

Hernease Davis:

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. 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. I'm a visual artist and the assistant curator of Education and Public Programs here at VSW. For each episode, I will be in conversation with an artist or two, discuss their background, their practice and how the project space residency has impacted their works.

In this episode, I will be speaking with artists Savannah Wood and Aaron Turner. As residents, Aaron came to VSW from Fayetteville, Arkansas in July 2020, and Savannah came to VSW in November of 2021 from Baltimore, Maryland. I invited them both to speak together about their work in the archive and how they met through the archive, specifically through one important historic image. We've included reference links to the works Savannah and Aaron discussed in their conversation, including a link to the photographic works over which their paths crossed. Savannah and Aaron are artists with distinct practices that involve rigorous research and deep emotional connections with history. I am very happy to share this conversation about their practices and their time during the VSW Project Space residency.

Savannah Wood:

Hi, my name is Savannah Wood. I was a resident at Visual Studies Workshop in November of 2021. Was born in the Bay Area in Berkeley, California, and grew up mostly in Baltimore, Maryland, where I live now. Spent a lot of time in both Los Angeles and Chicago, so I consider those places home as well. The work that I'm doing right now, artistically is mostly inspired by a pretty epic family story, and it coincides with the work that I do as a day job for money. Also, I work for my family's... Well, I work for an organization that's related to my family's newspaper business, the Afro-American newspapers, which was founded 130 years ago here in Baltimore. And, I'm the executive director of Afro Charities, which is a nonprofit partner to that organization. I like to look at family history and larger world and other histories, particularly from kind of like an embodied perspective as a way of putting myself in places to better understand what happened there and trying to find ways to visualize the felt, the things that are unseen.

Aaron Turner:

My name's Aaron Turner, and I am based in Northwest Arkansas. I teach at University of Arkansas, and I grew up in the state of Arkansas. I grew up in West Memphis, Arkansas. If you want to locate, that is right along the Mississippi River. You look across the river, there's Memphis, Tennessee. So, that's where I grew up. Pretty much spent time in that whole tri-state area of Mississippi, Tennessee and Arkansas. And, I like to photograph that area, specifically the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas. But, I also like to work in the studio to kind of look at the past, to understand the present, to imagine the future, I guess, theoretically and aesthetically. Yeah, I often feel like I'm stuck in the past. I like the past. I think it's unresolved. I like to use it, because it's interesting. Most times it's new stuff to me and I just like to reimagine it. So, I like to dive into archives. I love interviewing other artists and I love curating other artists. So, I'll stop there. It's a little bit about me.

Hernease Davis:

And thank you both so much for doing this and speaking with me and taking time to talk and to engage, and I'm extremely excited to talk with you both. I kind of started us off-podcast saying this, but I've been dying to get you two together. I am personally interested in how both of your work and your lives

intersected around the residency. And, we will get into your individual practices during this conversation, because both of you were very generous in sending ahead examples of your works and progress and interviews that contextualize your process and provide some insights into your works. And Aaron, Savannah, I have your gorgeous new book that was published through the VSW press, and we will get to all of that. But first, I'm going to ask a very open question and ask if it's fair to say that your practices cross paths, and that's how you first met.

Savannah Wood:

That, I think it happened on my end anyway. That was kind of the introduction. Yes.

Hernease Davis:

So Savannah, how did that happen for you and your practice then? Let's talk about the origin story.

Savannah Wood:

Sure. Yeah. I was scrolling on Instagram as one does and happened to see a post from Aaron, and I'm not sure how I got there actually. I don't know why it popped up. I think it was before Instagram was pushing accounts you might be interested in. So I'm like, I'm not really sure how I ended up there. But, in one of Aaron's posts, there was this photograph and I'm like, "That's my grandfather." And it was the cover of Aaron's book. So, it stopped me in my tracks because I'm like, "Oh my God. There's my grandfather on the cover of this person's art book. This is wild. I have to know more." So, I started digging in a little bit deeper. And, this is all during lockdown, pandemic times too. So, I think probably all of us are spending more time on the internet than anybody would ever care to admit.

But yeah, I think I just saw that Aaron had participated in the Visual Studies Workshop, and I was like, "Oh, I wonder what that is." So I did a little bit of digging and from there, saw that there's archives there, there's dark rooms there, there's all these things that I'm already interested in. And I was like, "Oh, this is really cool. Let me just send an application and see what happens." So, that was sort of the entry point. The photo led to a line of inquiry that landed me in Rochester.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. So, it's something that I think is really incredibly wonderful hearing this from you, Savannah. And, I've spoken with Aaron before. So, Aaron and I have had conversations around our practices, mainly around abstraction and, in getting ready for talks, been able to talk about, "Oh, why do we do the work that we do?" And so when I heard that story, the first thing I thought, I'm like, this is kind of why Aaron does work. This is one of the things that I think is what Aaron wants to happen with his work. It's fascinating to me, with Aaron, with your practice in particular, that it is social, that you are interested in other artists, but also interested in starting conversations. And so, I kind of saw Savannah, you picking out your grandfather as I'm like, "Oh, here is a beginning of a conversation."

And so, I've sat back and in seeing, Savannah, how you work and also the work with Afro Charities. Seeing that, I've been mainly keeping up with you through Instagram and there are things that happen. And I left you a comment on an image of the funeral for... Was it your great grandmother?

Savannah Wood:

Great great grandmother.

Hernease Davis:

Great, great. Your great great grandmother.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah. At a certain point I'm like, "Huh." Yeah. Great, great.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah, it was this wonderful photo, almost like an aerial, top down photograph of the streets, just filled with mourners, but a little sliver of the information set that it was coming from Bethel AME. And, I grew up in Bethel AME Los Angeles. And so, it kind of pulled me in where I'm like, "Oh my God. Bethel Baltimore? Oh wow." And so, those types of things that are happening with all of your work, and then thinking about this relationship that, Aaron, you're seeking out or hope to happen, it's been wonderful to see that develop. But Aaron, do you have any thoughts on that?

Aaron Turner:

Yeah, absolutely. I was really happy to receive that interaction from Savannah via Instagram. And for, you just recognize your grandfather in that image, because I think for me, the way I'm trying to use that image is, I don't want people to forget about the legacy of the Tuskegee Airmen. I think it's a very important time in history and World War II is such a catalyst for a lot of things. Not just the civil rights movement, but just so many things in American history and world history and it greatly impacts us today. And then I see these... I came across this image and this is how I use archives. I just thought this was just a beautiful image. The tonality of it, the lighting.

And I could go out and recruit people and say, "Oh, let's recreate this photo." But I'm not interested in that anymore. I'm interested in extending the legacy of the image, of the people in the image, soliciting other people's thoughts and reactions and opinions on viewing an image like that. And, I take that history and I just filter it through systems and processes that I have in place in my series called Black Alphabet.

Savannah Wood:

Could you maybe... I'm realizing that we are talking about something that we've seen, but this is an audio podcast. Could you describe the source image and what your manipulation of it looks like?

Aaron Turner:

Yeah. The source image is, there's a group of members of the 332nd fighter group pilots. And this is Tuskegee Airmen during World War II and I came across the... I don't think I originally came across the image on the Library of Congress, but I traced it back to the Library of Congress, because I would do a general Google search. But the image shows these group of gentlemen, I think it looks like they are maybe sitting in a meeting or viewing a projected video in a conference room. They're going over things maybe before they fly out or go on a run or something like that. But there's about four to five gentlemen present. And there's a gentleman on the left side of the image, Robert W. Williams, which is your grandfather, and you pointed that out to me, the expression on his face, the shadow and the light on his face, there was another gentleman sitting right next to him leaning on his knee and just that closeness, that intimacy there.

And then the other gentleman, you can see closely gathered around in this room. So, I just kind of think that's the description of the image that maybe I would give. And they're in these leather jackets, one your grandfather has on was the canvas jacket, the military type jacket with the animal fur on the collar,

which is really nice. I remember growing up having the GI Joe figures and having one of the Tuskegee Airmen. Always love the aesthetic of that military garb. But yeah, it's just a fascinating image. And I think, how I would also categorize that image and how it relates to my practice, is I look at the men in this photograph and they're stand-ins for men, other men in my life that I know now, it could be me, it could be a stand in for me.

The faces are really familiar in that way. And, I can think about my uncles and great uncles who served in the military, different branches like the Navy and the Air Force and the army at different periods and their experience. So, it's just kind of this crossover and layering that happens when I look at this image. And then, I took that image and I projected it onto this abstract installation in my studio. So, that was a way for me to take the image and redigest it or something, or turn it into my own interpretation, transforming it, giving the audience a new way to look at this historical image.

And that the lines in it are pretty sharp now that I'm looking at it now. It breaks up your grandfather's face a little bit, but still preserves the majority of the image. There's like plywood, there's silk, there's paper and all kind of stuff in there. I think it's a little bit of a C-stand, you can see if you know what to look for. But yeah, it kind of creates this geometric form that this image sits on top and it's very minimal. It's very minimal. And so yeah, that's how I would describe that, Savannah.

Savannah Wood:

Thank you.

Aaron Turner:

And for the audience. Yeah, no problem.

Hernease Davis:

So Savannah, there's something that you said that you were interested in the felt, the feeling, which makes me think quite a bit about your video that you sent us in terms of extending a legacy. I found it to be incredibly moving.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah. I feel like there's always so much backstory to [be] talking about.

Hernease Davis:

Because you did say, I think epic is a perfect word to talk about with your family.

Savannah Wood:

Oh my God, my brain. I always say I have long view on everything in the work that I'm making. I'm not really concerned so much with art market and production. I'm very much on my own timeline where I'm like, God willing, I'll live to be 80 years old and maybe I'll have an exhibition that makes sense by then. But in the meantime, just going to make things I'm supposed to be making. And I wanted to say earlier, we were talking about why Aaron makes Aaron's work and you want the connection and the recognition and to extend a legacy and those things. And I think in that scrolling and coming across that photograph of my grandfather, that's why I make my work is because, I'm always... My ancestors are always showing up. They're everywhere all the time and telling me what... Nudging me in the direction of what I'm supposed to be doing.

It's always very much coming from that place of there's work to be done, we have stories that we want to tell and we've chosen you to be that person, that vehicle to do that. And then there's an intuitive part to that too. The image that you use, I remember I was working on a project about my grandfather's life and I was flying home from Chicago and I'm on a Southwest flight and I open up the magazine and that picture's in it. And it's his birthday. And I'm just like, "What are you supposed to do with that?" You know what I mean? Except be like, "Okay, I guess I'm doing the thing I'm supposed to be doing."

And when I was living in Chicago, I worked two doors down, from this place where I have a photograph and on the back of it, the address is two doors down from where I was working the whole time I was in Chicago. There's so many synchronicities that I'm just like, "Okay. I just got to make this thing. I don't know what it is yet." So similarly with the video that I shared with you, when I first moved back to Baltimore to work with the Afro's Archives, I was just getting immersed in the collection and trying to have a better understanding, wrap my head around what's there. It's 130 years of black history. There's three million photographs in the collection, so it's massive. And so, really just trying to get a sense of it. And, part of the origin story of the newspaper is that, my great great grandmother, whose funeral photo we were talking about earlier, that she lent her husband \$200 to start the newspaper. And both of them had been born enslaved. So in my head I'm thinking, "Where did she have \$200 to do this?"

That's a question that I had never had answered before. And one day I'm in the archives and I open up this box and my answer was there. I think there's a whole scrapbook from her funeral. And those photographs that I shared were in the back of the scrapbook. But on the first page was an entire obituary for her, which mentioned that her father had been a wealthy landowner. But he had also been enslaved. So I'm like, "Okay. More questions." So it's just the deeper you go, the more questions you find. So, it's really just been a process of inquiry. And the video that I shared with you is an initial sketch or exploration into that backstory of how her family came to own the land, where they had been enslaved and the repercussions of some of their decisions that they had made six, seven generations ago and how that's affecting our family now.

So, when I talk about the feeling and the sensation, there's so many things that we cannot know based on the archival and historical record, but there's also this invisible, intuitive, ancestral connection that's very real. And so, how can we use both of those things to tell a complex story about a complex history? And, I think the form of experimental documentary, which we've seen more and more of, is one that I'm leaning into as I expand that project to encompass more of our familial diaspora and more of this history. And it is really epic. There's a huge span of time. There's so many wars that have happened and there's all this land that's involved. It spans into Canada also and there's just so much that this story holds and reflects back about American history that I'm really excited to dig into more. But it's also just like, "How the hell do you tell that story?" Succinctly. Maybe it's not succinct, but where do you start?

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. I was kind of thinking about that in terms of how, just sort of any story, and you can think about that in terms of a still photograph, that there is so much complexity and so much contextualization that goes into it. And especially if it's something that you're living and experiencing in a way that involves a lot of these feelings, a lot of this... synchronicity of opening up a magazine on a plane, you're in transit, transitioning somewhere else and having certain things line up in a way where it grabs you in a way that's not very physical and not visible at all. But also something that, how do you explain this to the person sitting next to you on the plane or even how do you explain this to someone else in your family who might not be paying as close attention or how do you explain this to... In terms of...

Savannah Wood:

Or do you?

Hernease Davis:

Yes, exactly.

Savannah Wood:

Because that's... Aaron, that's a question I wanted to ask for you also, clearly you're doing the research behind these images to have a sense of who are the people that are represented, what are the histories that they're bringing to the frame of the image. But, we don't necessarily know all of those details as a viewer. So, I wonder how important it is with... I know in your book you talked a little bit about having a critique from somebody about using MLK in your images because he's so recognizable. But with some of the less recognizable characters who show up, how do you feel about the audience's engagement with those images and whether or not they need to be legible on a historical level?

Aaron Turner:

Always... That's a great question. And, I always go back and forth on that, because we do have these historical figures and there's just tons of images that you can use from them. But, I think that was a really good critique and feedback that I got, even though it was hard to accept at the time, just because I was in my own head and I'm like, "How can you not see this thing that I'm trying to say?" But, that's the difficulty of communication and what makes it fun to be an artist. Like the challenge of communicating to other people. But then, part of me feels like I can't really control it. All I can do as an artist is, try to put out work, and this is my goal. I try to put out work that as many people as possible can enter and have an opinion about.

So, sometimes I don't give all the information. If I'm ever in the space with the work, I will talk you to death about the origin. But, that's where the speculation and the future aesthetics come in to my work, because I have to present it in a way where you can sit with it where the viewer can sit with it and I have to trust the viewer to interpret it, because I'm not always going to be there alongside it. And I also think using more unrecognizable faces, kind of also helps the everyday [person]... Because everyone's not into art. You know what I mean? Everyone doesn't go to school, get an MFA or anything like that. But that doesn't mean that they can't look at art and have an opinion. So, that goes back to me trusting the viewer. But if they see themselves and the work, just the everyday person, the everyday image, the everyday archive, the family, the album image, and I think that says something too about who can have access to art, who can be depicted in art, what matters in art.

So I think, showing the everyday person is important within art historical context, contemporarily and whatever era you want to jump back and forth to. That's kind of how I look at it. I think all of us want to control people's thoughts. We want that. That's a secret superpower maybe all of us want. But, that's never really going to be the case, unless you really just can mesmerize people with sounds and frequencies, which people do. That's another conversation.

Savannah Wood:

I don't know if I wanna know. I don't know if I want to control their thoughts, I feel like I'm just... The most, the stuff I'm making is, I'm just making it because I want to make it and it's healing for me. It's very selfish actually. I need them to-

Aaron Turner:

Absolutely.

Savannah Wood:

... understand enough, that they'll participate in it. And hopefully they'll get something out of it on the back end. But, it's kind of the way that, because I'm interacting with this newspaper archive all the time, I'm kind of just imagining, it's for the future. I don't know. It's for somebody who I might not have met yet. With the work that I'm making right now, I'm dropping all of these things in there that mattered to me about the story. And I'm like, maybe somebody will see this as a treasure map one day. Maybe they won't get any of it at all.

I can do the logical thing of writing the chronology and writing an article about it. I could do that part. But the felt, the spiritual aspects of it, the right person will get it. I guess that's part of like, I'm in my little lab doing my own thing, instead of, like, I'm not showing the work all the time. So, that's a different approach that I'm... But also when I was in that Visual Studies Workshop, the whole time I was just in the dark room, I was like, "This is really... I'm just trying to make this as indulgent as possible." So much of the work that I do on a day to day basis for my life, livelihood is for other people. So, in my artwork is where I go to be as selfish as I feel like it. To replenish myself.

Aaron Turner:

And that darkroom is magical. That's why I like talking to Hernease too, because you really got... That darkroom is a magical place. I've been in the darkroom a lot recently, myself, within this last year or so after not doing it for a long time. But, I remember making this one image for an open call and I titled it "in a darkroom" and I think I put in parentheses, "the only place a black man could be free is in a dark room". And it was just this contemplation on being in a dark void and being alone or feeling alone, but also feeling empowered too. It was just kind of... I don't know if it was smart or not, but it was just-

Savannah Wood:

I kind of love it.

Aaron Turner:

... something that I came up with at a time, right at the end of grad school and I was working in the darkroom a lot then, but it is really the one place that all my thoughts were clear and everything like that. Because, we all have to walk outside and just live daily life and you have interactions with people and you internalize them. And, I bring all that back to the studio and I try to deal with that in my titling and deal with that in the images that I select and the conversations that I want to have with people. Really, my images are just conversation starters to be honest with you. I just put them out there and I'm like, "I think this is interesting enough and recognizable enough, people will want to talk about it and then we can go some other places". So, I like how you describe the studio as a lab, because it can be a factory, it could be a bunch of things.

Hernease Davis:

I'm kind of in transition with this relationship with a darkroom and I characterize in a way that I don't know if it rings true for you two, but this idea of being indulgent in a darkroom and also seen as a place of freedom and as well as this notion of control or even relinquishing control, I think the darkroom is this wonderful place that I learned and also gravitated towards, because I saw it as a place of extreme order and such great control and something that was emphasized in all of my photo 101 and 201, color and

darkroom and black and white. Just this idea of being so precise and very rigid in an approach to what's a good photograph, what's a bad photograph or technique. And so, what's really kind of wonderful is that, the way the two of you guys engage or even grapple with that as a place of freedom or as a place of relinquishing.

But also, and I'll say for me it is a place where I'm learning how to not want to control people's thoughts, because I do have that tendency and I purposefully make it a choice to actively ignore the viewer, because that is where I go. And thinking of the darkroom as a place that can be this place for massive control and in a wonderful way, and maybe sometimes in a detrimental way, but a wonderful place to think about yourself and to have this wonderful sense of selfishness. Also, a place where you can have beautiful mistakes or wonderful surprises or these ideas that come to how are you going to title or how does this help me in the next step? What can I take from this experience? And so, the way you guys are talking about it, I think it talks about the flexibility of just working in such a way.

Savannah Wood:

It's been so long.

Aaron Turner:

I'll let you go first.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah, it had been so long since I've been in a darkroom, because of the demands of my work life. I could only be at the residency for two weeks and that felt indulgent. So it's like... Yeah. So, I just knew I was like, "Well, I'm not focused on perfect prints, I just am going to make this thing." I'm just going to be in here. It's really about the process and about the play and touch and the time to think about the images and that experience was... For part of this project, it's really just been exploration so far. So, I was able to go out to this land that my family was enslaved on and spend time there. And during the early stages of... I went there for the first time right before the lockdown happened. So, it became a refuge during this period when you couldn't be near people.

But, I could be outside and be very near to this history and embody that. And again, it's really about this embodiment to truly understand what this place is like, what's the temperatures like, what the sounds are, what the smells are. So little had changed. The houses that they lived in, were still there in various states of deterioration. There's a family cemetery there. It's just so much, it's so rich. Most of the photographs that are in the Afro archives were taken on a four by five press camera. And so, one of the things that I was thinking through was, I'm touching all these images all day, I have no idea how they were truly made. I'd worked with a four by five camera in undergrad, but it was in studio and on the rails. So, I hadn't had a handheld four by five camera ever before.

So, I ordered one off eBay and that's how I spent a lot of time during the early stages of the pandemic, was really just going out to this site and seeing these images on this scale and feeling what it feels like to take an image in that way, which is how most of the stuff was made that I'm handling all the time. And it's just... Again, the indulgence is just getting into it and feeling the materials and saying, "Fuck it. I'm going to just spend this money on getting this film developed. I'm not going out to eat. It's like, I'm not traveling anywhere. I'm not buying any new clothes besides sweatpants. So, let me just get into this."

So if I'm going to have a four by five negative, I should try to print it. When I got to the residency, I was like, "Well, let me just try printing this, see what happens, see what comes of it." And then looking at the contact sheets, I was like, "This is rad!" Because you have these four by five images from the contact

sheet, which I'm just like, "This is very nice to have, to handle and to make it, to bring it more into the physical." So much of my photography recently, because I haven't been focused on exhibition, has been mostly digital and not tactile. So, it really got me back into a more tactile space of touching prints and arranging and seeing how things could work together, which was great. It was a gift.

Hernease Davis:

And I know Aaron, you were in between semesters, there's only a limited amount of time that you're able to do residencies as well. How did that experience here affect how you started moving through your process after you left the residency?

Aaron Turner:

For me, when I was there, I had been doing it for a number of years anyway already, kind of like this. I teach... Right now, I'm in the middle of the fall semester. I don't really have time to make any new work. I just don't. The capacity for it kind of goes down. You have to-- you get pulled so many different directions. But, I always try to get one residency a year if I can. And that's usually one of my number one priorities. So, I can get away for a certain amount of time and actually get something done. So, I learned how to absorb, absorb, absorb when I'm not making things. And then when I get the opportunity to just free up my time, I just make, make, make, make, make. So when I was at VSW, I had planned to print in the darkroom and develop my own film, but it didn't work out like that.

But what I did do is that, I used the darkroom space as a backdrop, as a studio space. I made images inside the darkroom, in the enlarger stations using a digital projector in there projecting in this space and recording it with a four by five camera. And that four by five camera is special. I love the way you came to that, Savannah. You really have to come to it on your own. And once you do, you really never leave it behind, but I love the four by five camera. And I think when I was at VSW, I was really invested in Douglas, Frederick Douglas. Trying to understand that legacy. So I took a bunch of different images, just kept projecting, kept making new ones. And I think, maybe I made 80 or a 100 new images in that sh-- I just loaded film. I think I took a 100 pack of film and I'm like, "I'm going to use all this film."

And when I'm done with it, I'm done with it. And then this is my new batch of images to work with over the next year or so. Now, two of those images are in a show from that time now. And then, I'm doing another installation now, it'll be in Chicago in two months. But I took this Douglas image and this was from... I had this idea maybe two years ago, two and a half years ago, to take this one Douglas image and then just repeat it in these different processes. So Vandyke, cyanotype, gelatin silver, platinum, photo emulsion on glass, dry plate contact print, lumen print. So, it's about nine to 10 processes and I didn't really know how I was going to get it done. But fortunately, this opportunity came along. It's going to be done soon. Oh, and also a daguerreotype type. I got daguerreotypes made.

Hernease Davis:

Did you make the daguerreotype types or you had them made?

Aaron Turner:

I didn't. I had them commissioned.

Hernease Davis:

I was about to say. I would like to know how you do that?

Aaron Turner:

Because that process, I tried to Google it and you got to have specialized equipment and all this kind of stuff to do that. And it's available, but it's really something to take on. So I was like, I like collaborating with people anyway. So, I'm glad I was able to find somebody to work with to make that happen. So, it's just like having these ideas that you don't let go and finding time to make them happen. So, I think residencies are very important. And, I go to my studio every day and I think in the studio, I read in the studio, I write in the studio, I contemplate and stuff like that. I make a new image there, here and there but bulk of my work is done in residencies and in these stretches of short periods of time.

And then I'll think about it for a one or two year period, let opportunities come along and different things like that. So, that's kind of how I've operated my practice for the last few years and how I utilize residencies. And also just as a person and how my personality is, I really value relaxation and I really value labor.

Savannah Wood:

What's your sign?

Aaron Turner:

Oh, I'm a cancer.

Savannah Wood:

I'm just asking.

Aaron Turner:

I really value those things. There was a bunch of pictures that I made. I actually had, was using this material called Pulp Board. And you have to take a paintbrush and you dip it in water and you wet that material and you manipulate it and you form it and then you dry it. So, I was projecting on all these different sculptural pulp board things that I was making. So, that was very laborous. And just setting up the camera, moving it, focusing it, thinking mentally the labor and moving the projector around, trying to get it, the heat of the projector, start sweating in the studio environment. So it's like, "I'll do that for a long period of time." It's like, it's time to go eat. And then, I get that relaxation and I'm ready to go back to the studio at night and keep working.

And so, it's just intense periods of working, relaxation. Intense periods of working, relaxation. That's how I live my life. And that kind of gets into other things like people in my family, my great-grandfather was a sharecropper, his sons, which are my grandfather and great uncles, they used to pick cotton and take it over to the cotton exchange in Memphis, Tennessee. My grandfather didn't want to do that. He didn't want to go to college. He drove tanker trucks delivering gasoline, 18-wheeler drive. He worked at industrial factories and stuff like that. But, he was really never the type that really wanted to work for anybody, but he's no longer living. But, this is my mom's father that I'm talking about. My maternal grandfather. But, he could build a house from scratch. He knows the electricity. Nobody ever taught him. He knows how to do plumbing.

Nobody ever taught him to do that. So, really being able to work with his hands and being able to carve out a living for himself and be independent. So, I still kind of take those characteristics and if I can do it by myself, I would do it. But, I do value collaborating with people at the same time, because I still think that provides a level of independence as well. Recognizing where your skills fall short and where you need to include other people in the process and all that kind of stuff. So, I'll stop rambling there, but

that's kind how I think about using residencies and what I was thinking about in Visual Studies Workshop. And I'll say one more thing, I'm sorry I lied. When you were talking about your family... I was watching this video, a very beautiful video, Hard to Get and Dear Paid For. Savannah, but... this story of Enoch George Howard, which is your relative, right? Your descendant.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah. Yeah.

Aaron Turner:

I love how you talked about the constellation of the freckles. That was amazing. But, just knowing, I think I wrote down "understanding who you are". From the age of five and six, I have sat around these holiday tables and my paternal grandfather and my dad did all this research, going all the way back to England, this white family who owned our first descendant that came to be, the name Samuel is very popular in my family and has been passed down. My nephew is the fifth. So, that name has been passed down. But it's like, who owned the first Samuel or how did the first Samuel come to be? And I know all that information. I've known all that information since I was five, six years old. And then I'll walk around with that knowledge, understanding who I am. And I've heard these stories in my family about land ownership and how it was lost and stuff like that. So, I'm so excited and just happy to hear that it's still in your family.

Savannah Wood:

It's actually not.

Aaron Turner:

It's not? Oh, okay.

Savannah Wood:

No.

Aaron Turner:

I was thinking... Okay.

Savannah Wood:

No, it's owned. It's owned by the state of Maryland. So, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources owns it.

Aaron Turner:

Okay.

Savannah Wood:

But, which means that it's publicly accessible and they've owned it for a long time, but they haven't done anything with it. And in fact, parts of it have deteriorated further from where it was before because of that neglect basically. But recently, they got some funding to maintain this land. And the

folks who I've been working with there to get access to certain parts of the site and learn how to get out there, have been wonderful to work with. But yeah, it's not in the family anymore.

Aaron Turner:

Okay.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah. But, I'm glad to know where it is and that it's still publicly accessible.

Aaron Turner:

Just to even note it, I think it's just powerful to just have that knowledge.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah.

Aaron Turner:

It changes who you are.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah, it does. It changes how you move through the world and how you relate to history too. It's like, if I had a better understanding of these things when I was coming up through public school, maybe I would have a different kind of connection to that history or maybe not. Maybe, I needed to get to a certain age to care about any of those things and to actually dig more deeply into that. But, to have a sense of like, they bought this land during the Civil War, changes the way that I understand what was going on there and how that history unfolded. So, it just makes for a certain kind of intimacy with history when you have access to your own family's stories and can plot that along a timeline. And it shifts the way that we relate to space. Which actually I wanted to talk a little bit about, because I'm so glad you brought up Frederick Douglas earlier.

One of the things that was kind of... I mean it wasn't really a revelation, but it was a revelation in a way, was just recognizing that this region of New York was such a haven for black refugees of slavery essentially. And, thinking about specifically the trajectory of Marylanders through that part of the world on to Canada, specifically Frederick Douglas, specifically Harriet Tubman, two major figures of American history, who both came out of slavery in Maryland and settled and died in that region. And then with the story that I'm working on, two of the family members who lived on this land, escaped to Canada on the underground railroad and their descendants are settled in the Niagara region. And it's like, "What?"

Hernease Davis:

Yes.

Savannah Wood:

You know what I mean?

Hernease Davis:

Yes.

Savannah Wood:

Like, "Huh?" So, I'm just imagining the timelines of these things and "Did they know Frederick Douglas? Did they know Harriet Tubman? What is this?" The underground railroad is a thing. Obviously there are set routes that people would take and there's word of mouth for how to get through these spaces. But just thinking about those connections, and I think Canadians have a better sense of that history. Black Canadians have a better sense of that history than black Americans. We tend to just focus so much on the United States as if the borders have always been so fixed without really thinking about that... we literally have cousins just... right there.

Hernease Davis:

Well, I am personally fascinated by that. I think we briefly talked about this before you left, that I lived in Toronto for a summer. I knew that there were for instance like AME churches up there. But the only one that I could find was in the middle of nowhere, between Toronto and Niagara Falls. And I had to take a bus, I don't know how I got there, but some weird bus route in this very small town. And I also...

Savannah Wood:

Was it Hamilton by any chance?

Hernease Davis:

It wasn't Hamilton. It wasn't any city that I can or...

Savannah Wood:

St. Catharines is what I meant, actually.

Hernease Davis:

Oh no, it wasn't St. Catharines.

Savannah Wood:

Okay.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah, it wasn't St. Catharines, but it might have been in that area. And, there was some museum there that I'd heard about. But all the black... Or I would say the descendants of slaves, the descendants of slaves from the states were in Nova Scotia or Saskatchewan. And I'm like, "Where are they?" I couldn't find anyone who was a descendant of a slave in North America, in any city. And...

Savannah Wood:

Oh, that's interesting.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. And, I always was confused for being a very recent immigrant, because there was mainly just people who immigrated from the continent or from the Caribbean. And, one of my favorite things was when someone... I was like, "Oh yeah. So, how long has your family been here?" I'm like, "I don't know. 400 years." They go, "Whoa." And I'm like, "Slavery."

Savannah Wood:

What?

Hernease Davis:

What are you impressed by that? Like, "Wow, 400 years." I'm like, "Yeah."

Savannah Wood:

Well, I'm learning every day. And, I've just recently connected with some of those family members. There's apparently been family reunions that have been happening since I was born, and I had no idea, between the family in Canada and the family in the US. But yeah, in talking to one cousin, he was saying that there has been... It is actually a very large population of people descended from people who had been enslaved in Maryland, specifically in parts of Ontario. So, it's a very well traveled and well known route. And my understanding, and I might be like... Don't hold me to this, but my understanding is that, a lot of the black folks who are in Nova Scotia, came actually earlier. So, there might have been some who were earlier in Ontario as well, but part of that big push was around the time that the Fugitive Slave Act came into being in 1850.

And so it's like, instead of just coming to New York, you had to actually go to another country. But, folks who were in Nova Scotia, if I'm understanding this correctly and this is clearly a generalization, may have come even earlier and helped the British fight the war of 1812, which is... So the British were like, "Okay, great, thanks so much. You're free, but don't live anywhere near us. We're going to put you in Nova Scotia", and relocated people there. So, that's part of that history. Again, don't quote me, do your own research. But these are my broad strokes of recollection from my recent inquiries into this.

Hernease Davis:

Sure. But also, that you have this first person familial experience as well, I think is a part of that. That's fact.

Savannah Wood:

That's why I'm interested. Again, it's like you have this understanding of self and understanding of family and then you're like, "Oh, I want to know more about how this happened. What were the conditions that allowed for this to happen?" So, I actually traveled to Ontario earlier... this month? I don't even know what day it is y'all. Earlier this month and was intending to interview some cousins there, but they were unfortunately sick. One with Covid, and so I had to cancel shoots. It was an expensive extravaganza. But, I did get to see the Niagara Falls and the Niagara River and supposedly they swam across the Niagara River to get to Canada. And I'm just like, there's so many different portions of that river that could have been the place where you swam across. But parts of it-

Hernease Davis:

I can't.

Savannah Wood:

... are pretty choppy.

Hernease Davis:

That's rough.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah.

Savannah Wood:

Other parts are a little calmer, but it's just... So just going and being there and again seeing the water, trying to understand what that physical experience might have been like, what it could have looked like at that time. All of those things helped me to better picture what that human experience could have been. And when I was there, actually I was by the river's edge. As I was leaving, I noticed that somebody had left offerings at the river's edge facing towards America. And I was like, "Okay. So, there's somebody already coming to this exact spot and doing this similar work of trying to retrieve and to honor people who have come across this way." So, it's so much connection and there's so many little vestiges of that history that you can pick up on if you're looking for it.

Hernease Davis:

That makes me think of... And Aaron, I'd like for you to respond. But before I ask you to do that, it makes me think of some of your video and you're speaking over it. There is a narrative where you're speaking about the land in your family, but you're also asking these questions. And there are also these, what I'll call dichotomies, fact versus knowledge and past versus present, price versus true cost, seen versus known. These things that kind of squash time together and also interrogate this complexity around our experience with history and with this "felt" that you're talking about before, because it gives me chills to think about someone giving, putting offerings on the side of the river.

Savannah Wood:

It personalizes the history, because then you're standing there with your body imagining, what if I were to get in the fucking water right now and swim across and I'm not even concerned about somebody seeing me.

Hernease Davis:

Yes.

Savannah Wood:

In fact, I hope they see me. So if I started drown, somebody comes and gets me. But it's like, I have to do this in the cover of night, probably in the winter, because that's when a lot of... Just all of those considerations, just bring the history to the forefront in a way, that a book, a history book could never, but a work of fiction, a work of literature might. Part of the reason why I think it's so important to actually go to these sites and to put your own body in these places, so you can have that visceral experience and so you can connect with the humanity of history. Otherwise, it just seems so abstract. And when you are physically there, then the reality of it becomes kind of undeniable.

Aaron Turner:

I think I've been thinking the whole time, just thinking about land and landscape, going places physically. I think it's so important to do that. Because I think sometimes if you take a picture or video of land, it can be so abstract and then so generalized, I think there's a personal existence in relationship to all land

and when we figure that out it adds value and just, I don't know, makes it that much more interesting. So, I just feel like any place that you walk, any land that you occupy or any land that you're aware of, there's a personal history there before you even showed up. And I think, things stay and linger around. There's things that you can feel if you are present in a place versus looking at a picture of a place. Yeah. So, that's how I think about it.

Savannah Wood:

You know ... sorry, I'm all in right now. I'm like, so at this land in Maryland, the parks did an archeological dig there and the team that was doing that, one of the things that was the most fascinating thing I've ever heard was that, sometimes if they think that there might be a burial site somewhere, they'll have dogs that are trained to smell a particular chemical that is absorbed by trees that are planted near grave sites.

Hernease Davis:

Oh my God.

Savannah Wood:

And that the trees literally absorb the chemicals of decomposing bodies and emit this smell from people who are buried long time ago. But it's still literally in the earth. And so, when we're just like, humans only know, we can only experience so much of what's actually happening a lot of times, because we just shut ourselves down from actually connecting to all of our other senses. We've limited it to five. But it's like, there's so much that's imperceptible to us, either because of how we've shut ourselves down or because it just IS, physiologically. So, that's what part of what I'm interested in too is, what are all of these other ways of knowing that exceed what we've accepted as the standard for historical knowledge and historical understanding, without falsifying it. Showing the methods, showing your work in a math problem. This is how I got to this point, but I'm using different tools.

Hernease Davis:

Yes.

Aaron Turner:

I've been looking into micro rhythm and micro timing. There's just something about music that I'm just now understanding and I'm working on an exhibition right now. It has to do with music and I'm really trying to share my interest with other people about music because, the micro timing and the micro rhythm... And this is relating to just where Savannah left off. These things that you feel, these other senses and stuff. And I think, music is closest to what you were just describing, because it immediately puts you there. And so, that's why I've been trying to deal with it. A lot of my titles of my pieces have... I'll take song titles in parts of song lyrics and I'll title my piece based on that. That's how important music is to me.

And, I think it's more powerful than any visual image that I could ever create. But, I make visual images to try to emulate how music feels. And that's the best I can do. Because, you just can't outdo music as a visual artist, but you can incorporate it into your practice. And that's what I'm trying to do now. I won't get too much into it, but I'm still working on it. But, the reason I'm using that is, I had this exhibition called Backwards and Forwards at Light Work a few years ago and I was trying to talk about how you move backwards and forwards in time. Like how pictures do that, archives do that, history does that.

Being, living in the past and the present simultaneously, imagining the future. And I think, music does that through sampling and innovation and different things like that. I love sampling. I love identifying samples and music. I love what producers do with chopping different things.

Hernease Davis:

Archives.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah. So, I'm into all that. What vinyl... If you didn't know anything about vinyl, when vinyls were pressed, that was like, it's almost like saying it was a mono print in a way. Because, that was a one-off thing. Each vinyl, etching that sound into that, however that process happened, that was really a one-off thing. But Savannah, you talking about those other senses and that connection to land and other things happening all at the same time that we can't really see but we can kind of feel, I think music is part of that. And words and stuff and all that comes to, that's the best I can describe it now, but I'm trying to make work about it at this very moment. But yeah, that's just kind of where I am.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah, I think the only other thing that comes close to that ephemeral thing is smell.

Aaron Turner:

Oh yeah.

Savannah Wood:

When you think about pheromones for instance, or smelling something, smell is always kind of recognized for triggering memory. That's very specific memories and the ways that we understand fear and how that relates to our somatic bodies. I think music and smell kind of operate in somewhat similar ways, where it's beyond our grasp, but can influence us in ways that we didn't expect.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah. It's a metaphor. It's metaphorical for history. It takes you back and forth. We do that visually and we do that introspectively.

Hernease Davis:

Even talk about visceral, I'm kind of curious about the thoughts on this cover of your book on...

Savannah Wood:

Yeah. Obviously that's the first thing that you experience and it's so unusual and so delightful.

Hernease Davis:

So, describe it. I'm holding Aaron's book and it's got this velvety cover. And on the cover are these silver shapes of the... These are studio objects. These...

Aaron Turner:

Yeah. It's actually... It's one of the images from that series, but one of the images where it's inverted and isolated those objects, because they were in a void. I think they were in a black void. The background was suede or velvet. I really love those materials. I like how they absorbed light, I like how they feel. And I wanted the viewer who holds the book to experience those. And, it kind of goes back to music a little bit too, because I didn't really appreciate books, because I just thought they were ridiculously expensive to make. And I was like, "I'm never going to be able to make one of those." But somehow, I was fortunate to get the opportunity to do that. Now I understand how it works. But, I really see books as albums, how you work on something for a while and you figure out, "This is the way I want to share this."

Because I don't really use social media that much and don't really communicate that way. I really believe in seeing people face to face or connecting with people like this, with a purpose. And so, that's why, how I wanted to make my book. I want it to be something people... I wanted the size to be a particular way so people could carry it with them. I wanted you to understand the materials that I was using and that cover, that cover can pick up stuff. Stuff sticks to it, your fingerprints are probably on it some way. But when you touch it and feel it, I want it to be a certain reaction. And, that's what that particular project and that particular book is supposed to embody. It's supposed to be a long lasting experience. So every time you pick it up, you can have an experience with it. It's very specifically edited, has very specific information in it. And that's where it specifically lives. I don't really have it on my webpage or anything like that, but it's like, "You get the book, you know. If you don't have it, you got to go get it."

Savannah Wood:

A book is a perfect container.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah.

Savannah Wood:

I love books.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah. I really like them, now I'm working on a third one. But yeah, I really try to make them, I really try to spend time with them. DeAngelo took 10 years between that last album and the Black Vanguard album? So, the way that these musicians work is really similar to visual artists. I understand why musicians are so picky and so specific about what they do and thinking about Prince, playing all the instruments and producing the whole song and not being satisfied with the way other people do things, so he just did it all himself. But yeah, I'm really into music and how that is a metaphor for visual things. So, that's why I kind of volumize my words and then everything else. This book is what I would consider a LP or EP, it's not the full album, but it's what I've been doing in between. And, this third book that I'm working on is the first album.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah.

Aaron Turner:

It's the first album of Black Alchemy basically. That whole series. So, it's a very specific thing with a very specific set of pictures from volumes one, two, and three of Black Alchemy. It's very specific writing in there and very specific design. After that is that I'm going to work on the next one.

Hernease Davis:

All right. No, it's good to know. Savannah, is there anything to say about where you're thinking about your project going and any trajectory that you would like to share?

Savannah Wood:

Sure. I mentioned the video that I shared with you, that's about four minutes, is kind of like a sketch. Yeah. It's like a first attempt, first pass at getting some of these ideas down. So, I'm expanding that into a short experimental documentary and I've never really made film before. I've never worked with any kind of crew or anything like that. So it's just, again, I kind of get these nagging. "It needs to be more, it needs to be better. It needs to be X, Y, and Z." It's in my ear. So I'm like, "Okay. I'm going to apply for the grant." And then I get the grant, I'm like, "Oh, that means I got to make the thing. And there's timelines." And so, that's my way of working, where as if I don't have a deadline, it's not happening probably.

Aaron Turner:

Oh, yeah.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah.

Savannah Wood:

So, I'm going to have a film sometime probably next year.

Hernease Davis:

Oh, amazing.

Savannah Wood:

And my hope is... So, I will be sharing it with people. I don't know. Who knows what's going to happen. Here's what I'll say. I'm going to shoot the whole film by sometime next year. Hopefully will also be edited and ready to be shown in sometime next year as well. But, we'll see.

Hernease Davis:

Amazing. Wonderful. Like, oh, the squeeze of deadlines and obligations. It's just...

Savannah Wood:

I know and I've been trying to wriggle out. "Well, I thought we were only saying we had to do X, Y, and Z by this time." The technicalities of it.

Hernease Davis:

Yeah. I love that. That's great. This has been wonderful to hear you both speak about what you're doing and also the wanderings of how it's associating together, but also of course, distinctly in how you both

are approaching your works. And, I'm really excited. I'm so excited. And no pressure. Without pressure... No pressure.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah.

Hernease Davis:

I'm really excited to see y'all's work.

Savannah Wood:

Me too Hernease. For Aaron's work. For my oh my. We'll see.

Hernease Davis:

Yes. I really am. And thank you both.

Aaron Turner:

Thank you.

Savannah Wood:

Yeah, thank you.

Hernease Davis:

Aaron, so good to meet you.

Aaron Turner:

Yeah, very nice to meet you as well. Yeah, I can talk to y'all for a few more hours. This is when you start.

Hernease Davis:

I know.

Aaron Turner:

We go to the grocery store, get some food, cook some soul food, conversation... [fades out into music]

Hernease Davis:

And there you have it. I encourage you to visit Savannah and Aaron's websites to see more of their work. Those sites are savannahwood.info and aaronturner.studio. As Savannah mentioned, she is the executive director of Afro Charities, where she's doing the extraordinary work of creating programming around and increasing access to the Afro-American newspaper archive. You can also find Aaron having in depth and thoughtful conversations with other photographers on his own podcast project called "The Photographers of Color Podcast." Aaron's book EP, "There May Still Be Time Left", is available now at the VSW online bookstore. All of those links are in the show notes. As for the Visual Studies Workshop, please visit us at vsw.org, where we have information about the project based residency and more info about upcoming events both in person and online.

This transcript was exported on Dec 16, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Follow us on Twitch and Instagram at the Visual Studies Workshop, and feel free to send me an email at herneasedavis@vsw.org. This podcast is funded in part by the New York State Council on the Arts, with the support of the New York State Legislature. And, thank you so much for listening to this conversation with Savannah Wood and Aaron Turner. Stay tuned for the next episode. And until then, take care. Bye.