



microscope gallery

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Crystal Z Campbell “Notes from Black Wall Street: Upon a Century”

October 28 - December 4, 2021



Crystal Z Campbell, “Notes From Black Wall Street: Where Are the Stars?,” 2021, acrylic paint, Ink, fired clay, cowrie shells, archival photograph on wood panel, 36 x 60 inches — Courtesy of the artist

Microscope is pleased to present *Notes from Black Wall Street: Upon a Century*, the first solo exhibition at the gallery of works by Crystal Z Campbell, an Oklahoma-based artist whose practice includes painting, collage, moving image, public art, and installation. The exhibition marks the first solo presentation outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma, featuring selections from the artist’s new body of paintings and video works addressing the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, a century after its occurrence.

The paintings on view, including works completed this fall, complicate the line between painting and photography, and represent a selection from more than a hundred works from the artist’s “Notes From Black Wall Street” series, begun in 2016. Greenwood, commonly known as “Black Wall Street,” was among the most affluent black communities in the country at the time. Over 35 city blocks were destroyed and fire-bombed, with the city immediately passing a Fire Ordinance prohibiting rebuilding unless fire-proof materials were used. The series assumes as its starting point sepia-toned archival photographs sourced from a single archive from the 1920s taken over the course of the rebuilding of the Greenwood District, following its destruction during the 1921 Tulsa Race massacre.

“After finding holes cut in newspapers when trying to conduct research on the massacre, and tiring of images of rubble and destruction which circulate for very specific reasons, I began intervening upon these photographs. *Notes from Black Wall Street* includes over 100 painted photographs to meditate on a century of near silence and omission from the historical record. Upon looking at the subjects in these photographs, it was clear that the technology of photography was used to document a period of self-fashioning and self-determination. These photographs were made for the future.” — CZC

Enlargements of the photographs printed and mounted to wood are used as surfaces to which Campbell imbricates a variety of materials — including acrylic paint brass, beads, copper, textiles, ink, and cowrie shells — giving shape to this largely obliterated history with extremely detailed, vibrant, ecstatic compositions. Kiln-fired ceramic shards — often the primary evidentiary sources to date archaeological sites — figure prominently in these paintings and embody sites of omission within the composition. Campbell fabricates terra cotta clay tesserae (clay shards) and embeds them within these landscapes, paralleling the rebuilding of Greenwood from bricks that were inadvertently refired during the massacre and thus resisted attempts at destruction.

Despite the active suppression of the massacre for most of the past century, the event left indelible scars, which Campbell evokes through the tactile layering of paint, and other three-dimensional interventions on the printed photograph. Intricate color patterns loosely extracting from Art Deco (which was used to forge Tulsa's architectural identity within years of the massacre), alongside color theory, interference patterns, pointillism, and other references work with and against the photographic record, producing at times, histories that are illegible.

Using strategies of opacity, the artist conveys the gravity of the moment while letting us imagine Black geographic space, or the once "vibrant Greenwood community that danced, built, breathed, paced, planned, studied, worshipped, shouted, debated, shared, whispered, fought, watched, practiced, and dreamed there."

In a 23-minute single-channel video on view titled "Flight," Campbell reconfigures scenes from historical 16mm film footage recorded by Solomon Sir Jones in the mid-1920s documenting Black communities in Oklahoma to consider the loss of what was and what might have been, as well as the influences and traces left by communities such as Greenwood that are still visible today. For "Flight," Campbell shifts the original black & white tones to saturated red and green hues — colors that when combined, according to the opponent theory of color, are "impossible" for our eyes to see simultaneously — affecting the visibility of the images and repositioning analog, archival scenes from a not-too-distant past to a digital present time. Carina Evangelista of Oklahoma Contemporary, who previously presented the film, says: "Flight proposes a way of feeling one's way through the missing, muddled and delayed historical accounting, the dimensions of which inextricably condition the inequity that persists today."

Notes from Black Wall Street: Upon a Century opens on Thursday October 28th and continues through Saturday December 4th. Opening reception on Thursday October 28, 6-9pm. Masks are required for entry. Gallery Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 12-6pm, or by appointment.

Crystal Z Campbell is a multidisciplinary artist, experimental filmmaker, and writer of Black, Filipino, and Chinese descents. Campbell finds complexity in public secrets — fragments of information known by many but untold or unspoken. Recent works revisit questions of medical ethics with Henrietta Lacks's "immortal" cell line, ponder the role of a political monument and displacement in a Swedish coastal landscape, and salvage a 35mm film from a demolished Black activist theater in Brooklyn as a relic of gentrification. Select honors include a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship in Fine Arts, the Pollock-Krasner Award, MAP Fund, MacDowell, MAAA, Skowhegan, Rijksakademie, Whitney ISP, Franklin Furnace, Tulsa Artist Fellowship, Flaherty Film Seminar Fellowship, Squeaky Wheel, and UNDO Film Fellowship. Exhibitions and screenings include the SFMOMA, Drawing Center, ICA-Philadelphia, REDCAT, Artissima, Studio Museum of Harlem, Project Row Houses, SculptureCenter, Cinemigrante, and DocLisboa, amongst others. Founder of archiveacts.com, Campbell was a 2020-2021 Harvard Radcliffe Film Study Center & David and Roberta Logie Fellow and is currently a University of Buffalo CDI Distinguished Visiting Scholar in Art. Campbell lives and works in New York and Oklahoma.



Still from "Flight," by Crystal Z Campbell, 2021, single-channel video, color, sound, 23 minutes 44 seconds
Courtesy of the artist