

SYNC
Carolyn Lazard
September 10 – October 17, 2020

Essex Street / Maxwell Graham is pleased to present Carolyn Lazard's first solo exhibition.

And the Sun Still Shines
Tameka Blackwell

I love the sunlight that shines in on Thomas Jefferson Hospital's glass enclosed bridge.

The bridge has the appearance of hovering over Sansom Street. It was built as an extension for connecting the Chestnut Street side of Jefferson Hospital to the Walnut Street side. They once operated as two separate buildings. The Walnut Street side was built many years before the Chestnut Street side. Thomas Jefferson Hospital has become the premier hospital in the Northeast that handles spinal cord injuries. Anyhow, I'm glad it exists.

The elevators are full, as usual. Well, I'll have to wait for the next one, as usual. How dare these people delay my mission to the ninth floor, the purple floor, where my spot in the sun awaits me?

Purple is the color scheme of the floor — room numbers, nurses' stations, and the large number that greets you when the elevator doors open. The other floors have color schemes, too. The fifth floor is yellow, third floor is green, and the eighth floor is red.

Where are all these people coming from?

All right, I am forced to jock for position. 5 . . . 4 . . . it's on its way down . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . you fools better move out my way . . . 1 . . . here I go — zoom. I love it.

Don't leave on my account.

Once I'm on the elevator people don't like to ride with me. They usually jump out to get in another elevator. Maybe I frighten them by moving so quickly? Well, if I didn't, people would never let me on. So fine, don't get on with me — fewer stops.

Mom pushes the number nine and away we go. Man, she looks so tired.

"Mom, I got a plan."

"Yeah. What?"

"I'm a start my story for Eli's class when I get on the bridge."

"Yeah. You said that for the past two weeks."

"I know. But today is the day."

"Uh huh."

"Listen. My appointment is not until . . . what, another hour or so? I can start writing now. Right?"

"Right . . . turn around straight. So you can get off without hitting the arm of that chair."

"I got it."

"Yeah."

Man, she sounds tired. Bing!

The Ninth floor, sunshine here I come. Great, no one else is on the bridge. My three favorite elements for writing — and sleeping — sunshine and peace and quiet. Just as I like it.

"You need all three of your pillows?"

"Yes' um."

"Yes' um?"

"Thanks mom."

"Yes' um. I am going to sit in the lounge and it's about 11:00 o'clock. So come around about quarter of . . . 12."

“How am I supposed to know that?”

It’s funny, after so many years she still forgets about my inabilities.

“Oh, that’s right. I’ll come back at twenty of.”

“OK.”

“Don’t fall asleep or daydream with all this sun.”

“You know me too well.”

She even walks tired.

All right, Let the Story Writing Begin. Or, Let My Story Begin. Yeah, that sounds better as a title. This sun feels so good. I like to just turn my face up to it.

The flashing red lights on that ambulance are so red. It’s pulling into the Emergency and Trauma Unit on Tenth Street. That wasn’t here, at Jefferson, when I was brought to this hospital. I wonder if the person inside’s body is packed in ice for stabilization? As mine was. I wonder if they even do that anymore, after a person’s been pronounced DOA? As I was. I wonder if they need a tube inserted in their tracheae so they can breathe? As I needed. I wonder if the person is being transferred here from another hospital because of the severity of their illness? As I was transferred here from another hospital that wasn’t capable of handling a person with my level of spinal injury. Whew! What a ride, from then to now. Thank you, Jesus, for my Life.

“Hey, Tameka. Right?”

“Hi, Dr. Dittuno.” A Spinal Cord Specialist and my doctor during my seven-month stay here.

I cannot believe this man is still here. Still wearing his glasses on the tip of his nose. Let me peek at the feet. Yup, the brown Stacey Adams turned up at the toes.

“How are you, sweetie? You look wonderful. Here for a tune up?”

I frown at the word “sweetie.” I know I was young when I came here, but I am well past the sweetie stage. And I’m still processing the “tune up” remark. I left my house this morning promising myself not to become “Super Woman: The Crusader for all Causes.” But, I can’t help it.

“Sweetie, doc?”

“Oh yeah, how old are you now?”

“Too old for sweetie.”

An awkward silence falls between us while he rocks back and forth on the worn heels of his shoes. Should I release him now, or let him squirm a little more? Oh, I’ll dismiss him, only because he looks so uncomfortable and I have work to do. Besides, I can’t hold in my laughter any longer and he’s blocking my sun.

“Yup, here for a routine check up.”

“OK then, see you later. Keep up the good work.”

Laughter.

It amazes me how little common sense some of these doctors have. (Smile.)

I guess many people don’t expect the things that come out of my face. Man, this sun feels nice. I’m glad that cloud is gone. I don’t want any clouds on this beautiful sunny day. All right, back to my story.

Why is Mom coming now? It can’t be 11:45 already. I only have drawings of sunny smiley faces on my page. I wanted to have at least three or four pages written before she came for me or I get back home. Watch she asks me how much I’ve written.

“How much did you write?”

“Aren’t you early?”

“No, it’s quarter of. That’s all you did was draw pictures of smiley faces?”

“I’m still thinking.”

“Yeah, OK. Do you want all this stuff put away?”

“No. But, listen. My brain juices are just getting started.”

She smiles. “Yeah, all right. Get started around to the doctor’s office.”

Laughter.

I love her one-liners, and her smile. She doesn’t look as worn out when she got a smile on her face.

I hate this office. I always have to skillfully maneuver my way around the Ikea-looking doctor’s office furniture in order to find a corner to squeeze into while I wait my turn. There is a spot, between two cheaply framed chairs. It’s about twenty-two inches wide. Thank goodness I’m twenty-one inches wide.

Then I only have to go through the same ritual to get out of the spot where I wedged myself in.

Not bad. I whipped myself right in here. You go BIG GIRL.

“The lady said Dr. Chinkins is running around thirty minutes late.”

“OK. That’ll give me time to write at least a page or two.”

“Yeah, alright. Put everything back on you?”

“Mm, hm. Thanks.”

“Mm hm.”

Back to my empty page with the sunshine faces on it. Better yet, I’ll start on a clean slate or clean page.

“You have an audience.” Despite my mother leaning over to tell me this — she cannot whisper. I’m sure everyone in this matchbox of an office heard her.

I nod in agreement, before she loudly whispers something else.

Yes mommy, I’m aware of the woman across from me whose skin and attire look as if she just flew in from Florida. I know it’s nice today, but sandals and puddle-pushers? Oh, excuse me, capris. Aren’t you aware it’s still March? I saw her when she came in. Try to ignore her and write. I have two pages of thoughts down. Don’t stop the flow and do not look up again to meet her eyes – too late. No. Please don’t stare. I do not feel like playing the staring game with you. I have work to do. And trust me, I am much better at it than you are. Just smile then.

Smile.

All right, the soft smile I gave you was a hint that you’re being rude. It must’ve not worked because your eyes are still on me. I’m forced to give you the eye treatment. OK. What shall I focus on? Maybe your black roots that need a blonde touch up. Or maybe your thin red painted lips. No, not the lips. I’ll wind up laughing before I’m finished treating you with my eyes. Found it. That blotchy sunburned forehead with its four deep creases has my full attention.

She looks and I look. She looks and I look. She looks and I look. She looks and I look. Has anyone ever told this intelligent woman how rude it is to stare?

The woman with the gold hoop earrings and the blue raincoat, a London Fog like my grandmother used to wear, sitting next to my sunburned friend, appears to understand the purpose of my eye treatment. She shakes her head in disgust. Raincoat lady got the message. She probably was taught the same lesson I was privileged to learn.”DO NOT STARE, it’s rude and impolite.”

She looks and I look. She looks and I look. She looks and I look. She looks and I look. Oh, great. You call my name now. I am just getting relaxed. Do I turn away now? NEVER!

“Come on Mekey.” This is my affectionate family name given to me by my niece when she was two. She couldn’t pronounce my name Tameka properly.

She looks and I look. She looks and I look. She looks and I look. I don't feel like being Super Woman and teaching this woman some manners.

"Come on, your chair is on." My mom's voice tells me she's fed up with this lady's rudeness and my response to it.

I rest my head on my headrest, with my eyes locked on her forehead. My chair lunges forward. I take my head off the headrest, stopping the chair right in front of the rude woman's feet. She jumps, lifting her feet off the floor.

"I don't know if anyone has ever told you, but staring at people is very rude."

The woman blinks her eyes rapidly and looks at me as if she is amazed that I can speak.

All right, lady, I heard you call me the first time. Getting out this tight spot was a lot easier than I thought it would be. Maybe I feel as if I got something to prove. Or, I don't care whether I take a few of these cheap chairs with me, including the one Mrs. Florida is sitting in. Anyway, I got skills.

"Hi, Tameka?"

"No, she's Tameka?"

"Tm Tameka Blackwell."

Where is Erica, who sat at this desk for the past five years? She knows who is who. I hate breaking in new people.

"Yes, Ms. Blackwell. Dr. Chinkins will not be able to see you today and apologizes for any inconvenience."

Silence.

Where is Erica? This woman sounds like a recording. BEEP, please hold. BEEP, press one.

"Are you having any problems with your toes? Are you diabetic?"

"No, no problems. Nor am I diabetic."

"Because you could see Dr. Freed."

Dr. Freed? Not hardly. He's the same quack that don't believe it's essential for a person with a spinal cord injury to have their nails cut regularly and properly.

"No, that's quite all right."

"Would you like to make an appointment for next week?"

"No, I'll just call. Thanks."

"Let's go Bo." This is the affectionate name I gave my mom after I turned twenty-five, in order to keep from calling her "Mommy" in public.

It is warm enough to sit outside. I'll start to write when I get back home. Well, I get to enjoy the sun a little more. Finally, I don't have to fight to get on the elevator. Man, everyone is out today. You can always tell when it's lunchtime and when it is getting warm. The sun feels so warm.

"I am going to sit over here."

"OK. I'm going to sit over there, where the sun is."

"Keep watch for your ride."

"All right."

Well, if I'm not going to write, I still can think, while I'm sitting here. I'm still not sure about how to put my story on paper and make it interesting. I am not a very exciting person. I don't do much of anything.

No, please don't sit over here. I am in a corner minding my business. Besides, my eyeballs are tired of staring. Also, this wooden and stone bench next to me doesn't look very comfortable. Great, just what I don't want.

"Hi, honey." At least this little osteoporosistic white haired lady has the decency to speak. But that usually means there will be a slew of questions that will usually follow the gesture of politeness.

"Hi."

"Sun feels good, huh."

"Yup."

“I bet it feels really good to *your* body?”

You bet right, lady.

“Yup.”

No, don’t move any closer. Can’t you tell by my short answers that I don’t want to talk? Please, lady, that’s close enough. If I move back I won’t be in the sun.

“Where do you live, honey?”

I knew you had questions. It didn’t take you long, sister. I know you didn’t come sit over here for the sake of sitting.

“North Philly.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard about that place. A lot of dangerous things happening out there.”

Now, before I come to the rescue of North Philly and scare the living daylights out this lady, let me process her idea of North Philly being somewhere afar or “out there.”

“Were you born like that? Did something happen to you out there?”

Slow down, granny. I knew you were full of questions, but dag.

“I was shot.”

I love to see people’s facial response when I say that.

“Oh, my word.”

Whew, I didn’t know she had such beady little blue eyes behind all that hanging skin.

Silence.

I feel my mom’s eyes on me. I’m not going to look in her direction.

I feel her eyes on me, just like those days when I was in church and talking with friends when I shouldn’t have been. I would turn around to see her eyes chastising me.

Oh, I can’t help it. Yup, she’s looking at me. Smile.

“Was it gang related?”

Oh, God, this woman watches too much TV. Her favorite is probably detective shows because she is one hell of an interrogator. But let me give her a dose of reality.

Super Woman to the rescue!

“No, my injury wasn’t gang related. Actually, it didn’t happen ‘out there’ in North Philly.”

“Oh! Where did it occur?”

How did I know you were going to ask that?

“I was on the Boardwalk with some friends.”

“The boardwalk? The Atlantic City Boardwalk?”

Look, lady, will you let me tell this story?

“No. It was the Ocean City Boardwalk . . .”

“Were you vacationing, school trip, just visiting? What?”

Man, Agatha Christie. Sit back on the edge of the bench and let me finish.

“Just visiting. And I was on the boardwalk and this man came over to me when I was laughing — I forget about what. Anyhow, he said, ‘You know, you remind me of my wife.’ Then as I began to leave or walk away, he shot me.”

“My heavens! You poor dear. Well, did you look like his wife?”

Here comes the kicker.

“No, not at all. His wife was a thin woman with honey-blond hair.”

“What? What do you mean honey-blond hair? You mean his wife was white?”

“Yup.”

“Was he white too?”

“Uh, huh.”

“Well, how do you think . . .”

“I don’t know. I doubt if there were any similarities. Maybe it was my laugh. My mother used to tell me my laugh was going to get me in trouble.”

Especially when I was in Catholic School.

“What happened to him?”

“It is said that he went three blocks and blew his brains out.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yup. No trial, no sentencing and no punishment.”

“Where did he get the gun?”

“Oh, a small arsenal was later found in his home.”

Silence.

Thank goodness someone is calling. This lady is full of questions.

She shakes her head and pats my arm. Then she stands, while still shaking her head. She walks slowly toward a woman holding open a car door. The woman at the car has hair as gray as the inquisitive old lady, but her skin is considerably younger.

“Hey, Bo.”

“What are you doing?”

“Why is it that you think I’m doing something?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question. Besides, I know you.”

“I wasn’t doing anything but chit chatting.”

“What did you say to that woman for her to go away shaking her head like that?”

“I told her what she wanted to know.”

“What was that? What happened to you?”

“Yup, what else?”

“What did you say?”

“I told her all about my trip to Ocean City.”

“Why you tell her that? You know that is not how you got injured.”

“Because if I had told her that I was actually injured by a stray bullet from a police officer’s gun who was running down my block and shooting at the back of a purse-snatching thief, she would not have felt the same despair about gun violence as she did hearing about my friend Eileen’s shooting on the boardwalk. Or the story of Sharon’s father shooting her because he thought she was a burglar. All my story does is confirm every stereotype about violence in North Philadelphia. And I’m sure my friends don’t mind me sharing or borrowing their stories to make a point about the unexpectedness of gun violence.”

“Maybe. But let people think what they want. What happened to you was no fault of yours. So who cares what they think? You are not the saving grace of North Philly.”

“I know, but I can’t help it sometimes.”

“Well, when someone asks you what happened to you, just say . . . “

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

“Yeah, that’s good. Or tell them you’d rather not discuss it.”

“I like mine better.”

“Somehow I knew you would. I’m going inside to call and see why paratransit is late.”

“All right.”

When I get home on my porch I’ll start my paper, for sure. Right after the double episode of *This Old House* goes off. I missed it last week when I was sitting in the sun and beginning my paper. Man, this sun is awesome.

“Hi.”

“Hi. What is your name?”

“Thomas.”

“My name is Tameka. How old are you?”

“6.” He holds up six fingers. “Why are you sitting there?”

Super Woman to the rescue! I can’t pass up on an opportunity to teach little Thomas here about the dangers of guns. I better hurry up before my mother gets back.

“Well, my cousin was playing with a”

Tameka Blackwell was employed by Liberty Resources, Inc. as the Nursing Home Transition Supports Coordinator and as an Independent Living Services Specialist. She received numerous accolades for her dedication to the Independent Living philosophy and making a difference in consumers' lives from 2007 through 2010. One of these accolades was for the most Nursing Home transitions in one month. She also received the Jerry Segal Classic 2005 'Give Back' award from Magee Rehabilitation. She was a fierce advocate for the disability community, always fighting to make life better for her second family.

Tameka received National Honor Society status and held a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English (Cum Laude) from Temple University. She received a Certificate in Short Story Writing and Journalism from the National Correspondence School in Washington D.C. She volunteered as a motivational speaker through Magee Rehabilitation. She also worked as a part time paralegal at the Legal Clinic for the Disabled, Inc. which fueled her desire to become a lawyer.

Tameka co-authored a book titled "No Restraints: An Anthology of Disability Culture in Philadelphia." Her own short story was titled "And the Sun Still Shines." Tameka will be remembered for empowering individuals with disabilities to become vigilant advocates for themselves. She helped individuals with disabilities to see that they do not have to tolerate any type of abuse or disrespect. She was a testament on how one can be self-advocating, independent, and vigorously social, all while having a disability.

Tameka enjoyed listening to 70's soul and jazz music, and writing. She learned to live and enjoy her life in a new way – as a disabled person with independence, strong mindedness, vitality and confidence.

Biography sourced from the Tameka Blackwell Training Institute at Liberty Community Communication, Pennsylvania.

Carolyn Lazard was born in 1987 in California and lives and works in Philadelphia and New York. They received a MFA from the University of Pennsylvania in 2019 and a BA in Film and Anthropology at Bard College in 2010.

Lazard has published numerous texts including "The World is Unknown," with Triple Canopy in 2019; "Accessibility and the Arts: A Promise and A Practice" with Recess and Common Field in 2019; and "How to Be a Person in the Age of Autoimmunity," with Cluster Magazine in 2013.

Lazard received the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Grant; and The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage Fellowship, both in 2019; The Flaherty Fellowship; Wynn Newhouse Award; and Rema Hort Mann Artist Community Engagement Grant (with Canaries Collective), all in 2016.

They have participated in group exhibitions at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France (forthcoming); Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (forthcoming); Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany; Gebert Foundation, Rapperswil, Switzerland; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Cell Project Space, London, UK; Whitney Biennial, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York; Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) Vilnius; SALTS, Basel, Switzerland; Galerie Francesca Pia, Zurich, Switzerland; Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Shoot the Lobster, New York, New York; The Kitchen, New York, New York; New Museum, New York, New York.

In 2021 Lazard will have solo exhibitions at Cell Project Space, London UK; and Kunstverein Braunschweig, Braunschweig, Germany. In 2022 they will have a solo exhibition at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

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