

To Have and to Hold: Conversations with Virginia Colwell

[Leslie Moody Castro](#)

I first met Virginia Colwell in Mexico City sometime in 2016 through her work on the Durazo Project, which was about a corrupt chief of police in Mexico City in the 1970s and early 80s. I was intrigued by her research-based practice, which begins with her own father's archive, left to her upon his passing. This archive is unique and intersects with significant moments in both United States and Latin American history, often illustrating the deep ties of U.S. intervention in Latin America itself.

Virginia's research takes many twists and turns, and there is a meticulous amount of work that goes into her production. Specifically, her upcoming exhibition [To Have and to Hold](#), at Co-Lab Projects in Austin, has been five years in the making (far predating my time as Co-Lab director and Glasstire Guest Editor), as has been this series of interviews. I planned this series of conversations with Virginia to preface her exhibition in 2020, and since then the exhibition itself has also evolved. What remains the same, however, is the rigor with which Virginia has approached her research, and the ways that her own genealogy has intersected with the ugly and painful moments of U.S. history.

Leslie Moody Castro (LMC): Your father's archive is a significant part of your practice, much more than any medium. Why do you use the archive as a starting point?

Virginia Colwell (VC): I've always been really interested in history, but history in and of itself is a pretty broad topic. So, instead of just randomly picking different subjects of history according to my interests, the archive provides a jumping off

point that is really particular and melds both the private and the public. Or it can to the extent that I want within the work or within the project. The archive has so many different aspects to it, like bureaucratic papers, writings specifically about cases, or narratives about cases that I assume my father wrote. It has photographs, it has practice photographs that my father took, and more official ones like mug shots; it has newspaper clippings, and generally just different layers of detritus that challenge what an archive can be. In my father's archive, for example, there's the public and private aspect, decisions of what to save and throw out, different forms of documenting an event, whether it be narrative or visual, and even the different mediums for documenting. A photograph is different from a home video VHS tape, and both have aesthetic characteristics that interest me, but are also different ways of editing an event.



Virginia Colwell, video still from "The Island," 2010 as part of The Archive Series.

LMC: What makes your father's archive so unique from others?

VC: One of the important things is that I have historical documents I can play with. I don't have to go to a library — I have this stuff at my house and I have a certain proprietary relationship to it that is different from other archives which are more formal, academic, or where I am kind of a naive inquisitor. With this material, I have an opportunity to come up with my own way of researching where I can make

up and change the rules of the relationship. This archive is intrinsically quirky and personal, and also sheds light onto a lot of public and historical events. It has given me a lot of leeway as a researcher, and I have been able to come up with my own bizarre practices that can also change with each project in the same way that the mediums of the projects change.

LMC: How do you decide what to explore in the archive?

VC: Usually it starts with a simple curiosity around certain materials, like “where was this photograph taken” or “what does this photograph mean?” Or, something in there that sparks new questions. By now I also know the archive pretty well, so oftentimes I will be working on something else that connects to a question that’s in the back of my mind about my father’s archive, and that will start a whole project. It provides a sort of counterweight or point of reference, and it happens very organically.

The archive also intersects with my private life. It was made by a man that I only knew as my father for the first ten years of my life, and I remember him as a very ill father for a long time. He had cancer and was someone I didn’t know very well because I was so young when he died. While his archive provides historical content related to issues of corruption, Latin American History, United States intervention, colonialism, and racism, there is also the question of who this person was that made the archive, which exists as a parallel line of inquiry. Generally, there’s just a lot I can squeeze out of it, and it becomes the pretext to start different research projects from which I can solicit other archives and look for different points of view.



Virginia Colwell, “The Newspaper Clippings No. 5 (Bellevue Hospital), 2013, graphite on handmade tissue paper, 54 x 75 cm.

LMC: Can you give us an example of a project that started with and grew from the archive?

VC: A good example would be when I asked for the declassified files on Arturo Durazo. That was the first large project I did here in Mexico. The declassified archives on Durazo also named William Morales, a man who was associated with a case that my father investigated; he was a member of the FALN, which is a radical group for Puerto Rican independence. In the declassified Arturo Durazo documents, William Morales was supposed to be a prisoner exchange for Durazo — the chief of police in Mexico City from 1976 to 1982 — when he was captured by the FBI in Puerto Rico. That mere coincidence that I came across in that archive (the fact I already knew who William Morales was and that he was linked to my father’s investigations of the FALN), made it really obvious what the next project should be. The result was the exhibition [*Our Warmest and Most Affectionate Greetings*](#) in 2016 in Mexico City about the FALN, which operated mainly out of Chicago and New York in the 1970s.



Virginia Colwell, "Our Warmest and Most Affectionate Greetings," 2016, collage and drawing on newsprint, installation view and part of the series on the history of the FALN.

LMC: As you mentioned, you and I met around the time you finished the Durazo research, which I think draws some parallels to your current project, [To Have and to Hold](#), at Co-Lab. I actually use the Durazo project as an introduction to your work a lot. Can you talk a little bit about this current project, particularly the drawings and the process?

VC: The larger project itself has lots of pieces to it — digital prints, video,

photocopies in block ink — that had to do with my research into the former chief of police in Mexico City, who my father happened to arrest in San Juan, Puerto Rico when Durazo was “on the run,” so to speak. Nicknamed “El Negro,” he was flamboyantly corrupt and had an incredible hubris. He was this larger than life persona that was untouchable in many ways. At that time the chief of police position held lots of power. He was also the childhood friend — like a bully friend, or thug friend — of then-president Lopez Portillo, and was known for trafficking drugs and was wanted by the DEA before he became chief of police, a fact that the Mexican government was aware of.

He’s sort of an icon from a specific period of the late 70s and early 80s — there are comics made about his criminality and sexual exploits, as well as B movies and documentaries, because he was so ridiculous. He was also part of this old school system of permissible criminality from the top down, and was in Puerto Rico because his political protection ended due to a change of presidents in Mexico, and he was identified as a perfect fall guy for the new president Miguel de Madrid’s morality laws. I started researching Durazo, his career, and the sort of cultural and archival detritus that I could find on him, as well as this point of contact he had with my father — his arrest in Puerto Rico. One of the things that really interested me was that he built a beach house which he called the Parthenon, in a small town outside of Acapulco. It’s this ridiculous Greek Parthenon that had a discotheque, a jacuzzi, a large pool, Greek statues all over the place; it has this original bad narco taste and was built on confiscated land from the government, but more remarkably it was built by policemen themselves who were brought in from Mexico City. His political protection ended due to a change of presidents in Mexico, and he was identified as a perfect fall guy for the new president Miguel de Madrid’s morality laws. The drawings that you reference are this series titled *Durazo’s Parthenon*.

LMC: Durazo is so iconic in Mexican history, how did you relate the character and your proximity to his life and story back to the history itself?

VC: I was thinking a lot about the hubris involved in building something so iconic. What’s also interesting is that it’s been abandoned and in ruin since Durazo fled the

country in the early 80s. It was confiscated by the government, and to this day is in legal-limbo, where it is owned by the state, but no one knows what to do with it. It has this quality of decadent decay as a contemporary ruin.

So I started to mine this idea of the “Mexican ruin” a little bit further. In general, the iconography of the Mexican pre-Hispanic ruins is a major part of symbolic imagery of “Mexicanness.” The image of the ruin and Mexican identity is something that was constructed in the early 20th century by the government to unify a very disparate populace of various indigenous groups and immigrants. The Aztec and Mayan pyramids and Olmec sculptures — these iconic Mexican ruins — were strategically presented as an iconography to unify Mexican identity. I started thinking about the use of ruins as a part of identity and began relating Durazo’s Parthenon as a contemporary ruin to the less than ideal aspects of Mexican cultural iconography and identity.

I decided to take the image of Durazo’s Parthenon and recreate it in a new document that harkened back to the iconography of the original Mayan ruins. Some of the most famous images of those ruins were made by a foreigner named Frederick Catherwood, who traveled primarily through the Mayan areas of the country in the 1850s/60s, documenting certain pyramids. He created these really lovely sketches of those pyramids, which are considered the first record of both those ruins and of Mayan architecture.

What interested me was that these were some of the first records that illustrated those ruins to the world and to many Mexicans. The drawings were published in a book of engravings that was sold all over Europe and the United States as an outside view of Mexican culture. So I took Catherwood’s original drawings and made high quality digital prints. I then combined them with a 3D model I made of Durazo’s Parthenon, and I created this mashup of landscape imagery with the two images. It became a way of remarking about how these histories and iconographies live together in the landscape and architecture in ways that perhaps are not apparent on first view.



Reference work by Frederick Catherwood from the series “Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan,” 1843.

LMC: Why drawing as the medium?

VC: The mediums I use aren’t necessarily indicative of my practice, and that said, drawing is just another tool in my tool box. I use it as a way to mash up a whole bunch of different images and references. When I talk to painters or other draftspeople I often feel like an imposter because they have an entire language, and they talk about image and composition, whereas for me it’s just putting marks on paper. I do have a meticulous way of drawing that is crosshatching, like an engraving, but I kind of use it like a forger, like a means to an end.

One of the reasons I choose to draw is because I want to reproduce something in a way that shows my time with an image. I want to pass an image — be it a photograph or a document, or whatever — through me and onto a new sheet of paper. I am interested in the conceptual aspects of the things that are lost and the things that are added. Often when I’m drawing there’s an aspect to it that is like a testimony or witness to the amount of time that I spend with an image.

So it's not drawing per se, but copying an image, and when you look closely at them you can see every single line and every mark that I've placed down. There's a sense of accumulated time, patience, and determination to render an image that I think is important enough, or that deserves extra time and space in my practice. It's a way of saying, "this image, this document is important enough to me that it needs something beyond just reproducing it again." I could always just photograph these things, blow them up, and make other images of them — which I do sometimes — but I need a really good reason to use a digital print technique. I want that intimacy of the testimony of sitting down at the paper and putting in the time to reproduce something.



Virginia Colwell, "El Partenón de Durazo," 2012, ballpoint pen on handmade paper. Part of the Durazo series.

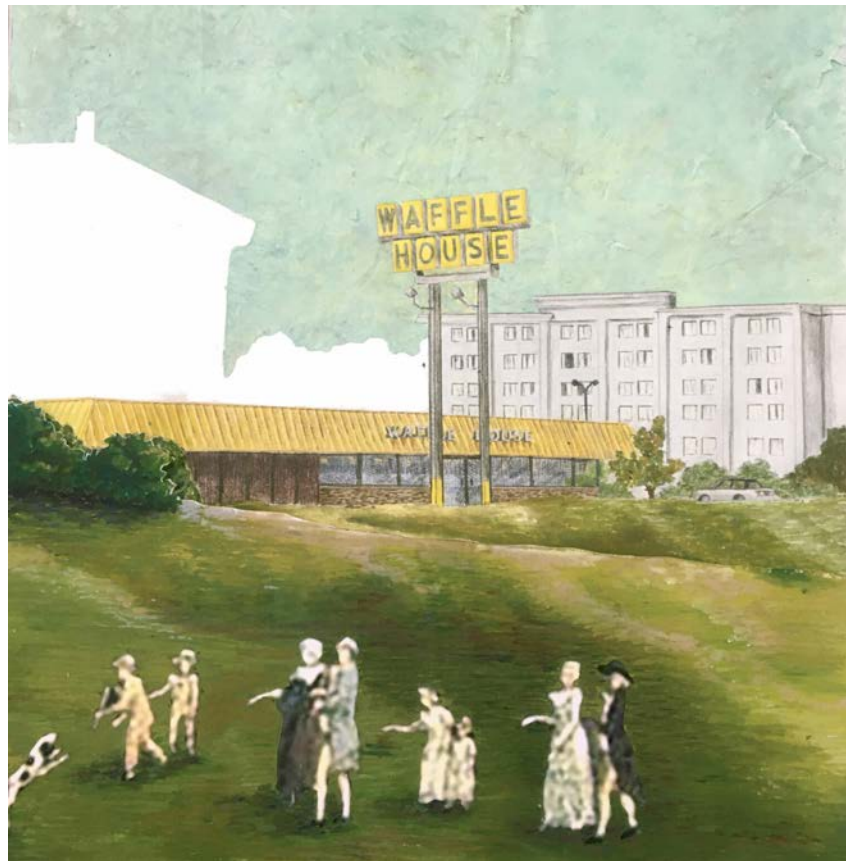
LMC: Time and labor has been a sort of undercurrent in your work, and the upcoming project, *To Have and to Hold*, is definitely another example of that. But I also think how the work challenges the truths we apply to history is another

really important component to your art. You meticulously deconstruct the idea that histories are both linear and fixed, but what's also really interesting is how your own family history collides with these major historical events. *To Have and to Hold* is such a great example of that.

VC: The project began with this desire to link up to different parts of my family history and research the line between those two points in depth. I had a memory from when I was little where someone said something about my family having house slaves at some point in time, and I also knew that parts of my family were some of the first colonists in Jamestown. I started thinking about the enterprise of colonization in the United States and was curious about how much I could document my own family's interaction with and perpetuation of the institution of slavery.

To Have and to Hold: Conversations with Virginia Colwell Part Two

Leslie Moody Castro



Virginia Colwell, "Myriorama" (detail), 2023, on view in "To Have and to Hold" at Co-Lab Projects.

Virginia Colwell's exhibition *To Have and to Hold* has been in process for the better part of five years, during a time in which our world has faced, seemingly simultaneously, both collective and divergent challenges. The research involved — and the final project itself — reflects the many changes and obstacles that have influenced Virginia's research, and the final installation itself looks at the romanticisation of the Southern landscape.

Leslie Moody Castro (LMC): Time and labor have been a sort of undercurrent in your work, and your upcoming project, *To Have and to Hold*, is definitely another example of that. But I also think the way the work challenges the truths that we apply to history is another important component of it. You meticulously deconstruct the idea that histories are both linear and fixed, but what's also really interesting is how your own family history collides with major historical events. *To Have and to Hold* is such a great example of that.

Virginia Colwell (VC): The project began with this desire to link up different parts of my family history and research the line between those two points in depth. I had a memory from when I was little where someone said something about my family having house slaves at some point in time, and I also knew that parts of my family were some of the first colonists in Jamestown. I started thinking about the enterprise of colonization in the United States and was curious about how much I could document my own family's interaction with and perpetuation of the institution of slavery.

LMC: Speaking of time, *To Have and to Hold* has been in the works for a while. Can you elaborate on how this project started?

VC: I mentioned my own family's connection with Jamestown, but the second part of that is the involvement with my father's archive. Over the years, I have researched several African American men that my father arrested for bank robbery—which was a federal crime—in the early 1970s, when he was an FBI agent in Richmond, Virginia. He saved their mugshots, which were then passed onto me in his general archive. I have been really curious about these mugshots for many reasons. I wanted to know who these men were, aside from the supposed crimes they committed, and I wanted to know why my father saved these images, because they're macabre souvenirs of the people whom he deprived of their liberty. That moment when the photo was taken changed the course of their lives, at least in the short term.

I also think it's important to consider the climate in which my father was working at the time. In the early 1970s, the Civil Rights movement had certain gains and school systems in the south reluctantly started to integrate by bussing students in, but it was also a time of white flight from the cities, which just repeated many of the same systems of segregation. This was all happening when my father would have arrested these men. I've been very leery of these images because they are souvenirs that served as a memento of somebody's entrapment, and what the FBI, justice department, and policing in general was doing in African American communities.

The justice department saw itself as a bastion against civil rights in many ways—it was and still is a very conservative institution. These activities are now seen to be another face of white supremacy and the ongoing repression that has its earliest roots in the institution of slavery in both Virginia and the United States. So I wanted to see if I could trace how my family interacted with this very southern manifestation of white supremacy, from that first colony in Jamestown to my father arresting African American men for bank robbery.

LMC: What were some of the initial conversations like when you started this research?

VC: It's actually hard to remember, because I started this research in earnest back in 2017 or 2018. At that point in time Trump was in office, and around the time when I started to really delve deeper, Charlottesville happened. But there still wasn't as much talk about white supremacy, historical oppression, and reparations as there has been since the death of George Floyd, the protests that followed, and the Black Lives Matter movement, which my research also coincided with.

What I do remember is that I was asked by many people why I would want to look into this stuff, and why I thought it was important, and what I thought would be the end result of this kind of research. Their subtext always alluded to the bigger question of "what is the value of tracing all the horrible ways in which my family acted as slave owners?"



A process detail of "Myriorama" by Virginia Colwell. The finished work is on view in "To Have and to Hold" at Co-Lab Projects.

LMC: And what did you learn through those conversations?

VC: It really depends on who I am talking to. When I talk with other white people, they offer a sort of congratulatory sentiment for doing this kind of research, then in the same breath they assert that their own families weren't slave holders. This could be true, but when you start doing genealogical research, you realize the quantity of families you are researching — it comes out to thousands and thousands of people — and it's hard to defend the idea that slavery did not touch a majority of people from the United States.

There is also a sense of wanting to distance oneself from the possibility that their family is equally as culpable as mine. There's also reactive questioning of what this research is owed, like the argument that we are not responsible for the "sins of our fathers," for example. I think the most disconcerting thing is the blithe innocence of our own history, which keeps us from really understanding the depths and breadth of slavery in the United States.

LMC: Can you unpack that further?

VC: The United States has had many, many more years of slavery than it has had without. Add to that the years of overt oppression in both the north and the south. There's this sense that what I am doing is unique, or that it's a small project, representative of only my family. In actuality, the slaveholding in the 12 generations of my family is quite representative of many families in the United States in general. The fact is that it's not something many white people question, and that easy denial has been built into our historical narrative, is disconcerting. Our genealogical memories are so short that something that happened 200 years ago doesn't seem particularly pertinent.

It's also been interesting to do the research and see how other researchers on genealogical sites omit that register of slavery. To say it's a shame is an understatement, because tracing the ancestry of many African American people is through the wills and deeds of white slave owners. If that evidence is edited, hidden, or obfuscated by the descendants of those people, then it hinders others from tracing their own genealogy. It comes down to the fact that even genealogical research sites perpetuate the erasure of people and the incredibly intricate history between African American history and white history.



A traditional Myriorama game of shufflable cards, featuring landscape drawings.

LMC: Let's get back to the project a little bit. Can you describe the collages/drawings and their references?

VC: There are two new works in *To Have and to Hold*. One is a series of landscapes entitled *Myriorama*, and the other is a large-scale installation sculpture. *Myriorama* takes its name from a nineteenth-century parlor and children's [game](#), which was a series of cards that, when put side by side, created a continuous landscape. The cards could be shuffled, which changed their order and changed the narrative of the images, according to their order. Myrioramas usually illustrated landscape scenes of different colonies, or of ruins in Italy. This game is indicative of the Romantic period, when there was great interest in Western European civilization in Europe, as well as the projection of that civilization in the colonies. The myrioramas in and of themselves are an idealized perspective of power over the landscape, and they literally play with the idea of control of the image of the landscape.

In terms of content, *Myriorama* deals with the representation of the landscape in the American South, starting with the colonial period and up through the present day — the works are a literal collage of different time periods. I became interested in the representation of the American South from the early colonial period up to

the Civil War. In my research, I found it curious that there is very little representation of slavery, considering that it is an extraordinarily predominant and economically crucial part of southern culture, and despite the fact that landscape paintings were normally commissioned by the landowners themselves.

Whereas, when British or French colonial landowners commissioned paintings, they would often depict their large labor forces, albeit with the narcissistic undertone of illustrating wealth. I find it really peculiar that this editing and disinterest in representing the full system of slavery existed really early on in the American South. Even today, we have sparse representation of the slaveholding system, which perpetuates disinterest and naïveté about the scale of slaveholding in the U.S., and its central contribution to America's historical power and wealth.



A process detail of "Myriorama" by Virginia Colwell. The finished work is on view in "To Have and to Hold" at Co-Lab Projects.

LMC: How do you put all this together into *Myriorama*?

VC: My landscapes mix digital images taken from colonial paintings, which were usually done by self-taught painters and are characterized by a simplicity to the depiction of the landscape. Very often they show typical western tropes of composition and perspective, and they illustrate grandeur through long, sloping pastures and portraits of the landowners strolling their property. I took fragments from these paintings and mixed them with fragments from contemporary landscapes, specifically the those of the land held by my slave-owning ancestors. I could easily trace which lands my family held because they show up in early British colonial deeds. An early colonial land holder would be given a land deed for the number of new colonists that they paid passage for, the majority of whom were indentured servants. I was able to find my family's land holdings on Google Maps, and used the Street View as a way of traveling through them. Myriorama combines Google images of the contemporary views of my ancestors' land, mixed with the colonial paintings of southern plantations.



A process detail of "Myriorama" by Virginia Colwell. The finished work is on view in "To Have and to Hold" at Co-Lab Projects

LMC: What really pulled you back to the landscape, specifically?

VC: What interested me was that, despite all the research I've done, and despite my academic and informed eye, I couldn't shake the sentimental romanticism of the iconography of the south, which has been cultivated by our culture and cultivated within myself. It's the way the lazy vegetation sways in the breeze and covers everything in thick green. I started to think about the unshakable idealizing and loving of a landscape through a narrative that has been constructed and that specifically aims to erase the histories of that landscape.

To Have and to Hold: Conversations with Virginia Colwell Part Three

Leslie Moody Castro

An excerpt from William Bartleson Sr.'s transcribed Will:

"...I bequeth to my wife \$140 in money now on hand, also three negros __, Edmund about 24 years, Alsa about 20 years, & Hannah 5 years old. To have and to hold the aforesaid property during her widowhood together with the proceeds thereof. And immediately after her Death or intermarriage (should such take place) the property aforesaid to be sold as my executors may deem best and if she should again marry she is to be entitled to her lawful part of said property and the balance to be equally divided between my children. . . . Also to Hannah my negro girl name Martha at the price one hundred and fifty dollars and a mare at the price of fifty dollars which has been received . . . I further desire that my two negro boys Henry and Jeff shall be sold and the proceeds equally divided between my children."

William Bartleson Sr. 1770 – 1832
Rowan County NC – Wayne County KY



Archival image of Virginia Colwell's family at a reunion in Grayson, Texas.

Virginia has an intense research-based practice, much of which begins with her own father's archive, whose work as an FBI agent intersected with many pivotal points in U.S. history and Latin American intervention. This idiosyncrasy was inherited by Virginia, whose life and genealogy also intersects with many ugly and painful moments of history in our country, and in the State of Texas.

In *To Have and to Hold*, Virginia explores the danger of southern romanticization, particularly in the landscape, a trait that many of us have also inherited and share.



Power lines in Veracruz, which have been covered with moss.

LMC: The landscape has become a major protagonist in this exhibition, and your research also revealed a little-known history about colonization efforts post Civil War that also factor into your work. Can you tell us about the colony in Veracruz and how that history is represented in the project?

VC: As part of my research into the Civil War period and the Reconstruction era of the American South, I came across this little-known history of numerous Confederate colonies that were established throughout Mexico, Central, and South America. There was a colonization project by a handful of high-ranking Confederates who insisted upon leaving the South and starting new colonies that would perpetuate their southern culture outside the United States. During the Reconstruction period, the lands that belonged to these people would have been confiscated and broken up by the Northern government as part of the Reconstruction laws.

At that point in time, some people thought they had no place within the new southern society, and with great arrogance, they decided they could just pack up and move to another country and establish new “mini-souths,” some of which were actually successful. There’s one in Brazil that celebrates colonial festivities to this day, and residents dress up in antebellum fashion as a way of honoring their ancestors. There was also one colony that was started in Veracruz, Mexico, and I decided to go there to see the place, or at least see what vestiges of the colony are still there.

Like much of the Southern United States, Veracruz is an area with a tremendous amount of humidity — perfect for sugar cane and rice production. And like much of the deep South, the landscape is covered in a tremendous amount of vegetation — lots of bromeliads, massive trees, and Spanish moss. When they came to Veracruz, the colonists would have seen a landscape and an agriculture that was quite similar to what they had in the American South.

What interested me was that despite all the research I’ve done, and despite my academic and informed eye, I still couldn’t shake this loving romanticism of the iconography of the South when I saw the Spanish moss and the ball moss inundating the telephone lines and electrical cables of Veracruz. This romanticism is seemingly harmless and has been cultivated in many people, myself included. It’s a sort of sentimentality toward the lazy vegetation that sways in the breeze and covers everything in thick green, and it’s an intrinsic part of southern identity.



Virginia Colwell photographing moss hanging from power lines in Veracruz, Mexico.

LMC: As a native Texan, I can also account for the fact that we certainly hold onto the mythology of our southern state. It colors much of our own culture and certainly defines us in many ways. What did you find in Veracruz?

VC: While I was in Veracruz, I had the feeling of being in a similar landscape to the American South, and that similar feeling of romanticism which is completely without basis. I started to think about that unshakable romanticism, this way of idealizing and loving a narrative that has been constructed in a way that aims specifically to erase the histories of that landscape, or to ignore them or cover them up in the same ways that a tree covered in Spanish moss and bromeliads is suffocated.

There aren't any vestiges left of the colony in Veracruz. That history sort of came and went and left very little trace, and certainly no permanent trace, image, or structure. The lack of a trace made me think a lot about history, and how history

has very few vestiges, very few ruins. This topic is one I touch on in a lot of other works — this absence of the past in a landscape. In Veracruz, there was a sense of romanticism in absence that captured my attention and made me think about the same romanticism in absence that exists in the American South.

LMC: How did this manifest in your work?

VC: The second piece in the exhibition, *without shadow of sympathy*, is an installation that is meant to replicate elements of the landscape. There was a disparaging and cynical report published about the arrogance of the colonists who traveled to Veracruz and thought they could start a colony. People went with dreams of transplanting the South someplace else, and there was a tremendous amount of misinformation and land speculation, and it was all an abject failure. The piece is titled after the words the writer of the report used to criticize the people who unscrupulously encouraged colonization, who promoted a fanciful Arcadia where a new confederacy could be reborn.



Process image of brass replicas of ball moss in Virginia Colwell's studio.

The work I made is a replica of the Spanish moss and ball moss that I saw covering the telephone wires and electrical cables in Veracruz. The pieces are done in brass, which was tediously cut, formed, and hand soldered. In the gallery space the pieces are a beautiful, shiny, swaying symbol of Southern romanticism. That said, I also wanted to comment on the deception involved in that romantic narrative of the South, so the flowers have surgical blades peeking out from beneath their petals. From afar you don't notice them, you just see a glint in the pieces, but when you get close you notice those very, very sharp blades that are intended to cut human skin.

It was my way of remarking on the harm and violence done by this romantic view of the South and the sentimentality we have cultivated around the southern landscape.



Process image of surgical blades between brass leaves for Virginia Colwell's installation at Co-Lab Projects.

LMC: Over the years you and I have talked a lot about the context of this exhibition — the context of the state of Texas, and specifically, the city of Austin, which has seen dramatic change and subsequent historical erasure in tandem with its gentrification. What is the connection to Texas within *To Have and To Hold*?

VC: Like many southern families, mine also started to move west as land was appropriated. I believe they first went to Kentucky, then to Grayson County, Texas where they were prior to and after the Civil War. That is actually a part of my family history that I don't know as much about, and where it becomes more challenging to trace the thread of white supremacy.

However, Grayson is where the lynching of [George Hughes](#) happened in 1930, which was a horrendous incident and the subject of the sculpture [Death](#), made by [Isamu Noguchi](#) in 1934. But, after the Civil War, the family traces went quiet and researching them will require going to Texas archives in person. Due to the pandemic and other life events, I haven't been able to continue that part of my research, but I want to study more about Grayson and the Reconstruction period in that area in order to try to identify how my family was involved, or see how they showed up in the archives.



Process image of brass replicas of ball moss for Virginia Colwell's installation at Co-Lab Projects.

LMC: Your family and family history has been a central point of departure for this project and exhibition. How does the title, *To Have and to Hold*, reflect that as well?

VC: The title of the exhibition comes from the will of one of my ancestors from Kentucky. The will designated the man's slaves to his wife by saying, "to have and to hold for the rest of her life." I was taken by that phrase because it's normally said in marriage vows.

I didn't realize the same language was also applied to enslaving people. I guess you could say that those words kept tumbling around in my head because they have so many implications that go with them. They are both a completely unexpected and very obvious way of describing slavery and the relationship between slaves and their slave owners. But they also are relevant to my relationship to this research, these documents, this history — what does it mean to hold this history close, what does it mean to have this history?

LMC: What are you taking away from the research and project, at least in this phase of it?

VC: I think it's important that things related to this project do not end with the Civil War. There's been a lot of work done in recent years to show the ongoing reincarnations of severe segregation, oppression, slavery, and racism in American culture, governance, and American history. But normally there's a jump from the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement, overlooking the one hundred years in between. These years deserve more study and consideration.

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