

Work of Merit - Paper.

ON ANCESTRAL FABRIC & THE POETICS OF LIFE

Nisha Merit aka *Work of Merit* is an independent curator based between Johannesburg and Berlin.



A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

NISHA MERIT & SAMARA HUGGINS

We are sitting outside in the garden in Johannesburg where Samara Huggins, a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, has joined for a residency at Gallery MOMO. Our conversation is focused, unpacking the young artists' practice. There is a piercing gentleness that surrounds Samara. An attentiveness to herself, her work and I guess probably everything in her proximity. Something that at first feels more befitting to a seasoned matriarch, because she has seen it all, experienced an unimaginable array of everything, carries the burden of good and bad memories of a lifetime and more.

Meanwhile Samara is in her twenties. It all starts to make sense, learning of her deep connection and upbringing amongst bearers, nurturers and ultimately the women who mould us over and over again while we navigate this world. Although Samara seems to firmly rest in her matrimony, her art practice hovers between intimate investigations and public interactions negotiating the personal aspects and the public consumption of such. Her works have the potential for a different type of access and a different type of usage with a high chance of not ever knowing the whole story. The artistic studio process often happens in isolated moments of working, in Samar's case she even (with so much she does) goes a bit deeper - engaging an integral process that later will not be visible other than through the traces of stitching together, composing and inscribing meaning to the material - paper, fabric, hair amongst others. Like when she turns her poetry into a system of codes and colours like a hidden rhythm that can be unlocked - if one knows. A rhythm that is performed and often embroidered communal, at home, with family. Hands moving, physical motions that the garment will ultimately carry, in between layers, through patterns and the materiality of shared experiences.

Nisha Merit

You describe yourself as "a poet, performer, artist and alchemist who explores how text interacts and reacts with the body. I embed language into hidden or undisclosed parts of handmade quilts, tapestries, and garments. Alongside women in my family, I weave, knit, embroider, dye, and stitch stories of ancestry, ecology, grief and healing." Could you please lead me through how these different aspects intertwine and unfold in your work?

Samara Huggins

I come from a family of women. Growing up it was my mom, my older sister and I and we spent time with aunts and my maternal grandmother. A lot of the stories that I have collected are from just sitting among those women and listening to their histories and experiences. And as I've grown up, I've learned how to braid my own life into those lessons and stories. That relates directly to my practice where I informally work with my mother. I'll be making a project and then hand it to her and say, "What do you think you want to add here?" or, "Can you stitch this part right here?" And she'll do it because for her, it also brings back memories of her childhood.

It's most important for me to imagine how the work speaks to, engages with, and impacts the people around me. My mom, when she does embroidery on a quilt, it reminds her of when she was about 15 years old. That's when she stopped embroidering just due to a traumatic experience. So she's finding healing through stitching and making. And that's really important for me to know and to witness. Recently, I've been making quilts for people whose loved ones have passed - I use their



garments and accessories, neckties, etc. and make these handmade quilts. So that the survivors can feel comforted by a comforter. That touches on the idea of how the body is involved in the work too. How can this fabric-object hold someone who needs it? Or how can it convey a story for generations to pass on?

In terms of ecology, I use a lot of plant-based materials. So the dyes that I use are all from plants and spices as well. I use a lot of Caribbean and Indian spices because that's my heritage. I also write a lot about elements of ecology, specifically clouds and rocks. Geology. I'm interested in the smell of rain when it hits the earth. I learned a new word called *petrichor*, the smell of rain. All these elements come together in my work - that's the alchemy part.

NM

Something I find specifically interesting in your work is the aspect of repetition, reiteration or reprise from a hand continuously stitching, a poem recited into the material or the story that gets conveyed again and again over generations. It feels highly intimate and yet it is always a sort of sharing or passing on. So the performance of the reiteration becomes an interesting site in itself, which when the work is completed, you might not even see in all of its parts.

Bringing it back to the body as an integral part of your work, it feels as if the performativity and the eligibility later on serves as a moment of assurance, a moment of being-here-now and making sure that something which is so strong and at the same time so fragile will live on. Does that interpretation resonate within the process of your practice?

SH

That interpretation is pretty spot on. When I think of my work, a word which comes to mind is "enfleshment". This idea of the body leaving marks, leaving traces but also being intrinsic to the objects themselves,

the process itself, the performance as well. I made a jacket maybe three years ago, made of three layers - the outer fabric, the lining and the interlining which is between those two. I wrote on the interlining in ink and I just wrote about the environment I was living in, what the walls looked like, what the air smelled like, all of the sounds... . Then I stitched the jacket together and although it hasn't been worn yet, I see with that piece it being worn and sweat into, to the point that the words "wear away". They are there, they were there, maybe the ink even bleeds onto the back of the person wearing it but you don't know exactly what it says anymore. Like a time capsule, an archive. It's a kind of translation of a material, a materiality that is also allowed to change.

NM

A beautiful meeting point between intricacy of the material and the body. The system of language and the materiality of different fabrics are prevalent in your art making. Can you explain what language means to you in terms of it being a tool to navigate and to ground?

SH

I've used language as a system in various ways in my projects. One of the most consistent ways is coding. I'll write something, a poem, notes, an essay and I'll make a legend, a key of common themes. I'll circle every time I mention something about the physical body, hands, feet, movement. Next, I'll underline any time I speak about change. There can be change in the weather, change in tone of voice and so on. I'll then use this key to create a textile. So the moments that I circle, maybe I'll ascribe those to a particular texture or fabric. The underlined sections could be a different texture or a different colour. Sometimes I work quite literally where I'll have the text in front of me and I'll see all of these lines, circles, dashes, marks, boxes and that will be my pattern. I'll just put that onto a loom or paint it, stitch it. Other times it's a little bit less literal.



One of my favourite ways of incorporating this system, these codes, is by having them completely hidden. Maybe on the inside of a pocket where no one can see it. Maybe you can feel it if you put your hand around but you have to know that in order to find it. In that way the words become intimate, the symbols have to be felt.

I made a jacket where I coded part of a poem onto the cuff. At first glance it looks like a pattern of beautiful colours and shapes but knowing the poem, I could read it. Sitting in the New York subway everyone has a book and then here I am with the cuff and my poetry. That feels really special to me.

I've had a lot of questions about who my work is for, who these codes are for. And I've struggled to find an answer because I find so much pleasure just knowing it. People might connect more deeply with the work and find their own sense of intimacy with it if they have access to the key but I still struggle with sharing it and I don't know why.

NM

Your works seem to me like a wealth of stories, memories and experiences all collected from different times and moments fabricated into an object. Could you please unpack one of your artworks for me. What's the works' story?

SH

I made a body of work that focuses on grief and cancer. A lot of the women in my family have survived or suffered from breast cancer. I myself had to have surgery because I had a lump in my breast when I was about 17. So that informs a lot of my work, sickness, the body and how that extends through generations. I made a series of garments and objects such as house slippers and rugs using my late grandmother's clothes. They were clothes that we salvaged from her home a few months after her death from breast cancer. At the same time I was writing about her life and her experience with cancer and how it impacted my

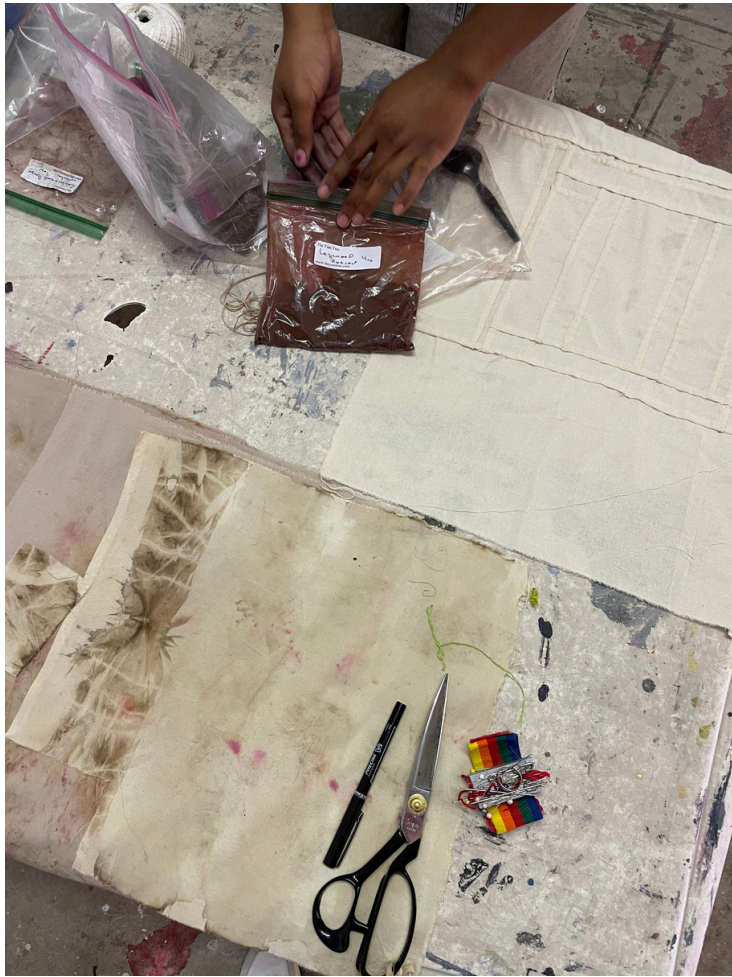
life. That collection focuses on temporality and mortality, healing. Two of my most memorable pieces are the pair of slippers and the rug that I made. On the bottom soles of the slippers, near the heel, I embroidered parts of a poem that I wrote talking about hair and how it is a container, a keeper of secrets, thoughts in your mind, anything really. But also thinking about hair loss due to chemo and where do those secrets go when your hair is gone?

My grandmother was really fascinated with my and my sister's hair as hers was falling off. So I walked on those slippers in various spaces for about a year and I wrote about that experience. So they've collected a lot of dust and dirt and the words have started to melt away. That's more of a time-based performance project that's very involved with the body with the title 'Outgrow your poem like an old t-shirt and use it to wipe your floors'.

The rug is sort of a new project. I want to make iterations of that using my own hair. I made the rug when I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago so I had to show it to advisors and teachers and there was a lot of controversy around it. Because it reminded them of World War II artefacts and they were saying, "How can you put your crown on the ground?"

That was a bit jarring for me because I hadn't thought about it in that way. When I make my work and you saw me earlier, I'm on the ground. I sit down, I lay down, ... so I wanted to make something that is close to me using parts of me so that I can just run my fingers through my hair while I'm sitting there.

So it was really interesting to hear that response to the work and it made me think about how once the work is out there, anyone can interpret anything from their own perspectives, their own lived experiences. For a moment that terrified me and maybe that's why I hold codes close to my chest because those are things that I don't want misconstrued. But I feel at peace with welcoming engagement and different conversations and becoming part of those conversations.



NM

The stories that you weave into your work are all very personal and it feels that making a rug out of your own hair is next step personal. How do you navigate having your art to a certain extent in the public sphere, judged, maybe bought and owned by someone else. Or how do you balance between yourself as a human being with a complex set of characters and emotions versus the lets say a bit more defined artist, showing work or selling works to collectors, institutions, etc.?

SH

I'm realizing now that the things that I have made for other people, that people have bought, don't have pieces of my physical body or those kinds of traces. There are a number of commissions that actually have traces of the patron. Like I mentioned before, the quilts made from people's loved ones who've passed on, those are their traces, their memories, their fabrics, their scents, their sweat. Even when I make things for my family members, they'll have traces of themselves. My mom asked me to make her a quilt, just a comforter. We were thinking about the embroidery for it, and I suggested that she write her own words and embroider them into the middle layer, the batting, similar to that jacket I mentioned before. And so she ended up writing and stitching letters to the women who raised her, letters that she won't or can't send because they've passed on or she just doesn't want to send them out, but she does want to share those words and then have them close to her. So I don't think I would sell something or give away something that is so much of my body, because that might be weird.

NM

Please walk me through your studio process and practice?

SH

I make a lot of my work from home. Even if I do have a designated studio. So even here [at the residency], I have materials spread out in the studio, but I actually make everything in my bedroom, except for when I need the stove or to lay everything out on the floor to see it. I like to work in cozy and confined spaces and in private, depending on what I'm working on. I process my thoughts better that way. When I work alone, by writing down field notes of the process, what I made today, here's a swatch of it, this is what it looks like, a picture, which materials were involved - my journal ends up looking like a recipe book.

NM

It seems that the defining part is the afterwards when you write down what actually happened. So I kind of like that speculative mode of trying out and then the result gets written on, during the proof of concept. In terms of being in Joburg, being somewhere else from your known environment, does that have an impact on your work?

SH

I'm sitting here trying to gather my thoughts, but I keep hearing the birds and that's one of the things that I've been taken by. During my time here I have heard so many bird sounds that I haven't heard before. So every day I'm just so surprised and thrilled and eager to connect with this environment. Because I still don't know which kinds of birds are making each sound and I haven't researched it, but I kind of like the mystery. I've also paid a lot of attention to the landscape here and how history has impacted what the earth looks like, the mind dumps and all. So that's been really powerful to me. I guess it is going back to language not necessarily a particular language but language as a system and understanding a space, whatever the space might be. That's what I find so amazing if you travel, to slowly understand the layer of the land through that system that is being spoken, being performed, that is around you.



NM

Who influences you, where do you draw inspirations from within the art making process and beyond?

SH

I am very inspired by US American author bell hooks, all of her writing, her essays about black feminism, about education and inequality in the education system. Also, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who was a Korean-US American writer and performance artist. Her book, *Dictee*, is so good. It speaks about language itself and how pain and trauma and violence can alter language. Her book is written in French, English and Korean, all of those languages mixed together on the page and there are these moments of coding and a lack of access if you don't speak one of the languages because she doesn't translate it for you.

And she uses fragmentation where she'll start a thought and then be interrupted by another thought and just lets that happen. Which links back to my own process of making physical objects but also writing with the fabric where I'll rip it up and I'll piece these fragments together into something that gradually grows.

US American Sonya Clark is an artist who also inspires me. She does a lot with hair in her work, synthetic hair but also real hair. She has this one piece, it's a collection of, I think her mother's hair - it's titled 'Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy' (2011). Audre Lorde. Toni Morrison. A lot of writers inspire me. They even inspire my visual work. Because I just get so taken by the language that it pours out in whatever form I feel like expressing it in. Fred Moten, who is a poet. His work talks a lot about the black diaspora and transience, its really powerful.

