



Vanessa
Gurman.

The
INCREDIBLY
TRUE
Sometimes horrific
OFTEN

humorous
ADVENTURES OF

A
WACKY

↳ BLACK Girl! ★



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AN LINE



ConceptArt
Gallery

PRESENTS an ARTISTS NOTEBOOK

Vanessa German

January 11 - February 17, 2018

the incredibly true
sometimes humorous
often horrific adventures
of a wacky black girl.
or,
a visual ritual into the power
of the black imagination.



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THIS IS THE THIRD time that Concept Gallery has had the privilege to exhibit Vanessa German's work. Vanessa's work has evolved in the way that only artwork by truly brilliant artists evolves. I like to tell her that with each successive exhibition she has "leveled up," like in a video game, where each achievement begets a new, more difficult landscape to explore and ultimately surmount. At the time of her first exhibition at Concept, she had not yet been included in the major survey of contemporary American Art entitled "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now," curated by Crystal Bridges Museum president Don Bacigalupi and curator Chad Alligood. "State of the Art" served as a stepping stone to other national and international exhibitions. At the time of our second show with Vanessa, she had just been selected for a single-artist MATRIX exhibition at the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art. Today I find myself watching in awe as Vanessa's accolades pile up—she has recently been the recipient of many major artistic achievement awards including the American Academy of Arts and Letters Jacob Lawrence Award just a few months ago.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Vanessa puts her whole soul into the making of her art. What results is beautiful and sometimes sad, expressive and at times mysterious. This show has particular personal parallels as she considers the labels we apply to women, particularly women of color, who are making a mark on the world and doing it without apology, despite constant interference and societal resistance. Do the figures represent “wackiness”? Or freedom? Her sculptures make weighty statements through historical (and not-so-historical) objects which represent the global insistence on placing people of color in a position of subservience. Despite this, I am struck by the persistent emergence of a joyous spirit in each new body of work. It is my honor to share this small corner of the world with that spirit, and to present a new embodiment at Concept Gallery through *Vanessa German: the incredibly true, sometimes humorous, often horrific adventures of a wacky black girl, or, a visual ritual into the power of the black imagination.*

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Alison Brand Oehler
Gallery Director
Concept Art Gallery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



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WITH EXCEPTIONAL VISUAL clarity, tremendous focus, and hands granted by the divine, Vanessa has fashioned an army of sister soldiers, leading us into the new world. If you look closely, through her and into the work you will see flashes of the past, flashes of the spirit and flashes of brilliance. Extraordinary artists pass our way once in a great while, and to my mind, Vanessa is one of the ones.

Carrie Mae Weems

Contemporary American Artist

New York, New York



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Sometimes i just let my Soul
loose. It's harder than it sounds.
Everything around me affirms
conceptual choices anchored in
reasoning, critical analysis, and the
brilliance of activating these spaces
through the material in aesthetic
surety. This, also don't come easy.
Sometimes then, i just make prayer.
i let my hands and my heart go
loose— like rapelling down k2— a
Holy free fall through deep purpose.
i believe that there is wisdom and
information in my Soul— through
my marrow, in every cell, in the
house of my DNA— and it can rise to
the occasion through my fingers, in
this creative process.







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i believe in the power of art &
i believe in the power of love. i
believe in the power of people &
How here we are all here together/
earthlings/siblings/gravity bound
& oxygen breathing beings of
carbon star shine & magic/99.to
99.9%/genetically identical/follow
the spirals on the palms of your
hands & turn to the person next to
you & say. hello relative.

we are all kin & we are in this, on
this together.

Sept. 12, 2017



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THE POWER OF THE MAP MAKER.

***inside the studio.

i love to make faces. i love knowing that it is a face-making day; it is heavy & rich with the promise of magic, or near-to-magic, to come up & out through my fingers. It is like a split in space-time opens up & some of my people come through, just for the moment of making, eyes & cheekbone & mouth. Just for a moment, they breathe, & i meet them through the tips of my fingers. We make eye contact, & then, they go on.***



Paint cup;
362 Black Madonnas.



i wanted

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to be



in the Met



soim

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in THE MET









this is what the POTUS said via twitter,

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Oct 19
The Fake News is going crazy with wacky Congresswoman Wilson(D), who was SECRETLY on a very personal call, and gave a total lie on content!

he is calling Democratic
Congresswoman Fredricka Wilson
“Wacky.”

Fredricka Wilson is RARE.

There are 535 members of Congress:

100 senators, 435 People in the House
of Representatives.

Of those 535, 84 of them are women,
of those 84 women, 21 are Black
women. The first Black woman ever
to be elected to the house of Congress
was Shirley Chisholm. UnBought &
UnBossed

Called many names, i’m certain, but,
i’ll bet that before the name calling...
There was the question: Who does she
think she is?





WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?

Which at the worst can be a dangerous question to have your own answers for. At the least...living a life of your own design, carrying a vision of yourself & living to that vision of yourself through your own authority, permission, and deep agency, would look a little *wacky*...Especially if you were never meant to have freedom, resources, or, to even be able to read & write your own name.

Living Free can look *Crazy, Wacky, Outlandish* especially if the expectation is that you will make yourself small, and ordinary enough to fit between the treads of an old work boot.

i've been called some version of "wacky" my entire life: wacky, weird, strange, "touched," "artsy"... unique or, just plain, *Special.* With a tilt of head.

All of which wd make my mother very happy.



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SUGAR SISTERS

i had an amazing art residency in 2016 at Artist Image Resource on the North Side of Pittsburgh. It gave me the opportunity to delve into the process of printmaking with printmaking experts. AIR is a special place that inspires, challenges and affirms the vision of artists who are fortunate enough to get the opportunity to work there. During this process i created a number of print editions, which is not normally something that arrives through my process;



i create unique, individual, discrete objects, or communities of objects for installation. The Seven Sisters, (the sugar sculptures), are my first foray into making unique sculptural editions. My work has a revelatory narrative nature; story arrives *through* both the material and the process; which means that we are ALL on a journey— the beginning doesn't predict the end.



This is enormously exciting for me; to mine the air, the material; the news of the day; to sift and distill crystallized ingredients into the work— this is a place of deep power to me. The Seven Sisters were created with deep faith and trust in this process of emergence, revelation and purpose. They are each power-figures as though medicine...



.....imagine going into a pharmacy with a prescription for a tincture or salve to lift the ailing spirit, to heal the bitter edge of a willing heart...

imagine then receiving one of these sculptures as your medicine, with a lists of tasks in relationship to both your need, and the purpose of the figure...

healing is all around us. (and within,too.)



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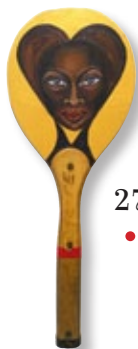
Sometimes, i say that it is a matter of life & death— this making Art. This life of studio & hands & material. & i am serious. You think that i am just dramatic, & i am, but i am also right with it. i am inside of my own hands. i am breathing *because* of studio i did not leap from the ledge of my own life. i didn't really understand *how* to make being alive work for me, until i just let myself BE how my hands needed me to be. i am not a fool, i am an Artist, & for me, this is a total thing. A truth to which my lungs owe their presence. i am lucky.





APRIL 25, 2017

there's a carrie mae weems
quote about playing & art. she
says something about how there
is tremendous freedom in
PLAY— as relates to art making—
she then goes on to say that
SERIOUSNESS can occur in this
place of play— that the playing
can be serious. i like this quote
because i recognize that what
happens to me in studio, the
making that i do is activating of
my own freedom; freedom is
present & contended with even
in its layers & complications. i
am thinking about freedom, and
being free.



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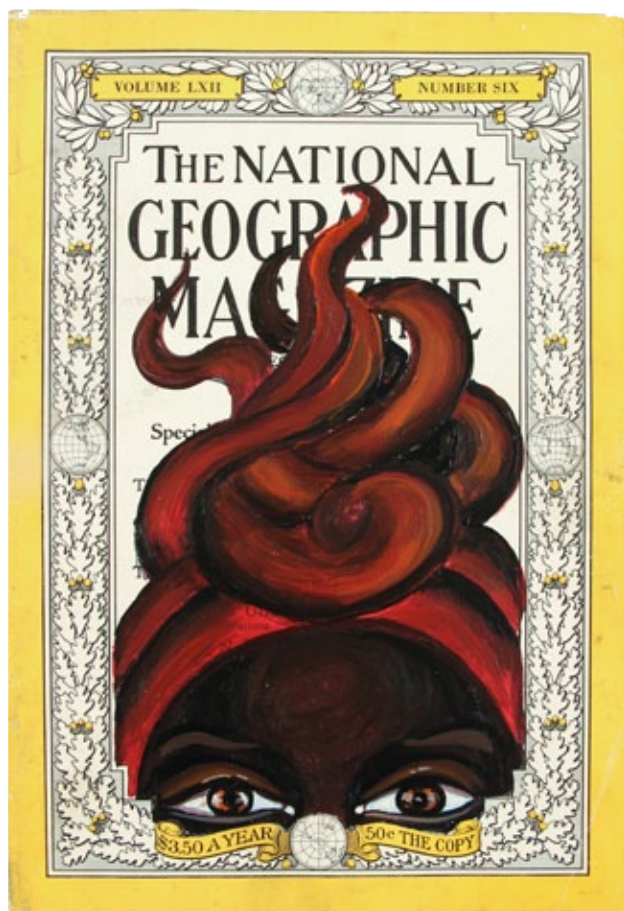


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i am thinking about how to both inhabit & unleash my freedom, whilst simultaneously carrying the recognition that as it were, black women were never designed for freedom, on this land. the structural systems designed our presence to be useful & invisible simultaneously. i have resisted invisibility since i was a little girl. i resist with my Love. i resist with every song that rings through me. i resist by centering my Joy. i resist through Art.







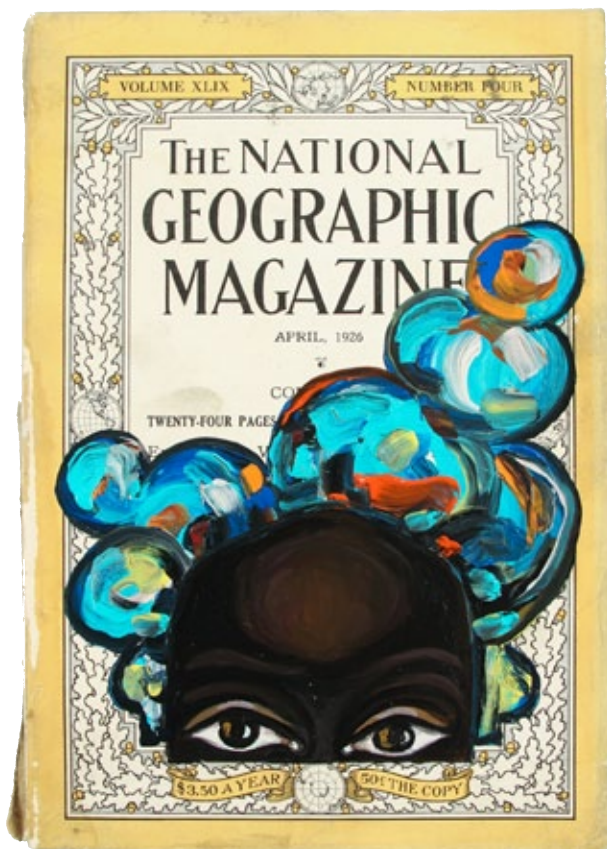
i recently started this series of paintings appropriating 90 year old copies of National Geographic magazines. You see a brown forehead, brown eyes, hair that is a headdress or a crown or the shape of a distant planet as seen through the magnetic field of my own imagination. They are the peekers. They are peeking over the edge. They have risen up through the pages & are seeking exile in a land not the page, in a land not the invention of greed & Myth & violence. They peek through the days & through the lies— they part the curtain of time.

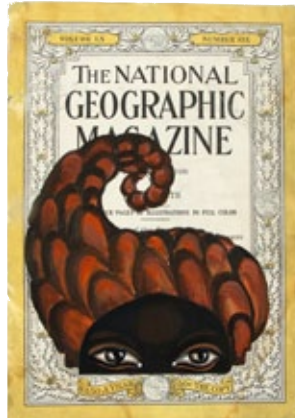
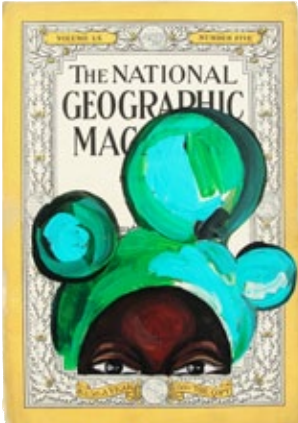


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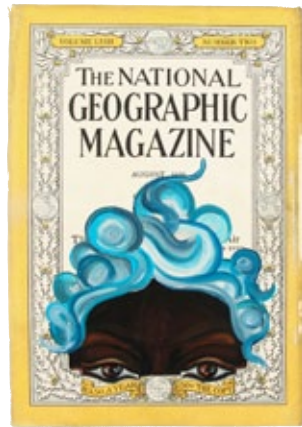
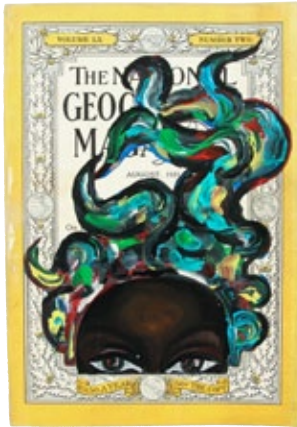


This is how i imagine my
ancestors sneaking & dragging
the future towards their mouths
in Harriet-like ways; in nights
& shadows pushed back against
barn doors between books
& words & letters that cost
blood to be held & devoured &
deconstructed & laughed at &
then restitched with words that
cd only be found. in a library
shelved by the soul. This is how
i imagine they bent the bars of
lies & shimmied their way out
into an edgeless ether, in bodies
& not in bodies, but OF the body
of Being; wearing the skin of the
Cosmos.





.....: i have a list of lies that
i reject utterly. i do not
participate in their decimation
of the human spirit. i ignore
them in a way that isn't ignoring
at all, it is, invisible-ing & i
kin do this with such seamless
skill that it is, above all things,
creative & restorative. if i did
not ignore them i'd have to
ignore my self & ruin my soul
in the consumption of their
undoing. turning away from
these most human-dismantling
lies allows the eyes of my soul to
continue to dream.



::::: Dream on. Keep dreaming.
While we fight & weep & lean
into the winds of change,
we must also drag the future
towards our mouths with
Boldness & Imagination &
Strategy & Romance & Clarity
of Spirit & Art, & & & & &
i am grateful for alla my artist
ancestors. For alla the tinkerers,
singers, healers, lovers of sky
songs & soil movers & story
tellers, keepers, & all of them. i
am grateful for all of the artists
& artist places. Dream On.

a BLUES FOR ERICA GARNER

...i cried out:...

In the name of Justice. i lift you up.

i cried out a loud sound, audibly, when the npr people told me that Erica Garner had gone on. i cried out & i did not even know that it was me making the sound.

It *did* something to me. to hear it. once they'd said her name. i knew it. i knew that her heart hadn't made it through to the end of the week, the end of the year. & the thing is, when they'd told us that she'd had a heart attack, we all knew what that was. We'd all turned around in a full circle to breathe in that news. We'd kept our heads to the ground & then we went directly to the tables. We laid out the stones we opened up the soils, we pulled out alla the old grandmother's ropes & jewels, all of the old cards came out—everything! We laid out everything! And we knew it was a long shot but we never even let ourselves breathe fully from that lung. We gave all of ourselves up to the prayers and we did not lift our heads until alla those prayers were limp & spent with the exhaustion of being handled and thrown up to the stars and back again and again! Oh! Our hands were exhausted. and even then. once we'd lifted our breaths, we knew that this holding pattern...was a heavy one.



We held it tight in
our bellies. Even
when they started
to say, she was gone
and we knew she
wasn't...we held it,
still.



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Then, when she went
on yesterday we released alla that holding and
it come outta me like the sound of a mountain
unmooring itself. One of the littles was in my
studio cutting plaster cloth, and she probably
wondered— why is ms.vanessa making that
sound? i made that sound because of anyone,
i knew that Erica Garner was fighting for ME.
i knew she'd have much rather been doing
something else, anything else, but she had
to become who she was— for US all. And she
did. And she stepped into it with RAGE and
GRACE. She was UNRELENTING. (i wonder
how many times she was called, “Wacky”?)
Her Heart took it on. Her Heart took us ALL
on. And now we lift her up & we carry her
through the city of our Dreams. All of the
wom*n i know will be holding their hands flat
to the sky today. We are carrying Erica Home.

December 31, 2017





here i am. here i am in a dress that
my mother made me. here i am in
this hair-do that humiliated me.
how was i to know that there was
love in this hair-do? the kids at
school said that i looked liked a
dog. i went to the bathroom and
flattened what i cd of the roller-
set curls. i stuffed the teased poof
under bobby pins. i tried to make
the crown of curls smaller. i tried to
make myself smaller. i tucked curls
behind ears; i curled myself into
the back of my mouth. i was so little
and my mama loved me so much.
here's to this kid; she made it.



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OCTOBER 1, 2017 8:58 am

i have to ask myself what kind of art do you make in the midst of a genocide? i have to ask myself,*** if all human beings are born free and equal with dignity and rights*** then how do i condone, how do i contend with the living realities of being politically Black, culturally Black and spiritually Black, on this land? On THIS land, where the living realities for one with my body, with my vagina, with my statistical maps, are, dismal to _____. What kind of art to make then? What kind of art is the art to be me?

What kind of art is the art to be made in this day and in this time? And do i dare to make this art that is everything, selfishly, that i need it to be? How dare i place myself— my political self? my black self? my cultural self? my spiritual self— at the center of this work? How dare i place black bodies—



black political presences? Black cultural presences? Black spiritual presences? at the center of this work? How dare i use this work to do real healing, real grieving, real reckoning?

If these are just some of the questions that i'm working with, then how can i not do this work?





Ok...so, sometimes i get a little queasy when it's time for the work to leave the house... i mean, studio. Not that they are like children, or anything like that... i get scared that something will break. It makes me want to bend over and do deep breathing exercises. The same people have been packing and shipping my work for years. They're good at it now. They know where to touch, where to lift, and how to strap the work in. It goes from my studio to a warehouse about 40 miles away where the work gets crated, or cartoned and then prepared to ship. It's like theater.



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This is a shelf in my studio. It is 1:27am.
January 1. i work both sides of the night, both
sides of the day. 4 eight hour shifts. Resting,
working, resting...working. The day really
has no edges when i'm making new work...it
just rolls in, it rolls on. The waking hours, for
working, the resting hours, for resting up to
working. There really is no other schedule.

i always try to bring in the new year in my
studio; turning the year over in my hands,
with my hands— it is an invocation.

How much of the process is invisible? How
much of the process has legs? How much of
the process is prayer? — which can tend to just
look like standing around, looking at things...
fingering objects...wandering from room to
room...



All of it matters, you know. Everything that goes into bringing it up, bringing it out, matters. For me the work exists in ALL of the living places. In the dream places. In the wandering between finding, building & starting over. ALL of the living places, visible and non, are material. This IS how we dance.

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•

How to do a thing with Love, (these are my ingredients): Time— take the time. Make the time. Love it with your breath, your hands, and your dreams. Love it beyond previous definition; be drawn into the layers & let even your fingerprints have at the _____. Don't feel the need to need answers to move forward. Move forward. Go to the inside of the inside of the inside. Be. Deliberate. & the Details. Learn to love edges. Honor the edges & marry all of your senses to the surfaces. Be possessed. Make the making your way of ingesting your own humanity. Let everything useful be an ingredient. Don't cower to the mouth of doubt; make peace with the curiosities of the mystery. Take data on this. Collected copious amounts of data. Get to know the real & most urgent shape of, "yes." Feed your, "Yes Machine." What do you feed, "Yes?" More yeses. Your Soul is hungry for, Y E S.

(My Soul is hungry for Yes.)





THIS IS EMORY BIKO,
the great artist, in my studio.
He had a severe stroke 10 years
ago. i'd barely heard him speak,
for 10 years. Then, one day, he
shows up in my studio, walking
with no limp, talking like 10
years ago, like the stroke never
happened. It made my hands
shake. i was shaking when i took
this photo. He is talking about
making art. He is running his
fingers over a weft of beads. He
is saying, "Yes." He is saying he
is ready to make art again.

A SIGN.

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The front door of the ARThouse stops traffic sometimes. i watch it from my window; gasps & cell phone pics & cars slowing down on the avenue. The idea was: let's see what happens if we just share what we love, a little bit, and on purpose. What will happen if we intentionally create a place just to share what we love the most? For me, The share is Art. And, it is love. It is how i know the best places of myself. It is how i stay inside of my own skin. Art makes me a better person. Sharing it is how i share love.







COLLECT CONTEMPORARY ART and traditional African ritual magic sculpture and other power objects. As a painter I've sought to tap into that deep well of spiritual connection that many indigenous cultures find when they create the meaningful objects that we now designate as art. When I first saw Vanessa's sculpture my reaction was she did it, she's found the motherload of spiritual information. Like Wifredo Lam before her, Vanessa has linked her contemporary art practice to a spiritual hoodoo that radiates from every aspect of her sculptures and paintings. They speak to me, inform me and dance a timelessness that is missing from so much of the current arts landscape. Her voice is unique and authentic and is heard loudly with her visual and spoken art. She is the real deal.

Danny Simmons
Artist, Poet
Founder of Rush Arts

THE FIRST THING that hits you is the voice—that clear, powerful, insistent voice filled with music, love, anguish, hope and warmth. If you're lucky enough to have Vanessa German sing to you, your life is changed forever. Artists do what they do because they must; we who are fortunate enough to experience what they do can benefit from their keen insights and deep wells of humanity. Vanessa is one of the most compelling and brave artists among us, because her voice and her work are unbridled and powerful—and because she chooses to share all that she does with the world, with all of us. Vanessa German's sculptures bring together extraordinary accumulations of ordinary things from our world, and she transforms them with uncanny magic and power. They enter spaces where her voice might not reach, and confront us with their beauty, their pain, their testimony. Her sculptures stand as silent but persistent witnesses and reminders of her truths and experiences. They demand our attention and awaken us with their implicating urgency and poignancy. This is one wacky black girl who is changing the world every day, for the better.

Don Bacigalupi, PhD

Founding President, Lucas Museum of Narrative Art
Former President, Crystal Bridges Museum
of American Art



vanessa german

Vanessa is a multi-disciplinary artist based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is the founder of Love Front Porch and the ARThouse, a community arts initiative for the children of her historic Homewood neighborhood. Her work is in private and public collections including Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, The Progressive Art Collection, David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and

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Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora, Snite Museum of Art, among others. German's fine art work has been exhibited widely, most recently at Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA; the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; the Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; the Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, FL; and in the traveling exhibition *State of The Art: Discovering American Art Now*, which originated at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR. Her work has been featured on CBS Sunday Morning, NPR's *All Things Considered*, and in *The Huffington Post*, *O Magazine*, and *Essence Magazine*. She is the recipient of the 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, a 2017 ART MATTERS award, and the 2017 recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters Jacob Lawrence Award. Vanessa German is represented by Pavel Zoubok Gallery in New York, and Concept Art Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



My mother made us artists on purpose. She surrounded us with the tools and methods to access our own creativity, on purpose. She knew that giving us unobstructed authority to the power of our own imagination, hands, and human wisdom would make us human beings capable of navigating the same world that bore out the story of Emmett Till. i thank my mama for being brave enough to raise us, 5, strange, beautiful, and creative Black children. i thank my father for not getting in her way.

i thank my family.



Hanover-Horton, Michigan, Christmas 2017

i thank EVERYONE who makes art happen EVERYWHERE. i'm serious about this— all the behind the scenes people who lift, move, manage, do administration supporting artists, art spaces and happenings— you all keep this civilization bearable.

To Alison, Kris, Pavel, Sam— you make art possible for me, every single day. How can i thank you for this?

To Carrie, Don, and Danny— your words live in the skin of my heart— you're precious, special Humans, and i'm deeply grateful to have friendship with you.

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