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Cover Image: Adebunmi Gbadebo. *Untitled 2*, 2023. Black hair, cotton, rice paper, indigo dye and printed photographs, 17 x 22in.

Hairitage

Curated by Favour Ritano
November 18 - December 18, 2023

Adebunmi Gbadebo
David Orrell
Dejeonge Reese
Jade Rodgers

apexart at Pratt - Brooklyn



David Orrell, *The Pencil Test 2*, 2021, Photography, 20 x 24 in.

Hairitage

Black hair is as old as Black people themselves, and it carries much more significance than simply being a physical feature. Since its inception, Black hair has been closely connected to Black identity, culture, and community. It is often seen as a symbolic representation of a person's origin, value, and social status. Additionally, hair has spiritual connotations for many Black people. Throughout history, there have been many examples of African people who have considered hair to be a source of power, a way to connect with a higher power, and a conduit for spiritual interaction. As a result, Black people treat their hair with reverence. Making hair is also a central part of how Black people connect and build community. Black-owned salons are often safe spaces where people can bond, socialize, learn about current events, and find support.

By employing the art of portmanteau to combine "Hair" and "Heritage", the exhibition title *Hairitage* explores the complex relationship between Black hair and the identity of Black people. Through thematic exploration of identity, memory, community, racism, and resistance, the presented works offer a nuanced examination of the politics of Black hair and how deep rooted systems of oppression have shaped the prejudicial treatment of Black people from the slavery era to present-day America. Featuring photography, mixed media, and video installation work, the exhibition brings together the works of Black and African American artists living and working in the United States including Adebunmi

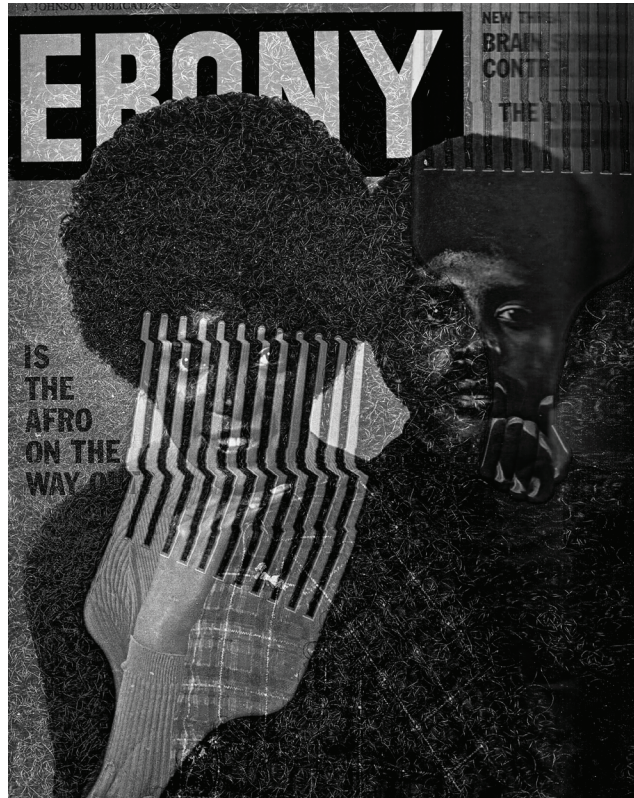


Jade Rodgers, *Visibility*, 2020, Pigment Inkjet Print, 22 x 16 in.

Gbadebo, David Orrell, Jade Rodgers, and Dejeonge Reese.

Historically, Black hair has been used as a tool of oppression and Black people have faced discrimination and prejudice due to this. For example, Black people have been fired from jobs, denied housing, and even suspended from school because of their hair. Policies made to prohibit natural hair styles like afros, braids, bantu, and locs have been a subtle way of removing Black children from classrooms. In 2010 and 2013 respectively, 3 primary schools in Oklahoma, Ohio, and Florida released dress-codes that banned wearing natural hair¹. One of the students had to change schools after being expelled for having dreadlocks. In Milwaukee, a teacher punished a Black first grader by cutting off one of her braids in front of the class and throwing it in the trash. This sort of discrimination is rooted in racism and the history of slavery in America. From the arrival of Black slaves in America being forced to work on plantations, history shows that Black women had to cover their hair with scarfs due to the harshness of the work they had to do. Following this enslavement and displacement, Black people have been faced with dehumanization such as having their head shaved in order to be presentable before the slave masters. To shave their heads is to strip them of their identity. Others who were allowed to work in homes imitated their master's wives by wearing wigs or styling their hair in certain ways.

This essay would be incomplete without acknowledging the first wave of the natural hair movement and other subsequent movements. In the 1960s and 1970s, the "Black is Beautiful" movement ushered in a new era of appreciation for Black culture, including natural



Jade Rodgers, *Is the Afro on the way OUT*, 2020, Pigment Inkjet Print, 16 x 20 in.

hairstyles, hair textures, and physical characteristics found in the African American community². Black celebrities were seen wearing their natural hair on TV and in public events as a sign of affirmation and solidarity. This movement was further strengthened by the Black Arts Movement, a cultural arm of the Black Power Movement that focused on sharing ideologies of Black self-determination, political beliefs, and African American culture.

The enduring commitment to recontextualizing Black culture is rooted in the diverse experiences of Black people and the racial discrimination they have faced, particularly towards their hair and bodies. To deny the existence of discrimination against Black hair is to deny racism against Black people. This exhibition explores the role of Black hair in contemporary Black and African American identity, while also acknowledging its historical significance in American culture.

Adebunmi Gbadebo uses collected Black hair throughout the Diaspora and historically imbued materials to

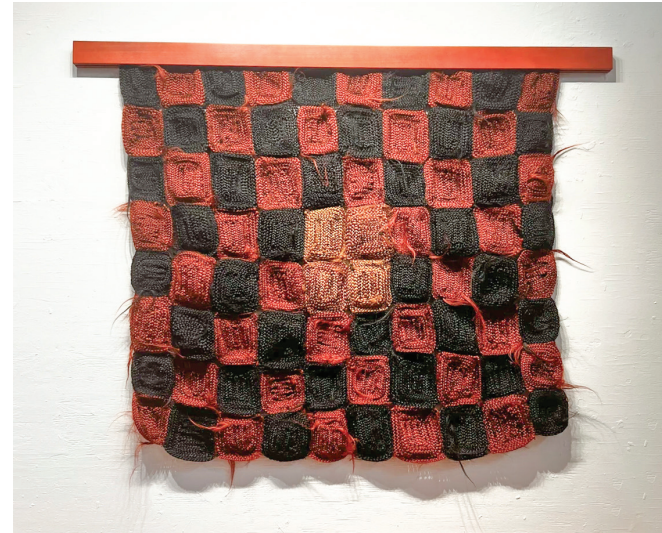
investigate the complexities between land, matter, and memory on various sites of slavery. Adebunmi Gbadebo's *True Blue: 18 Holes* series is a powerful exploration of the connection between Black hair, identity, and history. The series references the rice and indigo plantation where Gbadebo's ancestors were enslaved, suffered, and buried. The True Blue Plantation in Fort Motte, South Carolina, was named for the indigo production that took place there, but it was also a site of horrific violence and exploitation. Slaves forced to labor on the plantation had a very low life expectancy.

David Orrell's *Hairitage* project began as an exploration of his own identity and evolved into an inquiry into the role of Black hair in identity formation. Inspired by J.D. Okhai Ojeikere's photographic exploration of unique hairstyles throughout Africa, Orrell's inquiry led to uncovering current systematic racism against Black people. His series *Taji* and the *Pencil Test* challenge Eurocentric beauty standards and promote Black self-love, showing that Black hair is more than just hair. They draw from cultural references, historical events, motifs, and symbols to examine racism targeted at Black hair in American culture.

The Pencil Test series highlights the Black hair journey and racism targeted at Black hair in American culture. The works explore ways in which racism has historically and contemporarily influenced the way Black hair is perceived and treated. Historically, the pencil test was used as a method of measurement to decide who was considered White and Black



Adebunmi Gbadebo, *Untitled 3*, 2023, Black hair, cotton, rice paper, indigo dye and printed photographs, 17 x 22in.



Dejeonge Reese, *Hair Quilt*, 2023, Synthetic Hair, 40 x 50 in.

or nonwhite. It was part of a series of unofficial tests for the classification of race. After a pencil is pushed through the person's hair, they are asked to shake their head. If the pencil stayed in the hair, that would indicate it must be of kinky black stock and the person is therefore classified as Black. If the pencil slid through, the person could be considered white. *The Taji* series, on the other hand, celebrates Black pride and joy by featuring uniquely braided hairstyles found throughout the African diaspora. Orrell presents Black hair as a tool for empowerment and liberation, challenging Eurocentric beauty standards and promoting Black self-love. He collaborates with African American master hairdressers, models, wardrobe stylists and designers, set directors, and film producers to further exemplify the community effort where Black hair is concerned.

Jade Rodgers presented series *CRWN* explores Black hair as a site of affirmation, care, and refuge from daily anguish while also, at times, potentially being a site of more trauma. The project exists as a visual protest to combat the surge of imagery online of Black death and suffering during the summer of 2020. By highlighting Black hair care practices that have been used for generations. The familiar act of doing one another's hair creates a space of relief that most Black people are not afforded in their daily lives. The shared experiences of using certain products, hairstyles, and the appreciation that historically our hair was not simply for beauty purposes. This practice among others is personified through the contemporary Black experience. In her words "During slavery many Black women would hide food in their hair as a means for

survival. Today we carry on the traditions of braiding and hair care practices that are at the heart of our ancestors' stories of survival." Metaphorically, the collective weaving of the hair depicts how our hair ties us together in many ways.

Dejeonge Reese's *Hair Quilt* is inspired by the history of quilts in African American culture and how they were used to tell stories and send messages along the Underground Railroad. Patterns such as a bear paw on a quilt hung outside a safe house were used to signal to freedom seekers that safe food and water were nearby. Cornrows were plaited in ways that sent messages or acted as maps to escape enslavement.

This quilt is completely hand braided and hand sewn together, and it took over two months to complete. It is a beautiful and powerful tribute to the resilience and creativity of African Americans, and to the ways in which they have used their hair and other cultural traditions to resist oppression and find freedom.

Accompanying this exhibition is a video installation of interviews conducted to highlight the experiences and hair journey of Black students at Pratt Institute. In addition, interviews conducted at Black-owned hair salons further expand on what Black hair means and the role it has played in their community.

Hairitage aims to provide historical references and real life experiences of how Black hair has been misconstrued over the years. Together, the works of these artists and the interviews seek to educate audiences about the nuances of Black hair and how deeply it relates to the identity of Black people. Lastly, it celebrates the effort of generations that fought the oppression against Black hair and the resilience of young people in our contemporary time.

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Open Call Exhibition

1. Janelle Griffith, NBCNews When hair breaks rules: some black children are getting in trouble for natural hairstyles, 2019
2. National Museum of African American History and Culture, Black is Beautiful: The Emergence of Black Culture and Identity in the 60s and 70s