

Zoë Charlton | The Domestic



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Cover image: Zoë Charlton, *Homebodies #2*,
2014, collage on paper, 11 x 15 in.



Homebodies #3

2014

collage on paper

11 x 15 in.

Zoë Charlton's grandmother, Everlena Bates, was a domestic worker in Northern Florida. Charlton pays homage not only to her grandmother in her recent body of work, but also to the long history of African-American women's labor in white families' homes throughout the South. Although her grandmother did not speak often or directly about the conditions of her employment, Charlton nonetheless is keenly aware of the injustices, possible abuses, and intimate labor endured by black maids, housekeepers, and nannies who worked endlessly long hours and with little pay through the twentieth century. The collages and large-scale installation in Charlton's exhibition *The Domestic* at Schmucker Art Gallery examine the notions of caretaking across racial and class lines, the fragility and failings of a home, and the complications of gender and sexuality in relation to this intensely bodily domestic work.

In her series titled *Homebodies*, Charlton collages paper dolls with images of suburban houses. Silhouetted by the color and texture of the roofs and walls, the paper dolls are both juxtaposed with and incorporated into the architecture. The bodies appear out of proportion with the homes; the structures cover their torsos and heads, leaving bare legs, bobby socks, and Mary Jane shoes exposed. Charlton cut the illustrations on the houses sold for Lionel Train sets to evoke a 1950s storybook ideal, a sanitized version of a mid-century American home. By pairing paper dolls with images of toy houses, Charlton at first seems to collapse notions of whiteness with suburbia, a particularly classed and racially segregated definition of nostalgia and childhood. But, her human-house hybrid figures are not simply "playing house;" rather, Charlton's unsettling works echo Surrealist painter René Magritte's sense of the uncanny and the political intensity of Hannah Höch's Dada collages. One recognizes the houses immediately as familiar illustration and distortion. The dolls, modestly exposed in underclothing, the typical "blank canvas" for paper dolls, are concurrently vulnerable and threatening; her chimera is both monster and victim. In *Homebodies #3* for instance, the house does not simply overlap or obscure the body, but it appears as a haunting protrusion. The awnings over the door and window occupy the position of her yet-to-be-budding breasts; the space between her legs cuts through an urn filled with flowers. The house, now anthropomorphized, amplifies the girl's sexuality, but the darkened roof that swallows her head and shoulders also casts her in anonymous shadow.

With a feminine figure skulking behind a home's walls, the collages could be understood as a pre-pubescent version of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper." In Charlton's series, the girl in each work is eclipsed by the home she is expected to inhabit. Like Gilman's narrator, the viewer sees the figures trapped

behind this domestic façade; in both story and collage, the female form cannot be freed from her domestic sheath. Paper dolls often have functioned didactically to reinforce cultural norms of gender and race, two-dimensional characteristics related only to childbearing and caretaking. In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the narrator is restricted to a "rest cure" in a nursery, as a maid watches her baby elsewhere in the house.¹ With race identity and domestic labor in mind in Charlton's collages, the "rest cure" is a particular privilege of race and class. Charlton's conflation of house with a white female child alludes at once not just to a particular madness of motherhood and domesticity, but also to the delegation of intimate, parental, and perhaps demeaning responsibilities demanded of black housekeepers and caretakers.

The paper dolls of the little white girls appear again in Charlton's series *Reared*, where the girls' bodies are framed, compressed, cradled and enveloped by large, mature, nude black female torsos. African masks obscure these grown women's faces. The artist appropriated the photographs of nude bodies from various sources on the Internet, inclusive of pornographic depictions. The posture of some of the figures, with arms raised above their heads, as well as the collaged masks recall Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, his cubist tour de force of prostitution, primitivism, and almost violent spatial incongruities. Where Picasso borrowed his iconography from African masks seen at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Charlton takes her African masks from contemporary sticker books for children. It has been understood that the "Africanism" and "primitivism" of Picasso's work invoked a sense of anxiety of both death and sex; here, Charlton's masks do not signify Picasso's traumatic gaze, but a more nuanced, contorted, distorted representation of femininity, sexuality, and identity. By confronting a legacy of modernist primitivism, still found in the shadows of children's books and toys, Charlton reclaims the contentious conflation of "otherness" with discomfiting sexuality. The figures she depicts, like those in another recent series of large-scale drawings and collages titled *Les Demoiselles* where African masks are grafted to white bodies, subverts the terms of twentieth-century primitivism. More simply put, the sexualized primitivist fantasies once imagined by Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin and other white male painters here in Charlton's collages are presented as persistently "real." By using photographic referents for the black bodies, documents of actual women, Charlton urges a schism between the women's "true" physicality and the art-historical precedents that lewdly objectified their sex and race. The exposed bare legs of the girls, strangely sexualized in context with the corpulent black breasts, create an oddly unified, two-headed figure.

 RIGHT

Reared #2

LEFT

Reared #4

2014

collage on paper

 11 x 15 in.





Reared #7

2014

collage on paper

11 x 15 in.

 FOLLOWING PAGE LEFT

Bird For the Sportsman's Gun
graphite, acrylic paint,
and collage on paper

112 x 220 in.

Originally commissioned
and produced by
Artpace San Antonio.
Photo credit Charlie
Kitchen.

 FOLLOWING PAGE RIGHT

The Country A Wilderness Unsubdued

2018

graphite, acrylic paint,
and collage on paper

112 x 55 in.

Originally commissioned
and produced by
Artpace San Antonio.
Photo credit Charlie
Kitchen.

As singular entities, the figures in each collage disrupt established racial, gendered, and class hierarchies. Seen as composites, Charlton's women are simultaneously powerful and nurturing, objectified and obscured, exposed yet revered. Charlton's hybrids are unsettled binaries of white and black, sexual and innocent, young and mature.

In her review of Charlton's work, artist Joan Cox rightly describes how the collages "recall historically dominant patterns of non-whites (nannies, housekeepers) raising white children" and writer Mark Alice Durant similarly sees "echoes of the Hottentot Venus and the 'mammy'" in Charlton's works.² Although Charlton's figures are indeed in dialogue with historical labor, as well as with stereotypes and sexual spectacle, her collages convey a sense of greater immediacy absent in past imagery. In contrast with the crude satirical caricature of Saartjie Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," a victim of colonial exploitation of her race and sex and a performer in "freak shows" in London and Paris in the 1810s, Charlton's nude black bodies address the continuation of this sexual objectification in her citation of pornographic sources. The narrative in Charlton's works is not simply one of a distant historical past (with freak shows, mammies, and avant-garde African masks), but rather one of a more immediate and complicated rupture of sexuality, age, class, and race.

Charlton's large-scale collages offer a different kind of masking or camouflage of the women's bodies. Monumental nudes are both obscured by and emerge from abundantly lush and ethereal natural landscapes. Charlton takes the title of one work, *The Country A Wilderness Unsubdued*, from Frederick Douglass's 1852 oration, "The Meaning of July 4th to the Negro." In his speech, Douglass sharply describes "the gross injustice and cruelty to which he [the American slave] is the constant victim." Douglass continues with passionate outrage,

To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty,
an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity;
your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your
denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your
shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers
and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your
religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast,
fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy...³

Douglass's crescendo of rightful indignation finds its pictorial equivalent in Charlton's unrestrained landscape with a tangle of trees, a gaggle of flapping, flying geese and ducks, a wilderness unoccupied and decidedly unsubdued. Not far from where Charlton





Paul Russell Road

2018

wood, latex paint, lacquer paint,
plastic, and glitter

12 x 10 x 7 ft.

Originally commissioned and
produced by Artpace San Antonio.
Photo credit Charlie Kitchen.



currently lives in Baltimore, Douglass described seeing the slave ships from his home in Fell's Point and the slave market on Pratt Street in this speech, but the land in Charlton's collage is an Eden, a fantastical place of freedom and abundance. The wilderness Charlton depicts is a multi-seasonal explosion of forests and birds. Pink flowering trees nestle near snowy evergreens amidst vibrant green foliage. Like a magpie, Charlton collects bits of paper culled from myriad sources—children's stickers, illustrated books, mass-reproduced didactic prints of art, naturalia, and historical icons—that she often scans and enlarges. The result is a present-day fairy tale, a rewriting of Douglass's history where shouts of liberty are not hollow, but are dense with rejoicing and justice.

The artist has also acknowledged that these landscapes are not merely fantasy, but an oblique reference to her grandmother's land in Tallahassee. A homeowner, Everlena Bates was not powerless, but a proprietress. The hybrid form in Charlton's grand collages, at once figure and landscape, compresses and conflates art historical genres to again reclaim and revise a historical pattern of objectification and exploitation. *Paul Russell Road*, a large-scale sculpture titled after the address of her grandmother's house, is a more direct homage to Everlena as the matriarch. Years after this familial homestead was sold to developers and demolished, Charlton sketched the house from memory, and this monumental structure is a wistful approximation of the sun-faded blue Tallahassee home.⁴ Glitter covered Lionel train houses populate the interior of Charlton's sculpture, similar to the small bungalows illustrated in *Homebodies* series. The sculpture's oscillation of scale—from massive memorial to Lilliputian village—suggests the particular way memory is telescoped as time passes. In other words, some places that seemed expansive and imposing as children become peculiarly smaller when revisited as an adult, while other sites continue to loom large in one's retrospection and are continually recalled in dreams. Turned upside down, the house is not meant to be another model home, but a ghostly, distorted bricolage of a rich and complicated family past, one where stories were told, secrets withheld, and familial bonds secured.

The clever wordplay in the titles of Charlton's exhibition and series—*The Domestic*, *Reared*, and *Homebodies*—underscores the metonymy of each work. *Reared* evokes the relationship of black woman to white child, as one who cares for the other, but the title, particularly with the nudity in sight and in mind, also comes with whispers of vulgar physicality. Similarly, *The Domestic* is not simply a modifier for somewhere familiar, but is a synonym for a servant, usually black, charged with menial, physical, household tasks. Charlton's language pivots on issues related to personal perspectives

of race and class, the recollection of past pictures, and the body's relationship to the politics and power of home. Amidst the fragments of foliage, the historical, philosophical, and metaphorical meaning of the masks, and the obliteration of the women's bodies within the home, Charlton's works explicitly reveal a legacy of systemic racism and related sexual abuses that lurk behind the paper dolls and hollow suburban walls. Yet, in one of the large scale collages titled *Heavy Billows*, where a carefully modeled, black nude body seen from her waist to the top of her thighs, is nestled among billowing clouds, as bluebirds circle and weave through her legs. Despite the title's claim, the body does not appear heavy, but is instead pictured as a sylph, an immortal, hopeful spirit belonging to the air.

– Shannon Egan, PhD
Director, Schmucker Art Gallery



1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," *The New England Magazine*, January 1892.

2. Joan Cox, "Blue Balls, the Other, and Negative Space: Zoë Charlton *Festoon*," *Bmore Art*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.bmoreart.com>. Mark Alice Durant, "Exhuming Domestic Roots: The Mixed Media Works of Zoë Charlton," *Bmore Art: A Journal of Art and Ideas* 6 (Fall 2018), 58.

3. Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro, speech at Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852," in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 188-205.

4. Durant, "Exhuming Domestic Roots," 61. See also Amy Boone McCreesh, "Inertia: Zoë Charlton," *Bmore Art*, November 30, 2016, <http://www.bmoreart.com/2016/11/inertia-zoe-charlton.html>, and "G Fine Art Presents Zoë Charlton The Migration," *East City Art: DC's Alternative Art Source*, October 8, 2018, <http://www.eastcityart.com/openings-and-events/g-fine-art-presents-zoe-charlton-the-migration/>.

Heavy Billows

2018

graphite, acrylic paint, and collage on paper

112 x 55 in.

Originally commissioned and produced by Artpace
San Antonio. Photo credit Charlie Kitchen.

Zoë Charlton

EDUCATION

2001	Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME	2009	The Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington, DE, "Imitation of a Life"
1999	MFA, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, Painting		The Esther Prangle Rice Gallery at McDaniel College, Westminster, MD, "Prime"
1995	BFA, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, Studio Art	2008	ConnerSmith., Washington, D.C., "Family"

RESIDENCIES

2018	Artpace, San Antonio, TX, curator Dr. Jeffreen Hayes	2007	UNT Art Gallery, Denton, TX, "Saint of the Suburbs"
2017	McColl Center for Art + Innovation, Charlotte, NC	2006	Wendy Cooper Gallery, Chicago, IL, "...in the beginning"
2010	ART342 Residency, Ft. Collins, CO		Clementine Gallery, Project Room, New York City, NY, "Glory"
2009-10	Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC Artist in Residence	2004	Creative Alliance, Baltimore, MD, "There Goes the Neighborhood," with Rick Delaney
	Springfield Pottery, Springfield, MO sculpture Artist in Residence		
2005	Contemporary Artists Center, North Adams, MA		
2003	Patterson Residency for the Creative Alliance, Baltimore, MD		
2001-03	Drawing Center Viewing Program, NYC, NY		
1990	Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME		

SOLO AND TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2018	The Union for Contemporary Art, Omaha, NE, "The Ipseity Project," curator Nicole Caruth	2017	Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, "Engender," curator: Josh Friedman
	Artpace, San Antonio, TX, "The Homestead," curator Jeffreen Hayes		McColl Center for Art + Innovation, Charlotte, NC, "Stimulus"
	School 33, Baltimore, MD, "The Domestic"		Harvey B. Gantt Center, Charlotte, NC, "Simple Passion, Complex Vision: The Darryl Atwell Collection"
	Grizzly Grizzly, Philadelphia, PA, "Luster"		article Gallery, Montréal, Québec, "The Cinematic Archives of Identity, Embodiment, & Memory," organizer Ayanna Dozier, McGill Institute for Center, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies
2016	Terrain Exhibitions, Chicago, IL, "I Live On Paul Russell Road"		Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago, IL "A New Look"
2014	VOLTA art fair, New York, NY, with ConnerSmith.		
2013	ConnerSmith., Washington, D.C., "festoon"		
2011	ConnerSmith., Washington, D.C., "Paladins and Tourists"		

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (SELECTED)

2018	Taubman Museum of Art, Roanoke, VA, "Reclamation! Pan-African Works from the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection," presented by Secular Society
	Tuttle Gallery at McDonogh School, Owings Mills, MD, "aspect"
	SPACE, Pittsburgh, PA, "Identity Play," curator Kristen Letts Kovak
	Robeson Gallery, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ "Mirror Mirror," curator Anonda Bell

	Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC, "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now," curator Chad Alligood and Don Bacigalupi (April 22-Sept 3)	2012	Fischer Museum of Art, University of Southern California, LA, CA, "A Complex Weave: Women and Identity in Contemporary Art," * curators Dr. Martin Rosenberg and Dr. Susan Isaacs (catalog)
	Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL		Studio Museum in Harlem, NYC, NY, "The Bearden Project," curator Lauren Haynes (catalog)
	"Third Space/Shifting Conversations about Contemporary Art," curator Wassan Al-Khudhairi		Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, San Francisco, CA, "Solo ESAS Mujeres: Documenting the Universal/Material," curators Iona Rozeal Brown and Veronica Jackson
	David C. Driskell Center at University of Maryland, College Park, MD, "Shifting: African American Women Artists and The Power of Their Gaze," curators Curlee Holton and Dorit Yaron		Memphis College of Art, Hyde Gallery at Nesin Graduate School, Memphis, TN, "Facts, Fictions and Figures," curator Rehema Barber and Jennifer Sargent
2016	de Stijl, Austin, TX, "One/Sixth"	2010	Victoria H. Myhren Gallery, University of Denver, Denver, CO, "The Gleaners: Contemporary Art from the Collection of Sarah and Jim Taylor" (catalog)
	Telfair Museums, Savannah, GA, "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now," curator Chad Alligood and Don Bacigalupi (catalog)		Silber Gallery at Goucher College, Towson, MD, "Ambiguous Bodies" curator Laura Amussen (catalog)
	The Delaware Contemporary, Wilmington, DE, "Carried Weight," curator Jacqueline Milad	2009	Pulse New York (art fair), New York, NY, with ConnerSmith.
2015	Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD, "Janet & Walter Sondheim Artscape Prize" Finalist Exhibition		Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Camden, NJ, "A Complex Weave: Women and Identity in Contemporary Art"* curators Dr. Martin Rosenberg and Dr. Susan Isaacs (catalog)
	Studio Museum of Harlem, NYC, NY, "Concealed: Selections from the Permanent Collection," curator Hallie Ringle		Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, MD, "FAX" *
	Harvey B. Gantt Center, Charlotte, NC, "Venturing Out of the Heart of Darkness," curator Rehema C. Barber	2008	NEXT Chicago (art fair), Chicago, IL, with ConnerSmith.
2014	Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR, "State of the Art: Discovering American Art Now," curator Chad Alligood and Don Bacigalupi (catalog)		Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA and Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, TX
	Terrain Exhibitions, Chicago, IL, "Sticky & Sweet," curator Scott Hunter		"Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image Since 1970," curators Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Valerie Cassel Oliver * (catalog)
	Silber Art Gallery, Goucher College, Towson, MD, "Virilit-HE," curator Laura Amussen		The Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, "Invisible Rays: The Surrealism Legacy," curator Michael Rush
2013	Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL, "Etched in Collective History," curator Dr. Jeffreen Hayes		Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, IN, "Is You Is or Is You Ain't," curators Kristen Anchor and Jed Dodds *
	Salina Art Center, Fort Hays State University, Salina, KS, "A Complex Weave: Women and Identity in Contemporary Art," * curators Dr. Martin Rosenberg and Dr. Susan Isaacs (catalog)		

- 2007 Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA, "Past Over"
 NADA (art fair), Miami, FL, with Clementine Gallery
 Pulse Miami (art fair), Miami, FL, with ConnerSmith.
 Pulse London (art fair), London, England, with ConnerSmith.
 Art DC (art fair), Washington, DC, with ConnerSmith.
 Memphis College of Art, Main Gallery, Memphis, TN, "Reasons to Riot," curator Jovan Speller
- 2006 Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD, "siteMaryland," curator Darsie Alexander
 Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland, "black alphabet-conTEXTS of contemporary African-American art," curator Maria Brewinska (catalog)
 Haas & Fischer Gallery, Zurich, Switzerland, "This Ain't No Karaoke," curator Max Henry
 Union Gallery at the University of Maryland, College Park, MD "Fly: Over State Perspectives"
 Mixed Greens, New York, NY, "Hook Up"
 NADA (art fair), Miami, FL, with Clementine Gallery
 ArtBrussels 2006, with Wendy Cooper Gallery
 Scope NY 2006, with Wendy Cooper Gallery
 Diggs Gallery at WSSU, Winston-Salem, NC, "Not an Ocean Between Us: Voices of Women from Africa and the African Diaspora"
- 2005 Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, "Frequency," curators Christine Y. Kim and Thelma Golden (catalog)
- 2004 School 33, Baltimore, MD, "(In)visible Silence," curator Sanford Biggers
 The Drawing Center, New York, NY, "Talespinning: Selections Fall 2004" (catalog)
 Decker Gallery at Mt. Royal Station, MICA Baltimore, MD, "Baltimore/Chicago Show," curator Kerry James Marshall
- 2003 Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY, "Vici, Vidi, Video," curator Christine Y. Kim
 Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin, TX, "Beyond the Academy: Encouraging New Talent from Texas, curator Erina Duganne *
- 2000 Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, TX, "Out of the Ordinary," curators Lynn M. Herbert and Paola Morsiani
 Bridge Center for Contemporary Art, El Paso, TX, "The Question of Race"
- 1999 Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX, "Four Walls, Three Years"
- * traveling exhibitions

HONORS, AWARDS, NOMINATIONS

- 2016 Grit Fund/Robert W. Deutsch Foundation grant; Semifinalist Sondheim Art Prize; Joan Mitchell nomination
- 2015 Louis Comfort Tiffany nomination; Anonymous Was A Woman nomination; Finalist Sondheim Art Prize
- 2014 RUBYS Artist Project grant
- 2012 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant
- 2006 Baltimore Museum of Art, siteMaryland grant
- 2005 Synergy Collaborative Grant finalist
- 2003 Elizabeth Scott Fellowship
- 2001 Camille Hanks Cosby Fellowship
 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation nomination

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR
 Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, AR
 Studio Museum in Harlem, NY
 Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
 Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, NY
 Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University, MA

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January 25 - March 8, 2019

Artist's Talk:

January 25, noon, Lyceum, Pennsylvania Hall, Third Floor

Opening Reception:

January 25, 4:30 - 6:30 pm

Gallery Talk with Prof. Nicholas Miller,
 Asst. Professor of Art History, Gettysburg College:
 February 20, noon, Schmucker Art Gallery

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