

A large, glossy red sculpture of a hand, possibly made of resin or polished wood, is the central focus. The hand is in a relaxed, slightly curled position, with the fingers pointing upwards. The surface is highly reflective, showing highlights and shadows that emphasize its three-dimensional form. The background is a light, textured wall.

**ILANA  
HARRIS-BABOU**

**REINES VERGNÜGEN  
WHOLESOME FUN**

**2. Oktober–28. November 2021**  
**2 October–28 November 2021**

**KUNSTHAUS HAMBURG**

In ihren Videoarbeiten, Collagen und Skulpturen vereint **Ilana Harris-Babou** Humor mit scharfer Gesellschaftskritik und nimmt damit eine künstlerische Position ein, der es gelingt, rassistische Strukturen und soziale Differenzen im Spiegel der westlich-hegemonialen Konsum- und Medienkultur sichtbar zu machen.

Dabei bedient sie sich der Sprache populärer Werbeformate auf Youtube und Instagram, in denen sowohl Firmen ihr Marken-Image entwerfen als auch eine vornehmlich jüngere Generation ihren Warenkonsum als Lifestyle im Alltag, beim Kochen oder beim Heimwerken für die Kamera inszeniert. Hierin wird die Selbstermächtigung der Do-It-Yourself-Idee zum Paradigma der Selbstoptimierung, die neben praktischen Alltagstipps vor allem Effizienz, Performance und einen vermeintlich guten Geschmack propagiert. Die Absurdität dysfunktionaler – häufig getöpfter – Haushaltsutensilien und die selbstironische Performance der Künstlerin (zuweilen in Kooperation mit ihrer Mutter) persiflieren die Logik eines moralisch und ästhetisch optimierten Lifestyles.

Über den amerikanischen Kontext hinaus lassen sich in den Arbeiten allerdings auch viele Parallelen zu europäischen Verhältnissen finden, in welchen sowohl struktureller Rassismus als auch Privilegien einzelner Gesellschaftsgruppen im Alltag tief verankert sind.

**Ilana Harris-Babou** (\*1991, Brooklyn, NY) hat in den USA und Europa ausgestellt, zuletzt in Einzelausstellungen im ICA@UTC (Chattanooga), Jacob Lawrence Gallery (Seattle), The Museum of Arts & Design und HESSE FLATOW (New York). Weitere Ausstellungsorte sind das CCA Wattis Institute (San Francisco), das Queens Museum (New York), die Istanbul Design Biennale (Istanbul), die Kunsthall Charlottenborg (Kopenhagen), die Whitney Biennale (New York), das Jewish Museum, das SculptureCenter und das Studio Museum in Harlem. Sie hat Bildende Kunst an der Columbia University sowie der Yale University studiert.

Kuratorin: Katja Schroeder

In her video works, collages, and sculptures, **Ilana Harris-Babou** combines humor and a keen critique of society, revealing racist structures and social discrepancies in the mirror of western hegemonic consumer and media culture.

In this context, she adopts the language of popular advertising formats on Youtube and Instagram, in which companies develop their brand image and mostly members of the younger generation enact their consumerism as a lifestyle in the everyday sphere, capturing their cooking or DIY activities on camera. Here, the self-empowerment of the Do-It-Yourself concept becomes a paradigm of self-optimization, propagating efficiency, performance, and would-be good taste in addition to practical tips. The absurdity of dysfunctional household utensils, often made of pottery, and her self-ironic performances (sometimes in collaboration with her mother) mock the logic of a morally and aesthetically optimized lifestyle.

Beyond the American context, however, many parallels can be found in the artist's works to European conditions, in which both structural racism and the privileges of individual social groups are deeply anchored in everyday life.

Curator: Katja Schroeder

**Ilana Harris-Babou** (\*1991, Brooklyn, NY) has exhibited throughout the US and Europe, with recent solo exhibitions at ICA@UTC (Chattanooga), Jacob Lawrence Gallery (Seattle), The Museum of Arts & Design and HESSE FLATOW (New York). Other venues include CCA Wattis Institute (San Francisco), Queens Museum (New York), Istanbul Design Biennial (Istanbul), Kunsthal Charlottenborg (Copenhagen), Whitney Biennial (New York) the Jewish Museum, SculptureCenter, the Studio Museum in Harlem. She studied Visual Art at Columbia University as well as at Yale University.

# Decision Fatigue [2020]

Mixed-media Installation, HD Video, 8:33 min.

In *Decision Fatigue* (2020) thematisiert Harris-Babou den Boom der Wellness-Industrie und ihre Heilsversprechen und hinterfragt eine Welt, in der strukturelles Versagen oft als persönliche Entscheidungsfreiheit dargestellt wird. In Bezug auf das Konsumverhalten privilegierter Käuferschichten persiflieren ihre Videos in Form von Do-it-Yourself-Tutorials oder Markenwerbung den Trend zur Selbstoptimierung. Ironisch formuliert die Arbeit eine beißende Kritik an der Absurdität von Gesundheits- und Schönheitsstandards, für die vielen Menschen allerdings sowohl die Mittel als auch die Zeit fehlen.

In *Decision Fatigue* inszeniert Sheila Harris, die Mutter der Künstlerin, ein intimes, absurdes, stellenweise schmerzhaftes Make-up-Tutorial. Darin zeichnet sie selbstironisch die großen und kleinen Entscheidungen eines Lebens nach, das der Prämisse folgt, jung und fit zu bleiben. So präsentiert sie die tägliche Schönheitspflege für einen Lebensstil, in dem Stillen keinen Platz hat oder eine Makeup-Anleitung zur Vorbereitung auf ein Abendessen vor dem Fernseher. Spielerisch verwendet sie Begriffe wie *clean eating* [gesunde Ernährung] und *minimalist lifestyle* [minimalistischer Lebensstil] während sie ihrer Schönheitspflege aus Junkfood präpariert.

In *Decision Fatigue* (2020), Ilana Harris-Babou addresses the boom of the wellness industry and its promises of salvation, questioning a world in which structural failure is often framed as a personal freedom of choice. In reference to privileged consumer demographics, Harris-Babou's videos deride aspirational lifestyle trends, adopting the formats of Do-it-Yourself-tutorials or brand promotion. With irony, the work formulates a biting critique of the absurdity of health and beauty standards, for which many people, however, lack both means and time.

In *Decision Fatigue* the artist's mother, Sheila Harris, stages an intimate, absurd, in places painful make-up tutorial, tracing the choices she has made in her life, both large and small, to hold onto youth and remain well. For example, she presents her daily beauty routine for a lifestyle that doesn't allow for breastfeeding, or a makeup tutorial for the preparation of a TV dinner. While using junk food as ingredients for her beauty routines, she plays on terms like *clean eating* and *minimalist* lifestyle.

Videostills (Decision Fatigue)



This is my rose quartz face roller, and I'm sure you've seen these around now.



Rolling your face before having a TV dinner is part of the relaxation process.



Videostills (Finishing a Raw Basement)

# Finishing a Raw Basement [2017]

4K Video, 6:41 min.

„Die Werkzeuge des Herrn werden niemals das Haus des Herrn niederreißen.“ – Audre Lorde

In *Finishing a Raw Basement* (2017) nehmen Ilana Harris-Babou und ihre Mutter das Format der Heimwerkersendung als Vorlage für ein Kurzvideo über handwerkliche Ambitionen für eine zeitgemäße Innenraumgestaltung. Wie auch in anderen Arbeiten der Künstlerin behandelt das Video, Themen wie Schuld und Wiedergutmachung sowie die Idee des amerikanischen Traums. Letztere folgt der Vorstellung, dass jede\*r durch harte Arbeit und Ausdauer erfolgreich werden kann. Voraussetzung dafür ist allerdings ein Gesellschaftssystem, dass für alle gleichermaßen funktioniert.

Der amerikanische Traum ist der Inbegriff von Leistungsfähigkeit. Die Heimwerkersendung und ihre Allgegenwart steht paradigmatisch als ideales Sinnbild für die Verwirklichung dieses Traums im Eigenheim. Allerdings gründet diese Vorstellung auf einem systemischen Rassismus, der als Werkzeug und Material für das „Haus des Meisters“ dient. Wenn es in Ilana Harris-Babous Werk Absurdität gibt, dann deshalb, weil unsere Welt und ihre Grundlagen absurd sind. Die Künstlerin und ihre Mutter spielen „Bauherrinnen“, die einen anderen erfolgreichen Traum erreicht haben – sie sind Stars einer Reality-TV-Show. Ein populäres Format, das in ihrem Werk auch als Kochshow oder Musikvideo auftauchen könnte. Es dient als Rahmen, um den Zuschauer in ein vermeintlich leichtes Vergnügen zu

verwickeln. Auch der Humor funktioniert auf dieselbe Weise; er ist der sanfte Bote für die eigentliche Brisanz der Botschaft.

In *Finishing a Raw Basement* wird über Reparationen gesprochen. Ein Begriff, der die gleichen sprachlichen Wurzeln wie „Reparatur“ hat und den Akt des Reparierens oder Wiedergutmachens – meist durch einen Aggressor nach einem Krieg – bezeichnet. Die beiden Bauherrinnen führen das Kellergeschoss vor, beschreiben seine Vorzüge („modernes, offenes Konzept, rustikale Anmutung“) und weisen auf seine Probleme hin („Sehen Sie das? Ich sehe das. Ja, das sehe ich auch.“) und stellen fest, wie viel Arbeit noch bevorsteht. Was bedeutet es, etwas zu reparieren? Es heißt, das, was kaputt ist, wiederherzustellen, es in einen früheren „heilen“ Zustand zu versetzen. Es bedeutet, einen Mangel auszugleichen, zu kompensieren oder zu beheben. Aber wie oft ist eine Reparatur erfolgreich und vollständig genug, um die Erinnerung an das, was kaputt war, zu löschen? Die Werkzeuge mit denen bei Harris-Babou repariert wird, sind kaputt, es sind dysfunktionale Objekte. Der Keramikhammer zerbricht an einem Nagel. Der freigelegte Ziegelstein ist nur rot angemalt. Das Werkzeug wird dem Ausmaß des grundlegenden Schadens niemals gerecht werden.

Auszug aus einem Text von Ana Iwataki, ursprünglich veröffentlicht von Holoholo Books, *I will set a stage for you*, 2017.

*"You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools."* – Audre Lourde

In *Finishing a Raw Basement* (2017) Ilana Harris-Babou and her mother adopt the format of the home improvement show as a template for a non-linear, materially based exploration of domestic aspirations. The video deals with guilt, reparation, and the idea of the American dream as common themes in many works of her. It follows the notion that everyone can achieve merit through hard work and endurance. But this notion also assumes that the systems in which society operates work equally for everyone.

The American dream is performance par excellence. The home improvement show and its ubiquity is symptomatic of this—there is no more real symbol of the achievement of the dream than homeownership. Systemic racism is the foundation of this ideal; it is the tool and the material that built the master's house. If there is absurdity in Ilana Harris-Babou's work, it is because our world and its foundations are absurd. The artist and her mother play "construction experts" who have achieved that other dream of success—they are stars of a reality TV show. A popular format, which elsewhere in her work could be a cooking show or music video, serves as a framework to lull the viewer into an initial easy engagement. Humor plays this role as well; they are gentle messengers for the violence of the message.

The video also speaks about reparations. Reparations come from the same linguistic root as "repair"—they are an act of repairing or mending, most often by an aggressor following

a war. The two construction experts move through the basement, describing its selling points ("*modern, open-concept, rustic appeal*") and pointing out its problems ("*Do you see that? I see that. Yes, I see that too.*") They briefly visit a deck with a pool, they realize how far they have to go. What does it mean to repair something? It is to restore what has been broken, to return it to a formerly health state. It is to make good, to compensate, to mend a deficiency. How often though, is a repair successful enough, complete enough, to erase the memory of what was broken? The tools to attempt the repair are broken; they are dysfunctional objects. The ceramic hammer shatters on the nail. The exposed brick is only brick-red paint. The equipment will never match the scope of the foundational damage.

Excerpt from text by Ana Iwataki, originally published by Holoholo Books, *I will set a stage for you*, 2017.



# Human Design [2019]

HD Video, 5:40 min.

Mit *Human Design* (2019) stellt Ilana Harris-Babou eine Verbindung her zwischen der obsessiven Ästhetisierung der zeitgenössischen Konsumgesellschaft, die alle Ungleichheiten durch ein vermeintlich „authentisches“ Design nivelliert, und dem Trauma der Kolonialgeschichte, das die Realität vieler Afroamerikaner weiterhin prägt. Die Künstlerin hinterfragt, wie sich zeitgenössisches Design kulturelles Kapital aneignet und dabei bestimmte historische Kontexte ausgelassen werden. Hinter *Human Design* verbirgt sich eine wichtige Kritik an der Art und Weise, wie traditionelle Objekte und Kunsthandwerk gehandelt, angeeignet und umdefiniert werden, und wie ihre Geschichte zugunsten von Handelsinteressen und Kommerz übergegangen wird.

Das Video führt auf eine Erfahrung zurück, die Harris-Babou im Zusammenhang mit afrikanischen Holzschnitzereien machte, die im Flagship-Store des Möbelkaufhauses *Restoration Hardware* in Manhattan ausgestellt waren. Als sie nach der Herkunft der Schnitzereien fragte, antwortete ein Verkaufsmitarbeiter: „*Wir schicken unsere Mitarbeiter rund um den Globus, um diese originalen Objekte auszusuchen*“, und erklärte, dass sie nicht zum Verkauf stünden. Mit anderen Worten, es handelte sich um exotische Kuriositäten aus Afrika, die einen ansonsten nüchternen Verkaufsraum für den gehobenen, überwiegend weißen Geschmack attraktiv machen sollten.

Für *Human Design* schlüpft die Künstlerin in die Rolle der Geschäftsführerin eines fiktiven Inneneinrich-

tungsunternehmens, die im Senegal nach ihren ästhetischen Wurzeln sucht, um sie für ihre gehobenen Kundenschaft verwertbar zu machen. In der Rolle der genialen Designerin, die für ein auf Möbel und Wohnaccessoires spezialisiertes Unternehmen arbeitet, nimmt Harris-Babou den Zuschauer mit auf eine Reise zu den Ursprüngen des „guten Designs“. Das Video ist eine Satire im Stil einer Reisesendung für das Fernsehen. Was als Suche nach dem Ursprung von zwei Holzpaneelen mit volkstümlichen Schnitzereien beginnt, wird zu einer Geschichte der Selbsterkenntnis. Die Reise führt die Designerin nach Afrika, wo sie auf einer kleinen Veranda voller Masken, Totem und anderer Holzschnitzereien den Ursprung der beiden Paneele ausfindig macht. Eine noch genauere Untersuchung der Herkunft dieser Objekte führt sie schließlich zum *Maison des Esclaves* auf der senegalesischen Insel Gorée. Das Haus wurde 1776 erbaut und diente als vorübergehendes Auffanglager für afrikanische Sklaven, die nach Übersee verkauft werden sollten. Im Inneren des Gebäudes befindet sich eine Tür, die als *The Door of No Return* bekannt ist und direkt auf den glitzernden Ozean führt. Einigen Berichten zufolge diente diese Tür als direkter Zugang für Hunderte, wenn nicht Tausende von Sklaven zur Verfrachtung auf Schiffe.

Diese Geschichte hervorzuheben erscheint um so dringlicher, als die Wiederaneignung des Objekts als Ware daran scheitert, seine eigene Vergangenheit und Verfügbarkeit sichtbar zu machen. Harris-Babou manifestiert

diese Dringlichkeit durch verschiedene Schichten, Persönlichkeiten und Erfahrungen, indem sie eine Reise erfindet und ein Trauma in Erinnerung ruft, das persönlich und kollektiv, individuell und universell ist.

Auszug aus einem Text von Adriana Blidaru, ursprünglich veröffentlicht in Cura.31 magazine, 2019.



Videostills (Human Design)

With *Human Design* (2019), Ilana Harris-Babou establishes an interconnection between the obsessive aestheticization of contemporary consumer society that levels all inequalities through a purportedly 'authentic' design, and the trauma of colonial history, which continues to shape the reality of many African Americans. The artist questions how cultural currency is appropriated in contemporary design, and how specific histories are edited out. *Human Design* conceals an important critique of how traditional objects and crafts are traded, appropriated and whitewashed, and how their history is discarded for traffic and commerce.

The video was inspired by an experience she had involving African wood carvings displayed at the high-end furniture company Restoration Hardware's Manhattan flagship. When Harris-Babou inquired about the carvings' source, a sales associate replied, "We send team members out across the globe to find these one-of-a-kind objects," and explained that they weren't for sale. In other words, they were exotic curios from Africa used to enliven an otherwise staid retail space catering to upscale, largely white tastes. For *Human Design*, the artist casts herself as CEO of a fictional interior design company who travels to Senegal to find her aesthetic roots for the benefit of her high-end clientele. Playing the role of the designer-as-genius who works for a company specializing in furniture and home accessories, Harris-Babou takes the viewer on a journey to discover the origins of "good design." The video is a satire that imitates the aesthetic of the travel TV show, but what is initially the quest of finding the ori-

gin of two wooden plates carved with tribal patterns becomes a story of self-discovery. This journey takes the designer to Africa, where she finds the origins of the two plates on a small porch crowded with masks, totems, and other wooden carvings. But she requests an even deeper examination on the origin of these objects, which further leads to the *Maison des Esclaves* on Gorée Island, in Senegal. A house that was built in 1776, and used as a temporary holding center for African slaves to be sold overseas. Inside the house, a door known as *The Door of No Return*, opens up right into the gleaming ocean. Some accounts say that this door served as a direct passageway to lead hundreds, if not thousands, of slaves on ships.

The presence of this history can feel even more urgent in a context in which an object's re-appropriation as a commodity fails to account for its past and its conditions of arrival. Harris-Babou manifests this urgency through different layers, personas, and experiences, devising a journey and recalling a trauma that is personal and collective, individual, and universal.

Excerpt from text by Adriana Blidaru, originally published in Cura.31 magazine, 2019.

## Leaf of Life [2020/21]

Mehrkanal-Videoinstallation, Tapete, Maße variabel/  
Multichannel video installation, wallpaper, dimensions variable

In ihrer neuesten Arbeit, die während der letzten 1,5 Jahre entstanden ist, beschäftigt sich die Künstlerin mit den gravierenden Ungleichheiten im amerikanischen Gesundheitssystem. Gerade in der Corona-Pandemie hat sich nicht nur in den USA gezeigt, wie ungleich sich die allgemeine Gesundheitsversorgung in den unterschiedlichen Gesellschaftsgruppen auswirkt. In einem Interview der Künstlerin mit ihrer Schwester kommen konkrete Erfahrungen mit Rassismus aus ihrem engsten Umfeld zum Ausdruck. Sie werden durch Fernsehmitschnitte über und mit dem selbsternannten Heiler und Alternativmediziner Alfredo Bowman flankiert, der als Dr. Sebi bekannt wurde. Seit den 1980ern propagierte er eine umstrittene aber bis heute populäre Medizin, die auf Pflanzen basiert und für die Heilung von Menschen afrikanischer und indigener Abstammung bestimmt ist. Ebenso wie seine Methoden ist auch seine Biografie von Mythen, Gerichtsprozessen und Verschwörungstheorien durchzogen. Vor dem Hintergrund einer antikononialen Kritik bezog sich Dr. Sebi auf das Alte Testament aber auch auf Theorien des Schwarzen Nationalismus, um die Verwendung natürlicher Pflanzen als Heilmittel gegenüber den Medikamenten der Pharmaindustrie zu rechtfertigen. Die Früchte auf den Wänden, die in Harris-Babous Installation auf den ersten Blick wie als Dekoration wirken, sind einer von Dr. Sebi empfohlenen Diät entnommen, die eine strikte Beschränkung auf ausgewählte Lebensmittel vorsieht.

Neben Bowman kommen weitere prominente Persönlichkeiten in der Videoinstallation zu Wort, die sich auf unterschiedlicher Ebene für die Schwarzen Communities in Amerika stark gemacht haben. Darunter u. a. der US-Rapper Nipsey Hussle, um den sich ebenfalls Verschwörungstheorien ranken, nachdem er 2019 auf offener Straße erschossen wurde. Dabei wurde über den Zusammenhang von Nipseys Tod mit einer Dokumentation über Dr. Sebi spekuliert, an welcher der Rapper gerade arbeitete. Es gab Vermutungen, dass sowohl Nipsey als auch Bowman – der wenige Jahre zuvor in Untersuchungshaft starb – von der Pharmaindustrie getötet wurden, um die Schwarze Bevölkerung daran zu hindern, eigene und unabhängige Behandlungsmethoden zu entwickeln. Harris-Babous Videocollage *Leaf of Life* macht deutlich, wie leicht sich berechtigte Kritik an dominierenden Systemen für Verschwörungsmythen und ideologischer Propaganda missbrauchen oder damit in Verbindung bringen lässt. Letztendlich stellt sie hier, wie in ihren anderen Arbeiten auch, die Frage nach der Legitimation populärer Narrative.



Videostills/Collagen (Leaf of Life)

In her latest work, *Leaf of Life* (2020/2021), which was created during the last 1.5 years, the artist deals with the serious inequalities in the American health care system. The Corona pandemic in particular has shown, not only in the U.S., how unequal the general health care system impacts different communities. In an interview between the artist and her sister, concrete experiences of racism from her closest environment are expressed. They are flanked by television recordings documenting appearances of, as well as features about the self-proclaimed herbalist and healer Alfredo Bowman, popular known as Dr. Sebi. Since the 1980s, he propagated a controversial but still popular medicine based on herbs and intended for the healing of people of African and indigenous descent. Like his methods, his biography is riddled with myths, court cases and conspiracy theories. Bowman based his medical treatments on principles of traditional herbal healing that he was taught by his grandmother in Honduras, where he grew up. Driven by anti-colonial criticism he often referred to the Old Testament and Black nationalist theories to justify using natural plants as a remedy for illness, rather than the pharmaceuticals of the Western healthcare system. The fruits on the walls in Harris-Babou's installation, which at first glance appear to be for decoration, are taken from a diet recommended by Dr. Sebi, which includes strict restriction to selected foods.

In addition to Bowman, other prominent personalities have their say in the video installation, who have made a strong stand for the Black communities in America on different

levels. Among them the U.S. rapper Nipsey Hussle, around whom conspiracy theories also swirled after he was shot in the open street in 2019 and speculation arose about the connection to the documentary on Dr. Sebi, which the rapper was working on. Some claimed that Nipsey as well as the self-proclaimed healer – who himself died in custody – were killed by the pharmaceutical industry specifically to prevent Black people to figure out their own and independent way of medical treatment. Harris-Babou's video collage *Leaf of Life* makes clear how easily legitimate criticism of dominant systems can be misused for, or blend into conspiracy myths and ideologized propaganda. Ultimately, as in her other work, she raises the question of the legitimacy of popular narratives here as well.

# Smoke, Mirrors, and Splinters

By Dessane Lopez Cassell

“Is the American project a ceramic hammer?”<sup>1</sup> In this era of crumbling empires, Ilana Harris-Babou’s question is a fitting one. Like many of the queries her work poses, this particular one highlights the fragility of American exceptionalism, slyly underlining it in red pen.

Breakable hammers and other fragile tools abound throughout Harris-Babou’s creative output, which encompasses sculpture, video, installation, and more. Describing her work as a “Trojan horse,” the Brooklyn-born artist traffics in markers of the mundane, using them to poke fun at hyper-consumerism and our (sometimes unwitting) complicity with racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> In videos like *Reparation Hardware* (2018) and more recently, *Human Design* (2020), Harris-Babou crafts satirical takes on case studies in aspirational marketing. In each instance, she directs her lens at the enduring allure of the luxury home-furnishing company formerly known as Restoration Hardware (trendily rechristened RH in recent times).

“Reparations will be our most ambitious project yet,” Harris-Babou calmly intones in voiceover at the start of *Reparation Hardware*. Originally commissioned for the online streaming platform DIS. ART, the edutainment-style video sports a faux-inspirational soundtrack, transporting viewers to the placid realm

of high-end advertorials. Vaguely stirring piano chords score the artist’s entrance to a dilapidated old barn, an architectural trope ripped straight from the pages of RH’s notorious “source books,” in which rampant cultural appropriation is wielded in service of concocting a slick, yet perfectly rustic, Modernist aesthetic.

Here, the artist plays the part of a corporate “reparator,” a lone Black woman creative roving the American countryside in search of the nation’s most “authentic histories.” At various points, the video cuts to brown-and-white photographic stills that freeze her in time, with an upright broom in-hand. The gesture echoes that of Ella Watson’s in Gordon Parks’s *American Gothic* (1942), itself a jab at the structural inequities elided by Grant Wood’s iconic, eponymous painting from 1930.

Hands are a frequent motif, in this video and throughout Harris-Babou’s moving image work. They are often shown in close-up, dutifully writing, drawing, or otherwise toiling away in service of her biting takes on “good design.” In *Reparation Hardware*, our main character scribbles thoughtfully in a notebook: “40 ACRES AND A MULE” appears over and over again on a page in handwritten block letters. A perpetual trickster, Harris-Babou takes aim at the false

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1 Ilana Harris-Babou, conversation with the author, August 19, 2021.

2 Ilana Harris-Babou, BRIC Artist-in-Residence, BK Stories, August 9, 2016, BRIC TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG8YNLWrW74>

promise of reparations for freed Black people in the wake of the Civil War. That glimmer of restitution in the direct wake of centuries of enslavement is one that remains glaringly unfulfilled today—a fact Harris-Babou’s character lampoons, noting in a chipper tone: “We’ve earned the right to the soil, many times over and over. And now we’re determined to have it.”

Aptly, Harris-Babou’s futile tools—made of both tender clay and the aforementioned ceramic—thwack at crooked nails at various points; each casually violent meeting of materials rendering them useless as they crack, splinter, and bend out of shape. These “dysfunctional ceramics” make an earlier appearance in her 2017 video and installation, *Finishing a Raw Basement*. A spoof of popular home improvement shows, this work enlists Harris-Babou’s mother as co-star. Sheila Harris, a frequent collaborator of the artist, is perhaps the original doyenne of the artist’s unique brand of sly, deadpan humor. Together, the two play the roles of cheerful yet mildly disaffected hosts intent on sprucing up a “man cave.”

At one point, the characters exchange HGTV buzzwords: “Classic. Modern. Transitional. Mid-century.” Each sheathed in the demeanor of an awkward television host, their plastic smiles and perfect lipstick frozen into closely cropped frames. Cannily, Harris-Babou’s

video works are never scripted. The *Get Out*-style antics and campy exchanges are largely the result of improvisation between the artist and family members on camera. (She often ropes her siblings in as well.) Harris-Babou later “makes sense of [things] in the edit,” re-recording as necessary.<sup>3</sup> Though she often fills the roles of actor, art director, and prop maker, as well as editor, she sees her work as more akin to collage than filmmaking.

Reflecting on her chameleonic tendencies, Harris-Babou once recalled a high school-era Halloween costume, which, in hindsight, has become a conceptual well from which much of her work springs. Stuck without a costume, she donned all-white and went to school as just that—a comical stunt that reminded me of the use of whiteface on FX’s *Atlanta*, that similarly incisive and occasionally magical realist series. (Think Tobias Walner, rather than Teddy Perkins.<sup>4</sup>) Harris-Babou’s ingenuity, however, was lost on her supposedly progressive peers at Brooklyn’s St. Ann’s School. The expected whine of a white classmate—“if I dressed up as Black, I wouldn’t be allowed to do that”—laid bare a fundamental inability to understand what might have been one of her earliest performances, as well as the power dynamics at play.<sup>5</sup>

For Harris-Babou, performing whiteness is a way of “revealing its strangeness,”

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3 Ilana Harris-Babou, conversation with the author, August 19, 2021.

4 *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 6, FX, directed by Donald Glover. See here for an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diLqmtXe1tk>

5 Ilana Harris-Babou in conversation with Amy Beecher, *The Amy Beecher Show*, “Episode 30: Cooking Yoni Eggs with Ilana Harris-Babou,” August 9, 2019, <https://amybeecher.show/episode-30-ilana-harris-babou>





her aim being to eventually decenter it altogether.<sup>6</sup> Hence the importance of using her own body and those of her family; from her cunning spoofs of cooking shows (*Cooking with the Erotic*, 2016) and home improvement media (*Finishing a Raw Basement*; *Reparation Hardware*; *Human Design*), to her acerbic critiques of wellness culture (*Decision Fatigue*, 2020; *Leaf of Life*, 2020–), Harris-Babou’s work positions Black people in realms where they are traditionally omitted. Beyond commenting on absence, she draws our attention to the systems that perpetuate this commercial exclusion. Each sweeping gesticulation or thumbs up dripping in paint becomes a pointed subversion of the omnipresent, manicured white hands perpetually rendered in close-up. For regardless of their specific genre, these racialized tropes of aspirational media act as both the conductors and instigators of mainstream desires for *more or better*. These hands don’t just show us what we want; they tell us, from the vantage point of people we have been conditioned to heed. Harris-Babou’s work pulls back the curtain and points that out, eliciting cathartic cackles in the process. More recently though, her projects have veered slightly out of the realm of humor.

*Leaf of Life* and her ongoing *Wellness Collages* (an evolving multi-channel installation and a collage series, respectively) take on the deeply unfunny subject of healthcare inequality in the US. Begun in 2020, amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, these projects exert a laser focus on the allure and nefarious grip of “alternative” lifestyle empires like those of “Dr.” Sebi (born Alfredo Bowman) and Gwyneth Paltrow’s *goop*. Lawsuits and in some cases, serious consumer harm, have trailed these cult-like entities—the dubious philosophies of which have become all the more concerning amid a global health emergency.<sup>7</sup> Still, significant followings of everyday people and celebrities alike have flocked to each.

Among his numerous beliefs, Sebi proposed that health issues like sickle cell anemia, leukemia, and even AIDS could be remedied among Black people if they adhered to an all-alkaline diet, free of “Caucasian food” (animal products and processed foods).<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, he founded Dr. Sebi’s Cell Food to peddle his philosophies and products, attracting stars like Nipsey Hussle, Michael Jackson, and Lisa “Left-Eye” Lopes.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Ilana Harris-Babou in conversation with Amy Beecher, 2019.

7 See “Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop series on Netflix slammed by NHS chief,” *BBC*, January 30, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51312441>; Jonathan Jarry, “‘Dr.’ Sebi: What Do We Make of this Non-Doctor,” Office for Science and Society, McGill University, April 12, 2019. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/quackery/dr-sebi-what-do-we-make-him>;

Emily Kirkpatrick, “Goop Responds to “Frivolous” Lawsuit Claiming That Its Vagina Candles Explode After Lighting,” *Vanity Fair*, May 18, 2021. <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/05/gwyneth-paltrow-goop-vagina-candle-lawsuit-explosion-fire>

8 Ilana Harris-Babou, “Healing of the Nations,” *Triple Canopy*, August 5, 2021. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/healing-of-the-nations>

9 Chris Bell, “Conspiracy theories spread after Nipsey Hussle shooting,” *BBC News*, April 2, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-47785688>



For Harris-Babou, the subject strikes particularly close to home for a few reasons: just before the pandemic, her sister, a disillusioned health care worker, began following some of the Facebook content produced by Sebi's company. She quickly became alarmed by its promotion of life-threatening misinformation (including a total rejection of germ theory) and exited their orbit soon after.<sup>10</sup> Still, the continued, cult-like following of Sebi's doctrine remains concerning to Harris-Babou, particularly given its popularity among communities of color, upon whom the pandemic's disproportionate effect has been well-documented.<sup>11</sup> The uneven deadliness of the pandemic struck the artist early on, after a family member died from the virus: "for a long time after, I didn't know of any white folks who had anyone in their extended family who had died."<sup>12</sup>

In *Leaf of Life*, lush, brightly hued fruits and vegetables proliferate, adorning the edges of video frames and acting as wallpaper for the installation. A nod to Sebi's enduring belief in a cure-all alkaline diet, these raw foods float about like oversized props from a high-school play, as each video's sound and coloring conjures the oversaturated mystique of late '90s music videos. Each clip sends the viewer oscillating between ideological poles, bouncing from healthy skepticism of the medical industry to an anti-vaxxer level of distrust as if in a pinball machine. Dr. Sebi's world, as Harris-Babou presents

it, invites me to linger in an awareness of that curious grey zone in which Black folks who remind me of my aunts and cousins are somehow aligned with the (largely white) conspiracy theorists and libertarians I learned a long time ago to stay away from. An unexpected, troubling Venn diagram takes shape.

Skepticism, in Harris-Babou's rendering, might free you or plunge you into an endless rabbit hole of paranoia, particularly when combined with utter systemic abandonment. Worse still, the choice is rarely entirely yours, inextricably bound up in the contexts and systems we are each inextricably part of, oppressed by, or forced to comply with.

With startling clarity, Harris-Babou's work dispels the smoke and mirrors of the fantasy being sold to us, revealing what tricks us into buying it.

This text by New York based curator, writer and editor Dessane Lopez Cassell was co-commissioned in the occasion of the exhibitions "Tasteful Interiors" at ICA at UTC, Chattanooga, USA (Aug 16–Nov 5) and „Wholesome Fun“ at Kunsthhaus Hamburg, Germany (Oct 2–Nov 28).



10 Ilana Harris-Babou, "Healing of the Nations."

11 "Health Equity Considerations & Racial & Ethnic Minority Groups," Center for Disease Control and Prevention, updated April 19, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

12 Ilana Harris-Babou, "Healing of the Nations."

## IMPRESSUM

### Danke an / Thank you

Rachel Jobe Reese, Director and Curator,  
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Werke in der Ausstellung konnten durch die  
Unterstützung der Triangle Arts Association, NY  
realisiert werden. Die Ausstellung wird parallel  
zu ihrer Einzelausstellung *Tasteful Interiors*  
im ICA@UTC, Chattanooga, USA präsentiert.

*Works in the exhibition have been made with the  
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The exhibition will be presented in tandem with  
her solo show Tasteful Interiors at ICA@UTC,  
Chattanooga, USA.*

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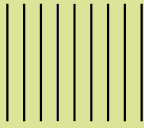
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