Case Studies

Alice George Studio | Patanisha Williams

Selected exhibitions showing the curatorial approach and public impact of Patanisha Williams's work.

The Audacity to Believe

Bringing the life of Dr. Marcus Foster into focus

Client: Marcus Foster Education Institute
Venue: African American Museum & Library at Oakland (AAMLO)
Year: 2023
Role: Curator and exhibition designer

The commission

The Marcus Foster Education Institute commissioned Patanisha Williams to curate and design The Audacity to Believe for its 50th anniversary, celebrating the life of the man behind the institution. The goal was to help visitors understand the person whose commitment to children and education continues to guide the Institute's work.

The approach

Williams researched Foster's life through archives and interviews, drawing on materials from AAMLO and the Oakland History Room. She brought these findings together in an exhibition featuring Adinkra symbols and an Afrofuturist design.

The exhibition combined photographs and personal artifacts, including Foster's book, awards, and graduation robe, with audio of his speech and video contributions from his daughter and Institute supporters. Visitors could encounter his ideas in his own voice and learn about him through the people connected to his life and work.

This approach gave the anniversary a personal dimension, connecting the Institute's history to Foster's beliefs, achievements, and continuing relevance.

The impact

Visitor turnout exceeded the project's expectations, and the exhibition received additional funding.

Williams's personal network helped generate unexpected media attention, with coverage including ABC7 News Bay Area, The Oaklandside, and the East Bay Yesterday podcast. This extended the exhibition's visibility across television, digital news, and audio, bringing Foster's story and the Institute's anniversary celebration to audiences beyond the museum.

ABC7 and East Bay Yesterday interviewed Williams as the curator, giving her opportunities to share the research and thinking behind the exhibition.

The commission gave the Institute a public setting in which to share its founding story during a milestone year. It demonstrates how archival research and exhibition design can make an organization's history accessible while supporting public engagement and visibility.

Town Treasures

Black Migration Stories

Bringing Oakland elders' stories into a museum and community gathering space

Original commissioner: Black Gold Storytellers
Exhibition partner and sponsor: Camron-Stanford House, Oakland
Exhibition dates: February 16–April 5, 2024
Role: Photographer, filmmaker and video editor, curator, and exhibition designer

The starting point

Black Gold Storytellers, founded by Dr. Adrienne Danyelle Oliver, commissioned Patanisha Williams to photograph Oakland elders Joyce Gordon and Oscar Wright for its project documenting Black migration stories.

Williams's contributions also included a short film about Gordon's migration and an edited video of Karla Brundage's Zoom interview with Ishmael Reed. She researched and added contextual details to help tell these stories.

The exhibition

Williams subsequently proposed an exhibition and accompanying public programming to Camron-Stanford House, securing its sponsorship and partnership to bring the Black Gold Storytellers project into the museum. Town Treasures gave visitors an opportunity to encounter the elders' experiences through portraits, written stories, and film.

She designed exhibition panels featuring each elder's Southern state of origin, photographs of the elder and the writer who told their story, and a QR code connecting visitors to the full narrative. This design recognized both the people sharing their experiences and the writers documenting them.

Williams also created a behind-the-scenes video of the photo sessions, giving visitors a view of the relationships and creative process behind the portraits.

An opening reception, a storytellers and elders panel, and migration-story open mics extended the exhibition into live gatherings where participants could share their own family journeys.

The impact

Strong community participation. The opening reception and the storytellers and elders panel drew packed audiences. Midbrow's review independently documented the crowded opening and the atmosphere of gratitude among participants, friends, and family. The open mics invited visitors to contribute their own migration stories.

Meaningful recognition. Participating writers shared that they had never seen their work celebrated in this way. Elders described feeling honored as though they had been placed on altars. Black Gold Storytellers founder Dr. Oliver told Midbrow, "It overjoyed my heart to see this exhibit."

Visibility beyond the museum. The exhibition received a Midbrow review and was featured in Williams's interview on KALW's Sights + Sounds, bringing attention to the stories and the public programming.

A foundation for continued programming. The response to the events supported the development of plans for recurring programming.

Town Treasures demonstrates Williams's ability to develop commissioned storytelling into a public exhibition that recognizes its contributors and creates opportunities for community participation.

Media and references

The Audacity to Believe

ABC7 News Bay Area | Exhibition feature and curator interview | August 4, 2023

The Oaklandside | New exhibit about OUSD's first Black superintendent opening at AAMLO | July 26, 2023

East Bay Yesterday | He was bringing people together | Episode 109 | November 17, 2023

California Humanities | 2023 Humanities for All Quick Grant awards

Town Treasures

Camron-Stanford House | Exhibition and public programming

Midbrow | Black Gold Found in Oakland Museum | Robin Lapid | February 19, 2024

KALW | Sights and Sounds Patanisha Williams | March 28, 2024