



INTERVIEW WITH

## *Gherdai Hassell*

BY ELLEN MARA DE WACHTER

Every artwork we encounter reaches us surrounded by a constellation of meanings, many of them present since the work's inception, others coming and going in response to new surroundings, audiences and histories. Over time and in different contexts, meanings shift. They grow or decline, and are sometimes supplanted by fresh insights, supplied by the artist's inner dialogue or unexpected discoveries, and affected by conscious and unconscious memories or opinions absorbed from friends, family, supporters and critics.

Photography by Jules Lister

## *A Constellation of Meanings*

See more additional work and learn more from the artist:  
[WWW.GHERDAIHASSELL.COM](http://WWW.GHERDAIHASSELL.COM)  
Image courtesy of Gherdai Hassell.

Image courtesy Gherdai Hassell

Gherdai Hassell creates multimedia work that reflects aspects of her lived experience and incorporates elements from the material culture that surrounds us and her historical research into family and public archives. Her paintings, collages and installations are often made up of an accumulation of diverse materials, from furs and silks to paint, Chinese calligraphy ink, glitter, coffee and gold leaf, all carefully layered to create a whole. The works often depict magnificent and sumptuously adorned Black women who exude a sense of self-contained power and equilibrium.

Since 2019, Hassell has been digging into the archives of Bermuda, on the lookout for nuggets of meaning related to her heritage and culture. Still a British territory today, Bermuda is a vestigial limb of Empire, a force bereft of much, but not all, of its once overwhelming impact. For a recent project, "I Am Because You Are," Hassell worked with her family tree, which a relative had drawn across eight generations. The genealogy traces her family's origins back from Bermuda to St. Kitts and its origins in a tribe in West Africa, from where her ancestors were captured and enslaved. Working with this newfound knowledge, she created a series of 350 digital collages printed on acetate: a multitude of portraits that re-imagine the identities of enslaved Bermudians.

Hassell's historical regard is bidirectional: She looks into her own history so that she can better move forward with her art. Her versioning of Afrofuturism explores the possibilities afforded by a commitment to the truth of her roots which, though they are marked by trauma carried through the generations, also supply the nourishment she needs for her own growth and flourishing. As Hassell puts it,

“Black people as the descendants of the slave trade exist more as a human accomplishment than the remains of human destruction.”



During the era of enslavement in Bermuda, which lasted from the early 1600s to 1833, when slavery was outlawed in the British Empire, the onion crop became the Bermudian equivalent to the cotton industry that exploited enslaved people in the United States: a valuable export grown as part of a sophisticated and inhumane system of oppression. Enslaved women from Africa and their children cultivated and harvested onions, becoming minders of the precious onion seed. This stewardship of the onion plant has engendered in Bermudians a metaphorical identification with onions, such that they will say of a compatriot, or "onion" who leaves the island that they are "out in the world spreading their onion juice" or, simply, "onioning."

Even in abusive systems where one group appears to wield absolute power over another, profiting from crops is possible only so long as the plants receive appropriate care and protection from pests and weather. Any consideration of the power dynamics between communities, or between humans and crops, must also credit the influence of plants on human social and economic realities. In spite of our attempts to characterize them as non-sentient and passive, plants have power over those who depend on them. To think of plants as somehow in charge of their people, then, might make it easier to recognize the agency and potential for self-empowerment in those who identify with, or as plants, even if, for reasons such as enslavement, that agency is repressed or symbolic.

As an onion spreading her juice, Hassell is fond of "peeling back the layers" of her own self, a gesture she extends to her work, with its many different layers of fabric, paper or color. The women she depicts embody characteristics Hassell recognizes in herself, which she then implants into the world via the images she brings to life in her work. By disseminating Hassell's imagery of sophisticated, self-actualized women, these works recall the horticultural technique of layering, a method of propagating a plant by burying the tips of its stems into adjoining patches of earth until they root and produce fresh growth, at which point they can be severed from the parent plant and left to pursue an independent existence in the world.

Like those layered shoots, Hassell herself has also put down roots in different places, and has lived in Bermuda, the United States, China—where she achieved a Master of Contemporary Art at the prestigious China Academy of Art—and now in the UK. She prizes the ability to generate meaning according to context, saying, "wherever I am located the work is connected to that place; the work changes when I go to a new place, and I can look at something fundamental in a new way."





Hassell has recently been learning to sew, a skill she has applied to a recent body of appliquéd banners constructed from layered strips of patterned cloths and painted canvas. She proceeds by laying down portions of cloth to test how they look, then lifts and rearranges them until she is happy, before stitching them in place. The assembled works depict confident Black women enmeshed in their surroundings—their skin tones and clothing echo the golden earth, the blue of sea and sky. Adding layers, Hassell has embroidered these banners and embellished them with braided and beaded locks of hair.

Hassell's use of cloth is also entwined with a multiplicity of meanings, from the social and economic histories of the textile industries to the human and environmental impacts of contemporary practices in the fashion industry, and the ideal of a sustainable future. These concerns are encapsulated in her immediate surroundings in Manchester, UK, where she

has lived and worked since 2020. In the 19th century the city, known colloquially as "Cottonopolis," was the center of the cotton industry, which was built on the enslavement of millions of Africans, and her studio is located in a former textile mill. With these histories in mind, and a desire to layer renewed life into old materials, Hassell has begun using cotton and other fabrics sourced from former mills and recycled clothes.

While history informs Hassell's art, she believes that ultimately experience is the truest teacher, and her ambition is for her work to "take in the things I'm experiencing" and to reflect "where I am physically in my body," both in terms of what her body is telling her, and where her body is located in space. Part of this physical knowledge is the phenomenological experience of textiles, intimate objects that affect us all in an unmediated way since they touch our bodies. ♦

Photography by Jules Lister

