

An Oral History Project Excerpt

with Mike Cloud

by Erica Hunt

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Additional support is provided by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

The complete interview with Mike Cloud will be published this winter at bombmagazine.org.



Dialogue of Growth, 2014, oil on canvas, 91.5 x 30.5 inches. Images courtesy of the artist.

Mike Cloud's approach to painting is rooted in his philosophy that paintings are objects in a system of objects. In his oral history with poet and essayist Erica Hunt, the pair reconvene in Cloud's studio in Chicago for a conversation that began in 2024 at the American Academy in Rome during their residencies as Prize Fellows in visual art and literature. Hunt had seen Cloud's work in his pristine studio at the American Academy, a presentation that differed dramatically from the works in progress on view in Cloud's Chicago studio. This acknowledgment is an entry point in their conversation. What results is a thick description of how we see objects and the many narratives and symbols they contain. In this excerpt, Cloud and Hunt expand upon "Mike Cloud's vocabulary" and his arrival at a language of painting that consents to ambiguity.

—Janée A. Moses, Director of the Oral History Project

ERICA HUNT: I see your works in progress, which are dynamic with blocks of color, different color combinations, details, and motion. The paintings and frames are very energetic. In this studio, there are works of all descriptions, and in different stages of execution, and of all shapes and forms, as well as a multitude of colors. No color predominates. I feel surrounded by the possibility of forms, images, references, and textures that are part of our experiences of the world and there for us to see in all of their astonishing variety.

MIKE CLOUD: I've always liked color. I came to art by reading about it—as a kid I went to the zoo, the aquarium, and those sorts of places but not to art museums. In high school at Saint Martin de Porres in Chicago, I used to skip class sometimes and meet my friends at a local shopping mall called Evergreen Plaza. To get there, I would take a bus. At 103rd Street and Western Avenue in Beverly, there was an art store that had books about art. This was the '80s. Back then, books about art didn't have a lot of pictures. They had text and maybe a couple black-and-white pictures. I read about what art did and saw the picture of Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* in black-and-white.

EH: My goodness.

below: Mike Cloud at Max Protetch Gallery, New York City, 2010.

MC: I understood that by looking at the little image, I could not feel the things the text described. I couldn't feel the expression of reality. I couldn't feel and temporal dimensions through the painting's representation of multiple perspectives in a single picture space. I didn't want to make things that looked like the pictures in the book, but I wanted to make things that would function as the works in the books were reported to have done: as symbolic catalysts for transcendent aesthetic experiences.

I turned to color and read a lot of books about color theory. At that time, color theory books were mostly about graphic design. Artists kind of stopped being interested in color theory after Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color* in the '60s. Artists—real artists—didn't care, but graphic designers still cared about stuff like color harmony, color psychology, and color schemes.

I started collecting books like *Color Categories in Thought and Language* by C. L. Hardin and Luisa Maffi.



Color in the Italian Renaissance Theory of Art by Moshe Barasch, *Black Is a Color* by Eivan Zabunyan, and others. I've got a big collection of color theory books that's now in my office because it got to be too much for my studio. One of the older theories of color and harmony, the one that interested me most, was a nineteenth-century theory from E. K. Rossiter and Michel Eugène Chevreul that suggested that we have a natural desire to see all the colors at once, and seeing all the colors is the sensation of harmony. There's an optical illusion where if you look at something red then look at a white wall, you'll see green, the opposite of red. It's called the color-after-image illusion.

Before they knew about eye physiology, people theorized that after

seeing an abundance of red, we have a natural desire to see what is called its complement. In the system of colors, a complement is whatever color is missing. If you look at red, you desire to see blue and yellow, which is green. My use of color is often based on the idea that there's a desire for completeness. Every painting, every time, is red, blue, yellow, green, brown, black, white, gray, pink, and purple, but they're in different quantities. The dream of pure abstraction is to produce a painting that has no subject; it's a subject, like a real thing in the world. Ad Reinhardt made a cartoon in the 1940s where a man points at an abstract painting

below: View of the artist's home studio, 2023.



and dismissively asks, "What does this represent?" The painting comes alive and angrily asks the man, "What do you represent?" The cartoon caption reads: "It is alive if you are. It represents something and so do you." The world has no symbolic meaning. But the reason the world has no meaning is not because it does not contain narrative. The world actually contains all the narratives. It has no meaning because it has no perspective. It's not narrative that produces meaning; it's perspective.

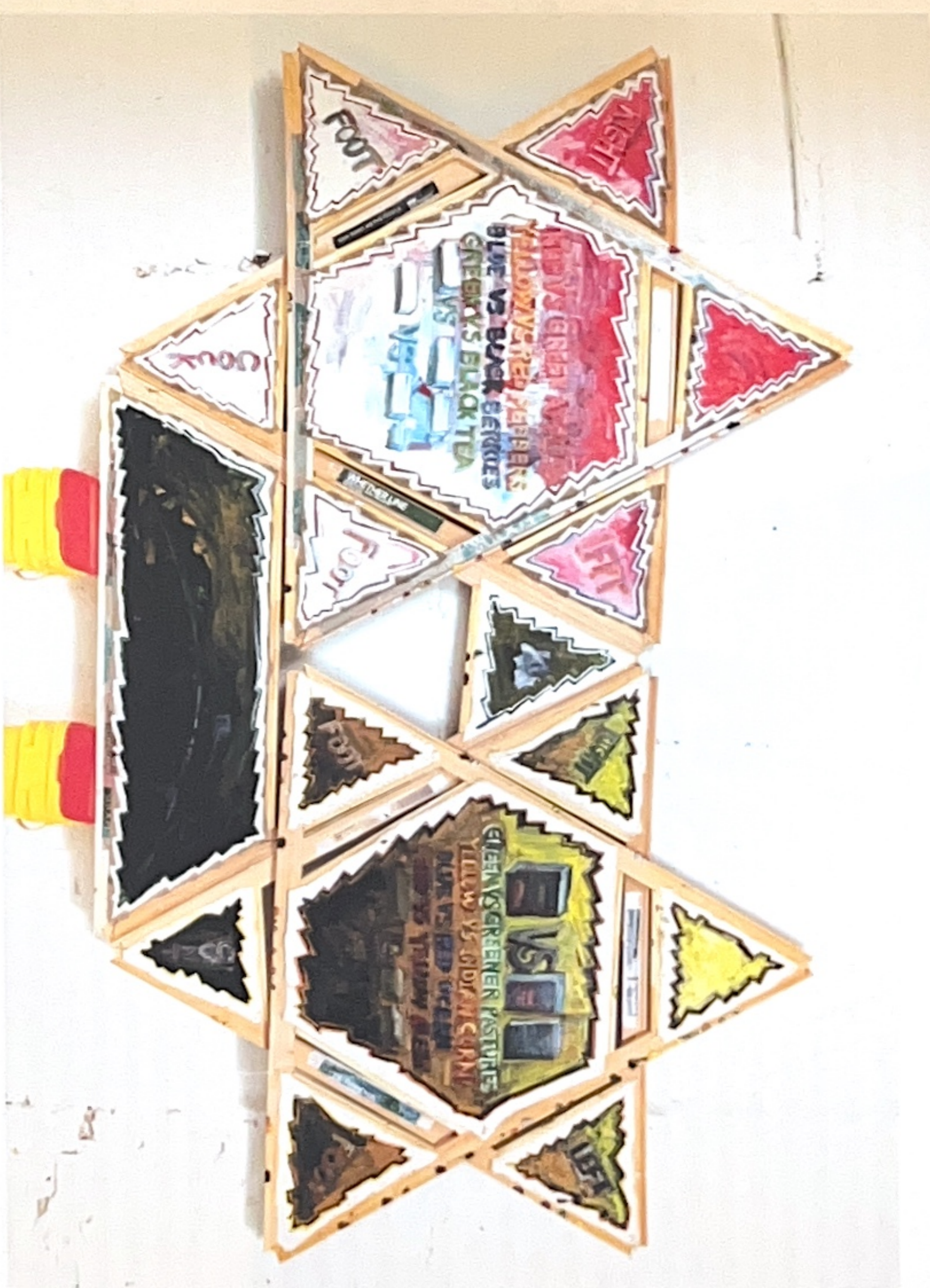
EH: That's a very provocative idea. You're talking about problems of representation, which makes me think about how there are certain acceptable ways of representing something. This desire to make a painting that is not about something but *is* the something. It is its own natural object, like a tulip tree, Manhattan schist or granite, a spotless starling, and so on, specific and situated. It's not a representation; it's part of the world of objects and manifests just like any other object in the world that we encounter. It's self-referential and meaningful in itself. It's meaningful on a phenomenological level.

Can you say more about how having all the colors there at once and in various proportions gives us the kind of complete visual satisfaction that we crave, perhaps, physiologically?

MC: It takes away from me, as the artist, the power to manipulate. I always find it annoying when paintings are read in order to elicit some aesthetic response. That feels—I wouldn't say childish—but un-collegial. Like, we're not making this together. We're not making meaning together. Ancient art feels very collegial to me. People were making it together and sharing in the process of its meaning.

EH: I wonder if we could change that or have a dialogue with a completely red-drenched painting. I imagine an artist like Mark Rothko saying, "It's not blood; it's just red." Or could we imagine someone seeing a red field and engaging with it and challenging their beliefs about red?

MC: But that is resisting what you imagine the artist's desires are, right? That's an aspect of interpretation and



communication. People resist what I'm saying to them because they think I'm trying to get them to do something. I want the paintings to seem innocent enough that you don't have to try not to think it's a Star of David.

EH: In other words, you're not pushing an ideological line. You do have a little bit of an ideology, but it's—

MC: I have no ideology.

EH: So, you have some thoughts about color, and it's not in the sense that we have belief systems. Ideology can sometimes seem like a bad word. It's not. It's just a belief system.

MC: But my ideology either inspires me not to withhold anything from you, or my ideology is that I ought not to withhold anything.

EH: Okay, so your belief system says, "Don't hold back; just let people have their experience." You're providing some framework or portal for people to have that experience of color. For me, it

is mostly very joyous, and it makes me wonder about the experience of making this work. The canvas stretchers are many different configurations and don't presume the plane, don't presume the edges and the center of the canvases. The configurations tease us to think about all of those conventions of a painted canvas. How do you think about making these frames and making these surfaces for your work with the half-moons and Mike Cloud's famous turkey hands?

MC: When I was an undergrad at the University of Illinois, they taught us how to make stretcher bars using two-by-fours that you cut and trim at an angle and then put together. Instead of cutting and trimming them, I used the two-by-fours whole, and I stretched around one half of the two-by-four and then stretched around one side and then the other to make something like a drum shape. I've always understood art to be different from craft in that a lot of the work in craft is invisible. When you upholster a chair, the parts where you staple it are hidden.

In making art, I didn't want to waste any energy or effort, meaning that if I stapled it, you should see the staples because otherwise I just wasted that aesthetic energy inherent in stapling. I want my work to compete with that of artists who have bigger budgets than I do and can afford to waste aesthetic labor because they hire other people to do their work. Everything I do has to be there. For me, it's related to color and how all the colors are present. In a work, all the labor should be present. That's also why I use colored glue. If I glue something, I want you to see that I glued it. If I saw something, or if I broke something, you should see that I did.

EH: It's very cool. Do you ever paint these frames?

MC: Sometimes. I experiment with different ways of painting the frames.

above: Studio view of *Shopping List Greener Pastures*, 2020, oil on linen with mixed media, 67 x 116 x 4 inches.

The problem is I don't want any work to be hidden, but I also don't want to do any work when a surface is already paying its rent. I don't want to cover something that is already paying its way. I don't know if you know, but I stopped painting for a couple years back in 2008. I just worked on collage during that time, and I made quilts. That experiment taught me how to fragment painting and how to make things in paintings so I could do one thing in one place and another thing in another place. Also, I try to bring the body into the paintings through the hand.

EH: Yes. So much to learn from the improvised and durational processes of quilting and collaging. Tell me more about what you mean by bringing the body into your painting.

MC: I guess I am trying to escape what I understand to be late modernism. I associate early modernism with Henri Matisse and the attempt to make a painting using all the elements of painting—color, surface, and so on—to their full potential, whereas late modernists like Clyfford Still took one element of painting, and another painter took another, and so on. I'll be the drip painter. You'll be the line painter. You'll be the color painter. And then together we'll mine the territory of painting as a group. That's how I was taught to make paintings: Each of us grabs one piece and then mines it. We go downward into the territory rather than across it. But I wanted to bring the pieces together to make a whole picture, and to me, a whole picture has atmosphere, living beings, plants, atmospheric phenomena, celestial bodies, architecture, and text. And I have a resistance to the figure, but I do the best I can to make a whole picture every time.

EH: Wow! There is a very specific vocabulary. I feel that this conversation could be the glossary—a compendium of the "Mike Cloud vocabulary."

MC: I have a worldview. And it's all kind of a comical attempt to make sense of the paintings that I read about as a high schooler in books like Andre Malraux's *The Voices of Silence: Man and His Art*, which just had tiny, blurry, black-and-white photographs.

EH: It's so interesting. You have a different way of seeing things, but it's also familiar in the sense that I do think artists, through their inquiries and practices, create specific languages that they begin to work in or mine. You were saying that late modernism was analytic. It took one piece of painting and brought it back. Your process asks, "What can I generate in the studio that has fullness or is holistic?"

MC: The painters I admired and had met personally by the time I was out of graduate school were late modernists in that way: Peter Halley, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed. And their work was funny.

In a letter, René Descartes once defined what abstraction is by describing the difference between abstraction and what he called exclusion. The idea is that abstraction, to paraphrase, is when you consider in isolation something that does not occur in isolation. The nervous system is an abstraction. Nobody's ever seen a nervous system, right? And if you imagine a nervous system existing alone, it's kind of funny. There's an absurdity about it. I think that late modernist paintings by Clyfford Still and sculptures by Dan Flavin are funny because they're putting things in isolation, like color and surface, that don't occur in isolation. Descartes mentioned the idea of exclusion, which is different because it's when we simply have a habit of understanding things together, like peanut butter and jelly. But if you realize they're separate things, new things become possible: You can make a jelly donut because you know you don't have to have peanut butter every time you have jelly. But in order for abstraction, like the nervous system, to stop being funny, I have to take it back to the whole system. If I understand the nervous system and take it back to the entire system of the body, then I can become a doctor. So, I was trying to take abstraction back to the entire system of the painting. And the results are these kinds of constructions, like these kinds of Frankenstein's monsters on the table. I'm not putting the pieces back together right. These are the wrong size—this one is big, and this one is small—but that's collage.

EH: That's the reassemblage in construction. I keep going back to the German philosopher Edmund Husserl and his philosophy of phenomenology and existentialism. He supposes a view that thinking is necessarily connected to the external world. We think thoughts, but we always need the external world to complement thought. There's always a kind of dialogic and dynamic quality to the ways that we experience being in the world, and to be a thinking being requires objects—people, animals, and things—to stimulate us, awaken us.

Part of my joy here today with you in your home studio is that I'm reawakened to fundamental elements of painting: brain, subject, form, color, and the other elements you name. All these things can be reconstituted in a way that wakes me up. My favorite quote from Kafka's letters is "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us," and I translate that idea into a call practitioners of any art form are compelled to answer.

MC: The iceberg in the soul.

EH: The icebergs in our souls. Exactly. It goes, "Pop-pop-pop! Crack. I'm awake now! I can feel my blood running through me again! Instead of walking in a daze. I see what you're describing."

Can you tell me about the spiritual implications of color and this project of collaging and reassembling the elements? How does spirit enter the whole picture every time?

MC: When you were describing externalizing thought through objects,

I thought, Of course, human beings have to do that in the same way we have to sleep. We would go insane if we didn't sleep, and I think we would go insane if we didn't externalize our inner objects, or our inner platonic forms. And we do it collaboratively because each of us is just gonna die in a few decades, but we need this planet covered by representations of our inner lives. I feel that I'm just collaborating of that project of externalizing our lives. This sounds silly, and I have to say it, but I'm trying to make our totems on the shelves here in the

EH: It's not silly. Literally, the totems on the shelves here in the



to always seem in the process of being made.

EH: The power of the improvisational. I want you to drill down a little bit more on the difference between power and fear. The figurines, you argue, are not fear-making because they're a little too complete, and they're hitting certain tropes of what a monster is. And then there's this other kind of rudimentary thing that is somehow more powerful than the figurine.

MC: I don't want to be a person who makes paintings. I want to be a person who's trying to make paintings. That process is more like the voodoo doll that you find under your sink. It makes you ask, "Is somebody trying to hex me?" The one you get off Amazon is finished. My paintings look like I'm still making them. Fear is about the presence of another person. Have you seen the internet meme "Would you rather be in the woods with a bear or a man?"

EH: Yeah. (laughter)

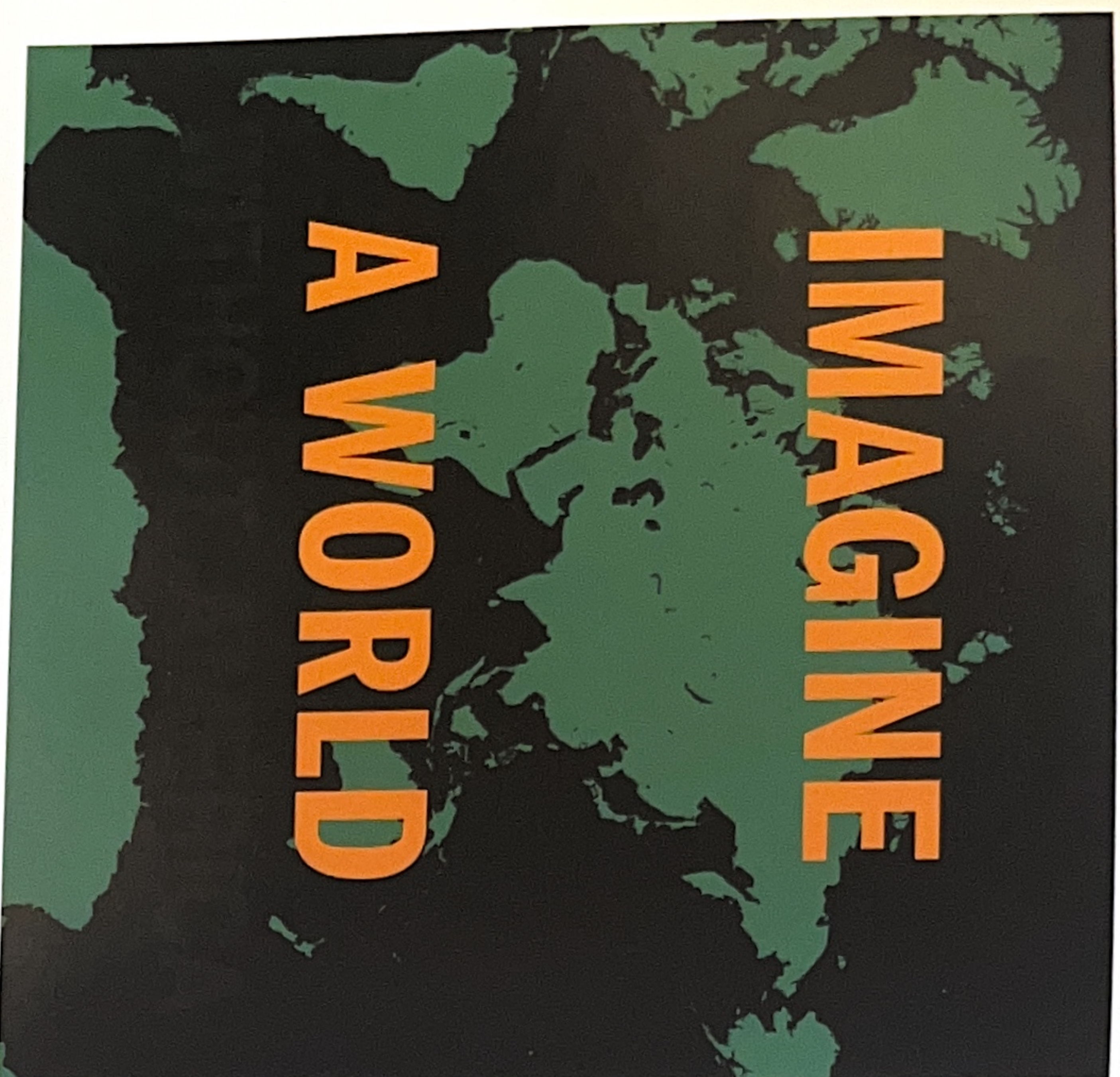
MC: What are the conditions in which being alone with another person induces fear rather than relief? When you're in the presence of a visual work of art, you're alone. What does it feel like to suddenly see the painter? Suddenly they're standing behind you. Is that a relief of some sort? For me, it's fear.

EH: Or is it power? I'm not sure I'm necessarily afraid. Perhaps in a Venn diagram of power and fear, there's an overlap.

MC: I think ambiguous power is the scary thing because that's when you're waiting. I was recently meeting with an arts professional who was very agitated, upset even, that my power as an artist is so ambiguous. Like, if they just knew what I wanted, then that would be fine. (laughter) But then I'd be their friend, or I'd be their enemy. I want to be ambiguous.

above: Shelf of monster figurines in the artist's home studio, 2025.

below: *Imagine a World Without America (Green Land)*, 2025, screenprint on canvas, 75 x 75 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York City, unless otherwise noted.



An Oral History Project Excerpt with Dread Scott by Rujeko Hockley

The Oral History Project is made possible with a major grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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The complete interview with Dread Scott was published this winter at www.oralhistoryproject.org.

Dread Scott is a visual artist who makes revolutionary art. His career has been marked by national controversy and a steadfast objective to exist in a world free of exploitation and oppression. In this Oral History Project excerpt, he conveys his concerns about the state of the art world to Rujeko Hockley, Arnhold Associate Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Hockley begins with a series of introspective questions about who Scott was before he chose a name in the punk aesthetic that honors his political activism and artistry. They continue with a detailed account of the controversy that brought Scott into legal and political battles and challenged his reception and legacy, both then and now. Scott concludes with a question for the art world, which he feels has not figured out what to do with an empowered artist whose artwork resonates with viewers at recognizable institutions and at protests for political and social reform.

—Janée A. Moses, Director of the Oral History Project

RUJEKO HOCKLEY: From looking at your work, it seems as though you've lived a very interesting life. If your work is a snapshot of your existence, I think it's gone well.

DREAD SCOTT: It's alright. I've got complaints, but I don't think there's an artist who doesn't want more.

RH: True. No one who becomes an artist thinks everything's been perfect and there are no issues.

I was really struck by the family photos that you shared with me and how beautiful they are but also how old they are. Those images are artifacts of such deep family history, which feels especially profound given American history and the state of the world for a Black person, and a Black American specifically. Tell me a bit about the image of this little boy in a high chair.

DS: That's me. Yeah.

RH: You don't have the same name as you did then, and we'll get into that. Who was that child? And who were his people?

DS: Well, the thing with kids is if you feed and water them, they get bigger. And if they don't manage to get eaten by lions or run over by cars, they become older. And so, I got older. One reason I shared a picture of me in a high chair is that the photo actually says more about my dad, Scott Tyler. Many people have photos of themselves from when they were kids, but most don't have photos with lights around them and in the background. I don't remember it, but I know my dad took the photo. Before I was born, my dad was a professional photographer. He was doing anything one could do with a camera to eat, but it was mostly photojournalism with *The Chicago Defender*. During my lifetime, he was a serious amateur. That meant I grew up around cameras, which is part of how I got into being an artist.

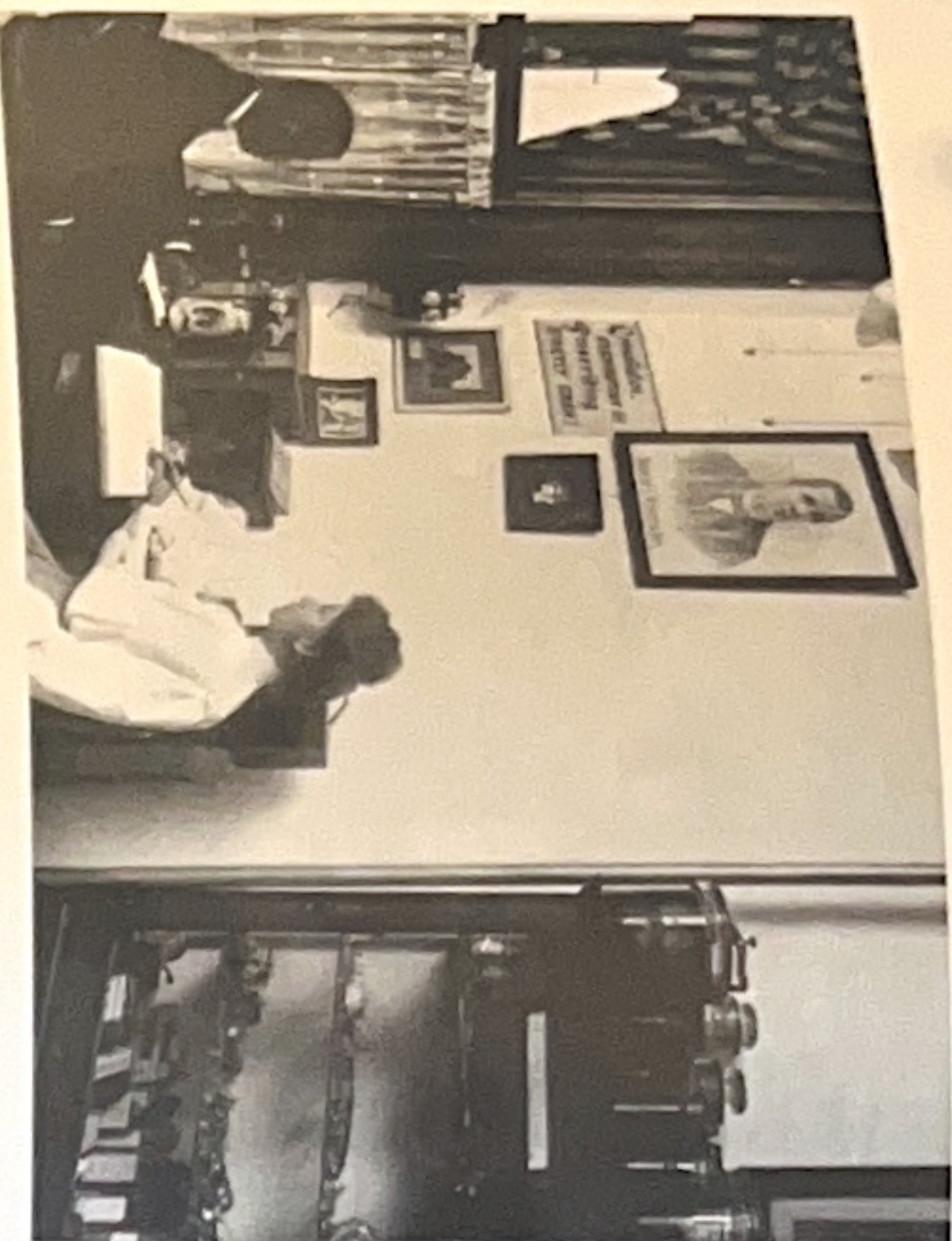
RH: And where were you living? Where was this photograph taken?

DS: I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. And the reason I specify the South Side of Chicago is because



above (left to right): photo of Dread Scott's great-great-great-great-grandmother, Betsy Gray, and her child and grandchildren, ca. 1875; Dread Scott (right) in Canada, ca. 1970. Photo by Scott Tyler Sr. Courtesy of the artist.

left: Dread Scott, ca. 1966. Photo by Scott Tyler Sr. Courtesy of the artist.



left: Dread Scott's great-grandfather, Ulysses G. Mason (left), in his office in Birmingham, Alabama, ca. 1905. Courtesy of the artist

out of gangs, but the Black Stone Rangers, a gang from the 1950s, were a defining part of the South Side and West Side of Chicago.

My parents sent me to a private school on the North Side. So, from the first grade, I was commuting a half hour or more, basically about eight miles, to a school called the Latin School of Chicago, which was predominantly white. During my commute I could see these real class and racial differences in the geography of the city. It was very striking.

RH: I noticed that you shared a family picture taken in a pharmacy with a portrait of Booker T. Washington on the wall. I'm curious about this photograph and the self-sufficiency and other values that Washington ascribed to, as well as about the promise or possibility in segregated Black communities. I think a lot about places and how, in this moment, however many decades later, we are ostensibly integrated but functionally continue to be very segregated. A lot has been lost in Black and Brown communities, but also, legal segregation was discriminatory and obviously not an option to return to.

DS: Since we're talking about family archives, we really have to talk about my mom, Joyce Tyler, because she became the archivist of the family. She valued these photos that date back to the 1870s. Her family valued the photos. They were middle-class and had the money to preserve them. These photographs were handed down

from generation to generation. Toward the end of her life, my mom wanted to transfer what knowledge she had to me. I grew up with them, and then I became the inheritor of them. I didn't realize until about ten years ago how unique this collection is. Most are gelatin silver prints, but there are some salt prints and daguerreotypes too. From my dad's side, I have photographs of me and my mom, two photos of his father, one photo of his grandfather and great-grandfather, and another of my grandmother. There are no other photos from that side of the family. It's a class thing: My dad was from a working-class family.

My great-grandfather on my mom's side was Ulysses G. Mason. I am positive that he was self-named. He lived in Birmingham, Alabama. He was a surgeon trained in Scotland—I don't know how he got the money to do that. He was a prominent person in that community. In addition to being a surgeon, he also set up a small Black bank. He had correspondence with Booker T.

I did a little bit of sleuthing around and discovered that the parents listed on my great-grandfather's birth certificate are different from the parents on his death certificate. I thought, Wait a minute—which are his actual parents? I started looking at census data. One census lists him as Urrius Mason, and a later one lists him as Ulysses G. Mason. He was born in 1873, and I'm certain that he decided to give himself the name of the man who led the Union Army to victory during the Civil War and freed us, President Ulysses S. Grant. I don't have evidence of that, but it's a very likely story.

RH: What does it mean to choose a name, and who are you honoring that choice? There are many different reasons, obviously, to change your name.

DS: Coming back to me and how became an artist—

RH: When were you like, "Yes, I'm an artist"?

DS: I thought I was going to be a scientist or an engineer. I loved science and math as a kid, and I was good at both, but I was a terrible student in high school. I hoped to attend a school like MIT or Caltech, but I did not have enough credits to graduate from high school. Technically I'm a high school dropout. My parents asked me, "What are you going to do?" And because I grew up around cameras, I said, "I'll be a photographer." My parents gave me cameras from a very young age. I started with cheap Instamatics, and I took photos when we went on vacation or were at family gatherings. Then I got a single-lens reflex—that was a good 35 mm camera. They kept buying this idiot kid film, and I kept taking pictures. My parents, instead of freaking out, which was what I would have predicted, were very loving, and they introduced me to photojournalists, architectural photographers, fashion photographers, and fine art photographers. One of them suggested I take classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I said, "Oh, that boring place with the lions out front?" And they said, "Yeah, dummy. They'll teach you to be a photographer."

RH: Yeah, that place.

DS: Unlike MIT or Caltech, SAIC didn't care whether I had graduated from high school or not. They didn't ask, and I



above: *Stage Dive #1*, 1984, gelatin silver print

below: Detail of *War Is Peace*, 1987, gelatin silver print.

WAR IS PEACE



didn't tell them. I absolutely fell in love with photography at SAIC, and I lived in the darkroom. I discovered that taking pictures could be an art, that it could have meaning, and that it could talk about the things you thought about.

RH: When did you change your name?

DS: It was between 1987 and 1988. The backdrop to this is I'm growing up in Ronald Reagan's America, which was a nightmare, particularly for the vast majority of Black people due to poverty and the war on drugs. America was fighting wars for empire around the world. It was coupled with this greed and selfishness and narrow-mindedness.

RH: It's a lot of déjà vu.

DS: There is a lot of déjà vu, but now is much worse in a lot of ways.

RH: Yeah.

DS: I started going to punk shows in the '80s because I didn't fit into Reagan's America. Punks were rallying and railing against it, and that seemed

demonstrations in front of SAIC and tons of articles in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*. It was on CNN. It ended up in the *Guardian* and *Time* magazine. Eventually I ended up on *Oprah*.

RH: I saw that. I was surprised. Or maybe I wasn't surprised, actually.

DS: Fine artists aren't on *Oprah*. It was an anomaly.

RH: Very much so.

DS: It was a huge deal that Congress would go to the extraordinary measure of trying to rip up the First Amendment by making a caveat that makes flag desecration illegal and specifically citing my artwork as part of the reason why they needed to do this. But it wasn't just about my art. It was about a much bigger question about the US flag and US patriotism, and my art was part of that larger discussion. The outlawing of my artwork was an attempt to overturn the decision of *Texas v. Johnson*, which was a flag-burning case from 1984 that went to the Supreme Court in 1989.

RH: The court in that case ruled that it was permissible.

DS: Flag burning was protected by the First Amendment of the Constitution. Congress tried to overturn that decision by passing a new law, and they addressed my artwork on the congressional floor. At the time, I was a twenty-four-year-old in a Midwestern art school. Congress was saying my art is something that is so dangerous that we have to make sure that it cannot be shown.

top: *I Am Not a Man*, 2009, New York City

bottom: Installation view of *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday*, 2015, nylon, 84.5 x 52.5 inches, at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York City, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City.



RH: It's impossible to look at these images and hear you talk about your experience and not think about our current moment. I'm curious: What do you do after your work creates a firestorm that gets documented with news articles and press across the country and around the world? Where do you go creatively after that?

DS: For about a year I didn't make that much art because I was fighting a legal and political battle, trying to stay out of jail. But eventually I went back to a project I had started right when that controversy happened, where I was going into the Chicago housing projects and photographing people. I knew that if there was going to be a revolution, these were the people who were going to be its bedrock. I wanted to connect with those people and photograph them and look at the existence of class and racial divisions, which were hidden from plain sight. My activist friends were trying to save the world by going to South and Central America. And I thought that the conditions of life that people are facing a mile from where we were sitting were just as dire. I called the project *Ghetto*. Also, the conceptual nature of *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* revealed how the work could resonate even with a non-art-world audience. I started doing that until it became unsafe for me to photograph in the projects, not so much because of the people who lived there but because of the threats on my life if I had continued to work visibly, in public, in the projects. The title of the conceptual work was *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions*. The work had audio tracks, and part of it included interviews I did with people in the projects. But I could do those interviews in their apartments and be less visible.

RH: The piece at the Whitney Museum, *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday*, is another kind of moment when you exited the art world and entered into the broader cultural and current events discourse. Can you talk about that piece and what happened there?

DS: I made it after Walter Scott was murdered in 2015. Walter was in South

Carolina, and he was supposedly stopped by the cops because he had a broken taillight. And for whatever reason, Walter decided to flee, which was perhaps a good idea because it was clear that the cop actually did want to kill him. He got about thirty yards, and the cop shot him in the back and then proceeded to call in, and I'm paraphrasing here, a "police-involved shooting where the guy reached for my gun, so I had to kill him." The reason we know that's not true is that there was a person with a cell phone who caught this all on video, which completely contradicted the story the cop told.

RH: Do you see a distinction between being an artist and being an activist or revolutionary?

DS: For many years I had been both an activist paying attention to police brutality and police murder and an artist doing various works about them. Walter Scott's murder was just outrageous. It was a cold-blooded murder, and it needed to be responded to. I'd known about the NAACP's flag for years. It read: "A MAN WAS LYNCHED YESTERDAY." My friend Terry Adkins—a brilliant artist—used it in some of his performances. He had recreated a full-scale one. After Walter Scott was murdered, I had this idea to add "BY POLICE" to the NAACP flag. I made this work, and it was first shown in a small gallery in Des Moines, Iowa. Later, *For Freedoms*, an artist collective, put on a show in New York City curated by Hank Willis Thomas and Eric Gottesman.

RH: At Jack Shainman Gallery in 2016.

DS: That show went up in June, and then, in July, Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were killed by the police in two separate incidents within thirty-six hours of each other. The show was already up but I reached out to Hank and asked if we could add that work to the show. I thought he would say, "The show's already curated. It's really unlikely," but he said he would check with the gallery. A half hour later, I got a call from Joeonna Bellorodo-Samuels asking, "How quickly can you get here?" I told her, "I can hop in a cab

now." We brought the flag down to the show, and it was placed outside of Jack Shainman's gallery. It was decided that we would hang it, but there was also a protest happening, so we took it there first. People don't take fine artwork that's going to hang in a gallery to a protest.

RH: No, they don't, but I'm glad it happened. It was profound to see you and the work at a protest in Union Square and then see this same work at the gallery.

DS: It was courageous of Jack to put the flag outside his gallery. It was photographed, and people like Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1 at the time, put it on Twitter. It became a story, and *The New York Times* did a story on the *For Freedoms*'s show, which was really great, specifically focusing on this artwork. Because of the notoriety, Jack was threatened with eviction by his landlord—I'm sure if he had put an American flag out there, the landlord would not have been upset. The gallery received violent threats, and I felt really bad for him. If you're just somebody who wants to be in the art world as a gallerist, for instance, you're not planning on taking a bullet for some artist's work.

RH: They're not signing up for all that.

DS: It's very heavy for me as an artist. The people who hate my work may want to kill me, but they often don't necessarily have easy access to me. But they can harm a dealer or somebody that owns or works in a gallery. I felt bad for Jack and also glad that he was very much behind the work. It would have been easier to say, "Okay, I can't deal with this," but instead he was very proud of the work. Then the Whitney heard about it, and you were part of bringing it into the collection, which was really great. It's important that that work is in a collection. It's important for work that's been part of popular discourse about important social questions to be in mainstream museums and be treated as art.

I value the audience that sees my work in a museum like the Whitney, but I also value the audience that sees it at a demonstration, or when I'm walking

the streets of Harlem, or when I'm on the outskirts of New Orleans. Everyone needs to engage these questions, and everyone needs art.

RH: It is important work.

DS: For a long time, the kind of work that I do, both because I'm Black and because of the content of the work, hasn't found a home in mainstream museums, even when the museums have finally allowed Black artists like Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, and Gary Simmons to be celebrated, breaking through decades of racism. Before that, you had to be Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden if you were going to be in a museum and Black.

RH: It's kind of crazy.

DS: A lot of Black artists got pushed into abstraction as a way of dealing with stuff. It's true in general but has particular pull for Black artists. Thelma Golden contributed to the '93 Whitney Biennial and then curated *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, which was a very important, radical show. Soon after, she followed up at the Studio Museum in Harlem with *Freestyle*, which was also a good show, but it was an implicit rejection of *Black Male* and was part of codifying "post-Black" art as the main legitimate way for Black artists to work.

RH: I preserve, always, the possibility of any artist to change their work over time. I feel like we can't really know the reasons these specific artists work in abstraction or may have changed their work in one direction or another. I certainly don't think it's true that abstraction can't be political.

DS: It's true that a range of forces encouraged Black artists to move toward abstraction, and it's not that abstract work can't be political and even radical. Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu are very radical. And Norman Lewis, Mel Edwards, and Jack Whitten found ways to connect their abstraction to their broader social concerns. Nonetheless, there was a real shift from the early '90s to the early 2000s. I don't want to ascribe knowledge of what

each artist was thinking, but museums, critics, and the art market reinforced it. Again, this is not to say that abstraction isn't political, but the art world's support for abstraction meant that the more overtly political work was not being supported, exhibited, and collected.

RH: I think the larger question of the place of performance and performance-based work in institutions is a resonant one. We see it across topic, ethnicity, and gender. There was a preponderance of performance-based work in the twentieth century and a relative imbalance in its representation in institutional collections, which, of course, to your point, we—institutions—are not the be-all and end-all, and neither should we be. That flag, for me, felt super resonant for that show—*An Incomplete History of Protest*—and for that moment because it had lived a real life, if you will. It had lived its life as an art object. It had lived its life as a lightning rod against misinformation and willful ignorance. It had lived its life as an active agent in a protest, a participant, and not as an artifact. That's quite interesting, conceptually.

DS: You're talking about the different lives of this work. My work often crosses lots of boundaries, both formally and in terms of audience. *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* was criticized by the president of the United States, outlawed by Congress, and written about deeply. It's studied in Art History 101. It's studied in law books. But it's not owned by a museum. *A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday* is. Which is great. My work is covered and discussed more and included in popular culture in ways that the vast majority of artwork is not. It is important historically, and yet most institutions do not collect or show that work.

To be a foundational part of the culture wars and yet not have had a solo show in a museum is very telling about the state of the art world in the United States and, I think, more broadly. There are a lot of really good shows. Recently, there's been a huge correction to the exclusion of Black voices from mainstream institutions. While my work is in some major

collections like the Hirshhorn, the Whitney, and the National Gallery, in general, it has not been discussed and collected the way you might think it would be given the national conversations my work is part of. I've been talking about national identity and patriotism since 1987.

RH: Which are major questions right now.

DS: I've been talking about the position of immigrants in society and belonging and questioning the formal art world. I'm doing performance and performative work in ways that, as you mentioned, have been difficult for museums, and in turn, they haven't appropriately collected it. There's a lot about my art and career that is extremely important for the art world to engage. It's not that I'm unknown. Hell, I'm doing an oral history with BOMB Magazine. But in a way, there has been a systematic exclusion. It's unfortunate, and I hope, over time, it gets corrected. How is it that there's an artwork that has literally been talked about on the floors of Congress, one that had been outlawed and then had that law determined to be unconstitutional as it was in violation of the First Amendment, and yet that same artwork hasn't been shown in the United States in twenty years?