

prop·er

Kassandra L. Khalil

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Kassandra L. Khalil is a visual artist and former codirector of Arts in a Changing America. Kassandra's drawings and sculptures explore how movement and gestures evoke personal and cultural memory. Kassandra channels her interest in Caribbean communities and the culture of resistance into organizing arts programming for her Haitian diaspora in New York.

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prop·er

/'präpər/

adjective

1. truly what something is said or regarded to be; genuine
2. of the required type; suitable or appropriate.¹

My mother used to make me copy down sections of the dictionary when I told a lie. She said that writing down each line exactly, taking down honestly what the page said, would teach me what it meant to be straight with people. To be a proper young lady. To sit up right. To keep your feet on the floor. To not make obvious one's discontent. My mother, Esther, learned this version of womanhood from her mother, Marie, a serious but kind woman who raised her nine children as a seamstress in Port-au-Prince.

My mother brought herself to the United States in her twenties and learned what it meant to be a proper American woman. To still sit up straight, but to make it sexy, to make yourself *for* yourself. I believe both of these women were being honest when they taught me these versions of propriety. What they did not know is that I skipped whole sections of the dictionary.

Only two weeks after I finished painting this series, my grandmother, Marie Lorvanette Laborde, transitioned to the Glory after ninety-six years



Kassandra L. Khalil, *prop-er*, 2020. Vintage sewing patterns, wax marker, ink, acrylic medium, 10 × 4 ft.

of love in action. This piece is about finding myself through the lessons of the women who raised me. It's about the marks laid for me as a guide and about my matriarchs' respect and love for me, however I cut the cloth.

Note

1. *Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English* (Encyclopedia.com), s.v. "proper," <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/proper-o>.