

Figure 1. Keren Alfred, space paper! 2020, handmade paper with abaca and cotton fibers, 18 x 24 in., private collection, Rotterdam, Netherlands

MAKING SPACE

By Keren Alfred

ABOUT KEREN ALFRED

Keren Alfred is an artist and an environmentalist. Her artwork builds on her environmental background and explores aspects of her identity as a Black woman from the Caribbean learning to resist and heal from oppressive systems. She majored in Environmental Studies at Brown University and received her MFA in Book Arts from the University of Iowa Center for the Book.

I'VE BEEN REFLECTING. I've been reassessing. I've been remembering my time in Iowa. I left Iowa in 2022 with an MFA in Book Arts from University of Iowa Center for the Book. I packed up what I could and moved to the East Coast. I display my handmade books on a shelf in the hallway. I store my paints, brushes, thread, natural dyes in various containers between my room and our storage area. I have boxes of handmade paper underneath my bed. There are boxes of my *space paper!* under my bed.

space paper! is a variable edition of handmade paper pieces made using pigmented abaca and cotton pulp in a deckle box. The front of each sheet is made to evoke ideas of outer space – being on earth and looking up at the stars on a clear night, having access to a deep space telescope and seeing nebulas, or being transported to another galaxy. This paper arose out of a collaboration with dance artist and movement researcher, Laila J. Franklin, whose MFA thesis *Space Cadet* considers Black and Asian women's presence in performance by “working to activate a methodology of kinetic imagination that might serve in re-orienting marginalized and oppressed bodies towards new possible futures.” *Space Cadet* involved Skittles that alluded to the Skittles 17-year-old Trayvon Martin carried the night he was murdered. These inspired me to create bright fluorescent stars with pigmented pulp on top of a black and navy-blue base.

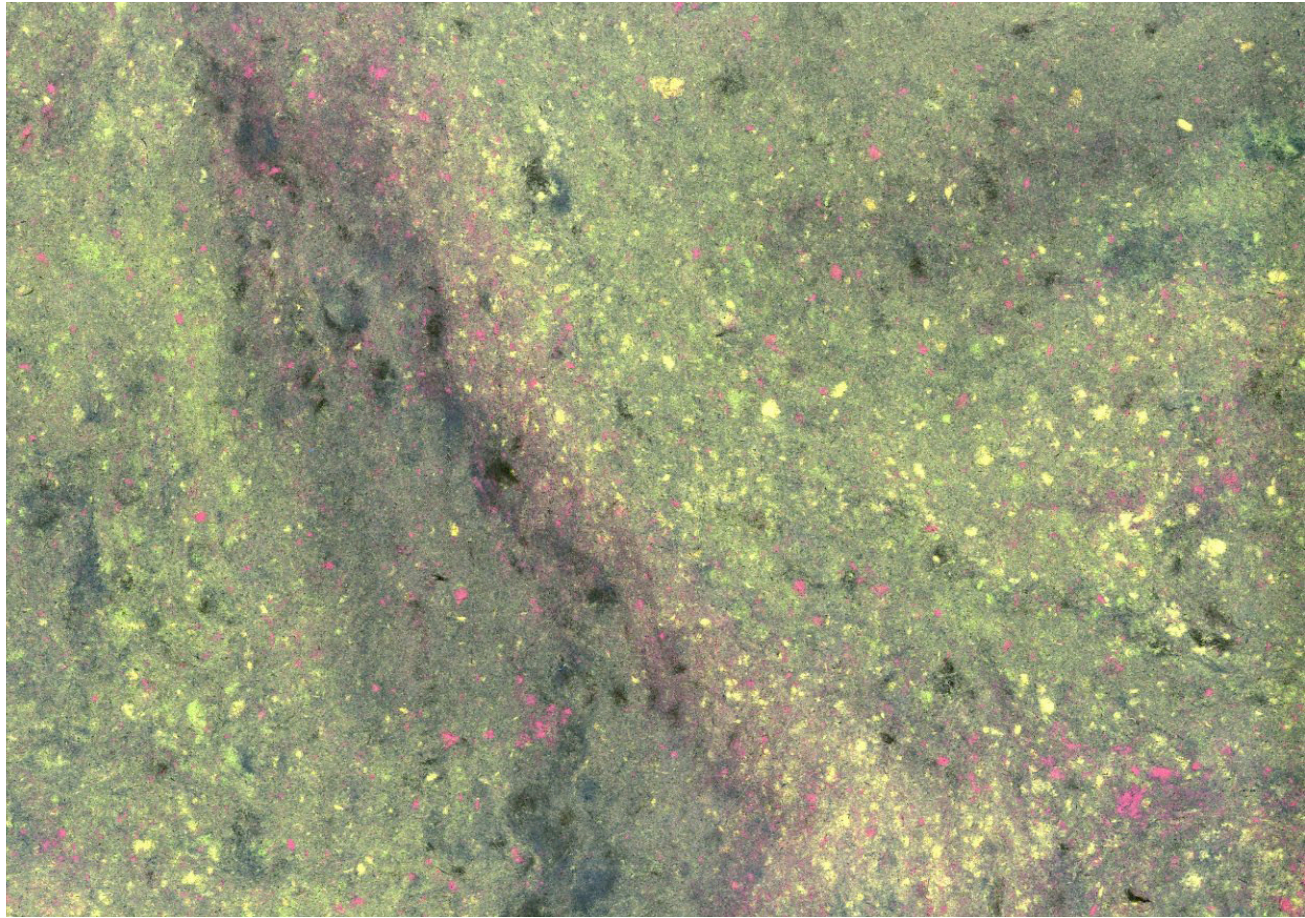


Fig. 2. Keren Alfred.
space paper! 2020,
handmade paper
with abaca and cotton
fibers, 18 x 24 in.,
collection of the artist,
Boston, Massachusetts

I came into grad school with a desire to focus on papermaking and was largely able to do so while I was in Iowa. I truly love making paper. I love feeling the water. I love feeling the pulp. I love just watching and facilitating the whole process because there are so many elements out of my control. I feel so grateful that I was able to be in Iowa and make paper. Unfortunately, the pandemic made it a bit tricky since I didn't have access to the studio for a good chunk of my degree. It was also quite difficult to create since I felt untethered and vulnerable as a Black woman in the United States during a time of heightened racial tensions. I was trying to make sense of the world and my place in it. I was also looking for ways to escape the world and imagine new futures.

I feel very attached to *space paper!* It symbolizes joy and hope. It is a physical representation of friendship and my collaboration with Laila. The creation of *space paper!* was a way for me to process some of the complex emotions and traumatic experiences related to being a Black woman, particularly a Black woman in 2020 with all the racial reckoning around that time. *space paper!* helped me leave Iowa on multiple levels - during a time when I couldn't go back to my home in Kingston, Jamaica because we closed our borders to minimize the impact of the pandemic on our island

I was absorbed by the whole process of creating *space paper!*. From initially conceptualising the paper (stemmed out of my learning the deckle box technique from a classmate

Fig. 3 (below) Keren Alfred pigmenting the abaca pulp that formed the base for space paper!, 2020 at the University of Iowa Center Book, Iowa City, Iowa.



Fig. 4 (right) Keren Alfred forming the individual sheets of space paper! in the deckle box, 2020, at the University of Iowa Center for the Book, Iowa City, Iowa.



Fig. 5 (below) Keren Alfred, wistful and BOLD, 2022, installation of space paper! at the University of Iowa Center for the Book's Merker Gallery, Iowa City, Iowa. Photograph by Taylor Hedrick, 2022.

and going on walks along the river with Laila) to the process of dyeing the colours (it takes time and patience to get pulp pigmented to deep black and dark blue) to experimenting with pulp consistency and finally booking time in the studio (headphones in ear and playlist at the ready) to create and iterate on my paper. I was tapping into joy and I was thinking about Afrofuturism. There is a legacy of Black people hoping and dreaming of better futures when the present is not what it should be. These go hand in hand – finding ways to center Black joy in the present and working from that place to imagine a better future for everyone.



For my MFA thesis, I created an installation of *space paper!* called *wistful and BOLD*, that was arranged in a grid of twenty-one pieces. The five inner pieces each have a phrase written in gold ink in the center. The papers showed a transition from a cloudy, murky sky with muted greys and blacks and few stars to papers where the sky/outer space clears up and galaxies and constellations and nebulas take form, and end with papers that show the deepest black and clearest stars. The phrases are:

DO YOU SEE ME?

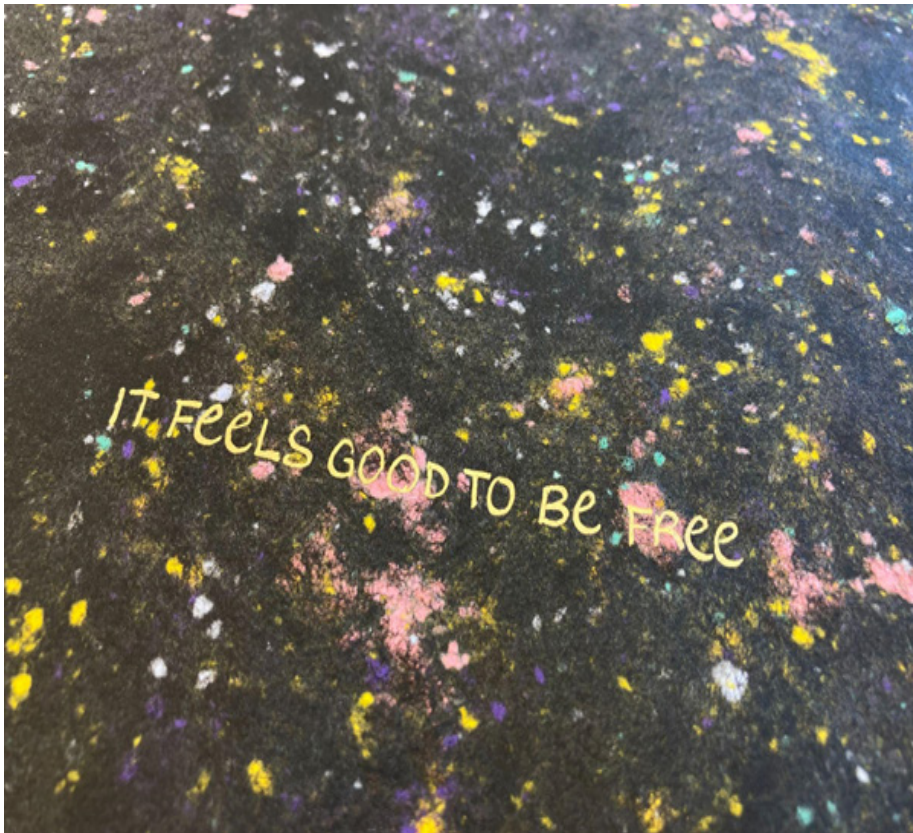
I'M TIRED OF BEING STRONG

DOING ALRIGHT FOR THE TIME BEING

HAFI GIVE THANKS

IT FEELS GOOD TO BE FREE

Fig. 6. Keren Alfred. This photo shows a detail from *wistful and BOLD*, 2022, *space paper and gold ink*, University of Iowa Center for the book, Iowa City, Iowa.



As such, the phrases also follow a transition: from resigned, sad and broken down, to working through the process, and ending with the statement that “it feels good to be free”.

wistful and BOLD was meant to be expansive and all encompassing. I wanted viewers to step back as far as they could from the piece to take everything in. Your back needed to be against the opposite wall to fully appreciate the transition from murky skies to the deepest darkest black. But you also needed to pay attention to the detail and to get in close to appreciate the weight of the five phrases. I wanted the feeling of space and expansiveness and feeling like you could get lost in it. And I wanted to bring people in for them to reflect on the details and on what can be contained in that expanse.

I think about joy in a similar way. Joy is expansive. Joy can be all encompassing. Joy fills you up and bubbles over. And joy requires you to pay attention and get close to see more of what's happening. It's both.

It's everything. You step back to take it all in and you get close and look at the details. I aim to cultivate more joy in my practice and to create work that not only speaks to the trauma that is part of the Black experience in the United States and the Caribbean but that also taps into intentional practices and experiences of joy. *space paper!* was a way for me to meditate on these concepts amid all the turmoil.

I have reflected on where I want my creative journey to go. I shared some of these thoughts with a room full of papermakers at the North American Hand Papermakers Conference in October 2023 but I'm still reflecting on it today. I took a break from making art when I moved to the East Coast. I told myself it was because I had just graduated and was taking time to wrap up my MFA. Then I told myself it was because I had just started a new job - a job that took me out of the art world. Then I told myself it was because I had just moved to a new city. Then I told myself that I needed to take a break from making art because I was burned out. Those were all true, but it was also true that I was having a hard time seeing myself as an artist outside of my MFA program. Imposter syndrome was setting in, and I wasn't prepared for the work that it would entail to re-envision my creative process without the equipment, resources, and support of UICB and the people I encountered there.

I think about capital-A "Art" and it's scary to me. I wrestle a lot with imposter syndrome, and I am a perfectionist. I put a lot of pressure on myself. I worry about sharing my work, even though I want to share it and enjoy doing so. I worry about asking for money for my work. Yet, every time I have shared my work, I have simultaneously felt validated, seen, heard, and fulfilled. Sharing my work feels good.

Desirability in self. Desirability in art? Concerns about how I'm perceived. How people perceive me. What people think of my art. Whether people are interested in my art. Like everyone, I want to be liked.

But I focus on making what I want and putting it out there. Success is in the making of the work. People liking it and wanting it is a bonus.

I want to use *space paper!* I want to turn it into something new. I have been working smaller because that's more digestible for me. I have been living in a smaller space since moving to the East Coast. I'm sharing the space with people. I left a lot of my supplies in Iowa. It felt like too much of a hassle to carry and I wanted to see what minimalism felt like. I'm now slowly building up my studio again.

Allowing time to pass. Being patient with a slower process. Letting myself mourn being away from the studio. Mourn that my MFA wasn't what I envisioned.

Iterative process. R...r...return. Returning to myself. I always trust myself.

Knowledge from the past. Reviewing concepts I was considering and seeing what they mean now.



Fig. 7. Keren Alfred with a sample of space paper! that matches her clothes, 2021 at the University of Iowa Center Book, Iowa City, Iowa.

I've been rereading an artist's book I made for my thesis and it's funny how a lot of the concepts are speaking to me now in different ways. I wrote about returning to myself. Meeting myself where I am. Trusting that I know what I need even if I can't explain it to myself or to others. But I can know all that and it can still be hard to do. As much as I appreciate process-driven work, I'm not patient with myself and with my process of becoming. I forget that the only constant in life is change. I have been afraid to confront my studio practice. Because that will bring up my questions and doubts and fears. But why do I have so many fears about art?

space paper! is precious to me and I think it's time for me to let go. I think I've had an image of wanting to give *space paper!* the "treatment it deserves" - to see it in galleries and juried shows - and I was building that vision into this capital-A Art idea I have in my head. Which is fine, but I also don't think it reflects where I am or what I need right now.

Right now, I'm navigating having a full-time job back in the environmental field. I'm happy to be where I am, but I think I need to go easy and let go of all of this pressure I'm putting on myself to create capital-A Art.

Meet[ing] myself where I am.

Art can be fun. Art can be vibes. Art can be therapeutic.

I have been making business card size affirmations with my handmade paper because that's what I need right now: small, sweet reminders that I'm a superstar and that I'm doing my best and that you're a superstar and you're also doing your best.

space paper! is taking on a new form and meaning with this project. Space now means making space for whatever needs to come next. Whether that's a new project, whether that's a new medium, whether that's more writing. Maybe I'll take up sewing. Maybe I'll get back into natural dyes. Maybe I'll just take some time off to focus on physical health. I don't know but I think it is time to let *space paper!* become something else. To let myself be open to what comes next. To evolve, to change, to be joyful, to be free.



Figure 8 Fig. 8. Keren Alfred creating affirmation cards from space paper!, 2024, Boston Ma