

# Melissa Joseph

## Workspace Program 2021

DIEU /  
DONNE /

Melissa Joseph explores memory, history, and diaspora in her work, centering bodies of women and people of color through the recreation of her family photographs. For Joseph, the photographs from her family's archive act as markers of her multicultural identity, as well as a means towards feeling connected to relatives living overseas in India. The family images capture scenes of daily life and important moments in her personal history, including gatherings and funerals, documented and shared with relatives who were unable to be there in person.

Using traditional craft materials including felt, ceramic, and more recently, paper, Joseph alludes to labor historically performed by women. At Dieu Donn  Joseph used pulp paint – a finely beaten, pigmented linen pulp that can be used like paint – on handmade abaca and cotton paper to create vibrantly colored and nuanced images of her family photographs. Working at Dieu Donn  has created ripples throughout Joseph's practice; the artist now incorporates color combinations she chanced upon through pulp painting into her work in other mediums. The materiality of the art object is particularly important to Joseph, and the medium often guides her, revealing itself as she works.

In recreating her family's archive through labor-intensive processes, Joseph offers attention and care to important moments and figures from her life. While the photographs are deeply personal and specific, Joseph's work is also relatable; the artist notes that even in the most specific scenes, viewers are able to find points of entry to their own pasts. After losing much of her family's photographs in a house fire, Joseph's recreated memories become even more important as markers of her past, and as representatives of connection in a diasporic community.

*I arrived at Dieu Donn  without preconceived ideas of what I might endeavor to make there, and it proved to be a good thing, because it was clear early on that the possibilities of paper are endless. Through an intuitive process, painting with pulp paint emerged as a natural way for me to make work. It allowed for expressionist, gestural, visual vocabulary akin to my felting and ceramic languages. I started making small paintings, and gradually increased the scale until my final piece, a 40 x 60 inch diptych. I learned so much in the process of making these works. It required a special type of endurance, both physically and emotionally. I also experienced a new type of fatigue, which I clumsily call memory fatigue. In my studio practice I often work with images from my personal family photo archive. I may use one or two im-*



Top: Melissa Joseph, *Sitting at the dining room table*, Abaca base sheet with pigmented linen pulp paint, 18 x 24 inches

Bottom: Melissa Joseph, *Airplane Window Diptych: The Grandparents*, Cotton and abaca base sheet with pigmented linen pulp paint, 24 x 18 inches

one or two images in a day. This process requires a return to the time and space of the photograph and all the emotions that come with it. When at Dieu Donn , I would work through four to five, sometimes even more images in one day. As I got more tired, the painting became more gestural and automatic. The circumstances forced me to be decisive, something I struggle with in general. I was in training and now I am ready for the next challenge. I hope to return to Dieu Donn  one day and make even larger pulp paintings. I will undoubtedly miss the beautiful dialogues I was lucky enough to have with paper, but we are now colleagues, and I know we will see each other again soon.

- Melissa Joseph



Above: Melissa Joseph working in the Dieu Donn  studio, 2022.

#### About the Artist

Melissa Joseph is a Brooklyn-based multimedia artist. Her work addresses themes of memory, family history, and the politics of how we occupy spaces. She intentionally alludes to the labors of women as well as experiences as a first generation American and the unique juxtapositions of diasporic life. Her work has been shown at the Delaware Contemporary, Woodmere Art Museum, Bemis Center for Contemporary Art, Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, and featured in *Hyperallergic*, *New American Paintings*, *Zyzyva*. She has participated in residencies at the Textile Arts Center, BRIC, Dieu Donn , and soon at the Archie Bray Foundation for Ceramic Arts.

#### About Dieu Donn 

Dieu Donn  is a leading cultural institution dedicated to serving established and emerging artists through the collaborative creation of contemporary art using the process of hand papermaking.

#### About the Workspace Program

Established in 1990, the Workspace Program offers annual residencies to New York State emerging artists to create new work in handmade paper. The primary goals of this program are to encourage emerging artists to explore the creative possibilities of handmade paper and to develop this art form through a process of collaboration and experimentation. The Workspace Program is presented to the public through an annual exhibition of works produced in this residency program, as well as through print, digital, and online formats. For more information about the Workspace Program, or to learn how to apply, visit [www.dieudonne.org](http://www.dieudonne.org).

#### Support

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