



mayfield brooks
Whale Fall with Me

January 27 – March 1, 2026

Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery | Center for the Arts | Wesleyan University

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Whale Fall with Me is a solo exhibition by mayfield brooks, the 2025–2026 CFA Artist in Residence, culminating their multi-year research on the life and death cycle of whales—a project that extends across writing, 'zine making, moving image, and brooks' embodied practice of vocal and dance improvisation. At the center of the installation is a newly-commissioned film focusing on the third chapter of brooks' *Whale Fall* trilogy. Created as a site-specific performance on the 1885 Tall Ship Wavertree in the care of the South Street Seaport Museum in New York, and at Rockaway Beach in Queens, New York where the artist lives—this film brings together multiple strands of the artist's exploration of the “whale fall” (an ecosystem process that occurs when a whale carcass sinks to the bottom of the ocean, its body feeding an entire world of creatures from the largest apex predators to the smallest microorganisms). Considering this phenomenon as more than an ecological event, brooks has used whale song and even the history of whaling (one of the first integrated industries relying heavily on Black and Indigenous labor) to imagine death as one of the most powerful life-giving forces in the universe. At its core, the whale fall asks: what becomes possible, inevitable, and necessary when systems break down? *Whale Fall with Me* gestures towards decomposition as a world-making force, a practice of liberation, a process of unbecoming that feeds a different existence.

Decomposing, Together

Kiara Benn '20

Assistant Director for Programming
and Assistant Curator for Performing Arts

Whale Fall with Me, a culminating iteration of mayfield brooks' multi-year project *Whale Fall*, drops the viewer directly into the artist's intimacy with their research. There is evidence of a deep familiarity, built through consistent curiosity and attention toward developing a practice that examines the behaviors of humans and more-than-humans alike. At its core, brooks' work seeks to uncover community strategies and systems of mutual care, especially amid late capitalist collapse. The ecological phenomenon, whale fall, is a process by which a whale carcass descends to the sea floor, providing an influx of food, attracting complex ecosystems, and sustaining life for decades. By posing the *Whale Fall* project as an ongoing embodied practice, brooks provides an opportunity to think through decomposition as a continuous catalyst for the development of new communities and a container to interrogate our relationships to extractive labor systems.

A recent *Whale Fall with Me* film shoot provided me with a firsthand account of what it means to join brooks in practice. We spent two days filming aboard the 1885 Tall Ship Wavertree, ascending and descending its vast structure. The cargo ship, under the care of the South Street Seaport Museum, felt like a surrogate for the body of a whale, and moving through the ship during filming resembled the different layers

of decomposition. We began on the forecastle, the forward deck of the ship, first capturing choreography where brooks mapped the intersecting lines of the ship's sails and ropes, acting as a live compass. Shortly after, we captured camilo, brooks' collaborator, on the ship's main deck in a movement that centered his undulating spine. brooks' movement felt like watching the attractive allure of efficient labor systems, the systems that allow us to get what we want, when we need it, while camilo's movement felt like watching the majestic, mysterious spine of a whale before they breach the surface of the ocean.

Then we moved to the back of the ship, where we focused on capturing another iteration of the *Spine Dance* where brooks and camilo come together and become one long spine, again reminiscent of how whales move in water.¹ This provided a moment to understand how these entities navigate the world and how they move to survive and nourish themselves. Later, the group transitioned downstairs into the cargo hold, which felt like the whale's ribcage and belly. This is where the whale holds what it has consumed; it is also where extractive systems store what they have taken. There, brooks focused on vocalizing and was accompanied by sound from electric cellist Dorothy Carlos. At this final layer, there was an honoring of echolocation produced by whales and



mayfield brooks, *whale fall abyss*, Performance, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's River to River Festival on the 1885 Tall Ship Wavertree at the South Street Seaport Museum, June 19, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Cherylynn Tsushima

a calling to ancestors implicated in the entangled histories of whalers and slave ships. As we descended, entwinement became clearer. The histories of these systems felt closer, their present results were visible, and the future of how they could continue to persist was clear. The process of breakdown encouraged me to imagine alternative systems and take responsibility for how I choose to interact with them.

At the inception of the *Whale Fall* project, brooks looked to whales at a time when they felt a sense of hopelessness about the state of the world. Inspired by community strategies and collective resistance during the Black Lives Matter uprisings, brooks embraced decay as a process able to foster new life and communities. At first discovery, the whale fall phenomenon offered brooks a way to sit with grief and feel their way through renewal and decomposition. Secondly, brooks recognized the whale fall as a powerful metaphor that enables one to reflect on their relationship with labor and extractive systems throughout the history of the United States. Spermaceti, oil extracted from the head of sperm whales, once powered candles, lubricants, and industry, but overhunting and the rise of cheap petroleum in the 19th century shifted energy extraction from whales to fossil fuels. That transition unfolded on former plantations, where petrochemical industries inherited the geographies of slavery, layering the exploitation of petroleum over histories of oppression and preserving racialized inequality by turning both Black labor and fossil fuel into interchangeable "fuels".² By interrogating these histories, *Whale Fall* has always asked the viewer to reckon with how extractive systems persist and what responsibilities we hold within them.

In 2021, brooks began developing *Whale Fall* as a project guided by a central question: what becomes possible, inevitable, and necessary when systems break down? The work unfolded across poetry, characters, films, zines, operas, installations, and showings. Each offering held space for breath work, vocalization through whale song, and improvisatory dance investigations. Visual worlds were draped in white and blue chiffon fabric, evolving to include silver mylar and sequins. Materials and objects circulated across iterations, sometimes having a consistent presence, other times disappearing only to return transformed. Renewability has remained a driving force throughout brooks' practice. By working with found objects, prioritizing waste reduction, and passing materials on to other artists, brooks enacts mutual aid as both principle and process.

Costuming further reinforced the themes. While some iterations featured bright red or reflective dresses, the recurring white coverall emerged as a central garment. Its utilitarian function and capacity to unify bodies evoke the formation of a crew. The uniform historically created a collective identity while obscuring individual labor. Here, the coveralls honor hidden labor while inviting reflection on its implications. It feels important that brooks chooses to stage an interrogation on labor through dance, as the medium automatically initiates empathy through embodiment. Movement requires the undertaking of emotion and memory of all beings and environments. Fittingly, brooks' overall work thinks through spiritual and ritual practices, paying homage to their environment, and honoring information that bodies may bring and take with them. In many of their provocations, brooks attempts to become a whale

or commune with whales, hoping to be their messenger. Furthermore, brooks invites attendees into this shape-shifting practice, inviting them to step into a ritual and follow along. Embodying a whale fall provides an opportunity to reflect on the interconnectivity of human and more-than-human life. The attempt to understand the feelings of another being brings issues of ecological impact closer to home, highlighting that if it affects one being, it affects all life and future life.

Each *Whale Fall* offering also included a zine created by brooks, sometimes in collaboration with graphic designers. The publications acted as the tangible extensions of the work, allowing audiences to carry the project with them. Additionally, accessibility drove the continuation of zine production. Zines took form in folded paper publications, QR codes linking to digital formats, and audio zines. Community care, here, meant providing several access points to all work. The publications now work as connective tissue and lend themselves to an archival practice. Similar to a whale fall, brooks' work leaves something behind. Both leave behind materials that continue to feed ecosystems and prompt new interactions initiated by a process of breakdown. Evidently, each chapter deposited language, materials, and ritual into a shared performance universe.

Now, in 2026, this exhibition asserts that whale fall, the phenomenon, has transformed into *Whale Fall* the practice. The installation expands beyond the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery's North Gallery into the South Gallery's Reading Room, where it dives deeper into the history of the multi-year project and brooks' year-long artist residency at the Center for the Arts. Zines, textiles, video and sound works, student artist books of

brooks' *Whale Fall with Me* poems, and related ephemera from previous iterations of the project emphasize the layered processes and elements—research, making, collaborating, performing, and archiving—that have shaped its evolution over time. Together, they point to *Whale Fall* as being an ongoing inquiry into grief, survival, and regeneration, highlighting the project's shifting modalities and long-term commitments rather than a singular and decided outcome. Accompanying the exhibition and located in the Reading Room is a comprehensive zine designed by brooks and camilo. This book functions as a physical archive, while the film invites viewers into an established practice. Together, they offer tools for stepping into brooks' way of working, one rooted in attention, care, and shared breath.

Whale Fall will continue to inform brooks' inquiries. Their ecological and ancestral research has now extended to the sea floor. As their next performance exploration, brooks will present an offering of their latest performance work, *dArK oXyGen*, in the CFA Theater on February 20 and February 21, 2026. The work looks at a recent scientific finding, the production of oxygen in the deep ocean through metallic minerals rather than through the process of photosynthesis. Drawing from ocean cosmologies from the Global South, Black gospel traditions, and breath, the work explores darkness as a generative space. With these two works unfolding on campus, viewers are invited to move between them. Sit with *Whale Fall with Me* in the Zilkha Gallery spaces, then cross into *dArK oXyGen* in the CFA Theater. Embody transition, participate in question asking, breathe together.

Endnotes

- 1 brooks, mayfield. "*Whale Fall: Reckoning / Abyss* (River to River Festival)."
New York, New York: Flipsnack, June 19, 2024.
- 2 brooks, mayfield, and drum, duskin. "*Sensoria: An Opera Strange*."
New York, New York: Flipsnack, June 9, 2022.

Profile

mayfield brooks improvises while Black and is based in Lenapehoking, the unceded land of the Lenape people, also known as New York City. brooks is a movement-based performance artist, vocalist, urban farmer, writer, and wanderer. brooks teaches and performs practices that arise from Improvising While Black (IWB), their interdisciplinary dance methodology which explores the decomposed matter of Black life and engages in dance improvisation, disorientation, dissent, and ancestral healing. brooks is the 2021 recipient of the biennial Merce Cunningham Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, a 2021 Bessie/New York Dance and Performance Award nominee for their experimental dance film *Whale Fall*, and a 2022 Danspace Project Platform artist. They were a 2022-23 Hodder Fellow at Princeton University, the 2024 Alma Hawkins Visiting Chair at UCLA with the World Arts and Cultures/Dance program, and currently are a Creative Time Research and Development Fellow.

Related Events

Opening Reception

Tuesday, January 27, 2026 from 4:30pm to 6pm; with remarks at 4:30pm in the gallery lobby.

Free and open to the public.

Saturday Exhibition Tours

Starting Saturday, January 31, 2026 at 2pm

Each Saturday at 2pm, student Gallery Assistants offer free tours of the exhibition.

Free and open to the public.

Lunch and Learn

Monday, February 9, 2026 from Noon to 1pm

BYOL (Bring Your Own Lunch) for a discussion and exhibition tour led by Associate Director and Curator of Visual Arts Benjamin Chaffee '00.

Free and open to the public.

AFTERWORDS: entanglement

Emma Bigé, mayfield brooks, Katie Brewer Ball

Tuesday, February 17, 2026 at Noon

Zoom

A conversation with artist Emma Bigé, CFA Artist in Residence mayfield brooks, and Katie Brewer Ball, Associate Professor and Chair of the Theater Department, Associate Professor of Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Faculty Coordinator of Sustainability and Environmental Justice Initiatives. Their conversation will explore queer and trans approaches to art making as a practice of environmental justice.

Free and open to the public.

dArK oXyGen

CFA Theater

Friday, February 20, 2026 at 7pm

Saturday, February 21, 2026 at 2pm and 7pm

\$8

Exhibition Credits

Whale Fall with Me, Film

Choreographer, Creator: mayfield brooks

Videographer: Suz Murray Sadler

Sound Designer: James Kogan

Sound Engineer: Andrew Fox

Performers: camilo, Dorothy Carlos (electric cellist)

Production Assistants: Isaias Pagán De Jesús '26, Clara Medina '26, Laila Coles '27

Producer: Kiara Benn '20, Assistant Curator for Performing Arts, Assistant Director for Programming

The development of *Whale Fall with Me* has been supported by Wesleyan University's Center for the Arts, Digital Design Commons Production Club, and Bailey College of the Environment; South Street Seaport Museum; Creative Time; and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The exhibition in the North Gallery of the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery was curated by Associate Director and Curator of Visual Arts Benjamin Chaffee '00 with Assistant Director of Exhibitions and Assistant Curator of Education Rosemary Lennox, Preparator Paul Theriault, and Assistant Director for Programming and Assistant Curator for Performing Arts Kiara Benn '20. The Reading Room installation was co-curated by Rosemary Lennox and Kiara Benn. Special thanks to Exhibitions Intern Nell Brayton '26. Thank you to Rani Arbo, Andrew Chatfield MALS '19, John Elmore, Lynette Vandlik, and Joshua Lubin-Levy '06. Support for this exhibition and related programs were provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



Andy Warhol

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

Cover image: mayfield brooks, *Whale Fall: Synovial Sea*, performance, BOFFO Performance Festival, Fire Island, New York, August 12, 2023. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo by Nir Arieli.



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