Grief Work: A Case for Wholeness

On Angela Hennessy's SECA Award Exhibition at SFMOMA

Photograph by Don Ross for SFMOMA, courtesy of the artist.

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By
Jasmine Narkita Wiley

"I would suggest that [Hennessey's] commitment to collective grief work is fundamentally a practice of love. Her subdued color palette of black, white, and gold—a chromatic language representing minerals, bodies, and extractions from Africa during the height of colonial empires—and her conceptual approach may not immediately signal this, but with a little digging and probing and listening, one inevitably arrives at love."

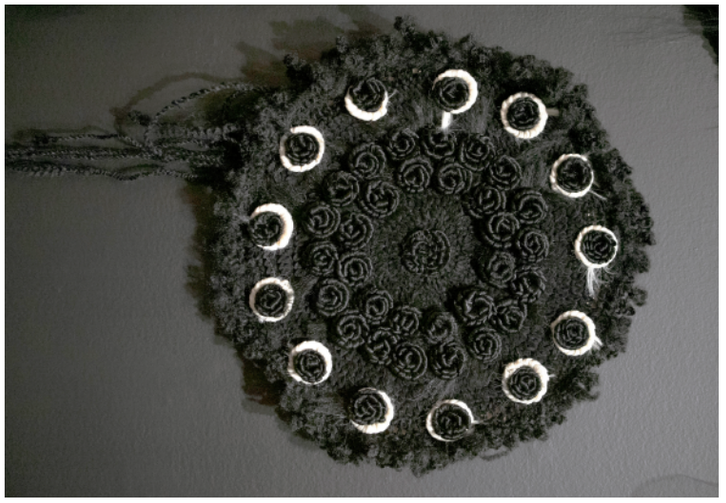
Angela Hennessy, an artist based in West Oakland, survivor of gun violence, and longtime CCA community member, invites us to reorient ourselves towards wholeness through individual and collective grief work. Though not explicitly stated in the interview playing in the exhibition space, nor during the textiles department tour, this intention becomes evident when you immerse yourself in her work. Stepping into the gallery where Hennessy's SECA award show is on view, you enter a room engulfed in darkness. This darkness evokes Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in which the writer discusses art as illumination. It is as if Hennessy herself has journeyed to a dark, ancient, and deep place to bring this work to light.

The dimly lit room is filled with circles—or more precisely, memorial wreaths. The installation features Hennessy's familiar materials: braided synthetic hair from her local beauty supply store—functioning as a medium between the living and the dead—gold leaf, and black chenille, a low-budget fabric chosen for its texture and how it absorbs and reflects light. *Wake Work*, an accumulation of wreaths, calls up the ornate arrangements seen at homegoing ceremonies for family members and those who lived grand lives, such as Aretha Franklin and Whitney Houston. These wreaths also share a striking resemblance to the funerary portraits by James Van Der Zee, renowned for documenting Black individuals embodying a spirit of abundance and plenty in 1920s and 30s Harlem. Hennessy additionally draws from pre-colonial West African grief practices as a reclamation practice, reclaiming traditions, ways of knowing, people, and lineages that were lost at the point of rupture where her ancestors departed the old world for the new.

With afterlives in mind, the installation also transforms into a veneration altar where spirits mingle. *Grief Warrior*, the matriarch figure positioned across from the collection of wreaths, appears to protect the sacred space. Look to the gathering of wreaths again, and an assemblage of planetary forms orbit above, signaling the necessity of collective grieving. Hennessy is asking us to lean into what Lorde describes as "a place of possibility within ourselves that is dark because it is ancient and deep." Why grieve? Why mourn? Perhaps there is something vital for us in our grief and collective vulnerability—something generative that can only emerge from mourning what has been lost, what has come to pass, and what continues to unfold in our world.

If this is indeed what Hennessy asks of museum visitors, I would suggest that her commitment to collective grief work is fundamentally a practice of love. Her subdued color palette of black, white, and gold—a chromatic language representing minerals, bodies, and extractions from Africa during the height of colonial empires—and her conceptual approach may not immediately signal this, but with a little digging and probing and listening, one inevitably arrives at love. On opening night, Hennessy invited audience members to gather and collectively call their ancestors into the room. Together with the artist and her collaborators, viewers acknowledged and mourned

Angela Hennessy, detail of *Wake Work* (2024)
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



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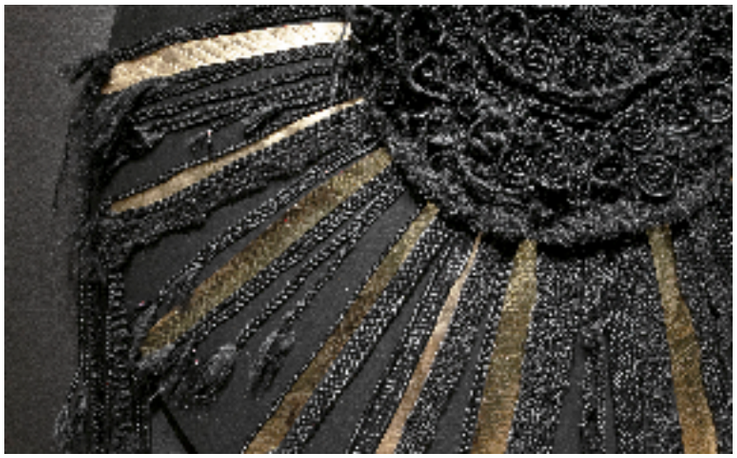
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



Angela Hennessy, detail of *Grief Warrior* (2024)
Photograph courtesy of the artist.

both personal losses and those shared collectively. They communicated with the dead and grieved for them as a community. In this process, participants witnessed one another's humanity—a profound act of love and connection.

In the sound installation, *Grief Spell*, which plays throughout the exhibition, Hennessy transforms silence about those who have suffered violent deaths. This becomes evident in the audio playback that references lives lost. Hennessy has tapped into a reserve, a place where many individuals will never find the courage to venture—a place full of sorrow, yet necessary for reorienting towards wholeness. Her work invites visitors to lean into discomfort, longings, and letdowns. To lean into all that must be grieved, but most importantly, to grieve our past—a past that has shaped the modern world as we see it today. Grief work becomes necessary at this moment, especially when grappling with the question: Where does one go from here? Perhaps the first step is to acknowledge and grieve.

Since 1967, the SECA Art Award has honored more than seventy Bay Area artists with an exhibition at SFMOMA and an accompanying publication. The award distinguishes Bay Area artists whose work, at the time of nomination, has not received substantial recognition from a major institution. The 2024 SECA Art Award Exhibition, curated by Shana Lopes and Maria Castro, is on view December 14, 2024–May 25, 2025, in SFMOMA's Art of California galleries on Floor 2.

Jasmine Narkita Wiley (MFA Fine Arts & MA Visual & Critical Studies 2027) is an artist, scholar, and writer who works across many disciplines. Her research explores temporality, lineage, and repair from a textiles, craft, and critical theory framework. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Public Relations in 2010 and a Master of Arts in Arts Politics from Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, in 2022.

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