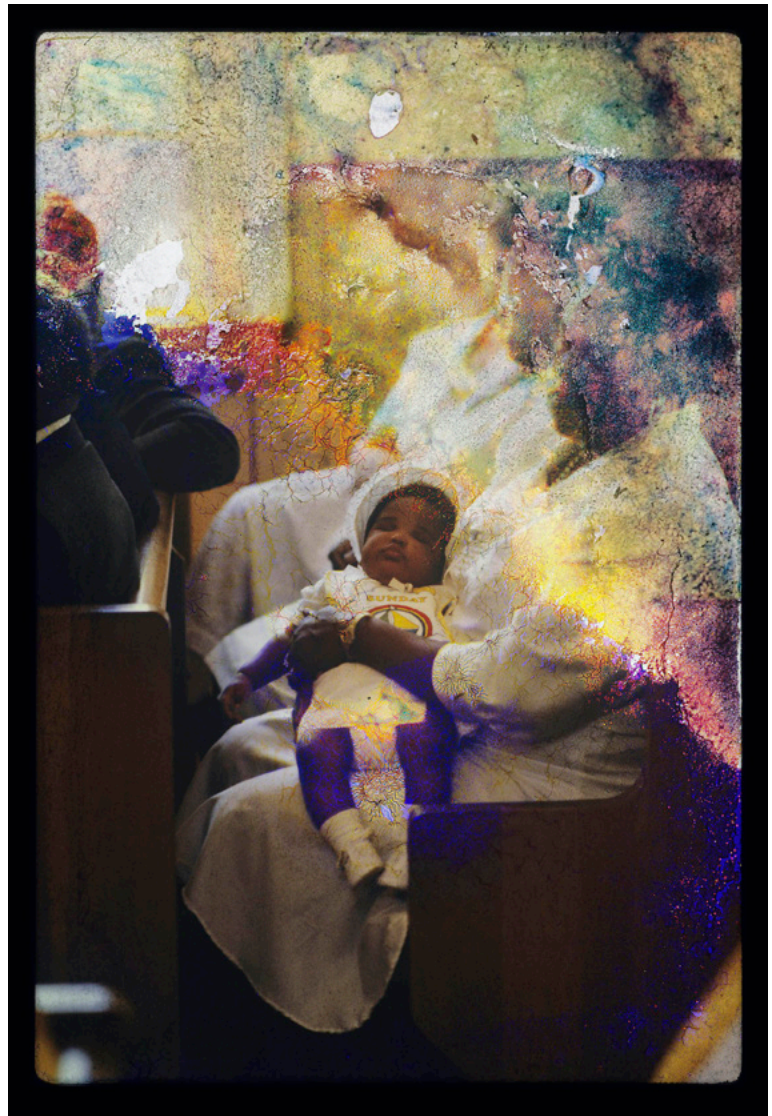


Embracing the Infinite Mother

TK Smith

The viewer's eye is drawn to the resting child in the center of the image. The child reclines, eyes closed and unaware of the camera that aims to capture them. Their beautiful round face is framed by the lacey trim of a white bonnet, which coordinates well with the lace sock cuffs just above their little white shoes. The tension in this image is found in the embrace between the child and the woman that holds them. The woman has laid the child in her lap, resting one arm beneath the child and the other across the stomach. This intimate embrace is both protective and indifferent, as the child is securely held while both tend to their separate business. The viewer finds these two within a church setting, anchored by the smooth grain of wooden pews. The woman sits at the end of the pew, revealing the hem and creases of a white skirt draping across her knees. Beside her are what appears to be the sitting figures of more women dressed in similar white. Above the pew before them, the backs of black suit jackets and stiff white collars reveal a row of men whose faces lie just beyond the frame. That is the full extent of the legible imagery that remains after Keith Calhoun's photograph *Mother with Child* (1996) was affected by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. The rest of the image has succumbed to the forces of nature, creating a partially abstracted image that touches on the sublime.



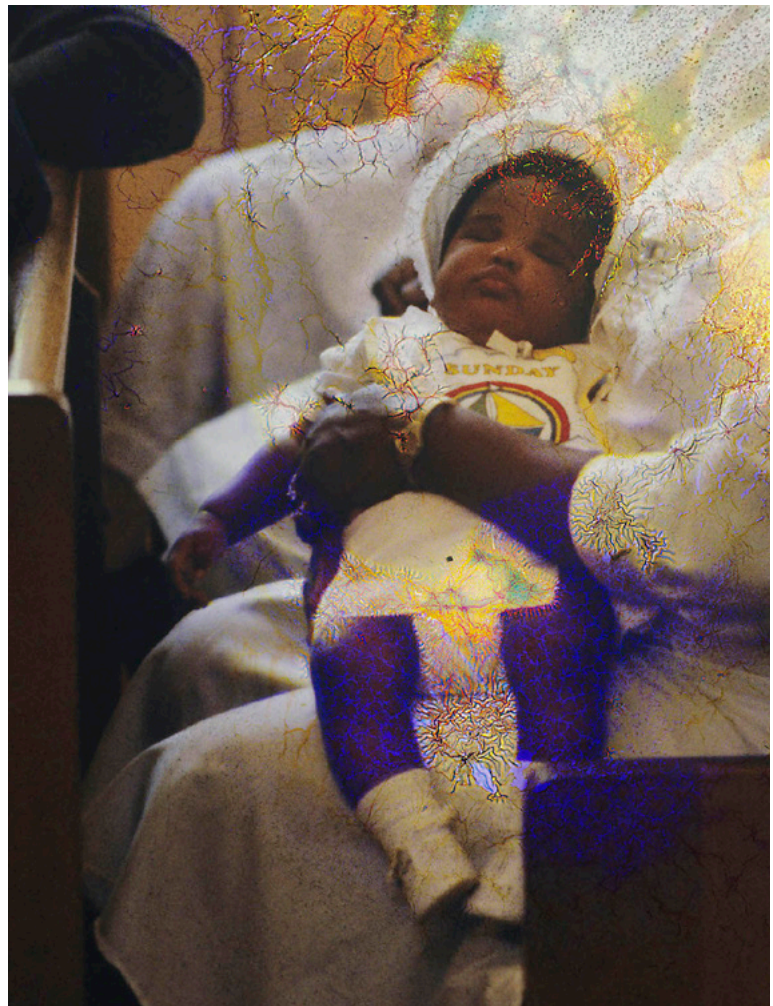
Keith Calhoun, *Mother with Child*, 1995 circa 2010

The 2020 exhibition *We No Longer Consider Them Damaged*, curated by Assistant Professor of Art History at St. Olaf College Hannah Ryan with assistance from Amanda Rose '21 for the Flaten Art Museum, presents a collection of photographs both physically and metaphysically transformed. *Mother with Child* is just one of the innumerable images that were altered by the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. The 2005 flooding of the Lower Ninth Ward resulted in the damaged archive of New Orleans-based documentary photographers Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun. Over 30 years of images preserved on Kodachrome slides were left waterlogged and moldy, rendering most of the images partially illegible. Calhoun and McCormick have spent decades documenting the lives of working-class Black communities in Louisiana through the media of photography and video. As self-proclaimed "keepers" of their culture, they work to make visible the labor, rituals, and ultimate beauty of everyday peoples. They have created images of the dock workers, the sugarcane field laborers, and the ditch-digging prisoners of the Angola State Penitentiary. These invaluable images document the transitions from human labor to machine, from Black labor to Latin, and from plantation shacks to row houses. McCormick and Calhoun also document instances of

celebration, tradition, and the mundane. They have captured river baptisms, fêting Mardi Gras Indians, and lines of children marching off to school. Together they have built an archive of compelling images that preserve the unique history and culture of Louisiana. Perhaps most significant, the archive does the critical work of asserting their presence in the greater visual histories of the United States. The compromising of this archive presented a profound loss, not only for the photographers but also for the communities they serve. What was once a collection of sharp, archival-quality images is now a collection that unabashedly reads as both visually and materially altered.

Though *Mother with Child* remains partially legible, the impact of the floodwaters on the film has permanently fragmented the image's composition. Perceptible damage has the potential to completely shift how viewers engage with and interpret the images, ultimately shifting how they feel. Viewers may feel a sense of loss or curiosity, causing them to question the reliability of the images to reflect truth. They may also feel comforted by the familiarity of the damage they see reflected in their own family albums at home. The damage done to *Mother with Child* is most evident in its loss of two-dimensionality. The image is no longer presented as a clear, flat surface that acts as a voyeuristic window into a particular place and time. It now appears layered and tactile, revealing to viewers that they are not just seeing an image, but an object. The delicate materiality of the film is now evident where portions of the gelatin layer have cracked and lifted from the transparent base. Large white spots appear where the emulsion was dislodged and lost, fragmenting the image like pieces missing from a puzzle. The dyes have bled and mixed, creating an array of discoloration in the top third portion of the image that trails diagonally along its right edge. Some of the colors are desaturated, making the image appear partially faded and dull. Within the innumerable cracks and crevices in the gelatin are vibrant lines of purples, pinks, and reds. This diagonal shock of color moves across the image akin to the waves of a color spectrum. Amongst the visual damage, the resting child remains visually legible, but what has been lost are the clear details of the women's faces. They have been reduced to gestural color and form by the floodwaters, abstracted into the impressions of feminine forms.

We No Longer Consider Them Damaged represents a radical shift in how McCormick and Calhoun's archive of images is conceptualized and consumed in their damaged state. After developing some of the waterlogged film, the pair recognized the visual beauty and the persisting historical relevance of their affected images, made more significant by the physical "touch" of the floodwaters. This shift has



Detail of Keith Calhoun, *Mother with Child*, 1995 circa 2010

transformed a body of damaged archival images into a body of visually abstracted images that in their very continued existence reflect the endurance of the peoples of New Orleans. Abstraction is a visual language of shape, form, color, and line used to create compositions that are independent from visual references to the real world. To abstract, or the act of abstracting, is an action that involves the modifying of a composition from something literal and discernible to a form ungrounded in reality.¹ The floodwaters of Katrina physically damaged McCormick and Calhoun's film, but visually abstracted their images. The result of waterlogging on the Kodachrome slides dislodged the film layers, caused the dyes to bleed, triggered mold growth, and enabled the deterioration of the film itself. These physical transformations greatly impacted the visual compositions of the images, resulting in vivid and lush discolorations and suggestive figures and forms. The intensity of the abstractions ranges from partial to pure, rendering some images simply discolored while others have been transformed beyond recognition. This collaboration between McCormick, Calhoun, and Katrina has produced a series of archival images partially dislodged from the reality they were intended to represent. Freed from that burden, the images reveal their innate capacity to evoke

1 Rudolph Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 153-187.

emotion, recall memory, and reflect truth despite being visually abstracted.

The expansiveness of this body of work reveals the inherent limitations of documentary photography and the crucial legibility of abstract languages in Black culture. The images included in *We No Longer Consider Them Damaged* exist at the intersecting visual histories found in flawed archives and the diverse history of Black abstract art. The genre of documentary photography is most concerned with chronicling historical events with an emphasis on concepts of truth and objectivity that is achieved through the mechanical accuracy of the camera.² The incorporation of visual abstraction into McCormick and Calhoun's practice may seem contrary to those aims, but when considering the defective relationship between Black histories and archives, the limited capacity for cameras to capture Black skin, and the often racist and politicized visual history of the Black body in transnational visual culture, it is evident that the genre of documentary photography and the concept of the archive itself inherently lack the capacity to fully represent Black realities. McCormick said herself in the 2018 catalogue *Louisiana Medley: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick*, "So many of our stories, our histories have been hidden, rewritten, guarded, and deliberately kept under lock and key, away from our sight and consciousness."³ McCormick and Calhoun's archive was created with a loving and knowing gaze, further informed by proximity and access to their own people. This bias does some of the mending work of correcting limited, lost, neglected, erased, and often racist documentation of Black people by producing thoughtful images formed by their own perspectives.

The fallacy of the photographic image as a representation of objective truth is well understood by image makers, but viscerally understood by multitudes of Black people across time. Black people have been conditioned to find traces of truth in between lines, in the missing gaps of card catalogs, in the coded language of policy, and behind the eyes of a demeaning façade.

Black Americans have never been able to rely on documents to accurately represent them or protect them as forms of irrefutable evidence. This point is made painfully clear when considering how the camera has been used as a tool for racial uplift. Fredrick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and W.E.B. Dubois used the medium of photography to show the world the humanity, the dignity, and the capabilities of Black people. The Civil Rights Movement relied on the camera to show the world

the atrocities of racial segregation and the violent response to peaceful protest. Today, many Black Americans rely on the accessibility of their cell phone cameras to make evident the threat of police brutality in their communities. Over a century of recording technological advancements, and justice remains elusive because even when evidence is available, it often cannot conquer racism. Abstraction plays an essential part in the formation of Black culture as it allows for multiple ways of communicating truths, enabling an oppressed people to pass on history, express themselves, and ultimately survive. The culture has developed multiple ways of interpreting the same facial expressions, hand motions, and expressive sounds to privately communicate in plain sight. Clever words and phrases form "double speak" and songs take on multiple functions as a form of praise, protest, and instruction. The works included in *We No Longer Consider Them Damaged* exist simultaneously as damaged and whole, both literal and abstracted. *Mother with Child* captures a visual transcription of the forceful floodwaters and reveals the spiritual power of the people of New Orleans.

Abstraction is a state of being in the world. It is a concept of reality that makes space and gives form to pure self-expression, transcending the confines of a racialized body. To reject the capacity for this body of work to communicate truths because of its obscured and illegible imagery is to reject the knowledge these images can still impart. Considering this, the abstracting of McCormick and Calhoun's archive is not a deviation of their practice but an expansion into the spiritual. Abstraction opens the imaginative space for multiplicity, or multiple understandings of Black imagery, experiences, and realities. By allowing the abstracting of their images McCormick and Calhoun are relinquishing full control, obscuring their personal biases, and expanding the gaze, making space for viewers to implement their own. The concept of abstraction is most concerned with the processes of the mind and visually divorces itself from figurative representation to allow for personal memory, emotion, and spirituality. What is left of the legible in the partially abstracted images provides grounding context with which the viewer must contend. Beyond that, individual viewers must confront the abstractions and draw from their own experiences to begin filling in the illegible gaps to find meaning beyond beauty. The abstractions have the potential to function as a mirror within an image, unbound from the white gaze, respectability, and performativity to reveal true aspects of the self. Abstraction functions similarly to Blackness in that it has no singular form,

2 Leslie Mullen, *Truth in Photography: Perception, Myth and Reality in the Post-Modern World* (Gainesville: State University System of Florida, 1998), 6-26.

3 Kathryn E. Delmez, *Louisiana Medley: Photographs by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick* (Nashville: First Center for the Visual Arts, 2018), 133.



Detail of Keith Calhoun, *Mother with Child*, 1995 circa 2010

aesthetic, or sound. They are both immeasurable, intangible, and illusively defined concepts bound only by the limitations of a narrow mind.

What happens when you view *Mother with Child*? Maybe you can smell the woman's perfume or feel the softness of her linen Sunday suit? Maybe gospel plays in your ears and the faded pages of old hymnals flash before your eyes? Maybe you recall turning to your neighbor or the shine of brass offering plates passing from hand to hand? The enduring power of *Mother with Child* is in the banality of the scene. The image captures the solemn ritual of a Sunday service in some undisclosed church in what viewers can assume is New Orleans. Every Sunday morning across the world, congregants journey to their churches to hear a preacher preach or to sing a song of praise. Across decades, denominations, and social classes the universality of the experience makes this image personal to a multitude of viewers that will see themselves in the figures. They may begin to recall their own churches, with their own pews and their own Sunday memories. The abstract

colors and forms obscure the women's faces like a veil. The intricate patterns vein color across the image. The lines could be read as the crawling roots of mangrove trees or the meandering waters of the Mississippi Delta. The colors feel warm, reminiscent of the Louisiana wetlands at sunset or the bursting phosphene left after staring up at the sun.

Blurring the definitive lines that so often tear us apart—an abstraction, an obscuring—makes room for us all. Abstracted families are formed by rejecting the societal importance placed on blood that renders a census form or family tree useless. Fictive kinship is the term used to define the loving bonds formed between people life has brought together. Childhood friends become “cousins,” a parent's best friend becomes your “aunt,” and the word “half” is never uttered when describing siblings with only a single shared parent.⁴ As a damaged archival document, *Mother with Child* has lost its ability to identify the woman holding the child as a living individual. The damage has obscured her face, rendering her a mere suggestion of a woman, dislocated from a discernible place and time. As an abstraction she is transformed into the idea of a mother, defined not by her individual identity, but through her embrace of the child. Is she the mother of the child she holds? Is she the child's grandmother or great-grandmother? Is she a church mother, a spiritual mother, perhaps a mother to her community? Is she the Madonna holding the resting Christ? Is she your mother? Can you feel the weight of her arm across your stomach?

Search the sublime color and form to find what feels true and the answers will always be yes, yes, yes.

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We No Longer Consider Them Damaged

The Abstract Photographs of Chandra McCormick and Keith Calhoun

Curated by Assistant Professor of Art History at St. Olaf College
Hannah Ryan with assistance from Amanda Rose '21

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⁴ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 106.