

UNSETTLING THE ARCHIVE AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF

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On January 19, 1981, just hours before president-elect Ronald Reagan gave his inaugural speech as the fortieth President of the United States, the television network ABC presented a program called the *All-Star Inaugural Gala*. Nationally televised from the Capital Centre in Washington, D.C., the gala attracted nearly 41.8 million American viewers and featured



Hollywood celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Ethel Merman, and Bob Hope. Also among the group was Ben Vereen, a thirty-six-year-old performer who had already cemented his legacy through appearances in the Broadway musical *Pippin* (1972) and the television miniseries *Roots* (1977), for which he was awarded Tony and Emmy awards. Introduced by comedian Johnny Carson, Vereen's performance at the gala paid homage to the legendary black vaudevillian performer Bert Williams. Highlighting the demeaning conditions of minstrels—a category of American performance in which Williams was

included—Carson's introduction acknowledged the history of segregation in American theater. When Vereen took the stage following these remarks, he might have rightly assumed that the gala would have provided him with a public platform to exercise his constitutional right to the freedom of speech and expression, and further to work through the historical traumas inflicted on black performers.

Dressed in a top hat, a coat with tails, and blackface—as Williams would have been required to wear during the early twentieth century—Vereen's two-part act began with a fictional scenario in which he is denied the right to buy President Reagan and his guests celebratory drinks. Concluding the performance with Williams's doleful song *Nobody*,¹ Vereen proceeded to remove his blackface makeup before the live audience, thereby defying the historical myth, as discussed by journalist Carolina Miranda, that

¹ Written by Bert Williams in 1905, the half-spoken, half-sung piece *Nobody* gained popularity for its discerning analysis and countering of stereotypes, propagated by racism in America. Originally performed in 1906 as part of Williams's co-authored Broadway production *Abyssinia*, the song, like the production, worked to bring awareness to black hardships and

excellence. By conjoining historical narratives like those of the Ethiopian Empire (exonym Abyssinia, 1270–1974) with stereotypes entrenched in American theater, the show was one of the first Broadway acts strategically organized to educate and theatergoers. "Bert Williams, 1874–1922," The Library of Congress, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200038860/>

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“a black man’s blackness is accepted only when it is masked by exaggeration on stage.”²

Tragically, the audience who tuned into the gala on TV were unable to see Vereen’s performance in its entirety. What should have been an emotionally critical break from the nation’s longstanding history of prejudice against black Americans instead resulted in an unsubtle and extremely unsettling perpetuation of violence. Against the agreement extended to Vereen, the



television broadcasters chose to omit the last five minutes of his act, inevitably distorting the political statement that the actor had intended to make: the elimination of minstrelsy through the removal of his makeup. Without having witnessed this part of the performance, viewers at home only encountered Vereen enacting blackface in front of

an applauding, predominantly white audience. And perhaps *most* enraged was the black community, who in their confusion over the performer’s intentions proceeded to ostracize him, thus causing his career to plummet.³ While Vereen’s individual experience is unique in itself, the circumstances of his excommunication due to hierarchical censorship and dissonance is not. In refusing to comply with the portrayals that dictate our internalized understandings of race within American society, Vereen proposed a countermyth to the narratives reinforced by popular culture.

Similar to Vereen’s attempt, Edgar Arceneaux, Jarrett Key, and Xaviera Simmons utilize their practices to unsettle historically accepted narratives. By re/turning to archival resources, they do so not with intentions of perpetuating these chronicles but, instead, with resolutions of exhausting former cycles of oppression that do not feed collective societal progress. Through his

² Carolina A. Miranda, “Column: Art, Reagan and blackface: Edgar Arceneaux examines controversial performance by Ben Vereen,” Los Angeles Times, November 17, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/miranda/la-et-cam-edgar-arceneaux-ben-vereen-blackface-20151028-column.html>

³ In response to Vereen’s performance, the political activist and entertainer Ruby Dee commented, “Poor Bert is turning over in his grave.” Robert E. Johnson, “Ben Vereen Still under Fire for Blackface Act at Gala.” *Jet Magazine*, February 12, 1981, 14–18.

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sculptures and photographic portraits, Arceneaux unveils censored materials in order to complicate the definitions that depend on colonial othering and the categorizing of racialized bodies.. Simmons’s photographs and text-based paintings mine historic archives, utilizing such visual and textual documents to consider unspoken narratives in critical terms. Key’s hair-paintings and documentation of their performances employ improvisational movement, mark-making, and ancestral memory as a series of proposals towards navigating the intangible nature of oral histories. Together, these artists ascribe and reinforce new personal and collective revelations, allowing themselves the freedom to explore, find, and redefine longstanding conventions. Through performative gestures and other radical forms of creation, Arceneaux, Simmons, and Key implicate the audience; they force us to consider the politics of place-making, while acknowledging our role as active agents, rather than mere spectators. In the artists’ propositions, we are enticed to examine not only the elements of human experience that historic narratives and archival practices generally displace, but also the possibilities (and perhaps the limitations) of employing alternative methods to rewrite cultural narratives.

Edgar Arceneaux’s photograph *First Dress: Frank Lawson as Ben Vereen as Bert Williams* (2017), references Vereen’s 1981 performance and portrays the actor Frank Lawson in the foreground of an ambiguous location.⁴ With his somber face covered in an inky substance, Lawson peers outward, past the edge of the frame, and appears to be in a state of contemplation that contends with the cyclical and complex legacies of history, memory, authorship, and trauma. As abstractions of President Reagan’s inaugural celebration, Arceneaux’s sculptures *Red Ronnie*, *Blue Bert*, and *Green Vereen* explore the segment of Vereen’s performance that was never aired. Drawing the viewers’ attention to the ambiguous qualities of the assemblages, Arceneaux’s sculptures mimic, reenact, and assume the gestures of the performers both in their making and naming.

While Arceneaux’s exploration of this historical event focuses on the personal experience of a single individual, the works might also be understood as grappling with the truth of broader historical narratives. By various methods

⁴ In Edgar Arceneaux’s 2015 live work *Until, Until, Until...* actor Frank Lawson reenacts Ben Vereen’s full 1981 performance and homage to Bert Williams during Reagan’s inaugural gala. “Edgar Arceneaux: *Until, Until, Until...*,” *Performa* 2015, accessed January 6, 2020, <http://15.performa-arts.org/events/until-until-until>

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of re/interpretation, Arceneaux encourages an analysis of history that not only acknowledges the influence of collective understanding and cultural memory but one that also allows for constant revision.

Critically considering the flattening of marginal narratives, Xaviera Simmons uses her multidisciplinary practice to explore the legacies and systemic injustices that American history has rendered invisible. Proposing that we as a nation make “foundational shifts towards a new type of Democracy,” she pursues her work through research, primarily of historic documents, photographs, and audio recordings.⁵ Totemically juxtaposing her own photographs with sourced images, in such works as *Sundown (Number Five)* 2018 and *Sundown (Number Fifteen)* 2018, the past and present intermingle as the artist positions herself, alone, in a landscape to serve as a witness and character. These works at once rupture time and foster the coexistence of disparate experiences, connected by the reverberation of racial prejudice in the United States. In this, the myth-making that Simmons herself performs could be seen as both timed and timeless in its relation to the archive and the present moment.



In her large-scale paintings, Simmons employs texts to produce poetic visual gestures that expose historical conflicts. These paintings, like her photographs, incorporate archival materials but extract from them words, rather than images. The texts that Simmons uses often relate to

hegemonic narratives and are drawn from materials as diverse as Christopher Columbus’s diary to Michigan Representative John Conyers’s political speech regarding the anti-racism bill H.R. 40.⁶ Treating her text-paintings as rhythmic vibrations of history Simmons overcomes one of the traditional barriers, as Evan Moffitt has observed, that marginalized groups typically

⁵ Xaviera Simmons, “A Day: June 1, 2019,” MoMA, August 16, 2019, accessed January 6, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/136>

⁶ Written by Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), H.R. 40 was presented to Congress in 1989. The bill established slavery and racism in the United States as an inhumane structure impacting African Americans from 1619 to the present.

The bill further proposes the establishment of a commission with which reparations and other collective remedies would be allotted. For the full bill: United States Congressional Senate Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act of 2019. 116th Cong., 1st sess. HR 40. Washington: GPO, 2019. Print.

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“comb [through] the archive of U.S. history in search of something they can recognize, only to realize that history was written to exclude them.”⁷ Simmons addresses this problem head-on by actively rewriting accounts that exclude the disenfranchised groups and by reconfiguring old systems of language, thereby fostering a platform for more comprehensive accounts to exist.

Drawing inspiration from the traditions of jazz composition, Simmons uses improvisation in her process.⁸ Constructed through a series of breaks, repetition, and sequencing, the text takes on a rhythmic quality that becomes integral to the re/telling of the selected narrative. The poet and scholar Fred Moten has raised the related question of what to make of text that disrupts its own reading, proposing that the breaks between the poem and its aesthetic impact can provide a generative base. These textual gaps provide, in Moten’s words, “a space of emotional resonance that conventional language struggles to articulate.”⁹ In relation to Simmons’s paintings, this idea suggests that her abstracted language (and the act of writing) serves as a poetic device whose function extends beyond mere communication into the realm of human emotion. As poetic devices, these transcriptions of, and alterations to historical texts in her paintings perform and work towards freedom; by creating a space in which sociopolitical narratives that have previously excluded the voices of the masses can be reimagined.¹⁰ Simmons’s abstracted language creates a series of dynamics that allows for the authoring of new narratives. Offering a way through her work, she articulates the impact of oppression without reproducing it, ensuring that patriarchy’s role in written history is not absolved.

Jarrett Key uses their own hair as a paintbrush to pull paint across the surface of unstretched canvases, trusting their queer, black body to act as a tool for mark-making. Key often documents this process so that their paintings become an extension of their performative acts. These acts take on the role of records

⁷ Evan Moffitt, “What Can’t Be Read,” *Frieze*, December 18, 2017. Accessed January 6, 2020, <https://frieze.com/article/what-cant-be-read>

⁸ Pérez Art Museum, “Watch Xaviera Simmons discuss her works in “Poetics of Relation.” YouTube video, uploaded May 29, 2015. Accessed January 6, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIUs7kYC9Lc>

⁹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Understanding jazz as an act of freedom, Patricia

Williams offers the idea that “jazz [functions] as a metaphor for inventive engagements with the law.” Thus, in its ability to pull from a long lineage of traditions, jazz becomes representative of various kinds of life scripts. While Williams’s interpretation of jazz aligns its making to a practice discharged by the structural order of American history, she also echoes its founding principles as being of its culture. Peter Margulies, *Doubling Doubtless, and All That Jazz: Establishment Critiques of Outsider Innovations in Music and Legal Thought* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 2007).

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that at once celebrate, examine, extend, and are shaped by personal and ancestral histories. By invoking the legacy of their grandmother, who often cited biblical tales such as *Samson and Delilah*, Key recalls the impact of oral storytelling and its importance to the dissemination of narratives that could not be

written by his elders.¹¹⁻¹² This notion takes precedence in the creation of his work. Expounding from several loosely choreographed moves, Key utilizes the canvas as a container to ground the elusive nature of oral narratives. Taking on language through bodily movements that respond rhythmically to songs, spiritual hymns, and family conversations, their saturated marks build gradually like words in a sentence. In relinquishing concrete physical prompts, Key's body is transformed into a listening device capable of interpreting and extending beyond the corporeal, to a level of somatic improvisation that highlights alternative ways of knowing. Danielle Goldman claims these *authentic movements* are grounded by reflection and a system of spontaneity pertinent to understanding the body and its senses. She proposes that the "vital technology of the self [is] an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and civil society."¹³

Key's upbringing in the church provides further groundings for considering not only the importance of communal congregations on a multigenerational spectrum, but also the historic role of convening in order to maintain connections to marginalized narratives primarily kept by way of movement and oral traditions. Movement-based artist mayfield brooks, in her dance project entitled *Improvising While Black* (IWB), suggests that using the voice and body to navigate societal and architectural structures, grants the space to rupture and "provide a series of gestures to engage, surprise, risk, and tell-truth." Through extracting from such spaces, she continues, "we are able to

¹¹ *New International Bible*, Judges 16:16-20.

¹² Danielle Goldman argues that, in the history of oral storytelling, dance and other improvisatory acts are deeply rooted in non-Western traditions. It is due to "this history [that] makes it hard to ignore the racism embedded in the claim that [oral history] lacks rigor."

See Danielle Goldman, *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 16.

¹³ Danielle Goldman, *I Want To Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1-27.

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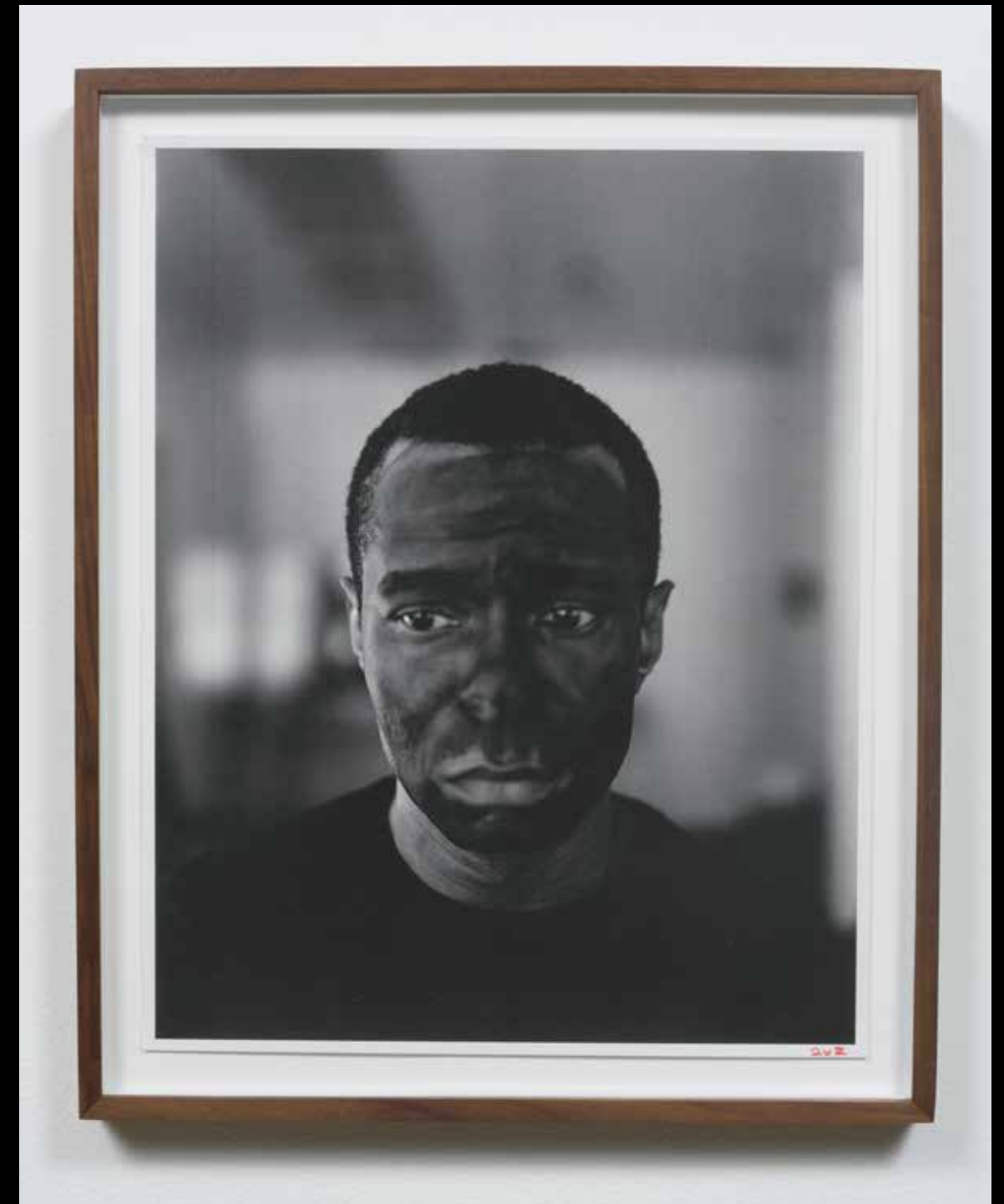
pinpoint a standard of existing in blackness that is not concrete, but instead raises the stakes of our vulnerability to each other."¹⁴

Echoing the constructs of daily life that require the negotiation of space and society, Key's unfiltered movements are both complicated, and rendered vulnerable to the dynamics of consumption by their contact with the canvas. In this physical exchange and association, the canvas as a signifier meets Key's movements both with resistance as well as a malleability that influences the structure of the paint. In contemplating the gestures inscribed in Key's hair-paintings, we are led to ask: what does it mean to "dance" history, and what are the potentials and constraints of this form of communication? In Key's use of the canvas as a record, the viewer is led to an awareness of the relationships existing between bodily mark-making, transcription, and translation. Exploring how the body might emit and sound information, Key's work as a practice of intuition lends itself as an example of how we might further contribute to history and place-making in ways that reflect our nations' narratives in all their totality.

Reflecting on Edgar Arceneaux's project *Until, Until, Until...* (2015), writer Sharon Mizota observes that the power and beauty of art lies in its "ability not only to excavate the traumas and travesties of [history], but to locate them in the fears and desires of the audience, us."¹⁵ This thought is echoed throughout the works in this exhibition. The artists reimagine and reject history as a stagnant player fixed by time, through actively utilizing their practices to reinterpret and unsettle problematic historical narratives. They engage in real-time history-making that acknowledges colonization, and the narratives that have been ushered to the margins at its hand. This further calls attention to the problematic hierarchies instilled in history-making as we know it through various methods of revitalized transcription and assemblage. In this naming (or perhaps renaming), the exhibited works challenge the long trajectory of authorship, omission, and history as fact disjointed from fiction. These counter-myths oppose dominant historical narratives, presenting a multiplicity of accounts that decouple the single-tracked nature of hierarchy in order to advance society as inclusive and multifaceted.

¹⁴ mayfield brooks, "IWB = IMPROVISING WHILE BLACK: writings, INterventions, interruptions, questions," *Contact Quarterly Journal*, Winter/Spring 2016. 33-39.

¹⁵ Mizota, Sharon. "Ben Vereen, Ronald Reagan and the travesty of blackface, potently remembered." *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2017.



Edgar Arceneaux *First Dress: Frank Lawson
as Ben Vereen as Bert Williams*, 2017.
Black and white photograph, 21 × 17.25 × 1.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer.



Edgar Arceneaux *Blue Bert*, 2017.
Cast aluminum, enamel, hat, pedestal,
51.5 × 12.75 × 12.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.
Photo by Jeff McLane.



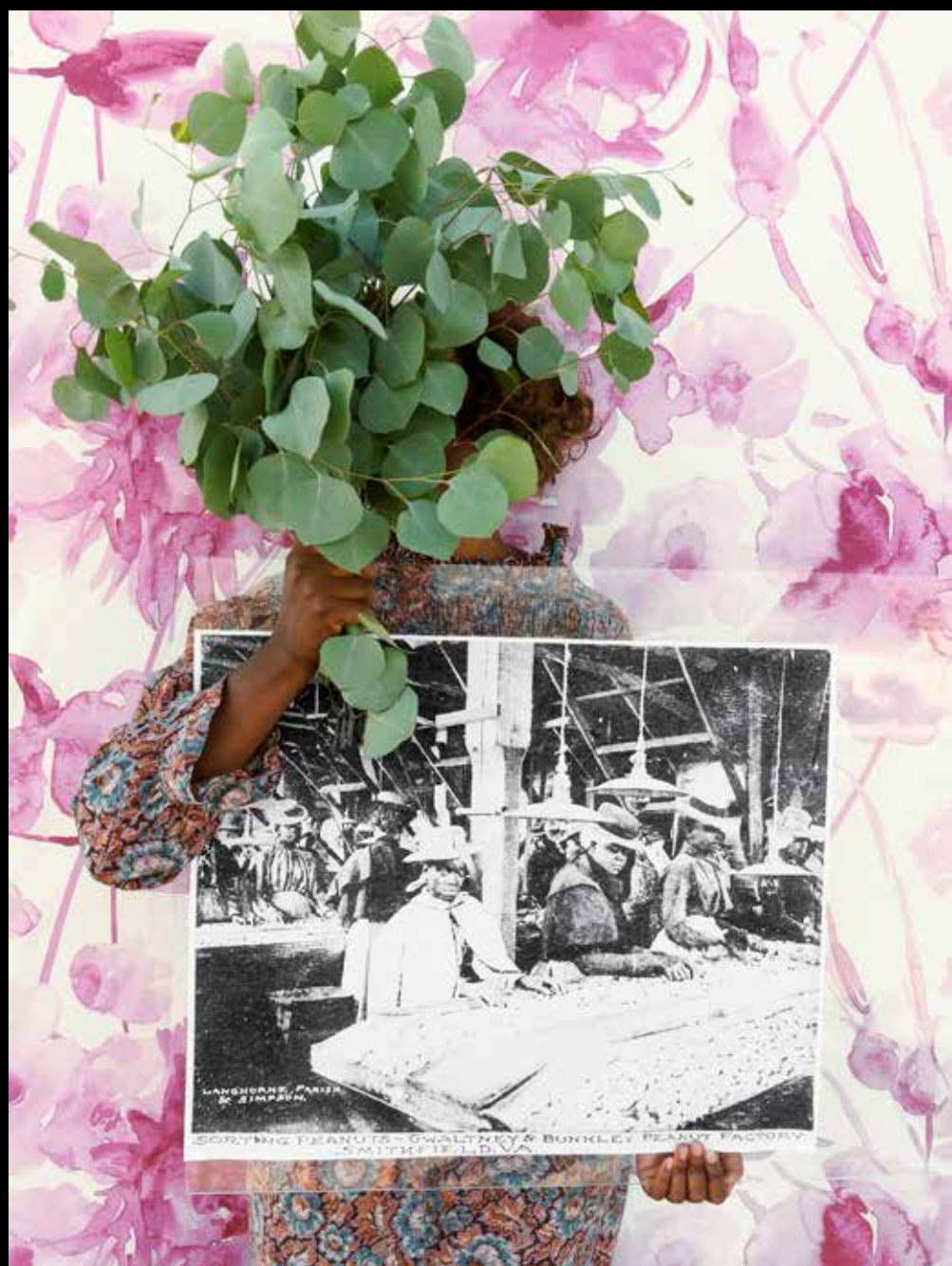
Edgar Arceneaux *Red Ronnie*, 2017.
Cast aluminum, enamel, hat, pedestal,
48.75 × 12.5 × 12.75 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles.
Photo by Robert Wedemeyer.



Jarrett Key *Hair Painting #14*, 2019.
 Video, 10mins 2 secs. Courtesy of the Artist.
 Video by Wael Morcos and Jon Key.



Jarrett Key *Hair Painting #15*, 2017.
 Tempera on canvas, 106 × 64 inches.
 Courtesy of the artist. Photo by John Key.



Xaviera Simmons *Sundown (Number Five)*, 2018.
Chromogenic color print, 60 × 45 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery.



Xaviera Simmons *Sundown (Number Fifteen)*, 2018.
Chromogenic color print, 60 × 45 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery.