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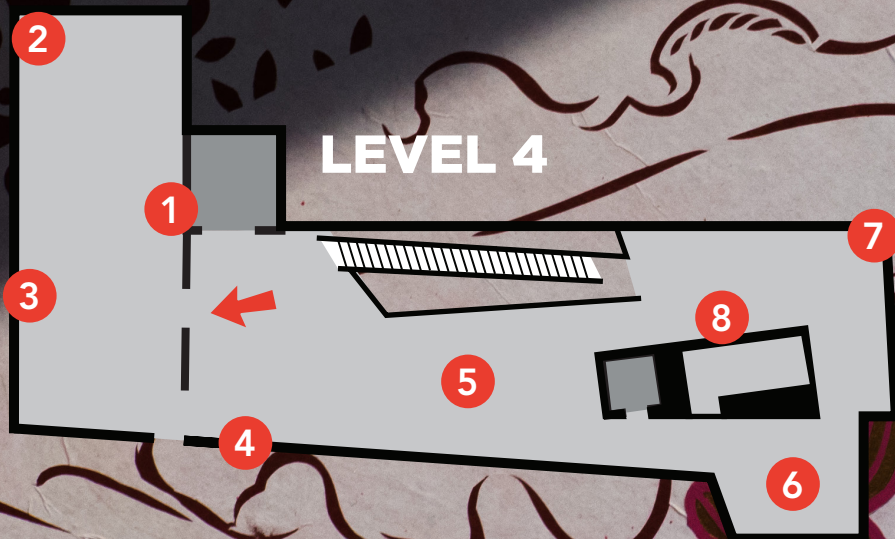
**SWOON**

THE CANYON • 1999-2017



*The Canyon* is Caledonia Curry's first career retrospective, presenting an archaeology of the past eighteen years of her prodigious career. Known far and wide as "Swoon", this tireless artist and humanist pushes the function of art beyond the frame – practicing a holistic form of making that is action, catalyst, catharsis, engagement and exchange. Her trajectory is equally expansive, from emulating old masters as an art student, to invigorating the city with figures born of paper and paste, to sprawling installations within galleries and museums, to eclectic collaborations and raft building, to serving as the hub and spokes of international ventures advancing human rights, social justice and civic revitalization. To, in her words, "embrace the world and be part of it," there is an unwavering empathy in her work – enlivening the people and places around her to build deeper, healthier communities. Careful observation underpins Curry's core practice of drawing and printmaking and mythology magnifies its impact – turning people and their portraits into archetypes that swell with symbolic meaning.

The same can be said of what "Swoon" has become - transcending the pseudonym of a singular individual to blossom as a gathering space where a multitude of partners, materials and ambitions meet. Within this unwieldy, optimistic, and continually evolving constellation, Curry sows the seeds of the world she aspires to live in. In this place art is neither leisure nor luxury, but a fundamental social good that pulses through the arteries of a healthy society. This exhibition reflects upon these ambitions and propels them forward – celebrating the projects, challenges, people and partnerships that have made Curry an artist of, and beyond art.





The brochure serves as guidebook for this exhibition, providing orientation by way of section descriptions and a gallery map. Please note the components that are interactive (they have signage indicating this); Please do not touch any other works of art, as they are fragile. You may also access interview clips with the artist via the phone numbers listed in this guide.



**Hear the artist! Dial: 513-463-3680**

**Use Guide by Cell codes for each section**







## 1 1999-2001

Curry has conceived the first section of this exhibition as a time capsule where the audience walks along a roughly chronological timeline of her career. Every year between 1999 and 2017 is represented by figures, animals, insects, architecture and/or various patterns and cityscapes she has depicted via prints, drawings, collage and cut paper. Upon entering this space through an arched passage we find a second door to the left, salvaged from the gritty, but legendary NYC center for art and activism "ABC No Rio." This popular venue was shut down in 2016, but not before Curry contributed to the ad hoc "guestbook" of graffitists and taggers who scrawled their signatures onto this impromptu archive. To the right we enter the Swoon archive with Curry's earliest block prints depicting New York street scenes in a style reminiscent of contour drawings. Seeking to escape the insulated nature of her art education at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Curry explores the

city in a more immediate manner here – translating her observations through lines that trace her urban muse. She likened the process to developing a visual lexicon, where people and places become an iconographic alphabet. Another turning point came when she printed these scenes onto vellum and pasted them onto public walls to marry her art with the city's texture. When buying blocks of linoleum began to stress her meager art student budget, Curry expanded into cut paper. In this section of the show we see her first full-length figure combining a portrait of her grandfather with a cross-section of urban activity. In a precursor of things to come, she thereby employs people as portals onto larger social observations. It is also notable that a series of cut paper cicadas adorn this part of the time capsule, with their 17-year gestation period mirroring the span of this survey show. • [Code: 40](#)



## 2 2002-2004

In the new millennium Curry continued to translate her art school training of emulation and observation into more detailed street scenes – making ever greater strides in defining what her practice could be. She made sketches of the people and places around her while sitting on the subway or city benches, but began to rely more heavily on photographs as the basis for her prints and drawings. In what would become one of her signature techniques, Curry works from photos and video stills to render split-second observations that otherwise pass fleetingly. Pushing the 19th century concept of the “*flâneur*” (one who leisurely meanders city streets) into a more heightened place, she counts American photographer Helen Levitt as one of her

primary influences at this time. Peering into the soul of a place, Curry grew increasingly involved in the inhabitants and interactions that generate the heartbeat of the urban environment. Her burgeoning inventory of these observations made manifest in paper, vellum and now Mylar would soon take on added dimensionality as Curry began to construct rudimentary tableaux in her apartment kitchen. With some elements mounted to found materials and other hanging from above, these organic assemblages foreshadowed future installation work, as well as much more expansive projects involving the actual building/restoration of rafts and houses.

• [Code: 41 & 42](#)

## 3 2005-2008

In 2005 Curry continued to push further into both three-dimensional and psycho-geographical space, creating a series of prints based on views into New York City subway windows. These portals became the front entrance to Swoon’s first major site-specific installation inside the colorful, Soho-based gallery Deitch Projects that summer. The front door of the installation lead to a hallway through which viewers could catch glimpses of the windows as they walked – reminiscent of seeing into a neighboring cabin as two subway cars pass one another inside the tunnels. In so doing, and with a greater consciousness of how to shape an environment, Curry began to compose space according to the principles of her drawings. Conceiving the gallery as a continuous installation, she sought to move people through a room in a similar way as she would lead one’s eye through a composition. Representations of scaffolding, power lines, fire escapes, bridges, water towers and street signs take on added presence in the ensuing work – creating networks of directional lines and nascent city plans.

These ambitions would subsequently propel her beyond the art world as Curry gathered her first team of collaborators to build a makeshift raft that sailed down the Mississippi River in 2006. Parts of succeeding raft projects are re-assembled in this section of the time capsule, serving as both architectural embellishment and substrates for her prints and patterns. • [Code: 43](#)





## 4 2009-PRESENT

Moving towards 2010 and beyond, the scope of Curry's practice expanded exponentially as she participated in ambitious international ventures marrying art with human rights and civic revitalization. The breadth of her figurative work underwent a similar expansion as Curry's portraits grew more intimate and archetypal at once. What began as a private catalog of anonymous city-goers came to include representations of her friends, family, colleagues and collaborators as figures that live as both subjects and symbols. As a case in point, her close friends Alixa Garcia and Naima Penniman employ art, performance and poetry (as the duo "Climbing PoeTree") to cultivate education, community organization and social activism. As both individuals and a duo they appear regularly in this period of Curry's work, most notably holding one

another, eyes closed, in a timeless embrace that has crowned Swoon's rafts and welcomed her flotillas to harbor. Naima was the model for the ascendant water goddess *Thalassa* as well, speaking to the way Curry weaves mythology, folklore and fairy tales into observational portraiture to build rich, composite characters. Like swelling hubs that amalgamate her many interests, the portraits of this period also incorporate elements of historical paintings like James Ensor's *Two Skeletons Fighting Over a Hanged Man* (1891), Valentin Serov's 1910 portrait of Russian dancer Ida Rubenstein, and components of German artist's Käthe Kollwitz prints. Curry thereby fuses elements of her art historical education with illuminated portraits of loved ones to build a modern day pantheon of icons that span from street to museum.

• Code: 44 & 45





## 5 THALASSA

Curry grew up in Florida where the ocean was a daily part of her life, and an intimate part of her practice and persona. In April 2010, while she was working concurrently in Haiti and New Orleans, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill took place in the Gulf of Mexico. In what would eventually become the largest marine oil spill in the history of the petroleum industry, Curry was deeply distressed and felt as if a friend was being mortally wounded. An exhibition at the New Orleans Museum of Art provided a vehicle for her to wrestle with this grief and channel her emotions into a place of healing. Her friends and fellow artists Alixa and Naima present work addressing the affects of Hurricane Katrina, and were working with Curry in Haiti at this time. She asked Naima to be the model for her vision of the Greek goddess *Thalassa* – a primeval spirit of the sea and guardian of all its creatures. Described in Aesop's fable "The Farmer and the Sea," *Thalassa* is often pictured as a matronly woman, half-submerged in water, with crab claw horns, seaweed garments and a ship oar in hand. Curry's version maintains a number of these characteristics but pushes them into a more lyrical

place as this 21st century *Thalassa* rises to overcome the folly of mankind. Her goddess ascended in monumental fashion in the New Orleans Museum atrium, and has since reappeared in Braddock, PA and the Detroit Institute of the Arts – soaring in more universal terms as a symbol of resilience and rebirth. • Code: 46

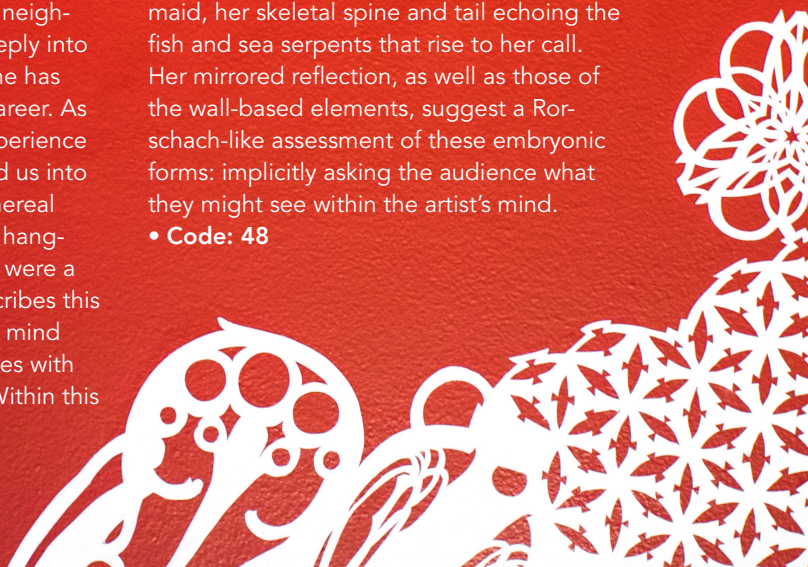


## 6 TUNNEL

Curry employs the low ceilings and more intimate quarters of this gallery to cast the CAC's architecture as a metaphor for subconscious passage. Moving from the culmination of her time capsule chronology and the climactic rise of *Thalassa* in the neighboring space, Curry dives more deeply into the emotional trauma with which she has been contending throughout her career. As an outlet from the spectacle we experience in the atrium, the crimson walls lead us into a dream-like cave adorned with ethereal cut paper forms lining the wall and hanging from the ceiling. If the 4th floor were a self-portrait of the artist, Curry describes this section as a tunnel leading into the mind as an underwater grotto that bubbles with thoughts in a state of becoming. Within this

subterranean allegory of the artist psyche we see suggestions of Curry and her sister at play – floating within a sinuous space of aquatic creatures. The siren character *Miss Rockaway* appears here as a demure mermaid, her skeletal spine and tail echoing the fish and sea serpents that rise to her call. Her mirrored reflection, as well as those of the wall-based elements, suggest a Rorschach-like assessment of these embryonic forms: implicitly asking the audience what they might see within the artist's mind.

• Code: 48





## 7 MEDEA

Curry confronts many of her most unsettling personal memories in this installation. In hopes of overcoming their undertow and more effectively re-shaping the trauma that has reverberated throughout her life, she reassembles some of her most iconic figures into a cathartic allegory. Entitled *Medea*, after the infamous figure in Greek mythology, this work traces a lineage of love and pain through Curry's matriarchal family tree. According to myth, the volatile Medea murdered those closest to her as a means of inflicting vengeance. As cases in point, she distracted her father (to flee with her lover Jason) by killing her brother Absyrthus, and then slaughtered her and Jason's children after his suspected betrayal of their marriage. She is pictured here in the act of filicide, along with Curry's great grandmother, grandmother, mother and sister, as well as a fetus that dangles between two dancing skeletons.

This work employs the house as a metaphor for both the family and the psyche – splitting open to reveal a restless totem of faces and folklore. The fissure is crowned by a mirrored portrait of her grandmother as a young woman that Curry has previously dubbed *The Ice Queen*. Surrounded by shards, it locates a woman less hardened than the matriarch whose manner of rule led to a jagged relationship with her daughters. Deeper in the structure's core, a spider-like creature bearing human features spawns a swarm of demonic masks that speak to Curry's attempts to simultaneously manifest, exorcise and contain that which haunts her. Diary-like clips delving deeper into this past – as well as snippets of related storybooks, newspaper articles, psychological theory and literary references – loop in the intestinal artifacts of the house, as well as the neighboring switchboard, which Curry elaborates upon here:

*A vision swept over me where suddenly I saw myself as a telephone switchboard. I could feel my body as though it contained a mess of wires. My emotions were one end of a wire, patched into their correct causes and events. But I had scrambled things. In a flash of clarity I saw that I had deliberately crossed the wires. I had separated reaction from event, emotion from cause, mixing the wires so that emotions would come at random – seemingly connected to no root cause – or events which seemed catastrophic would carry no reaction. I understand now that I had done this to hide a most unbearable truth about how much I feared the ones I depended on, and loved. Especially that precious one in the middle, the mother. I was only 15 when this vision came. It showed up whole, a little immaculate piece of wisdom, that wouldn't make sense to me for another 22 years.*

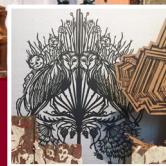






## 8 WALLPAPER

The wallpaper adorning over a quarter of the gallery on the 4th floor is a response to the architecture of Zaha Hadid and Curry's desire to activate its many planes. Describing the CAC's atrium as "soaring, diminutive and disorienting," she sought a treatment that would dance across walls and amplify the patterns pasted on Hadid's imposing black staircases. To do so, Curry marries past designs with fairy tales and folklore in monumental swaths of hand-crafted wallpaper. Each roll was produced one floor up from her Brooklyn studio by EFS Designs, an 80-year old firm which uses tables the length of football fields to silkscreen each design. Five ensuing patterns surround the *Medea* installation with a kaleido-



scopic array of color, pattern and narrative. The green-gold *Leaves* paper is an adaptation of a design featured on the central tree in Curry's 2014 Brooklyn Museum exhibition "Submerged Motherlands," while the pink-and-scarlet *Windows* paper samples a frieze designed for the architectural rehabilitation project in Braddock, PA. In a related decorative translation, the turquoise-and-white *Radiolarian* paper is based on a design Curry is developing for a newly built Bamboo house in Cormiers, Haiti as part of the ongoing Konbit Shelter project. The golden *Red Riding Hood* and black *Owls* incorporate more well-known storybook characters in a manner that speaks to the neighboring *Medea*. • **Code: 47**





## NARRATIVE ROOM

This section features a collection of portraits that both amplify and transcend their subjects to become portals into deeper, more elaborate stories and campaigns. Moving beyond temporary encounters and art world exclusivity, Curry describes how the experiences shared with the people portrayed here “started to run a little deeper” – growing more intense, involved, and emblematic. Spanning almost ten years and a diverse quartet of countries, these projects highlight Curry’s practice of employing art as a catalyst to connect individuals and communities, and bring attention to important political causes.

In 2008 Curry immortalized Mexican teenager Sylvia Elena Morales Huerta – turning the young woman’s murder into a poignant memorial against femicides in Juarez and the border politics that contribute to this epidemic. Four years later she traveled to Meru, Kenya to fight violence against women in a parallel context, working with the organization “The Equality Effect” that brought legal action against the country’s government to enforce constitutional protection against rape. In 2015 Curry battled the punitive culture that often surrounds substance abuse in the United States by working with Mural Arts Philadelphia to tell stories via art therapy workshops, public speaking and a pantheon of public faces. Earlier this year she continued the effort to bridge social divides between natives and newcomers by picturing Maram Alawad – a young Syrian immigrant in Lund, Sweden – on a monumental scale. • **Code: 50**

Sylvia Elena

**Code: 51**

Five Stories

**Code: 52**

Maram

**Code: 53**

Tumaini

**Code: 54**



# COLLABORATION ROOM

Dithyrambalina &  
The Music Box

Code: 58

Braddock, PA

Code: 56

Konbit Shelter

Code: 57

Curry has participated in a number of large-scale collaborative projects over the past two decades that continue to live outside her direct involvement. This section highlights four undertakings spanning eleven years and three countries which employ art as a catalyst for unconventional community building and civic revitalization. While varied in appearance, these endeavors are characterized by an aspirational and inclusive approach - employing local people and resources to cultivate career skills, establish sustainable operations and infuse architecture with creativity. In each, Curry is one part of many: working alongside artists, educators, musicians, farmers, architects and organizations to promote alternative forms of living, working and thinking.

She often characterizes herself as a water spirit, and the seeds of these ventures were sewn along waterways as Curry gathered eclectic crews to build DIY rafts that lived an off-the-grid dream of "swimming cities." Their utopian aspirations were never fully realized, but the notion of utilizing materials at hand to generate humble, but resourceful models fueled the ensuing Konbit Shelter project in Haiti. Their use of earth bag architecture to rebuild portions of this earthquake-ravaged country had been prototyped in the economically-depressed borough of Braddock, PA via the Transformazium collective - where a Super Adobe dome rose alongside a now burgeoning tile company as this group partnered with residents to revitalize a former church. Architecture sang in a related way in New Orleans when Curry collaborated with the city's Airlift organization to orchestrate a music box village that embedded instruments into each structure, and a performative city into possibility. • Code: 55







## **SWOON**

### **THE CANYON • 1999-2017**

September 22, 2017 – February 25, 2018

Curated by Steven Matijcio

#### **Generously supported by**

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Caledonia Curry, who exhibits her artwork under the name SWOON, is a visual artist and printmaker who has spent her career exploring the relationship between people and their built environments. She was born in 1977 in New London, Connecticut and grew up in Daytona Beach, Florida. Curry studied at the Pratt Institute in New York from 1998-2001, and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. Her early interventions in the urban cityscape took the form of wheat-pasting portraits to the walls of cities around the world, and her public practice has expanded to employ art to rebuild communities and humanize today's most pressing social and environmental issues. She co-founded Konbit Shelter in 2010, an artist's response to the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti that same year. Other community-based endeavors include collaborating on the construction of musical architecture in New Orleans, and a neighborhood revitalization project in North Braddock, PA. Alongside her place-based work, she has a studio practice of drawing, printmaking, architectural sculpture and installations. Curry's work has been collected and shown internationally at galleries and museums including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Brooklyn Museum; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Detroit Institute of the Arts; the Skissernas Museum in Lund, Sweden; and the São Paulo Museum of Art, Brazil.

**THANK YOU** to all those who assisted in, or contributed to the production of *The Canyon*:

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*All works by Swoon*

*Images Courtesy of Contemporary Arts Center*

Cover: *Amanda* [detail], 2017

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