

Aisha Harrison

An Offering of Collective Wisdom

by Lauren Karle



Aisha Harrison's sculpture *The Deposit* depicts two people sitting on a couch, a white stream issuing from the mouth of one. In explanation Harrison writes, "Sometimes we say something ignorant, even to friends." As a privileged White woman, I felt at times that I had done so in conversation with Harrison. When I asked her for details on her self-description as Black and multi-racial, for instance, she reminded me that race is a construct meant to oppress and categorize. In the past her work aimed to explore such issues by representing her lived experiences as a multi-racial woman both to others and to herself.

Exploring a Collective Wisdom

Since leaving academia, Harrison has used her work less to convey an articulated message and more as a means of listening to her ancestors and her truth. Her father's family is believed to have originated in Nigeria, though she has only managed to follow the history back seven generations to the Harrison plantation in South Carolina. Presumably because enslaved women were often raped, this side of her family tree also includes European ancestry. Harrison's ancestors on her mother's side were Irish, English, Scottish, and French and—an internally conflicting irony—some owned slaves. She was able to trace her mother's European lineage back 20 generations, but slavery erased her father's ancestry.

Despite this, her ancestors live on, both through her and in her. "They have a lot to teach us," she says. "I feel like an intermediary vessel. The work is not just mine." Harrison no longer sees herself as a teacher in the singular, but rather as a vehicle through which collective wisdom passes forward. She allows herself time for listening when she takes a dive into what she calls the "well." In its depths, she feels all the energy of





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1 *Self-Compassion Tool #1*, 16 in. (41 cm) in width, clay, graphite, paint, 2021. 2 *Two Winds Sharing Breath*, 18 in. (46 cm) in length, handbuilt stoneware, built solid with armature then hollowed out, terra sigillata, once fired to cone 4 in an electric kiln, graphite rubbed on post firing, 2017. 3 *The Deposit*, 11 in. (28 cm) in length, handbuilt stoneware, built solid and then hollowed, once fired to cone 4 in electric kiln, clay and salt applied post firing, 2013. Photo: Shauna Bittle. 4 *She-nah-num Salmon Prayer*, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, built solid with black-pipe armature, unfired clay to be cast in bronze, to be completed 2021. Photo: Misael Martínez.

her ancestors, their collective struggles, wisdom, and strength. Over the last several years, she has explored the well by using a modified form of Progoff Intensive Journaling, which is an unfolding process for self-development, along with a method of touch drawing that she learned from Deborah Koff-Chapin. Harrison explains, “My understanding is that we all have a personal well where we can tap into both our subconscious mind as well as the collective unconscious. All things are interconnected at a deeper level. We can access that wisdom and connection in the underground stream.”¹

Touch drawing is a prolific, rapid-fire monoprinting process in which Harrison rolls ink on a board, covers it with tissue paper, and uses her fingers to draw intuitively. She then goes back and titles each print like a book. The combination of journal writing and these images allows her to unlock subconscious threads that have evolved from drawings to prints to clay. Some of the results are now being cast in bronze. She hopes that by being cast in bronze they can become public outdoor sculptures.

Honoring Her Past to Face the Future

Woman with Graves at Her Back represents an ancestor who survived the journey across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa. Harrison imagines the subject outdoors, overlooking the Salish Sea (also called the Puget Sound) in Washington State, a place where she can finally rest after her tragic and heroic life’s journey. The life-sized figure sits on a corner with her legs dangling, conveying weary confidence. The cavity below her ribs is exposed. Moss is meant to grow here and will “need to be tended, like our relationship to land and ancestors of the past, present, and future,” Harrison explains. “Her bravery and will to live is part of why I’m here today,” she continues. This is one of Harrison’s ways of fulfilling the innate human need to honor the

people from whom she descends. It’s a place to recognize her identity and find strength to face the present and the future.

On the woman’s back is a circular pattern of dashes that alternate directions. The dashes are reminiscent of scarification but represent graves, reminders that the effects of slavery are not old wounds. The passing of seven generations has not been enough to overcome the consequences of enslavement and the systemic racism that continues today. Now that the piece is cast in bronze, the tactile quality of the graves will lure viewers in, enticing them to touch: in effect, to rub the woman’s back. Not only will this gesture imply healing and support, but repeated touching will also make the graves shine with remembrance of the lives lost. The circular pattern represents wholeness and connection, imparting the feeling of hope. The figure’s facial expression suggests that she is tired but still looking forward with resolve, offering wisdom to those who follow in her footsteps.

Building Compassion Through the Human Form

Harrison’s figures and facial features are blended from different sources. When she goes down the well, she asks what face needs to come through. She may reference photographs of her family and herself or use books to find faces that resonate with her. She will often combine features from different sources, no face being a singular portrait. Many of the bodies start with hers. Descending from both enslaved people and slave owners, Harrison carries a lot of tension in her body. Taking the time to observe and sculpt her own form, has, she feels, made her more loving and closer to her physical and spiritual body. When teaching, she finds that her students experience a similar effect. Features, such as wrinkles, that they thought were ugly become parts of their stories. Her goal is to represent anatomy accurately but build compassion through the human form rather than create an exact portrait.

One of the important lessons her ancestors have passed forward is how to carry on through hard times. They gave up so much that she feels a deep responsibility not to squander the tools she has, but rather to use them to their fullest potential. She chooses clay because she feels that it is its own entity and guides her; it helps her learn things. She trusts the material. As her hands form it into a figure, she feels a relationship, a partnership with the clay. The forms already exist, and her job is to be open to them manifesting themselves.

Inspiration in Nature

Along with being receptive to ancestral knowledge and clay's independence, Harrison listens to the voices of the natural world and elements in her surroundings. For example, while hiking with family, she noticed the roots of a red alder growing between rocks along the river's edge and reaching into the water for nutrients. The vision correlated with a recent experience spinning yarn. Things merged intuitively, and she began adding red thread in her work. In *Ancestor I*, the threads connect the heart to the horns and trees carried on the figure's head, uniting human, animal, and plant ancestors. In *Through II*, a cluster of red threads emerges from the area she associates with the voice. Her use of thread to represent blood, roots, and arteries reminds me of the red lines in Frida Kahlo's paintings *Henry Ford Hospital* and *The Two Fridas*. Both artists look to the continuity of ancestry and to nature to find and express the contents of the soul.

Locations—in the ecosystem, landscape, and human history—are vital to Harrison and her work. She lives near Olympia, Washington, on a strip of land between two bays. She can see the Salish Sea

through her neighbors' yard. Her family has lived on this parcel of land for four generations, and she is confident that it is the only place she ever wants to call home. The trees, rain, scents, and animals allow her to just be. Her grandparents had rented the apartment on the first floor of the house, her parents bought it, and she herself lived there from the age of five. In 2011, when the house burned down, she felt that she had lost parts of both her childhood and her future. Her mother rebuilt in the same location with a space for a studio. Her family now rents the house from her mother, who continues to live on the property in the downstairs apartment. Harrison describes their land as "not manicured, but intentional." The acre includes a small, open field and an area of woods with native trees, plants, and forage for animals. While it might look unkempt to the neighbors, Harrison and her family have curated it with trailing blackberries, honeysuckle, Oregon grape, and even some raised beds. She views the land as a sanctuary for birds, deer, and other wildlife.

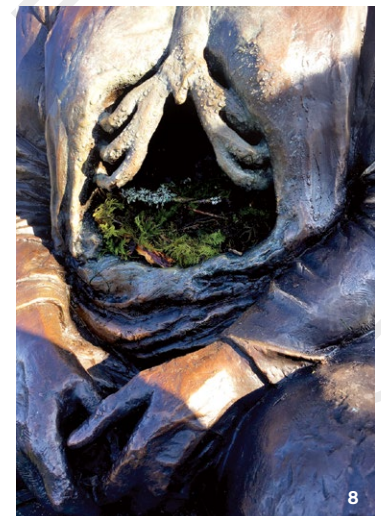
And yet, this land that she loves was stolen. Like many treaties, the Medicine Creek Treaty of 1854, signed along the banks of the She-nah-num (Medicine Creek/McAllister Creek), granted the treaty tribes rights to fish and hunt on traditional lands but removed the indigenous tribes to small parcels of land.² The concept of land ownership did not exist in the Chinook trade jargon that the treaty was interpreted into and the treaty was not negotiated nor honored. Harrison made *She-nah-num Salmon Prayer* as a prayer for the water, the salmon, and the 137 species that are dependent on the salmon. She points out that we humans, in particular the original inhabitants of her family's land, are also dependent on the salmon for survival.



5 *Woman with Graves at Her Back*, 5 ft. 1 in. (1.5 m) in height, unfired clay before being cast in bronze, handbuilt solid with black-pipe armature, 2021.



6 *Woman with Graves at Her Back* (back view), cast bronze. **7** *Woman with Graves at Her Back* (right side view), cast bronze, flowers. **8** *Woman with Graves at Her Back* (front cavity view), cast bronze, moss. **5–8** Photos: Misael Martínez.



The line extending from the figure's mouth follows the path of part of the She-nah-num. The plants and animals on the prayer line are parts of the salmon's ecosystem. "As a multi-racial person," she says, "I work to hold complexity and difference in my body and in my work."

Connecting Generations

In *take You apart to make something new*, Harrison combines the human body and nature into a metaphor for connecting generations. The hair, which looks like tree branches, stretches up toward the stars, connecting the future and the past. The head, spinal column, and pelvis are supported by the roots, which suggest the stability of the past. She uses the pelvic bone as a symbol for the cradle of life, the place where earthly ancestors grow life. Each individual twines past, present, and future into a single living and breathing ecosystem. "The idea that we exist separately from everything else needs to be dismantled," Harrison argues. "You don't get a YOU." We need to look to our unique strengths as things we have to offer for the greater good. I would add that she is representing a connection between contemporary society and what is going on with our planet. Mother Earth is very sick. As natural resources become scarce, social systems become stressed. The title suggests that everything might need to fall apart in order that it might be rebuilt.

Recently, Harrison has been moving toward bronze public sculptures made from clay originals. She says, "I would like to replace some of the sculptures being torn down right now." She has a fundraising campaign to cast *Woman with Graves at Her Back* and *She-nah-num Salmon Prayer* in bronze. Some people have questioned that the work may be too challenging for a broad audience, but I would argue that her very personal work is also universal. We should all strive to be future ancestors. Harrison does this by never becoming complacent, by continuing to educate herself about systems and indigenous histories, and by making this work. She engages in a constant process of listening, taking breaks, and returning to the work. She tries to prepare her own son for the reality of the world and to be resilient. While we each have our own gifts to offer, we should all engage in the struggle to make this a better world for our descendants. We should never stop learning and listening. Like Harrison, we can challenge ourselves, the people around us, and the institutions that we are part of. We can look to our past, present, and future. And we should certainly all continue to be self-reflective and live our truth.

If Harrison's ancestors could dig deeply into their souls and muster the courage to move forward, so can we. In *Two Winds Sharing Breath*, Harrison depicts opposing forces that decide to share the same air. They are not easy on each other—the wind is strong and faces distorted—but they share breath even though they are different entities. Down in the well, Harrison feels that reconciliation is possible, but she and her ancestors have been working on healing for a very long time. She wants to feel hopeful. She sees a lot of work being done in contemporary society and feels devoted to using her tools to be part of the solution. "Small acts are big too," she says. "If everyone does small acts, things can happen. I want my work to be a drop in the river. I'm already in the river. When you get in the river, that's when your small impact can join the movement towards a better world and a better planet."

the author *Lauren Karle is a studio potter, socially engaged artist, public high school art teacher, and mother living in Minnesota. To see more, visit www.laurenkarle.com.*

1 Ira Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal Process*, 25th printing (1990), (New York: Dialog House Library, 1975) 46-47.

2 www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/2017/03/23/medicine-creek-treaty-1854/.



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9 *take You apart to build something new*, 31 in. (79 cm) in height, handbuilt stoneware, terra sigillata, once fired to cone 4 in an electric kiln, watered-down acrylic paint, 2018. **10** *Ancestor I*, 3 ft. 5 in. (1 m) in height, handbuilt stoneware, built solid with armature then hollowed out, once fired to cone 4 in an electric kiln, terra sigillata with graphite rubbed on post firing, embroidery thread stiffened with glue, 2018. **9, 10** Photos: Misael Martínez.

Guided Journaling and Touch Drawing

For Harrison, each cycle of work begins with her brainstorming process, which is a combination of ideas learned from Progoff Intensive Journaling and Touch Drawing. As a high school art teacher and artist myself, I think that there is much to learn from Harrison's deeply reflective process. The world would be a better place if we all looked into ourselves—our pasts, presents, and futures—the way Harrison does.

Guided Journaling

Harrison begins by doing some writing. The Progoff journaling method consists of many components; Harrison uses an adaptation of the dialog component in her art practice.

Using the prompt to write about "the now," Harrison "checks in with herself." Potential questions include:

- Where are you in your life right now?
- How has it been for you physically in this period?
- What do you feel connected to right now? She considers higher powers, larger movements, and social groups.
- When did "now" begin? Any parts of "now" are fair game—small or large.

Harrison examines her answers, then selects an idea or thought that piques her interest and writes a new "now" statement about just that one idea. Then she writes the stages of development, or what Progoff calls the "Stepping Stones" of how that idea came into being in her life and how it has developed into where it is in the "now" statement.¹ An example of a thought she might explore is, "When was belonging something you thought about, felt, or didn't feel?" After the stages of development, the thought or idea takes on a sense of its own self: it becomes its own entity with a personality and its own wisdom.² To have a dialog with it, she settles into herself with her eyes closed, feeling its presence.

She lets images come into her head, not directing or controlling them, but simply letting them direct themselves.³ She watches the images, as if they were on TV. She records the images, then closes her eyes again and sits quietly, feeling the equal relationship between the element and herself.

Harrison engages in dialogs with various entities: with her body, her ancestors, or pieces of her work. She listens to these, letting go of expectations, trying not to think of what they would say, but letting them say what they want. Sometimes this leads to a touch-drawing session and sometimes touch drawings lead to more dialog and journaling.

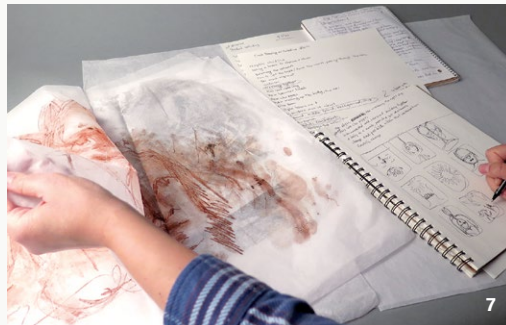
Touch Drawing

Touch drawing is the other interchangeable process Harrison uses to listen to her subconscious. In a touch drawing session, she uses these materials:

- Masonite board: 18x24 inches
- Windsor-Newton water soluble oil paint: Koff-Chapin also uses this. It works best because once it dries, it's permanent. You can add wet media afterward and it doesn't smear. It has good viscosity and stays wet for the right amount of time.
- Brayer: must be soft, 4 inches wide
- Tissue paper: buy tissue that is flat or rolled, not creased too much.
- Her hands

Put paint directly on the Masonite board. Roll in all directions with a 1 inch border (1, 2). Lay tissue paper on top and use your fingers to draw (3). The paper can be touched in any expressive way to make a mark—fingers, hands, and elbows can all be used (4). Harrison does not like to use a drawing implement because she feels that the ideas lose their directness. She approaches these drawings with no





investment in their appearances. Play and let go! She views them as direct lines to emotional and intuitive content. Ideas are abstract. She draws the thing she is exploring, and draws how it feels. Scratch, hit, do various things to move through it. Harrison spends maybe a minute at the most on each drawing. When finished, peel off the paper (5) and put it paint side up on the ground (6). She can immediately roll the paint back out on the board five or six times with no need to add more. This helps her to find a rhythm. Typically she will do 30 drawings in one session. To clean the board, put fresh paper on top of the ink three or four times and roll it to pick up what is left. A seasoned board comes to have a personality and actually starts to work better.

As long as there is not too much paint, she can stack the drawings all face up right away and they won't stick together. Harrison titles the drawings in order (7). She always writes the titles on another sheet of paper, so the drawings keep their own essence. If she is working through a thought, parts of the thought come out in different drawings. She views the process as a journey, trying to be receptive to what is possible. With no imposition, she lets the titles reveal themselves without judgment or editing. In this mindset, she writes down all 30 titles.

The titles are sometimes weirdly worded. She notices the way they lead into each other. If she becomes interested in a title, she might go back to her journaling method and have a dialog with that title. For example, when the title, "roots that were growing towards the sky" emerged, she asked, "whose roots would grow towards the sky?" This

touch-drawing session, title, and dialog eventually led to the idea of being held between rooting to the sky and rooting to the ground. The result was embellished prints, a wall piece, *Pelvis Roots* (8), and eventually the sculpture *take You apart to make something new*. Sometimes the titles together form a poem that inspires Harrison's art.

Nothing about Harrison's process is linear or prescriptive. Sometimes she will do a touch-drawing session while listening to a speech or opening a book and reading a random phrase. She will bring in outside influences to explore, rather than just using her own internal struggles or thoughts. The titles can become more drawings, essays, maquettes, carvings, or pillow forms with stencil-like drawings on them (an intermediary step between two- and three-dimensional work). Although she looks at the titles together as a book, many don't have a meaning: they are transition drawings that don't hold anything at that time (they might later). She does not look at the results of this process as precious, instead she often submits them to a dialog, asking, "Who are you? What do you want to become?" She is listening.

To learn more about Ira Progoff's Intensive Journaling Method and workshops go to <https://intensivejournal.org>. To learn more about Deborah Koff-Chapin's Touch Drawing Method and workshops go to <https://touchdrawing.com>.

1-3 Ira Progoff, *At a Journal Workshop: The Basic Text and Guide for Using the Intensive Journal Process*, 25th printing (1990), (New York: Dialog House Library, 1975).