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**NIKESHA BREEZE**

**FOUR SITES OF RETURN: RITUAL | REMEMBRANCE |  
REPARATION | RECLAMATION**

April 30–June 15, 2021

**RITUAL | RE:MEMBER DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE**

Friday, April 30, 11am–5:30pm

**OPENING RECEPTION**

Friday, April 30, 5–7pm

See page 3 for full performance/event schedule.



© Nikesha Breeze

(April 2021) “As I mature as an artist, and as a human being on this planet, I realize that everything I do is actually just one thing,” says **Nikesha Breeze**. “In my art, which is my life, I want to touch the world, as I am touched. Wound touching wound.” This transcendent notion informs every aspect of the Taos artist’s sweeping exhibition *Four Sites of Return: Ritual | Remembrance | Reparation | Reclamation*. **Breeze’s** multifaceted magnum opus distills decades of their creative output, and crystallizes deep truths of the Black experience through visual art and ritual performance. Its appearance at form & concept initiates an exhibition series that will sweep the state and the nation. For **Breeze**, *Four Sites of Return* also represents a mantle passed from their own ancestors in Blackdom, New Mexico, a turn of the century freedom colony with a remarkable American story.

In early 2022, *Four Sites of Return* will travel to New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. Later that year, portions of the show will appear at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn. “If you visit one gallery show in Santa Fe this spring, make it *Four Sites of Return*,” says Jordan Eddy, Gallery Director and Curator. “Nikesha is entering the national conversation, and she’s doing it from a perspective that is both distinctly regional and quintessentially diasporic. As an intersectional expression of Black, Brown and Indigenous healing and reclamation, it is both of this place and for the nation and the world. It will sing to you.”

In *Four Sites of Return*, Breeze works fluidly across a wide range of mediums including large-scale figurative painting and drawing, durational and site-specific performance, clay and bronze sculpture and mixed-media installation art. The 5,000-square-foot exhibition will feature six monumental series, representing elements of the titular “Sites of Return.” Among them is *Arc of Return*, a large-scale wooden boat adorned with etched copper, which will anchor the gallery’s 20-foot-tall atrium space. A series of 108 clay masks, numbered in reference to the roughly 108 million lives lost through colonization, enslavement, forced migration, and racial genocide since the 1400s, will encircle the gallery’s entire ground floor. Never-before-seen works from *Archival Portraiture*, an ongoing painting and drawing series inspired by historic photographs of often anonymous Black Americans, will appear throughout the show.

“All of my projects start with deep scholarly research, and often draw on Black imagery and narratives from the past,” says Breeze. “But the ritual space I’m creating through these artworks exists in the spirit of Afrofuturism and the ‘Otherwise.’ Past, present, future—it’s a construct. I want visitors to lock eyes with the people I’m portraying and feel their immediate presence and sacred humanity.” This time-and-space bending approach to storytelling pushed Breeze and Eddy’s curatorial efforts far beyond the confines of the traditional solo exhibition. Small sculptural works by an international consortium of BIPOC artists will commingle with Breeze’s artworks in the concurrent group exhibition *Hand Tools of Resilience*.

The communal elements of *Four Sites of Return*—as reflected in Breeze’s direct engagement with

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visitors and other performers, and the intersectional premise of *Hand Tools of Resilience*—echo a notable thread of Breeze’s personal history. In 2016, after almost two decades of living in Taos, Breeze discovered that their direct ancestors helped settle Blackdom, New Mexico. Founded in the early 20th century, the boomtown was the state’s first all-Black community, and a testament to the power of Black excellence and innovation. Though Blackdom became a ghost town in 1921, many of its descendants still live in New Mexico—and its original inhabitants roam some of Breeze’s artworks. “It was as if I was recreating all the people of Blackdom,” Breeze told Southwest Contemporary, regarding her early visual art explorations. “It’s a prayer for justice for Indigenous, Black and Brown people. There’s that total feeling of anger and absence [...] and then on the other side, there’s a celebration of resilience.” Today, reflecting on both the monumental and intimate output of the past several years, Breeze says, “I’m creating the space for this moment to emerge which touches humanity.”

Nikesha Breeze investigates the interrelationality and resilience of the Black and Queer body in relationship to power, vulnerability, the sacred and the ancestral. As a Black, Queer, Intersex, and Non-Binary artist and mother, Breeze employs performance art, film, painting, textiles, sculpture and site-specific engagement to create spaces where Black, Brown, Indigenous, and Earth bodies can be seen as undeniably sacred and inviolable. In 2018 Nikesha completed a solo museum show entitled *Within This Skin* at The Harwood Museum of Art in Taos, NM. Nikesha has been awarded national recognition at the 2018 International ARTPRIZE exhibition, winning the juried 3D Grand Prize award as well as the Contemporary Black Arts Award, for their sculptural installation: *108 Death Masks: A Communal Prayer for Peace and Justice*. In 2019 Nikesha was invited to Ghana to work as a visiting artist on the historical *Nkyinkyim* installation at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, created by international award-winning artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo.

### **ABOUT HAND TOOLS OF RESILIENCE**

The open call for *Hand Tools of Resilience* invited international African Diasporic and Indigenous artists to examine the conscious and unconscious tools that Black and Indigenous people have created to survive, thrive, and build within oppressive and abusive systems. The project asked international artists to imagine a new tool and its Afrofuturistic use and functionality: tools that could extinguish gaslighting or passive racist treatment, that take the shape of covert and overt armor or protective talismans, hand-tools for loosening systems of supremacy and abuse or chisels for shaping new Black and Indigenous realities. Convened by Nikesha Breeze, the jury included Indigenous artist Rose B. Simpson; Ghanaian artist and activist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo; artist Le’Andra LeSeur, and independent curator Isra Rene.

### **ABOUT FORM & CONCEPT**

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## PERFORMANCE / EVENT SCHEDULE

### RITUAL | RE:MEMBER DURATIONAL PERFORMANCE

**Friday, April 30, 11am–5pm • Restricted capacity event**

Nikesha Breeze prepares *Four Sites of Return* in this durational ritual performance, culminating at the exhibition's opening reception. Nikesha will be joined by artists and performance collaborators Tigre Mashaal-Lively, Lazarus Nance Letcher, Suldano Abdiruhman, Madeleine Le Cesne and Miles Tokunow. *From 11am to 5pm. A limited number of visitors will flow through the gallery at any given time.*

### OPENING RECEPTION

**Friday, April 30, 5–7pm • Restricted capacity event**

*For this open house style reception, a limited number of visitors will flow through the gallery at any given time.*

### RITUAL | STAGES OF TECTONIC BLACKNESS SCREENINGS

**Saturday, May 1: 3:00pm | 3:30pm | 4:00pm • By appointment only ([Schedule now](#))**

This short film by Nikesha Breeze with cinematography by MK captures moments from *Stages of Tectonic Blackness*, an eight-hour durational performance produced by GROUND SERIES and featuring Miles Tokunow, Nikesha Breeze and Lazarus Nance Letcher. The piece is an elongated mourning dance for Black bodies and Earth bodies, combining prayerful movement, original music, Black philosophy and decolonized time.

### REPARATION | HAND TOOLS OF RESILIENCE PANEL DISCUSSION, PART I

**Saturday, May 15, 10–11am ([Join on Zoom](#))**

Nikesha Breeze and Gallery Director Jordan Eddy convene a virtual panel of jurors and artists who participated in *Hand Tools of Resilience*. They'll discuss remarkable outcomes of the exhibition's distinctive premise, which invited BIPOC creatives to manifest small-scale artworks representing the conscious and unconscious tools that Black and Indigenous people have created to survive and thrive.

### REMEMBRANCE | HAND TOOLS OF RESILIENCE PANEL DISCUSSION, PART II

**Date/Time TBA ([Request an update](#))**

Join Amy Andrieux, Executive Director/Chief Curator of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) and artist Nikesha Breeze for a live talk on the Afrocentrist and Afrofuturist themes explored in *Four Sites of Return* and *Hand Tools of Resilience*.

### RECLAMATION | "HEART OF DARKNESS" READING

**Saturday, May 22, 2pm • Restricted capacity event ([Schedule now](#) or [join on Zoom](#))**

Nikesha Breeze debuts their book "Heart of Darkness: A Reclamation of Language and Power" at this reading. The publication is a vivid documentation of Breeze's ongoing effort to reclaim language and power from racist literature—in this case, Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel "Heart of Darkness"—using a method similar to blackout poetry.

### REPARATION | FINAL RITUAL

**Saturday, June 12, 7–9pm • Restricted capacity event**

Nikesha Breeze invites the audience to participate in a special closing ritual performance ahead of the show's subsequent travels to Las Cruces, NM and Brooklyn, NY. *Due to Covid-19 safety procedures, a limited number of visitors will flow through the gallery at any given time.*

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### CURATORIAL STATEMENT

Jordan Eddy, Director

I'll begin by describing an artwork that does not appear in this exhibition, at least physically. It is the first painting that Nikesha Breeze made in their art studies at the University of New Mexico-Taos, and it currently hangs above their dining room table. The bottom edge of the large panel holds a collage of tangled leaves, a rich brown crust spattered with white, cerulean and crimson pigments. This is the riverbank, and at its edge floats a rowboat.

The narrow vessel, with its weathered exterior and spindly oars, foregrounds a vast field of cracked gesso. This is a strange space, somehow chaotic and still, its fissures revealing molten veins of a red-and-black underpainting. The title of this piece is *Underground Railroad*. Like all of Breeze's work it is rooted in deep scholarly research, in this case tracing the paths of enslaved people through the now-legendary liberation network. When Breeze describes the work to me, however, it is as though the narrative is unfolding in the present, visceral moment.

"It's this breathless, ecstatic feeling of finding a boat to freedom, waiting for you, in the dark," they tell me. As Nikesha speaks, my senses heighten and the craggy surface of the panel softens to my eye. Pale pigment and gesso alchemizes into bright moonlight, and there we stand, together, on the bank. This is the moment that I've come to think of as the convergence in the context of Breeze's work. Breeze might call it an invitation to the "Otherwise," which they describe as "a world where Black bodies and ideas are seen as existing in hypervalue, a realm of indivisibility between Black artistic aesthetic, Black time, and ritual healing."

The crux of this experience is that Breeze is not just inviting us, the viewers, to the convergence of the "Otherwise." Through scholarly exploration, and the elaborate and tender preparation of ritual space, Breeze conscientiously moves beyond colonialist and capitalist notions of knowledge and chronology. Black historical figures—or rather, Black citizens of the past who were barred from white historical narratives—join us on this voyage. In this space, they are unburdened but not unscarred, linked to their eras but startlingly present in a shared time and place. Their whole selves are centered: their joy and their pain. Their value is inviolable, their brilliance tangible, even if key biographical details were torn away from them through white violence, suppression and erasure.

"I want people to resist the urge to guess [my subjects'] stories," Breeze tells me. "We are all here, now, face-to-face." In this Afrofuturist mode, the artist sculpts time into a loop, ferrying us far beyond our own restrictive paradigms of past, present and future. The rowboat of *Underground Railroad* is the first in a fleet of vessels that glide—literally or metaphorically—through Breeze's visual artwork. There are slave ships (of *108 Death Masks: A Communal Prayer for Peace and Justice*), a steamboat (of "Heart of Darkness: A Reclamation of Language and Power") and, of course, the copper-lined vessel that forms a sacred ceremonial space at this exhibition's heart (*Arc of Return*).

These ships travel, once and again, to *Four Sites of Return: Ritual | Remembrance | Reclamation | Reparation*. In a sense they transform the exhibition itself into a great vessel, one that exists in a space that is both liminal and central. If you are reading this, you have already crossed the threshold, either physically or virtually. We are all here, now.