

March 8 2021 - April 21, 2021

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE!

Cristal Sabbagh



DEPS Artist Profile

Glass Curtain Gallery – Columbia College Chicago
1104 S Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605

Gallery Hours: Monday–Friday, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.

Capacity of gallery is 10 visitors, and masks are required.

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE!

An exhibition by Cristal Sabbagh

OOPS! POW! SURPRISE! Takes a deep look at Cristal Sabbagh's interdisciplinary practice that includes traditional portraiture, ceramics, and performance. While movement is the spine of her practice and the core that all her other work emanates from, intentional spontaneity, reverence, and bliss are threads woven throughout.

Sabbagh's performance practice, rooted in improvisation and Butoh, walks a line between the everyday, the divine, the personal, and the political. In embodying in her art transformational memories while simultaneously celebrating pop culture and the experimental, she challenges power structures and awakens viewers' senses.

Working both in a solo capacity and with collaborators, Sabbagh is equally attuned to individual perspectives and collective structures. As with Sabbagh's previous projects, *OOPS! POW! SURPRISE!* will also incorporate collaborative work. Her collaborators include Erin Peisert, Scott Rubin, Keisha Janae, Ramah Malebranche, and Sara Zalek. In various configurations, these collaborators have regularly engaged in improvised performances, opening up new avenues for Sabbagh's material and conceptual exploration.

Although her work is defined in movement, her practice also looks outward to portraits of the world around, taking the forms of traditionally drawn portraits, figurative ceramic sculptures, and nontraditional portraits on ceramic mugs. Sabbagh labors over each piece, that act as homage and memorials and are a resistance to white-supremacy. Her traditional portraits include images of Black Trans lives that have been taken or disrupted. And her nontraditional portraits take the form of Black creatives lovingly emblazoned on ceramic mugs intended to be shared by friends and family. Not only do these works infuse the user's everyday coffee and tea rituals, but their ceramic forms will stand the test of time, potentially outliving the user by thousands of years and leaving traces of how we lived, recorded by Sabbagh's hand.

Cristal Sabbagh

Cristal Sabbagh is a teaching interdisciplinary artist influenced by film, history, politics, Butoh and improvised sound.

She's currently curating and performing in *Freedom From and Freedom To*, an improvisational, cross-medium performance piece. She was awarded a DCASE IAP grant to help fund, and It's an opportunity to combine most of her creative interests in a risk-taking and vulnerable way. It uses an ensemble of dancers and improvising musicians that are remarkably diverse in their approaches to dance, instrumentation, and backgrounds. She's a core member of Marie Casimir's Djasporas dance collective, seen at the Instigation Festivals in Chicago & New Orleans over the past four years. For the past three years, she's also been a member of Move Move Collaborative, in Baltimore, Maryland. She has portrait prints featured in Seer Gallery's Collection in Chicago.



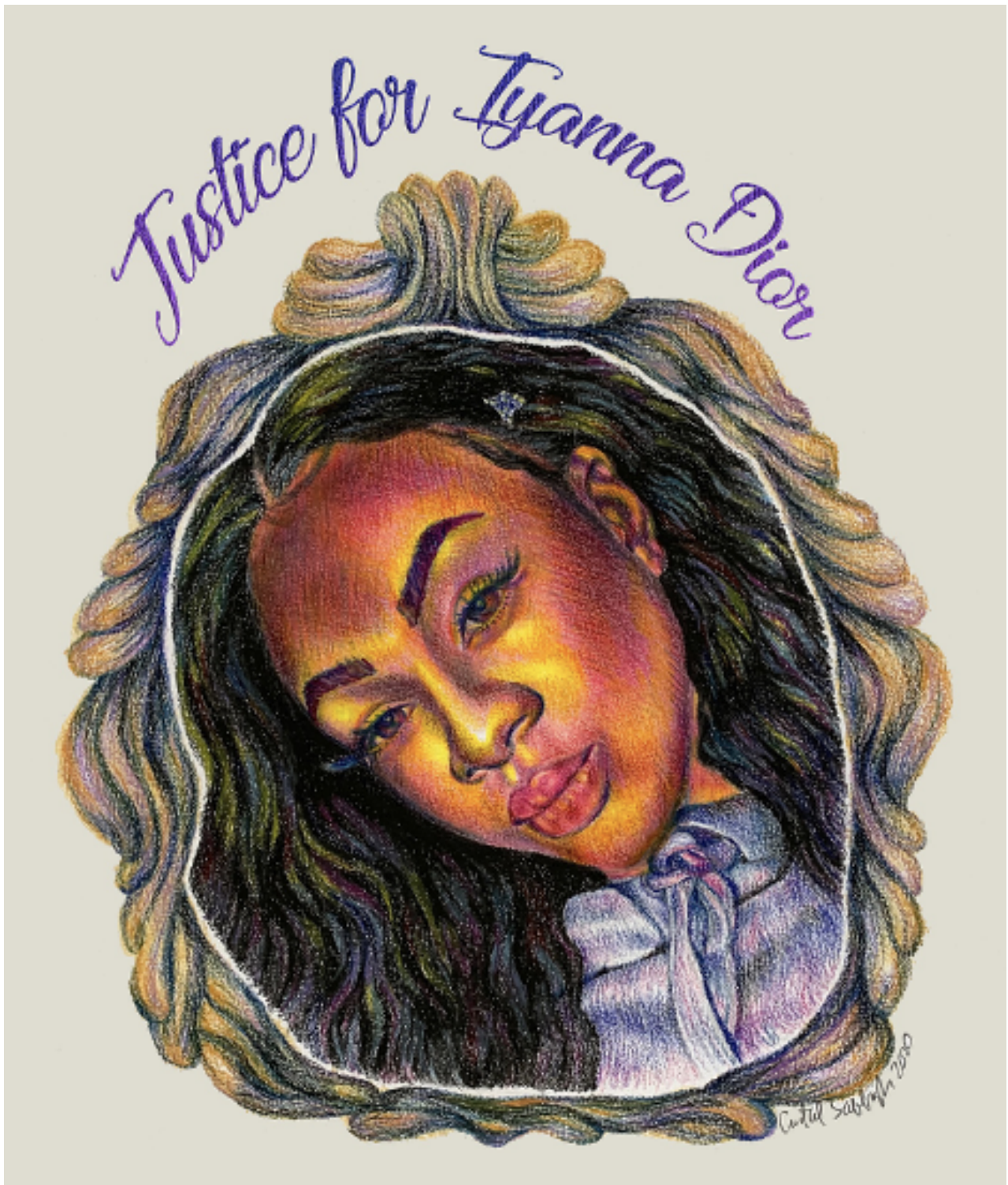
Prince, 2019
Ceramic mug



Chadwick Boseman, 2020
Ceramic mug



Billy Porter, 2020
Ceramic mug



Justice for Tyanna Dior, 2020
Mixed media on paper



Justice for Tony Mcdade, 2020
Mixed media on paper



Get Out, 2019
Ceramic mug



Get Out, 2019
Ceramic mug



Grace Jones, 2019
Ceramic mug



Indya Moore, 2020
Ceramic mug



James Baldwin, 2020
Ceramic mug

Say Her Name



Oluwatoyin Salau

Say her name, Oluwatoyin Salau, 2020

Mixed media

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

Kaylee Fowler: What is your history with dance, and what is Butoh, and how do both of these factor into your practice?

Cristal Sabbagh: As a young person I was dancing a lot in my free time. I didn't have much formal training until high school when I took dance instead of gym. My teacher taught ballet and modern. Outside of that I was influenced by hip hop, and later in my 20's West African dance. In college, I was on dance team for two years and that was more about technique and precision within the group. Later, in my 20's I grew out of learning precise movements per counts and expanded to doing more organic movements.

A performance I did with a friend led me to Butoh by accident. It was an emotional piece about death and the spirit. An audience member spoke to me afterwards and said it reminded her of Butoh. I inquired to know more about it and she told me to see the artist Akira Kasai at the MCA. That was back in 2004. Ever since then my movement process has been heavily influenced by the Butoh dance form, especially as practiced by Diego Pinon and like-minded

dancers. Diego believes in performers being authentic to emotions, as well as simultaneously showing fragility and strength. His training involves reacting to symbolic prompts of his choosing, and the dancer must above all embody these symbols. Through Butoh I unfurl memories, connect to my ancestors and spirit, and cultivate energy to transfer to audience members.

Working with live improvised music has inspired my best work. I'm a core member of Marie Casimir's Djasporas dance collective, seen at the Instigation Festivals in Chicago & New Orleans over the past four years. The festival brings music, movement and visual artists together for a week of improvised and interesting interdisciplinary collaboration in each city. For the past three years I've also been a member of Move Move Collaborative, in Baltimore, Maryland. This group convenes for its annual 10 day movement intensive, where people from across North America and Europe come together to create a movement performance. We culminate with a public performance that incorporates improvising musicians. I included a short sample from last summer's performance.

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

I'm interested in breaking down the traditional barrier between audience and performer. This can take the form of breaking the fourth wall in a dance performance, seeking audience input to drive the structure of the performance itself, or involving the audience to such a degree that the boundaries of the performance break down until all that remains is a happening. To curate and perform in *Freedom From and Freedom To* awakened my call to bring diverse groups together within the performers as well as the audience. Creating an environment of safety and love is integral so that the performers can be as vulnerable as possible and offer authentic emotions.

KF: You are the founder of *Freedom From and Freedom To*, which is described as "cross-medium improvisation." What was the inspiration behind this, and how did you get started with this work?

CS: I was inspired to move forward with this idea after working in similar fashions with Marie Casimir and Steve Marquette's Instigation Festival since 2016. Marie is a dancer who invited other dancers from both Chicago and New Orleans, and Steve gathered the

musicians. At each iteration, whether it was performed in Chicago or New Orleans, there would be a week of small improvisational performances between dancers and musicians. It was always different, electrifying and freeing for me. Similarly, I was inspired by being a member of *Move Move Collaborative*, in Baltimore, since 2017. This is a temporary ensemble, founded by interdisciplinary movement artist, Peter Redgrave, that gathers dancers from North America to workshop with each other, and eventually develop a piece for an audience at the end of the 10 days. For the culminating performance improvising musicians would join us for the score. Again having both of these experiences in my life led me to wanting to curate something in Chicago. I talked this over extensively with my dear friend Erin Peisert, who is also an interdisciplinary performance artist, and has performed in each iteration of *Freedom From and Freedom To*. I wanted to have a diverse group of dancers and musicians that would be excited to rise to the challenge to create something, and at times with folks that they may not have met before, on the spot. Another aspect was involving the audience to pick all of the sets by chance. My husband was the MC and had audience

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

members choose the names out of hats. There was no rehearsal with the performers beforehand, and each group made unique and fleeting worlds. I chose to curate and show *Freedom From and Freedom To* at Elastic Arts which is a non for profit organization that fosters artistic exploration and multi-arts performances.

KF: For this exhibition, you will be combining your performances with a series of portraiture; what do you find interesting about the overlap of these two mediums, and how do you anticipate them informing each other?

CS: Many of the people that I illustrate are trailblazers in the entertainment industry, and I've been a huge fan of music and cinema for my whole life. Within my movement work I use narrative in the form of symbols and metaphors that I embody in an authentic way. Not only do I want to honor my artistic subjects within my artistic expression, but also through my movement expression as well. I'll be collaborating with three other dancers as well as two musicians for this effort.

KF: Do you consider movement another form of portraiture?

CS: It definitely can be especially when I've done Halloween dance tributes, for my high school art students, of many people and or characters from film. I've honored Prince for many decades through artwork, as well as through performance. It's always so much fun to lip synch and improvise, while embodying a part of their energy. Most recently for Halloween I performed as the Joker, Georgina from the movie *Get Out*, and Lafayette from *Hamilton*.

Like I was saying before, if I'm trying to embody certain prompts, energies, metaphors, or feelings I want to be as authentic as possible and let it manifest inside of me before I offer it to others. When I'm drawing or painting I'm immersed in not just looking at the subject, but trying to extract their essence in my artwork, as well as to show my artistic voice.

KF: There is some urgency in your portraits, how do you pick your subjects? How do you think time will change and affect how you view these portraits?

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

CS: Some of the people that I've illustrated have been beloved characters in film or tv, extraordinary musicians, as well as Black Trans folks that have had their lives disrupted or taken. I'm a Black woman in a white supremacist society and I've had to wait far too long to see certain folks celebrated in the entertainment industry. For example, the movie *Get Out* was a game changer in the horror genre and it's been really sad that it's taken this long. In many horror films if there was a Black character we've been trained to not get too connected since they are usually the first to be killed off. *Get Out* was a triumphant psychological horror for many reasons, not only was it written and directed by Jordan Peele, but the lead protagonist didn't die at the end, and there were many nods to great films, e.g. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* and *The Stepford Wives*. The concept of one body with two souls was powerful because the power dynamics were so imbalanced. The concept of Black bodies not having agency is nothing new due to slavery. The lead character escaping the fate of being yet another trapped soul stayed with me, as well as trajectory of some of the other characters. I was already painting .

portraits on mugs when the movie came out and it was especially fitting to paint three of the characters on tea mugs due to the hypnosis thread in the film (which also used teacups). The subjects that I'm currently painting are documenting my life in a sense, as well as my interests. Some are also documenting the urgency for people to pay attention such as the violence towards Black and Black Trans bodies. I hope in the future that there will be a big change and that the average age of a Black Trans woman isn't 35 years old. There needs to be a humongous cultural shift as to how we treat each other as equals.

KF: You use non-traditional methods for your portraiture. For this exhibition, a lot of the portraits will be on ceramics. Where does this interest in non-traditional portraiture stem from, and why is it important to represent them in this way?

CS: Ever since I was a child, I've loved drawing and painting faces. Painting on mugs was a happy accident. This stemmed from me making thrown mugs for the participants of the first *Move Move Collaborative* back in 2017. After I made them I decided to paint Prince after I found an underglaze pencil, and some

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

underglaze watercolors. After countless hours the final result was horrible. I was still learning and accidentally put clear glaze over the portrait area and many of the details faded. My former sculpture teacher set me straight about it as well, particularly in relations to the red and orange colors. The ones I was using early on were fading. Even though the first two portraits were a struggle I was still excited and determined to have success. I kept at it and friends and family on social media were expressing interest. The process is laborious, and scary at times, but extremely rewarding. I now know which particular colors don't fade in high fire, as well as how many layers to paint on. I'm also a perfectionist when it comes to capturing the likeness of my subjects. I about died when Billy Porter liked the mug that I did of him on IG! Painting on ceramics has been a revelation in a sense because the act of drinking tea or coffee is pretty universal, and so many of friends do it regularly. The subjects that I pick are conversation pieces themselves and would be perfect for a tea party. Objects made from clay survive for thousands of years and have given us clues as to how certain cultures lived.

I'm interested in preserving a slice of how we lived during this time.

KF: What are some of the changes or challenges this year has brought to your practice, and are there any new inspirations in your work that have arisen from them?

CS: There have definitely been challenges to my movement practice, and that has been adjusting to collaborating with others through online platforms like zoom and twitch. Right away when quarantine started, I asked a handful of dance friends to respond to dance prompts through IG. At first, I was the one coming up with the prompts and another friend started the hashtag #promptresponsegroup. A bunch of us added prompts to an excel sheet that I started, and when we wanted, we'd respond. It was really freeing to figure out where in my house or yard to film, and if I should bring in props, or incorporate my kids if they wanted. I also was able to use some of my musical friends' music occasionally as well. I was invited to do a Quarantine Concert with Experimental Sound Studio and collaborated with my friend who plays the viola. At the time I wanted to keep it a duet so that there

Interview with Cristal Sabbagh

Continued

wouldn't be too many little rectangles to look at on the screen. You really have to listen and observe even more with your eyes when you're collaborating through a flat screen. I was also on the planning committee for Move Move Collaborative which is normally in person in Baltimore for 10 days in the summer, but clearly was going to be all virtual. Working with a group of dancers, as well as a musician for a week, really opened my mind to what could be possible through zoom. We experimented with highlighting different body parts on the screen, as well as using props as filters on our laptop cameras, and different lighting effects from lamps, cell phones, and holiday lights. Since we had 13 people performing, we worked out a score and certain folks would perform in particular sections so that it wouldn't be overwhelming, and some of us mirrored each other for continuity.

Having time to problem solve the technology has really helped during this time, and the other upside is the documentation is instantaneous and can be shared with others if they aren't able to see live broadcast performances. The last *Freedom From and Freedom To* was in August and the

performers were in the space a month prior my son picked the sets by chance from a hat. We spread it out over two nights, only had 5 people per set, and two sets per night. Everyone was masked unless playing a wind instrument or singing. It was such a gift to perform again together inside of a space, even without a live in-person audience. We were broadcast live through Elastic Arts twitch channel and the next one is planned for December 5th and 6th!

As far as my fine art I work from my home and purchased a potter's wheel. My good friend Carl Mankart has his own pottery business and I'm able to fire my pieces at his studio, but I do intend to purchase my own kiln soon.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. Design, animation and illustration by Graphic Design major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gianella Goan. This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council Agency.

Learn more at colum.edu/Pow

Contact information: Mark Porter, mporter@colum.edu / 312.369.6643

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