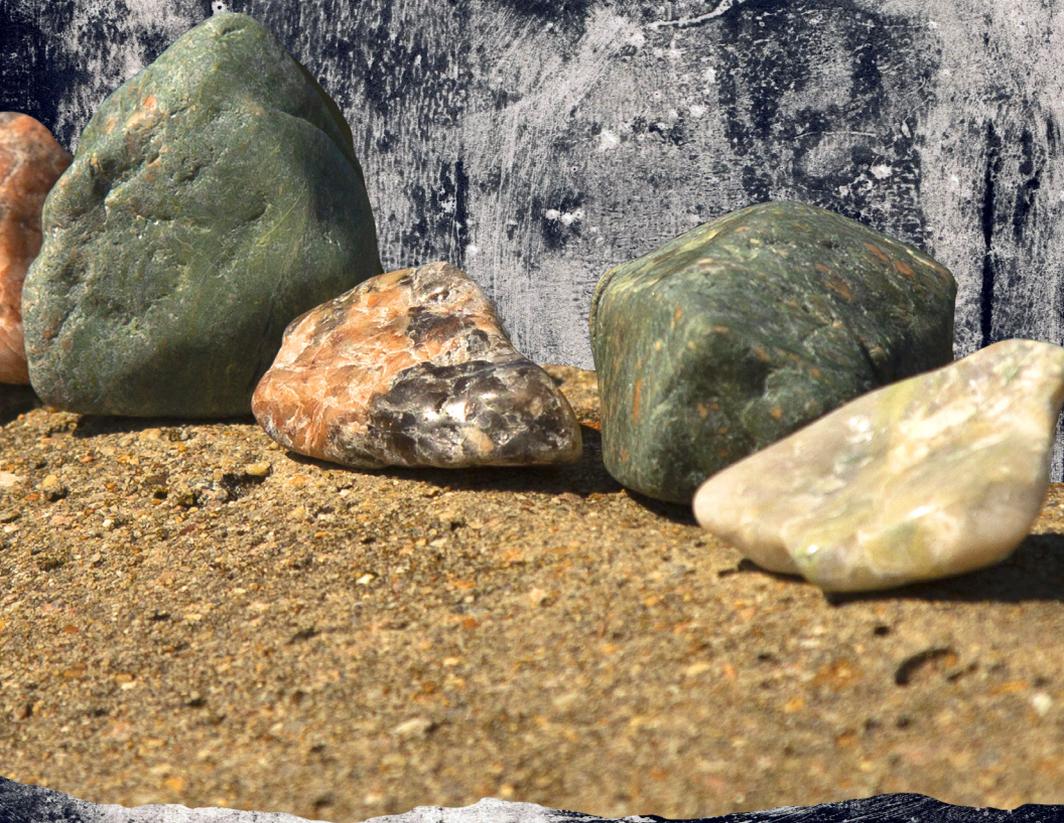


walking with

Lily Cox-Richard, Michael Jevon Demps
and Library of Radical Returns

December 7, 2018–February 10, 2019





FOREWORD

On November 15, 2019, the Visual Arts Center of Richmond debuted the exhibition, *walking with*, a collaboration between Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Devon Jemps under the collaborative name Library of Radical Returns. The exhibition was inspired by the time the artists spent together walking along the James River and it explored all the ways this site carries the complex and complicated histories of the city.

Using locally sourced, refined clay and “traces” of the sites of these walks through rubbings and collections of natural and man-made objects found along the river, the artists transformed the gallery into a corresponding site for deeper investigation. By incorporating elements of captured sound and video, the audience had the opportunity to be completely immersed in the different ways the artists processed their time together along the James. In fact, the audience was encouraged to handle, rearrange objects and add their own river video content to the exhibition through a dynamic hashtag that uploaded and projected the tagged videos. In this way, we were all invited to walk with the artists and process our collective pasts and futures together.

The exhibitions in VisArts’ True F. Luck Gallery allow us to explore the different ways contemporary artists are innovating the materials and processes we teach in our 17 professional teaching-studios. For this reason, it was a pleasure to present an exhibition where artists used a range of media in non-traditional ways to create a dynamic environment.

We extend our gratitude to Altria Group and the Allan and Margot Blank Foundation for their generous support of our exhibition programming. Related educational programming is supported by grants from The Windgate Charitable Foundation, The Community Foundation, Wells Fargo, Dominion Foundation and The Fan District Association. We also thank the Virginia Commission for the Arts, CultureWorks and The Arts and Cultural Funding Consortium: City of Richmond, Hanover County and Henrico County for ongoing support of our programming and operations. I also extend appreciation to Melissa Messina for her curatorial guidance of the exhibition, and finally, to the artists, Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Devon Jemps, for a beautiful installation of the works and for giving us all the opportunity to experience our city and surroundings through their thoughtful and collaborative spirit.

Stefanie Fedor
Executive Director
Visual Arts Center of Richmond

Cover: Digital piece

Back Cover: *Portal 2*, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Inside Front: *Holding Spaces 1*, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, driftwood, rocks, concrete, candles, offerings (detail)

Inside Back: Library of Radical Returns, 2019 (detail)



To Walk With Lily Cox-Richard, Michael Jevon Demps, and the Library of Radical Returns

“Share what you have. Take what you need.”
- Library of Radical Returns

This exhibition—part living laboratory, part de facto artist studio, part healing sanctuary—is the first of many experimental art projects that will be created under the collaborative umbrella of the Library of Radical Returns, brainchild of artists Lily Cox-Richard and Michael Jevon Demps.¹ The philosophy of the Library of Radical Returns (LORR), as stated by the artists in the gallery’s wall text, is “rooted in explorations of shared energy, of lending without concern for eventual return, with trust that the energy sent out into the world compounds and creates returns

greater than any actual object being brought back.” This ethos fueled the development and realization of LORR’s premier exhibition: *walking with*. This exhibition is an immersive installation of collaboratively-made sculptures, prints, live stream video, sound and ritual offerings that seeks to explore the sites and histories of Richmond to “specifically try to understand place through materials and ways that one makes.”² To walk with the artists and the Library of Radical Returns is to time travel along the banks of the James River, to share a path of gentle exploration

and deep observation through a mired history and uncertain future, one that is specific to Richmond and yet an all-too-common landscape for the South. In nuanced ways, the exhibition poses challenging questions about how we heal from trauma, how we consider industry, our land and its ecology and how we find common ground to go forward together. Rather than pressure the work to convey the slippery answers, however, *walking with* instead presents an understanding that the answer is in the collective questioning.

The ideation for the project came about during walks that new friends Michael Jevon Demps, a newcomer to Richmond by way of Detroit and New Haven, Connecticut, and Lily Cox-Richard, a native of Virginia, began to take along the James River

and on Belle Isle. Each found the time spent on the river to be generative and grounding. They began to discuss the ways in which activating the site, so fraught with contentious histories but also alive with activity, could bring about recuperative energy in the context of an exhibition. Their decision to make new, collaborate work cemented at the intersection of paths on the river’s south bank—the place where the Richmond Slave Trail passes under Interstate Highway 95 and meets a waste treatment plant and the rugged rip rap of the city’s flood wall. This loaded juncture of energy, history, industry and recreation became a main source of inspiration. Cox-Richard describes the impetus as one of setting out to “try to understand how to be present and contend with the kind of histories of industry of all types

¹ For this first iteration over twenty collaborators are named on the acknowledgements text in the gallery. It also includes a notation reminding us that the “James” was not the first name for the River, and recognizes the Indigenous people, including the Powhatan Confederacy and other tribes, on whose land we live and work today.

² Artists talk, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, November 15, 2019.

walking with gallery installation, 2019

here, and their traumas...and have an experience with the River that doesn't try to forget what's happened here." Through collaboration in art and exhibition making, the artists also wanted to acknowledge and explore the differences in their individual experiences of moving in the world "as a Black person and a queer person, as a woman and a man," and think through inherent systems of navigation in relation to new activations of space. With this approach at the fore, the exhibition is deeply embedded with notions of attention and intention.³

The experimental nature of *walking with* is in keeping with the spirit of exploration and discovery that mirrors the educational mission of

the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. Works were created rapidly in the few months leading up to the exhibition in direct response to the artist's conversations, walks, research, studio experimentation and the gallery itself. The exhibition continues to develop and change over the duration of the show by way of additional artistic interventions and audience interactions.⁴ On many levels, time is a critical component of the show. How change occurs over the course of time—be it in an hour, a season or a geological age—is as critical a concept in *walking with* as the notion of compressing time itself, perhaps even bending it toward a new more conscientious moment. As such, rock tumblers become time machines set to speed up the river's smoothing

processes. Small candles in the subtle shapes of okra, corn and mushrooms, which in their actual form have their own growth and seasonal time, slowly burn and drip on rocks and driftwood in temporal yet timeless ritual. Ghostly photographs of the river become static monoprint montages papered like evidence on the wall, while pastiched live video clips of the rushing river loop in perpetual footage.

While walking on the James River, the artists began to consider the layers of meaning in the materials around them and how they could be used to make art. They reflected on the smooth glassy surfaces on the River that hide the swirling tumult just below. They considered the choppy rip rap as a violent unearthing of material taken

from one place to create a barrier for another. They probed the properties of local minerals and stones such as unakite and quartz for their healing properties. All that surrounded them became metonym and metaphor for the history of industry—particularly the extracting and moving of goods, including people—that make Richmond what it was and is today. Demps, having recently returned to Richmond from Zimbabwe, became fascinated by the similarities in rocks from both places. He took particular note of a nearby plaque explaining the residual stones left over from the collision of West Africa found as far north as New Jersey and south to the Georgia coast. Demps also found himself responding to the charged energy of Richmond in general where,



³ Ibid.

⁴ The artists' collaborative processes began well before the installation of the exhibition in workshops, group dinners and deep listening and making events held with fellow artists and community members in their shared Richmond studio.

Rapids, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, river water, silt, grit, riprap, bits of hand-pressed local clay, motors, hardware, acrylic barrels

he says, “you can’t not contend with the history. Everywhere you go, you can viscerally feel the things that have happened here—in monuments and markets.”⁵

The artists brought to the project unique relationships to natural and industrial materials cultivated from their personal artistic and spiritual practices. *walking with* demonstrates their collective interest in notions of how objects are given, have inherent or can be charged with energy and power, and how these possibilities are furthered by the effort of collaborative forces. Both sought to not only create new objects together, and with a community of so-called “co-conspirators,” but to also bring the resulting works together into a concatenated space that evokes healing energy. As such, they extend their haptic and imaginative responses to the landscape in an experiential interpretation of the interconnectedness of materials,

objects and their making. As the potential in materiality is of the utmost importance to the artists’ practices and to the context of the exhibition, it is important to note that almost every object in *walking with* is made with materials from Richmond and more specifically sourced in and around the James River. Moreover, materials used in processes to make one series of works recycled into other methodologies or were sometimes used as sculptural objects themselves. For example, the collaged works on paper, entitled *Portals*, are prints made with the pigment from slurry, the bi-product of the rock tumbling process. The rock tumbling takes place, in works entitled *Rapids*, with help from fired bits of ceramic made from local clay. Three free-standing sculptures, or *Residuals*, are made of found rebar and anchored by sets of robust rocks from the River. They feel boat-like with draped bed sheets for sails that are patterned with abstracted amber



⁵ Artists talk, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, November 15, 2019.

Left: *Residuals 2*, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Center: *Residuals 1*, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Right: *Residuals 4*, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag



Portal 4, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

and slate gray sunburst forms like crests. These found cloths, used by the artists in the clay-making process and then to make rubbings over the river rock, “know the tenderness of caressing rocks and river banks, of milking clay through fibers. They trace presences of bodies and bounties.”⁶

Works in the show honor the ways in which each artist understands how objects can “hold energy or hold history, hold trauma or hold healing.”⁷ Only three were made individually, each selected by the other artist to commemorate the beginnings of this shared experience. Cox-Richard’s 2016, *Old Copper Futures* is a 1000-pound bale with a bright orange moving blanket set between it and the concrete baler on which it rests. In this arresting work, once-prized copper parts devalue into a compacted configuration, junkyard findings turned Minimalist monument. In this synthesized form, Cox-Richards questions if the piece “might retain



the wisdom of knowing electricity.”⁸ And Demp’s 2019 *WAVES: ASK AND LET GO*, a sculpture made in Richmond from detritus found on the shores of Biscayne Bay where the artist was on residency, is assembled into a kind of shrine or alter. In it he reminds us that objects we choose to be around in our lives have “a kind of residue,” and to consider “how they are charged, how we charge them and how they charge us.”⁹ With extraction and alchemy in mind, the artists produce new relationships, and in some ways new histories, for these works that align with and deepen similar strategies used throughout the exhibition.

In the artists’ skilled hands, organic materials become magically transformed by a deeply intuitive understanding of form. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Holding Spaces* sculptures. In one such work, a weighty piece of driftwood is balanced precariously on the floor, held in place by a few large



rocks. It entices the viewer with its outstretched, tendril-like branches and dramatic shadow play. Gingerly placed on and around it are pink and blue clay-like, cement pillows, candles, herbs and other organic offerings that sustain it in active ritual. Another work in this series stands enchantingly in the distance. A sinewy branch propped against the wall at a single point is ceremoniously draped with a printed cloth. It is grounded by the carefully curated accumulation of rocks and candles on the floor just below. These pieces in concert with the mélange of organic prints arranged like tree formations on the wall remind us, and in many ways take us to, the place by the river that brought about their realization. As such, the anthropomorphic wood forms read as surrogates for the wounded bodies of ancestors, laid bare then ornamented and anointed for healing.

While nature visually prevails in the exhibition, it is astutely offset by the sound of industry. Upon entry, visitors immediately hear the hum of motors below the cacophony of toppling rocks. Six industrial, though homespun, rock tumbler sculptures, or *Rapids*, sit atop cinderblock and wood plank tables. These pieces were built with assistance from VisArts staff and filled with ceramic bits made by studio assistants and students. The tumblers polish the stones that the artists have collected, transforming dull, abrasive surfaces of



⁶ Language on wall labels describing the Residuals series.

⁷ Gallery talk with staff, Visual Arts Center of Richmond, November 15, 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Left: *Old Copper Futures*: 951 lbs. of #2 scrap copper from Revolution Recovery, New Castle, DE, Lily Cox-Richard, 2016, copper, concrete, blanket, 42" x 26" x 39"

Right: Library of Radical Returns, 2019

Holding Spaces 2, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, driftwood, rocks, concrete, candles, offerings



lackluster rocks, those we generally pass over daily with no notice, into shining gems of geological wonder. *Rapids* quite literally embody the idea that many hands must come together if we are to create change. These kinetic sculptures essentially accelerate what rivers do naturally, as if appealing us to polish our

proverbial load and to find our shine. They reflect the urgency felt by the artists, one that asks us to examine our environment and not take for granted the beauty just beneath the surface of daily ugliness.

If one listens closely, however, machination is not the only sound

in the gallery. Undertones of an ever-moving river rush in from the darkened back room. They entice us to move through to the space where we come upon a live video projection on the wall. Smartly titled *Live Stream of Streams*, the feed is a compilation of outdoor shots taken by Cox-Richard and Demps from their own

treks and added to with contributions uploaded from the community using the hashtag #walkwith_LORR. While the soundscape seems to be coming from the footage, a different score actually emanates from speakers set just below the projection. Demps, also a musician and DJ, has masterfully mixed a collection of

Live Stream of Streams, Library of Radical Returns, 2019, projected video aggregate of river moments



the artists' field recordings from the river and nearby trails specifically calibrated to resonate at low, subtle frequency levels. This added dimension of sound, culminating in dialogue with the rock tumblers, creates an immersive experience as the river is made more viscerally present.

The footage of the live stream video clips offers a wide range of perspectives on the river, from close up details to distanced vistas, and shows various color palettes that reflect different times of day. These clips emphasize the prominence of the River's presence in the city and the many ways in which it is engaged. The images also serve as stand-ins for psychological states of mind. We respond to, and cannot help but be moved, as we stand before placid, peaceful scenes as well as those of tumult and voracity. This

affect is made all the more impactful in relation to the Cox-Richard sculpture, *Woundwood*, placed on the floor before the projection. In it, the silicone mold of a tree retains crusty, dark flakes of bark, as well as the texture of cinderblock where the knothole cavity, once an open receptacle, was woefully filled. The scale and texture of the piece feels bodily, and in relation to the footage evokes a raft on which we can consider a leisurely trip or perhaps a quick escape.¹⁰

walking with pays homage to the energies that exist in materials and the ways in which humans can give power to or activate these properties. Honoring this reciprocity, the artists create mappings of reality that are at once archived and imagined. In many ways, transference is the leitmotif for the exhibition. Works in the

¹⁰ The artists tell us, at their November 15 gallery talk with staff, that they are interested in knotholes as portals, often found in literature as a magical space where transformational things occur, as in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.



WAVES: ASK AND LET GO, Michael Jevon Demps, 2019, wood, glass, paper, steel, foam, graphite, candle wax and bricks, 36" x 22" x 9"

show continue to be activated with offerings by the artists. New video footage and sound components augment the original soundscape. On shelves near the *Rapids*, a collection of newly polished rocks manifest. The gallery is a living laboratory and a sanctuary for transformation. It is an homage to the ways in which slag and slurry and sludge can be made beautiful with determined effort, a belief in transcendence and the ability to shift perspective. Cox-Richard and Demps remind us that perspective is not fixed, but that it finds focus as it collectivizes. On another set of shelves, we find baskets of materials, a kind of curiosity cabinet of items such as buttons, rocks, candles, incense and ceramics. There is a sign for the viewer that reads: "If something pulls you, go ahead

and pick it up. You are welcome to rearrange things here or create the energy and space you need somewhere in the room." These are words to live by. They remind us that we can participate. We can make an offering. It will shift the energy in the room. Like ripples in a river, it will change the perspective—perhaps temporarily, perhaps forever. But change will take place with intention. To begin, however, we must first be paying attention.

Melissa Messina



walking with gallery installation, 2019

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Holding Spaces 1
Library of Radical Returns, 2019
driftwood, rocks, concrete, candles, offerings

Holding Spaces 2
Library of Radical Returns, 2019,
driftwood, rocks, concrete, candles, offerings

Holding Spaces 3
Library of Radical Returns, 2019,
driftwood, rocks, concrete, candles, offerings

Portal 1
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 2
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 3
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 4
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 5
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 6
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Portal 7
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, collaged prints made with rock tumbling slurry, drawings made on site

Residuals 1
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Residuals 2
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Residuals 3
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Residuals 4
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, fabric, clay, graphite, rebar, magnets, tumbled slag

Rapids
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, river water, silt, grit, riprap, bits of hand-pressed local clay, motors, hardware, acrylic barrels

Library of Radical Returns, 2019

Woundwood
Lily Cox-Richard, 2018
silicone, epoxy putty, bark, mixed media, 9" x 46" x 81"

Old Copper Futures: 951 lbs. of #2 scrap copper from Revolution Recovery, New Castle, DE
Lily Cox-Richard, 2016
copper, concrete, blanket, 42" x 26" x 39"

WAVES: ASK AND LET GO
Michael Jevon Demps, 2019, wood, glass, paper, steel, foam, graphite, candle wax and bricks, 36" x 22" x 9"

Live Stream of Streams
Library of Radical Returns, 2019, projected video aggregate of river moments

walking with sound installation

BIOGRAPHIES



Lily Cox-Richard



Michael Jevon Demps

Lily Cox-Richard is a sculptor and an assistant professor at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts. Recent solo exhibitions include the Blanton Museum of Art (Austin, Texas), Yvonne (Guatemala City), Artpace (San Antonio, Texas), Hirschl & Adler Modern (New York, NY), among others.

Michael Jevon Demps is an interdisciplinary artist, musician and DJ. Since earning an MFA in sculpture from Yale University, the artist has been awarded several residencies including Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and The Fountainhead Residency (Miami, FL). Recent exhibitions include Blackburn 20/20 (New York, NY), Charles Moffett (New York, NY) and The Studio Museum in Harlem (New York, NY).

Melissa Messina is an independent curator and curator of the Mildred Thompson Estate. In 2016 and 2017 she guest curated *Conjurers: Artists Transforming the Ordinary* – Vanessa German, Marcus Kenney and Shawne Major; Natasha Bowdoin: *Lunar Spring*; Nate Young: *(re)collection*; and *The Embedded Message: Quilting In Contemporary Art* (co-curated with Stefanie Fedor) at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. She served as the curatorial advisor to *walking with*.

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