

**Reflections from a Henry Art Liaison:
*Fishing Was His Life and this was a densely wooded hill***

[Henry Art Liaisons](#) are undergraduate student interns from the University of Washington who aim to change the face, practice and future of museums by amplifying the diversity of voices active within the Henry Art Gallery.

By Hayden Stern, 2022-23 Henry Art Liaison

Fishing Was His Life and *this was a densely wooded hill* are works that, at first glance, exist in visual opposition to each other. They draw on very different ideas about materials, dimensionality, contrast, and use of space, as well as ideas about individual versus collective authorship. Walking through these exhibits back to back with Curator Nina Bozicnik and former Associate Curator of Public and Youth Programs Mita Mahato, Ph.D. gave me the opportunity to additionally appreciate the thematic cohesion of these two works, and think about two very different material strategies for solving similar thematic questions.

In *Fishing Was His Life*, Nina Chanel Abney uses layered monoprints to draw attention to Black American fishing culture. At first glance, these works look flat, high contrast, and almost commercial. The slight three dimensionality of the collaged prints becomes apparent only in close up. Likewise, it was only in spending more time in the room that I was able to take in the nuance of each image, which collectively hold themes of camaraderie, environmental degradation, the transatlantic slave trade, and the economic impacts of racialization. Some of the collaged pieces bear human fingerprints, a kind of visibilization of artistic labor. I appreciated that detail given that the greater project of this installation is to visibilize a different kind of sidelined Black labor.

During our tour of the exhibit, Nina Bozicnik explained that Abney moved intentionally to a more graphic, geometric style, hoping that a hyperpalatable visual vocabulary would encourage viewers to sit with difficult images and themes with more ease. One of the works that particularly stood out to me was a piece which depicts a Black man in a boat spearing a fish. The figure is large, with a sense of movement and agency. Stenciled in a repeating pattern in the background are the stylized figures of black bodies, a nod to the catastrophic death toll of the transatlantic slave trade and the middle passage. The juxtaposition of the foreground and background is deeply moving. Amidst unceasing violence and insurmountable obstacles, Black Americans find ways to survive, exert agency, and connect with place and with each other.

Walking into *this was a densely wooded hill*, an installation by artists Satpreet Kahlon, Asia Tail and Kimberly Corinne Deriana of the yəhaw' Indigenous Creatives Collective, was very unlike spending time in Abney's colorful, high contrast room. Separated from the lobby by a thick white curtain, the space is naturally lit, with a curvilinear, copper lined floor space furnished with tree stumps. Outside of the copper lining, the floor is littered with oyster shells.

At the apex of the curved floor hangs a large, mobile-like sculpture, with donated objects woven onto it, many with cultural significance. These objects were sourced from Indigenous participants and yəhaw Indigenous Creatives Collective members, and objects will continue to be added during the duration of the installation.

The experience of being in the space is quiet and awe-inspiring. Mita Mahato explained that the integration of organic elements and natural lighting was designed to blend the idea of outdoors and indoors. The installation itself is an ode to Indigenous grief: for loss of culture, loss of land, loss of livable Earth. That the installation will continue to grow and change feels like testament to the idea of cyclical time, of growing something out of devastation, as well as the power of collective mourning.

Both exhibits examine the devastation of colonialism, of the grief of environmental racism and climate disaster. They also both hold space for the miracle of having survived, even given what has been lost (and is still being destroyed). These works examine the legacies of settler-colonialist violence unflinchingly, passing over neither the pain nor the resilience. While the artists have very different aesthetic approaches, both use beauty to begin a conversation that might otherwise be difficult to invite others into, without veering into voyeurizing tragedy. Side by side, they ask the viewer to engage critically with land, resource extraction, and cultural survival.