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BEMIS × CENTER

RAVEN HALFMOON:
Flags of Our Mothers

+

PAUL STEPHEN
BENJAMIN:
Black of Night

SUMMER EXHIBITIONS

May 18–September 15, 2024

About

Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts facilitates the creation, presentation, and understanding of contemporary art through an international residency program, exhibitions, and educational programs.

Residency Program

For more than four decades, Bemis has provided artists from around the world dedicated time, space, and resources to conduct research and create new work. Bemis offers artists private live/work studios, financial support, technical/administrative assistance, and opportunities for intellectual discourse about contemporary art. Nearly 900 artists have participated in the residency program.

Bemis's Curator-in-Residence Program provides a curator the opportunity to participate in the Bemis Residency Program, serve as a professional resource to Bemis artists-in-residence and the Greater Omaha arts community, and organize exhibitions and public programs at Bemis Center.

Bemis's Sound Art + Experimental Music Program, launched in 2019, is a special track within the Residency Program for artists working in sound, composition, voice, and music of all genres. Participating artists receive financial, technical, and administrative support, along with dedicated facilities for rehearsing, recording, and performing. The program includes LOW END, a performance venue offering free live shows for the public to experience the

latest innovations by local, national, and international sound artists and experimental musicians.

Exhibition Program

Bemis Center's exhibition program features solo and group exhibitions of artwork in all media by local, national, and international artists. Exhibitions are always free, open to the public, and frequently introduce the community of Omaha to the most experimental and provocative art forms today.

Public Programs

Throughout the organization's history, Bemis Center has offered artist-driven, community-responsive programs that bolster civic engagement in the creation and understanding of art. Public programs provide regular opportunities for the public to learn about and be inspired by the visual arts. Through artist-led classes and workshops, ARTalks, open studio events, panel discussions, film screenings, and performances, the community has direct access to artists and to their diverse approaches to artmaking and interpreting the world around us.

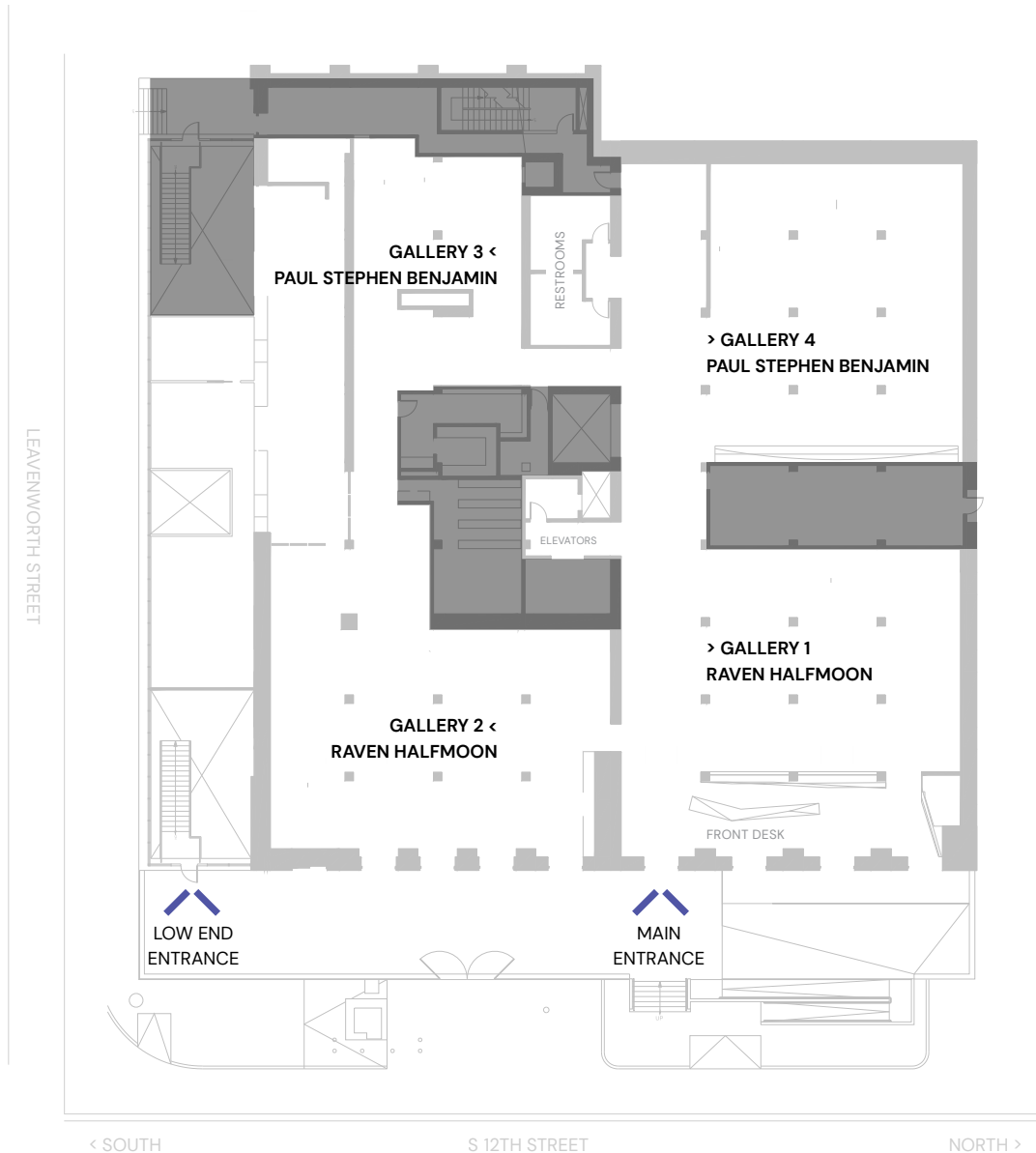
Map

Gallery 1 + 2

Raven Halfmoon: Flags of Our Mothers

Gallery 3 + 4

Paul Stephen Benjamin: Black of Night



THE FUTURE OF LEGACY

RACHEL ADAMS, CHIEF CURATOR AND DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *RAVEN HALFMOON: FLAGS OF OUR MOTHERS*
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

As an artist, a citizen of the Caddo Nation, and a Native American woman, born and raised in Oklahoma, Raven Halfmoon is ultimately a forward-thinking cultural preservationist.¹ She builds upon the ancestral histories and artistic techniques passed down to her, creating work that speaks to the contemporary moment. By relaying histories left out of mainstream conversations and expanding upon them, Halfmoon culls inspiration from her personal heritage—the ancient pottery of the Caddo and the major earth mounds constructed by her ancestors—and her present-day interest in popular culture to highlight her feminist lineage and the strength found in its complexities.

Studying anthropology at the University of Arkansas allowed Halfmoon to personally expand her knowledge of Caddo culture as well as the cultures of others. She is greatly inspired by the *moai* statues on the island of Rapa Nui (Easter Island) and the monumental stone work of the Olmec civilization, and one can see all these influences in her sculptures that blend traditional techniques with contemporary aesthetics.² In a conversation with Christian Ayne Crouch, she stated, “That’s where a lot of my artwork is informed: really trying to physically manifest in my work these intricate concepts of identity that I was grappling to better understand all through school. Taking the imagery and iconography from

1. The Caddo Nation was a confederacy of several southeastern Native American Tribes who were forced to a reservation in Texas, and in 1859 removed from there to Indian Territory, where their Tribal Headquarters now reside, in Binger, Oklahoma.

2. Rapa Nui is the native name for Easter Island, a territory of modern-day Chile. It is famed for archaeological sites, including nearly nine hundred monumental statues called *moai*—carved human figures with oversize heads, often resting on massive stone pedestals called *ahus*—created by inhabitants during the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.

The Olmec people are believed to have occupied a large part of modern-day southern Mexico. The Olmec civilization is referred to as an archaeological culture, meaning that what is known about it is based on artifacts rather than texts. Archaeologists think that artifacts found primarily on the northern half of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mesoamerica from 1200–500 CE represent the Olmec society. The name *Olmec* was actually invented by scholars, derived from the Nahuatl (Aztec) word *Olmecatli*, which means “inhabitant of the rubber country” and is a reference to rubber production in the area where many of the artifacts have been found.



Raven Halfmoon,
Flagbearer, 2022.
Stoneware, glaze.
Photo credit:
Jason Mandella.
Courtesy of the artist
and Ross + Kramer
Gallery, New York.



Raven Halfmoon, *Star Sister I*, 2021. Stoneware, glaze. Photo credit: Jason Mandella. Collection of Mark McDonald and Dwayne Resnick, courtesy of Ross + Kramer Gallery, New York.

the Caddo pottery. . . that I was seeing and holding and studying, and reinterpreting that [in ways] that makes sense into my work and on a contemporary platform.”³ She uniquely rekindles in her style the tradition of clay work handed down from her ancestors, the Caddo people. Known for creating vessels, pots, effigies, and more, the Caddo

people dug clay from the Red River and its tributaries in what is known today as Louisiana, eastern Texas, Arkansas, and Oklahoma.⁴ The works were often functional, yet elaborately decorated with several types of motifs, including the appearance of basketry weaves, zigzag patterns, encircling bands of horizontal lines, double-back meanders, chevrons in symmetrical units, even stars and other flourishes.⁵ The designs were often symbolic, carrying cultural and spiritual significance. The pottery was coil built, engraved, pit fired, and finally burnished. In her teen years, Halfmoon learned from Caddo tribe member Jereldine Redcorn—a self-taught Caddo potter who has brought the traditions of Caddo pottery, including incising (cutting linear designs) and punctuating (pressing a pointed implement to indent or puncture), to contemporary times by studying pottery in museum collections. These techniques are noticeable on many of Halfmoon’s works, including the cross-hatching on many of the faces and the fingernail marks that are embedded in the clay body, adding her signature texture to each work. Like Redcorn and her ancestral Caddo potters, Halfmoon hand coils the clay and then punctuates it—a Caddo

technique that involves layering rounded thumbprint-like forms on the surface. While encouraging viewers to reconsider social and historical narratives through reframing perspectives surrounding identity, culture, and ethnicity, Halfmoon skillfully births body-size to over-life-size works that monumentalize the legacies of her tribal heritage.

Flagbearer, 2022, Halfmoon’s most ambitious work to date, was built in three sections and then stacked. The ceramic figure, standing at over twelve feet, towers over the viewer. It represents a full body, with head, torso, and legs—an expansion from Halfmoon’s previous figures that are usually only a head and/or a bust. Glazed in Halfmoon’s traditional color palette of red and cream, the figure’s face is marked by a circle painted under one eye. With a largesse that pays homage to colossal works found in Mesoamerican civilizations, *Flagbearer* encompasses how Halfmoon aims to present her work: as larger than life, in conversation with natural elements found in the landscape, and at the same time pushing the boundaries of clay. With an ode to the figurative works of artists Viola Frey and Simone Leigh, this sculpture represents every woman and no woman. It helps to imagine and move us toward a new future while simultaneously representing past lives that Halfmoon



Raven Halfmoon, *Caddo Woman Warrior*, 2021. Stoneware, glaze. Photo credit: Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Ross + Kramer Gallery, New York.

aims to unearth and honor.

When looking closely at Raven Halfmoon’s ceramic sculptures, it’s not only the size that stands out, but also the details. Using her hands as tools, the weight from her body pushes into the clay, leaving the latter embedded with her prints. Her clay bodies are strong, like the women she portrays—often dark brown or black, similar in color to the clays her ancestors used.⁶

3. Raven Halfmoon in conversation with Christian Ayne Crouch, February 18, 2021, in *Raven Halfmoon: Oklahoma to Manahatta*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Ross + Kramer, 2022).

4. The original homelands of the Caddos consist of the Red River Valley from southeastern Oklahoma to Natchitoches, Louisiana. Beyond Natchitoches to the Mississippi River confluence, Tribes that claimed allegiance, kinship, or relationships to the Natchez and Choctaws (whose principal settlements were east of the Mississippi River) occupied the lands.

5. Richard F. Townsend and Chester P. Walker, “The Ancient Art of Caddo Ceramics” in *Hero, Hawk and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, ed. Townsend, Robert V. Sharp, and Garrick Alan Bailey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 236.

6. Halfmoon has created work outside of her home state for several years, but she is deeply embedded in Oklahoma and its ties to her Tribe. While growing up in Norman, her mother worked for the Caddo Tribe, helping to repatriate cultural objects back to the Caddo people in the 1990s, and her grandfather was chairman of the Tribe from 1987 to roughly 1989. Halfmoon attended events on the reservation, including dances and gatherings. She culls from the landscape to inform the colors in her work. In a place where the redness of the dirt seeps up through the ground, and the black and dark brown clays pulled from the Red River are reflected in the historical pottery of the Caddo, the Oklahoma land physically imprints itself into the mind’s eye of the artist.

Glazed with a viscous energy that allows the paint to drip and pool, she often restricts her glazing palette to creams, reds, dark browns, and blacks, painting the glaze with a thick brush. The works are “tattooed” with symbolic markings from her Caddo heritage: the horizontal, double-back meandering symbol for the Red River, crosses that represent the four cardinal directions, and five-sided celestial stars.⁷ Her signature, scrawled in a graffiti-like style, is always a focal point, branding the work with her name and the lineage of women that came before her. Representing the Native body through large-scale heads, busts, heads toted together, and sometimes a body astride a horse, Halfmoon sculpts those she knows—herself, her maternal family members—and gives voice to her ancestors. *Flags of Our Mothers* includes recent works that touch upon the breadth of Halfmoon’s practice. Included are several of Halfmoon’s largest works to date, as well as a range of small-to-large sculptures of heads, busts, horses, and a screenprint—a nod to her earliest medium of paint. Regardless of medium, the works demand viewers to delve into the historic marginalization and continued invisibility of Native people, especially women. The work is unapologetic, in concept, in scale, and in presence. Her work demands that

the invisible or overlooked finally be seen.

Women are the protagonists of Halfmoon’s work. While inserting Indigenous culture into art historical systems of representation,⁸ she emphasizes the complexities of the Caddo social structure. As members of a matriarchal society, women held important roles and positions of authority within the community. Family lineage was traced through the female line, reinforcing the central role of women in Caddo society. They were responsible for farming, tending crops such as corn, beans, and squash, and managing the food supply. Their expertise in agriculture was highly regarded, and this knowledge was passed down through generations. Women also engaged in various economic activities, such as pottery making and weaving. Sometimes they were village leaders and custodians of sacred knowledge, responsible for maintaining rituals and preserving the Tribe’s spiritual traditions.⁹

Weeping Willow Women, 2022, showcases three women pressed together next to each other and mirrored front and back. One side of the work is glazed in a cream color, the other in red. The sculpture is thick (approximately 56 inches wide) and it is stitched at the seams with three



Raven Halfmoon, *Star Sister I* (detail), 2021. Stoneware, glaze. Photo credit: Jason Mandella. Collection of Mark McDonald and Dwayne Resnick, courtesy of Ross + Kramer Gallery, New York.

stars on each end. While the figures create one large plane on both sides, they are simultaneously distinct and similar. Their hair falls down their bodies in two flowing waves, and they stare forward, unwavering yet serene. Halfmoon’s symbol for the Red River winds across their bodies, connecting them to each other, to the clay that the Caddos used, to their ancestral homeland. Opposite in scale to *Weeping Willow Women* and without its repetition, *Sah-CooH II*, 2022, is a small head, only nine inches tall. Meaning “Sun” in the Caddo language, *Sah-CooH II* is a work that is inescapably linked to the violence and anguish that Native people have endured for centuries. With a section of the head ringed in bright red glaze, covering the mouth, the work not only speaks to this history of past oppression but to the present. Violence against Native people, and in particular Native women, is

significantly higher than that experienced by other races, and the crisis in missing and murdered Indigenous people has resulted in approximately 4,200 unsolved cases in the United States alone.¹⁰ *Sah-CooH II* solemnly points to this ongoing epidemic, which continues to be sidelined in terms of importance.

Halfmoon’s work is an ongoing exploration of her personal experiences as a Native woman, as well as those of her mother, her grandmother, and up through the ancestral line. These experiences are retained in the passing down of knowledge and illustrated in her works through their strength and size, the structural and decorative techniques, and the stoicism that these figures portray. At times, the figures are ambiguous and androgynous, yet they aim to highlight the complexities of being Native and female, being powerful women in physicality, engaging the often unheard histories of “the other” and critiquing existing stereotypes. She imbues her work with spirit and stories quietly demanding to be seen and heard. Incorporating contemporary imagery and symbolism, Halfmoon honors her Caddo and Native heritage while integrating present-day elements. Her works fuse the traditional with the contemporary—reflecting an innovative approach to artmaking and Halfmoon’s commitment to both preserving Caddo ceramic traditions and extending the boundaries of what defines contemporary Indigenous art.

7. Caddo women traditionally had tattooed circles on their breasts and lines on their faces.

8. See, for example, the essay about her work *Caddo Dancing in Binger*, *Oklahoma*, 2019, included in Craft Contemporary’s clay biennial *The Body, The Object, The Other*, by Suzanne Isken, Holly Jerger, Caroline Ellen Liou, and Andres Payan Estrada, in *The Body, The Object, The Other* (Los Angeles: Craft Contemporary, 2020), 44–45.

9. Cecile Elkins Carter, *Caddo Indians: Where We Come From* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995).

10. Indian Affairs, US Department of the Interior, “Missing and Murdered Indigenous People Crisis: Violence Against Native Americans and Alaska Natives Far Exceed [sic] National Averages,” accessed June 23, 2023, <https://www.bia.gov/service/mmu/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-people-crisis>.



Raven Halfmoon, *HASINAI (Caddo): Our People*, 2021.
Stoneware, glaze. Photo credit: Jason Mandella.
Courtesy of the artist and Ross + Kramer Gallery, New York.

PRAISE SONG FOR HANDS

KINSALE DRAKE

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *RAVEN HALFMOON: FLAGS OF OUR MOTHERS*
EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Praise my mother, praise her hands.
I feel I write about hands too much,
but sometimes they are all I remember
at first: palms smoothing together,
dissolving the edge
of memory. Navajos are hairless, and she laughs,
the sound rolling like ancient waves over
what remains of prehistoric oceans: the fish-
bones and kelp dust that must now fertilize
the great saguaro. The piñons, the prickly pear.
The reeds that bend into baskets, the ever-
birthing swirl. And clay, somehow everywhere
and holding stories to our knees,
tucking gifts between our fingers,
coating words I offer in return to my mother.
We emerge from every remembering
the color of a sunset. Even
When we are smoky—pine trees blunt
Against the sky, her jewelry
Blurred like tears, there is the red earth
Where we sat. Our arms,
Like two roads linked
and blanketed in clay.
In the deep blue,
I follow them back.

PAUL STEPHEN
BENJAMIN:
Black of Night

CURATED BY RACHEL ADAMS, CHIEF CURATOR AND DIRECTOR OF PROGRAMS



ABOVE: Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Black Suns*, 2023. Black Light, Black Power strip, Black extension cord. Courtesy of the artist.

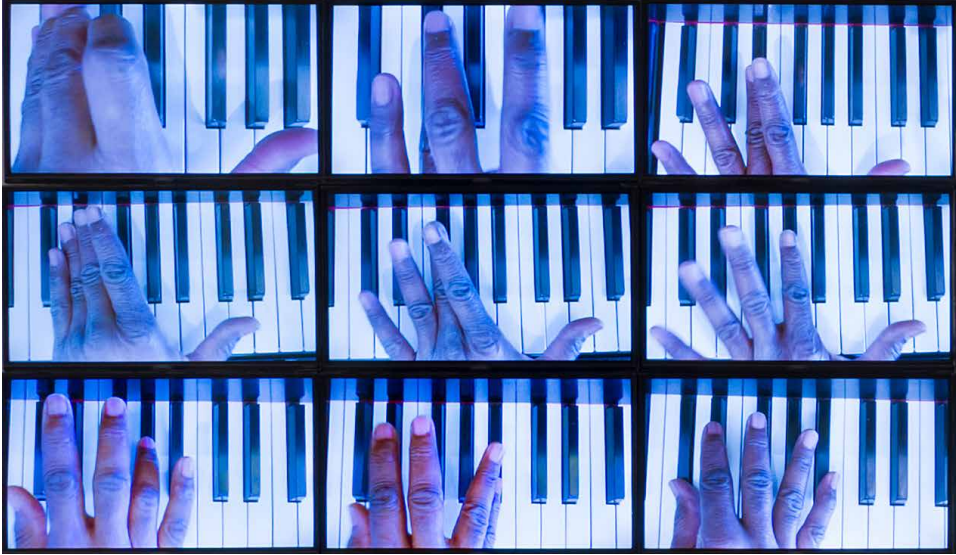
OPPOSITE PAGE: Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Black Haiku (detail)*, 2022. Black latex paint, Black vinyl. Courtesy of the artist.

Six Questions with Paul Stephen Benjamin

RA: *While using Blackness as a starting point, your work explores deep and multifaceted concepts around African American identity, history and culture. Could you share more about the conceptual genesis of using black both as a color and a symbol in your practice?*

PSB: In my work I am very interested in balance and consistency. My process consists of mining blackness, both in color and meaning, and I am constantly balancing aesthetic and concept within my work. There is a

constant flow of experiences, mined information, visions, ideas and black colored objects—paint, fabric, the word, etc—that coexist. I am working to create a balance among all of these things. I strive to be non didactic. Aesthetics and concepts may not always match and sometimes that is the challenge of creating conceptual balance for me but one or more things create entry points into ideas. I am breaking things down into their simplest form.



Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Sonata in Absolute Black* (detail), 2020. 36 Channel, Color, Sound, loop. Courtesy of the artist.

RA: Like *Black of Night*, your practice is multidisciplinary and works often incorporate elements from video, sculpture, painting and performance, creating layered multimedia experiences. Can you walk us through your creative process? How do you decide which mediums will best convey the message of each individual piece?

PSB: I do not limit ideas to one medium. I am always thinking across the spectrum of materials and how best to execute something. I am not afraid to take an idea and create the same concept of a work in a different medium. For instance a black flag can be a sculpture, it can be a video, it can be a silk screen print, a photograph and on and on.

RA: Working across multiple mediums can present unique challenges,

from technical issues to thematic integration. What are some of the most significant challenges you've encountered in your multidisciplinary practice, and how have you addressed them?

PSB: Oftentimes the biggest challenge is not knowing. When I work I am using different media because I believe the medium I use at a particular time is the best way to communicate my ideas. I love making, the process, and figuring things out. So I am always trying to be creative in how I execute an idea. Working in different media requires makers to learn how to do something. I am also open to using someone else's expertise to execute my ideas.

RA: Artists often draw inspiration from a variety of sources, whether personal, historical, or cultural. Who

are some of the artists or intellectuals that have influenced your practice, and how have they shaped the way you approach your work?

PSB: Yes there were/are many people who have had a great impact on my thinking about the theory and philosophy of life and art. Early in my career I met Nathaniel McLin. McLin for 20 years, hosted *The Critic's Corner* on Kennedy-King College's WKKC-FM radio, interviewing artists about their work and ambitions. He moved the show to the University of Chicago's WHPK-FM and renamed it *The Art Museum of Chicago*. McLin would call and just start talking, the more I listened the more he talked. He would give me insight on books,

artists, writers and theorists to read/study. He also would share essays and reviews he was writing. McLin, also wrote an essay for Kerry James Marshall's book *One True Thing: Meditation on Black Aesthetics*. He would often quote from Kerry James Marshall's essays, reviews and lectures.

RA: How has your artistic practice evolved over the years, and are there new themes or mediums you are interested in exploring in your future projects?

PSB: I often describe my practice as an evolution of ideas. Even when younger I decided to expand how I worked, changed some of my processes and mastered what I made. I learned that when you work on things you are naturally interested in, you are never at a loss for ideas. In my practice, I still see concepts and ideas that were present in the past. The execution and outcome are different but many of my earlier thoughts are present and constantly evolving.

RA: What direction do you see your work taking in the next few years?

PSB: I see my work expanding. There are concepts and ideas that I have been working on for years that require different space, and resources. Over time I always find a way to realize them. The new works being exhibited at Bemis are an example of time, space, resources for new works/ideas to be imagined and realized.



Paul Stephen Benjamin, *Black Cotton Flag Made In Georgia*, 2019. Black Cotton, Black Nylon, Black Rope, Black Metal Flag Pole. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen©.

Public Programs

May 29 6 PM
TALK
In Conversation with Tania Candiani—2023 Ree Kaneko Award Recipient

Mexico City-based interdisciplinary artist Tania Candiani will discuss her current practice and how it connects to her experience as a 2004 Bemis residency alum.

June 8 2 PM
WORKSHOP
Poetry Reading + Workshop
Led by renowned poets Kinsale Drake and Maritza N.

Estrada, this reading and discussion will be followed by an ekphrastic poetry workshop in conjunction with *Flags of Our Mothers*.

Workshop funding provided by:



June 13 6 PM
RESIDENCY
Meet + Eat
A casual community potluck to connect with summer Artists-in-Residence and Curator-in-Residence to learn about their practices.

July 20 2 PM
TALKS
OMA ARTalks
Join Omaha artists to hear them discuss their favorite works in *Flags of Our Mothers* and *Black of Night*.

July 25 6 PM
TOUR
Curator-Led Tour
Join Rachel Adams for a tour and discussion of both exhibitions on view.

Aug 3 12–5 PM
RESIDENCY
Open House / Open Studios
Tour the current exhibitions, participate in an artist-led activity, and go beyond the galleries to discover Bemis's upper floors, where you can visit with Artists-in-Residence to see their studios and view their works in progress.

Aug 10 4 PM
LECTURE
In Conversation: Raven Halfmoon with Rachel Adams
Exhibiting artist Raven Halfmoon will discuss her influences and expansive artistic practice.

Aug 15 8 PM
PERFORMANCE
Julius Eastman / Seth Parker Woods: The Holy Presence of Joan d'Arc (1981)
In conjunction with *Black of Night*, Grammy-nominated cellist Seth Parker Woods will play his new version of Eastman's piece for cello and electronics.



RSVP

LIVE @ LOW END



Ben Vida with Yarn/Wire
Thursday, May 9
8 PM



Jiji
Thursday, June 6
8 PM



aja monet
Thursday, June 20
8 PM



Yann Novak with G. Brenner
Thursday, July 18
8 PM



Mary Lattimore
Thursday, August 1
8 PM



Passepartout Duo
Saturday, August 3
4 PM

Bemis Center's Sound Art + Experimental Music Program and LOW END performances are made possible by The Mellon Foundation.

Additional support is provided by New Music USA's Organization Fund in 2023–24.



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Gallery Hours

Wednesday	11 AM–5 PM
Thursday	11 AM–9 PM
Friday	11 AM–5 PM
Saturday	11 AM–5 PM
Sunday	11 AM–5 PM

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