champion; Mentor; Advocate; Actor; Songwriter; Playwright; Curator; Host; and Keynote Speaker; Joel Daniel Phillips - white Visual Artist.

JB: Part of your series “am i that name?”, the small works on paper, all black and white, at quick glance appear to operate in the realm of modernist abstraction, playing adeptly with intertwining figure and ground relationships. However, with a closer perusal, I see they are close-up drawings of your posed stick figure sculptures. They use a remarkably interesting and gendered array of materials, including charcoal, oil sticks, lipstick, eyeliner, and frames of cast cement. Can you elaborate on those choices?



Place no. 6, 2, 4, 7, 15"x 14", charcoal, oil stick, lipstick, eyeliner, cast cement, 2021-22

SH: A common thread running through my work is my use of material; I choose materials that are not passive but objects that actively contribute to the subject of the work. In this series, I was interested in the normative hierarchical power structure of gender and sexuality expressed through stick figures and the queer use of everyday materials and objects such as industrial equipment, hardware, and decorative wallpaper, materials that are commonly associated with either the "feminine" or "masculine".

The figures appear to be metal but are made out of a two-part urethane resin and spray-painted flat black to give the work the appearance of metal. I used black throughout the series because of its dichotomy: sophisticated and primitive, emotional and intellectual; the absence of color evokes a strong response.

The works on paper were inspired by the shadows cast on the walls from the sculptures. The work enlarges body parts from the figures and, in most cases, renders the shapes as black silhouettes. I began using charcoal and experimented with oil sticks and make-up as a medium. I found success in applying black lipstick and eyeliner on top of the charcoal, giving the black a deep and rich quality. I returned to the paper and used a razor blade to scrap aside some lipstick, creating texture and showing the art-making process.

JB: I noticed that on your website that you don't use any capital letters in the titles of your work or your labels. Constructs of language and its limitations clearly figure in your work. Can you speak about how language defines things and its relationship to your larger art project?

SH: Gender. Race. Age. Intelligence. Marriage. Groundhog Day. Language follows specific rules, shaping how we understand the world. The definition of a word exists because people in a particular group or society believe the meaning is authentic and valid. As a result, language isn't neutral. It emphasizes certain things while ignoring others. When a community's accepted beliefs about power and privilege are perceived as objective truth, it can have serious social, cultural, and political consequences.

My art practice challenges social and linguistic constructs in the United States through precisely made artworks organized into collections. The work covers various topics and techniques that investigate behavior, media, policy, and institutions as tools of oppression.

JB: Façade figures prominently in your work. Your installation "am i that name?" projects video images onto architectural constructs from a multitude of directions,

creating shifting and layered images and identities, as well as complex areas of light and shadow. How do you source your video imagery?

SH: The video installation at Melton Gallery on the University of Central Oklahoma campus was a collaboration between Carrie Kouts, the gallery director, and me over three days of experimentation and play. The installation includes five projectors situated at different heights, projecting four separate videos of three-minute looped portraits of Queer folk throughout the gallery. The portraits are moving and still images - part photography, part film, and part performance. The two custom-designed screens cast shadows, and different-sized broken portrait projections compel a closer look. The work becomes interactive when the viewer casts a moving shadow on the wall, and the image is projected onto the person. The installation is a queering of sound and space through material, soundscape, and the placement of the videos and speakers throughout the gallery. (Keep your eye out for Carrie. She moved from Oklahoma to Providence this past summer and is in the RISD MFA sculpture program. She's lovely!)

JB: In your series "in a measured line" you use light emanating from behind a drawing or beneath a sculpture to destabilize our assumptions about the object or the image. It implies a space we cannot fully apprehend, or perhaps a façade. Can you say a little bit about your use of light in these pieces?



Rage, Rage against the Dying of the Light, wood, foam-core, paper, LED lights, 6'x 6'x 5.5", 2014-15

SH: In this collection, LED lights are embedded behind the surface of each piece and partially illuminate the space inside through various breaks on the surface. These openings give a glimpse into a private and mostly hidden inner landscape. Light and, at times, material escape onto the two-dimensional surface, creating a dialogue between the flat plane and the three-dimensional space inside.

I used light as an element in this series to explore the concept of spirituality. As a lifelong atheist, I approached the possibility of a god with deep skepticism. Although this work opened a door, I moved on to other subjects after completing the collection.

JB: Shelby, you have a very diverse practice including installation, video recording and projection, sculptural fabrication, and works on paper. There is certainly a lot in play in the world that is relevant to your work. What is next for you?

SH: In addition to writing grants and marketing *Beyond the Whitewash*, *Am I that Name?*, and *It's a Girl!* to universities and museums for exhibitions, I'm researching the subject of spirituality, forgiveness, love, and community for a new series. I'm asking questions about the ways I can use knowledge to examine my actions and beliefs critically. I'm interested in the difficult work of care, being responsible, showing respect, and willingness to change despite my resistance. I am looking for the "thing" that provides the courage and strength to stand up for my beliefs and be accountable in word and action. I'm drawn to those with an active spiritual life whose daily practice embraces the qualities I seek in this series.

Jean Blackburn is a contemporary painter, sculptor, and educator who "finds ways to re-assemble objects so that they achieve levels of significance and emotional resonance one would barely have imagined possible" (Michael Amy, *Sculpture Magazine*). Her paintings and sculptures address the domestic settings' power to shape and reflect our understanding of the world. Blackburn has exhibited her work throughout the US and Internationally, including at the DeCordova Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Aldrich Museum, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Neuberger Museum, and the Ierimoti Gallery in Milan. Her work is held in museums and private collections around the world. Additionally, Jean has worked as an Archaeological Illustrator in Petra, Tuscany, New Mexico, and New England. She received a NYFA Grant for sculpture and worked as a visiting critic at numerous institutions including Anderson Ranch, the Vermont Studio Center, and Brown University. In 2014, Jean was awarded the John R. Frazier Award



for Excellence in Teaching for her teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she has taught for many years. She resides in Providence, Rhode Island.

www.blackburnartproject.com

www.instagram.com/jean_blackburn/?hl=en