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Toni L. Griffin Featured at the 18th International Architecture Exhibition at the Venice Biennale

Land Narratives: Fantastic Futures explores the lost histories and potential futures of “Black Belt” sites on Chicago’s South Side

New York, NY — Architect, planner, and educator Toni L. Griffin presents *Land Narratives: Fantastic Futures* in the Central Pavilion of the International Architecture Exhibition of the 18th Venice Biennale (May 20 to November 23, 2023). Griffin is one of 89 participants from around the world featured in *The Laboratory of the Future*, curated by Ghanaian-Scottish architect and novelist Lesley Lokko. The exhibition spotlights Africa and the African Diaspora, giving voice to those who have been “silenced for so long,” in Lokko’s words, while focusing on the twin themes of “decolonization and decarbonization.” “There is one place on the planet where all the questions of equity, race, hope and fear converge and coalesce—Africa,” remarks Lokko. Griffin, who directs her own transdisciplinary urban design and planning firm urban american city (urbanAC) and is the founder and director of the Just City Lab at Harvard Graduate School of Design, where she is a Professor in Practice of urban planning, will exhibit alongside Adjaye Associates, Cave bureau, MASS Design Group, SOFTLAB@PSU, Kéré Architecture, Ibrahim Mahama, Koffi & Diabaté Architectes, atelier masōmī, Olalekan Jeyifous, Studio Sean Canty, Sumayya Vally and Moad Musbahi, Thandi Loewenson, Theaster Gates Studio, Hood Design Studio, among many others.

Land Narratives: Fantastic Futures examines the lost histories of the “Black Belt” neighborhoods of Chicago’s South Side and recognizes the untapped creativity of generations of inhabitants whose imaginations have been curbed by segregation and land vacancies. Her project draws from interviews with eight Chicagoans who relate their land memories as well as dreams of “fantastic futures” for their neighborhoods. She prompted her subjects, who include generations of Chicagoans from ages 25 to 80, to think beyond worldly constraints, using the trope of the superhero

to challenge them to think of future-forward scenarios for the places they call home. One representation of the “superhero” idea appears in the form of a flying figure from the Jesse White Tumblers, a gymnastics troupe and Chicago institution that has served urban youth since 1959.

With collage, mapping, video, audio, and 3D-printed clay vessels, Griffin’s installation translates her subjects’ cultural practices, joys, and unbound visions. The work is inspired in part by the writings of the late scholar Richard Iton, whose award-winning book *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Oxford University Press, 2008) explores the ways in which black popular culture forged community, affected politics, and influenced global culture. “Black Fantastic is deliberately provocative; suggestive of something wicked, magical,” reads the foreword to his book. “[The] fantastic serves as a space of the other, both spatially and racially.” Griffin uses the term, like Iton, to “destabilize and fragment the arenas of so-called ‘rational’ modernity...via ‘deviant’ strategies.”

“Systemic racism in the U.S. has depressed the value of land in historically Black and segregated neighborhoods,” notes Griffin. “The latent value of this land, occupied by Black Americans, can be unlocked by Black creative imaginations.” She created a series of portrait collages of her subjects, finding the process fitting given her aim to bring imagery of the past, present, and future into one image. In her words, “Collage became, for me, a method of narrating reparation and reclamation.” The audio-recorded interviews were used to 3D-print “sound objects,” clay vessels that visually represent the subjects’ musings and responses to Griffin’s challenge, on how to be “the superheroes of their own land, communities, and economic well-being.”

Land Narratives is a deeply personal project for Griffin, who grew up on Chicago’s South Side. “My hope is to create a dialogue between land histories and current conditions, fostering ideas on how architectures and spaces are imagined and created by Black people, as a way of reclaiming the space of the city where Black Americans were formerly confined to inhabit and thrive.”

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FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT:
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TEAM BIOGRAPHIES

About Toni L. Griffin

Toni L. Griffin is founder of urbanAC, a planning and design practice that works with public, private, and nonprofit partnerships to reimagine, reshape, and rebuild just cities and communities. She has a track record for leading transformative projects rooted in addressing historic and current disparities involving race, class, and generation. Her practice has collaborated with cities on the cusp of just social and economic recovery including Chicago, Indianapolis, Rochester, and St. Louis.

Griffin is also Professor in Practice of Urban Planning at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and is founding director of the Just City Lab, a research platform that investigates how design's impact on social and spatial justice in cities. She has authored several articles on design justice and is the co-editor of *The Just City Essays* (Next Cities, 2015). She has lectured extensively in the U.S., Netherlands, South Africa, and South America, and served as an Obama Presidential appointee to the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts.

About Urban American City

urbanAC LLC, based in New York, is a planning and design management practice that works with public, private, and nonprofit partnerships to reimagine, reshape, and rebuild just cities and communities. urbanAC's work is rooted in crafting bold and distinctive approaches to addressing issues of urban justice through design and inclusive collaborations. The firm is typically hired to design, lead and manage complex, comprehensive, and transformative social and spatial urban planning and revitalization frameworks, rooted in addressing historic and current disparities involving race, class, and generational inequity.

urbanAC provides embedded strategic thought leadership to its clients to support long term success. The firm's process emphasizes both data-driven technical expertise and invaluable community expertise, with design approaches tailored to each unique locale. urbanAC is a pioneer in integrating its research on social and spatial justice into practice, helping clients find real and tangible approaches to just equitable processes and outcomes.

urbanAC's team brings over 20 years of practice in architecture, urban design and planning in both the public, private and academic sectors. With an understanding of how traditional architecture practices work, the firm has developed and built projects at multiple scales, led cross-disciplinary design teams, created master plans, regulatory land-use frameworks, and citywide transformative plans.

Danny Clarke

Danny Clarke is an artist-researcher whose practice investigates the intersection of exterior and interior experiences, particularly in relation to personal and collective counter-memories tied to land and place. Clarke's current work explores the spatial practice of immersive listening as an emergent archival practice within an expanded field of listening and recording technologies that invite a meditation on the sensorial and experiential knowing, multispecies ecologies, and collective memories. His ongoing work involves translating audio frequencies into ceramic 3D-printed vessels, which serve as tangible connections between the bodily memory of collective activity, experience, and time to the place memory of land, site, and space.

Rayshad Dorsey

Rayshad Dorsey is an architectural designer from South Carolina and holds a Master of Architecture with Distinction from Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he won the Araldo A. Cossutta Annual Prize for Design Excellence in 2021. Dorsey was the founder and President of Harvard GSD National Organization of Minority Architecture Students and served as a student member on the Dean's Diversity Cabinet. He has worked for firms across the U.S., including Atelier Cory Henry in Los Angeles, WW Architecture in Boston, Patterhn-Ives in St. Louis, and is currently at Howeler + Yoon Architecture in Boston. In 2022 Rayshad was an invited editor and contributor to *OBL/Que* no. 4, a journal on anti-racist conservation practices and discourses. His research interest lies at the intersection of architecture, critical conservation, race, and spatial planning.

Gabriel Soomar

Gabriel Jean-Paul Soomar is a designer and researcher whose practice uses digital technology to investigate the intersections between architecture and identity. Through critical fabulation, his work traverses' slippages between pasts, presents, and futures in the Caribbean spatial imaginary. His design and research contributions have been published and exhibited in several international publications and institutions—most notably, the Museum of Modern Art in New York as part of the *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* exhibition (New York, 2021) and Alice Yard's contribution to *Documenta 15* (Kassel, Germany, 2022) . He is currently a student at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

EXHIBITION CREDITS

urban american city (urbanAC)

New York, USA

Toni L. Griffin, Chicago, USA, 1964. Lives and works in New York City, USA.

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Land Narratives | Fantastic Futures

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