

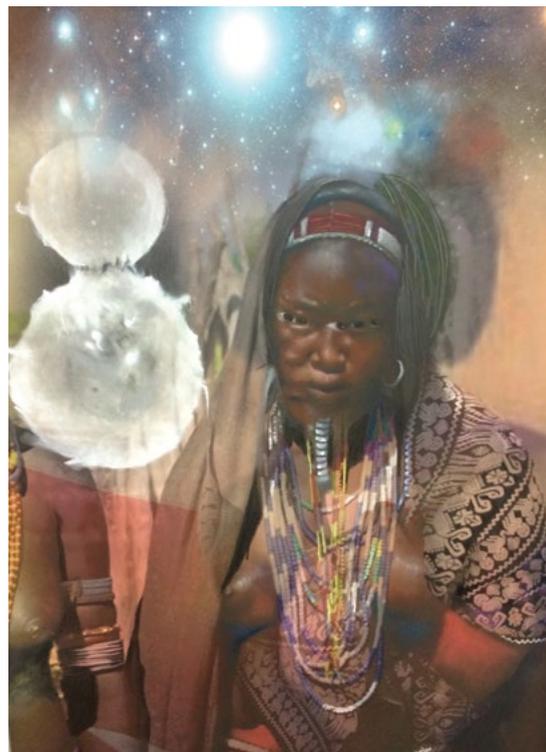
Deliberate tears and halting ruptures abound in the remarkable installation of Jessica Wimbley's work in the Art Gallery at the College of the Canyons. Antique cabinet cards are hung on the gray walls like constellations—navigational tools that help to orient the viewer as they move between narratives and participate with the artist in an examination of the construction of selfhood. Additions of paint, pencil marks, and hair offer further guidance as images are peeled away to reveal reverberating layers behind. Wimbley describes the process of creating these works as similar to creating a drawing, with the antique photos offering rich ground in which to carve, model, and connect seemingly disparate subjects into fugitive representations.<sup>1</sup>

Wimbley's mixed media and digital collages juxtapose antique cabinet card photographs with massed produced images taken a century later. Introduced in the 1870s and replacing the smaller carte-de-visite, cabinet cards are albumen photographs made from glass plate negatives that are fixed to sturdy card stock to allow the photos to be handled, written on, mailed, collected, and displayed. Such photos, which could be printed in multiple, made portraiture both affordable and desirable to the growing middle class. Significantly, they also mark the first time in history when people other than the powerful or wealthy elite were represented on a large scale. While black people certainly participated in the mania that quickly spread through Europe and the U.S. collecting photos of themselves, celebrities, and the people and places of the world, their access to such popular entertainment was nonetheless limited by the racial oppression and segregation enacted during the Redemption era.<sup>2</sup> That white subjects remain ever abundant and black subjects rare in the collections of cabinet cards that Wimbley purchases to create these works is potent evidence of the systematic denial of black subjects present at the moment photography began to boom, and lasting well into the Civil Rights era.

Through her interventions, Wimbley's work pointedly intervenes in the white supremacy of material culture, targeting the Victorian cabinet card as an originary site. Ripped, rearranged and reconfigured, Wimbley's remixed works not only fill in knowledge gaps, but argue for an understanding of black identities that are at once complex and varied, aspirant and accomplished, and perhaps most importantly, quintessentially American. The artist explains, "through the merging of images, I seek to create a hybrid, which exposes the shifting of identities in relationship to both historical and social political understandings of American history and citizenry."<sup>3</sup>

In a breathtaking work from the *Ebony Cabinet Card* series, Wimbley cuts through a vintage photograph of a couple sitting earnestly in formal attire to reveal an image from *Ebony* magazine depicting a more contemporary couple embracing. The soft brown sepia tone of the image on the surface betrays its age, while the later black and white image underneath introduces a visual rift. Looking sternly beyond the camera's view the Victorian woman's gaze is full of contempt, disclosing a boiling tension to which the artist's intrusion proposes an explanation—the man sitting beside her appears to be transforming into a more carefree, less inhibited body wearing a crisp suit, and side burns to envy. In between them, a second woman emerges to simultaneously suggest the interior mind, lurking desire, and forbidden unions.

Cabinet cards often featured the photographer's embellished logo, juxtaposing advertising and the individual's portrait in a practice that persists in social media.



1.

Cover:  
Cabinet Cards: Ebony 1, #10, 2014-2019 (detail)  
mixed media collage on panel  
10 x 8 in.

1. Belle Jet, 2016 (detail)  
Eleven mixed media collages on panels  
57.75 x 28.25 in. each
2. Cabinet Cards: Ebony 4, 2014-2020 (detail)  
mixed media collage  
6.5 x 4.25 in.
3. Cabinet Cards: Ebony 2, #21, 2014-2019 (detail)  
mixed media collage  
6.5 x 4.25 in.
4. Cabinet Cards: Ebony, Melanin, and Me, #8,  
2014-2020 (detail)  
mixed media collage on panel  
10 x 8 in.



2.

3.



4.

Wimbley finds these floating interlocutors to be curious, especially when combined with marks labeling the sitter, such as an inexplicable stamp marking the subject "negro" on a cabinet card purchased as part of a large group. Adeptly, Wimbley scrambles the happenstance codes, constructing mash-ups that can be simultaneously understood as monstrous and amazing, critical and uplifting, frank and bombastic.

A case in point, *Belle Jet Sandi Baartman*, in which Wimbley digitally merges images of herself, her relatives, found ethnographic photos, and "Beauties of the Week" from *Jet* magazine. The title references both the popular publication and Sara Baartman, a 19th century Khoikhoi woman from southern Africa who famously traveled to London and Paris as a side show performer. Exploitative illustrations made of Baartman while she was in Paris and sold as carte-de-visites are well known to this day and mark the pungent rise of scientific racism—the use of scientific signifiers such as comparative analysis and measuring systems to justify racial prejudice. Wimbley's provocative conflation of her own visual history disrupts imagery used to support pseudo-scientific claims of white superiority, and is then punctuated by *Jet* magazine's reclaimed pin-ups who decidedly affirm the beauty of black women. Wimbley's use of celebratory and jubilant photos of black women taken from publications made for black audiences confront the unusualness of black subjects in the earlier cabinet card photos head-on. The assemblages prompt the viewer to question the very conditions of identity formation, making visible the psychological conditions and entanglements black subjects are forced to negotiate within the overwhelming whiteness of the visual realm.

Importantly, Jessica Wimbley's work moves beyond simply crafting an authentic presence for the black body by questioning how different constructions of identity manifest and interact within different spaces. Compressing time and space, remixing micro and macro signifiers in order to cultivate subjects that have not been allowed, and developing contexts for which language does not yet exist, Wimbley conjures visual fragments from the past, placing them in dialogue with the present to testify to an attempted erasure and steadfastly affirm otherwise possibilities. As the artist explains, the signifiers she works with—dividing cells, Shirley card color blocks, spectacular planetary assemblages, idealized pin-ups, ethnographic documents, etc.—are pieces of a story that invite the viewer in to make the image complete.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Wimbley's works synthesize what her sources divided: the cabinet cards offering middle class white Americans a visual presence; and the images from black periodicals unapologetically generating what white media outlets refused to imagine. In this blending, what Wimbley's work ultimately achieves in are unvanquished images of black American identities represented freely.

- Denise M. Johnson

Denise M. Johnson teaches art history at Chapman University and is pursuing her doctorate in Cultural Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Brochure Design by Nicholas Pavik

1. Jessica Wimbley in conversation with the author, December 30, 2019.
2. Though little recognized today, in response to the constitutional reforms made during Reconstruction banning slavery, guaranteeing the civil rights of formerly enslaved black people, and granting black men the right to vote, refusing to admit defeat, the Southern elite worked to "redeem" white supremacy by terrorizing black people and stripping them of their rights through legislation that often prioritized states' rights over federal.
3. Jessica Wimbley, "Americana 2013/2014," *Jessica Wimbley*, <https://www.jessicawimbley.com/copy-of-americana>.
4. Jessica Wimbley in conversation with the author, December 30, 2019.