

biennaleofsydney

Nikeshia Breeze

Living Histories, 2026

cotton gauze, wood, steel, cyanotype prints, furniture, sound, video projection, paper

Courtesy of the artist

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Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney.

Education Resource (K-6)



Stages of Tectonic Blackness: Blackdom (video still) (from the *Stages of Tectonic Blackness* series), 2022
Commissioned by the National Performance Network. Photograph: Monika Kennedy. Courtesy of the artist.

Overview



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Nikesha Breeze is an artist and a storyteller. She lives in New Mexico, but her ancestors came from Africa. Sometimes, history books leave out important stories, almost like a memory that has faded away. Nikesha uses art to find these lost stories and give a voice back to African people whose histories were erased.

Look up! Can you see how tall and mighty this tree is? This is an African Baobab tree. In Africa, these trees are very special. They are meeting places where communities come together to share stories and knowledge. Nikesha has built this giant tree here to create a special place for us to listen.

Look closely at what the tree is made of. It isn't built from wood or bark. Nikesha used cotton, corn, wheat, and sugar. These materials tell a difficult story. A long time ago, African people were forced to work very hard on farms growing these crops, but they were not paid and were treated very unfairly. Nikesha uses these specific materials to remember her ancestors' hard work and strength.

You will notice the tree trunk is made of see-through cotton curtains, not solid wood. This represents how the history of these people was almost hidden from us. It's like looking through a foggy window. But Nikesha invites you to be brave. She wants you to step inside the heart of the tree. Inside, you can hear songs and voices from the past. By walking inside, you are helping to remember the stories that were almost lost.



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108 Death Masks: A Communal Prayer for Peace and Justice (installation view) 2024,
Commissioned by the Equal Justice Initiative: Freedom Monument Sculpture Park. Photograph: Kate
Russell © Kate Russell. Courtesy of the artist.



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Discussion Questions

Stand at the bottom of the Nikesha's tree. This is an African Baobab tree. In Africa, these trees are magical meeting places where people tell stories.

This tree isn't **made** of wood. How is this sculpture **different** from a real tree you might **see** in a park? Nikesha invites you to walk inside the tree. When we step inside the tree, we can hear music and voices. These are real voices from the past. How does it make you **feel** to stand inside and **listen** to them?

If you could **whisper** a message back to the people in the recording, what would you **say** to them?

Why do you think it is **important** that we are allowed to **walk** inside the art, rather than just **looking** at it from the outside?

Next to the tree, you can **see** small branches with fluffy white cotton growing on them. Cotton comes from plants, and it is used to make lots of things we use every day, like clothes and soft fabrics. A long time ago, people were forced to work very hard picking cotton from these plants. They were not treated fairly, and they did not get to choose this work. Nikesha wants us to think about their stories and the history behind this material.

If you **look** closely, the tree in the artwork is also **made** from **cotton**. It has been **changed** from a **soft** plant into a strong **fabric shape**.

How do you **think** cotton changes from a **soft, fluffy plant** into fabric that can be used to **make** clothes or even a tree like this? And why do you **think** the Nikesha chose cotton to tell this **story**?

Practical Activities

Activity 1

Nikesha tells a story using different materials instead of words. Your job is to translate what you see into what you feel on paper.

Walk up close to the sculpture (but don't touch!). Look for the corn, wheat, and cotton woven into the tree.

Imagine what these materials feel like. Are they bumpy? Scratchy? Hard?

Use your pencil to draw that feeling. Press hard! Make jagged lines, heavy dots, or spiky scribbles to show how rough and hard the work was to grow these crops

Now, look at the trunk of the tree. It is made of sheer curtains. Does it look heavy or light? Does it look like a ghost or a cloud?

Change how you hold your pencil. Hold it lightly. Draw soft, swirling lines or gentle shading to show how the curtains look like a fading memory.



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Activity 2

Think of a memory that is very important to you. It could be a person you love, a happy day, or a story your grandparents told you.

In the centre of your paper, draw a small, simple symbol of that memory. (It can be tiny!).

Carefully fold your paper around the drawing. Fold it again and again until it is a small, tight ball. This is your Memory Seed.

Hold your seed tightly in your hand. Look at the giant Baobab tree. Just like you are holding your memory tight, this tree is holding the memories of thousands of people safe inside its trunk

Keep your seed in your pocket. When you get home, you can "plant" it by putting it in a special box or unfolding it to share the story with someone you trust.





Anonymous African American Man and Child; 1856 (from the Archival Portraiture series), 2022,
Photograph: Kate Russell © Kate Russell.
Courtesy of the artist.

