



*Finishing a Raw Basement* (still), 2017. 4K video, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

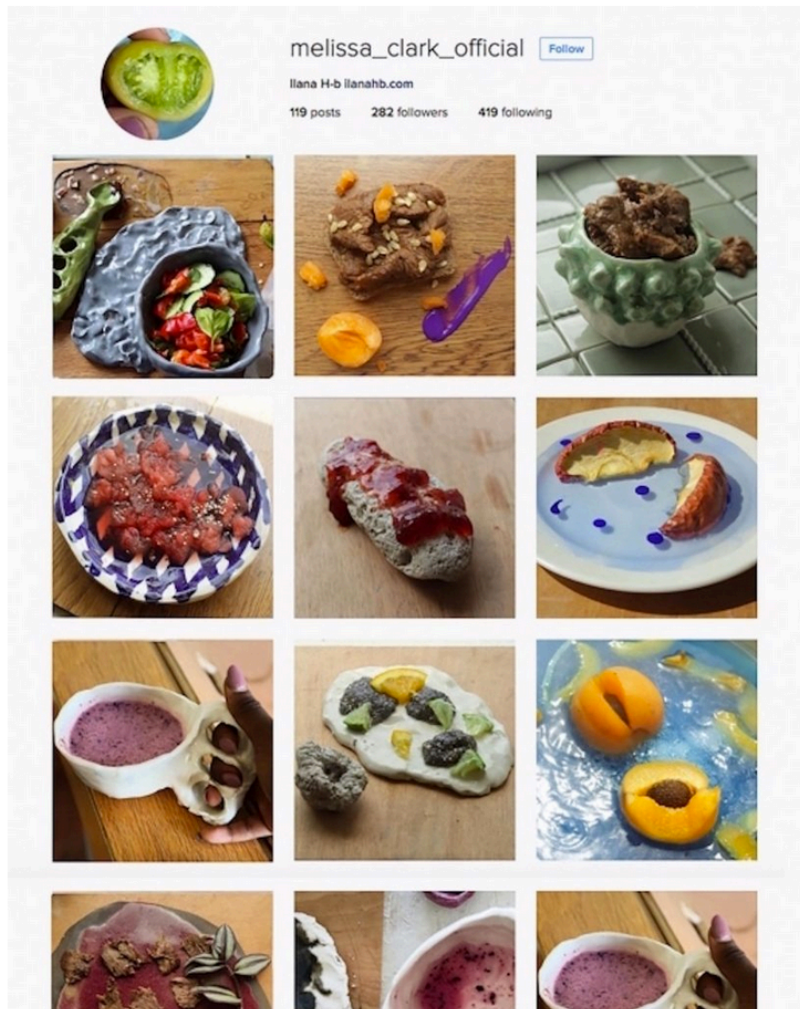
## Critical Aspirations: A Conversation with Ilana Harris-Babou

September 4, 2019 by Amanda Dalla Villa Adams

Ilana Harris-Babou is often considered a video artist, but her practice fluidly negotiates sculpture, installation, performance, photography, and online platforms like Instagram. Using accessible pop-culture tropes—music videos, cooking and home improvement shows, DIY aesthetics, and the language of advertising—she undermines expectations in order to question individual and societal assumptions about American history, race and reparations, gender and sexuality, and economic privilege. Harris-Babou’s politically subversive works offer neither answers nor postscripts; instead, they present open-ended methods for examining the many forms of mainstream entertainment, media, and thinking that we encounter daily in the 21st century.

**Amanda Dalla Villa Adams:** You’ve said, “I always thought about myself as a painter who works on the surface and now I’m working on the surface of a screen.” How does mediation fluctuate across your different platforms? You move from *melissa\_clark\_official* (2018) on Instagram and the videos to installations and the homewares catalogue in *Red Sourcebook* (2018).

**Ilana Harris-Babou:** In America, screens are everywhere. We look at them from the moment we wake up until the moment we close our eyes at night. I work with imagery from everyday life. Projectors are for special occasions like lectures or theaters. My videos lose some of their potency when they’re projected. It’s an issue of scale. My work on Instagram lives on your phone, in your hand. There’s an intimacy in that interaction. If you look at a cooking show on a flat-screen TV, the host’s torso might be the same size as your own. They say, “I’m me, and you’re you, and today we’re going to make a grain bowl.” It feels like everything is happening in the present tense. Most of my videos are up on my website in their entirety. I don’t think of the gallery as an end point. I’m ok with folks viewing my work in a state of distraction while scrolling through their inbox.



melissa\_clark\_official, 2016. Web-based project, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: In *Studio Sounds* (2013), you remade music videos. Are you still using the music video as a platform?**

**IH-B:** Music videos still influence my editing style. I let the rhythm of the soundtrack dictate the pace of my cuts. Timing is essential in music videos. Images are on the screen for just long enough to be exciting or enticing. Take a bottle of champagne spilling, for example. If it flashes by too quickly, it's illegible. If it lingers for too long, it becomes mundane or grotesque. The image is valuable because it is fleeting. Studio lighting also imparts value to the objects and people it illuminates. I eventually tired of referencing music videos so explicitly. I started looking at cooking shows and other forms of what I like to call "aspirational media." A slice of pie immaculately styled in a TV studio is very different from one shot on a phone with the flash on.

**ADVA: You've said, "I like to think about a certain format as a Trojan horse. I can use that as a frame to get into the viewer's life...and then once I get through the gates, maybe a whole different set of ideas." Your work is subversive because it takes on pop-culture references that people might dismiss as vapid, but by doing that you're able to be humorous and satirical while critically raising ideas. How is this a method for your practice?**

**IH-B:** Humor is a really valuable tool we have to digest painful realities. It's the sweet coating on the medicine tablet. I'm ok with people coming to my work for different reasons. Someone could be attracted by the sensuality or the slapstick humor. Some people might recognize the more academic references. In *Cooking with the Erotic* (2016), some people might recognize beats of the rap songs I sample. Some audiences might be able to catch several different references at once. If someone is a fan of the British cooking show host Nigella Lawson but doesn't understand my critique, I'm not mocking them. I choose to reference shows like hers because I love watching them. I'm implicated in everything I'm critiquing. Part of me wants nice furniture like the products I mock in *Reparation Hardware* (2018). It's a critique, but it also comes from a place of play and affection. It's not entirely cynical.



*Some Music Videos* (still), 2011. SD video, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: Can you describe your process? How do you make your videos? Does the text, script, or video material come first?**

**IH-B:** It definitely changes a lot, and it's still evolving. Normally I start with a camera in the studio. I don't have other people do the camera work, and I don't have actors. It's me, maybe my mother, Sheila Harris, a remote control, and a camera. I'll have it rolling while I'm playing around with materials and seeing what happens. Everything that resembles a narrative takes shape in the editing process. I end up using only about five percent of the footage I shoot. I don't use storyboards or scripts. Sometimes I ad-lib a phrase in front of the camera and it sounds good, but the lighting was off or the voice was muffled. If I isolate it in the computer and it seems important, then I'll re-shoot it.

**ADVA: Your scripts incorporate found texts, including General William T. Sherman's Special Field Order No. 15 (1865), Restoration Hardware catalogues and words written by the company's CEO, Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" (1978), and a 1936 Federal Housing Administration tract. How do you choose these texts?**

**IH-B:** My sources come from all over the place. They're often conflicting or contradictory perspectives on a single theme. I like to turn the words against themselves. Vague musings about purity in an interior design catalogue become something else when juxtaposed with racist housing legislation. You get to see just how similar the language is. In *Cooking with the Erotic*, I combined Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Cookbook* (1932) with Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," samples from rap songs, and videos from *New York Times Cooking*. Often, I pick sentences based on how they feel coming out of my mouth. I'll be enticed by a particular cadence or rhythm. The best phrases have multiple meanings. In *Red Sourcebook*, there's a line from the CEO of Restoration Hardware that says something like, "We hope you appreciate our decision to curate the very best objects, ideas, and people that society has to offer." He cites Steve Jobs, talking about a desire to "ratchet up our species." You might not notice how crazy that sounds until it's taken out of the pages of a glossy catalogue.



*Cooking with the Erotic* (still), 2016. Two-channel HD video installation, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: Are your works with your mother collaborative? Do you think of her as an alter ego?**

**IH-B:** I have a really hard time directing other people while I work. I've worked with my family members since I started making art. I basically think of them as the closest people to me who aren't me. That's as far as I'm willing to go for now in terms of who is in front of the camera.

The projects are mine, but they are infused with my mom's voice. I'm certainly not directing her in a classical sense. Often, I just ask her a question and let her riff on it. For example, in *Finishing a Raw Basement* (2017), I ask her, "What kind of house do you want me to live in?" and she responds imaginatively and earnestly. I'll also give her passages from texts to recite, but she can only memorize a line or two at a time. When you watch the videos, you can see that she has a camera presence that is all her own. She's kind of a ham, which is something I admire about her. She's ready to be seen, and she demands to be seen. I'm much more self-conscious.

Our conversations about the content I'm researching are important. When I was making *Cooking with the Erotic*, I was looking for alternatives to the conventional recipe format. I wanted texts where food preparation was described in detail, but where something else was also going on. The first "recipe" I found was a passage in "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," where Lorde describes kneading a dot of yellow food coloring into a softened bag of white margarine. My mom was visiting my studio, and she got super excited about this image. She remembered doing that herself as a little girl. My grandmother was a maid in a house in Connecticut, and my mother shared a room with her there. It was my mom's job every day to knead the margarine. It was something she looked forward to; it was like a game for her. Lorde talks about eroticism not as a pathologized set of relations between people, but as a way of looking at the world. It can be a way of owning labor through sensuousness and play. It so poignantly echoed my mother's experience.

**ADVA: In your work, labor is often depicted as a futile task. For example, in *Reparation Hardware*, you make hammers that break once you use them.**

**IH-B:** I think about labor in several ways. Who gets to do useless tasks? I think about the notion of the artist as genius. I think of Jackson Pollock flinging around paint, how his desire to create becomes an end in and of itself. We might talk about the process of someone heating up dinner for their kids as solely utilitarian, maybe even mundane. Frivolity should not be relegated to art spaces—we're all entitled to play. Our small acts of creation should be honored.



Untitled Lamp from *Restoration Hardware*, 2018. Lamp, ceramic, and epoxy resin, 4 x 4 x 11 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: Why do you repeatedly use dripping paint, fingernail polish, food, gelatinous materials, and ceramics?**

**IH-B:** They're generally materials associated with making. Some come from a studio context—for instance, clay and paint. Others might be seen in kitchens, nail salons, or hardware stores. They're also just materials that I like to squish around in my hands. I typically start making things first and then find an explanation for what I've done later.

**ADVA: Some works, like *Studio Sounds* or *Cooking with the Erotic*, make heavy use of sensuality, which doesn't seem as essential in *Finishing a Raw Basement* or *Reparation Hardware*. Is there a shift?** **IH-B:** I'm not moving away from sensuality. The color palette might be a bit more muted, but I'm still taking the time to linger on textures and surfaces. You see my hands a lot in the work. I like to imagine that the videos have a haptic quality. I hope the viewer is feeling through me, rather than just looking at me. Perhaps this shared feeling brings us closer. There is a bit more melancholy in the two videos you mention. I made them after the election, and the ensuing feelings are in there. I've always ruminated on a brand of aspiration that seems particularly American, so, of course, things feel a bit more complicated in those two works.



*Finishing a Raw Basement*, 2017. 4K video installation, dimensions variable. Photo: Kyle Knodell, Courtesy the artist

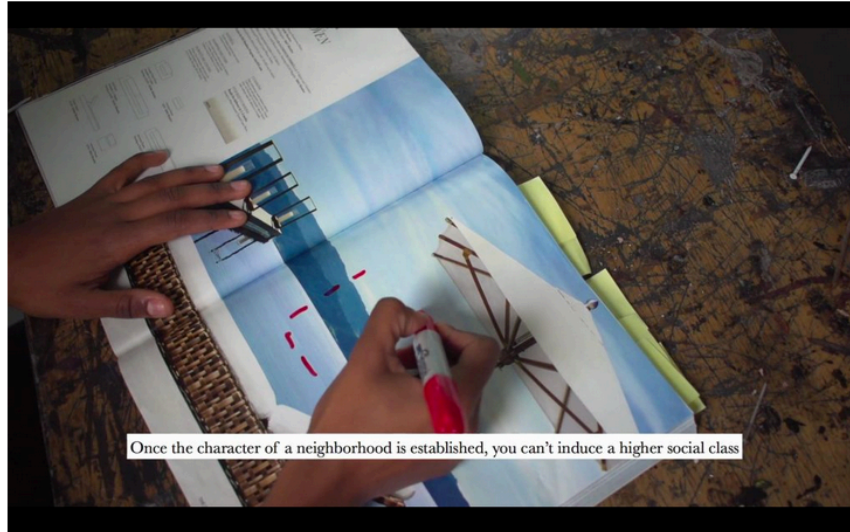
**ADVA: Guilt and reparations are common themes in your work, appearing in *Finishing a Raw Basement*, *Red Sourcebook*, and *Reparation Hardware*. Is this guilt understood in terms of a general oppression of other people, or is it specifically tied to race?**

**IH-B:** I think about guilt broadly. Obviously, slavery is one of America's major sins, and there's no way to talk about American guilt without talking about race. I think that one way we seek absolution is in entertainment. Another is in our purchasing power and where we choose to allocate our resources.

**ADVA: What is your understanding of the American Dream in works like *Reparation Hardware* or *Finishing a Raw Basement*? Your mom made a powerful statement in *Finishing a Raw Basement*: "You can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools." Where did that come from?**

**IH-B:** That's based on words spoken by Audre Lorde at a feminist conference at New York University in 1984. She felt that the organizers of the conference had failed to represent the perspectives of poor women, women of color, and queer women. Feminism in that context was decidedly white and straight. The real problem with the conference was that it was organized completely within the pre-existing principles of academia. It was attempting to dismantle a patriarchal space using the very tools of power. *Finishing a Raw Basement* takes the form of a home improvement show, à la *This Old House*. In the video, my mom and I adopt the roles of father and son entering into our man cave to work on a construction project. The Lorde quotation was a perfect way to complicate this narrative.

The American Dream is the notion that through hard work and ingenuity everyone can get what they deserve. More specifically, everyone can get the money they deserve to buy the things that they deserve. In order to believe the Dream, one must believe that the systems we are operating within run fairly. The notion of reparations is terrifying for many. It's a step too far. Why is this? To impart reparations is to admit that the system was rigged all along. During his campaign, the president asserted that the American Dream is dead. That's very different from admitting that it was never alive in the first place; that for some it's always been a nightmare.



*Red Sourcebook* (still), 2018. HD video, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: *Finishing a Raw Basement* was tied to living in Richmond and *Reparation Hardware* seems tied to your time in New England, specifically a New England defined by land ownership, pastoral landscapes, quaint villages, elite citizens, and gentleman farmers.**

**IH-B:** Yes, definitely. I shot *Finishing a Raw Basement* while I was a Fountainhead fellow at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. Nostalgia fills the landscape of that city. Specifically, nostalgia for its former life as the capital of the Confederacy. I began thinking about the Civil War and its relationship to homeownership then. *Reparation Hardware* was initially commissioned by DIS for their new web platform dis.art. I was writing the proposal for them just as I was getting ready to leave Richmond for Williamstown, Massachusetts, where I currently teach at Williams College. I always imagined that the piece would be shot in the region. That part of New England has its own strange relationship to nostalgia. All the barns have paint that peels ever so elegantly. Everyone wants to think they are a nice person. Both places are interested in preserving the visual legacy of a supposedly more idyllic, authentic time.

**ADVA: Even though you take a critical view of class and race, much of your biography is connected to elite Ivy League or liberal arts schools in the Northeast. How does that inform your work?**

**IH-B:** I make the work I make not in spite of, but because of my educational background. When I was five, I got a scholarship to a prestigious private school in Brooklyn. I feel like I've been performing the particular brand of whiteness that I embody in my videos ever since. When I was a student at Yale, the dining halls had custom china and chandeliers. They also had a stained-glass window with an image of happy slaves picking cotton. I couldn't have made the work I've made without the resources of the institutions I've studied in and taught at. It's always been an awkward fit for me, as I suspect it is for many.



*Reparation Hardware* (still), 2018. HD video, dimensions variable. Photo: Courtesy the artist

**ADVA: What are you thinking about with your new work?**

**IH-B:** I'm thinking a lot about lifestyle and travel blogs. I'm particularly interested in the wellness industry and phrases like "clean living." I was recently in the Hamptons researching fitness culture. There's a wellness magazine called *Purist*, which is distributed at the farmer's market in Amagansett. It's a mélange of wealth management company advertisements and sincere advice about how to live a healthier, more honest life. This notion of purification is terrifying. I'm interested in how the anxieties we have surrounding honesty and truth play out in the body. Crystals and \$100 skin oils abound. It seems like a great chance to explore new materials in my sculpture. Maybe I'll make some healing crystals out of sugar. Or encase a flip phone in amber to capture embodied healing residues from simpler times. Or maybe I'll distill some probiotic face wash from Cheetos. We shall see.

*Ilana Harris-Babou is currently featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial.*