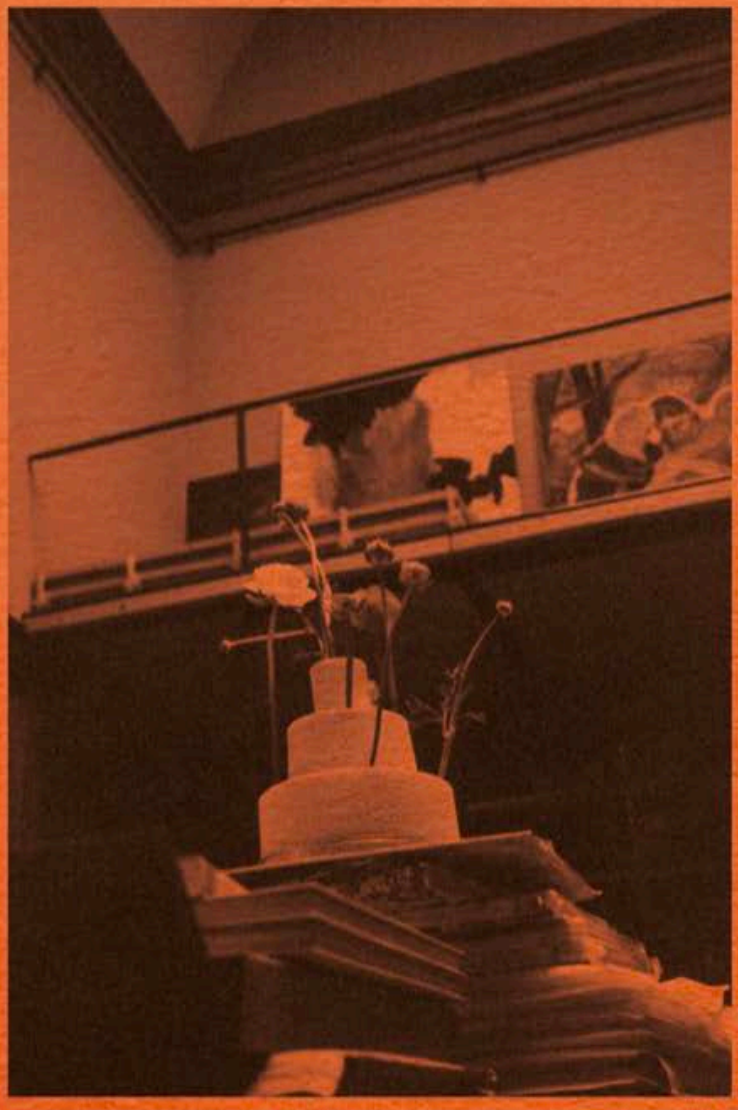
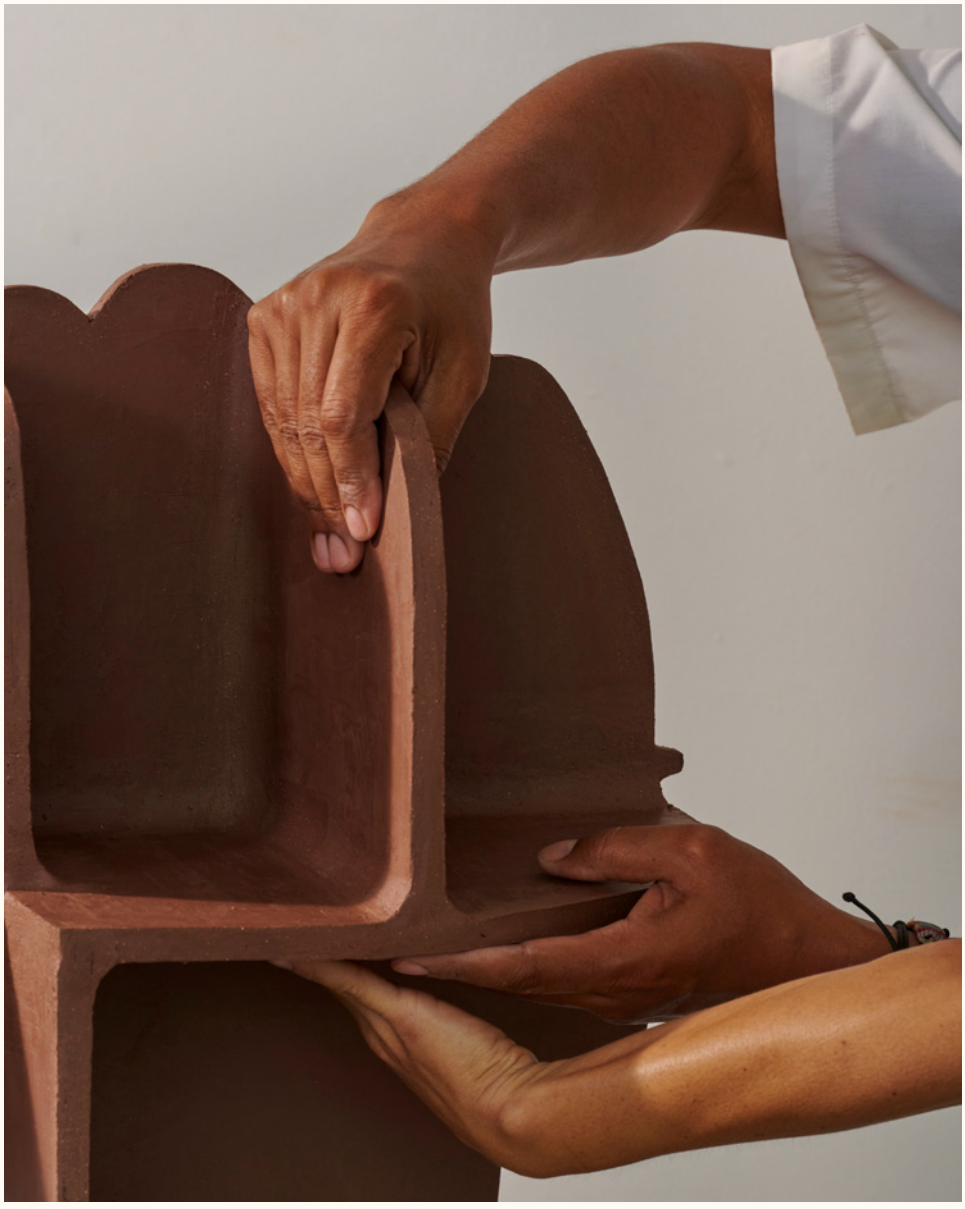
Disegno



The Journal of Design #38
Short stories about memory and design
Autumn 2024

Ancestors in the Making

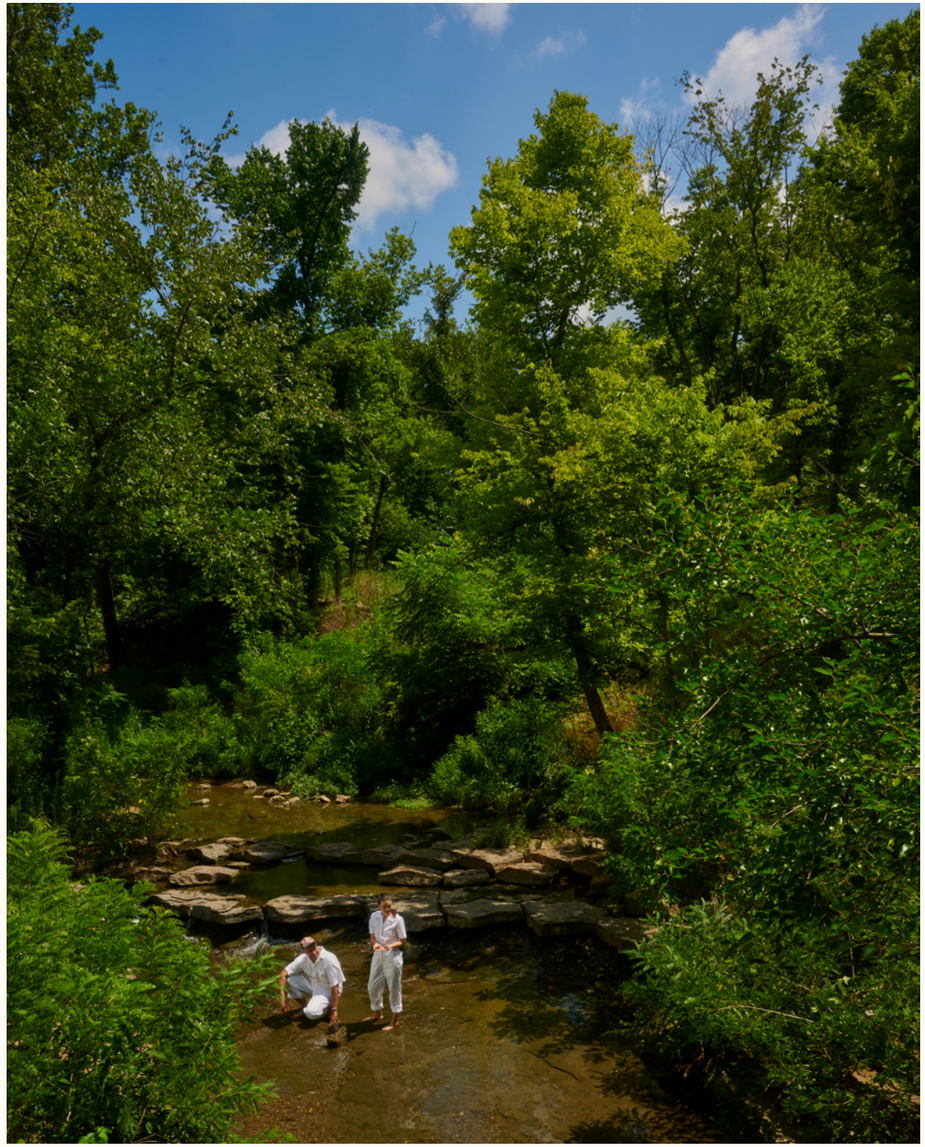
Stephen Burks and Malika Leiper seek meaning through form at the University of Arkansas



Malika Leiper and Stephen Burks, partners of industrial design studio Stephen Burks Man Made, joining clay slabs as part of their Ancestors project in development at the University of Arkansas School of Art.

Introduction Malika Leiper Words Najha Zigbi-Johnson Images Brandon Forrest Frederick

Report



Near to their ceramics studio, Stephen Burks and Malika Leiper forage for clay in the Tanglewood Branch creek in downtown Fayetteville, Arkansas. Earthenware clay, or terracotta, is characterised by its high iron content, which turns red or orange once fired. This clay is typically found in riverbeds and lakebeds where the ebb and flow of water over millions of years has deposited minerals, namely iron, into the ground.

Stephen and I are beginners when it comes to ceramics and we intend to stay that way. For the last six months, as visiting artists at the University of Arkansas School of Art, we've become students of these most ancient and universal of materials. Through an ongoing body of sculptural furniture-scale objects called The Ancestors, we're learning how to mix, manipulate, fire and glaze clay. Our intention is not to become ceramics artists, nor to make a perfect work of clay. Rather, we're searching for novel ways to apply the craft at various scales, through industrial processes, and in combination with other materials.

In the ceramics-mixing room, where our process begins, commercial sacks of dry powdered material are stacked six rows high onto pallet racks. Reading fantastical names such as custer feldspar, OM4 and redart, I have the impression of being in a medieval alchemist's laboratory. In fact, these are the ingredients that make up the "clay bodies" – specific recipes for clay that will determine the plasticity, shrinkage rate, strength, colour and porosity of the material at its various stages of transformation.

The Ancestors is a new and ongoing body of work that gives value to our kinship ties as a means of building community and continuity across diverse temporalities and geographies. Most people can trace their lineage back three generations to at least six individuals: their great-grandparents, grandparents and parents. But if one were to instead go back just 10 generations in American history, around 250 years to 1774, their total number of direct ancestors would be 2,046 people. At that moment in time, the United States of America had not even been established. Despite the brutality and bloodshed this country was founded upon, the land and its peoples date back even further.

The oldest known North American ceramics are shards of pots discovered on an island in the Savannah River between Georgia and South Carolina, and are believed to be 4,500-years-old. These artefacts, most likely used for cooking, are remnants of early hunter-gatherer societies dating from the late Archaic period. Indigenous American societies mixed their clay with Spanish moss, which helped to extract the moisture from the raw material before firing. Like these ancient vessels, the clay bodies of our handmade Ancestors are a low-fire earthenware with a high content of grog, a material that tempers the clay, preventing it from cracking as it dries.

Who are our ancestors? How do we pay homage to their memory and honour their presence in our lives through daily ritual and practice? We began to ask these questions during the tumultuous summer of 2020 when the pandemic converged with the Movement for Black Lives. As we marched the streets of downtown Brooklyn among crowds of protesters, we were compelled to consider what type of sacrifices our ancestors made just to get us here. Even today, the world witnesses the cold-blooded murder of African Americans at the hands of the police, while the United States faces the impossible reality of a second presidential term for a criminal who spreads hate and xenophobia. How did we get here? And how can the world of contemporary design move outside its narrow commercial boundaries into spaces where it is most needed?

As we give form to new ancestors in Arkansas, our practice has expanded into new territory. If commercial design is a box left closed, with each detail specified to the micron, then art is a box left open. Unlike in a typical design process, where the end goal is defined from the outset, the artistic process has no such predetermined destination. It's a new way of working, and it requires a degree of faith.

Malika Leiper is a writer and the cultural director of Stephen Burks Man Made.

The thing about the ancestors is they choose us, and when we listen, we become instruments for their will and wisdom. Increasingly, as I grow into myself, my life has become animated by this truth. When I heed spirit's call – those echoes and late night whispers – I tend to find myself in the right spaces, with the right people, doing the type of work that feeds my soul. In this sense, I think they conspired for my creative kinship with Malika Leiper and Stephen Burks, and their studio Stephen Burks Man Made. It's one of those reciprocal, always growing and generous types of relationships. It feels good.

Born into a family of artists and organisers, I have long been rooted in the Black radical tradition and a type of creative abstraction. I've always believed that art in



Malika Leiper working with Amplifiers at various scales at the University of Arkansas School of Art as part of the studio’s parallel veneration project, Spirit Houses.



Ancestors (Half A Man). The title is a reference to the “Three-Fifths Compromise” of the 1787 US Constitutional Convention, which declared that any person who was not free would be counted as three-fifths of a free individual for the purposes of determining congressional representation.

its most expansive form is what keeps social movements alive – helping us envisage more just alternatives for our collective future. I was taught that revolution needs design, poetry, music, jazz and funk. And in a world full of smoke and mirrors, art is often the most honest representational form. In this way, I see my evolving work as a writer, educator and cultural strategist as being in service of a creative and intellectual unfolding that is informed by the wisdom of the ancestors. In fact, I believe that they guided me to this moment.

Stephen and Malika are my friends, but I also see them as co-conspirators, designers and worldmakers who sit at this threshold between the sentient and profane. I still remember the first day I visited their Brooklyn studio. Maybe it's because I had just finished reading Jacob Olupona's article 'Rethinking the Study of African Indigenous Religions' on the way to our meeting, but when I walked into their workspace, I became perfectly overwhelmed by the sense of spirit that wafted throughout the room. Traditional west African masks hung next to texturally distinct versions of open-faced spirit-houses, which sat on industrial shelving alongside early 3D renderings of what would become *Stephen Burks: Shelter in Place*, their expansive solo exhibition that debuted at Atlanta's High Museum of Art in 2022. These modern altars, from a woven floor lantern to a wall-mounted display shelf, a partitioned coffee table to an ambiguous wooden container, reflect a critical expansion of traditional altar use through a new craft-oriented typology.

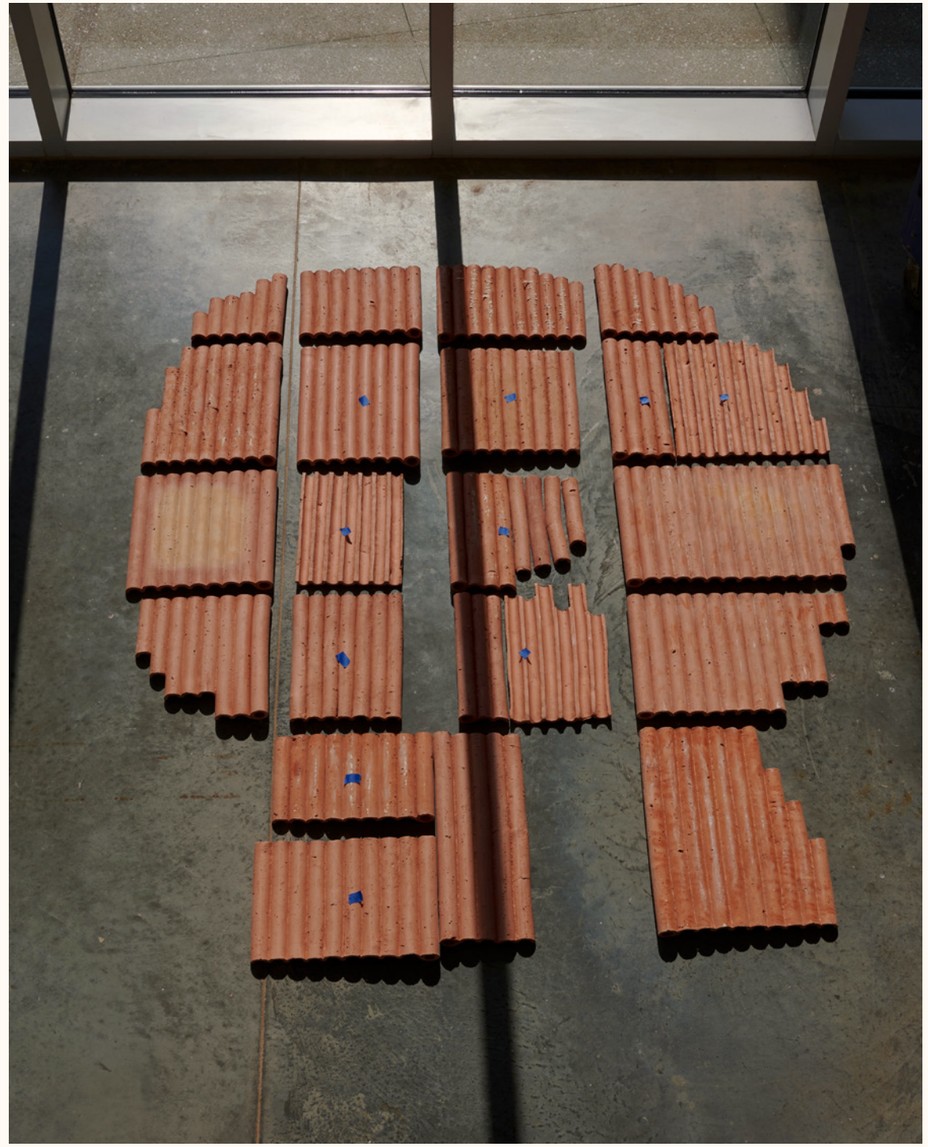
I guess I didn't expect an industrial design studio to be so preoccupied by ancestors and the intangible. Lights, tables, chairs and mirrors are functional. And yes, they tell stories and hold meaning, but by and large they are ubiquitously legible. Yet what I have come to understand is that Stephen Burks Man Made is, among many things, helping to give shape to that which is infinite.

Since our first meeting, Stephen, Malika and I have shared a variety of discussions and writing exercises that seek to explore the essence of spirit and venerative practice within the context of contemporary design. Sometime last year, we all sat under the Manhattan Bridge along the DUMBO waterway over bento boxes with the subway rattling above. It was New York at its finest. During our conversation, they broached the idea of AI as its own "divine" interpretative tool: a technology helping to shape representations of ancestors both known and unknown into physical form through an unfolding process that pairs "the hand and the machine". Through their use of a simple AI script, they combined visual inputs of early Ancestors prototypes with images of historical figures, including Malcolm X and bell hooks, to create abstract figurative sketches that served as creative and spiritual guides in their physical design process. I was intrigued yet also hesitant.

Just two months earlier, hundreds of leaders across the tech industry had signed an open letter calling for a moratorium to be placed upon AI lab developments. The rate at which AI was (and still continues to be) advancing confirmed my own long-held foreboding about unchecked technological advance. I remember spiralling in bed after reading the letter, crying over my iPhone 13 about the prospect of being taken out by machines and the rapacious greed of 27-year-old white Silicon Valley tech bros. My somewhat luddite tendencies, paired with my ethical aversion to corporate conglomerates and big tech as an arm of empire created an immediate tension around the idea of AI having anything to do with the purity of ancestral cosmologies. If I'm totally honest, the whole idea still feels slightly sickening to me. But increasingly, I have understood that this sort of technology will remain relevant in our lives, and that, as Black folks, we must be at the forefront of its use and implementation.

I credit this growth in thinking to the conversations I've had with Stephen and Malika about their interest in engaging AI in their exploration of Indigenous ancestral practices. Their approach to this framework places primacy on human-centred and emic knowledge, which necessitates the development of ethically situated relationships, and community and diverse spiritual practices as central to art and design. I also owe this evolution to my 19-year-old political science students at the Macaulay Honors College in New York, who have creatively (and sometimes lazily) engaged ChatGPT and Midjourney in their work. Collectively, we've decided there's no escaping this reality, and that it is up to us to shape our use of these tools in an epistemically decolonial manner.

Over the course of the past few years, I have watched Stephen and Malika use AI as a way to explore themes of ancestrality in their work. Most specifically, their series The Ancestors, which initially began as one of five commissioned speculative prototypes by the High Museum, has expanded into a collection of monumental and figurative objects inviting us to consider our lineage



Ceramic extrusions from Ancestors (Shield), laid out to reveal the cabinet's abstracted figure.

and kinship ties across time and space. This ongoing body of work has opened up the studio's practice to new creative expressions, in which a deeper spiritual impetus seems to be leading the way. And over the last two years of investigation, these original gestures have taken on new shape and materiality with the introduction of clay.

The studio's first Ancestor, Ancestors (Guardian), debuted early this year in the winter 2024 show *The New Transcendence* at Friedman Benda Gallery in New York City. This group show, curated by Glenn Adamson, explored the place of spirituality in contemporary design, uncovering how the field might become a vehicle for personal or societal transcendence. Made of double-walled corten steel adorned with glazed stoneware tiles, Ancestors (Guardian) serves as a functional sculpture, with hidden shelving peppering its beautifully statuesque figure. At 6ft tall, the piece offers an emergent material language for the ephemerality of self-transcendence within Black life and social movements across the United States. The literal and metaphorical monumentality of this piece beckons viewers into its sphere, affirming the grandeur of the ancestors as a force that is worthy of contemplative honour.

At the University of Arkansas, new ancestors are now emerging. Ancestors (Shield), Ancestors (Half A Man), and Ancestors (Shadow) represent a search for ancient epistemologies in our modern world. Through these works, the studio is actively helping to usher in a reconfiguration of primordial practices into our everyday lives through a range of objects, from functional furniture to more conceptual and abstract figurative forms.

Objects like Ancestors (Shield) seek to define and protect sacred space. Once completed, this cabinet will stand at a towering 7ft tall, composed of more than 20 handmade polychromatic ceramic doors. The arresting exterior of doors is formed from clay tubes, which are split lengthwise then joined to create a ribbed surface. The robust interior shelf structure, meanwhile, will be made of solid hardwood (red oak or padouk) with the final addition of industrial rubber sheets to enclose the form. While shields are associated with war and violence, this new Ancestor poses an alternative challenge of how we can protect ourselves, and our communities, from a hostile world while also reflecting back the beauty of it. By extension, Ancestors (Shield) contemplates how design can serve as a kind of spiritual armour. In this way, The Ancestors has become its own ethical intervention, expanding our daily practices and sense of home as a space to commune, honour and love in ways that affirm our intrinsic interdependence with the world around us through functional, domestic objects. In turning toward and honouring spirit-based cosmologies, the studio is creating a new design lexicon and physicality through which we may engage the wisdom of our forebears and honour the lives of our loved ones.

To me, there is nothing more powerful, more pure, or beautiful than connecting with my ancestors. I think about their complex lives, often marked by war and displacement. I think about their brilliance, beauty and many accomplishments. I think about what they might have dreamed for themselves and the ways that the world remained rigid, not often bending in their favour. I think about my life as an extension of their own, and believe that our ancestors live on through us all, and that, in the purest sense, our lives are a reflection of their will.

I imagine their dreams had something to do with our collective freedom and wholeness. I imagine their dreams included trees growing unfettered and fish repopulating fresh waters. But instead, we remain in turmoil and existential malaise. I suspect we always will do as long as the project of settler colonialism continues, and that the ancestors will remain uneasy. Yet it is through their infinite wisdom, as humans turned to boundless spirit, that I believe we can find freedom, clarity and creative joy. Stephen and Malika's exploration of the ancestors through their practice has brought forth new possibilities for more life, and a capaciousness that feels imperative against the limitations of our vision of the Anthropocene.

To do the bidding of our righteous ancestors is to expand the depths of our collective humanity, and may we shift into "right relationship" with ourselves and this world by doing so. These beautifully composed designed objects have become an invocation of ancestors known and unknown, whose wisdom and spirit serve as a guiding force. **END**

Najha Zigbi-Johnson is a writer and educator exploring the intersections of Black space making, social movements, and contemporary art.

Brandon Forrest Frederick is an artist and educator currently living in Northwest Arkansas.