

An Audacious Gaze on the Black Queer Archive

The collage artist Alanna Fields draws on vintage photographs, reframing her subjects with wax and glitter—and an eye for subversive gesture.

Near the middle of singer-songwriter Moses Sumney's second studio album, *græ* (2020), comes a song called "jill/jack," in which the artist interpolates a stanza from Jill Scott's sexy, meandering 2004 song "Cross My Mind." Backed by icy synths, Scott recites: "He had that masculine thing down / Shoulders and back straight / Never slumping / Never round." Sumney's distorted voice dips in, and the lyric soon shifts, then shifts again: "(She) had that masculine thing down. . . . (He) had that (feminine) thing down. . ." These slippery, incantatory words run through my mind when I look at Alanna Fields's work. In the mixed-media artist's collage series *As We Were* (2019) and *Audacity* (2019–ongoing), subtle gestures—the tilt of a shoulder, a hand at the waist—become precious centerpieces of Black queer expression. Like Sumney's song, Fields's work is an act of lyrical interpolation: poring through photographic archives from as far back as the 1920s and as recently as the '80s, she culls vernacular images of Black queer people and then interweaves and overlays them with strips of wax paper, trails of glitter, and other fragmented embellishments. The result is a new kind of archive, one less interested in identifying details or immaculate historical

records and more keyed toward honoring the careful shifts between concealment and audacious play that are her subjects' vital, vibrant body language.

When we spoke on the phone some weeks back, Fields had just arrived at her studio in New York's Hudson Valley, where she's continuing to build *Audacity*, growing her personal archive of vernacular images, and also working at a brand-new body of work, which will be on view this May at Baxter St at the Camera Club of New York, Fields's first solo show. In this new series, she is continuing to retrieve and reframe gestures of desire, but this time, she is intentionally decentering amorous relationships in her images and, instead, looking at queer people at home, in nature, on their own—a way of seeing the “lushness,” as she puts it, of queerness unqualified by lovers, unbridled by landscape.



Alanna Fields, *Dark Body*, 2019, from the series *As We Were*

Nicole Acheampong: Where do you source your found images?

Alanna Fields: A couple of places. Primarily, I source them from online collectors on eBay. But I've also been really blessed to have some people donate photographs to me. I've gotten a lot of great donations. I have a really large archive of queer people in the military that I've just been sitting on. I got that from my mentor Allen Frame, who was also a professor of mine at Pratt.

Acheampong: When you find these photographs on eBay, or when they're gifted to you, are there identifying details attached? It seems like a big part of your work is moving through anonymity and obscurity. Are you intentionally removing identifying details, or is that more a side effect of these archives?

Fields: Sometimes I will get names written on the back of the photographs. Sometimes there will be dates or places. In some of the photographs—you know, when you get a film slide, there'll be

“February ’67” in the corner. In some of the pieces I keep those details, but I really want to work with the ghostly matter of these photographs, because I don’t know these people, and there’s not a lot of information or context there. A lot of it is imaginative or present in things like gesture. There’s a piece that I have, *Past Tense Future Present* (2019), and on one of the panels, you’ll see written across the photograph “Pals Forever,” and then below that a couple who very much seem to be lovers and have this amorous energy between them. What are



Alanna Fields, *Severed Gently*, 2019, from the series *As We Were*

we really looking at? We have a note written here that kind of denotes what the relationship is, and a photograph that exposes it. There’s that tension. I think a lot of that has to do with the dissemination of snapshots and photographs like that, and sharing them, but also having to keep that protection for yourself, so that others may not know what the nature of your relationship is. So there’s that too.

Acheampong: Your captions are often pointedly enigmatic. The images are either untitled or titled things like *Severed Gently*, *Nonchalantly*, or *Dreadful Funkiness*. Would you say that the way you name these works is a part of aiding in that concealment?

Fields: Yeah, I would say particularly with *As We Were*, I really tried to address, through different modes, the obscurity there. For example, with *Dreadful Funkiness*, I was thinking about the dread and funkiness associated with queerness, specifically in the Black community, and homophobia, and how something so beautiful can be seen with such disdain. With *Severed Gently*, you have a couple who’s cut at the neck and at the hip very intentionally. I chose to crop that photo. This couple was in San Francisco outside of an AIDS/HIV testing clinic, and I was thinking about the divide between lovers because of the virus, but also, you know, the grasping at the waist, how very tied to each other they are, even in the potential separation of the two.



Alanna Fields, *Untitled (Blue)*, 2019, from the series *As We Were*

Acheampong: I want to talk about the wax veils and the ways that they divide the subjects, but also just the materiality of the wax. The veil seems to be lifting off the work; there's a three-dimensionality that's captured. And throughout the series *As We Were* and *Audacity*, the wax never conceals your subjects perfectly. It's never perfectly smoothed down. How are you working with the texture of the wax?

Fields: Initially, when I began making *As We Were*, I printed out these photographs at around four by five inches, some at eight by ten. I had really huge windows in my studio at Pratt, and I taped the photographs to the windowpanes. I had this tracing paper, Japanese Kozo paper. I started creating the veils with the paper, layering over specific areas that either communicated touch or had some gesture there, some point of contact, or over the face and cut at the neck. I was attracted to the fact that although the paper was obscuring the image, I still had access to what was underneath. Nothing was ever completely blocked.

There was this persistence to be seen from underneath the veil. I wanted to play with that a bit more; I wanted to have something that would allow me to introduce color, but still have this texture that I felt was so perfect with the wax. And so, I began working with dry pigments, and mixing them in with beeswax, and dipping the papers and creating these colored veils that I was able to layer over the photographs. It expanded from *Untitled (Blue)* to *Dark Body* (both 2019), where the photograph isn't covered in wax, but the wax is in ways moving off of it or surrounding it. I wanted to play with color and how color can heal, but also how color triggers memories and sensations, and to have that cadence, that narration through color paired with the photographs.

Acheampong: Are there colors that you find yourself coming to again and again? Or any that you avoid?

Fields: Avoid, I would say no, but I have used less of the pure beeswax and have added more color into it, even if it's a soft peach or kind of beige color. Shades that allude to skin—those are things that I'm really attracted to. But I'm still working with these pops of color, these reds, these blues,

these deep blacks and browns, that I feel create their own story alongside the photographs and bring more memory into them.



Alanna Fields, *Past Tense Future Present*, 2019, from the series *As We*

On the symbolism of wax, early uses of encaustics were to preserve paintings through the application of thin layers. Along with the potential to see and not see with the wax, I really love the fact that it seals the memory, it holds the memory, it holds the photograph together.



Alanna Fields, *Untitled II*, 2019, from the series *As We Were*

Acheampong: The “seeing but not seeing” is a really poignant idea throughout your work. You’re dealing constantly with this tension between hypervisibility vs. invisibility. Is there a side of that equation that you are working more toward, or do you feel like the work is constantly teetering between that visibility and invisibility?

Fields: In this new series, wax is still there, but wax is being used as a way to frame the photographs and parts of the photographs, rather than to create these moments of concealment. So it’s functioning differently. It was really important in *As We Were* for it to be a mode of concealing, because I was looking at the quietude of queerness that was in these photographs. It wasn’t very overt; it wasn’t audacious. If it wasn’t the touch of the hand, maybe it was the touch of the forehead, or the overlapping of a shoulder, that could be dismissed as friendly closeness. It was really important for me to honor those photographs and their history and that way of being concealed, but also to push those images to the surface, because they just haven’t been seen.

Now, I have moved away from concealment, because I’m looking at later images, images in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, where there was a bit more freedom and audacious nature to how our queerness shows up photographically. The wax will begin to frame, rather than conceal or cover.



Alanna Fields, *Ain't Studdin You*, 2019, from the series *Audacity*



Alanna Fields, *Still Ain't Studdin You*, 2019, from the series *Audacity*

Acheampong: In your artist statement for *Audacity*, you write about “looking closely at embodiments of masculinity and femininity through aesthetic posture and gesture.” How do you decide which gestures to make your centerpieces? I saw a lot of hands; I saw a lot of body parts that maybe aren’t the most obvious ones people think of when thinking through sexuality or sexual expression.

Fields: It’s really varied in *Audacity*. With *Ain't Studdin You* and *Still Ain't Studdin You* (both 2019), I’m looking at the way that the subject is holding his mouth and the kind of nonchalance in the way that he’s holding his cigarette, the way he’s sitting in the chair and turning his body. It’s still subtle but very familiar to my queer eye, if that makes sense. Like, I see it and I’m like: [snaps] “Oh yes, I see you.”

With *Miss Elijah* (2020), I’m looking at the hand on the hip but also [the subject’s] very long fingernails, and this crop top, but this soft line of the waistline, and that contrasted against the hair that’s on the subject’s stomach. That tension and that dance, choreography, between

masculinity and femininity was something I really wanted to bring out in *Audacity*.

In *Come Live with Me Angel* (2020): the hand on the knee, the gaze. It's a mood I'm really trying to get after in *Audacity*, the feeling of the photographs. It's less static. I feel more movement when I look at them than in the earlier images that were in *As We Were*.



Alanna Fields, *Distant Lover*, 2020, from the series *Audacity*

Acheampong: There is such a long history of extremely exploitative gazes on Black bodies, queer bodies, and Black queer bodies in particular. Do you see *Audacity*, or any of your works, as an active remedy against that? When you talk about movement, that makes me think of the agency of your subjects, and I wonder how that agency confronts a history of objectification.

Fields: Yeah, that's something that I definitely always have in mind. I think that Black queer bodies and especially Black queer male bodies have been sexualized in photography, especially contemporary photography. I'm not really interested in doing that. I'm not really interested in communicating the sex, but rather the sensuality. Whether that's through gaze, or laying on the floor and grabbing your knee and looking in the way that makes me feel like *I'm* supposed to come hither. It's that type of feeling that I'm after, rather than just looking at the body.



Alanna Fields, *Come Live With Me Angel*, 2020, from the series *Audacity*

Acheampong: And in your newest series that you mentioned, where you're thinking of people and bodies that are not necessarily in a sexual or romantic relation, did that affect your gaze at all, the parts of the body that you decided to focus in on?

Fields: I think I started to think more about Black queer aesthetic. In *As We Were*, I think that in all but two of the pieces, we're looking at interior spaces and those types of choices: choices of dress and clothing. Because we have an introduction of color there, we're able to see more of the choice that one takes in presenting themselves and showing their queerness through style and aesthetic and the way they adorn their home. That's something I was also really interested in: how the body moves through space, what we adorn the body with, rather than, you know, skin and form.

Acheampong: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. The anonymity of your subjects is, for the most part, a cornerstone of your works, but I did see that you have a self-portrait series. When did that come about, and what drew you to turning the camera on yourself? Did your relationship to visibility and concealment completely shift when you were the subject?

Fields: You know, I did that self-portrait series back in 2016. I had just started grad school. It's weird how things come full circle. I was thinking about Black queer archives without really thinking about it. I was thinking about not having seen myself in photographic history before, and I wanted to subvert the gaze. And so that has a lot to do with why you're not experiencing my face from the front, but rather profiles or the back of my head. I was also thinking about how my queerness shows up in my aesthetic choices—in my hair, in the strength of my back and how I hold my body. That was the beginning of thinking about these expressions of queerness photographically, even before I knew that I would be doing this work. I think I've always been thinking in that way, in my mind and in my body and obviously, now, in my work.



Alanna Fields, *Miss Elijah*, 2020, from the series *Audacity*

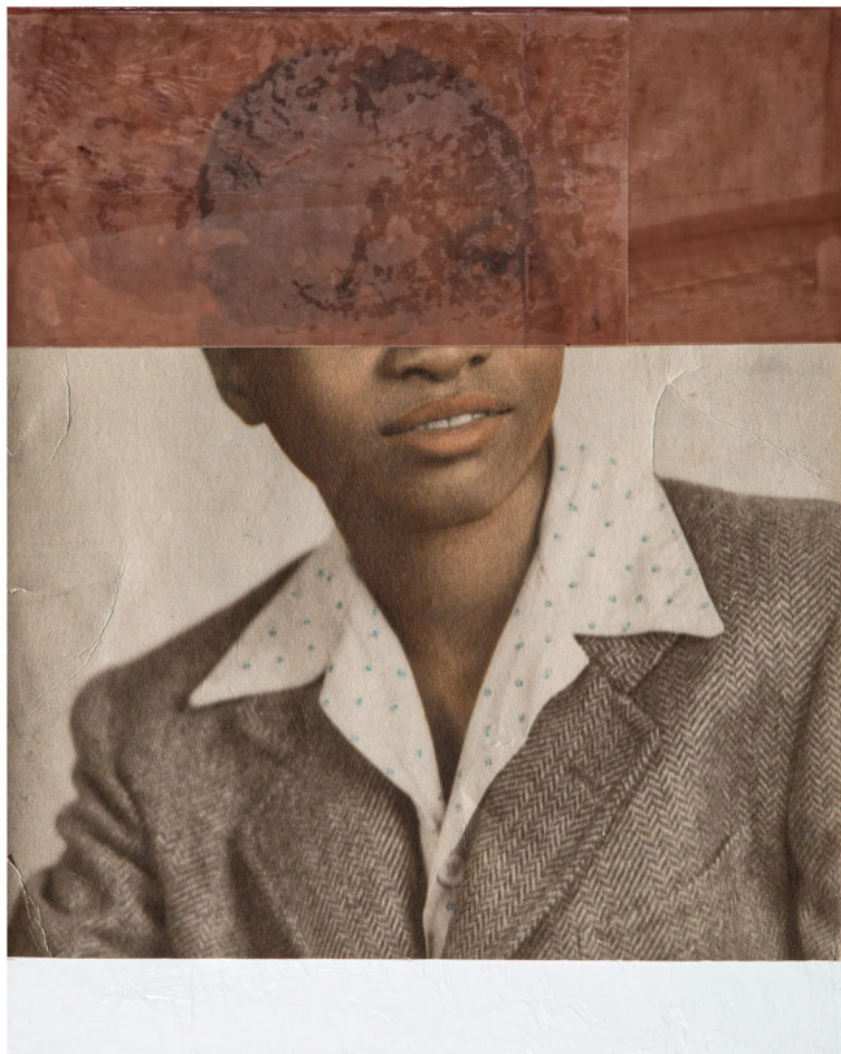
Acheampong: When did collage become a logical way for you to think through these ideas?

Fields: In my [*They Who See We*](#) digital collage series (2017), I was looking at documentary photographers, primarily white, who were photographing Black children in housing projects. I was thinking about hypervisibility and invisibility there. I had just moved to Brooklyn from DC, and I encountered these huge NYPD floodlights that would shine into people's apartment windows. I started researching that. It was causing health problems; children weren't able to sleep at night. I was thinking about how to turn that gaze and that surveillance inside out and have us gaze back at you, as a way to confront your own biases and those that were projected onto these children in these photographs.

That was my first foray into working with collage. I find it hard to go back to not working in that way. There's such choreography in being able to bring material in with a photograph, and layering as a way to address things that aren't so neat or regulated but are more complex and expansive and shift depending on how you look at it and where. Even the wax: I buff the wax over time, and it becomes shinier, and you're able to see more underneath. I think it would be hard for me to break away from working in that way. It's like, I can't unsee it now.

Acheampong: And I don't want you to! [Both laugh] Who are your key inspirations, the artists that turned you toward thinking in that way?

Fields: I love Carrie Mae Weems. I love Lorna Simpson; I really love the way Lorna Simpson has pushed past needing to have one solid medium and working in one particular way, jumping to painting and using text. Again, it all feels like choreography: we can't just look at this image, we need to add more context to it. I'm always revisiting Weems's and Simpson's work. Lyle Ashton Harris's as well.



Alanna Fields, *Gentle Woman*, 2019, from the series *As We Were*

Acheampong: You are also a graphic designer. How does that practice inform or interplay with your other artwork?

Fields: I think for the most part, I've kept them separate, but I've been working a lot with an herbalist on brand packaging and paying a lot of attention to texture, adding some complexity in the design. I think that my collage elements drift over into that space as well. I think it's my language, the way I understand things: to layer materials and sit them next to one another and on top of and underneath. It's that ecology of visual language that I think is becoming unique to my practice and how I look at art in general, how I consume things.

Acheampong: During the COVID-19 pandemic, masks have become very quotidian. Does the way that people are much more concealed in public space factor at all into how you're now exploring masking more figuratively in your work?

Fields: It's made me want to resist the mask in my work and make things more visible, and to zoom in on them and zoom out. Wearing a mask every day, I see my face—like, my whole face—in the morning and at night. But when I'm out during the day, I'm covered, and I have a hat on, so I see my eyes and that's it. In my work, I've been really thinking about centering these subjects' faces and not cropping them but seeing the fullness of their gaze, their smile, their environment, their gestures also. Just the fullness of it all. Because I feel so cropped on a daily basis, cropped and covered.

Nicole Acheampong is a writer based in New York whose work has appeared in *Art in America* and *The New York Review of Books*, as well as *Aperture* magazine, where she was previously assistant editor.
