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# Project Review: 'Making Room for Abolition', by Lauren Williams

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## Project

Reception

March 23 2022

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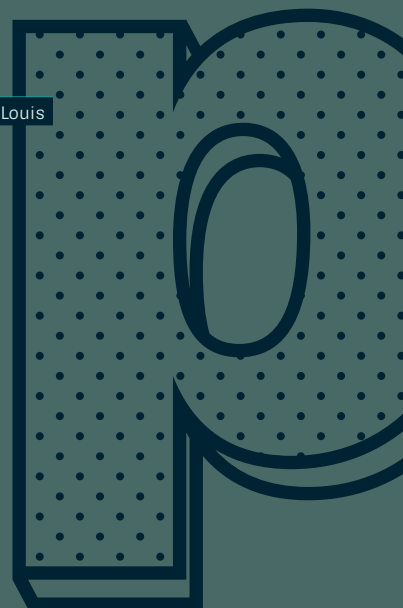
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This review positions Lauren Williams' installation 'Making Room for Abolition', shown in 'Monolith' at Red Bull Arts in Detroit, as a speculative design project that presents a two-fold critique: one directed at us society and the other, at speculative design itself. As a discourse and practice, speculative design offers a model for designing in socially-oriented, post-capitalist contexts, but it has yet to fully unmoor itself from colonialist ideology. I present common critiques of speculative design—specifically: the lack of attention to race- and class-based struggles, the assumption that time is absolute, and its stance that preferable futures must be plausible—to show how Williams addresses these shortcomings while centering Black experiences and imagination in a dream of abolitionist futures.

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**Keywords**

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Speculative Design

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Critical Design

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Abolition

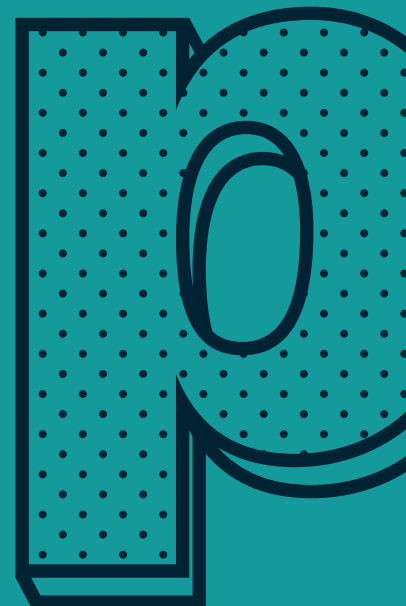
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Design Futures

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Afrofuturism

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## Project Review: 'Making Room for Abolition', by Lauren Williams

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### INTRODUCTION: PROJECT DESCRIPTION

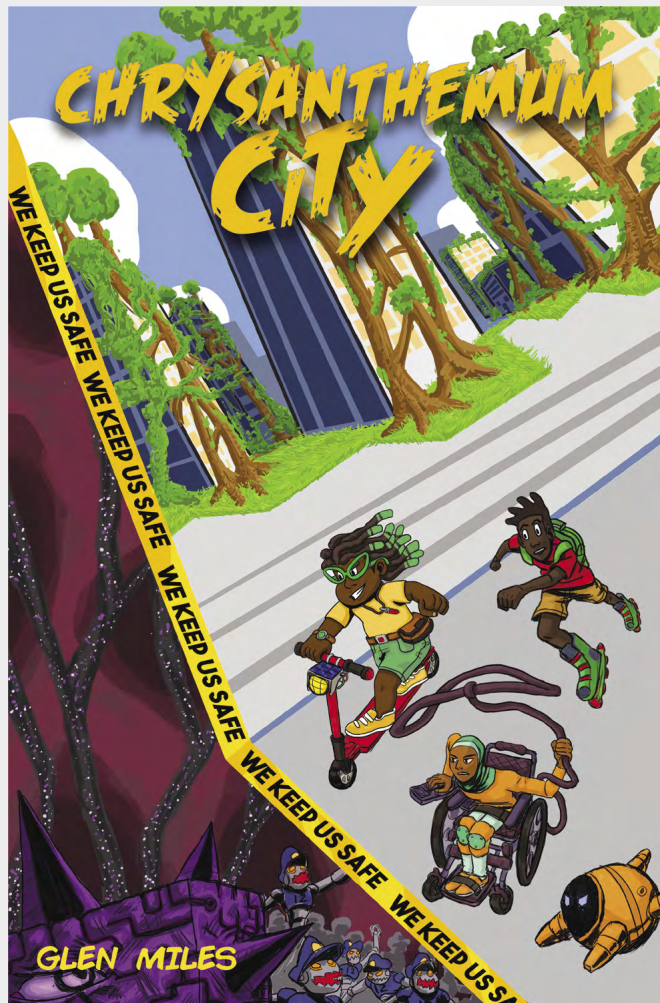
In Lauren Williams' installation 'Making Room for Abolition', exhibited in 'Monolith' from October 8 to November 5, 2021, at Red Bull Arts in Detroit, visitors are invited to a domestic space where they interact with household objects (Figure 1). These objects are props that seem familiar at first, but they reveal themselves to be anything but banal. Serving as context clues, the props guide visitors through the space and assist them in interpreting their surroundings. Each prop opens a range of semantic possibilities while making references to political discourse, works of literature, and symbolic practices. In such a way, Williams brings her own perspective to design: one that centers Black cultures, imagination, and liberation— aspects of Afrofuturism, as Woodrow Winchester III (2022, p. 344) describes it, but without the space travel and techno-fantasies that Martine Syms eloquently resists in 'The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto' (2013).

**Figure 4:** A view from the outside of 'Making Room for Abolition', an installation by Lauren Williams at Red Bull Arts in Detroit. Photograph: Clare Gatto, 2021. Courtesy of Lauren Williams.



On a side table, one finds a bit of mail: a universal basic income check, a conflict resolution summons. Besides this, a locally manufactured product called 'Flamin' Hot Freetos', playfully suggests alternative food systems while hinting at a multinational snack brand whose contested back-story raises questions about meritocracy, class struggle, and identity affirmation (Castrodale, 2021). On the floor, there is a solar-punk cartoon, a collaboration with illustrator Glen Miles, about a group of children who happen upon the ruins of a bygone police cruiser (Figure 2). Elsewhere, a pile of cash is denominated in hours, indicating a time-based economy that equally values all forms of labor. Its proximity to a roll of American dollars suggests these bills would circulate simultaneously with a national currency. Additionally, there are maps, books, tools, and family heirlooms that signpost visitors through three sequential spaces separated by sheer fabric.

**Figure 2:** *Chrysanthemum City* is a solar-punk cartoon illustrated by Glen Miles with typography designed by Lauren Williams. Courtesy of Lauren Williams.



The first space in this fictional world is our current moment, in which the carceral state and the market society show signs of failure. The second space transitions to an increasingly localized, cooperative society. The last space is the furthest future, a time after global capitalism and the most abstract of the three. From any one space, the others are always visible. Dimly lit and dream-like, the setting appears to be mostly in a time forthcoming, but it makes many historical references, situating the visitor in *non-time*, where past, present, and future are conflated in a way that defamiliarizes the home, making it strange.

Yet homes are not always stable or comforting places. Williams' installation was made in Detroit, a context whose history of disinvestment cannot be ignored, and where Williams herself lives. Once the center of the US automobile industry and mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century ideals of middle-class prosperity, the city is now plagued by industrial ruin: depopulation, widespread vacancy, wealth disparity, and real estate speculation. In some Detroit neighborhoods, homes are sites of state-sanctioned violence, surveillance, and control. Speaking to and from this (her own) community, Williams' stated goal was to transform the idea of home from a 'carceral' site to a space for "abolitionist imagination" (2021c). Creating spaces to dream, Lesley-Ann Noel (2022) observes, can help people from historically oppressed communities visualize themselves in the future and therefore recast the narratives that exclude them. 'Making Room for Abolition' contextualizes abolitionist politics in a broad vision of the future that not only includes Black and Indigenous voices, but positions them as the starting point.

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### **ABOLITION IN THE UNITED STATES**

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In the context of the United States, *abolition* is a term that originates in anti-slavery movements and today stands for organized efforts to abolish police and prisons while demanding new models of societal care. Opponents argue that law enforcement is necessary and protective, although some support reform. Abolitionists believe that reform is impossible, noting unsuccessful past efforts to legislate meaningful change. Abolitionists view policing as a historical process that began with slave patrols and continues to be an oppressive system that disproportionately criminalizes Black people (Davis, 2003, pp. 22–39; Vitale, 2017, pp. 7–8, 30). The pervasive idea that people of color commit more crimes and must be subjected to excessive force is one factor contributing to the higher rate of police brutality in Black communities (Vitale, 2017, p. 8).

While the population in the United States is only five percent of the world's total, the US hosts over twenty percent of the world's prison population—the highest in the world (Davis, 2003, p. 11; Fair & Walmsley, 2000, p. 2) and Black residents are 3.5 times more likely to be imprisoned than white residents (Minton & Zeng, 2021). There is no correlation between the mass incarceration

rate, nor the number of police, and reduced crime (Davis, 2003, p. 12; Vitale, 2017, p. 35). Abolitionist literature shows that police do not protect people from crimes, but oppress them through violence (Vitale, 2017, pp. 49–54) while providing a false sense of security to wealthy, property-owning classes (Neocleous, 2000, pp. 42–44). Abolition is not imagined as a singular prohibition—that is, outlawing police and doing nothing else—but as part of a comprehensive societal restructuring that makes policing unnecessary. Police funding could be redirected, for instance, toward a ‘care force’ of social workers and mental health professionals whose interventions could connect people in crisis with support, thus preventing crime (Asher & Horwitz, 2020).

In ‘Making Room for Abolition’, Williams takes care not to disentangle the American penal system from its settler-colonial context, where plunder (land grabbing, labor exploitation, extraction of natural resources) and erasure (of Indigenous and African ways of knowing, doing, and being) are techniques of a social order that values property and profits. Each prop is an open-ended sign through which Williams prescribes no solutions but invites visitors to reconsider what comprehensively makes a healthy society: how to live together safely, relate to nature responsibly, preserve plural histories, and equitably value labor. What makes ‘Making Room for Abolition’ a significant contribution to design discourse is Williams’ cutting, two-fold critique: one directed at US society and the other at speculative design.

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### **DEFINITIONS AND CRITIQUES OF SPECULATIVE DESIGN**

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Speculative design, as Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby define it, is the practice of creating fictional products and environments that propose future scenarios and inspire reflection on present conditions (2013, pp. 2–3). James Auger (2013) further articulates it as an investigational approach that moves design away from the necessity of commercial viability, presents alternatives through fictions shown as prototypes, and initiates dialogues between experts and users (2013). Speculative design places importance on well-made props that, by physically manifesting narratives, ground viewers in the familiar world of today, while also imparting meanings and embodying values that belong to another time and place (Dunne & Raby, 2013, pp. 43–44). Successful speculations transport audiences to a profound thought experiment using ‘perceptual bridges’: techniques that connect perceptions of the world today to the fictional worlds on display (Auger, 2013).

Speculative design projects need not be optimistic to inspire reflection—indeed, some projects are disturbing. Take ‘Slave City—Cradle to Cradle’, designed in 2005 by Atelier Van Lieshout: this project pushes capitalist logics to an extreme by exploring the use of human slaves as an energy source for cities (Dunne & Raby, 2013, pp. 86–87). Whether utopian or dystopian, speculative

designs must be believable (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 4). Believability corresponds to a location on the 'Cone of Futures', which maps the distance between the present moment, shown as a point at the end of a triangle, and a range of futures emanating outward. The widest space in the cone is the 'possible future'. Within this space lies the 'plausible future', and within that is the 'probable future'. A slender section on the border of plausible and probable marks 'preferable futures'. Outside the cone, Dunne and Raby (2013, p. 4) write, is the world of "fairy tales, goblins, superheroes, and space opera," and is of no interest. One of speculative design's most vocal critics, Cameron Tonkinwise disagrees: "There is no reason to imagine why the preferable does not in fact lie outside the plausible, and even outside the possible. Many utopias, as highly preferable, are deliberately implausible" (2014, p. 173).

By indicating the present as a single point, the Cone of Futures suggests that all people experience *now* in the same way, an indication that speculative design is still entrenched in a European rationalist view of time. Tonkinwise writes, "it is very apparent that while 'we' are all at this moment in the calendar imposed upon us in the name of functional global capital, many of us are in very different 'places', with very different sets of futures" (2014, p. 174). This brings to mind yet another room: Dipesh Chakrabarty's "waiting room of history" (2000, p. 8), which describes how European modernity suspends many global communities in the 'not yet' of linear time, which is to say the 'not yet' of self-rule and, by extension, the 'not yet' of the benefits of technological futures. Lonny Avi Brooks writes that from such cruel historical conditions, it is possible to transform past traumas into reclaimed futures by shifting the gaze away from white normativity toward pathways in which Black and Indigenous communities "recover counter-futures, make new memories, and (...) imagine virtual, augmented, and real spaces" (2022, p. 337).

The critique of speculative design's allegiance to European conceptions of progress is compounded by its maintenance of a purview in which mostly white, upper-class practitioners preoccupied with first-world problems stage highly aestheticized visions of doom that seem ignorant of colonialism (Thackara, 2013). Tonkinwise (2016) takes issue with speculative designers at privileged institutions who "imagine what they believe to be dystopian scenarios in a distant future, when in fact people in other parts of the world are already living versions of those lifestyles." Luiza Prado and Pedro Oliveira (2014) likewise implore designers to avoid making the subject of their terror what is, in fact, the reality of other people's lives and recognize that they may belong to societies whose wealth is built on the disasters of others.

While speculative design offers a research-based model for post-capitalist practice, speculative designers have too often claimed expertise in communities where they lack lived experience, while failing to recognize the

hybrid economies and local systems that are already in place. Brooks (2022, p. 325) observes that less than two percent of professional futurists are from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities and, consequently, these communities are rarely considered in futures visioning. Technology-driven speculative futures have proven to be anti-Black, issuing structural exclusions and algorithmic injustices (Winchester, 2022, p. 345), while science fiction techniques used in speculative practice have reproduced historical and present-day oppressions (Noel, 2022, p. 2). It behooves speculative design as a provocative strategy for instigating positive change, to adopt heterogeneous perspectives as well as socially-engaged, cooperative methods. Speculative design could better recognize the critical frameworks already in use by designers who identify with marginalized and oppressed communities.

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### **WILLIAMS' CONTRIBUTION**

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'Making Room for Abolition' is one such critical project that draws on speculative design's central tenets while addressing its shortcomings. The installation is a well-researched scenario that effectively transports audiences to a 'what if' mindset. Williams builds a perceptual bridge through the setting of a home and, through meticulously crafted props, frames an abolitionist future as preferable and utopian. Plausibility is a central issue in abolitionist debates. Williams shows that incremental steps are already being taken, and, though the process is gradual, it is not impossible.

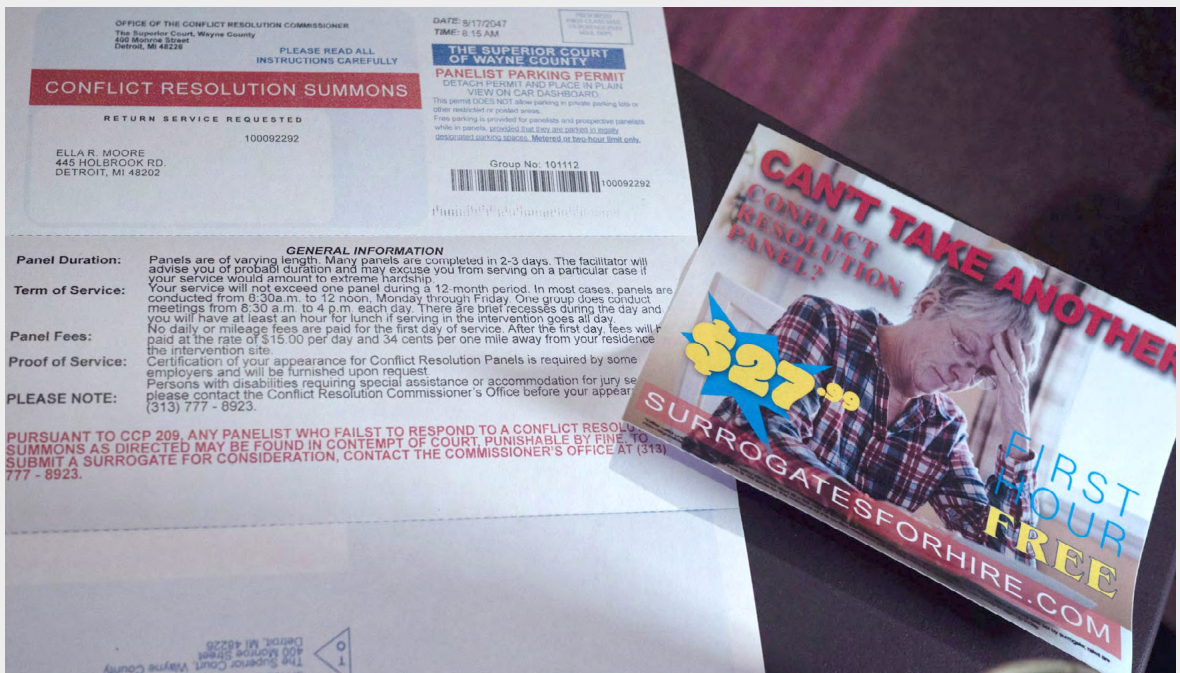
While it is common for speculative designers to create fictional disaster scenarios for the purpose of inspiring reflection, Williams (2021c) links a lack of post-capitalist imagination, particularly on the issue of abolition, to 'disaster capitalism' in real life. This term, coined by Naomi Klein (2008), describes the way property developers seize upon catastrophe—like hurricanes, earthquakes, war, or, in the case of Detroit, industrial ruin—to swiftly profit from reconstruction. Such opportunistic privatizations displace the poor, rendering them less visible within the rhetoric of revitalization, and literally unhousing them so that the wealthy can build private resorts or luxury condos. Describing Detroit as a site of "manufactured disasters and disasters of manufacturing," Williams (2021c) contextualizes the home in disaster capitalism, transforming this speculative setting into an indexical sign of class struggle and gentrification. Here, home is metonymical of the United States' ongoing pattern of plunder and erasure. But it's not pessimistic—the props, like punctures in time, reveal worlds of possibility.

Notably, Williams' process involved input from local abolitionists, artists, and residents—people who are already planting the seeds for post-capitalist futures in Detroit. Rather than imposing her personal vision, she used co-creative methods to give form and content to existing and collaboratively imagined cooper-



**Figure 3:** This summons to attend a conflict resolution was contested by some of the abolitionists who advised Williams. Photograph: Gizzhigad Bieber, 2021. Courtesy of Lauren Williams.

ative systems. In workshops prior to the show's opening, Williams engaged audiences in dialogue and made revisions to the installation based on their feedback. For instance, Williams received input that one prop—the conflict resolution summons (Figure 3)—was problematic because, in a truly emancipatory future, there would be no need to coerce people into consensual procedures. Williams (2021b) accepted this criticism but continued to display the object if only to demonstrate how easy it is to re-inscribe speculative worlds with the same power dynamics that shape our own.



Many speculative design projects prominently feature technology, sometimes to the point of uncritically supporting techno-determinism. In the colonialist ideology of progress, technological 'solutions' are seen as neutral and universally beneficial, rather than culturally situated phenomena whose benefits are unevenly distributed or which may not be beneficial at all (Álvarez Caselli et al., 2021, pp. 1–2). Ruha Benjamin elaborates on this in *Race After Technology*, showing that technology is not inevitable nor something that simply imposes itself on societies; it is also true that “social norms, ideologies, and practices are a constitutive part of technical design,” and this includes racial ideologies (2019, p. 41). In 'Making Room for Abolition', there are no digital media. Williams relies instead on material objects and printed matter. She decided early in the process to omit tech-based props to better highlight social narratives (L. Williams, personal

communication, October 11, 2021). 'Making Room for Abolition' is primarily about relationships between autonomous people and the cooperative, sustainable worlds that could be built from this foundation. It does not forecast tomorrow's technologies nor how these will mediate social relations and subjectivities.

Time, as it pertains to Black experiences in the United States, is a concern running through Williams' work. She observes that the lens through which African-American communities imagine futures is shaped by the inaccessible past—that is, lineages made untraceable through the erasures of slavery (Williams, 2021a). In 'Making Room for Abolition', time is neither linear nor absolute. It is rather *existential*, which Frederick van Amstel and Rodrigo Freese Gonzatto describe as a subjective temporality that allows social groups to construct possibilities of existence by combining "historical memory" with the "will of destiny" (2022, p. 34). Williams' props acknowledge colonial oppressions by enunciating Indigenous cosmologies from Africa and the Americas, suggesting that futures come by way of unrealized pasts.

**Figure 4:** In this prop, a local currency corresponds to hours, not dollars, and is blazoned with a Sankofa bird, an Adinkra symbol meaning "go back and get it." Photograph: Giizhigad Bieber, 2024. Courtesy of Lauren Williams.



One prop shows a map of Detroit, restored to the Anishinaabe name *Waawiyaatanong* ('at the curved shores'), but the topography is reshaped by floods, indicating both the city's current infrastructural problems and the possibility of future collapse. The bills constituting the time-based currency prop (Figure 4) are blazoned with a Sankofa bird, the Adinkra symbol meaning "go back and get it." This symbol, depicting a bird whose head faces an egg on its back, is indicative of Akan philosophy: the egg represents the future which comes by returning to the past and retrieving what was lost (Temple, 2010, p. 127). This strategy of reclaiming and linking Indigenous and African cultural forms connotes the intertwining erasures endemic of racial capitalism in the United States. The implication is that abolition will require the comprehensive transformation of American society, including the foreclosure of white supremacy as it is manifest in visual culture and political structures alike. By symbolically redeeming the past as pluriversal, Williams suggests a future unfettered from colonialism.

### **CONCLUSION**

Lauren Williams' installation 'Making Room for Abolition' comes from and concerns subjects that do not prominently feature in speculative design, while presenting a space for public discussion about ongoing political issues. Influenced by Mundane Afrofuturism, the work is an important contribution to speculative design, in that it reflexively expands the discourse, not only concerning *what* it discusses, but *where* and *by whom*. Williams simultaneously serves up a critique of US society that is not generalized, but specific to Detroit's particular entanglements with capitalism and colonialism. While it is locally attentive, it is globally relevant. Far from an aestheticized vision of doom, Williams presents a multivalent sign-scape which, emanating from Black perspectives in solidarity with Indigenous struggles, leverages the connotations of everyday life to invite audiences to bring their own knowledge and experience to the thought experiment. **D**

### TECHNICAL DATASHEET

**Contributing Artists:** Nayomi Cawthorne (furniture), Logan Merry (metal fabrication), Sarah Wondrack (fabric walls), Saylem Celeste (quilt), Glen Miles (graphic novel), Gabriel Totzke (stools), Alexis Shotwell (mugs), Cyrah Dardas (drawings), Seti Iyi (voice), and Monique Thompson (voice).

**Materials:** Installation with mixed-media objects.

**Year of Execution:** 2021.

**Principal:** Lauren Williams.

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