

Art

In vanessa german's New Exhibition, Freedom, Value, and Time Coalesce Through Elaborate Assemblages

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"THE FATHER SHOES" (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 25 x 22 x 13.25 inches. All images by Laura Shea, courtesy of Kasmin, New York, shared with permission

vanessa german knows how to translate experiences. In her latest project with the Skinner Museum—Mount Holyoke's early 20th-century cabinet of curiosities—she explores what decolonization means by interacting with the institution's 7,000 precious historical objects. german finds past, present, and future in everything from Native American baskets to Samurai swords to pieces of the Great Pyramid of Giza.

By touching these great American valuables, the artist explores ideas of rarity and protection amongst the context of this country's sordid history with distorting people, objects, and the inherent value of every living thing.

On an episode of *The Green Dreamer*, Gavin Van Horn from the Center for Humans and Nature talks about flipping our perspective from being head over heels to heels over head, instead privileging touch. "That involves us not just venturing out into the world in a way that we are just grasping what we need but being open. Think of our own porosity...Our skin is just a membrane...it keeps us bound together enough so we can think of ourselves as individuals, but it's also a constant exchange of information between ourselves and the world around us," Van Horn says.

german's solo exhibition, *THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON PLANET EARTH*, began as a quest to own the story of the Skinner Museum by doing what no one else on Earth can do to these precious items: touch them. She found that she was not only grasping for something but that she was moved and found connection through the tactile interactions. While reaching for objects society deems valuable and in a reality where fat, Black, queer women are not, she was not granted value but instead recognized it already within herself.



"WALK IN BEAUTY" (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 18.75 x 6 x 11 inches each

german translates that revelation into a mixed-media installation and healing site so deeply rooted in place that it captures the concurrence of time. The installation, "MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS," is made up of artifacts and words collected from the Mount Holyoke community related to questions of emancipation.

There is also a sense of freedom and groundedness across the show. In "THE FATHER SHOES," one shoe has nails that evoke the feeling of digging into the earth, while the other sole features shimmery thread. In the pair, there is "one for leaving and one for coming back," the artist says. Similarly, "WALK IN BEAUTY" is a sculptural rendition of knee-high boots made of rose quartz. This evokes the physicality of our surroundings (a path, movement, stone) and the emotionality of what such concepts represent in our everyday lives (the journey, the heart). No one story, element, or gift is valued above another. All are woven throughout time.

THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON PLANET EARTH is on view at the [Mount Holyoke College Art Museum](#) through May 28, 2023. german recently [was awarded the prestigious Heinz Award](#), and you can [find more of her work on Instagram](#).



"FREEDOM IN THE SOUL" (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 31.5 x 21.5 in x 13 inches



Left: Detail of "GRACE" (2022), mixed-media installation. Right: Detail of "INNER FIRE AND JUBILANCE" (2022), mixed-media installation



"INNER AND THE WASHERWOMAN IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN" (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 39 x 26 x 15.25 inches



"WE HONOR THE CYCLE OF CYCLE" (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 27 x 21 x 13.5 inches



Left: “TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSMUTE DEEP SORROW AND DEPRESSION” (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 29.5 x 22 x 11.75 inches. Right: “TECHNOLOGY TO TRANSMUTE RAGE” (2022), mixed-media assemblage, 28.25 x 15.25 x 15.5 inches



Detail of “FUN IS ITS OWN TECHNOLOGY” (2022), mixed-media installation

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