

# ‘The Last Black Calligrapher in San Francisco’

Hunter Saxony III relies on centuries-old calligraphic techniques to create conceptual art that explores identity, justice, and mortality.

BY JESSICA ZACK | MAR 27, 2023



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In the days following the brutal murder of a Black teenager at an Oakland BART station in 2018, Hunter Saxony III created the series *Nia Wilson / Say Her Name / No Silence*. Saxony penned Wilson’s name in delicate, scrolling red ink across 1930s magazine photos of wealthy white southern families posing in their finery. He had found the images years earlier at a secondhand shop in Austin, Texas. For the series, he charred the edges of the pages, singeing them to suggest a “history

that shouldn't be told, the dots we'd like to disconnect," he says. "The burning is for societal ugliness that should have been manicured into an American dream by now but clearly hasn't."

Saxony, who calls himself "the Last Black Calligrapher in San Francisco," is a conceptual artist who uses centuries-old calligraphic techniques in unexpected ways to probe ideas about self-discovery, mortality, and injustice. An image from his *Nia Wilson* series is on view (in person and online) through April in the exhibition *Strikethrough: Typographic Messages of Protest at San Francisco's Letterform Archive*, a graphic design, typography, and calligraphy museum that acquired 20 of Saxony's works for its permanent collection. His first commercial solo exhibition in San Francisco—featuring new and old work—opened in March at Eleanor Harwood Gallery, in the city's Minnesota Street Project. "I love how formal his work is and that it's also shrouded in mystery because of the obfuscation and the elegant frills around everything," says gallerist Harwood. "You really have to sift through to see its essence, and when you're trying to figure out what you're seeing, you end up more in abstraction."

***This article appears in Issue 23 of Alta Journal.***

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Saxony created a number of similarly haunting works in 2020 and 2021 as a way to process the racially motivated murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and the police killing of 24-year-old Breonna Taylor in Kentucky. *Whose Race Are We Running...from (for Ahmaud)* is especially potent, with the name Ahmaud in large, florid script over a vintage image of five white men competing in a hurdles race. In *Double Dutch Lamentation (for Breonna)*, slightly blurred words can be made out on the reverse of Italian parchment paper.

"Hunter uses 19th-century ornamental techniques to create something that actually feels much more contemporary than many lettering and graphic design artists,"

says Stephen Coles, Letterform's editorial director and associate curator. "It makes you realize right away it's not an advertisement; it's not a corporate branding exercise. It's something different, and deeper."

Coles compares Saxony's work to that of the early-20th-century Dada movement or the Russian constructivists (who also favored a minimal palette of red and black): "They did something similar, using letters less to be read and more to be looked at and absorbed."

Despite how socially responsive his recent work can be, Saxony doesn't think of himself as an activist artist. "If you're making protest art, make the message super clear so people understand it," he says. "That's not what I'm doing. I'm trying to understand the world around me."



© HUNTER SAXONY III, COLLECTION OF LETTERFORM ARCHIVE

*“Nia Wilson / Say Her Name / No Silence” (2019), by Hunter Saxony III.*

## **CLAIMING A MEDIUM**

Born Terry Hunter Addison III, Saxony creates art under a pseudonym out of a long-standing fascination with noms de plume as “a way to create a new version of oneself, a way to escape and rediscover.” When he moved to San Francisco from his native Rhode Island in 2003, he left behind his fresh-out-of-college data-entry job and decided he “wanted nothing to do with a life behind a computer.” Instead, he got a cheap apartment in Haight-Ashbury and a retail job at Urban Outfitters to pay the bills, and he resolved to “spend as much time as I could in rare-book rooms.”

He had been practicing calligraphy ever since getting his first set of primary color chisel-tip pens as a gift in elementary school. He plunged deeper into the antique craft of hand-lettering as a “pretty difficult” teenager, he says, after coming to the realization that his fascinations with graffiti, poetry, rap, and hardcore music all had one thing in common.

“For whatever reason, it was always about the lettering,” Saxony says. “The words and the letters themselves resonated,” whether in a spiky Gothic-lettered skateboard logo or on the album covers of the punk bands he followed, like Strife and Earth Crisis. “They used really powerful words for their band names, and I think that was the start of me trying to pair powerful words with my art. Even in art class, instead of making a picture, I wanted to make a skateboard-brand logo, because the letters were sick.”

Saxony grew up in a family of educators (his father was an associate dean at Brown

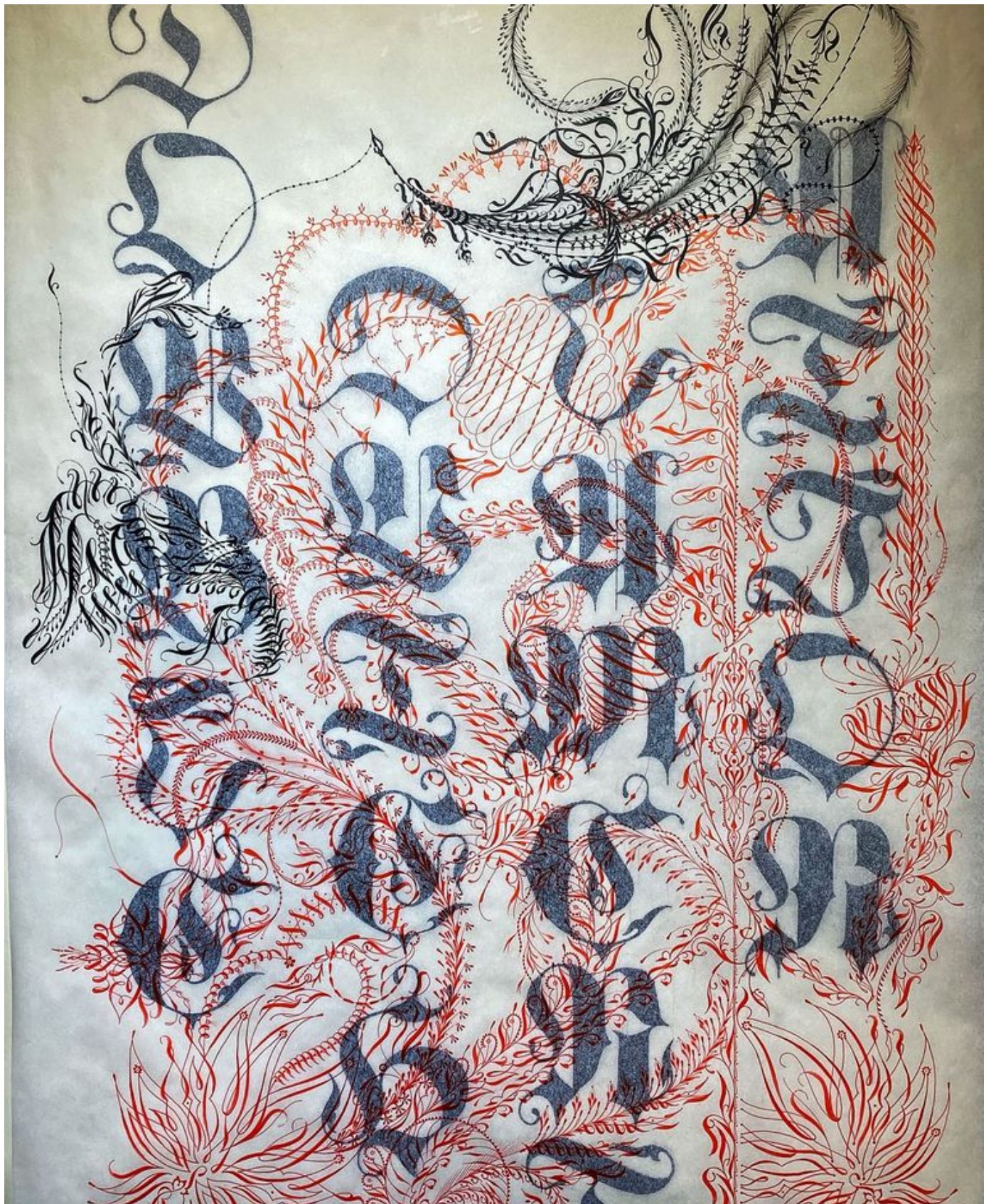
University; his grandfather was an education professor). As a student at Johnson & Wales University, he started spending time in the rare-book collection at the 200-year-old Providence Athenaeum library, tracing his love of script back to its root sources. He studied everything from medieval illuminated manuscripts to German and Italian copybooks, “pulling influence from anything that inspired,” he says.

In San Francisco, Saxony sought out the volumes of valuable calligraphy in the collections of the city’s antiquarian book dealers, such as those in the gallery-filled 49 Geary building, near Union Square. But he quickly discovered that those rarefied, hushed spaces weren’t always welcoming to self-taught 21-year-old Black calligraphers who were there to learn, not acquire. “I was so nerdy. They didn’t really like me because I was just there to look,” Saxony says.

So he bargained for time instead. “I’d ask, ‘Hey, can I give you 30 bucks to pore through your books and take some photos?’ And that became my thing. I’m not going to buy this \$16,000 book, but if I could just get 45 minutes with it...” he says.

Saxony made the most of those precious brokered hours. Over the next two decades—including countless visits to rare-book rooms to study European classics and, more recently, Arabic and Asian lettering as well as Middle Eastern and North African ornament—he developed an increasingly recognizable personal style. Because he wasn’t aware of an African American tradition in this form, “calligraphy felt totally open to me,” he says. He could make the medium his own: exquisitely detailed, bright-red-and-black ink drawings, sometimes done on photographs, with large calligraphic letters and geometric shapes often hidden within the ornamentation.

“Using Gothic forms of lettering as a modality in which to address Black issues is pretty rare within the art world,” Saxony said during a lecture at the San Francisco Public Library in November 2022. “In fact, from a historical standpoint, when I started working with letters, I didn’t know any modern writing specialists that were Black.”



© HUNTER SAXONY III

*“Double Dutch Lamentation (for Breonna)” (2020), by Hunter Saxony III.*

**FEELING THE WORDS**

On a sunny winter morning in the small home studio of his second-floor Mission district flat, Saxony, who has long dreadlocks, chunky glasses, and an infectious grin, chats enthusiastically about his evolving art practice. He also designs tattoos, in collaboration with his girlfriend, tattoo artist Megan Wilson. His recent pieces, many as large as posters, are taped to the walls and layered on the glass desk where he works for marathon stretches most days. “More than eight hours can go by, isolated with my thoughts, with just this paper, in this room,” Saxony says.

His work is painstaking, undeniably beautiful, but also confounding. Words are often intentionally obscured, written along atypical, swirling or pinballing paths instead of left to right. The act of reading forces the viewer to slow down and search for meaning, in the process realizing that legibility itself might be optional.

In Saxony’s *Perpetuate*, the title word is spelled out clockwise around the paper’s perimeter. Letters trace the shape of an infinity symbol in *Incessant*. In his diptych *Bare Fragility*, the ornamental elements form a Greek omega and alpha. The meanings embedded in his chosen words might be cultural, sociopolitical, or entirely personal.

Saxony notes that he’s even made work—such as his series *Between You and I*—“where only one other person knows what it says,” creating a kind of secret language between artist and collector.

“The collector could share that meaning, or could keep it to themselves, and others would see it as just letters and ornamentation,” he says. “I kinda like it that way. I’m playing with the idea of, How much information do you need to actually understand for the piece to be either beautiful or important?”

It’s not surprising to learn that Saxony’s favorite artists work primarily in ideas, rather than a specific medium, such as South African sculptor and installation artist Jane Alexander, public performance artist Pope.L, and Jenny Holzer “for the way she can make a personal dialogue a universal statement,” he says.

They’re conceptual artists, like Saxony himself, whose work shares an element of