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We

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Painting and Printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

WE

By Wesley Chavis, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2017.

Major Director: Cara Benedetto, Associate Professor in the Department of Painting and Printmaking

Here is an exploration of the intergenerational Southern Black American Body, a complex collection of persevering souls of the past, present, and faith-driven future. Through the sensorial physical encounters of my body, sometimes recalled through the physicality of another, I locate the labor to belong, the complexity of submission, sensual awakening, displacement, absence, and the expansive spiritual force of the collective body.

Using documentary additions of archived family photos and journal entries, I expand and abstract the occurrence of my presence through non-linear time, connecting the personal to the complex communal. These documents are the slippery prophecies of my being, *our* being, that simultaneously cause, effect, and become the present-day poetic text. This work complicates desires to essentialize and understand black presence—embracing the process of becoming, seeping, seeking.



Small One-Handed Grip

with light pressure, you hold another, maintain your grip, but don't hurt your lover

intimacy that is expected, and I remain
I remains amidst We, contended



Within the gothic gates of a white dream was the contradiction: being Black. I walked Connecticut roads, smiling to preserve the dream. Still, your nightmare oozed with my breath, through the pores of my flesh.

In the crack of my lips was the distance between you and me, the lessons I learned from Mom to get by. A breathy position that carried the scent of gumbo and the vibrato of her song. There was the air I released. I can breathe, and I choose to breathe my way home.

Your gentle touch on the back of my neck. My gentle body nestled into your crevices. I shift to see your Black and know that submission makes sense again. In you, I am soft. When the lessons burst up from my belly, let me be this soft with you. Let home be your finger tracing my eyebrows, my earlobes, my jaw, tired from the pressure of staying shut. Let home be an opening, a Black breathy word.

I wish I could seep inside that word as you watch the creature I become. My misty wind northbound over Virginia Beach, howling for a sentence to make sense of it all. Leaving apathy behind in a salty wake.

Let home be a church of Black children. We will have faith in our experience. And when our history collides with the world, I hope we hear the howl. I pray you hear it too. And, white dreams make way for gray realities on a Richmond sidewalk.

Gray is the transition from your dream to mine. And in the wet fog of my searching, our brown skins pass. I acknowledge your presence in our own secret sensuous world. Our slacks slip away. Then, we commune.

On the final day,



One Fingerprint

water seeps through your pores;

her to a medic.

Interpretation

As I go following God's commands,
am I called to stop along the way
and sacrifice for the injured? Yes.

2. Dream

This one was less clear. It involved
a mentor carrying a gun, a golden
and beautifully inscribed gun. I
get a sense it was meant to
protect or be a source of power

i'm slowly turning red at the
memory of you

you said you mourn the sin of
your compliance with a system
that unfairly benefits you while
oppressing your black brothers and
sisters

you then apologized to me, because you
are white. In fragile vibrations, your
tone/words pushed their way forward.

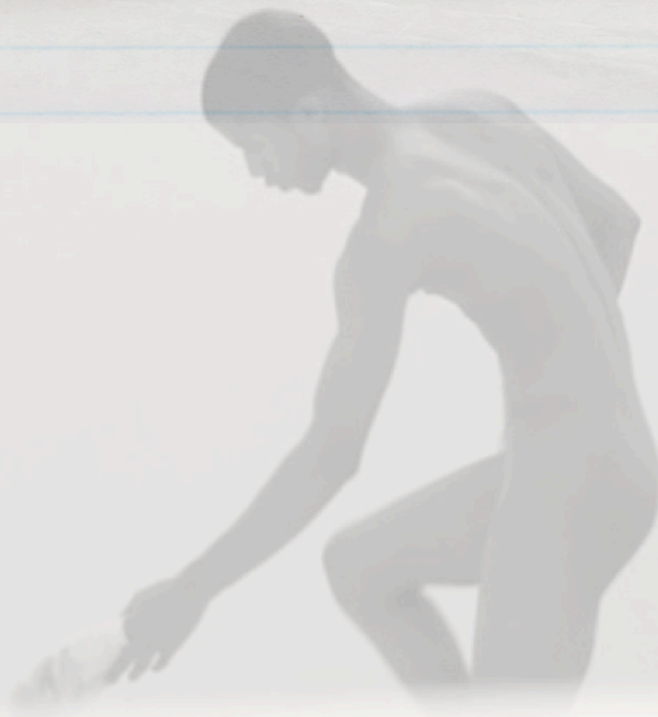
As I recall, I uncrossed my arms
to welcome your words. And then I
accepted your apology but felt so
conflicted. I didn't feel better, but
I think you did. And that's good for
you.

I really love you for trying, testing,
acknowledging. What's next? I still
feel weird.



Objects of Blackness? (The Cup)

I don't know what the symbolism is of the bees' wax
but I like the smell, I like the comfort
and feelings of home and domesticity of the smell
Do you find masturbation shameful?
Are you a dancer?





teeter

A leg is a crease,
in deep

slithering flesh
to a valley.

Shining fog drapes the resting boys,
its long journey

to complete inhalation.

Black mold

We exhale a heavy cloud
to cloak us,

hickory smoke from above,
to stroke

temptation, laughs through the deep
press to the neck
and slip
along

pulse

into infinity pool.

Clouded mass;

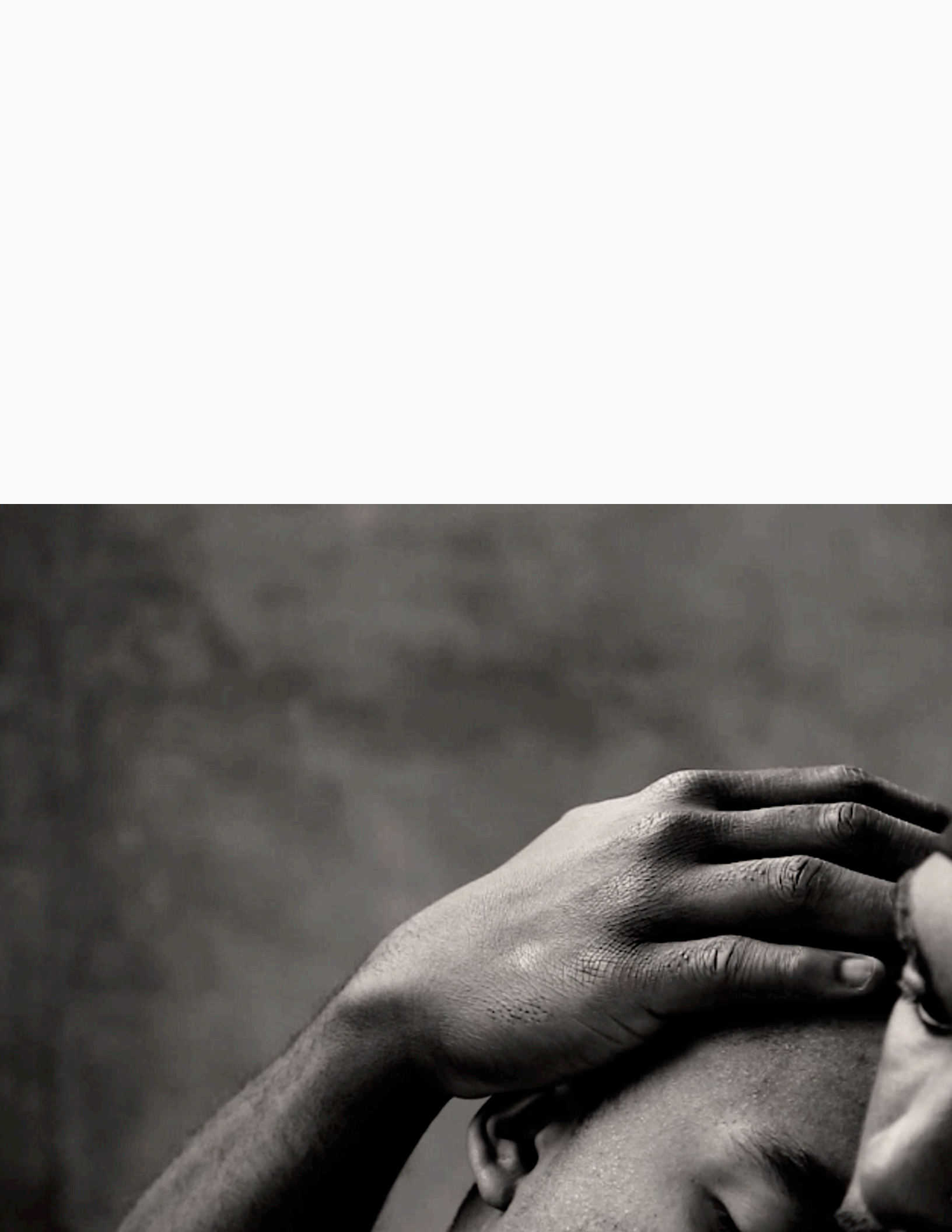
fatted calf,
stumbles.

Isaac in his delirium

dark hickory high

Indecipherable
sounds of contact

echo up into dry air.



My brother and I knock on the wall until two white boys arrive on the opposing side.
They wanted to play.

We meet near the edge of the clearing where the forest begins. Under the small
pressure of my Nikes, flakes of brown bark release damp suction of salty rain. The
smell is bittersweet. It finds my skin so good and doesn't let go.

Joey squats to the grassy ground, his pale fat finger guiding his body down. The little
appendage strokes the bark, twirls the surface until its creases spill beads of warm rue.
The smell is bittersweet.

Here, I recall my body through Joey's eyes;
in red, the white boy looks at me, at "he".

With his tippy-toes, he presses the earth in order to lower my seat so I can join the
seesaw. I eagerly swing my leg over the plank and sit. I hurl my weight to the ground.
Then, I watch his propel into the hot air. Flung from the seat, he was a screaming black
spot against the blue sky. I am gawking at the surreal scene, heavy against the dirt
floor, overweight by some realization.

My flying little friend smacks a tree then thuds against dense soil.

Big Wrap, Forearm

digging, feel the cool beneath that calms angst, rest and be still, allow yourself to melt into the cold until it becomes warm, there, you will be met with peace for a moment

Big Wrap, Forearm

digging, feel the cool beneath that calms angst, rest and be still, allow yourself to melt into the cold until it becomes warm, there, you will be met with peace for a moment

Small Side Fist

on point a pressure meaty and soft, unexpectedly soothing, a fist aimed at the door

Mangled Pulling

pulling straining to rip the shred, once its removed, your arms will fling open, empty, confused, free, light

Larger Rightward Nothing

sense Karen, a hovering hand hesitant to press, ask it to come closer

Small Soft Corners

you just noticed the physical flaws, then, they disappeared, a movement in your belly makes you cry in the grass

Small One-Handed Grip

with light pressure, you hold another, maintain your grip, but don't hurt your lover

One Finger Press, Massage

once the surface is broken, fall into the air where prayers pass, let a word pass through your back, and hear it whisper through your chest

One Fingerprint

water seeps through your pores; we grow.

Leftward Nothing, Smaller

visualize

Prayer Hands

exploding through the creases is a dust that coats your face, you inhale and taste an indescribable flavor

The wind cleared my senses with my sister's perfume.

Now, wood smells like carrots and greens –

As we sit in silence, woven strands of wood and chipped paint cling to the outer layer
and avoid the hidden history of liquid pulsation from a three tree system - exhale.

The divine body bleeds without rhythmic pulse. We lather in its pulp, yet feel no nerve.
It isn't dead, but it will need us to

peak life soon.

I'm just not close enough to moisten its crust and lift the aroma.

to peak my nerve

to peak hers

to find my root

to find absence when I expected his

I inhale this daydream as if intimacy arrives by breath alone, and I become numb pulp,
waiting for the lovely ferment of an outspoken pastoral wetness.

We see branches, sodden with the gelatinous red remains of a miracle, clawed and teased until life departed and wings broken.

From beneath the tree, a blue jay calls...

So, I touch the naked bird, unsure of whether to cup or nudge its vibrating body, whether to lift and cradle its furry warmth or let my hesitant hands prod its fear.

My sister breaks branches and molds them into a prickly round.

On Mom's porch, we feed it soaking bread.

The hatchling flails, still surviving some ill-conceived attempt to fly

when evening comes,



He carries me.

hnee
s high,
e,
heat
chy
ers the
er than
e blue.

triangle.
ad for
and

summer.
path to
die,
e. No

to

biker
his path
Tess
are
just three

light
page
servants
No

peachy
dead
in
dry
ground

soldiers
drier
summer
triangle

nannies
couldn't

expected. It soaks

spring now

I'm before four trees in a graveyard, now three.

In the triangle the light shows high, shivers my neck.

Two trees are family, one is uncle
with red ribbons on his trunk.

I imagine Jess dead in the triangle. I couldn't tell if she was sad or content. Just slowly
dead, and she looked at me.

I imagine me dead in the summer. I got hit by a biker on his path to the other dead,
servants, soldiers, nannies, I die - unkempt in an obtrusive grave. No pain.



we see God timber

Wordless, we are cutting onions for a gumbo. Your face hovers over the pot as steam and oil merge on your skin to make beautiful light. I watched it all, trying to confirm a vision I had of this moment.

The vision: me, laid bare in queerness; you, becoming

Momma, partner;

Mary, Jesus.

Drinking meaty broth, you ask me to tell you what you need to know. Then our future bough brakes. Submerged, we hear dense moans from paradise and harmonize with dry throats.

My story massages your fear, unravels your body as it tries to tense.

Before I knew how to hide, the walls of your belly massaged all. I return there through the crease of our supple hug. Guided by deific pressure, my body returns. We wait.

Soon, our pores drip watery brine, and we wash

against the daily death.



Breathe hard.

Prayer Hands

exploding through the creases is a dust that coats your face, you inhale and taste an
indescribable flavor



we grow.

Here. Your gentle touch on the back of my neck. My gentle body nestled into your crevices. I shift to see your Black and know that submission makes sense again. In you, I am soft. When the lessons burst up from my belly, let me be this soft with you. Let home be your finger tracing my eyebrows, my earlobes, my jaw, tired from the pressure of staying shut. Let home be an opening, a Black breathy word.

With no boundary, a sticky vapor condenses The Body and dribbles low. An East Texas flow, collecting umami, supping sulfur.

Running South, we are a merciful primordial flood.

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