

## ARTIST STATEMENT

Under direct examination from NAACP attorney Mr. John Scott, and upon the question, "You want to tell the court why you joined this lawsuit?" from Judge Huxman, Silas Hardrick Fleming responds:

"Well, it wasn't for the sake of hot dogs; it wasn't to cast any insinuations that our teachers are not capable of teaching our children because they are supreme, extremely intelligent and capable of teaching my kids or white or black kids. **But my point was that not only I and my children are craving light, the entire colored race is craving light, and the only way to reach the light is to start our children together in their infancy and they come up together.**"

We are making a museum because a museum is a thing that most people know as a place to go, to see, feel, think about and experience the stories of ourselves and worlds both known and unknown through the many dimensions and textures of existence. A museum is a journey. It is always saying, "We have somewhere to go— let's go." And the journey is everything, isn't it? It is weird and upside down and turned inside-out and pretty and patient and colorful, mournful, historic, natural, spiritual, conceptual, hideous, embarrassing, funny, loving, holy, divine, gentle, loud, intimate— yes, the museum gives us everything that life is. Only it is a deliberate misdirection of gaze, isn't it? Even when the museum is pointing at the thing itself— the sculpture, the photograph, the art... it is also always pointing at you, too, isn't it? This is why we are making a museum, because we want to point at ourselves, at you, at *\*the story\**, and say, all of this, all of this is awake and alive for consideration. All of this is available to use, as we will, to build a new world.

— And Power-Figures?

Yes. Power figures— power objects of figurative build. Objects created to bring into present presence the invisible mysteries, magics and spirit that holds and moves us as human beings.

As a person of imagination and creativity, as a Black Human Person on this Land in this society, my dialogue is with Power and power: structures, strategies, the imprint of such on the human body, mind and spirit. So, the power-figure is an opportunity to both complicate and clarify. The power figure as (art) object belongs to the long destiny of human technologies; we've always looked to the stars and brought the light into our

breath and created with it. We've always found our own reflections in the faces of nature. We've always been people compelled by the invisible, mysterious and un-language-able. This is where we find ingredients of power.

So, yes, Power-figures because we are warriors. We are ordinary and small as school children and even in our hope, we are warriors. Let us acknowledge the power of our hearts in this matter. Let us acknowledge the power of our togetherness in this matter. Let us acknowledge the weight and timing of the whole thing and how we started it, and we walked it all the way home. This is why Power figures— because look at how powerful we are, and this legacy that has not ever let itself down. This is why, have you ever seen something that has truly never given up? Well. You're in it... we're in it.

— The Materials:

Most everything came from Topeka. The antique malls and your friends and neighbors giving things and bits and pieces of old Topeka houses for sale at the habitat for humanity restore— we built a museum out of Topeka stories, the visible and the invisible. But also all of the things I always use— my language of love, power, creativity, and magic. We use what is everyday. We use the deceitful ordinary. That chit chat of chaos— objects that demean and glorify us. Objects that are often so obvious they become invisible and terrifying at the same time. Those kinds of things and objects that I classify as magic objects like shoes, clothes, keys, padlocks, books, cups, and buttons. When I am with these materials, I know that more than one thing is happening at the same time. That is something to consider, how many faces does a story/object have, and who decides?

— An Operetta:

Yes. What else would we do? We are dramatic and beautiful. So, yes, let's get on stage and become the beloved community— in this way we are the fulfillment of a prophecy, aren't we? In this way, it is actually *the act of making the spoken word operetta* that is our most powerful place of creation, for this is the act of turning the many into one. For those among us who have, for every different reason, excluded ourselves from the faith and idea of oneness, come here and witness this spoken word operetta. It is a medicine. It brings with it a future of newness and hope. In this way it is but a love song singing its own self.

# VANESSA GERMAN: PAIN, LOVE, AND MAGIC IN THE WAKE OF BROWN V. BOARD<sup>1</sup>

Feeling, I think, is the most important thing that we do as human beings.<sup>2</sup>

—vanessa german

vanessa german's art is alive. Her complicated, manifold creations pulse with life, energy, and power, each wildly exceeding the sum of its parts. Her artistic practice is concerned with "*the sensorial shifts and energetic pricklings*"<sup>3</sup> of objects, in her words. She handles her materials with intention—feeling, listening, and imbuing them with care. The work she produces from this intuitive process feels full of potential and possibility.

german brings all the vitality of her practice to *CRAVING LIGHT: The Museum of Love and Reckoning*. The multimedia installation stands as a tribute to the people, stories, and legacies of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in commemoration of the landmark decision's 70th anniversary. It results from a year-long process of co-creation with Topeka residents. At a series of workshops, site visits, and interviews, german made art with community members, talked with them about their lives and about *Brown v. Board*, and gathered their experiences, ideas, and belongings. These became the raw materials for *CRAVING LIGHT*.



vanessa german, *Mother Ransome and Rememory to All of The Teachers Who Loved Us Into Ourselves* (detail), 2024, mixed media. Photo by Jordan Whitten courtesy of vanessa german Studio.

Her installation considers a broad swath of American historical events, stories, and dynamics related to the *Brown v. Board* decision. *THE SET UP: PLESSY V. FERGUSON* marks the beginning of the installation's chronological scope, though its roots stretch further back in time. The work pairs two figural sculptures, both partially composed of small figurines. In place of the lighter sculpture's head, tiers of porcelain Europeans and Euro-Americans pose in charming tableaux of leisure and gentility. Objects of a very different nature form the darker sculpture's head. A chorus of Jim Crow-era statuettes materialize stereotypical Black characters. Mammies, Sambos, and other derogatory tropes born from the white imagination surround a monkey figurine in a distressing dialogic metaphor.

The work's weighty binary poses important questions about the cultural materials that we are each given to tell our stories and construct our identities. Who has the ability to create narratives in our society? How do people conceive of themselves when someone else controls the writing of their history? How does a story change according to its physical components? *THE SET UP* visualizes the "separate but equal" doctrine, a legal justification for racial segregation established by the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson* and overturned by the 1954 *Brown v. Board* verdict. "Separate but equal" was, of course, always a fiction; when a single group controls all the levers of power, equality is out of the question. *THE SET UP* confronts us with the fact that our nation has used pretenses like this to deny Black Americans freedom, agency, and self-determination.

***CRAVING LIGHT*** stretches from this nineteenth-century point in time to the present moment in works like *SUMNER SCHOOL: There's a man living under Sumner School: Moreover I Am Convinced of The Interconnectedness of All Things: Living Altar to the Fact that Love Leaves No One Behind*. In 1951, all-white Sumner Elementary refused to enroll third-grader Linda Brown, though she lived a short walk away. She was instead required to ride a bus to all-Black Monroe Elementary. As a result, her father, Oliver Brown, became the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit against the Topeka Board of Education. While Monroe has become the site of the *Brown v. Board of Education* National Historical Park, Sumner has been empty since 1996, moldering in disrepair. *SUMNER SCHOOL* honors a man who currently lives under the deteriorating building. The work takes the form of a golem made of bricks, wood, tennis shoes, and other materials gathered from the ruins of the school. Bundles of glass vessels hang from the sculpture, resonating with West African and African diasporic traditions in which glass bottles are used as a form of spiritual protection. German invites visitors to leave coin offerings on the steps of the work: "*Please hold the coin in the warmth of your hand and make a love-wish into the creation of a world that leaves no one behind.*"

*SUMNER SCHOOL* is a sincere tribute to a vulnerable man, a reminder that

his adverse circumstances are the upshot of a system that does not nurture all its constituents, and an earnest wish for a more equitable world. Perhaps it is also a warning. If we are not careful stewards of the *Brown v. Board* story, its hard-won lessons may fall into neglect and disrepair, imperiling future generations.

Other works in **CRAVING LIGHT** span the years between and beyond the points in time marked by *THE SET UP* and *SUMNER SCHOOL*. In *WE HAVE NOT DECIDED YET*, clothes and shoes sourced from around Topeka, relics of long-absent bodies, surround a neon sign that blinks between the words “public,” “memory,” and “enemy.” *REDLINE MAN, or, a Shiny Hole In The Chest Where The Dream Was Meant to Live* invokes the history of discriminatory housing practices that have created obstacles to home ownership for generations of Black Topekans. *THE GLIMPSE, or, A Mildly Haunted Cabinet of American Stories* places found objects— toys, a Tuskegee medal, shockingly racist ceramic figurines— in conversations with one another. The work’s unexpected groupings create a generative space where viewers can forge their own connections and pathways. Participants in the *Brown v. Board* case are evoked in various media, including *ET AL, or The Child Plaintiffs As Power Figures*. These eight shrine-like assemblages— “power-figures” in the lexicon of german’s practice—suggest *minkisi*,<sup>4</sup> Central African figural vessels that hold sacred medicines and symbols of power. Like *minkisi*, german’s power figures function as spiritual receptacles, calling forth strength and protection. These and the other works in **CRAVING LIGHT** are each accompanied by a label with a list of materials. german wrote a thorough, poetic accounting of everything that she put into each object, including traditional physical materials as well as impressions, contextual facts, and benedictions.

The works have an emotional resonance that borders on magical. The experience of the art is not primarily rational or cerebral; it is a deeply felt encounter that “*privileges touch and connection*,”<sup>5</sup> as writer Kéla Jackson noted. german’s magic conjures the people and stories of *Brown v. Board*, giving them space and breath, here and now. The past haunts the present, as in Toni Morrison’s idea of rememory. The character Sethe in Morrison’s novel *Beloved* describes rememory as an intense impression seared into the present by the past, an actual entity that can be seen and felt:

**If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. ... The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you.**<sup>6</sup>



vanessa german, *NANCY TODD/LUCINDA TODD: The Instigator/love is the gasoline: My Love Language is Fire* (detail), 2024, mixed media. Photo by Jordan Whitten  
courtesy of vanessa german Studio.

german's art bodies forth rememory, allowing us to come face-to-face with physical vestiges of individual and collective memories. We are visited by the histories, remembered experiences, and impressions that are at the heart of **CRAVING LIGHT**. Mirrors recur throughout, encouraging us to see ourselves in them, the present moment reflected in the past.

**CRAVING LIGHT** is a reverent act of memorialization. It takes care to commemorate the individuals of *Brown v. Board* without subsuming them under the narrative of progress that is often constructed from this history. These were people with full, particular lives, and yet there is so much that we cannot know about them. german's solution is to fill the installation with an excess of objects and materials— a plentitude of details from which we can imagine and reconstruct the missing pieces. We are invited to join her in an act of critical fabulation, a term scholar Saidiya Hartman coined to refer to the practice of filling gaps in the archive— particularly those related to the histories of enslaved Americans— by creating stories about what might have once been there. As Hartman argues, the intent is

not to speak for these individuals, "but rather to imagine what cannot be verified ... and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. ... It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive."<sup>7</sup>

**CRAVING LIGHT** is also a way of giving new shape to past events. german's art recognizes that histories and the ways we tell them must change as needs change; they are a way of making sense of the present. She selects and transforms elements of given discourse, combining the real and the imaginary, the remembered and the forgotten, the spoken and the unspoken, to offer new perspectives on the past.<sup>8</sup> Her resulting work empowers those who are overlooked or disserved by traditional cultural narratives.

**CRAVING LIGHT** invites us to unravel myths, stereotypes, and stories associated with the legacy of *Brown v. Board* and of U.S. race relations in general. It reminds us of the unpleasant details of these histories that we often prefer not to examine too closely. Perhaps we would like to believe that *Brown v. Board* ushered in a new era of racial harmony, but the facts do not bear out this narrative. As german remarked, "*The Jim Crow signs were taken down, but we weren't asked to remove them from our hearts.*"<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, dissecting histories and reckoning with the past can be uncomfortable. Familiar narratives of American history exclude most elements that contradict the idea of our nation as heroic and pure,<sup>10</sup> and german's art starkly confronts us with those painful, neglected details. It insists that if we want to move forward, we must look back with an unflinching gaze. As poet Holly Bass wrote about german's practice:

**Properly applied, the artwork acts as a psychic poultice, drawing out the toxins from our subconscious memory. It asks us to remember the things we collectively try to erase. It asks us to acknowledge our complicity in the continuation of American myth-making. It asks us to take up arms and begin the work of healing the wounds of history.**<sup>11</sup>

There is an implicit trust of the viewer in **CRAVING LIGHT**. german believes that we are strong enough to hold this history; that we must, and we can. And alongside the painful parts, she reminds us that there is tenderness in this story, too. *NANCY TODD/ LUCINDA TODD: The Instigator/ love is the gasoline: My Love Language is Fire* poignantly embodies maternal love and protection. Lucinda Todd wanted her daughter Nancy to be able to take the music lessons she desired. The Topeka Board of Education informed her that musical education was not offered at Black schools because it was of no interest to

Black children. Todd became an outspoken advocate for her daughter and other Black students, eventually joining the twelve other petitioners in the *Brown v. Board* case. Nancy Todd, for her part, later became a musical therapist— a remarkable transmutation of pain into healing.

**CRAVING LIGHT** also offers hope. The cubic wooden sculptures of *PLAY/SCHOOL*, overgrown toy blocks, are decorated with schematic symbols— hearts, suns, hands— that remind us of all the tools we have at our disposal to start anew. It invites us to consider how we might take what we have learned, let it transform us, and then move forward to build something better. **CRAVING LIGHT** insists that we bear witness to all of it— the pain and the love and the hope in *Brown v. Board*. It is a privilege, a responsibility, an exhortation, a gift, if we are brave enough to meet its call.

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## Endnotes

1. This essay is indebted to vanessa german, who provided valuable suggestions and insights about the works discussed throughout.
2. Quoted in Spencer Bailey, "vanessa german on Art as a Way of Life and Love as a 'Human Technology,'" *The Slowdown*, August 17, 2023, accessed April 10, 2024, <https://www.slowdown.tv/article/the-big-interview-vanessa-german>.
3. Quoted in Kéla Jackson, "Transcendent Touch: How vanessa german Transformed an Archive," *Boston Art Review* 10 (Spring/Summer 2023): 85.
4. *Nkisi* is the singular form of this word. Other writers have noted the connection between german's power figures and *minikisi*. See, for instance, Daniel Simmons, "Inherent Magic," in *Vanessa German: Miracles and Glory Abound* (Flint, MI: Flint Institute of Arts, 2019), 27-36.
5. Jackson, "Transcendent Touch," 89.
6. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 36.
7. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 12.
8. This is a paraphrasing and application of literary scholar Birgit Neumann's argument about novels that she terms "fictions of memory." Birgit Neumann, "The Literary Representation of Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning, and Sara B. Young (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 334-335.
9. vanessa german in conversation with the author, March 2024.
10. Roderick A. Ferguson, "A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," *American Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (March 2009): 187-88.
11. Holly Bass, "The Evidence of Things Not Seen: A Periodic Tableau of Elements in the Work of the Artist Vanessa German," in *Vanessa German: Miracles and Glory Abound*, 40.