

Alicia Henry

Re'al Christian

Alicia Henry
Analogous III, 2020
Acrylic, thread, yarn, and dyed leather
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist





Alicia Henry
Analogous III (detail), 2020
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Alicia Henry's work is driven by interpersonal connections. Through her interdisciplinary practice, Henry explores the feelings of connection and isolation that permeate our day-to-day lives. The human figure is at the center of much of her work, but instead of rendering each figure unique, she creates subjects that more or less conform to one another in appearance. Through these figurative groupings, she considers how similarities and differences define both individual and collective identities. In examining social relationships, Henry seeks to highlight how arbitrary distinctions—whether of age, class, gender, or race—shape stereotypes and complicate social encounters.

Henry's interest in figuration first emerged during her childhood, when she began using paper to create dolls.¹ She sees her artistic practice as a continuation of those cut-outs, with silhouetted figures constructed out of paper, textiles, and leather.² Though Henry primarily

identifies as a painter, she works in an interdisciplinary manner. Her figures often make reference to traditional craft and textiles, which she was exposed to as a child and further studied during her time in art school. By incorporating flat forms and pared-down materials, she uses a minimalist approach to push the limits of figurative representation. Their simplicity, however, is deceptive. While Henry is not necessarily interested in exclusively focusing on race in her work, she seeks to question how viewers interpret figures they see as racialized Others. "At this time in the United States," Henry has said, "the brown body has become politicized."³ Her work confronts how the presence of Black and Brown bodies is often received as a political gesture, and asks viewers to question their own immediate assumptions both in her work and beyond.



Installation views of *Alicia Henry: Witnessing at the Power Plant*, Toronto, Ontario, January 26–May 12, 2019: *Untitled (cluster)*, 2019. Acrylic, graphite, charcoal, thread, paper, cardboard (top); *Untitled (Fragments)*, 2019. Acrylic, graphite, pastel, colored pencil, crayon, felt, thread, yarn, paper, cotton (bottom).

Henry's figurative works are often hung together, either in pairs or groups that she refers to as "families." For her 2019 solo exhibition *Witnessing* at the Power Plant in Toronto, she presented *Untitled (cluster)* (2019), a wall installation comprising violet and ochre figures. Though they bear limited features, their curved silhouettes suggest female attributes. Across from *Untitled (cluster)* was another installation, *Untitled (fragments)* (2019), a series of mixed-media cut-outs that further break down the compositional elements of the human form into individual body parts and obscure clear readability. Due to their ambiguous features, these subjects resist easy characterization. In contrasting these two installations, Henry sets up a dynamic in which one set of figures are more easily susceptible to misidentification. The artist demonstrates how the process by which we incorrectly identify individuals based on their physical attributes can be seen as an act of objectified indexicality.

Henry's subjects are at once playful and enigmatic, with simplified clothing, attenuated limbs, and nondescript facial features. Pieces such as *Untitled (Tall Figure)* (2015) reference traditional modes of portraiture: closely cropped compositions, stark frontality, and stoic expressions recall nineteenth-century photographs. Her works appear fragile, as their missing limbs and weathered surfaces attest, reflecting the delicacy and impermanence of the natural materials used in their creation.

African masks were another early influence for Henry, whose parents collected and displayed masks in their home—a practice the artist has continued herself.⁴ Beyond their aesthetic qualities, the artist is inspired by the performative use of masks in communal rituals. Her installation *Analogous III* (2020) addresses the problematic history of African masks as appropriat-



Alicia Henry. *Untitled (Tall Figure)*, 2015. Dye, thread, cotton, charcoal, linen, felt, acrylic, 80 × 24 inches.

ed art objects, while also referencing their performative nature (see pages 38–41). The piece comprises mask-like faces hung in succession to form a monumental wall installation. Each face is made of dyed leather, stitched together with thread and yarn. Like her earlier works—*Untitled (Large Red Face)* (2015) for instance—the faces in the *Analogous* series are collaged from disparate materials, endowing the forms with a disjointed, patchworked appearance.

With the masks hung side by side, the installation recalls a procession, a body of people engaged in a ritual that can be either celebratory or mournful. The work suggests a range of stylistic influences from cubism

to arte povera, but in evoking the procession as a communal ritual, *Analogous III* also recalls the expressionist paintings of Norman Lewis, who often depicted such movements in a manner teetering between representation and abstraction. Henry's installation treads a similar line and simultaneously reflects how masks complicate the process of looking. Each face—with gaping mouths, large eyes, and elongated flesh—carries intense emotionality, though the precise nature of that emotion remains ambiguous. Some appear to be laughing, others screaming or crying. Our inability to unequivocally read these expressions contributes to their uncanniness. For Henry, these emotions do not represent opposite ends of a spectrum, but are all intertwined in the complicated, often contradictory ways in which we communicate.

Henry was born and raised in a rural town in Illinois. She now lives and works in Nashville, Tennessee, and is an associate professor of art at Fisk University. She received her B.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and M.F.A. from Yale University School of Art. Over the course of her career, she has garnered numerous awards, fellowships, and grants, including the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and



Alicia Henry. *Untitled (Large Red Face)*, 2015.
Mixed media, 48 × 30 inches.

Sculptors Grant, the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Ford Foundation Fellowship. She has held residencies at Women's Studio Workshop, Art in General, the MacDowell Art Colony, the Fine Arts Work Center, and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. In 2016, Henry received the 1858 Prize for Contemporary Southern Art Award and the Centre of Excellence for the Creative Arts Fellowship.

Henry's work has been shown around the United States at spaces including the Atlanta Biennial, Cheekwood Museum of Art, Frist Art Museum, Tennessee State Museum, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, South Bend Museum of Art, Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Carnegie Museum of Art. She has also presented her work internationally at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada, the 13th Havana Biennial, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

- 1 Alicia Henry, telephone conversation with author, April 27, 2020.
- 2 “Karen Barbour | Alicia Henry.” Zeitgeist, January 2016. <http://zeitgeist-art.com/barbour-henry-2016>.
- 3 Henry quoted in “The Power Plant presents Alicia Henry’s first solo exhibition in Canada.” The Power Plant, 2020. <http://www.thepowerplant.org/Exhibitions/2019/Winter-2019/Witnessing.aspx>.
- 4 Alicia Henry, telephone conversation with author, April 27, 2020.