

# A DNA Test Led Yashua Klos to New Connections and New Art

On the occasion of his inspiring solo debut at the Wellin Museum, he talks about Black labor, migration — and the family he recently discovered.

By Seph Rodney

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Yashua Klos's first solo museum exhibition, "Our Labour," at the Wellin Museum of Art in Clinton, N.Y., is a profoundly meaningful debut. Throughout the show the themes of family and labor are intertwined with the historical circumstance of the Great Migration and the coincidence of a DNA test revealing his blood relatives who had been barely known by the artist.

Klos, 44, who was born to a white mother and a Black father and raised by the mother in Chicago, now has his studio in the Bronx. He primarily works in the medium of prints, which make up the majority of pieces in "Our Labour." But the show also includes his hybrid maple wood sculptures that integrate ritual masks signifying Klos's African ancestry, and welding helmets, which are the accouterments of car manufacturing labor — the profession that lured his own family from Memphis to Detroit in the 1960s.

I've long been familiar with Klos's oeuvre after seeing his solo show at Tilton Gallery in 2015, and subsequent group exhibitions at International Print Center New York and BRIC. His work consists of distinctive collages of prints and graphite on paper that most often feature human faces or hands commingled with feathers, rock formations, or pieces of wood and brick, as if he regards people as fundamentally constructed of these quotidian materials.

The show's curator (and director of the Wellin) Tracy Adler, who has known the artist since her days as a curator at Hunter College Art Galleries, says "Klos was always a standout to me." She continues, "Printmaking can often feel historical and very pristine but his felt improvisational and open-ended. He throws the rule book out when it comes to printmaking."



Yashua Klos in the process of making "Our Labour" (2021) at BRIC, woodblock print on muslin and canvas. Yashua Klos; Andrew Kist

Recently I spoke with the artist via Zoom about the work that is in the show and how it helped him connect with his family and loved ones. This exhibition will travel to his gallery, Sikkema Jenkins, in Manhattan in October. These are excerpts from our conversation.

**So, your show at the Wellin Museum is titled "Our Labour." Who is the implied "us" in that title?**

I like titles to have double meanings. If I'm lucky, I can find one with a triple meaning. "Our Labour" is first a reference to my family and the work that my family has done in the auto plants in Detroit. It's a reclamation of a larger history of Black labor in America. But it's also a larger historical context of the Black "our," which has been excluded from having visual representation [in this nation's history].

And then, I think — back to the personal — this is a new family for me. I mean, they've been there the whole time, but I am getting reconnected to them, learning about all of the work that they have done to stay together. It's a big-ass family. I recently learned that my dad was one of 15 kids, and they all had a lot of kids.

And think about the migration effort of Black folks moving from the South to the Midwest, maintaining family, raising each other's kids, and working, and having these jobs. I'm thinking about all that labor, and all the labor that it's taken for me and them to also incorporate one another into our lives.

Lastly, my work is explicitly about *process*, which is why I left alongside the artworks those raw MDF blocks of wood [used to make some of the prints], because I like to unveil some of that labor in my own practice, the hand in the work.



"When the Parts Untangle," 2022. Woodblock print on muslin and oil-based, relief block ink on canvas, Japanese rice paper, spray paint, mounted on dropcloth. Yashua Klos; John Bentham

**You discovered this family later in life. Is one of the things this show brings to the surface the question of what actually constitutes family?**

From being raised by my mother, I learned that your family are the people who you survive with, the people who support you, and who you support, and my mom's best friends were my aunties, and their children were my cousins and my brothers.

**There was a moment when you had some initial connection through your father, I think when you were 7?**

That's right. I knew they were there the whole time. I just didn't have a way to get in contact with them. I grew up without my father. I met him two times in my life, and when I was 7, he took me on a road trip to Detroit, where I met the rest of the family, but being 7, it all felt like a dream. I wasn't sure how much of it was really real, and of course, as kids, we make our own narratives to protect ourselves. So, I blocked out that that was even a possibility to ever get back in touch.

Then [in February 2019] I did this DNA test, not with the intent of connecting to them, but to find out the African countries that I'm connected to. And then a year later, I got a Facebook message from Detroit.

**What was the nature of the message?**

"Hey, we did a DNA test over here. It looks like you might be a close relative. In fact, you look like some of the cousins here in Detroit." They said: "Do you know about the McDonalds or the Masseys out of Detroit? And I said, "Eureka. My dad is Leon [McDonald], you know?" And they said, "Well, then, we're cousins."

She left a phone number, and my head exploded first, and once I gathered the pieces, I paced back and forth, and I was like, what's going on here? Is this legit? All of a sudden, it seemed so available.

So, I jumped on FaceTime. My cousin Paige was on the other end, "Hey, this is my mom, your auntie. Look, that's your Uncle George that just walked in. That's your ..." It was, like, people just popping in the house. In my mind, I had written them off as being similar to the stories I heard of my dad. But it turns out they're the most generous people I ever met in my life. It's been like hitting the lottery.



Installation view of Yashua Klos's exhibition at the Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College. Artwork on left wall: "Tyla," 2021. John Bentham

**So, let's talk a bit about what's in the show. You have a mural that is a kind of family tree, "Our Labour" (2020–2021). What inspired the composition?**

The composition is inspired by Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry Mural, made in 1933, on the walls at the Detroit Institute of Art. The second time I went to see my family I saw this mural and was just blown away by how large it was. Months later, I said: That mural could be the composition for my family tree, because I was trying to wrestle with understanding my relationship to all these people.

Being a visual learner, I need to see these faces and memorize their relationships. So, the mural is divided using some of the main components of Diego's mural for the factory background, with Grandma [his father's mother] in the center, dropping the motor, and then her first four Massey boys on the left side, the 10 McDonalds in the center, and then she had one last, Paul Green, all the way to the right. Then, on the plant floor, where Rivera placed workers, I placed first cousins, nieces, nephews, and then, of course, a sneaky self-portrait.

**Could you talk about what else is in the show and how they relate to the central theme?**

There is an image "Vein Vine" (2021) with the hand taking a moment to hold and admire those [Michigan] wildflowers — we talked about labor and being compelled to fulfill this representational need of Black folks in this historic space [of fine art portraiture]. I don't want to continually replicate images of Black folks working — the assumptions of the Black body as a body for work. So, that hand isn't working, it's taking a break.



Yashua Klos, "Vein Vine," 2021. Woodblock print on muslin, acrylic, archival paper, Japanese rice paper, and spray paint, mounted on canvas. Yashua Klos; John Bentham

**So, it's a moment of leisure. It's a moment of appreciating beauty that is actually available to that Black person?**

Absolutely. I'm thinking about all these residential areas where there's abandoned properties, weeds and wildflowers that are growing over things and reclaiming them, and thinking about those as symbols of reclamation, not only a reclamation of nature after capitalism has collapsed, but a sort of reclamation of Blackness.

**Is there anything else you want to tell us about "Our Labour?"**

I started this during Covid, I'm sure a lot of us were feeling a need for connectivity in a new way during Covid, and I'm pretty sure that my reconnection to family really helped sustain me through that. The project became a way of bridging that space between us, became a way of communicating, of building a relationship, of needing each other. You know, we needed each other to make this thing happen.

#### **Our Labour**

Through June 12, Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College, 198 College Hill Road, Clinton, N.Y.; (315) 859-4396; hamilton.edu/wellin.

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