

Hernease Davis (00:10):

Hello, and welcome to the Project Space, a podcast featuring some of the remarkable artists who have participated in the Project Space Residency here at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York.

(00:21):

The Project Space Residency has served both regional, national, and international artists for many years, providing a studio space and access to VSW facilities. I'm Hernease Davis, the Assistant Director of Education here at VSW. For each episode, I will be in conversation with an artist or artist group to discuss their background, their practice, and how the project based residency has impacted their works.

(00:48):

In this episode, I will be speaking with the artist, Granville Carroll. Granville came to VSW as a regional resident and as an extremely recent graduate of the MFA program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. During our conversation, we touched on how he uses photography, spirituality, and philosophy in his work, and what changed when he got to the residency.

(01:11):

During his time here, Granville engaged very thoughtfully with the VSW community. So you'll hear him refer to Tate Shaw, who is the director of VSW and the VSW Book Press, as well as Michael Darcy, who is a book artist and recent alum of VSW. I have also had many long conversations with Granville that stem from his thesis project at RIT as well as the work he started while here at VSW. I am very excited to share this conversation that includes quite a bit of reflection of how Granville's time during the residency has impacted his work.

Granville Carroll (01:44):

So my name is Granville Carroll. Born in California. Lived there for the first five years of my life. Grew up in Washington state, but I moved all over almost every year and a half, two years. Lived in Arizona for seven years, and now I've been in New York for three.

(02:03):

And so I did my residency here at VSW from September to October of 2021, this year. Really wonderful time. And I would describe my practice as one, I'm just an artist. I use photography as my main medium of choice, but I'm thinking about things in a lot of different ways that sometimes doesn't involve just visual media, but I'm thinking about the ideas of blackness.

(02:34):

As a black artist, there's all these projections and expectations and things that are thrust upon us. And so instead of trying to run away from it, I confront it by redefining the narrative around blackness,

associating it with the cosmos, associating it with power and origin story. A lot of my digital work incorporates myself as self portrait artist, but then also the landscape and trying to find the meeting place of the two. And then also using poetry as a way to share the existential ramblings of my mind.

Hernease Davis (03:14):

Yeah, that's wonderful. How did you decide to apply for the VSW Project Space Residency, and what was the application process like for you?

Granville Carroll (03:25):

Yeah, so I initially actually wasn't going to apply. I was like I don't know about this. So I had started this project, Dark Matter, which is what I worked on during my residency here earlier this year, and I knew I wanted it to be a book. So I'm sort of challenging myself to work in a different medium, if you will. It's still photography photo based, but thinking about it in a book and what that container means for the work. Using poetry, using representational abstract imagery.

(03:58):

So when it came down to apply to the residency, I had a couple friends who sent it to me and was like, "Oh, Granville, you should check this out." And I was like, "Oh, I don't know. I'm teaching, I'm working. I've got all this stuff going on." And then one of my coworkers at the museum was like, "You should really apply." So I was like, all right, fine. So I decided on the day that it was due that I would apply and submit an application.

(04:26):

And it was actually really easy. I had looked at the application prior to the due date. I mean, it was kind of hard though, because it was like, you have to be very concrete and direct. So it's like, describe your practice in 200 words. And it's like, my God. So I was sitting there, All right, let's distill what it is that I do, what this project is about, which I think actually is really helpful because it takes out all the fluff and all the unnecessary material and just allows you to get straight to the point.

Hernease Davis (04:56):

This is your first residency, is that right?

Granville Carroll (04:58):

Yes. Yes, it is.

Hernease Davis (05:01):

Making sure. All right. So then what were your expectations coming in? And also you talked about before about a little bit of a resistance. Why do I need this? Or is this for me? I'm doing all these other

things. And so then when people were suggesting that you do a residency, what were your thoughts about what it might have been like? And then how did that coincide with or even challenge your expectations, especially since this was your first one?

Granville Carroll (05:29):

Yeah, I try to go into new experiences without expectation because I could lead into false hope, which can lead into disappointment, and I didn't want to be disappointed, right? So I didn't want to have this idea of what it was supposed to be like, but I think a part of me, especially being somewhat of a newly graduate from grad school, graduating in 2020, I think I had a slight expectation in which more people would be around and would be saying, oh, you should try this. You should do that. All these voices that you have in grad school would direct your work in one way or another. But coming here, it was like, "All right, well, we loved your proposal. We are really down for this project. So here's the facilities, here's the resources. Let us know what we can do for you and just have fun." And I was like, that is amazing.

Hernease Davis (06:25):

You've just graduated from RIT with your MFA. So that's a three year program?

Granville Carroll (06:31):

Two year.

Hernease Davis (06:32):

Oh, okay. Two years. So really intense. Two year MFA programs are very concentrated, intense, and coming into this environment that is outside of what you're used to. VSW is also in Rochester, but it's a different part of the town. And I'm also wondering if that came into it as well, but break down "Amazing".

Granville Carroll (06:53):

Amazing. Yeah. So freeing for one, just to be given a space to work in, that's really beautiful, Amazing studio. And I was like, I don't ever want to leave this space. So yeah, it was nice to have a dedicated workspace outside of my home. Because I usually just work in my apartment here in Rochester.

(07:19):

But then just having the freedom to come and go at any hours of the day or the night. And then when people were around, they were still very much willing to speak with me and share their time and energy, which is always, for me, a gift that I like to receive in gratitude.

(07:37):

I had space to think, time to explore and experiment and to move through my process uninhibited. And I feel like in grad school or even

undergraduate, is you have all these people who are trying to push you in one direction or another. And usually it comes from a good place, but it can feel inhibiting sometimes being told what you should do instead of just having this space to work through your ideas and pull it apart and bring it back together and take the fragments away and reposition it. So all of that was just amazing. But also seeing as though I wanted to make a book. I was like, well, VSW is known for book making.

Hernease Davis (08:25):

Yeah. Okay. So let's talk about this book.

Granville Carroll (08:28):

Yeah. Okay. What do you want to know?

Hernease Davis (08:30):

Well, I want you to talk about your process and your experience with coming in with this idea of how you wanted to work in this medium. Had you made books before?

Granville Carroll (08:41):

No, this is my first book. Yeah.

Hernease Davis (08:44):

So then how did you come to thinking of the work that you've put into this book as being a book project? Was it VSW or was it something that kind of fit with something you already had in mind to work with this body of work?

Granville Carroll (08:57):

So I mean, I did take a book making class in grad school, and that was really fun. So I think that sort has been lingering in my mind about, okay, how can I incorporate this into my practice?

(09:09):

After grad school, I created a new project called In the Finite Infinitely, and it's sort of an extension from my thesis project, Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me. But I just started thinking to myself and asking questions about, all right, I'm really comfortable with digital composites and making these really, in some ways abstract images of the body within these imaginative spaces.

(09:42):

And I started to go through my archive of images and I was like, I have thousands and thousands of photographs that have never seen the light of day that nobody has ever been able to experience. And that even myself as a photographer hasn't really spent time with. So I was like, I wonder if I can make a project around these images and then using those images to influence the images that I will take in the future for the project.

(10:13):

And I also wanted to challenge myself to not use digital composites in the work. I wanted no self-portraits either, because those are two things that I am used to doing. I think that's what most people have come to know my work as. And so I said, yeah, all right, I'm going to challenge myself. And so I did it. So the book, I wanted it to be something experimental, like a book is a book, right? But I wanted to sort of shift it a little bit and just create a different experience. Because a lot of my work is digital and because of Covid I've had really wonderful opportunities to show my work digitally, but I wanted to have something physical for people to interact with and see the materiality of the image and to just dive into it in a different manner.

Hernease Davis (11:09):

And I also want you to talk a little bit about anything that you learned in that process, especially with this physical medium where you're challenging yourself to step outside of how you would approach your work. So without self-portraiture and without composites.

Granville Carroll (11:29):

Yeah. So I'd say one thing that was really challenging is because of the way my mind works when it comes to photographs, I'll go out, I'll take these pictures of the landscape, of myself or whatever, and I'm like, Oh, there's so many possibilities of what I can do with this image to take it into Photoshop and just completely transform it.

(11:46):

So as I'm going through my archive and I'm pulling, I guess what you can consider maybe the rejects for my composites, I started to say to myself, oh, damn. There's actually a lot of potential that I could use. But I was like, no, no, no. You can't use that for composite. It's going to be for the book. Because that was another thing, is that the book incorporates abstract and representational images that are more in line with, you take a picture, you do some adjustments with it and that's what it is.

(12:17):

But making a book is just a whole different world. So you have to think about how is it going to be produced? How's it going to potentially be published? And when you're designing it, you have to think about, okay, is this going to be hand stitched or is this going to be perfect bound? Is this going to lay flat? Is it going to be spiral? It's all of these things that I was like, Oh Lord, what did I get myself into?

(12:45):

But it's been really, really fun. And having the community here at VSW in Rochester to sort of teach me these ways. Michael Darcy, one of the

alumnus here, he's very good at artist books and has taught me a lot about, all right, Granville, now you have to start thinking about X, Y, and Z. The type of paper that I want to use. What is the cover going to look like? The sequencing of the images and just the size of the book too. Just all of these different variables. It's been really fun, but I also realize there's a lot more work to be done.

Hernease Davis (13:28):

Because I remember seeing your first iteration and by the time I returned and was like, "How are the books going?" You had five. And you're on the fifth book. And even me, so I would say that I'm, I will use the word notorious for being the not book person. I'm not a book person here at VSW, I'm the photo person. And so one of the things I really enjoyed about going into your studio was seeing those quote, unquote rejects. And I laugh when you say that because I'm like, these are beautiful images and usually outdoors of trees.

(14:03):

And I have a memory of how you sequence them on the wall in between older works that were self-portraits. And I thought all of them together really add to the images that are quote, unquote straight images. And I'm wondering if they added any significance to you as well.

(14:22):

But in terms of the book, you had a happy accident on one of the printers with ink. Do you remember that? I remember walking in and you're so happy about it.

Granville Carroll (14:34):

Yeah. So for the folks listening, so Dark Matter is incorporating the images, but it also is using poetry. So I have my own original poems that I wrote for this project. So I'm experimenting with different black papers because I want to do black ink on black paper so that you have to really look at it and interact with it. And to also speak to the idea of dark matter being this elusive substance that we have yet to fully come to understand. So I'm experimenting with different black papers to see the density, the fill, all the stuff. So I'm put it in there and I put the wrong piece in the printer that already had a poem written on it.

Hernease Davis (15:19):

Oh, that's right, yes.

Granville Carroll (15:20):

Yeah. And it ended up by the grace of God actually being the same exact poem that got printed on that page, but it was askew. Visually, it was really beautiful, but then the way that you read it was sort of like this repetition and it had this rhythm to it. And I was like, "Wow, I never would've thought to do this, but thank you printer for

messing up my initial printing process and making me having to go through it again. And then me not even being aware of what I did." And it's like, those are the moments that I live for and just art making in general.

Hernease Davis (15:55):

Yeah, I would imagine that because you're so skilled in composites and even skilled in photography, that that would happen less so in that process. Is that true?

Granville Carroll (16:07):

No, it's not actually. Yeah. Well, and that's why I love composites. Because I'll have an idea for what I want to do, but there's so much that happens throughout the process where one, it just doesn't work because digitally, the way that light is interacting and tones and stuff are laying upon each other, there's some limitations still. You can't just do anything.

(16:34):

But I try to stay within that space of the unknown while I'm making, because it pushes me to think about things differently. So I come to it with this idea, okay, I want to take this mountain and I want to take this portrait that I have of myself and I want to embed water and make it seem like we're underneath it or something, let's just say. And I'll go in to try to make it, and then I start to move things around differently. And then I'll add a layer of color onto it, which then shifts the way that I perceive it, and then it shifts the way that I want to take the image. And so there's a lot of play that happens and it's just being in the moment and just being in the flow allows me to recognize these experiences and then just lead with it. It's like the work is speaking for itself and says, "This is what I want from you." So I'll listen.

Hernease Davis (17:33):

That is very beautiful to hear because it describes that happy accident or what I described as a happy accident, seeing that come out of the printer quote, unquote incorrectly. But being open to the surprises that this process gives you in terms of the actual layering, like an actual layering happened and then it spurred another thought about rhythm and repetition and added another layer of poetry to it.

Granville Carroll (18:01):

Absolutely. And also thinking about the visual aesthetics of words on a page, I think that's something that sometimes might get lost in translation. We think about topography and all this stuff, right? Along with fonts and size and all that. But thinking about the word or words as an image and that happy accident allowed me to see how the way that the words fall into the page is also an image in and of itself. And it's what's going to create a whole different experience for the viewer as well. Instead of just like, "Oh, I'm reading a

poem." But now you're actually looking and experiencing something hopefully on a much deeper level.

Hernease Davis (18:45):

It's interesting to hear you speak about words and poetry as image, because there are images of poetry in your latest body of work.

Granville Carroll (19:00):

Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me.

Hernease Davis (19:02):

Yes. And there are two prints that are very striking in that they are essentially images.

Granville Carroll (19:11):

Yeah, so they're screen printed on clear acrylic.

Hernease Davis (19:13):

Oh, clear acrylic.

Granville Carroll (19:14):

And it's backed by a steel sheet that's really heavy.

Hernease Davis (19:19):

So there's two poems. There's Am I? I am. and then there is I Am.

Granville Carroll (19:27):

Yes.

Hernease Davis (19:27):

Do you want to talk about those pieces and how they relate to what you're doing with Dark Matter? And has it evolved or added to any ideas that were associated with making essentially images of this poem or these two poems as a part of your thesis work?

Granville Carroll (19:45):

Yeah, I think from the thesis work, those two poems, Am I? I am. and then I Am, have definitely influenced the way that I've been thinking about the Dark Matter book. And part of it is of the reason why I wanted to continue with the poetry and image is because of that project, my thesis project. And because I felt like those words had so much meaning and added so much value to the overall work itself, the body of work. I was like, oh, I have to continue this. Because a little side note is that before I got into photography, I actually got into poetry and actually began writing all these poems and I had this secret poetry social media page, if you will. It's still active. I don't use it anymore.

Hernease Davis (20:37):

Will you tell us the handle?

Granville Carroll (20:40):

I think it's Granville17 on allpoetry.com. Yeah. I'll verify. We can put it in the notes or whatever.

Hernease Davis (20:48):

Okay. Yeah, yeah.

Granville Carroll (20:50):

When I made those pieces for Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me, I actually played around with different substrates, if you will. So I actually ended up, I have a version of Am I? I am. that is laser engraved on a piece of wood that I then stained with a really dark, almost black wood stain. And then I painted half of the letters gold and left the other half black. So it's really hard for you to read the first half, which is part of the questioning aspect of self and identity and where I am in this world. And then the other half that is gold is me affirming my existence and then saying that here I am in this capacity. And so thinking about color, thinking about tones, thinking about the way that light is hitting this object and either being sucked in or being released back out to the world, all of these things sort of came to mind.

(21:48):

So when I was doing Dark Matter, the first versions of the book, had a lot of white pages, and what I kept hearing from people was that they're like, I don't want to see white pages. I just don't. These images are so dark and so beautiful that it just needs to be something different.

Hernease Davis (22:11):

And can you say why you were using white pages? Because there was a reason why, and I remember talking to you about that.

Granville Carroll (22:18):

Mostly was because it's just traditional, right? It's sort of expected. So even though I was like I'm going to make this experimental book because I was so new to book making design, excuse me, design, it was just the way to go.

(22:35):

But I was also thinking about early on in the residency, I had a conversation with Tate and I was like, I just don't know if I feel comfortable with having the white pages either. I totally hear what people are saying from an aesthetic perspective, but conceptually it doesn't feel right. Because then what happens is that the whiteness becomes a foundation and the support for the book and the idea for it is to let blackness be at the forefront. So I was like, I have to play with black pages somehow, but I just don't know.

(23:10):

So between Michael and Tate and other folks were like, black text on black image, Granville, duh. And I'm like, wow, okay, you're right. So it's really helpful to have these conversations with people so they can get you outside of your own little limited thinking sometimes.

(23:31):

And so I thought about that, I was like, oh, that's amazing because it's beautiful, but it speaks so much to the idea of Dark Matter. Like I said before, it's this elusive substance the viewer has to really engage with the words and really look at it. It's not making it easy for people to understand or to see. So yeah, so just thinking about the materiality, thinking about the experience of the viewer, the experience that I'm having as a creator of it too, and how can I bridge the gap between myself and the person who's going to be looking at this?

Hernease Davis (24:05):

And I think especially since you have such a strong conceptual basis for it, when you combine it with a medium that does have those markers of what we have experience with, speaking as an artist who doesn't make books but has experience with types of books, for instance. And I think of them as having essential parts like a cover or some type of binding and some type of pages. But in an art context, when you're working with artists and we have a conceptual foundation that can be translated into a book, then those things that you think are essential or that you can consciously assume should be there. Like, oh, the first page is going to be blank. And what is blank? What is blank? It's a white page. It's not necessarily a black page. We don't think necessarily about the color. But for you in particular, it's really great to hear going from this idea of this is just here, but realizing that there is also a way of integrating that decision into the concept.

Granville Carroll (25:11):

Yeah, because I was always taught when you're working on a project, you have to think about the technique, the concept, and the aesthetics. Those are the pillars, those are the foundations to create something that hopefully has power and meaning to it. So sure, could I make something really beautiful and gorgeous? But if there's no concept, then what's the point?

Hernease Davis (25:34):

And for you especially, you're making very rigorous work that it's also very beautiful and it was like a pleasure to go into your studio all the time.

(25:48):

I think it's really, really fascinating that one of the important aspects of your work is challenging the viewer to read, quote,

unquote, to read or to view or to take time. A lot of your composite works are filled with information, are filled with process, but also particularly with your self portraits, I think there is a lot of complications in there, especially when you are using your own body against a nebula or a night sky. And also in terms of how you display or show series of works with nature outside, some type of outside or something that's coupled but also has your hand in it clearly in terms of the composite-ness and also the sharpness or the color.

(26:37):

When I hear you talk about the other iterations of these poems though, I would love to see the wood cut, but the idea of the wood cut, what you're doing with the color on that also, it continues what you're doing in terms of, I want to obscure and I want to allude maybe, and then with the gold, it is this stamp of existence and an assertion of yourself.

(27:05):

It's interesting because, okay, so one of the things that we've talked about before is this struggle that you have with asserting yourself. So I kind of want you to talk about where that comes from. And then also this consistent want for the viewer to have to work hard or to spend some time or some effort, some meaningful effort.

Granville Carroll (27:32):

Yeah, I think that's a really good question, which sort of implicates me personally. I am a shy person, I would say. Some of my friends say, Granville, you're not shy at all. I think I am. I'm an introverted extrovert, I guess, but I usually don't like to be seen. I don't like to be in the spotlight. But it's really interesting that in my day to day I like to just of flow through and just be, but then when it comes to art, it's like I'm a whole different person.

(28:14):

I'm more of a rebel than I would say in my day to day. I'm obviously using myself in the image, which is sort of an active vulnerability, or at least trying to get to a place of vulnerability, which actually I think is at the core of this idea of self opacity. But also wanting people to understand the complexities of what it means to be human. You can't just look upon somebody and say, I get them. You just can't. You have to sit there and spend time. You have to feel their energy. You have to observe their body language and their eye movements and listen to the tone of their voice and all of these things.

(28:56):

And so when it comes to image making, I want the viewer to have to engage with this space or the subject in that same complex manner. That you cannot just look upon this and say, oh, it's beautiful and write it off, or oh, it's cosmos and write it off. Sure. It's all those things, but it's so much more.

(29:17):

And so, this is my belief about the viewer, is that if someone approaches it and they see it from a very shallow perspective, that's because that's where they're able to meet themselves, which is not meaning to make a judgment call about them or to say that they're a shallow person, but to say you have to dig deeper, you have to use your imagination to activate what's happening in this image, because I'm giving you a lot to look at.

(29:49):

Some of it is abstract, but enough of it is so representational that you can start to pull the pieces together. And of course people from different backgrounds, cultures, belief systems and stuff are going to come to it with different experiences and perspectives. But that's part of what I want, because that is allowing the conversation to grow and unfold.

(30:09):

So it begins with the imagination. Imagine something in which doesn't exist, but exists within the mind. And then once you do that, it activates a part of yourself in which you start to see the world from a different perspective. And you don't want to have to hide or be too opaque to where people can't enter you in some capacity. It's all about this balance of being accessible, but then also making space for self. And it's all about the meeting point between self and the viewer, creator and the experiencer, but then also trying to look at everything from the perspective of the ultimate observer, which is seeing self in relation to the whole of existence.

Hernease Davis (31:01):

Yeah, I really appreciate that because what you are doing is so difficult, but at the same time, there's so much hope in the possibilities of that. And I think you have to hold onto that in terms of your hope and humanity just to speak very generally about it. And I struggle with that. So you challenge me in terms of, and I'm talking a lot about resolving things and resolution and the possibility of resolution starts off with, I think, this hope that there could be some understanding. And in that understanding, it doesn't mean totality like a total of understanding, but it is, I think in understanding is this acceptance of complexity.

(31:51):

And with your work and also hearing you speak about your work and reading interviews with you about this work, I find it very challenging because I am very pessimistic in that sense.

Granville Carroll (32:08):

Okay, I'm here for it.

Hernease Davis (32:09):

And yeah, I'm pessimistic in my real life and I'm kind of pessimistic sometimes with the work. And I'm unfortunately sometimes very dismissive and how I work, I don't even really think about the viewer, and that's mainly for me, but I've also been wondering if that's also been a part of my issues with even imagining that there could be some resolve or that there could be some understanding that I could start off with where I'm like, I want to be understood, or I want people to think deeply about this thing, and so therefore I will try at the very beginning.

(32:44):

It happens. And I think that's also part of the magic of art and also the magic of relation. And also the magic of being a human and perspectives and being able to bring that thing that you're speaking about, where you are creating images that never existed, things that we physically and in reality could never see. And sort of using those tools of photography to create those worlds, but not just to be like, oh, look what I can do. It is a very much a way of relating and a relationship that's with the viewer to invite them, just this invitation, and I love that.

Granville Carroll (33:27):

I was just thinking that, I was like, it's an invitation to the viewer, it's an invitation to anyone to enter my space. And hopefully by that it provides them space to do the same for themselves and then space for them to do that for others.

(33:48):

I talked about vulnerability. And showing yourself physically is one form, because you are putting yourself out there to be judged, to be talked about in ways that you may not really want. And then also just showing the body and sometimes nude perspectives and it's like, whoa, okay, the world has seen. One thing is I will never do a full frontal because there's no need for me, for my work.

(34:17):

But the other part of vulnerability is our mental emotional vulnerability. That's a really important aspect. And I've thought about this idea of hope within my work and asked myself, why is that so important? And it's important because the world is not filled with hope. Especially lately in the last almost two years, we've been dealing with this pandemic and all of this crazy stuff happening.

(34:49):

And I just look at the world and I'm like, it's so dark. I understand that. I know that it's not the best place all the time. So I'm like, okay, well what can I add to the narrative to help people in some way? At least, hopefully it touches one person to remove themselves from this abyss of negativity and give them a little semblance of light.

(35:18):

And personally, I've experienced a lot of pain. I don't want to go through life continuing to just experience pain, but I want to experience what's on the other side of that, which is love and it's joy and it's happiness, and it's imagining the unimaginable and stepping into that realm.

(35:37):

And it's like being a child, right? I'm speaking to my inner child that then hopefully will speak to other people's inner child and be like, look, y'all, let's play a little bit. The world is dark, the world is ugly. But you know what? It's also really incredibly beautiful. And if we can tap into that, then we can actually begin to start thinking about new ways of being, which hopefully could then redirect our course in terms of everything. Politics, environment, social identity constructs, and all these things, to push people to just think a little bit differently about what we've been given. Because this isn't all that there is. So yeah, I invite the viewer.

Hernease Davis (36:23):

All right. So, Granville, in you talking about this work and also this invitation and how you're making this work as something that I think that you need and also want to bring other others into. There is a moment when we were during one of our very long conversations in your studio where I think we were both sharing about topics that are off limits to us, that we are thinking about, and we know that they're there, but we're not ready to integrate into the work. And you said, "I wish I didn't have to make this work." And can you talk about that and also just kind of expand on what you meant when you said that?

Granville Carroll (37:13):

Yeah. The plight of the black artist is difficult. I'll be honest, when I first started photography and was like, oh, I'm going to be an artist, I was so naive to think that it was just all fun and games. I was young and excited about something new.

(37:35):

But when I got to grad school and I had all of these projections about my work being about the black experience, about representation this, representation that, and I'm like, but I don't want to talk about those things. I want to talk about other things that to me, not say that these things don't matter, but to me are more important, personally. I feel like the concepts I want to talk about, like solitude and isolation, talking about the mental, experiential, philosophical stuff about the world, that's what really gets my fires going. But everyone's like, oh, well you got to talk about, because you're a black self portrait artist. And I'm like, Well, shit. You know? Damn.

(38:29):

And so when I came to this conclusion of, I don't have to actually just because these white folks say I have to, and they're interested in these topics, and that means a lot to them, doesn't mean that I have to.

(38:47):

But then I started to spiral down into this space in which I was like, well, but I kind of do, because these are real issues that affect the community. The ideas of race don't just affect black people, it affects all of us. And so I then had to decide how do I blend these philosophical, spiritual, otherworldly ideas that I have about life and existence with a very real heaviness of race politics and social identity and all of that in between?

(39:32):

And I think I'm doing a fairly good job at finding the balance, but it's a continuous journey. But I wish I didn't have to make the work. Because you look at these white artists or even other artists sometimes too, and they are not greeted with the same expectation.

(39:52):

And I'm just like, wow, I wonder how freeing that is to be able to pick up whatever idea, whatever it is you want to investigate and engage with and run with it without anybody questioning you about what it means in terms of your own personal identity. I couldn't just neglect the fact that these are issues that are happening. And not to say that I wasn't aware of them before, but I just wasn't actively engaged with it in my work. And so now it's making work about blackness when I said, I don't want to make work about blackness, but I'm doing it in a way that feels comfortable and feels genuine and honest to me.

(40:33):

So it's not like Dark Matter, this project that I worked on at the residency here, it's looking at racial blackness and the construction of it through some research and other stuff that I've gone into. But I'm saying, let's look at it differently. There's liquid blackness, this theory that was founded by Dr. Alessandra Raengo at Georgia State University and her students. And it's a phenomenal, phenomenal research group that's looking at this idea of blackness and the sensory experience of it, and primarily looking at it through film, but there's a wealth of knowledge there in terms of how we all approach blackness, which got me thinking about, well, blackness can mean so many things, right? It can be death, it could be the night sky, it can be heaviness, but it can also be light. There's all of these ways that we can envision it.

(41:37):

And so I don't want to make the work because personally it affects me

emotionally in a way that I just don't like to feel. I don't want to feel heavy all the time, but by doing this project, it's like I'm associating blackness with power. I'm creating temporal blackness. I'm opening up to spiritual and spatial blackness so that when a viewer interacts with this, they don't know what they're looking at, but they know that they see blackness and then they are then going to have to be confronted with their own ideas about what blackness means to them, but then also look at what I'm presenting them myself.

(42:18):

So it's a strange place to be in, but what someone had told me before is that if we, black artists, don't do the work, who else will? Because no one else can. If a white person comes in here trying to talk about racial blackness in the same capacity that we do, people are going to be like, What are you doing? That's appropriation. There's all this stuff. And what maybe that should happen.

Hernease Davis (42:46):

And it has happened in terms of reception of certain works. There was that issue at the Whitney where there was a protest that entered a very complex conversation around representation and the limitations of representation around that work as well. There have been protests by a very famous artist, who I'm just going to refer to as just a famous artist, who was taking liberties with images taken from black magazines. So Jet and Ebony, and thinking of who has, not necessarily who has ownership of those conversations, but I think how you are approaching it as someone who's very aware of their own complexity, I think there is that very complex space that we have to exist in where there is this projection of flatness onto you. And that critique of, sure, I'm going to go past you being introspective and being authentic in your work. And what I'm going to do is flatten it out to a generalization that I understand as a viewer. And that is incredibly painful. It's disheartening as an artist.

Granville Carroll (44:13):

So much.

Hernease Davis (44:13):

Yeah. Because it's also disheartening as a human being who exists and breathes and lives and walks through time and has had a history before and will have future after. So it's something that I'm also aware of. And just for personal reasons, just this has a lot to do with the pessimism that I hold onto and the hope when, the hope that I'm referring to in your work, there's also a patience there. And with me, there is an emphatic impatience, I'll say, not necessarily in my work, but in my process or things that I choose not to address. And I make self portraits, but I make them very abstracted. And so then I have come across the frustration of viewers not being able to race me.

Granville Carroll (45:18):

That's fantastic. Because they don't have to have access.

Hernease Davis (45:25):

Exactly. Yeah. And so a part of that is not on purpose. I'm not thinking of them. As I said before, I'm not thinking about the viewer. The way I work. I set it up where I care more about myself than the viewer. And it is a conscious effort because it's me responding to me being very, very hypervigilant of others. And so when I go in, it's me and I don't walk around racing myself. I don't walk around thinking of how I also am uncomfortable with straight self-portraits, but also the conversations I'm having are very introspective and very psychological and instinctual. And so then just even by how that manifests. There is the struggle of the viewer wanting to recognize when they see me, they want to see that in the work somehow where they can like, "Oh, this is black art." No.

Granville Carroll (46:28):

Exactly.

Hernease Davis (46:29):

And so that with you, because it is such a different manifestation of this introspection, but you're also in conversation around this need to be flattened and you are, I think, quite successfully challenging that. And I think what you're doing with this book as well, being able to work in the language of a book, it's personal. You're holding it, it can be a singular experience, but also you're very much in control of what's in it, how it looks, how it feels, and in this process of the choices that you're making. So then do you feel different in this book form in terms of the work that you wish that you didn't have to make?

Granville Carroll (47:23):

I do actually. So one thing that I really struggled with, because I remember having conversations with people about this very similar topic, about not really wanting having to do this work. It's so much work. And they're like, "Well, if you don't want to talk about it, just remove your body from it." And I was like, "Child, no. Because then I'm implicating myself in the ideas of black erasure and I just don't feel comfortable doing that." Simply, I don't want to respond to it that way.

(47:55):

So with Dark Matter, I think I've evolved to a point where I understand that removing the physical representation of my body does not mean that I'm removing blackness necessarily. And that my hand being in the image, by me taking it, by manipulating the exposure as I choose to making it black and white, putting it into this container, the book form, this is a self-portrait, even though it is not a direct representation of me.

Hernease Davis (48:30):

Yes, yes.

Granville Carroll (48:34):

And so it excites me, even though now I have version six that I have, yeah, I have version six.

Hernease Davis (48:40):

So excited.

Granville Carroll (48:41):

I'm working on version seven. I'm going to hopefully stop sequencing so I can get to an end point. But initially, like I said, I didn't want to have the self-portraits in there because I wanted to challenge myself with a different sort of visual strategy. But with these later versions, I've reincorporated some composites, I've reincorporated some self-portraits, but the self-portraits, most of them are solid black figures printed on black paper with light, but it's black.

(49:15):

So I'm like, all right, so if you're going to flatten me to this two dimensional plane of existence, I'm going to go ahead and do it. So I could show you that even in the two dimensional plane, there's so much power and beauty and sovereignty there. And then it still is unfolding into several other planes of dimension because of the way that you're turning the page, the way that light interacts with it. It's sensory. That's what I want.

(49:43):

And so yeah, I'm excited because I'm now taking all of these experiences that I've had in the last couple years, all that I've learned from my personal to the academic, intellectual, whatever, and incorporating that and finding new ways to address those concerns that I have about the way that we are looked at as black people.

Hernease Davis (50:08):

I mean, I have to say that you describing that, because I haven't seen it, haven't seen this latest iteration of your book in process, but I went through your website and how you're describing it, it reminds me of, I believe the series is called Solitude, or one of the images, the image is called Solitude. They're self portraits in very low light.

Granville Carroll (50:34):

Almost completely black.

Hernease Davis (50:35):

Almost completely black.

Granville Carroll (50:36):

Black Serenity.

Hernease Davis (50:37):
Yes. Black Serenity.

Granville Carroll (50:38):
Black Serenity's the name.

Hernease Davis (50:41):
There's some images in there that I really, really, really love. So then as you were describing this kind of a reaction to flatness, a reaction to being flattened, I thought about that series and I know it's not the same. And because that's older work, right?

Granville Carroll (51:02):
Yeah, from 2018.

Hernease Davis (51:04):
And thinking about, huh? Okay, so this is 2021 Granville that has done all this work and all this research and has been through this residency and throws so much process, it feels like, it could be a return?

Granville Carroll (51:21):
It is.

Hernease Davis (51:21):
Okay.

Granville Carroll (51:23):
Yeah, no, you're right on point. Because Black Serenity is a project that got me thinking about all of this stuff. That was the first project that I developed in grad school because my professor said, "Why do you have to do everything in the computer? Why don't you try something different?" so I said, "You know what, I'm going to take you up on this challenge. Yeah, you're right. I'm here to learn something new. I'm here to be pushed. Let's go for it."

(51:52):
So being in this new state of New York, I had never been here until the day I moved to New York. I'm around, it just was so foreign. And so I really started to think about isolation and solitude, and what does that look like for me? What does that look like for other people?

(52:10):
So I went with blackness because the darkness is a space of possibility, but it's also a space that can be a detriment. And so I wanted to play with that duality between which talks about isolation, usually connected to a negative sense of loneliness within solitude, which is healing and reconnection to self.

(52:39):

So I bring this work into, for Crit, I'm stoked about it. I'm like, baby, I just made something great. I'm excited to show something different. And then that's when the conversations came flooding in, "Oh, this is about the black experience. Oh, this is about being black and da da da da." And it was like, I mean, I guess yes, because I'm a black man and I'm sharing my experience, but I'm not speaking for the whole, I'm not the monolith for the community. I have actually a very diverse family, and we're not all black. So just even that. I was like, I don't know what you want from me.

(53:17):

So now I can't talk about that work without talking about racial blackness, which makes me a little upset because I really do love that project, but I don't really want to touch it again because it's just, it's too much surrounding it internally that I need to unpack.

(53:36):

But Dark Matter was sort of a return to Black Serenity, but then just thinking about it differently. So I have created this space using darkness to talk about this canvas of potential and possibility, the imagination. So now let me actually fill in the space with poetry, with these abstract images of water and the land and the sky.

(54:12):

So yeah, it's this weird sort of cyclical approach. But what I always tend to do with my work is try to find that thread that's woven through everything that I do because there's no separation. Everything that I'm doing is influenced by my past and my hope for the future. So as I'm thinking about Dark Matter, I'm thinking about Black Serenity, I'm thinking about Because the Sun Hath Looked Upon Me, and all the other projects that I've done, and just seeing what did I miss on the first initial round and how can I then re-envision and put it out there in a new way?

Hernease Davis (54:58):

I mean, is there anything else you wanted to talk about during your time as a resident?

Granville Carroll (55:03):

So the thing that surprised me is how closely related my work is to death. Like I said, I hadn't thought about it. Which I don't know why that's so surprising to me because I'm talking about spirituality, I'm talking about these different dimensions, which should obviously incorporate death, but it just was not at the forefront.

(55:27):

But a colleague of mine invited me to do a show surrounding photography and death. So that got me really thinking about it. And then as I was just contemplating the book Dark Matter that I'm

creating, and it is the cycle of life and death that has brought us to this exact point. You have to have matter that came into being but then disintegrated and fell back down. And then it's this whole cycle that repeats itself.

(56:00):

And so it's not directly shown in there, you don't see any dead animals or really dead leaves or anything like that. But it's there as part of the existential quandary that I am constantly faced with. And then the writings as well, my poem are sort of connected to these ideas too, and just transformation. It's this idea of transformation and transmutation. So that was really exciting. But then also kind of scary because death is a lot, right?

(56:37):

And I remember coming across this song that my sister sent me called Akal, A-K-A-L sometimes is how it's spelled, but it's Akal, and it's from the Kundalini tradition, sacred tradition in India. And it means the act of undying. So when a soul is departing or has departed from this world, you chant this to allow their passage to the next dimension to be peaceful.

(57:09):

And so I'm listening to this song, I'm like, oh, it's just really beautiful. It has one of my favorite artists in there, Trevor Hall. I was like, oh, this is just great. But I was like, what is this word? So that's when I looked it up and found all this information. And so that idea, the act of undying, is lingering in my mind, and I cannot, for the life of me fully understand it. I mean, it seems kind of simple, like infinite, forever, but it's just not that simple. And I know it's not that simple.

(57:40):

And so that, that's the biggest thing from the residency, from this project, that has pushed me into a new way of thinking. And then with current life events happening, it's pushed me even further down this sort of pathway of wanting to really look at death, how it affects the living, how we think about it in terms of just existence in totality, but then also really, really, really thinking about next step of evolution, the next step of being or how many stages of being are there. So we'll see how it unfolds and manifests in the work in the future.

Hernease Davis (58:20):

Yeah. This has been really wonderful, and thank you for being so generous, honest, and thoughtful about your work. And we'll continue talking because it always, always happens.

Granville Carroll (58:31):

Always, it's good, we need it right?

Hernease Davis (58:38):

And there you have it. For more about Granville Carroll and his work, check out his website at granvillecarroll.com. And follow him on Instagram [@granville_caroll](https://www.instagram.com/granville_caroll). Those links are in the show notes. And for more information about the Visual Studies Workshop, feel free to visit us at vsw.org where we have more info about our upcoming events, both in person and online.

(59:06):

And keep in touch. Follow us on Twitch and Instagram at the Visual Studies Workshop. And send me an email at herneasedavis@vsw.org. That's H-E-R-N-E-A-S-E-D-A-V-I-S at vsw.org. And don't worry, those links are also in the show notes.

(59:29):

This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of New York State Legislature. And thank you so much for listening to this conversation with artist Granville Carroll. Stay tuned for the next episode. And until then, please take care. Bye.