

"Lava Thomas: The Seeker"

By Faith Adiele

June 29, 2022



Photo by Carolyn Fong.

Lava Thomas has finally come to understand and accept her role. "I never thought of myself as an active seeker," she says. "But for my family, ancestors, descendants, my role has been a seeker." A multidisciplinary artist whose practice spans drawing, painting, sculpture, and site-specific installations, Thomas is known for addressing issues of race, gender, representation, and memorialization. Her work centers Black experience, mining personal and national histories to recover and amplify erased voices and facilitate healing. The elegant balance of research and the experiential requires her to act as historian, writer, storyteller, archivist, and—whether she likes it or not—activist. "I look at history as being cyclical, especially in this country," she says. "The bulk of my practice is really about uncovering, unearthing these hidden histories of Black women."

JESSICA SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilverbmangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

While studying at UCLA's School of Art Practice and the Bay Area's California College of the Arts in the 1990s, she toyed with becoming a writer or a conservator. Ultimately, however, she found writing too "painful," and when her internship at the Getty Conservation Institute exposed her to the photography of prominent artist Carrie Mae Weems, Thomas realized that she, as a Black woman, could make rather than conserve art. Her storied career confirms this. Thomas is a recipient of an American Academy of Arts and Letters purchase prize, an Artadia Award, and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant. The Berkeley-based artist's work is held in permanent collections from Johannesburg to Washington, D.C., to Philadelphia to San Francisco and has been exhibited at museums across the nation.



ARTWORK AND PHOTOS © LAVA THOMAS

Four of the 15 drawings from Lava Thomas's *"Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott"* (2018–21).

The things Thomas has found in her role as seeker include a photo album belonging to her grandmother, a beauty salon owner, in a piano bench a decade after her death in Los Angeles: "We completely missed it when cleaning out her house. I found it purely by accident, while looking for sheet music. For some reason, I ended up being the recipient." The photographs formed the basis of *Looking Back and Seeing Now* (2015), a site-specific installation composed of large-scale drawings of family members and an inverted pyramid made of tambourines hanging from the ceiling. The instruments move in the wind to create sound and cast shadows.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

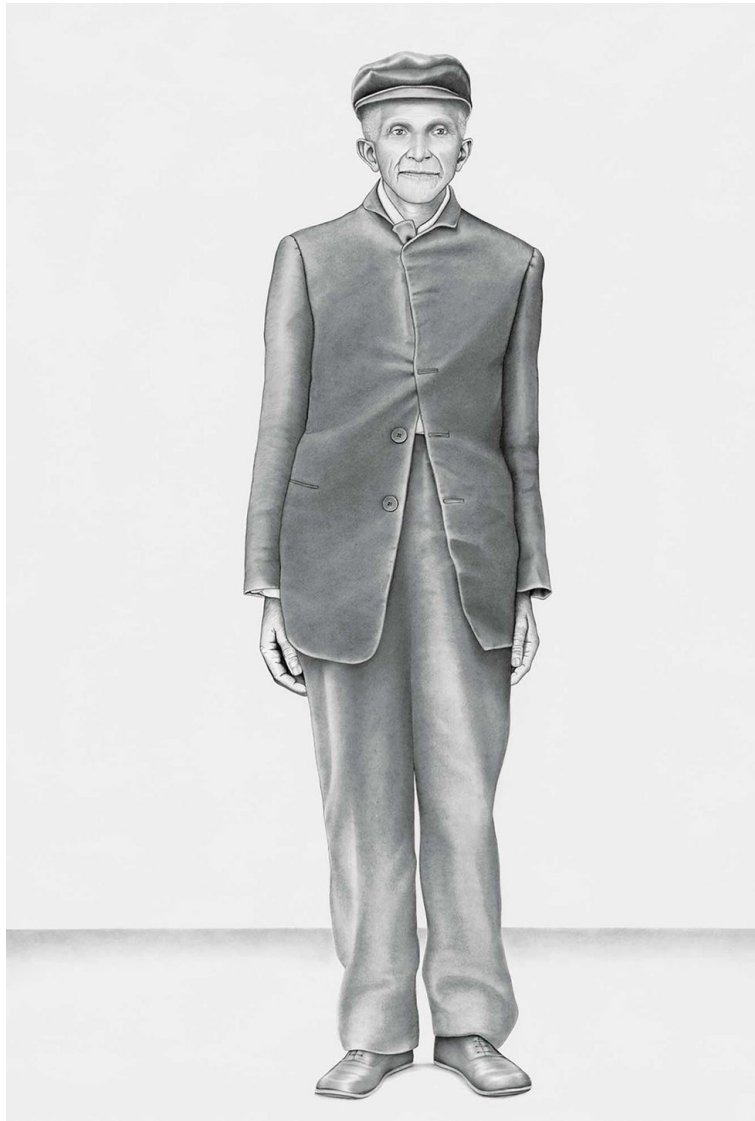
Even more serendipitous is the way her new project, *Decatur* (2022), fell into her lap. Though Thomas had grown up hearing stories about Decatur, Texas, and her grandmother returned to visit family every year, Thomas herself had never been there. Then, three years ago, she learned that Decatur's Wise County Genealogical Society was organizing a military memorial for her maternal great-great-great-grandfather, Charles Hering Arthur (1846–1926), a freeborn man who had served in the Union army during the Civil War, as a private in Company K, Fifth United States Colored Infantry Regiment. Before that, she had known only snippets about her great-great-great-grandmother, because her mother had been named for her, and nothing about him. Thomas traveled to Decatur for the memorial and learned that after the war, Arthur had left Ohio and settled in Texas, where he met an emancipated woman named Betty. They were the first Black couple to be legally married in Wise County. They owned land and occupied a place of distinction in the community, and today two streets are named for them.

"I call this the genesis of my family," Thomas explains of *Decatur*, because prior to emancipation, marriage between enslaved people wasn't recognized: "Our bodies were chattel used to create capital. Family making was a big part of Reconstruction." In Texas, Arthur changed his name, and "this act of self-sovereignty severed his nominal ties with enslavement, but complicated his claim to receive a military pension, as he was required to 'prove' his soldier identity," she says. Ironically, his eight-year legal battle provided valuable documentation of Reconstruction-era Black life and generated the document archive that inspired Thomas's project. She found herself the recipient of a dossier of 100 documents, including Arthur's correspondence with the pension office, interviews with soldiers with whom he had served, affidavits from him and his wife, and photographs, including one of a slight, elderly man in cap and suit. *Decatur* features portraiture and document prints that reveal Arthur's life story and military record.

These new works, which include her first portrait of a man and first full-length portrait, debuted in *Lava Thomas: Homecoming* at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, in Alabama (running through July 24). The show, the most comprehensive exhibition of her work to date, also contains *Looking Back and Seeing Now* and 13 drawings from *Mugshot Portraits: Women of the Montgomery Bus Boycott* (2018–21). This important series owes its inspiration to two discoveries: staff at the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office found the arrest logs and photographs from the Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56), and Jo Ann Robinson, the educator who initiated the boycott, wrote a memoir, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It*. "If Robinson had not documented it in her own words, my work would not exist," Thomas explains.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



ARTWORK AND PHOTOS © LAVA THOMAS
Charles H. Arthur (2022) from the "Decatur" series.

One of the first successful civil rights protests in the Deep South, the Montgomery bus boycott inspired other nonviolent actions, established the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a national leader, and cemented the role of women in the movement. Thomas's series pays homage to ordinary women turned heroic by lovingly re-creating their mugshot photos by hand. Not only do the expressive, granular details have meaning, but so do her tools of creation. "I try to be as intentional as possible with materials," Thomas explains. "I want to have a defensible reason for what I'm using." She draws with graphite pencils and Conté pencils, which are waxy and much darker than graphite. The idea is that pencil is easy to erase, much like Black women's history. Once it becomes a portrait and is placed within a frame, "this excavated history has to be protected. But we know that rewriting history is a common occurrence. Just because I've unearthed it doesn't mean it's protected, that it endures."

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Much like the everyday activists in *Mugshot Portraits*, Thomas found herself thrust onto the front lines in 2019, more history in the making. "I didn't seek the Maya Angelou commission," she explains, referring to the fiasco in which the San Francisco Arts Commission selected her proposal for a monument of the author outside the city's Main Library, then rescinded the offer when San Francisco supervisor Catherine Stefani objected, wanting a traditional statue rather than Thomas's design.

"I was invited to apply," Thomas recalls, "then found myself in an untenable position." No one at the arts commission would speak to Thomas, and at the public committee meeting that followed the decision, she was not allowed to finish the three-minute statement she had prepared. The Bay Area arts community rallied, against the backdrop of Black Lives Matter and Confederate and other statues being torn down.

SeeBlackWomxn, a collective of Black feminist artists and activists formed at Oakland-based curator Ashara Ekundayo's eponymous gallery, launched a campaign. Thomas was selected as a 2020 honoree in the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts 100, an annual list that "celebrates the everyday heroes—artists, activists, and community leaders—for their extraordinary commitment to building sustainable, equitable, and regenerative communities." She found herself being asked to give talks at Art + Practice in Los Angeles, UC Berkeley, and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) and interviews in many newspapers and art journals, including the *New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *ArtNews*, and the international *Art Newspaper*. In summer 2020, the arts commission apologized to Thomas, and in the fall it reversed course, unanimously approving her revised *Portrait of a Phenomenal Woman*.

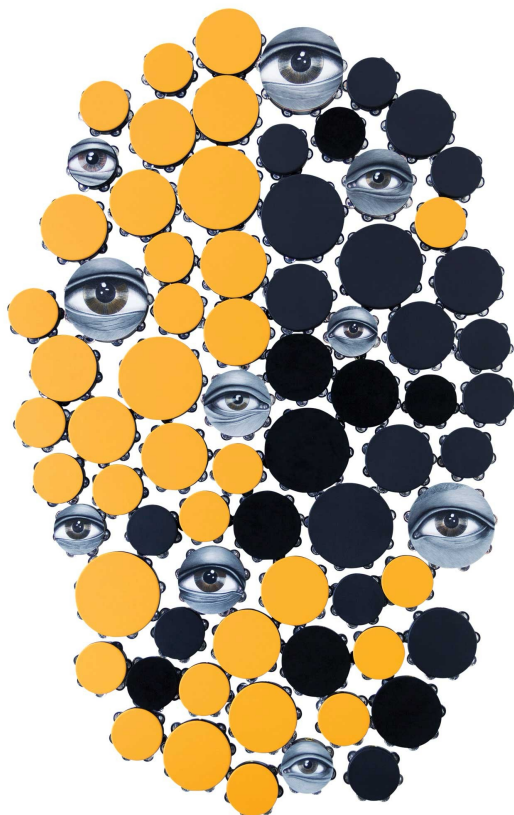
Tentatively scheduled for an April 2023 unveiling, the Maya Angelou sculpture will be Thomas's first public art project. Again, the intentionality behind her research and materials is evident. The piece consists of a nine-foot-tall bronze book with Angelou's portrait on one side and a quotation on the other from her 2010 speech upon donating her personal papers to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture: "Information helps you see that you're not alone. That there's somebody in Mississippi and somebody in Tokyo who all have wept, who've all longed and lost, who've all been happy. So, the library helps you to see, not only that you are not alone, but you're not really any different from everyone else. There may be details that are different, but a human being is a human being." The sculpture's shape is in conversation with *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison* (2003), a rectangular bronze monolith in Manhattan's Riverside Park by Elizabeth Catlett, another artistic foremother. Thomas chose an image of Angelou from 1973, during the Black Power and Black Arts movements, when the author sported a short Afro and lived in Berkeley. "I wanted to give the city something new, something different," Thomas explained to *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist George McCalman, "because Dr. Angelou was such an innovative, extraordinary person in her life and work: civil rights activist, the first Black woman cable car conductor in San Francisco, the first Black woman to direct a Hollywood movie, the first Black woman inaugural poet in U.S. presidential history—so many other firsts."

Thomas's decision to accept the commission, after all that had occurred, took some soulsearching, and her current show at BAMPFA addresses this ambivalence of whether and how to work with

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

institutions with "a pattern of institutional neglect" toward Black women. After BAMPFA acquired one of the drawings from *Mugshot Portraits*, the museum invited her and three other prominent Bay Area artists to curate artworks from its permanent collection and place their own works alongside those they selected. Eager to discover the sisterhood of other Black female artists in the holdings and determined to use the platform to highlight work by Black women, Thomas accepted her first major curatorial project, *The Artist's Eye*, on exhibit through July 17.



ARTWORK AND PHOTOS © LAVA THOMAS

Freedom Song No. 5: We Shall Not be Moved (2022) from the "Freedom Songs" series.

Seated in her West Berkeley studio below a striking portrait of a brown-skinned female conjurer with a chain headdress encircling an image of the Nile and the Great Pyramid at Giza, Thomas moves her laptop so I can get a good look over Zoom. The painting, *Djedi* (2019), is by Lezley Saar, the daughter of influential artist Betye Saar, whose landmark mixed-media piece *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) is celebrating its 50th anniversary and appears in *The Artist's Eye*. While working on the show, Thomas discovered that few acquisitions of Black women's art have been made since BAMPFA acquired Saar's groundbreaking piece. Thomas found that the museum's database didn't even allow her to identify Black female artists in the permanent collection. She also confronted some shocking numbers. Not counting a recent donation of African American quilts, only 59 objects out of the 25,000 pieces are known to be by Black women—in other words, 0.00236

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

percent. Once again, she found herself an accidental participant in history, faced with the decision of how to negotiate curatorial activism and institutional critique.

The Artist's Eye offers an elegant solution. The show's opening statement details Thomas's curatorial process and BAMPFA's dismal representation of Black female artists before going on to laud the diversity of their artistic expression. A glass case of ephemera from the archives displays books about artists in the show as well as seminal titles like *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga. Oakland-based Sadie Barnette's installation, *My Father's FBI File* (2017), consists of blown-up redacted documents tagged with pink spray paint, referencing her father Rodney's roles as a Black Panther and the proprietor of San Francisco's first Black-owned gay bar and nightclub. The photography includes one of British-born Bay Area photographer Erica Deeman's portraits of women from the African diaspora and Carrie Mae Weems's iconic image of the capture of then-Black Panther Angela Davis. There's a huge bronze sculpture from Barbara Chase-Riboud and one of Bay Area artist Mildred Howard's glass punctuation marks, from Thomas's private collection. (For more on Howard, see "Public Purpose, Public Art.") The paintings include three by Berkeley-based Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, who uses india ink and brushes made from Spanish moss to address the erasure of Black female bodies, and a miniature work by abstract painter Mary Lovelace O'Neal, who chaired UC Berkeley's Department of Art Practice for years. Here, Thomas has hung the tiny painting by O'Neal alone on the wall to highlight the fact that it's the only piece by O'Neal in the permanent collection and that O'Neal was known for monumental-scale canvases.

Thomas created two pieces specifically for the exhibition that give a generous and intimate look at the psychic costs enacted on marginalized artists. For *Aspects of the Artist's Dilemma* (2022), she has enlarged three pages from her private journals in which she wrestles with whether to continue with the show. She writes:

I've heard firsthand the oppressive conditions that exist here. At an institution renowned for its political activism, in a city known as the most radically progressive in this country.

She concludes, "But absenting myself is not an effective form of protest. In practice, it's a form of self-erasure and self-silencing," and draws strength from history, quoting Davis and Audre Lorde. She then expresses weariness at the many statements of solidarity being issued by museums, the same statements she developed into her second work for the show, a video titled *Solidarity Redux: Black Lives Matter* (2022). Seated onstage at a shadowy table in a pool of light, an open laptop in front of her, Thomas proceeds to read museums' responses to the Black Lives Matter protests for 36 minutes. After each of the 21 statements, she pauses and looks up to regard the viewer. It's simple and effective. We, too, are exhausted by the well-crafted rhetoric.

Aspects of the Artist's Dilemma, which viewers can listen to in the artist's own voice by scanning a QR code, is in conversation with *Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma* (1978), a mixed-media installation in the permanent collection in which conceptual artist Adrian Piper speaks to viewers faced with a photograph of a Black crowd approaching. Piper is in turn referencing the influential 1946 essay "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," by collage artist and author Romare Bearden. For Thomas, Piper's and

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Bearden's pieces presented opportunities. She'd never before worked in video, though reading aloud felt "very comfortable and very familiar." Much of her work is inspired by Black devotional practices, and "recitation, oratory, reading aloud were very much a part of the Black church and my cultural upbringing." And while she writes about her work a lot and has been an avid journal keeper since elementary school, she explains that it was a real breakthrough to share pages for the first time. "I have what I call secret practices," she confesses. "Journal writing, it's not a public activity." The decision was characteristically organic, emerging from her inquiry into "the best medium for what it is that I'm trying to achieve. So, yeah, there we are again, intentionality with materials."

The Berkeley show is a reminder of long-standing inequities, even in so-called radically progressive and inclusive places. "Liberalism harbors its own anti-Black bias and misogynoir that doesn't get talked about in the Bay Area," Thomas says. She lives and works in Berkeley but was born and raised in Central Los Angeles, where her grandmother's home still stands. "L.A.'s mythologies are both similar to and different from those of the Bay Area," she explains.

It's these mythologies of "freedom, possibility, reinvention" that drew her family, along with so many other Black southern families, north during the Great Migration. And it's her willingness to examine these shared ideals and to unearth lost histories that makes her work so critical to the current moment. "My work is not only research-based; it's very much experiential-based," Thomas says. "I'm not necessarily creating work for a universal audience. Because I am my own audience foremost."

Clearly, the rich legacy of Black women inspires her role as seeker, from the Angelou quote about information helping us see that we're not alone to Toni Morrison's oft-cited speech to the Ohio Arts Council. Thomas paraphrases the famous quote—"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it"—to explain her mission. "My practice really is based on creating the works that I want to see in the world, and telling the kinds of stories that I'm not seeing with my work, and creating the kinds of change that I'd like to see societally that my work can make."

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508