

## Depth of Identity: Art as Memory and Archive

It is Summer 2022. We mark two and half years into a devastating global health crisis that has affected millions of people across the globe. While it has been centuries in the making, we are also two years into an explosive reckoning with race, equity and true justice. We are also at least five and half years into what could be called a targeted strategic political erosion of basic civil liberties and deliberate miscarriages of the laws of the land by particular factions in American politics. This is an equally startling, painful and hopeful time. A moment that requires us to simultaneously sift through and cleave to elements of our past that keep us grounded, in order to heal and progress into a future in full color. This is the crux of *Depth of Identity: Art as Memory and Archive*, a groundbreaking exhibition featuring 19 multidisciplinary visual artists from three continents and ten countries many of whose routes and roots trace through the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. Part of a years-long inquiry instigated by curator Rosie Gordon-Wallace into migration and its emotional, metaphysical, practical and political implications, *Depth of Identity* leans into engagements with liminal spaces and hybridized social experiences born of diasporization and the transformational processes of breaking and remaking of worlds inherent within it.

One of the most critical considerations in this contemporary moment for immigrants — and, truthfully, anyone in America — is the incredibly tumultuous political tenor and increasing violence in the United States. Notions of space for respite came up repeatedly in conversations with the exhibiting artists. It isn't just about the trauma of this time, but instead reclaiming one's mental and emotional capacity and creating a community of care. This exhibition is a continuation of decades-long legacy of *Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator* making the community central to its vision, mission, and work. Many of the exhibiting artists have been collaborators since the early aughts. As their practices have grown, DVCAI has grown with them and created expanded community-engaged and responsive spaces for their work to be shown. Gordon-Wallace's curatorial explorations at the intersection of migration and the creolized spaces it creates ultimately ask the questions: How does one make community anew? How do we keep each other safe? It is the crux of the human condition; and in this particularly difficult and fractious time we find ourselves in as a society, a renewed and sustained allegiance to community and relationships is essential. Our relationships are the mechanism through which we learn, survive and thrive. Often they are the healing balm to wounds to which we sometimes cannot tend ourselves. The interplay of the works in *Depth of Identity* is an illustration of that critically important symbiotic relationship. It is a centering not just of this crucial process of community-building and creative practice but also the concerns and color of life beyond the typical narratives found in Western hegemonic spaces. This work is about life at the margins and the alchemy possible when we can recalibrate our focus toward expanding the breadth of our notions of vision and the freedom it affords us. The works in the exhibition explore matters of the environment, visibility, human rights, materiality and more through these artists' personal histories and visions for the future.

Surinamese multidisciplinary artist Dhiradj Ramsamoedj has a unique approach to portraiture. His figurative yet abstracted work is framed through the idea that every person is a mystery, no matter how close-knit their relationships may be with others. Ramsamoedj's figures are bodily and yet ephemeral. The figures are marked by swirls, strokes, and striations of color marking the elusiveness of a view of these persons' inner selves. Facial features, skin tones are loosely defined, if at all. His 2010 oil painting, *De familie geesten*, which translates to "the ghost family" in English, is an example of his signature style. The work is based on a memory of a family gathering during his younger years. It is a scene of repose and relaxed conversation similar to one found at any family event. Ramsamoedj's approach renders the members of his family opaque, and furthermore untethered from an outsider's gaze. His rendering of this scene, while allowing for each member of his family's autonomy, also feels like an offering of protection and love.

René Tosari's oeuvre combines both organic and abstract forms and figures. Tosari's shapes are attended in a palette reliant on the sun-drenched colors one would only find in the Caribbean and South America. The works feel dense, and rich, owing to the artist's technique of layering acrylic and oil paints to create a texture, depth and dimensionality. Working for five decades between Suriname and the Netherlands, the artist continually pushes against the boundaries of material and their conventional uses. His two paintings *Hybrid*, 2012, and *Untitled*, 2022 contend with issues of the environment, agriculture and design. In *Untitled*, Tosari's blues are reminiscent of the sea illuminated just so by the light of the sun. There are figures seemingly displaced and shrouded in the blue. The unobscured figures in the foreground are painted with flourishes and garments in a color reminiscent of "safety orange." It is a shade of orange almost universally reserved to note a need for caution, and to set objects apart from their surroundings, particularly the sky. Though the figures are faceless, their heads are downcast, perhaps in sorrow. A figure just off center, feels like a woman. Her arms are

raised above her head, pleading to be seen, to be helped. In an era plagued by rising sea levels and extreme shifts in weather happening in communities that often lack the resources to prepare, these details suggest a devastating flood. Living in a coastal community like Paramaribo, Suriname, Tosari no doubt considers the ever-present beauty and danger of the sea and the added perilous dimension of climate change. For communities in the Caribbean and South America and regions around the world like it, a major climate change event is not a far-afield, spectral “what-if” scenario. It is a very real risk that requires serious investment in the form of attention, resources. Tosari’s work asks us to see the humanity of the people in his community and the risk they and so many others bear.

Like Tosari, Cuban artist Grettel Arrate Hechavarría is constantly in pursuit of new techniques and modes to work material beyond traditional approaches. Throughout her long and storied artistic practice she has been a painter, muralist, illustrator and graphic designer using methodologies from all of them in each new iteration of her expression. Her recent experimentations with ceramics find her disrupting the boundaries of the tradition through her incredibly painterly use of glazes, glass, oxides and more. The transgressive nature of her intention is further complicated and heightened by what she describes as “the play of luck and chance when the high kiln temperatures intervene.” In Hechavarría’s series *The Peacock’s Tail*, the interplay of abstract lines and the fresh color palette she is known for in her painted works is clear and present. For millennia, humans have evoked the peacock and its plumage, as a representation of love, immortality, vitality and so much more. In *The Peacock’s Tail III*, 2019, there is a figure at the center of the plate; ribbons of highly-pigmented glaze reminiscent of the bird’s luminescent feathers adorn her. The feathers nurture and cover her in compassion and kindness, and perhaps by virtue of looking, the viewer is too.

Guadeloupean painter Bruno Métura believes his paintings serve to connect “the human dimension to its rightful reality in the cosmos.” His abstract works seek to make visible the fraught histories, and inexplicable effervescence of the Antillean region through form and color. He is interested in the ways that perspective — political, peripheral, and otherwise — may disrupt our ability to communicate. Métura’s current body of work “Recto-Verso” deals directly with visualizing the multiplicitous history of the Caribbean, and laying bare those methods of seeing. The name itself translates to “front-back” from the French, suggesting a panoramic view. As we turn from one side to the next, it requires us to look at every angle. In the works in his *Hints of Illusions* subseries, Métura creates diptychs, merging canvases replete with frenetic impressionistic marks, and a palette of hushed tones. His chromatic choices are subtle; gently they beckon us to look more closely, to allow our eyes to follow every line and mark within sight to develop a new understanding of not only the Caribbean, but ourselves and the lands and histories we inhabit.

Caroline Holder’s ceramics practice is also interested in the multiplicity of perspective, origin and history. A native of Barbados, through her process of intimately feeling her way into an object, Holder’s clay works “deconstruct and recreate complex forms” with slip cast or hand-building. Her oeuvre often revolves around themes of finding connections, belonging and their requisite challenges. At a glance, the artist’s installation *Home to Go*, 2019 feels familiar and not. Holder’s choice to make the objects at an intimate scale adds emotional heft to the work. As viewers, we want to pick them up and hold them. Open the bottles to smell the familiar scents. There are perfect replicas: a bottle of jerk seasoning, a tube of water crackers, a tin of corned beef, a bottle of Mount Gay extra old rum, and other objects that trace the staple items of Caribbean food and cultural folkways. Holder has nestled each object into a perfectly-fitted spot inside of a suitcase. Everything is neat; too perfect, perhaps. Each object is labeled but drained of the color in its typical package design, seemingly striking a chord about the depersonalization and starkness often felt by displaced people searching for new places to call home. That the goods can move with us is a source of solace and comfort.

Conversely, the color and energy of virtuoso Korean artist Kim Myung Sik (Andy Kim)’s work often offers viewers a more straightforward opportunity for joy and pleasure. Through his paintings, Kim provides viewers a reminder of the truth of our incontrovertible connection to nature and the peace it can bring. In his series *East Side Story*, Kim somehow offers an immaculate and yet highly-chromatic environment in his canvases. Using a palette knife and his fingers to meticulously apply oil paint to his substrate, the artist (sometimes delicately) invokes the lushness of the natural world in the *mise en scène*. Each tableau features homes surrounded by plant life. In *East Side 17 - MS03*, 2017 there is a booming shock of color in the background - vermilion. Perhaps Kim wanted us to see a field of red mugunghwa, or hibiscus, often considered a symbol in South Korea of eternal abundance.

Born in Japan and having a very international cosmopolitan upbringing, Samo Davis’ interdisciplinary practice too has a connection to joy and nature as a point of inspiration. Davis’ makes digital and sculptural works using materials as wide ranging as clay, code, paint

and plastic in pursuit of what the artist calls “small, multi-dimensional worlds.” Their practice involves creating sculpture through a process of repetitive gestures, akin to a meditative state. In their worlds, the artist creates a total mind-body connection rooted in relating through the human experience. Davis’ sculpture *Happiness in ROYGBIV*, made from plastic, resin, pom-poms, yam, and clay, utilizes color, form and scale as a therapeutic balm and an explosive expression of joy.

In his new surreal “quasi-figurative” paintings, Asser St. Val explores questions of the body and its access to spirituality, expanded reality and universal consciousness. As a young person, St. Val migrated from Haiti to the United States; upon arriving he experienced his first incidence of racial prejudice based on his status as an immigrant and the color of his skin. From then on, St. Val began a life-long investigation into skin tones, neuromelanin (a chemical secreted in the human brain by the pineal gland), and its functions in the body and beyond. Using unconventional materials like chocolate, fresh ginger, flour and others in addition to traditional paint, St. Val uses his fantastic and sometimes borderline abject inclinations to probe the histories of the Global African Diaspora, notions of sexual desire, and narratives about Black people and the higher functions of neuromelanin as a catalyst for spiritual transformation. In his 2022 painting *IMEALTHUR*, a bodacious figure seems to be walking on water after a rise from the sea. The upper portion of the figure’s body seems to be a cephalopodic form starting at the base of her lower back with tentacles coiling around her feet, and a large shell-like form at the top of her back. Is she real? Is she Yemaya, a divine archetype many Africans brought with them across the Atlantic? If we can see her, what can we see within ourselves? What might we transform?

Through a litany of small cuts, Autumn T. Thomas’ transforms rigid wood to a flexible, pliable form she can manipulate. For Thomas, her methodology invokes the fortitude of Black women, and other women of color often have to demonstrate in order to survive in the West. Through her intricate acts of rending and torsion, Thomas seeks to create a foundation that balances “structure and fluidity” in each sculpture. Moreover, she desires to shift the historical and conceptual framework of the entire discipline. The sculptures employ the air, light and shadows to activate the eye toward their sinuous lines and textures. In line with laying bare the histories of Black women, her work *Lift Every Voice* (2021) is a nod to the work, life and legacy of inspirational but often forgotten Harlem Renaissance sculptor and educator Augusta Savage. Famously, for the 1939 World’s Fair Savage was invited to create a sculpture entitled *The Harp*, also known as *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, after the Negro National Anthem. It was heralded as a stunning feat but it was destroyed because she could not afford the cost of casting the sculpture in bronze. Thomas poetically addresses Savage’s influence, and that of countless other women of color in forming delicate windchimes nestled into the flexure of the wood. Every movement near *Lift Every Voice* potentially sets the work singing of the stories we have never heard.

Similarly seeking to bridge narrative and aesthetic gaps through digital and material interventions, multidisciplinary artist Stephanie J. Woods examines the interiority of Black American culture. Sifting through the intricate details of domestic space, mechanisms for adornment, the embodiment of tradition, Woods’ dynamic art practice is investigative and uninterested in direct mimesis. She wants to invoke the memory but offer new experiences that do not center trauma and instead source pathways that perhaps demystify its impacts and origins. Her vibrant photographic series “*Shake Em*,” in part conjures the classic rite of passage for young Black children of wearing braids adorned with beads. The sensation and musicality of it is sublime, even reminiscing on it as an adult. In the photographs just the hair is visible against splashy resist-dyed fabric reminiscent of the sounds, styles in bustling African cities. Many of the resist dye-traditions in West Africa date back to the centuries prior to the slave trade. Each figure’s hair is adorned with a brightly colored beaded netting commonly seen around the shekere, a ubiquitous West African percussion instrument created with seeds, beads, or shells inside of a dried gourd. It is used in secular and sacred music all over the global African Diaspora. When played the instrument recalls the gentle thundering of beads sailing through the air in joy; but maybe it was the other way around. We adapt; finding ways to feel, taste, see and hear home. Woods’ intervention allows those (interrupted) contexts and moments to be synchronized and perhaps even syncretized.

Kurt Nahar’s oeuvre has long centered on the stochastic nature of the contemporary social and geopolitical sphere. Through his interplay between material, color and other strategies, he expresses his emotions and thoughts on social ills, and injustice in his native Suriname and in the world. The artist often invokes Dada, a major movement in early 20th century art noted for their desire to disassociate from the models of art that catered to the bourgeois and their stance against war and the violent political machinations of the time in Europe. Adopting its methodologies, Nahar offers viewers a space to confront, and consider information they have not seen together before. His 2021 mixed media work *ObronnyObronni* can be read as an outcry against the contemporary art world, and

its colonial foundations. The title translates to “foreigner” or “stranger” in the Akan language groups in modern-day Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana from which many Afro-Surinamese people descend. It has also been used to refer to white people. In the tableau, a face juts out from the center of the composition. The proportions don’t feel quite right. There is something about the oval shape of this figure’s face and the ways the eyes are set that call to mind Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer’s famed *The Girl With The Pearl Earring*. Vermeer is considered a member of the halcyon Dutch Golden Era of painting. This period of investment in the arts was possible only through capital produced at the expense of millions of indigenous people enslaved and exploited in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. On the figure’s cheek, Nahar photo transfers text bearing the names of some of the global art world’s most diverse and well-known happenings: Documenta in Kassel, Germany, and dak’art in Dakar, Senegal. Beneath that is the name “Tedja.” While it is likely a reference to Afro-Surinamese artist and writer Michael Tedja, it could just as easily be a nod to the Indonesian billionaire art collector Alexander Tedja. He writes “Dada” in paint throughout the tableau. It all feels like a triangulation of history, and the futures - stories, objects and people - we will lay claim to.

Similarly traversing contestations of the contemporary, Julian Pardo, directly engages with environmental and social issues from his native Colombia and in his new home city Miami. Since 2019, groups of citizens have formed *la primera línea*, or a “front line,” in the streets to protect and defend protestors from increasingly violent displays by the Colombian military and police during public rallies about labor rights, taxation and human rights issues. Throughout the global pandemic and its waves, the protests have ebbed and swelled, with what the artist notes as more than “70 murders and 3,500” incidences of police brutality, gender-based violence against the dissidents to date. In solidarity Pardo created *primera línea*, 2022. The front line protestors in Colombia self-organize to be a literal shield between the public and the police, often using bike helmets, and whatever else they can find to hold the line. Pardo wax casted a hand grenade and a larger-than-life bullet, objects the police continue to use at protests. The objects are tied together with a long, strong wick. They ominously hang in the air, marking the danger bodily contact would bring. Paying homage to *primera línea*’s bravery and ingenuity, as the red wax moves across the floor it leaves a red line. He uses line to make an impactful statement on human rights.

Similarly, Izia Lindsay’s graphical creative practice is an open platform for self discovery and exploration. Lindsay’s work channels and transforms indigenous Caribbean archetypes and folklore, particularly of his native Trinidad and Tobago through an intuitive process of feeling, breathing and making forms on canvases and other substrates, and digital means. His eight-piece series of screenprints “Symbolism in Caribbean Iconography” openly explores the gestures, history and cultural positionalities of the artist’s native Trinidad and Tobago. Calling to mind flags, Lindsay’s works have an almost vexillological function and weight. That the works all hang like tapestries adds to their power. In particular, *Symbolism in Caribbean Iconography*, no. 1, features an abstracted representation of a steel pan, the ubiquitous and internationally beloved instrument first developed in Trinidad in the 20th century. These abstracted forms connect in a way that calls to mind pan bands in the Queens Park Savannah for the annual Panorama competition during Trinidad’s carnival season. It is the largest and most important steel band competition in the world. The work offers a portal to the electricity pulsing through the Grand Stand, and the audience’s excitement and appreciation for the culture and community.

Jamaica-based Kenyan artist Mazola Wa Mwashighadi’s practice centers on exploring the rhythms and wonders of life. Born to an ethnically diverse family in Mombasa, Kenya, at an early age it was instilled in the young artist that freedom and the keeping of traditions in community were paramount. Throughout period of self-study and stints at art schools including Edna Manley College of Art in Jamaica, Mwashighadi has developed a wide-ranging praxis informed by and engages forms including dance, poetry, music, sculpture and more to place the past, present, future into “one in continuum.” His series *Vessel for Reincarnated Souls* utilizes found objects to create what feel like counter-canopic jars. In Ancient Egyptian culture, canopic jars were used to preserve the organs of the mummified for the after life. Hearts were thought to be the seat of the soul and were left undisturbed. In one vessel, in a deeply poetic gesture, he welds washers into a form that feels akin to a protective netting. Washers are a ubiquitous tool; they are meant to relieve pressure and evenly distribute force. Mwashighadi’s work feels alchemical, offering us space to reimagine ways for the heart to heal from the wiles of the world before the energy transforms into new life and experiences.

The source material of Jamaican artist Michael Elliot’s drawings and photorealistic paintings often rests within the artist’s contemporary interrogations into histories of the Black people dispersed in the Atlantic World. Elliot’s process is research-intensive and seeds viewers with the tools to delve deeper into the stories commonly untold. He has a penchant for the allegorical, creating

richly layered and politically charged images through his methodological approach. His 2022 painting *Seeds of the Last Tide* (Clotilda), bears a traditional watermelon sliced open. The title alludes to the infamous ship, *The Clotilda*, the Great Migration, and a myriad of historical moments in the Black American experience. Often referred to as the "last slave ship," in 1860 the crew of the "Clotilda" illegally kidnapped and transported people from modern-day Nigeria to Alabama at the behest of a lawless Southern planter. Recently, a team of researchers have begun to excavate the ship from where it was purposely sunk. Elliot also invokes the harrowing journeys and successes of the Great Migration. Beginning just over a century ago, it was a mass exodus of Black people from the rural American South to cities in the Northeast, West, and Midwest in search of freedom from racial violence and new opportunity for their families. It may be one of the single most important migratory movements of the modern era, in that it offered Black people spaces for cultural innovation, intellectual and economic ascension on a scale that had never before been seen in the United States. In the tableau, Elliot inventively supplants the watermelon seeds with cowrie shells and Lilliputian-esque Black figures, representing abundance and blessings that followed even in circumstances meant to diminish.

Flourishing in the face of the unimaginable is a central theme of Senegalese-Mauritian-American artist Yacine Tilala Fall's video installation, a segment of her longer performance work *Self Portrait* (Jigéen, Jabar, Yaye, Ndey), 2021. The viewer meets the artist sitting in a rocking chair with her hands, torso, thighs and feet bound to the chair. Her face is covered with a handmade white, yellow and black fabric mask. As the scene begins to unfold, an ochre liquid, a concoction of water, turmeric, lemon and honey, is poured over her head, dyeing the mask, leaving plump bits of turmeric-stained lemon adorn her skin and flesh-toned clothing. She bucks against her constraints, struggling to free herself from its hold. The work considers the journey of Fall's mother, and the ways she had to remake herself upon leaving her native Senegal. The subtitle refers to the very limited lens through which women are often viewed in Senegalese society of the time; the Wolof words *jigéen*, *jabar*, *yaye*, *ndey* translate to woman, wife, mother, and aunt respectively. Upon leaving Senegal, a wellspring of possibility of who she might be and what she might do in the world opened. Fall embodies the struggle to break through these societal boundaries as she writhes and pulls against her bonds to free herself and unleash her fullest potential.

Kim Yantis and Lucinda Linderman's *Suiting Up For The Future's* collaborative research-based costume and performance practice too is engaged in transformation of potential energy of adorned bodies in motion. Through the use of upcycled post-consumer objects, the costume and performance works are aimed at bridging the ever-widening gap between our understanding and the pressing conditions of impacting the health of the environment through the anthropocene (the current geological epoch on the planet related to human influence). *Suiting Up For the Future's* work draws attention to "negligent industrial and governmental practices," while accessibly dispersing data on the state of the environment. All over the world the impacts of the anthropocene are felt in the form of unprecedented temperatures at both ends of the spectrum, superstorms, droughts marking irrevocable shifts in life communities at risk. The wearable featured performance video is in direct conversation with climate change in the hope that humanity may confront the clear and present danger with decisive action.

First generation Jamaican, ninth generation Black American, Brooklyn-based Aisha Tandiwe Bell's work interrogates the ways people who are marginalized in the West negotiate space. Bell considers that she and many people who have similar backgrounds have been made to feel entrapped in a social strata limited by the lenses of race, gender, nationality, and class. Occupying a complicated and intersectional position, we often contract, expand, and shift into, what DuBois famously called double-consciousness at-will. The materiality of Bell's practice spans paint, clay, fabric, wood and cardboard expressed through multidimensional forms of sculpture, performance, and installation. Through these stratagems, she offers methodologies and mechanisms toward fluidity, fugitivity and ultimately wholeness. Her installation *What Lies Beneath* brings together her trap box and ceramic works on wood into a single sweeping gesture. Bell's trap box forms appear to be a trap laying in wait to confine an unwitting viewer. The box is held open and upright with a large wooden stick. The trap box is connected to nine mask-like sculptures mounted to painted wood panels, each adorned with painted backgrounds. Each panel represents a new identity to inhabit or shapeshift into. It is a precarious freedom from captivity at best, but a freedom nonetheless.

Indo-Guyanese multidisciplinary artist Suchitra Mattai works bridges the divides between the fiber arts, collage, and sculpture and history. She descends from South Asian migrants who came to the Caribbean in the 19th century. It is a story rarely told outside of the region, but its implications are myriad. Conceptually, Mattai frames her use of fiber methodologies as a mechanism for elevating the

story of this migration, and the narratives of the women in particular who have been discounted. In Mattai's choices to juxtapose and activate materials like sequins, and vintage saris in her works, she renegotiates and revises the telling of history and offers agency not just to the women in her family but to those in the Indo-Caribbean diaspora at large. Her tapestry-like mixed media art work *Soca Queen*, 2020, features an obscured self-portrait. Soca is a vibrant, celebratory music form from the Caribbean that combines African, Asian, European and indigenous rhythms and melodies. In carnival celebrations around the region, competitions are held to crown musicians who offer audiences the most revelry as Soca kings, queens and monarchs. The figure's face is adorned with diaphanous feathers, appliqués often found on garb for special occasions, and a shimmering garland of sequins. The pieces of sari cover her body, almost like a curtain. Muted tones configure intricate wheels of boteh, the traditional Persian teardrop motif, are prominent on the fabric. Most know it as paisley. Due to a massive demand for the pattern during the colonial era scores of factories in Paisley, Scotland, began to mass produce it. Thus, it was renamed, arguably erasing untold histories and livelihoods of the women and their families who had made and worn the pattern for centuries along with it. Through her choice to allow this fabric to simultaneously cloak and costume her body, Mattai literally wears and employs the spoils of history in celebration as she sees fit.

Together these artists from disparate corners of the world offer respite, joy and mechanisms for recognition. It is no mistake that these elements render human life its richest and most meaningful. *Depth of Identity: Art as Memory and Archive* offers unctious morsels of color, and deep sense of criticality and nuance. Michael Elliot, Yacine Tilala Fall, Kurt Nahar, Suchitra Mattai, Autumn Thomas, René Tosari, and Kim Yantis each teach us to see anew through their choices of materials and conceptual juxtapositions. Samo Davis, Grettel Arrate Hechavarría, Andy Kim, Iziai Lindsay, Bruno Métura, Mazola Wa Mwashighadi, Stephanie Woods offer us portals toward compassion and healing invoking scenes and states of exquisite bliss. Aisha Tandiwe Bell, Caroline Holder, Julian Pardo, Dhiradj Ramsamoedj, and Asser St. Val, ask us to consider freedom in all its dimensions. *Depth of Identity* deals with the ever-shifting articulations of and strategies for self-definition. Just as the proverbial dust settles, something else may shift and we are required to renegotiate our world yet again. This exhibition offers us a subtle lesson on living in a state of elasticity, and expanded vision.

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