Home starts from within

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Home Starts from Within

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work and supporting monograph to the family and friends who have helped me see the journey through and never letting me give up on myself. Specifically my parents always encouraging me to follow my path to doing what I enjoy.

Father And Mother, I Love You
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the faculty and staff that have helped and supported me throughout my time at James Madison University—a special thank you to my committee members for their guidance and unwavering support.
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Abstract

Moving to Harrisonburg proved to be a culture shock for me because in the past, I had lived in areas where the levels of diversity were different and allowed me to feel more at ease. I faced the issue of feeling uncomfortable in a new-found environment and felt compelled to start a dialogue about my experience through my artwork. It was imperative for me to find a way to create a community for myself, and by doing so in my artwork, I have thrived from my experience of feeling out of place. I began making work about self-image, family and community in order to give myself a place in the community. It was important to remember that a location is what you make it, keeping in mind that home or community starts from within. After starting the dialogue about diversity, I found that living in this new area became much more comfortable.
Home Starts from Within

Joliza Terry

Home, its Evolution, Displacement and Belonging

“You can kiss your family and friends goodbye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you.” – Frederick Buechner.¹

Buechner illustrates my sentiments during my years spent in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Despite taking quite some time to embrace this notion of subconsciously longing for placement in a new community, when I finally did, it influenced my artwork in an unimaginable way.

In the past, I have lived in areas that are very diverse in terms of multiculturalism. Since moving to Harrisonburg, I have felt a level of discomfort for which I am not accustomed, causing me to feel more self aware. The discomfort made me feel as though I was at a standstill, in a time of my life that I felt I should be making much growth. The feeling of stagnation resulted from being uncertain of how to deal with the issues, internally and externally. I was toying with the idea of whether I should address it or tread lightly during my time at James Madison University. As more time passed, leaving the elephant in the room unaddressed allowed the discomfort to weigh heavier and heavier on my heart and it began to take a toll artistically. What did I perceive as the elephant in the room? In the end, it was my feeling of displacement and not feeling comfortable enough to have conversations about it. There have been several instances that I have wrestled with while here: from something as small as not feeling comfortable

in a hair salon because of the various bright eyes and startled looks you receive to a more overt act of a vehicle proudly displaying the Confederate flag. Despite being discomforted by these instances, I would always keep in mind a saying my parents would use. Growing up, my parents often asked me “how do you eat an elephant?” and would reply, “one bite at a time.” This simple question always reassured me that I can tackle any obstacle as long as I take it one step at a time. Keeping that in mind, it was important to address it head on.

These feelings informed my artwork which became about issues of race and the diversity in the area. One example is a video that contained only white words against a black background, filling the screen similarly to a typewriter. The words were statements or questions people made to me since moving to Harrisonburg; they profoundly affected how I felt in the community, unbeknownst to the person making the statement. Figure 1 contains photographic stills of some of the quotes said during that time that affected how I felt. At the end of the video, the white words fill the stark black background, mirroring my feelings of being flooded with these thoughts. This video is reminiscent of work by Glenn Ligon\(^2\) and his use of lettering that would overwhelmingly fill the background. It was clear, at this point, that remaining silent about my discomfort was not an option because I felt displaced from my family and was longing for a sense of community. In turn, creating artwork about these issues lent itself to more dynamic artwork. This proved to be therapeutic in a way that allowed me to grow as an artist.

I have always been surrounded by family and friends that helped make a new environment a place I enjoyed calling home. People say you do not appreciate something

until it is gone, and in my new found home of Harrisonburg, I have come to understand this upon being surrounded with new, unfamiliar faces. In the new environment, I became highly aware of white privilege. White privilege is a form of control which takes both active forms, which we can see, and in embedded forms, which members of the dominant group are taught not to see. Succumbing to the adverse affect of white privilege entails the inability to turn on the television or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my race widely represented; it also involves feeling isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared. “People of the dominant group are taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by others, but unfortunately are never taught to recognize it in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance.”

Through dialogue and process, I hope to get people thinking about identity, community and the environment in which we live.

My work increasingly became about community, identity, self-image, and how they are important, specifically as an African American woman during this time period. It is important to have identity because without identity, there is no diversity. Being a product of a multicultural household, a mother from Bermuda and a father from America, I have always found the value in diversity. Raised in a home that fostered an understanding of this value, the idea has seeped into my work and forced me to balance intersectionality of cultures, subconsciously. Although identity is important, it was not enough to satisfy my desire to have this much needed dialogue about diversity.

This period of growth and exploration led me to realize the significance of relationships on a deeper level and forced a renewed self-evaluation. Whenever faced with challenges, I turn to a statement my parents would always make as I was growing up which was, “grow where you are planted.” Keeping this mantra in mind is the only thing that has driven me to overcome adversity, along with support of family and friends. This has given me the opportunity to learn to grow comfortable in my discomfort, gaining a learning experience.

At this point, a shift in the thinking behind my work occurred. I began using statistical comparisons of the various geographic areas, for which I have spent extended periods of time, to influence my work in an abstract way. These abstractions got the ball rolling with the ideas of location, place and belonging. Although the abstractions of Okinawa, Japan; Bermuda; Portsmouth; Woodbridge; Charlottesville; and Harrisonburg, Virginia were a jumping off point, they did not fulfill my longing to feel at home.

Mapping these specific geographical locations was just the tip of the iceberg, but did not capture what home means to me. “Home is an emotional experience understood to be socially constructed, meaning it is culturally and historically embedded and therefore in no way hardwired into our biological systems. It is important to note that the location of home as a place can be variable and multiple; meaning a person can have more than one home, home locations can change, and that home is a matter of degree and can be missing altogether.”

Naturally, over the years, my idea of home has evolved and been molded by experiences. Although it has transformed over time, when I think of home, there is a

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common thread that remains: love, warmth and community. Whether it comes from immediate family, extended family or even friends whom which I consider family, these qualities are the foundation of home.

As a child, I thought of home as arriving at our house on Hetten Lane, after what I perceived to be a long day of school, and being welcomed by my grandmother, who lived with us during the time, and my English Bulldog, Buddy. My older siblings were often still at after school activities and my parents, being active-duty military, were still at work, involved in the hustle and bustle of Washington, DC Metropolitan Area. I viewed this time as an opportunity to spend with my maternal grandmother. Many members of my family jokingly tease us about our closeness, and even refer to me as her fourth daughter.

Additionally, in our neighborhood, there was a park where all the neighborhood youth would pass their evenings playing outside. I spent many hours there after school, while my grandmother would prepare dinner for the family, a meal that would be enjoyed every evening around the dinner table.

You could imagine my surprise when arriving home on break from college for the first time and seeing a sold sign in the middle of our lawn of the house I had spent the past thirteen years of my life. At this point, it was clear that the idea of home was going to change drastically and quickly. For years, my parents had sporadically visited open houses thinking about buying a new house, but my siblings and I never took it seriously because nothing had ever come to fruition— until now. I knew for the next year, while they were building their new house, I would have to adjust accordingly. I was reluctant
to come home to visit because I felt that there was not ample space for me in their one bedroom apartment. Fortunately, my sister, who had recently moved to her new home, served as my saving grace. I immediately took her up on her offer to stay with her during breaks, but I was still grappling with my new idea of home because my childhood home was now a thing of the past.

I was told that college is the best years of your life. Keeping that in mind, I believed I would get a new definition for home, as a part of my college experience. My parents are people that believe that the likelihood of graduating decreases drastically once a student moves off campus, needless to say, while all my friends were moving off campus, I spent all four years of college in on-campus housing. Annually, I had a new residence, thus I considered the city as a whole my home, rather than a specific dwelling. It was a place where I was surrounded by friends and loved ones, I created a home away from home in a new environment, my friends serving as a surrogate family.

Now that a few years have passed after being out of college, and my parents have been in their new home for some years and have ample enough room for me to visit, I no longer can pin down what I call home. I have grown to realize that despite all the places I call home have their differences, a common thread does exist. Home is a place where there is a community of love and warmth where I can feel comfortable in my skin—home starts from within.

**Race, Representation & Materials**

In my work, I am constantly drawn to representations of people and the idea of family. I became more and more curious as to why this subject was so important to me. After researching, I found that it is deeply rooted in African-American culture to hold the
institution of family to a high esteem. During slavery, families were often separated, and during this separation members would often feverishly search for their lost relative. Because of this engrained history of the black family longing to stay together through times of adversity, I believe African-Americans have a different relationship and understanding of family than other cultures. Family in the black home has been tested over time and has survived the slave system, legal segregation, discrimination and enforced poverty.\textsuperscript{6}

In addition to an emphasis on family, my work consists of materials that are found in a middle class, American home. Household objects are appropriated to give them a placement in the world. The objects included in my work are portraits of family members, a dining room table, items that complement it and linoleum flooring.

The content of my work includes portraits of people in my life that I consider family. The emergence of portraiture dates as early as 5000 BC, where skulls were modeled out of clay,\textsuperscript{7} showing that representation of people has played a significant role for humans for generations. My process consists of striping lines out of the material to create a design. By doing this, I view myself allowing memories of the person to resurface. The process is a form of coping with my current environment, which helps me to feel at home. Not only did my desire to feel closer to my loved ones affect my idea behind creating portraits, but how African Americans are portrayed in the media also served as a large influence.

Media and its Influences

When I was growing up, I loved that I could look to the media to see an accurate portrayal of the world in which I lived. In the 90s and early 2000s, there was an overwhelming presence of black faces on television that represented the black middle class in America, a scene for which I am accustomed. The influence was so prevalent that my parents used a name from one of the popular shows in the 90s entitled “A Different World.” Naturally, my experience with these television shows differs from that of another, I hold nostalgic feelings towards the shows because I view them as a part of my childhood. The shows gave me a better understanding of black culture and the importance of identity. Currently, I am disheartened by the sparsity of positive representation in the media because of how it will affect the youth; it played an important role in how I perceive myself and I want the next generation to have a similar experience. On these sitcoms, attending college and attaining a white collar profession was the norm; it showed me as a child that monumental goals are attainable. As time passes, I have noticed that the prominence of shows that portray the black middle class in America is nearly non-existent, yet poverty, abuse and mockery of the culture is prevalent. As a response to this, I feel it is important that in my work members of a black middle class America are portrayed, combating what the media shows on a daily basis.

When I think of the skewed representation of African Americans in the media, I often think of the generation to come, specifically my nephews or my future children, and how important it is to be a positive example of what it means to be an African-American in this climate. During a commencement address at Morehouse College, a Historically
Black University, President Barack Obama was quoted saying, “every one of you has a grandma or an uncle or a parent whose told you at some point in life as an African American you have to work twice as hard as anyone else if you want to get by.” This universal phrase, said to young African-American children, is in part what motivated me to create imagery of what was lacking in history. I was also influenced by Awol Erizku, a New York based artist, who has a similar sentiment as myself. He found that throughout history, in art, people of color were not represented and he wants to fill in the gaps where he feels color was lacking.

**Formal Qualities and Process**

Much of my work contains hundreds of lines carved into the surface, a process, that I discovered, somewhat unintentionally. Initially, it began my desire to continue working as a printmaker but not having the facilities to do so. It became imperative that I found a way to work around that obstacle. As a part of this, I began thinking of methods to use everyday materials as an avenue to make prints. Thinking back on past printmaking classes, I began to brainstorm. I remember taking more interest in the woodcut and linocut methods of printmaking over other processes such as intaglio, silk screen or lithographs. Woodcuts and linocuts result from using various shaped carving tools, to create a relief surface which is later printed, leaving the reverse image as the final product. The advantage to both woodcuts and linocuts is the fact that the studio is not always necessary to create them. I found woodcuts to be too cumbersome but I

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rather enjoyed linoleum cuts. Despite being pleased with linocuts, I wanted to make them much larger to more actively challenge the viewers’ viewing space, forcing more of an interaction between observer and artwork. Still keeping in mind the parameters I had set for myself, I went to the hardware store to find items that can be carved.

Being that my parents were always attending open houses in search for a new home, our current home was frequently being upgraded to keep the house modern. As a result, I was no stranger to the hardware store and often found myself spending my Saturday mornings at Lowe’s or Home Depot with my mother, in search of items to aide these modifications to the house, lawn and garden. Now in graduate school, I find comfort in my search to find supplies at the hardware store. It was there that I had the important realization: kitchen flooring is made from linoleum and it would be possible to carve it, creating a life size linocut. Naturally, repurposing materials comes with its challenges, but the reason I fell in love with printmaking is because of the idea that there are no mistakes, just happy accidents.

At the hardware store, I found that I was able to get long rolls of vinyl flooring. While, the front of the flooring is impossible to carve, the back of the flooring gives, having similar properties to linoleum printing blocks for linocuts. With that discovery, a happy accident was born.

The scale of the pieces made them come to life, because it gave them presence in the room—an idea I got from looking at work by Chuck Close.10 His larger than life-size portraits have a profound affect on how the work is perceived. Keeping this in mind, I made an effort to create larger and larger work. I also wanted to give the carving more

identity, thus, I chose to not print them or make duplicate copies. I wanted each carving to have its own uniqueness, similarly to the person or persons portrayed.

When I first began making these works, the drawings were simple, making it very easy for the viewer to see who was portrayed in the image (Figure 2). I have always had an interest in simple drawings that contain more substance than originally perceived. I enjoy, for example, how Kara Walker\textsuperscript{11} tactfully executes this, with her stark graphic images. At first, the images appear to be whimsical, but after a deeper look, one realizes that they are far more conceptual than initially perceived. She uses playfulness and light heartedness to address deeper issues of race and slavery.

After exhibiting these simply-carved pieces, I enjoyed the feedback from viewers, but felt that they were not engaging the work as much as I had hoped. I searched for a way to make the work more engaging, and came across Jim Lambie\textsuperscript{12} and his use of line throughout his floor sculptures. I was immediately entranced by the lines and bright colors. With this in mind, I revisited some of the portraits, adding more lines tirelessly, until the portrayed figure is almost lost in the background (Figure 3). Despite being almost lost, the viewer can find the image after looking at it more closely.

Ultimately, the viewer is able to still find the person largely due to gestalt theory. Gestalt theory pertains to the psychology of art. Rudolf Arnheim is the researcher who is associated with this theory.\textsuperscript{13} Historically, the theory boasts a unified approach to perception and how humans make connection throughout the world.\textsuperscript{14}

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whole is more than the sum of its parts; we perceive the world as ordered, clear cut and meaningful.15 Without thinking, the mind has the ability to make connections in order for us to perceive illusions, this can often be seen in art. This is due to the fact that the way in which a line is perceived is based upon the influence surrounding stimuli.16 In my work, portions of the piece can be removed creating a pattern but once viewed as a whole, the entire image becomes clear. Keeping in mind that the brain has the ability to piece together images, I continued to make more large linocuts, exploring with line, color and other material as well.

Similarly to the method of hatching, creating value through spacing the lines closer and further apart on the carvings creates depth. Hatching is a technique used in both drawing and painting, where tone is built up through a series of thin strokes or lines that are more or less parallel. How close together they are influences the tone, with closer lines creating darker tones.

The lines in my work has people questioning the origin of them and my need for patterning. I have encountered much feedback that perhaps there is an African influence but I do not believe that is the case. There seems to be no clear cut answer besides memories of childhood. Many of the cultural influences in our house were a combination of Japanese, Bermudian, and military culture, as a result of past travel. A great deal of these objects were contained behind glass, on high shelves or in rooms that were off limits and only intended for guests. These objects contained intricate patterns, which, I found entrancing and fascinating. Because of the nature of where they were stored, I held them to a higher regard.

For some time, the large linocuts or carvings were stark black and white, with sporadic but limited splashes of color. I had been wanting to add color, but also felt I needed to be methodical about it. Fortunately, being patient paid off: one day, while working in Photoshop on the drawings of people for my next project, I stumbled upon a method of including color purposefully. I noticed that some of the portraits, when manipulated, appear to look like maps. This was a perfect way to incorporate my previous ideas of mapping and location into portraits of people, while simultaneously adding more layers to the carvings (Figure 4). With each portrait, I used colors that were reminiscent of the individual, or their personality, while simultaneously trying to keep them different from one another. Although, making the colors specific for the individual proved to be somewhat of an obstacle, using high key and low key variations of the colors added more richness and contrast.

Not only is the intricacy of the drawing important, but the placement of the subject in the composition, in relation to the other subjects around it has meaning. For example, in Figure 5, the level of which the person is carved on the surface relates to age and hierarchy within the family. In other examples, where there are multiple people on one carving (Figure 6) it is loosely based on age in relation to the other people in the same image. In creating a community in these large carvings, it was important to create individual portraits of my immediate family. Similarly to their individual roles in my life, I envision them as pillars for which I build the foundation of my new home. Their portraits serve as a stand in for the individual.
Additionally, I ventured further to create three even larger carvings, hanging at three by twelve feet tall. It was important that these be larger, because they included more people. These works include portraits of friends, who I consider family, and cousins. Each carved surface has a specific theme serving as a symbol for people in each category of cousins, which are your first friends, grade school friends and sorority sisters. Each individual has played a role in my lifetime’s support system proving that their appearance in the carvings is important.

For the larger carved series, I included a work that is even larger, hanging at four and a half by twelve feet. This object contains images of myself, portrayed chronologically starting from birth to present day. This particular piece was probably the most enjoyable to create because of the memories that surfaced. While finding the numerous photographs of my life, I enjoyed deciding which images to include, from the picture of me in elementary school with missing front teeth to my monumental events such as graduating from high school and college. The pictures helped me reflect on the journey I have lived thus far and the exciting possibilities to come.

One memory that is particular important, as a child, my mother would tie ribbons in my hair to make a bow. She was very particular about the ribbons, using only ribbons that came from Bermuda because of the specific material used. It was a way of her connecting my sister and I to our culture in Bermuda; many of the little girls in Bermuda would wear ribbons in their hair, undoubtedly matching their outfit of the day. I remember hating the ribbons, not because I did not like them, but because of the extra
time it would take in preparing for the day. Despite them being such a pain to my childhood self, I appreciate them now because of the story it tells.

**Dining Room Table**

After stumbling upon the process of carving linoleum flooring, I was curious if other household materials could be folded into this idea. After brainstorming, I thought about the dining room table, something that plays a pivotal role for the family dynamic. It serves multiple purposes for the family’s growth and development throughout the years. Naturally, the dining room table serves as a place for the family and/or friends to gather and share a meal. In addition to serving as a meal gathering location, it doubles as a business meeting place and numerous social activities that do not revolve around food. Because of monumental role it plays in building relationships, I acquired a table and started carving on its surface.

The dining table is packed full of memories and experiences with which viewers can relate. I remember first seeing Carrie Mae Weems’ *Kitchen Table Series*¹⁷ and being able to relate immediately; a reaction that I would happily welcome from my viewers. By interacting with the table, my hope is that the memories which they have from their own experiences surface. Although the table is not the table which is used by my family, it serves as a surrogate table for my newly developing idea of home. It solidifies my created environment and makes me feel more at home. A colleague once noted that the table seemed cold and unwelcoming, which is an affect I was trying to accomplish; the table represents the loneliness I felt in the new environment. By making this piece, I created dialogue around the issue and put some of my reservations to rest.

While working on these various projects, I found that the action of carving is very taxing on the body; and the idea of labor keeps coming to mind. I see my process, however, as a “labor of love,” because it is honoring loved ones.

Historically, much of my work has had a heavy technological background, consisting of mostly video and animation. Although it will always have a place in my heart, at times I feel limited behind a screen and feel the need to be more tactile. Although the results of these carvings appear to have shied away from technology, during the process it plays a critical role, ensuring that it is not a medium of my past. Typically, traditional media, such as painting or printmaking, inform new media, yet the method in which I work it is reversed: using technology helps me layout a floor plan for the work.

**Installation Process**

The manner in which the work is hung in the gallery is methodical. This is similar to my strategy of placement of each figure within each composition. With the exception of one, the work resembles scrolls; I thought it was important to hang them in a method that they are able to be viewed as such. Because each piece represents a person or persons, I wanted to maintain the idea of human presence through installation. It was imperative that the work not be flush to the wall so that a passerby movement would influence it, becoming an active work within a gallery, similarly to how a human would react. The work is hung on hooks through grommets so that they float away from the wall. Additionally, the order in which each piece is placed is important in creating movement as well.
The portraits of individual family members have varying shapes painted as their background and are placed at different levels on the carving. It was important that similar shapes in one piece be placed next to differently shaped backgrounds in another. By doing this, the viewer is forced to continuously move their eye to follow the movement it creates. Additionally, the larger carvings which are painted with bright colors with a stark black background are placed between the smaller individually carved portraits, in order to further force the viewer to interact with the work in the space. (Figure 8).

Finally, the table serves as the focal point of the exhibit, drawing the viewer in by its tactile quality and heft. The scrolls and other wall-hanging work surrounds it and creates somewhat of a more intimate space and a sense of presence. This is done to give the table a sense of a human presence, and further iterate the sense of longing. A single table setting is left behind on the table to signify the idea of displacement, despite the central sense of home. My desire to leave something on the table was inspired by Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum*\(^\text{18}\) exhibition, where he placed objects together so they create a conversation with one another.

**Conclusion**

Throughout my journey of discovery, I have realized the significance of self-image, identity, family, friends, and community. My work has shown me that from discomfort or despair can grow beauty and success. My work parallels with my needing to belong in a new community and, it opened me up to making artwork that I would not have imagined making in a community in which I felt comfortable. It has helped me

create my own sense of community and grow stronger during challenging times. In the future, I plan to work with scale even more—scale of the image and of the material—to create even more dynamic work. I also want to delve more into the idea of juxtaposition as illustrated by the table installation. Moreover, I would want to broaden my subject matter beyond people, but to places, things, and environments that represent home as well.
Figure 1
Food for Thought Video Stills
Video
December 2013
2:22
Figure 2
Individual Family Portraits
Mixed Media—Spray Paint, Acrylic Paint,
Linoleum flooring
December 2014
Figure 3
Jovial
Acrylic Paint, Linoleum flooring
April 2015
3’x 3’
Figure 4
Self Portrait
Acrylic Paint, Linoleum flooring
December 2015
2’x 5’
Figure 5
Multiple Individual Portrait
Acrylic Paint, Linoleum flooring
April 2015
Each 2’x 5’
Figure 6
Cousins
Acrylic Paint, Linoleum flooring
April 2015
Each 3’x 12’
Figure 7
Family Portrait
Dinning Room Table
April 2015
Figure 8
Exhibition Layout
April 2015
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