



Basil Kincaid

UNLEARNING TO QUILT

by Mallory Nezam

ON a chilly, quiet night in 2014, **Basil Kincaid** had a dream about his grandmother. In a small village on the water, a young girl takes his hand and guides him down a meandering, wooded path. They stop at a dead end where a house sits atop a long street. Emanating from the long staircase is a thick gold light that ripples like a river, and, as Basil nears it, he begins to make out the image of his grandmother, waiting at the top of the staircase.

At the time, this dream was powerful enough to wake him from his sleep in a cold sweat. Basil was in Accra, Ghana at an artist residency for **Arts Connect International**, and far away from his family. Perhaps this was a cry of homesickness, or maybe it wasn't worth reading into. But Basil knew that there was a strange power in her appearance that night, and the memory lingered. He still recalls it in perfect detail.

The dream resurfaced in Ghana and then back in the U.S. She would reappear, always in the thick, gold light, and Basil would wake up. Finally, a dream in mid-March of 2016 in St. Louis woke him in frenzy. His grandmother appeared once more with the same, rippling gold aura, yet this time

she stood firmly in front of a house wrapped in a beautiful, vibrant quilt. He had never seen anything like this. Ignited by this new image, Basil woke himself up from his dream. Lucid, he scratched for meaning.

The image of his grandmother triggered memories of long evenings in his childhood when she must have stitched and sewed and cut for hours—and Basil must have been by her side. He remembered looking up; he remembered pulling out fabric from piles. The dream had unveiled a past he'd almost forgotten he'd had.

At the time Basil's practice consisted of painting, drawing, mixed-media collage and sculpture, techniques in which he had been trained in art school. But quilting? Quilts did not produce the same artistic reveries in his art world. They were family objects, utilities. Yet in his dream Basil felt shaken by a clear message. He had to quilt. He felt he had inherited this calling.

The very next day he asked a friend to teach him how to use a sewing machine and subsequently taught himself to quilt. He has quilted every day since.

He knew then that he had already been born to be a quilter, emerging from this legacy of thriving artisans who had never been revered as artists, their quilts never seen as works of art. But Basil wanted to change that. He began to unpack his own learning about what art could and couldn't be. As he reflected, he had to "unlearn in order to relearn," or forget, in order to remember.

As an emerging artist, college was a solitary enterprise for the only black artist in his department. Basil studied studio art at **Colorado College** where he spent much of his time practicing the popular forms his department was teaching, like painting and drawing. It wasn't until moving back to his hometown of St. Louis, MO that he began to rub elbows with other black

Left page: **Basil Kincaid *Double Consciousness & The Singularity of Our Inner Light*** 2017, 36" x 24".

Top: **Basil Kincaid *Amelioration*** 2017, 24" x 36".

Bottom: **Basil Kincaid *Borley*** 2014, scratch cards, vinyl, fabric, model, 24" x 36".





Basil Kincaid *InnaSpace Travel* 2017, 24" x 36".

artists and witness new ways of making. As a young graduate, it was hard for Basil to keep up the same art supply habit he'd developed in college, so he began using found objects from the area, like salvaged wood and metals. His re-familiarization with St. Louis' community of artists of color also helped introduce him to other methods of art making and to community-oriented practices that reignited an interest in the intersection of his ancestry and his art practice.

Basil continued his education through the excavation of heritage and community instead of paths more traditionally expected of successful contemporary artists. A few years after moving back to St. Louis, he began to wander away from painting and drawing, and, playing more with found objects, started **The Reclamation Project** with two other black artists in the area. Through this project, the trio uses discarded objects to construct new meanings. As they explain, they focus on "reclaiming the debris of our collective past and

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present as a way to forge a new future." A similar process was occurring within Basil—a rewriting of his own personal story through the insistence of a new form, of making something from what's already there, an alchemy of pulling out the magical from the mundane.

The process of unlearning can be incredibly energizing, and can lead one to a new path of personal and artistic liberation, but it is equally painful to unstitch what has been sewn. For this artist, much of his journey through artmaking has become a process of healing as a black artist, from generations of oppression and misunderstanding. When Basil sews, he is spending time with his grandmother, healed through the act of celebrating her daily practice as an artistic craft worthy of all the spotlighting, curatorial text, and press coverage that his work now receives.

Basil was awarded a fellowship through Arts Connect International in 2014, which allowed him to dig deeper into questions about his heritage and its relationship to his art practice. Placed in Accra and Labadi, Ghana, he spent a year developing a place-based practice and created *Reclamation 2: Ghana: A Call Home*, in which he crafted sculptural works using discarded prepaid telecom scratch cards. The artist adhered the cards together with the help of community members and the **GoLokal Performance Art Group**, resulting in a patchwork pattern of waste turned to vibrant fabric which emulated local textile designs. Alongside the GoLokal collective, the artist shot portraits of these works embodied, as performers donned the faux fabrics amidst the local landscape. Basil also hung some

Right page, top: **Basil Kincaid Quilt: Form 3: Sky Music** 2018, silk, cotton, tweed, polyester blend, cotton thread, wool, corduroy, Adire Oniko, 96" x 58" x 18".

Right page, left: **Basil Kincaid Quilt: BlackPraxis** 2017, silk, cotton, tweed, polyester blend, cotton thread, metal, wooden frame, 45" x 73" x 6".

Right page, right: **Basil Kincaid Quilt: The Code: Listen & Honor Her** 2017, silk, cotton, tweed, polyester blend, cotton thread, metal, wooden frame, 43" x 66" x 7".





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of the broader pieces as stand-alone works for exhibitions in Boston and St. Louis. These objects possessed quilt-like qualities of which, at the time, Basil was unaware.

Upon returning from Ghana, and resettled in St. Louis, Basil had the final dream that shocked him into quilt-making. The patterning he had been practicing through *Reclamation 2* began to shift into full-fledged quilting. Back in the U.S., he felt foreign amongst materials he'd used for years, while undergoing a slow reverse culture shock. Quilting entered his life at just the right time, when both artistic form and personal identity were merging into a singular quest.

In 2018, as he prepares for upcoming exhibitions, his foray into quilting continues to evolve. For the past two years, Basil has played with the human form as subject matter. Currently, his quilts are taking on more abstract shapes, serving as wall hangings and sculptures instead of being worn by Basil or other performers.

The artist is interested in a constant pursuit of pushing quickly and dramatically beyond personal boundaries at the instance of discovery. After recognizing his quilts were attached to human shapes, Basil immediately began to remove his anthropomorphic armatures, and spent time in his studio working himself into a new space.

To Basil quilting is about place. Most of his materials remain sourced through collection and donation. In this sense Basil continues to tell the story—almost a collective narrative—about the places from where these fabrics came, their owners, and the people who've decided to share the items with him (he often posts calls for fabric donations on social media). The pieces then become just as much about Basil reconnecting to his personal heritage, as it is about the artist creating new histories and shared stories from our collective pasts.

Basil Kincaid's solo exhibition *Gates* is on display at the University of Missouri-St. Louis through May 15, 2018. gallery210.umsu.edu



Left page: **Basil Kincaid** *The Visionary* 2017, 24" x 24".

Above: Artist portrait.

Kincaid is also a part of the group exhibition *Refraction: New Photography of the African Diaspora* at Steven Kasher Gallery New York City, NY. On display April 19–June 12, 2018. stevenkasher.com

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