

Stephanie J. Woods  
where the  
sun shines

**GALLERY GUIDE**

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# ...The Things That Cannot Be Taken...

■ BY KIRSTEN PAI BUICK PH.D.

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There is a dark myth that permeates the history of enslavement in the United States. It is the myth of the “whistle walk,” which was the walk supposed to have been made by enslaved people who were forced to whistle along the passage to the dining room as they delivered elaborate meals to their enslavers and their guests. The sound was to ensure that the enslaved were not partaking of the abundance that was grown and prepared by their hands. A corresponding and more long-lived myth is that of Black people’s insatiable and unnatural hunger for watermelon (google the annually reported outrage of Black children served by their school cafeterias some variation of watermelon and fried chicken during Black History Month). The craving was the justification that masked the very real evidence of deprivation to be found in the accounting books of plantations that chronicled the pittance spent on their captive workers; slave narratives that told horrific stories of mental and physical tortures and scarcity; the findings of archaeologists who are able to reconstruct the diets of enslaved Africans by unearthing the remains under what had been plantation slave quarters; and finally, the evidence of “soul food” itself, harvested from the unwanted parts of animals and the simple vegetables, grains, and fish that became the staple of what is now a genuine “cuisine.” Watermelon was free growing and abundant; and it helped to stave off undernourishment in the midst of plenty withheld from those who created it. Eventually, the fruit was appropriated by caricaturists to become a “staple” of stereotyped images of Black children and adults who monstrously devoured it.

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*... I am always reminded of my family who chose to survive: who chose to laugh and tell the same stories and laugh again ...*

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What has always intrigued me about the work of Stephanie J. Woods is the monumentality with which she treats family traditions, ancestral legacies,



Stephanie J. Woods, *watermelon sandcastle*, 2022, Watermelon and beach sand from Galveston, Texas, archival ink-jet print, 21.5 x 41 x 2 inches, Courtesy of the artist.

and the things that could not be taken from Black people. In *my papa used to play checkers*, Woods builds a photograph filled with a daughter's childhood memories of her father that is rich in symbolism. Checkers is more than just a popular neighborhood game; it is ancient, and the hand dyed cotton fabric that replicates and references a checkerboard is the metaphor for the neighborhood and equally for the landscapes that shape us. Characterized by the good-natured competition and wit exchanged by Black men in parks and domestic spaces across the country, checkers is a game of men who race across the board to become kings. Here, however, the "board" has become soft and hand-crafted and drapes protectively around the ears, neck, and shoulders of the figure. The brightly colored, red plastic beads and barrettes tell the viewer that the figure is a girl or woman whose elaborately braided, Afro-textured coiffure creates a protective cage around a watermelon that has been halved and that now rests upon her head. The watermelon is a surprising and touching detail. It is a reclamation that also honors a father for the good times and good things that can be recalled. The chessboard is a neighborhood, is a landscape, is a royal robe only matched by the beautiful and intricate braids, by the beads and barrettes that adorn this royal crown.

I am always uplifted by Woods' work, and I am always reminded of my family who chose to survive: who chose to laugh and tell the same stories and laugh again; who prepared the collards, hot water cornbread, and hammocks and who put their little girls in beads and braids; and who showed us through deeds and words that there is better to be had if we honor our past and step forward with the same faith that mandated that they nurture us in strength and in love.



Stephanie J. Woods in her studio. Courtesy of the artist.

## About the Artist

### ■ STEPHANIE J. WOODS

Stephanie J. Woods is a multimedia artist based in Albuquerque, New Mexico where she is Assistant Professor of Interdisciplinary Art at the University of New Mexico. Raised in Charlotte, North Carolina, Woods cultivates an artistic practice concerned with exploring Black American culture, identity, and the impact of involuntary cultural assimilation. She works primarily in the fields of photography, fiber, video, and sculpture and creates mixed-media works, handcrafting the props featured in her photographs.

In 2021, Woods was selected to attend the prestigious Black Rock Senegal artist residency in Dakar, Senegal, and also won the 1858 Prize for contemporary southern art awarded by the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina. Woods is the recipient of several other awards, fellowships and residencies, including the 2022 Harpo Prize, the Fine Arts Work Center fellowship, ACRE Residency, McColl Center, Ox-Bow School of Art and Artists Residency, and Penland School of Craft. Her work is featured in permanent collections at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art and the Gibbes Museum of Art. Additionally, she has been featured in *BOMB Magazine*, *Art Papers*, *Lenscratch*, *Burnaway*, and *Boston Art Review*.



Stephanie J. Woods, *she deserves to shine (detail)*, 2023, Porcelain, synthetic hair weave, hair beads, and hair jewelry, 48 x 120 x 4 inches, Courtesy of the artist. A collaboration between Stephanie J. Woods and Chantel Bollinger.

## About the Gantt

Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts + Culture is a multidisciplinary arts institution located in the heart of Charlotte, North Carolina. Founded in 1974, the Gantt's mission is to present, preserve, and celebrate excellence in the art, history, and culture of African-Americans and those of African descent through visual and literary arts, dance, music, film, educational programs, theatre productions, and community outreach. The Gantt features fine art exhibitions from around the world and is home to the nationally celebrated John and Vivian Hewitt Collection of African-American Art, which was generously donated by Bank of America, and is accessible online.

Named for Charlotte civic leader and former mayor Harvey Bernard Gantt, the Gantt is housed in an iconic, award-winning structure designed by architect Philip Freelon, co-designer of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

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COVER ARTWORK CREDIT: Stephanie J. Woods, *Shake EM I*, 2022, Afro hair, hair beads, yarn, barrettes, and hand dyed cotton fabric, archival ink-jet print, 24 x 36 x 2 inches, Courtesy of the artist.