

# NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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## SKETCHBOOKS AND SOME THOUGHTS ON CASSANDRA: PROPHETESS AND PRESS

A Conversation between **Kandis Williams** and **Keith Rivers**



**Keith Rivers:** So Kandis, you chose two pieces from your sketchbook for this time capsule. How central is your sketchbook to your process?

**Kandis Williams:** My sketchbook has always been vital to my practice as a place to organize ideas, to think through how I'm going to execute plans. It's a kind of repository for images from the world that are interesting. I take a lot of notes. I organize my thoughts through writing and scribbling. My sketchbooks haven't changed at all during COVID—they haven't changed through anything. They stay the same, which is really nice as it allows me to move to other spaces with relative ease.

**KR:** The sketchbook is where a lot of the most valuable ideas are cause that's where it starts. So many people are interested in the finished product, but I think the sketchbook is the most paramount in terms of getting into the mind of the artist and understanding the practice.

**KW:** It becomes almost a design space to roam in for others as well. A lot of sketchbooks contain innovations that history has used. I'm thinking also about W. E. B. Du Bois's notebooks and journals. The sketchbook is a mobile space for artists' thoughts, like Emily Dickinson's notebooks.

**KR:** You're always working until the last minute. It's not a situation where you would look back at these sketches versus the finished product because they're not completely finished, but can you give us an idea of your thought process?

**KW:** I'm just always working. But I like that

Left: Kandis Williams's sketch for *Nay, but tell me, am I not unlucky indeed, / To arise from the earth and be only a weed? / Ever since I came out of my dark little seed, / I have tried to live rightly, but still am a--weed! / To be torn by the roots and destroyed, this my meed, / And despised by the gardener, for being--a weed. / Ah! but why was I born, when man longs to be freed / Of a thing so obnoxious and bad as a--weed? / Now, the cause of myself and my brothers I plead, / Say, can any good come of my being a--weed? / Imagine smoking weed in the streets without cops harassin' / Imagine going to court with no trial / Lifestyle cruising blue behind my waters / No welfare supporters, more conscious of the way we raise our daughters / Days are shorter, nights are colder / Feeling like life is over, these snakes strike like a cobra / The world's hot my son got not / Evidently, it's elementary, they want us all gone eventually / Troopin' out of state for a plate, knowledge / If coke was cooked without the garbage we'd all have the top dollars / Imagine everybody flashin', fashion / Designer clothes, lacing your click up with diamond vagues / Your people holdin' dough, no parole / No rubbers, go in raw imagine, law with no undercovers / Just some thoughts...*, 2020

Right: The artist, captured here in her studio, is included in the Hammer's Made in L.A. 2020 biennial.



the idea of the work being done is a tension in my practice. An exhibition deadline is when work ends up being "done." When it gets photographed, I feel like it becomes sealed or done in a way. I've been thinking a lot about how I do and don't create images—like in the performance work, I'm able to create context, but I don't create any images. I just take them and mangle them. I also don't write. I talk a lot, but I don't like writing the way I like reading. I love putting writers' words together that way—like fitting images together. That feels like something I'm getting more used to, actually feeling empowered by, that Frankenstein process of being able to use different collage sources and point to their production and then deconstruct the logic of certain images—without "making" images. In that way, as soon as I pick the images and cut them up, they're done. And then, they can take the form of writing, or sketches, collages, conversations, classes, philosophical interventions, emails, TikTok, furniture, tombs, archives...or any form. That goes back to the sketchbook—it's like the whole container for your logic—language.

**KR:** We talked before about some of your influences or artists that you are in dialogue with or look to for inspiration.

**KW:** Thinking about musicians helps me a lot in the studio. I've been thinking about Cauleen Smith's work and how much a sense

of composition is your own kind of fingerprint or your own character—how you catch rhythm or how you proceed within rhythms. I know for sure I'm not a great dancer; I have a really disjointed, twisted sense of speed and rhythm. I definitely feel like each of the collages ends up taking a pace like musical compositions. I've been thinking about Stanley Whitney and Hannah Höch. The people I'm looking at are already in the work, in its composition; they're cited in the titles and in the process and forms things take.

**KR:** Since you were producing this work during quarantine, was there a watershed moment with what's going on?

**KW:** No, the idea of this moment being a watershed...a watershed for what? Maybe the Mayan calendar's end of the world wasn't supposed to be 2012; it was to be 2021. That's the most viable watershed idea I've heard lately! We have this strange poetic notion that genocide is incidental. We take pictures of it, and we mourn a little bit; we make a memorial, and then we forget about the system that attenuates the events of bureaucratized human death as we sustain its logic. And it's a persistent logic, as Dylan Rodriguez talks about in his writing. It's a logic of all sorts—of seizures of capital, of disenfranchisement, enfranchisement. The political issues and tensions we see now are some of the foundations of the plantation politics this



country was built on. The sounding boards of social media and historical archaeology and the critique happening there is opening up a clear sight of what has actually happened the last four hundred years. The work of a Black populace voice from Twitter and Instagram has created a court of evaluation. I don't even think this is a culmination moment. I guess I don't think 2020's peaked yet.

**KR:** That's quite possibly true.

**KW:** Is there a term to describe this moment? COVID was interesting because there was a large, very confusing popular voice that was speaking to human fragility and to systems of oppression and how they don't fairly maintain life for various citizens. I think there was work being done or an idea of organizing to try to preserve vulnerable people's lives, with or without government help. What was really annoying was getting text messages from very privileged older white people saying, "Share this resource," and it's a screenshot from a tweet from their aunt about how to not spread COVID with hot lemon—or the many, many Google Docs of mutual aid resources with uninvestigated phone numbers that just link you to one sort of wealthy person's \$40 donations. Seeing how many of our systems were so bankrupt in terms of any ethical practices to preserve Black and brown life and especially Indigenous life... that's a shame this culture is going to bear—more publicly now that COVID language and initiatives disintegrate or give way to protesting militarized police brutality. Seeing the rise and power of white supremacy is astonishing but not surprising—shocking still, unfortunately, are the lynchings... another viral lynching. It was heartbreaking and continues to be so.

**KR:** It definitely is. It's one after another, one after another. You thought it slowed down a little, but now it's just on rapid fire. You can't turn the TV on without seeing people dying. We're literally watching the death of a person.

**KW:** Over and over again.

**KR:** On loop.

**KW:** And I don't feel like it slowed. The heartbreaking thing is watching white America and white people teetering still on the idea of Black life mattering and the anxiety of the question one must ask: For how long will they pay attention? It's heartbreaking watching how these politics circulate in people's inboxes and on people's feeds for a season. This fetishism is the logic

that we need to erase, that Black people are interchangeable with objects, goods, services and sexual qualities to be donned as fashion permits. The commodity fetishism is hard to swallow after we don't have a chance to publicly or privately mourn before the Black Lives Matter Doritos come out.

**KR:** Right after the Pepsi.

**KW:** After the Pepsi commercial! It all goes together. It's the way that we are also used. Our lives, bodies, stories, voices and our minds are used to sell the idea of progress or to sell the idea of value, while we are dying, being murdered, being lynched and hunted.

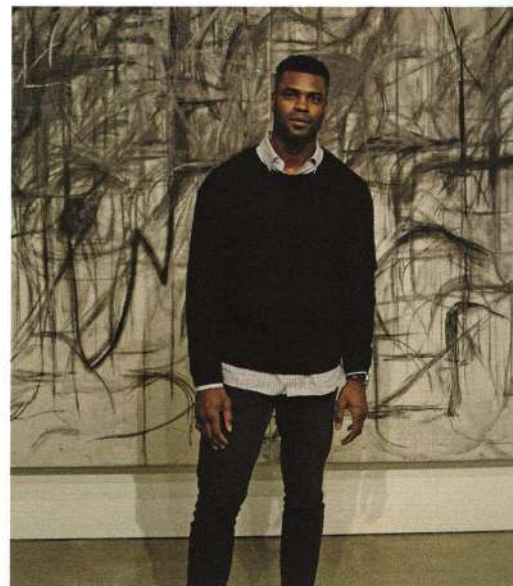
**KR:** The culture that America produces is

## **"THE HEARTBREAKING THING IS WATCHING WHITE AMERICA AND WHITE PEOPLE TEETERING STILL ON THE IDEA OF BLACK LIFE MATTERING AND THE ANXIETY OF THE QUESTION ONE MUST ASK: FOR HOW LONG WILL THEY PAY ATTENTION?"**

**—KANDIS WILLIAMS**

generally that of people of color. Yet, the people who produce this culture—that makes others want to come to America—are not valued.

**KW:** Exactly. That's why I'm really into three books in the canon right now. There's *The Delectable Negro* by Vincent Woodard, *Love & Theft* by Eric Lott and *Development Arrested* by Clyde Woods. What's really clear for me in these books is the plantation model for the experiencing of another person, or race, or class of citizen. It's surveillance systems; it's entitlements and restrictions; it's pleasure hierarchy; it's spectatorship of death. All those things are rooted in plantation politics, and they expand into what we have now...



**KR:** Racism. Slavery transferred into Jim Crow...

**KW:** It feels really clear that that's what white America is grappling with—that they both love and hate Black people. They love our culture, our songs, our dances, our aesthetics and how our aesthetics also manifest ethics. It's like how Barbara Kruger appropriates the Black Panther newspapers, how a lot of white feminist gestures appropriate Black politics in order to make their claim and how every culture has hip-hop now—and that's how they protest. We build forms of protest and then they're appropriated without address to our physical oppression—or what's worse? Evisceration.

**KR:** After this conversation, I feel like you don't believe Cassandra will be believed—for anybody who doesn't know, Cassandra is a figure in Greek mythology.

**KW:** She's definitely on my mind a lot lately. She's the only person who foresaw the Trojan horse and the fall of Troy...

**KR:** We've had this watershed moment, where we feel like people are starting to believe because you see people from multiple different races in the streets, protesting, but what does that really mean? And what kind of change does that reflect? They talk about defunding the police. Education's been defunded for a long time. LAPD has billions of dollars, and you defund them \$150 million. That's a drop in the bucket.

**KW:** Yeah, they won't have the nice riot shields. They're using military-grade shit right now against civilians... But that's the thing—Cassandra was heard; she just wasn't believed. Some understood her omens and



Left: The former NFL linebacker Keith Rivers is now an avid art collector and patron. Right: Williams's sketch for *We have spared no expense. scope, scalpel, axe, drill. The Sort of Thing You Should Not Admit: violent death, turns out to be puzzlingly complex and if you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or, then you ain't black*, 2020



debated them. She was cursed to not have agency, but she was born into a high title, so she was seen and heard. She even had a twin brother, Helenus, who she taught to divine and who was able to translate in some cases, to warn. Between belief and action, that's where the Cassandra myth is really potent. She's a moment to decide and to act or to ignore a sign.

**KR:** I tend to agree with you. I'm a cynic. I hope for the best, but I'm expecting the worst because human nature is human nature.

**KW:** I can add a hopeful note because I think that's not all human nature. I feel like we've naturalized a lot of different violences that we actually, on many levels, fight against simultaneously. This is like Cassandra's Blackness. In one aspect there is the struggle to evidence your power, and in another way, that external validation is futile. To make

others believe is a burden. Believing your ethics yourself is the first call to action—just to stand in your truth.

**KR:** Definitely.

**KW:** But what I'm really tripping on is how do you predict the future. *Algorithms of Oppression*, a book by Safiya Noble that the Women's Center for Creative Work book club is reading, opens up a whole conversation about algorithms, racism and predicted behavior. It's the idea that you can predict the future based on a reading of the present that involves understanding incremental growth and patterned behavior. Proto-Greek priestesses and prophetesses were people who understood basic phenomenological systems, like the lunar calendar, how different plants grow, how different birds nest and migrations. I'm getting a sense of what a prophecy in Cassandra times might've meant and

thinking about what an algorithm means today. Algorithms predict something based on pattern, informed behavior. We have this opportunity to intervene on this whole system or logic of genocide by just pointing out certain holes in it—or even pointing at its growth and saying this is coming. I see this coming because I see the fester. I see hatred building. I see violence brewing. Divining the future is about being able to properly code the past in order to anticipate the behavior of the present. So, in thinking about Cassandra now, I'm thinking about all the online diaspora and how the diaspora could be enabled by the virtual and algorithms. I've been thinking about how to use the press, especially, and the figure of Cassandra to say, this is not a prophecy that's magical; it's a prophecy that's literally about grounding a sense of what has happened into a sense of action to prevent it.