



Melinda Hunt, video still from *Loneliness in a Beautiful Place*, 2018

## ***In the Presence of Absence***

**Artists:** Inbal Abergil, Emily Carris, Leigh Davis, Valery Jung Estabrook, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Nene Humphrey, Melinda Hunt, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, M. Carmen Lane, Todd Shalom

**Curated by** Jillian Steinhauer

**March 27–May 11, 2019**

EFA Project Space, 323 West 39th Street, 2nd Floor, NYC, between 8th and 9th Avenues

Hours: Wed.–Sat., 12–6 PM

[www.projectspace-efanyc.org](http://www.projectspace-efanyc.org)

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EFA Project Space is pleased to present the first exhibition curated by celebrated arts journalist Jillian Steinhauer, ***In the Presence of Absence***, which looks at the nature of grief. The show explores the creative possibilities of mourning and looks at how people transmute suffering over the loss of loved ones into ways to live.

American society is grounded in the denial of grief. The United States was founded on the slaughter of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans, yet there are no official, national monuments to attest to these crimes or honor their victims. Meanwhile, statues venerating those who perpetrated them—colonizers and missionaries, slaveholders and Confederate soldiers—abound, creating a sanitized and glorified narrative about the roots of this country. Who gets to be memorialized, and whose perspectives are privileged in that process? These unresolved historical traumas and the erasure of violence underpin our present political reality. Some Americans are mourning a version of the country they thought they knew, while others have been unable to escape the consequences of its myths for centuries.

Day to day, American culture treats death as either a public spectacle or a highly private matter. But the attendant sorrow and pain don't disappear, and time doesn't heal all wounds; it just changes them. *In the Presence of Absence* posits that one way to move forward is to deal with our grief—to admit its existence, sit with it, make space for it, and work through it. To hold it in its constancy and discover what it can engender. The artists in this exhibition offer a place to start.

For **Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds** and **Melinda Hunt**, grief is a spur to activism. Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) makes artwork that educates viewers about state violence against Native Americans, often through blood-red prints featuring potent, poetic combinations of handwritten words. As the founder of the *Hart Island Project*, Hunt uses a variety of media to demystify and increase access to Hart Island in the Bronx, where more than 68,000 people have been buried in mass graves since 1980. The island, which is operated by the New York City Department of Correction, remains off-limits to the public.

**Jaamil Olawale Kosoko** and **M. Carmen Lane** (Haudenosaunee: Mohawk/Tuscarora) tie together the personal and political dimensions of grief, creating sacred spaces in the gallery through site-specific, mixed-media installations. Both are mourning the losses of family members, and through their processes, investigate the disposability of black and brown bodies in American culture.

In her series *N. O. K. – Next of Kin*, **Inbal Abergil** complicates the stereotypically heroic narrative of American militarism, documenting the way Gold Star families keep and display the artifacts of their relatives killed in action.

**Emily Carris** and **Nene Humphrey** look to history for methods of giving mourning a physical form. Carris evokes the labor of her African American ancestors by adapting their craft traditions, including protection quilts and homemade dyes, which she has produced from plants like indigo and from vintage shackles. Humphrey began making Victorian mourning braids after her husband died, substituting wire for hair. She is also an artist in residence at the LeDoux Neuroscience Lab at NYU, where she studies the amygdala, the powerhouse of emotions in the brain, and draws connections between its systems and the braids.

**Leigh Davis** and **Valery Jung Estabrook** offer work that focuses on healing. In the gallery, Davis will build a *psychomanteum*, a therapeutic tool meant to bring about emotional experiences. Viewers may enter the darkened chamber and attempt to make spiritual contact with the dead. Estabrook's videos replicate the physical gestures of care and in the process become their own act of comfort for grief.

A series of public programs will build on the artwork on display in the gallery. At the opening on March 27, **Jaamil Olawale Kosoko** will present an excerpt from *Chameleon*, an in-progress multimedia project that explores how Black communities in the U.S. survive and affirm their existence, performed by **Nile Harris**. On Saturday, March 30, **Edgar Heap of Birds** will speak about the practices and processes he's developed over more than three decades of making art. On Thursday, April 11, **Todd Shalom** will lead *Good Grief*, an intimate event where participants will share their own stories through pre-recorded songs. On Thursday, May 2, a panel (guests TBA) will delve into the forms and possibilities of memorials, co-presented with **Reimagine End of Life**, a community-wide organization that explores big questions about life and death. A publication launch and reading event will take place in conjunction with the closing of the exhibition on Saturday, May 11, from 2 to 4 pm.

*In the Presence of Absence* will be accompanied by a publication with written contributions from **Michelle García** and **Jessica Lynne**. The exhibition's curatorial fellow is **Nick Witchey**, and curatorial adviser is **Meghana Karnik**. Melinda Hunt's work appears courtesy the Canada Council for the Arts.

*This exhibition is dedicated to Henrietta, Suzanne, and Bronia.*

Confirmed Public Events:

- **Wednesday, March 27, 5:00 PM–6:00 PM**, curatorial walk-through with Jillian Steinhauer; **6:00 PM–8:00 PM**, opening reception, with performance by **Jaamil Olawale Kosoko**, *Chameleon (The EFA Installments)*
- **Saturday, March 30, 2:00 PM–3:30 PM**, artist talk by **Edgar Heap of Birds**
- **Thursday, April 11, 6:30 PM–8:30 PM**, *Good Grief*, a participatory music event with **Todd Shalom**
- **Thursday, May 2, 6:30 PM–8:30 PM**, panel discussion co-presented by **Reimagine End of Life**
- **Saturday, May 11, 2:00 PM–4:00 PM**, publication launch and exhibition closing

Additional public programs and partnerships will be announced in the coming weeks. Visit <http://projectspace-efanyc.org> for an up-to-date schedule of events.

About the Curator:

**Jillian Steinhauer** is a journalist and editor living in Brooklyn, NY. Her writing has appeared recently in the *New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *The Nation*, and *The Art Newspaper*, among other publications. She won the 2014 Best Art Reporting Award from the U.S. chapter of the International Association of Art Critics for her work at Hyperallergic, where she was formerly a senior editor. She writes mainly about art and politics, or the intersection of art and the world, but has been known to go on at length about cats, as in an essay commissioned for the 2015 book *Cat Is Art Spelled Wrong* (Coffee House Press). She received her master's in Cultural Reporting and Criticism from NYU.

About the Artists:

**Inbal Abergil** is a visual artist and an educator originally from Jerusalem. Abergil works in photography, video, text, and installation. Coming from Israel, a culture where loss, conflict, and trauma are substantial parts of daily life, had a profound effect on her artistic vision. Abergil's work has been exhibited internationally in museum and gallery exhibitions in the U.S., Belfast, Northern Ireland, South Korea, Amsterdam, and Israel. Abergil is the recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Grant (2018). Her work has been shortlisted for the 2018 Documentary Essay Prize at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Her series *Nothing Left Here But The Hurt* has been nominated for the Prix Pictet Photography Prize (2012). Abergil received her MFA in visual arts from Columbia University (2011) and is an Assistant Professor of Photography at Pace University.

**Emily Carris** is an artist and founding member of The Art Dept/Colored Vintage, a collective-run vintage store and workshop space dedicated to sharing stories and uplifting underserved artists, particularly queer, nonbinary, and artists of color. She has a BA in education and photography from Eugene Lang College in New York. She holds a master's degree in photography from UCA in Kent, England. Her work exploring the personal and cultural legacy of slavery and the Black female body has been exhibited nationally and internationally. Emily has worked as a photography teacher and museum educator at the International Center of Photography in New York. She currently lives and works in Philadelphia.

**Leigh Davis** is a multimedia artist and educator. She has created performances and/or events for the former Morbid Anatomy Museum, Dixon Place, and Hunter East Harlem Gallery, in NYC. Her work has been featured at

Open Source Gallery and BRIC (Brooklyn) and the Maryland Institute of Contemporary Art (Baltimore). Recently, Davis created a site-based audio work for the historic chapel at Green-Wood Cemetery. She is a recipient of numerous awards and grants, including those from The Pollination Project and the New York Department of Cultural Affairs. Davis holds a BFA in photography from Savannah College of Art and Design, GA, and a MFA from Concordia University, Montreal. She teaches courses at Parsons the New School for Design and works between Brooklyn, NY, and Washington, DC.

**Valery Jung Estabrook** was born in Plantation, Florida, and raised on an organic Asian pear farm outside of Lexington, Virginia. She holds an MFA in painting from Brooklyn College and a BA in visual art from Brown University. Her work has been exhibited in major cities both domestically and internationally, including in New York, Los Angeles, Nashville, Lagos, Bilbao, and Melbourne. In 2018 she received the Gold AHL-T&W Foundation Contemporary Visual Art Award, an annual award recognizing artists of Korean heritage in the United States. She currently resides in New Mexico.

**Hock E Aye VI Edgar Heap Of Birds** is an artist and an advocate for Indigenous communities worldwide. His work includes multidisciplinary forms of public art messages, large-scale drawings, Neuf Series acrylic paintings, prints, works in glass, and monumental porcelain enamel on steel outdoor sculpture. While representing Indigenous communities, his art focuses first on social justice and on the personal freedom to live within the tribal circle as an expressive individual. Heap of Birds' work was shown in the 2007 Venice Biennale and has been exhibited at some of the most renowned institutions in the world. In 2012, he was named a USA Ford Fellow and in 2014 was honored as a Distinguished Alumni from the University of Kansas. Now retired from teaching at the University of Oklahoma after 30 years of service, he continues to serve there as professor emeritus.

**Nene Humphrey** has exhibited in numerous museums and galleries since coming to New York in 1979. Exhibition locations include the McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX; Mead Museum, Amherst, MA; Palmer Museum, PA; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; Sculpture Center, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, and the Lesley Heller Gallery, New York, NY. Humphrey has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Rockefeller Foundation, Brown Foundation, and Anonymous was a Woman, among others. Her work has been written about in numerous publications including the *New York Times*, *Art in America*, *ARTnews*, *Sculpture* magazine, *Hyperallergic*, and *Artforum*. Since 2005 she has been artist in residence at the Joseph LeDoux neuroscience lab at NYU, where her work has focused on explorations of the brain mechanisms underlying human emotions. She is currently collaborating with musician and composer Matana Roberts on a multidisciplinary performance piece, *Lining Out*.

**Melinda Hunt** is a Canadian-born artist and founding director of The Hart Island Project, a public charity with an arts and social justice mission. She is a recent recipient of the Women's Film, TV and Theatre Fund of the City of New York Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment. She is a current recipient of a Research and Creation Award by the Canada Council for the Arts 2017–2019. She is a 2017 NYFA/NYSCA Fellow in Digital & Electronic Art. Her work as an artist and activist includes developing software for a storytelling platform known as the Traveling Cloud Museum, featuring clocks of anonymity assigned to people who disappear into mass graves on Hart Island. Her creative work has generated three pieces of legislation. Melinda graduated from Reed College (BA) and the Pacific Northwest College of Art (BFA). She received her MFA from the Yale School of Art and a MS in Digital Imaging & Design from NYU.

**Jaamil Olawale Kosoko** is a Nigerian American poet, curator, and performance artist originally from Detroit, MI. He is a 2019 Red Bull Arts Detroit Writing Fellow, 2018–2020 Live Feed Artist at New York Live Arts, a 2019 DiP Resident Artist at Gibney, a 2019 National Dance Project Award recipient, a 2017 Princeton Arts Fellow, a 2017 Jerome Foundation Artist in Residence at Abrons Arts Center, and a 2017 Cave Canem Poetry Fellow. He lectures, speaks, and performs internationally. His previous works *#negrophobia* (nominated for a 2016 Bessie Award) and *Séancers* have toured throughout Europe, appearing in major festivals including Moving in November

(Finland), TakeMeSomewhere (UK), SICK! (UK), Tanz im August (Berlin), Oslo Internasjonale Teaterfestival (Norway), Zurich MOVES! (Switzerland), Beursschouwburg (Belgium), and Spielart Festival (Munich), among others. He was an inaugural graduate member of the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University, where he earned his MA in Curatorial Studies. More at [jaamil.com](http://jaamil.com) or @jaamilkosoko.

**M. Carmen Lane** is a Cleveland-based two:spirit African-American and Haudenosaunee (Mohawk/Tuscarora) artist, birthworker, consultant, and facilitator. Their work has been published in numerous journals and anthologies including the *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Red Ink* magazine, and *Anomaly*, and they are a contributor to the Lambda Literary Award-nominated *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two Spirit Literatures*. Carmen's first collection of poetry is *Calling Out After Slaughter* (GTK Press, 2015). They are the founder and director of ATNSC: Center for Healing & Creative Leadership ([www.atnsc.org](http://www.atnsc.org)), an urban retreat center and social practice experiment in holistic health, leadership development, Indigenous arts & culture, and Akhsótha Gallery located in the historic Buckeye-Larchmere neighborhood. Carmen is a member of NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science, Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, and the experimental pop-up gallery collective ArtsSalvageCLE. Their work was exhibited in the 2018 Front Triennial as a part of *A Color Removed* (with Michael Rakowitz). Carmen was a 2018 Creative Fusion artist-in-residence.

**Todd Shalom** is the founder and director of Elastic City, a nonprofit organization that produced over 200 participatory walks and events between 2010 and 2016. In collaboration with performance artist/director Niegel Smith, Todd conceives and stages interactive performances in public and private environments. Todd has been a faculty member at Pratt Institute and the School of Visual Arts. His work has been presented by Abrons Art Center, Brooklyn Museum, Columbia University GSAPP, Des Moines Art Center, The Invisible Dog, ISSUE Project Room, MIT List Visual Arts Center, The Museum of Modern Art, The New Museum, P.S. 122, and Stanford University. Todd has been an artist-in-residence at Akiyoshidai International Art Village (Japan), Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts (Omaha), Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, and SHIFT (EFA Project Space).

## PRESS INQUIRIES

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## ACCESSIBILITY

EFA Project Space is located at 323 W. 39th Street, 2nd Floor, between 8th and 9th Avenues, in Manhattan. The building is wheelchair accessible, entrance at sidewalk level (no steps), with two accessible elevators in the lobby. Guests are asked to sign in in the lobby, but no ID is required for entry. Nearest accessible subway station is 42nd Street/Port Authority, 1 block north on 8th Avenue.

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**EFA Project Space**, launched in September 2008 as a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary arts venue founded on the belief that art is directly connected to the individuals who produce it, the communities that arise because of it, and to everyday life; and that by providing an arena for exploring these connections, we empower artists to forge new partnerships and encourage the expansion of ideas. [www.projectspace-efanyc.org](http://www.projectspace-efanyc.org) **The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA)** is a 501(c)(3) public charity. Through its three core programs, EFA Studios, EFA Project Space, and EFA Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, EFA is dedicated to providing artists across all disciplines with space, tools and a cooperative forum for the development of individual practice. EFA is a catalyst for cultural growth, stimulating new interactions between artists, creative communities, and the public. [www.efanyc.org](http://www.efanyc.org) EFA Project Space is supported in part by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council and additional funding from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

