

Artists Rally to Preserve Black History in Sag Harbor

A pop-up exhibition is helping a historical society conserve its archive of the Black experience in beach communities facing increased gentrification.

By Aruna D'Souza
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SAG HARBOR, N.Y. — When Storm Ascher, 27, an artist and founder of the pop-up gallery Superposition, moved here from Los Angeles in 2019, she was simultaneously struck by the warmth and acceptance of the community and the fact that she was almost always the only Black person in a room.

Then she read Colson Whitehead's autobiographical novel "Sag Harbor" and learned that the house she lived in was a mere two blocks from Eastville, one of the oldest Black communities on the South Fork of Long Island, and one that offered evidence of multicultural integration among Black, Montauk, and Shinnecock people, as well as those of European descent, since the 18th century.

And she was a mile or so from Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest, and Ninevah (a.k.a. SANS), Black beach enclaves established in the 1930s and '40s that have been drawing prosperous professionals and cultural bright lights from New York City for generations.

"I thought 'where is this town he's talking about?' And I look on a map and it's across the street from me! I was like, are you kidding me?" Ascher said, laughing.



The artist and gallerist Storm Ascher is planning an art exhibition to support the Historical Society and its archives. Jeremy Dennis for The New York Times

Ascher's explorations made clear that both Eastville and the SANS beach enclaves are facing pressures from real estate development and the passage of time. A number of the generally modest structures built by working and middle class families in the 19th and 20th centuries, some purchased from the Sears catalog, have passed out of the hands of the families that originally bought them. Those houses have been torn down and replaced with much grander buildings, sometimes converted to short term rentals, which has been jarring for this longstanding, tight-knit community.

Allison McGovern, an archaeologist, anthropologist, and cultural resources consultant who conducted an inventory of structures in SANS and Eastville in 2017, says that 12 historically significant buildings have been demolished in the years since.

After meeting with Georgette Grier-Key, the executive director and chief curator of the Eastville Community Historical Society, and the artist Michael Butler, a member of the organization's board whose family has had a presence in Sag Harbor for generations, Ascher decided to focus her third anniversary pop-up exhibition on Eastville. Half the net proceeds of the online sale through Dec. 31 will go to the participating artists, most of whom are Black, and half will go toward supporting the conservation and digitization of the Historical Society's archive.

Only a few of the participating artists had known of the longstanding African American presence in Sag Harbor and Eastville. "I wanted the curatorial theme to be about Black utopia, joy, leisure, luxury, things that have not been expected to be part of the Black experience but have persisted here since the 1800s," Ascher said.

The participants took markedly different approaches to the show's theme. A photograph by Chinaedu Nwadiabia, "Ben&Barry," is a witty commentary on African American achievement, showing a toy figurine of Benjamin Banneker, a free Black man from Baltimore who, in the late 18th century, used his skills as a mathematician and astronomer to write popular almanacs, posed with one foot resting on former President Barack Obama's memoir, "The Audacity of Hope." (The artist created the work after finding both items in her rented Airbnb in Lagos, Nigeria.)

Audrey Lyall, a Brooklyn-based artist, was struck by Ascher's focus on luxury and plenitude. She offered a painting of a woman collaged with faux snakeskin, rhinestone-tipped acrylic nails, and two different markers of value — cowrie shells and a \$10 bill.

"I didn't know there were any historical Black and Indigenous communities in the Hamptons — we always think of that area as very white, very wealthy," Lyall said in a telephone interview. "It almost seems inaccessible to Black people and other people of color." She added, "I wanted to learn more about it myself." Butler's work, "The Prize Catch," formed a sort of anchor for the show. He describes his small, highly detailed paintings as folk art, drawing upon oral histories of Eastville gathered over years. He knows he should write a book, Butler said, "but for now my paintings are my form of storytelling." Banners of each of the 17 artworks hang on the fence of the cemetery across the street from St. David AME Zion, a landmark overseen by the historical society, "to create a juxtaposition between our ancestors and people working right now," Ascher said.

Established in 1840 and the oldest extant Black church on Long Island, it served a congregation made up of African Americans, members of the Montauk confederacy, and Irish Americans employed in the town's once thriving whaling industry. St. David's is believed to have been a stop on the Underground Railroad, and Eastville was later known to be a safe harbor for people escaping Jim Crow laws in the South. "They lived together, they worked together, they worshiped together, and they're interred together," said Dr. Grier-Key, who characterizes Eastville as one of the earliest truly integrated communities in the United States. Superposition's pop-up exhibition and sale will be an annual event to bring resources to the Historical Society, which has largely survived through the efforts of volunteers since it was established in the mid-1980s. "As each structure is converted, demolished, or what have you, you lose that whole sense of history," Butler said of the town. "As people pass away or move away, you have fewer and fewer people that are going to know these stories."

You also lose key pieces of material culture and historical documentation, as it turns out. In addition to deeds, family albums, maps, and other documentation, the center holds an important cache of tintypes of the early Montaukett and African American families who lived in Eastville. Some were found nailed down to repair broken floorboards in one of the old houses in the neighborhood — a signal of the need to preserve these modest shacks, which have cultural significance beyond their architectural value, Dr. Grier-Key said. As might be expected for a place that attracted the likes of Lena Horne, Harry Belafonte, and Langston Hughes, artists have always had a presence in Sag Harbor. The abstract painters Al Loving and Frank Wimberley were part of a group called the Eastville Artists in the 1970s. Wimberley in particular has had a long association with the Eastville Community Historical Society and, Dr. Grier-Key pointed out, made the sculptural mirror that hangs in the center's restroom. The late Reynold Ruffins — a graphic designer and a founder of the storied Push Pin Studios — along with his wife, Joan Ruffins, and daughter Lynn Ruffins Cave, were subjects of an exhibition here in 2018.

Dr. Grier-Key, Butler and Ascher hope to begin acquiring work for the historical society's collection. When I ask her who is on her wish list, she cites, among others, the artist Tomashi Jackson. Jackson's recent commissioned project at the Parrish Art Museum, "The Land Claim" (2021), drew upon the histories and current experiences of the Black, Indigenous, and Latino residents on the East End of Long Island.

As an example of what the Eastville Community Historical Society might achieve, Dr. Grier-Key and Ascher point to the Southampton African American Museum, which opened to the public last Juneteenth under the leadership of Brenda Simmons. In addition to a historical exhibition, the museum's inaugural program included a show with work by Sanford Biggers, Melvin Edwards, Theaster Gates, Glenn Ligon and Kara Walker, lent by the collector Peter Marino, whose foundation is located nearby.

Ascher has on principle avoided opening a physical gallery space because of the way that "artists' districts are a catalyst for gentrification," she said. So the opportunity to contribute to establishing a permanent historical archive in Eastville is especially important to her.

"I could go stand there with a sign and say 'don't gentrify this Black community, hashtag cancel' or I could actually do something more permanent," she said. "I feel like with something like this, you want to preserve something."