

GENERA TIONS

**HELINA
METAFERIA**



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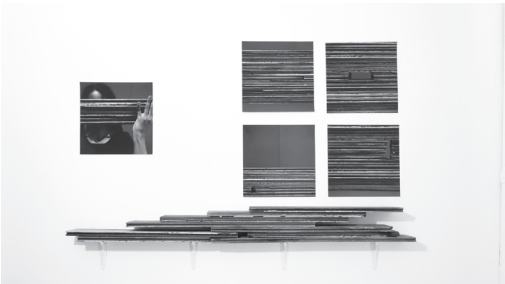
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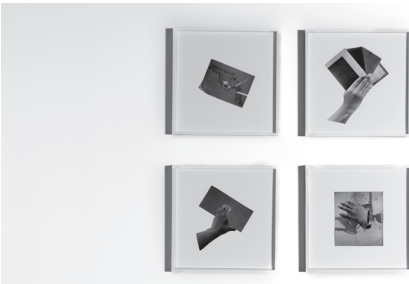
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INTERNAL COVER:

Slow Dirt, Live Performance,
30 min, 2016

PORTFOLIO SECTION:

1. *Slow Dirt*, live performance,
30 min, 2016

2. *Woodn't It Be Beautiful*, archival
inkjet print and wood installation,
54" × 33", 2017

3. *Amulets for the Displaced*,
assemblage, 56" × 35", 2017

4. *A Seat*, video still, 3 min, 2017

5. *Tribal Side Eye*, mixed media
collage, 58" × 23", 2018

6. *Headress 13*, vinyl mural,
44' × 16', 2021

7. *Race Cards series*, mixed media
collage, 16" × 16" each, 2020

8. *A Seat*, installation view,
130' × 10', 2017

9. *Empress Returns*, mixed media
collage, 72" × 33", 2018

10. *Ancestral Honoring*, live
performance, 20 min, 2015



*This exhibition and book is dedicated to
Maigenet Shifferraw (1947–2016) & Getachew Metaferia.*

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**GENERA
TIONS**

HELINA METAFERIA IN CONVERSATION

with MICHELLE MILLAR FISHER
AND CHENOA BAKER

MICHELLE MILLAR FISHER: I want to dive right in with a question that has been on my mind since we last spoke. You talked then about your work being in service to women and their labor upholding democracy, which is so often work that goes underrecognized. And you spoke about your series, *By Way of Revolution*, being born from grief after losing your mom. So, can you talk a little bit more about how your mom and the notion of matrilineage has informed your work?

HELINA METAFERIA: Like most artists, I'm informed by my upbringing, the environment that I grew up in, and the values that I saw acted out in front of me. It wasn't just my mom. Both of my parents were politically involved. My father teaches political science and my mother was also an educator, but she also led a nonprofit Ethiopian women's rights organization, which was made up of expats from Ethiopia who were unable to return to their country because of political situations and their activism work.

¶ Various sources report that estimates of Ethiopians living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan region are currently around 250,000.

¶¶ The political and cultural landscape in the United States at the time of my parents migration includes the height of the civil rights era and Black Power movement.

¶¶¶ The 1974 Ethiopian revolution marked the end of the Ethiopian monarchy under the leadership of a military coup, beginning a long period of violent political suppression and human rights abuses across the country, known as Red Terror.

¶¶¶¶ Reference: *Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 and the Exodus of Ethiopia's Trained Human Resources* by Getachew Metaferia and Maigenet Shifferraw.

My family is from Ethiopia. My dad grew up in a small city called Gore, and my mother is from Addis Ababa, the capital. And I was born in Washington D.C., another capital that attracts a lot of political activism, and it's also home to the largest population of Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia. My parents were among the first waves of immigrants to come to the United States, in 1969 and 1973. They came for school, with the intention to return to Ethiopia, but Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown and killed by an undemocratic and dictatorial military regime that made it impossible for people, especially people who were educated, to return to the country. They would face imprisonment or death. My parents remained in the D.C. area and there was a bigger influx of fellow Ethiopians, especially when racial justice issues made some progress in the U.S. I owe a lot of my family's immigration history to the progress that African-Americans have made in this country.

My father teaches at a historically Black college, and he wrote a book on Ethiopian history and how it overlaps with American histories. And so, I always had this very diasporic household that allowed me to think critically, and also to not take for granted the liberties we have. My mother passed in 2016 and, for me, it was a really devastating moment. I had just finished graduate school the year before, and she had helped me make part of my thesis work—a wearable sculpture made from an archive of family histories. When she passed, I thought about how she always wanted me to become much more involved in her women's rights work, her work to free Ethiopian political prisoners, her work against child marriage issues, and just equity.

Our house was the mailing address for my mother's organization, so we would constantly get papers and letters of support from people around the world collected by Amnesty International on behalf of political prisoners from Ethiopia. As a kid, I was just overwhelmed by it, but when she passed, I really wanted to connect to what she connected to, which was service. I started thinking much more critically about what was happening in our country in 2016, including Black Lives Matter and the election. I thought about the labor of women and the untold histories of women, and that allowed me to connect more with her.

I wanted to continue her work, but in a way that felt like me. *By Way of Revolution* was born through that.

*This interview took place on August 21, 2021.

📺 Video still images from *The Call* can be found on pages 20–21.

📰 A 2002 article in *The Baltimore Sun* reported that between 1815–1860 Fells Point was the leading disembarkation site for carrying slaves into New Orleans and the Deep South.

👥 Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) is an acronym which, according to Google trends, began gaining traction on the internet in May 2020 among the increased attention to the Black Lives Matter movement.

I started with *The Call*, a video work. I knew Melani Douglass [descendant of Frederick Douglass], we had been undergrads together. I had just met Ayanna Gregory, who had just lost her father, [civil rights activist] Dick Gregory, and we were connecting over grief, a shared loss. And then, I was introduced, through Melani, to Paula Whaley, who was grieving her brother James Baldwin 30 years later. I filmed *The Call* in Baltimore, Maryland at Paula Whaley's home. She is a sculptor, and so she had her beautiful doll sculptures around her. Melani offered spoken word, and her young daughter Asherah joined Ayanna to offer inspirational songs. I also filmed scenes at one of the most significant slave ports in U.S. history, in Baltimore, in the Fells Point area.

I was interested in the familial ties of people—in their case, descendants of men who were all internationally renowned for their activism work. All of these women are very powerful artists and speakers in their own right, and they spoke about the women in their family who were lesser known but were vital in civil rights histories. And so, I had a conversation with them, very much like how we're in our living rooms right now. That was the first piece of *By Way of Revolution*.

During that time, I was at Michigan State University working as an artist-in-residence in Critical Race Theory and they had a really big library archive of radical print materials from across the political spectrum. I had the chance to work with librarians in these special collections, particularly photographing and scanning U.S. civil rights images, posters, African posters of the diaspora, and anti-apartheid movement posters. I fell in love with the Black Panther newspapers. They're an organization that took control of their documentation and archives, asserting their own narrative that counters the media's perception of them. Throughout my research, I looked for the stories of women. They were under-told, but they were there in a lot of the labor, in the invisible service in these activist organizations and movements. This is a complicated history, it's not all perfect and romanticized, and certainly one issue was always gender equity. Research is messy, research is complicated, archives are full of power structures, and they're to be questioned, and the institutions that house them need to be questioned, and these are all things that I don't take for granted. Tracing this matrilineage allowed me to heal on my personal journey grieving my mom. But also, it allowed me to connect to a wider world, to recognize service of which she'd been a part.

I am Ethiopian-American, and in my work I'm telling stories that connect to and include pan-African stories, and also, oftentimes, BIPOC stories. I think about the complexities of migration and diasporic histories, and I recognize that I have a very particular perspective. I often get the question, "How do you manage the identity politics within the work?" When I was a graduate student in Boston, in particular, I found a lot of solidarity in BIPOC communities and that was not only refreshing but profoundly important during my time in the city, particularly with the history of racism being so pronounced in Boston. One thing that I have found in my research, is that many of these Black liberation organizations had global perspectives. The Black Panther newspapers, for example, was documenting, and also inspiring, revolutions throughout the world in the 60's and 70's, amongst all races and ethnic groups. That global perspective and ability to gain solidarity and allies

across organizations was also what made them so threatening to the establishment.

CHENOA BAKER: Thank you so much for sharing how your work is rooted in a familial legacy. I want to pivot and ask you about how you developed your visual language. When you look back at your earliest works, is there a moment where your approach really coalesced and became concrete?

HM: I started my path as an artist identifying as a painter, because that's usually what you get exposed to in public high schools, if your school has an art program at all. I was really drawn to figure painting, trying to capture something about a person that couldn't be seen. In undergrad, I majored in painting, and then for eight years after undergrad I kept a studio and did a lot of mural painting and I was also a teaching artist. There was always an educational aspect, wanting to make art accessible. I've always had that interest. And then, I went to graduate school at the Museum School, and it is not a place where you do one thing. I walked in as a painter like, "I'm going to paint," and I walked out doing everything but that. I remember, in graduate school, I had this identity crisis moment. I realized my ego was around being a painter and I felt like the earth was coming out from under me, because I was taking mainly classes on performance and video and installation. There was this unearthing that I really needed.

I tried to get paint to shout and act, but it wasn't doing that for me—but movement was. And movement, to me, connects a lot with ritual. When I learned more independently about Ethiopian painting histories, because I couldn't find that in my education system, it's very much tied to ritual, whether it's religious painting or talisman traditions. I love this idea that art can heal, that it has the ability to be visual medicine. I love the idea that the figures in my work can move and they can talk and they can speak and they can activate, which is the language of protest. This is how I became interdisciplinary as an artist.

When I started documenting performative works, it made me think of archives. I grew up with a lot of archives around me because I had professor parents who had a lot of books and who wrote books, so I was comfortable with looking through materials and reading and analyzing and researching. As artists of color, the risk that we run is that we're considered didactic, like, "We're telling people what to think and feel and what histories are," but there's so many under-told stories.

In all of my work, I draw people in with beauty and aesthetic delight, which I attribute to my background in painting. I adorn the women in my collages and make them so regal, some of it inspired by Ethiopian cultural traditions. And now, I mean, I live in Harlem, I walk down the street and I just see all the style and the beauty. You can't tell Black women nothing. We know how to take care of ourselves. That regality, for me, is a way that people assert power, attention, command. The collages are made up of archives, and it's this information that, as adornment, becomes affirmation.

MMF: You often work with people through embodied movement workshops, and you've talked a little bit about how you came to performance at the Museum School. How do these workshops figure as part of your practice, and have your earliest ones changed from the ones you've done more recently?

HM: If I don't use my own body, which is very accessible, for the figures in my collages then I turn to people that I've had a meaningful exchange with. This oftentimes is within the context of a workshop, or bodies that are activated already, in a sense, because they are activists, and they're on the frontlines, for example when I have worked with Black Lives Matter chapter leaders and founders.

For the workshops, I've been organizing them around the country at universities and institutions and organizations that have invited me to facilitate spaces for BIPOC women-identifying folks, so cis, transgender, nonbinary, on the femme spectrum. These are folks who, to be within those institutional systems, there's often a lot of compromising, because those spaces generally are not built for them. The workshops are incredibly intimate, and they last between 90 minutes and two and a half hours. In that time, we get very deep, very quickly. I am very intentional about not providing documentation of those workshops. I really protect that space to allow people to feel like they can share things that are more personal, and to develop trust in a short period of time, which is an art form in itself.

During the workshops, I lead exercises on how to deconstruct tension in the body and we use gestures of protest and resilience as a framework for how one releases trauma. Just as an example, when my mother passed away, I was, of course, very emotional, and my aunt told me, "Beat your chest"—that is something that, in rural Ethiopia, when people die, it's a way to move the energy out physically, so you're not holding that grief. I'm really interested in these intuitive or cultural gestures. I also think about epigenetics—what does it mean to offer healing, not just to myself individually, but potentially, future generations? The workshops are really questions. I don't have answers, but I want to get people dreaming together and using our imaginations in a way different from what dead white men have designed for us in these institutional spaces hundreds of years ago.

So, we do the performance workshop, then I photograph those who volunteer. Not everyone wants to be photographed. The photograph is the predecessor for the collage work. For my upcoming show at Museum of Fine Arts in Boston [MFA], I photographed students, faculty, and staff from MassArt, Northeastern, Emerson, and SMFA Tufts. I was interested in the Fenway Corridor, particularly, and reclaiming space at the MFA, which is another institution with a complicated history. I want people to feel like that exhibition in particular is a protest, it's a community that's made visible. It's the inspiration of descendants of activists, it's the archives of local Boston resources from Harvard and Northeastern. It's my visual medicine for going to SMFA—that amazingly complicated experience of being at a predominantly white institution.

At the MFA, I'll also show *The Woke* which is a compilation of crowd sourced texts that I've gathered over the last few years from various participatory projects, installations, and other exhibitions. For example, most recently, in my solo show at Northeastern University, there was an interactive participatory installation, where people could answer various questions that had to do with institutional change. The most popular question was, "What is your everyday revolution?" And then, from many, many quotes, I selected a few to be a part of these protest signs. And the protest signs

are created with font and text that's reminiscent of civil rights movements, archiving the voice of community.

CB: What are some of the sources you look to for sustenance as you work?

HM: I've studied with Milagros Phillips, she's an Afro-Dominican race healer, and her method is digging into histories of institutionalized oppression, followed by meditation as a way to go deeper and sink into the heart space. I'm interested in the work of Resmaa Menakem, who wrote *My Grandmother's Hands*. He's also interested in psychosomatics for race healing, particularly in this country. I love adrienne maree brown, who wrote *Emergent Strategy*. And, I mean, BLM actually started as a performance art collective, with Patrisse [Cullors]. There's a very strong history between performance studies and activism. For more academic scholarship, I turn toward Black feminist scholars, including bell hooks, Sylvia Wynter, Audre Lorde, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt.

CB: As you were speaking, I was thinking about the quote that I've often heard, that "performance is the rehearsal for the revolution," and I see that your work really immerses and interpolates audiences into the revolution. What is your relationship to spaces of exhibition and display, like museums or spaces of collecting and acquisition, like art fairs, where audiences often meet your work?

HM: Well, when I was in graduate school, I hung out with a bunch of activists in Boston who were artists, but were not interested in going to a school like SMFA. There are folks who just feel like you can't do anything from within the inside, and some of those folks participated in Decolonize Our Museums and were protesting at the Museum of Fine Arts. And so, I think you need folks who are critical of and don't want to participate in the system to make all the noise with less risk. And I think you also need folks who have, to some degree, made peace with the contradictions of what it means to be a person of color, a woman, in a space that's deeply rooted in preserving colonial legacies and racist histories, that continue to demonstrate bias in how they collect and whom they collect. There are some deep contradictions that I have to deal with in those spaces, and I choose to use my role and platform to do as much advocacy work as I can.

In my role teaching social practice at Brown University, I have these conversations every day with my students. We read institutional critique and we think about the ways in which we can utilize the resources to which we have access. I will paraphrase James Baldwin who said that as artists, we're incredibly powerful and dangerous, because we can mingle with different parts of society, but we also are on the fringes of society, too, so we're always analyzing it and critiquing it. And then, in one of my videos, *(Middle) Passage for Dreams*, my friend and poet Natasha Oladokun makes the claim that artists are prophets, that they tell people that there's a future coming before it's there. And so, our role as artists is to be able to be in space with and in proximity to many different relationships to power. And if we can maneuver that, we can also influence hearts and minds of many people through our work, which is incredibly powerful.

¶ Reference:
The Artists Struggle for Integrity, James Baldwin's 1963 speech at the Community Church in New York.

MMF: Who are your mentors? Who's the person you owe most to as an artist? What is your artistic inheritance?

¶ According to the Center for Disease Control, epigenetics is the study of how our behaviors, environment, and stressors can impact our DNA, and the DNA of our descendants for up to seven generations. Epigenetics are reversible, and can be altered through physically changing the body through diet, movement, exercise, etc.

¶¶ Images from the collages from the MFA exhibition can be found on pages 17–19.

¶¶¶ Images from *The Woke* can be found on pages 24–25.

HM: That's such a great, great question. I have five people, Black women, outside of my mom, who have really guided me and were all my teachers in some way. And that prompted me to want to teach. The first was my high school art teacher, Dr. Deborah Ambush, who pulled me to one side and said, "Be an artist, you have skill." I had no artists in my family, so that was powerful. Dr. Monifa Love Asante is the second figure. I went to Morgan State University for undergrad, where she taught, and she still is my mentor to this day. She was like a fairy godmother, and she introduced me to the artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, who taught at the Museum School. I met Magda and only applied to one graduate school, because I wanted to work with her. She always brought her students into her work. And I learned to do that from her, with my students, so she is my third mentor. The fourth is Dr. Kimberley Hébert who taught writing at the Museum School. I learned everything I need to know about grant writing from her, and she helped me write the cover letter to get my first teaching job. And then, another woman, Dr. Adara Walton, who is like a modern-day shaman. I've known her since I was young, and she taught me meditation and how to center myself. I've just been surrounded by a flock, and I think part of my mission in teaching is knowing that it just takes one person. They don't have to be there for your whole life, but just for a little bit, and they can shift and guide you, and then it just opens up your world. I always think, "I have to pay it forward." I can never pay those five women back, but I can do it for somebody else, and that's paying them back, so it's generational.

In terms of artists whose work has been inspirational to me, I am very interested in the work of Betye Saar, Simone Leigh, Ana Mendieta, Howardena Pindell, and Adrian Piper—artists who bridge the political with the social and spiritual to make art objects and performance. When I was a teenager, my parents sat me down to watch Ethiopian-American filmmaker Haile Gerima's *Sankofa*, and that was a pivotal moment for me. Haile is a staple figure in the LA Rebellion of Black Filmmakers, and also in the Washington, D.C. community, where I grew up. I grew up going to Sankofa bookstore on Howard University campus, which he founded and ran. My mother held her women's activist group meetings at the bookstore. His film was the first time I saw an Ethiopian creative make a Black Diaspora narrative that retells history from the perspective of the oppressed. It was made independently, without the pressures of Hollywood, and in a way that took back control of Black images and imagination, unlike anything I had seen up to that point. This is what I hope my work can do, in the form of collage, video, performance, and installation.

CB: What about your peers? We wanted to ask you about *The Wide Awakes*, for example?

HM: I am part of an art and activist collective called *The Wide Awakes*, which originated in 2019, right before the pandemic. It was founded by Hank Willis Thomas with support of many artists, such as Eric Gottesman, José Parlá, and the For Freedoms family. It is an international network of artists, thinkers, people—anyone who wants to participate can participate. It's open source, which I love. It really gives trust to people. It's about promoting change through joy and through love, and it sounds corny, but I have found it so simple yet effective. *The Wide Awakes* community is modeled after the original *Wide Awakes*, which was an abolitionist movement in the 1860s, which

was a bunch of white men in capes, trying to get Abraham Lincoln elected. We're a much more diverse group. But the same idea of modern-day abolitionism holds—what does it mean to be very proactive around voting, very proactive around protests for justice. And so, I started just showing up and doing my performances with them, and then started to become an organizer, and I just fell down a rabbit hole of wanting to be around these smart, brilliant people all the time.

MMF: What support or opportunities do you wish you'd had for your work that don't currently exist, but you think should or wish did?

HM: When I first went to art school, I went to a predominantly white institution and I was a fish out of water, culturally. I also couldn't afford it. I had to leave. There were so many things that I just didn't know in the arts, but some people knew it and they figured it out or they just knew how to navigate the educational part, the cultural part, the introduction to why any of this history was relevant. I mean, I was learning that Western art history is the only art history, and I was really so frustrated. And then, I eventually resumed studying, but I went to a historically Black college, which didn't have the most robust funding for the arts, but there was a lot of support and care and acknowledgment of my humanity that I did not experience initially. Equity is something that I really work on, especially as an educator. I think there needs to be more pre-college programs that allow young BIPOC folk who are on their way into higher education, people who are marginalized and minorities, to learn the system, and then, once they're in school, to support them to completion. And then, once they're out of school, what's next? I was very fortunate to get fellowships and residencies as a gateway into academia, but there should be more programs like this made available, particularly for BIPOC artists.

CB: What is the question that you never get asked about your work that you wish you did?

HM: Something I've been thinking about lately is, "who are all the people that allowed you to be where you are today?" I guess, the question is, to make one piece of art, who helped? Who was there? I think about all the librarians who helped to archive this work, whoever donated these archives. I think about my research assistant, Wes, who helped print the archives. I think about Marla, who helped me research in the libraries, and Barbara who helps me in my studio. I think about the people who work at Blick, where I get my art supplies from. I think about my dad and my partner, who check up on me when I am working 60 hours or more a week sometimes. I think about all of the people who issued me grants, who give me free studio space in residencies, and the curators and artists who visit my studio and give input in my practice. I think about all the people in my world and the people I don't even know who have helped to shape this work. I want to make these really long labels, just thanking people.

MMF: Let's do this for your exhibition at the MFA! A paper label is very easy to reprint if we need to add a name to it. And you could even have the invitation, "If you think you should be on this list and I've forgotten you somehow, tell me, and I'll put you on it," and we'll just reprint the label.

HM: I love that.

¶ A list of professional acknowledgments for the production of the Museum of Fine Arts exhibition and this catalog are listed on page 38.

CB: I'd like to revisit your friend's quote about artists being prophets for our last question. I believe in the power of words and intention, and as we end, what would you want to prophesy through your artistic practice?

HM: Like many people, I've been following the news and thinking, "There's got to be another way." I know this is a very polarized world, and there's always going to be these gradients of experiences, and hurt and pain is how we grow, but what would it look like to have a more humane society? What does equity look like in a new imagined world? Can we work with the earth and with each other in an ethos of care and community or must it always be within systems of patriarchy and racism and classicism, all of these things that tear people apart in order for some people to feel important? Focusing on the type of love and joy within The Wide Awakes community is what I'm trying to move towards with the work I make, the teaching I do, and the relationships I nurture. I am optimistic when I'm in intentional community and when I see what can be done. I'm very fortunate to be an artist, because it allows me to use my imagination in collective to envision something new, a more equitable society of empathy, care, and love.

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HEADDRESS 29,
HEADDRESS 28,
HEADDRESS 30
 mixed media collages
 8' x 4'
 2021





THE CALL
 single channel
 video stills
 17:05
 2021



THE CALL
single channel video
17:05
2021



THE CALL
single channel video
17:05
2021



THE WOKE
text, acrylic, paper,
wood installation
16' x 10' x 3'
2021



GENERATIONS
 Installation view
 at the Museum of Fine
 Arts, Boston, 2021.

HELINA METAFERIA'S NEW HISTORIES OF REVOLUTION

ARUNA D'SOUZA

WHERE DOES HISTORY LIVE? Where does revolution live? These are two of the questions Helina Metaferia's work seems to ask consistently, whether in the form of performance, video, installation, collage, or socially engaged community building work. And, as might be expected given the diversity of mediums that Metaferia uses, as well as her own complicated identity—as the daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, themselves expats because of political changes at home, raised and educated in the U.S., a Black person of the diaspora—the answers to those two overriding questions are similarly varied.

History and revolution live, her work proposes, in archives, in genealogies, in canons, in oral histories—the places one might expect—but also in bodies, in momentary acts of reunion, in the way we hold trauma and joy in our muscles and minds, in our dreaming. These are sites of knowledge of our pasts (and of aspirations for our futures, which, after all, are what drives revolution). Such places are especially important for those who have been cut off from their origins by enslavement, but also by war, by political and social oppression, by the escape from economic insecurity, and so on.

In *Refiguring the Canon*, Metaferia does just what the title says—transforms the art historical canon via the figure, or, more specifically, via her figure. The series includes collages in which fragments of famous works of art spring from her face or body like headdresses or flowers or veils, as well as photographs and videos of her moving her body in response to—in concert with, as well as at odds with—paintings by Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and others. It also includes the installation *A Seat: Pulling up a chair next to Joseph; in conversation with Nzinga, Rosa, Shirley, and Solange* (2017), which takes on Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth's famously laconic (and iconic) *One and Three Chairs* (1965).

Kosuth was interested in the way language (including visual language) could operate on different registers; *One and Three Chairs* thus consists of an actual, three-dimensional wooden folding chair, a black and white photograph of that same chair, and a dictionary definition of the word “chair.” The piece raises all sorts of philosophical and aesthetic questions about the way symbols (words, photographs) relate to objects in the world. One thing it doesn't address, or even make space for, is the body that might occupy the chair, and how that body might relate—or not—to the languages that Kosuth takes as given.

Metaferia's response seems to offer up all that Kosuth's piece leaves out. Consisting of a video monitor showing her manipulations of the chair (she turns it over, rests it on her back, sits on it in unconventional ways); a photograph of her contemplating the chair which sits upside down on the floor; the chair itself; a quotation from Shirley Chisholm; and a phrase from Solange Knowles, the piece creates a chair-based history of the revolutionary women alluded to in her title.

Queen Nzinga of Angola was a 17th century monarch who, when she went to negotiate with the Portuguese who were trying to colonize the region, was offered not a chair but a mat on the floor to indicate her subordinate position; in response, one of her attendants formed himself into a chair so she could sit on

the same level as those who would diminish her. Rosa Parks sparked a civil rights revolution because she refused to sit where she was told she must. Shirley Chisolm, activist, Congressperson, and candidate for president in 1972, famously said “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” Solange Knowles, whose album, “A Seat at the Table,” explicitly refers to Chisolm’s slogan, wrote an essay titled “And Do You Belong: I Do,” in which she discussed the experience of being a Black woman in a predominantly white space. Kosuth’s piece suggests, in a Gertrude Stein-esque fashion, that “a chair is a chair is a chair.” Metaferia is showing us all the ways that for Black women, who are always positioned as Other in relation to the dominant language, a chair is never, in fact, simply a chair. At the same time, she seems to physically channel the legacies of these women in her engagement with a simple object.

Another kind of canon that Metaferia takes on in her work, most explicitly in her ongoing series, *By Way of Revolution*, is one embodied in the histories of Black political activism: namely, the centering of Black male activists at the expense of the Black women, whose work in revolutionary circles is often crucial but largely takes place behind the scenes and therefore is easily overlooked.

Metaferia’s own mother led a nonprofit organization advocating for the rights of Ethiopian women. When she died in 2016, the artist connected to four female relatives of renowned activists: Melani Douglass, a descendant of Frederick Douglass, and her young daughter Asherah; Ayanna Gregory, daughter of Dick Gregory, who died in 2017; and Paula Whaley, who was still grieving the loss of her brother, James Baldwin, three decades after his death. Metaferia gathered them, artists in their own right, at Whaley’s house in Baltimore where they spoke to the often unacknowledged role that the women in their families played in the civil rights movement. The result of the encounter was a 17-minute video titled *The Call* (2019). Steeped in a moment that saw the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in response to the ongoing murders of Black men and women by police around the country, the piece is a collective call to action. It is also a reminder of the individual callings many people have to follow in the footsteps of their elders and ancestors to take up the task of changing the world.

Metaferia’s *Headdresses* complete the *By Way of Revolution* series. These collages are centered on images of women of color involved in activist organizations, or who become activated through Metaferia’s movement workshops. Led by the artist in fellowship with different communities across the United States, these workshops encourage participants to use physical gestures of protest in order to release tension and trauma—personal and collective—from their bodies. (Metaferia does not allow the workshops themselves to be photographed because she doesn’t want hosting institutions to instrumentalize her work or the participants’ images to burnish their “diversity cred.” The women Metaferia photographs for her collage series participate at their own discretion.)

Metaferia then adorns the images of women activists with photographs and newspaper clippings culled from archives of radical movements as well as pictures from old

Ethiopian, Kenyan, and South African travel magazines, a process which she first began at Michigan State University when she worked as an artist in residence in 2018–19. The resulting collaged head-dresses are both an honor and a burden, it seems: a sign of these women activists’ esteemed status for the work they are doing to change the world, but also a recognition of the colonial fetishization of Black femininity and the marginalization of Black women in movement politics.

For Metaferia, the question of what is worth fighting for seems to originate in the imagination—in dreaming of possible futures, and in creating the kinds of situations which allow for such dreaming. *(Middle) Passage of Dreams*, a three-channel video from 2016–19, does just that. Three friends, artists all, lie in a field of fresh grass in a star-like configuration, touching at the head; others lie on the beach as the waves lap their feet; others stand still in forests in the autumnal chill or the wintery snow. Over the sounds of nature, they speak, in quiet and intimate ways, about what it means to be in the world as a Black person—the joys, the possibilities, but also the pressures, the trauma, the violence. They close their eyes, they laugh, they stare at the clouds. They sit or stand or lie down in places that allude to past horrors—the ocean, across which hundreds of thousands of Black people were carried against their will; plantations, on which Black people were enslaved and worked to death; forests, in which people who tried to liberate themselves from enslavement or the inhumanity of Jim Crow were lynched (or maybe, rarely, found refuge).

(Middle) Passage of Dreams creates an opportunity for respite for her friends from the daily, grinding exhaustion produced by living in white supremacist society, and for those who are allowed a view into these spaces of meditation and imagination. As Metaferia points out at one point, “walking through life while being Black is a special type of adventure, being female is a special type of adventure—it requires you to be even more bold and audacious to do the things that maybe someone else who isn’t bodied that way can take for granted.”

“I believe in making dreams reality, and I believe we all have the power to do that,” declares Metaferia in her video. Indeed, we do—and by claiming that power, the artist reminds us, we can change the world.

*



HEADRESS 28

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Union Women and Children at Labor Day* March, Sep 6, 1982, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Union Women Demonstration, 1981-1983*, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Women Office Workers, 1976-1977*, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Women Office Workers Demonstrate at Labor Department, 1976* Oct 13, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Leinwand, Freda [photographer], *Marchers in Support of International Women's Day, 1977* Mar 12, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Leinwand, Freda [photographer], *Pro-ERA Demonstration and Women '80 Demonstration, 1980* Aug 26, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Unknown [discarded protest sign], *'Awake + Outraged' Sign From Women's March on Washington, 2017*, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

HEADRESS 29

Men of All Colors Together, Boston [creator], Two men carry a banner reading "Boston black and white men together" while marching in a parade, 1984, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Gay community news, May 6-12, 1990. volume 17, number 41, Boston, MA, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Gay community news, December 6-12, 1987, volume 15, number 21, Boston, MA, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Gay community news, June 21, 1986. volume 13, number 47, Boston, MA, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Unknown [discarded protest sign], *'Raised Black Power Fist / Resist' Sign From Women's March on Washington, 2017*, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

HEADRESS 30

The Boston Globe [photographer], *Picket Line at the Boston School Committee Offices*, August 07, 1963, James W. Fraser (collector) photograph collection, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Dopkeen, Joyce [photographer], *Pay Homage to Dr. King in the Common*, April 8, 1968, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Crown Heights Demonstration for Black Civil Rights*, July 16, 1978, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute.

Lane, Bettye [photographer], *Black Civil Rights demonstration*, April 17, 1979, Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Harvard University Radcliffe Institute

Unknown [photographer], *MLK March on Blue Hill Ave*, 1969, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.

Unknown [photographer], *Silent Marchers at Davidson Courthouse in Nashville, Tennessee*, April 19, 1960, Northeastern University Library, Archives and Special Collections.



HELINA METAFERIA is an interdisciplinary artist working across collage, assemblage, video, performance, and social engagement. Her work incorporates archival research, literature, dialogical art, and somatic studies to reclaim overlooked stories that center marginalized bodies in positions of power and vulnerability.

Metaferia received her MFA from Tufts University's School of the Museum of Fine Arts and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Recent solo exhibitions include Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of African Diaspora, San Francisco, CA; and New York University's The Gallatin Galleries, New York, NY. Group exhibitions include Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, MI; CF Hill, Stockholm, Sweden; and Modern Art Museum, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Metaferia's work has been supported by residencies such as MacDowell, Yaddo, Bemis, MASS MoCA, and Silver Art Projects at the World Trade Center. Her work has been reviewed in publications including *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Washington Post*, *Financial Times*, *Artnet News*, and *Hyperallergic*. Metaferia currently serves as Assistant Professor at Brown University in the Visual Art department, and lives and works in New York City.

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