

MADE AWARE

Place, Materiality and Performing Black Interiority

by narkita

I come from eight feet deep aqua blue water, heavy heat in the summer months and backyard barbecues with smooth jazz and laughter in the background.

—narkita

I was raised in Nashville, Tennessee where familial expectations and respectability politics left little room for a young girl to unabashedly follow her curiosities. Despite my upbringing and the social pressures that surrounded me, I flourished, and eventually made my way to the Mountain West to start something new.

It didn't take long to notice the absence of Black people in Denver, Colorado. We were greatly outnumbered in the Mile High City, but with my portrait and interview series "Black in Denver," I found myself part of a subculture of Black people practicing introspection, finding solace in nature, healing and incorporating aspects of African American religious traditions into their lives. It was within these pockets of community where I was introduced to ancestral magic, meditation and yoga as a spiritual practice. The room where I practice these daily rituals and the objects found within the space are represented in my solo show, *i found myself in the mountains*.



narkita, *i found myself in the mountains*, 2023. Installation, dimensions vary. Photo: Amanda Tipton.



narkita, *don't remove the kinks from your hair, remove them from your brain*, 2023. Performance. Photo: University of Colorado Denver Experience Gallery.

My yoga practice was where I tapped into what **Audre Lorde** describes in *Poetry is Not a Luxury* as something ancient and hidden.¹ (Lorde and other Black feminists play a significant role in my practice). To communicate this, I share a poetry fragment cut from yoga mat material which reads, "I ran, I ran, I ran to self, she looked back and laughed." This fragment is a distillation of my experience with mindful movement where I explore the existential question: Who am I? I communicate this construction of a higher self through a sequence of black-and-white self-portraits assembled across the gallery wall.

With each sun salutation, I also mapped my way back to something dark, ancient, and deep.² I connect not only to my true self, but something ancestral. Placing found objects from my altar throughout the gallery was a means to convey my admiration and publicly keep watch with the dead.³ To further render these spirits visible, I took direction from bell hooks' writing in *Art on My Mind*, and invited the viewer to consider the contextual possibilities of something familiar,⁴ such as silhouettes of combs and afro picks combined with the color

of the sea and paper made of cotton. Continuing to follow the practices of my ancestors, I incorporated hues of blue and indigo throughout the exhibition to protect the artwork inside.⁵

Each day in my home, I also sat and engaged the breath on a braided rug which I recreated for the show. Performing labor carried out by Black women in the antebellum South, I submerged my hands into the blackest ink of the indigo vat and pushed needles through cotton cloth to communicate with my ancestors.⁶ I also see these actions as a reparative strategy. The indigo-dyed cotton cloth that makes up the hand-braided floor piece speaks to human commodification and the exploitation of natural resources for profit. Popularized in the Colonial era,⁷ the art object is a site of ceremony. A place where I engage the breath to connect with my matrilineage, unravel the psychological impact of colonial violence, and cultivate self-compassion.

Concerned with the politics grounded in the breath, the braided rug took on an additional function. On opening night,



narkita, *i found myself in the mountains*, 2023. Installation, dimensions vary. Photo: Amanda Tipton.



narkita, *we must never forget the bones*, 2023. Found objects, dimensions vary. Photo: Amanda Tipton.



narkita, *and now we come to sit*, 2023. Natural indigo-dyed, machine-sewn, plaited, and hand-sewn cotton fabric, 48 inches in diameter. Photo: Amanda Tipton.

I staged an unannounced performance that included friends who played a significant role in my choice to look within. I invited each of them to sit together around the floor piece and engage in a five-minute breath flow. This was followed by a spoken word piece that I wrote and delivered. We became a spectacle because the viewers did not expect a performance. The action was a callback to the breath, and many audience members heeded to our call and joined in the collective breathing. The participation of the audience reminded me of the Combahee River Collective,⁸ a group of Black feminists who believed that society would benefit from movements that center Black women. I see the action and the onlookers who joined as their theory in practice.

In *The Shamanic Bones of Zen*, **Zenju Earthlyn Manuel** suggests that seeing begins when we are quiet and still.⁹ This notion runs through my interior life and cultural production, but what if there was a collective decision to slow down, breathe, and turn inward? What could be unlocked? This show and the opening night performance engendered many questions, to which I have no answers. I am simply a thinker and maker who is contemplating and imagining. I have many ideas, visions and dreams, and I am fortunate that my aesthetic musings find their way into public spaces that spark critical dialogue about the possibilities for tomorrow.

¹ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif.: Crossing Press, 2015), 36.

² *Ibid*, 37.

³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016), 17–20.

⁴ bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press, 1995), 4.

⁵ Karen Hampton, “African American Women: Plantation Textile Production From 1750 To 1830,” *Textile Society of America*, 2000.

⁶ Mary Madison, *Plantation Slave Weavers Remember: An Oral History* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 103.

⁷ Amy Mall Hicks, *The Craft of Hand-Made Rugs* (New York: Empire State Book Co, 1914).

⁸ Joy James and T Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *The Black Feminist Reader* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 261–270.

⁹ Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Shamanic Bones of Zen* (Boulder, CO.: Shambhala Publications, 2022), 3.

—*narkita (she/her) is a researcher, writer and interdisciplinary artist whose practice spans the mediums of photography, textiles, installation, and performance. She earned her BS in Public Relations in 2010, and a MA in Arts Politics from the Department of Art & Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU in 2022.*

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narkita, *don't remove the kinks from your hair, remove them from your brain*, 2023. Performance. Photo: University of Colorado Denver Experience Gallery.

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