

# Smoke, Mirrors, and Splinters

By Dessane Lopez Cassell

“Is the American project a ceramic hammer?”<sup>1</sup> In this era of crumbling empires, Ilana Harris-Babou’s question is a fitting one. Like many of the queries her work poses, this particular one highlights the fragility of American exceptionalism, slyly underlining it in red pen.

Breakable hammers and other fragile tools abound throughout Harris-Babou’s creative output, which encompasses sculpture, video, installation, and more. Describing her work as a “Trojan horse,” the Brooklyn-born artist traffics in markers of the mundane, using them to poke fun at hyper-consumerism and our (sometimes unwitting) complicity with racial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> In videos like *Reparation Hardware* (2018) and more recently, *Human Design* (2020), Harris-Babou crafts satirical takes on case studies in aspirational marketing. In each instance, she directs her lens at the enduring allure of the luxury home-furnishing company formerly known as Restoration Hardware (trendily rechristened RH in recent times).

“Reparations will be our most ambitious project yet,” Harris-Babou calmly intones in voiceover at the start of *Reparation Hardware*. Originally commissioned for the online streaming platform DIS. ART, the edutainment-style video sports a faux-inspirational soundtrack, transporting viewers to the placid realm

of high-end advertorials. Vaguely stirring piano chords score the artist’s entrance to a dilapidated old barn, an architectural trope ripped straight from the pages of RH’s notorious “source books,” in which rampant cultural appropriation is wielded in service of concocting a slick, yet perfectly rustic, Modernist aesthetic.

Here, the artist plays the part of a corporate “reparator,” a lone Black woman creative roving the American countryside in search of the nation’s most “authentic histories.” At various points, the video cuts to brown-and-white photographic stills that freeze her in time, with an upright broom in-hand. The gesture echoes that of Ella Watson’s in Gordon Parks’s *American Gothic* (1942), itself a jab at the structural inequities elided by Grant Wood’s iconic, eponymous painting from 1930.

Hands are a frequent motif, in this video and throughout Harris-Babou’s moving image work. They are often shown in close-up, dutifully writing, drawing, or otherwise toiling away in service of her biting takes on “good design.” In *Reparation Hardware*, our main character scribbles thoughtfully in a notebook: “40 ACRES AND A MULE” appears over and over again on a page in handwritten block letters. A perpetual trickster, Harris-Babou takes aim at the false

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1 Ilana Harris-Babou, conversation with the author, August 19, 2021.

2 Ilana Harris-Babou, BRIC Artist-in-Residence, BK Stories, August 9, 2016, BRIC TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bG8YNLWrW74>

promise of reparations for freed Black people in the wake of the Civil War. That glimmer of restitution in the direct wake of centuries of enslavement is one that remains glaringly unfulfilled today—a fact Harris-Babou’s character lampoons, noting in a chipper tone: “We’ve earned the right to the soil, many times over and over. And now we’re determined to have it.”

Aptly, Harris-Babou’s futile tools—made of both tender clay and the aforementioned ceramic—thwack at crooked nails at various points; each casually violent meeting of materials rendering them useless as they crack, splinter, and bend out of shape. These “dysfunctional ceramics” make an earlier appearance in her 2017 video and installation, *Finishing a Raw Basement*. A spoof of popular home improvement shows, this work enlists Harris-Babou’s mother as co-star. Sheila Harris, a frequent collaborator of the artist, is perhaps the original doyenne of the artist’s unique brand of sly, deadpan humor. Together, the two play the roles of cheerful yet mildly disaffected hosts intent on sprucing up a “man cave.”

At one point, the characters exchange HGTV buzzwords: “Classic. Modern. Transitional. Mid-century.” Each sheathed in the demeanor of an awkward television host, their plastic smiles and perfect lipstick frozen into closely cropped frames. Cannily, Harris-Babou’s

video works are never scripted. The *Get Out*-style antics and campy exchanges are largely the result of improvisation between the artist and family members on camera. (She often ropes her siblings in as well.) Harris-Babou later “makes sense of [things] in the edit,” re-recording as necessary.<sup>3</sup> Though she often fills the roles of actor, art director, and prop maker, as well as editor, she sees her work as more akin to collage than filmmaking.

Reflecting on her chameleonic tendencies, Harris-Babou once recalled a high school-era Halloween costume, which, in hindsight, has become a conceptual well from which much of her work springs. Stuck without a costume, she donned all-white and went to school as just that—a comical stunt that reminded me of the use of whiteface on FX’s *Atlanta*, that similarly incisive and occasionally magical realist series. (Think Tobias Walner, rather than Teddy Perkins.<sup>4</sup>) Harris-Babou’s ingenuity, however, was lost on her supposedly progressive peers at Brooklyn’s St. Ann’s School. The expected whine of a white classmate—“if I dressed up as Black, I wouldn’t be allowed to do that”—laid bare a fundamental inability to understand what might have been one of her earliest performances, as well as the power dynamics at play.<sup>5</sup>

For Harris-Babou, performing whiteness is a way of “revealing its strangeness,”

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3 Ilana Harris-Babou, conversation with the author, August 19, 2021.

4 *Atlanta*, season 1, episode 6, FX, directed by Donald Glover. See here for an example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diLqmtXe1tk>

5 Ilana Harris-Babou in conversation with Amy Beecher, *The Amy Beecher Show*, “Episode 30: Cooking Yoni Eggs with Ilana Harris-Babou,” August 9, 2019, <https://amybeecher.show/episode-30-ilana-harris-babou>



her aim being to eventually decenter it altogether.<sup>6</sup> Hence the importance of using her own body and those of her family; from her cunning spoofs of cooking shows (*Cooking with the Erotic*, 2016) and home improvement media (*Finishing a Raw Basement*; *Reparation Hardware*; *Human Design*), to her acerbic critiques of wellness culture (*Decision Fatigue*, 2020; *Leaf of Life*, 2020–), Harris-Babou’s work positions Black people in realms where they are traditionally omitted. Beyond commenting on absence, she draws our attention to the systems that perpetuate this commercial exclusion. Each sweeping gesticulation or thumbs up dripping in paint becomes a pointed subversion of the omnipresent, manicured white hands perpetually rendered in close-up. For regardless of their specific genre, these racialized tropes of aspirational media act as both the conductors and instigators of mainstream desires for *more or better*. These hands don’t just show us what we want; they tell us, from the vantage point of people we have been conditioned to heed. Harris-Babou’s work pulls back the curtain and points that out, eliciting cathartic cackles in the process. More recently though, her projects have veered slightly out of the realm of humor.

*Leaf of Life* and her ongoing *Wellness Collages* (an evolving multi-channel installation and a collage series, respectively) take on the deeply unfunny subject of healthcare inequality in the US. Begun in 2020, amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, these projects exert a laser focus on the allure and nefarious grip of “alternative” lifestyle empires like those of “Dr.” Sebi (born Alfredo Bowman) and Gwyneth Paltrow’s *goop*. Lawsuits and in some cases, serious consumer harm, have trailed these cult-like entities—the dubious philosophies of which have become all the more concerning amid a global health emergency.<sup>7</sup> Still, significant followings of everyday people and celebrities alike have flocked to each.

Among his numerous beliefs, Sebi proposed that health issues like sickle cell anemia, leukemia, and even AIDS could be remedied among Black people if they adhered to an all-alkaline diet, free of “Caucasian food” (animal products and processed foods).<sup>8</sup> In the 1980s, he founded Dr. Sebi’s Cell Food to peddle his philosophies and products, attracting stars like Nipsey Hussle, Michael Jackson, and Lisa “Left-Eye” Lopes.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Ilana Harris-Babou in conversation with Amy Beecher, 2019.

7 See “Gwyneth Paltrow’s Goop series on Netflix slammed by NHS chief,” *BBC*, January 30, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51312441>; Jonathan Jarry, “‘Dr.’ Sebi: What Do We Make of this Non-Doctor,” Office for Science and Society, McGill University, April 12, 2019. <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/quackery/dr-sebi-what-do-we-make-him>; Emily Kirkpatrick, “Goop Responds to “Frivolous” Lawsuit Claiming That Its Vagina Candles Explode After Lighting,” *Vanity Fair*, May 18, 2021. <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2021/05/gwyneth-paltrow-goop-vagina-candle-lawsuit-explosion-fire>

8 Ilana Harris-Babou, “Healing of the Nations,” *Triple Canopy*, August 5, 2021. <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/healing-of-the-nations>

9 Chris Bell, “Conspiracy theories spread after Nipsey Hussle shooting,” *BBC News*, April 2, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-47785688>





For Harris-Babou, the subject strikes particularly close to home for a few reasons: just before the pandemic, her sister, a disillusioned health care worker, began following some of the Facebook content produced by Sebi's company. She quickly became alarmed by its promotion of life-threatening misinformation (including a total rejection of germ theory) and exited their orbit soon after.<sup>10</sup> Still, the continued, cult-like following of Sebi's doctrine remains concerning to Harris-Babou, particularly given its popularity among communities of color, upon whom the pandemic's disproportionate effect has been well-documented.<sup>11</sup> The uneven deadliness of the pandemic struck the artist early on, after a family member died from the virus: "for a long time after, I didn't know of any white folks who had anyone in their extended family who had died."<sup>12</sup>

In *Leaf of Life*, lush, brightly hued fruits and vegetables proliferate, adorning the edges of video frames and acting as wallpaper for the installation. A nod to Sebi's enduring belief in a cure-all alkaline diet, these raw foods float about like oversized props from a high-school play, as each video's sound and coloring conjures the oversaturated mystique of late '90s music videos. Each clip sends the viewer oscillating between ideological poles, bouncing from healthy skepticism of the medical industry to an anti-vaxxer level of distrust as if in a pinball machine. Dr. Sebi's world, as Harris-Babou presents

it, invites me to linger in an awareness of that curious grey zone in which Black folks who remind me of my aunts and cousins are somehow aligned with the (largely white) conspiracy theorists and libertarians I learned a long time ago to stay away from. An unexpected, troubling Venn diagram takes shape.

Skepticism, in Harris-Babou's rendering, might free you or plunge you into an endless rabbit hole of paranoia, particularly when combined with utter systemic abandonment. Worse still, the choice is rarely entirely yours, inextricably bound up in the contexts and systems we are each inextricably part of, oppressed by, or forced to comply with.

With startling clarity, Harris-Babou's work dispels the smoke and mirrors of the fantasy being sold to us, revealing what tricks us into buying it.

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10 Ilana Harris-Babou, "Healing of the Nations."

11 "Health Equity Considerations & Racial & Ethnic Minority Groups," Center for Disease Control and Prevention, updated April 19, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/health-equity/race-ethnicity.html>

12 Ilana Harris-Babou, "Healing of the Nations."