Aribumi Badebo. What an honor and a pleasure is today to see your smiling face on the screen and to be in community with you, to talk about your work. I am so excited. We met at the Metropolitan Museum of New York where your work was featured in the Hear Me Now exhibition. That show has now traveled to Boston where it's now at the Museum of Fine Arts and it's going to continue on to Michigan and Atlanta. I'm just so excited because you are just a phenomenal person. I've got a chance to know you a little bit better, being in a class with you at the Met Museum, taught by curator Adrian Spinozzi, the Curatorial Practice Program, where you decided to join in with the rest of us. And it has just been an honor and a pleasure to listen to you talk. So I'm so excited for everybody to hear you today. So thank you for being here. Well, thank you for having me and like in that time of getting to know you and learning just all the amazing and legendary artists that you've had the pleasure of being in commune with and talking with. Like I'm really, really honored to be another artist to that list and to know you in this format. So thank you. Oh, hikes, hikes. Well, I have to say, I love you. Okay. So, um, let's start from the beginning or yeah, we're going to go back. Okay. So you are what is considered a young artist because you're under 30. Well, I'm 31. Oh, wait, you're 31. Why don't you think you were 26? No, I'm 31. I wish all this stuff I did happen just at 20. You're still a young artist because any artist under 60 is considered a young artist. Yeah. All right. So you are considered a young artist because you're under 40. You're under 35. Still, you're a young artist. But I want to think back to your time as a student, both in K-12, elementary, middle, high school, and college. How did those learning experiences shape or develop who you are today as an artist? Yeah, so I grew up in Maplewood, New Jersey. People from Maplewood refer to it as MAPSO, Maplewood, South Orange, or like kind of the two communities that kind of almost act as one. But I was raised by my mother, who's now she passed away of COVID in 2020. But she was a single mother. - I'm sorry. - Thank you. When she's from Brooklyn, I joke around, I say people from Brooklyn act like it's a state. But she moved to Jersey for law school and that's how she ended up in Nork, New Jersey. So even though I grew up in Maple and Nork was really dear to her. And she often, a lot of the kind of programming I did as a child, she looked to Nork because They had a lot of kind of free program for children. And when I was three, she entered me the North Museum, which is now the North Museum of Art, had a junior museum, a part of their educational program. And part of like the junior museum, they had classes for toddlers, where you could come in on Saturdays and make art with your parent. And at three, my mom had me at the North Museum almost every Saturday in these classes. And for the longest, I had like artwork from that kind of period of my life. My mom turned almost every hallway in our home into like mini galleries. So I always say like my art career started at three. People who knew me K through 12 probably know me more for running track. Track and Field was like a major part of my family's life. My aunt and uncle are now probably in their like 20, 60 year of they founded and still run a track team in our community, the Jaguars. So track was kinda like my outward life. Like everyone knew me going to track practice or going to a track meet. And I ran track from like seven to like 22, but like more privately, I was always engaged in actually longer than my like athletic career in art. So I was in these art programs. And then obviously I engaged in like just the kind of requirements of art classes in a K through 12 public school setting. but my mom, I guess she saw some like innate talent or just interests in art in me. And she really nurtured that. So I think starting in third grade, I took private art classes. There was a woman in our

community an artist named Evelyn Graves who would give classes. She actually had a career as a private art teacher, but in her retirement, she continued to provide art classes to children in the neighborhood on various days of the week in her basement, which was like her art studio. - I was just about to ask you where, what did you do in her basement? - Wow. - West Orange. So I would every Wednesday for maybe like five years of my life, my mom would leave work, she was an attorney, pick me up from school and take me to Miss Evelyn's house. And I think the classes were like two hours and it was like through Miss Evelyn's practice the first time I like learned about Romare Baradin or saw collage and saw mixed media, but we were doing everything from working with clay to mixed media, collage, painting, like the foundation of painting and drawing. So in a way, like those classes were more kind of influential in my artistic development. And then, you know, she made like Kool-Aid and gave us like cookies for snacks and stuff. And my mom did not play like Kool-Aid and all that. So it was like the treats, you know, to have all these sugar. - Oh, she didn't know about that. - No, but I really learned, you know, like how to charcoal drawings and how to like properly kind of use fixative to make sure it doesn't smudge and to preserve it. Like all those things I learned in this kind of private communal art space and setting in Ms. Evelyn's basement. This is all super fascinating because it's making me think about, you know, your mom, She was sort of developing this curricula for you outside of the school space. And I'm wondering, 'cause it sounds so enriched and it's in the community with people that you knew. And I'm wondering like in the schooling setting, it was, you said that it was much more meaningful, the practices that you were learning, the lessons that you were having outside of school. But I'm wondering about what was happening in the schools. It wasn't as inspiring or was there, were there art classes? - Yeah, so I mean, I grew up maple and in South Orange is the suburb, so we had like, I guess a decent kind of creative and artistic education. Like it was a kind of district where it was mandatory for us to like choose an instrument. Like were we an orchestra and band? So I played the cello. - I was really small, so I was like, I want a big instrument. And I really love-- - So you were carrying this big instrument that you probably fit inside the case. - You know, and even I reflect on that, when my mom saw I had kind of a talent for that I was taking private lessons with my public school orchestra teacher in her home. So I think I had a good education in that district, especially once I got to high school and I kind of was locking in more that like this is really something I'm passionate about and think I wanna pursue. But my mom seemed to always, like even in that example I talked about with like orchestra always seemed to like want to supplement kind of the education that I was receiving in my like schooling with like just, you know, really for like pushing that further. Like I remember in high school, especially in your junior and senior year, teachers are really honing in on like developing your portfolio to submit for college applications. And my art teacher at the time, Mr. McKim, who I found out later was also like my art teacher to a former boss of mine, Visa Butler, we had like the same art teacher, like, but Mr. McKim would teach private portfolio development and figure drawing classes at a community center in South Orange. And so I would, you know, have his class at regular school time and in the night, like starting, I guess the classes started at maybe like four or five or six, I would go to the community Baird Center and take his portfolio development classes because she really just, and I don't know if it was like a kind of response to her being a single mother or just my mom always talked about like, you know, she was a lawyer, but she chose like kind of the smaller law firm route because she

wanted to be a mother that was when five a clock hit, she was off of work and she was then like involved and present in her child's you know life and she was like a mother to my friends as well you know the mom probably with like we never like grew up in a house or things like that but she was the mom car pulling and taking us to New York and taking us to concerts. Like she was that mother. So I think a lot of it was just her personality and her parenting style. I will say though, like specifically those classes I had with Miss Evelyn, her being a black woman, what I would say was present in her kind of setting that wasn't in my K through tells was just learning about Black artists. Like I would say I graduated Columbia High School really only knowing dead Black artists, you know, and a lot of that wasn't through my school education. It was through, you know, going to the North Museum, you know, the The first time I saw Eleanor Sui's work was at the Nork Museum, and I believe they are the first institution to collect his work. The first time I saw a Romare-Baird in retrospective was at the Nork Museum, and it was recommended to me by Ms. Evelyn. So that kind of foundation of learning about black artists was outside of schooling. I don't think we touched on any black artists, to be honest. And it wasn't until I got to college specifically, I would say more when I got to SVA because I went to three schools for undergrad. And also our program department, Being in Chelsea was the first time I learned about like all of these black artists that were living and having successful careers as artists. And that was supplemented with, like I said, us being in Chelsea and, you know, being able to just walk down the street and walk into a Jack Shaman gallery or a house or an worth and literally see shows of artists or sometimes even bump into artists that I was learning about, you know, in my kind of college education. Wow, you've said so much that is really poignant. I wanna say first, I'm touched because I'm a single mom. And since my daughter could walk, I was like, okay, you can walk, we're ready for museums. So I've been taking her to museums and she's taking classes at the Guggenheim for toddlers. And so I'm just like, oh, wow, maybe I have a little, you know, and I, and she walks around, she tells people, I am an artist, you know? She will introduce herself and I love when I hear her say that. And I'm like, you know, so it's so refreshing to hear about your mother. What amazing woman supplementing your schooling experiences with these like profound deep learning and culturally relevant learning experiences for you as an artist, as a young person interested in arts. And so hats off to your mom. Do you remember what prompt to do to want to pursue a career as an artist? I know in high school there's lots of talks, especially what you're in your junior year, you know, like, what do you wanna like major in? And at first I was like an architect. And part of that was because, I don't know, like I said, I didn't know really any living artists. I mean, probably Ms. Evelyn was, but she was a teacher. - Mm-hmm. like that wasn't kind of what sustained her financially. So I just felt like it's creative, you draw, you make money. You know, Mr. Brady on the Brady Bunches Architect. (laughing) I was like, I guess that's what like artists pursue if they wanna make a living. But then I guess when I learned that like you could major in fine arts in college, I kind of went all in and I was like, oh, this is what I wanna major in. And like I said, I wasn't aware of rare that you could have a career in this, probably until I got to college. But I guess the second I knew this is what I wanted to major in and that that was possible in my junior year, sophomore year, I just kind of went headfirst. And luckily, like I had the mom to like jump head first with me, you know. That's wonderful. Yeah. So you've exhibited your work in several different institutions and, and your work is now being collected in prestigious collections. What is

in your opinion, your biggest achievement so far? And yeah. So I guess, um, it's interesting. I mean, I think the obvious one is that I was in a group, like a major group in a historical group exhibition. The show I was in hear me now, the Black Potters of Odechfield was the first time the Met exhibited work of enslaved people. And especially the company that I was with, not only Dave Drake, but like Simone Lee, The Astor Gates, Robert Pruitt, Woody DiOthello. So I guess like one may be being in a group exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum. It's definitely, I could see the impact of being in a show like that, like kind of the opportunities that have come since being in that show and continue to being in that show. I think one of the coolest things that happened to me I don't know if people will say it's the biggest, but I was in a show at the DACA Art Summit in Bangladesh. - That is cool. - As an artist, I don't know to have your work kind of take you to like Asia and to be in that context in an international show. And it was also an amazing experience to see people from a different part of the world, like still be engaged and like move from your work. Like as an artist that gave me a lot to witness. But it's funny, like I used to write like eight goals for like my career, my one year, my two year, my five year goals. And then like, I would accomplish them and realize like, oh, these weren't so lofty. Like as I thought, like I would have things like I want to get into a residency, you know, in two years or, you know, like thinking those were major things. And I guess at this point, I've kind of relinquished that kind of idea. And I truly feel like the nature of my work, being ancestor work, being work that really kind of honors them and has this like reverence for them and stays connected to them. I really feel like just doing that work in general, like they have been the ones that have been blessing me. Yes. opportunities that one may say or like these major, major opportunities in I feel like I've seen them more as just divine things that have happened to me or just like truly blessings, you know, that I almost feel like as long as I do this work, which like I often call like ancestor work, that I don't know the world of possibilities will open for me because all these major stages that my work has been able to be exhibited in or collected by ultimately just keeps their story alive. So I just feel like they just be knocking down doors for you know. Yeah. I believe they do. Yes, for sure. You talked about travel, so I do want to ask you if you can expand on that, the role that travel has played in your artistic practice. Yeah. Well, one, when I was referring to Bangladesh, that was really major for me because I remember specific moment where a group of locals came in, not even, you know, there was a kind of disconnect in the fact that I couldn't speak Bangla, they didn't speak English. But them just seeing the work, they understood almost everything about it simply through the color blue because in their country, they have a history of kind of colonialism and slavery and how they were colonized by the British to produce indigo. And so their connection to this color, which to most of us seems neutral, but to me, obviously, my family was enslaved on the indigo plantation. So just through the color blue kind of opened up this world for me to communicate and to connect with people who I couldn't even do that verbally with. So I think that was kind of one example where I saw that how that kind of the importance of traveling and learning about different cultures and communities through traveling and how art can kind of break down these barriers. And now I guess travel has, I feel like most of my travel has been to South Carolina, the plantation where my family was enslaved is in South Carolina. And then also being involved in Hear Me Now, traveling with curators to Edgefield. So most of my travels is, and I'm doing another project in South Carolina. So I feel like most of my travels is to South Carolina, but like I've exhibited in

London and that was also another kind of eye-opening opportunity to see how a European audience engages with my work. And I felt like there was an aspect where they really connected with the fact that a lot of my work is through abstraction. You know, lots of these histories of abstraction originated in Europe. So they have kind of a relationship to that style in ways that I find in America, sometimes especially like black audiences connect with representation because of kind of this burden or lack of representation in these spaces. So travel, especially like through exhibitions, I think has become important for me to understand how different audiences and kind of what their entry point is into the work. And it kind of informs me, I think, in the studio space where I gain a greater understanding of what exactly are those entry points. So I experience your work as a sort of meditation, a construction of your identity through the history of your ancestors. What do you discover about yourself through your practice? - Almost everything. So, you know, I kind of, I would say I grew up with a good understanding of my history and background and, you know, where I come from, But through my art practice, specifically, I guess, through using like black hair as a medium and thinking about hair as ancestry and DNA and information, I started to look more into my own ancestry. And like, I guess my curiosity about things that I didn't know about my lineage and ancestors, he came kind of like grew through my own practice. And it led me down, I guess, I'm not gonna say the loophole, but it led me down the road of kind of finding out for myself where my family was enslaved. And at that time, my questioning was just, just thinking about my relationship to this country. And I guess it led me to, well, how did that relationship start? And it started on this plantation or three, I should say, true blue plantation, langzine plantation and singleton plantation in Fort Mott, South Carolina. And that path led me to a family historian who is now just like a really, really close family member to me, Jackie Whitmore, who was kind of the steward or the care of a lot of our family's history. and also someone who's been caring for the cemeteries on these three plantations. So I guess the more connected I became with him, the more kind of curious or interested I became in wanting to know about kind of my relationship to this country and kind of that origin, I guess I reflected that the most through my artistic practice. You talked about traveling back to South Carolina a lot, and I know because I've heard you speak before, I know that what you're doing when you're going there is research. So I wanted to ask you to talk about your research practices, the role that research plays in your practice. Yeah. So research is foundational to my practice. The first kind of support I ever hired in my studio practice were research assistants and interns before like an artist assistant or manager or anything. But for me, research, I say is the foundation of my practice because I feel like all of my work is informed by that. You know, usually my process starts off heavily with researching true blue plantation, or the histories of indigo, or the histories of rice cultivation. True blue is also a rice plantation, or these practices in West Africa, or in Nigeria or in Sierra Leone or wherever kind of the work is about starts off first with researching that like extensively. Probably before I even decide what I'm going to make. And for me that research serves as the kind of parameters in which every kind of decision making, I'm doing whether that's the material that I'm using, how I'm implementing the material, how I'm implementing my process is all informed by that research. What does that research look like? So I guess when I was doing research on my own, I guess part of it started off with just having a name like True Blue Plantation and going into like South Carolina historical records and trying to learn as much as possible about True Blue, you know,

going through records of former enslaved owners of True Blue. Unfortunately, oftentimes, most researches, especially like around slavery, is archived through their voice and their records and their documents. The enslavers. Yes. So, you know, I remember, you know, beginning or researching a lot of this stuff, I was looking through wills of former enslavers. I was looking at historical maps. I was looking at appraisal lists. And that was kind of the first times I was finding names of ancestors, which was horrifying. And also, I say like a miracle that a name like I have a name. You know, it was listening to oral history projects of South Carolina and, you know, listening through oral histories of Ravenel's, which was one of the slave owning families of my family. And the Ravenos are a major kind of family in South Carolina even to this day. So it's doing a lot of that and it's kind of expanded into hiring research interns. Mya Pill was a research intern for me, Anastasia Warren, a former classmate, and then they became my research assistant was supporting me at, you know, not just kind of those histories, but also researching like different processes of clay making or different firing techniques. We did a trip to True Blue. I took a trip with my god sister, Nichelle Williams and Maia Pill, and we photographed headstones that were in True Blue to kind of create an archive of all of the bodies that are in the space and identifying kind of their geopoint location of where they are, so that research sometimes looks like archiving this history, supporting my cousin Jackie and and archiving and documenting and photographing and videotaping the land. Sometimes research looks like trespassing. - Yes, I remember that video you shared in class at the Met where you guys, you were like running and there was like another car coming, yeah. - Yes, so there's lots of physical spaces on True Blue Plantation that my ancestors built, one of them being a church, Jerusalem Church, that's just across the road from True Blue Cemetery. And the first time I went to True Blue Cemetery, we trespassed on the land. I probably shouldn't be saying that, but we trespassed on the land just to get a photographic documentation of this church for me, that church represented the physical evidence still on this plantation that my ancestors were here, you know, of their kind of artistic expression. It's the evidence of the first institution they built when they became free people. Well, I don't believe any man made boundaries should keep you from being in dialogue and community with your ancestors. So I don't look at that as trespassing. Yes. Absolutely. You are a multidisciplinary artist. You use so many different mediums. You work in so many different forms. How do you make these choices? How do you choose the materials that you're going to use? How do you decide on a particular form that you're going to execute? Yeah, so when I was at SVA student, SVA, that's when I made the decision to use black care. And it was, and for the longest, that was my sole material. But that decision came out of response from a moment in art history class, seeing the painting "Olympia" by Edward Manet, which in that kind of moment, it was the first time I saw a black figure represented in this kind of thousand years of art history. am my professor barely acknowledged this black woman in this painting being one of two people in this particular painting. And I guess in that moment, not only did I see how even when represented we are still erased, we are still ignored, we are still subservient, within this history. I also saw the role of paint as a material in kind of perpetuating this white narrative, historically, you know, if one were to study art history or look at art history, for me it is a history of white supremacy. And because that history is told primarily through the material paint, it kind of pushed me in the direction of what material is me. And for me, like black hair, it's our politics, it's our spirituality, it's our culture, it's our finances a lot of times. (laughing) But it's our ancestry, it's

literally our bodies. So, I made that decision in art school that black hair would be my material. And since then it's kind of probably because of like the research that I've taken expanded to involve indigo and hair dye, blue hair dye specifically, and cotton and soil from true blue plantation that I turn into clay and objects that I have found that have been left behind on these plantations that I use as evidence of their existence. Do you get any pushback about using hair? Because I have a friend who recently cut his hair. He had a big afro and he cut it down. And I was like, "Oh my gosh, I know an artist who would love this hair." And he was like, "Oh, I'm superstitious." So I was like, "Oh, but I was going to collect it for you." So can you speak about that? Does that happen? I guess my biggest pushback is when I'm specifically going to barbershops. Like I remember a moment of going to Harlem barbershops and like asking for the hair in the trash can. And it was like, hell no. Why? Support your work. I think what you're doing is cool. But, you know, and I think some of that is just retentions from our relationship to our hair. Free slavery, you know, like. understanding the spiritual significance that our hair holds. So I always say, like, I'll never ask someone to cut their hair for my work. You know, all the donations have been voluntary, have been people who, people or like barbershops who just feel a great connection with the work. and lots of times it's people who have cut their hair and feel really honored that through my practice their hair could take on this kind of second life and be kind of shaped and cared for and made into this art piece. And I find that as now my work is being collected specifically by museums, there's this like additional layer where people are really kind of motivated to donate their hair to specifically see their hair, their bodies, an extension of themselves in spaces that have historically disregarded us or excluded us. You know, and I often say like, it's powerful to have a representation of you on a wall, like in a museum. But I think it's another thing to have you. Yes, literally, yeah, on a wall in a pedestal. And so I guess like, you know, I know which barber shops to go to. Yes, yes, I love it. I mean, it just it's just really powerful when you see it in person. And it does have this sense of aliveness. You know, you almost feel like it's growing, you know, like in my mind, it's like, every time I see it, it's like, did that grow a little bit? Is it still growing? You know, it's like the relationship has like enabled like some growth in my mind. But so you have recently engaged in collaborative practices as well. For example, with students from Clemson University. And on your website, have a section for hair donations. How does involving the public or other artists in your process influence your aesthetic? Yeah, I think involving the public keeps my practice going. You know, I know the kind of ideas and things that are in my head. I just, I have a lot to say, but I think in projects like what I'm involved in with Clemson, I could explain that further or you know, receiving hair from the public. It pushes me or it expands my ideas in ways that I can't do by myself. So when someone's donating their hair and within their kind of donation is a letter about why they cut their hair or story about why they cut their hair, that's something that is outside of me. And then I could kind of take in and reflect in the work or the project that I'm involved in with Clemson. Basically a group of students from Clemson University in South Carolina saw my show at the Met and saw the ways in which I use like the land and soil from cemeteries to honor Black life, Black labor, like enslavement, and figured that I could be an artist to help support them in their efforts to recognize and honor and to make artwork about the 667 Black bodies of enslaved convict laborers, sharecroppers, wage workers, and their families who have been recently discovered on Clemson's campus using ground penetrating radar that are buried on their

campus grounds. And none of these bodies are marked or identified with a proper headstone. They're all right now just marked with a temporary kind of flag to identify there's a body here. But Clemson University before was a university was Fort Hill Plantation. And one of the enslavers had a will that when he died, he wanted his plantation to be transformed into a school of agriculture and of course then slave population supported that transformation and then it later became Clemson University and wasn't even integrated into the 60s. You know, so those students coming to me asking me to help support them in an effort to make an art piece that kind of talks about this history is adds to my practice. Yes. So it expands even, you know, my work just around True Blue and it starts to bridge these gaps about these other histories of enslavement and erasure that are happening all over this country, that I could be a part of. So I would say working with the public are the legs of my practice that allows me to keep working. You know, last week I was in Chicago for an AERA conference and I got to hear, it was the first time I got to be in community with in the same space as Dr. Cynthia Dillard who I just love her scholarship. And she talked about how this notion of self-care is not really the approach that we as Black people take to caring. We do it in community. So it's more like community care. And so what you're saying about your collaboration with those students really just brought that up for me thinking about. And the last question I want to ask you is about self-care. So I wanted to ask you, as you work on these several projects, which are really deep and I imagine quite emotionally charged for you, dealing with social and cultural engaged themes. How do you practice self-care? And what would you suggest other artists or other women artists in particular do? Yeah, I love that kind of example that you talked about self-care and community. I found that like at some point in my practice, I could take better care by bringing people to support me like in my work and that it just does better for them, my ancestors that, you know, my practice look more communal. communal. But yeah, it's interesting that question of self care is one that comes up a lot when I'm like giving talks or something. And I feel like as my practice or understanding of like what this work is expands that question expands as well. And I feel like at this of my career, one thinking about my practice as like spiritual work, rounds kind of me and how self care looks. So right now self care looks like, you know, before going to a cemetery, the land of the dead, like truly acknowledging that, you know, giving the offering to the land, you know, thanking the land and my ancestors before I even take anything from this space like soil or objects or anything to give something to it. Self-care looks like ritual. Yeah, taking moments of rest. I remember specifically, there was one week I was in South Carolina and in a week's time, I think I visited eight different plantations and dug soil from two. And I just felt so heavy. Like in that week's time, I think I entered three former slave cabins, you know, and energetically, that's a lot. So like in those spaces, you know, slave cabins, plantations, cemeteries is a lot. And I think as a black person, in general, like, not only just like being in those physical spaces, but driving through, there's this innate kind of energy or presence of warning and danger, you know, that like My black body is in this space that is just present, like in the car, you know, just driving past a cotton field. So care has looked like rest. Sometimes care looks like a lot of reality TV. Like major, just like kind of distractions. Sometimes my research requires care, you know, like reading stories of slavery through research could be a lot. You know, so I guess just taking time, making sure that I'm not doing this work alone, making sure like spiritually I'm fortified. I've recently been initiated to the Yoruba tradition. So now I feel like I have a true foundation of like

when I say spiritual work or ancestor work of how to fortify myself and protect myself and clean myself spiritually so that I could do this work. So nowadays care looks like being a year of a priest or thinking like truly like acknowledging the spaces that I'm entering and being present to that, I guess. - Yeah. And then there's a lot of us who are always, you know, we just love you so much. And I think some of us, like myself, we ask that question because we want to find ways to care for you, you know, as you so courageously shepherd us in this journey, this learning journey that you are teaching us all about. And so I'm just so grateful for you. I'm so grateful for your practice. And I mean, you're so young, you have so much to do in the future. So it's just gonna be wonderful to watch you, you know, as the years go by and to see all that you're gonna do. I'm just so excited to watch that develop. So thank you so much for spending this time with me today on this podcast, Beyond Beauty, where we're really talking about all that is, that is so much profound knowledge and practices that really goes beyond the beauty of the aesthetic that people are experiencing and when they encounter these works, that there's so much deep thought and care and all that that goes into these works. And so I thank you for being a part of this conversation. - Thank you so much for having me. It's been such an honor and a pleasure.