

Fellowship 21

Sasha Phyars-Burgess

J Houston + Aleem Hurst

Honorable Mentions

Mikael Owunna

Infinite Essence

## About the Artists

### **Sasha Phyers-Burgess**

b. 1988.  
Scorpio.  
Black.  
Alive.

**Odette England** uses photography, performance, writing and the archive to explore themes of autobiography, gender and ritual. England is a 2021 Lightwork Artist in Residence, and was the 2020 Artist in Residence at Amherst College and the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts Studio Program.

**Kata Geibl** is a Budapest born photographer living and working in The Hague. Her work is mainly focused on global issues, capitalism, the Anthropocene, and the ambiguities of the photographic medium.

**J Houston** is an artist & photographer working in Pittsburgh, PA and NYC. Their work has been recently featured in *W Magazine*, *Aint-Bad*, Klemm Gallery at Siena Heights University, MI, CONTACT Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, and Houston Center for Photography. They hold a BA from Carnegie Mellon University.

**Aleem Hurst** is an artist living and working in Pittsburgh, PA. They received a BFA from Point Park University, and have had their work included in spaces such as Sweetwater Center for the Arts, Silver Eye Center for Photography, Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, Bunker Projects and the CVA Clement Gallery at the University of Toledo.

**Vikesh Kapoor** is an artist from Sunset Pines, Pennsylvania, whose work examines race, class and identity as a first-generation American. His ongoing photo-based narrative, *See You At Home*, has received support from curators at the National Portrait Gallery, SFMoMA, LACMA, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and the Andy Warhol Museum.

**Marcus Maddox** is a photographer working and living in Philadelphia, PA. His work is characterized by a natural tone, guided by intuition and empathy. Drawn towards the personal, Maddox sets out to capture the human condition in a meaningful and cinematic way.

**Mikael Owunna** is a queer Nigerian-Swedish American multi-media artist and engineer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Exploring the intersections of visual media with engineering, optics, Blackness, and African cosmologies, his work seeks to elucidate an emancipatory vision of possibility that pushes Black people beyond all boundaries, restrictions, and frontiers.

## Exhibition Note

While our galleries have been closed this Spring due to COVID 19, we have created virtual 3D tours of our exhibitions which are available through our website! These tours include information about each photograph in the gallery, as well as supplementary text and short wall labels from different members of our Pittsburgh community! Vist: [silvereye.org](http://silvereye.org)



## I. The Cadence of Collaboration

Collaboration can function a lot like a cadence, which we typically think of as a rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds in language, or as the beat, time, or measure of rhythm based motion or activity, like music. Cadences can be slow, or fast, start and stop, and function differently in different settings. Collaboration can play a huge role in artistic production, and thinking of it like a cadence, opens up the possibility for lots of different interpretations.

J Houston and Aleem Hurst developed their project together making their artistic choices as a team. Sasha Phyers-Burgess works collaboratively with the community within the Austin neighborhood of Chicago. She learns from the community and makes photographs which interpret different aspects of the experience of living in that neighborhood. Vikesh Kapoor's project centers around his parents and they inform much of what the final images look like - but they do not necessarily have an active role in the creative process.

### *Questions for Looking:*

- Are there visual clues in J Houston + Aleem Hurst's collaborative project that tell you this installation was created by more than one artist? Does the way the artwork is organized as an installation, across multiple walls, impact the way you are thinking?
- Step inside Sasha Phyers-Burgess' exhibition. What about this room makes it feel collaborative, or community-based? Do you feel like you only hear, or see, the voice of the artist, or are there lots of different voices speaking through these photographs?
- In Vikesh Kapoor's images, the artist uses family snapshots to tell the story of his parent's life before and after they immigrated to the United States from India. How does this mixture of present day and historical images influence how you think about his parent's role as collaborators?

Images from left to right, top to bottom: J Houston and Aleem Hurst, *Aleem and Brian*, 2019; Sasha Phyers-Burgess, *Couple #2 Hand*, Columbus Park, 2020; Vikesh Kapoor, *On an Island*, 2014; Vikesh Kapoor, *Before Immigration*, No. 3, 1969



## II.

## World Building

Photography can be a tool for constructing new worlds. The photographer can use different props, lighting or perspective to create images which plunge the viewer into an alternative space. Photographers in this exhibition use fiction, personal narratives, and archival imagery to tell stories and imagine the possibility of different worlds. J Houston and Aleem Hurst traveled back to their childhood homes in the Midwest to make photographs which re-envision personal landscapes. Odette England brings together contemporary images and archival material to prompt questions about the treatment of female gender in the rural farming community she grew up within. Kata Geibl stages photographs to create cinematic scenes that feel otherworldly.

### *Questions for Looking*

- Kata Geibl photographs things which exist in reality—people, animals, landscapes, nature—but are there elements in her photographs that make them feel like they were created in an alternate existence? Consider how artistic decisions like size, lighting, and scale help to fill out and tell a story.
- Odette England uses her personal life history growing up on a dairy farm in rural, Southern Australia, to look at how female gender is viewed within rural farming communities. Her project uses both archival imagery and contemporary photographs to speak to her experiences. How does including moments from the past and the present influence this story?
- Objects play a large role in J Houston and Aleem Hurst's project. Purple medical gloves or a shiny emergency blanket might not seem that powerful, but they have specific memories, or emotions attached to them for the artists. Think about objects that mean something to you - how might you photograph them to communicate those feelings, as opposed to an object you don't have a personal attachment to?

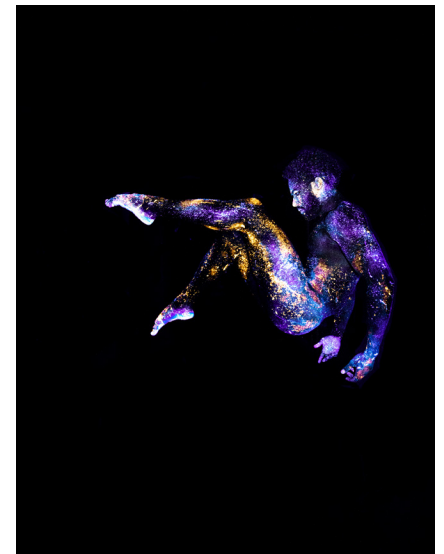
### III.

## Color Choices

Marcus Maddox and Mikael Owunna have created portraits on view in the gallery. Both artists use color in ways that make us question how much effect it has on how we interpret these works of art as photographs or as a different medium. Maddox manipulates his photographs, using software like Photoshop and Lightroom, to alter the tones in the image, and prints on a specific kind of paper, so the final image appears flatter than a hyper realistic photograph, and the images take on the softer qualities we might associate with a painting. Mikael Owunna also uses technology in his practice. Working with dancers as his subjects, Owunna uses fluorescent paints to hand paint the dancer's bodies and takes the photographs in darkness, using an ultraviolet flash for light. The resulting images appear as brightly colored figures, floating, or dancing, in a constellation of stars.

#### *Questions for Looking*

- How would you describe Mikael Owunna's artwork, if you didn't know about the technology and photographic process? Does this impact the way you think about the rules of photography, or what is and isn't a photograph?
- In Maddox's work, the artist dresses his subjects in simple outfits, giving the Black skin of his subjects a place of privilege or emphasis in the image. Maddox uses this technique to highlight the subject's identity in a positive and affirming way. If these images looked more like a traditional, documentary photograph, would it affect the way you interpret or understand them?
- Describe the color palettes in both Mikael Owunna and Marcus Maddox's work. Are these colors you associate with the "real" world?



### III.

## Community Perspective

Jessica Gaynelle Moss reflects on Sasha Phylars-Burgess' photograph, *Rachel's, Mae Suites, Austin, Chicago, 2019* (2019)



Sasha Phylars-Burgess' work recognizes and celebrates the race, culture, and lived experiences of people of the African Diaspora, specifically of North America and the Caribbean. She uses photography (influenced by journalism, documentary, portraiture, and fine art photography) as a way for her to examine her own life, family history, community and culture.

Phylars-Burgess' work speaks to the pursuit of life's most defining question: Who am I? The artist, like many of us who identify as Black people across the diaspora, is on a quest to find herself through the stories of our elders, the details of a stranger's face, or the discovery of any semblance of the familiar within a foreign landscape. We're all hoping that one day we find ourselves.

As a Black woman, I have found parts of myself in Phylars-Burgess' work, particularly the piece *RACHEL'S, MAE SUITES, AUSTIN, CHICAGO, 2019*. This black and white image depicts a close view of the corner of a bed in a domestic, interior space. The artist has cropped the image to remove the top half of a framed piece of art on the wall, the bed comforter can't be placed within a particular

trend, and overall there aren't many details that could place the location, to whom the room belongs, or when the photograph was taken. However, the two satin pillowcases placed at the top of the bed wash satisfying feelings of safety and belonging all over me. The satin pillowcase tells me that this Black home is similar to the one I grew up in. I begin to recall all the ways that I watched my older sisters, cousins, mother and grandmother care for their hair. The pillowcase, bonnet, du rag and scarf act as cultural signifiers, offering an understanding of the importance of this shared cultural experience.

In strange spaces, we find solace in moments of familiarity--  
a simple head nod  
the slump or hunch of a shoulder  
in our rolling laughter that grows and builds as we hear ourselves  
in the crevasses of the hands of an elder Black woman  
catching the rhythm of your neighbor's music  
the smell of a local Fish + Chicken franchise  
scenes of protest demanding justice  
a glimpse of a satin pillowcase.

In much of her work, Phylars-Burgess presents Black viewers with feelings of familiarity, comfort and closeness. Even as many of the subjects of her photographs are strangers and the environments in which she is capturing her imagery may be unfamiliar, Phylars-Burgess' work is able to still connect us no matter how disparate we may feel. Phylars-Burgess says, "I hope that Black people see themselves in [my work] and say, 'Yeah, I know that'. That's all I've ever wanted."

Thank you, Sasha Phylars-Burgess for continuing to show us, us.

*Jessica Gaynelle Moss is an artist, independent curator and arts consultant to institutions and private clients. She serves as the Administrative Director to Sibyls Shrine*

## Glossary

<b>Archive</b>	A collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. Artists Vikesh Kapoor and Odette England work with an archive of familys photographs, and found photographs
<b>Cadence</b>	A rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds in language, or the beat, time or measure of rhythmical motion or activity
<b>Installation</b>	A form of art, developed in the late 1950s, which involves the creation of an enveloping aesthetic or sensory experience in a particular environment, often inviting active engagement or immersion by the spectator
<b>Medium</b>	Refers to the different materials or supplies that an artist utilizes in order to create a work of art. In photography, this can refer to both the type of film or process being used, as well as the paper the image is being printed on
<b>Perspective</b>	Technique used to depict volumes and spatial relationships on a flat surface, as in a painted scene that appears to extend into the distance. In photography, perspective often relates to the point of view the artist chooses to take - where they are seeing something happen from
<b>Tone</b>	The relative lightness or darkness of colors in an image, which can refer to both color and black and white
<b>Ultraviolet</b>	A wavelength shorter than that of the violet end of the visible spectrum but longer than that of X-rays

## Reading List

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- Crewdson: Gregory. *Beneath The Roses*. 2008. New York: Abrams Books
- England, Odette and Jennider Garza-Cuen. *Past Paper, Present Marks*. 2021. New York: Radius Books
- Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. 2009. New York: New York University Press
- Preciado, Paul B. *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*. 2020. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e)
- Owunna, Mikael. 2019. *Limitless Africans*. Marseillan: FotoEvidence
- Phyars-Burgess, Sasha. *Untitled*. 2020. New York: Capricious
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