

## Artist Statement from Lanecia A. Rouse: Reimagining Citizenship and Personal Rights

I am interested in the stories we are born into, the ones we allow to claim us, the ones we write for ourselves, and the ones we let go of. We are a story people. Collage is a medium that allows me to explore these textured layers of narrative, memory, and identity—particularly as they relate to Black American citizenship and the ongoing struggle for recognition and rights. Remembering our history, the stories that we are born into and that have had a bearing on our lives, grounds us in the strength of those who came before us—artists, preachers, freedom fighters, dreamers, farmers, educators, creators, and builders who shaped a world from struggle. I have never seen history as a burden or something to fear. It's a guide—a tool that not only helps to make meaning by embracing our stories, but also teaches us lessons through facing the complex layers of the human experience. History makes me more resilient and more hopeful.

For this exhibition, I created a series of 39 canvases bearing witness to the lives of 38 African American military personnel once highlighted on the Arlington National Cemetery website. Current national leadership recently altered how these histories were presented, revising and stripping these soldiers of particularities and identities significant to their contributions—especially because of the prejudices and systems they faced at the time. U. S. Some of these soldiers' stories were erased altogether. Witnessing this moment in our contemporary history affirmed my role as a Black American citizen and artist: to be a keeper of our stories and histories. I was once again reminded of the fragility of recorded history and the importance of telling these stories through my work.

We all have power within our spheres of influence to remember well and bear witness to our stories and histories. Creating this work became a profound reckoning with the past, the present, and a declaration of hope—like the soldiers I bear witness to on canvas—for a future where we are all more free.

As part of my process, I went on a pilgrimage to Arlington National Cemetery—our nation's most sacred memorial ground where presidents, Supreme Court justices, and countless service members rest, where the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier stands as testament to sacrifice, and where the eternal flame burns for those who gave their lives in service to country. Here, on land that was once Arlington Plantation, I visited the sites of all 38 African American women, men, and memorial sites that were once prominently featured before being buried within the website where people must first know of them to even search for them. Walking through these expansive hills, I found each site and spoke the name of the person aloud and said, "Thank you for your service. Thank you for helping to make me a little more free." I walked for two full days at the cemetery to spend time at each site and photograph their tombstones.

Through this work, I navigate the complex questions of what it means to be a Black American citizen of the USA today—my home. These questions generate answers that spiral into deeper inquiries, revealing the layered nature of citizenship itself. The work also includes a collage honoring my grandfather, who serves as my entry way into this discovery. On my father's side, there are three generations of men who served in the US military, starting with my grandfather who enlisted during WWII of his own record. He fought in WWII and appears from his uniform to have been a Buffalo Soldier (an African-American infantry division of the US Army). He spoke about the war only once with me when I went to Italy for school and told me he had been there as well during the war. He wasn't particularly patriotic. He didn't know he was even eligible to receive veteran benefits until one year before he died, likely because, I presume after working on this project, he maybe received a blue discharge, which was neither an honorable nor dishonorable discharge given to many African Americans, denying them access to military benefits.

My grandfather became a pastor. He especially loved the song "Amazing Grace," which I suspected all along that he'd want me to sing it at his funeral. He requested, however, that I sing "He Looked Beyond My Fault," which I realized during this project combines the old WWII "Danny Boy" and "Amazing Grace"—combining the military and faith forces that were profoundly impactful in his life. This work engages in what Toni Morrison calls "rememory," filling in the blanks of his life through conversations with my family and historical research. Each canvas holds fragmented lines from Morrison's work.

This series explores the complex terrain of Black American citizenship—from the USCT (United States Colored Troops) soldiers who fought not only for freedom but for recognition as citizens deserving of full rights, to contemporary moments when our stories risk erasure. Through collage, I layered personal and collective memory, bearing witness to those who helped expand the meaning of citizenship while questioning what full citizenship looks like today.

Accompanying the visual work is a soundscape titled "Are You Sure?" featuring the sounds of someone editing—typing and putting documents in the recycle bin—with a cover of Woody Guthrie's folk song "This Land is Your Land" recorded by my friend Liz Vice playing in the background. When you delete something on a computer, it asks you "Are You Sure?"—a question that cuts to the heart of historical responsibility. The piece is titled "Witness," which holds multiple layers, questions, and serves as a call to action.

The work stands as both memorial and meditation on the ongoing journey toward a more perfect union—one story, one canvas, one remembered life at a time.