

essence

"Lava Thomas Turns Her Family History Into Art With 'Lineage'"

By Okla Jones

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The artist's first exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery brings her ancestors into public view through large-scale graphite and Conté pencil portraits.



Photo Credit: Em Monforte (Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco)

Years ago, visual artist Lava Thomas had gone to her grandmother's house looking for sheet music. Instead, she found a photo album hidden away for generations. It was 2013, and she had just attended the funeral of a friend's mother, who was buried in the same cemetery as several members of her own family. After visiting the graves of her great-grandparents, grandmother and mother, Thomas went to the house and began searching. Unbeknownst to her, opening the album would forever change the course of her work.

"Those first two images that I saw were these two women that were clearly from the late 1800s, early 1900s, studio photographs of these women that just hit me with such force," Thomas said. "It literally took my breath away and I knew that I had to draw them."

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Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

The photographs eventually led Thomas deeper into her ancestry. More than a decade later, her research provides the basis for *Lineage*, her first exhibition with Jessica Silverman in San Francisco. On view through October 24, the show features eight large-scale graphite and Conté pencil drawings alongside hand-drawn reproductions of documents Thomas uncovered while tracing her family's history in post-Emancipation Texas.

Her research eventually brought her to Charles Arthur, her great-great-great-grandfather. Born free to a formerly enslaved father, Arthur served in the Civil War and later abandoned the surname of his father's enslaver. His decision to choose his own name created complications when he applied for a military pension. Proving his identity took eight years and produced a paper trail containing depositions from fellow soldiers and testimony from his wife, Elizabeth Arthur.

Thomas also learned Charles and Elizabeth were the first Black couple to legally marry in Wise County, Texas. Elizabeth had been born enslaved and never learned to read or write. She gave birth to 14 children, though Thomas says only six were recorded within her marriage. "Their story is foundational because it is the beginning of the legal origins of my family and demonstrates how African-Americans built families post-emancipation," Thomas says.

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Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Lineage gives those lives a scale rarely afforded to Black family photographs from the period. Thomas renders her ancestors as monumental figures, using thousands of individual lines to build their faces and clothing. In *Unnamed but Not Unknown II (Promise)*, a female ancestor appears inside a diamond-shaped graphite frame. Thomas knows little about the woman, yet the photograph provided enough for her to begin a conversation through drawing.

"She's proud," Thomas said. "And every aspiration of my family is bound into that portrait. She's clear-eyed. She has her entire life in front of her, and she's going forward with confidence. I felt an immense amount of pride drawing that portrait."

Her portrait of Elizabeth carries a different understanding because Thomas knows pieces of her story. Learning what Elizabeth endured brought Thomas closer to a woman separated from her by five generations.

"Sometimes when I'm drawing, I have to stand back and I'm in tears because there's also an overwhelming sense of gratitude to my ancestors for what they were able to achieve," Thomas noted. "I'm the direct descendant on my maternal line from people who were enslaved, a great-great-grandmother who was essentially illiterate, and here I am five generations later, creating monumental portraits of them and bringing their stories into public life."

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East Side Elementary Schoolhouse, 2026

Graphite and Conté pencil on paper

Frame: 63 7/8 x 92 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches / 162.2 x 235.9 x 7 cm

Paper: 62 x 91 inches / 157.5 x 231.1 cm

(Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco)

In Thomas' *East Side Elementary Schoolhouse*, measuring roughly five feet tall and nearly eight feet wide, she marks her first architectural portrait. The work depicts Eastside Elementary School in Decatur, Texas, where generations of her family learned to read. Her grandmother frequently returned to Decatur and participated in efforts to restore the school and secure its landmark status. Thomas later visited the city while working as a visiting artist at Texas Christian University.

"When I went to Decatur for the first time, I took photographs," she explained. "I found these landmarks that my grandmother talked about, these landmarks that she described and her stories to me growing up." Seeing a building she had heard about since childhood offered another connection between family memory and surviving evidence. "It's an example of how the pursuit of education and literacy was urgent in the pursuit of Black freedom in this country because enslaved people were forbidden to learn to read or write."

Drawing has been part of Thomas's life since childhood. She spent hours in her grandmother's beauty shop, where a calendar featuring work by Charles White hung on the wall. Commissioned

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by Golden State Life Insurance Company, the calendar introduced Thomas to a Black artist whose primary medium was the same one she loved.

"Through his work and seeing people that looked like me and my family in his work, [it] really let me know that there was a professional avenue for me in the drawing that I was doing as a child," she recalled.



Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

Thomas now uses the form to give her own family a place within the historical record. Pension files and other archival materials appear alongside the portraits in *Lineage*, redrawn by hand rather than presented as supporting evidence. Each document helps reconstruct lives whose stories could have easily disappeared.

As Black history faces renewed challenges in schools and public institutions, preservation has become increasingly urgent. Creatives, she believes, have a role in keeping those records visible. "Artists can research those histories, preserve those histories, interpret those histories through whatever means is available to them," she said. "It's up to us to preserve our histories."

Lava Thomas' *Lineage* is on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery through October 24, 2026.

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