

Elana Valcova-Anacostia Portraits

Artistic Statement

Throughout the modern ages, photographers have recognized their role in contemporary society as contributors to building and reflecting history and empowering people through portraiture. Since the invention of the medium, photographic portraiture has been used as a form of evidence, memory, a poetic symbol of one's existence, and as a tool for self-representation. Frederick Douglass, the most photographed person of 19th century, recognized the power of photography to change one's narrative. Douglass commissioned over 150 of his portraits, with an intention to proclaim himself as a man of self-possession and to fight racial stereotypes. Considering the current events, and the call for social justice reform, it is important to me as an artist, to give voice to those underserved in our communities. Between the summer 2019 and winter 2020, I have created over a hundred of 4x5 wet plate collodion portraits, working with communities in Maryland, Virginia, and Colorado. I believe that the experience that I have gained in the process propels me to take this project to a new level of my social practice and work further with non-profit organizations to share wet plate collodion with people today.

Project Proposal – Anacostia Portraits

Anacostia Portraits is a skill-sharing community arts project that aims to document a historically Native and African American community, and to use a historic photographic process to bear witness to the Anacostia people in this place and time. As many parts of DC, the social landscape of Anacostia Village is on a verge of gentrification, which will have a permanent effect on the community. Working with the Anacostia Art Center, I will make portraits of people who live in the neighborhood, using the historic Wet Plate Collodion process. The goal of the project is to engage Anacostia community in creation of artifacts and provide an artistic experience, which focuses on self-representation and empowerment, within a historic context. I intend to organize six bi-weekly community portrait sessions, at the space provided by Anacostia Art Center, and create over a hundred of photographic plates. During the sessions, each plate will be hand-coated, exposed in camera, and developed instantly, with the process visible to the participants. Because of the participatory nature of the project, the participants experience the artwork firsthand, while the image is created and as they receive a physical plate with their likeness. The general public and the members of the community will be invited to observe the process, accompanied by a brief history of photography presentation. For each person photographed, I will create two tintypes; one plate will be shared with the sitter, and the other will become a part of an installation and a digital archive. Upon completion of the participatory sessions, the photographic plates will be scanned and archived in a digital format. The portraits created during the sessions will be mounted on boards and displayed in an installation at Anacostia Art Center. In addition, a website featuring the project will be created, allowing a wider audience to experience the artifacts.



Timeline--May and June 2021

