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Restorative justice: Vanessa German's art celebrates black lives

Raennah Lorne

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“There’s an incredible well of creativity that it takes to endure your humanity when it feels like you’re not in the right skin.” Vanessa German in Avery Court, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT, 2016. Photo: Allen Phillips / Wadsworth Atheneum.

Vanessa German grew up in Los Angeles in a creative household, wearing clothes her artist mother made, writing stories, and crafting creations from the scrap materials her mom laid out on the dining room table for her and her siblings.

“We were makers as a way of life,” says German, the 2018 recipient of the \$200,000 Don Tyson Prize, which recognizes “significant achievements in the field of American art.”

“My earliest memories of joy and knowing and understanding a sense of euphoria in being alive was through making things—the joy of gluing lace to cardboard and realizing I could make a separate reality in a story different than what existed in living reality. That is the way we came to know ourselves.”

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She speaks on the phone from an artist residency in Mexico, where she is preparing a new body of work for a solo show, opening in Los Angeles in March. This new work is her special baby, she says, because it will be installed in the city “where I came to love the feeling of making art, the process of being in materials—being in a relationship with them and activating that relationship with intention.”

The as-yet-untitled new work is a series of sculptures and wall works constructed inside the frames of tennis rackets. “There is a point of classical mechanics,” German says, “that talks about the moment of inertia, the torque that it takes to bring something back to center.” The tennis rackets represent her experience of growing up black in L.A. “when hip-hop became hip-hop and AIDS became AIDS,” she says. Like her previous work, it reckons with mortality. But it also explores what it meant “to be alive in a culture of celebrity,” she says, in which Leonardo DiCaprio and other child stars were among her classmates and she learned to play tennis in Compton where Venus and Serena Williams practiced.

It’s about “what it was to be black in that environment and creative and sort of wild...how you make yourself as a black person...and what that is to find your center, the force of motion.”

After her exhibition opens in Los Angeles, German will come to Charlottesville for a week-long residency at The Fralin Museum of Art at UVA, where her sculpture and sound installation, “sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies,” opens this week.

She created this work, which premiered in 2017 at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh—where she has lived since 2001—in response to the “ongoing deaths” and unsolved murders of black women and girls in Pittsburgh.

“I think of it as an act of restorative justice, a healing ceremony by sight,” she says.

Some of the sculptures in the installation are heads without bodies, solemn faces, and closed eyes, adorned with headpieces made of found objects, from tree branches to ceramic figurines. Other sculptures are vivaciously dressed bodies without heads, their expressive fingers pointing, flipping the bird, or forming fists.

She found some of the materials that compose the sculptures in her neighborhood of Homewood—in the alleyway near her house, on the street, in dumpsters—and some items people left on her porch. Once, a person left an entire box of shoes—large, glittery, funny, and beautiful shoes, she says, that were likely used in a drag performance.

She is particularly moved by the lives of black transgender women, and notes the prevalence of violence against them. “There’s an incredible well of creativity that it takes to endure your humanity when it feels like you’re not in the right skin,” German says.

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Vanessa German, American, b. 1976. “sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies.”, 2017. Mixed-media installation. Image courtesy of the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, PA. Photographed by Tom Little.

“sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies” can be read in two ways. The first is the experience of someone whose loved one has been murdered in the street and she cannot go to her because the body is cordoned off by police tape. The second is the interiority of trauma itself and the dissociation a person may experience from her own body in order to survive the experience.

“As a descendant of enslaved Africans,” German says, “the soul of my culture, the soul of my people, is you attend to a body in a very special way in the space they have died. The ways bodies are tended to in a Western capitalist, patriarchal culture contributes to the trauma.”

She recalls how the body of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, lay uncovered in the street. “This continued the horror, for his body to be treated like he wasn’t a person, like he wasn’t a boy just an hour before,” she says.

Yet there is something of triumph and celebration in her installation. With its vibrant colors and the sound of dance music and uplifting voices mixed among whispers, it is, German says, “a force that can

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galvanize the sense of terror and tragedy and simultaneously connect that tragedy with the beauty and miracle it was that our people lived and were whole, miraculous, stunning human beings.”

“sometimes.we.cannot.be.with.our.bodies” will be on view at The Fralin February 22-July 7. Vanessa German will be in residence at the museum March 25-29, and will give a public talk on March 28.