



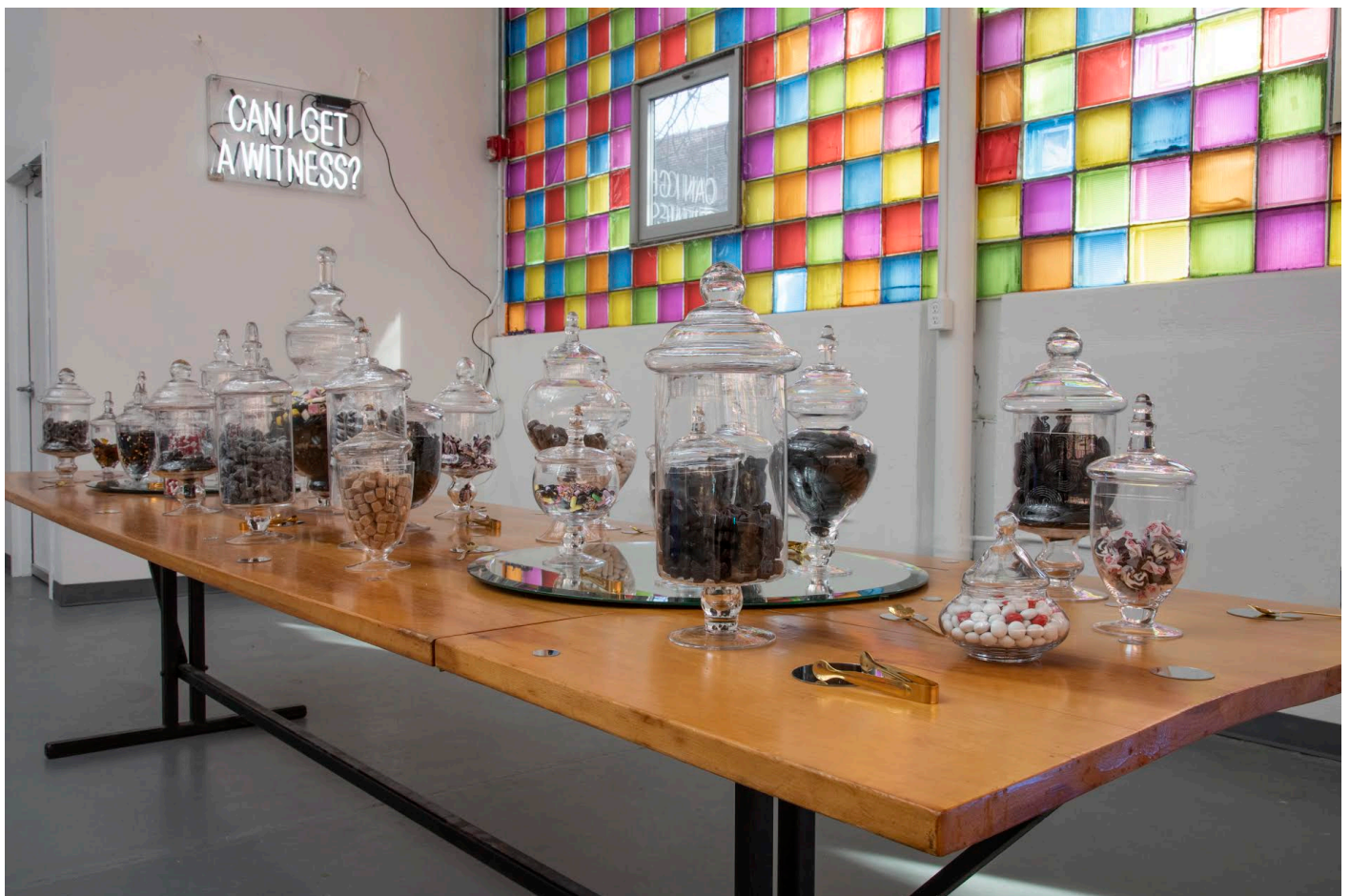
CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

The Boston Globe

In Providence, Nafis M. White explores pleasure and pain

‘Freedom Is My Favorite Position,’ at Central Contemporary Arts, is a body-based approach to art featuring mandalas made of synthetic hair, mixed media, and licorice

By Cate McQuaid Globe correspondent, Updated February 15, 2023, 12:07 p.m.



Nafis M. White's "Self Portrait," 2020-present. Black Licorice, Glass Jars, dimensions variable. NAFIS M. WHITE, CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS



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PROVIDENCE — Nafis M. White’s “Freedom Is My Favorite Position,” an exhibition curated by André Bloodstone Singleton at the new nonprofit gallery Central Contemporary Arts, is by turns exuberant and mournful. Embracing personal and societal wounds with tenderness, White insists on the healing comfort of pleasure.

The artist is known for her “Oculi” wall sculptures, mandalas made of synthetic hair. There’s a spectacular wall full of them here. She lists materials on the label: “Hair, Embodied Knowledge, Ancestral Recall, Audacity of Survival, Bobby Pins.” Every labor-intensive coil and twist seems a prayer, and she adds leather jackets, tassels, shells, and more. These works — some up to 8 feet in diameter — read like spiritual compasses in which a deeply felt past points the way ahead.



Nafis M. White’s “Oculus,” 2021. Hair, Embodied Knowledge, Ancestral Recall, Audacity of Survival, Bobby Pins. NAFIS M. WHITE, CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

White, who identifies as mixed race and queer, crafts the “Oculi” using Black American, African, and Victorian hairstyling techniques. (Victorians wove the hair of dead loved ones into jewelry.) Holding her ancestors close, she is mindful of the historic traumas of Black Americans, and of the hate and oppression faced by BIPOC and LGBTQ people today. She treats that pain as a sacrament.



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“Self-Portrait” features a table full of glass chalices filled with black licorice — a candy many either love or loathe. Visitors are invited to help themselves. Echoing the Roman Catholic Eucharist, the Communion ritual that includes Christ’s instruction “Take this, all of you, and eat it. This is my body, which will be given up for you,” this piece evokes the terror of enslavement, but also the love of ancestors who kept the faith for their children’s future.



Nafis M. White’s “Semi,” 2023. Mixed media. NAFIS M. WHITE, CADE TOMPKINS PROJECTS

The artist built the large, tarp-covered “Semi” from her belongings and those of an ex, in storage since their 2019 breakup. She is unpacking and divesting herself of that baggage through the run of the show. On the wall beside it hangs “Hunger (Red Series)” photographs of the artist eating alone during the COVID lockdown less than a year later. She wears a corset, and she’s relishing each bite, embodying pleasure as a salve for loneliness and a restoration of joy.

White’s sensual, body-based approach to art reminds us that, clever as we are, our bodies are where we hold grief. They are where the deep work of healing occurs, and our portals to connection and delight.

NAFIS M. WHITE: FREEDOM IS MY FAVORITE POSITION

At Central Contemporary Arts, 22 A St., Providence, through March 18. www.centralcontemporaryarts.org/