

ON THE CONSIDERATION OF A BLACK GRID

SILAS MUNRO

POLYMODE STUDIO

(UNITED STATES OF AMERICA)

Silas Munro is a designer, artist, writer, curator, and founder of Polymode. He curated *Strikethrough: Typographic Messages of Protest* at Letterform Archive. Munro contributed to W.E.B. Du Bois's *Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America* and co-authored *Black Design in America: African Americans and the African Diaspora in Graphic Design 19–21st Century*.

Corresponding author

Silas Munro, Polymode, 2389 W 31st St. Los Angeles, CA 90018,
silas@poly-mode.com

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Abstract

From the funky, fresh Black modernism of the Johnson Publishing Company's headquarters designed by John Warren Moutousamy with Arthur Elrod and William Raiser to the expressive graffitied grids of Adam Pedelton's monumental canvases in black and white, there lives a wide-ranging matrix of possibilities for what I consider to be a Black Grid. As a queer Black artist, designer, and design historian, living and working in conditions of a triple consciousness of overlapping marginalization, I have been in countless situations throughout my career, surrounded by a sea of practices and pedagogies that don't represent me, my lived experience, or that of kindred spirits. As a result, I have committed to redirecting and centering art and design BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) voices and scholarship in making, writing, and education as a transformational process. To that end, I enact poetic research, which seeks to find lineages from biological ancestors, antecedents in art and design, and chosen family.

Keywords: Design Systems, Design History, Graphic Design, Africa, African American, Fractal Geometry, Grid, Visual Art, Diaspora, Cultural Studies

On the Consideration of a Black Grid

From the funky, fresh Black modernism of the Johnson Publishing Company's headquarters designed by John Warren Moutoussamy with Arthur Elrod and William Raiser (Fig. 2) to the expressive graffitied grids of Adam Pedelton's monumental canvases in black and white (Fig. 3), there lives a wide-ranging matrix of possibilities for what I consider to be a Black Grid. As a queer Black artist, designer, and design historian, living and working in conditions of a triple consciousness of overlapping marginalization, I have been in countless situations throughout my career, surrounded by a sea of practices and pedagogies that don't represent me, my lived experience, or that of kindred spirits. As a result, I have committed to redirecting and centering art and design BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) voices and scholarship in making, writing, and education as a transformational process. To that end, I enact poetic research, which seeks to find lineages from biological ancestors, antecedents in art and design, and chosen family.

A big challenge across all fields of design and for those of us who want to know and tell its histories are the limited pathways for Black designers and design students. The rich resources, references, methods, and potential mentors are teaming in classrooms, studios, corporations, museums, publications, archives, and family lineages, chosen or otherwise. And yet African, African American, and African diasporic designers make up a fraction of design programs and professions. We have been historically repressed, held back, omitted, or undervalued. This is a deeply structural issue, and the devalued history of Black design and art is deeply embedded in the systems of societies and cultures informed by the

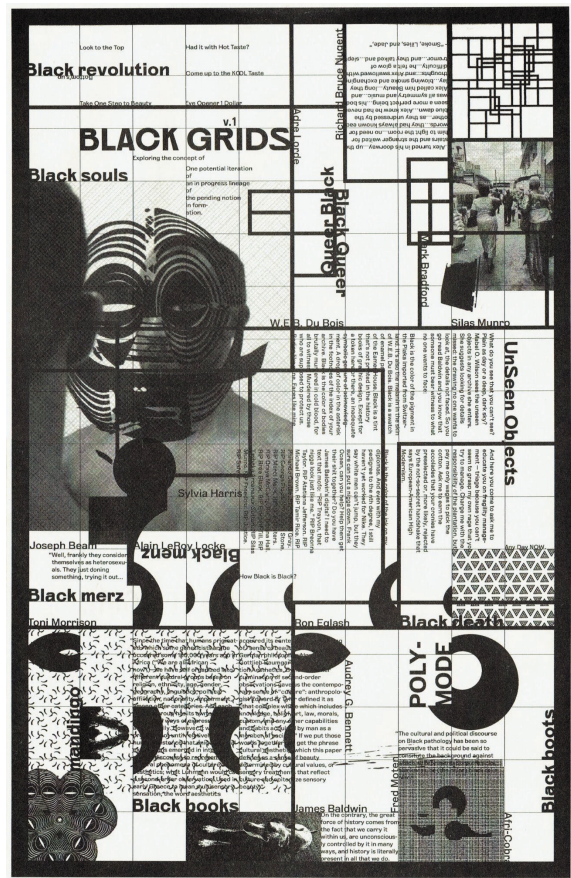


Fig. 1 *Black Grids v1.0*, Silas Munro, 2021. Risograph on paper, 11 × 17 inches.

impact of the colonial construction of race that came out of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.¹

Statistically, Black designers make up 3% of all graphic designers in the United States, while Black Americans make up

¹ See Nell Irving Painter's *A History of White People*, "Although science today denies race any standing as objective truth, and the U.S. census faces taxonomic meltdown, many Americans cling to race as the unschooled cling to superstition. So long as racial discrimination remains a fact of life and statistics can be arranged to support racial difference, the American belief in races will endure. But confronted with the actually existing American population—its distribution of wealth, power, and beauty—the notion of American whiteness will continue to evolve, as it has since the creation of the American Republic.



Fig. 2 *The Johnson Publishing Company cafeteria*, designed by John Warren Moutoussamy with Arthur Elrod and William Raiser Photo. Photograph by Alexandre Georges, ca. 1972.

10% of the population.² I have felt this disparity personally throughout all of my education and career. While in graduate school studying at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, I was one of the very few Black students in the graphic design department. One of the reasons I ended up in that program was meeting Tasheka Arcenux-Sutton in 2006 on an open studio day in my application process. At the time, she was the only Black student in Graphic Design. Her ability to verbally express her particular way of working and interests drew me to the program. Once I became a fellow student, we found a kinship with each other, we even sat next to each other. Both of us were trying to find our own histories in design, which was not being explored by our Faculty (there were no Black Design faculty), so we became each other's resources. The culmination of her thesis project, "I'm an Angry Black Woman," must have snapped me and her out of the daze of absence. Tasheka had found the book *African Fractals* by Ron Eglash and told me, "Silas, you might want to think about looking at this book." She was right, when I saw the fractals book, it blew my mind. In it, I saw the lineage of my mother's people from Uganda. To see evidence of art and design scholarship connected to my family

was amazing. At the same time, Tasheka had turned me on to Saki Mafundwkia's research on African alphabets. Again, this research channeled my mom's lineage from Uganda, and seeing design scholarship connected to my people changed the way I saw myself as a designer.

From there, I discovered the renowned design scholar Audrey G. Bennett's text, *Follow the Golden Ratio from Africa to the Bauhaus for a Cross-Cultural Aesthetic for Images*, which traces a lineage of fractal ingenuity in the Sub-Saharan



Fig 3 *OK DADA OK BLACK DADA OK (ALL WE)*, Adam Pendleton, 2018. Ink and spray paint on canvas, 84.3 x 60.2 inches. Courtesy of the artist, (c) Adam Pendleton, 2018.

² See AIGA Design Census began in 2019, and many, many essays, roundtables, panels, and articles on Where Are the Black Designers that point back to Cheryl Miller's 1987 PRINT Article based on her Thesis Document, eyeondesign.aiga.org/where-are-all-the-black-designers-a-roundtable-discussion.

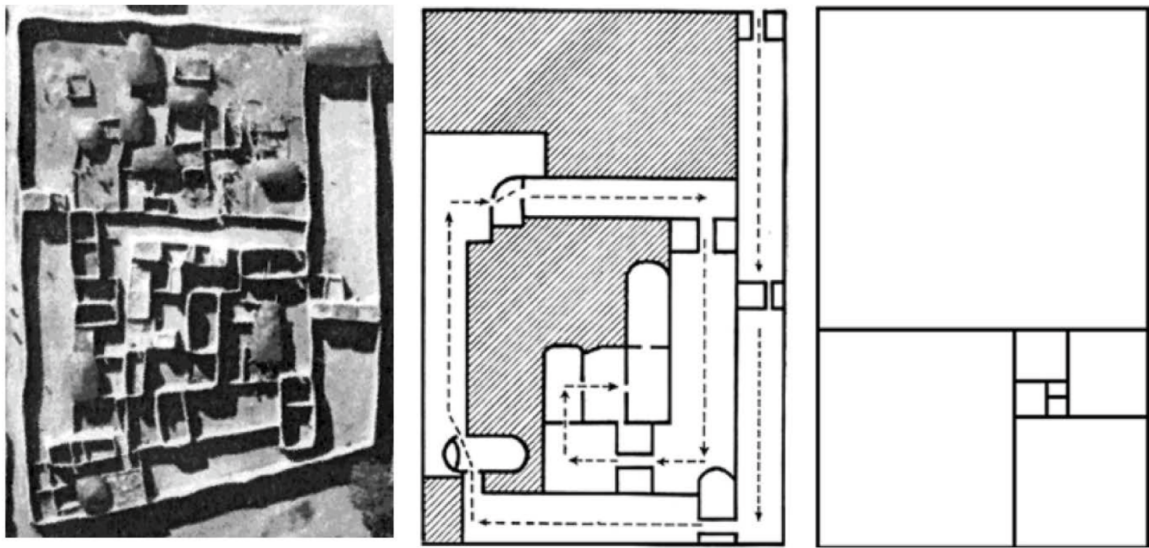


Fig. 4 (from left to right) Aerial photo of the palace of Chief in Logone-Birni and path through the palace (courtesy Ron Eglash and African Fractals CSDT) with visualization of golden rectangle spiral (courtesy Audrey G. Bennett), 2020.

Cameronean palace of a Chief in Logone-Birni that likely influenced Egyptian, North African Temple architecture, linking to Italy through the mathematician Fibonacci known for his so-called “golden ratio” that then informed European ideals of beauty circulating in the infamous Bauhaus art school (Fig. 4). Bennett’s postulations connect to my meandering search to see myself. When I first discovered Audrey Bennett’s anthology—*Design Studies*—in grad school, I didn’t realize she was Black. As I went out into the field and was teaching myself, her research became a crucial reference.

During the pandemic, along with Tasheka, Pierre Bowins, and the design studio Polymode, we put together a BI-POC-centered design history class, *Black Design in America: African Americans and the African Diaspora in Graphic Design 19th–21st Century*. We asked Saki and Audrey to speak, and from there, she invited Ron to speak about their work—other speakers followed. It was our way to get the history off the page, of things my colleagues and I had read in our

research. During a contentious conversation in one of the online classes, a colleague named Christopher Dingwall was lecturing about the histories of Black design in mid-century Chicago, showing a special 1969 issue of *Ebony* called *The Black Revolution* designed by Herbert Temple and photographs of The Johnson Publishing Company Building designed by John Warren Moutoussamy (Fig. 3). In the chat, I mentioned that the works looked similar to Black Grids, and I wondered, “What would a history of those look like?” In graphic design pedagogy, in particular, a key absence is scholarship in and around the grid. There are many “how-to” manuals, but few texts that are critical. The grid, as a construct, runs underneath and through contemporary design and its theoretical underpinnings. Yet is not often analyzed directly. During the Q&A discussion, a prominent white design critic I look up to said, “Silas, there is no such thing as a Black Grid. A grid is just a tool that changes depending on how you apply it.” To say that I was crushed puts it mildly. As

someone who's been historically marginalized, I often ask myself, "What do we do with the grid?"

I was immediately trying to prove this academic wrong. I felt the white supremacy of that comment. I felt invalidated. I felt that I was being gaslit. That is a truth I could feel in my bones about what a privileged design education had told me. This critic, Gunnar Swanson, was saying that a grid is an inherently neutral thing. That a grid can only be defined by how it is used. The problem was not just his comment, but a collective trigger of all the moments where design education, design for designers, and design writ large have let me down. The design of stop-and-frisk policies makes me uneasy anytime I see a police car ahead on the highway, or driving in my rear-view mirror. The many awkward moments where there has been no other Black or queer person to look up to or talk with in a critique. Luckily at that moment, that was not the case for our virtual one-room school house at BIPOC Design History.

According to my idol, there is something utopian about the almost infinite applicability conceptual idea of the grid as a toolbox. It's not a grid in the neoclassical sense of harmony, such as in music, for example, but a modernist grid that contributes to progress and to organizing the world in an industrial way. But then I asked myself, are we now in this place where industrial and digital progress made our world better, happier, more peaceful, resolved, and ordered almost half a century later? Not! The grid might be helpful for presenting matters that feel logical and ordered, but our world is much more complex in so many ways, politically, economically, and socially. So I wonder how the grid can deal with the messiness of the world, and I feel that it has its limitations there.

I asked myself, how do I feel about the grid? How do I really feel? I often feel the grid was imposed on me. That I am not a designer without a grid. And a very particular grid. A coded grid that says right, that says just, that says beautiful. And by a particular grid, I mean the modernist grid. And by modernist,

I mean a particular flavor of European influenced American grid vernacular. Since I was in school I've been told that a grid is a grid so many times. That it is a tool, and it depends on who uses it. Over time, my use of the grid in both my client-based work and my studio work has had a varied range of strategies. In applied projects for clients, the grid is often motivated by my design training to have proper typography, proper spacing, and proper alignment. Those rules and codes say you have to conform a certain way. That it's not "good" design without those codes. You have to be this way or that way. When I was presenting at a recent panel in Switzerland, I had to identify what I think a grid is, and there were so many expectations in my head about what is okay or not okay to be used that it felt so confining and defining in such a grided space that I almost couldn't breathe.

My practice is about pushing back at this Western-biased framework. But I also paradoxically love these grids and have a similar longing for their dream of structure. Through my research, making, and teaching, I feel that a grid can provide a safe space or something to refer to, which in turn allows one to be intuitive or expressive in the structures we all face in our lives. I've struggled in many ways to write about an absence of Black and Indigenous presence in the grid. What I'm doing visually—this is the possibility. We don't necessarily have the formulas and the algorithms just yet, but this is the start of it. Making work as a biracial person who's looking at Ugandan lineages in tandem with my Minnesota lineages and combining them is where I've started. A lot of what I have explored so far is through using fractal geometry and visual histories where it's not necessarily Euclidean based.

In my lived and educational experience, grids have a history connected to imperialism, white supremacy, and the way that empires have colonized, especially BIPOC folks, using an idea of systems to taxonomize, value, and extract the resources of indigenous and vulnerable people. If you think about the Brookes slave diagram as an example, the grid



Fig. 5 *What Kind of Child are You to be Treating Your Mother This Way?* (Whitman Yawp Dock), Silas Munro, 2019. Photo collage and cut vinyl, 8.5 x 11 inches.

carries ways of organizing and controlling the “other.” And so, for me, the idea of a Black Grid is a liberatory way of looking at a history of geometry that is native to Indigenous and Black people.

In 2019, I created the piece *What Kind of Child Are You to be Treating Your Mother This Way?* (Fig. 5) The title comes from a phrase my mom would say to me as a child in her indigenous language of Lunyole when I misbehaved. My mother never taught me to speak this dialect. But I knew when she said that phrase that I was in trouble. As an adult, I realized this is connected to generational trauma around the assassination of her brother, my Uncle Silas Munabi, who was a politician betrayed by friends and murdered by Idi Amin’s successors in

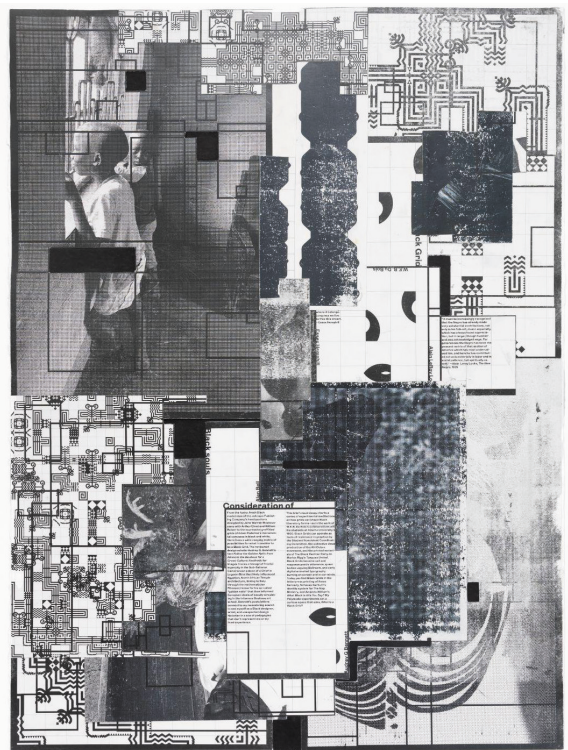


Fig. 6 *Black Grid Redux*, Silas Munro, 2022. Collage, computational drawing, ink on printmaking paper, 22 x 25 inches.

1981. Juxtaposing a photograph of a nude self-portrait that is a mix of empowered Black queer liberation in a time of PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis for HIV prevention) and ubiquitous online nudity was overlaid with a disrupted and fragmented Ugandan mask made of torn and stretched black cut vinyl. In this piece, I was trying to make sense of family histories of violation and national and queer persecution of gay people in my mother’s homeland and in my home here in the US. Breaking and twisting this graphic of a mask I could initially only touch through print and digital means, but output as cut vinyl became a commentary on what I feel like is a broken relationship to colonialism, to a restrictive “Swiss Grid,” and to my own shame around being a queer person of color in a what can be a hateful, ignorant world.



Fig.7 *Black Grid Redux* (detail), Silas Munro, 2023. Computational drawing, ink, on printmaking paper, 22 x 25 inches.

The physical mark-making, and machine outputs remix, as seen in *Black Grids v1.0* (Fig. 1), an edition of risograph prints shown at Bennington College in the 2021 group show *Bring it Home*, curated by Ramon Tejada and Anne Thompson, was another watershed moment of making. This work informed a series called *Black Grids Redux* (Fig 6, 7, 8), where computation processes collide with transfer and collage to oscillate and iterate between analog and digital modes of pattern-making connected to retraced African native forms. I interject additional self-portraiture, and family photos to personalize, rupture, and expand the notion of what a grid can or could be. These multiple modes of inter-weaving generate vibrations are visual, metaphoric, social, philosophical, communal, familial, and spiritual responses to difficult moments in my life and in the world. I

feel at this point, my work as an artist, historian, and scholar is only scratching the surface of a series of experimental meditations on how grids can shape liberatory forms—as in the work of W.E.B. Du Bois's collaborations with his students at Atlanta University in 1900. Black Grids operate as tools of resistance in graphics by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the collective visual production of the AfriCobra movement, and the printed materials of The Black Panther Party. In Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied*, Black Grids become call and response poetic utterance, queer bodies voguing Ballroom, and early digital animated typography burning on screen and in our minds. Today you find Black Grids in the letterpress printing of Amos Paul Kennedy Jr., Schessa Garbutt's identity system for The Nap Ministry, and Amanda William's *What Black is this You Say?*

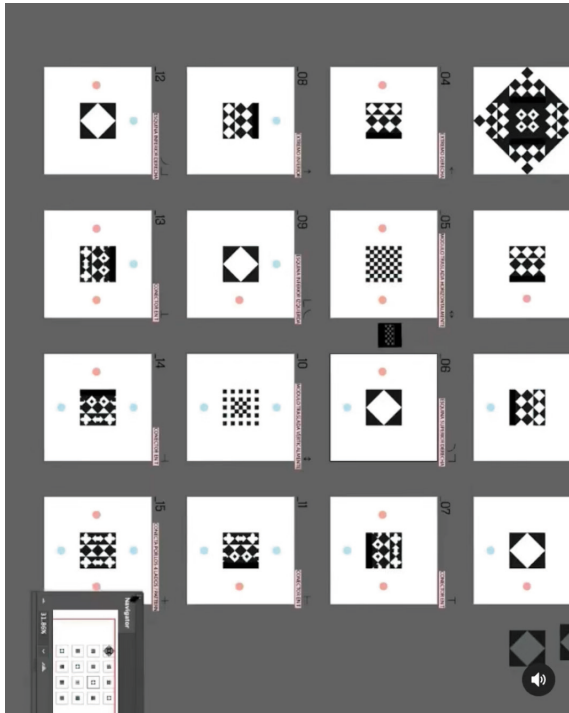


Fig. 8 *Black Grids Drawing Tool*, Silas Munro. Advisor Vanessa Tinizaray, 2021.

As I've continued to make collages, digital drawing tools, and video works have also taken form as a kind of speculative way of making grids. One of the first public expressions took form as a commissioned video on extended display at Tufts University Art Galleries, Joyce Cummings Center 2022–2027, called *Fractals Transcending* (Fig. 9,10). At the same time I've explored more intimate and personal videos, including a few shots on a trip where I risked personal safety to visit family in Uganda in 2021. In one clip, my cousin is making this traditional dish of matoke for my 40th birthday, which is a savory banana dish that is a staple of Ugandan cuisine (Fig. 11). And she wraps the bananas in these leaves the way that she pulls the dish together using these different textures of leaves to make a structure to roast the leaves in, I realize, this is a Black Grid as well. There's also a video of me drumming with my family, my grandfather's drum, all of us singing and chanting and dancing. To me, this idea of a grid could also be something radical or sonic or a communal living thing that's not always rectilinear, integer-based, or math-based alone. My Polymodal design investigations continue to seek a curious space that asks, What might be a Black Grid?

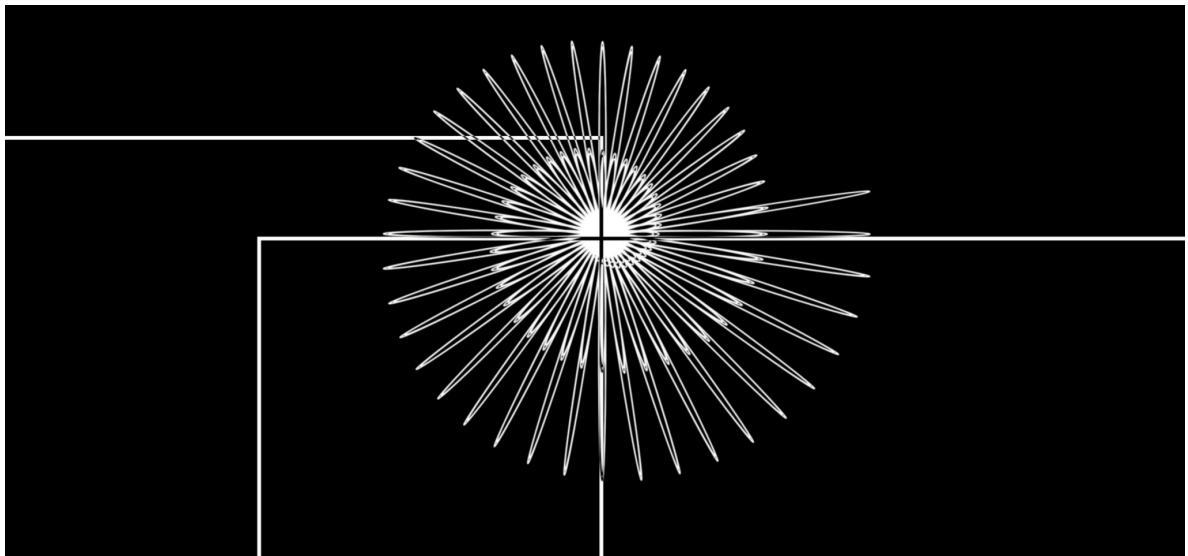


Fig. 9 *Fractals Transcending*, Polymode, 2022, 1080p HD Video.

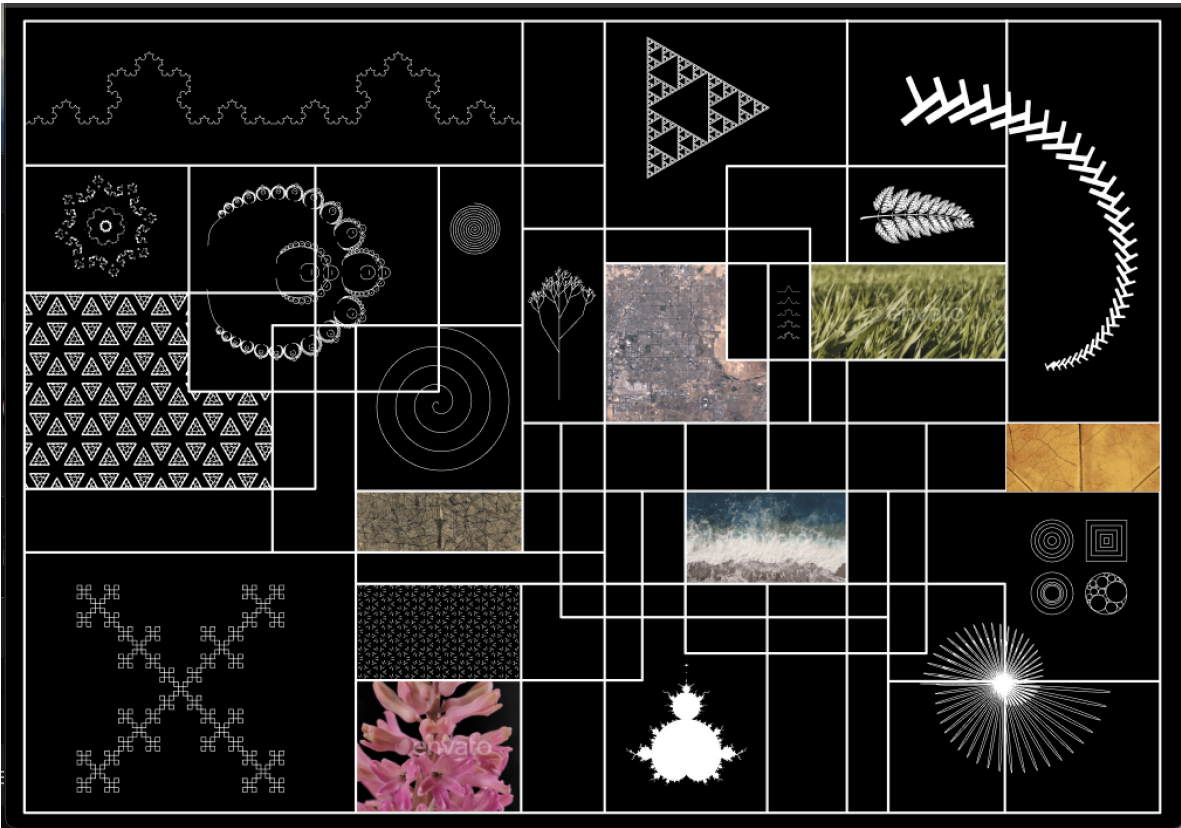


Fig. 10 *Fractals Transcending*, Storyboard as Grid, Polymode, 2021–2022, digital collage. Images of Koch curve, Sierpinski Triangle (courtesy Ron Eglash and African Fractals CSDT); image of cornrow simulation (courtesy of Ron Eglash and Audrey Bennett, Cornrow Curves CSDT).



Fig. 11 *Cousin Making Matoke*, August 15, 2021. Dorcas Ssengoba makes a traditional preparation of Matoke, a steamed savory banana dish that is a staple of Ugandan cuisine.