

MAKE MAGAZINE

Krystle Lemonias

BIO

Krystle Lemonias is recognized for her influences from the intersecting concepts of class, race, gender, economic inequity, citizenship, and labor rights. She believes immigrant Black communities contribute richly to the United States' cultural diversity and the workforce despite the barriers faced. Her works explore primarily women's domestic labor contributions that play an integral role in the function of our society and contemplates the domestic socialization passed on through generations to do these jobs. She uses found materials, patios, printmaking methods and iconography to stitch together these themes with personal narratives. Her works have been exhibited at Blum and Poe in the Show Me the Signs campaign for #sayhername and Make America What America Must Become at the Contemporary Art Center in New Orleans. She has also shown at the New York Academy of Art in the AXA Art Prize Exhibition in 2020, and at the International Print Center of New York in the New Prints: Umbra in 2019. Lemonias was born in Jamaica, in 1989, and spent most of her young adulthood in New Jersey. She acquired a BFA in printmaking from New Jersey City University in 2018. She is currently a graduate assistant and Master's in Fine Arts candidate at the University of South Florida.

STATEMENT

Immigrant Black communities have contributed richly to the United States cultural diversity and the workforce despite systemic inequalities they face. My artwork explores these women's work as domestic laborers that play an integral role in the function of our society. This piece explores the social complexities in these spaces regarding class, citizenship, economic inequity, and labor rights. In using the baby clothes of the children my mother in the composition cares for I tell untold stories of her experiences as a nanny. Individuals that are documented and undocumented people serving as essential participants to America's workforce.



Portrait of Krystle Lemonias.

Interview with Krystle Lemonias

Written by Andreana Donahue

Can you tell us a bit about your background and how you became interested in becoming an artist? What were some early influences?

I'm Jamaican-born, where I spent my formative years and which has been an immense influence. I distinctly remember in 6th grade, in Jamaica, my artwork was presented to the principal. My art teacher shared with her to highlight that I had been excelling in art class. She asked me what profession I wanted to do as an adult and I declared, "I am going to be an artist." I believe saying it out loud and not being discouraged inspired me to take this path to be an artist.

Where are you currently based and what initially attracted you to working in this community? Are there any aspects of this specific place that have surfaced in your work?

My studio is currently based in Tampa, FL where I am an MFA candidate at the University of South Florida. I'm fortunate to have a full scholarship and a modest studio to experiment with various ideas I have been interested in exploring. I chose Florida because of the lovely weather but also because of the numerous facilities I would have access to in their interdisciplinary program. Being here has allowed me to slow down and be fascinated by how people interact with each other. Watching these connections have led to reflections of previous interactions with family and friends. These contemplations are surfacing in my current work.



Photo of Krystle Lemonias's studio space in Tampa, Florida.

Can you tell us about your studio space? What are some of the most crucial aspects of a studio that make it workable for you?

My studio space is about 250 square feet, always cold, and has pretty terrible lighting. Despite this, I have managed to make it comfortable and a productive workspace. Currently, I'm working with a lot of fabric so I have two walls that I pin the four works I create at a time that are in various stages. I must have a large desk in the center of the room where I cut fabric or the woodblocks that I print on my fabric works and a 1950s Singer sewing machine at one end of the table to put everything together. I have a trolley with a small cutting mat on top that I move to each work cutting small pieces of fabric to fit in various sections and pinning them in place temporarily. I have two lounge chairs where I take my breaks and entertain guests. I have two lines of rope that run across the room to pin works printed that are drying. Lastly, I have an instant pot, electric kettle, and toaster to warm or cook meals and make loads of tea to keep me fueled.



A Portrait of the Past and Present, 2018. T-shirts, relief print on fabric, 30×45 inches.



Eeh, Hole Still!, 2020. Baby clothes and woodblock relief on fabric, 56×34 inches.

What is a typical day like?

My typical day in the studio starts a little after noon and often ends late in the night. I usually have a schedule for the week as to what part of the work I will be focusing on to have some sense of accomplishment at the end of each session. My work is very labor-intensive and can feel as if it will never end so I give myself checkpoints to measure my progress. Some days are designated to cutting and pinning fabric and the next just sewing the fabric in place.

What gets you in a creative groove? What puts a damper on your groove?

First things first is a full stomach. Usually, after lunch, I begin working on the task for that day. I get going in the project when I have my audiobook, podcast, or my Krystle Da G.O.A.T playlist on. If I stayed too late in the studio the night before that would put a damper on my groove for the next day. In such a case I would work on a less complicated part of my project that some work is accomplished though it may not be significant.

What criteria do you follow for selecting materials? Do you prefer to maintain a narrow focus or work across diverse media? How do you navigate the limitations and possibilities that result from this path?

I have specific rules for the materials I use in my practice. A project as a whole should comprise at least 80% recycled and/ or repurposed materials that include baby clothes, bed sheets, upholstery fabric, and empty food packaging. This means that a part of my time is spent sustainably collecting items that are transformed to the needs of the project. I think of my work as part of our consumer ecosystem and don't think making impactful work should be at the expense of our environment. The source of the materials is usually significant to the subject and gives context to the works' conceptual idea. I use various processes to complete a piece such as sewing and relief printing but each piece starts with a story that I am distilling to its parts I find most universal. The story that I pull inspiration from intuitively guides why and how I use my material and with this, I'm able to decide when I have done enough.

Can you walk us through your overall process? How would you describe your approach to manipulating materials? What about decision-making and editing?

As of late, I find a starting point from images that my subjects share with me in conversation. With permission to use the image, I would project and trace it on heavy upholstery fabric. The sketch is then used as a guide to cut patterns from various fabrics. I then choose an assortment of baby clothes and light upholstery fabrics to stitch to create the composition. To finish I carve woodblocks with adinkra patterns and parts of the background to relief print on each piece. I'm not delicate with handling my materials. I cut and tear fabrics as one would use fabric ends to create a quilt. With this approach, I feel free to add and subtract parts I work on when something doesn't seem to be working.

Can you talk about some of the ongoing interests, imagery, and concepts that have informed your process and body of work overtime? How do you anticipate your work progressing in the future?

This work began from being inspired by immigrant black women who work as domestic laborers. This interest began when after leaving home to go to graduate school my relationship with my mother became strained. In my reflection of the situation, I found we connected significantly through nanny work, something we no longer shared. I recognized that despite our disagreements on many things I value her work ethic, resilience through challenges, and dedication to providing for her family. My current works celebrate these characteristics. Conceptually, I'm using baby clothes sourced from the family whose children she once cared for and have deconstructed them into these compositions as a type of representational resistance she has displayed in these work environments. I use various configuration tactics to show her acknowledgment to advocate for herself on the job. Each piece shares different moments on the job she navigates. I will complete this series in the next few months and move on to learning about another subject's experiences doing domestic work.

Do you pursue any collaborations, projects, or careers in addition to your studio practice? If so, can you tell us more about those projects, and are there connections between your studio practice and these endeavors?

In addition to my practice, I collaborate with colleagues from graduate school to curate exhibitions of our artwork on campus and in local galleries. I also work as a union organizer for the University of South Florida's Graduate Assistants Union. In this position, I reach out to GAs to check on their working conditions, assisting in building the strength of our union through membership, inform GAs about their rights as employees, and the terms of our collectively bargained contract. There are certainly connections between my practice that displays the resilience of black domestic workers and my other pursuits. I'm passionate about individuals making opportunities for themselves. My curatorial work assists in filling a small part of the gap for opportunities that serve artists of color and women to make a more equitable society. Community advocates are imperative to help engage others in matters that concern the conditions of their job and to speak on their behalf for fair and safe work environments. As a result of the pandemic, many artists have experienced limited access to their studios or loss of exhibitions, income, or other opportunities.

Has your way of working (or not working) shifted significantly during this time? Are there unexpected insights or particular challenges you've experienced?

Last year March when everything closed down and I didn't have access to my studio my I found myself doing a lot of writing. By this time I had been in the MFA program for a semester and a half. I used that initial time of the lockdown to ruminate on why I was making this work. I wrote short stories, reflected on the stories, and did a lot of reading. When I was able to get on to campus to get some supplies I took home my sewing machine and fabric to be able to work in a limited capacity in my apartment. I'm fortunate that I was able to continue my position as GA remotely along with working becoming even more thoughtful as I was working on these artworks. Working during the pandemic and all that took place last year made me convinced that this work is relevant to many people.



Go play wit yuh toys till I done, 2020. Baby clothes and relief print on fabric, 54×65 inches.

In a time that seems to be marked by uncertainty, collective anxiety, and increasing social unrest, why do you think the perspectives and contributions of artists remain meaningful? Do you feel a natural relationship exists between your work (or the role artists play more broadly) and confronting established systems—of power, cultural institutions, or otherwise?

Artist's work has continued to be meaningful to society because we reflect, capsule, and question everything. This allows people to learn about others and their environments in ways they may not have considered. There is certainly a relationship between my work and confronting established systems. This series centering on my mother's experience as a nanny address various negotiations she makes throughout her day. I believe my mother was able to avoid exploitive working conditions by code-switching and reflecting passive-aggressive behaviors she experienced when necessary. It's also possible as a fair-skinned black woman she didn't receive as much push back because of her proximity to whiteness. I then contemplate what this means for the viewer who I perceive to be her employer, the other children she cares for in the home, or her children that watch her learn the work that they too may one day need to do. There is an ongoing toggle of who has the power in these fiber works.

Can you share some of your recent influences? Are there specific works-from visual art, literature, film, or music-that are important to you?

My recent influences are broad. I listen to a lot of podcasts, "The Secret Adventures of Black People," "Intersectionality Matters," "Nice White Parents," "This Is Uncomfortable," and "Death, Sex and Money" to name a few. Investigative journalism informs the viewpoints I chose to use when developing my compositions. This summer I'm in a book club reading, "How to Be An Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi and watching the Hulu series "The Handmaid's Tale."



Yuh no see say Him hungry?, 2019. Baby clothes and woodblock relief on fabric, 57x90 inches.

Who are some contemporary artists you're excited about? What are the best exhibitions you've seen in recent memory?

In April 2021 I visited the Wynwood art district in Miami to see the exhibition UNDERCURRENT by Ema Ri at Spinello Projects. He is a young Cuban artist that is using drywall as an art medium to create paintings. I was awestruck by the conceptual idea and his technique. In the second week of June, I saw the artists Allana Clarke and Jeffery Meris in Un/Common Proximity. This was the culmination exhibition for the 2020 NXTHVN Fellows that is up until August 2021 at James Cohan Gallery. I was fascinated by the various materials these artists are using in their practice. I have also enjoyed seeing Kennedy Yanko's sculptures. Her use of scrap metal is phenomenal.

Do you have any tips or advice that someone has shared with you that you have found particularly helpful?

Commit to yourself that what you create isn't a hobby. Establish a schedule that will allow you to pour energy into your craft every day then share what you regularly do in the capacity that best suits your work. This could be on social media, in local galleries, at school, and/ or at an art fair.

What are you working on in the studio right now? What's coming up next for you?

This summer I'm at the Guttenburg Arts residency in New Jersey. Here I have been working on two fiber works and an installation that continues to center on my mother's work as a nanny. These artworks will be a part of my solo exhibition at Andrew Rafacz Gallery in Spring 2022.

Anything else you would like to share?

I encourage young artists especially those of color to seek a mentor. Someone already doing what you hope to do and is willing to share with you how you too can reach where they are step by step. This has been invaluable to my growth as an artist. Go look at art often, where ever you live. There is so much inspiration that you can receive from looking at other art. Lastly, learn a little about a lot. This allows you to be able to carry a conversation with people with various backgrounds. This is important because an art career is built on relationships. Genuine connections that will serve you for years to come.

To find out more about Krystle Lemonias check out her [Instagram](#) and [website](#).