

Naomi Harrison-Clay and Ruby Harrison-Clay.

The Perfect Unfolding.

TKS, 2021.

5 x 5 in. archival giclee print of a mixed media artwork on paper, printed by Uncommonbindery. Housed in a yellow glassine envelope with pink embossed colophon sticker. The occasion of the collaboration is Steve Clay's 70th birthday, and the original artwork is included in his festschrift.

COLLABORATION & PROCESS

N: The few times we have collaborated artistically together, it's come very naturally. We sit down together and create, little discussion is needed beforehand. Gestures between us are fluid in part because we are thread from the same stuff. Actually, the main other time I remember collaborating together was on a larger piece for our mom's [Julie Harrison] birthday. We sat on the floor of Ruby's room in San Francisco with markers, pens, pencils, crayons, colored pencils, and cray-pas and worked on the page without any discussion about what we were doing. Our mom received it and classically said it resembled a vagina; which, it classically did.

Because we are currently living on opposite ends of the country, our process for *The Perfect Unfolding* occurred in 3 steps: We met over Zoom and discussed ideas and thoughts, conjuring the form and shape for our piece, leaving the content open-ended. Next, we worked separately on our own pieces resulting from that conversation and mailed them to each other. Then, Ruby visited the family in New York and we sat down together with a host of materials and both of our pieces, cutting, gluing, and drawing until we both felt it was done.

R: The only way I know how to collaborate is intuitively and improvisationally, mutually leaning over a piece and adding gestures and textures which build upon each other naturally. Because we were physically in different states at the time of beginning this project, the process included some early logistical conversations about how to physically assemble a piece together. We started with individual sketches and ideas, which we patched together in person during a mutual visit home. In orienting towards the idea of the project as an homage to our father [Steve Clay], on the occasion of his 70th birthday, the central themes came up serendipitously and informed the assemblage of the card—specifically the “perfect unfolding” concept coinciding with the folding of the piece, which mirrored a larger modality of living taught to us by our father. This acceptance ultimately allowed the piece to flow out of us uninterrupted and unjudged.

CONCEPTS OF FAMILY

N: The original piece was made as a 70th birthday gift to our dad, so feelings about family and blood connection are super relevant to this piece and were present throughout the whole process of conceptualizing and creating the work.

Some of the imagery in the piece was pulled from ancestry.com, where I spent a moment attempting to learn more about our lineage, studying the faces in black and white photos of unmet ancestors, names and dates that contrive the stories that bred our existences into being.

Because of our [Ruby and Naomi's] shared upbringing and social contexts, I think we naturally share a lot of aesthetic and conceptual values; and our relationship allows for a place of total non-judgement that can only emerge from connections that are built on deep trust, empathy, and shared experience.

Being related, we are able to enter the creation space from similar vantage points, shared vocabularies and sensibilities and sensitivities.

Inevitably, sitting down and creating together is a process that resembles and draws upon the canon of all of our lifelong interactions—pretending the couch was our sailboat as kids; naming one thing we learned each day at the dinner table; tromping through the woods wearing orange vests; slamming the door in each other's faces. . . I guess what I'm saying is that it's hard for me to separate the product of a collaboration from the relationship itself. What we create together is an artifact of our shared lives.

R: In my experience, collaboration is a form of intimacy. It takes confidence and trust to cultivate a creative space together—in fact it takes that much to do it alone! In my ongoing process of creating a relationship of honesty within myself, it is only in a handful of my closest relationships that I have found the ground to open up artistically.

Growing up, intimacy was structurally embedded in the ways our family shared space—from the lack of fully private rooms which meant a lot of sensory overlap between spaces, to the fact that throughout childhood and to this day Naomi and I share a bed while visiting our parents house in upstate New York. This shared experience, the knowingness of each other for our entire lives, and the fact of being birthed from the same body, informs the relationship that we have.

To me, this context inherently informed both the process and content of the piece.

STRUCTURE

N: Growing up, our dad introduced us to the idea of “the perfect unfolding,” and it was a phrase that was often used amongst our family. Whenever something went wrong, we would announce that it was a perfect unfolding, and wait for the perfection to reveal itself; which it always did, every time.

The structure of this piece was intended to invite viewers to fold and unfold in new ways to create different images and stories. I hope folks will allow for the piece to guide them in interacting with it; turn it around, upside down, inside out, crumple it, prop it up, let it be a sculpture, read it like a book, play it like a score.

R: Each of the folds [comprises a] different piece that is created based on how the piece is folded. It is not meant to be completely unfolded and looked at. It is many pieces contained in one.

I colored the paper using natural dyes made of turmeric, eucalyptus acorns, and black beans.

BROADER THEMES

N: I think our mom instilled in us a real sense that there is no such thing as “bad art”, that all creation has inherent value. This idea is very present in all of my work, whether it’s vocally improvising alone in the car, collaging with my sibling, designing a mobile home, writing in my journal, cutting up underwear to make a doll, or recording a freak folk album. I try not to distinguish too much between life and art.

My work has always valued process over product and relied heavily on intuition, chance, impulse, and play.

Today, I heard Bayo Akomolafe say: “God is the drama, God is the confusion, God is the things we don’t know how to under-

stand or articulate”. For me, that is what art is too.

Art is a language for what is inarticulable; art is a transcription and translation of what we do not already know, or what our bodies keep secret from our minds; art is a vehicle for moving and transmuting energy.

I am drawn to strong emotion, and I am drawn to ugly things.

R: Themes I am drawn to in my art-making: my body, other amorphous and fluid forms, the gendered framework around existing in a body, surreal spaces and landscapes, feelings-based abstraction, ancestry and spirit.

BIOGRAPHICAL

N: Naomi was born into a pool of early blood; itching to get out of the claustrophobic womb. In the world, they slept for months, passed from hand to hand.

23 and a half years later, Naomi is prey to selfhood, being and becoming articulable things: gay, white, nomadic, inhabiting a gendered avatar, city-bred, bread-eating, soft-spoken, noise musician, grant writer, thought writer, faith-haver, disciple of Sound and Love, student of Sensation.

Naomi is writing this from all sorts of positionalities: one of which is a cheap condo balcony overlooking the foggy beach of an off season resort town in South Carolina.

Another of which is a descendant of Norwegians, Beverly Clay, American values, slave-owners, musicians and artists, immigrants, a brief lesbian separatist, alcoholics and untraceable things.

R:

