

January 14, 2022

Media Contact:

Cookie Washington

Phone: 843-259-8108

Email: cookiesews1960@gmail.com

New Art Exhibit Showcases Black Artistic Interpretations of Land Ownership and Cultural Preservation

Griots of Cotton, Indigo, & Clay features more than 100 pieces of artwork by Black master fiber artists, ceramicists, sweetgrass preservers, and blacksmiths

CHARLESTON, S.C.—Just in time for Black History Month, a new art exhibit will showcase a diverse set of installations exploring the themes of Black agrarianism, ecological stewardship, and material culture.

Organized, facilitated and produced by the Black Belt Justice Center/Acres of Ancestry Initiative and the Return of the Bees Quilt Collective, the exhibit raises awareness of textile and earth-based arts practices as a way to preserve the rich history of art in America.

[“Griots of Cotton, Indigo, & Clay”](#) will premiere at City Gallery at 34 Prioleau Street in Charleston and run from January 17, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, through the end of Black History month. The exhibition is presented by the City of Charleston Office of Cultural Affairs, as part of its annual exhibition program at City Gallery. Additional support has been provided by the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation. For information on attending the exhibition, visit charleston-sc.gov/citygallery.

“I believe that the beauty of Black art lies in its ability—perhaps even its mandate—to marry the personal and political, to worry the festering sores of social circumstance into striking quilt patterns and earthen vessels that are hypnotic in healing and informative,” said Torreah “Cookie” Washington, a textile designer with more than 25 years of experience as an artist and the curator of the exhibit. “Black art highlights both inter- and intra-community dynamics, playing with light and shadow in spaces that may otherwise not be illuminated.”

Of especial importance in the traveling art exhibit is the theme of climate and environmental justice. Several of the pieces will feature narratives around the reclaiming and healing of the earth.

Artist Arianne King Comer is growing sweet grass and indigo on her land to help sustain the sweet grass basket makers who have lost access to sweet grass in many places because of

gentrification. A master indigo artist, Comer was trained in Nigeria and [boasts a portfolio](#) of vivid and engaging artwork.

“In the summer of 1992, living with Nigerian craftsmen who created art honoring ancestry by creating work derived from nature, forever changed my focus as an artist,” said Comer. “In 1994, I moved to South Carolina and immersed myself with the creatives of the LowCountry. I am now living on sacred fertile land on Wadmalaw Island. I have committed to growing indigo, sweetgrass, and other Indigenous vegetation to sustain healing and create art.”

Pieces will feature techniques in appliqué, basket-weaving, collage, indigo, and painting.

“Most of the artists that have works in this exhibit have worked outside the gallery system due to lack of funding or by being ignored by the ‘mainstream gallery system,’” said Washington.

“We intentionally named our exhibition ‘Griots of Cotton, Indigo, & Clay’ because it carries ancestral wisdom about African diasporic peoples’ stewardship of the earth,” said Tracy Lloyd McCurdy, executive director of the Black Belt Justice Center and co-chemist of the Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund. “African diasporic cosmologies and lifeways are rooted in a deep reverence for the earth and our collective responsibility to her. Our ancestors understood this responsibility and passed these spiritual practices, ecocultural traditions, and agrarian knowledge through family lineage and memory. Our exhibition is an embodiment of ancestor recall.

“Through our exhibition we exalt Black farmers and earth-based crafts people as the wayshowers out of climate catastrophe, racial injustice, and hyper-capitalistic plunder. Through the preservation of fiber art and agrarian material culture, we return to our highest spiritual selves as land stewards and cultural knowledge keepers.”

“Art makes visible the pain that buries itself in the cavities of existence, that logic and reason alone cannot access. It forces its audience to contend with truths that may otherwise be buried in the mundane rhythm of everyday life,” Washington said. “I believe Black art is a lifeline that can sustain movements and make sense of the moments that many Americans cannot adequately grasp.”

###

Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund is a multidisciplinary, cooperative ecosystem rooted in Black ecocultural traditions and textile arts to regenerate custodial land ownership, ecological stewardship, and food and fiber economies in the South.

The Black Belt Justice Center is a legal and advocacy nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting African American farmers, landowners and communities in the Black Belt region in efforts to retain and

increase land ownership; to create sustainable, land-based cooperatives and entrepreneurial businesses; and to ensure intergenerational and community wealth.

Supported by the Acres of Ancestry Initiative/Black Agrarian Fund, the Return of the Bees Collective is a supportive and active community whose mission is to raise visibility of and educate the public about the vast spectrum of African American textile art and artists. Return of the Bees Hive members work out of their own homes or small studios. They strive to gain strength, share knowledge, and support each other's projects. They take part at least twice a year in a traditional quilting bee gathering, usually at their group shows.