

The Reciprocity of Flesh: Sacred Assemblage in Miami

by Kristina Kay Robinson



**Focus : Loni Johnson and Chire Regans
2023 Teaching Artist Studio Residents**

locustprojects

“That’s what the old ones said in ancient times and we talk it again.”

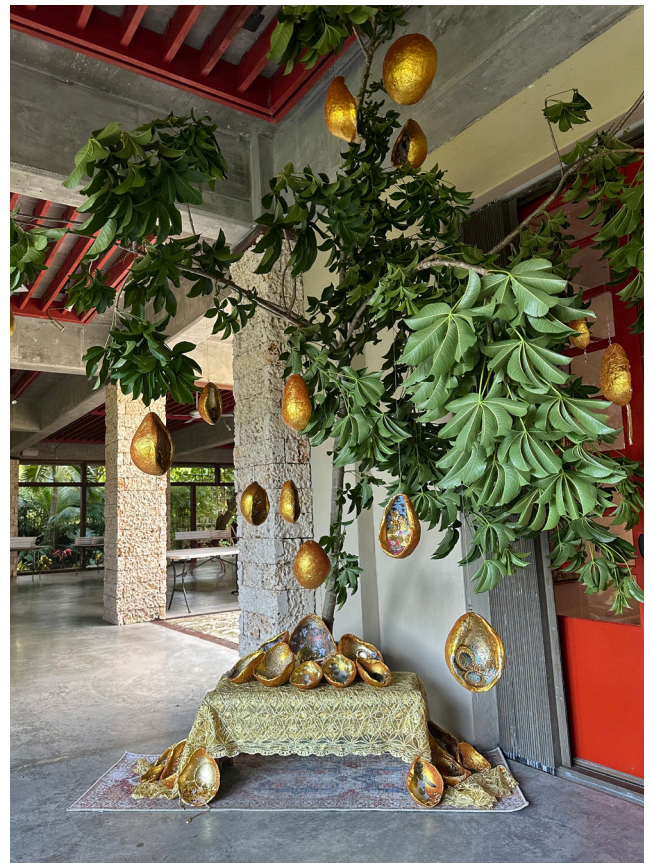
–Zora Neale Hurston,
“Hoodoo,” *Mules and Men*.



Chire Regans: “Roscoe”, 2023, 12” X 2”, yarn, fabric, metal earrings, human hair, mounted on canvas, photo by Frank Casale.

ago. It’s a crossroads of Miami’s history in a lot of ways, Johnson said, referring to the neighborhood I was staying in just a few blocks away. In 2005, the 18 square block area was developed into upscale shops, a few years following the start of Art Basel Miami. Regans and Johnson themselves sit in multiple personal intersections as exhibiting artists and mothers, longtime friends, colleagues as residents together at Locust Projects, and their other interlocking collaborations. Within the multinational landscape of Miami these two artists are creating space and articulating an experience of both Miami and the country at large that challenges popular narratives and questions how, when, and if at all, the place of the Black American experience in the story of the diaspora is understood.

Chire “VantaBlack” Regans, a St. Louis native has called Miami home for three decades and her practice reflects her multiple landscapes and memories of home. Throughout the height of the pandemic and protests following the death of George Floyd, Regans created a series of portraits of victims of police and gun violence. Resisting contemporary art trends to stylize or sensationalize such portraiture, Regans utilized social media to tell individual stories and create an archive to the promises of lives stolen. Her mural at Bakehouse Art Complex, *Say Their Names* features over 250 names of those lost abruptly and prematurely—each name rendered by hand by Regans. Regans’s artist moniker, “VantaBlack,” derives from the world’s blackest pigment, a material that absorbs 99.6% of the visible light that hits it. Regans’s vast capacity to hold so many stories in her mind, heart, and in her hands struck me viscerally, as I listened to her recount the personal stories of loss that connected her to her subjects and to their loved ones. Our discussion in her studio, in large part, was dedicated to the notion of a grieving after grieving. The aftermath of the creation of such a large body of work, where the victims only grow day by day—what then can be a balm?



Loni Johnson: “Let it Linger”, Installation at The Kampong as a part of the exhibition *Biscayne*, photo by Frank Casale.

Regans's recent public art installation titled *To What Lengths*, on the plaza at MOCA, says that balm is an exaltation of the living. Representative of women in her family, long stretches of braiding hair and other adornments and embellishments associated with the practice swayed from palms. Seating was arranged at the bases, the trees acting as braiders and the observers as the braid-ees. The new body of work she has been making during her residency time at Locust Projects continues this delving into the spirit sustaining practices of Black women. Large spiral soft sculptures incorporating braiding hair, chord and textiles created new galaxies in the studio, each one a world into itself. It is so important to remember and be remembered. It is the work of a lover and a warrior. also featured at The Bakehouse Art Complex was Loni Johnson's *3:33| A Procession (Reprise)*, a ritual through movement anchored by a site specific altar constructed by Johnson. Altars and shrines play an important role within the canon of assemblage and within the landscape of the American South, emblemizing the many cultural Souths the region contains. Loni Johnson's practice elucidates this function, charting both her own individual growth over time, and the lives of family and friends. A treasure trove of photographs supplied by her father, the family's documentarian, covered her table of supplies at Locust. My eyes were wet as I inhaled the familiar smell and felt the texture of eighties era photographs. We both knew what it meant to lose precious memories to storms. On one of her other working tables of materials were books on spirituality, theory, works of fiction. Much of our visit we spent exchanging stories of how we came upon particular authors, artists and cosmologies. Johnson's sculptural shrine pieces that filled her studio space at Locust consisted of repurposed mirrors, headboards as well as her own geometric constructions, overlain in gold and adorned with collaged and embellished images from her family archive along with cowries, hair ornaments, earrings and other objects serving dual practical and sacred purposes. Johnson described the process of recharting her own personal journey from girl to woman via recreating these moments from her collective past. Among her own work were little boxes and wooden frames, tiny portable shrines made by members of the wider Miami community from workshops held by Johnson.



Chire Regans: "Carolyn", 2023, 36" X 3", yarn, fabric, metal earrings, mounted on wood, photo by Frank Casale.



Johnson's works on view at Oolite Arts' Windows at Walgreens in North Beach, photo by Edson Smitter.

Ancestral memory collides gracefully with the present and the future in both Johnson's public ritual presentations and installations. Johnson's grandparent's beloved "pink room" was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Remnants, a site specific installation at Locust Projects in 2021 recreated this family room and reimagined it as a safe space for Black women to recall who they were, who they had been and still yet to be. I was gifted one of the pod-like objects that sat among Johnson's larger scale sacred assemblages. The tiny gold shapes resemble shells, or the domes of Sufi shrines. From certain vantage points the vessels resemble boats or some other form of interstellar spiritual travelcraft not yet seen.

The value around reciprocity, giving honor and space to their own individual journeys as artists and returning that giving to their own children and the youth of their communities is a long held tradition in the artistic practices of Black women. Both Johnson and Regans embody this practice's potential for transformation. Through both the transparency of the public square and in the opacity of the spirit, new roads are being opened in Miami.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kristina Kay Robinson is currently the New Orleans Editor at Large for Burnaway in Atlanta.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

This text was commissioned by Locust Projects in conjunction with our first Teaching Artist Summer Studio Residency through an open call process supporting teaching artists not currently in a formal studio program or represented by a gallery. The first selected residents included Dimitry Chamy, a professor at FIU, in addition to Loni Johnson and Chire Regans who were able to extend their residencies to complete significant new bodies of work that was the inspiration for this text. Locust Projects is excited it is able in its new space to offer free temporary studio space during the summer to teaching artists who apply through an open call, giving them the time, space and focus to nourish the creativity that they so generously

ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Loni Johnson is a multi-disciplinary visual artist born and raised in Miami, FL. As an artist, educator, mother and activist, Johnson understands that as artists, there is a cyclical obligation to give back and nurture our communities with her creative gift and it must be utilized to better our world. Through movement and ritual, the artist creates healing spaces for Black women and explores how ancestral and historical memory informs how, when and where we enter and claim spaces. Ms. Johnson graduated in 2003 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from SUNY at Purchase College School of Art and Design. Johnson is the Lead Coordinator of Art Detectives-an arts education program rooted in the framework of Social Justice at Perez Art Museum(PAMM) Miami, Prevention Coordinator of youth arts prevention program at Concept Health Systems, and Chairperson for the National Visual Arts Selection Panel for National YoungArts Foundation. Johnson is one of the founders of Miami Melanated Arts- a collective of Black artists who are creating space to reimagine what effective and impactful Arts eco-systems in South Florida could be. She continues to work with community organizations such as Girl Power, S.O.U.L Sisters Leadership Collective, and Voices United by providing youth the opportunities to find and nurture their identities and creative voices. She received a Knight Champion Award in 2019 and is a frequent guest speaker, lecturer, facilitator, and performer.



Artist **Chire "VantaBlack" Regans'** art practice exists at the intersection of social justice and storytelling. Her work responds to urgent societal concerns and functions as a critical platform to amplify the voices of community members who are often silenced. Over the past decade, Chire has focused primarily on community advocacy and depicting social narratives without distortion in various mediums. As a Saint Louis native, the birth of the Black Lives Matter movement triggered a sense of urgency in her art practice. Her work continues to evolve, allowing for broader social accessibility and creative scale. In South Florida, Chire continues to merge her artistic practice with community-led activism, emphasizing the art of storytelling as a means of engaging with communities with radical empathy and transparency.

ABOUT LOCUST PROJECTS

Founded by artists for artists in 1998, Locust Projects is Miami's longest running nonprofit alternative art space. We produce, present, and nurture ambitious and experimental new art and the exchange of ideas through commissioned exhibitions and projects, artist residencies, summer art intensives for teens, and public programs on contemporary art and curatorial practice. As a leading incubator of new art and ideas, Locust Projects emphasizes boundary-pushing creative endeavors, risk-taking and experimentation by local, national and international artists. We invest in South Florida's arts community by providing artists with project grants and empower creative careers by supporting the administrative work of being an artist through an onsite artist resource hub and access to pro bono legal services.



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