

Haley Whetstone

May 5, 2023

To Hear and See With Love, -

To photograph the Black body is a task that must be handled carefully. In a way that is not making yet another spectacle. To photograph the Black female body, especially, must be handled with care, attention, and positive intention. It is not enough to showcase these women and their stories. What's important is hearing the voices, thoughts, feelings from those seen in the photographs. Ignoring our faces or making us into a spectacle or something to be "educated" on is already bad enough; to ignore what we have to say is just the icing on the cake. This is why I am creating this project. I am tired of only seeing the pain of my ancestors be displayed in prestigious galleries that I'd otherwise not see if I didn't go to a prestigious, terribly expensive college in New York; an opportunity of viewing Black pain afforded to a mostly wealthy, White audience. I am tired of having to view the women I look up to in photographs as a history lesson and not knowing much else about their lives. I want to see Black women be humanized. I want to see us take up space in the art world and actually be both seen and heard for who we really are. We are so much more than a spectacle, so this project is one of my forms of art activism. My form of giving Black women a platform to change. To finally make the art I want to see, and to make everyone else have to see it too.

In this piece, conversations are paramount to the point of the piece as a whole. Not only is it important to SEE Black women as humans, but it is equally important to HEAR the words they have to say. I didn't direct anything that was said to me. I simply asked the women who participated in this

piece to say whatever thoughts they had about their identity that they'd want a White audience to hear. These conversations flow naturally, as I am simply allowing the audience to listen in on the thoughts and feelings we have to share. There is no filter nor any censoring as Black women are often told we're "doing too much" when we show passion and there have been times at Vassar in which I've been told, "everything isn't about race" when I talk about my identity. In this case, these conversations about our race are discussed with however much passion, anger, or joy we feel in the moment. The presence of the voices are a part of the humanizing element of this work because the viewing of the images can't be taken as a mere spectacle given the content being discussed by these women. The messages they share are not meant to make White viewers and listeners feel bad or any shame, but they're meant to provide an insight into our everyday lives. Listen to what we have to say and perhaps that would lead to more meaningful conversations across racialized and gendered lines.

Dr. Beverly Tatum writes in her book, "Can We Talk About Race", about the dilemma White people face when it comes to their privilege. She writes that the knowledge White people have of the injustices their race has done upon Black people causes a level of guilt so great that they try to ignore it, yet this keeps us apart and a lack of recognition deepens that pain.¹ In order to heal a pain like this, members of the dominant race must face not only the injustices done upon people of color, but the injustices done upon all people in general. Ignoring our faces and voices does harm to both groups. It is especially important in the case of Black women, who have so many tropes thrown upon us and the intersection of our race and gender renders us invisible. I want my predominantly White audience here

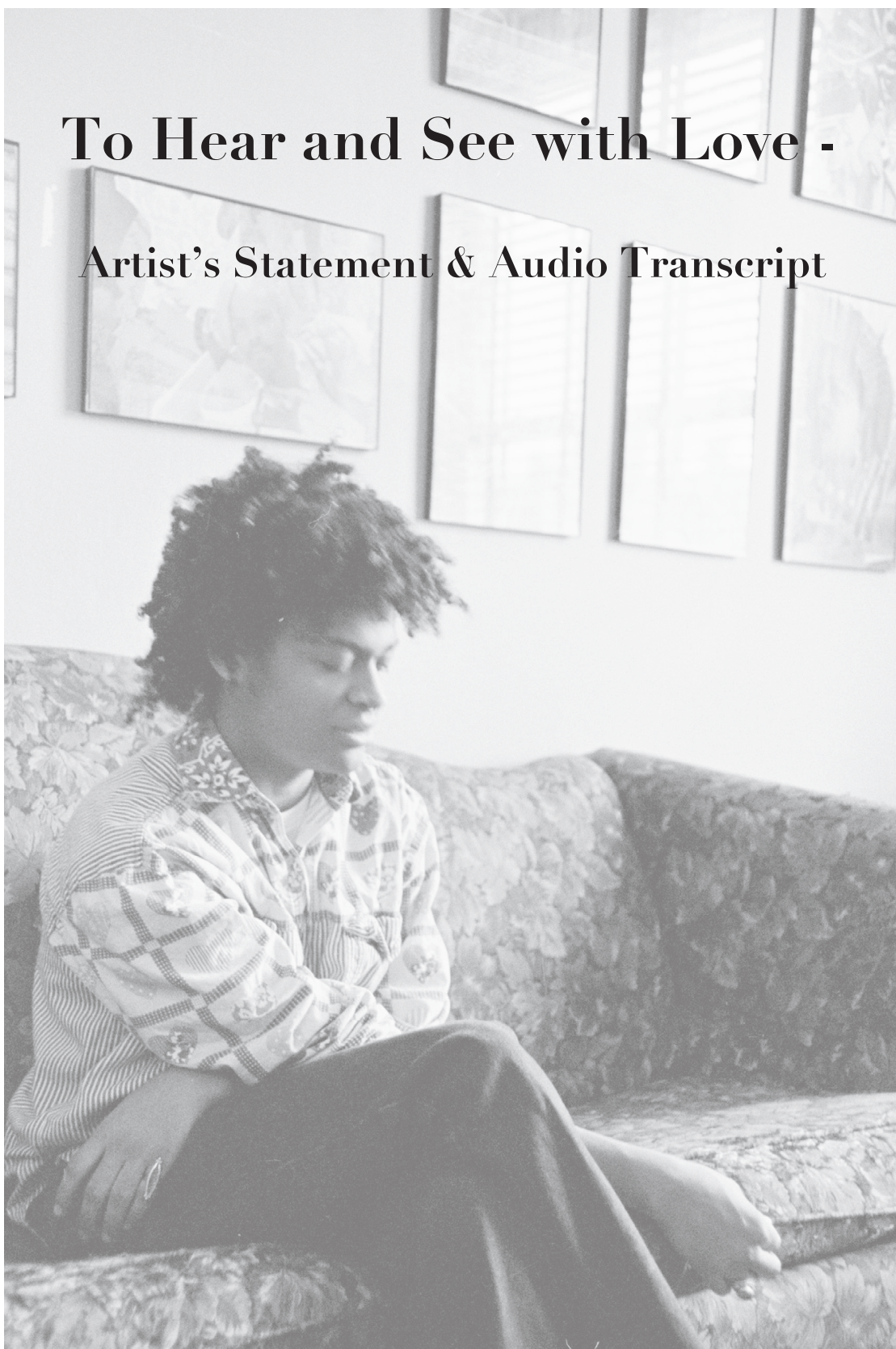
¹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, "Defining Racism: 'Can We Talk?'", in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race* (Basic Books, 2017), pp. 14.

at Vassar to understand this message Tatum writes about. In a way, this project is informed by some ideas of critical race theory that so many “anti-racist” White students here claim to support. Viewing this project would really challenge that support and hopefully open up a new understanding and dialogue for all audience members. Hearing these conversations will ideally lead to even deeper conversations with Black women and femmes in the world.

As an artist, I want to create the ideal artwork and space for a message I want to share with an array of people. As an activist I want to bring about social change in a topic that matters greatly to me. This is a project of healing, and recognizing others. A project meant to create a new art space, and an activist-inspired move to change an audience’s perspective. I approach this with care, love, and positive intention. My only hope is that all viewers leave with those feelings in their hearts and are able to leave seeing Black women as the humans we are.

To Hear and See with Love -

Artist's Statement & Audio Transcript



To Hear and See with Love -

*A Visual and Auditory Experience -
By Haley Whetstone*

Artist's Statement

I am tired of having to view the women I look up to in photographs as a history lesson and not knowing much else about their lives. I want to see Black women be humanized. I want to see us take up space in the art world and actually be both seen and heard for who we really are. We are so much more than a spectacle, so this project is one of my forms of art activism. My form of giving Black women a platform to change. To finally make the art I want to see, and to make everyone else have to see it too.

Audio Transcript

Audio 1

F: Being Black is beautiful... all of the time and all the time being black is beautiful.

M: Mhmm.

M: Sometimes I feel like I wouldn't talk to people I talk to, or like, I wouldn't be like where I am if I wasn't Black. It's just like I can't imagine not being Black. Whenever I look at my hair I'm like, "yeah."

F: Waking up not Black, I feel like that's a whole movie. Like woahhh, wait I'm not Black?

M: You're sick for that one!

F: It's just, it is hard sometimes. It's like we were talking about, in one of our classes that if you're in a room and you're prompted with the statements, like the "I am" statements so you say like, "I am this... I am that..."

If you come from a non-marginalized identity you're less likely to say that about yourself. So like, if you're a man you say, "I am a man", but if you're like a woman or you identify as like a femme, you say like, "oh I am a woman" or "I am a femme." The same thing goes for race, so it's like a white person won't be like, "oh I am White", but a Black person will be like, "I AM Black."

Just because all of our day-to-day interactions are, not all the time shaped

by race, but they usually are shaped around our skin color, and how people perceive our skin color, and the connotations behind our skin color. Like, “Okay well, she’s Black so she’s probably gonna think about this, and say this, and she’s probably gonna bring up this. She’s probably gonna do this alot...”

And it’s like, I can’t- I can’t move away from that.

M: It’s like, I love the identity of being a Black woman, but I hate how it’s used as an identifier, like for me.

F: Mmmm

M: Especially like you don’t know shit about me, but you already know... oop she Black.

F: Yeah, exactly.

—

H: I don’t know, just tell me how you feel.

J: Well for one thing, A) I’m going to always have to work twice as hard to get half as far, and I know that’s something people say a lot but I don’t think people truly understand what that means.

Especially for me, I work hard, right? I’ve gotten my degree, I’m going places. But, it’s almost never going to be enough in comparison to someone else who has different identities than me.

H: I think about how much work I do and like, how my work is received versus how other people view it. Like, when I work hard people are so impressed, or surprised.

And they say things like, “Oh wow you’re the best [this] we’ve ever had that actually puts in effort.” And it’s like I’m doing the same, getting compensated, I *think* the same, but I would never know. To hear that they didn’t work as hard to get that same recognition is disheartening because it’s like, why do I have to do so much.

H: For me as an artist... For one there’s already not enough Black women. But I do get irritated, when a lot of the artists I’m recommended to look at are the same three Black female photographers.

We’re still here, but no one talks about us. And I have these dreams of becoming one of the great Black female photographers, but it’s also like... are my dreams unrealistic, even though they’re realistic for every White student here?

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A: I think I personally feel like being a Black woman in a space like this is powerful. It’s a really great thing to just be here and to resist the stereotypes against me and just to show that I worked my butt off and I made it here and I deserve my place here. And it’s really nice being around other Black women because we’re powerful, and we’re strong and that we all deserve the right to attend a higher up institution.

A: They hate to see us, but... They hate to see us win. And, we’re not going to stop winning, so.

A: Honestly, they should reevaluate why they don’t want to see us win. Like, why are we a threat. We’re not stopping now and we’re never gonna stop. This is only the beginning.

A: I don't know. I think it's just time for them to let go of their preconceived notions of the stereotype of the angry Black woman. And, the reason why we do carry so much anger is because we have so much passion, and rage is not always a bad thing. You can have good rage and that's why these movements have always been so successful because we really want to bring about these changes.

R: Society always paints a certain image and there isn't a collectivist.... There is a collectivist solution to get out of that, and it kind of let's you do whatever you want. And, as a trans woman specifically, it connects to that because it allows me to be able to play with my gender in a way that doesn't allow society to box you in, if that makes sense.

R: I don't know, society wants to paint Black women as either a caricature of either too strong, or too weak or hypersexualized, or not sexual enough and that kind of allows me to just do whatever.

I don't know. There's a joy in finding a certain position in the madness, and knowing that whatever you do is going to be criticized so why not just make the most out of it in general.

Audio 2

F: I forgot who said it but she was like, “ When I walk into a room, my blackness walks ahead of me,” and it’s like...

M: Yeah who like -

F: I don’t remember who said it, but when I read that I was like “Damn.” ‘Cause it’s true! Like, before I even open up my mouth you’re already conjuring these images of me saying things, doing things, talking a certain type of way and it’s like, what if that’s not me at all.

M: Mhmm.

—

J: It’s a very lonely business to be a minority in a... well in anything. But for me as someone who is in a STEM field, I was the only, well one of two Black girls in my entire major.

—

R: So, you can take up a lot of space and diversify companies and stuff. And you can even like, make Black businesses, but I don’t think that’ll ever be as resistant as art.

R: We need more Black art majors. We need more Black artists in general.

H: True.

R: Black art and White art take up very different spaces though, and I’m grateful for that because most Black art, to me at least, seems like a little bit inherently resistant.

J: In the back of my mind I know I am in one of the least desired groups romantically, and that just sucks. I can't even... I don't know, it's just going to be really hard to find somebody because my features aren't commonly desired in American contemporary culture.

M: Like being Black has like... so many people see it as you limiting your options, but once you pass that mentality it has done nothing but expand my options.

F & M: Mhmm!

M: I feel like there's nothing that can compete with a room full of Black people. Like, that energy is immaculate.

F: Exactly. Like feeling that, especially when we were singing that song together I was just like, I am a part of something bigger than myself. I finally felt that. I'm like yeah, YEAH!
This is what it means to be Black. This is Blackness.

M: I feel like it's just healing to the soul. It's healing to the college me at a PWI, it's healing for the inner child that just never felt like hmmmm. And it's also healing to, I feel like, to the ancestors that be or the ones that you feel within you.

Audio 3

J: It sucks when I had professors asking me to trace my ancestry and I'm like, "I can't do that!"

Like, I don't know if you understand why I can't do that like you can, but I can't.

J: I feel as though when I go back to my old school it's foreign. The gentrification, it's there, and I just... I hate that I've been out of high school for four years and I'm not even recognizing the place that I went to.

The events are different, the culture is different, and I feel as though I cannot resonate with the current student population anymore. If I were to go back and see my teachers, half of them aren't even there anymore. So, I don't know, it's just a different world.

H: My mom tried to join the PTA and had a hard time because the White parents only think about their kids and their area, when that school is open to all kids in the Atlanta metro area.

H: The kids the school was built for were priced out of the neighborhood.

J: Oh yeah.

—

H: Like, how do you feel about being a Black woman in America? Like, what are things that you would want... like if a White person were in the room and we were having this conversation, what's something you'd want them to hear?

S: I feel like they need to stop with the fake diversity and inclusion stuff because they're just jumping on the bandwagon because everyone else is doing it and it makes companies *look* a certain way.

As long as they got a Black face representing their school or their company, then they feel like they're being fair and they're not racist, when at the end of the day everybody knows that they are.

I mean the only way to show that you're not is to pay these Black folks what they're worth... and put them in positions where, you know, they can actually make a liveable wage and stuff so...

H: My identity is not like, something for them to pity and then use it for their own, you know, agenda to say that they're not racist or they care about us.

—

R: Everything to them is just a statistic. 'Cause, if you try to sit down in a room with them and ask them what is the benefit? Say, there are three percent more Black people this year than last year. Ask them, "What is the benefit to you of that", and they're gonna feed you bullshit.

It's about a statistic and it's, "increasing diversity" but what does that mean to you?

H: You're right.

R: Are those more experiences that you can exploit? Are those more experiences you can take advantage of? Are those more experiences you can isolate? Or, are those experiences that you're using to get federal funds? Are those experiences that.. Like, it's just like what? It doesn't make sense.

—

H: Well in Africa, the term came from—

S: Negus.

H: Which was meant for, “King”. But, the colonizers turned it into a derogatory term.

S: Exactly, so if you want to call us that, WE should be calling us, “NE-GUS”, not what they consider, n-i-g-g-a.

S: The more we continue to care about it and the more we get mad about it, the more they’re going to want to do it. Just like with a child. You know, with a child you tell them, “Hey! Don’t do this.” Now they’re going to get curious and want to do what you just told them not to do.

H: Like, I want White people to help, but I think sometimes the best way they can help is to shut up.

H: There’s intentions. Like those who want to help because they genuinely care versus those who just go and hold up a sign to look like they’re not racist and put it on Instagram.

S: Mhm.

S: In today’s society, nobody actually goes out and actually meets people and talks to people. It’s still people out there that are genuine allies. Like, I know co-workers that are all about, you know, the rights of Black people too, but —

H: Yeah.

S: As far as social media, yeah everybody on social media is fake. But, you just gotta get out and meet people.

S: I think anybody– White or Black – or any other race who puts anything out on social media for attention is not genuine.

I don't need your recognition, it's just, you know, you do it from your heart. You don't do it for recognition. You just don't. You don't do that.

H: Right.



Fanta 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Marissa 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Marissa 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Fanta 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Marissa 3

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



Joyah 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



Anisa 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Anisa 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 15in

2023



Anisa 3

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Anisa 4

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Anisa 5

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

17 x 11in

2023

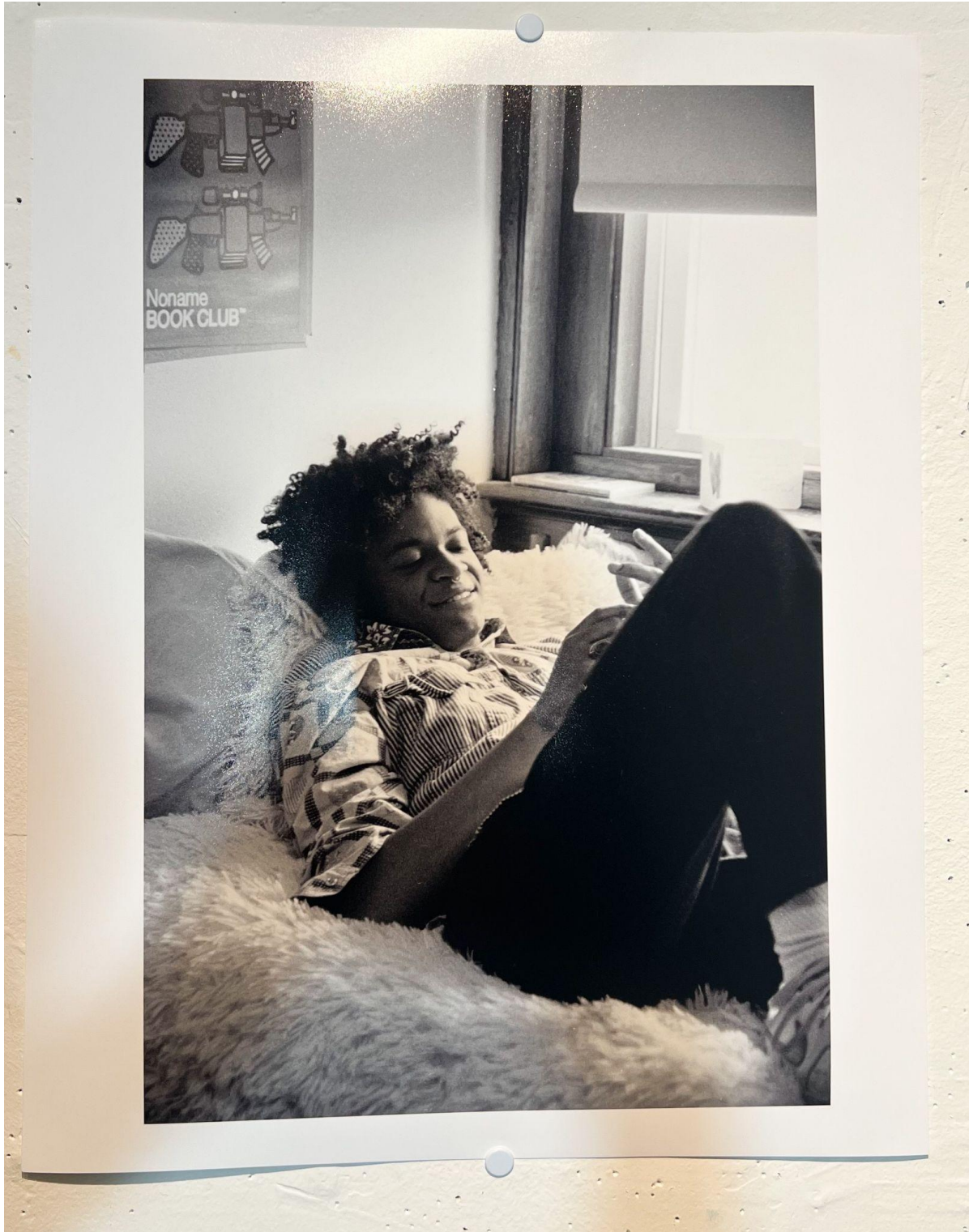


Anisa 6

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Rae 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Rae 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

17 x 11in

2023

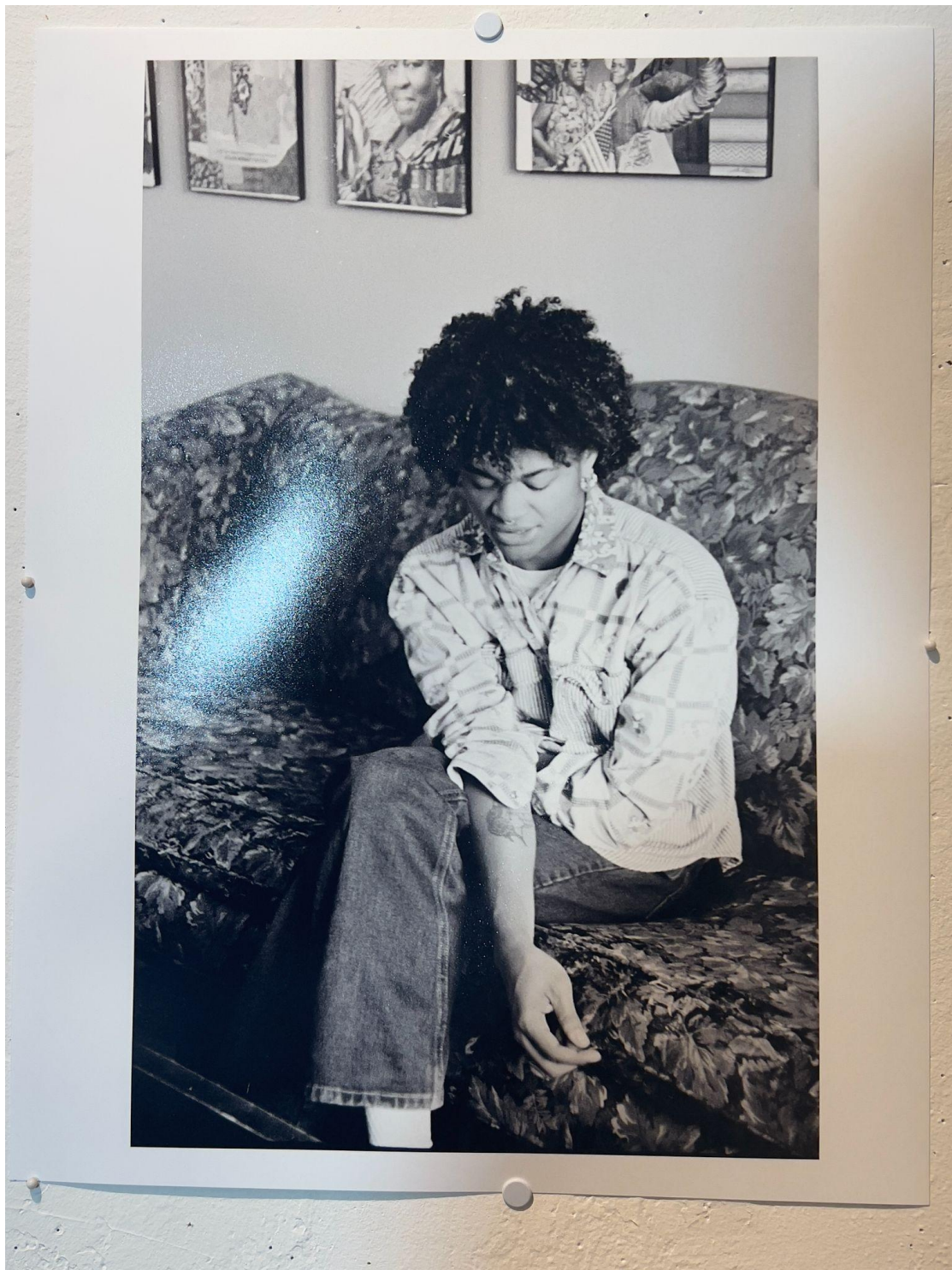


Rae 3

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

17 x 11in

2023



Rae 4

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Diane

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

13 x 16in

2023

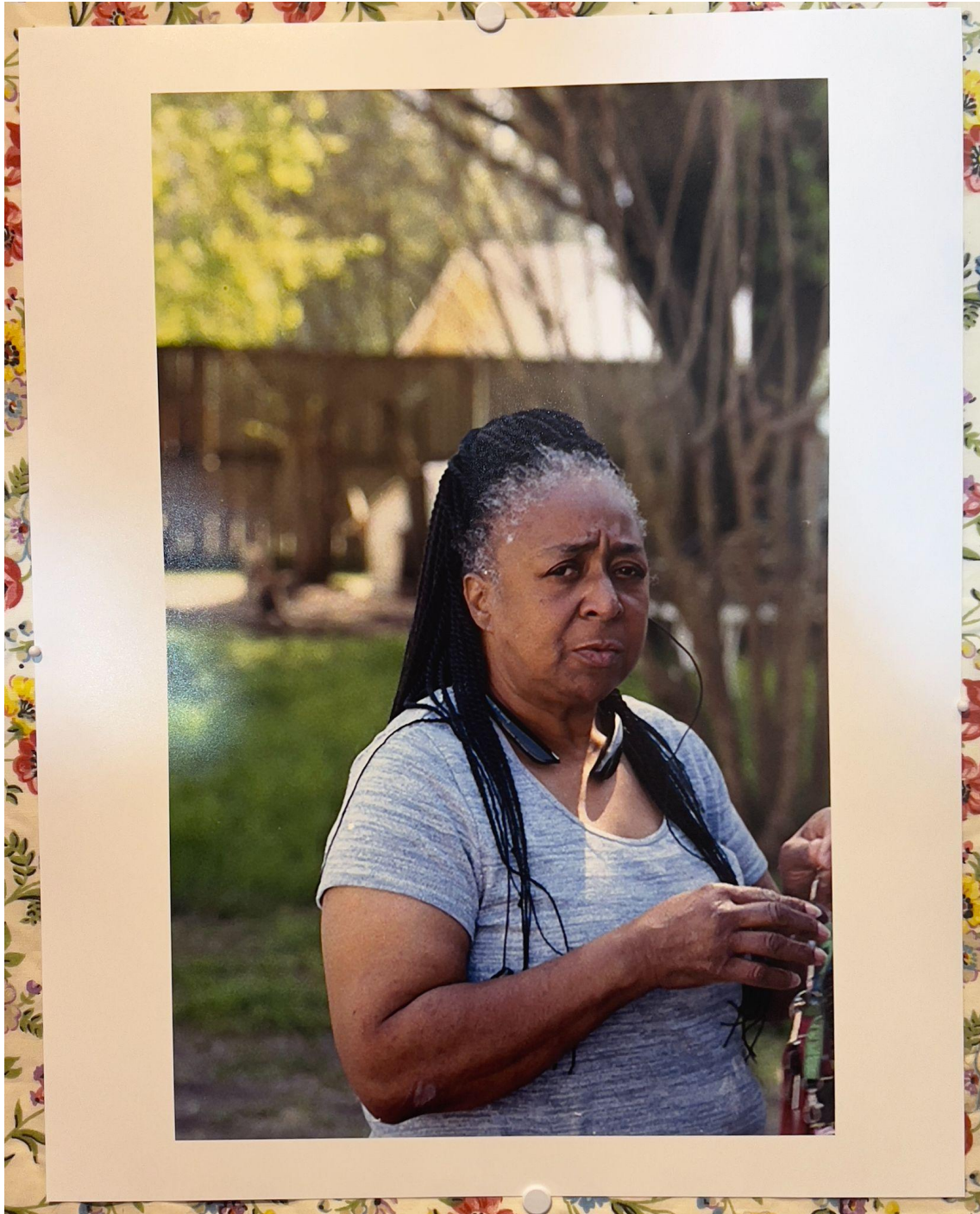


Cheryl 1

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

13 x 16in

2023



Cheryl 2

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

13 x 16in

2023



Vickie 1

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



Vickie 2

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



Vickie 3

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



Rae 5

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Rae 6

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 3

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 4

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 5

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 6

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Joyah 7

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Shalanda 1

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023

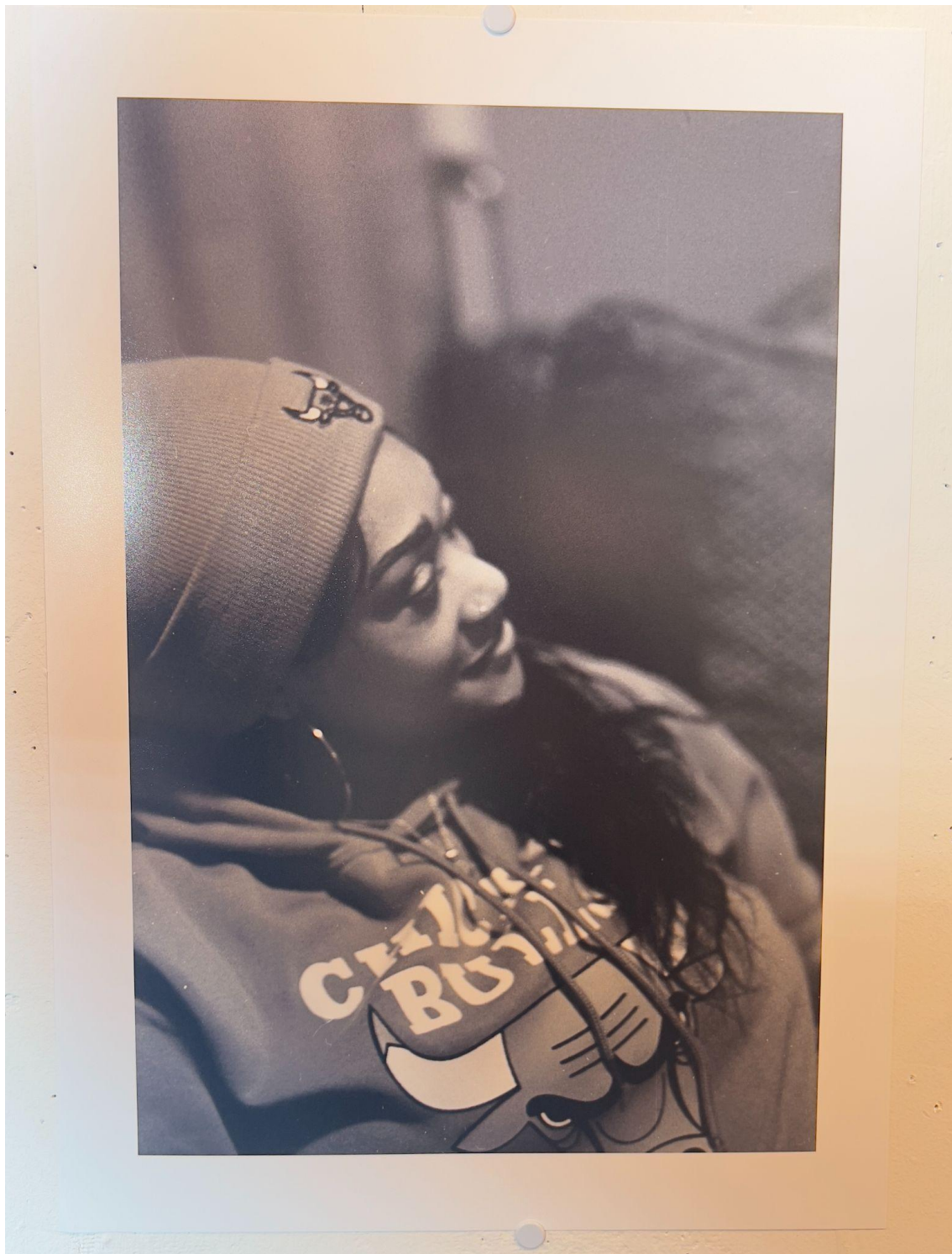


Shalanda 2

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2023



MeMe

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



TT

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Mom 1

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Free 1

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Free 2

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Mom 2

Color 35mm film photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

11 x 17in

2023



Mom 3

Black and White Photograph, printed on premium luster photo paper

8.5 x 11in

2022



Installation View 1

2023



Installation View 2

2023



Installation View 3

2023



Installation View 4

2023

Installation Walkthrough Video:

<https://vimeo.com/827791194>

Audio 1:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JozS20qkPGYjRL4AlqcmHdxgoGkzoR58/view?usp=sharing>

Audio 2:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1reNmpHl_8YDk5dsbnsTqC5WqKG_-ySjw/view?usp=sharing

Audio 3:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XToNN1sbIFYtWdn-m8kGZ0roSstZtzz1/view?usp=sharing>

