

Trina Michelle Robinson: Archival Imprints

by Meghan Smith



Trina Michelle Robinson reconnects with her family's past through intense archival research and material innovation. Her artistic journey started years ago when her mother called to tell her that a long-lost family photo album had turned up, surprisingly, in a neighbor's attic. This discovery allowed Trina to follow her lineage from Chicago to Kentucky to the West Coast of Africa — a profoundly painful story she hadn't heard in full before. "I went down the genealogy rabbit hole," she explained, "and the only way I could properly process all of it was creatively."

Robinson investigates family histories through a variety of media including film, text, and printmaking. Her newest series of relief prints addresses the life, death, and legacy of her great-great-uncle William J. French, a World War I officer buried here in San Francisco at the Presidio. After his sudden death in 1932, the press discovered French had been passing for white his entire military career. Passing—a well-documented phenomenon in American history, literature, and popular culture—may have afforded French the freedom to excel in white society, but it also distanced him from loved ones. Visiting Black family members or returning to his home in a segregated neighborhood was an enormous risk.

Robinson's practice is her way of reconnecting these severed familial ties, of retracing French's story to claim his heritage. She feels a deep personal connection to French—or at least, to the person she imagines him to be. "I look at him as my partner in this project," she told me fondly. "He has shown me my history, but he's also with me currently." Robinson fantasizes daily about what his life was like: who did he spend time with? Where did he travel? What music did he listen to? What were his goals, his fears, his desires?



Image courtesy of Trina Michelle Robinson

Fleshing out the quiet, human details of French's personality is a form of protest against how the media defined him. White newspapers in the 1930's treated his death callously, framing his existence as a deception and remarking on the 'shock' of white officers who had invited him into their homes. In their eyes, French was no longer a hero serving his country but an opportunist intruding upon white racial purity. "When they found out his ancestry, everything changed," Robinson explained. "I'm trying to tell his story from a Black family point of view, not the sensationalized white narrative."

Her new prints address media narratives head-on. All five repeat the same composition, based on a photocopy her uncle made of a 1932 article in *The Chicago Defender* detailing French's story. The quality is incredibly degraded — much of the text is illegible — to reflect both the age of the article and the layers of copying and interpretation. The first print on the left is a strong black-brown, while the last on the right is a faint wash on the paper beneath.



Installation view, Trina Michelle Robinson,
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courtesy of CCA Exhibitions




Jars of in Robinson's studio, image by Meghan Smith

On another level, the medium also stands in as a symbol of Blackness, of family, of roots. The special ink she used for this series is bone black pigment mixed with soil and charred cedar from Senegal, which she collected on a trip to trace her ancestry. Even in the faintest print, traces of French's ancestral connection remain.

For Robinson, connections across time are solidified through specific materials. She pointed me to a collection of small glass jars in her studio filled with earth, waiting to be incorporated into artwork. One particularly special jar holds soil she brought back from a riverbank in Mount Sterling, Kentucky, where her great-great-great grandfather was once enslaved. The current owners of the property explained to her that the land had remained virtually undisturbed since then. There was some sliver of possibility she was touching the soil he touched, walking a route he walked; visualizing him there next to her was almost too much to process. Robinson's tone conveyed the weight of this experience: "this is why materiality is so important to my work. If I can't connect with the actual people, I can connect to the imprints, the traces of them."

Robinson is anything but naïve about this quest for connection. She acknowledges that the histories she pieces together will always be, on some level, imagined – her ancestors' full personhood can never be recovered. But the fantasy is exactly what makes her work so compelling. Refracted through her gaze, her ancestors take on new personal and social meaning in the present. Her drive to amplify historical resonance is contagious, too. As Robinson described to me one of her favorite family photos – a great-grandmother, one hand on her hip, the other gripping a jar of something she had just canned, looking "tough and proud" – I couldn't



help but see her influence on the artist in front of me, coaxing stories from jars of earth, determined to bring her family's truth to light.

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Trina Michelle Robinson explores the relationship between memory and migration through film, sound, archival materials and text. Her work has been shown at galleries and film festivals throughout the country including including the Black-Star Film Festival in Philadelphia, the San Francisco Art Commission Main Gallery, Southern Exposure and Root Division in San Francisco, and New York's Wassaic