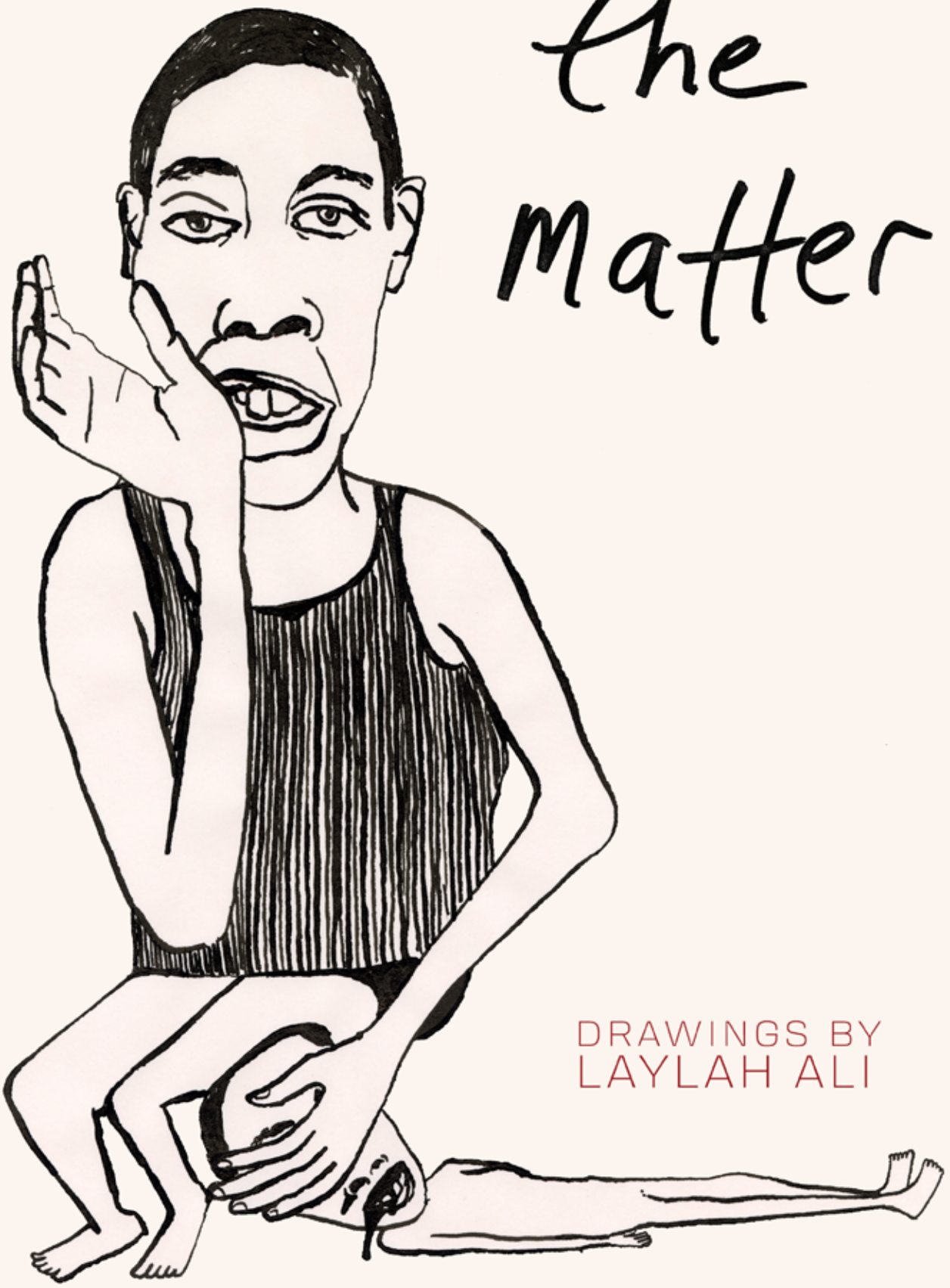
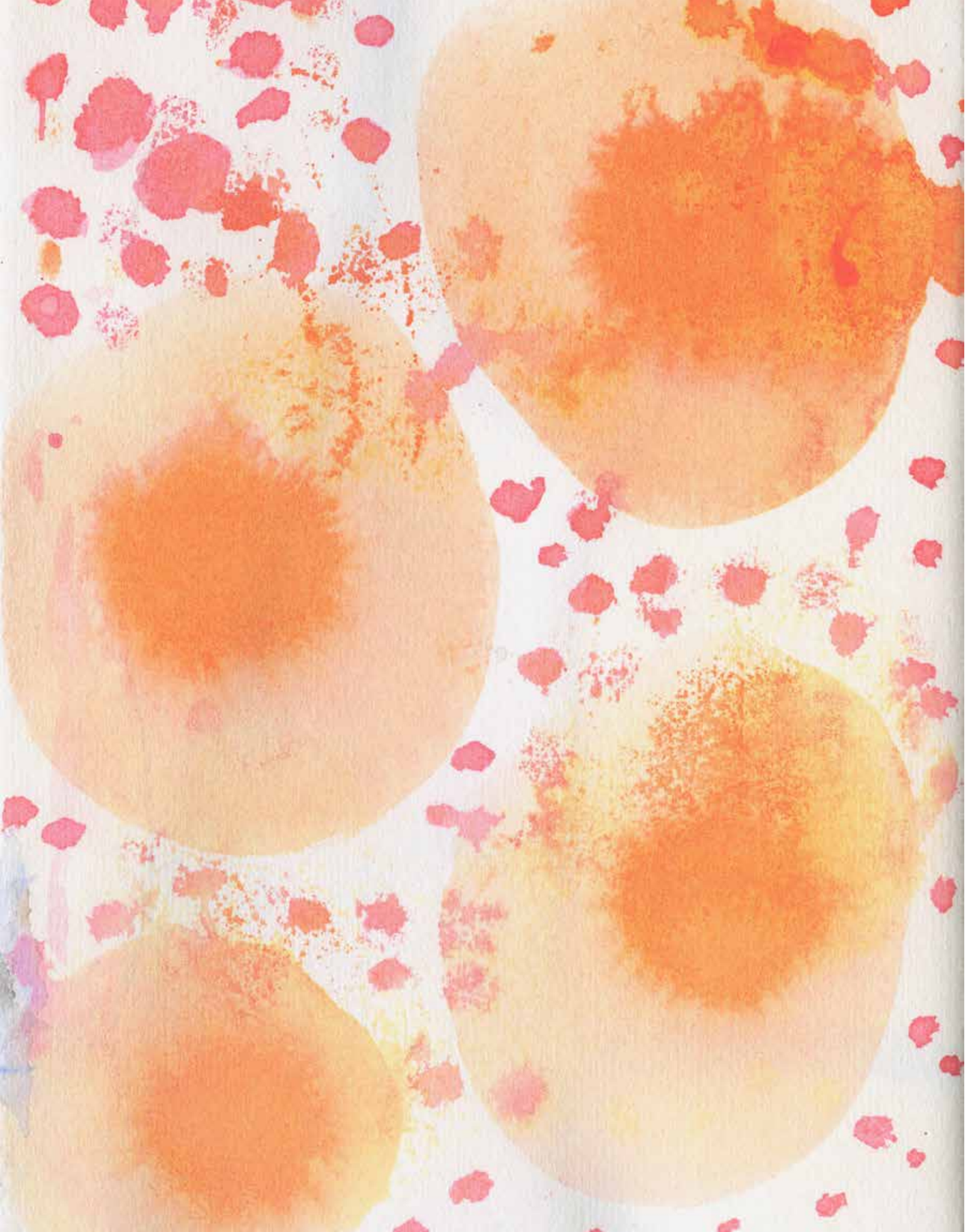
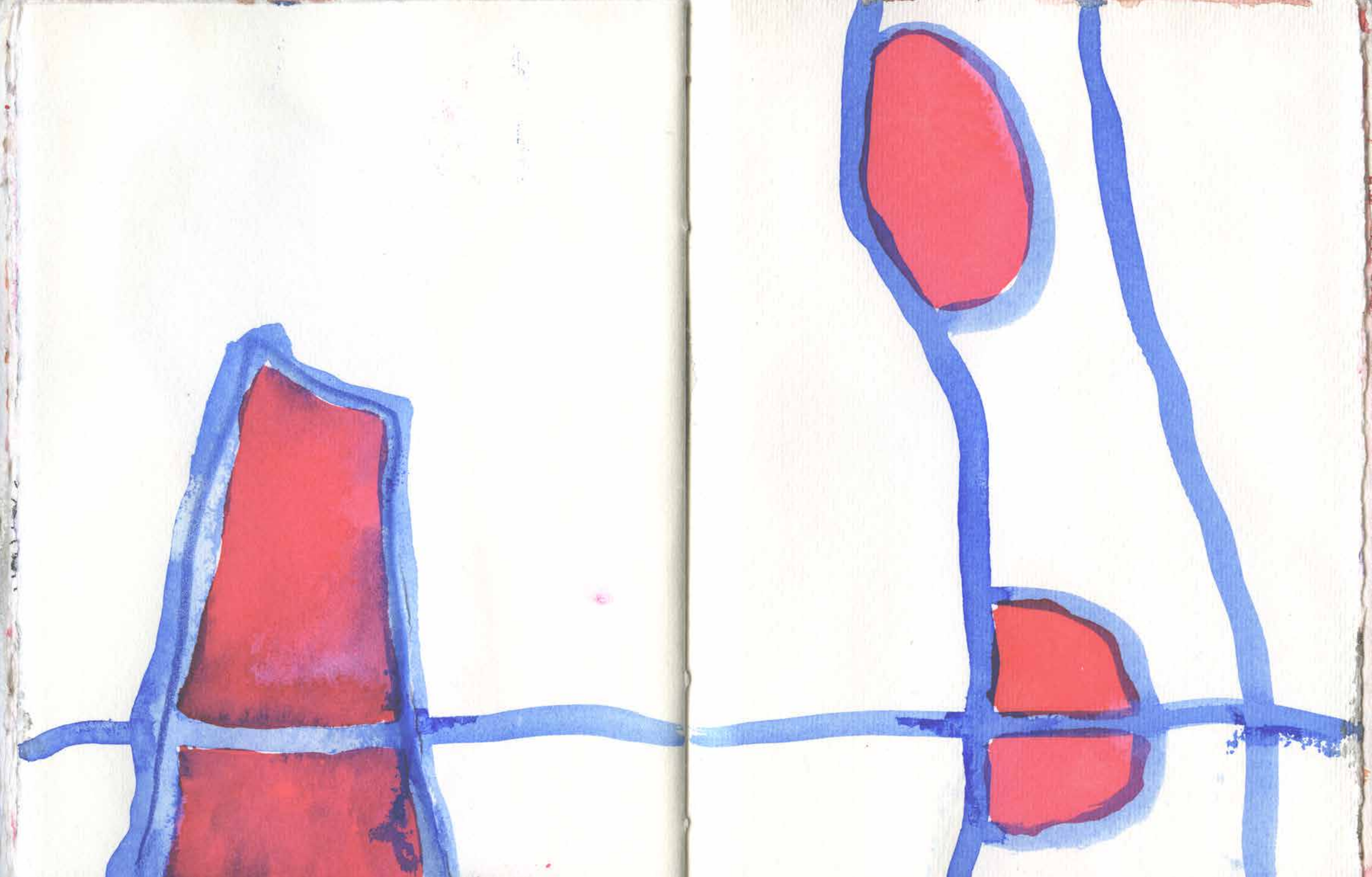
Is anything the matter?



DRAWINGS BY
LAYLAH ALI



(9) Pointless recounting of personal history.
(10) "The Diary of Ali."
(11) Brown eggs from brown chickens, white eggs from white chickens.
(12) Contaminated sandals.
(13) "Throw stones at your friends if you want, but not me. You don't know me."
(14) Necessity of a master list.
(15) Perfectly acceptable + functional creativity.
(16) Startling + numbing spectacle.



Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery
State University of New York at Fredonia
January 23 through April 14, 2024

University Museum of Contemporary Art
University of Massachusetts Amherst
February 13 through May 9, 2025

Colby College Museum of Art
Waterville, Maine
October 21, 2025 through April 19, 2026

Is anything the matter? Drawings by Laylah Ali

Foreword
Barbara Räcker, Director, Marion Art Gallery

The Marion Art Gallery is pleased to coordinate and present *Is anything the matter? Drawings by Laylah Ali*, a nearly three decade survey of Laylah Ali's drawings. With the earliest works created in 1993, the exhibition includes ink, colored pencil, soluble crayon, colored marker, and mixed media drawings. Together they demonstrate Ali's ongoing interest in allegories that are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) connected to, in her words, "race, power, gendering, human frailty, and murky politics." The extensive time span allows visitors to discover stylistic and contextual similarities, contrasts, and shifts in her drawings. The origin of our exhibition title is from Ali's 2008 *Note Drawings*, a series in which she includes non-sequitur thoughts:

256. 100 of the malcontents.
257. Is anything the matter?
258. A young hothead.
259. Beware "the shipload of women."
260. Apology rescheduled to the following morning.
261. The malcontents complain they are suffering from festering bullet wounds.
262. The prison administrator reads the list of demands (flanked by various wives).
263. Killed a man but not "a killer."

In a 2020 *Art in America* interview with William S. Smith, Ali talked about the importance of drawing in her process:

> I am always drawing. That never changes, though the materials do. That is how I process my thoughts, how I keep connected to my work when I am teaching, how I experiment and generate ideas for more finished works... My drawings can be much looser, and more spontaneous, than my paintings, which are plotted and planned. Things from the drawings can work their way into the paintings—or not. Sometimes the drawings just are their own thing.

When asked what she hopes audiences will take away from this exhibition, Ali replied that she wanted drawing to be "considered as an accessible, emotionally connected, and potent mode of thinking that is not necessarily based in realistic representation." She noted that "many of my drawings are brain-to-paper" and that "there can be fruitful thinking that is not logic-based."

First and foremost, we would like to thank Laylah Ali, not only for allowing us to present such an important and intriguing body of drawings, but also for her attention to detail and commitment to this project, which includes two other venues, the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, Maine. Several Fredonia professional staff and faculty were an indispensable part of this project. Exhibition Coordinator Hyla Stellhorn was an inestimable aid to this project and every exhibition in the Marion Art Gallery since Spring 2018. We are grateful to Jason Dilworth, Associate Professor of Graphic Design in the Department of Visual Arts and New Media at SUNY Fredonia, who is always generous with his time, support, and patience in designing the Marion Art Gallery's publications. For their insightful contributions to the catalog, we would like to thank Karen Kurczynski, Professor of History of Art and Architecture at University of Massachusetts Amherst; Arisa White, Associate Professor of English at Colby College; and Romi Crawford, Professor of Visual and Critical Studies and Liberal Arts at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The State University of New York at Fredonia is eternally grateful to Cathy and Jesse Marion for their ongoing support of the Marion Art Gallery through an endowment established with their generous donation. The exhibition, publication, and related programs are also supported by a grant from the Fredonia College Foundation's Carnahan Jackson Humanities Fund. We are appreciative to Friends of Rockefeller Arts Center for their ongoing support.

Power in Play: The Drawings of Laylah Ali

Karen Kurczynski

"I am not a product of burning vision or of loud or quiet certainty. I am a product of mixed messages," stated artist Laylah Ali in 1995 during her first exhibition at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo, NY, her hometown.[1] Subtlety, complexity, intersectionality, irony, and racial and gender ambiguity all come to mind when confronted with her work. This is, as a rule, a quiet confrontation, restrained and personalized by the small-scale formats, understated colors, and intimate textures, often in ink, colored pencil, gouache or other water-based media on paper. The "mixed messages" it contains are to be unlocked by us, because they deliver no obvious certainties. Instead, they layer multiple references in poetic abbreviation.

In a representative drawing from 2004, two armless, gender-ambiguous figures in garments resembling skirts or armor are connected to each other's heads. Meanings proliferate rather than settle, largely through the continual circulations from line to color to signification and back again, reinforced by the contours of the figures that lead the eye toward the edges and around. These odd figures challenge the observer to follow, to react, to question, to define—and then to look again, to start over.

These are puzzling scenes that unsettle in their insistence on multiple readings, carefully calculated to resist closure. Instead, they provide an opening toward a dialogue. As the artist states, they "push [...] the viewer toward an act of articulation, toward that moment when what is seen by the eyes moves toward a speaking act."[2] As visual poems, Ali's drawings cannot be fully captured in words, precisely because they are her response to the very inadequacy of language to describe human experience. "The drawings are an expansion of our limited terminology," she says.[3]

Ali grew up the mixed-race child of a working-class family in Buffalo and experienced both domestic violence and "ugly racism" along the way. "My time in Buffalo was characterized by a great deal of family difficulties," she recalls, "financial worry, low to medium to high level battles. So, in short, Buffalo gave birth to my political self. My self who can fight a

1 *Hallwalls Calendar*, September and October, 1995, https://www.hallwalls.org/pubs/311.html.

2 Laylah Ali, "Interview with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram" in *Laylah Ali: Paintings and Drawings* (Buffalo, NY: Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, 2017), n.p.

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all Laylah Ali quotations come from conversations with the author in 2022–2023.

good, long fight."[4] She grew up aware of the struggles of Black liberation in the U.S. thanks to her African American father. At the same time, a white American mother and two white half-siblings from her mother's first marriage to a relatively wealthy man exposed Ali to class and race inequality on an intimate level. A biracial child and the only Black student in her public elementary school, she would attend the private high school of her white half-brothers on a scholarship.

Ali states, "I think that most everything I make is about the disconnect between bodies and freedom."[5] She recalls that as "a brown person who has lived amongst a white majority" she has become "very attuned to the feeling of being surveilled." This formative training in awareness of the multiple ways an "external self could be interpreted in various situations," led to a sense of guardedness "deeply embedded almost as a survival mechanism."[6] Her drawn characters often feature spectacular visual costumes and prominent staring eyes, making visual dramas of interpersonal spectacles.

The sense of personal discretion also relates to the artist's non-binary gender identification, which could be better described as a gender non-identification—a refusal of the existing terminology of gender. Ali faces routine experiences of misunderstanding or marginalization with a sly sense of humor that informs her drawings and texts. The personal scale of her drawings captures the quotidian ubiquity of the discomfort that arises when people can't quite categorize each other. At the same time, the diminutive charm of her drawn figures makes their suggestions of violence, subjugation, and dramatic injustice all the more jarring.

In the early 1990s, Ali graduated from Williams College and studied for her M.F.A. at Washington University in St. Louis. The U.S. art world was shifting rapidly from the large-scale expressive painting that dominated the 1980s, most spectacularly in the commercial success of the male Neo-Expressionist painters, toward a new recognition for art about social identity, histories of slavery and colonialism, and the politics of multiculturalism. Photography, conceptual art, video, and installation practices dramatized the connections between identity, history, and memory. Ali was familiar with the postmodernist practices of artists like David Hammons and Cindy Sherman from her studies at Williams. She was "searching for other kinds of artists," she recalls, perspectives marginalized in the mainstream media but increasingly recognized in the art world. She became interested in Sister Gertrude Morgan, a Black visionary artist from South Carolina who ran a chapel for orphans and runaways and drew pictures of her visions of the New Jerusalem.[7] Morgan's brightly colored figures of herself in a white uniform-like dress and elaborate scenes of her encounters with angelic beings and hand-written messages from God find a distant echo in Ali's laconic figures, sometimes accompanied by hand-written notes, even if their acerbic humor owes more to Hammons.

In New York, Ali was also struck by art-activist responses to the AIDS crisis in the practices of ACT-UP and Gran Fury. In 1991–92, she attended the renowned Whitney Independent Study Program in New York, which exposed her to advanced critical theories of the time and talks by artists she admired, including Black installation artist Fred Wilson. Rather than give in to the pressure to explore the more polished conceptual and installation strategies foregrounded at the Whitney ISP, though, Ali maintained an interest in handmade work. Inspired by Faith Ringgold's quilts with hand-written narratives about African American life and the sequential narratives of dysfunctional American families in Ida Applebroog's multi-media paintings, she produced a quilt of drawings on paper based on old family photographs, coated with wax and sewn roughly together in a grid format. She would soon leave behind the intense materiality and exploration of personal memories in that experiment to focus on drawing and painting in series. This approach was both more intimate and more open-ended, as Ali developed imagery that combined lived experiences with historical imagery and speculative themes, often in the same work.

Ali's drawings make new connections through visual forms that act as their own kind of language, more open-ended and intuitive than words. She eschews digital media in favor of tangible works that make a space for personal reflection and interpersonal dialogue. "I prefer the stillness of paintings and drawings," she says. "I like the way that stillness can invite a viewer in and that a reflective space exists that is activated—or not—by the viewer."[8] Drawing has been key to her process since the beginning, but overshadowed in the reception of her work by the paintings, especially the "Greenheads" series for which she became known in the late 1990s.

Historically, drawing has been strongly associated with the personal and the imaginative, key aspects taken up in Ali's drawings. For centuries drawing was considered a preliminary stage toward a finished work. It operates similarly in the sketches Ali produces for her paintings, particularly the *Greenheads* with their careful compositions, controlled finish, and calibrated colors. In modern art since the Romantic era, drawing shifted meaning and artists began to appreciate its relative rawness and idiosyncrasy—all the ways it resists beauty, finish, and perfection.[9] Drawing became closely allied with ideas of originality and authenticity channeled in the artist's highly personal gestures, thought to be direct indexes of their inner psyche. Henri Matisse described drawing as a "means of expressing intimate feelings and describing states of mind," conveyed "without clumsiness, directly to the mind of the spectator."[10] The apparent immediacy of drawing continues to appeal to audiences, and its accessibility means a wide range of viewers can relate to its methods.

4 Ali, "Interview with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram," n.p.

5 Ali, "Interview with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram," n.p.

6 Cylena Simonds, "Laylah Ali in Conversation with Cylena Simonds, Curator, Exhibition Projects, inIVA," exhibition brochure (London: International Institute of Visual Arts, 2007), n.p.

7 Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Made with Passion: The Hemphill Folk Art Collection in the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990).

8 Simonds, "Laylah Ali in Conversation with Cylena Simonds," n.p.

9 Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 39–45 and 410–32.

10 Henri Matisse, "Notes of a Painter on His Drawing, 1939," in *Matisse on Art*, ed. Jack D. Flam (New York: Dutton, 1978), 81.

Ali explores the ways drawing can convey not only affective states but also ideas, from color and composition to linear gesture and hand-written text. "Brain-to-paper is so underacknowledged as an important place of connection with people, empathy, information," she observes. "We often look to theater and performance for that. Drawing has that potential too to connect with another person's inside, emotional self." She acknowledges that drawing conveys complex concepts as well as emotions, but it does so in indirect ways, through sensory *and* linguistic means. Her drawings connect the rational and the emotional world, information and affect. Like the modern artists who deliberately broke with their academic training, often emulating children's drawing, she, too, established her unique artistic voice by breaking with expectations about "good" drawing. She notes that her "training was so tied to representational, observational drawing that it left whole worlds out." Inspired less by children's art than by caricature, animation, and political cartoons, Ali allows her drawings the freedom to get weird and awkward and unexpected. Drawings on paper tend to act as palimpsests recording the history of their own creation, making them subject to the vagaries of material accidents that muddy the old ideas about direct expression. Where, Ali says, paintings "carry more weight, somehow, [about] what is valued in our society, drawings seem to me more like the blood that is flowing." They present images in movement, attempting to break out of existing categories of thought. They often deliberately celebrate the odd, the speculative, and the queer, in all senses of the term, making the drawings a profound commentary not only on her own emotional experience, but on that of all kinds of people who struggle against labels and lack of recognition.

While drawing's potential to share ideas and emotions remains important for Ali, her drawings also participate in a broader contemporary discussion about the politics of personal expression. Artists today question the confinement of artistic expression to trained professionals given to virtuosic and sometimes bombastic displays. Whose expressions get seen and whose don't? Who has the authority to identify artistic talent and the means to promote it? "I'm interested in destabilizing this notion of talent," Ali notes. Her gestures are not aggressive or declaratory. Her sensitivity to particular qualities of line and color draws the observer's attention to, as she describes, "intentions, contact, attention level, choices." Her characters make visible the race and gender politics that shape them all.

Drawing allows Ali to envision personalities and identities that are more nuanced and multifaceted than the words we use to name them. Her practice of drawing develops unexpected bodily arrangements, adornments, and interpersonal encounters that push open not only historical categories of visual representation but also, more importantly, our preexisting ideas about people. Rather than immobilize us in awe of a visual spectacle, her scenarios disarm us through humor and invite us into a subtle and nuanced conversation. While mindful of "our" divergent backgrounds, they draw out our most expansive, open-minded, and compassionate selves.

Haunting History: *Nat Turner's Vision*

At the MFA program at Washington University in St. Louis in the early 1990s, Ali pushed back against the dominant appreciation for abstraction and mark-making for its own sake. She made large-scale charcoal drawings featuring imagery of nooses and other political subjects. She "wanted to make it impossible to only talk about craft." Moving away from expressionist approaches and experimental facture, she carefully honed the sociopolitical content and narrative potential of her drawings, which related to her longstanding interests in writing and history. Ali prefers her works "to be read closely, from the same distance as one would hold a book."[11]

Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision situate the artist's own image in relationship to a notably heroic, but also enigmatic, historical figure who led the first outright and arguably the most successful slave rebellion in U.S. history. Inspired by Christian visions of retribution, enslaved field hand and preacher Nat Turner incited a slave insurrection in Virginia in 1831 that led to the violent deaths of 55 slave owners and their families before white authorities in turn hunted down and killed Turner and his followers. Turner's own perspective is only available through the white journalist Thomas R. Gray who published his *Confessions* later the same year.

No one knows what the Black rebel Nat Turner looked like, giving Ali free rein to envision his likeness in relation to her own—and she recognizes that self-portraits are filled with "lies and mistruths."[12] With these untrustworthy images, her series proposes that history can only ever be fiction, just one version of a story, the reality of which is always too complex and multifaceted to fully portray. In several scenes, Ali depicts herself as a male or androgynous or non-binary figure. In many, it is unclear who is Ali and who is Turner, forcing us as viewers to hold open all possibilities: it could be both or neither; a woman can resemble

11 Rebecca Walker, "Racial Profiling?" *Black Book Magazine* (Spring, 2001), 67, cited in Margo A. Crutchfield, *Material Witness* (Cleveland: Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 2004), 15.

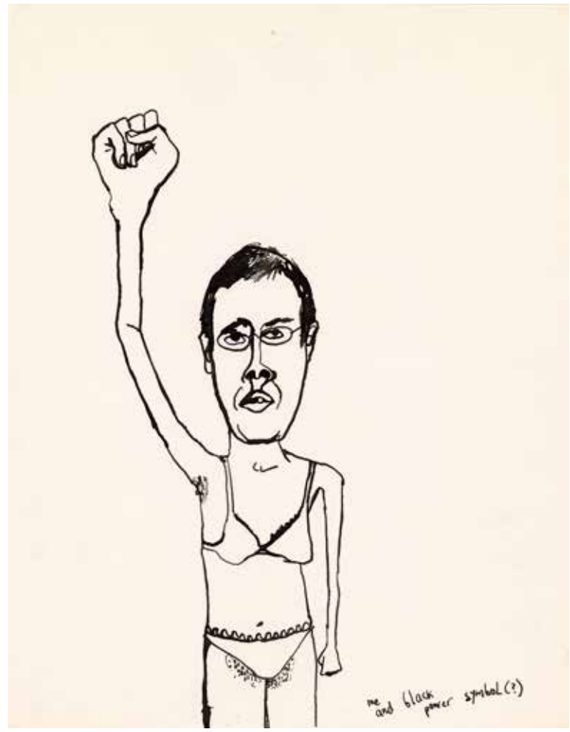
12 Libby Rosof, "Who Are You? A Wary Laylah Ali Asks at UArts," account of a lecture at University of the Arts, Philadelphia, 2007, *Artblog*, https://www.theartblog.org/2007/08/who-are-you-a-wary-laylah-ali-asks-at-uarts/.

a man or a child or what we see as a man or a woman could be a non-binary person. The drawings cultivate a profound openness to shifting identifications that has direct implications for how we might encounter strangers in the gallery or out in the world.

Executed in the 19th century method of dipped ink on paper already yellowing with age, these drawings explore the embodiment of a historical era through both image and technique. Yet the vignettes often feature bodies in modern clothes and hairstyles. The visions alternate as Ali and Turner, as Turner's "vision" and a "dream" Ali describes in the meandering stories that play out on various text drawings. Several scenes feature the corn cob referenced in Turner's *Confessions*: "while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven," one of several bloody visions that led Turner to carry out his "work of death."[13]

In one scene, the corn becomes the hooded head (pointed like a Klan robe) of a hanged figure in underwear, a masculine-looking tank top over a feminine-looking brief, with pubic hair unceremoniously showing. The two-headed Turner/Ali figure wears jeans and reads a book with a blank cover, suggesting the *Confessions* themselves or other historical accounts. Turner/Ali reads the book with eyebrows raised, an expression suggesting credulity or at least engagement with a narrative that might be the *Confessions*, the book of Ali's poetic or dream vignettes, or any other volume of knowledge or art or stories. Like

13 Nat Turner and Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.*, 1832, https://www.loc.gov/item/07009643, 9.



Ali's later works about John Brown,[14] the *Nat Turner's Vision* drawings force us to confront not only how our singular raced and gendered bodies intersect with the impersonal forces of history, but also how history is written and rewritten for different sets of bodies. The *Nat Turner's Vision* series foregrounded trans imagery in a striking way at a moment when "queer" was just starting to gain widespread recognition, and Ali herself was commonly mistaken for a man in everyday life. Meanwhile, transgender studies would remain marginal in contemporary art discourses for another two decades. Only recently have discussions of trans rights and representations become prominent in the U.S. art world.[15] For this essay, I understand "queerness" as moving beyond traditional, binary gender categories following the open-ended definition of Mel Chen, as "an array of subjectivities, intimacies, beings, and spaces located outside of the heteronormative."[16] Ali's works frequently embody such broadly queer themes in ways that also relate to trans interpretations. Not only do these drawings celebrate queer and transgender imagery, but they also play openly with signifiers of race, in full recognition that race cannot exist apart from gender. When gender signifiers shift, so, too, does racial identification. In one scene, a figure in feminine underwear holds up their right fist while the caption reads, "me and black power symbol (?)." The question mark only underscores the

14 Laylah Ali, "John Brown Song!" 2013, https://www.diaart.org/program/artistswebprojects/laylah-alijohn-brown-song-web-project.

15 David J. Getsy and Che Gossett, "A Syllabus on Transgender and Nonbinary Methods for Art and Art History," *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 2021), http://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=16500.

16 Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 104.

ambiguity. This figure with short dark hair and glasses could be read as white or Black, masculine or feminine or gender ambiguous.

In another drawing a protagonist with shaggier features, a crew-neck sweater, and cutoff shorts faces their larger, floating avatar in tank top and underwear, with the caption "NAT VISITS THE LINCOLN MONUMENT and finds it looks strangely like herself." The humor comes not only from the silliness of this modern Lincoln, but also the complex anachronisms jumbling key moments of U.S. history together: Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831; Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and its inadequate implementation over the generations; the construction of the Lincoln Memorial in 1922; contemporary teardowns of monuments as affirmations that Black Lives Matter; and other more imaginative relationships that the drawing might suggest. The shifting genders reinforce the instability embedded in the image, to suggest that identity is a continuous high-stakes game in which we are all thrown into play. While history represents its victors and victims categorically, any representation in ink or marble proves inadequate to the complex mutability of intersecting identifications that animated the lives in question. The medium of drawing, because it foregrounds process over finish, is uniquely able to manifest identification as a process, as opposed to the illusion of a "complete" identity. Racial, gender, and national identifications are phantasmagoric processes over which no one of us—not the artist, nor the visionaries of history, nor the anonymous subjects of our own confessions—are ever fully in control.

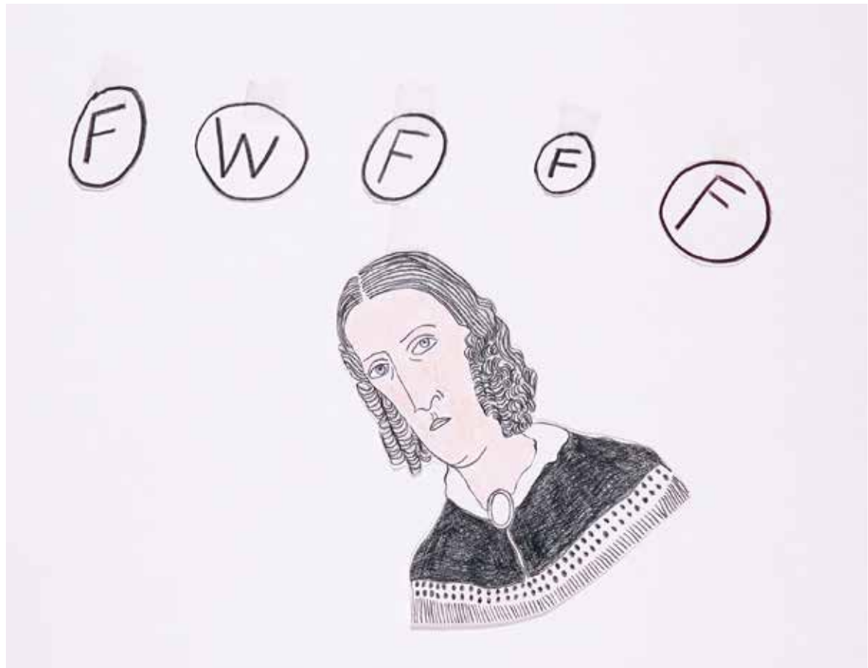
Disarming Heroes: *B Drawings* and *Superman Drawings*

The personal nature of Ali's early engagements with historical figures would soon give way to the more tightly composed *Greenheads* paintings (1997–2005), which put Ali's work on the map of the global art world following their exhibition in 1998 at the Drawing Center in New York City. The *Greenheads* continue to define the artist's work for many audiences. They present interpersonal dramas of power and vulnerability in a straightforward style reminiscent of cartoons, but without their easy narrative closure.

The *Greenheads* developed partly from colored pencil drawings called *B Drawings* (1995–1997). They include scenes of interacting brown figures and heads colored anywhere from pink to brown to green. Disembodied heads (these figures have no ears, noses other than paired dots, or hair) float in small or large groups, sometimes accompanied by letters or words. Some suggest family groups, such as a scene of four

grayish magenta heads with tongues sticking out. The eyes stare with expressions that could be read as confrontational, afraid, sly, emphatic, or manipulative. While the two large heads and one smaller one appear locked in a conversation or confrontation, the smallest and darkest head seems to fall away from the group, like a cell moving steadily away, leading us discreetly with them into the beckoning space of the lower half of the composition. The scene dramatizes an abstract coming of age story. It could also serve as a metaphor for any social hierarchy, where the stronger and louder suppress the agency of the smaller, but in their narcissistic preoccupations allow space for the smallest to escape notice. The tongues suggest a body out of control, a phallic aggression, a family pathology, and a discourse driven more by emotion and survival of the fittest than rational consideration. The emerging *Greenheads* world already seems utterly atomized, individualistic, and mutually antagonistic—despite the shared color of the heads, which suggests a shared heritage.

Not all the *B Drawings* feature round, colored heads. One collage drawing presents a relatively lifelike head-and-shoulders representation of Julia Dent Grant, the wife of President Ulysses S. Grant. Raised on a Missouri plantation, Grant is notorious today for her support of the institution of slavery even in the midst of the Civil War, when her husband was General of the northern armies. Ali bases her likeness on an engraving of Grant in her student days at Mauro Academy boarding school where her expression bears a slightly furrowed brow. From a contemporary perspective, it is hard not to judge a figure who insisted that her own enslaved servants Eliza, Dan, Julia (Jule), and John—gifts



of her father, owner of around thirty slaves in a border state not affected by the Emancipation Proclamation—were happy with their lot even as her husband led the northern armies fighting in the name of their freedom. She even brought Jule with her on multiple visits to the front to assist in her work as a nurse, creating a bit of a scandal for her husband and putting Jule in real danger of capture by the Confederate army. Jule managed to run away and self-emancipate in Union-held Louisville, KY, in 1863—a fact which Julia Grant "regretted, as she was a favorite with me."[17]

In the *B Drawing*, Ali colors the skin of Julia Dent Grant a pale peach shade but leaves the eyes cold and colorless. Whiteness is also signified in the blank cameo that holds a black shawl together at the base of her neck. Ali turns it into a redacted white portrait, reinforcing the work's critical questioning of who has access to and control over historical representation. Above the portrait floats another set of abbreviated signifiers collaged to the page with tape. Five letters are hand-drawn in circles: F, W, F, F, F. While no single reading can fully encompass what they mean, the abbreviations FWIW (for what it's worth), MWF (married white female), and FW (forward, firewall or f*** with) provide some useful possibilities. The proliferation of "F, F, F" at the end reinforces the drawing's adversarial tone, reading as a sort of "F*** you" to the weight of history itself, with all its general F***ed up-ness.

17 *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 126. See also Sarah Fling, "The Formerly Enslaved Household of the Grant Family," The White House Historical Association, April 17, 2020, https://www.whitehousehistory.org/the-formerly-enslaved-household-of-the-grant-family.

After introducing flying figures into her work for an untitled artist's book for her 2002 show at the Museum of Modern Art, Ali returned to superhero imagery in 2005 with a set of *Superman* drawings. They depict red-caped figures with brown hands, green heads, and black masks. In one scene, three armless figures with round black heads sit on a couch above a smaller hero (drawn, cut out, and attached to the page) with tights, a red cape, and a pale brown, hairy "mask" over a green head. While the flying figure's feet are literally cut away, the small, seated figure seems to wonder what happened: a thought bubble shows three severed legs sporting different shoe options. The vulnerability of these flying figures combined with their general inability to save anyone make them seem endearingly human. They wear variations on Superman's classic superhero suit, sometimes with a vertical red-and-white-striped belt reminiscent of Captain America. But in response to the hyper-visibility of Black bodies in popular culture, they refuse the expected muscular physique and scramble typical signs of race and gender. These whimsical, preoccupied masked figures refute the power of the white gaze that, as Stuart Hall writes, "fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire."[18] Ali's drawings un-fix human images from the white gaze, from the heteronormative gaze, from the male gaze. She replaces normative depictions of heroes with playful, androgynous, potentially non-binary or queer or trans anti-heroes. Skinny and awkward, they reject the power of heteronormative white masculinity, defy stereotypes of Black masculinity, and deflate the hubris of nationalism that the superhero genre celebrates.

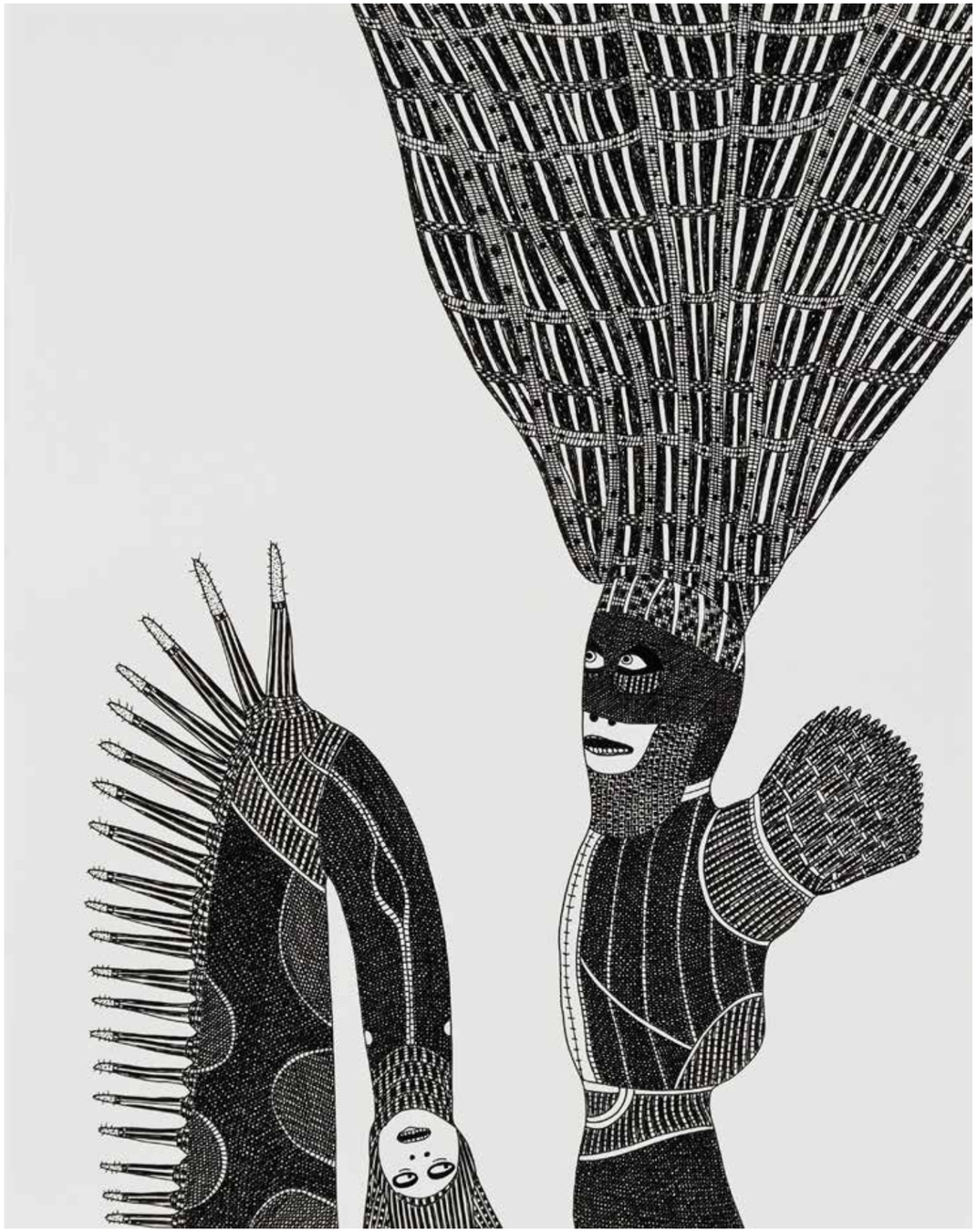
Code Scrambling: *Typologies*

The *Typologies* drawings (2005–2007) show carefully outlined and patterned black and white characters drawn in fine-nibbed archival Pitt Artist Pens on Bristol vellum paper, slightly off white in tone. They include single figures from a head and shoulders view and small groups of characters. Ali recalls that her "goal was to make drawings that could hold you like a painting, to see if I could get the spectacle into the drawing." The resulting images remain mesmerizing, not only for the complexity of their patterns, but also for the political implications of their arguably "exotic" costumes.

The reduction to black and white of the *Typologies* characters implies a rational approach that relates to histories of cultural anthropology as well as colonial-era photographs and diagrams of racial physiognomy. A parody of an anthropological system, the series negates the politically charged history of categorizing people by visual signifiers—the ideological justification for slavery and colonization—by creating multiple pseudo-typologies. Complex patterns capture a sense of wonder over what sort of interior might exist for such figures and in what kind of unexpected cultural context they might participate. As Andrea Frohne writes of the *Typologies*:

> They may remind the viewer of a historical figure, a medieval knight, a comic book character, etc., but a specific defining of identity remains perpetually

18 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989), 78.



> deferred. Rather than negotiate life through fixed typologies, Ali offers the option of identity as a continuous process and production that lies somewhere between fantasy and reality.[19]

Alex Baker describes how these drawings seem to present an "anthropology run amok," but in ways that "underscore the absurdity of racial misrepresentation through biting humor."[20] Like visitors from some alternate reality, these characters pose for our scrutiny while revealing nothing. Instead, they allow us to observe our own thoughts and interpretations of who they might be. What attributes we are drawn to and what attributes we find strange reveal our own normative expectations, and the beauty of the lines and patterns themselves draw us toward a broader acceptance of physical and cultural difference.

The reduction to black and white allows for a diversity of texture, pattern, and ornamentation, resulting in figures that juxtapose modern and traditional, indigenous and colonial, industrial and pre-modern elements: a feathered headdress may recall a peacock tail, a Sioux warrior headdress, or a Brazilian Carnival costume; a transparent face mask evokes scuba gear or lab goggles; long flowing robes imply ecclesiastical or courtly dress; detailed patterning suggests engraved metal armor, tooled leather, or elaborate embroidery. Figures may be missing limbs or feature extra growths emerging from odd places. No longer defined by quintessentially human traits, appendages, and interpersonal relationships, the *Typologies* extend from human to animal to vegetal worlds, suggesting forms growing and waning, morphing and cocooning, hanging on and talking to (or yelling or howling at) each other.

In one scene with two armless figures dressed in black patterned garments, the left-hand figure bends over at an impossible angle as if either prostrating themself or demonstrating some exotic gymnastics move. While the bending figure has a row of imposing spiky protrusions that appear to end with skin and hair, the other figure has a somewhat larger and lumpier torso. Out of it springs a sheaf of forms reminiscent of a quiver of arrows, a plethora of pens, or a smaller version of the elaborate headdresses worn by both figures. The righthand figure's beefier torso and "beard" suggest masculinity. The bending form's smaller proportions, a leaf shape in the center of their torso, and the vulnerability implied by their expression suggest femininity. Rather than different genders, the figures could equally signify parent and child, or just small and large people. The human tendency to seek symbolic meaning by making categorical associations leads us down paths that the works themselves ultimately refuse to substantiate.

Many figures in Ali's drawings can be read equally plausibly as male or female, white or of color, non-binary or queer or trans, as if they inhabit a permanent conditional tense of gender and racial possibility. Ali explains her consistent attention to bodily politics:

> I think about how narratives of freedom and self-realization are this never-to-reach destination that we drink, and are sold, and that motivate and enervate

19 Andrea E. Frohne, "Laylah Ali," in *Beyond Drawing: Constructed Realities* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Art Gallery, 2008), 7–9.

20 Alex Baker, "Laylah Ali: Drawings from the Typology Series," in *Laylah Ali: Typology*, 3–4.

> us. Those narratives have extra weight and sometimes deadly stakes for, as many of us know, bodies of color, and queer, trans, and women's bodies. Bodies that resist being externally named, that exist in places they are not supposed to exist, that claim space they are not supposed to claim. The tension between being a body versus a person versus an individual.[21]

Their undecidability destabilizes the supposed permanence of identity categories. Judith Butler famously describes the way gender is performed through actions that imitate and reproduce its dominant categories, within or against the grain of preexisting significations. For that reason, she argues, "what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality."[22] While this performativity defines all gendered bodies, it impacts bodies that defy gender norms differently. Cameron Awkward-Rich's understanding of the trans body as painfully "haunted" by the experience of not conforming to gender could also describe Ali's figures, ambiguously gendered or displaced from coherent signs of race, but everywhere haunted by these categories.[23] Perhaps most important, the way that these characters invite identifications *across* categories of race, gender, and sexuality invites us to step outside and across our own experiences or identifications and imagine other possibilities.

Ali also frequently casts characters into the world without various appendages and often with other burdens they are forced to carry, creating unsettling effects or potentially inspiring compassion. Images of bandaged or disconnected limbs suggest primal fears of bodily vulnerability and potentially personal readings for different viewers. Ali is interested in exploring the strength that remains in the body when limbs are removed, like a challenge to which her figures must rise.[24] In many scenarios, her armless figures appear powerful, sometimes standing up to characters who challenge them or managing to care for smaller figures strapped to their bodies. Her work forms a powerful commentary on both experiences of disability and the politics of public responses to it. In terms of disability studies, images like these encapsulate the profound insight that "disability is not simply lodged in the body, but created by the material conditions that 'dis-able' the full participation of a variety of minds and bodies."[25] Disability is not something internal to a body, but created situationally and always shaped in a political context.

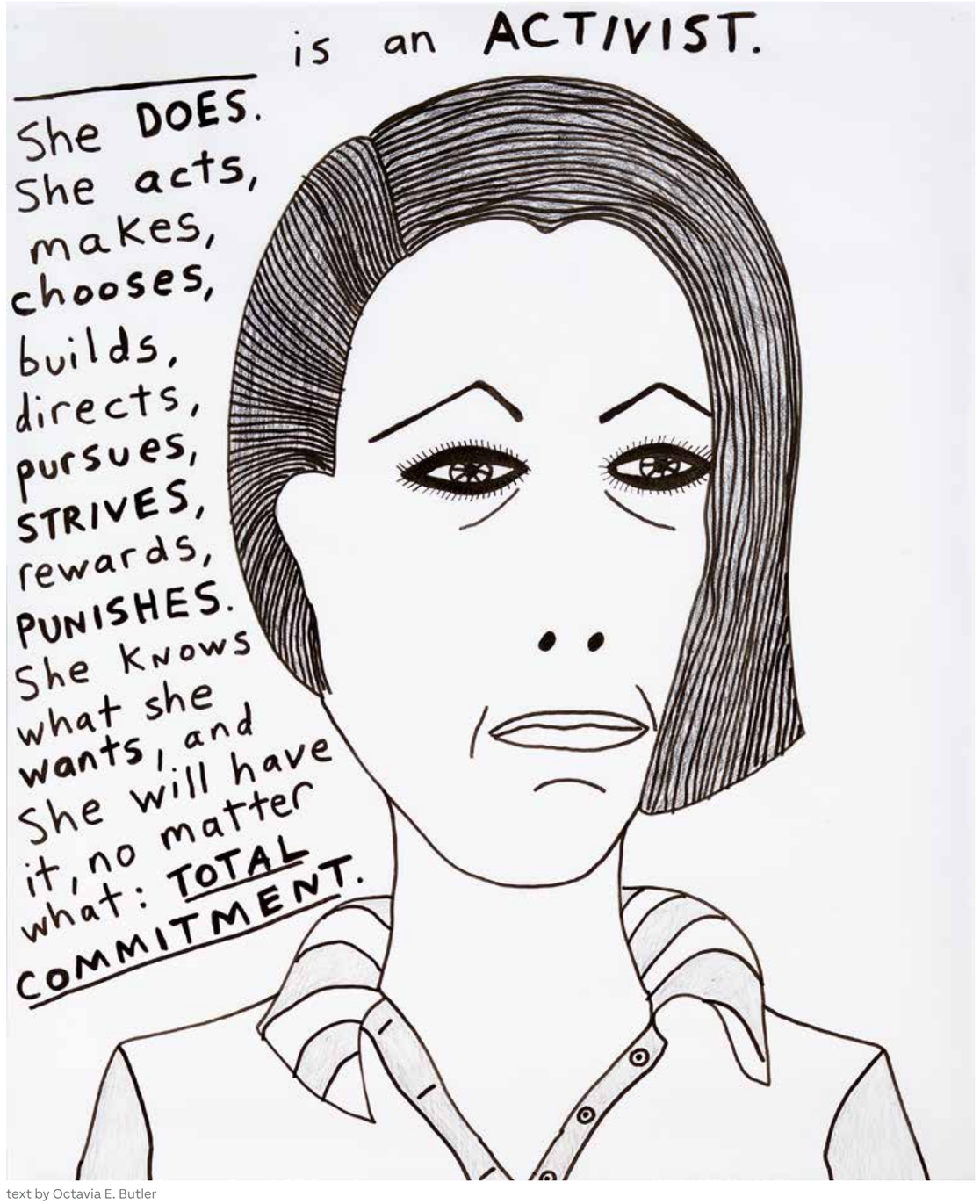
21 Ali, "Interview with Lillian-Yvonne Bertram," n.p.

22 Judith Butler, "Preface (1999)," *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), xxiii.

23 Cameron Awkward-Rich, *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* (Duke University Press, 2022), 6.

24 Laylah Ali in "Power," *Art:21*, 2005, video, 12 min., https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/laylah-ali-in-power-segment/

25 Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, "Disability Worlds," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013), 54.



text by Octavia E. Butler

Syncopating Thoughts: "Note Drawings" and "Commonplace Drawings"

In 2007, Laylah Ali published a little book called *Notes with Little Illustration* that alternated reproductions of the *Typologies* with lists of numbered notes handwritten by the artist. They include a wide range of observations, titles, quotations, critical reflections, shopping list items, and other disconnected thoughts, for example:

9. Pointless recounting of personal history.
10. "The Diary of Ali."
11. Brown eggs from brown chickens, white eggs from white chickens.
12. Contaminated sandals.
13. "Throw stones at your friends if you want, but not me. You don't know me."
14. Necessity of a master list.[26]

The phrases read as excerpts from a stream of consciousness account of the brain at work, anonymized and generalized from sets of real thoughts and ideas collected by the artist and rearranged. The thoughts and quotations are excerpted into rhythms that appear syncopated, like jazz, but also linearly organized, like a grocery list. Ali combines her own thoughts with snippets of reading, overheard conversations, news soundbites, and "common sense" wisdom. It is as if she organizes these into a poetic composition by first breaking them down into musical notes. The different threads juxtapose (among other things) her work and its reception, her daily life as a modern American consumer, her consideration of ethics and critical theory, and her and others' experiences inhabiting a body on earth, sometimes a specifically raced and gendered body. While "Pointless recounting of personal history" recalls the common experience of exchanging Too Much Information, "You don't know me" suggests being prejudged by someone's implicit bias arising from stereotypes of social identity.

The *Notes* provided a break from the demanding process and exclusively visual signification of the *Typologies* and *Greenheads* at a point when the artist needed to find a new direction. They are also a return to her earlier consideration for writing, poetry, and history in early 1990s works incorporating written words.[27] Ali fuses the two strategies together in *Note Drawings* compounding the semantic possibilities of the *Notes* with the semiotic complexity of fictional human faces or bodies over which parts of the list are written. These colorful characters contain signs of gender and race. A figure may sport skirts or pigtails and a moustache, or a beard on a subtly effeminate face or body. Many play with the signifiers of gender in a way that makes it possible to call them "transgender"—except the term's specificity already distorts their fictionality. They are also clothed—or, at least, semi-clothed—in veils, masks, and garments that sometimes strategically reveal their nudity, aspects that also appear in the *Typologies*.

Unlike in Ali's earlier work, though, many of the bodies in the *Note Drawings* sport feminine attributes. Ali acknowledged at the time that, "I have de-sexed my figures for so long—or maybe one might classify it as

26 Laylah Ali, *Notes with Little Illustration* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2007), n.p.

27 Allan Isaac, "Here Comes the Kiss: A Conversation between Laylah Ali and Allan Isaac," *The Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1–2 (2008), 155.

text by Octavia E. Butler

a masculinized unisex realm—that I am finding some sort of enjoyment in giving them additional physical expression."[28] Pink skirts, pigtails, feminine veils, and triangles of pubic hair appear alongside male signifiers like beards and boxer shorts that seem somehow sapped of manliness. Almost none of them seem to be at ease or in control. Taken together, the youthful appearance of many of these skinny, pale, freckly, and pimply figures combined with the personal and hand-written statements recall cultural stereotypes about teenage girls and their diaries. Of course, the violence and political references that enter in—"52. Women who have been burned up"; "90. The school also burned down."—could well be found in the diaries of real adolescents.

For her *Commonplace Drawings* (2016), Ali delved into the literary diaries of Octavia Butler (1947–2006), the renowned Black science fiction writer, at the Huntington Library in California. The series is named after Butler's "commonplace books," notebooks where she jotted down "everything from grocery lists to story ideas to orphan phrases that struck her ear."[29] Ali transcribes Butler's notes as captions to characters she creates in smooth black contour lines. The unpretentious drawing style belies some of the characters' fierce expressions, as in the female "activist" with pointed eyebrows who, the text relates, "knows what she wants, and she will have it, not matter what: TOTAL COMMITMENT" In this universe defined largely by Butler, the most passive and seemingly ineffective characters are often the most ethical. This is evident in another scene with two androgynous faces who speak a dialogue that begins with, "We cannot kill," and ends, "But we can always kill THEM." The face speaking the final lines features a jutting chin and open mouth full of teeth, while the first speaker at right remains placid, eyebrows smoothly raised and mouth perhaps slightly frowning,

28 Kevin Young, "An Interview with Laylah Ali," in *Laylah Ali: Note Drawings* (Lincoln, MA: De Cordova Museum, 2008), 14.

29 "Commonplace Drawings by Laylah Ali," in *Radio Imagination: Artists and Writers in the Archive of Octavia E. Butler* (Los Angeles: Clockshop, 2018), 56.

reminiscent of the emotionless alien Mr. Spock from the original *Star Trek* television series.

In these scenes, the fragility of the paper and delicacy of the line, as well as the thinness of the bodies depicted, materially embody the ethics of vulnerability and passive resistance implied in the dialogue. The uncanny interactions encapsulate some of the major themes of Butler's profound, and profoundly relevant, explorations of human survival, violence, and the possibilities of cooperation and empathy in the face of apocalyptic conditions. Several drawings depict trans-human figures with weird hairy or worm-like protuberances reminiscent of Butler's famous alien characters, the Oankali from her *Xenogenesis* series. This race of creatures features special tentacles that allow empathy through touch but also facilitate genetic access to bodies that they colonize as hosts to save dying species (notably, humans) and propagate their own. The Oankali have male and female genders as well as a third nonbinary gender known as Ooloi, who produce mated pairs of humans with alien species. The *Xenogenesis* trilogy continues to inspire scholarly debates around the "toxic pasts of biology" but also the potential of "multiracial, queer futures."[30] Ali's drawings celebrate queer sexuality more candidly than ever in the interactions of nude feminine characters with Butler's lines saying things like, "Do gloves 'help'? YES." and "Sex is interesting".

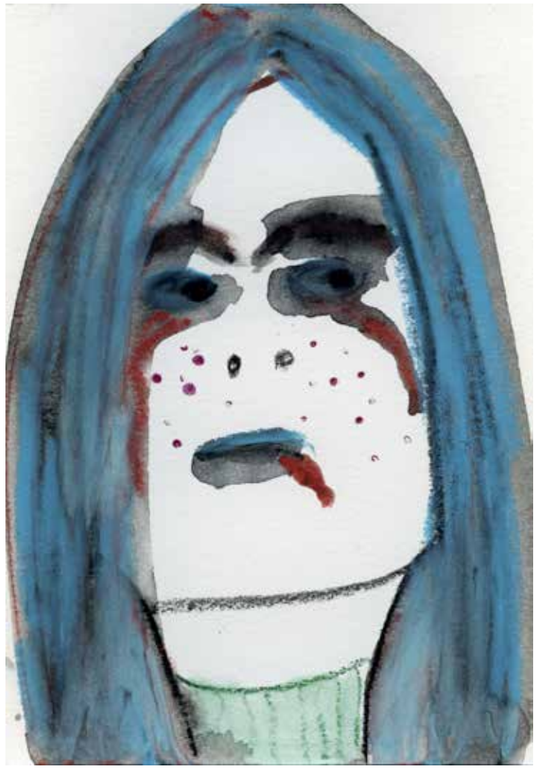
30 Dagmar Van Engen, "Metamorphosis, Transition, and Insect Biology in the Octavia E. Butler Archive," *Women's Studies* 47, no. 7 (October 2018), 733.

Reconfiguring Body and Mood: *Studies*, *N.O.*, and *Harbinger* series

In 2010, a friend gave Ali a set of extra invitations from their wedding. She began a series of *Studies* on the blank side of the 3 x 5 inch card stock that would occupy her on and off for the next two years. These images continue to expand her range of figural representations, incorporating various references to gender, racial, subcultural, sexual, and corporeal identifications. The new complexity relates in part to Ali's recognition of the multiplicity of racial experiences. "I have been moving from working with all figures of color in the 2000s to a more interracial cast of characters or figures," she states. "I want to keep exploring our intense, underreported, underacknowledged interraciality in the United States."[31] Many *Studies* explore the impossibility of definitively identifying a person's race, given the shifting appearance of bodily details conditioned by light, by makeup, by clothing, or by the diverse coloration of different body parts, for example a face versus a hand or a breast. A closeup of someone with a hand under their chin subtly deflects us from an understanding of *who* they are, into a curiosity about what they might be feeling in that moment. The series emphasizes warm colors, suggesting a material flesh that underlies these characters' surface appearance. The washes and wet-on-wet marks that define many of the images suggest a vitality of flesh that continually moves and circulates.

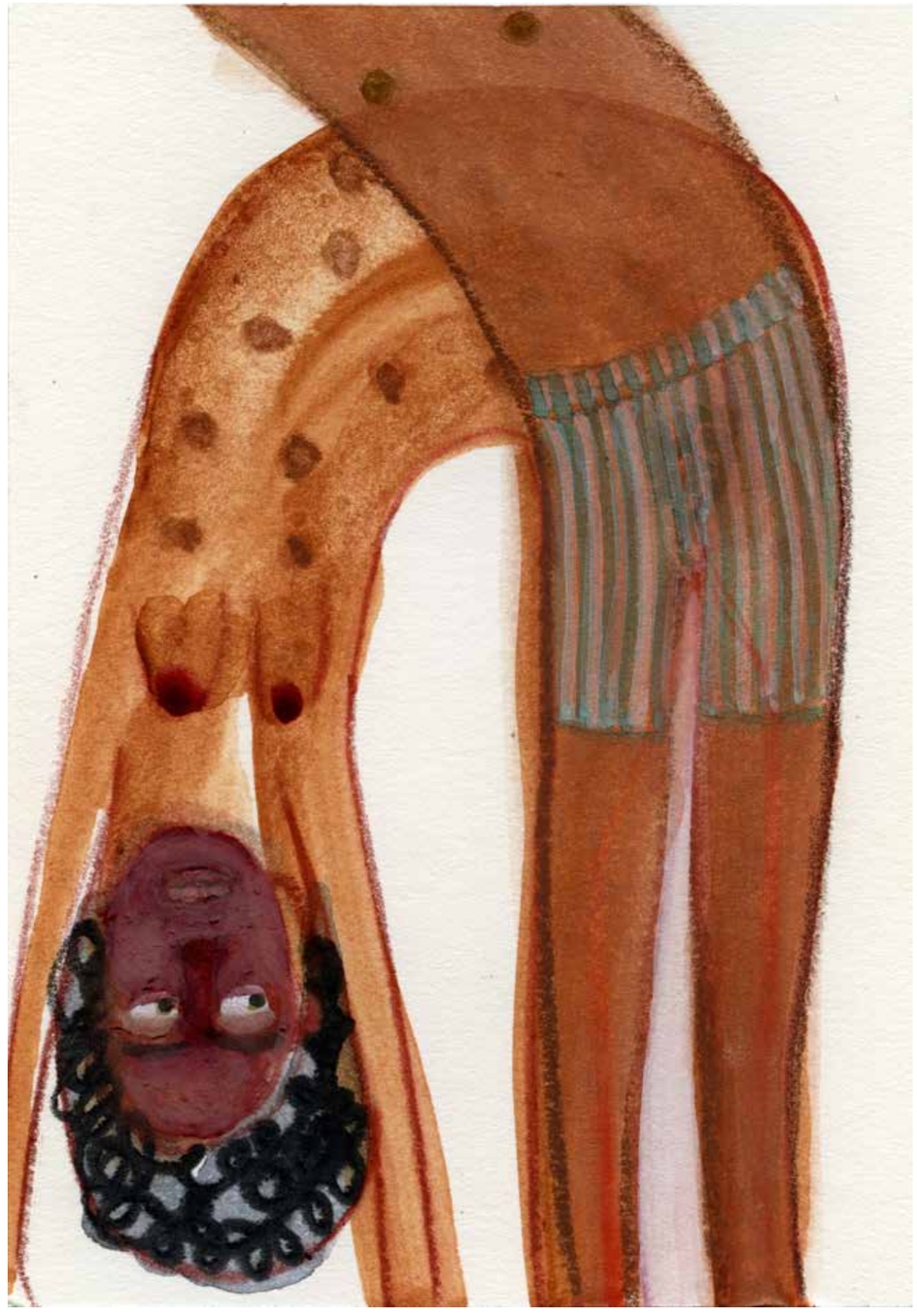
The small scale allows for experimental views and moments of sensation: a closeup of staring eyes, a sensation of water streaming past a torso, a fist

31 Laylah Ali and William S. Smith, "Figures of Color," *Art in America* 108, no. 7 (November 2020), 62.



connecting with someone's jaw. The *Studies* divert us with a parade of marginalia. The drawings pry open figuration in ways that reject the reductive tendency to view it as a simple representation of static identities. Instead, the *Studies* challenge our expectations by juxtaposing the human and inhuman or superhuman; bodies both vibrant and ill at ease; faces shown raw, as if just awakened with a bad hangover, or made up for a workday morning or a hipster Halloween bash.

In art history, "study" refers to the process of studying, the object of the study, and the preparatory sketch for a more developed work. This series encompasses all three at once—except that there is no finished work, only a speculative process. They insist on their status as incomplete, a situation characteristic of drawing as a medium. In a contemporary art world where drawing is no longer just a study and can consist of any medium—from graphite on canvas to scratching on film to the movement of string, or light, or breath—the only remaining attribute that distinguishes drawing is arguably its resistance to finish. Drawing is associated with the emergence of an image rather than its completion. Ali experiments with different media in the *Studies* using water-soluble crayon in combination with ink, colored pencil, and water-based paints. She often allows the paint to distort, dissolve, or otherwise subvert the lines of the drawing. In this series painting, normally a medium defined by finish (or at least by the achievement of a visual spectacle of unfinish), becomes subsumed by drawing's adamant experimentalism.



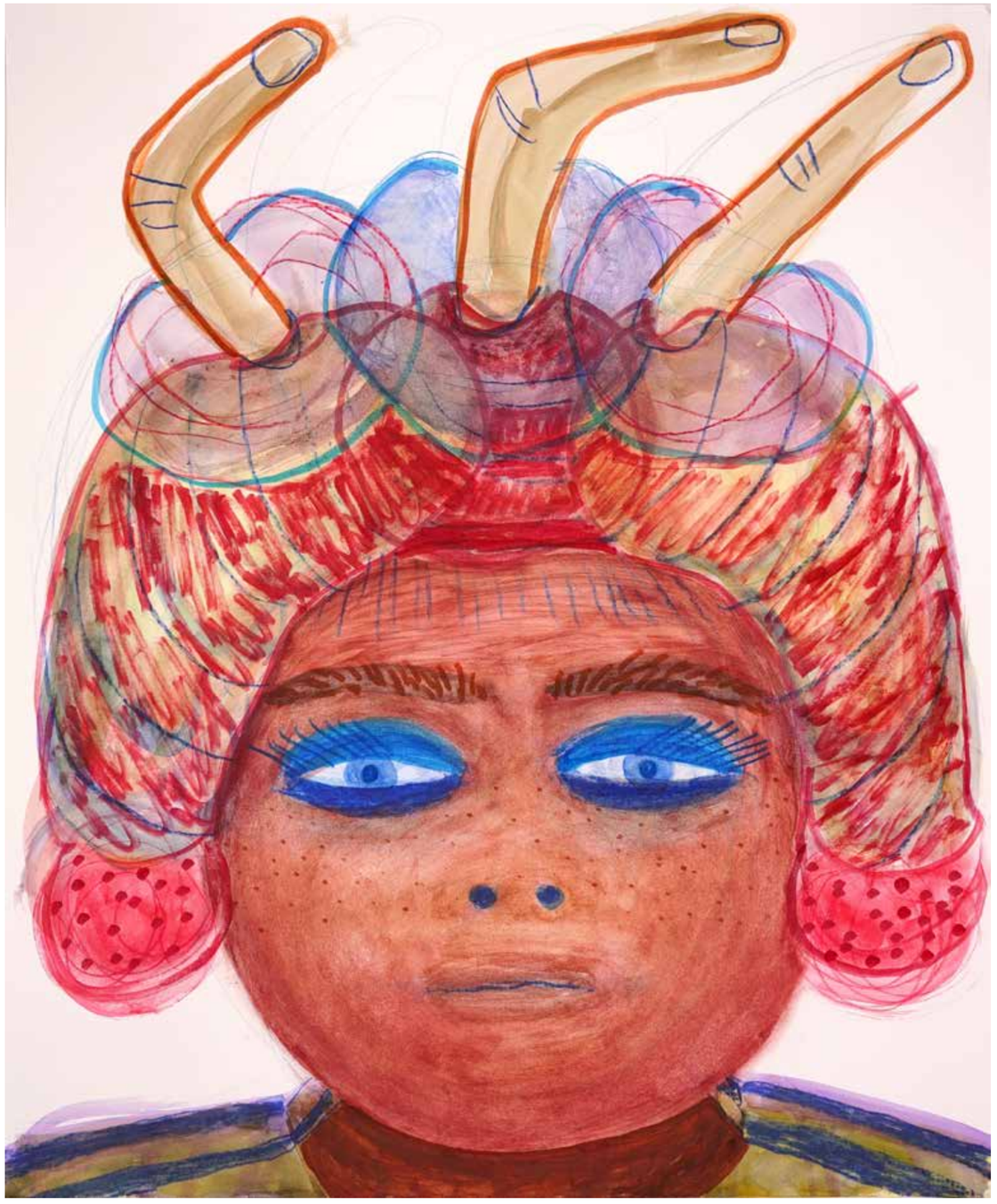
The *Studies* are not based on specific people, though they may or may not recall actual people. In this context, it is impossible to differentiate accident from attribute. A figure bending over has dots on their chest—are they moles or wounds or hives or a proliferation of nipples? Is this one figure in the action of bending, or two different figures? And what does the bent figure see as they turn their eyes toward the other figure's green-striped underwear with its hint of pubic hair? The odd slippages can read both as variations on the structure of the human body itself, and as rejections of the ways it is conventionally defined and, inevitably, judged.

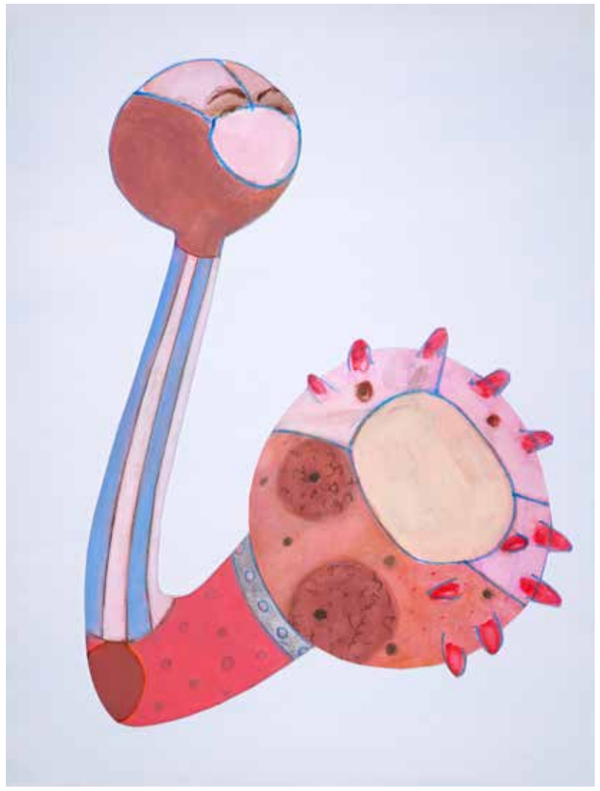
These protean drawings present visions of instability that pry open categories of gender and racial representation. The vignettes call for a recognition of experiences suppressed in a culture preoccupied with normative bodies, attractiveness, and positive images. The androgyny of many of the *Studies* opens them to queer or transgender readings in a non-exclusive way. While some characters make overt reference to femininity, for example breastfeeding a baby, any gender or racial identification remains provisional, as in Ali's earlier drawings.

Imagination is given free rein in another series of drawings depicting body parts that morph into cellular forms, fingerlike appendages, and colorful sexual organs in unusual configurations. Ali called these drawings *N.O.* for New Orleans, where they were made during a 2018 artist residency. While their colorful patterns could be seen as channeling the city's famed theatricality, the abbreviated title with its obvious refusal short-circuits any one definitive reading. Bodily fragments appear scrambled: thin brown arms become fingers or transform into hair or penis-like appendages, round colored heads pile up, blue-rimmed eyes gaze enigmatically out at us, and cellular and floral analogies proliferate [Figs. 17–19]. The vivid color makes them phantasmagoric, a psychosexual synonym for dreamlike. From a titular "NO" that pushes back against interpretation (specifically via our limited categories of gender, race, ability, and sexuality) to the global permission to invent characteristic of both dreams and art, the series continues the exploration inspired by Octavia Butler's descriptions of alternative organisms and new forms of genitalia.

The violent legacies of slavery and colonialism inform a drawing of disembodied brown heads crammed together into two ends of a partially submerged organic vessel. The scene uncannily recalls the middle passage during the era of slavery, or its more recent legacy of racial oppression in the U.S. response to hurricane Katrina. Yet such a reading does not preclude any number of others, in which the heads could be seen as embryos, cells, spores, or other living particles. The collapsing of scale and distance in these drawings combined with their fantastic imagery brings us back to the question, *what is a figure*? Equally important are a series of fundamentally linked questions that open onto the politics of interpretation: what figures do we value with recognition, with rights, with life?

The *Harbinger* drawings (2020) build on the biomorphic experiments of *N.O.* in response to Ali's experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, when illustrations of the virus became ubiquitous and global responses to the crisis laid bare the particular





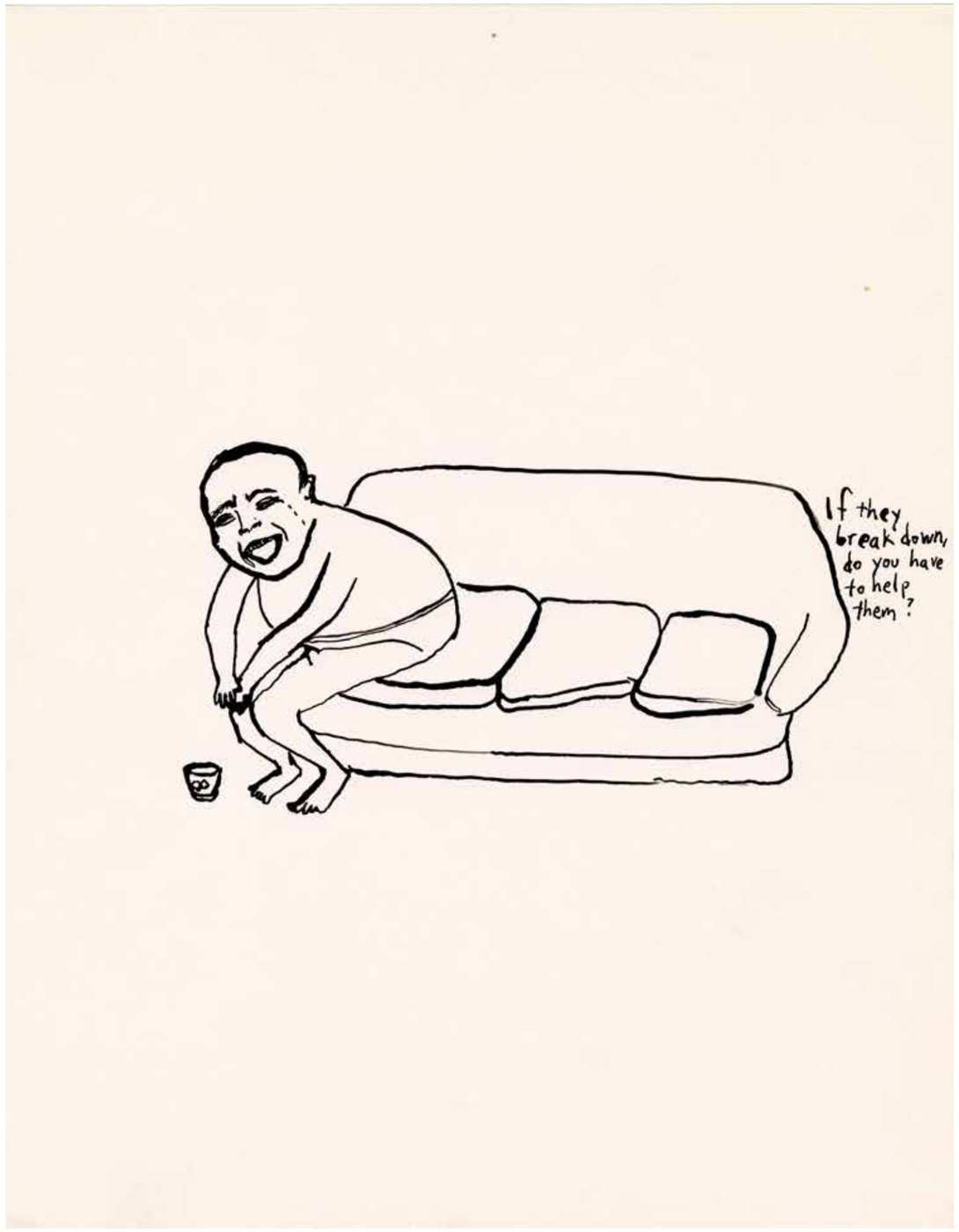
challenges faced by racialized and indigenous communities, impoverished and elderly people. These quirky figures present some combination of creatures, human heads, autonomous limbs, microorganisms, and footballs. They are masked, banded, bandaged, and full of mirth, or at least cartoony life. Some resemble wrecking balls on a threatening, studded body, suggesting the utter chaos and destruction left in many families and communities in the wake of the pandemic. At the same time, the containment of the bodies in hooded masks and segmented costumes also suggests their own need for protection and care. They recall not only cartoons and cells but also hospital gowns.

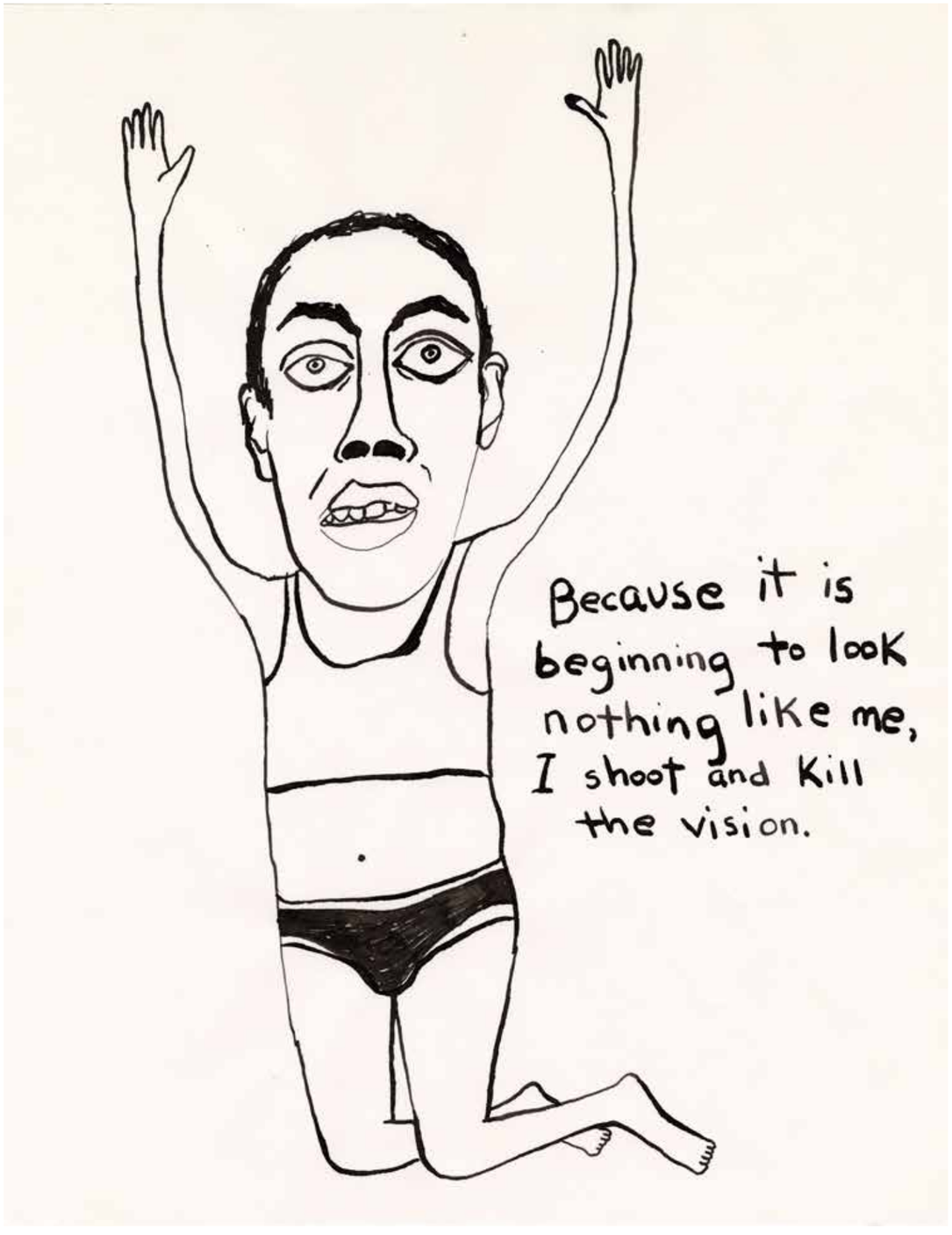
The series began as a reckoning with personal loss, sketches related to the death of Ali's mother in a nursing home in 2020, in the midst of the pandemic. The unusually expressionistic final sketches Ali made of her mother stand out as some of her most raw and personal images. These are frenetic drawings made quickly with water-soluble pastels. "I think of them as energy drawings," Ali says. "Trying to transfer the energy of my longing for her into marks on paper."[32] These inchoate sketches suggest a poignant transformation of the classic Pietà scene of Mary mourning the adult Jesus in her lap. In one drawing, the two figures appear almost indistinguishable, connected by a vivid circulation of violet lines and a shared interior of fleshy pink and red colorations. The hairless figures with their empty, blue, ghostlike eyes recall the haunted human presence in Edward Munch's *Scream*—except where

32 Ali and Smith, "Figures of Color," 62.

Munch's image exemplified the masculine alienation of the avant-garde artist, Ali conveys the profundity of a mother-daughter bond that persists through all the stages of life. It might be Ali on brown knees holding her weakened mother or a memory of her mother holding her, signifying how caregiving roles shift and change over a lifetime. The drip of violet watercolor paint down from the left-hand figure's head points beyond the physical plane into another one, or maybe into ours. These scenes of death simultaneously recall the moment of birth. Their fluid marks capture both the actions of care and the emotional resonances of love and loss. Once again, the drawings speak directly, poignantly, and openly to the viewer's own psychic landscape.

Ali's characters continue to evolve. Rooted in their historical moments, they gesture toward other worlds. Their concise poetry loosens up with time, becoming more colorful, playful, and in some ways more queer, all the more attuned to the workings of power and the politics of race, gender, and disability. They invite us to find our own emotional relation to them, while their unexpected interactions pry open our preconceptions. Making full use of the freshness and vividness of drawing, Ali calls us to witness the operations of power and violence, subtly expanding our empathetic horizons through careful observation and humor.


If they break down, do you have to help them?



Are you one of them?
An interview with Laylah Ali

Romi Crawford

Romi Crawford: What are your thoughts about pulling together a body of work for this exhibit of your drawings over many years? Are there any surprises for you in what shows up? And how do the selections help to produce a sense of your ongoing vision?

Laylah Ali: Drawing has been a constant for me since I was in my early 20s, so the process of preparing for the show has been a chance to meet myself again at different ages. Looking through the drawings is different from reading through a journal because the drawings seem to cut right past sensible or logical self-presentation and go directly into the more raw and vulnerable questions I was having at any given time. The main surprise for me is how many drawings that I come across that I have forgotten about.

There are some obvious consistent elements over time with my drawings. A major one that I notice now would be my disinterest in realism as a way to examine bodies.

Also, these figures are usually brain-to-paper, meaning I don't use models or real people as direct sources though they can be indirect sources. The one exception would be when I use myself in the drawings, but it is usually also brain-to-paper Laylah.

When you ask about vision, I think of a drawing from my *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series that I did in my mid-20s where I wrote: "the vision was just a way to order a vast oncoming hopeless depression."

But some of my ongoing general concerns—if one pictured them as an entangled mass rather than separate strands—would be race, power, gendering, human frailty, murky politics and not necessarily in that order.

I was in fact focusing on vision because of your specific reference to "vision" in the Nat Turner work, so what you wrote is that much more fascinating! Is vision more a projection of order after the fact of something chaotic and depressing? Is there anything about that "entangled mass" of ongoing concerns that inform a direction in your work that is at core depressing or chaotic? I refer here to your litany of race, power, gendering, human frailty, etc. Do you work around these because they are so unbearable?

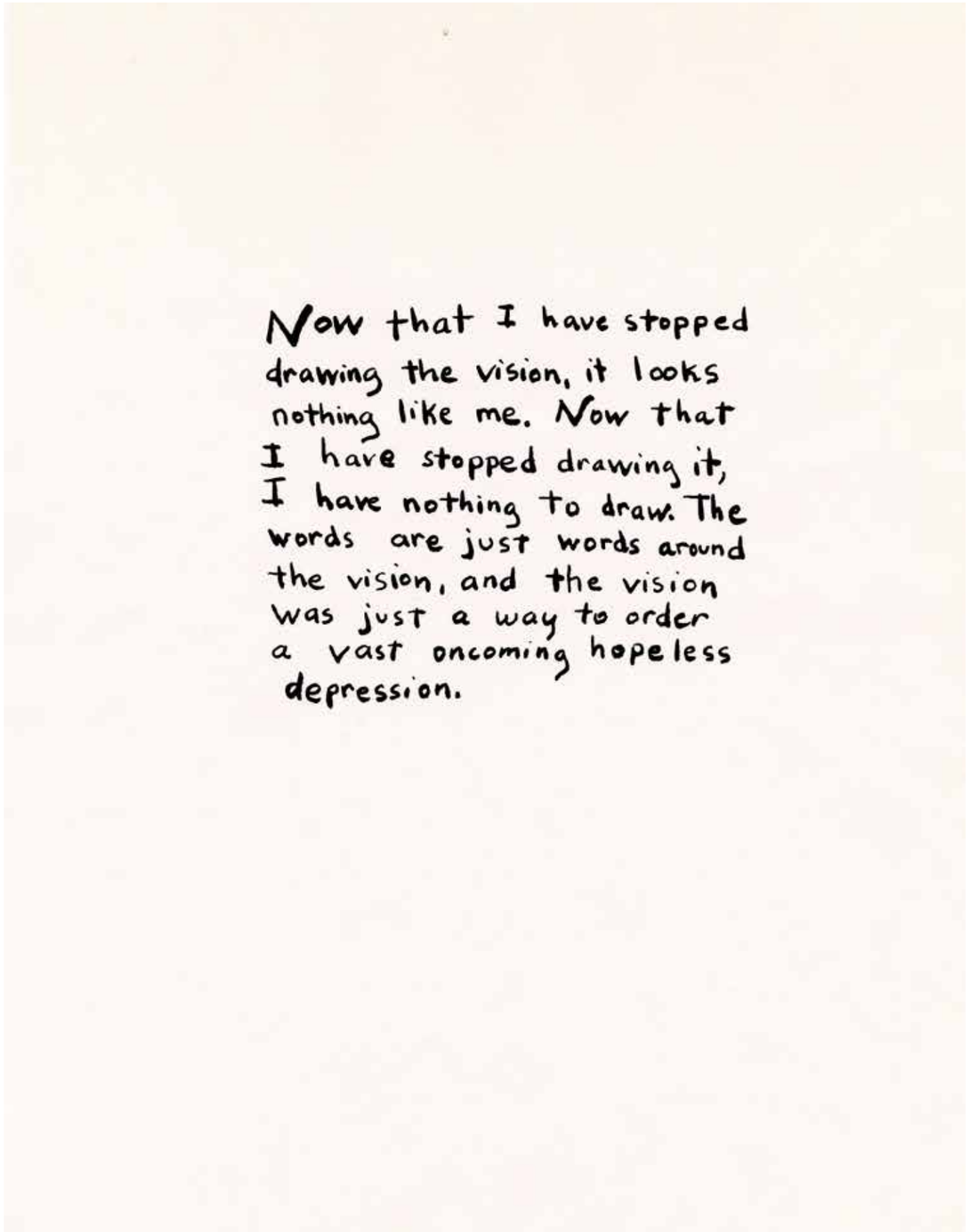
I do think that visions are often spurred by extreme circumstances. It has been said that Nat Turner had multiple visions and signs that convinced him that he must violently eradicate the slave owners. One of the signs was blood on corn in a field that he was laboring in. There were others: lights in the sky, an eclipse of the sun... each of these moving him closer to being able to engage in the irrevocable act of insurrection against the white power structure in 1831. I remember reading about these accounts of his visions, of his growing certainty of what must be done.

In the *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* drawings, I was exploring how this kind of vision, which is often violent in nature and has the goal to change the course of history, has usually presented as primarily gendered male in its drive and focus. Among other things, the drawings contained some longing for that certainty of vision, but also with the knowledge that it was also absurd of me to do so. Perhaps even more than that, I resisted that certainty.

Drawing for me is an act of making the entangled mass external — but without knowledge of what the outcome will be. My drawings are usually intuitive. In that way, they are different from my paintings, which are more planned and structured.

Even as you are known as an artist who leverages the accessibility of cartoon-like imagery, you also mine historical subjects (such as Nat Turner). How much bearing does historical reference and research in general have in your practice?

Sometimes, the research process is quite important, as with my *John Brown Song!* web project or the Octavia Butler inspired *Commonplace Drawings*. For those



projects, I spent a great deal of time poring over historical materials, not knowing what would come of the research. Having spent time in the Huntington Library [where Butler's archives were stored] with scholars who were writing books, I was very aware that the research I do is open-ended and without a goal in mind. I do find a particular pleasure in diving deeper and deeper into information, but there are other times that I do projects that are not researched at all—they are cognizant of history but also deliberately ahistorical. I think this is one of the true freedoms of being an artist; you can make your own methods. I should say that though the research process can be influential, the research itself may not end up in the work in ways that always make logical sense or form some kind of coherent thesis.

That makes sense. In some ways your forms are magical because they are somewhat free from or not overburdened by a prior history. And they are not necessarily pointing in obvious ways to the future either. The extra appendages or exaggerations of surface and skin have an otherworldliness that could be anchored in something primordial and evolutionary. Can you share your view of the time, space, and geography that some of the forms inhabit?

I think the figures in nearly all my drawings and paintings exist in a past present future that has ground, sky, and water as the main elements. Other than clothing with accoutrements and the context of a bleak environment, they really just have their relationships with each other. They are without buildings, phones, walls, cars, etc. In my early *Greenheads* paintings, there was the occasional bed and operating table reference, and there is a couch in one of the Nat Turner drawings, though there are so few of these context objects that I can almost remember them all.

The face and the head (of the human body) is a key motif in many of your works. Some evoke every person-ness, but others are more specific. Do these reference particular people that you know or have encountered? Who are they? Which of these notions is more interesting to you– every person-ness/universality or specificity/ particularity?

Occasionally they are inspired by particular people in my life—my mom or dad, my daughter, friends or romantic interests and sometimes the random public figure—like I did a drawing that was a reaction to one of Trump's annoying press secretaries. I would say the drawings are mostly not based on anyone I know but are put forth as ways to capture certain emotional states or affects that I am trying to explore through the various skewing lenses of how we are both categorized and self-categorize. The drawings aim for the shifting place where our external self, which we can only control to a point, meets our internal self, which is full of conflicting information and feelings. In that way, these drawings are always going to come with the same limitation of seeing someone, a stranger, and being adjacent to them, feeling something about them but ultimately not being let in.

And of course, your *Greenheads* series of paintings, as you have attested to in other interviews, point towards a universal subject. What other strategies do you deploy to address race?

Well, the *Greenheads* yearn to be seen as universal figures but also are constrained by their time, which has difficulty seeing black figures as being able to reference all humans. In that way, I think all my figures are racialized because that is how I have experienced the world.

Part of the reason I make things is as a way to both understand and push back against what I and others are experiencing or observing in the world. In that way,

the work serves as a lifeline for me to continue to be in the world and have a sense that I am not being wholly digested by these forces that are wreaking havoc.

So in terms of strategies, I guess one of my main thoughts is that race in my work is rarely alone as a category. It is always tied to other complicating factors. That is the only truthful way to make sense of it. It gets back to my earlier comment about the entangled mass.

You leverage the terminology and idea of "typology" though your typologies are in no way generic, simple types. They are ornate and complex, very unique, creature-like occurrences. The drawing form of the typologies is also complex and hyper-detailed. Is that detail intended to cover up or safeguard the types? To secure them in some way? Or does it disclose something about them?

I like what you propose that the figures in those drawings are made safer by all of the hatching and crosshatching that make up their external garb. I think that many of us learn to wield our external selves like an armor that protects our vulnerabilities.

We mostly interact with the world based on random, quick, external interactions. It is hard to push past people's boundaries into an honest exchange, so we are continually negotiating signs, symbols, skin, and they become a sort of specious code or shorthand. My work is concerned with both the absurdity of this shorthand and its ubiquity, and if anything can be salvaged from it.

Skin color gives off all sorts of signs that are not necessarily connected to the person inside the skin. I can't change my skin to suit situations; in some places it's neutral, some places it's a plus, and others it is a liability or a danger. That is a great deal to negotiate. So clothing or adornment becomes a way to manipulate such readings. For instance, to redirect attention, to appear larger than life, or to fit in.

Could you slow down one of the *Typology* drawings and describe the process of such meticulous drawing? Do you have a clear design schematic or do you improvise your way through the design? I guess I'm also asking about how interested you are in design aesthetics, given the design competence and beauty in those works?

The *Typology* drawings always started with a general idea in my head (like two figures kissing, one is prone). Before I put pen to paper, I knew what the energy between the figures would be and the power dynamic. I would start by making a simple contour drawing that established the figures and the negative space between them. So, in that very first stage, the negative space had to come alive for the drawing to become one that warranted more attention.

That initial stage had to be very focused and confident and then after that, the drawing became more intuitive and spontaneous. They weren't sketched beforehand. They felt more like puzzles to be solved as I was making them—I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen in terms of the dress or the adornments or the degree of hatching or cross-hatching of lines.

I have consciously thought about making things initially appealing in order to carry other kinds of information that is not as easy. I have never termed it as design aesthetics but often thought about it as a strategy to bring people in or toward something through color and pattern but not ultimately for the purpose of staying with the pleasure or beauty aspect. In the end, if one is only talking about the quality of line or the way I have laid color onto a surface, then I have not succeeded.

What is the relationship between these *Typology* drawings and your more spare renderings, like the *Studies* series?

I think the sparer works that you mention may better capture an emotional expression. I am trying to cut to an unguarded place with fewer marks. I often work from my own raw emotional state for those kinds of drawings.

It seems important that the range of what I am thinking about is represented by a range of marks and time engagement. Sometimes, I am needing to act out, to lacerate, to quickly puncture. Other times, I want to build something over time, layering, changing it as I go—a long slow mark with a brush, a jab at the paper with a sticky oil pastel, cutting an eye from one piece of paper and carefully pasting it on another. The paper to me has bodily qualities that make it inviting for the kinds of inquiries I am making.

The self-portrait is evident in your work obviously in some instances (*Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* and *Commonplace Drawings*) and less obvious in others (*Studies* series or *Note Drawings*). What does your take on the self-portrait allow for? Why do you think the self-portrait of the artist remains a potent constant?

For me, because my external self has never fully belonged to me, I see my self-portrait as expansive and gesturing towards "not-me" as well.

I will give you the example of when I traveled around Europe as a college student backpacking, taking trains, and staying with many strangers in the late 1980s. In each country, I was assigned—socially, not officially— a different incorrect idea of my identity based on my brown skin, usually according to local prejudice. That assigned identity was almost never favorable and it was rarely linked to my true mixed African-American heritage but rather instead assumed me to be Northern African, which was closer and more tied up with who was trying to migrate to some of those European countries at the time. It served as a great lesson of the mutability of our external selves no matter how much we have developed a solid sense of ourselves and our own history. I should also say this was true when I was an exchange student

in Kenya as well. The need to classify people is very strong. Who are you? Where are you from? Are you one of them?

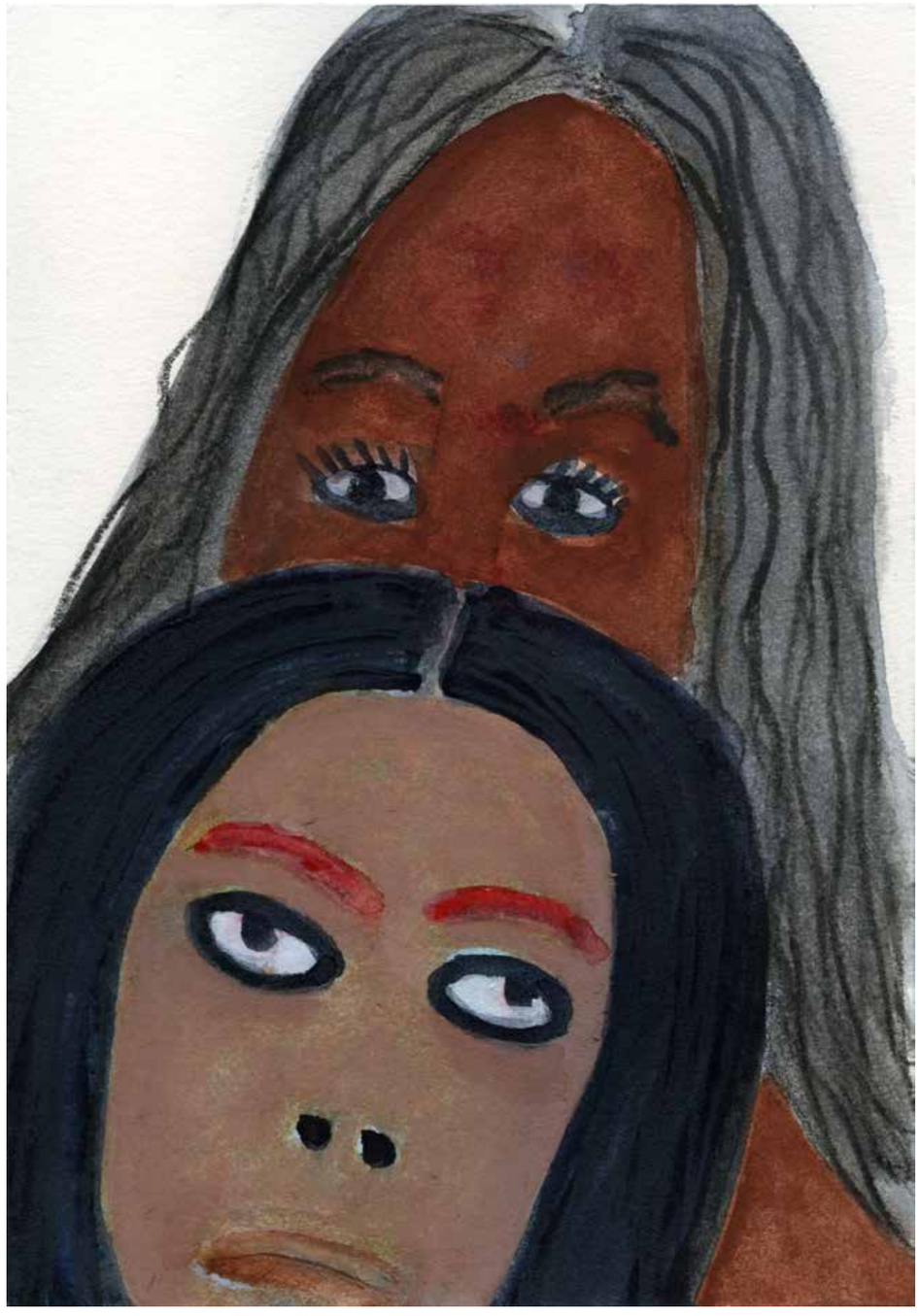
So, getting back to the self-portrait, I have often thought of my own misinterpreted body, especially as a younger artist, as a vehicle for exploring what is bigger than myself, which I think is true of many Black artists. But it is also true that I am me, with all of my peculiarities and specific history, and the self-portrait is also a way to assert: I exist. Someone like me exists, and I am going to document that. The self-portrait is the only kind of portrait where you can, if you want to, truthfully bridge or even skip the artifice of the exterior. It can be generated from the inside of my being. That has a great deal of appeal.

The use of text and language shows up periodically in your work (*Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision*, *B Drawings*, *Note Drawings*, for example). How do you perceive language serves as a useful formal and also communicative tool in your work?

I think that the use of language asks us to respond with language. It is perhaps a more forthright invitation to put your thoughts into words, which may be a more direct call to action. I think of it as a kind of prodding the viewer to act, as if articulation places us more in a distinctly political space.

The *Studies* series have so much emotion and pathos in them. Would you ever draw this out more in characterizations that speak, talk, or have story lines? I ask this also because of your use of text and language. There is, for me, a thought bubble of some sort looming on the edge of so many of these works. I know you have forayed into printmaking and have worked in other media, but would you collaborate with a writer or filmmaker to draw that out?

I rarely rule anything out. I would have never thought my *Greenheads* paintings would have inspired a performance ["figures on a field" with choreographer Dean Moss]—and I initially resisted that collaboration because I couldn't figure out how



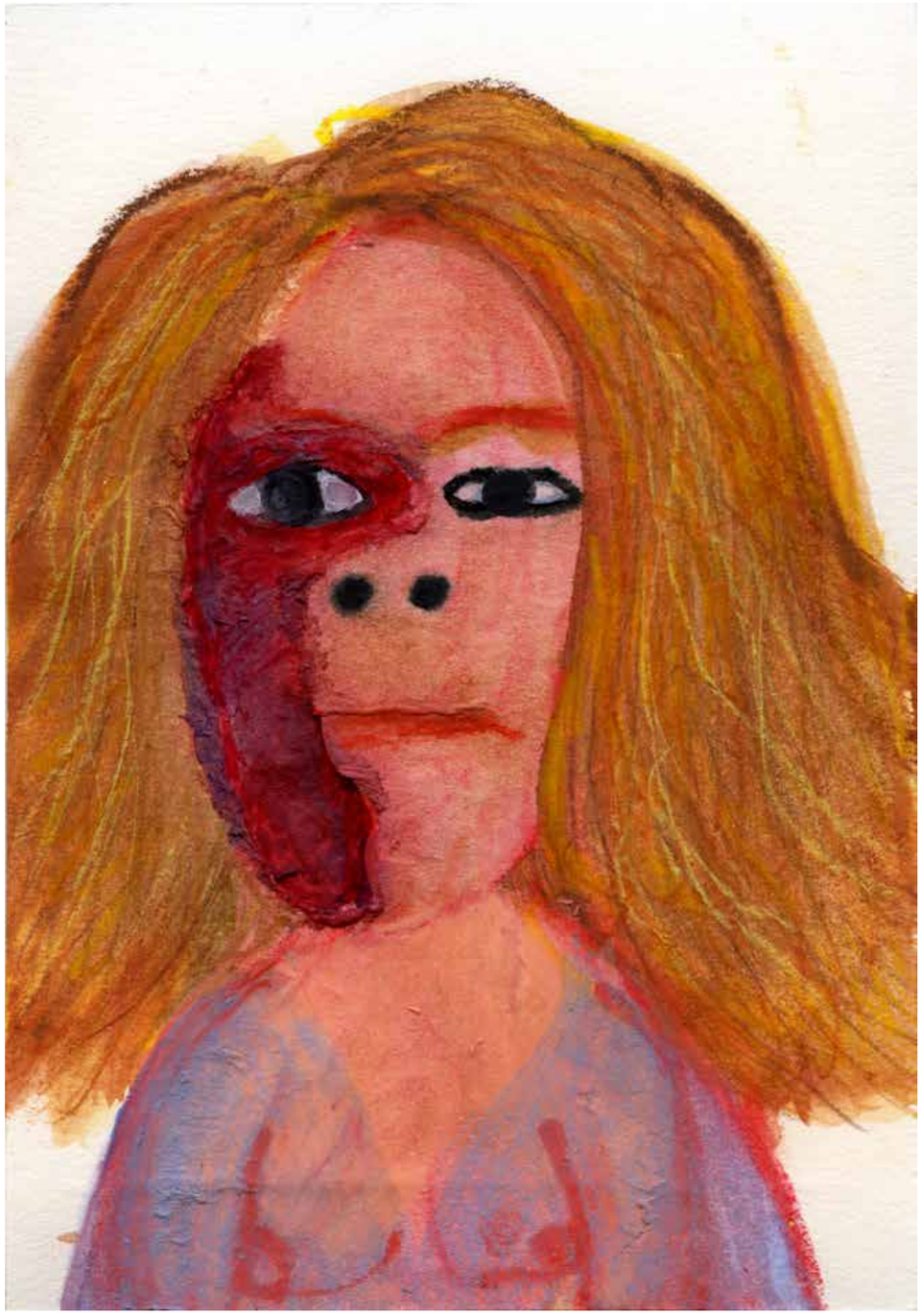
my figures would translate into being represented by actual human bodies—but that proved to be a meaningful interpretation.

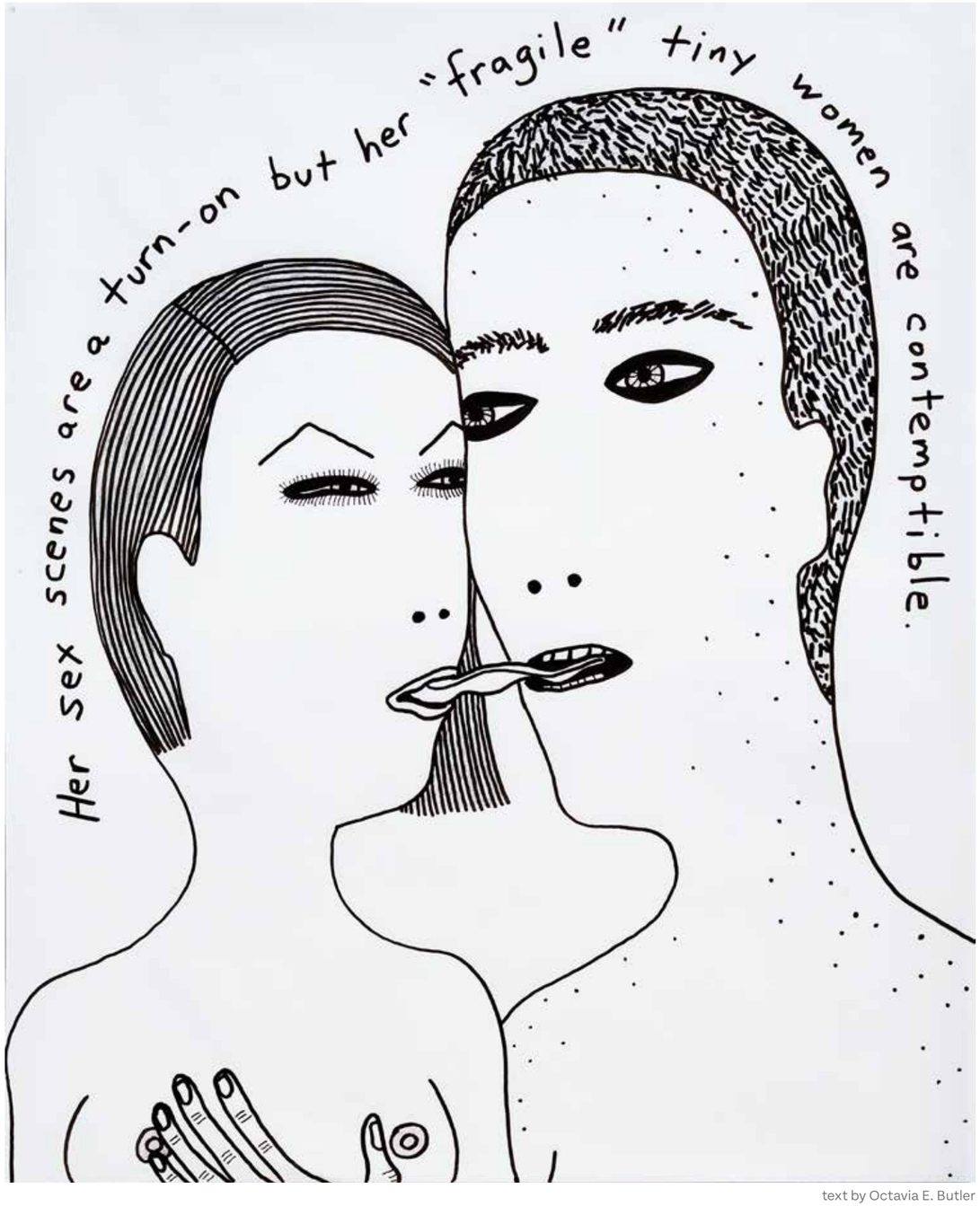
And as we conduct this interview, there are creative writers who are responding to images from the *Studies* series for a literary magazine so I will look forward to seeing what they come up with. And poet Arisa White is writing something for this catalog! This kind of work with writers seems particularly well suited to the openings I leave in the work.

In general, I think the process of collaborating is a much healthier human way of working than being primarily alone in one's studio for decades. That being said, I am usually relieved to return to the studio after a collaboration, no matter how well it went. Whether true collaboration can produce the same kind of distinctive vision, I am not sure.

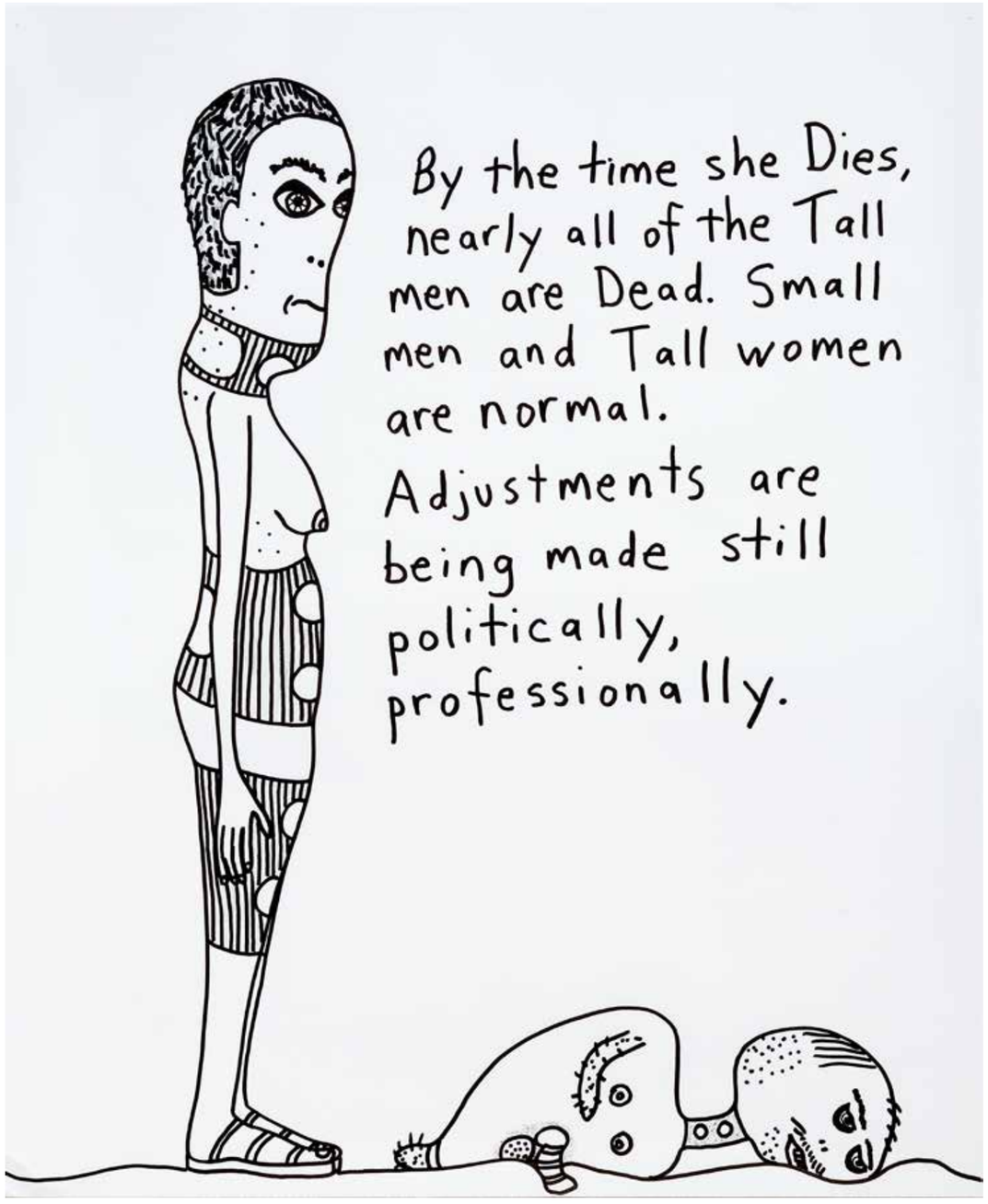
I also appreciate the implied existential lone-ness that marks your practice and character forms, so I'm just as interested in the continuation of that project. What direction are you interested in now?

Paintings are on the horizon. My creativity is on a circular path—or maybe some sort of variation on an oval would suit me better—and paintings occur at intervals on that path, which feels right to me. I am not aiming to make increasingly spectacular things to mark the progression of my career. But my hope is that as I grow older, I can achieve new depths in the work. What I have been interested in, what I have worked on so far, it seems that it will provide a lifetime of examination if I keep paying attention. It is a lifelong project with different iterations.

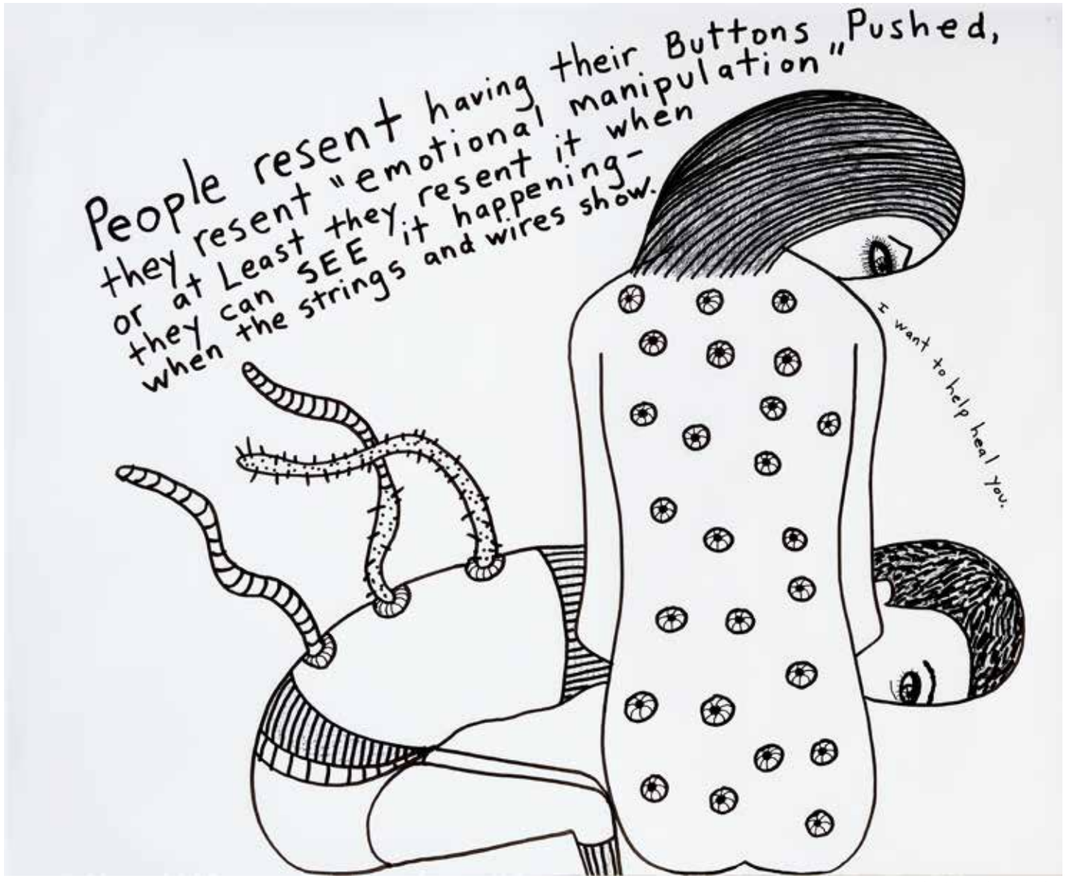




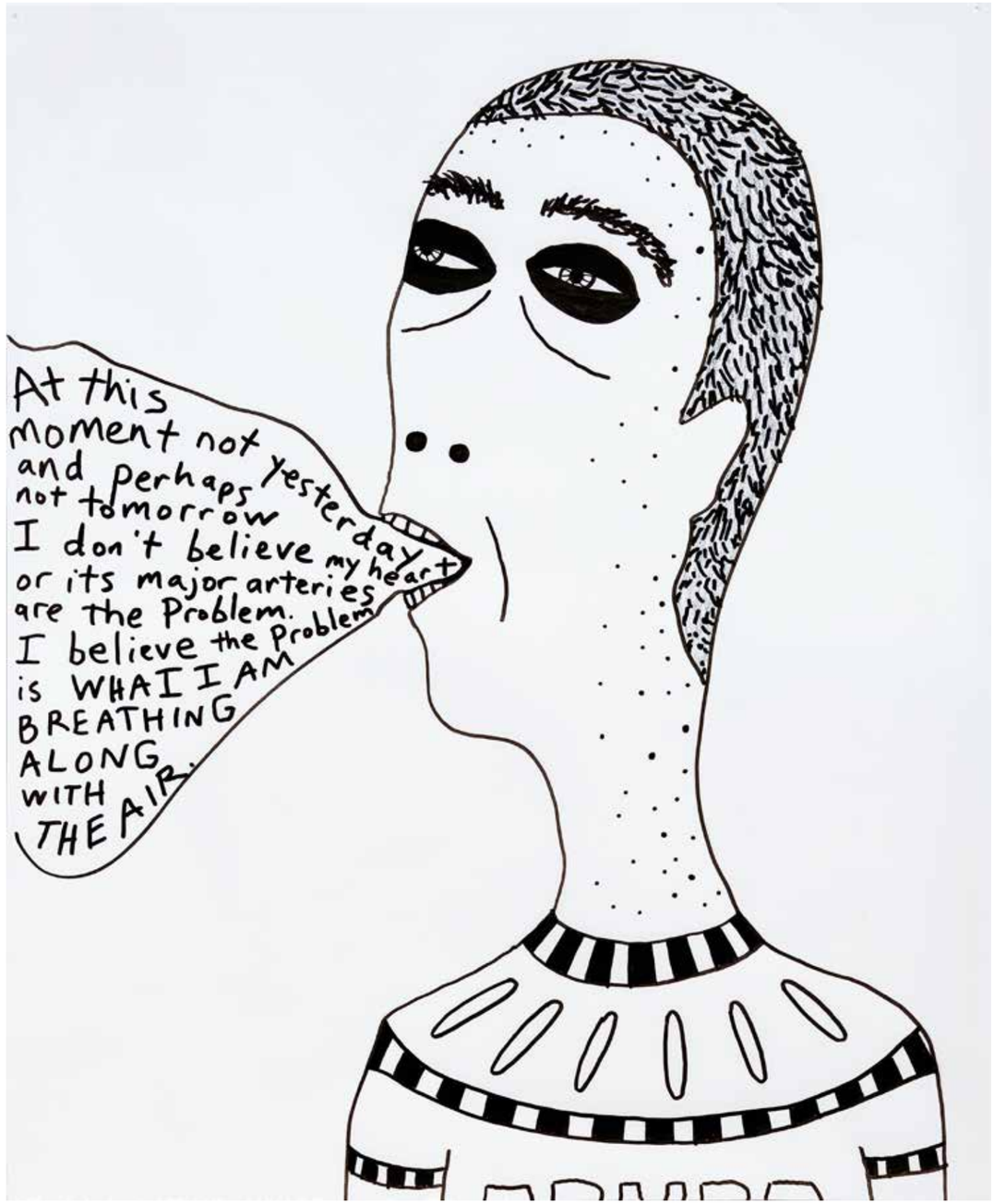
text by Octavia E. Butler



text by Octavia E. Butler



text by Octavia E. Butler



text by Octavia E. Butler

In a Small Font, I, Too, Say, "I want to help heal you." | A Poet's Encounter with Laylah Ali's *Commonplace Drawings*

Arisa White

Current weather:
77°F (25°C), Wind NE at 6 mph (10 km/h), 79% Humidity
Maine mass shooting is the 36th one in 2023
13 minutes ago Israel expanded Gaza ground operations

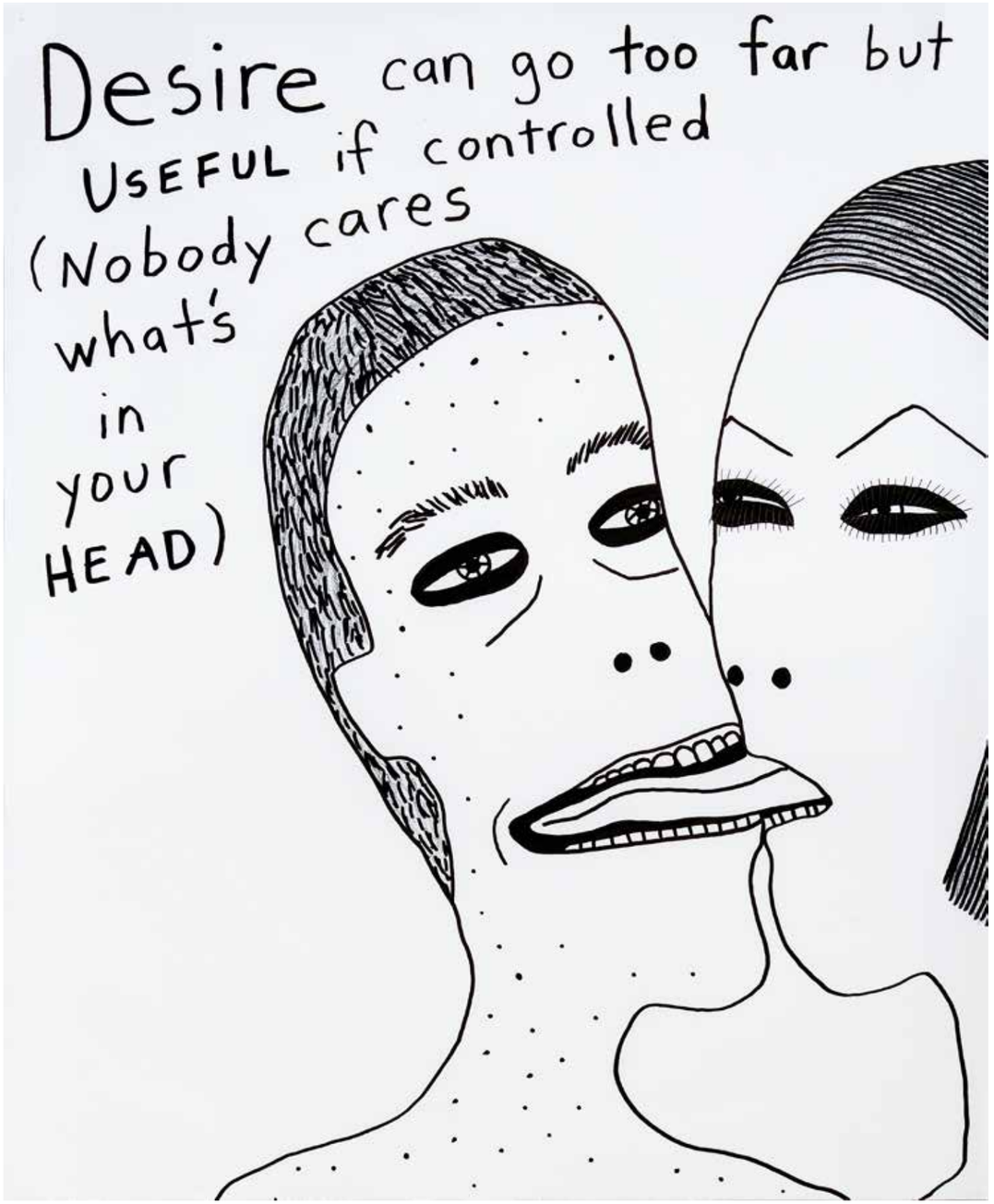
Like weather on the skin, you feel the touch of these drawings. Tentacles reaching from the spine, suggestive of connection. How needy we are? How want and wanting and barnacled to more? The *Commonplace Drawings* feel like Laylah Ali created composite sketches of my therapy sessions. Where I become both familiar and stranger to myself.

The body is seen as engendering a series of demands drawn on the skin—this sensory organ of ours, sensuous and alive. A continuous scarf, the first barrier, that becomes operative, seeking and questing as the body stretches, even for just a moment, beyond the political and professional ways we are being made still.

The generation of reverse ekphrasis, these drawings were guided by intuition and the willingness to be discovered.[1] I look up the definition of Ali's last name: "rise, ascend." It becomes an analytic and I recognize, there is rarely a sense of ground in these drawings. They occupy the air, a common place between us.

Ali used Octavia Butler's "writings as a springboard for making the drawings" and what we see are the resonances, the flights across time, the merging of two selves, minds—the reports from the flesh. This imaginative field of energy, stark and blunt, ink on paper, our differences made clear and tangible.

1 In an email interview with Laylah Ali, who had been invited by the Clockshop arts organization to participate in *Radio Imagination: Artists and Writers in the Archive of Octavia E. Butler*, Ali states: "My approach was basically to look through as much as I could and have intuition guide me. Over a series of visits, I looked at photos Butler collected as well as newspaper articles, drafts of novels, and many journal entries, which I gravitated toward. Her journal entries provided the text that inspired and is included in the drawings." From my point of view, this appears as "reverse ekphrasis" because in the literary tradition, often it's the poets who are imaginatively reflecting on, and writing about, a piece of artwork.



text by Octavia E. Butler

Vulnerability is a common place. We are emergent bioforms concocted from the gut flora of the beast. We are archival and brand new, shamefully unadorned in the empire's new clothes. We are the pulse and pause of never feeling we are good enough. From the brink and border, we arrive to do the difficult work of having our buttons

pushed
filled
evacuated
kissed
fed
licked
witnessed
adored
bridged
peeped So we can understand

at what point we meet our edge and make these agreements: "We cannot kill each other, . . . / But we can always kill THEM."

How useful is our desire in rubber gloves? We are not immune to messages in the air, to the haptics of horripilation. Feel the object in your hands, writhe with cilia. How it will slip and escape naming. Belong to all things and be fugitive to none.

It is our mission to know what it is we do.[2]

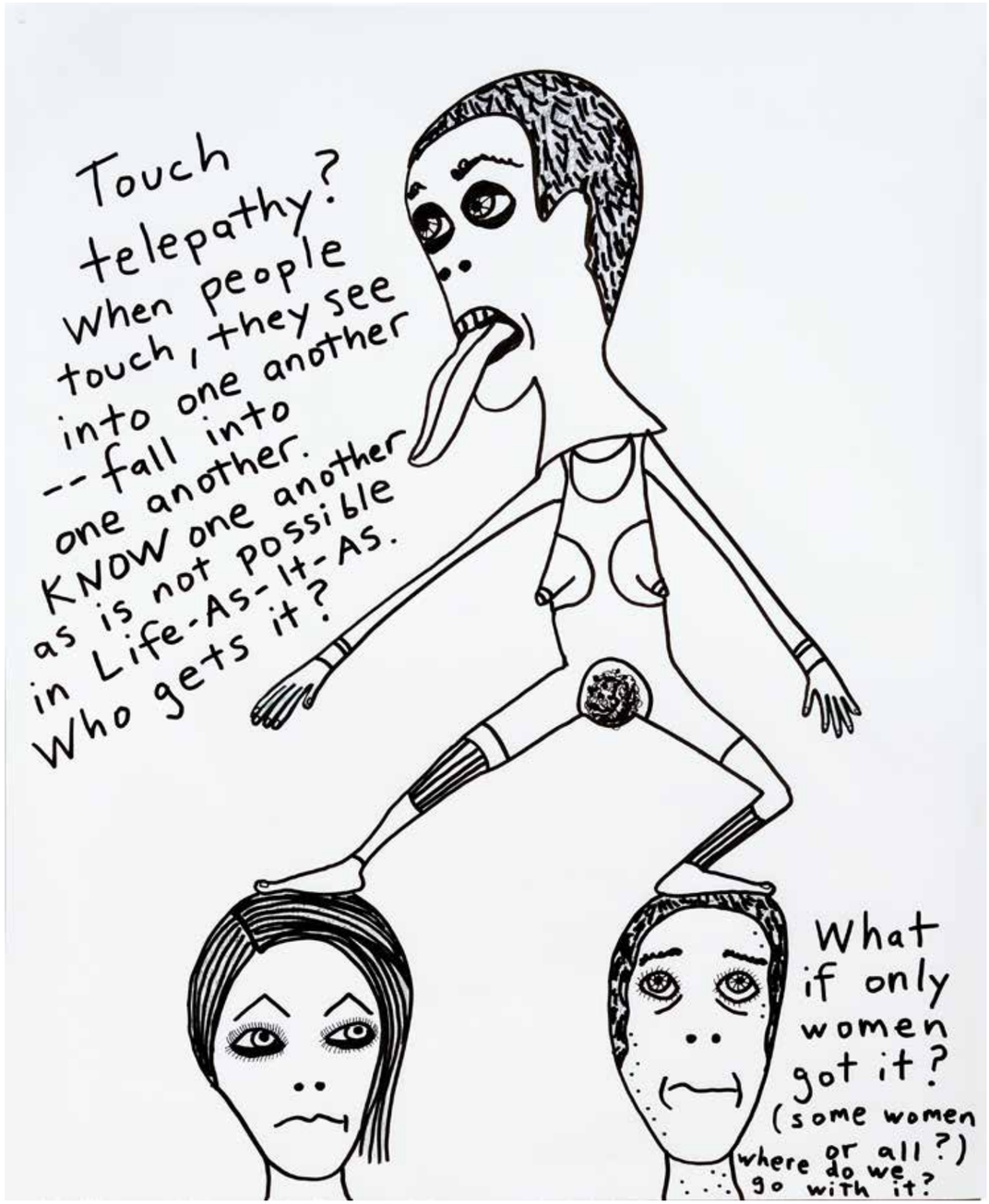
It is our role to make conscious what we cannot see. To express the network of our relating in which we pore and portal into and come out slick, shaped by the passageway of travel. Look at the new geometries Ali has gifted us with, a third-dimensionality to what was supposed to remain unsaid and diaristic.

New bodies are brought forth that we can call our own:

Tall women stone-eyed to small, contemptible bodies of dead men.

The chosen back for turtle barnacles native to the Atlantic Ocean.

2 Courtesy of Laylah Ali, who shared with me some photos of Butler's writings from the Huntington Library. In one photo, Butler writes, in bold marker: "**Her goal is to understand her "mission"—to know what she is to do.** She wonders, wanders, blunders, wanting, NEEDING teachers."



text by Octavia E. Butler

The foot lifted from the neck and now in warrior pose on their heads.

> It is with the right eye they strike a bond—a strategy backed by neuroscience to bring the alien home. The strange is given a place that is common between us. A place of ritualistic verbs and dutiful abstract nouns—our addictions transmute eyes to extra black Americana beans. The skin becomes petrified, cracks, the skin erupts a labour of moles—the body yelling surrender to the drive of exclaiming marks.

“Who gets it?”

The echoes. The common place drawn between us. Wild and transforming us with the death of certainty. The reformation of the I. If an oak can become a chair, major arteries are how you get in and out of a state. Sex is an interstate. Tender empiricism is an attitude.[3] The self extends and her back is not a single-person story, but setting and situation. The world is wetter in some places,[4] and her skin has adapted to the adhesive of 25 barnacles, the methodical crash of seawater, and her spine’s crescent bend.

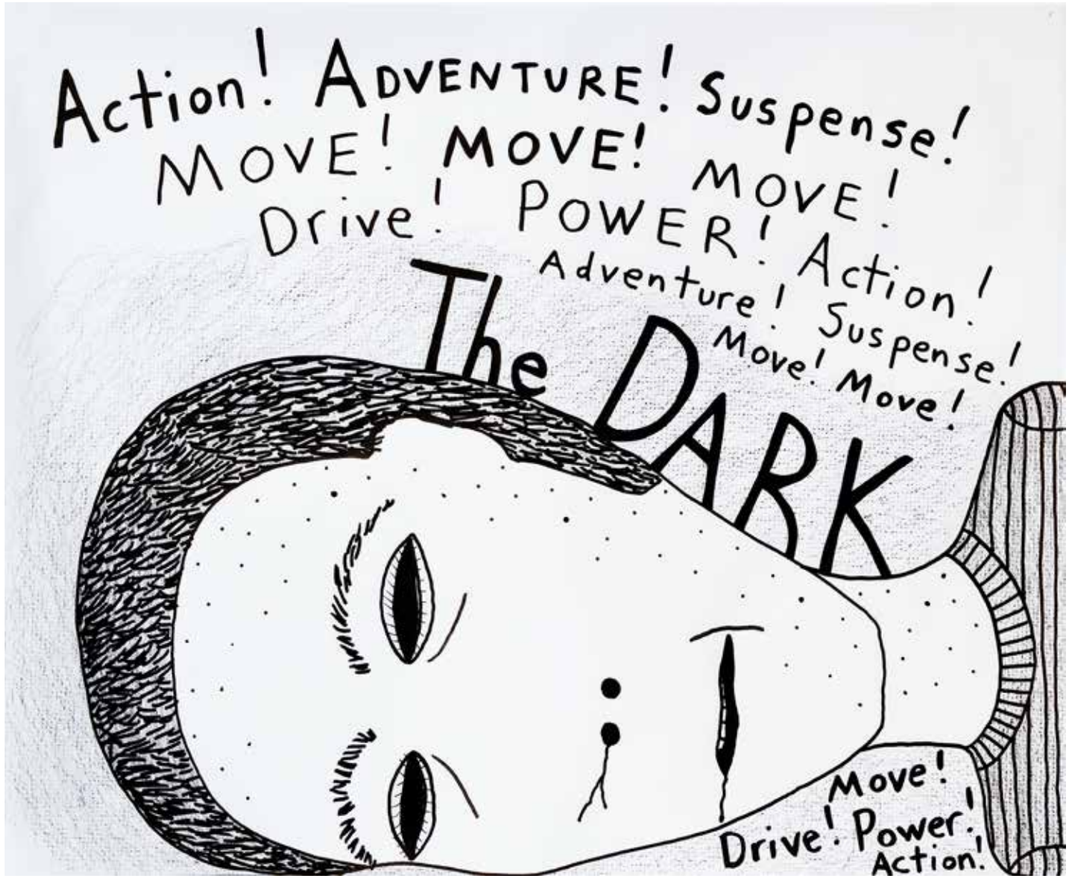
A tender scene that turns-on the moon or lunatic inside us. Rouses the imperative to help heal. And she is there, offering enough privacy and shield for the body to prostrate in a depressive angle. Are we amphibious and ready to commit our eyes to deprivation, pinwheels, and baggage? Our words fed back to us in fig-shaped speech balloons. We will sweat, be elemental, offer our salt as medicine every time we touch. We will draw on each other and our hearts won’t be the problem.

My heart is the reason I’m a Believer-Prophet.[5] New worlds of perception open up to me. “Persistent, intelligent, yet absolutist.” A romantic wooed by my own cyclical catastrophes.

3 Andreas Weber, in his book *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, writes: “The doctrine lies not in the neutral analysis of the world, but rather in entering in relationship with it and allowing oneself to be transformed by this relationship. Goethe called such an attitude “tender empiricism.” In it, the self extends itself as an echo of a constantly vibrating creative potential and ‘every object properly perceived opens up a new organ of perception in us.’ ”

4 Courtesy of Laylah Ali, who shared with me some photos of Butler’s writings from the Huntington Library. In one photo, from Butler’s notebook, she writes: “The aliens have arrived and hidden themselves. That’s life. Global Warming. The planet has gotten hotter, dryer in some places, wetter in others. So? That’s Not story. That’s setting & situation. . . .”

5 Courtesy of Laylah Ali, who shared with me some photos of Butler’s writings from the Huntington Library. In one photo, from Butler’s notebook, she’s defining different kinds of believers: “Strong, intelligent believer; Fearful believer; Follower; Fanatical believer; Pacificist believer; Believer-Prophet; Loving Believer; Low-esteem Sadist believer; and Competitive Leader.” The complete definition of a Believer-Prophet, also includes: “May be dangerous. Is a leader, a mover.”

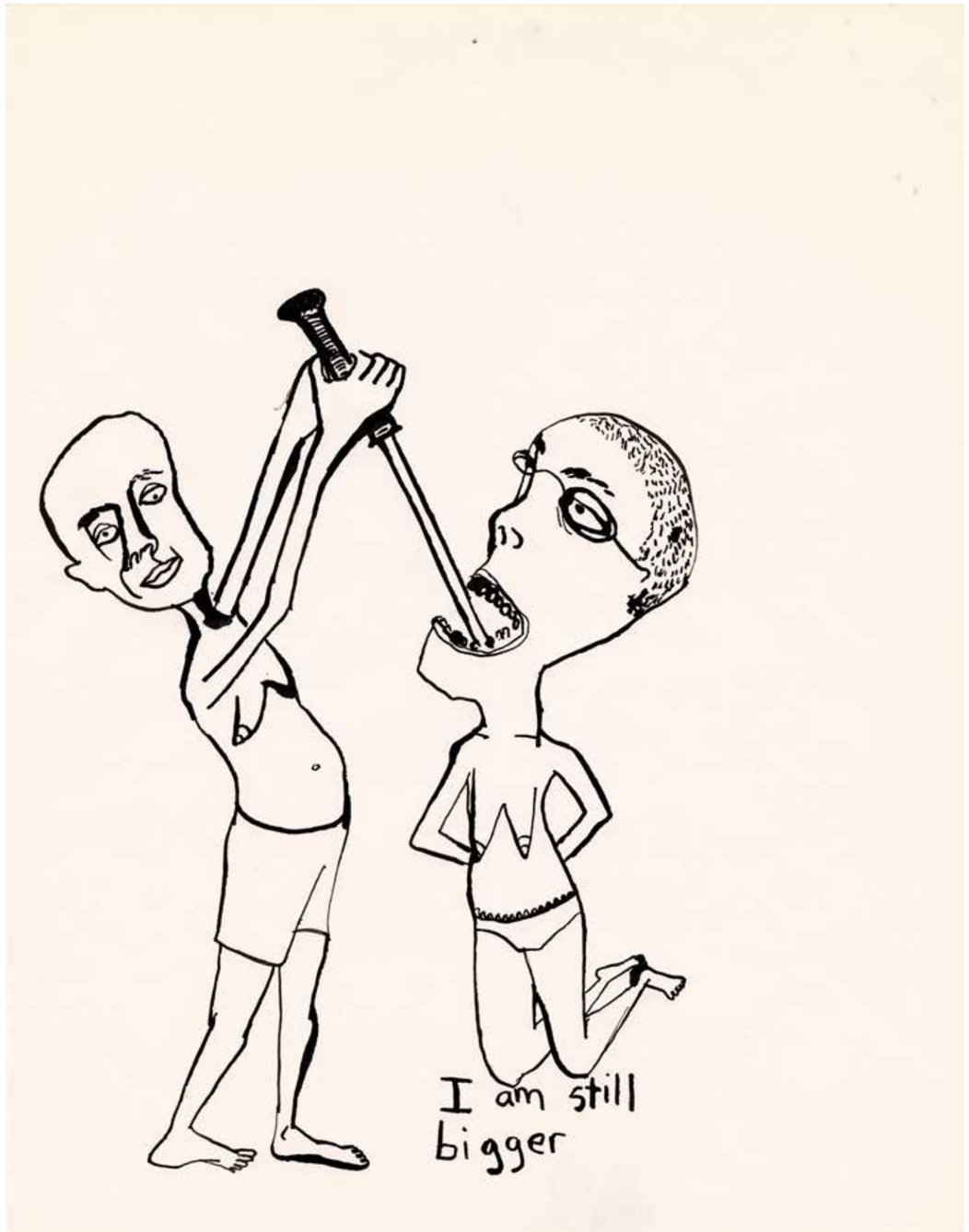


text by Octavia E. Butler

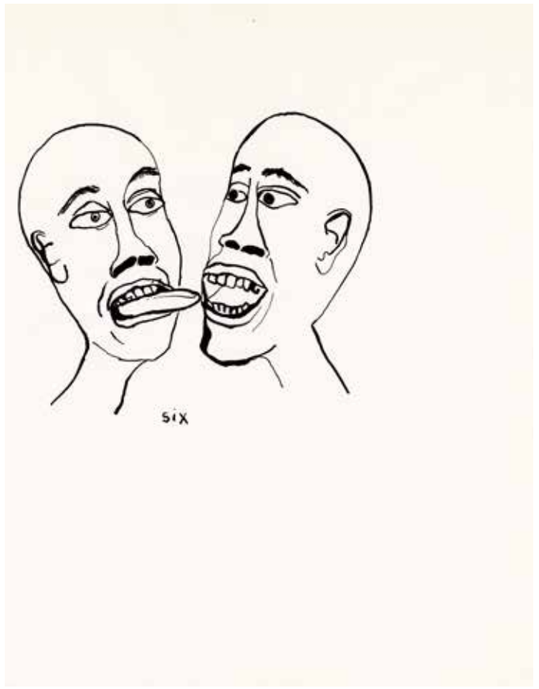
I have fallen into another
my thumb missing the target of her nipple
and into another
her eyes beneath the roof of so much doubt
and an other
The Dark saturated and moved with her tongue
into a-not-her I have fallen and I loved her hair's asymmetrical strings and wire

It is not possible in this epidemic of loneliness to know one another with the air we breathe, hidden systems inhaled along with fragile tiny women who troll the creative void of "not yesterday" and "perhaps not tomorrow." I draw on the air with the warm scalpel of my descending body.

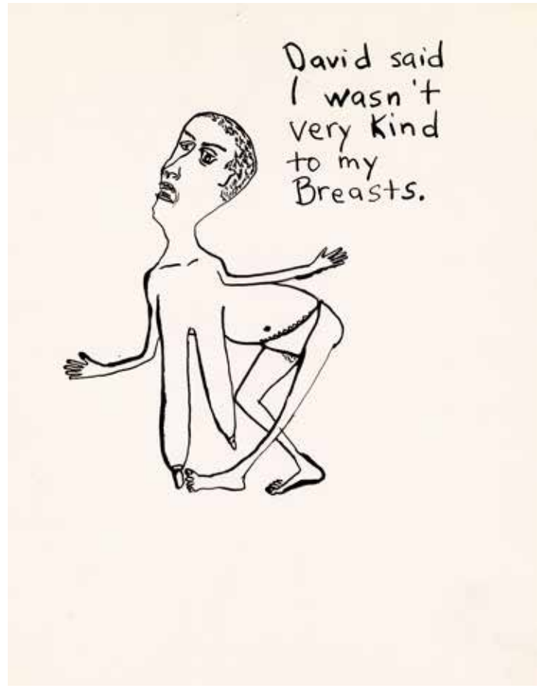
Brave is not a common place between us. Living beings productive-to-a-fault, we become skinless, no longer fluent in care. We lose our sense. We must put our skin in the commons to sustain. Change comes from total commitment to refusing the mad libs of sentences already constructed.


I am still
bigger


His vision
Becomes
Irritating.


six

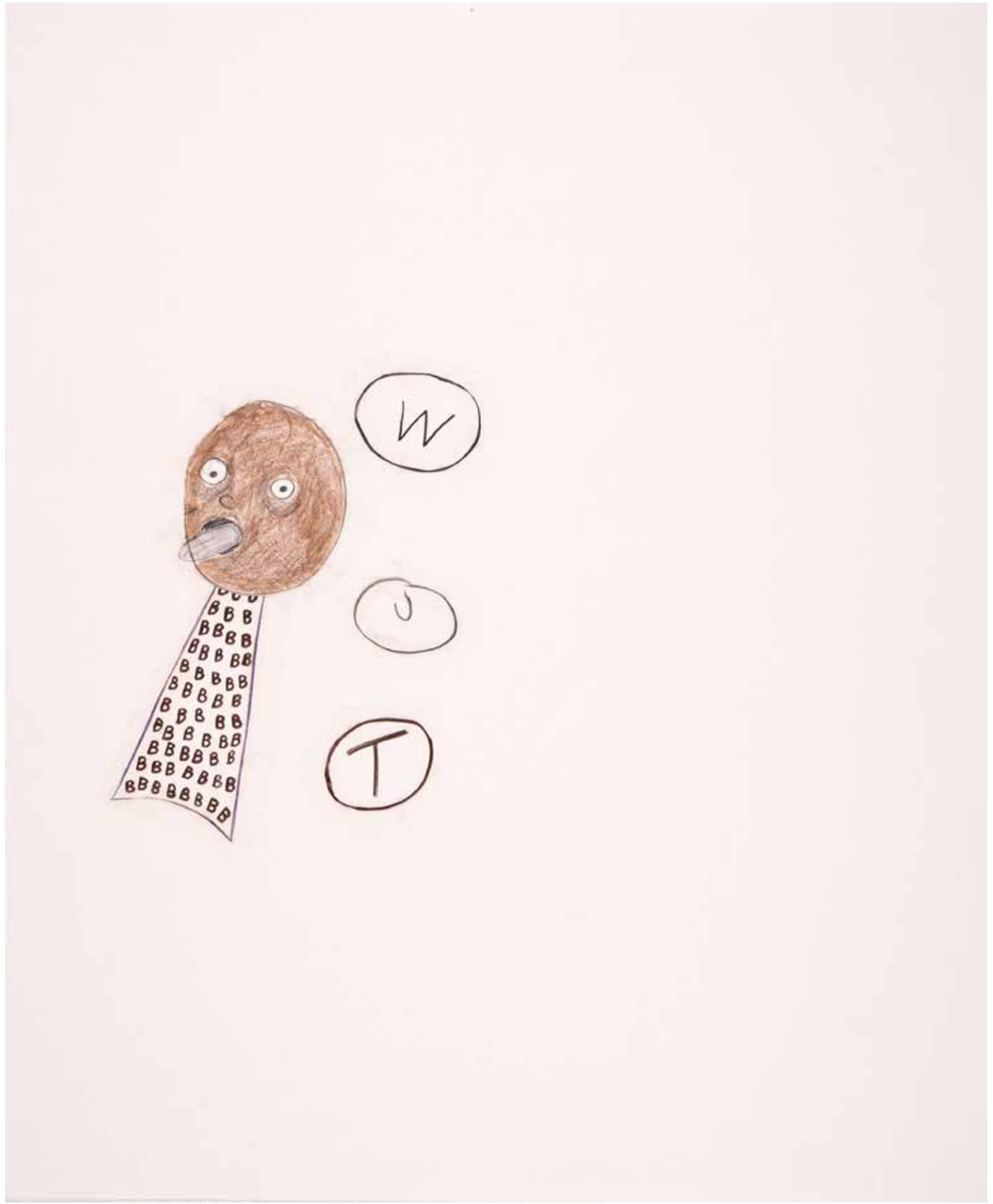

Nat Kisses Nat


David said
I wasn't
very kind
to my
Breasts.

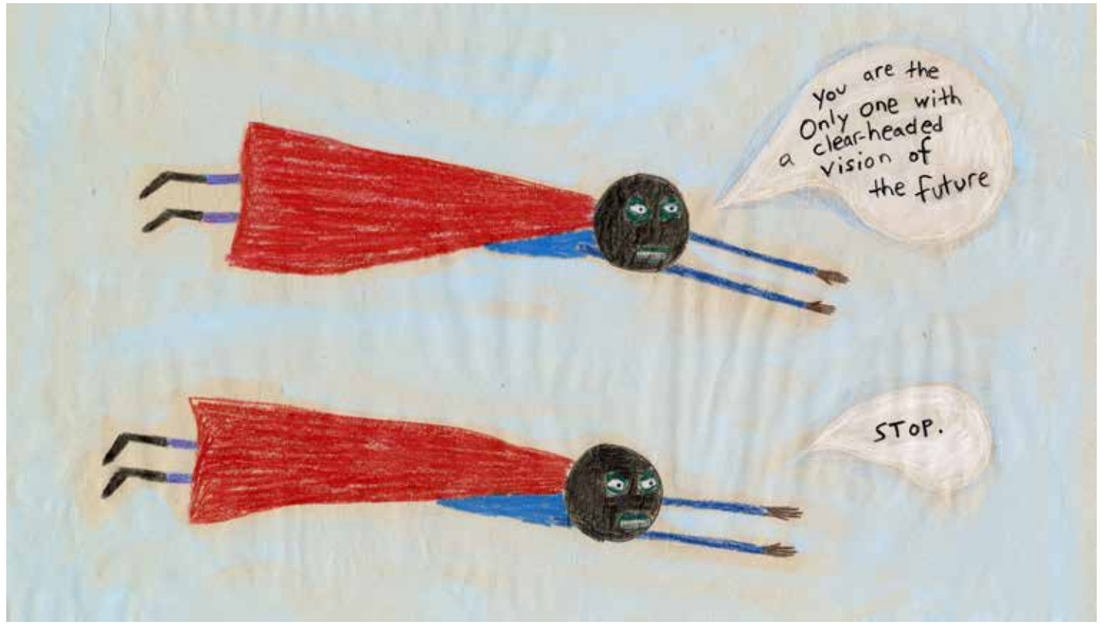
I witness the aftermath ~~of~~ of the vision's devastating collision with a helicopter.

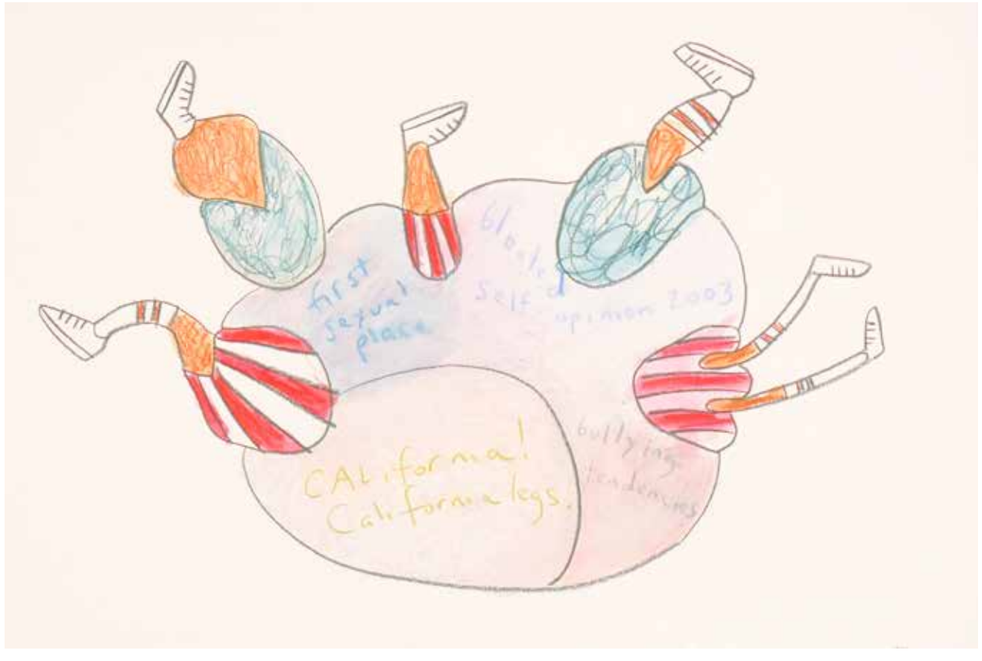
Bystanders pull its thin limp body from the compact car. "It is my husband!" I want to say, but I am rooted to the spot, on the seat of my bicycle, Kitty-corner from the accident.

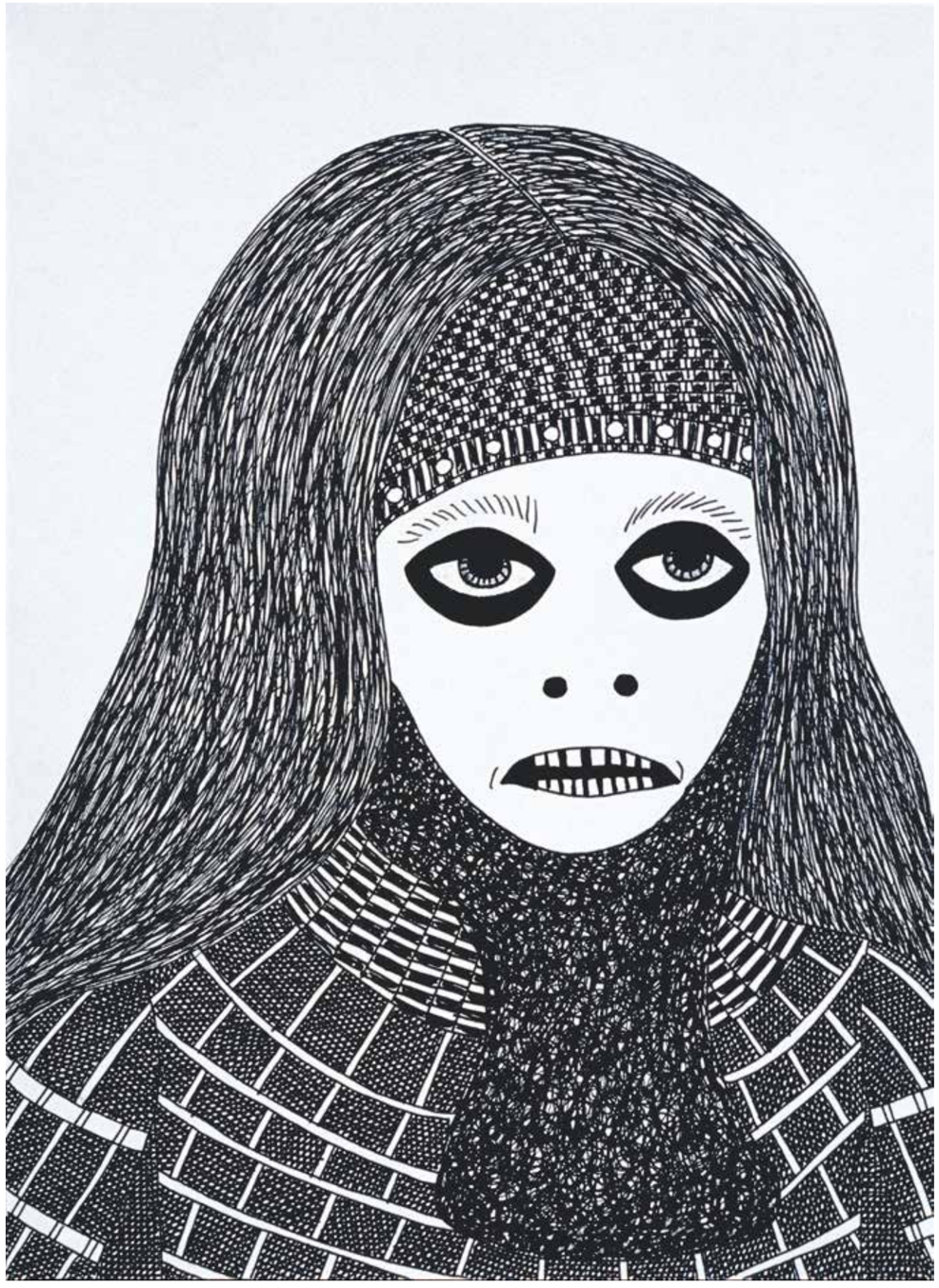
I am wary but excited. The dream, not the vision, has come into my room to ask me for a band-aid. I only have blue Snoopy band-aids so we stand close, leaning over the small metal box, sorting through them. It is a hopeless search but I understand the dream, not the vision, is using this as an excuse to stand as close as it does.

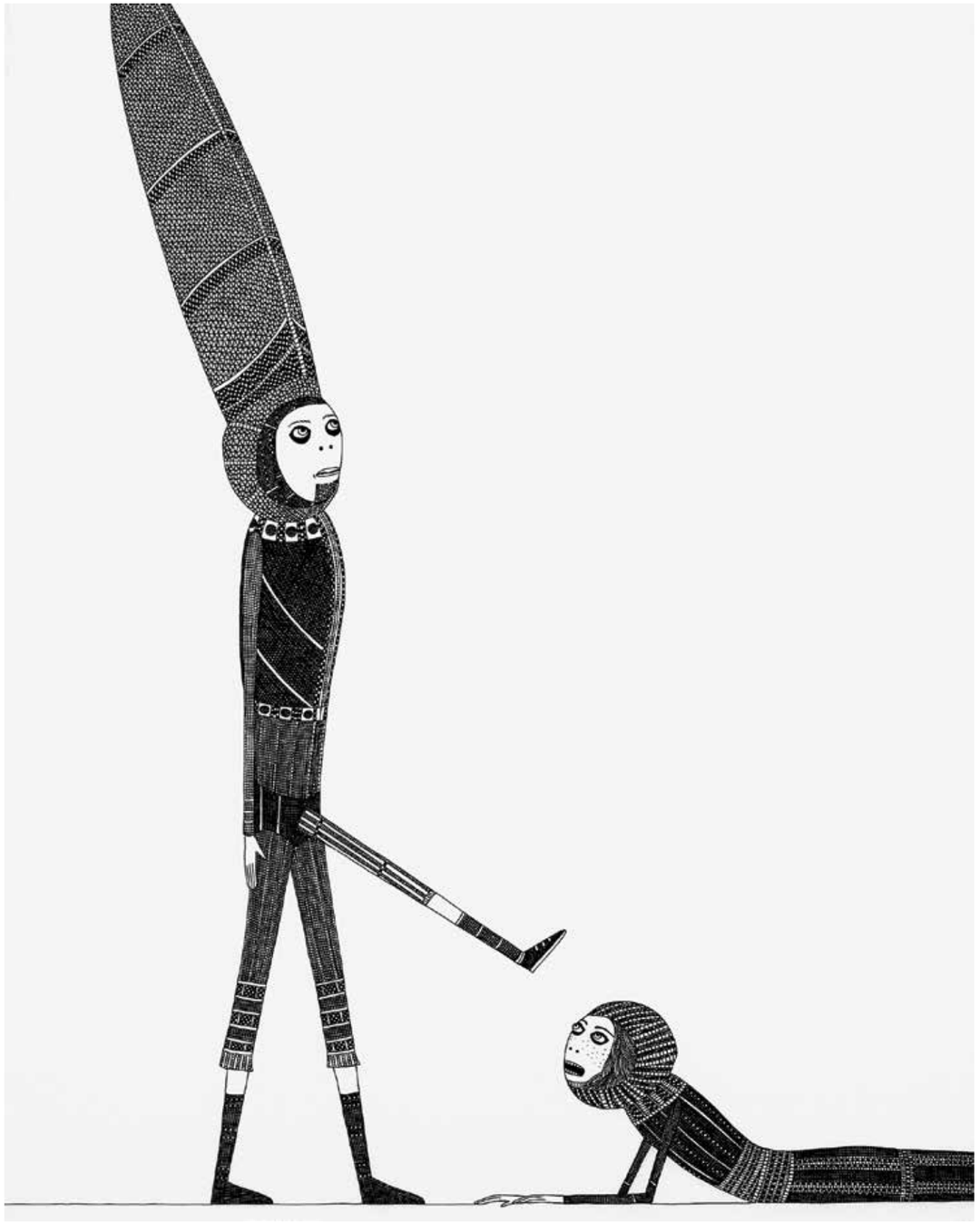

W
J
T


Please
You are in crisis

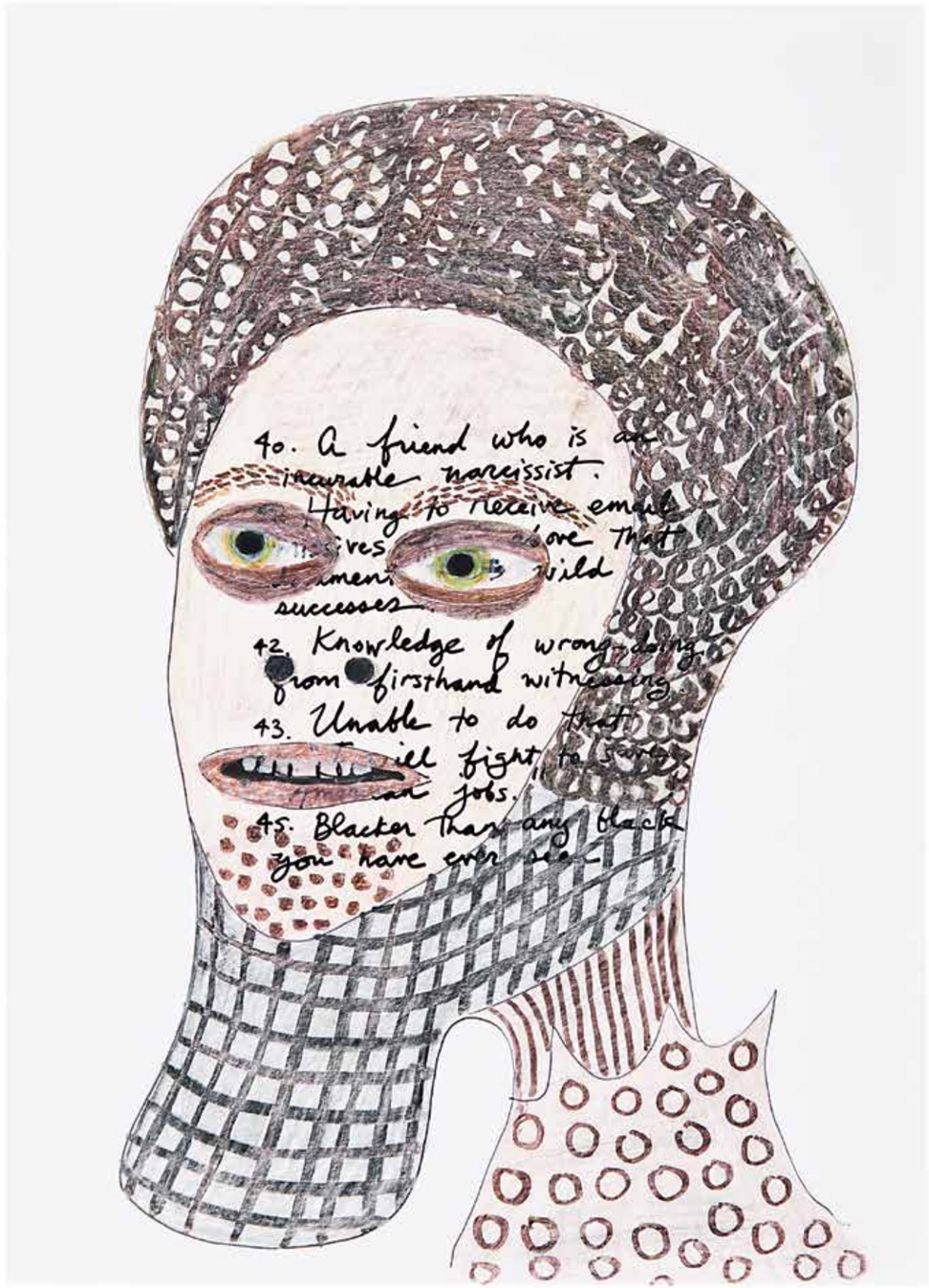

You are the
Only one with
a clear-headed
vision of
the future
STOP.

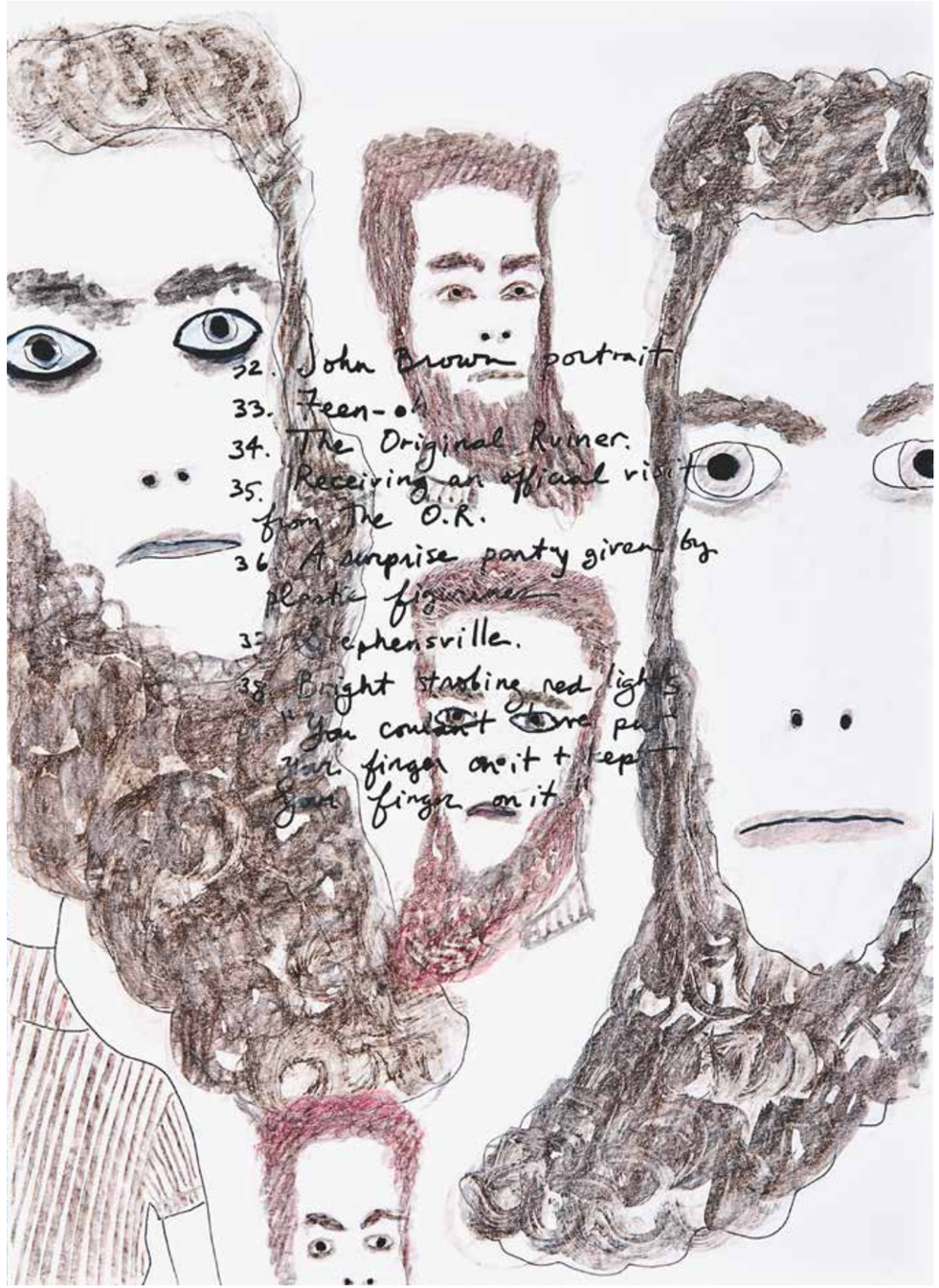

first
sexual
place
CAlifornia!
California legs.



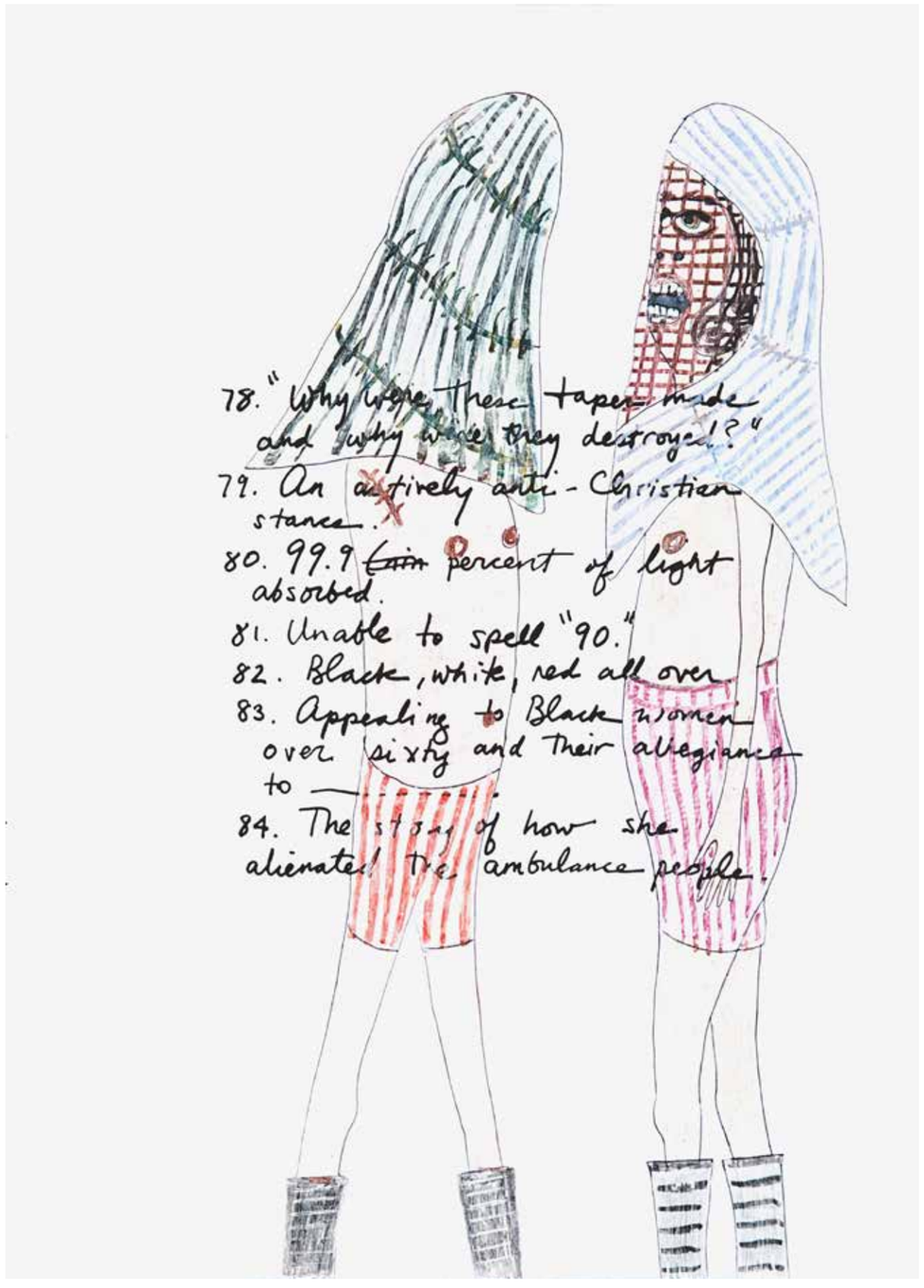


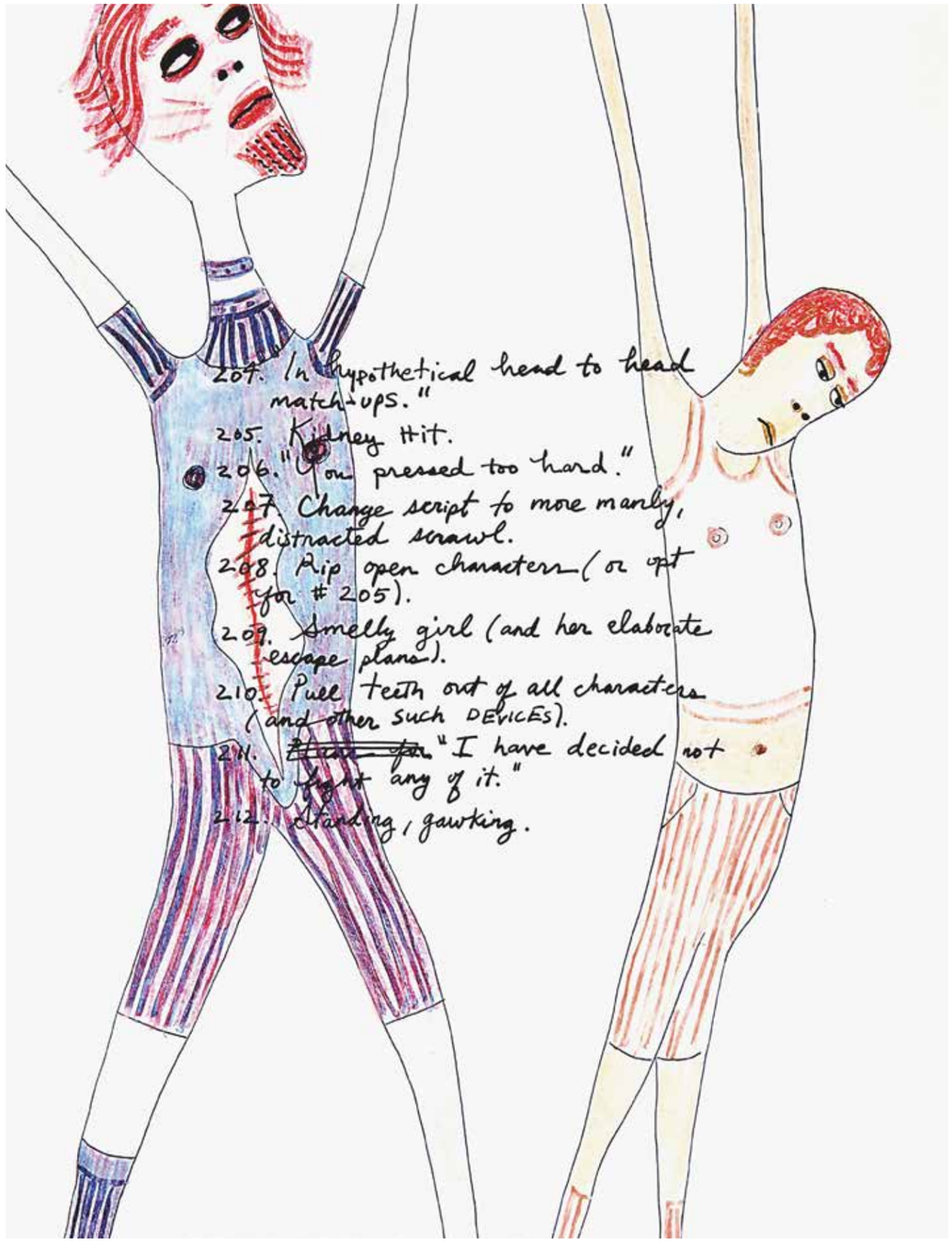
127. The alternative: to twist its head like you were killing a chicken.
128. Or step on it, and its louse ridden children.
129. ~~Raise~~ Raise it like your own.
130. Feed it ~~raisins~~.
131. Treat ~~us~~ our deceased daughter as a stranger, intentionally.
132. You smell ~~like~~ rotten on ~~hot~~ raps, hookers, and other small time fargets.
133. Fortify personal borders + beef up "skin patrol."

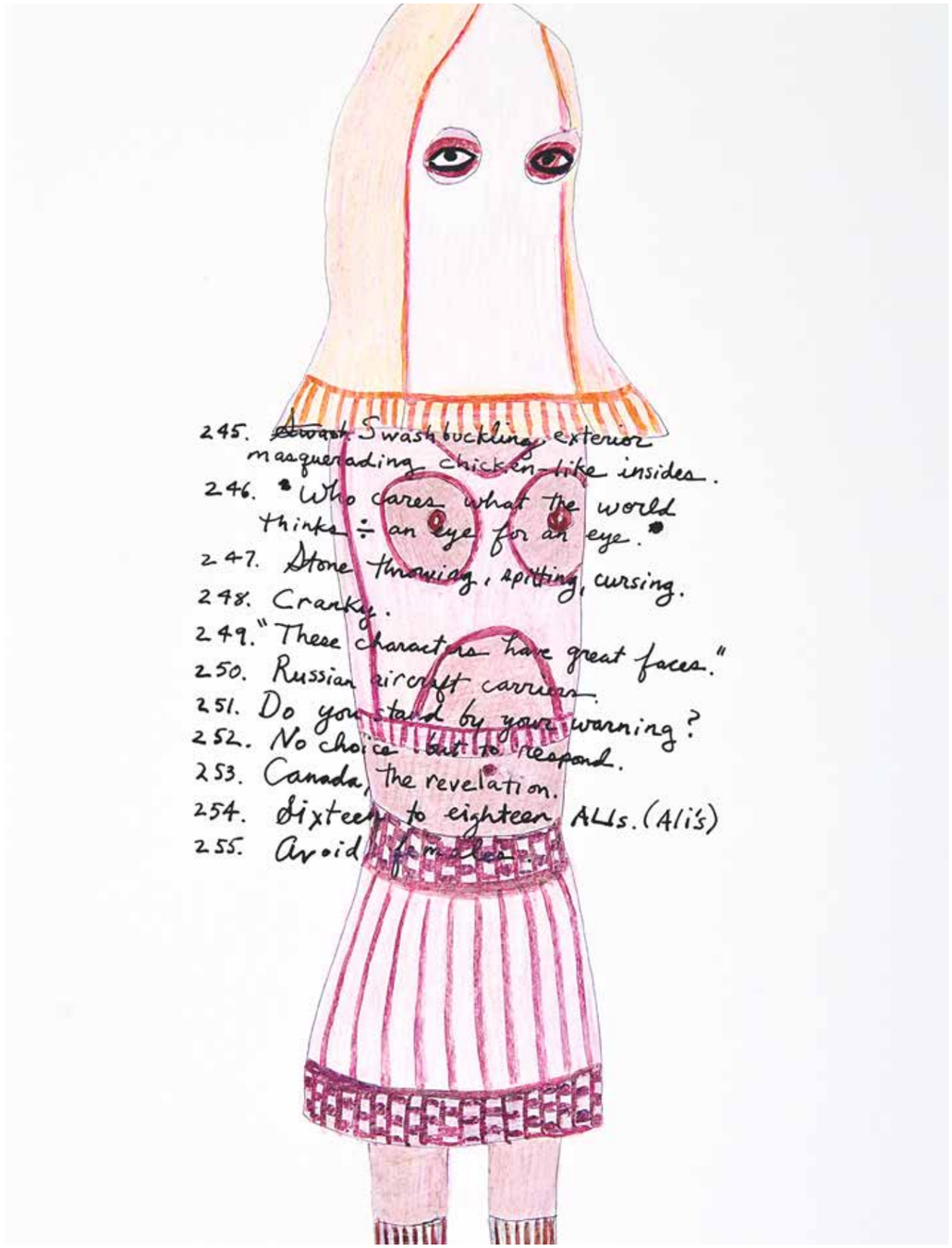




85. What he/she thought after being thrown / jumping.
86. Three notes, one confession.
87. Six fingers, one cut off; twelve fingers, two cut off.
88. "The objective is success."
89. The wood cabin burned down.
90. The school also burned down.
91. Mutualist, mutualism.
92. Narcissism versus solipsism.
93. "I will make you proud."


78. "Why were these tapes made and why were they destroyed!?"
79. An actively anti-Christian stance.
80. 99.9 ~~Extin~~ percent of light absorbed.
81. Unable to spell "90."
82. Black, white, red all over.
83. Appealing to Black women over sixty and their allegiance to ——
84. The story of how she alienated the ambulance people.


204. "Hypothetical head to head match-ups."
205. Kidney hit.
206. "You pressed too hard."
207. Change script to more manly, distracted scrawl.
208. Rip open characters (or opt for #205).
209. Smelly girl (and her elaborate escape plans).
210. Pull teeth out of all characters (and other such DEVICES).
211. ~~Block for~~ "I have decided not to fight any of it."
212. Standing / gawking.

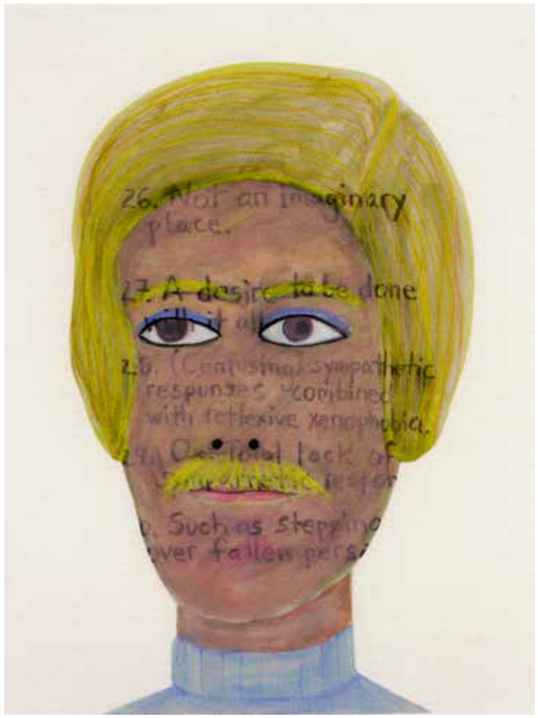

245. ~~Stoic~~ Swashbuckling exterior masquerading chicken-like insides.
246. "Who cares what the world thinks ÷ an eye for an eye."
247. Stone throwing, spitting, cursing.
248. Cranky.
249. "These characters have great faces."
250. Russian aircraft carriers.
251. Do you stand by your warning?
252. No choice but to respond.
253. Canada, the revelation.
254. Sixteen to eighteen ALLs. (Alis)
255. Avoid females.


308. Winning headscarf amongst men.
309. The boar of boars.
310. Disobliged-less.
312. Your friend & [illegible] People.
313. Refused to [illegible] body in Amb[illegible] because [illegible] affiliation (visible due to scarring).
314. Consultation with aforementioned- and previously unknown - witch doctors to arrange for highly specific revenge.

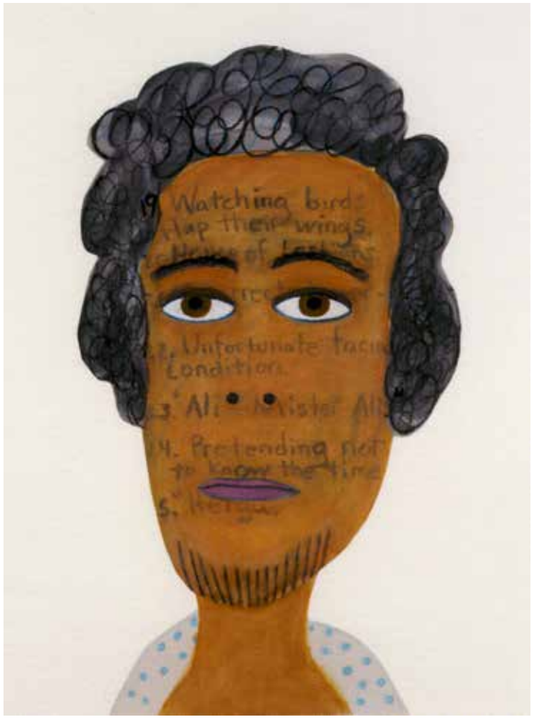
256. 100 of the malcontents.
257. Is anything the matter?
258. A young hothead.
259. Beware "the shipload of women".
260. Apology rescheduled to the following morning.
261. The malcontents complain they are suffering from festering bullet wounds.
262. The prison administrator reads the list of demands (flanked by various wives).
263. Killed a man but not "a killer."

381. Dear Diary.
382. One hour = 1000 dollars.
383. Ten four hours = four thousand dollars.
384. "Terrifying, large breasted woman."
385. "What can brown do for you?"
386. At the Impressive + Talented Accommodationist
387. Sally, biographical point.
388. #384 says "... precisely the question of representation that I am talked about."
389. Yes, failure, not mine.
390. The way in which.
391. Wart picker ingratiated himself with the merchant seamen.


13. Always doing the right thing.
Always claiming to do the right thing.
You are very welcome.
A town plagued by buzzards.


26. Not an imaginary place.
27. A desire to be done
2.6. (Conditional) Sympathetic responses combined with reflexive xenophobia.
Such as stepping over fallen per


Secretly


9. Watching birds flap their wings.
Unfortunate facial condition.
3. Ali Meister Ali
4. Pretending not to know the time.


8. Dysuria
1. Hand-like hooves
interested in
of his
do it
so can I."


Shallow title-seeker
"The old man
Pound,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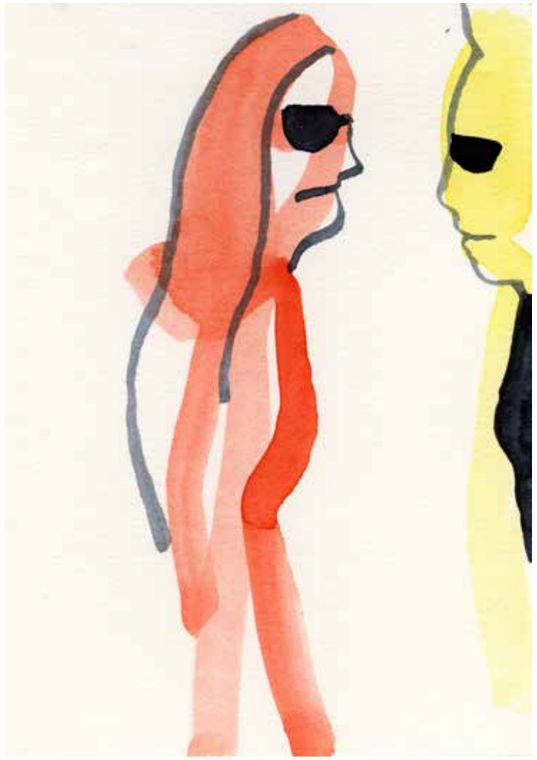

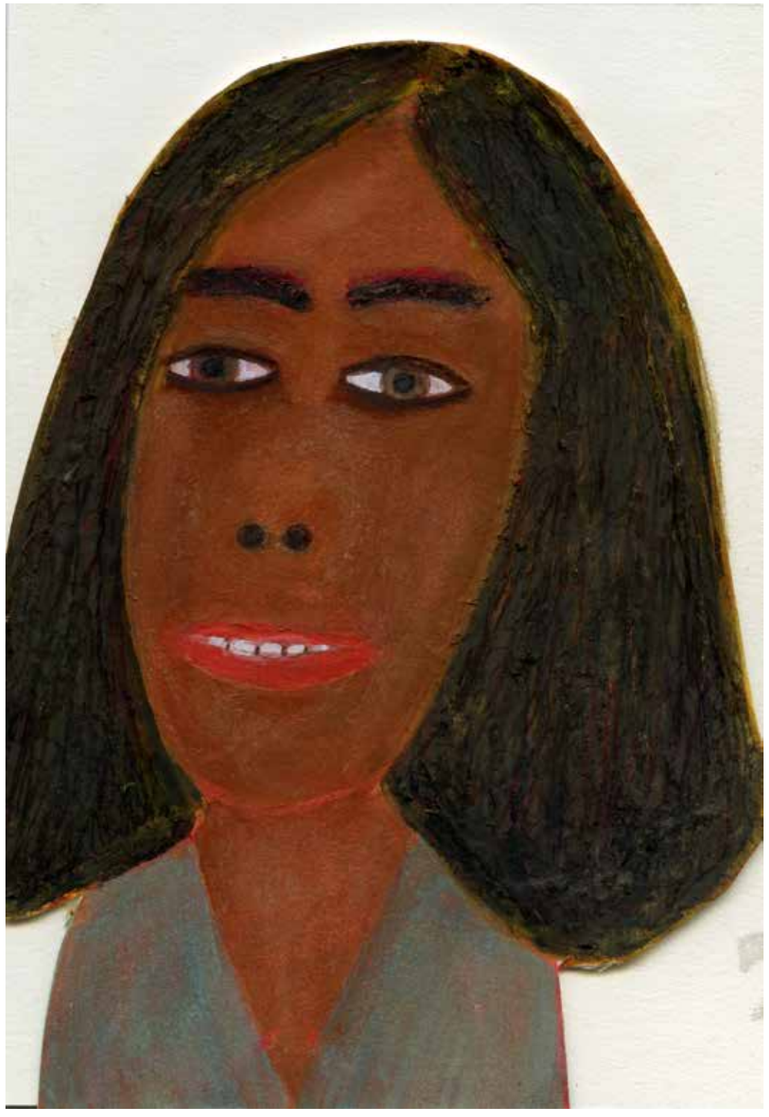

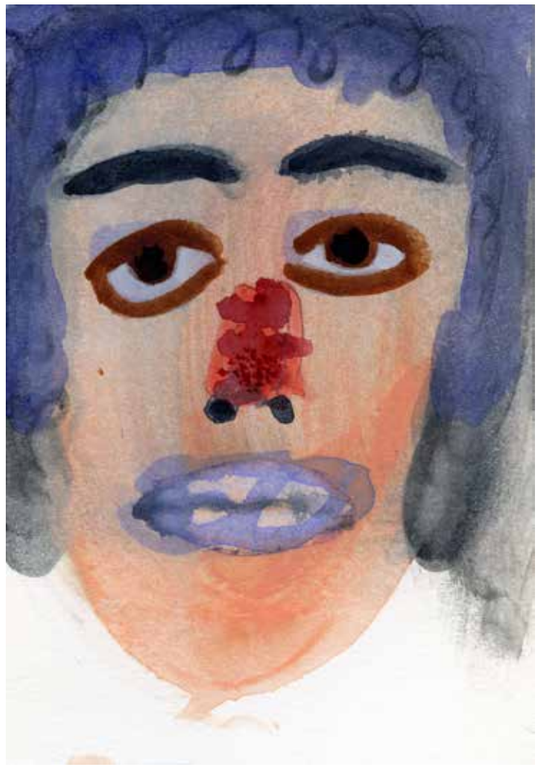

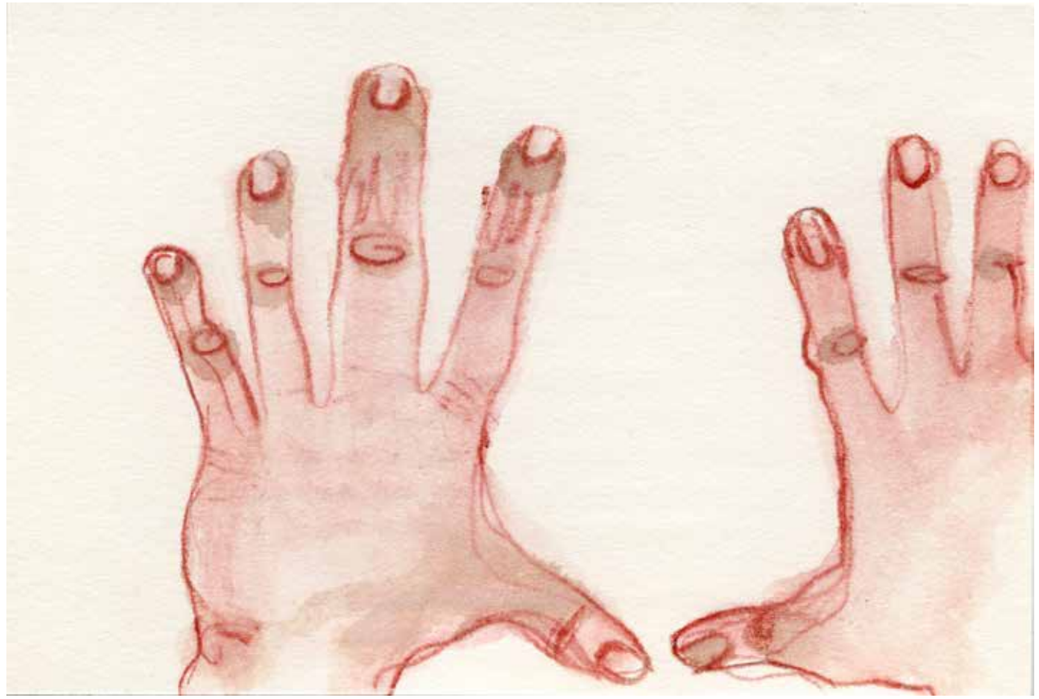

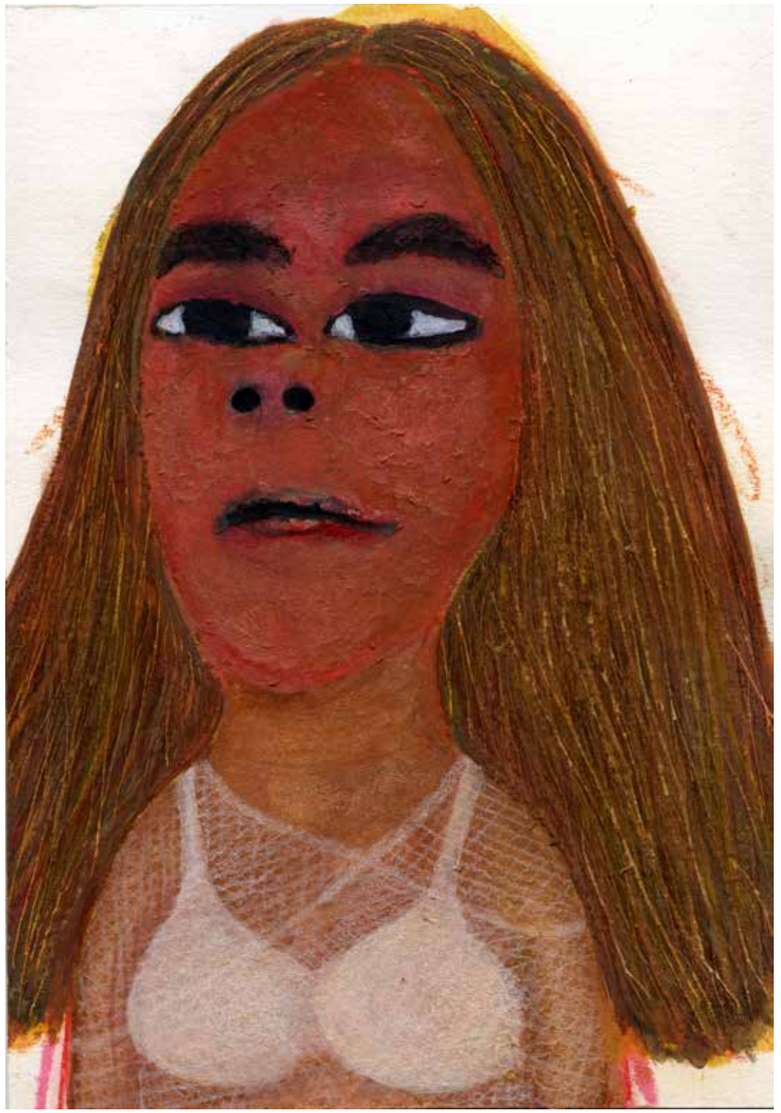

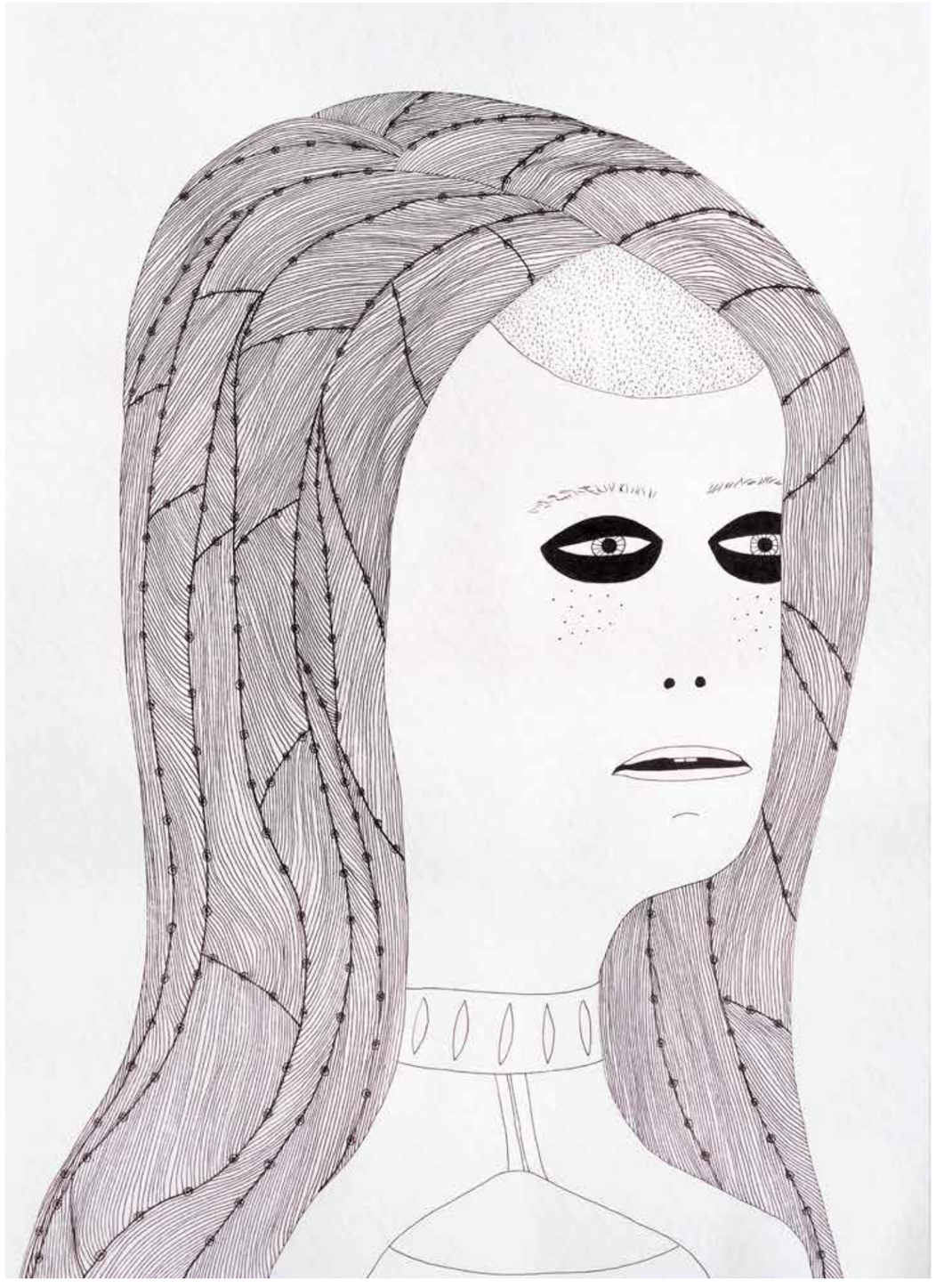

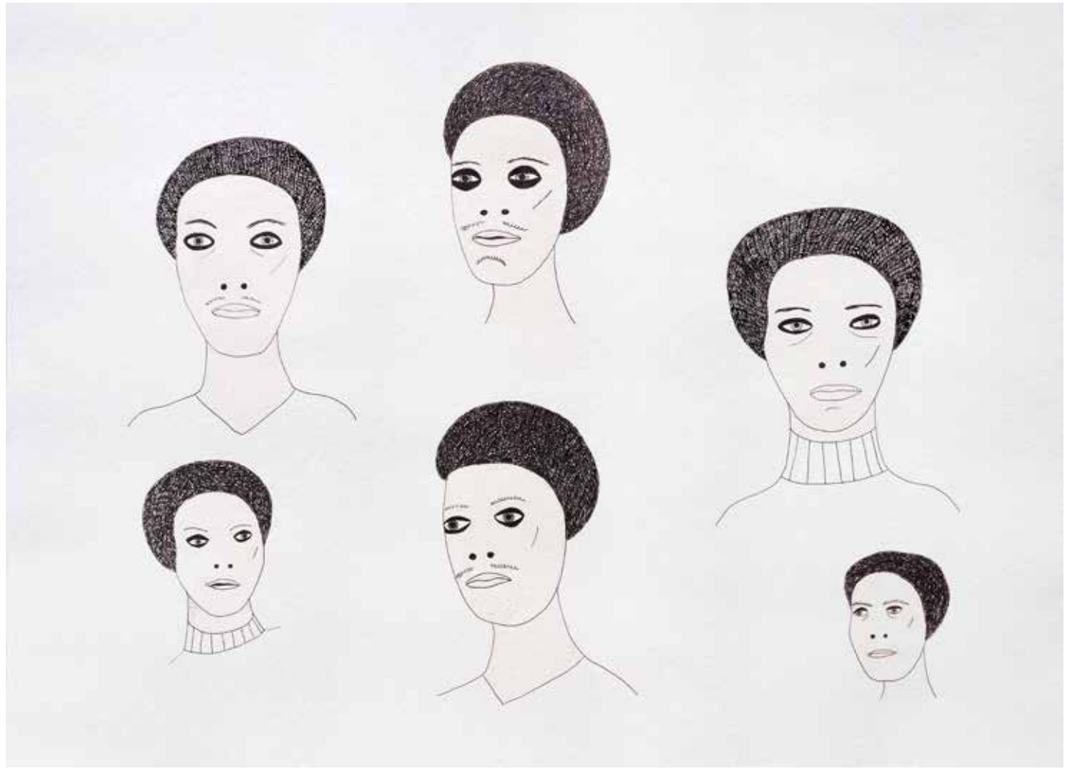

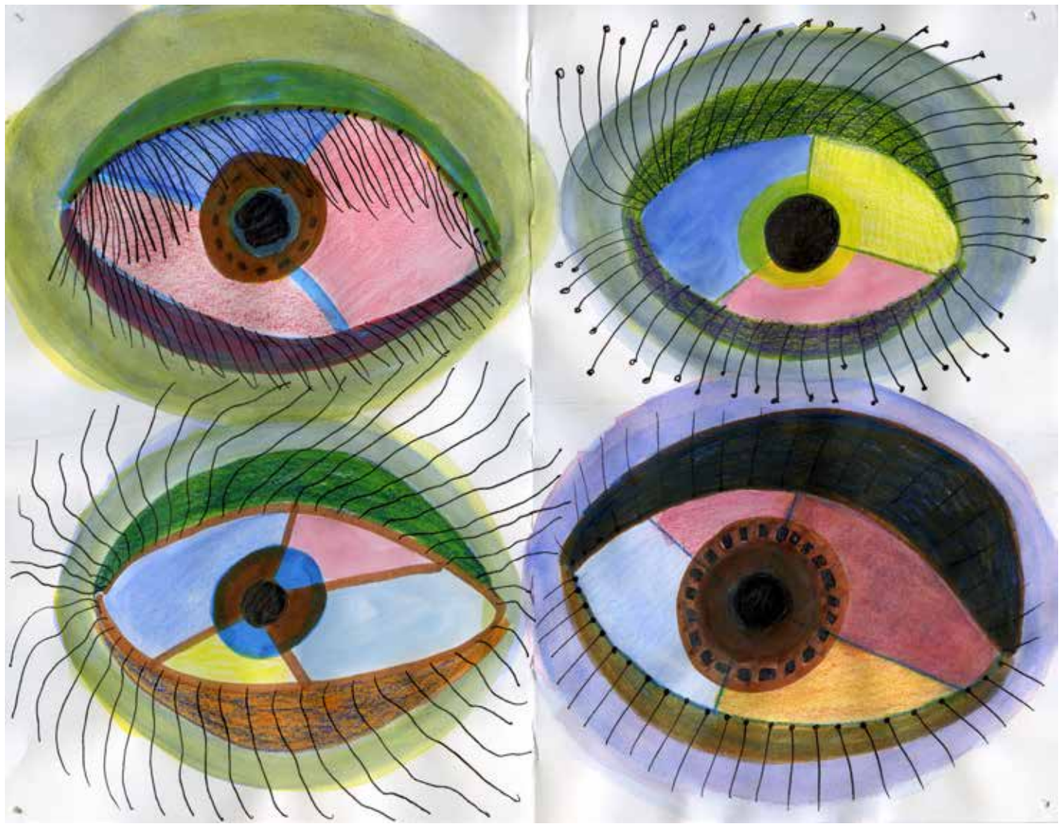

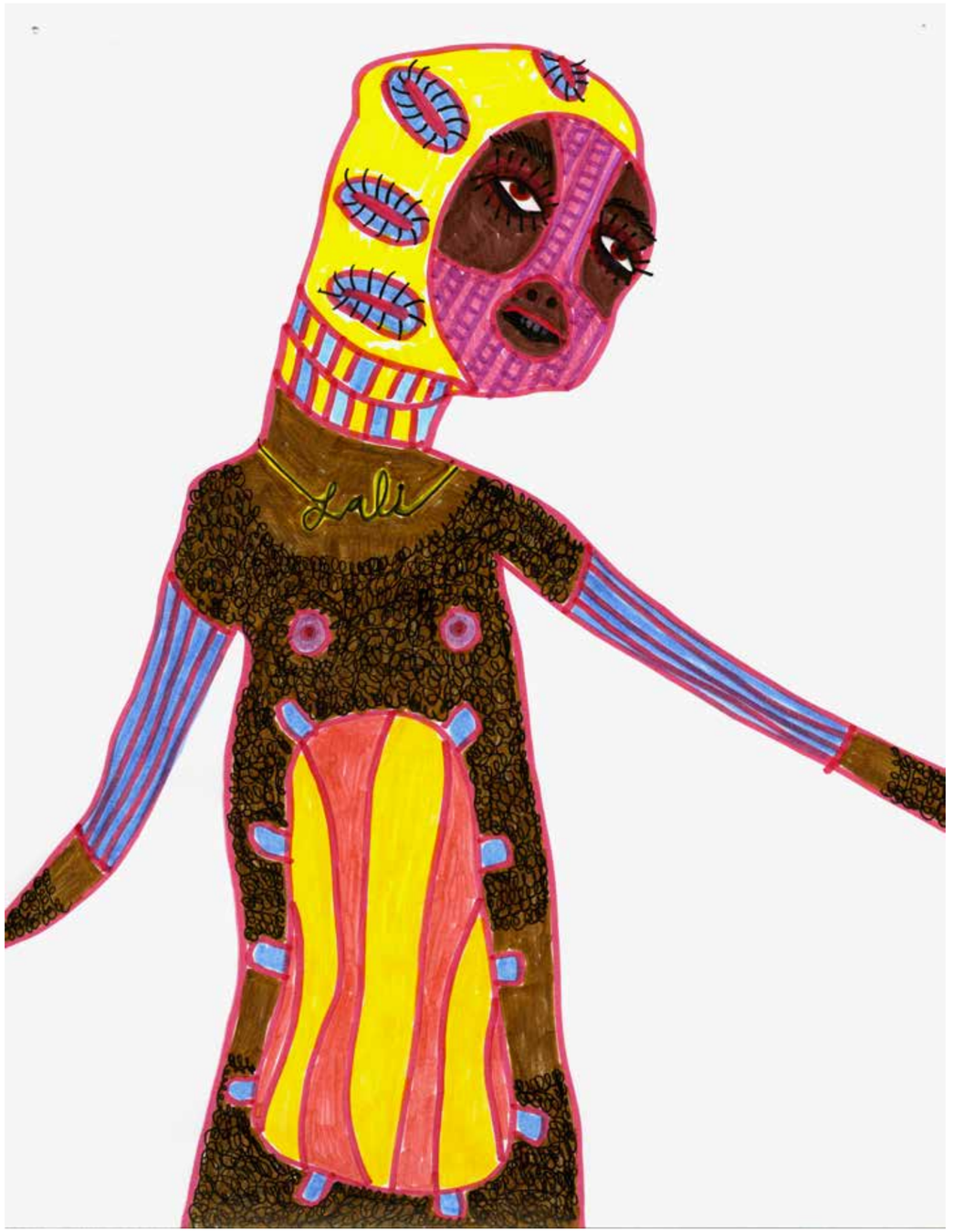
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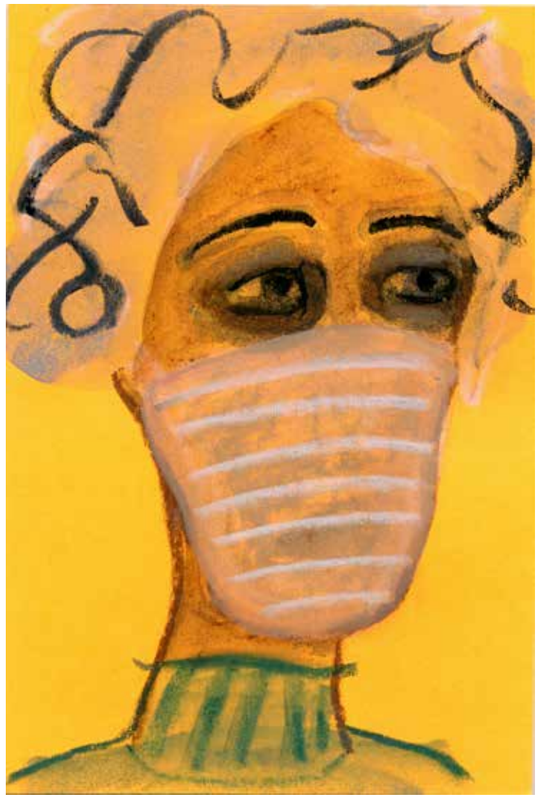

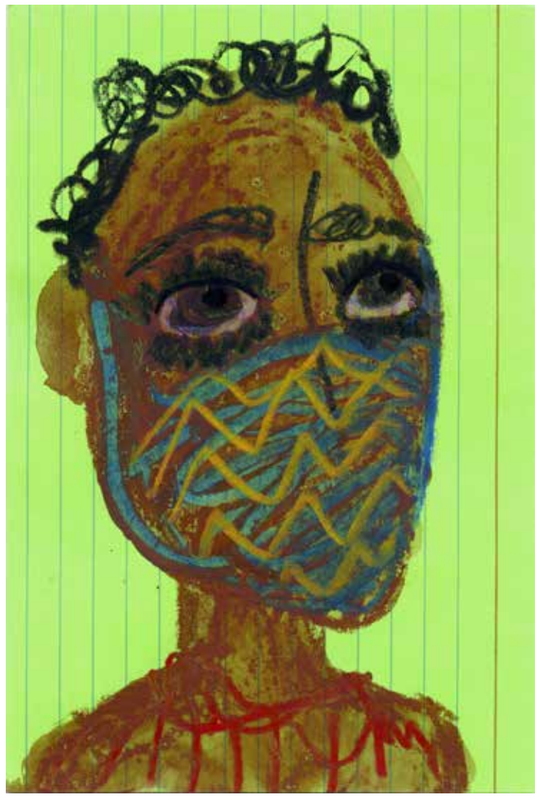

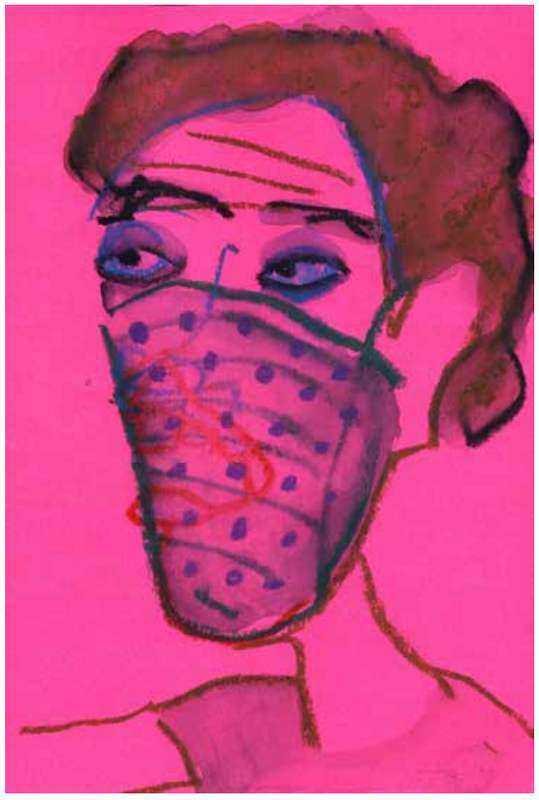

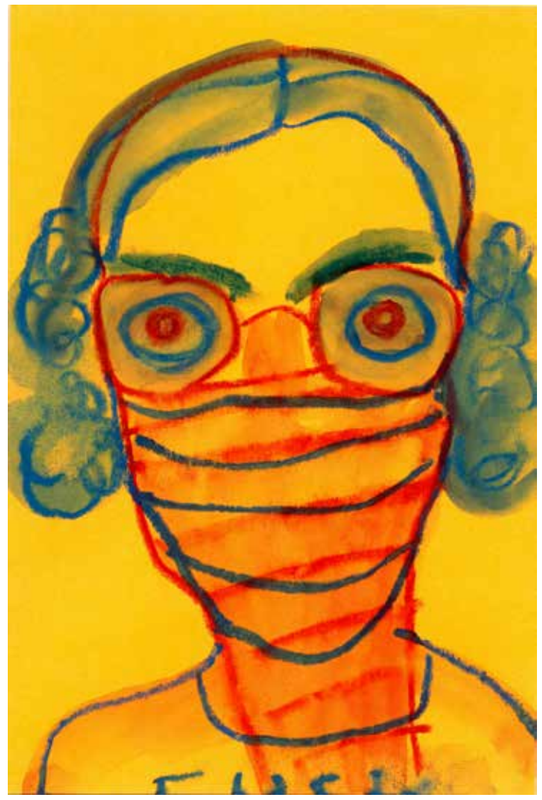

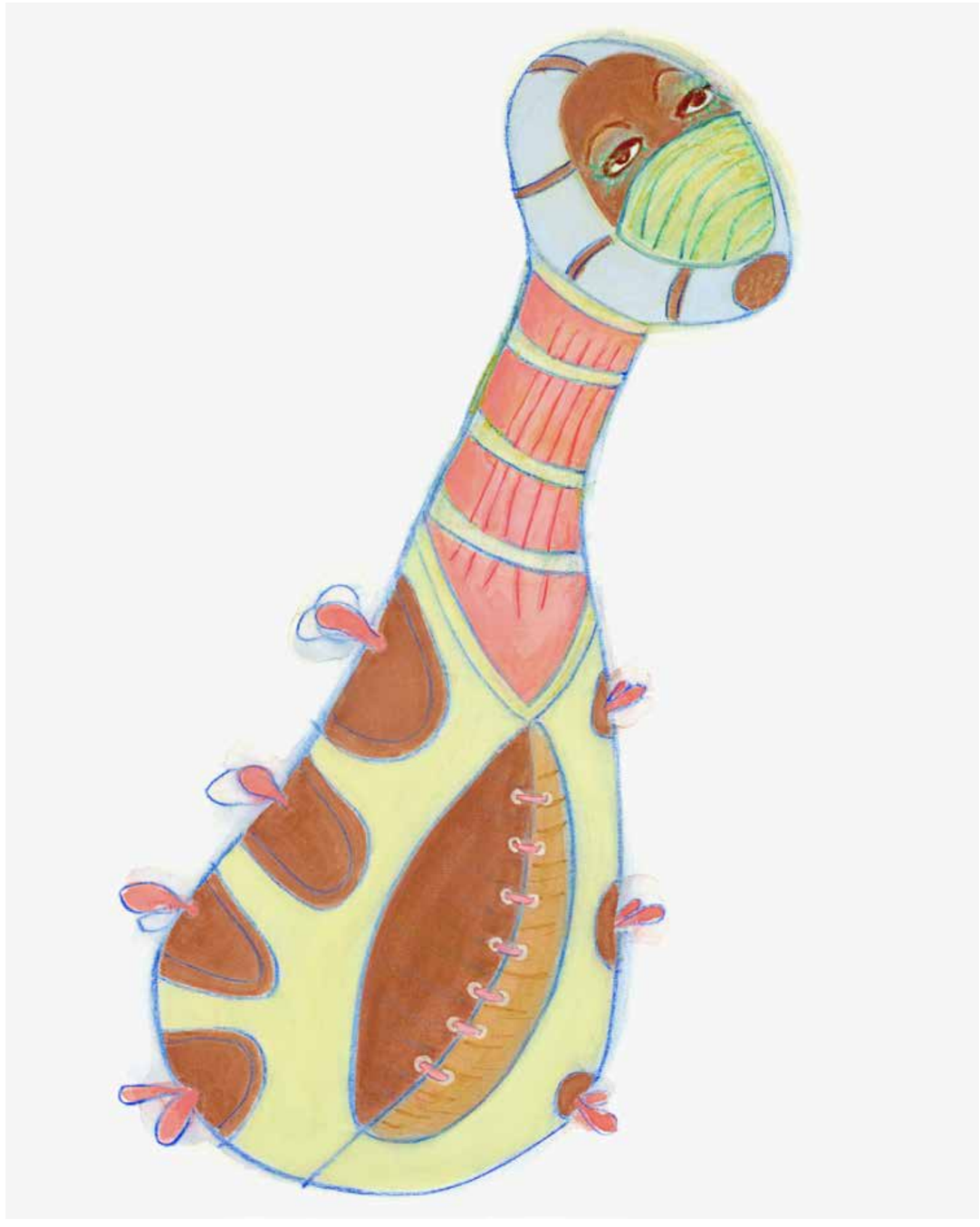

Laylah Ali (b. 1968, Buffalo, New York) is an artist based in western Massachusetts. Ali has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis; and MASS MoCA, North Adams, Massachusetts, among others, and her work has been exhibited at the Venice Biennale and Whitney Biennial. Ali's works are included in the permanent collections of numerous public institutions, including the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Seattle Art Museum. Ali has been the recipient of multiple honors including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant, United States Artists Fellowship, William H. Johnson Prize, and the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston Artist Prize. Her work and process were highlighted in season 3 of the acclaimed PBS *Art21* series. She is currently the Francis Christopher Oakley Third Century Professor of Art at Williams College, Williamstown, MA.

Karen Kurczynski is a Professor of the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author of *The Art and Politics of Asger Jorn: The Avant-Garde Won't Give Up* (Routledge, 2014) and *Reanimating Art: The Cobra Movement in Postwar Europe* (Routledge, 2020). Her article "Drawing in the 1990s: Historical Revisions and Phantom Visions" (*Burlington Contemporary*, June 2023) relates to her current research on drawing as an inter-media practice in relation to politics, race, feminism, and decoloniality.

Romi Crawford is a Professor of Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and founder of the Black Arts Movement School Modality and the New Art School Modality. Select publications include: *Fleeting Monuments for the Wall of Respect* (Green Lantern, 2021); "Reading Between the Photographs: Serious Sociality in the Kamoinge Photographic Workshop," in *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop* (Duke University, 2020); and "Surface and Soul in the Work of Nick Cave" in *Nick Cave: Forothermore* (DelMonico/MCA, 2022).

Arisa White is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Colby College. She is the author of *Who's Your Daddy* (Augury Books, 2021), co-editor of *Home Is Where You Queer Your Heart* (Foglifter Press, 2021), and co-author of *Biddy Mason Speaks Up* (Heyday, 2019), the second book in the *Fighting for Justice* series for young readers. She is a Cave Canem fellow and serves on the Community Advisory Board for Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance. Currently, in development with composer Jessica Jones, White is working on *Post Pardon: The Opera*.

Catalog Checklist by Page

1 Sketchbook page, 2006, ink on paper

2 Sketchbook pages, 2018, colored ink on paper

4 Sketchbook pages, 2018, ink on paper

8 Untitled, 2004, water soluble crayon on paper, 10.75 x 8 inches

12 Untitled (from *Greenheads* series), 2005, gouache and acrylic on paper, 7x 5 inches

14 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

15 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

16 *B Drawing*, 1995, colored pencil and cellophane tape on paper, 17 x 11 inches

17 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

18 Detail, *B Drawing*, 1995, colored pencil on paper

19 Detail, *B Drawing*, 1995, colored pencil and cellophane tape on paper

20 Untitled (superman), 2000, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 11.75 x 8.25 inches

22 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

25 *Untitled* (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

27 *Untitled* (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

28 *Untitled* (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

29 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 3 x 4.5 inches

30 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

31 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

32 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on paper, 17 x 14 inches

34 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on paper, 17 x 14 inches

35 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on paper, 14 x 11 inches

36 Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper, 24 x 18 inches

37 Detail, Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper

38 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

39 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

40 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

43 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

48 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

51 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

53 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

55 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

56 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

57 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler and Laylah Ali.

58 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

60 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

62 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

64 Untitled (from *Commonplace Drawings* inspired by the archives of Octavia E. Butler), 2016, ink, colored pencil and pencil on paper, 14 x 17 inches. Text by Octavia E. Butler.

66 Sketchbook page, 2018, mixed media on paper

68 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

69 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

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75 Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

76 *B Drawing*, 1995, colored pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches

77 *B Drawing*, 1995, colored pencil on paper, 17 x 14 inches

78 Untitled (superman), 2000, colored pencil and gouache on paper, 7 x 5.5 inches

Untitled (superman), 2000, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8.5 x 11 inches

79 Untitled (superman), 2000, graphite and colored pencil on paper, 8.25 x 11.75 inches

Untitled (superman), 2000, gouache and colored pencil on paper, 9 x 16 inches

80 *Study for Greenheads painting*, 2004, mixed media on paper, 10 x 7.5 inches

81 *Study for Greenheads painting*, 2004, mixed media on paper, 10 x 7.5 inches

82 Untitled (leg drawing), 2003, water soluble crayon on paper, 15 x 22 inches

83 Untitled (from *Types* series), 2004, water soluble crayon on paper, 15 x 11.25 inches

84 Untitled (from *Types* series), 2004, water soluble crayon on paper, 11.25 x 7.25 inches

85 Untitled (from *Types* series), 2004, water soluble crayon on paper, 11.25 x 7.25 inches

86 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 7.5 x 5.5 inches

87 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 7.5 x 5.5 inches

88 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 7.5 x 5.5 inches

89 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2005, ink and pencil on paper, 24 x 19 inches

90 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2006-2007, ink and pencil on paper, 24 x 19 inches

91 Untitled (from *Typology* series), 2006-2007, ink and pencil on paper, 24 x 19 inches

92 Untitled (from *Note Drawings*), 2008, ink, colored pencil, ballpoint, and gouache on paper, 10 x 7.25 inches

93 Untitled (from *Note Drawings*), 2008, ink, colored pencil, ballpoint, and gouache on paper, 10 x 7.25 inches

94 Untitled (from *Note Drawings*), 2008, ink, colored pencil, ballpoint, and gouache on paper, 10 x 7.25 inches

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97 Untitled (from *Note Drawings*), 2008, ink, colored pencil, ballpoint, and gouache on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

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101 Untitled (from *Note Drawings*), 2008, ink, colored pencil, ballpoint, and gouache on paper, 11 x 8 .5 inches

102 Untitled (from *Nordic Types*), 2008, mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches

103 Untitled (from *Nordic Types*), 2008, mixed media on paper, 30 x 22 inches

104 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

105 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

106 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

107 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

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110 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

111 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

112 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

113 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

114 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

115 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

116 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 4.5 x 3 inches

117 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 4.5 x 3 inches

118 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

119 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

120 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

121 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 4.5 x 3 inches

123 *Study for Acephalous series*, 2014, ink and colored pencil on paper, 31 x 22 inches

124 *Study for Acephalous series*, 2014, ink and colored pencil on paper, 22 x 31 inches

125 *Study for Acephalous series*, 2014, ink and colored pencil on paper, 22 x 31 inches

126 *Head Studies*, 2015, colored marker, watercolor, pencil on paper, 14 x 21.5 inches

129 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on paper, 17 x 14 inches

130 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on notebook paper, 8.5 x 10.75 inches

131 Untitled (*N.O.* series), 2018, mixed media on notebook paper, 8.5 x 10.75 inches

132 Untitled (goiter), 2018, colored marker on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

133 Untitled (pussy hat), 2018, colored marker on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

134 Untitled (from *Mask Studies*), 2020, mixed media on index card, 6 x 4 inches

135 Untitled (from *Mask Studies*), 2020, mixed media on index card, 6 x 4 inches

136 Untitled (from *Mask Studies*), 2020, mixed media on index card, 6 x 4 inches

137 Untitled (from *Mask Studies*), 2020, mixed media on index card, 6 x 4 inches

139 Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper, 24 x 18 inches

140 Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper, 18 x 24 inches

141 Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper, 18 x 24 inches

143 Untitled (from *Harbinger* series), 2020, mixed media on paper, 18 x 24 inches

148 Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 3 x 4.5 inches

150 Sketchbook pages, 2018, mixed media on paper

152 Sketchbook page, 2018, colored ink on paper

Front cover: Untitled (from *Self-Portraits with Nat Turner's Vision* series), 1993-94, ink on paper, 11 x 8.5 inches

Inside front cover: Sketchbook page, 2018, mixed media on paper

Inside back cover: Sketchbook pages, 2018, colored ink on paper

Back cover: Untitled (from *Studies* series), 2010-13, mixed media on card, 5 x 3.25 inches

Cathy and Jesse Marion Art Gallery

Is anything the matter? Drawings by Laylah Ali

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Access to the Octavia E. Butler archive at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA organized by Clockshop, Los Angeles in conjunction with their 2016 program *Radio Imagination: Artists and Writers in the Archive of Octavia E. Butler*.

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