

# WITNESS



Exhibition  
Guide

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Dear Patrons,

Welcome back to WACO Theater Center as we celebrate 5 years supporting the dreams of artists and young people. We are honored by your presence at WITNESS, a visual art experience through the eyes of Black femme-identifying artists.

There is power in declaring one's own self-image; we hope you sense the intimate and personal nature of the work of the fourteen Black femme-identifying artists featured. As the co-curator of **WITNESS** and as Black woman, I feel a responsibility to ensure emerging and under-subscribed Black women have a platform to reflect the world as they see it.

A special thank you to my co-curator, Genel Ambrose. Genel, your fierce protection of Black women artists is inspiring; thank you for lending us your bright light.

We are proud to offer this free admission art exhibit to our community. Please consider giving a donation to support our future programming. Your support directly benefits the artists, young people and community members that WACO serves across Los Angeles and beyond.

The arts provide a gateway to the stories and histories of our communities. They allow us to laugh, cry, reflect and heal. We know the power of art and will continue to invest in education programs and world class productions.

As we continue our artistic season, Black with a Capital B, we look to deepen our commitment, and expand our footprint to reach more artists and young people who we know will change the world.

Enjoy yourself. Allow the exhibit to reflect you. We look forward to seeing you again at the theater, and invite you to join us, as we celebrate 5 years and our journey into the future.

Together — we are WACO. We are creating a home Where Art Can Occur.



**Richard Lawson**  
Founder & Artistic Director



**Tina Knowles Lawson**  
Founder & Artistic Director

# About the Partners



Founded in 2017 by Richard and Tina Knowles Lawson, WACO (Where Art Can Occur) Theater Center is a community arts and youth mentorship organization in Los Angeles. WACO provides Black artists and young people platforms to showcase their creativity, in order to manifest their dreams.

Learn more at: [wacothatercenter.com](http://wacothatercenter.com)



## GOOD MIRRORS

GOOD MIRRORS is a cultural institution committed to reflecting Black women and girls as whole and dignified beings through storytelling, social impact initiatives, and community empowerment projects. Learn more at: [goodmirrors.institute](https://goodmirrors.institute)



**BLACK WOMEN  
PHOTOGRAPHERS**

Established in July 2020 by Polly Irungu, Black Women Photographers (BWP) is a global community, directory, and hub of over 1,500 Black women and non-binary identifying photographers, spanning over 60+ countries and 35+ U.S. states. Learn more at: [blackwomenphotographers.com](https://blackwomenphotographers.com)

# Programming Calendar

**WACO Theater Center**  
5144 Lankershim Blvd.  
Los Angeles, CA

**Sunday, May 7**  
**3:00pm - 4:00pm**

## Storytelling Through Film

with Sophia Nahli Allison, Amber J. Phillips, and Dana Davenport. Moderated by Jaunice Sills McSwain (Chairwoman Emeritus, Black Women Film Network)

Join us for a conversation with Sophia Nahli Allison, Amber J. Phillips and Dana Davenport about their process, practice, and perspectives around amplifying Black femme narratives through film.

**Sunday, May 14**  
**12:00pm - 6:00pm**

## Legacy Archives

with Amber Evangelista aka Valley in Film

Caregivers and families are invited to get their images captured on film in celebration of Mother's Day.

**Sunday, May 21**  
**3:00pm - 4:00pm**

## Memory Work

with Alexis Hunley and Cara Elise Taylor

A conversation with Alexis Hunley & Cara Elise Taylor about legacy, portraiture and stewarding memory through family archives.

**Saturday, May 27**  
**3:00pm - 4:00pm**

## Closing Weekend: Can I Get A Witness?

Join us for a closing discussion between the curator and the artists around themes in their work, their artist practice and what they hope visitors bear witness to and take away from the show. Followed by Q&A.



# Curatorial Statement

**What do we witness when we see through the eyes of Black women?**

**What becomes visible?**

**How does looking alongside Black women shift our point-of-view?**



Photo credit: Sophia Nahli Allison

#WITNESSatWACO



WITNESS brings together fifteen Black women, genderqueer and non-binary artists born or based in Los Angeles, to share their vision of society, community, and themselves through art — in the tradition of Black feminist thought.

We are continually tasked with defining and redefining ourselves in order to navigate societal misrepresentations of our humanity. **WITNESS is a visual record of Black women's ability to harness identity, lineage and ancestral wisdom as super powers enabling us to see (and be) what others cannot.**

The installations, portraiture, audio and film works that comprise WITNESS act as portals to a world where distractions of racism, sexism and homophobia cease to exist. **The image makers demonstrate how Black women are innate artists, worldbuilders, visionaries and conjurers who employ creativity as a practice of self-preservation - rendering ourselves, our children and our communities whole in a world that attempts to diminish us.**

Exploring themes of identity, girlhood, womanhood, family, community care, future-making and dreaming, **WITNESS invites you to look alongside and through the eyes of these artists to bear witness to Black subjects existing wholly and beautifully.** While doing so, we encourage you to reflect upon your own experiences of unfolding, blooming and becoming the person you are today.

**Finally, this space is a call for you to be a witness and steward of memory.** In the current culture war that is attempting to erase our stories from the history books, stewarding them is a critical act of self care that will allow us to continue to thrive throughout generations. **To be a Black woman is to exist as a divine being in the flesh with a paranormal ability to soar despite the odds. Knowing our stories makes this possible.**

# Meet the Curators



## **Tina Knowles Lawson**

Artistic Director, WACO Theater Center

Passionate about her philanthropic endeavors, Tina Knowles Lawson is a noted designer, entrepreneur and art collector. Lawson, her family and extended family members have built and established a number of space for young people, including the Knowles-Rowland Center for Youth located in Houston, Texas. In 2010, Tina partnered with her daughter Beyoncé to create the Beyoncé Cosmetology Center at Phoenix House in Brooklyn, New York as a resource to empower women, while providing them the life skills that would give them hope and a means of support after leaving the center. She founded WACO (Where Art Can Occur) Theater Center in 2017 with her husband Richard Lawson, providing a platform for artists and youth to live out their dreams through mentorship. She has received many awards including the prestigious Ace Awards, the International Global Leadership Award and the Golden Hanger Award. In 2011, Tina was honored by the University of Houston as part of their Living Archive Series and in 2014 by the Texas Women's Empowerment.



## Genel T. Ambrose

Founder, GOOD MIRRORS

Genel T. Ambrose is a multidisciplinary artist, cultural curator, and writer. As an artist, she creates art and experiences that interrogate memory and the role that technology plays in preserving and sharing the narratives of Black women and girls. Genel is the Founder of GOOD MIRRORS, a cultural institution committed to accurately reflecting Black women as whole and dignified beings. Genel is currently a Create Change Artist-in-Residence at the Laundromat Project and a member of New Inc, the New Museum's incubator program for professionals working at the intersection of art, technology and design. A graduate of The New School, Genel received her MFA in Creative Writing, Non-fiction and a dual bachelors in Journalism and Sociology from New York University. Genel has published works with i-D magazine, VICE, and Garage Magazine, among other publications.

# Meet the Artists

Alexis Hunley

Amber Evangelista

Amber J. Phillips

April Bey

Cara Elise Taylor

Dana Davenport

Dee Williams

Elise Peterson

House of Aama

Liam Woods

Sade Ndya

Sophia Nahli Allison

Stephanie Mei-Ling

# Alexis Hunley

Photographer



I create documentary, commercial, and editorial work for a variety of clients including: The National Center for Civil and Human Rights, TIME, Best Buy, Pinterest, Essence, and Airbnb.

Propelled by my love for storytelling, I have always been drawn to work that provides space for me to explore vulnerability and intimacy.

As an artist experiencing life via multiple intersecting identities, I have found that my desire to dive deeper and reach for the truest, most authentic forms of expression drives my creative pursuits.



*I am my grandma's baby.  
And it is my privilege to tend  
to her long-deferred dreams.*



*As the custodian of my late grandmother's  
archive, I have been given a gift beyond  
measure. The discovery of her extensive  
collection of work has given me a window  
into a world I wish I could have explored  
with her. A world that intimately connects  
us now.*

*I am struck by the power of her intuition,  
the depth of her vision, and the grief I feel  
witnessing her work. Work that the world  
deserved to witness.*



*As I make my way through each new box,  
I am able to see the world through her  
eyes-a world that is both familiar and new.  
The world of an artist. A mother. A wife. A  
neighbor. A sister. A friend.*

*The uncanny similarities between my work  
and my grandmother's have given me an  
even deeper appreciation for the roadmap  
she has left me. Despite the fact that these  
treasures have been hidden away in boxes  
for all these years, there is no question that  
her creative spirit has been a guiding force  
in my own journey as an artist.*

*I am ZZ's baby.*



# Amber Valley Evangelista

Photographer



Amber Valley Evangelista is a full-time mom of four children, a photographer, and a curator. Her specialized interest in vintage film cameras and Polaroids brings a nostalgic tone to her captured images. She is the founder of Valley in Film. A company that focuses on portraiture and other creative assistance, including fashion, campaigns, and workshops. Her company's mission is to make film photography more accessible to all audiences by sharing fun techniques and tips through social media, studio classes, and mentorships; and by providing affordable photo sessions to help resuscitate a dying art form. As a full-



time photographer, Amber uses portraiture to document her family moments, showcase her passion for fashion, and amplify the stories of minorities. Her passion for working with various artists and connecting with the community has secured sponsorships and partnerships with companies such as Cinestill Film and Topa Topa Brewery.

Amber's most recent project is a solo curated show currently on exhibit at The Santa Barbara Arts Fund. It is entitled "The Kind of Mother: Coloring Outside the Lines of Motherhood," an exhibition celebrating the complexities of femininity and motherhood in the Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) community. Film photography has always been a way for Amber to reconnect with her childhood and give others the same sense of nostalgia and home when viewing her images. Amber's ongoing photo series, Legacy Archives, is her personal passion project. This series offers family portrait sessions to those looking to capture photos that ensure they will never forget who they are and where they've come from.



# Amber J. Phillips

## Visual Artist



Amber J. Phillips is a storyteller, filmmaker, and creative director. She creates world building narratives using warm visuals and vulnerable performances through her lens of being a fat Black queer femme auntie from the Midwest. Amber recently released her first short film, *Abundance* about the limitations and radical possibilities of identity. Amber is the producer, writer, and performer of *Abundance* that was most recently a 2021 Black-Star Film Festival selection and won the audience award for Best Short Narrative. Amber's written and visual work imagines a world where Black womanhood is an abundant overwhelming experience of safety, pleasure, and joy. She is devoted to using radical Black imagination to create stories, art, culture, and community.



You can experience  
more of Amber's work  
on Instagram and Twitter  
[@AmberAbundance](#) and  
at [AmberAbundance.com](http://AmberAbundance.com)

# April Bey

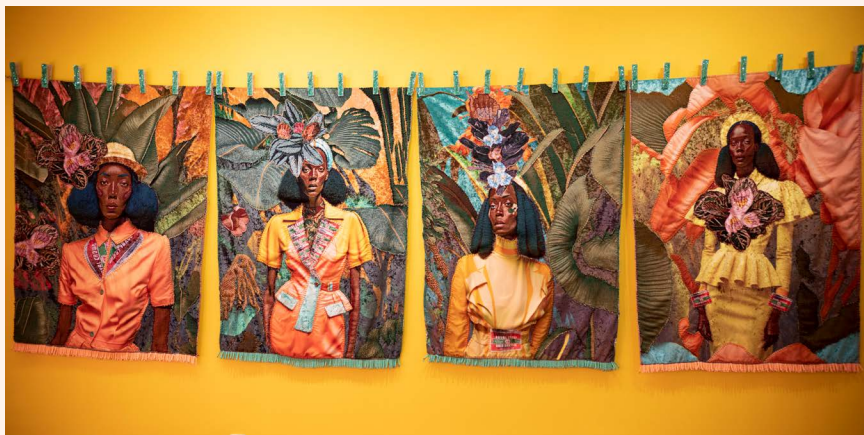
Visual Artist



April Bey grew up in The Bahamas (New Providence) and now resides and works in Los Angeles, CA as a visual artist and art educator.

Bey's interdisciplinary artwork is an introspective and social critique of American and Bahamian culture, feminism, generational theory, social media, AfroFuturism, AfroSurrealism, post-colonialism and constructs of race within supremacist systems.





Sankofa, They/Them  
Tapestry



# Cara Elise Taylor

Photographer



Cara Elise Taylor is a Black woman from the Midwest, raised by Afro-Latino parents, making images that see the depth and multitudes of Black people globally. The themes in her work include nostalgia, history, Blackness, health & wellness, community, food/cooking, and Caribbean/Afro-Latin culture. Her motivation for photography has always been the importance of preserving history by making an archive of the world as it is now, through the divinity and depth of a Black woman's perspective.



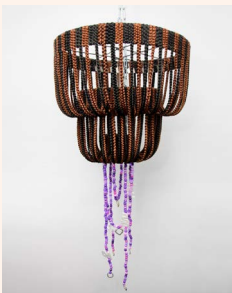


# Dana Davenport

## Interdisciplinary Artist



Dana Davenport (1994) is a Korean and Black American interdisciplinary artist shifting between installation, sculpture, video, and performance. Within her practice, she addresses the complexities that surround interminority racism as a foundation for envisioning her own and the collective futurity of Black and Asian peoples. Davenport utilizes synthetic hair as a proxy for her body to discuss the strained relationship between Black and Asian peoples, specifically in America. As a product overwhelmingly sold by Koreans to Black Americans, she considers the implications of the material as it sits on the beauty supply shelf and how it is activated in the hands of Black folks through love and labor.



# Dee Williams

Photographer



Dee Williams is a queer Jamaican-American photographer and visual artist whose work centers around stories of the African diaspora. Inspired by the rich diversity of unique cultures and communities, Dee seeks to celebrate those stories through fashion and portraiture, while deconstructing and redefining the outside monolithic views, ideas, and representation of Black culture and people. Using fashion as the background for social commentary and taking in her experience in Social Media Management for publications like Ebony Magazine, iOneDigital, and Thrillist, she is able to shift those perspectives, especially in media and entertainment, to a more inclusive and diverse spotlight across multiple platforms. Her work has caught the eye of various publications, such as GQ, Wired, and Essence.





After spending 8 years in New York City, Dee is now based in Los Angeles, California, where she continues to make her name in digital marketing and commercial + editorial photography.



# Deun Ivory

Photographer



Deun Ivory is a Texas based creative wellness visionary, multi-disciplinary artist & photographer whose work centers and celebrates Black women. widely known for her ethereal aesthetic & creative ingenuity, Ivory curates visual experiences that inspire those who engage with her work to restore and reclaim narratives rooted in self-empowerment, joy & worthiness. Ivory draws from the belief that beauty is wellness, which informs her exploration of art, spaces and design as healing mechanisms for marginalized communities.

As a visionary, Ivory serves as the founder and creative director of two influential brands: the body: a home for love, a 501(c)3 non-profit helping Black women heal through photography and Black women are worthy, a social impact initiative specializing in conceptual design and immersive art installations.





# Elise R. Peterson

## Visual Artist



Elise R. Peterson is a visual artist and media host living and working in Los Angeles.

Elise's work investigates and connects the nuance of the human experience through a limitless practice in storytelling. She has illustrated two children's books: *How Mamas Love Their Babies* and *The Nightlife of Jacuzzi Gasket*.

Working parallel in animated collage, recorded audio, and installation, Elise's visual practice encapsulates intimate storied moments, void of linear timing, pasted against portals of fantasy while joining moments of internal and external existence.



# Liam Woods

## Photographer



Liam Woods is a Trans + Non Binary Image Maker based out of LA. Their work is characterized by the vulnerable, candidly intimate storytelling of Queer people, People of Color and other marginalized communities.

In their 5 year experience as a photographer, Liam has partnered with brands and companies such as Apple, Adidas, Facebook, Spotify, Johnson&Johnson and Warby Parker. They have also shot for publications such as People, Washington Post, Bloomberg, Vogue Paris, The New York Times, LA Times, Cosmopolitan, and Playgirl Magazine. With their brand experience, Liam has formed over 50 creative job opportunities (and counting) for BIPOC and Queer People both in front of and behind the camera. The main mission in their work is to continue to build upon community and provide resources/access for the betterment of BIPOC and Queer creatives as a whole.

## ***“Welcome Home” navigates the soft solace of Queer companionship during hard times.***

*I wouldn't be where I am without the tender touch of the loved ones in my life. I wanted to celebrate that by capturing dynamics of individuals and the important people in their lives that they lean on. Specifically in Black and Brown Queer spaces.*

*With our community being thrown in the pits of erasure, it is more important now than ever to share our light and stories with the world. We must never forget how precious these moments are and the great impact love can hold.*



# House of Aama

## Visual Artists



House of Aama is the spiritual expression of mother and daughter design duo, Rebecca Henry and Akua Shabaka in material form. Manufactured 100% in Los Angeles, California.

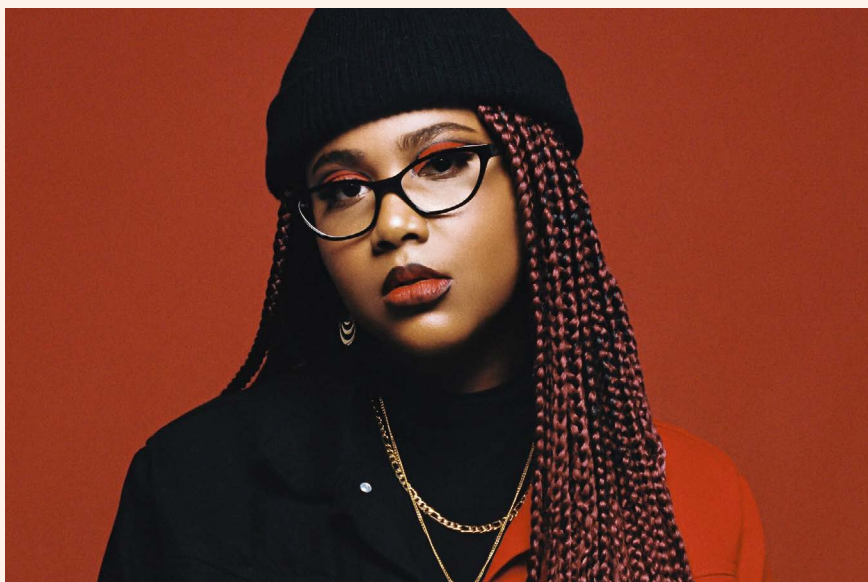
House of Aama explores the folkways of the Black experience by designing timeless garments with nostalgic references informed by historical research, archival analysis, and storytelling. We aim to evoke dialogue, social commentary and conversations around heritage, remembrance and shed light on nuanced histories. House of Aama presents its fashion items as an offering for raw, primal energy to exist in physical form.





# Sade Ndya

## Cinematographer



Sade Ndya is an LA based Cinematographer, who also specializes in Fine Art and Community Organizing. Sade's creative style is grounded in surreal-like imagery, intricate attention to production design and dynamic lighting dedicated to portraying the beauty in being black.

Sade is represented by The Gersh Agency. Her work has been published on platforms like The LA Times and Netflix, where her work was highlighted in the recent documentary 'Strong Black Lens'. She has freelanced working for notable companies like BET, Disney, NBC, Hillman Grad and Hoorae. Through her organizing work, Sade works with Made In Her Image, a non-profit that provides women and non-binary youth of color with education, resources and industry opportunities in film, media, and technology.





Website [www.sadendya.co](http://www.sadendya.co)

“Re-Imagining Black \_\_\_” is a two screen video installation created by Sade Ndyia, reflecting on the past history and evolving future of black women in cinema. The left channel pays homage to the legacy of iconic black actresses; Cicely Tyson, Diahann Carroll, Pam Grier, Beah Richards, Esther Jones and Hattie McDaniel. The right channel re-imagines the future of roles for black women on screen; from surreal storylines to candid experiences within Black womanhood. The installation spotlights a single theater chair, inviting audiences to interact with the piece. The theater chair symbolizes elevation, granting black women audiences the space to be the core audience of their own stories. “Re-Imagining Black\_\_\_” is a hopeful piece of manifestation, affirmation and ideation. For black women to be at the forefront and in control of their own narratives within cinema.

# Sophia Nahli Allison

Filmmaker and Photographer



Sophia Nahli Allison is a black lesbian myth.

An Academy Award® nominated filmmaker, self-portrait photographer, and artist from South Central Los Angeles, she reimagines the archives by excavating hidden truths. Her work, a meditation of spirit, conjures ancestral memories, mysticism, and abstraction to explore the space between reality and dreams. She engages with themes of flight, identity, and time, to unearth and awaken spiritual archives and portals.

Sophia was a 2020 United States Artists Fellow and a 2014 Chicago 3Arts Awardee. She has been an artist-in-residence at Black Rock Senegal, MacDowell, The Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France., POV Spark's African Interactive Art Residency, and The Center for Photography at Woodstock. She holds a Master's in visual communication and a Bachelor's in photojournalism.



Sophia received a 2021 Academy Award nomination for her short experimental documentary *A Love Song For Latasha* (2019), of which she was the director, cinematographer, editor, and a producer. Through a collaboration with Netflix and artist Victoria Cassinova, the first Latasha Harlins mural was created in South Central Los Angeles. In 2021 she directed and co-wrote the HBO Max special *Eyes On The Prize: Hal- lowed Ground*.

She is expanding her ongoing self-portrait series *Dreaming Gave Us Wings* into a cinematic installation and delving deeper into the medicine, art, and science of marijuana.

# Stephanie Mei-Ling

Photographer

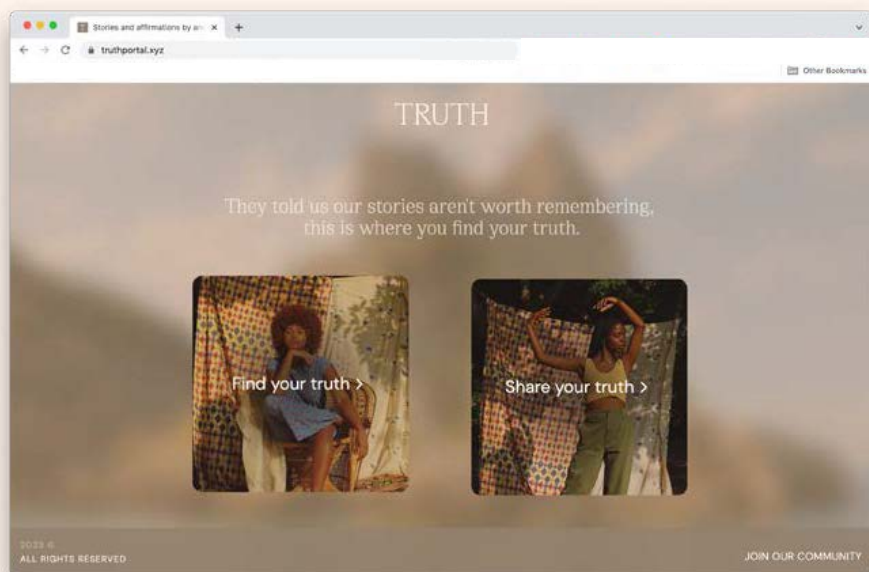


Stephanie Mei-Ling is a Black-American/Taiwanese documentary photographer based between Brooklyn and Los Angeles. Through her work she explores such layered issues as the complexity of intersectional identity; elevating the narrative of invisible communities; society's fetishization of marginalized subcultures; the universality of otherness through a global lens; and the appropriation, re-appropriation and reclaiming of cultural narratives.





# TRUTH Portal



TRUTH Portal is an interactive installation and [web platform](https://truthportal.xyz) that collects and transmits audio-based stories of Black women, by Black women in an effort to combat algorithmic bias and expand the data that informs how Black women and girls are depicted online. As a digital universe of ancestral knowledge, TRUTH seeks to provide Black femmes an alternative experience on the internet through storytelling and community. TRUTH Portal is a project of GOOD MIRRORS led by creator Genel Ambrose.

Experience the portal online at [TRUTHPortal.xyz](https://truthportal.xyz)

**Lead Collaborators:** Aisha Shillingford and Shanna Sabio

**Research Manager:** Nzinga Muhammad

**Data Scientist:** Lauren Schores

**Syllabus Development:** Mali Collins

**Art Directors:** Sulamita Javier and Nia Acosta

**Design:** Elisa Slaton

**Web Development:** Carleton Maybell





# Thank you

to the WACO Theater Center

**Richard Lawson**, Artistic Director

**Tina Knowles Lawson**, Artistic Director

**Shay Wafer**, Executive Director

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**Isreal Spencer**, Mentor

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**Nia Miranda**, Senior Executive Assistant

**Steven Foley**, Director of Operations & Production

**Terrence Terrell**, Mentor

**Tocarra Cash**, Education Coordinator & Mentor

# Thank you

to Black Women Photographers  
and GOOD MIRRORS

**Genel T. Ambrose**, Founder GOOD MIRRORS

**Jennifer Williams**, Consultant

**Lavonda Manning**, Consultant

**Linda Lee**, Consultant

**Mariana Sheppard**, Consultant

**Nia Acosta**, Art Director

**Polly Irungu**, Founder Black Women Photographers

**Shayna McPherson**, Consultant

**Sulamita Javier**, Art Director

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#StartSmall Initiative

#WITNESSatWACO

# WITNESS

April 1 -  
May 27, 2023

Gallery Hours  
Friday to Sunday  
12:00 PM - 6:00 PM

WACO Theater Center  
5144 Lankershim Boulevard  
North Hollywood, LA 91601

