

BmoreArt

Art AND: Abigail Lucien

By Suzy Kopf, June 11, 2021



The sculptor talks about moving to Baltimore during the pandemic, thinking with your hands, and singing to your plants.

Abigail Lucien makes poetry from household and building materials. One of MICA's newest full-time faculty hires, Lucien moved to Baltimore in the summer of 2020 to accept a position in the school's Interdisciplinary Sculpture department and has been discovering the city slowly during the pandemic while also living in the aftermath of personal tragedy.

The Haitian-American sculptor (whose pronouns are they/she), lost both their father and grandfather to COVID last summer and has poured that enormous loss into a new body of work currently on display in the show *In Practice: You may go, but this will bring you back* at [SculptureCenter](https://www.sculpture-center.org) in New York. The resulting three-dimensional works, which are made of carefully chosen materials and arranged in a stark gallery space, are so quietly powerful that feeling translates through

photographs of them. As of this writing, I have not been able to view the work in person, but I do feel their force without question.

Lucien grew up spending summers with her father in Cap-Haitian, Haiti, and living with her mother and siblings on the northeast coast of Florida for the school year. Attracted to the community and collaboration of print shops, she studied printmaking at Florida State University and later went to graduate school at the University of Tennessee Knoxville to further their study in printmaking. They were named to the 2021 Forbes 30 Under 30 list in the Arts & Style category by judges Tory Burch, Ashley Graham, Ashley Longshore, and Kehinde Wiley.

The experience of being bicultural and biracial is central to Lucien's work. "A lot of my work is quoting hidden or visible-yet-invisible architectural structures that stand in as metaphors for cultural references and inherited colonial structures," she explains. Her focus is "probing and investigating how that affects the way that we navigate the world, particularly for those people of color, through my own experience."



Lucien's work is an investigation of how everyday materials can function as metaphors recalling an absence or intimacy of the human body, and they work most often with their own body, using it as a tool they describe as "activating inquiry" with materials. In airy compositions of metal, video, found material, print, and sound, the artist hopes that their activation of selected but familiar material will leave space for viewers to question their own experience with the works and the structures they evoke.

For the installation at SculptureCenter, titled in *Holding Your Name Like Butter in Your Palm* , Lucien used 365 pounds of cocoa butter to cast breezeblocks in the ubiquitous "sunflower" pattern (also known as cloverleaf and snowflake depending on the region and manufacturer) to evoke passageways in both Haiti and Florida. They also cast bricks from SculptureCenter's original foundation in cocoa butter, recalling both the creation of a building and the act of laying a memorial to the

departed. Into these bricks, she carved the initials of Black people who were killed by the police in 2020.

“The act of hand carving a name is a way of meditation on loss,” Lucien says. “The gesture is symbolic of a prayer one might cast for care or protection over a loved one. The installation’s essence is to be reflective and restorative, making a statement of the importance of valuing Black life within and outside of the context of an art institution.” While visitors cannot touch the piece and feel it melting with their own body heat, the smell of the cocoa butter is still extremely evocative, leaving the viewer to make their own associations with the lubricant which is often applied directly to the body as a gesture of care.



Abigail Lucien, *Holding Your Name Like Butter in Your Palm*, 2021, cocoa butter, bronze, sea salt, chicken feet, matches, soy wax, acrylic and vinyl on steel, Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of SculptureCenter, by Kyle Knodell

Unable to return home to Haiti due to COVID, Lucien is missing the important rituals that are intended to provide comfort and typically accompany deaths that occur outside of a global pandemic: gathering with family, a funeral, and time at home together to discuss a shared loss. The pieces at SculptureCenter are a reflection of the labor and weight of grief as well as what inevitably comes next: getting on with your own life, which Lucien explains “the experience of how you

make room for other things, while you're still living with grief and having that sort of daily ritual of understanding."

In Mary Oliver's poem "In Blackwater Woods"—part of the collection *Our World*, written after the death of Molly Malone Cook, her partner of over fifty years—the speaker explains that to live we must do three things: "love what is mortal/ to hold it/ against your bones knowing/ your own life depends on it/ and, when the times comes to let it go/ let it go." What Oliver knew, and what Lucien is telling their viewer, is that letting go of people closest and most important to us is the hardest. The process of making this work for Lucien was a ritual and a meditation of mourning for her family members, as well as for members of the Black community killed by police in the first year of the pandemic.

There is a factuality about continuing to live while someone important to you has died; it becomes like a scar that you can choose to expose or not. Perhaps this is the letting go that Oliver talks about. The pain becomes less raw and more mundane, a once gaping wound that morphs into an old sports injury, largely letting you walk around and live life and then flaring up and totally flattening you without notice. The word "lost" when applied to death feels entirely hollow—people typically are not missing, they are dead. But they are lost to us, and we often prefer poetry to fact. For everyone who has lost core family members, it's an absence that never gets better. But over time, the feelings you carry around death change. For Lucien, this process is about "navigating these sort of unresolvable moments that are these steps towards a healing."

SUBJECT: Abigail Lucien, 28

WEARING: Handyma'am coveralls, thrifted sleeveless baby blue turtleneck, CAT sneakers

PLACE: Zoom



Suzy Kopf: What is the most important book (or books) you've read or are reading?

Abigail Lucien: Audre Lorde's [*Sister Outsider*](#) remains a pinnacle collection of writing to me. The past few weeks I've been keeping *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* at my bedside. It's this thick, purple-bound text that I think I got from the ICA at VCU's book shop (shout out to EggyB for their brilliant selection!). I enjoy flipping it through like it's a dictionary, reading the poem I land on aloud, then chewing on it for a while.

I also have about seven books cracked open right now in various states of completion. Here are a few: Kathryn Yusoff's [*A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*](#), Legacy Russell's [*Glitch Feminism*](#), Judith Butler's [*Bodies That Matter*](#), and Ocean Vuong's [*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*](#).

What was the worst career or life advice you've ever received? What is the best?

A mentor once told me, "time is the most expensive material you will ever use." That changed the game for me in terms of putting a new perspective on how I value my professional and emotional time and labor.

The worst advice I've gotten is "hot glue is not an acceptable fine art material." Whoever told me this clearly has no idea what they are doing or just has absolutely no fun.

You recently arrived in Baltimore (August 2020) to take a full-time faculty position in the sculpture department at MICA. How has adjusting to Baltimore been for you?

It's been strange, like getting to know someone while they're a little bit asleep. Everyone that I've met, as far as colleagues or my students, they're all framed in a little yellow Zoom box. So that's been really strange for me. I'm an incredibly in-person type of person—I respond really well to body language and aura. So how I communicate has had to change. It's also changed the way that I understand my practice, both as an artist and as an educator. And also, as a home builder. My relationship to the city that I live in is new. It's been beautiful—instead of restaurant hopping and feeling out different vibes, I'm taking long walks and park hopping. There's something really silent about the way that I've been navigating this city that I think is completely shaped by the fact that we are in a pandemic.

How would you describe your relationship with failure? Is there any advice you give to students about dealing with the disappointment that is a natural part of any career?

Failure is a perception. Not everything is about "getting" something. Of course you're allowed to be bummed when something you took a risk on or worked hard for doesn't go as planned. But there's so much to learn from going all-in after something you want, and even more to learn from picking yourself up and doing it again.

You're from a family of priests and you often refer to aspects of your work as being spiritual to you. What does spirituality mean in the context of your work?

Faith is something that I've been taught in my home life, my whole life. I've seen really closely what the structures of religion and church can do in both beautiful and devastating ways. I have my own personal journey with spirituality, so naturally at times its presence is felt in the work. A lot of that has been resurfacing through the experience of losing my father and grandfather to the virus this past summer. There's been a lot of personal inquiry of where myth and truth and faith intersect in both my work and in my personal life. Those things are sort of bleeding together right now. I find it difficult as a Haitian woman to not have some sort of faith, to not

believe in anything. The power of will and the power of manifestation and the power of belief—those things are very real to me. They're very tangible to me. There is also this space in Haitian culture that allows for conflicting ideology, conflicting beliefs to co-exist. That is something that I'm incredibly interested in: how do these things that seem like they could negate each other exist in the same place and also have such parallelism?



Foreground: Abigail Lucien, *Holding Your Name Like Butter in Your Palm*, 2021, cocoa butter, bronze, sea salt, chicken feet, matches, soy wax, acrylic and vinyl on steel, Dimensions variable. Photo courtesy of SculptureCenter, by Kyle Knodell. Background: Work by Quay Quinn Wolf

What does your daily or weekly routine look like during the semester? Being at home so much and teaching sculpture from home are hugely challenging, so how do you structure your days to feel the best?

I try to take a walk and feel the sun on my face every day. Living in Florida, I became a half-lizard and whilst moving progressively northward in my adult years I've learned how necessary the sun is for my mind.

I think best through my hands and on my feet. I'm always encouraging my students to "think with their hands" and to do the same when working out their ideas in physical forms. When we get too in our heads, anticipating and planning our next move, sometimes this can keep us from actually manifesting it.

This has probably been the toughest thing for me teaching sculpture online; encouraging and empowering students through physical application and having each other as support systems to learn from is central to how I build community in my classrooms. We're still definitely rooting each other on through our computer screens but, sadly, it can never really compare.



Have you had any pandemic-influenced either hobbies or just things that you loved coming back into your life because you've had more time to reflect on them?

I have a big plant family I take care of, and I think nurturing something and caring for something that's living is really beautiful. Witnessing that growth is important. Lauryn Hill said, "anything that's not growing is dead." I love the notion of existing within a space where constant growth is expected. I think to not be growing, to not be growing out of things, to not be growing into other things, would be a sort of stillness that I would be uncomfortable with.

I think about this in my work too. I stay humbled by how excited I can be to learn something new. I feel like I will never not be like that. That sort of curiosity or hunger for knowledge—it's something that drives me. I think a lot of the time, especially when I talk to my students, there's this idea of getting to a point and stopping there. I'm not interested in putting boundaries on what I can learn or do or know. Not so interested in drawing finish lines. I would rather continue growing.

Since you're a devoted plant parent, what are your top tips for keeping plants alive?

They do most of the work themselves. Like anything else, if you give them too much love they will rebel. And thirdly (I like sets of threes), singing! Singing helps. Sing and dance with your plants and they will sing and dance back.

Do you have a daily "uniform" or specific favorite piece of clothing? What is it?

If I'm at home, the vibe is anything soft and witchy.

If I'm in the studio, chances are I'm wearing my Handyma'am coveralls. The last thing I want to be concerned with when I'm working in the studio is wearing

something too precious or too restricting to get down on the floor in. Most workwear is tailored for men, so, as a femme sculptor who loves to embrace all their curves, finding workwear that doesn't make me have to choose between suffocating my thighs or looking like a potato sack has traditionally been tough. That's why I go hard for my "made for women, by women" coveralls. They also have this sick workwear grant to allow their garments to become more inclusive and at an accessible price range. I mean, c'mon.



Abigail Lucien, *A Song of Ascents*, 2020, soap, enamel, chicken foot, beeswax, rebar, 26 x 26.5 x 5 inches. Photo by Dev Hein

Like a lot of contemporary sculptors, your work is materially driven. Do you have a desert-island material? Is there a material you would be very upset about if you could no longer find it anywhere to use in sculpture?

A desert-island material? No, not really. A desert-island tool though? My 9mm Olfa knife is my baby. Always at hand no matter the process or material I'm working with.

What are the last three emojis you used?

Sparkle. Tamale. Smiling face with tear.

Inspiration comes from everywhere, but in a career it is likely that you'll be put into context with other people. Who do you see as your contemporaries? Whose art is yours in conversation with? Or if there aren't any other artists whose work you see your own in, are there structures, places, or other notable influences on you?

I've had a big fat crush on [Quay Quinn Wolf](#)'s work. They know this. It may or may not be mutual. For the first time, our works are sharing space together while on view in New York at SculptureCenter.

Positioned in the same corridor, the works have this tactile dialogue with one another; with my work you can imagine the feeling of that temporal, softening state of cocoa butter as it melts in your hand—at the same time imagining what the smooth, hard pressing the dozens of pearls glittering on Quay's work might feel like in proximity to your own body. Katherine Simòne Reynolds was so thoughtful in every step of their curation of the exhibition. I feel blessed for my work to be in context with the works of all the artists in the show.

Do you believe in astrology? If so, what kind of insight can astrology give our readers about you?

Yes and no, which ironically is actually exactly how someone with my astrological sign would answer this question. Do I believe planetary alignments and movements affect the nature of our human instincts? Absolutely. Do I believe most of our common knowledge about astrology is fed to us from junk food apps that feed on our own insecurities to get us to keep coming back? Yes, this too.

I was born in The Week of Magic. Typically, I get one of two reactions when I reveal my sun sign: the first is a pursed lip and a knowing “mmmhmm,” and the second a puzzled face and a “hmm” that's been saturated with a little disappointment at my tameness. For the sake of leaving *something* in this interview to the imagination, you can guess where the stars place me on our astrological calendar.



Who are your art or business heroes and what do you look to them for? Do you have anyone whose work you've always admired or whose career you'd like to emulate or just someone you think would be a cool person to have coffee with? Why are they the coolest?

Tracee Ellis Ross. Me, always in total awe, would absorb all she has to spill about staying humble and authentic to yourself while navigating competitive industries that would rather see POCs competing than uplifting each other. She would give me improv tips while also gracefully pointing out how to keep my curls hydrated and quenched. We would catch up over tea weekly-ish (social distanced of course) and FaceTime each other while both wearing boss-ass pantsuits.

What would your teenage self think of you today?

I think they'd be surprised but down for it.

Did you have a formative and/or terrible first job? What was it?

One summer when I was seven or eight, I operated and was the only employee of my very own massage business out of my Ton Caleb's summer camp in Pignon. I used to tell the American visitors that I "didn't mind the stress on my hands because it was a good warm-up for drawing" (LMFAO). I'm not sure if it was pure masseuse "talent" that made that summer gig pop off or if it was simply folks feeling bad and wanting to support this weird little curly-haired girl with an ambition as heavy as their lisp. Either way, I made bank and kept said bank in a miniature, plastic, red barn. The top of the barn was hinged and you could store things inside. Most kids probably put plastic barn animals in there but for me it was my wad of USD. Later that summer I lost the tiny red barn and my summer earnings with it. There's not some big moral lesson that comes with this story. Maybe, actually, that's it. That's the lesson right there.

What have you learned the hard way?

You don't have to rush everything.