

PRINTING AS PROLOGUE

Recent Work by Allan Edmunds



WoodmereArtMuseum

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Woodmere**ArtMuseum**

FOREWORD

I count Allan Edmunds among the few artists I know whose creative talent in the studio equals his imaginative might as an entrepreneurial leader in the arts. After fifty years of building the Brandywine Workshop and Archives into the internationally renowned resource it has become for artists, educators, museums, collectors, and lovers of art, Edmunds is retiring. To mark the milestone, Woodmere is pleased to present *Printing as Prologue: Recent Work by Allan Edmunds*, an exhibition of eleven new works made by the artist over the last two years. As bold as they are nuanced, these works look inward and linger thoughtfully on family legacies that continue to shape the artist's consciousness. It was in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that this introspective journey developed. The last two years were also a time of reckoning with the ingrained racial injustices of American life. In this regard, Edmunds has long been a powerful voice and one of Philadelphia's most direct and consistent figures in the confrontation with institutional racism and social injustice. This new body of work speaks to our time, offering a path forward that lies within each of us. Edmunds points to histories that resonate both personally and socially, encouraging us to embrace the exploration as a source of strength.

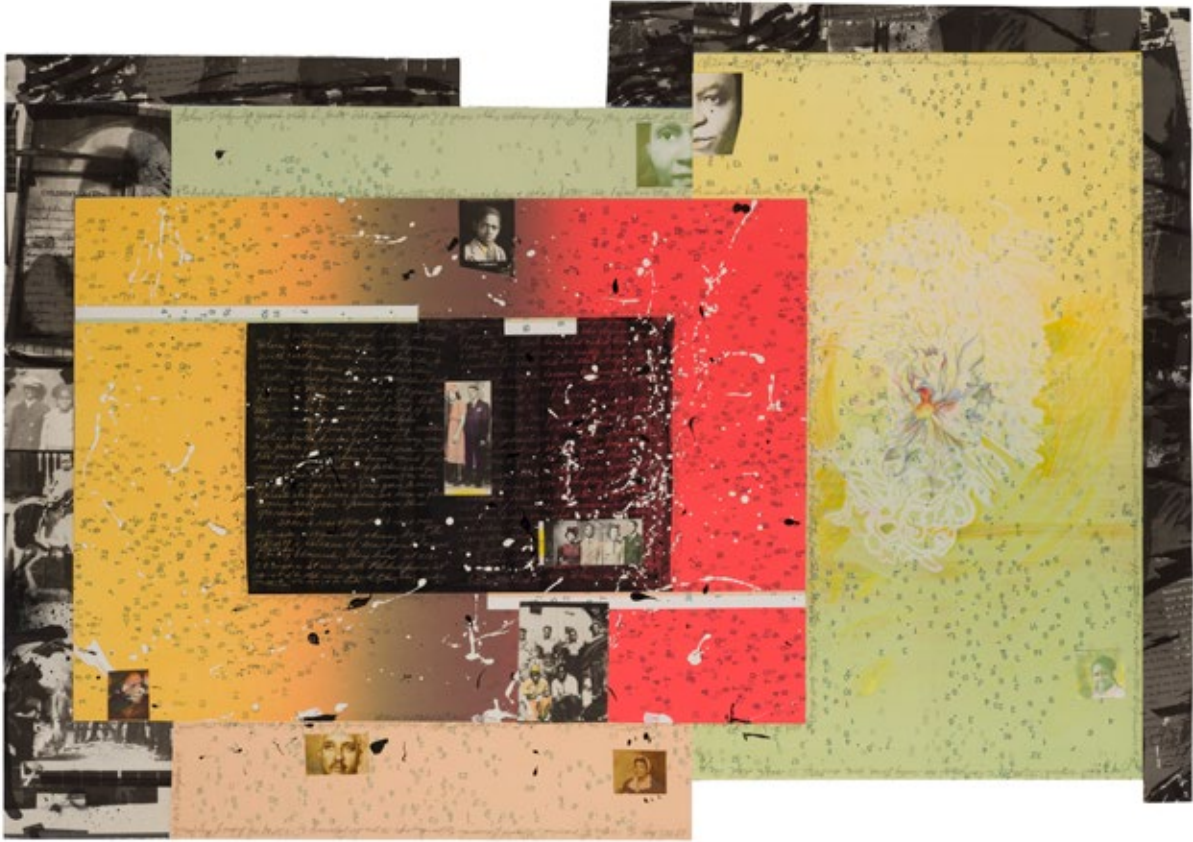
It has been Woodmere's honor to work with Edmunds over many years, and we thank him for the partnership out of which this exhibition grew. To celebrate his achievement at Brandywine, we needed to do something meaningful, and that means using our galleries as a platform to share his art with others.

Ruth Fine is also among Woodmere's great friends and her essay in this catalogue explores Edmunds's new work, illuminating its qualities of formal invention and creative weaving of personal and social content. A distinguished curator and artist herself, Fine always gets to the heart of her subject, and we thank her for her generosity in working with us on this exhibition and on so much else. The title of her essay, "Printing as Prologue," refers to Edmunds's history of deep immersion in the life of Brandywine, a center for printmaking. Fine conveys so much in those three short words that we had to make it the exhibition's title. I would also like to express thanks to Jean Woodley, chairperson of Brandywine's Board of Directors, a member of Woodmere's Education Committee, and a longtime friend and colleague. Jean's many contributions to the art community of Philadelphia as both educator and leader are tremendous.

This exhibition is funded by an anonymous donor and the Dr. Dorothy J. del Bueno Endowed Fund for Exhibitions at Woodmere. We thank our dear, late friend and former trustee for her continuing generosity and support. I recall enjoying and discussing Edmunds's earlier work, *Playtime: Inner City* (1976), when it was on view at Woodmere several years ago, and I know she would be thrilled with our current show. Woodmere curatorial staff—Rachel Hruszkewycz, Laura Heemer, and Rick Ortwein—implemented all aspects of the exhibition with their usual professionalism and flair, and I extend my admiration and thanks to all.

WILLIAM R. VALERIO, PHD

The Patricia Van Burgh Allison Director
and Chief Executive Officer



By the Numbers (One Day Fannie Met Jerry), 2022 (Courtesy of the artist)

PRINTING AS PROLOGUE: ALLAN EDMUNDS AND COLLAGE

RUTH FINE

Printmaking has been central to the artistic life of Allan Edmunds (American, born 1949) for more than half a century. In the late 1960s, he was enrolled in undergraduate and graduate studies at Temple University's Tyler School of Art, then located in the Philadelphia suburbs. He spent his junior year in Tyler's Rome program, which enhanced both his printmaking skills and his sense of a larger history of art. It was there that he was inspired by his mentor and instructor Romas Viesulas, (1918–1986) a Lithuanian-born printmaker who taught at Tyler for twenty-five years, to major in printmaking. Edmunds's commitment to his work, not only in printmaking but in all media, is consummate. A high school teacher in the School District of Philadelphia and the founding director of what is now the Brandywine Workshop and Archives in Center City, Edmunds has channeled many of his own creative endeavors into collaborating with other artists and printers.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the necessity of working virtually that it engendered, have given Edmunds an opportunity to focus on a new body of work, his first extensive exploration of collage, that is the focus of this exhibition. The notion of collage—bringing together visual elements from multiple sources to create a world that recognizes all of them—is central to modern and postmodern thought and art. Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) was the master of this methodology, indicating that he was operating in the spaces between art and life.

For Edmunds, life has always centered on his family, which at the time of this writing includes Anne, his

wife of fifty years; daughter Angela and her fiancé Dennis Blue; and daughter Kimberly, her husband Clifton O. Braxton, Esq., and their son, Edmunds' grandson, Clifton Allan Braxton. They are at the heart of the artist's most vivid concerns.

But the family members who populate his new group of collages are for the most part of earlier generations, or Edmunds's own. The images of the artist's maternal and paternal ancestors are from a family album compiled by his mother, Fannie Mae Hairston Edmunds. The artist's parents married in 1937, shortly after his father, Gerald Ransome Edmunds, returned from participating in the Works Progress Administration's Civilian Conservation Corps. Fannie Mae died in 1987, and in reviewing her belongings, at the instruction of his father, who appointed him the family archivist, Edmunds discovered a blue speckled composition book, of the sort most of us have used at some point



Detail of Edmunds's mother's handwriting included in *Light Amidst the Darkness*, 2021 (Courtesy of the artist)



Detail of Edmunds' parents included in EFA I, 1989 (Courtesy of the artist)

in our lives. In the notebook, his mother, whose handwriting Edmunds greatly admires, noted the dates of her children's births, their weight at that time, when their first teeth pushed through, their first days of school, and so forth. The listings brought back to Edmunds many marvelous memories from his childhood, as the second-to-youngest of his siblings.¹ Edmunds also became the caretaker of a large cache of family photographs, from both the Hairston and Edmunds sides. These further inspired his focus on previous generations, on whose shoulders he stands. While ancestors are important to families of many ethnicities, they certainly are to those of African American descent, with the belief that each generation improves upon the lives of the last.²

Edmunds speaks of Fannie Mae as a "true mother," who stayed home and took care of her children while his father, the eldest of seventeen siblings, held down multiple jobs, functioning as a resilient, hardworking man akin to John Henry, a figure

who is the source of the title for *My Father Was a John Henry*.³ In this collage, nearly all of the elements are printed, with important references to the slave ship image that appears in several of the artist's new works, emphasizing this aspect of African American history and pointing in different directions to parallel the lives of those who arrived on this land. Included is a text about the John Henry story, portraits of Edmunds's father, and images of railroad workers from the public domain that Edmunds found online.

Edmunds thinks of his father as signifying and representing the iconic Black man. Keeping this in mind, the artist was horrified when he read that at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one out of nine Black males who caught the virus died from it. They likely were particularly vulnerable because of underlying health problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Edmunds's concern for Black men, publicly shared through the Black Lives Matter movement that followed the killing of



My Father Was a John Henry, 2021 (Courtesy of the artist)



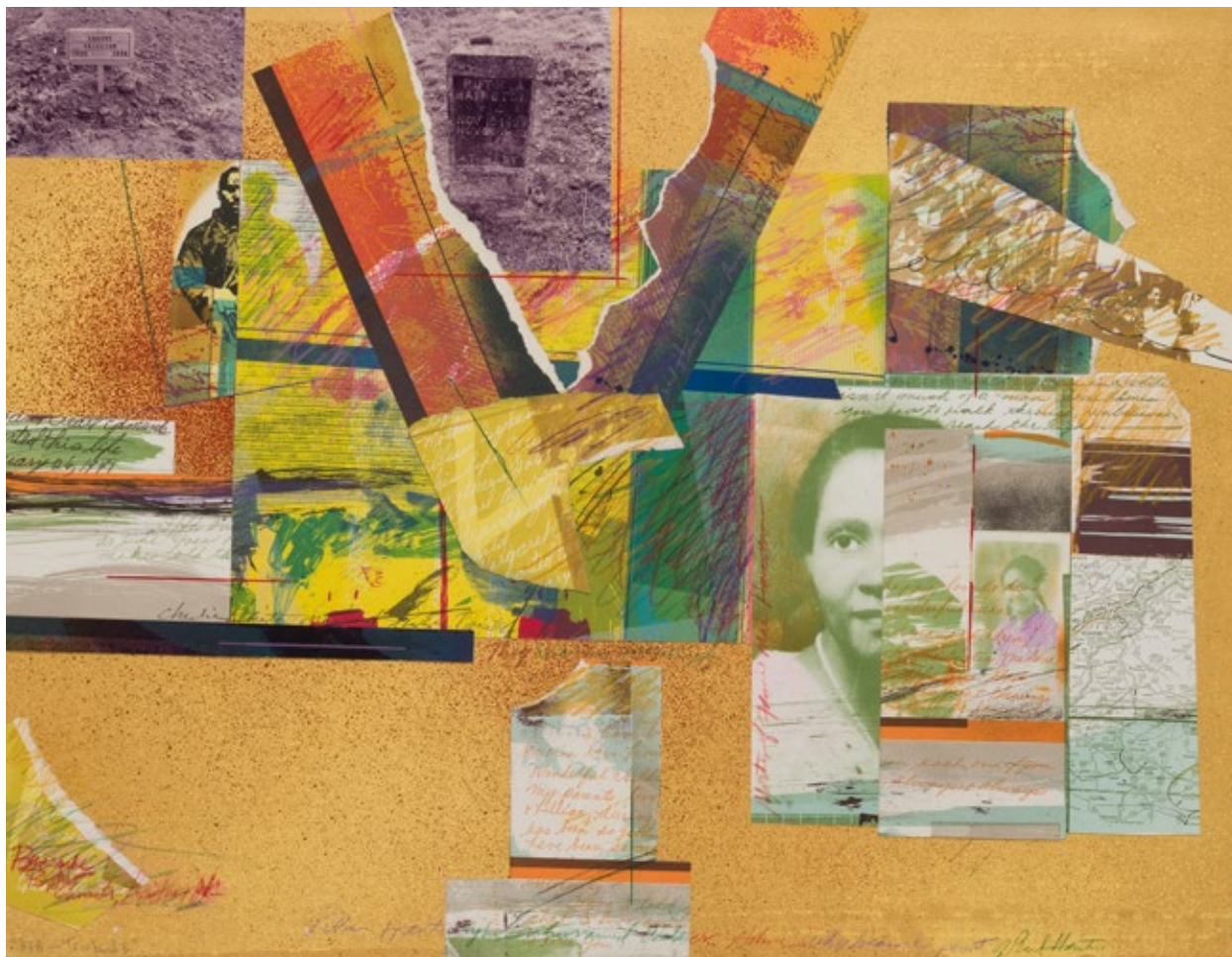
EFA I, 1989 (Courtesy of the artist)

George Floyd,⁴ in addition to the artist's essential focus on family, became a thematic inspiration for his collages. He has said that a subtitle for this exhibition might accurately be *Resilience*. His hope is that his collages, in all of their layered complexity, touch on all of our resilience and our vulnerability, and that they have meaning in relation to all families, not only to his, and not only to those of African Americans.

The earliest work on view is an offset lithograph titled *EFA I* (*EFA* signifies Edmunds Family Album), created in 1989. This was two years after his mother passed away, and after he had begun his *HFA* series (signifying Hairston Family Album, ancestry that Edmunds can trace back to approximately 1849). These were done during a sabbatical from his teaching in the School District of Philadelphia in

1988–89. He spent that fall in Cardiff, Wales, as a senior research associate in digital printing, the early stages, when only dot matrix printers were available. He digitized the photograph of his parents holding their firstborn sons, Gerald Ransome, Jr. and Thomas Henry, enlarging it to highlight the dot matrix as a textural element. The original image appears in *EFA I* and several other subsequent works.⁵

EFA I is the first work Edmunds created that was specifically inspired by his mother's composition book. A photograph of his mother, and multiple variants of that digitized picture of his parents and their two eldest sons are featured, the two in the foreground highly visible, the others ghostly in the background. The piecing together of images approach that remains at the heart of Edmunds's



Trueblood B, 2005 (Courtesy of the artist)

process is evident here, as it is in other prints from this period. Similarly, the use of a subtle palette can be tracked throughout the exhibition, although in several works the artist also celebrates brilliant juxtapositions of hue, as in *Trueblood B* (2005), part of a group of Hairston Family Album works that honor his mother's family, as the Edmunds Family Album, noted above, honors his father's. It is the one other work included here, a collage, rather than a print, with additions in colored pencil, worked prior to the main body of 2021–22 collages. Both Pearl Hairston, Edmunds's mother's mother, and Margaret Ransome, his father's mother, are included in *Trueblood B*, blending the family heritages.

The *Fannie Mae* (2021) collage is created primarily from offset lithographed papers, with direct screen print and black paper additions. One of several works in which related black shapes appear, this strong, dark configuration suggests the darkness associated with experiences of being Black in America and constant racial division caused by coloration of Black bodies. Also, Edmunds uses black as a space/shape-defining element, containing and enclosing other image elements. It is not important to Edmunds that the discrete parts of his compositions be readily "readable," either the images or the text that appears in them. For him, it is the overall impact of the work he cherishes



Fannie Mae, 2021
(Courtesy of the
artist)

and wants others to connect with, offering a sense of the power of ritual in our lives and in his work. Motherhood surely is a primary subject here, as multiples of Fannie Mae's babies are depicted.

The title of *The Commitment* (2021) suggests marriage as an institution which was denied to

enslaved people or determined by those who saw them as property. Slaveholders encouraged the matching of certain individuals who could increase the plantation's wealth by producing strong, healthy children. The lack of self-determination and the positioning of human bodies as property made



ABOVE: *Wissahickon*, 1975, by Sam Gilliam; printed by Allan Edmunds (Courtesy of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives); RIGHT: *The Commitment*, 2021 (Courtesy of the artist)

choice and marriage a huge advancement factor for African Americans socially and economically. In this context, *The Commitment* has important ritual meaning as well. For many struggling families, marriage tended to take place in the home of a parent. In the photograph of three couples at the lower register of the composition, the artist's parents celebrate their vows with others, whose names are not known. This collage is worked in a similar manner as *Fannie Mae*, with the addition of flocking as an essential surface element, a process unique among the works included here.

Roger Matthew and Brothers (2022) (reproduced on page 17) features another of the artist's siblings, described in *Fannie Mae*'s composition book as weighing eight pounds, thirteen ounces, when he was born in 1947. The collage includes printed woodcuts for the first time, probably growing from Edmunds's recent collaborations with Alexis Nutini, who worked with Brandywine on extensive projects

with Sam Gilliam (1933–2022). Gilliam was the first non-local artist to create work at Brandywine, and was in the midst of a monoprint project at the time of his death. While Edmunds's art is undoubtedly impacted by many Brandywine artists, Gilliam was especially important in his introduction to Edmunds of an open and unpredictable possibility for the exterior of his images, as seen in several collages here, including *Children on the Block* (2021). Gilliam also was a close friend throughout the workshop's history, and a model for Edmunds in many ways. In a recent email, Edmunds recalled, "Sam stood out as an African American artist whose talent, invention, self-confidence, and stubbornness kept him focused and made him, to me, a model of professionalism that I could follow He helped me, and he helped BWA, to explore the world through art and to advocate and pursue, successfully, the need for diversity and inclusiveness as a measure of excellence."⁶





Children on the Block, 2021
(Courtesy of the artist)

Children on the Block records childhood friends living on the 5500 block of Master Street, in West Philadelphia. These included Edmundses, Taylors, Reddings, and Ruffins, families who together comprised the community at a time when each household had sway on the other to raise children with positive communal values, taking care of and looking out for one another.

By the Numbers (One Day Fannie Met Jerry) (2022) (reproduced on page 3) comments on the fact that we mark birthdays, weddings, deaths, and other milestones—including horrific events—by their dates

(numbers), which symbolically function similarly as words. Numbers in this work contribute to the visual narrative, in which Edmunds reflects on ancestry by intentionally contrasting numerals, the work's title referencing the date his parents met.

Generations (2022) (reproduced on page 16) reflects on the passage of one generation to the next, from the Cooleemee Plantation in Mocksville, North Carolina, where the Hairston clan began. Edmunds envisions visits over time by the plantation's enslaved ancestors and their descendants through to the Edmunds family.



We Rise, 2021
 (Courtesy of the
 artist)

Three generations of Edmundses assembled at the family home on Master Street, celebrating Gerry and Fannie Mae's growing clan. Layered forms and spaces and linear rhythms address the constant movement and change within the family.

While *We Rise* (2021) is from the same time period as others in the show, the work's theme is more directly and immediately universal, in regard to the movement away from enslavement (signified by the slave ship at the bottom left) toward resistance and triumph (signified by the clenched hands at the upper left).



Children on the Block (detail), 2021 (Courtesy of the artist)

Edmunds works on as many as five or six collages at a time, moving from one to another, as he gets stymied and needs a new set of givens in a different work to stimulate his thoughts. He may work the collages over several months before he considers them finished. Indeed, he only considers them finished when they are framed, many of them intended for a specific family member. The frames complement the imagery, as well as Edmunds's sense of the recipient's life and style.

Much of Edmunds's imagery is abstract, and much is textual, in addition to the visual components of the family photographs. Some pictures are embedded as actual printed photographs; others are transformed through the screen printing, offset lithographic, and relief printing processes. The first two of these have been the primary techniques used for decades at the Brandywine Workshop and Archives.

The family ancestral portraits are numerous. Edmunds's father died in 1991, four years after

his wife, having experienced fifty-seven hospitalizations during his lifetime. Edmunds can't help but wonder if he was at some point a victim of medical experimentation, as were so many African American men.

Edmunds for the most part keeps his mind positive about such matters, spiritually moving on from the past and generating affirmative intentions of pressing forward. However, he remains aware and conscious of negative possibilities, and the notion of the photographic negative, to be printed either as a negative or a positive image, sustains a metaphor for this dually defined sense of life's complexity.

Edmunds has several technical agendas in developing this new body of work. In many of the collages he employs papers that were unsuccessful proofs of prints undertaken over the years at Brandywine that he specifically saved. Some of these prints were published, while others never were. These sheets are not recognizable in relation to the original artists' work, however, because



My Father Was a John Henry
(detail), 2021
(Courtesy of the artist)

Edmunds asked his longtime printer Robert Franklin (1929–2012) to alter them in specific ways that Edmunds believed would be important to his own work, sometimes decades later. Among the works on view are papers derived from prints by Willie Cole (born 1955), Dr. David C. Driskell (1931–2020), E. J. Montgomery (born 1930), Jules Olitski (1922–2007), and John Scott (1940–2007). Edmunds also salvaged sheets that were tossed away as ruined, and some collage papers were printed specifically for this project. Some sheets are cut, others are torn, and some are both, to vary the character of their edges and the way they intersect and overlap with other forms.

In some instances, it was important to Edmunds that direct handwork was absent. To accomplish this, he added lines and areas of color by pushing ink through the printing screen using a standard tool for the screen-printing process, the squeegee. In other works, he drew directly onto the collage. In all cases, however, printed papers are at the essence of the work, which has meaning for the artist as

this process of multiple originals has long been associated with bringing art to a larger population, and to spreading images to distant corners of the world. Edmunds’s belief in the power of art to bring people together and help them understand each other is essential to the notion of *Printing as Prologue*, a start, with much to follow.

NOTES

- 1 Edmunds’s parents had eight children, two of whom died in infancy. Two of Edmunds’s other siblings have also passed away: his brother Gerald Ransome, Jr. was killed in 1968 by a hit-and-run driver and his sister Lillian Mildred Edmunds McCray died in 2019 from cancer.
- 2 See Henry Wiencek, *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999). Edmunds was surprised to discover that the enslaved side of the family made greater life progress over time than the side that was free.
- 3 The story of John Henry was also explored by Jerry Pinkney, another African American artist whose work has been shown at Woodmere Art Museum.
- 4 Giulia McDonnell Nieto del Rio, John Eligon, and Adeel Hassan, “A Timeline of What Has Happened in the Year Since George Floyd’s Death,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/25/us/george-floyd-protests-unrest-events-timeline.html>.
- 5 Allan Edmunds, email to the author, July 20, 2022. Edmunds supplied requested information about several works discussed, much of which has been incorporated into this essay.
- 6 Allan Edmunds, email to the author, July 5, 2022, “Reflections on Sam Gilliam, the Person.”

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

All works by Allan Edmunds (American, born 1949).

EFA I, 1989

Offset lithograph, 21 x 29 1/2 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Trueblood B, 2005

Print collage and colored pencil, 22 x 29 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Children on the Block, 2021

Lithograph print collage and colored pencil, 30 x 22 in.

Courtesy of the artist

The Commitment, 2021

Lithograph print collage and flocking, 32 x 22 1/2 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Fannie Mae, 2021

Lithograph print collage and screen print on black Arches paper, 37 1/2 x 27 1/2 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Light Amidst the Darkness, 2021

Print collage, screen print, and colored pencil, 27 x 31 in.

Courtesy of the artist

My Father Was a John Henry, 2021

Lithograph print collage, screen print, brushed ink, and colored pencil, 50 x 38 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Generations, 2022

(Courtesy of the artist)





Roger Matthew
and Brothers,
2022 (Courtesy of
the artist)

We Rise, 2021

Print collage, silkscreen, and
colored pencil, 36 1/4 x 23 1/4 in.
Courtesy of the artist

**By the Numbers (One Day Fannie
Met Jerry), 2022**

Print and splatter ink collage
with colored and graphite pencil,
32 x 48 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Generations, 2022

Print and splatter ink collage,
screen print, and colored pencil,
31 1/2 x 25 in.
Courtesy of the artist

**Roger Matthew and Brothers,
2022**

Color woodcut and lithograph
print collage, screen print, and
colored pencil, 25 x 19 1/2 in.
Courtesy of the artist



Light Amidst the Darkness, 2021 (Courtesy of the artist)



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On cover: **The Commitment**, 2021
(Courtesy of the artist)

