

## ELVIRA CLAYTON | *YEARNING TO BREATHE FREE*

February 7 - March 22, 2026

Opening Reception: Saturday, February 7, 7-9pm

Gallery Hours: Thurs + Fri: 4-6pm, Sat + Sun: 2-6pm

Open Source Gallery is pleased to present *Yearning to Breathe Free*, an exhibition by Elvira Clayton.

*Yearning to Breathe Free* examines displacement through materials associated with migration, survival, and instability. Using the red, white, blue, and black woven plastic bags—often referred to as “refugee bags,” “Ghana-must-go bags,” “Turkish suitcases,” and “Chinatown totes”—along with tarps, Clayton works with objects embedded in global histories of movement and vulnerability.

These utilitarian materials, commonly used by migrants, refugees, and laborers, function as vessels for belongings, trauma, and memory. In Clayton’s Harlem community, immigrant street vendors frequently use them to transport goods to market. Tarps—materials of emergency and exposure—allude to fragile forms of shelter, offering partial protection that is both temporary and necessary for survival.

By cutting them apart, Clayton deconstructs the bags and tarps, then reassembles the fragments into large-scale, totem-like sculptural weavings. The works are embellished with inexpensive articles—such as safety pins, pony beads, and found objects sourced from the “African Market”, dollar stores, beauty supply stores, and hardware shops in her Harlem neighborhood. These elements function as amulets and talismans, offering symbolic protection for communities rendered vulnerable by displacement.

Accompanying the weavings is a group of handmade dolls constructed from the same materials. Existing in direct conversation with the larger works, the dolls address the rise of xenophobia-driven policies and mass deportations in the United States. Their fragmented and irregular bodies reference physical and social vulnerability, while minimal text—recorded from the lived experiences of displaced people—transforms each figure into a site of testimony.

The exhibition title, *Yearning to Breathe Free*, is taken from Emma Lazarus’s poem *The New Colossus*, inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty—originally intended as a gesture of welcome toward immigrants:

*“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free...”*

In reclaiming this language, Clayton asks what it means to yearn for breath, safety, and belonging in a time when such promises are increasingly denied.

Elvira Clayton (b. 1971, Lafayette, LA) is a storyteller working in various media, including visual and performance art. Anchored in historical research, much of her practice responds to the lives of people who lived under American slavery. She mines slave-related archive collections and documents to uncover hidden histories and stories she brings to light through her work. “Through this process, I am honoring my own enslaved ancestors.”

For press inquiries, please contact us at [contact@opensourcegallery.org](mailto:contact@opensourcegallery.org)

