

# San Francisco's "Last Black Calligrapher" Invites You to Go Deeper

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Hunter Saxony III imbues his lettering work with layers of meaning, while also intentionally leaving it open to interpretation. In the process, he's taking an age-old,

## traditional art form in a new direction.

One summer morning in 2018, the artist currently known as Hunter Saxony III sat down in his San Francisco studio with eight antique photographs, each picturing descendants of antebellum plantation families. He took out a brush pen and, in an elegant script, covered the images with a name—*Nia Wilson, Nia Wilson, Nia Wilson*—a blood-red explosion of flourishes obscuring the poised Southern women in corsets, the men in top hats. Days earlier, Wilson, a Black teenager from Oakland, had been stabbed to death by a white man as she waited at a BART subway station for the next train. Her murder had shocked the community, setting off waves of protests.

When asked to elaborate on the meaning of his series, “Nia Wilson/Say Her Name/No Silence,” Saxony, now 41, just smiles and offers his tattoo-covered hands, palms open, an invitation to interpret as you will.

A whiff of mystery unfurls from Saxony’s calligraphy work, his lettering strewn with riddles. He’ll ink the backside of vellum to be viewed, blurred and ghostly, through the front, or rearrange text in a secret pattern—an omega shape, for instance. Staunch capitals glare from behind delicate curlicue veils, while bold strokes march across letterpressed book pages, engraved frontispieces, marbled endpapers, an old photo of somebody’s face.

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“A Veil of Fog, A Veil of Acceptance.” Archival ink on found paper, San Francisco, 2022.  
*image courtesy of Hunter Saxony III*



Stephen Coles, associate curator and editorial director of the nonprofit [Letterform Archive](#), immediately picked up on this enigmatic quality in Saxony's calligraphy.

"It demands that you take your time," says Coles. "Slowing down can also make you reconsider any snap judgments about the content. You're forced to rethink as you reread." The archive recently acquired several of Saxony's calligraphy pieces, and included one in "Strikethrough," an [exhibition of protest-themed typography](#) that opened in July 2022 (and is on view through April 16, 2023). "The Nia Wilson piece plays an interesting role [in the show]," says Coles, "because so much of the other work speaks to issues with a very direct, singular voice, while Saxony's is subtle, hidden, and multilayered."

Behind Saxony's cat-and-mouse lettering game is a fun-seeking shape-shifter, most recently found wearing brightly hued threads, shoulder-length dreads, round-frame glasses, and a signature catching smile. He calls himself "The Last Black Calligrapher of San Francisco," among other rotating noms de plume, which can make it difficult to track him down. Saxony was born into a family of academics; his father and original namesake, Terry Addison, Jr., was the dean of students at Brown. The solitary Black kid in a white upper-middle-class Rhode Island neighborhood, Saxony grew up in a house full of books, encouraged by his parents to pursue "Black excellence," a [philosophy conceived in the 1970s](#) that at times he found too rigid to accommodate his freewheeling interests.



Saxony lives in San Francisco's Mission District with his partner Megan Wilson, a tattoo artist with whom he often collaborates. "It's hard to pull up here as an artist," he says. "Many artists I know have already left. We won't be able to stay in the City forever, and there's a frailty in that. We're trying to make an impact while we can."

**A**fter two years at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, Saxony moved in 2004 to California, where he experienced pronounced racial and economic segregation for the first time. He says other Black people he met in his West Oakland neighborhood easily sussed out he was educated, middle-class, East Coast. "I realized [then] how fortunate I am to have had opportunities."

Saxony was drawn to Oakland's graffiti, particularly its obscure text, with messages seemingly meant for members of an exclusive club. He'd played around with calligraphy in high school, and wondered if he could spike it with graffiti's insider ethos. The late New York graffiti artist **Rammellzee once said**: "We didn't call ourselves 'graffiti writers,' we called ourselves 'bombers'—we were in the military—military ain't got nothing to do with what anybody says." Saxony wondered: Could he become a calligraphy bomber?

Like many calligraphers, Saxony is self-taught, his interest rooted in a lifelong love of wordplay that led him to stints as a poet, emcee, rapper, and band logo designer. In Oakland, he inhaled calligraphy from musty tomes found in rare book rooms, where he studied the history of scripts and the anatomy of letters with their *ears*, *tongues*, *waistlines*, and *feet*, this new knowledge breathing life into his art. And he began to put in the countless hours and years of practice it takes to become a proficient scribe.





"Tools keep me centered," says Saxony. He likes to keep it simple: a pencil, a ruler, a brush pen, a calligraphy marker, a copy machine (for sizing and physical image manipulation), and a light table.

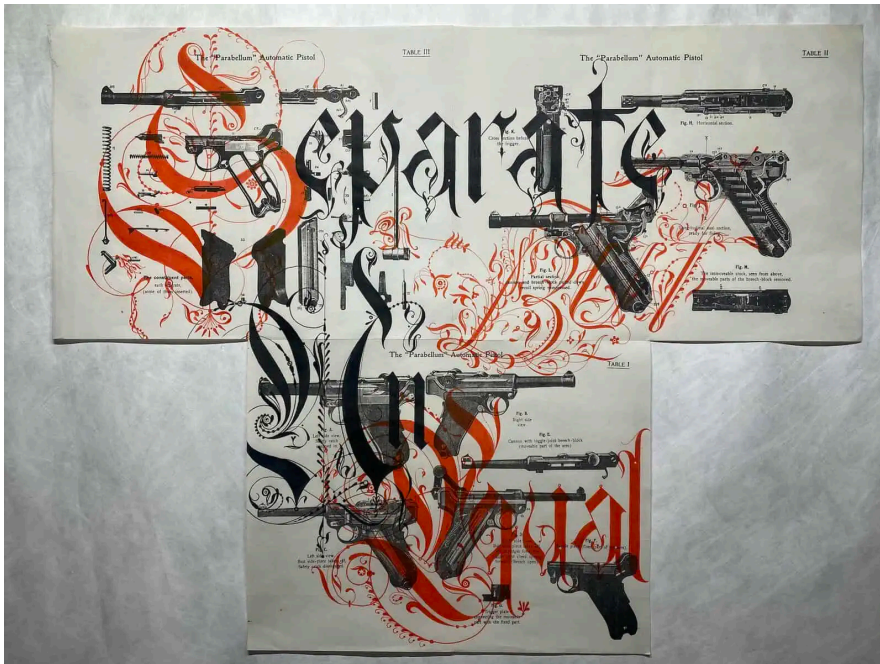
In time, Saxony developed an acute understanding of the physics of calligraphy. He learned how the placement of a stroke invites the next one to follow, and how to combine the basic elements of lettering: weight as a dance of pressure and release; composition, the relationship between letters and space; and order, an intuitive knack for organization, harmony, and balance.

Saxony is an ardent fan of blackletter (also known as Old English or Textura Quadrata), a type of Gothic script that originated in the Middle Ages. Gothic was designed to squeeze as many words as possible into deluxe manuscripts, with letters "elongated, angular, and laterally compressed... bearing a resemblance to the pointed arches of gothic architecture." So steeped was the script in religion and status, and so notoriously illegible, that the Italian poet and humanist Petrarch fumed, in the essay "La scrittura," that Gothic was haunted by "darkness and gloom," and read "as though designed for something other than reading."

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# meaning of words? It's a question I think about a lot."

Yet broody, inscrutable blackletter, along with other conceptual threads Saxony weaves into his work, allows him to challenge his reader. "I play with legibility," he says. "I like coded messages." Beyond aesthetics, Saxony wants his lettering to carry the nuance, ambiguity, and even brutality he sees in the world around him—a departure from the precise, literal meaning typical of calligraphy. Does he consider his work political? "I don't think of myself as an activist," he says. "I don't have the answers, but I can float an idea, or ask a question."



"The past is our anchor. Our point of no return. Everything that has happened after that is righting the course, or tiresomely trying to do so..." ("Same As It Ever Was..." Archival ink on found paper, San Francisco, 2021). *image courtesy of Hunter Saxony III*

**E**mulating the Oakland graffitists who'd first intrigued him, Saxony also plays with the notion of gatekeeping. "Who grants and receives permission to the meaning of words? It's a question I think about a lot." A question as layered with history as a palimpsest: "The alphabet is an abolitionist," argued [an 1867 Harper's Weekly article](#). "If you would keep a people enslaved, refuse to teach them to read."

Consider the legacy of anti-literacy laws, which punished enslaved Black people caught reading or writing; and the mid-century Jim Crow literacy tests designed to suppress the Black vote; and the fact that today, a century-and-a-half after the end of the Civil War, [85 percent of Black youth in the U.S. are unable to read proficiently](#)—not to mention affirmative action's uneasy fate on the Supreme Court chopping block. The equation "[literacy equals freedom](#)" still adds up.



Finely developed muscle memory from years of practice allows Saxony to work in the "flow" of a contemplative state. "My practice has taken root in the understanding and conveying of emotion," he says. "When you look at my work, I want you to feel something."

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## calligraphers.”

Even as **handwriting traditions disappear from American culture** and his chosen city is **gentrified into oblivion**, Saxony continues to ink optimism onto the page. Nothing seems to deter the man who could possibly be the last and only Black calligrapher of San Francisco, yet who claims his existence in such a rarefied, “liminal” space feels natural, even motivates him.

“I hope to be part of a new tradition of American calligraphers. While I am a calligrapher in modality, I’m an artist in totality.”

On my latest visit with Saxony in his studio, he picked up a piece from his Nia Wilson series and examined it thoughtfully: A group of white men dressed in their Sunday best gather in front of a grand house; a Black man in a servant’s uniform stands far behind and off to the side. Strokes of crimson lettering lash across the assembly like live wires whipped about by a cyclone. The curled end of a “W” sits nestled in the Black man’s hand. W for Wilson? W for why?



“The slow strokes of a pen, creating words that take time to digest, totally contradicts a world that is increasingly mechanized and tuned to serve short attention spans,” says curator Steven Coles. *image courtesy of The Letterform Archive*

“I put these elements together to see what would happen,” says Saxony. “I’m inviting you to go deeper.”

*Saxony’s calligraphy will be exhibited at the [Eleanor Harwood Gallery](#) in San Francisco from March 4 through April 15, 2023.*

*[Melinda Misuraca](#) is a freelance writer whose work can be found in the [Best Travel Writing series](#), [Salon](#), [AlterNet](#), [High Times](#), [Hidden Compass](#), and more.*

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