

## Exhibition Checklist

### CHERYL HARPER

born 1954

*Cheryl Harper's Wedding Dress*, 1976

mixed media

*Pamela Harper's Wedding Dress*, 1952

mixed media

*Wallpaper*, 2019-20

woodcut, linocut, stencil, ink and acrylic on Japanese paper

### BETYE SAAR

born 1926

*Nevermore*, 2010

mixed media on paper

Collection of the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College. Purchase made possible by alumnae and friends led by Katharine Stark Caldwell '74 and Anne Wilkes Tucker '67, on the occasion of the 100th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art, 2011.

### CARRIE MAE WEEMS

born 1953

*Untitled (from the "Sea Islands" series)*, 1992-2000

gelatin silver print on paper

Collection of the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College. Purchase made possible by the Mary S. Schreyer Acquisition Fund in memory of her son George Sumter Schreyer and herself, 2001.

### *From the collection of Stephen and Cheryl Harper:*

Lesesne and Harper family photos, 1870s-1930s

### Vitrine objects:

Beehive-style English Candlesticks, circa 1880, brass

Cream Pitcher, 1791, sterling silver

Hot Water Urn, 1796, sterling silver

Plate from Eastern Europe, n.d., brass

Sugar Basket, circa 1795, sterling silver

*Passages* is generously sponsored by Maier Museum of Art members,  
Sally Maier Rowe '67 and Nancy Hays Gottwald '55

Catalog design by Janet Fletcher, Studio 5 Graphics, Lynchburg, Virginia  
Printed by Print Works, Lynchburg, Virginia



Cheryl Harper, *Wallpaper* (detail), 2019-2020.



Bundles of sweetgrass and bulrush in Mary Jackson's studio, Charleston, SC.



Museum and Heritage Studies seniors, Erik Gulbranson and Sara Primm, cultural anthropologist and visiting lecturer, Dr. Sheila Walker, and professor of art history Andrea Campbell examine Lesesne Plantation artifacts on loan from the Charleston Museum, South Carolina.

## History and Heritage:

### Discovering the African American Experience at Lesesne Plantation

An exhibition on view in the North Wing of Lipscomb Library  
March 27 - October 9, 2020

*P*assages throws into sharp relief the distinction between the Lesesne's silver tea service and the Harper's brass ritual objects, evoking the different lives of these two families. Harper's installation also prompts us to consider the other families in this story: the enslaved who lived and worked at the Lesesne Plantation. The first senior seminar in Museum and Heritage Studies at Randolph College embraces the challenge of narrating their story. Using artifacts excavated from the Lesesne Plantation and loaned by the Charleston Museum, the students are exploring what can be known about these families, which is difficult in the absence of much written documentation.

Due to the scarcity of information about the lives of enslaved individuals at Lesesne, the seniors are considering the role of heritage in learning about the past. The manufacture of sweetgrass baskets was one of the technologies brought by Africans to the colonies and is a craft tradition continued today. The seniors interviewed Mary Jackson, a sweetgrass basket artist whose work has been acquired by the Smithsonian and has earned her the distinction of a MacArthur fellowship. The students' exhibition presents what is known about the use of the baskets in the plantation economy while considering what the ongoing tradition contributes to our knowledge of African American history.



Mary Jackson, sweetgrass basket artist and MacArthur Fellow.

Cheryl Harper,  
*Passages Dress in Progress*, 2017,  
at James Oliver Gallery, Philadelphia.



MAIER MUSEUM OF ART  
AT RANDOLPH COLLEGE

FEBRUARY 28 - MAY 3, 2020



# PASSAGES:

*An Installation in Progress by Cheryl Harper*

Four hundred years ago last summer, a ship landed in Virginia bringing enslaved Africans to the colony. To refocus American history, *The New York Times* began “The 1619 Project” to begin the story of our nation from that moment, so that “the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans” is central to the narrative. The fluid nature of history may be both its best and worst characteristic: its scope is usually defined by those in power and many voices may be omitted from its content, which is necessarily subjective. When new questions are posed to the historical record, or when authors outside the powerful seize the pen, what we know as history can change.

So, too, what each of us knows about our family’s history changes according to the questions we ask and the information we seek. Presented with old family heirlooms, Cheryl Harper looked for answers about their past and in her research discovered that her husband’s lineage goes back to a plantation owner in colonial South Carolina. In *Passages*, Harper responds to the revelation that her husband’s ancestors were enslavers and contrasts this legacy with that of her family, Eastern European Jews who were among the oppressed.

*Passages* urges us to remember those whose lives and deaths were not within their own control and to consider the responsibility we bear today, both for the past and the present. With greater awareness of African American history and in the context of increasing immigration world-wide, it is timely to consider the issues faced by those living in the diaspora and to reflect on the humanity of our individual behavior and collective policies. While speaking to these issues of wide significance, Harper’s installation is intensely personal and should also challenge viewers to consider their own history and which elements of it they will claim as their heritage.

Andrea W. Campbell, PhD  
Professor of Art History, Randolph College  
Curator of Passages



Cheryl Harper, *Wallpaper* (detail), 2019-2020.

## ARTIST’S STATEMENT:

*Passages is an evolving project that explores the dual nature of my family history. I contrast the material legacy left by my husband’s family, who as slave owners were oppressors, with the items passed down by my family, who as Jews living in Eastern Europe in the twentieth century were among the oppressed. The purpose of my project is to bring attention to the feelings of loss that are still pervasive among Jews and African Americans as a result of their persecution and to foster discussion and understanding.*

As a Jewish child born in the generation after the Holocaust, I sensed that everyone in my family and my ethnic community had a general sadness but I did not know why. A childhood friend’s parents were Holocaust survivors. Her mother was so beautiful she could have been Snow White, but she had numbers tattooed on her arm. The adults had conversations in hushed tones as we children played upstairs. As I grew older, I began to understand the sadness but did not feel particularly discriminated against, except as a woman. I believed that anti-Semitism was in the past and we lived in America! While I felt relatively safe then, I feel now that anti-Semitism and bigotry are on the rise around the world and that it is urgent for us to communicate and consider the histories of the oppressed and oppressors from multiple points of view.

I understood I married into a somewhat patrician family but knew little beyond anecdotes about my mother-in-law growing up in a large house on the Jersey side of the Palisades, a corner cabinet filled with some old objects, and vague stories of Southern ancestors. Then my husband inherited that corner cabinet which contains items that belonged to his oldest ancestors in this country: an immigrant who received a land grant in what is now South Carolina and ran a plantation using enslaved labor.

My husband’s ancestor was Isaac Lesesne, a French Huguenot who came to the colonies for the religious tolerance and abundant land they offered. Lesesne still appears as a middle name in our family into the current generation. Unfortunately, just as we knew what questions to ask, those family members who could have given us answers passed away.

Isaac Lesesne succeeded as a plantation owner by using slaves brought directly from Africa (today’s Sierra Leone). The Africans not only cultivated the expanse of Lesesne land, they were brought specifically because they knew how to produce indigo and rice. The Lesesne material legacy includes ads for runaway slaves that were placed in newspapers for over a century, starting as early as 1734. Some slaves ran away before they had new, Western names and were to be recognized only by their physical descriptions, including scars. Later ads name the slave(s) and speak of promised punishment for the runaway in the infamous Charleston Workhouse, where incarceration involved the lash and torture and was carried out without sullyng the hands of the owners. Imagery from several ads inspired a section of my printed wallpaper that incorporates slaves being chased by hounds. In addition, there are images of indigo and rice, the two cash crops that were grown on the Lesesne plantation.

The imagery in the printed wallpaper also refers to my family. During our research, we found a work of art made by one of my great-great uncles from Europe; an elaborate papercut called a *mizrah*, a Hebrew word meaning “east.” Mizrahs, typically made by men who had leisure time, were placed in a room in the direction of Jerusalem and were faced during home prayer. This artwork was a going away gift to my great-great grandfather and dates to the year of his immigration from Austria-Hungary. It is a rare example, signed and dated (1878), that has been passed down through the family and has been published by experts. The large blue prints in the wallpaper are in homage to the papercut and echo its stylized animals.

Other images in my wallpaper prints refer to individual members of my family. I have photographs of two great aunts

which were taken circa 1930 when the sisters were in the blush of youth. My great aunts did not escape the “final solution” and died in a Nazi death camp as did millions of their co-religionists. This pair of sisters is represented in a block print, shown in a setting with barbed wire to symbolize their fate. One holds a scroll, the other a book, suggesting a level of education that was unusual for women living in a small village. Another block print in the wallpaper depicts my great-grandmother and her four sisters, shown safely ensconced in the United States in the late nineteenth century.

Heirlooms are included in display cases and reveal the difference in affluence between our families. The sterling silver water urn and creamer that belonged to my husband’s family were made in London in the 1790s while the sugar basket is likely to be of the same date but was probably made by a silversmith in Charleston. My family’s objects are far more modest: a pair of English brass candlesticks that were used in lighting Sabbath candles and a brass plate, brought to this country in a sack by my great-grandmother around 1900 when she left her village in what is now Russia.

These silver and brass heirlooms are represented in the printed wallpaper and are echoed by the metalware displayed beneath the hanging wedding gowns. Additional household and personal objects below the wedding gowns suggest the lives of leisure and sophistication of one family as opposed to the hardship and striving experienced by the other. The wallpaper includes imagery based on a 1930s photo of two girls from the Lesesne family playing with a tea set, referring to the nature of the assembled objects and evoking the lifestyle of that family.



Cheryl Harper, *Wallpaper* (detail), 2019-2020.

The wedding gowns represent both sides of our family. My mother-in-law’s beautiful 1952 wedding gown is enriched with her christening outfit, an element of her mother’s 1924 elopement dress, and family jewelry. My family is represented by my own wedding dress from 1972 which my daughter also wore in 2017. I have adorned it with elements of clothing worn by several generations in my family including my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

I am laying out one family history so that this installation may bring us into conversation about where we go with the information we have and continue to uncover. My art is intended to honor the stories of the persecuted and it is my hope that as we learn more about the past we will shape a better world for today and tomorrow.

Cheryl Harper, artist



Cheryl Harper, *Pamela Harper’s Wedding Dress* (detail), 2019-2020.

<sup>1</sup> Jake Silverstein, “Editor’s Note,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 18, 2019, 4-5.