

# THINKING THROUGH PORTALS

CHARLOTTE STREET FELLOWS' SPATIAL REASONING

By Emily Cox

wasn't ready to travel into new dimensions on a Tuesday afternoon. But at the Nerman Museum the artworks of Charlotte Street Foundation fellows glyneisha, Cory Imig, and Kathy Liao created portals that shaped the space around me in new ways.

Cory Imig's abstract installations, glyneisha's sacred spaces, and Kathy Liao's massive drawings constitute the *Portals* show housed within the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art at Johnson County Community College.

While promoted as one exhibit, there are truly three separate ones. Each artist is given their own space in which to make unique statements to cast us into their idiosyncratic dimensions.

## Entering the Void

Cory Imig's work is visible upon first walking into the museum, filling the lobby space. An open-frame geometric steel sculpture, "Volumetric Form VI," is a dominating emptiness. Its angles and openness make it hard to grasp its shape or even presence. I walked in circles around it, trying to see where and what it is, even though it stood far taller than me.

Down the hall, her curtains of blue ribbons stretch diagonally across the lobby space. "Linear Spaces (blue)" appears as a barrier, echoing the sort of trepidation we can experience in institutional buildings, but then upends that trepidation by being an opportunity for play. Imig invites the viewer to walk through the ribbons, to touch them, to be immersed and surrounded by them. The barrier dissolves into softness, lightness.

I stood smiling in between the swaths of ribbons, feeling the joy of a kid in a blanket fort, delighted at the specialness of a temporary space constructed just for you.

Our expectations of institutional space continue to be disrupted with Imig's digital media work: a digital monitor hangs on the wall behind the museum's information desk, displaying solid hues. There's a presence in this absence. It feels like an information screen with the information missing. We may find ourselves waiting for something, and then realizing that the thing is already there.

## The Brightest Timeline

Upstairs, Kathy Liao's massive painting "<liú nián>" (2021), translated as "fleeting time," offers a slip in the multiverse. My breath caught as I was immediately pulled into this scene that is recognizable as a metro platform but also looks wholly belonging to another dimension—as if the metro platform were submerged in a pool of bright, swirling, pastel-colored paints.

I found that I was standing just as the central figure in the painting was standing, their back to me as if one step ahead. As if I could take one step forward and be inside their shoes. As if I could take one step forward and be whole, inside the painting.

Liao has created a portal. I recommend standing in front of it for a good long while. Let yourself be pulled into the portal and slowly notice your surroundings. A child is clinging to your leg. The man sitting over there watches us, his face unreadable. The despondent youth on the train, oblivious and lost in their own thoughts.

Her other two works in the exhibit, "In Between the Lines" (2019) and "Without" (2018) also are staggering in

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The Charlotte Street Fellows exhibits are on view now through April 24, 2022, at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, at Johnson County Community College (12345 College Blvd, Overland Park, KS 66210). The museum is free and open to the public. An artists' lecture and closing reception will take place on Thursday, April 21 at 6 p.m.





Above: glyneisha installation view from the exhibition *Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows - 2020*, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Left: Kathy Liao installation view from the exhibition *Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows - 2020*, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Photo: EG Schempf

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size, though they hold little color.

“In Between the Lines” is a collage of airport scenes, with zig-zagging stanchions and airplanes looming overhead. The emptiness, the waiting, the never-ending lines, the stark grey and white skies above—these all create this sense of the stagnation and uncertainty, and staleness of traveling in airports.

#### **Traveling Home**

Entering glyneisha’s multisensory exhibit *Pack Li.gh.te*, I was transported to a sacred space adorned with lush green walls. These are painted with organic forms and embraced by a soft deliberate soundscape that includes the background beat of Erykah Badu’s “Bag Lady,” selections from Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf, and more.

glyneisha’s artist statement speaks to the importance of space in her work: “Through her work, she honors traditions of Black domestic spaces as a source of refuge, healing,



Cory Imig installation view from the exhibition *Charlotte Street Foundation Fellows - 2020*, Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Photo: EG Schempf

and imagination. Though these spaces are familiar, the rebirth of these interiors within the traditional white wall gallery is also an act of resistance against the systemic racism that is embedded within museum settings.”

Eradicating the white walls in this gallery and saturating them with the green of trees and broad-leaved plants immediately signals she is writing against institutional traditions and their inherent hierarchical oppression.

The exhibit’s focal point is two altars that fill the walls with shelves holding clear glass jars containing a wide variety of contents: dried herbs, shells, candleholders, dried slices of citrus, turmeric powder, infused oils, lengths of hair, brightly colored fabric, carved mask icons, dried berries, flowers, and chunks of shea butter. Items that all are imbued with medicinal, spiritual, ritual value.

In the exhibit’s wall text, independent curator Silvie Fortin writes, “Simultaneously referential and experiential, the multisensory work seeks to create a safe space, a space of healing, identification, affirmation, and celebration, especially for Black visitors, who may not feel welcome in museums.”

Entering this smaller gallery tucked away from the larger open air space of the Nerman feels like entering a womb. A place to be safe, held, and fed.

As with viewing any artwork, our lived experience provides a filter through which we understand

and appreciate the work (or don’t). *Pack Li.gh.te* reverberated through me powerfully. At the same time, as a white woman, I know that the rituals, lineages, and lived experiences that glyneisha honors and elevates in her work are not mine—that I can never fully understand what it is to inhabit them.

glyneisha’s graphite drawings and mixed media collages show domestic spaces. Relationships of warm connection, tense dissolution, and absence.

The vividly textured collage “Oral Storytelling Traditions” lovingly renders two women on a stoop, one tending to the other’s hair. Both faces are calm, with attentions focused inward. They sit in the liminal space of a stoop, both public and private, at ease and fully themselves. They are at home, and they are extending that presence of home into public view. They are in a neighborhood of belonging. They are two Black women creating and owning their space in a world that does its best to dispossess them of it.

Each of these artists makes us conscious of the space that we exist in and offers new perspectives on how we move through them. glyneisha, Imig, and Liao create portals to new dimensions of their own creation. Dimensions that are ready to teach us. Dimensions that tickle that part of our brain stuck in old patterns, and push us into new ones. They show us that new patterns, new movements, new visions are available. This is what good art does: shakes us out of our familiar dimensions, transports us, and rewrites the spaces we exist in. ■

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