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# vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH at MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE ART MUSEUM through MAY 28, 2023

SOUTH HADLEY, Massachusetts / October 13, 2022

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([ARTFIXdaily.com](https://artfixdaily.com)) A new exhibition, *vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH*, will be on view at the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM) through May 28, 2023. Featuring video and sculpture by the artist, activist, performer, and poet vanessa german,\* the exhibition navigates ancestral memory and the contemporary landscapes of race, politics, and the pandemic with a uniquely powerful and profound approach.



vanessa german (American, b. 1976) *INNER FIRE AND JUBILANCE*, 2022 Detail, Mixed media installation  
 Collection of the artist, courtesy of Kasmin, New York.  
 Photo Laura Shea

The genesis of the exhibition is german's response to the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum, an early 20th-century cabinet of curiosities at Mount Holyoke College. The collection—ranging from Lakota Sioux beadwork and a merchant ship's carved figurehead, to 19th-century folk art portraits, dinosaur tracks, and Samurai swords—is an impressive and unwieldy trove of over 7,000 fascinating objects. Skinner, a local silk magnate and philanthropist who spent a lifetime acquiring objects from around the world, left his museum and collection to Mount Holyoke in a 1946 bequest.

### The Video

german began with a question: "How do we decolonize a thing, a museum, a collection?" Her answer – captured in a moving video titled *vanessa german is THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH* – turned into an emancipatory endeavor: to touch every object in the Skinner collection. In this way, the artist felt that the story of the Skinner Museum could be reanimated and retold.

The artist explains that through her touching every Skinner object, “I own the story of the Skinner Museum. We own the truth that more than one thing is happening at the same time, in the same place. And, then into the future of future past—all points in space and time are connected. Everything is touched.”

Through this process, she discovered that holding some of the objects created profound feelings: when she held pieces of Stonehenge and the Great Pyramid of Giza, she was moved to tears and began to shake as if the objects were offering her a spiritual message.

### **The Installation**

Inspired by the Skinner collection, german decided to create her own museum, a sacred space of healing. First, german invited the Mount Holyoke community to join her in the creation of a body of work that would focus on the topic of emancipation. With MHCAM student interns, german created a series of prompts and calls for materials on campus. Thought-provoking questions were asked, such as “What do you need forgiveness for?” and “What are you currently learning and un-learning?” Posters and collection stations were installed across campus to gather written responses and personal objects and clothing, which resulted in an outpouring of words and belongings. german then incorporated the anonymous written responses and objects – including boots, figurines and jewelry – to create all the artworks for the exhibition. The result is her mixed-media installation titled “MUSEUM OF EMANCIPATORY OBJECTS,” which includes more than a dozen of the artist’s iconic power figures and other assemblages.

*vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH* also features photographs taken by Laura Shea, the Museum’s photographer, who documented the artist’s progress, capturing meaningful moments of german with many of the objects she encountered. In addition, visitors are each invited to take home a small offering from the artist, a piece of rose quartz—a mineral associated with unconditional love and healing.

Opening events with the artist will be held on Thursday, October 13, 2022. *Artist Talk: The Concert* will be presented from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m., followed by a procession to the opening reception, which will be held from 6:30 to 8 p.m. The exhibition commemorates the 75th anniversary of the 1946 Skinner bequest to Mount Holyoke College.

Tricia Y. Paik, Florence Finch Abbott Director, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, noted, “We first invited vanessa in 2017 to develop a show for this 75th anniversary, but due to Covid, we had to postpone the exhibition. That’s when german switched course to her extraordinary idea of touching every object in the Skinner Museum. Her conceptual project is a remarkable radical act, and has now become a powerful chapter in both the history and future of the Skinner Museum.”

The exhibition at MHCAM is concurrent with vanessa german’s New York City gallery exhibition titled *Sad Rapper* at [Kasmin](#), 509 West 27th Street, which will be on view from September 8 through October 22, 2022.

### **About vanessa german**

vanessa german (American, b. 1976) an artist working across sculpture, performance, installation, and photography, in order to repair and reshape disrupted systems, spaces, and connections. The artist’s practice proposes new models for social healing, utilizing creativity and tenderness as vital forces to reckon with the historical and ongoing catastrophes of structural racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, resource extraction, and misogynoir. A visual storyteller, german utilizes assemblage and mixed media, combining locally found objects to build protective ritualistic structures known as her power figures or tar babies. Modeled on Congolese Nkisi sculptures and drawing on folk art practices, they are embellished with materials including beading, glass, fabric, and sculpted wood, and come into existence at the axis on which Black power, spirituality, mysticism and feminism converge. Based in Homewood, Pittsburgh, german’s artistic practice is intertwined with and inextricable from her dedicated role in activism and community leadership. In 2011, german founded the Love Front Porch, an arts initiative for the women, children,

and families of the local neighborhood that began after she moved her studio practice onto the front steps of her home. Three years later, in 2014, german opened the ARThouse, which combines a community studio, a large garden, an outdoor theatre, and an artist residency. Upholding artmaking as an act of restorative justice, german confronts and begins to dismantle the emotional and spiritual weight imposed by the multi-generational oppression of African American communities. As a queer Black woman living in the United States, german has described this as a deeply necessary process of adventuring into the wild freedom that the inhabitation of such identities demands. This activist instinct emerges in german's work to postulate powerful narratives of freedom and love. german has been awarded the 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, the 2017 Jacob Lawrence Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the 2018 United States Artist Grant and, most recently, the 2018 Don Tyson Prize from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Her work is held in private and public collections including the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, the West Virginia University Museum, Everson Museum of Art, Figge Art Museum, Flint Institute of Arts, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, David C. Driskell Center, Snite Museum of Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art and Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College. german's fine art work has been exhibited widely, most recently at the Figge Art Museum, The Union for Contemporary Art, The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia, Flint Institute of Arts, Mattress Factory, Everson Museum of Art, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Studio Museum, Ringling Museum of Art and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

*\*lowercase letters are the preference of the artist*

## Background

**vanessa german—THE RAREST BLACK WOMAN ON THE PLANET EARTH** celebrates the 75th anniversary of the landmark bequest of the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum to Mount Holyoke College in 1946. An earlier exhibition [Lenka Clayton—Comedy Plus Tragedy](#) (September 28, 2021 through May 29, 2022) also celebrated the Skinner Museum, but was not open to the public due to Covid. Clayton (b. 1977), a British conceptual artist based in Pittsburgh, selected individual objects that once amazed Joseph Allen Skinner and reactivated them for a 21st-century audience. Through her incisive reinterpretation—including new titles, shifts in context, and material juxtapositions—Clayton rendered each object anew, most likely in ways that Skinner never intended. She found both comedy and tragedy through varied and unusual objects that revealed the idiosyncratic and fascinating collection of the [Skinner Museum](#). Through a multi-year process, Aaron Miller, MHCAM's Associate Curator of Visual and Material Culture, worked closely with both vanessa german and Lenka Clayton, helping to coordinate each artist's vision.

## About the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum

The Mount Holyoke College Art Museum (MHCAM) aims to spark intellectual curiosity and creativity through direct engagement with works of art and material culture. Founded in 1876, the Museum's collection comprises more than 24,000 objects, including exemplary Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities; art and artifacts from the Indigenous Americas; paintings, sculpture and decorative art from Europe and the United States; photography, prints, ceramics and numismatics; and a focus on women artists. In recent years, the Museum has made significant acquisitions of global contemporary art, including works by Afruz Amighi, El Anatsui, Bisa Butler, Lenka Clayton, Willie Cole, Jes Fan, Martine Gutierrez, Stephen Hannock, Jennie C. Jones, Hector Dionico Mendoza, Zanele Muholi, Shahzia Sikander, Lin Tianmiao, Carrie Mae Weems, and others. Through thought-provoking exhibitions and educational programs, MHCAM serves as a nexus for experiential learning across academic disciplines and as a resource for the broader community.

MHCAM is free, open to the public, and fully accessible. Hours are Tuesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. For additional information, please visit [artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu](http://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu).

## About the Joseph Allen Skinner Museum

The more than 7,000 objects in this collection represent a lifetime of collecting by Joseph Allen Skinner (1862-1946). The Museum, bequeathed to Mount Holyoke in 1946, boasts important collections of minerals and fossils, early lighting, rare books and documents, furniture, maritime objects, artifacts from Oceanic cultures, firearms, glass and ceramics, tools and farm implements, 19th-century souvenirs, Native American objects, and much more. Highlights include a mid-19th century ship's figurehead from Ipswich, Massachusetts, a 115-pound meteorite from Diablo Canyon, Arizona, and the door to the 18th-century childhood home of Mary Lyon, the founder of Mount Holyoke College. To learn more and explore a virtual tour of the Skinner Museum, visit [artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/collection/joseph-allen-skinner-museum](http://artmuseum.mtholyoke.edu/collection/joseph-allen-skinner-museum).

### About Mount Holyoke College

Mount Holyoke College's exploratory education and collaborative community empower students to extend their knowledge and expand possibilities for themselves, their communities and the world. As a women's college that is gender-diverse, Mount Holyoke inspires students to break through barriers and make change for all. With a vibrant campus in South Hadley, Massachusetts, Mount Holyoke is home to 2,200 students, who connect with over 180 years of tradition while shaping our shared future. To learn more, visit [www.mtholyoke.edu](http://www.mtholyoke.edu).

### Exhibition Sponsors

The exhibition is made possible by the Susan B. Weatherbie Exhibition Fund and the Leon Levy Foundation.

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