

HYPERALLERGIC

Love, Art, And Politics Intertwined

These four artists dig into the cultural and geologic history of the enclave of Staten Island to produce work that resonates with the core of bell hooks's commendation to love.

by Charlotte Kent
December 1, 2021



Shervone Neckles, "Terciopelo: Bush Woman Collar" (2016-2021) wearable mixed media garment: velvet, skin-up shells, embroidery thread, fabric trim, and notion glass beads and sequins, variable dimensions presented with conch shell & jab jab helmet (©Shervone Neckles, image by Yao Zu Lu)

Above the door of the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art, a stained-glass window reads: "Sailors' Snug Harbor / For aged, derelict and worn out sailors." Nevertheless, respect and concern are the

foundation for the 83-acre rest home endowed by Robert Richard Randall. Inheriting his father's fortune, accrued as a privateer in the Revolutionary War, Randall decided to gift the majority of his estate as a home for retired sailors who had nowhere else to go. He recognized, without prejudice, those whose labor enabled his privilege. Snug Harbor housed an ethnically diverse group of old and infirm men in the last years of their lives. For three decades after Randall died, his extended family fought in court against this radical act of care.

The works by four artists currently displayed at the Newhouse in *Roots/Anchors* present an opportunity to engage deeply with the social and geologic ground of Snug Harbor. Their investigations and thoughtful works made me think of bell hooks' message that love is "the primary way we end domination and oppression." Care for the plants and communities, the tools and histories of this plot of land grounds the diversity of their respective practices and presentations while endowing viewers with examples of the powerful politics enabled by love.



Xaviera Simmons, "Always the Witness" (2021) four channel video installation (Nature 5:30; Bodies 10:00; Color Blocks 6:45; Number 21 5:08), vinyl lettering (all photos by the author unless otherwise noted)

Xaviera Simmons, who describes her practice as "rooted in shifting definitions of landscape, character development, art, political and social histories and the interconnectedness of formal processes" calls upon all of these elements in the most direct engagement with the history of the buildings among all the artists in this show. In her work, "Always the Witness," (2021) she provides oblique means to imagine the relations among these sailors.

The first screen presents a blurry landscape as if seen from a car, with audio of wind through a half-open window. The last screen reintroduces the notion of air in audio of dancers' breathing, their rough exhalations contrasting against the simple steps they make while moving around and with each other. The second screen offers closeup views of segments of bodies, such as a curved line of skin nestled against skin. The third features an animation of falling boulders or cells of various hues against a black background, settling on each other until they fill the rectangle. One person suggested that the four screens represent genres like landscape, abstraction, and portraiture, but that seems a little too pat. Being positioned in the central gallery, visitors reencounter her screen work as they move in and out of other galleries. This placement allows

an encounter to be based on glimpses of different moments from the entire work, more like whiffs of a dream than a conclusive narrative arc. Similarly, we may observe love in our lives and still struggle to define it.



78 x 96 inches, three pillowcases, ink on fabric, Will Corwin, "Snailow Charger (The Dig)" (2021) plaster, sand, aluminum wire; 32 x 16 x 6 inches

"Wildflower Alphabet" (2021) is an extension of Katie Holten's *Love Letters*, a series that identifies native plants and bases a 26-letter alphabet on them. The simplicity of Holten's delicate wildflower drawings belies the rigor in her research-based practice. Reintroducing the oft-ignored landscape grounds us in the acreage of Snug Harbor and the larger metropolis that is the basis for these ecological collections. She produced seed packets of the flowers associated with the letters L (lovegrass), O (orange milkweed), V (vervain), E (early goldenrod) that are displayed for visitors to take and scatter. Sharing really is caring. On the opposite wall, hanging from the ceiling, sheets painted with hieroglyphs articulate the plant language she cultivates wherever she goes. She wrote passages from Theodor Dreiser's essay from 1898, "When the Sails Are Furled," (one of the only accounts of the sailors' lives at Snug Harbor) on sheets for "Love Letters (Snug Harbor)"(2021). When I was there, the windows were open, and they shifted in the breeze like sails on a ship.

Across the hall, the sculptor Will Corwin highlights sailing vessels in plaster and bronze, their rough textures making them

look as if recently excavated. Their appearance alludes to an integral ambition of the show: cultivating awareness of local environments and their connections with distant people and places. Lucy Lippard's *Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (2007) was a guiding text in the curator Melissa West conceiving the show, and Lippard's catalog essay "Furled Sails and Ebbing Lives" discusses how the artists engage the locale to offer "portals to the past with ramifications in the present."

This talk of boats, however, turns me toward the many who are ferried unwillingly. Shervone Neckles presents prints on black velvet from "Domiciliation"(2019) and sewn pieces hung like curtains over

presentation boxes lined in prints of neurons on black velvet from “Terciopelo” (2014-16). The prints depict figures, objects, and symbols of home and its loss, using her background as the basis for a mythology. In addressing the rootedness of people, Neckles’ work engages the history of enslaved Africans brought to these shores, who are part of the history of Staten Island. There were slaves here, but also Sandy Ground, one of the first free Black communities located only 12 miles away, on the southern side of Staten Island.

The centerpiece of the room with her work is a hybrid, wire-frame carnival costume hanging on a wall. “Terciopelo: Bush Woman Collar” (2016-2021) alludes to a Caribbean folkloric character, Lajabless, adapted from Erzulie, a West African goddess of love, but Lajabless represents love that rages over injustice and betrayal. Pillars placed on either side of the wall hanging hold a conch shell and horned helmet, symbolizing carnival. The three pieces together represent the invitation to call upon this powerful figure for the armature necessary to fight for who and what one loves with fervor. As I returned to the Ferry Terminal, I saw an ad of two people kissing that read “No stopping New York. There’s no stopping love.” Sponsored by recoveryforall.nyc.gov, the poster reminded me of the city government’s efforts to fight inequality and the climate crisis while building a new economy. Love can be a force for change and not just a convenient slogan but, as bell hooks makes clear in *All About Love*, that itself takes work: “Understanding knowledge as an essential element of love is vital because we are daily bombarded with messages that love is about mystery, about that which cannot be known.” The author reminds us that love is an exercise in perseverance and cultivation, both personal and political. These four artists dig into the cultural and geologic history of the enclave of Staten Island to produce work that resonates with the effort at the core of bell hooks’s commendation to love. Once we overcome the gross sentimentality that has destroyed the power of love, it might well be the root and anchor we all need. This cynical critic included.

Roots/Anchors continues at Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art (Snug Harbor, Staten Island) through December 31. It was organized by Melissa West.