

FRIDAY

GOOD TIMES



FRIDAY GOOD TIMES

CURATED BY LAURA NOVOA



I George Floyd changed everything. The debates and rationalizations that followed his murder made Chris Friday tired. The need to explain the obvious felt Sisyphean—and the tiredness felt existential, historical. It was not something that a nap or social media break could fix. So Friday turned inward, and her figures did too.

Before George Floyd, Friday's artwork was an expression of her own willingness to engage audiences in conversations about race, Black bodies, and their presence/absence in contemporary space. She assumed the role many Black artists take in having to explain their work, to justify its intrinsic value by framing it through a moral or political lens. In earlier works, like *Just for Me* (2019) and *Martyr* (2018), the figures are compositionally open—facing the viewer in a way that invites questions and dialogue. In the latter, a *Pietà*-like figure sits on a rocky pile of dollar bills, decked in Jordans, hair freshly styled, thick chains adorning her neck. She cradles a thin, shirtless man, possibly hurt, passed out, or worse. Despite the weight of the slack body on top of her, she exudes a sense of calm intensity. Nothing about her hints at the violence or chaos that prompted this scene.

Friday's use of the *Pietà*, a long-established visual trope, and her insertion of Black bodies in an art historical context, as done notably by contemporary artists Kerry James Marshall and Kehinde Wiley, is a direct affront to the legitimacy of the historical record by explicitly pointing to its gaps. She undermines the grip of ownership that Christianity as practiced in white communities has long held on the *Pietà* and reaffirms the tableau as a symbol of maternal love and devotion in the image of Black bodies. What could be more humane than allowing a man to be *held* as he dies in his mother's arms?

George Floyd died pleading for his mother. Asphyxiated and *held down* by a man with a knee on his neck.

IN/VISIBLE MEN/D

2021
Chalk on black archival paper

II

During one of our first studio visits, Friday and I were talking about her recent work and we came upon a figure she had made as part of the *In/Visible Men/d* series (2021). The drawing is of a young man wearing a collared shirt and ripped jeans, one leg bent over the other. His left hand is tucked into his pocket, the other holding his forehead, fingers lightly interlaced with short dreads falling over his face. He seems tired and leans his thin frame over slightly to hold himself up.

I remember when Friday began working on this piece, during a residency in the summer of 2021. Over the course of twelve weeks, I saw the figure take shape from a swath of black paper, never imagining that something so large and detailed would emerge. The creases in his clothing and the veins running down his arms are sculpturally rendered. The downturn in his shoulders makes him seem both heavy and fragile, imposing yet deflated. I liked walking into the space and seeing him, a constant fixture during those hot summer months, not wanting to be disturbed and disturbing no one. Sometimes I felt like I was intruding on him as he was taking a moment to rest—to put his head down and close his eyes—after a long shift at work or a late night out.

It struck me to hear from Friday that someone visiting her studio had found the figure menacing. Even in moments of obvious vulnerability, Black people, particularly Black men, are perceived as dangerous. I wondered what about the figure had prompted this fear and contempt. Was it the scale of the work? Was it the fact that we cannot see his face? Or was it because the figure depicted is of a Black person?

In a conversation for the African American Studies Department at Princeton University, scholar and author Tina Campt calls for “a practice of looking that positions you [the viewer] in relationship to blackness regardless of whether or not you are Black.”¹ For Campt, it is not about presenting a Black perspective or vantage point; rather, it is about generating a framework that places us in relation to blackness by “profoundly registering it, forcing us to, in many cases, be uncomfortable with our proximity to that precarity.”²

Art is about confrontation. It solicits a response and requires us to recognize if and how we are implicated. Why the visitor responded the way they did to Friday's work is not in question. What is in question is how they chose to act upon their response.



1. Tina Campt, interview with Mélena Laudig and Collin Riggins, Department of African American Studies, Princeton University, podcast audio, June 16, 2022, <https://aas.princeton.edu/news/aas-podcast-season-2-episode-8-black-gaze>.
2. Campt interview.

III

The pressure's taking over me, it's beginning to loom
Better if I spare your feelings and tell you the truth
Lately, I redirected my point of view
You won't grow waitin' on me . . .

[Chorus]
I choose me, I'm sorry . . .

Do yourself a favor and get a mirror that mirror grievance
Then point it at me so the reflection can mirror freedom³

3. "Mirror," track 18 on Kendrick Lamar, *Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers*, PGLang, Top Dawg Entertainment, Aftermath Entertainment, and Interscope Records, 2022.

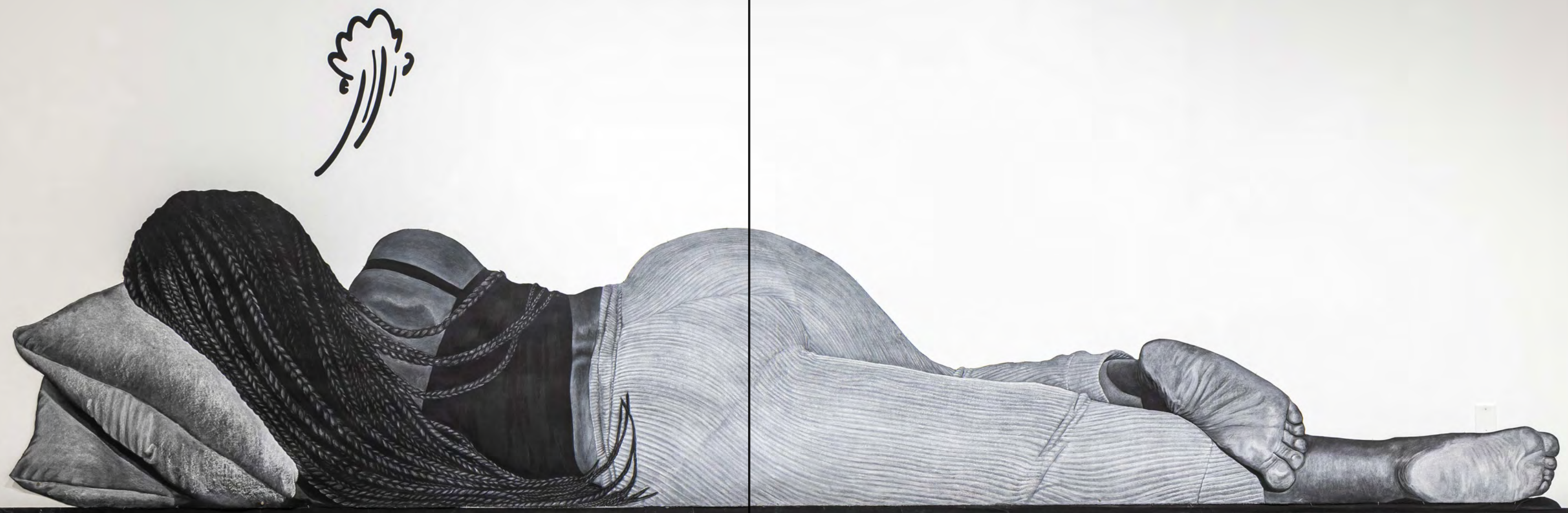


REST AS REPARATIONS SERIES

UNTITLED, AALIYAH

2022

Chalk on black archival paper



20 FEET TALL

2021
Chalk on black archival paper

The deliberate gesture of *turning away* is a consistent element in Friday's recent drawings. This "quotidian practice of refusal"⁴ involves limiting knowledge to something or someone, and is therefore an overt and defiant expression of the unwillingness to comply with the expected or the required.

In *20 Feet Tall*, the first of these drawings from 2021, we see a woman who is presumably sleeping, her head resting lightly on a folded pillow, her right foot over her left knee, slack and relaxed. While the figure's attempt at inconspicuousness is undermined by her scale, Friday disrupts the traditional dynamics of spectatorship by withholding visual information from the viewer and granting the woman anonymity.

The figure gives us her back, and in so doing denies us the possibility of identifying or knowing her. *20 Feet Tall* is a direct challenge to the way we usually interact with images—as consumers who are granted full and unrestricted access to the things before us. Despite the title, which in its use of the word *tall* suggests that the figure will loom over us vertically, she extends herself horizontally along a wall, requiring that as viewers we situate ourselves in reference and deference to *her*, not the other way around.

20 Feet Tall, like much of Friday's work, exists in the public realm (in this case, the gallery space). Yet the work also occupies a space apart from and beyond the viewer. Friday positions her figures in such a way that their privacy is considered above all else. They inhabit a liminal space that renders them at once visible and hidden, public and private. They exist, in view of others but live in the comfort of their interiority. The freedom to decide how much to give or show of oneself is about reclaiming space, about determining how and why one may choose to assert or relinquish control, and to whom.

IN/VISIBLE MEN/D

2021

Chalk on black archival paper



George Floyd changed everything.

His death showed how viscerally and publicly Black bodies exist in relation to violence, struggle, dispossession, and disposability. The intimacy and sanctity of his death became a mediated spectacle, captured on our phones, shared and reshared, solidifying problematic and pervasive misrepresentations of Black bodies and blackness.

What if, instead, we see Black bodies embodying leisure? What if they lie softly in a field of flowers or jump energetically into the clouds? In *Untitled, Courtney* (2022), Friday draws a young girl in sequence. First, she is captured with arms stretched upwards, her legs crossed at the ankle; then her arms swing back and she brings her legs up, knees bent, high and off the ground. Finally, her arms are pulled back as far as they can go, legs straight. She is playing. But against the ambiguous setting of a white gallery wall, she looks like she's flying.

Friday drew *Untitled, Courtney* in her usual chalkboard aesthetic—precisely detailing the folds of her shirt, her muscles and ligaments expanding and contracting as she jumps up and down, and long, singular strands of braided hair covering her face. In a

recent exhibition, *One More River* (2022) in Clarksville, Tennessee, Friday placed *Untitled, Courtney* in a setting of simply rendered, comic book–style illustrations that reveal a cloud, birds, and the grassy banks of a river.

The setting becomes a strategy that positions subjects in a determined space of Friday's own making, while also challenging a set of assumptions and prescriptive understandings that condition their existence.

Friday's treatment of her figures, of the respect and generosity she grants them, is reminiscent of Jennifer Packer's paintings of family and friends. "Packer's work is interested, situated; it operates in compassionate and not spectacular relation to the people and environments that she paints."⁵ Similarly, Friday's figures, who are often of people close to her, are suffused with a sense of care that feels tactile, tangible. The attentiveness is palpable in the way she renders even the most minute of details.

The placement of Black subjects in a context of care is for Friday both personal motivation and political stance. *Untitled, Courtney* and other works in the series illustrate the concept of "rest as reparations" not as a passive act, but rather, as an active commitment not merely to exist but to thrive.



REST AS REPARATIONS SERIES

UNTITLED, AMERIE

2022

Chalk on black archival paper

5. Christina Sharpe, "Jennifer Packer: 'Abundant with Light,'" in *The Eye is Not Satisfied with Seeing*, eds., Melissa Blachflower and Natalia Grabowska (London: Serpentine, 2021), 14.



REST AS REPARATIONS SERIES

UNTITLED, COURTNEY

2022

Chalk on black archival paper

FOLLOWING SPREAD

Installation view of *One More River* exhibition at The New Gallery in Clarksville Tennessee, 2022



VI

Temporary layoffs.
Good Times.
 Easy credit rip-offs.
Good Times.
 Scratchin' and survivin'.
Good Times.
 Hangin' in and jivin'.
Good Times.
 Ain't we lucky we got 'em
Good Times.⁶

SIT DOWN SOMEWHERE

2022
 Cotton, burlap



GIMME SOME SUGAR

2022
 Cotton, burlap

VII

Chris Friday: You know that auction at Christie's? It was called "Say it loud!" And of course, the ending of that phrase is, "I'm Black and I'm proud!" Just the reference to it was enough for the mind to complete it.

The show needs a title like that.

Something that includes the themes of joy, rest, and privacy for Black bodies in a society that affords them very little, while acknowledging the origins of those perceptions (television) and how it affects what we're seeing when we look at Black bodies.

For example, the projection/video that I thought about making was one in which very benign everyday scenes are taking place but the "laugh track" or audience sounds are contextualizing what you see.

Laura Novoa: The jarring feeling of the visual and the audio not really coinciding.

CF: Exactly. And figuring out how to bring that into the drawn figures as well.

I was thinking about music that switches back and forth. Like is this the sugar shack or is it a church? Are these bodies twerking or catching the Holy Ghost?

LN: Lmaooo. Maybe they're one and the same!

CF: Lmaooo. I wanna make figures that walk that line, so you won't be able to tell.

VIII

Friday spent many late evenings throughout her childhood watching the '70s "sitcom" *Good Times*. In the opening credits, the theme song is a call and response giving sound to the scenes of the city before landing on a drawn portrait of the Evans family. It runs down a list of social and economic hardships sarcastically categorizing them as "good times."

This conflicting duality, captured concisely in the theme song, but present in the overall premise of the show brings up complicated feelings for Friday. As a kid, it was difficult to assimilate her reality with the mediated portrayal of the Evans family, one much like her own, struggling to "just live" and having that struggle, broadcast on television to millions, framed as a comedy.

Now, as an adult, Friday realizes that humor in shows like *Good Times* is a way to disarm and charm audiences, specifically white audiences, into seeing the humanity of the characters on screen. It disguises pervasive and systemic injustices as experienced by Black folks, into something consumable and easy to watch. Simultaneously, humor is an effective way to relay information about lived experiences without the backlash, disbelief, or defensiveness sharing such experiences usually incites.

Friday has developed work that employs, but also departs from, the traditional use of humor as coping mechanism. In a recent exhibition of resident artists at Oolite Arts, *Lean-To* (2022), Friday installed ceramic pieces from her *Supplement Archive* series (2019–present), an ongoing exploration that functions

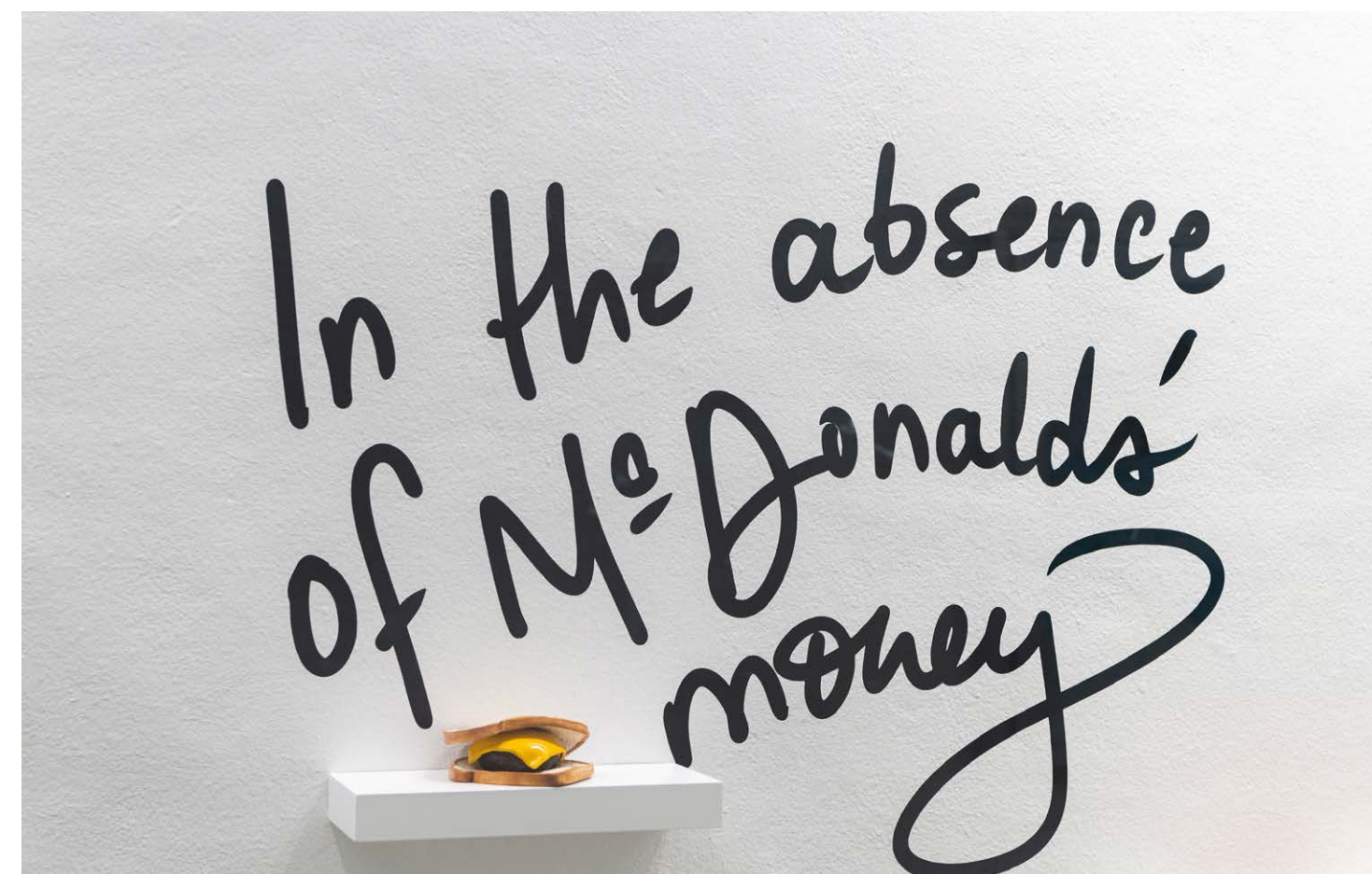
as a material inventory of Black iconography and cultural symbols. Dishes of rice and beans and macaroni and cheese and fried chicken, a gleaming burger patty with cheese on sliced bread, a can of peach soda, and a bag of salt and vinegar-flavored chips sit carefully on shelves. Annotations including arrows, circles, asterisks, and phrases like "We got food at the house" and "In the absence of McDonald's money" are scrawled around the objects, grounding them in the home and family.

There is humor, but also a sense of tenderness, that radiates from these snippets of dialogue, likely uttered by moms, aunts, grandmothers, older cousins—figures that project both a sense of authority and love. In this particular iteration of *Supplemental Archive*, food is both physical and spiritual nourishment, consumed at a cookout after a Church gathering or out of the window of an ice cream truck with friends. Food and the rituals that accompany it become an indispensable part of both the quotidian and ceremonial aspects of Black social life.

Friday's work is less about amusing or indulging and more about creating the space for an inside joke; she uses language to communicate in a way that is relevant only to those who understand it and perhaps illegible and nonsensical to those who don't. Like her drawings, there is a *turning away* or *turning inwards* that gestures towards a sense of privacy and specificity, that prioritizes care and love for oneself and one's community first and foremost.

SUPPLEMENT ARCHIVE

2019–2022
Kiln-fired ceramic







SUPPLEMENT ARCHIVE
2019–2022
Kiln-fired ceramic



Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is *the imperative to respect black noise*—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant dis-course of Man.⁷

INTERIOR 2:
FIGURES LOUNGING

2022
Installation view of *Front room*
exhibition at the NWSA Gallery in
Miami, Florida



In her essay, *Venus in Two Acts*, scholar and historian Saidiya Hartman speaks to the limits of the historical archive. How can one negotiate and push against these limits in a way that challenges the boundaries of our own understanding? How do we honor what has been said, as much as what has been left unsaid?

Friday's work is not a means of explaining or justifying blackness or of making a case for the significance of Black art. On the contrary, Friday's work stands against the "excess of legibility" and firmly roots itself in the "right to opacity."⁸ She establishes a practice based on the use of the inward turn, of finding comfort in interiority, of grounding her work in the textures of everyday life, and of privileging everyday moments as liberatory. She doesn't reject the inevitability of a life conditioned by scarcity or precarity; rather, she denies an existence wholly defined by it. Within this framework, she presents a more personal and nuanced perspective of *good times*, not as a sarcastic resignation to the expected, but as a spectrum of realities that accommodates a varied and dynamic set of lived experiences.

Friday's aesthetic, its visual expression and political impulse, is supplemental in the way that it enhances the preexisting and ongoing archive of accumulated images. She proposes a more expansive view of Black life as a counterpoint or counternarrative to the images we come across in the mass media. Her work is more attuned to the complexities—to the good times and the bad times—that define life itself.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chris Friday is an artist whose works claim space and demand presence. Utilizing a variety of media and materials and combining both personal narratives and popular culture, Friday's artistic practice is thoughtful and powerful.

We are honored to present her first solo exhibition curated by Laura Novoa. We are thankful to Laura for her continuous support of Friday's practice and vision. Through countless conversations and studio visits together, they created *Good Times*, a tour de force of joy.

Our mission at Oolite Arts is—as our founder, Ellie Schneiderman, said, "to help artists help themselves." We foster the growth of artists through exhibitions, public programs, short- and long-term residencies, professional development, direct funding, and publications.

This exhibition and publication was made possible by contributions from many talented individuals. Many thanks to Amanda Bradley, Oolite Arts' Programming Senior Manager, for coordinating all facets of this publication and Samantha Ganter, Programs Coordinator, for her work on leading the production of the exhibition. I also want to express my gratitude to all the Oolite Arts staff who bring their passion and talents to our organization every day—along with our Board, whose members embrace and champion the dynamic vision for Miami arts that drives our work.

Lastly, I would like to thank Rebecca Sylvers and Miko McGinty for designing this publication. We hope that this broadsheet will continue to serve the artist well beyond the length of the exhibition and push her practice forward in critical and thoughtful ways.

Dennis Scholl
Oolite Arts

Cover and back cover: *Untitled, Courtney* (detail), 2022.
Chalk on black archival paper

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Front cover; pp. 1, 4–7, 10–13; back cover:
photo courtesy of Amir Aghareb

pp. 14–15, 22: photo courtesy of Monica McGivern

pp. 20–21: photo courtesy of Alex Del Canto

Exhibitions and programs at Oolite Arts are made possible with support from the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade Mayor and Board of County Commissioners; the City of Miami Beach, Cultural Affairs Program, Cultural Arts Council; the State of Florida, Department of State, Division of Arts and Culture, the Florida Council on Arts and Culture; the National Endowment for the Arts; the Lynn & Louis Wolfson II Family Foundation, The Jorge M. Pérez Family Foundation at The Miami Foundation; the Al & Jane Nahmad Family Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. Additional support provided by Walgreens Company.

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7. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *small axe: a caribbean journal of criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 12, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article/12/2/1/32332/Venus-in-Two-Acts>. (emphasis added)
8. Sharpe, 15.



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