

AUNT CHLOE

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Krista Franklin

“To Make Wholeness and Beauty from
Fragments of Things”

Sharan Strange: Hybridity is obviously a central formal element of your art-making process. Does it especially resonate with our contemporary moment? Is it emblematic of conceptions and expressions of Blackness? Of liberatory possibilities for Black artistic practices?

Krista Franklin: I haven't given much consideration recently about whether the art of collage, or hybridity as you called it, resonates with our contemporary moment, but with the ongoing popularity of collage and mixed media as a medium that many artists are engaging with I would lean toward saying yes, obviously. Why this is a popular choice in the contemporary art world right now I really couldn't say.

What I frequently tell people is I learned the art of collage from the women in my life, in particular my maternal grandmother, who sewed and quilted and found a variety of ways to make wholeness and beauty from fragments of things, remnants of things. If that is emblematic of Black artistic practice or expressions of Blackness, then yes. Do I believe that Black people have long had to create using whatever was at their fingertips, at their disposal? Absolutely. I do think Black people are masters at combining and piecing things together out of necessity and sometimes for art's sake.

SS: What are some of the predominant processes involved in making your artwork? You often make handmade paper, for example. Would you talk a little about the rigors and pleasures of the materials and techniques you use?

KF: Paper is at the heart of my entire practice, whether visual or written. I've been in a love affair with paper since I was a child, and if my work has any thesis at all it's the constant investigation of paper as a powerful alchemical substrate. All of my creative processes revolve around it, what is and can be printed on it, how it can be deconstructed and reconstructed, how it can be broken down and reformed, how I can bend it to my visions.

SS: You have an exquisite limited-edition artist book, *Under the Knife*. What do you like about handmade books and paper? In putting the book together did you envision it like curating your own exhibition? Or, putting together a poetry collection? Are those approaches similar for you? Will you make more hand-crafted books?

KF: I'm interested in the book as a form and the book as object. My engagement with bookmaking as a part of my practice revolves primarily around how can I use the book as object to convey a concept or idea that I want to develop? *Under the Knife* was a project that I created in collaboration with a number of designers, bookmakers, and a letterpress printer. When I co-created this work with this incredible team of artists some of my concerns were how could I construct a book that would essentially be a stand-in for my body. It is a project that deals with the institutional racism in the medical profession, the surreal nature of undergoing multiple surgical procedures over the span of my teen years until my late forties, and the complicated story of my maternal line, among other things.

The project went through multiple phases – from writing it to intervening on the writing with a number of materials to the design of the overall structure to its construction – over the course of a year. I didn't envision it like curating an exhibition; I envisioned it like I was creating a work of art about my life and my family's lives. There were elements in the early phases that were similar to organizing a poetry collection but it was more complicated than that because it had a number of visual considerations and challenges that one does not have to concern themselves with when putting together a traditional poetry manuscript. I will probably make other artist books in my career if I have the right collaborators to work with, and if I get an idea that would be most suited to the book as a form or formal consideration.

SS: I read an interview where a writer said: "I think of myself as a visual artist who happens to use words. I approach poems as stories much like paintings and films." Does this resonate with you? How would you characterize the relationship between your visual art and written art? How much are they interrelated—does your visual art stimulate or catalyze the poems and vice versa? (e.g., I'm also curious about how poems are wedded to the collages and other visual works in *Too Much Midnight*.)

KF: There is no relationship between my visual art and my written work if I'm being 100% honest. They are two separate things, two different practices that I work in. *Under the Knife* was the culmination of deploying both of those practices in the same artistic space. However, there is no connection in *Too Much Midnight* between the visual work and the poems besides the fact they are next to each other in the book. If there are connections I leave that to the imagination of the reader/viewer, but for me there is no authentic connection in that collection between the art and the poems. They're just sharing space in the same object. They are not wedded in any way.

I do, however, both in my writing and my visual practice, work in image. The image is a deep consideration for me. I strive to make powerful images that resonate and stay with the viewer/reader long after they've walked away from it.

SS: In *Too Much Midnight*, your poems are quite intriguing and dexterous...they're satisfyingly complex tapestries of figurative language, rhythms, themes, allusions. For example, "Manifesto, or Ars Poetica #2" along with "Preface to a Twenty-Volume Homicide Note" (for Amiri Baraka),

and “Call” (which brings to mind both Baraka and Sonia Sanchez) seem to me an almost definitive statement about your work in the context of Black art and the larger society. Lineage, memory, and the power of culture are especially potent themes. Why are they important to you? What lineages do you identify with?

KF: Thank you for the compliment on the poems in *Too Much Midnight*. “Manifesto...” is most certainly a definitive statement about my work. It was, in fact, an assignment I was given in graduate school to write a manifesto that also served as an artist statement about my work. The piece itself is a collage, or what I refer to as “a bastardized Cento”, that is constructed largely from lines or references to other people’s writing and work as well as older poems of my own.

I’m preoccupied with lineage, memory and cultural power for a number of reasons. The foremost reason being that I’m a Cancerian and we are obsessed with the past. That’s the most basic reason. The past is more interesting to me than the present and even the future. It’s just the way my mind and imagination work. I’m a believer in the idea that if you can’t grapple with and understand the past then you can’t create a viable and productive future. You’re literally flying blind and thinking you’re innovating when actually you’re just repeating people who did it better (and sometimes worse) decades, sometimes centuries ago. Familiarity with the past and with cultural and collective memory are exceptionally powerful to me, and my artistic lineages are diverse. As far as the ones I identify with I say, just read “Manifesto...” You’ll get a pretty solid idea from that poem.

SS: I love the poem for your mother, “Infinity: A Love Poem.” It’s included in a section of *TMM* that you’ve dedicated to “Extrapolating Motherhood.” Why was this theme important to you? What’s the conversation you’re trying to have about mothering? (This is or has been a prominent theme in collections by some of your contemporaries—Raina León, Maya Marshall, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, Natasha Marin—as well as older poets Lucille Clifton and Rita Dove, for example.) Is there something particular, for you, that needs to be told about Black women as mothers? Or the relationship of Black children to their mothers?

KF: Motherhood and mothering has been a consistent theme in my work for a large part of my career. I’m pretty sure I exhausted everything I needed to say about it with *Under the Knife* and can hopefully move on to other themes now. In actuality, the novels of Toni Morrison planted the seed of motherhood as a theme worth exploring in my own writing. I consider *Beloved* one of the most incredible, honest, and brutal ghost stories about the hazards of being a mother when you are a Black woman. The fact that my cousins and I are the first generation to be reared by our biological mothers after a two generation rupture also made it that much more appealing as a topic of investigation for me. And that’s all it is: an investigation, a critical thinking around the angles of what it means to mother another human being and the intricacies and pitfalls of that incredible endeavor.

There are multiple things that need to be said about mothering and motherhood and I've long believed there's an unspoken agreement, a cloak of silence, around the topic and its many permutations. If anything I was long interested in pulling the cloak off of that romanticized idea that's shoved down women's throats around it. It's a complicated choice and one that women should be thoroughly informed about before diving in. There's just too much at stake.

SS: I'd like to ask about the spiritual dimensions of your creative practice. In a recent interview with Avery R. Young and Aricka Foreman in *The Yale Review*, you all discussed "hauntology." Would you say a little bit about that here? How are you guided by the presence of Spirit, or spirits? Is there a spiritual aim to your work overall?

KF: The conversation in *The Yale Review* was a part of a folio curated by the poet/writer and brilliant thinker, Phillip B. Williams. He wanted to explore some of the thinking and ideologies around the term "hauntology." Avery, Aricka and I contributed to the folio through a conversation between the three of us about how the dead influence our work and the ways in which we engage Spirit(s) in our individual artistic practices. I think the best thing would be to read the transcript of that conversation in Phillip's folio for an understanding as I think the conversation does a fine job of that. (*Aunt Chloe: Read the conversation [here](#).*)

Suffice it to say that the spiritual and metaphysical worlds are at the heart of nearly everything I do. It transcends my artistic practice. There's a spiritual aim to how I move through the world. The art and writing are just byproducts of that.

SS: You'll have a new book release in November 2022. (I've already pre-ordered my copies!) What's in store for readers in *Solo(s)*?

KF: Yes, thank you for asking about it, and for pre-ordering your copies. *Solo(s)* is the accompanying publication to my exhibition debuting at DePaul Art Museum in Chicago of the same name, *Solo(s)*, which opened on September 8, 2022. I wouldn't refer to the publication as a catalog for the exhibition although there are a few works featured in the publication that will appear in the exhibition. There's some writings from me in there that were previously published or presented in other spaces, and it also includes a beautiful essay written by the curator, Ionit Behar, as well as visual works that many people haven't seen before. The publication is limited edition (only 500 copies). Once it's gone, it's gone. (*Aunt Chloe: Order Solo(s) [here](#).*)

SS: Thank you, Krista.

Krista Franklin is a writer, performer, and visual artist, the author of *Too Much Midnight* (Haymarket Books, 2020), the artist book *Under the Knife* (Candor Arts, 2018), and the chapbook *Study of Love & Black Body* (Willow Books, 2012). She is a recipient of the Helen and Tim Meier Foundation for the Arts Achievement Award and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant. Her visual art has been exhibited at DePaul Art Museum, Poetry

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Foundation, Konsthall C, Rootwork Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Photography, Studio Museum in Harlem, Chicago Cultural Center, National Museum of Mexican Art, and on television. She is published in *Poetry*, *Black Camera*, *The Offing*, *Vinyl*, and a number of anthologies and artist books.