

CULTURAL
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2101 Constitution Ave., N.W.



Surface from Under the Microscope

The Henrietta Lacks Series

Baltimore-based artist Jeffrey Kent's paintings are characterized by bold content and a thoughtful use of layered material and color. The works in this exhibition are inspired by the story of Henrietta Lacks, an African American tobacco farmer who moved to Baltimore in 1941 from southern Virginia and died in 1951 of cervical cancer at the age of 31. Her cancer cells—taken months before she died without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine, vital for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization, AIDS and Parkinson's disease research, and more. Lacks' cells, known as HeLa cells, have been bought and sold by the billions, yet for decades she remained virtually unknown and her family uncompensated.

Kent's abstract paintings reference the contrast-phase microscopic imagery of HeLa cells to pay homage to the woman from whom they were derived. Inspired by the undulating shapes and forms of cellular structures, Kent playfully suggests that "they appear as celestial bodies floating in an atmospheric universe." Yet, considering Lacks' story and the history of medical testing on African Americans without their

consent, the artist also intends to raise questions about medical ethics, patients' rights, and race.

Jeffrey Kent is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice includes mixed media painting, sculpture, performance, and video. Using everything from paint, to water jugs, to books, Kent orchestrates visual perplexities that pose many questions to the viewer. His artworks are created in series as conceptual analyses of society and investigations into past decisions that affect present and future populations. The artworks are exposing and encouraging social discourse around topics that are often overlooked and uncomfortable. Born in Boston and based in Baltimore, Kent holds an MFA from Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore.

#HenriettaLacks | @CPNAS

On the Cover: *Culture HeLa No. 10*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, framed in oak, 16 x 16 inches, Collection of George Ciscle; *Culture HeLa No. 1*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, framed in oak, 14 x 14 inches.



Curator's Statement

Intersections of art and science offer unique opportunities to explore diverse perspectives and imaginative aesthetics. Often considered binary ways of thinking (either/or), art and science projects demonstrate a capacity to expand limitations and create narratives that inform and celebrate creativity as well as exploration.

Surface from Under the Microscope: The Henrietta Lacks Series by Jeffrey Kent is an exhibition combining art and science that also confronts social consciousness and equity. The series of paintings encourage further study of the life of Henrietta Lacks' and celebrates the transformative power of her immortal cells.

Most know her story by now. Henrietta Lacks was a tobacco farmer from Virginia who moved to Maryland and died in 1951 from cervical cancer. Her cells were harvested without her knowledge or consent for scientific and medical use. The HeLa cell line became a cornerstone for scientific research for much of the 20th century and her descendants were unaware and lived in poverty despite the scientific breakthroughs.

As in the layering of the paint to create the imagery, her story is layered with themes of the dismissal of the black body, medical ethics, spirituality, racism in medicine, and the significance of her cells.

Rebecca Skloot's book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, respectfully documents the unfolding story of a vibrant rural woman and her family who cope with the ferocity of her cancer and death, and the non-disclosure of her scientific importance. HBO and Oprah optioned it as a TV movie in 2017.

Skloot later organized The Henrietta Lacks Foundation to help individuals who made important contributions to scientific research without personally benefiting from those contributions, particularly those used in research without their knowledge or consent. Jeffrey Kent is donating a portion of his income from the sales of paintings in this series to the Henrietta Lacks Foundation.

As an artist, Jeffrey Kent's work illuminates political, economic, and social issues relating to the African American experience. Residing in Baltimore, MD, he received an MFA in painting from the Maryland Institute College of Art where he studied with the renowned artist Sam Gilliam who taught Kent to use acrylic paints in multi-layered applications to create depth.

Kent's works are usually large. In his process of creating the series, after prepping the canvas, he added a layer, then intuitively removed some of the paint through markings, then layered color again, intuitively removing paint again, and repeated this process until satisfied with the composition.

During his research for the series, he located images of her cells, viewed videos, and spoke with oncologists and surgeons about HeLa cell functions. He saw the images of the cells moving and regenerating, and then he began painting.

Interpreting his works in *Surface from Under the Microscope*, Kent pays homage to the importance of Henrietta Lacks' body. Although her physical form is implied, we do not see a physical representation of her created by Kent. What we see is "under a microscope," the essence, abstracted images that are inspired by her cells and their movements.

It's another world under the microscope. One sees the essence of life, matter, and change. The exhibition encourages viewers to spend time uncovering the layers and looking further into her story to understand the triumph of her life.

Surface from Under the Microscope was originally exhibited at the Howard University Interdisciplinary Research Building in Washington, D.C. and was supported by the Black Artists of DC. During the summer of 2017, images from the exhibition were shown in *Issues Magazine* published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; the University of Texas at Dallas; and Arizona State University.

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I would like to thank all those who made the exhibition possible at the National Academy Sciences. I am grateful for the vision of J.D. Talasek and his colleague, Alana Quinn, for suggesting that the exhibition be reinstalled at NAS.

I am also grateful for the support of Russell Simmons, President and other members of Black Artists of DC and the Howard University Interdisciplinary Research Building, specifically Dr. Gary Harris, Dr. Linda Jones, James Griffin and staff who have supported my artistic ventures. And, Jeffrey Kent and Cleo Baker, I appreciate your creative genius!!!

—Carol Rhodes Dyson, Guest Curator
Curator, Busboys and Poets and Howard University
Interdisciplinary Research Building, Washington, D.C.



Evolution of the Remixed (Searching)

2002-2017

acrylic and oil crayon on canvas with exposed stretchers

72 x 94 inches



HeLa No. 1
2017
acrylic on canvas, framed in oak
32 x 32 inches

Excerpts from Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

When Henrietta Lacks was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1951, doctors at Johns Hopkins Hospital took her cancer cells without her knowledge or permission and grew them in test tubes. They were hoping to create an immortal cell line, a cell line that would continue to grow outside of the human body, to be used in medical research. Due to a mutation in Lacks' cancer cells and because they were stored under specific conditions, they continued to reproduce indefinitely. Called HeLa cells, they are now recognized as the first immortalized human cell line. They have been invaluable in medical research, vital for developing the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, AIDS and Parkinson's research, and more. Yet for decades, Lacks remained unknown and her family uncompensated. Author Rebecca Skloot, who first heard about HeLa cells in a community college biology class in 1988, published the bestselling-book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in 2010, after spending a decade researching Lacks' story. Excerpts from the book are published here with Skloot's permission.

Deborah's Voice

When people ask—and seems like people always be askin to where I can't never get away from it—I say, Yeah, that's right, my mother name was Henrietta Lacks, she died in 1951, John Hopkins took her cells and them cells are still livin today, still multiplyin, still growin and spreadin if you don't keep em frozen. Science calls her HeLa and she's all over the world in medical facilities, in all the computers and the Internet everywhere.

When I go to the doctor for my checkups I always say my mother was HeLa. They get all excited, tell me stuff like how her cells helped make my blood pressure medicines and antidepression pills and how all this important stuff in science happen cause of her. But they don't never explain more than just sayin, Yeah, your mother was on the moon, she been in nuclear bombs and made that polio vaccine. I really don't know how she did all that, but I guess I'm glad

she did, cause that mean she helpin lots of people. I think she would like that.

But I always have thought it was strange, if our mother cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowin about them takin her cells, now we don't get a dime. I used to get so mad about that to where it made me sick and I had to take pills. But I don't got it in me no more to fight. I just want to know who my mother was.

Chapter 4 The Birth of HeLa (1951)

Henrietta spent the next two days in the hospital, recovering from her first radium treatment. Doctors examined her inside and out, pressing on her stomach, inserting new catheters into her bladder, fingers into her vagina and anus, needles into her veins. They wrote notes in her chart saying, "30 year-old colored female lying quietly in no evident distress," and "Patient feels quite well tonight. Morale is good and she is ready to go home."

Before Henrietta left the hospital, a doctor put her feet in the stirrups again and removed the radium. He sent her home with instructions to call the clinic if she had problems, and to come back for a second dose of radium in two and a half weeks.

Meanwhile, each morning after putting Henrietta's cells in culture, Mary started her days with the usual sterilization drill. She peered into the tubes, laughing to herself and thinking, Nothing's happening. Big surprise. Then, two days after Henrietta went home from the hospital, Mary saw what looked like little rings of fried egg white around the clots at the bottoms of each tube. The cells were growing, but Mary didn't think much of it—other cells had survived for a while in the lab.

But Henrietta's cells weren't merely surviving, they were growing with mythological intensity. By the next morning they'd doubled. Mary divided the contents of each tube into two, giving them room to grow, and within twenty-four hours, they'd doubled again. Soon she was dividing them into four tubes, then six. Henrietta's cells grew to fill as much space as Mary gave them. Still, Gey wasn't ready to celebrate. "The cells could die any minute," he told Mary. But they didn't. They kept growing like nothing anyone had seen, doubling their numbers every twenty-four hours, stacking hundreds on top of hundreds, accumulating by the millions. "Spreading

like crabgrass!" Margaret said. They grew twenty times faster than Henrietta's normal cells, which died only a few days after Mary put them in culture. As long as they had food and warmth, Henrietta's cancer cells seemed unstoppable.

Soon, George told a few of his closest colleagues that he thought his lab might have grown the first immortal human cells.

To which they replied, Can I have some? And George said yes.

Chapter 29 A Village of Henriettas (2000)

For nearly a year after our first conversation, Deborah refused to talk to me. I traveled back and forth to Clover, sitting on porches and walking the tobacco fields with Cliff, Cootie, and Gladys's son Gary. I dug through archives, church basements, and the abandoned, falling-down building where Henrietta went to school. While I was on the road, I'd leave messages for Deborah every few days, hoping to convince her that if she talked to me, we could learn about Henrietta together.

"Hey, I'm in your mother's tobacco field by the home-house," I told her. "I'm on the porch with Cousin Cliff, he says hi." "I found your mother's baptism records today." "Aunt Gladys is doing well after her stroke. She told me some great stories about your mom." I imagined Deborah leaning over her answering machine listening, dying to know what I'd found. But she never picked up.

One day her husband, the Reverend James Pullum, answered the phone on the second ring and started yelling without saying hello. "They want to be assured that they going to get some MONTERARY SATISFACTION. And until anybody makes an AGREEMENT or puts that on PAPER, they are NOT going to talk ANYMORE. Everybody's received some compensation but them, and that was they MOTHER. They just feel wrong about it. It's been a real long haul for my wife, and she really takes a trip on it. Used to be she just wanted John Hopkin to give her mother some credit and explain that cell stuff to where she understand what happened to her mother. But they ignored us, so now we just mad." Then he hung up on me.

A few days later, ten months after our first conversation, Deborah called me. When I answered the phone, she yelled, "Fine, I'll talk to you!" She didn't say who she was and didn't need to. "If I'm gonna do this, you got to promise me some things," she said. "First, if my mother is so famous in science history, you got to tell everybody to get her name right. She ain't no Helen Lane. And second, everybody always say Henrietta Lacks had four children. That ain't right, she had five children. My sister died and there's no leavin her out of the book. I know you gotta tell all the Lacks story and there'll be good and bad in that cause of my brothers. You gonna learn all that, I don't care. The thing I care about is, you gotta find out what happened to my mother and my sister, cause I need to know."

She took a deep breath, then laughed. "Get ready, girl," she said. "You got no idea what you gettin yourself into."

Characters

Deborah "Dale" Lacks – Henrietta Lacks' fourth child
Mary Kubicek – George Gey's lab assistant who cultured HeLa cells for the first time

Dr. George Gey – head of tissue-culture research at Johns Hopkins. He developed the techniques used to grow HeLa cells from Henrietta's cancer tissue in his lab.

Margaret – George Gey's wife and research assistant. She was trained as a surgical nurse.

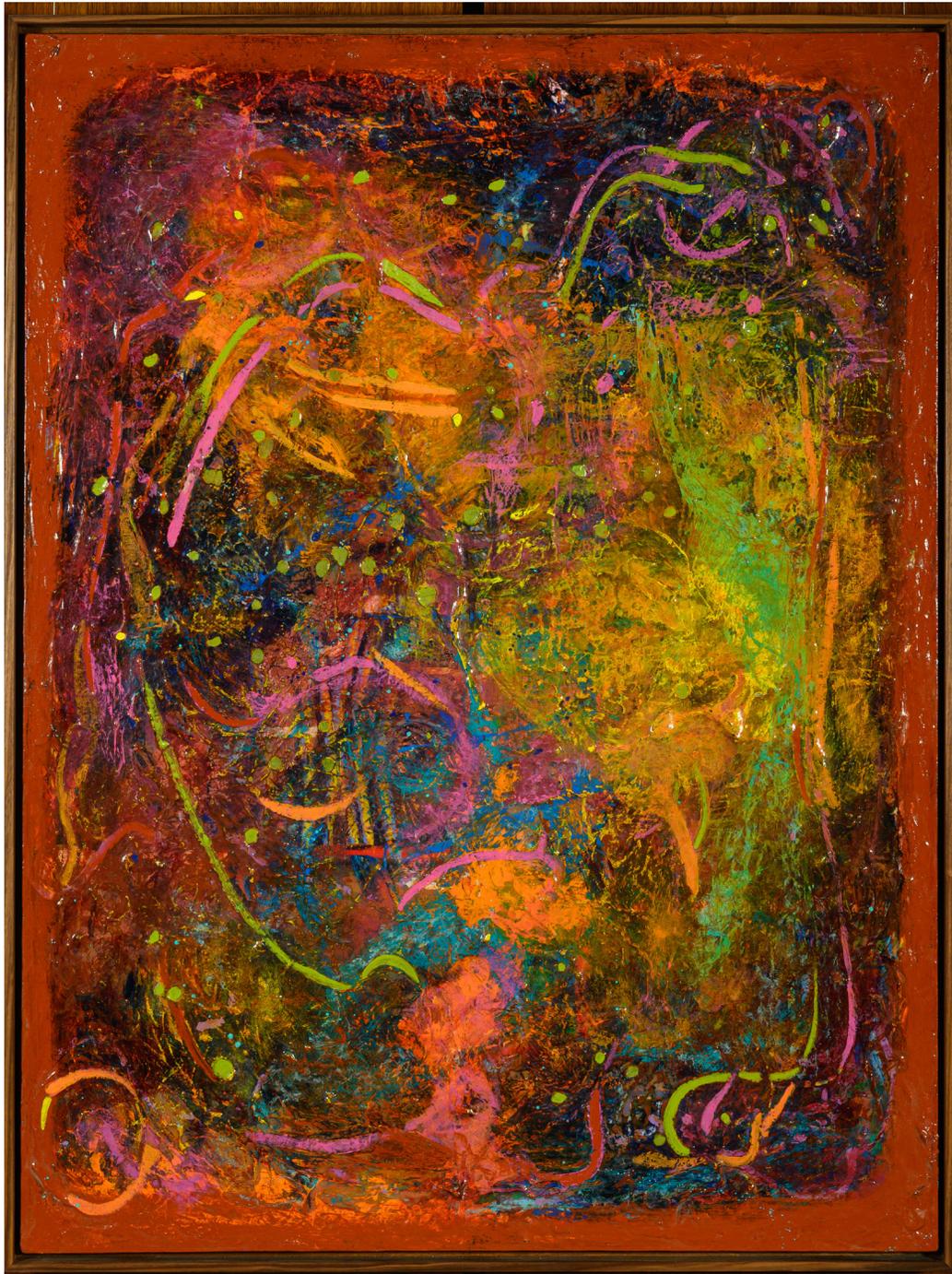
Cliff Garret – Henrietta's cousin. As children, they worked the tobacco fields together.

Hector "Cootie" Henry – Henrietta's cousin

Gladys Lacks – Henrietta's sister, who disapproved of Henrietta's marriage to Day.

Gary Lacks – Gladys's son and Deborah's cousin. A lay preacher, he performed faith healing on Deborah.

Reverend James Pullum – Deborah's second ex-husband, a former steel-mill worker who became a preacher.



The Carnival, Anything Can Happen (A Positive to Every Negative)
2018
acrylic on canvas, framed in oak
36 x 48 inches
Collection of Sheila and Jerrell Gibbs



Split Decision 2
2017
acrylic on canvas
78.7 x 63 inches

Cellscape Vistas

Jeffrey Kent has created the most vital, timely, commensurate artwork to engage the saga of Henrietta Lacks. Acknowledging that the action of the saga occurs in the realm of cells, rather than in the world of humans, its visual politics is scale-appropriate. And Kent transports us to this realm of action by way of his painterly technique, laying down varying thicknesses and stark color intervals. Revealed as topographies, the works exhort us to traverse them, not simply to view. And Kent's technical dynamism, nodding to action painters like Helen Frakenthaler, Jay DeFeo, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock, captures the gross fecundity of the HeLa cell line.

"Feracious" may be the best adjective for HeLa. The line is notorious for its aggressive generativity. Ms. Lacks' carcinoma-derived cells have germinated thorny questions spanning domains that seem also to bloom and propagate: Jim Crow-era racial politics, bioethics, Baltimore lore, the Oprah-verse, and Black American women's often central, silent, subjugated place in medical research. And like the cell line that is its subject matter, Kent's HeLa series is vigorously, almost playfully fecund.

It's virtually impossible to think about HeLa for more than three seconds without monstrous techno-horrific figures coming to mind. There is the technical immortality of the cell line, its ability to continue replicating given adequate environmental conditions. Add to that its penchant for colonizing lesser cellular strains—even in hyper-sterilized lab environments designed specifically to prevent contaminations—and its history begins to sound like the replicator-based nightmares that American filmmakers have been conjuring up for the better part of a century. That this vigorous cell line began in Ms. Lacks' cervical carcinoma, the condition that ultimately led to her bloody demise, exhibits particular affinities with the notably influential transmedia *Alien* franchise. Octavia Butler, scholars tell us, made explicit use of the HeLa saga in her Exogenesis trilogy. There an extraterrestrial life form finds great value in an African American

female protagonist's singular "talent" for creating cancerous cells, and it uses that talent to restart life on Earth after it has been devastated by an apocalyptic thermonuclear exchange.

The key virtue of Kent's HeLa series is that it refuses to let us forget any of these lines of flight by expressing the cells' dynamism at the level of technique.

The impasto technique that Kent reverently acknowledges having learned from Sam Gilliam imbues the series with a third dimension of variable depths. "If you master an impasto technique, people will want to eat your paintings up," the master is said to have told the student. In combination with the fluorescent pallet Kent frequently deploys, the effect is not unlike an Olympic view down onto a complex, jungly terrain. Gilliam's seductive endorsement works in reverse, too: for their juxtapositions of suggestive peril and invitations to explore, the paintings also threaten to consume, or at least envelop, viewers.

The HeLa series breaks so sharply away from the sentimental, human-centric representations of Ms. Lacks, as presented in Oprah's HBO biopic *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and in the HBO-commissioned portrait of the movie's protagonist, that it makes more sense to think of Kent's works as something other, and arguably more, than portraits. Merging elements of expressionist portraiture and topographic cartography, the HeLa series is comprised of what we might call "cellscape".

The cellscape is superior to the photorealistic portrait in at least two ways. It more accurately and acutely witnesses the ongoing activity of its subject matter. The HeLa cells are, at the moment of your reading, enabling thousands of biomedical experiments, underwriting tens of thousands of biomedical treatments, and overrunning and colonizing other cell lines in who knows how many labs around the world. And in the public consciousness, HeLa has continuously inflamed debates across an extensive range of technical-experimental as well as lay-popular domains. The cellscape convey this dynamism and vigor. The photorealistic and televisual depictions of Ms. Lacks,

particularly Kadir Nelson's 2017 neo-Rockwellian portrait, *Henrietta Lacks: The Mother of Modern Medicine*, are comparatively stagnant, born in a state of suspended animation, and suited to an officially concluded past. Now in the collection of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Nelson's painting aims for its subject's canonization, for her installation in the American civil rights iconographic pantheon. Nelson's Ms. Lacks is literally nimbed. This black woman's cheeks are rosy. She shields her pelvis with the Bible. Stabilization and partial sanitization of the swirling complexities of her story are possibly encrypted somewhere in its luminescent, quasi-creamy surface, but, if so, enclosed and entombed, as if the story, too, were permanently stabilized.

Secondly, the HeLa cells function as a vista onto a three-dimensional mythos, a narrative terrain, perilous and likely unavoidable. Like all maps, whether empirical or imaginary, the cellscapes are invitational and suggestive of traversability. They bear

witness to a way. Many have effectively argued that a capacity to witness, a classical function of Western painting, has dissolved under contemporary art markets' pressures and ultra-acidic, post-Baudrillardian cynicism. The cellscapes look both backwards to an earlier, more earnest phase of art politics ("No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It's an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy," Picasso declared) and forward to probabilistic futures in which we are all Henrietta Lacks, our bodies, down to the molecules, standing reserves for bio-pirates at work just beyond the rim of accepted experimental norms and professional codes of conduct, hypnotically chanting their absolving mantra: *What's the problem?*

—Michael Bennett

Assistant Director for Innovation Policy, School for the Future of Innovation in Society, Arizona State University

