

## Nikeshia Breeze

### *Living Histories, 2026*

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

Courtesy of the artist

Copyright © Nikeshia Breeze

Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney.

---

## Education Resource (7-12)



*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.

## Overview

History is often accepted as a fixed truth, yet for many, it remains a fragmented narrative where voices have been deliberately silenced. Nikeshia Breeze is a multidisciplinary



# biennale of sydney

artist who challenges this silence through an Afro-Futurist framework, fusing past, present, and future to honour African American heritage. Her installation, *Living Histories* (2026), acts as a vessel designed to confront the systematic erasure of these ancestral narratives.

Breeze's work is dominated by towering structures resembling African Baobab trees. Constructed from cotton, wheat, sugar, and corn, these materials physically represent the exploitation of enslaved African ancestors during the antebellum plantation economy. These forms are enclosed in sheer curtains, illustrating how the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade is often deliberately concealed by dominant cultural forces. While the sculpture is the vessel, the work's core meaning is found in its activation through durational performance. Breeze reclaims the 1930s *Federal Writers' Project*, a historical archive of interviews with the last surviving enslaved people, as the foundation for this engagement.

During scheduled activations, contemporary performers inhabit the installation to interpret the stories found in the archives. By using the lived body to embody these accounts, Breeze transforms these accounts into an immediate, breathing experience. This process of archival reclamation persists even in the absence of live actors, as audio recordings of the ancestors fill the space to ensure their forgotten voices are restored to the global narrative.



# biennale of sydney

*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.



# biennale of sydney

## Discussion Questions

History is not always clear; often, the stories of marginalised groups are obscured or erased. Breeze uses sheer curtains to wrap the trees, creating a visual barrier that makes the interior look fragmented and indistinct.

How clearly can you **see** what is inside? How does the fabric **change** your view?

How does the **experience** of trying to see through the fog of the curtain mimic the **difficulty** of finding the **truth** in history books?

Do you think art has a **responsibility** to **reveal** what has been **hidden**? How does this work **challenge** us to look harder at the past?

Breeze's work is not just a static object; it is an activation. It uses the 1930s Federal Writers' Project, a government archive of interviews with the last surviving enslaved people and brings it to life through sound and performance.

When you step inside the heart of the tree, you are surrounded by audio recordings.

How is the **experience** of listening to a voice **different** from reading a wall text?

How does **placing** a living **performer** or a real voice inside the sculpture **transform** the **archive** from a government record into a living memory?

Does this work suggest that **history** is finished and in the past, or that it is still alive and **changing** today? Explain how.

## Practical Activities

### *Activity 1: Material Memory*

Select a specific section of the Baobab tree structure where the materials are most visible.

In the centre of your page, create a detailed observational sketch (approx. 5 minutes) of a small patch of the surface. Focus clearly on texture, density, layering, and the way the cotton is constructed or woven into the form.

Around your drawing, draw three arrows pointing to specific details in your sketch (for example: an exposed thread, a break in the surface, compressed cotton fibre).

Next, respond to the following:

1. What are the physical traits of the material — soft, fragile, or brittle? Think about how its texture feels and how it looks. In art, these sensory details often reflect the deeper meaning of the work, such as the contrast between a gentle appearance and a harsh history.
2. Cotton wasn't just a fabric; it was a global commodity built on a system of forced labour. Consider how the material represents the exploitation of people and the global trade networks that grew from it.



# biennale of sydney

3. Why did Breeze choose crops like cotton instead of permanent materials like marble or bronze? By avoiding traditional monuments, Breeze subverts ideas of power and permanence. This choice asks us to think about memory — specifically, whose histories are celebrated in stone and whose are kept alive through the materials of everyday labour.

## Activity 2

Step inside the intimate space of the installation or stand as close (but not too close - don't touch!) to the sheer curtains.

Close your eyes for 60 seconds. Do not speak. Focus entirely on the audio recordings including the voices, songs, or sounds of the ancestors.

Open your eyes. On your paper, write down five specific words or phrases that capture the feeling of the sound (e.g., distant, hollow, insistent, mournful).

Now, look through the sheer curtain to the cabin, the cotton flowers hanging, and the photographs and video installed. Notice how the world outside looks blurry or shrouded. Imagine the curtain is a filter of time. Write two sentences describing how the curtain changes your view of the outside world.

Combine your observations into a 3-line statement of witnessing:

Line 1: "I see..." (Describe the obscured view through the curtain).

Line 2: "I hear..." (Describe the quality of the voices from the archive).

Line 3: "I acknowledge..." (A statement respecting the stories being told).





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

