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Healing Through Memory:

Matrilineal



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By Ashley Spencer

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Wednesday nights at CCA tend to hold an intoxicating buzz. I luxuriated in it as I walked into the Nave from Double Ground to find Gabby Severson, a friend, artist, and curator of the *Matrilineal* exhibition held at PLAySPACE. She gushed that she couldn't have gathered a more cohesive group to discuss the power of the maternal. Every artist, no matter the medium, followed the subject matter of the show metaphorically or literally; to trace, uphold, and honor the generations of femininity that have come and gone.

I arrived early and was able to walk through the exhibit prior to the sizable crowd that eventually flooded the room. The work transformed and shaped the space into something sacred or altar-like, with billowing paper and fabric. Suspended and grounded, the pieces drew the eye up and down—then flowed through the space. Dare I say; linearly.

I approached Grace Jin, whose work was the first to be seen in line. After hugs and praise, we faced the wall-bound triad of a handscroll and inked silk canvases titled *Bodhidharma Cave*, *Medicine King Temple*, and *Guanyin Cave*. She guided me through her summer trip back to China and shared that she had been collaborating with her grandmother through traditional medicine, as well as traversing sacred yang caves with both her mother and grandmother. She informed me of her passion for the divine feminine and its integral cultural connection to the black and gray that snaked through the work in varied brushstrokes, calling on the dark and damp caves.

We shifted our attention to the duo *Anatomy of a Grotto Heaven* and *Prescription for Longevity*. Grace is not only pursuing an MD in medicine at



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Stanford, but also her MFA in Fine Arts. She credits her path to both generations of her grandmothers being medicine people. "Nai-Nai was the first woman from her village to attend college for medicine. Unable to finish her education, due to the Cultural Revolution, grandma worked with barefoot doctors in rural China to provide first-aid, health education, and herbal remedies as a part of a revolutionary movement to bring health to the masses."

She recalled the calligraphy scrolls she painted in her grandma's studio, using her signature brown-hued medicinal herbs. Despite the clamor of the show, Grace's calm temperament and vivid memories brought me to the place of stillness she championed in her storytelling. The artwork she displayed summoned questions about Western medicine, capitalistic pharmaceutical greed, and what deep medicinal practices should look like. She left me with a question she expressed that captures the duality of balancing her two fields of study alongside her ancestry: "What does healing take?"

Holud, a work by Nishat Ahmed, nodded to the dark drape of Grace's aesthetic with a pinned sari frame, then burst into vibrant yellow ceremonial pre-wedding dresses. Nishat, radiant in blue, made her way over to greet me. Immediately, we bonded over our experiences with the turmeric ceremony, and our shared excitement for the act of color and joy the celebration evokes. She stressed that, although the painting is recognizable through Gaye Holud, meaning it held layers of Nishat's past. Book pages paste the backdrop of the scene, and she pointed out the different novels embedded in the paint. Nishat giggled as she confessed to reading her mother's medical books growing up, among the other childhood favorites. She then pointed to her mother's sari, directing me to the Bangla alphabet that is printed across the fabric. Nishat revealed that she can't read or speak Bangla very well, and even though the pages in the painting made her who she is today, she finds herself resenting the colonized language. The painting altered in that moment, manifesting into Nishat's desire and defiance of the erasure of her familial language. The paint that slowly redacts those books physically embodies the purpose of *Holud*—a gift of a new beginning and a cleansing with turmeric and tradition. Nishat excitedly steered me to her other installation, *Heaven is Green*.

A light olive-green sari shimmers on the wall, draping a few feet to the floor and into the space. Green plants of all species sit on and around the scene, and a light illuminates the shiny fabric from behind, casting leaf shadows. A trio of collages creates a column down the middle of the sari, and in the center is a photograph of Nishat's grandmother holding her mother as a baby.

"My mom says she doesn't need to see the image in color to know that my grandmother is wearing a green sari." Nishat's allegiance to her maternal line honors the continued dedication to creating heaven on earth—sharing that her grandmother believed it to be the color of heaven. She traces that belief, faith, memory, and greenness, and merges them right before our eyes.

Friends came to chat with me after my conversations with Grace and Nishat, and I couldn't help but fan-girl over not only the exceptional art, but also the curation of the exhibition. The generational maternal line and cultural lineage stood proud—the subtle ones like healing practices and the physicality of the hanging fabric and paper awed me. It wasn't until I spent time with the next artist that I had the epiphany about the color red. In Grace's hand-scroll *Medicine King Temple*, in the lower right corner, a boxy red stamp catches the eye and directly ties to the red saris and garb in Nishat's *Holud*. In the alcoved center of the space is a grid of hand-embroidered indigo fabric squares. Like a period at the end of a sentence, the very last square holds a red closed circle.

Jasmine Narkita Wiley is known for her ritual work in striking hand-dyed indigo textiles. Since blue is the color of her portfolio, red was the first thing I asked about when she approached me. She expressed the spontaneity of the red and that she had been thinking deeply about bloodlines and their connection to labor. The intimate sewn drawings came from a place of vulnerability and stillness.

She confessed, with a shy smile, that they are something she does in her studio when she needs to make something without consequence or too much thought, but over time and with accumulation, they become something with gravitas. This purity is visible in the quilt stitches that wiggle into circles and unshape themselves down the collection of line drawings. My finger traced the skipping circles in the air, as she told me about how the circle is precious to her practice and how the wholeness and enlightenment it conjures keep her in its loop. Jasmine lovingly spoke of her mentor, who became a maternal figure in her life, and that they had taught her all she knows. She transparently stated that even without direct family teaching, she reached through time with this meditative craft and listened to generations of ancestors whose hands guide hers.

Earlier in the night, Gabby Severson mentioned how she scouted an artist outside of the CCA Graduate Fine Arts program to exhibit in the show. Tricia Rainwater, an emerging indigiqueer artist, was a good friend of our beloved curator and happily agreed to include *Falamvit*



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Ishla Chike. After our quick introduction, I asked Tricia about their work and she delightfully humored me, teaching me about their artistic origins and motivations as we moved around the suspended installation of red berry-dyed ribbons and a red-headed two-foot stack of missing posters on the floor.

The square mobile hung in the space, the bells at the bottom of the ribbons whispered, asking us to hear them ring. Tricia lamented the sound of the piece, calling back into focus the importance of honoring the Native women and femmes of all ages who have disappeared. Each ribbon represented every name on the take-away posters, and the bells at the top and bottom resonated an audible wish for them to return. Tricia grieves the holes now torn in the lineage of mother to child and child to mother, and asks us to participate in the slow, deep healing that is continually denied by the colonial oppression of Indigenous lives. The hairs on my neck stood tall as Tricia's voice echoed through the near-silent space. I felt the installation's hovering presence as they connected the mobile's suspension to the trauma held in their communities, much like a mobile over a crib.

After thanking Tricia for creating such beautiful and meaningful work, I made my way toward the exit. My mind reeled through all that had been revealed through the excavation of *Matrilineal*. Grids and squares circle back to the drawn lines of generational inheritance. The cultural voices merge in and out of the gallery's silence. The buzz I felt dissipated without the crowd, and the music of the work filled the room as it guided me through the doors. I left filled with gratitude for the healing that took place.

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Ashley Spencer is an artist and writer whose work reflects her perspectives as a Black creator. With a decade of experience in ceramics, sculpture, and mixed media, she delves into the complexity of the black experience, hauntology, and femme autonomy. Spencer received an MFA in Fine Arts from California College of the Arts, where she is now working towards her second MFA in Creative Writing.

