

## ***Home-goings and the Celebration of Black Life***

My pop-pop's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday happened recently. Throughout the day, my family was sharing memories of him in our family group chat such as his favorite phrases and songs. My dad often points out how similar we are. We talk about our ancestors with joy and humor, describing their quirks and mannerisms that have been passed down through generations: we celebrate the lives before us.

Celebration is an integral part of the Black community, whether through moments of triumph or moments of grief. Irene Antonia Diane Reece's exhibition, *Home-goings* at Galveston Arts Center which was on view from June 5 - August 22, 2021, explores and celebrates Black life through spirituality. By using photography, installations, audio, and text, Reece reminds us that the most rebellious act Black people can do is celebrate themselves.

The term "Home-goings" is taken from Reece's upbringing in the Black Southern Church. It is the act of celebrating an ancestor's passing, their memory, and their passage to a better place. Reece uses photographs and elements from her family archive, along with her personal experiences, in her work. As a result, *Home-goings* is a deeply personal celebration and exploration honoring Black life.

The mirrored curation of the galleries offers two different experiences: one joyous, one somber. *Call and Response* (2021, audio loop, 40 minutes), a series of Christian hymnals offering praise to God, plays in the Brown Foundation Gallery. In the adjoining 1878 Gallery, Reece's *In Remembrance of Me* is illuminated by a soft glow of diffused light from the windows.

Both pieces come together to offer a sensorial experience that helps further transform the gallery from a metaphorical to spiritual space.

Throughout this gallery are several artworks that transform the space from an installation to a place of spiritual experience. A large black and white photograph cut down the middle (*Let the Church Say Amen*, 2021, Metropolitan United Methodist Church, Conroe, TX, Inkjet Print and Mod Podge, 72" x 88") hangs on the main wall, drawing the viewer in. A group of women dressed in formal wear for a pageant is the focus, while a little girl in the lower-left corner stares directly at the viewer, bored.

On either side of the photograph are two groupings of paper fans: on the left is *Protect Black Girls* (2021, Inkjet Print on Church Fan, 12" x 8") and on the right is *Protect Black Boys* (2021, Inkjet Print on Church Fan, 12" x 8"). The text on the back of *Protect Black Girls* reads: "*We need to protect Black girls. Because they ain't protected. We need to fight for our Black women. Because we ain't fighting for them. We must protect them. They deserve better – we deserve better. Thank you for Black women, Lord. Their descendants have blessed the earth.*" Due to the placement of the work, the viewer is able to make a direct connection with the text and the little girl in *Let the Church Say Amen*. Experiences from Reece's childhood along with the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's report "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls Childhood" influenced her creation of this work.

All the fans in the exhibition are created through a combination of imagery from the artist's family archive including the photograph featured in *Protect Black Boys*. Reece draws inspiration from her archive and creates new works through appropriating layers of images and text. This process, when paired with her large-scale photographs, forces the viewer to

acknowledge that these are real lives that are at stake. *Protect Black Girls* and *Protect Black Boys*, in particular, reminds viewers that Black children are not allowed to be innocent: they are seen as threats from a young age.

*In Remembrance of Me* concludes with a prie-dieu (prayer kneeler) and a large pile of brightly colored artificial flowers at the base. By using artificial flowers, Reece emphasizes the idea that while our ancestors are gone, they never truly die.

*I Am Blessed To Be In Your Presence* (2021, Metropolitan United Methodist Church, Conroe, TX, Inkjet print and Mod Podge, 70" x 88"), in the Brown Foundation Gallery, is a large inkjet photograph covered in the same glitter Mod Podge used in *Let The Church Say Amen*. Members of the congregation stand outside the church, posing in the bright sun, creating a high contrast image. The size of the photograph places the figures at eye-level with the viewer, making their presence known and reinforcing their significance - they are not relics of the past to be ignored. "I Am Blessed To Be In Your Presence" is written across the bottom, turning the artwork title into a prayer for the viewer to repeat while in the space. The combination of these elements creates a haunting memorial, and as a result, contributes to the reverential atmosphere in the gallery. Viewers are offered a space for reflection, leading to an inner spiritual, and physical transformation.

*Black Liberation Theology* (2021, Inkjet print on church fan, 12" x 8") highlights the resiliency of the Black community whereas *Y'all Are Still Trying to Hide Racism* (2021, Inkjet print on church fan, 12" x 8") confronts non-Black viewers. The front of the fan contains an image of a colorful bouquet of flowers with text overlaid on top, stating the failure to dismantle white supremacist structures in both America and the world. The text on the back of the fan

reminds Black viewers that their existence is a beautiful blessing. Reece's text stems from James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, an influence on Reece and her practice.

Underneath *I Am Blessed To Be In Your Presence* lies *I'm Sorry I Couldn't Save You* (2021, Communion wafers and inkjet prints on a platform, 2" x 96" x 36"). Rows of Communion wafers line the wooden platform with an image of a Black person placed on top. There are people the average viewer may recognize such as George Floyd, Emmett Till, and Breonna Taylor due to the extensive media coverage of their lives, but there are also several lesser-known faces that go unrecognized due to a lack of education and attention to Black History. The four girls at the top of the artwork are victims of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Two of the white supremacists and preparators of the bombing were tried in 2002; others were never charged. Some stories go uncovered, but their lives still matter, with or without the attention of the non-Black community. The use of Communion wafers takes inspiration from Communion, a Christian rite where members of the congregation eat a wafer that is symbolic of the body of Christ. Reece applies a similar sense of spirituality in her installation to these Black lives, a reminder for the Black community that while our experiences are different, our collective history will always be the same.

The installation ends with *Call and Response* (2021, Salt, Dimensions variable). The phrase written in salt, "*I'm sorry I couldn't save you Beloved. I won't forget you. Soon it will be done. Trouble of the world, going home to live with God. For God so love the world that they gave their child...our black children. Sunshine fades n shadows fall. But sweet remembrance outlasts all*" is partially destroyed by visitors who failed to acknowledge its presence. This ignorance and lack of respect towards the artwork fulfills the points Reece has been stating in

the exhibition – Black lives are treated as disposable. The combination of all five artworks creates a memorial for all Black lives lost, those that we know about, and those who passed quietly.

There are two artworks in both galleries that remind non-Black viewers of their duty to the Black community. Both *Untitled* (2021, Church service attendance board with acrylic on paper, 32" x 16") and *Go on and Testify* (2021, Acrylic on Paper, 11" x 9") mimic church schedule boards, but instead of events there is a cry of anger. *Untitled* features statistics married with text describing the danger Black lives are in daily, while also reminding Black viewers they deserve to be here. The title *Go on and Testify* references the phrase pastors give to their congregation to spread the word of God; it is also a quote from Dr. Barbara Shabazz, a clinical psychologist. By using this phrase, Reece emphasizes the point that non-Black viewers have the responsibility to use their privilege to protect Black lives.

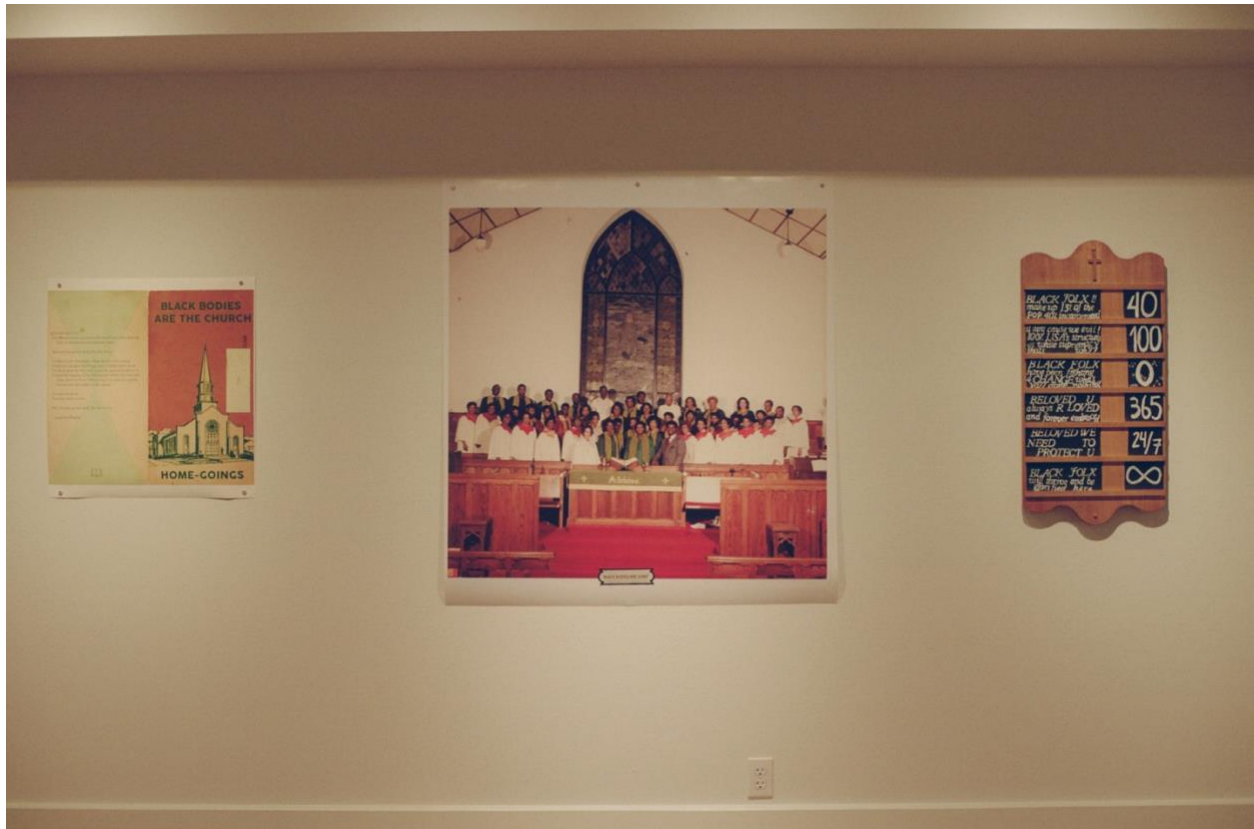
Reece's exhibition creates a memorial dedicated to both her ancestors and the collective ancestors of the Black community. *Home-goings* is an exhibition for the Black community that gives them the time and space to laugh, cry, reflect, and exist. While the Black experience is not a monolith, there are moments in Reece's work that every Black person can relate to. *Home-goings* is a reminder that Black lives matter and always will: we should celebrate them.



Irene Antonia Diane Reece, *In Remembrance of Me*, 2021, site specific installation, artificial flowers, Inkjet print, church fans, kneeler bench, and cross, 1878 Gallery, Galveston Arts Center (part of *Home-goings*, June 5 – August 22, 2021), Photo Courtesy of Troy Montes



Irene Antonia Diane Reece, Brown Foundation Gallery, Galveston Arts Center, Installation view (left to right): *Black Liberation Theology*, 2021, Inkjet print on church fan, 12" x 8"; *I Am Blessed To Be In Your Presence*, 2021, Metropolitan United Methodist Church, Conroe, TX, Inkjet print and Mod Podge, 70" x 88"; *I'm Sorry I Couldn't Save You*, 2021, Communion wafers and inkjet prints on a platform, 2" x 96" x 36"; *Call and Response*, 2021, Salt, Dimensions variable; *Y'all Are Still Trying to Hide Racism*, 2021, Inkjet print on church fan, 12" x 8"  
 Photo Courtesy of Troy Montes



Irene Antonia Diane Reece, Brown Foundation Gallery, Galveston Arts Center, Installation view, left to right: *Black Bodies Are The Church*, 2021, Inkjet print on Hahnemuhle, 24" x 24"; *Black Bodies are Sonic*, 2021, Trinity East United Methodist Church, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward, Houston, TX, Inkjet print, 48" x 44"; *Untitled*, 2021, Church service attendance board with acrylic on paper, 32" x 16"

Photo Courtesy of Troy Montes





Irene Antonia Diane Reece posing in front of *In Remembrance of Me* at the Galveston Arts Center, 2021, (part of *Home-goings*, June 5 – August 22, 2021), Photo Courtesy of Troy Montes