
Shooting Stars – The Impossible Reunion

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Abstract

Shooting Stars – The Impossible Reunion (2014-) is an ongoing portraiture series by visual artist Sasha Huber. The series commemorates victims of gunshot assassinations and killings perpetrated for political, ethnic, ideological, economic reasons, or as hate crimes. It brings together people from around the world who risked their lives to make change happen or who died simply for being who they were.

Keywords: visual art, gun violence, activism

The Shooting Stars (2014-) portraiture series is an impossible reunion of historically and geographically separated persons who gave up their lives to make change happen or who died simply because of the color of their skin, gender, national origin or religion. This series developed out of an earlier portraiture project that helped me realise portraiture was the starting point of my art practice and has continued in several other projects over the years. Since then my work has expanded substantially, with the making of performative interventions that renegotiate history through video, photography, and research. These projects are centrally concerned with the politics of memory and belonging, particularly in relation to the legacy of colonialism.

The first portraiture series was *Shooting Back – Reflection on Haitian Roots* (2004). I portrayed individuals whose actions shaped the historical and social conditions in Haiti, from the fifteenth century up to the twentieth century, and who made Haiti what it is today—the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.¹ To symbolize the start of the oppression and enslavement of the indigenous Taíno (Arawak) peoples on the island,² I decided to ‘shoot back’ at *Christopher Columbus* (1451-1506), who arrived for the first time in what is now Haiti in 1492. After only twenty-five years following Columbus’s arrival in Haiti, at least 80 percent of the Taíno had died from warfare, massacre, executions, or European-introduced diseases (from which the Indians had no immunity). And at that same time, now 500 years ago, the transatlantic slave trade started with the forced migration of millions of people from the African continent to the ‘New World’, including Haiti.³

I further portrayed the Haitian dictators *Françoise “Papa Doc” Duvalier* (1907-1971) and *Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier* (1951-2014), as they were the reason for my mother’s family fleeing Haiti for the US in the mid-1960s. My mother settled in New York where she met my Swiss-born father. The two then moved to Zurich, Switzerland, where my sister and I were born in the 1970s. I have always felt that the two countries, Switzerland and Haiti, could not be more different from each other, and I was always especially curious about my mother’s heritage.

Figures 1-3. *Shooting Back*:
Christopher Columbus
(Conqueror, 15th century);
Francois “Papa Doc” Duvalier
(Dictator of Haiti, 1957-71); Jean-
Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier
(Dictator of Haiti, 1971-86),
 metal staples on recycled
 wood, 80 x 115 cm, 2004. Private
 and institutional collections.
 Courtesy of the artist.



I made these portraits because I found myself repeatedly confronted by the fact that my family—especially my mother—didn't let me visit my relatives in Haiti, due to the political disturbances and the possibility of kidnapping (two of our relatives there experienced this). Somehow, that frustration was the initial impetus for learning more about Haiti's history. At the same time, I discovered a technique of using a high-pressure staple gun to 'draw'. After testing out the staple gun, while protecting my eyes and ears with safety goggles and ear muffs, I realised that the tool's sound and weight resembled an actual gun. To me, the tool symbolized violence and trauma. I immediately decided that I would want to use it to create art works that relate to this metaphor. Eventually, I merged this method and my response to the frustration of not being allowed to visit Haiti. By 'shooting' staples, I realised I could capture a moment in time and, simultaneously, literally nail down and react to unjust history. It felt good to 'shoot back' symbolically and non-violently.

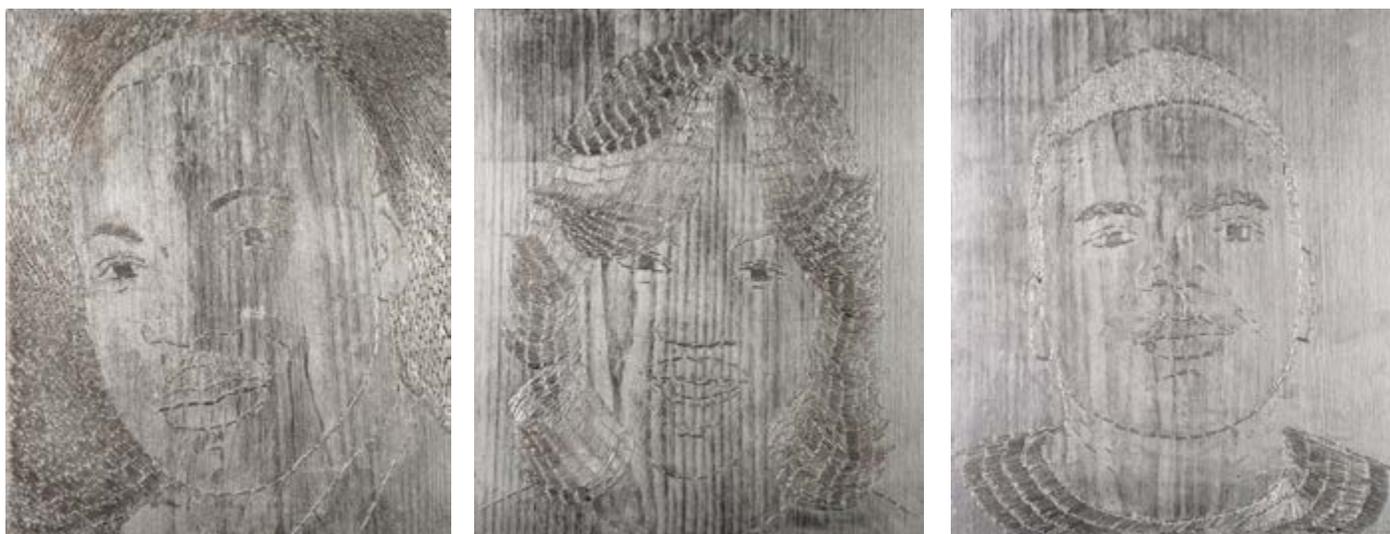
Soon after, I decided to use this technique on different subjects that were still related to violent and traumatic events, but now in order to commemorate the victims' stories and struggles. It was also a way for me to learn about and make sense of the world we live in. Metaphorically, I see the use of the staple gun not only as 'shooting', a term used when taking a photograph, but also as 'shooting back' with a weapon, in the same sense that bell hooks writes about 'talking back' as a means for the oppressed and colonized to move from silence to speech.⁴ I pull the trigger one shot at a time, drawing with each staple precisely and permanently into the surfaces of different kinds of woods, sometimes burned by fire or painted.

Recently, I made a portrait of the American author James Baldwin (1924-1987) in a public space. I stapled his portrait onto a window shutter of the 19th century *Burg Hüsli* chalet in Leukerbad in the Swiss Alps, where he lived occasionally between 1951-53 to write parts of his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. I made this work in his honour, and it was my attempt to make visible his time spent in this small mountain village as the first black person in the community, which he describes in the essay "Stranger in the Village" for Harper's Magazine in 1953. The portrait is part of a new portraiture series titled *The Firsts*.

Figure 4. Sasha Huber, *The Firsts – James Baldwin (1924-1987)*, Leukerbad, Switzerland, metal staples on wooden window shutter, 2018. Photo: Siro Micheroli. Courtesy of the artist.



In contrast to my earlier Haiti-centred work, *The Shooting Stars* portraiture series is dedicated to people from around the world, from the past to the present, who became victims of gunshot assassinations and killings perpetrated for political, ethnic, ideological, economic reasons, or as hate crimes.⁵ The entire *Shooting Stars* series consists of 32 portraits. The starting points were historical figures such as Baptist minister and civil rights movement leader *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1925-1968) and civil rights activist *Malcolm X* (1925-1965). One of the underlying messages of the series is that in the United States, African-Americans still live in danger, facing racial profiling from the authorities, security forces, or self-appointed vigilantes, who single-handedly carry out executions. In response to this situation I made portraits of *Michael Brown Jr.* (1996-2014), *Renisha McBride* (1994-2013) and *Trayvon Martin* (1995-2012). Martin's and Brown's deaths at the hands of the police sparked the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement,⁶ which demanded that police change how they deal with minorities and tackle systemic racism and inequality. BLM co-founder Opal Tometi stated: 'The movement is a struggle for the human rights and dignity of black people in the US, which is tied to black peoples' struggle for human rights across the globe'.⁷



Figures 5-7. Sasha Huber, *Shooting Stars: Martin Luther King, Renisha Marie McBride (1994-2013), African-American woman; Michael Brown Jr. (1996-2014), graduate from Normandy High School, St. Louis, US, silver leaf on metal staples and larch wood, 27 x 32 x 4 cm, 2014.*

The *Shooting Stars* series further includes a portrait of my mother's godfather, the jeweler *Jean Chenet* (1918-1963). He was killed by the Tonton Macoute, the Haitian paramilitary force set up in 1959 by the dictator François "Papa Doc" Duvalier. Another family member, a former officer in the Haitian Army, *Lt. Henri "Riquet" Perpignand* (1916-1958),⁸ who returned to Haiti from exile in Miami in 1958, was shot during an attempted coup against the dictator.

The series also comprises portraits of victims of two recent tragedies: the politically and ideologically motivated massacre of 77 innocent Norwegians in 2011 in Oslo and on Utøya Island and the killing of the young Iranian asylum seeker *Reza Barati* (1991-2014), who was shot during a demonstration in Australia's detention center on Manus Island, Papua New Guinea, in 2014.

Page 125. Figure 8. Sasha Huber, *Shooting Stars – Malala Yousafzai* (b. 1997, Pakistan), silver leaf on metal staples and larch wood, 80 x 110 cm, 2014.



Also, part of the ongoing series is the portrait of Malala Yousafzai, who survived an assassination attempt in Pakistan in 2012 and became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Previously, the youngest awardee was Martin Luther King Jr., who received the peace prize in 1964. Malala continues to put her life at risk by standing for equality and children’s right to education worldwide. Portraying her was important to me, because she survived the attempted assassination and remains able to continue her work. Her survival prompts the question: ‘What would the world be like if all these people whom I have portrayed had survived?’ Africa’s Che, *Thomas Sankara* (1949-1987) declared one week before his murder: ‘While revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill their ideas’.⁹

The *Shooting Stars* series was shown for the first time at the Korjaamo Gallery in Helsinki, Finland, in 2014. In 2015 the whole series was part of the group exhibition *Becoming by Recalling*, which was dedicated to cultural heritage and identity, and curated by Susanne Ewerlöf at the Passagen Konsthalle in Linköping, Sweden. A year later, Heather Galbraith (Massey University, New Zealand) invited me to contribute a selection of *Shooting Stars* (2014) to the international group exhibition *Trigger Points*,¹⁰ which she was curating with Andrew J. Saluti from the Syracuse University Art Galleries. The exhibition was installed in the Palitz Gallery in New York City in conjunction with the *Memory Works* symposium. Galbraith wrote in the exhibition catalogue: ‘*Trigger Points* . . . explore[s] the potent and slippery nature of memory. It examines the way memories are triggered by sensory stimuli, haptic encounters and visceral prompts, and how episodes, actions or encounters are felt physically and emotionally as well as understood rationally’.¹¹ The selection of my works included *Martin Luther King* (1925–1965); *Michael Brown Jr.* (1996–2014); *Malcolm X* (1925–1965); *Renisha McBride* (1995–2014); and *Sitting Bull* (1831–1890).

In 2017, curator Sasha Dees invited my husband, artist Petri Saarikko and myself to participate in her group exhibition *DNA of Water* with fellow artists Deborah Jack and Simone Bennett at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art on Staten Island, United States. I would exhibit both my individual and collaborative projects. In her curatorial statement she wrote: ‘water carries the world history yet has the fluidity to keep adapting to the present and future and is in a continuous transition. How do we as a people relate to our history, our present and future?’¹²

For the exhibition, Dees was interested in my ongoing *Shooting Stars* series and was thinking of how to introduce and present the work within the local context. Important parts of the series are the well-known political figures of the civil rights movement mentioned earlier, and portraits of everyday people who were victims of police violence and who became famous because of media attention following their tragic deaths. The series is committed to remembering their lives and highlighting the unchecked police brutality that results in so many deaths. The website *Mapping Police Violence* reported that 99% of cases of people killed by police in 2015 have not resulted in conviction of any officers involved. There is almost no accountability for the police.¹³

All victims will be missed and remembered by their family, friends, and community. The traumatic memory is an ever-returning nightmare that any person of color can experience in the United States. I'm thinking how shocked and angry the people affected must feel when this hell on earth happens, over and over again. In the US, almost every day someone is killed by the police. In 2012, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement released a thorough report, *Operation Ghetto Storm: 2012 Annual Report on the Extrajudicial Killing of Black People*,¹⁴ which documented all the reported killings of Black Americans by police officers, security guards, and self-appointed vigilantes. The report calculated that, on average, every 28 hours a Black man, woman, or child is unjustly 'executed'.¹⁵ Based on the *Mapping Police Violence* website, '[p]olice killed 1,147 people in 2017. Black people were 25% of those killed despite being only 13% of the population'.¹⁶

The art historian and writer Yvette Greslé wrote about fellow artist Phoebe Boswell whose installation *A Matter of Memory* resonates with my own artistic memory-work: 'Sometimes we imagine that it is possible to bury what is too painful to think of. Traumatic memory is often described in terms of insistent repetition and return, of the surfacing of memories we would rather suppress'.¹⁷

As Dees and I were discussing *DNA of Water*, we reflected on the fact that the exhibition was taking place on Staten Island, home of the late Eric Garner (1970-2014). Because of this connection, I had an opportunity to portray him in the exhibition. Eric, a former horticulturist at the New York City Parks, was detained on July 17, 2014 and put in a chokehold by an NYPD police officer. As he was being choked, Garner protested repeatedly: 'I can't breathe!' until he lost consciousness and died shortly afterwards. Garner's 'crime' was selling single cigarettes from packs without tax stamps.¹⁸

Exhibiting his portrait in Staten Island inspired me to contact Garner's family and present the portrait to his mother and the family at the end of the exhibition. I chose one of the photos of him published in articles discussing his case and made his portrait in my studio in Helsinki prior to my arrival in the US.

Figure 9. Gwen Carr holding her son's portrait Shooting Stars Series – Eric Garner (1970–2014), white gold leaf on metal staples and larch wood, 27 x 32 x 4 cm, 2017. Photo: Stephan Schacher © Sasha Huber. Courtesy of the artist.



Then, while I was in New York, something serendipitous happened. I invited my friend Tamara Lanier from Connecticut to the opening of *DNA of Water* at the Snug Harbor Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art gallery in March 2017. I got to know Tamara in 2012 when she became aware of the petition website www.rentyhorn.ch which I had launched in 2008. It is part of my long-term artistic engagement with the *Demounting Louis Agassiz* campaign, which was aimed at removing the name of the 19th century Swiss-born naturalist, glaciologist, and racist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) from a 3,946-metre peak in the Swiss Alps. The campaign also advocated renaming the peak ‘Rentyhorn’ in honour of the Congolese-born slave Renty and countless others who were robbed of their freedom. Among his other racial indecencies, in 1850 Agassiz ordered Renty to be photographed on a South Carolina plantation ‘to prove the inferiority of the black race’.¹⁹ To my astonishment, upon learning of the website, Lanier wrote to me revealing that she is a descendent of Renty! He was her Great-Great-Great-Grandfather. She could speak about Renty and help to fill the gap that transformed the objectifying portrait of him which Agassiz made in the name of ‘science’. Tamara and her two daughters came to Switzerland to the opening of an exhibition held in Grindelwald, near the Agassizhorn.²⁰ She shared information that was not documented when the daguerreotypes of Renty were made in the first place.

Tamara told me that she and her daughters would be able to attend our opening at Snug Harbor and that she would come with her friend Gwen Carr, who happened to be Eric Garner’s mother! What made this situation so unexpected was that I had not yet informed Tamara of the works I would be showing in the exhibition. She was surprised and happy when I informed her that the exhibition would contain a portrait of Eric. She said that she could arrange a collect call between herself, Gwen, and me. This allowed me to share my idea with Gwen, who was happy to hear about the gift. She was pleased to see the portrait of her son, and I sensed that she was touched by the work and its intention.

Figure 10. Gwen Carr and Sasha Huber looking at Eric Garner’s portrait at the *DNA of Water* exhibition. Photo by Stephan Schacher. Courtesy of the artist.



I wanted Gwen to be able to take something home on the day that we first met in person. Since the exhibition was going to last several months, I decided to make for her a rubbing (graphite frottage) of the portrait before applying the white gold leaf on top of the staples and the wooden surface. Because the metal staples give the works a haptic, relief quality, such frottages become like a reproduction of the original on paper.



Figure 11. Unique frottage drawing of Eric Garner's portrait for Gwen Carr and Family at the beginning of the DNA of Water exhibition given in March 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

As a way of documenting the artwork, I asked Gwen in advance if she would like to be photographed together with the artwork before the opening of the exhibition in March 2017. Photographing her with the work was a special occasion for me because at that very moment, the artwork was transformed into more than just a representation of a person I did not know. With this sudden connection to Eric's relative who lived through and is still dealing with the aftermath of this huge loss, I entered a space that no exhibition, nor art collection—institutional or private—could ever reach. While it is important that the work can be seen and discussed by people who feel concerned with or connected to its meaning, I felt that giving the artwork to Gwen and her family would be the appropriate place for it. In their possession, Eric's portrait would enable daily commemoration.

In September when the exhibition ended, Sasha Dees visited Gwen at her home to bring her the portrait. She told me that Gwen was so happy, and that the work was to be installed beside photos of Eric taken throughout his life. On my next visit to New York, I will make sure to visit Gwen.

I often reflect on my responsibility in relation to artworks made in memory of those who are not necessarily going to be part of the historical record. I believe that artists who engage in memory work must do it in an ethical way. This applies to the representation of people from the past, but especially to contemporary subjects, because they might have living relatives, as in Eric Garner's case. My portrait of him contributes to his memory alongside his mother's own story which she tells in her recently published book *This Stops Today* (October 2018). She speaks about the loss that compelled her to become an activist and fight for racial equality, and how her family's tragedy is but one example of how law enforcement treats blacks in the United States.²¹

In 2018 Curtin University in Perth, Australia, asked for my permission to publish my photograph of Gwen Carr holding Eric's portrait, and Michael Brown's and Reza Barati's *Shooting Star* portraits on their newly initiated online project *Deathscapes—Mapping Race and Violence in Settler States*. The description reads:

The project aims to produce new knowledge about the practices and technologies, both global and domestic, that enable state violence against two key racialized groups, Indigenous people and racialized migrants and refugees at the border. The project adopts a transnational and cross-disciplinary approach to racialized state violence working across four countries (Australia, the U.S., Canada, the U.K.) to map the sites and distributions of custodial deaths in locations such as police cells, prisons and immigration detention centers. The Deathscapes website will be a distinctive and innovative feature of the project, as a free-to-access resource that documents racialized deaths transnationally via a single digital site that consolidates statistics, analysis, graphics and artworks; it is a resource that is both archival and analytical, and for use by multiple publics.²²

This website allows the works to be presented within a dedicated context and contribute to public memory accessible to readers from around the world.

Like meteors, the men and women portrayed in *Shooting Stars* have flashed, and still flash, across the sky above us, momentarily lighting up the metaphorical darkness of horror and injustice that surrounds us. Like meteors—traditionally wished upon in many cultures—they allow us to formulate our longings and to project our desires. And they leave us wondering whether shooting stars might turn into much-needed guiding stars.

Endnotes

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Biographical Note

Sasha Huber (b. 1975) is a visual artist of Swiss-Haitian heritage, born in Zurich. She lives and works in Helsinki. Huber's work is primarily concerned with the politics of memory and belonging, particularly in relation to the legacy of colonialism. Sensitive to the subtle threads connecting history and the present, she works with performance-based interventions, video, photography, publications, archival material and the compressed-air staple gun—while aware of its symbolic significance as a weapon. She is known for her artistic contribution to the long-term project *Demounting Louis Agassiz*, which promotes awareness that the Swiss-born Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) was a proponent of 'scientific' racism, and a pioneering thinker of segregation and 'racial hygiene'. She has participated in international exhibitions including the Biennale of Sydney 2014, the Venice Biennale 2015 and international artist residencies together with regular collaborator artist Petri Saarikko (2015 at Te Whare Hera International Artist Residency). She holds an MA in visual cultures from the University of Art and Design Helsinki and is presently undertaking practice-based PhD studies at the Zurich University of the Arts in Switzerland.

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