

## The inaugural Southeast Queens Biennial: A Locus of Moving Points

*We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.*

-bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

The inaugural Southeast Queens Biennial: *A Locus of Moving Points* features the work of eighteen visual, performing, and literary artists across two community venues, the York College Fine Arts Gallery and the Central Library of Queens Library. *Locus*, from the Latin for “location” or “place,” has a number of definitions: in geometry, it refers to “the set of all points satisfying some condition,” but it can also denote “a center of activity, attention, or concentration.” The Biennial’s title nods to this area’s reputation as a literal gateway for travel—by land and air—while reinforcing its standing as a vibrant, influential arena for cultural production and ideological exchange. All of the artists exhibiting are Southeast Queens residents, a number of them were born and raised here, and many have strong ties to other parts of New York and the world that are reflected in the works on view.

The exhibition’s organization takes inspiration from the writings of intersectional feminist activist and author bell hooks. In her 1989 book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks declared the margin(s) a place of power and radical openness. *A Locus of Moving Points* seeks to activate what hooks described as the transformative potential of shifting one’s focus to consider the margin and center not as disparate parts, but as parts that make up a whole body, thereby reorienting Southeast Queens within the city’s cultural milieu. Though often underserved by city and state funding, the residents of this community and the esteemed cultural institutions they have built, including the former Store Front Museum, Black Spectrum Theater, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Afrikan Poetry Theater and others, have been major contributors to New York City’s preeminence as a global destination for the arts.

### Site 1: York College Fine Arts Gallery

The unique pulse of Southeast Queens has always stemmed from cross-cultural exchange within and between its various immigrant communities. However, economic uncertainty and scarcity of arts resources and funding can pose challenges for artists living and working here. Okechukwu Ofiaeli addresses this uncertainty in his project *Waste to Wealth*, which provides a business model and system for transforming discarded, salvaged or overlooked materials into cash crops and commodity goods. Similarly, Odathrowback, a contractor, carpenter, and artist, salvages industrial materials from construction sites to produce mixed-media wall murals that read like modernist designs encoded with personal histories. For the Biennial, Odathrowback will create a community portrait made from 333 wooden bricks covered in fabric donated by York College students, faculty and staff, as well as the community-at-large. This commissioned work will enter into York College’s public art collection and remain on view with a plaque naming all of the contributors.

One goal of the Biennial is to foster intergenerational exchange between artists to illustrate how urgent political discourse from previous decades is still relevant. Janet Henry’s *Words of Love* (1983), first shown in the 1980’s at Linda Goode Bryant’s Just Above Midtown gallery, delivers an uncensored account of the artist’s experiences with sexual objectification. Henry’s call to make visible entrenched forms of sexual harassment and violence in the

workplace, on the street, and at home, mirrors the recent rise to prominence of Tarana Burke's #MeToo social media activist movement. Damali Abrams the Glitter Priestess extends the conversation with her video *Baby It Couldn't Have Been You That I Feared* (2010). In this work, Abrams intersperses a montage of segments from mainstream media and viral videos denigrating and blaming black women for their supposed unmarrigability with a performance of a song recounting an all-too familiar tale of abuse at the hands of a mate. In doing so, Abrams deconstructs fantastical tropes imposed on black womanhood. Shervone Neckles advances the discussion from a wholly different approach with her mixed media tapestries *Germinate* (2014-16), *Touched* (2014-16), and *Bush Woman* (2014) from her series *Give & Take: Terciopelo*. These works are at once ethnographic, rooted in the African and Indigenous healing traditions found in the Caribbean and Latin America, and mythical, renderings of a creation story that places the beauty, power, and resilience of Black women at center stage.

Several artists bring light to histories that have been obscured or forgotten. Sana Musasama's ceramic sculptures *Stop* (1994) and *Sugar vs. Sap* (1992) resurrect the Maple Sugar Movement, a little-remembered 18th century anti-slavery campaign to eradicate American consumption of sugar cultivated by enslaved persons. Musasama describes the trees as "silent witnesses" who do not speak, but have observed history unfold over the last several hundreds of years. Elizabeth Velazquez's site-specific installation and performance *Innumerable Voids* (2018), encourages viewers to consider the lost legacies of the relatively unknown pre-contact and early settler histories of Jamaica. Velazquez's behemoth black fabric installations are situated on the York College campus, across from St. Monica's, Methodist and Prospect Cemeteries. The visual contrast between these cemeteries is striking: while Methodist Cemetery, founded in the 19th century, is overgrown and hidden behind a locked gate, Prospect Cemetery is preserved thanks to a recent clean up effort as part of a commitment to historic preservation. Natali S. Bravo-Barbee's installation *c. 1986* (2016) mines the lost memories of her family archive, asking questions of her Argentinian heritage and Catholic upbringing by pairing cyanotype depictions of children's lace collars with a mannequin of a young girl wearing her childhood garments. A dramatic light cast on the mannequin produces a shadow symbolic of the immeasurable gains and losses faced when families are forced to re-make their homes in new countries.

## **Site 2: The Central Library of Queens Library**

The Central Library of Queens Library hosts the second part of the Southeast Queens Biennial with *Notations in Passing*. This group exhibition kicks off the library's Mobile Museum Initiative with an exploration of photography, painting, drawing and collage that values the continuity of the lived experiences of the exhibiting artists.

Immigrants, refugees, and everyday people striving to empower themselves inform the work of several artists. Photographs by Salimah Ali, Renee Harper, Corona Johnson and Lisa Wade, who have each lived and worked in Southeast Queens for over forty years, focus on people, family, and neighbors in and around Jamaica. Ignoring a culture that often renders the viewpoints of Black women and the lives of Black people - both interior and exterior - as unworthy, each of these artists have developed their practice with the intent of creating records of the world as they know it.

Other artists investigate the interconnectedness of the body to the global economy, matters of diplomacy, and the natural world. In her silkscreens and drawings, Rejin Leys places Haiti's refugee crisis of the 1990's in conversation with the country's current post-earthquake displacement crisis, tying the events together through an iconography of biomorphic forms developed over thirty years. Damali Abrams the Glitter Priestess makes mixed media depictions of black and brown mermaids adorned like kings and queens to work through inherited traumas of enslavement, and healing. Inspired by her Guyanese heritage and the divine feminine, the figures hope for an inclusive future. Painter Ify Chiejina illustrates the black experience in *Dying to Dream*, a haunting series created in the months following the shooting and trial of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Chiejina's works depict portraits of black men and women surrounded by a cacophony of tidal water, verdant land, plants, and animals. These scenes are simultaneously life-affirming and threatening, shedding emotional light on the threads of colonial enslavement and racial discrimination that exist today under disguised forms.

At a time when the number of displaced people around the world is at a record high, *A Locus of Moving Points* reorients the concept of a "local" exhibition to focus on difference within a shared geographic region. The artists' quests for coming to terms with their unique individual pasts, presents and futures, serve as starting points for conversations about our country's political divisions, and our profound collective resistance to getting to know our neighbors. This exhibition opens the door for visitors to recognize their own heritages, and to discuss their hopes and dreams for the role that cultural production might play in our future effort to embrace our many peripheries as part of the center.