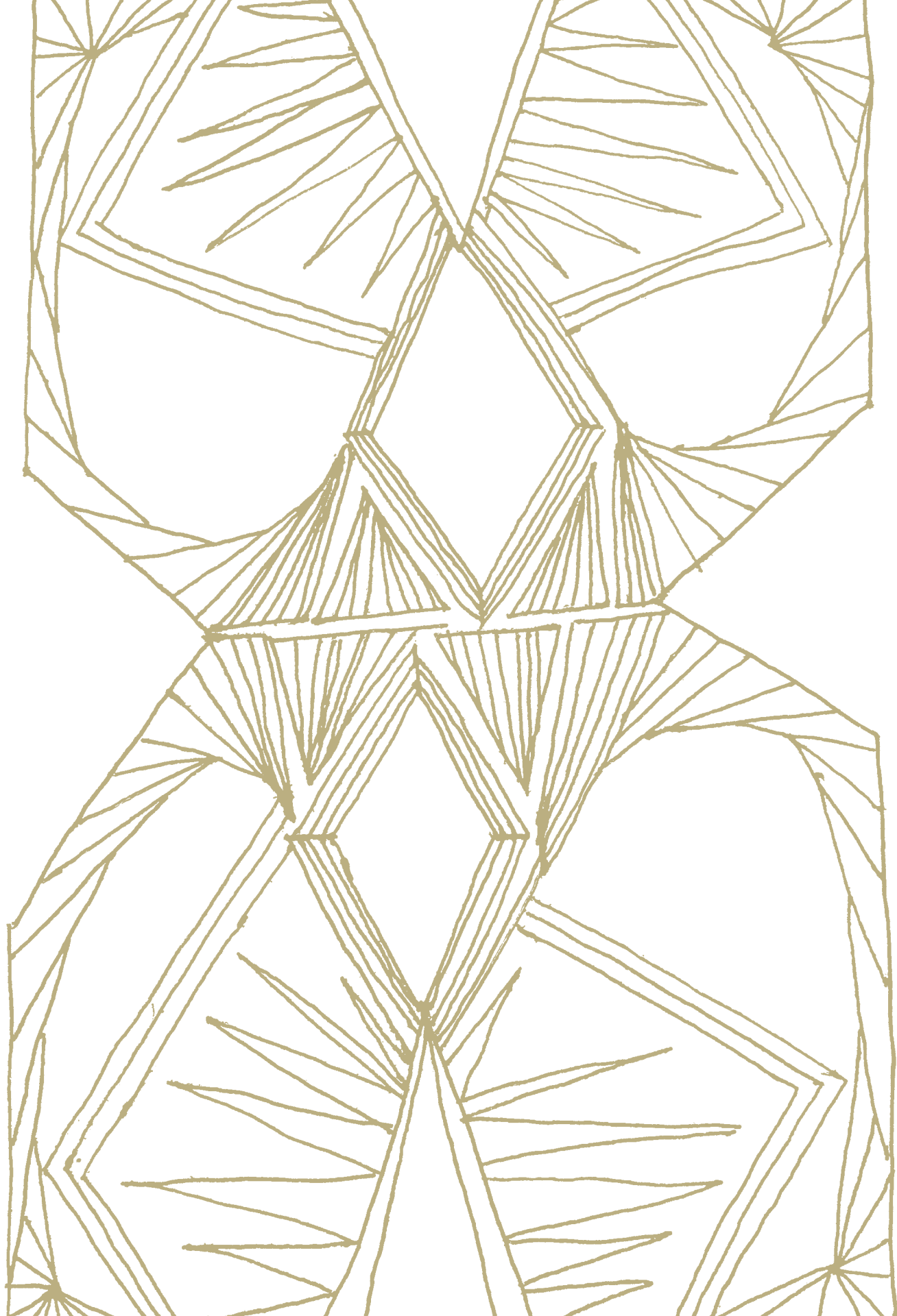




# SUCCESSIONS

## TRAVERSING US COLONIALISM







# SUCCESSIONS TRAVERSING US COLONIALISM

August 28 – December 12, 2021

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

Curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah

*The primary font used in this publication "Bayard," was designed  
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# FOREWORD

Jack Rasmussen

Director and Curator, American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

On behalf of the American University community, I welcome Amber Robles-Gordon and her exhibition, *Successions: Traversing US Colonialism*, to our museum in the Katzen Arts Center. It is the fruit of many journeys, and it arrives at a critical time.

Shortly after Robles-Gordon graduated from Howard University's MFA program in 2011, I started coming across her genre- and medium-busting objects and installations in different spaces around Washington, DC. They were always ingeniously crafted and colorful, and were also obviously so much more. Curator Larry Ossei-Mensah, writing in this catalog, put his finger right on it: "...Robles-Gordon constructs artwork steeped in ancestral memory that evokes transcendental experiences, actively engaging the viewer's conscience."

Ten years after I first began to focus on her work, Robles-Gordon's art has only grown more evocative and affecting for me. *Successions* features abstractions recalling her Afro-Caribbean heritage and her

experience as a part, and not a part, of these "United States." I can hear the beat of her native Puerto Rico, but I can also feel the heat building as hurricane season comes earlier and earlier to the islands.

At the same time, I understand the implicit challenge of Robles-Gordon's Afro-Caribbean feminism vis-à-vis my own complicity in propping up the status quo, acting in my capacity as one of the lesser white captains of the District of Columbia's culture industry. The third floor of the American University Museum is just the place, amidst her extraordinary installation suspended in space, to continue this critical discussion.

Noel W Anderson, in his provocative accompanying essay, describes Robles-Gordon's art as a strategy of "dissent," her "resistance" to the colonialist project so obviously proceeding right under our noses here in DC. Her exhibition is a challenge we must accept. We must collectively resist before we reach the third act of this tragedy.

Opposite: *y mi bandera vuela mas alto que la tuya, and my flag flies higher than yours* (detail), 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.  
Page 4: *Elemental: Tierra, Aire, Agua, Fuego, Elemental: Earth, Air, Water, Fire* (detail), 2020. Mixed media collage, 18 x 24 in.





Puerto Rico

CULEBRA I







**“WHAT I REGRETTED MOST WERE MY SILENCES.”<sup>1</sup>**

**— AUDRE LORDE**

**“I SURRENDERED MY SPANISH TONGUE—  
A CRITICAL PART OF MY CULTURAL IDENTITY...”**

**— AMBER ROBLES-GORDON**



# A DECENT WAY TO DISSENT

Noel W Anderson

If their confessions tell us anything, it is that Black lesbian feminist scholar Audre Lorde (1934–1992) and Black womanist artist Amber Robles-Gordon share a belief in the superiority of tongues. The moralization of kinds of speech is welded to ideas of white dominance. A function of the colonialist project, moral connections with certain types of language are associated with both truth claims and the purity of whiteness. “Hear this *truth*,” as an early-twentieth century Sunlight Soap advertisement proclaims, “So clean and white.” A similar chromatic hierarchy can be witnessed in the whiteness of Modernism’s supposedly neutral *grids*. Literary scholar and cultural critic Phillip Harper spotlights the grid’s association with whiteness in his book *Abstractionist Aesthetics* (2015). By looking at founding father Benjamin Franklin’s system of *13 Virtues*—a gridded calendar chart of his primary virtues with black dots marking dates he had not performed them—Harper shows how Franklin’s pursuit of a virtuous and *decent man* (a white man) required the reduction of black dots (the banishment of blackness).<sup>2</sup>

Blackness-as-stain haunts and animates Black feminist creativity. Both *authors* articulate concerns about

white supremacy’s reach through different means—Lorde through literary arts, and Robles-Gordon through visual arts; committedly contending colonialism. Representative of the colonialist project, *Father Daddy* Franklin, scribes an architecture echoing that of elementary school grammar books. Words like “red” “yellow” “blue” trapped within linear grids. The grid being a graphic symbol for order. In this subtle way, might we consider *language* as tracking the *grid’s* movements.

As with the grid, language is a means of ordering the world. Through words, language is able to *structure* the world’s elements in totality, in totality, in totality... In keeping with Heidegger’s notion that “language is the house of being,” both authors recognize the *structural* implications of language...speech...a word. White supremacy projects from this cloaked colonialist logic its *Declaration of Decency*: “We hold these *truths* to be self-evident, that there is a proper language and way of speaking, which positions all other tongues in opposition.” Robles-Gordon’s refusal of her Spanish mother tongue is her response to an ideological valuation of language: the moralization of speech. Yet her commitment to a *decent* way towards subjecthood conceals the reality



of her future *dissent*. Are there historical examples of Black subjects initially pursuing the colonialist ideology of appropriate types of speech, only to result in future dissent? In locating these, might we find parallels of resistance available for all Black and Brown peoples?

Robles-Gordon's movement away from her linguistic home, while grounding her future resistance, is actually an *ascent*. Countless numbers of radical Black thinkers seemingly "moved-up" (away) from racial and cultural roots, only to return through dissent. Black feminist activist Angela Davis studied in the academic houses of language—Brandeis University and University of California, San Diego—only to return to Black liberation through the terms learned at these institutions. She brilliantly used the master's tools—*linguistic grids*—to earn an acquittal for false murder charges during the infamous 1970 Soledad Brothers trials.<sup>3</sup> Our annals are filled with initiates of the radical Black tradition co-signing colonialism's *Declaration of Decency*, in order to ultimately disrupt decent speech ("virtuous acts") through the use and enactment of dissident terms—Black (academic) vernacular begins a haunting echo.

(Don't Don't trouble the water water wa...  
leavit alone lone one)  
(Why don't you why don't you, why don't on't you,  
let it beeeee)<sup>4</sup>

Mama Aretha's backup singers counsel. Don't they realize that the return home requires treks across choppy grounds? Reverberating within these anticipated

stumbles, false starts, misdirections, and missed-directions, is a geometry from which Black *dissent* is birthed—similarly obsessed with *mama's tongue*, but biologically distinct, deeply rooted in a *hyper-original* connection, constructed in peculiarity: matrilineal line.<sup>5</sup>

Mama be the bridge:  
initiating an arch to a flexible causeway  
ancestral agency.<sup>6</sup>

This continuum of Black logic binds daughter to mother: Robles-Gordon's aesthetic (+) her mother's linguistic concerns. *Mama be the bridge*. Born in St. Thomas, US Virgin Islands, and living in Puerto Rico from six months to the age of ten, the artist's mother's upbringing reflects a diverse cultural landscape. When speaking of her mother's childhood, Robles-Gordon dictates demographics from her archive: "Afro-Caribbean, Puerto Rican, and Afro-Latino—at all levels of social and political hierarchy." She even establishes "accommodations" for whites, "Most white people that were around her were already part of the Caribbean historical and social ecosystem."<sup>7</sup> *Mama be that bridge!* A connective cord to kinship. While in personal conversations, the artist expresses the ineffability of describing her close bond with her mother, Robles-Gordon distinguishes herself from her mother when speaking of each other's respective *tools*, saying, "My mother chose to use language, linguistics, and writing," whereas Robles-Gordon chose "art and various aesthetic languages."<sup>8</sup> Although their forms differ, they share in the

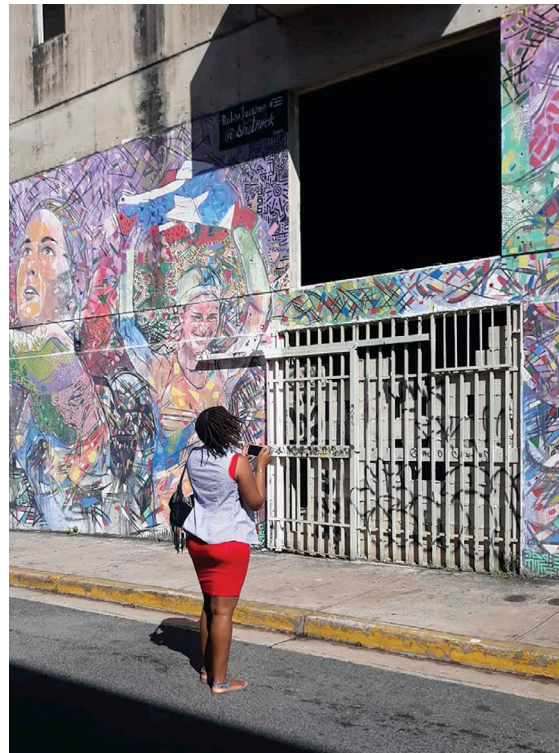


Photo credits (Left): Carmen Robles-Inman, (Right): Rafael Rivera.

need to communicate. Thus expressing what Lorde realizes is central to her: "...what is most important to me must be spoken."<sup>9</sup> While mother and daughter share in the desire to communicate, they understand their duty to speak.

That Robles-Gordon understands her duty, is clear. What remains a revelation is how she deploys her tools. Through form, gesture, noise, line, and color, she is proving equipped to take on the continued challenge of contending the white colonialist project. Returning to our speculative *Declaration of Decency*, its cosigner Franklin, and his grid—all recognized through the linguistic—might there be an aesthetic parallel? What does aesthetics *declare*? Who are *its* cosigners?

Aesthetics' declaration arrives cloaked in modernist terms: *Interaction of Color*, "'American-Type' Painting," *Ways of Seeing*. Tracking Franklin, all these daddies of invention—invented daddies—subscribe to a static way of seeing. The grid again becomes a perceptual tool for ordering capturing the world. As the grid failed to anticipate my editing his true intentions in the previous sentence, it reflectively has an overactive blind spot.

(Don't Don't trouble the water water wa...  
leavit alone lone one)  
(Why don't you why don't you, why don't on't you,  
let it beeeeee)<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, this time we *ain't* taken that advice. We must trouble the waters. As *mama be the bridge*,



we know we are safe. The grid does not know how to qualify the unqualifiable. Make it plain: *it* can't capture everything. We can *chart* instrumental rationality beyond industrial complexes. In an eerie way, organizing pigments, mediums, and art movements, gets meted-out within the same graphic tool which tallied enslaved peoples, livestock, and raw goods. Inverting Franklin's matrix for a second, we see the grid as a marvelous "capture and catalog" tool. And in this way it violates the very term within its founding text—*decency*.

It's not decent to capture and enslave  
to qualify at will  
to never try to save  
*to always seek to kill.*<sup>11</sup>

The centuries of anti-black "negotiations"—resulting in "justifiable" acts of authority—seem a bit excessive don't you think? With all these breeches of decency, is there a "cordial" way to dissent? Does resistance require a modicum of decorum? Or at least the knowledge of what counts as decorous?

Putting all manners aside...*who the hell cares for decent dissent* (polite refusal)!? What is most central to Black ontology is resistance. White supremacy—the author of our lingering declaration, through its violation of Black life—made necessary that all forms of dissent remain *ready at hand*. The many strategies for liberation enacted by our ancestors must be prepared for deployment. We can look to our mothers for methods of critical refusal: Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, the artist's



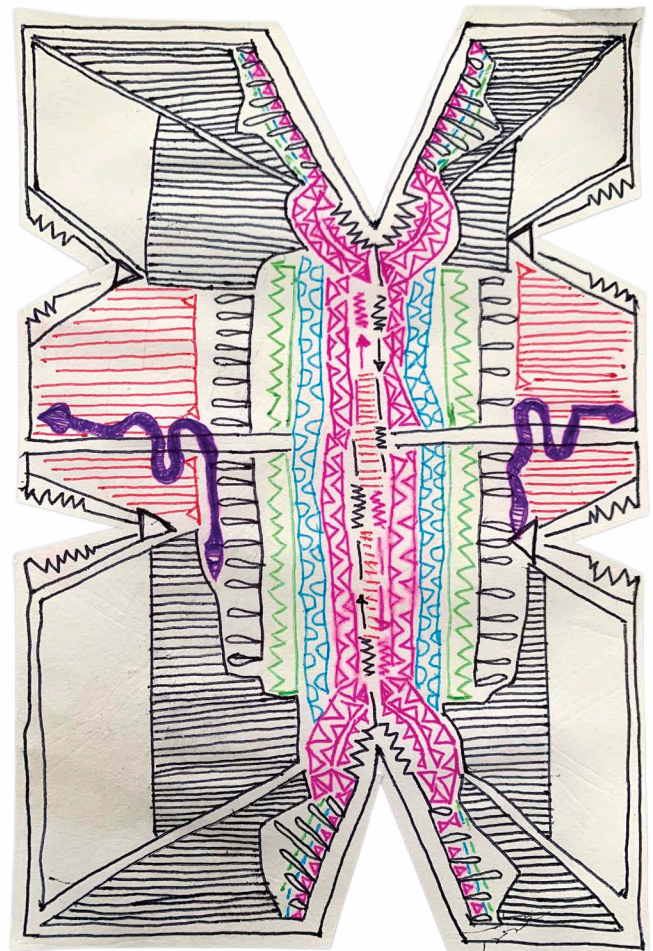
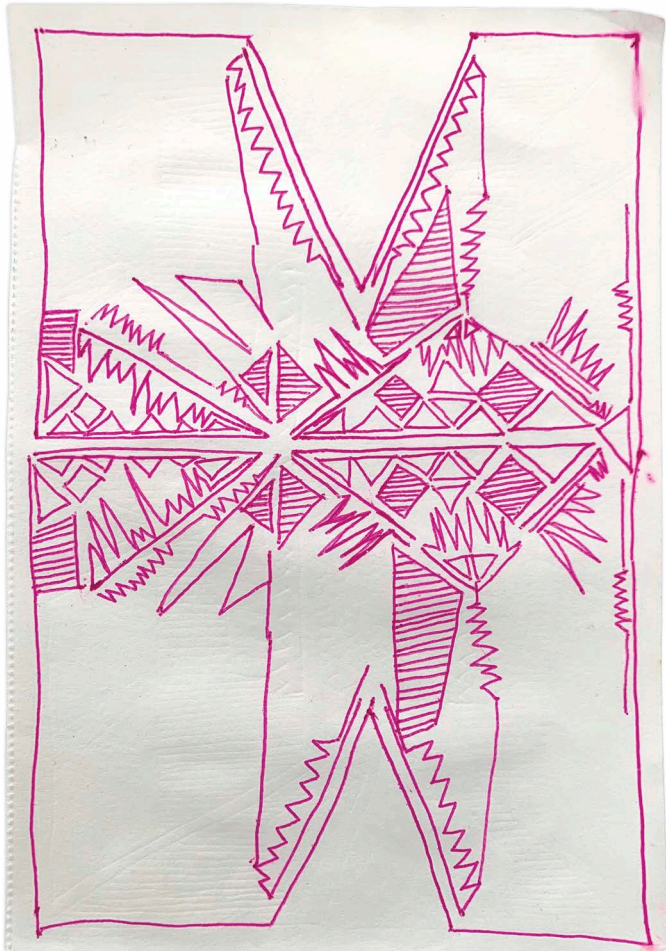
mother. Looking to *her* is a return to roots; a return to the centrality of dissent for the existence of Black life. A return to an ancestral home.

Reconnected by shared dissent, what must concern us now, is organizing historical acts of resistance. Is there a database, say, for reducing the "neo-liberal" gentrification in Harlem? Said in jest, but seriously, the archives of resistance assume many forms—slave narratives, oral traditions, maroon communities, planter's farm books, ship registers, black epistemologies, letters, and memoirs. To this list let's add the following: form, gesture, Baroque, abstraction, Alma Thomas,









*Place of Breath and Birth sketches.*

line, color(ed) theory. An inventory of artistic *strategies* of dissent. How does Robles-Gordon deploy her expansive bag of tools? In what ways do the tools and their deployment re-establish historical kinship connections?

Robles-Gordon makes a familial return to ancestral forms of resistance through a patchwork of artistic mediums. In her mixed-media piece, *La Isla del Encanto*, 2020 (p.33), an abundance of energy pours from the surface in vertical bands of color, a collaged spectrum of bold monochromatic columns vibrating next to patterned swatches of color. Muted pink meets vibrant red, meets two-toned orange pattern, meets green, meets zebra, meets cerulean blue. But contrary to the suggestion of movement evoked by these columns of color is the central motif of the *Ficus Elastica*, commonly known as the rubber tree. The artist translates this natural Puerto Rican vegetation into a symbol of fortitude and strength, authoring a visual economy to the two-dimensional plane. In what appears to be ballpoint pen on banal white paper, she deploys a series of interlocking hand-drawn triangles and lines as a core ordering element. *La Isla del Encanto* is the Spanish name for Puerto Rico, *the island of enchantment*, which is the artist's mother's childhood home. In this context the tree signifies the possibility of homecoming: her return, as well as her mother's, to a material and metaphorical natal occasion. The recovery and deployment of Robles-Gordon's mother's mother in the title tongue situates her listener (viewer) within the geographic parameters of Caribbeanness. Provoking *our* return home.



Such an interpretation requires an understanding of the continuum of historical acts of aesthetic resistance central to the futurity of Black life. Speculatively, one might seek mimetic references to nineteenth-century African American slave quilts, the geometric patterning of which *Encanto's* collaged spectrum echoes. Stitched to appear technically inferior, these textiles encoded messages for fugitive slaves. Slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad could read the textiles for instructions to aid in liberation attempts.

Furthermore, Robles-Gordon establishes a possible connection between herself and her past through her appropriation of the Washington Color School's use of







color, form, and structure. While the bands of color and leftover materials connect Robles-Gordon and her readers to African American epistemologies, the Washington Color School paves that gulf with a patchwork of hues, fields of stains, and malleable beauty.<sup>12</sup>

The school's matriarch, Alma Thomas, might be a structural *Ficus Elastic*; a sturdy figure against which to model resistance. Like *Encanto*'s core figure, Thomas's stable, authorial mosaics of color, in such works as *Fall Atmosphere* (1971)—possibly fusing quilting strategies with Pointillism's perceptual pursuits—poses a subtle challenge to Modernism's grid.<sup>13</sup> Organized in vertical bands, Thomas's chromatic dashes insinuate the grid's (whiteness's) inability to control Blackness.

In search of another Black form against which to establish the limits of white supremacy, we abruptly call to service Beyoncé. Her film, *Homecoming* (2019), opens with the Black feminist entertainer, cloaked as an Egyptian royal band leader, marching towards the camera. Witnessing her advance, the camera-as-grid (tool of capture) retreats. The swaying of her hips pushing the percussion to its edge. (The rhythm section is a kind of grid, holding the ground for improvisation.) The metallic warrior instructs the camera-as-grid to “catch these hands.” Good luck! The grid can neither catch, capture, nor control the surplus that is the totality of Black performance.

Returning to Robles-Gordon through Mama Thomas, and Sis Beyoncé's rattling the retreating lens (the limits

of whiteness), might *her* work offer deployment of creative disturbances—strategies of resistance through aesthetic means?

As with Mama Thomas, we witness the same perceptual and formal concerns in Robles-Gordon. The forms and shapes of *Encanto* grapple with the grid, sliding all over the place. *Catch...these...hands!* Bars of color wobble under their emotional weight, while the rubber tree's crystals dance. It's a celebration! Robles-Gordon recovers the organic grid of slave quilts and Mama Thomas, and in doing so, she returns to her creative ancestral roots.

Whether for banishing Blackness, quantifying property, or mapping out the two-dimensional picture plane, the Modernist grid has been deployed as a white supremacist tool of capture and civilization (making decent). However, the joke's on modernism. What the artist's practice makes legible are the many ways to *buck* one grid, while initiating another. *Black Maternal Mathematics: flexible grid?*<sup>14</sup> Her forms and grid collaborate for affective communication. Accompanying *collaboration* is *empathy*. Robles-Gordon's grid, too, “empathizes”—accepting the marginalized, seeking the hidden, valorizing the edge. In contrast, the western grid collapses from its confrontation with Black social life. With it goes the structure—the house. The abundance of materials—colors, detritus, dashes, slashes, attached to moans, cries, shrieks, always laughter—express the limits of white Western patriarchy's drive to determine. Black peoples are not singular beings,

Opposite: *El altar eterno de las mujeres abandonadas y las almas renunciadas. Sin embargo, la elección siempre debe ser de ella. The eternal altar for the women forsaken and souls relinquished. Yet the choice must always remain hers.* (detail), 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.



rather, we are busting at the seams with surplus. *It's a celebration!* Robles-Gordon's deployment of black surplus in her exploration of the formal, conceptual, social, and political implications of (Black) aesthetics, does not merely condemn the grid for its rigidity, but exposes the very limits of whiteness.<sup>15</sup> Black people are so robust with inner *stuff*, that the grid can't even begin to portray the depth of meaning internal to Black subjectivity. As Black maternal mathematics (a malleable grid seen as a *descent* from western *decency*) emerges in Robles-Gordon's reclamation of ancestral liberation strategies, her work announces to its oppositional colonialist ecology the truth: *Y'all ain't ready... ain't never gon' be ready!*

*There is a ~~decent~~ way to dissent!*

Merely saying “no!” won’t cut it. Rather, the act of speaking requires a plan. Fortunately, dissent has a historical blueprint. Robles-Gordon’s schema is instructive for methods of refusal, recovery, and return required

for a *tending-toward-blackness*.<sup>16</sup> Robles-Gordon’s manipulation of language is both an advance towards, and a retreat from, decency. She initially adhered to “decent” ideas of assimilation based on whiteness, but over time recognized the value of opposition, using the language she had gained in the process. While *dissent* from the *decent* seems like a *descent*, in reality it can be read as *ascent*—social mobility is exchanged for spiritual movement during a return to the ancestral. While Lorde rejects the creative weaponization of the master’s instruments by the oppressed, Robles-Gordon suggests that recasting the “master’s tools” against their associations with whiteness, morality, language, and structure *will* dismantle his house. Advancing toward colonialism’s “big house of language” provokes a necessary relocation: language *must* displace and dispossess the possessor. Said another way:

*Let's make the master homeless,  
as we return home...*

*Noel W Anderson (b. Louisville, KY) received an MFA from Indiana University in Printmaking, and an MFA from Yale University in Sculpture. He is also Area Head of Printmaking in NYU's Steinhardt Department of Art and Art Professions. Anderson utilizes print media and arts-based-research to explore philosophical inquiry methodologies. He primarily focuses on the mediation of socially constructed images on identity formation as it relates to black masculinity and celebrity. In 2018, Noel was awarded the NYFA artist fellowship grant and the prestigious Jerome Prize. His solo exhibition Blak Origin Moment debuted at the Contemporary Arts Center (Cincinnati) in February 2017 and travelled to the Hunter Museum of American Art in October 2019. His first monograph, Blak Origin Moment, was also recently published.*

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 41.
- <sup>2</sup> Phillip Bryan Harper, "Is you my daddy?" in *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African-American Culture* (New York: NY University Press, 2015), 32-34.
- <sup>3</sup> Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools" in *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017), 89.
- <sup>4</sup> Franklin, Aretha, "Bridge Over Troubled Water," 1971.
- <sup>5</sup> American slavery is known as "the peculiar institution," from which birthed the Maternal line. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2, Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection. (Summer, 1987), 64-81.
- <sup>6</sup> The organization of this indentation is meant to allude to a more malleable, flexible ordering system. Further down, speculated as *Black Maternal Mathematics*.
- <sup>7</sup> Personal email with Amber Robles-Gordon.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Lorde, "Transformation," 40.
- <sup>10</sup> Franklin, Aretha. "Bridge Over Troubled Water." 1971.
- <sup>11</sup> Black Maternal Mathematic's ordering. See footnote 7.
- <sup>12</sup> "Inferior" here highlights the identity of these materials as detritus, shavings from other broader forms.
- <sup>13</sup> See the work of Georges-Pierre Seurat (1859-1891).
- <sup>14</sup> See Heidegger on mathematics "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics." Katherine McKittrick "Mathematics Black Life." The realization of "Black grids" modes of calculating and organizing.
- <sup>15</sup> Black surplus is "erotic"—in the sense of Eros as "love." We have an abundance of love within. How else can our forgiveness after 500 years of terror be explained?
- <sup>16</sup> Black scholar Huey Copeland develops this Heideggerian influenced triad as "a leaning into and caring for," Black subjects. For an extended meditation on this term, see Copeland's, "Tending-toward-Blackness," *October*, 156 (2016): 141-144.







**“BEFORE, I COULD ONLY GUESS OF WHO I WAS.  
NOW, THANKS TO MY ART, I KNOW WHO I AM...”**

**— LUHRAW**





# ABSTRACTION AS A PORTAL

Larry Ossei-Mensah

Amber Robles-Gordon creates visual tableaux imbued with magic and mystery. Engaging complex concerns with political, socio-economic, and environmental implications regarding issues of placemaking and citizenship, this Afro-Latina mixed media artist leverages her practice as a platform. She transforms these issues into supernatural moments designed to make the viewer think, question, and think again about the societal impact of these concerns. I've spent several years looking, learning, and reflecting on Robles-Gordon's work to decode what makes her artworks so compelling. I've concluded that Robles-Gordon constructs artwork steeped in ancestral memory that evokes transcendental experiences, actively engaging the viewer's conscience. Gestural drawing, painting, and sewing are some of the strategies she employs to transport the viewer from the pictorial to the inner depths of her imagination. Robles-Gordon intently dissects and reconfigures materials, developing a rich visual language operating on a sophisticated register. This language interweaves a variety of artistic strategies including Geometric Abstraction, Action Painting,

and Quiltmaking, providing a robust and layered discourse. By incorporating these gestures within her work, Robles-Gordon has created a nuanced approach to thinking about abstract painting, our world, and the pursuit of social justice.

*Successions: Traversing US Colonialism* is more than just an exhibition. It is a proposition for cultural reclamation, an interrogation of the domestic and foreign policies applied to US territories and districts like Washington, DC, enacted by the US government. *Successions* also examines how these policies catalyze social, cultural, and economic inequity prevalent in these territories, creating vignettes that highlight the discriminatory and oppressive ethos embedded into the United States' DNA. These points of view are the crux of *Successions*, amalgamated into a larger discourse about the act of abstract painting as a pathway towards understanding the complexities of our society. The unfurling of these complexities serves as a catalyst for the Robles-Gordon to question notions of access, citizenship, and sovereignty for indigenous people and people of color that





From top: *DC Political, Welcome to the District of Colonialism* (Front), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 86 x 90 in.; *DC Spiritual, Native American* (Back), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 86 x 90 in.

inhabit US territories. These territories are social and cultural spaces historically commodified by the US government and rarely treated equally from a policy standpoint.

*Successions* is a first-person exploration of how these territorial policies shape the social landscape of the United States. Robles-Gordon, who is of Afro-Latina and Puerto Rican heritage, spent part of 2020 and 2021 shuttling between San Juan, Puerto Rico (her birthplace), and Washington, DC (where she currently lives) to prepare for this exhibition. As she traversed between spaces, her perspective on the circumstances on the ground evolved. She saw communities in San Juan still dealing with the ripple effects of Hurricane Maria and Irma almost three years later and witnessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic first-hand. Daily curfews and limited access to essential resources were a wake-up call for Robles-Gordon and inspired her to make *Successions* more than just an exhibition. It had to be a call to action, illuminating the challenges that citizens in these districts and territories face daily that never make the front page news. They may go viral for a moment but these unsolved issues remain even when the attention shifts. The works featured in *Successions* mine the stories, personal narratives, and aesthetics of Caribbean women, particularly of African descent, to investigate implications of placemaking, contemporary colonial policy, and notions of citizenship on these social groups. *Successions* furthermore interrogates past and current US policies within federal districts (i.e., Washington, DC) and territories (i.e., Guam, Puerto Rico, and



the US Virgin Islands). By highlighting nuances related to US governance in its federal districts and territories, Robles-Gordon seeks to question who has access to resources, citizenship, and the right to sovereignty.

*Successions* also builds on the legacy of the Washington Color School, which peaked from the 1950s to the 1970s. Robles-Gordon follows in the footsteps of her predecessors, including Sam Gilliam and Alma Thomas, who created work in response to key events during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Gilliam with his *April 4* (1969) in response to Dr. Martin Luther

King's assassination and Thomas with *March on Washington* (1963) used their platforms to speak up about issues of their day. In some of her work, Robles-Gordon responds to a chaotic time in history and calls for social justice, a crisis amplified by the murder of George Floyd. Robles-Gordon creates a pathway via abstraction to understand indigenous and other marginalized communities through color, shape, form, material, and quilting. These current events have recalibrated how we as Americans engage with daily life, as many of us search for meaning and normalcy. These variables position *Successions* as not only a proposition but





From left: *Puerto Rico Political* (Front), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.; *Puerto Rico Spiritual* (Back), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.

a portal that captures a slice of the zeitgeist, telling the stories of communities rarely given a stage for creative expression. Robles-Gordon uses her artworks as a forum to unfurl her own layered personal identity and to investigate how cultural heritage can inform artistic practice and understanding of geopolitical policy.

As part of her preparation for the exhibition, Robles-Gordon spent the past year researching several US territories—American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the federal district of Washington, DC. This research has enabled her to identify the suppressed histories of these communities to map out new possibilities and enlighten her viewers. This research serves as

source material to inform her creative strategies as she worked between Washington, DC, and San Juan. Working between these two locations proved fruitful, inspiring a robust ontological framework, enabling her to unpack her maternal Afro-Puerto Rican heritage through abstract American paintings. She utilizes these roots to further engage with themes such as womanhood, colonialism, and hybridity. Moreover, Robles-Gordon sought to investigate how these influences can provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues percolating within our society during the era of COVID-19, anti-Black violence, and oppressive structures designed to impact marginalized communities adversely.





*Observación de influyentes: cultura y herencia Taina, el clima y el machismo, Observation of Influencers: Taino culture and heritage, the climate and machismo, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*







These discoveries are clearly articulated on the surface of each collage and quilt. Robles-Gordon incorporates evocative symbols into her works, prevalent in both subtle and overt ways. Symbols include the black and white Puerto Rican flag found in *Puerto Rico Political* (2021), a tangible representation of the island's resistance movement. The resistance focuses on policies like The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (instituted in 2016). Many Puerto Ricans deem this act a failure that exacerbated the island's debt crisis. The black and white flag appears on the island of Puerto Rico as a symbol of defiance, and Robles-Gordon poetically introduces it to her audience. Other symbols such as fruit, deconstructed text, and tropical plant life appear, inviting the viewer to decipher the multivalent dialogue that Robles-Gordon initiates with this body of work.

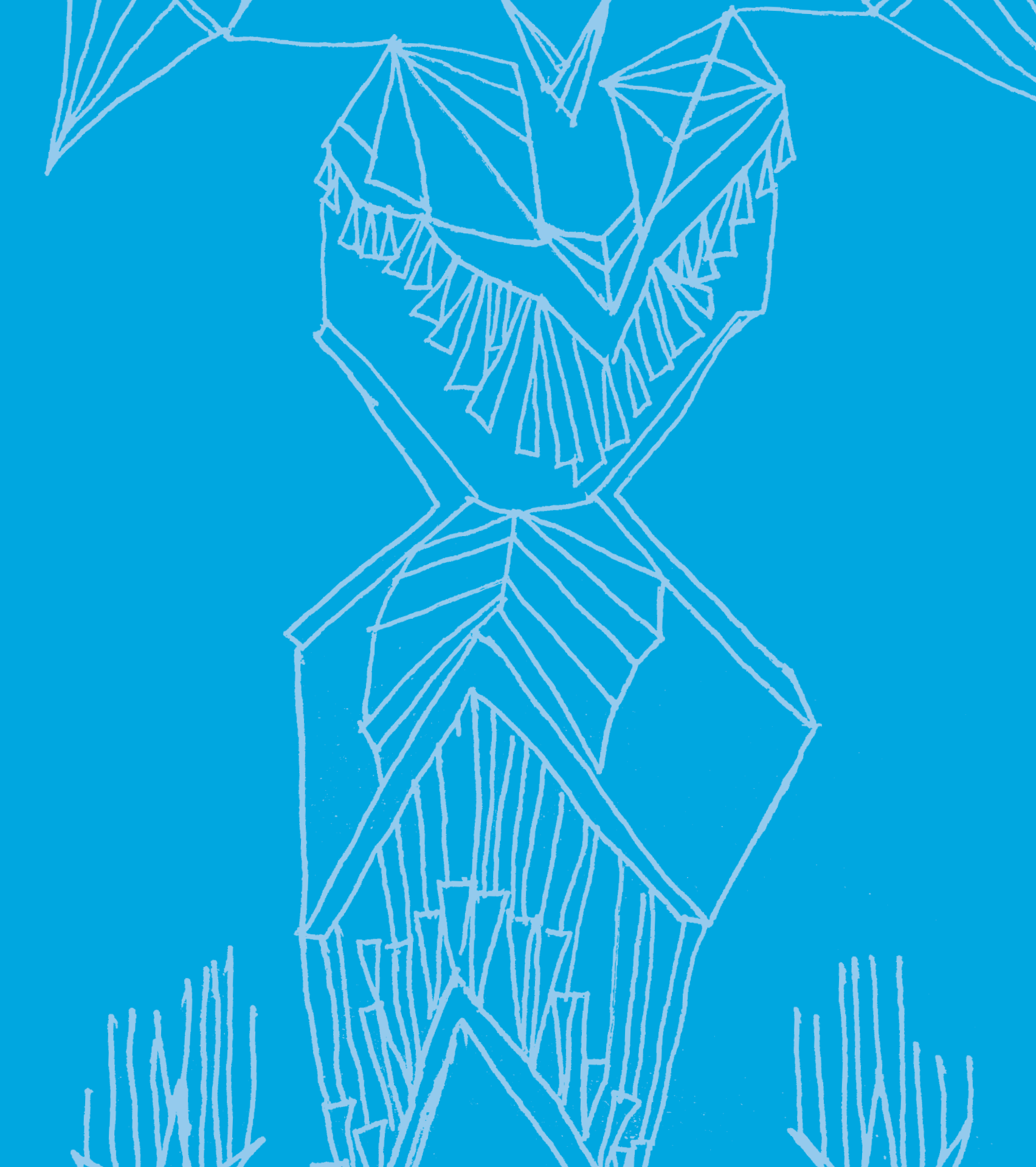
*Observation of Influencers: Taino culture and heritage, the climate, and machismo* (2020) is a powerful mixed media collage that sets the stage for the exhibition. This stage functions as a forum to integrate and unpack the impact of indigenous communities throughout the course of history. The Taino people were nearly wiped out due to the ripple effects of colonization as a result of forces, disease, and battles with the Spanish, particularly in Puerto Rico. The Spirit of the Taino people occupies the central point, reflected in the plant life, totems, and birds collaged into this piece. Like other featured works, this piece provides a constellation of visual signifiers that reflect the artist's strong point of view, expanding our understanding of omitted histories

and communities. In this composition, Robles-Gordon created a universe ordered by African organizing principles and unified by a totemic structure. These principles encompass a sense of rhythm, pattern, and repetition on the work's surface. It is a quintessential example of Robles-Gordon's ability to juxtapose unexpected colors, forms, and imagery. This unique vernacular recontextualizes how the viewer considers both the celestial and earthly to speak on climate change, and vegetation using bird symbols that are significant in many indigenous cultures.

As much as the exhibition highlights geopolitics, sociology, and abstract painting, this work is also profoundly rooted in personal narrative. These works have coerced Robles-Gordon to interrogate her understanding of her identity, community, and the various forms through which power is articulated. *Reclaiming who I am* (2020) is a vivid example of this personal inquiry, via the lens of an abstracted self-portrait. The one visible eye represents an omnipresent oracle, looking into the past, present, and future. Moreover, anchored by the Black strips of color on the left and right sides of the composition, Robles-Gordon deftly asserts her pride in being an Afro-Latina woman. Through these works, Amber Robles-Gordon invites us, viewers, to look at both ourselves and at each other, while questioning our complicity in upholding oppressive behaviors, policies, and social structures that suppress communities on the margins. Through this self-examination, the exhibition is also a call to action for agents of change to make society better for all.

Opposite: *Reclamando quien soy, Reclaiming who I am* (detail), 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 24 x 18 in.





# SUCCESSIONS

AMBER ROBLES-GORDON



## PLACE OF BREATH AND BIRTH



*Botánica del Amor, Autorreflexión y Espiritualidad, Botanical of Love, Self-Reflection and Spirituality, 2020. Mixed media collage, 18 x 24 in. Collection of the David C. Driskell Center.*





*Tendedero, Comunidad y Energía Eterna, Clotheslines, Community, and Eternal Energy, 2020. Mixed media collage, 18 x 24 in. Private Collection.*





*Elemental: Tierra, Aire, Agua, Fuego, Elemental: Earth, Air, Water, Fire, 2020. Mixed media collage, 18 x 24 in.*





*La Isla del Encanto, The Island of Enchantment, 2020. Mixed media collage, 18 x 24 in.*





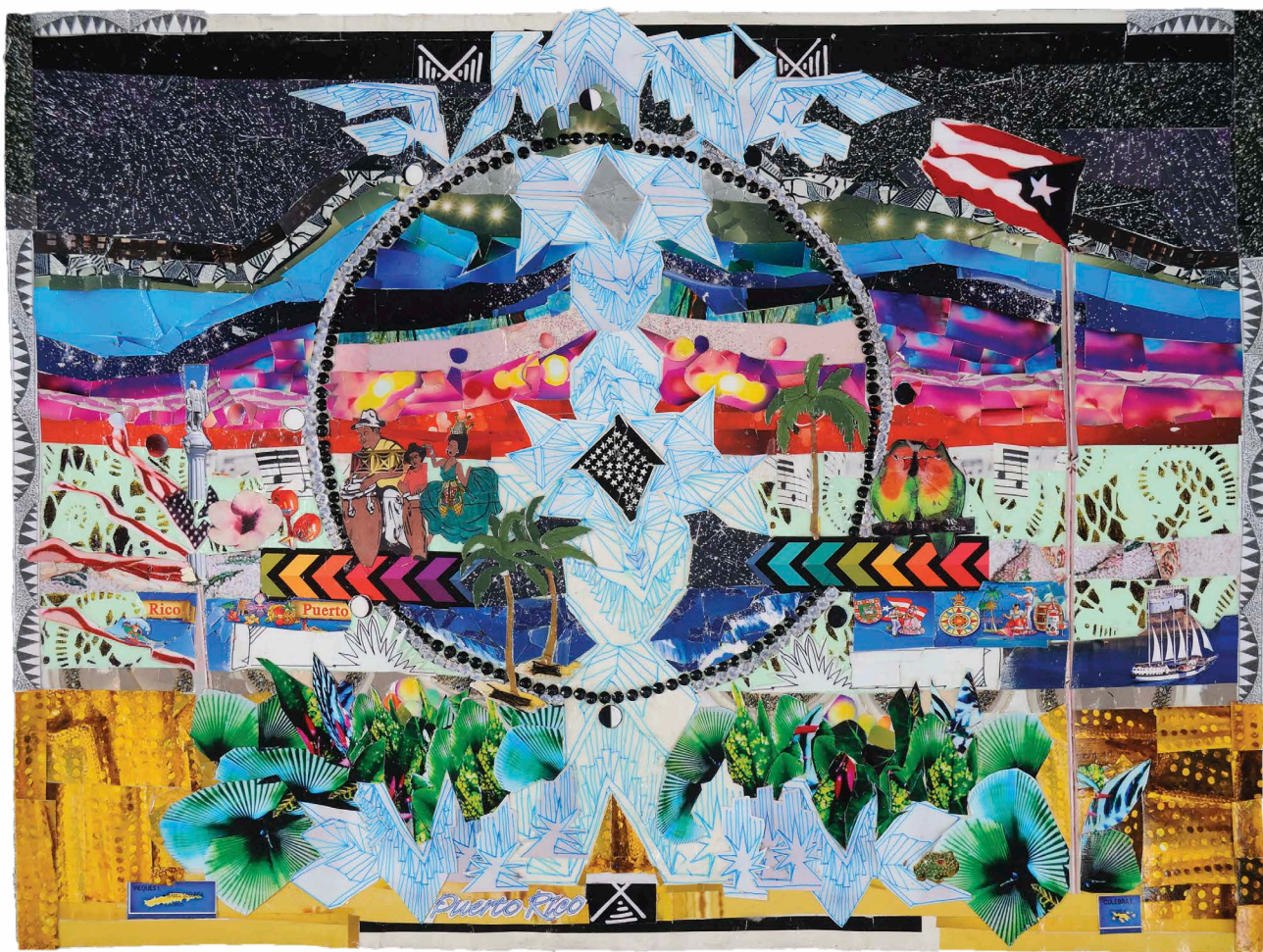
*Observación de influyentes: cultura y herencia Taina, el clima y el machismo, Observation of Influencers: Taino culture and heritage, the climate and machismo, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*





*El altar eterno de las mujeres abandonadas y las almas renunciadas. Sin embargo, la elección siempre debe ser de ella. The eternal altar for the women forsaken and souls relinquished. Yet the choice must always remain hers., 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*





*y mi bandera vuela mas alto que la tuya, and my flag flies higher than yours, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*





*Reflexiones sobre el yo, la virgen maría y el colonialism, Reflections of self, the Virgin Mary and colonialism, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*





*Reclamando quien soy, Reclaiming who I am*, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 24 x 18 in.





*Para las bahías bioluminiscentes y las tortugas, For bioluminescent bays and turtles, 2020. Mixed media collage on canvas, 18 x 24 in.*



# SUCCESSIONS: TRAVERSING US COLONIALISM



*USVI Political (Front)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 90 x 86 in.





*USVI Spiritual, Moko Jumbie: Walk Tall and Heal Forward (Back), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 90 x 86 in.*





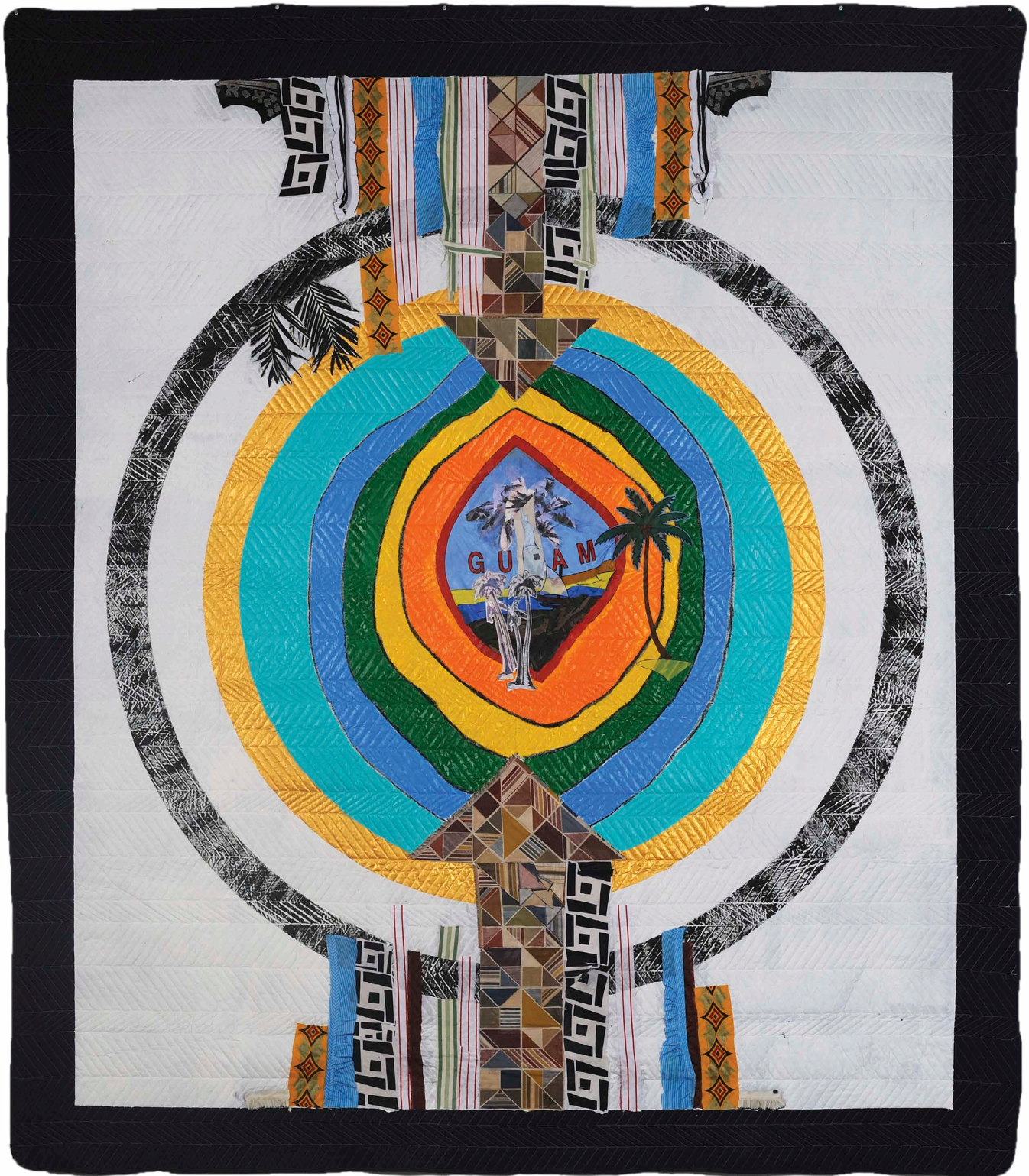
*DC Political, Welcome to the District of Colonialism (Front), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 86 x 90 in.*





*DC Spiritual, Native American (Back)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 86 x 90 in.





*Guam Political*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*Guam Spiritual*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*Puerto Rico Political (Front)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*Puerto Rico Spiritual (Back)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*American Samoa Political* (Front), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*American Samoa Spiritual (Back)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





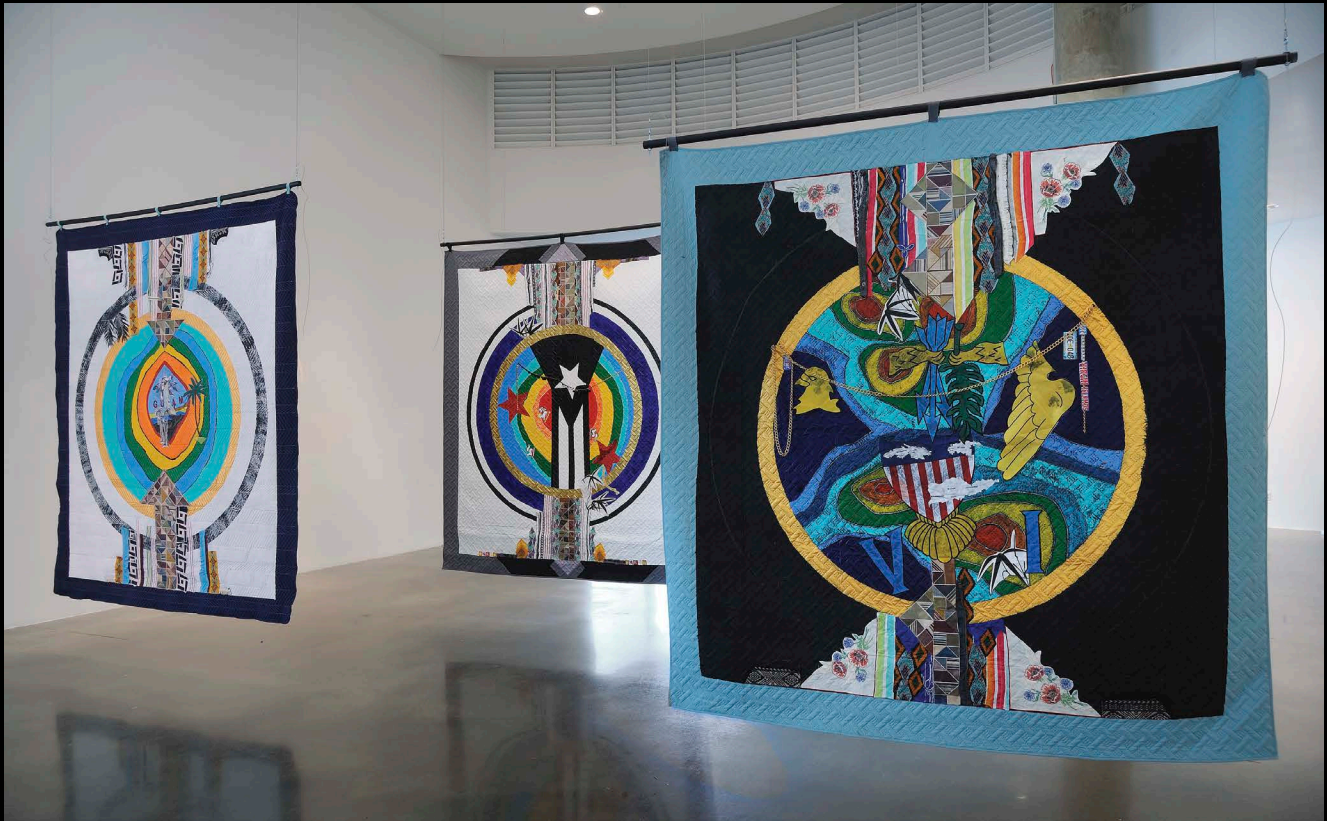
*When All Is Well (Front)*, 2020. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.





*When All Is Well/The Hawk (Back)*, 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.

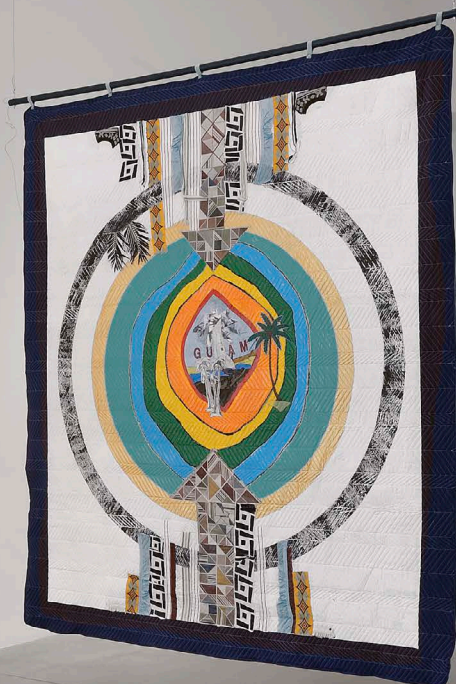
















Installation photography courtesy of Greg Staley.







# ARTIST STATEMENT

Amber Robles-Gordon

In September 2017, two category five hurricanes, Maria and Irma, collided into Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands (or USVI, St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix). As a person of both Puerto Rican and USVI descent, I experienced anger and disbelief as I observed the inept media coverage and poor treatment in the aftermath of this catastrophe. Maria rammed Puerto Rico with 175 mile per hour winds at landfall and Irma into the USVI with 178 mile per hour winds. These natural disasters left millions of people facing the largest blackout in US history, rendered multitudes homeless, and killed almost 3,000 people. This onslaught was followed by Trump's dawdling and inadequate relief response worsened survivors' pain and suffering.

Two years later, I traveled to Puerto Rico to address questions raised by my insistent five-year-old self about our identity. The fight for my heritage and language inspired experiences and artworks and filled the missing slivers of my cultural identity. In addition, my return to the US mainland due to the global pandemic deepened my need to understand the political implications of the Greater United States, otherwise known as US territories. As a 22-year resident of the District of Columbia, I have witnessed passive-aggressive posturing between the US federal seat and its city-state capital.

*Successions: Traversing US Colonialism* is an abstracted exploration of the historical underpinnings of US Colonialism, the intersections of language, culture, institutional racism, anti-Blackness, and their immeasurable impact within the US territories. The US has 14, five of which are inhabited and unincorporated: American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The remaining nine uninhabitable, very small islands, or atolls.

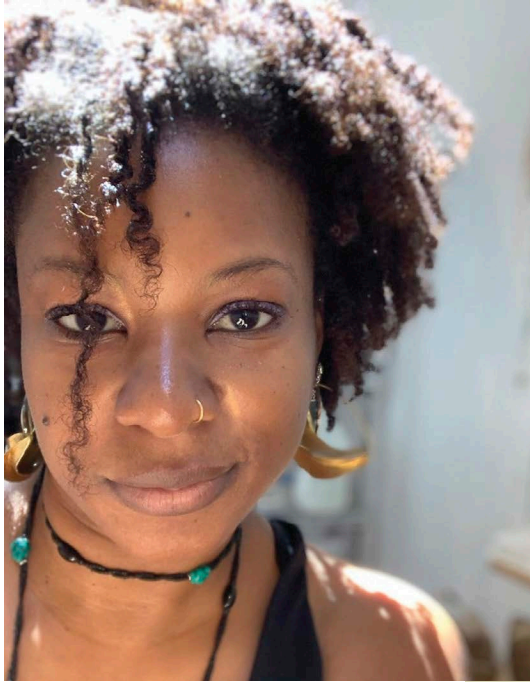
Under US purview, these territories have historically been politically and economically underfunded and underdeveloped, resulting in high poverty rates. This has catalyzed a higher than average enrollment in the US Armed Forces as a pathway out of impoverished circumstances. However, residents who live in these territories have limited voting rights. Moreover, they do not have full representation in Congress. Additionally, throughout the territories, the Federal Government has annexed an excessive amount of indigenous land for Army and Naval bases and other federal uses. US control of these territories, and their economic reliance on tourism, has subsequently *Americanized* their people, ecology, culture and agriculture.

The exhibition features two bodies of artwork: "Place of Breath and Birth," a series of ten 18 x 24 inch mixed media

collages on canvas works, and "Successions: Traversing US Colonialism," seven, 83 x 89 inch (approximately), double-sided mixed media assemblage quilts. The front of each quilt deconstructs the national flag or seal of each territory. This side reflects interpretations of the political, socio-economic, environmental, and racial implications that have shaped the current conditions of people in those spaces. I emphasized the incorporation of geometric forms and mark-making into my works to provide a platform for the back of each quilt to focus on each territory's culture and spirituality in addition to our collective humanity.

I challenge viewers to consider what legacy our generation bequeaths to the next. For how much longer will indigenous people of color allow themselves to be divided into singular silos and remain collectively conquered? I attempt to emphasize the inadequate treatment of US territories and consecutively highlight their global connective tissue, shared existence, and cultural resilience, for "*no man (or woman) is an island entire of itself*" (John Donne, 1642).





AMBER ROBLES-GORDON is a mixed media visual artist of Puerto Rican and West Indian heritage. She is known for her commissioned temporary and permanent public art installations for numerous government agencies, institutions, universities, and art fairs.

Robles-Gordon has over twenty years of experience exhibiting and in art education, commissioned critiques, lectures, teaching, and exhibition coordination. She received a BS in business administration from Trinity University and an MFA in painting from Howard University, Washington, DC. She has exhibited nationally and internationally, including Germany, Italy, Malaysia, England, and Spain. Robles-Gordon has participated in residencies in Costa Rica, Washington, DC, and at the American Academy in Rome, Italy. Her artwork has been reviewed and featured in numerous magazines, journals, newspapers, and online publications.

Most recently, she held an online solo exhibition at Galeria de Arte, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and was featured by Tafeta Gallery in the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London, England, and during London Art Week. In 2022, she will create a traveling exhibition in collaboration with Cultural DC and El Cuadrado Gris Galeria in Puerto Rico.



LARRY OSSEI-MENSAH uses contemporary art as a vehicle to redefine how we see ourselves and the world around us. A Ghanaian-American curator and cultural critic, Ossei-Mensah has organized exhibitions and programs at commercial and nonprofit spaces around the globe from New York City to Rome, featuring artists including Firelei Baez, Allison Janae Hamilton, Brendan Fernandes, Ebony G. Patterson, Modou Dieng, Glenn Kaino, Joiri Minaya and Stanley Whitney. Moreover, Ossei-Mensah has actively documented cultural happenings featuring the most dynamic visual artists working today, including Derrick Adams, Mickalene Thomas, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Federico Solmi, and Kehinde Wiley.

A native of The Bronx, Ossei-Mensah is also the co-founder of ARTNOIR, a 501(c)(3) and global collective of culturalists who design multimodal experiences aimed to engage this generation's dynamic and diverse creative class. ARTNOIR endeavors to celebrate the artistry and creativity of Black and Brown artists around the world via virtual and in-person experiences. Ossei-Mensah was a contributor to the first-ever Ghanaian Pavilion for the 2019 Venice Biennial with an essay on the work of visual artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye.

Ossei-Mensah is the former Susanne Feld Hilberry Senior Curator at MOCAD in Detroit and currently serves as Curator-at-Large at Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), where he curated the *New York Times* heralded exhibition *Let Free Ring and A Return: Liberation as Power respectively*.

Ossei-Mensah has been profiled in publications including the *New York Times*, *Artsy*, and *Cultured Magazine*, and was recently named to Artnet's 2020 Innovator List. Follow him on Instagram at @larryosseimensah and Twitter at @youngglobal.



Photo: Anthony Artis



Special thanks to Noel Anderson and TAFETA - London.

**To learn more about the exhibition and view Robles-Gordon's *Northern Mariana Islands*, visit our website:**  
**[american.edu/cas/museum/2021/successions.cfm](http://american.edu/cas/museum/2021/successions.cfm)**

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Front cover: *Puerto Rico Spiritual* (Back), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.

Back cover: *Puerto Rico Political* (Front), 2021. Mixed media on quilt, 104 x 90 in.



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