



# Physical Apprehension of Black Skin

Kandis Williams  
IN CONVERSATION WITH  
Legacy Russell







The Black body as a site of experience, and the forced, aspirational social interactions that it undergoes—on the planes of the corporeal, the psychological, and the spectacular—are the grounding forces behind KANDIS WILLIAMS’s multidisciplinary work. Here, in dialogue with curator and writer LEGACY RUSSELL, Williams discusses the founding of Cassandra Press and its linkages with Black Lives Matter and Black femmehood; the pedagogy of a collective community that also challenges preconceived understandings of institutional spaces; architecture as a means to explore how bodies are linked in space both abstractly and literally; and blackness as a communication technology both viral and vital.









LEGACY RUSSELL  
You founded Cassandra Press in 2015, when the world looked very different, but also in many ways exactly the same in terms of the concerns and demands that brought the press into being and continue to make this work—archival work, witness work, listening work, thought labor, care work, dream work—necessary, urgent, and timely.

KANDIS WILLIAMS  
When I heard the three words “Black Lives Matter” together for the first time, it was probably right around that moment in winter 2015, and it just exploded so many concepts that I had previously felt reined in by physically, emotionally, spiritually. It made me ask myself how I mattered to me, and begged for the space to question and interrogate so many internal and wider social dynamics. For many people, it gave a conceptual thread to start untangling blackness from social and historical death. So many other philosophical propositions that have been pivotal in our cognition while firmly denying Black life any right to be. The *making of blackness* has many modes and even more authors than just governing policies of European colonial power. Black Lives Matter started that conversation as well, being one of the only mainstreaming Black queer movements we’ve seen rise into everyday speech. It forced concerns about anti-life practices, extreme appropriative and erasure practices, that we had taken for granted under global white supremacy into the light of critical, popular engagement—the court of public opinion opened to Black voices en masse. Even with Black studies departments being active since the late 1960s, Black Lives Matter gave a vernacular call to arms that reached *all* Black ears, became call and response and echolocation. I ran with it as a proposition for the repair and instigation of respect for Black practices and Black life, Black folk. Renegotiating whiteness and the anti-life practices that emerge from whiteness as an identity—centering that discursively—was essential to starting the press. My attraction to Cassandra as a myth is through my feeling that the idea of *being believed* in a body just a few short years ago was considered both hysterical and intuitive, illegible in its otherness. Cassandra feels critical to understanding the paradox Black femmes face in ordering the world through song, dance, gesture, attitude, resilience, values, morality, et cetera, while being simultaneously brutalized, financially abused, demonized, and stolen from.

LEGACY  
I love that notion of being believed as something you continue to center across your practice in conversations tied to blackness, and Black femmehood in particular. You’re also thinking about the pedagogy of collective community, and how that can be enacted through such vehicles as Cassandra Press. And about architecture as a framework for reflection on what needs to be built and how to reimagine history.

KANDIS  
I imagine architecture in a twofold way. I think a lot about the material concerns that are offset by racialized constructs. This is really an issue of logistics, distribution of material, and extraction of resources and means of production that become one of the main historical means of global slavery. The primary concerns

that Afro-Indigenous and Latino-Indigenous artists are bringing ever to the foreground, Rafa Esparza and Aline Cavalcanti being just two that I admire. Both the spaces that our bodies end up occupying *and* the things our bodies end up being clothed and wrapped and gathered by are as physical as they are psychological and metaphorical. My second way of seeing architecture is similar to anatomical abstraction, a program that can dictate futurity through movement, through especially how our bodies are linked in space or resting together or working together. That kind of architecture is an agreement between space, place, resources, governance, and our feeling, emotional, spiritual selves. I teach a 4D design course where we look intently at the hut, the church, and the prison, which could all be made of the same material and use very similar designs yet instigate distinct and different modes of being in the human occupier. I see “blackness” as a place-program-dynamic architecturally that has very little to do with Black people and so much to do with how we are sanctioned and annexed from shared human collectivity.

LEGACY  
Climate change has been disproportionately impactful on Black people and communities of color. When we talk about sustainability, we are also refusing a paradigm of anti-blackness that has excluded Black people from what it means to be sustainable in the first place, meaning an investment in the future.

KANDIS  
Right. With metaphorical abstraction especially and activation of some metaphorical extensions of shapes and materials, I see how architectural programs then become scripts that dictate social movement through space. By looking at the more violent aspects of a culture that lived in architecturally ratified segregation for all of its existence, we see the violence of forced movement in every structure we step into and the power to make another move, take their space, kill or harm them, possess or consume them, as a theater the Black body feels so bound to. I’m not sure why we don’t understand things like microaggressions, police brutality, redlining, interraciality. Their bedfellows are rape and colorism, and environmental predations as choreographic. Especially that distance between the definition of movement and the understanding of how and why we move is a space of dissonance my work tries to navigate, always asking the question posed by Saidiya Hartman in “Venus in Two Acts” (2008): “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?”<sup>1</sup> And more importantly to my studio work: Do the possibilities that come with seeing and articulating that violence outweigh the dangers of looking at it? The cognitive dissonance and the associative properties that I like to juxtapose bring out the aporia held in some ungenerous metaphorical extensions of blackness into the material reality of Black life to understand how blackness provokes the mythic, provokes the iconic, while being held by death, without title, without support, without names, faces, so many other recognitions of life. I’m thinking about that lexicon of especially metaphorical creations and this multi-modal contained dissonance like a musical notation that we are all forced to learn and play throughout our lives.

LEGACY  
Let’s talk more about abstraction, since it plays a special role in the ways you make and think. How does *A Line*, your forthcoming exhibition at David Zwirner in New York, relate to *A Field*, your project at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (2020–21)? What is the lexicon you’re building? Your work seems to signify and direct like a Black script, or score, or—to invoke the word you use to guide us around your upcoming exhibition—*notation*.

KANDIS  
I’m thinking about the image and abstraction, about text as afterimage or even pre-image. Dissonance there is contained. Recently I gave a presentation on image and representation in the context of starting a Black television network. It was really interesting to think about blackness as a communication technology because it is constructed and surveyed the same way an architecture program is, like so much of our historical existence. So much of the violence of our archive comes from these forced social scripts and forced movement scripts, and is from slavery disposition, dislocation. Even our joy is scripted, and has become an industry that produces further hermetic violence on Black subjects. Our celebration, our collectivity, happens for history in scripted places. Offsites are often lost to the archive. The Maroon village is a beautiful speculative fiction without the serious support of new archaeologies and investigations; it will remain such for most of us. The Black home is dictated by redlining.

What’s interesting is how much energy and investment there is from non-Black people in the construction of spaces (physical and metaphorical) for Black beings to be contained by. Even anti-racist diversity, equity, and inclusion committees need a violent abstraction or a container to witness Black life. I think about that container as a capability for the almost instantaneous production of meaning. Actually, *A Field* was before and *A Line* is coming. Thinking about those containers as racialized constructs, negations of legacy, negotiations of history that become containers of meaning that are passed down, orally, in policy, through art and music and predicate a lot of our experiences of the material world. That’s the link through *A Field* into *A Line*. That line moving forward and backward, the line with two sides that’s one side. The physical apprehension of Black skin, the other constant containment of Black bodies into laboring, sexual commodities. This is Cheryl Harris’s “Reflections on *Whiteness as Property*” (2020).<sup>2</sup> There’s Black personhood, there’s Black being, then there’s Black bodies, Black death, Black spectacle. I see the infinite depth of the cognitive dissonance of participating versus resisting and how continuous that is, especially in developing meaning for us.

But it becomes almost a volcano—right?—where we can short-circuit from the most general signifiers into the hyper-iconic. That’s something we’ve seen with civil rights in the algorithm era—Black trending superstars like Kanye and their massive influence of vernacular aesthetic orders and prepares white audiences for Black death, for interracial white supremacy, and truncate Black experience as they amplify it. It renders our understanding of the lives of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor as not just political but as market

signs, as spaces of investment, as content material, commodities like posters or T-shirts. That’s the curse of Black participation right now—that our images are shaped as political and as collective by a few pop stars and millions of martyrs. We see that blackness has not just a vitality but a virality too, and thus a hyper-capacity for meaning production. I’m working through understanding those harmful means of production versus those means of production that are simply hyper-potent.

LEGACY  
A lexicon and a rhizome, seeing viral blackness as something that exists through and beyond the digital. You’ve cited digital platforms like TikTok as places where blackness becomes both a trapping and a site of real and rigorous research and collective praxis, and how these exist both in opposition and also in great support of each other. Thinking about this broader world that is being imagined and built, and of course about architecture as critical to goals of Black futurity, I’m curious about what Cassandra Press is and exists and explores. Through this print material, are you continuing your research into the digital?

KANDIS  
That maybe goes back to this comment about the machinic quality of humans in an architecture program. I’ve been giving a talk called “Reproduction Is Not a Metaphor,” about caricature and its dual apprehension. How fetishism and caricature interact in the distinguishing of “taste”—caricatured performance becomes a space for white supremacy, but also misogyny, to socially reproduce *and* a space of financial and physical stability, validation, and reward. Thus, yes, safety for many Black performers and in greater contexts like *codeswitching*. This is an ungendered form of reproduction, just as machinic but essentially hyper-organic, hyper-memetic. It is how we teach each other where whiteness and death are, and how to avoid them. Also how we’ve built movement out of this previously “secret” knowledge. They become fields of mutual degradation and exacerbated, hyper articulate forms of communication. They reproduce dynamics of white safety and domination while cementing performative space for Black being. How we’ve learned about us is from those pauses and grins and side eyes that let us see the person under the performance. That communication in between the lines that a hundred years of Black actors gave through degrading scripts, degraded parts. So those scripts we learn, we internalize, we see the space under the performance, then write the elusive quality into our right to be—perform certain characters and they become instantly viral.

This is why TikTok is so interesting. The script can be learned in thirty seconds. That is the glance of recognition of blackness within another person. We have a hyper-communicative culture because of the fight for our lives, our rights, in our pain and joy. This is Moten’s *In the Break*, Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus*, Browne’s *Dark Matters*. We have a hyper-communicative pause. We have a gestural base that is essentially written through the resistance to the reality of a century of forced scripts. I like the idea of a digital duration, but I also understand especially that space behind the eyes, that psychological space of blackness as a construct that is produced as infinite. It’s always been a virtual







difference, a scale of something more than human. I mean difference literally in terms of extracting certain parts or colors from the visual—difference and saturation. Mark Christian Thomas's *Black Fascisms* (2007) comes to mind, but also K. J. Greene's "Intellectual Property at the Intersection of Race and Gender: Lady Sings the Blues" (2008). I look to Bracha L. Ettinger's concept of trans-subjective co-poiesis to think through representation, media, and where we find resistance within imperial meaning making and vapid political slogans.

LEGACY

On the topic of mimesis: call and response, echo and imitation are important in this ongoing conversation and active participation. In the arts in general, thinking through how to crack open our assumptions about who art should be for, and how pedagogy can be shaped as a response to that, is radical and intervenes in the historical narrative.

KANDIS

Issues of encryption, audience, legibility, and participation are interesting because they link both to seeing myself within many worlds and my erasure, my own illegibility, my being barred access to certain conversations. The pains that gave birth to Cassandra Press had so much to do with the onslaught of virtue signaling from white peers and partners during the 2016 Trump campaign and election coupled with the expression of their inherent inability to respect their Black friends, lovers, bosses, employees. BLM opened a court of public opinion and expectations of accountability in white folk that explode from behind the veil of liberal etiquette—they had to be accountable in their bedrooms, offices, vacations, and be held to the same level of accountability as white lawmakers publicly and in media.

When I have Cassandra shows within institutions, there is this strange kind of projected space of my own singular body and mind as collective. I would never say I'm acting or performing, but there is a way that this mythic woman has helped me find a theater to at least house the dissonance of my participation in systems that both erase and force the symbolic register—that dead archive—onto Black femme bodies. All of those questions feel a little bit deterministic. I've also learned from navigating that totem structure of mysogynoir, a reflex to look down the ladder of oppression. I've learned that it is over-deterministic, it doesn't allow us to see the superstructure that comes at us in an ever-closing circle, until it lives inside of us.

Asking who I make work for doesn't allow those terms to exist in relation to me without power. I can only answer as to what I'm making work against. I love that my work finds people, that Black audiences find my work, but I also trust Black audiences to find the work they need to find. I ultimately trust the Black community in all its forms to elevate the work it needs to elevate. The work that I'm making with Cassandra is primarily against certain production propositions, certain publishing and dissemination protocols. We make art in almost every second of our innovative process, but what I'm making art against is the notion of the further commodification of Black women without us making a sound to intervene. What I'm working against is so many mechanisms that silence us emotionally, finan-

cially, and in our process of becoming in relation to others. I do a lot of my kicking and fighting behind the scenes. That's what I'm speaking to, really, is a space where future Black femme bodies aren't overdetermined and under-supported.

LEGACY

Cassandra Press also challenges our understanding of range within institutional space. You are turning inside out the notion that institutions must be fixed, specifically saturated in anti-Black understanding that limits our being and our becoming. Now it's important to reconsider replication, mimesis, and abstraction. The pure act of reproduction running alongside the idea of the mechanical certainly breaks open as we consider what it is to replicate and reproduce different models of blackness. On simulation of blackness, one of my favorite texts is Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). I was deeply enthused by the through lines and transference between that text and your forthcoming show because you're thinking about what it means for a culture that simulates blackness to confront understandings of Black personhood that may be misaligned with their assumptions. I'm curious about your blurring of what is real versus what is simulated, and how this question of authenticity—like an authentic blackness—is itself a root problem.

KANDIS

I think about the production of deviance, especially autonomous Black women's praxis, and how that autonomy is demonized and vehicularized and weaponized in order to fence in future Black femme identities, to perpetuate the caricature for future generations as dangerous. We see so many interesting implications of that deconstruction right now, especially the hyper-wheel around nostalgia. Even thinking about imitation, echo, reproduction, replication, and this concept of reproduction not being metaphorical especially in how we reproduce blackness, especially when it doesn't come from Black creators. All of those ethical quandaries and ethical paradoxes are reproduced alongside of it, render primary sources as footnotes, not authors. I felt this all in 2020 especially, painfully working alongside various non-Black artists in this time of Black virality. I've been using the term "genuine fakes" to describe working alongside non-Black cultural producers as a consultant on how to engage meaningfully in Black creative and intellectual history when their work attempts anti-racist sentiment but they have not held space for (or even considered) their own anti-Black sentiment. Working in white institutions as a Black cultural producer, I can genuinely say that those copies that use of blackness as a political stilt or viral trending content are void of much vital substance. They are like PDFs—compressed. Think about the Delectable Negro, a means of consuming. Authenticity as primitivism as well. Ettinger has a great term for it: "fascinence." Not fascination, not permanence, but fascinence. A way that fascination produces a constant umbilical relationship, where the poor Black experience becomes everyone's means of exploring their own joy, their own rage, their own dislocation, their own misappropriation. Even just looking at how Black Lives Matter gets transformed into all lives, blue lives, Black Labs, you know what I mean? It's like if you've lived in a Black body, you understand so quick-

ly the cultural producers who are rendering us as substance. That substance becomes a moment of hyper-interpretability. We see those ethical holes, where Black bodies are used to expand representation for others while being subjected to production standards and structures that call for our erasure. Ethical misunderstandings will follow, and their work will always be shaped by them because it is an echo. The reproduction is not purely metaphorical. You will reproduce the staging. You will reproduce the lighting. You will reproduce the caricature that gives away your anti-Black register. And maybe only a few Black people will see it and probably they won't have enough voice to determine any form of critique.

As afraid of cancel culture as people are, we still don't have a lot of those voices and praxis to produce critique. Just seeing the world freak out since 2015, be so confounded and confused and afraid of a Black populous chattering class online. Black Twitter strikes fear in the hearts of people. It's wild. Saying that even a small critical base of Black cultural producers are not bound by the institution has completely offset the idea of intellectual property and its distribution, the image of blackness versus the Black person and its distribution, the hyper-real. We have access to so many means of imitation, of replication, of sorting out original from copy, right? Black performance has an internal cipher, we're always inside and outside. We're always looking at it and deconstructing it. There's humor there. There's movement there. There's physical gesture there, but there's also an extremely potent discourse for exactly that resistance of the production of your own self as deviant. I laugh at my pain as much as I try to prevent it or soothe it. I love it and understand its horror. *Amor fati*.

LEGACY

As we are thinking about deviance, we must also think about how that is mapped out, engaging all the tropes of historical horror to the point of nostalgia. Nostalgia is in so many ways a trope of horror because as we look backward, as we romanticize what came before, we are effectively envisioning a world that refuses the presence and possibility of Black life. In your work, you explore the language and tropes of horror as part of this engine of replication, but also as a weapon of capitalism and theft of blackness in the United States and globally. The ways in which the Black body is transformed by having it fed back to itself in a kind of echo loop through an anti-Black lens is certainly monstrous. Part of the paradigm is also thinking about how these different tropes of monster, zombie, villain, or disintegrated cyborg are parts of this machinic work of trying to navigate and negotiate. But these things, as they come into contact, imbue in us almost a triple consciousness. To be both living, dead, undead, and reborn all at once allows for a collapsing of space and a supreme site that is inherently radical, and pushes us to represent ourselves outside of a colonial gaze. To refuse the institutions of Eurocentric supremacy that foreclose a possibility of future consciousness.

I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the collapse of space and time, especially in relation to your forthcoming exhibition. I think space and time are being renegotiated entirely, and you are establishing new models of what that looks like, asking us to step into these

new histories. They certainly arc back to what came before, but the reimagining becomes necessary given that you are asking us to actively restructure what the world should look like.

KANDIS

I teach horror within the definition that Dylan Rodríguez lays out in "Inhabiting the Impasse: Racial/Racial-Colonial Power, Genocide Poetics, and the Logic of Evisceration" (2015).<sup>3</sup> Genocidal poetics is a view of exactly that dissonance. It's how we cope with and digest the totality of worlds ending, the real corporeality of so much torture mandated by various forms of white supremacist colonial ordering.

LEGACY

And this idea of a Black congregation that exists through and beyond the digital is a model of horror for an anti-Black audience, a Eurocentric audience that cannot envision a world where the central narrative is driven and dictated by anyone else's vision. There are opposing views of what is horrific. Your work allows us to exist on that carousel, and it's an uneasy one. For folks accustomed to standing on one side, it's important to reposition the understanding of whose horror, whose world is ending, and what are the ways in which the future can be built.

KANDIS

For me the carousel is less about whose form of horror, and more about whose horror is *active*. The genocidal poetic is exactly the wrapping of all of us into these narratives that create a binary of who's being tortured. I think the carousel is between horror and terror. Terrorism, and being able to terrorize others, comes from social, political, and religious regimes, also military strength used to occupy and disperse. There are volcanoes of meanings—all of those varying signifiers and means of control—from religious to militaristic. All of these processes create monsters, and horror is essentially the carousel between creating a form of terror (or perceived terror) through its poetic form, which would be horror. Especially for Black bodies, identifying with the monster is not necessarily recuperative politically, but it is such a rich base to think with discursively. This is a beloved thesis from art school my friend Miciah Hussey just reminded me of: Linda Nochlin's "The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity" (1994).

Horror essentially is the carousel between the creating of a poetic form out of physical terror or seeing socially accepted or state-sanctioned terrorism through a poetic lens, which would be my definition of horror as a genre that comes out the Victorian era. In that regard, for Black people, identifying with the monster is not necessarily recuperative politically but it is, like you're saying, such a rich base to think through what's happening discursively, what feelings remain after a massacre, what senses remain piqued after torture. And politically, as a genre it helps white bodies imagine their implications in the terrorism of marginal and Black folk as a fictional universal expression of good and evil. I just picked up Paul B. Preciado's report to the academy of psychoanalysts, *Can the Monster Speak?* (2021). Immediately they're like, "This was not the speech I ended up giving. When I actually stood in front of this room where I'm the only non-binary body, the feeling of being the monster actually







limited their capacity to speak.” There’s something for me there, a huge part of that carousel between terror and violence. Another thing about trauma: when you’re actually imbricated and imbued in it, there are so many silences. It’s sad because we don’t have a culture that can see one individual narrative as a truth. We need a structure to produce those truths, and that structure is normally argument. And so the argument of am I human or am I not produces historically many bodies as monsters. That form of narrativization, it’s a Wynter sort of thing. It’s a part of narrative that is completely unsettling because all parts of the story are colonially occupied.

LEGACY

From science fiction to magical realism, all the Hollywood tropes perpetuate the Black contour as the greatest threat. What that looks like obviously is populated in a million different ways. I am trying to think through how to disrupt some of that. To think about questions of agency within it and move toward a different understanding of who can be empowered within it. We need a redefinition of “human,” even. The entire taxonomy of humanity is the problem. As you are building this incredible body of work that traverses discussions of creative and intellectual property, of course it intersects with Black culture and Black people, and anti-Black structures as systems of disenfranchisement.

With respect to *A Line* and then *A Field*, how might we navigate such questions? What does it mean for “human” to be an inherently anti-Black taxonomy? We are active producers and contributors to the advancement of culture, while simultaneously the whole framework of property is itself an anti-Black proposition.

KANDIS

It’s interesting to think about blackness and copyright law, patents and trademarking, and especially the critical Plessy v. Ferguson question of personhood and reputation as ownable property. Dis-identifying with ownership leaves us with a big void of understanding exactly how intellectual property law was developed around branding. These are legal policies that shape our existence. TikTok viral dance appropriation is very similar to the ownership of Black death—we do not inherently, let alone legally, own any of the means through which we communicate. Why can’t we have a culture in which young Black kids can own the movements they generate that go viral, and be compensated for them? Why is that so far beyond what we consider in many of our creative industries?

Cassandra just released a three-part reader on cultural property for the LAX Art exhibition *The Absolute Right to Exclude: Reflections on Cheryl Harris’s “Whiteness as Property”* thinking through erasure and how subtly erasure happens, especially in large productions. Thinking about what was established right after the Civil War through the Lieber Code and especially how Black slave bodies were apprehended as cultural property, our labor and objects often registered as spoils of war—apprehended, captured, surveyed, and extracted from as cultural creators—and how that structure is still disenfranchising young Black creators today. This is the work of critical race theory, right?

So much Black virality right now is impacting and being strategically gathered in order to shift policy, so it’s really

interesting seeing very similarly harmful viral caricatures be employed right now again in another form, populist chatter of Black Twitter. It seems as though that breath inside of the degradation, those speech/text/image acts and pauses of resistance, have made such powerful modes of thought out of caricatures that they Trojan horse their way into the middle of the conversation of capitalist consumption. Fighting back and seeing those means of erasure met with a constellation of talking heads. This is the nature of the anti-performance at the heart of Black Hollywood that I hold in fascination—a fully embodied disidentification from harmful abstractions and harmful stereotypes via memes. I love seeing this very dialogic conversation happening between young Black cultural producers, Black folk, and images that they feel they are scripted to perform. Seeing the fallout of the seeing together, where those predatory theaters (medical, political, structures) feel like they are getting Matrix-ed out of feeling like viable “reality.”

LEGACY

There’s been some discussion about American Sign Language (ASL) in terms of what it means to engage with Black vernacular in ASL and having that exist through and beyond TikTok, which I think is amazing and monumental. Who owns the gesture and how it should be expressed. How do you ensure that the transmission of Black data is done with care? This brings up so many questions regarding the structures these things are operating within. They are hyper-objects and larger than life. They touch on so many parts of what it means to exist in the world. But certainly they are also hyper-local, very granular, and that too is important given that these are Black vocalities.

KANDIS

Even the label “Karen” is so interesting. We’re now thinking about that form of entitlement as performance, as social theater, with certain conventions. Even Karen is in this realm of copyright. There’s actually a movie called *Karen* out now! Viral naming/seeing/being like this is increasingly codifying those social scripts. We are seeing them play out and play up through Black folk acting as community archivists. The Karen sightings and Karen accounts, what they do is testify, and I think that’s back to this wit(h)nessing idea. They testify to harmful dramas, deadly theaters, where we as a society really need to evidence our truth. The archive of testimony of Black folk is building the political power of archives and online sharing platforms and shifting a lot of social policy.

LEGACY

As we think about reimagining and restructuring social policy, what would the world look like if Black women were believed? Are we healing yet? Can we get there? Can we love us? It’s a destination we are journeying toward, trying to create space for that possibility to be assumed and empowered.

KANDIS

About putting myself in a future space: I feel like we are there. The thing we’re dealing with now is a recognition that so many of our literary, political, and aesthetic dystopian fantasies of the future have been a negotiable present. Thinking back to abstraction: we produce a poetic in order to distill, distend, and distract us from the material present. But then there’s another

side of that, which is that the poetic acts as so much collective ether. Something that gives me a future is also rooted in a very undug history. I think a lot about Nyx, the goddess of night, and Erebus, the god of darkness, and their first children, Dawn and Ether. I think about blackness, and this void or the darkness as a construct that had power before racialized bodies, before aesthetic and moral coding of dark and light phenomenologically became political and began to be invoked en masse in order to separate and segregate. It’s modern fruit hanging from an older tree. There’s a real necessity to stop seeing the way we do. It’s a painful process, even thinking about what I believe to be the Black feminine “we.”

Dissolving aspects of Being makes the word “fugitivity” too morally decisive, but I feel there’s a way of being not-seen, a transformative aspect of un-seeability, that is maybe darkness or maybe simply night, without light but fully possessed and in being. That might be a space of healing, and of rejoining with what we as people feel our powers, abilities, and capacities are. There are so many ways in which those semantic trap-pings become praxis, hyper-interpretable and imbued with unethical propositions, but I trust Black people to get there always. I think our lives, our images, our media histories have proven that we get there without this “we.” Our eyes and our I’s are so bound that phenomenologically this seeing is affirming one and all—that we’re human to us—in conflict and in peace. We get there through the ether and we get there through the dawn. We get there through the sunsets. We get there through darkness, in night.

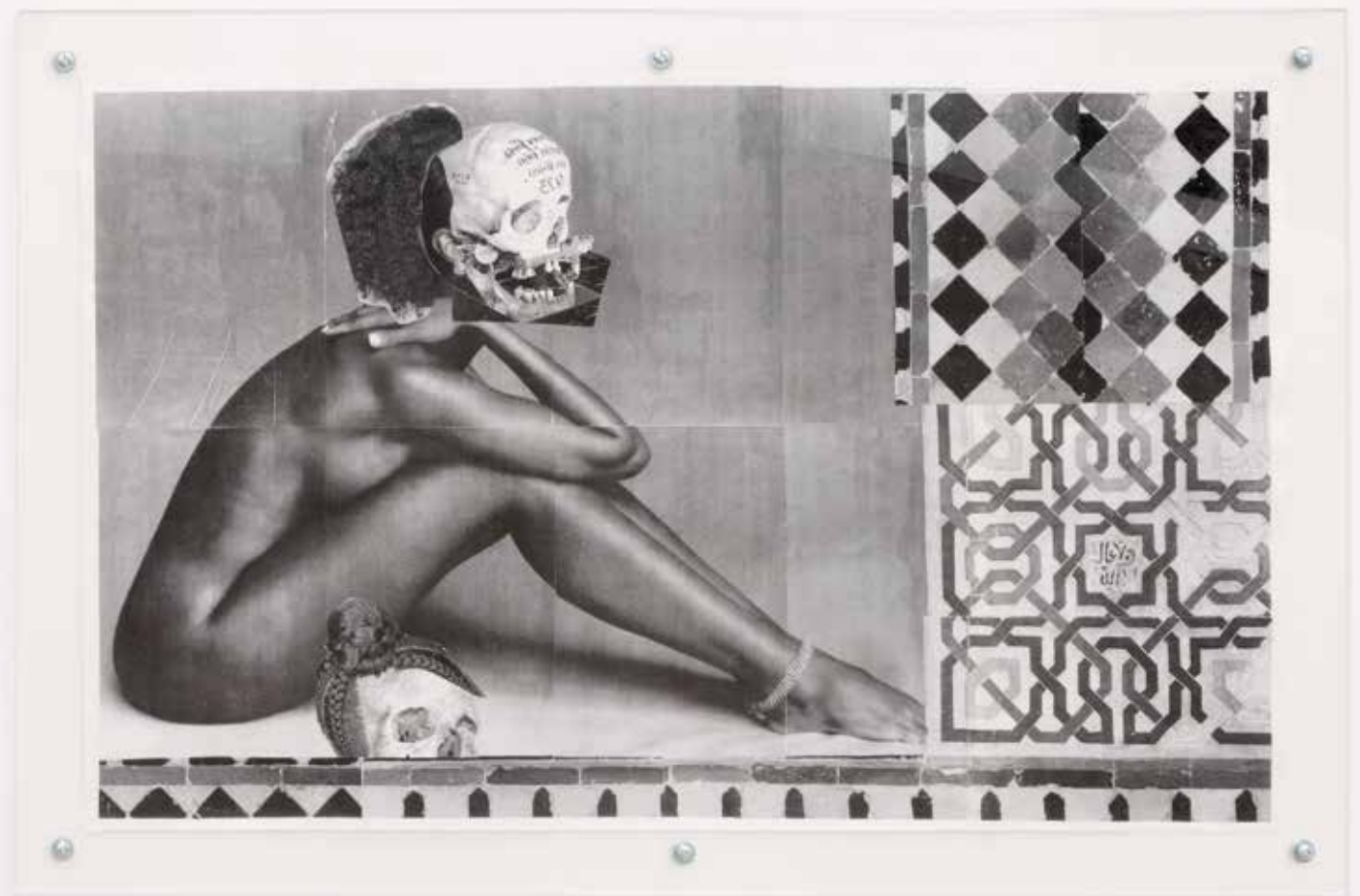
Nyx and Erebus had other kids: dreams. Morpheus was the firstborn of their tribe of dreams. They also have the Keres, who are violent death goddesses. They have old age. They have joy. They have friendship. They have a giant. They have a couple of Egyptian kings. These aspects of being transformed without being seen are also potent, affective. I would love to see images evoke that. It’s a dissonant space.

- 1 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14.
- 2 Cheryl Harris, “Reflections on Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 134, no. 1 (2020): <https://harvardlawreview.org/2020/08/reflections-on-whiteness-as-property/>.
- 3 Dylan Rodríguez, “Inhabiting the Impasse: Racial/Racial-Colonial Power, Genocide Poetics, and the Logic of Evisceration,” *Social Text* 33, no. 3 (124) (2015): 19–44.

KANDIS WILLIAMS (b. 1985, Baltimore) lives and works in Los Angeles. She has exhibited at Night Gallery, Los Angeles (2021); Simon Lee, New York (2020); Frye Art Museum, Seattle (2018); and Underground Museum, Los Angeles (2014), among others. Recent exhibitions devoted to her publishing company, Cassandra Press, have taken place at Luma Westbau, Zurich (2021) and LAXART, Los Angeles (2021). In fall 2020, the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University opened *Kandis Williams: A Field*, a multistage solo exhibition curated by Amber Esseiva. Williams was featured in the 2020–21 edition of *Made in L.A. 2020: a version* biennial at the Hammer Museum and Huntington Libraries, Los Angeles, where she was awarded the Mohn Award for artistic excellence. Her work is in the permanent collection of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and the Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin. She is the recipient of the 2021 Grants to Artists award presented by the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, New York. In fall 2021, Williams is presenting the inaugural show at the new David Zwirner exhibition space 52 Walker, New York, programmed and led by director Ebony L. Haynes. A solo show by Williams will open at Serpentine Galleries, London, in 2022.

LEGACY RUSSELL is a curator and writer. Born and raised in New York, she is the executive director and chief curator of The Kitchen, New York. Formerly she was the associate curator of exhibitions at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Russell holds an MRes with distinction in art history from Goldsmiths, University of London, with a focus in visual culture. Her academic, curatorial, and creative work focuses on gender, performance, digital selfdom, internet idolatry, and new media ritual. Russell’s written work, interviews, and essays have been published internationally. She is the recipient of the Thoma Foundation 2019 Arts Writing Award in Digital Art, a 2020 Rauschenberg Residency Fellow, and a recipient of the 2021 Creative Capital Award. She is the author of *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (Verso, 2020), and her second book, *BLACK MEME*, is forthcoming from Verso.











34 Work from *Kandis Williams: A Field* (detail), Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–21. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

36 (From top, clockwise) Works from *Kandis Williams: A Field*, Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–21. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson; *After birth all diligence is transferred to the calves; then the farmers brand them with their mark and the name of their breed And set aside those to rear to perpetuate their kind, to keep as sacred for the altar, or to cultivate earth and turn over the uneven field breaking it's clods. the rest of the cattle pasture on green grasses, but train those that you'll prepare for work and service on the farm when they are still calves and set them on the path to dociling while their youthful spirits are willing, while their lives are tractable. some few women are born free, and some amid insult and scarlet letter achieve freedom [sic] with that freedom they are buying an untrammelled independence and dear as is the price they pay for it, it will in the end be worth every taunt and groan.,* 2020. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

37 Works from *Kandis Williams: A Field*, Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–21. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

39 Work from *Kandis Williams: A Field* (detail), Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–21. Courtesy: the artist and Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Paul Salveson

40–41 *Kandis Williams: A Field* installation view at Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, 2020–21. Courtesy: Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond. Photo: David Hale

44 *Cervical Smile*, 2016. Courtesy: Night Gallery, Los Angeles

45 *But it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.* (details), 2016. Courtesy: Night Gallery, Los Angeles

48 *Nay, but tell me, am I not unlucky indeed, / To arise from the earth and be only a weed? / Ever since I came out of my dark little seed, / I have tried to live rightly, but still am a--weed! / To be torn by the roots and destroyed, this my meed, / And despised by the gardener, for being-- a weed. / Ah! but why was I born, when man longs to be freed / Of a thing so obnoxious and bad as a--weed? / Now, the cause of myself and my brothers I plead, / Say, can any good come of my being a--weed? / Imagine smoking weed in the streets without cops harassin' / Imagine going to court with no trial / Lifestyle cruising blue behind my waters / No welfare supporters, more conscious of the way we raise our daughters / Days are shorter, nights are colder / Feeling like life is over, these snakes strike like a cobra / The world's hot my son got not / Evidently, it's elementary, they want us all gone eventually / Troopin' out of state for a plate, knowledge / If coke was cooked without the garbage we'd all have the top dollars / Imagine everybody flashin', fashion / Designer clothes, lacing your click up with diamond vogues / Your people holdin' dough, no parole / No rubbers, go in raw imagine, law with no undercovers / Just some thoughts...,* 2020. Courtesy: Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder

49 *Belladonna Atropos. On the one hand, the plant appears to withdraw from a human economy of desire and hovers at the limits of our affective identification. But it also produces profound effects on us, including setting in motion our imagination. This oscillation is not only a defining characteristic of vegetality but functions as a key trait of speculative literature, giving this genre a power and agency that is inherently linked to the vibrancy of plant matter. can all the tight pussy gals step forward?,* 2020. Courtesy: Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Marten Elder

52 *The Mother the Son and The Holy Spirit*, 2018. Courtesy: COOPER COLE, Toronto

53 (Top) *Iconic face of Death Mask II*, 2018. Courtesy: COOPER COLE, Toronto

53 (Bottom) *Iconic face of Death Mask I*, 2018. Courtesy: COOPER COLE, Toronto

54–55 *the rivers of styxx* installation view at COOPER COLE, Toronto, 2018. Courtesy: COOPER COLE, Toronto

57 *Landscape and RFD*, 2018. Courtesy: Night Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane

