



THE VISUAL LIFE OF SOCIAL AFFLICTION

A Small Axe Project

THE VISUAL LIFE OF SOCIAL AFFLICTION

CURATORIAL TEAM:

DAVID SCOTT, ERICA MOIAH JAMES, NIJAH CUNNINGHAM, JULIET ALI

VLoSA
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small axe project



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Dedication

BELKIS RAMÍREZ

25 enero 1957 - 15 mayo 2019

25 January 1957 - 15 may 2019

Belkis Ramírez was an artist with a deeply poignant and expressive sense of the gendered modes of social affliction. Her art offered us a way to critically consider the full implications of the demand for gendered social justice. For those of us who had the privilege to know her, she brought astonishing light into our worlds, and a wicked sense of humor. Belkis Ramírez was a gift to us, and we honor her work and life.

David Scott

PROLOGUE: On the Idea of The Visual Life of Social Affliction

The idea of “social affliction” seeks to encompass the range of social injuries and social suffering inflicted upon the human spirit as a consequence of long histories of marginalization, discrimination, and violation. The point is to render intelligible a social domain of moral harms. Notice, then, that the idea of social affliction is less concerned with the external or empirical features of social oppression (as important as these undoubtedly are as conditioning social facts) than with its *lived experience*, the ways people undergo or endure an experience of degradation, humiliation, shame, and hopelessness in everyday social life. Therefore, the idea of social affliction aims to evoke an existential field. It seeks to capture the destructive impact of social, economic, and political powers on people’s lives; it seeks to evoke how ordinary people cope with, or accommodate themselves to, the social relations that deny them recognition or infringe on their basic sense of humanity. “The Visual Life of Social Affliction” project (VLOSA) exhibited in this catalogue inhabits this sensibility. Our wager is that the visual arts constitute one of the most vital expressive and hermeneutic optics through which to explore social life in general and the life of social affliction in particular.

Needless to say, the Caribbean is no stranger to the life of social affliction. In a very real sense, the *modern* Caribbean not only was born in the structural violence of Native genocide, African slavery, and Indian indenture instituted by the colonial regime and its powers, but has been sustained since those founding moments by the relentless continuation (under different names, each more euphemistic than its predecessor) of institutionalized disrespect, disregard, and dishonor. Violence, in quotidian forms, has been the rule, not the exception, in Caribbean history: the violence of poverty and of racial injustice and the violence involved in the repression of nonnormative sexualities and religious nonconformity (whether driven by the institutions of the state, the church, or the family), these are familiar to anyone with a modicum of conventional knowledge of the Caribbean.

One way of telling the story of contemporary Caribbean visual practice—perhaps indeed, one way of telling the story of *modern* Caribbean visual practice—is to say that, on the whole, the aesthetic intelligence articulated by artists has been predominantly oriented toward not only expressing but also making sense of the various forms of social suffering and social affliction that are

part of Caribbean historical experience. Across the regional and diasporic Caribbean, and in a remarkable array of forms and media and styles and content, a significant body of contemporary Caribbean art has sought to make poignantly legible the stigma and demoralization and indifference and insecurity and anguish that are the moral psychological inscriptions of ordinary Caribbean life.

An articulation of the Small Axe Project, the VLOSA project seeks to participate in this larger Caribbean space of critical discourse and practice. VLOSA is the fourth in a series of interventions into the domain of visual practice and art criticism that the Small Axe Project has undertaken in the past decade or so. It follows “Caribbean Visual Memory” (2009), “The Visual Life of Catastrophic History” (2011–13), and “Caribbean Queer Visualities” (2015–16). All these projects, including the current one, VLOSA, have been supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and we are enormously grateful for the foundation’s continued interest and unstinting support of our work over the years. In each of these projects we have been able to commission original visual work and to solicit original written work around the theme at hand. We have been guided by the idea that visual work is, potentially, a critical practice no less than any other field of cultural work, a way of questioning the status quo, including the ossified structures that produce and reproduce social affliction and social suffering. But we have also been guided by the concern to participate in the development of critical writing on Caribbean art practice. Above all, however, what interests us is stimulating a process of *dialogue* between artists and writers—part of the larger project of *crossing* critical genres that has been the mode of engagement in the Small Axe Project. Thus, with “Caribbean Queer Visualities” we expanded our process so as to set real-time conversations in motion and to learn from them. For that project we hosted two occasions (at Yale University and Columbia University, in 2014 and 2015, respectively) where for each venue we paired five artists and five writers. The idea was to provoke a conversation around our theme that would then inform the work commissioned from both artists and writers. This process was so suggestive that we decided to make use of it again in the VLOSA project. Again, this time at the Lowe Art Museum at the University of Miami in 2018, we paired ten writers and ten artists in a conversation out of which the commissioned work evolved (some of the images from this occasion can be viewed at smallaxe.net/sxvisualities/catalogues/vlosa). We hope that this process represents one di-

mension of a larger principle of collaborative work that we in the Small Axe Project have sought to advance.

In taking this journey with us, I would like to thank the artists and writers (in alphabetical order): Anna Arabindan-Kesson, Marielle Barrow, Nijah Cunningham, Blue Curry, Florine Demosthene, Ricardo Edwards, Chandra Frank, Erica Moiah James, Patricia Kaersenhout, Christina León, Miguel Luciano, Anna Jane McIntyre, Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, René Peña, Marcel Pinas, Belkis Ramírez, Nicole Smythe-Johnson, Kara Springer, Claire Tancons, and Yolanda Wood. They all warmed to our perhaps unusual invitation and brought to the project a vibrant energy and a demanding sense of integrity and creative purpose. Alas, though, as we began to assemble and prepare the catalogue, one of the artists, Belkis Ramírez, passed away. We mourn her loss, but we celebrate her memory and all that she gave to us. I would also like to thank my VLOSA colleagues, Juliet Ali, Nijah Cunningham, and Erica Moiah James, for the imagination and conscientiousness with which they helped to shape and realize this project.

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René Peña

8

ARTIST

René Peña

COUNTRY

Cuba

TITLE

Untitled

MEDIUM

Digital Photography

DIMENSIONS

60 in. w x 32.308 in. h
(1524 mm w x 820.6232 mm h)

PHOTO CREDITS

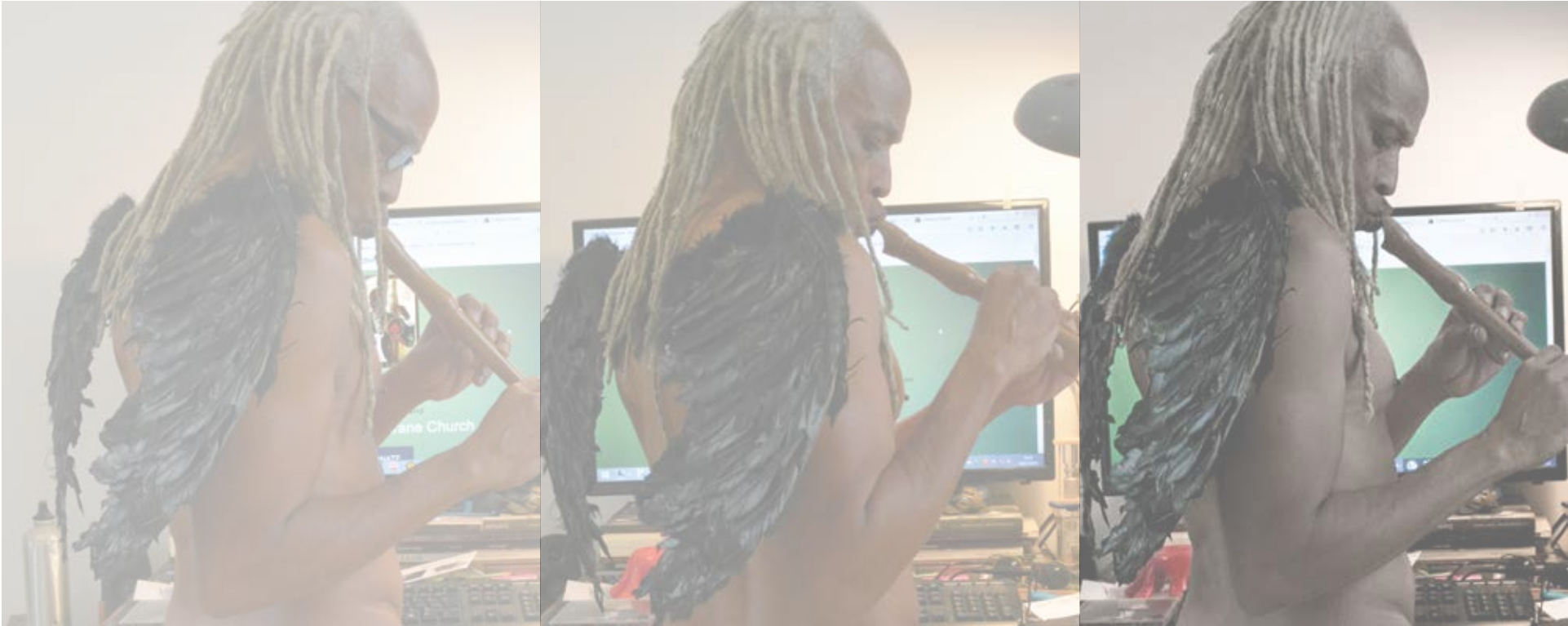
René Peña

YEAR

2018









Erica Moiah James

ON RENÉ PEÑA

12

The Black Sublime

I

There are no black angels depicted in the history of Western art.¹ With *Untitled (archangel)* (2018), René Peña inserts a monumental black angel into the void of art history (fig. 1). The work represents a male figure (the artist himself) as a black black-winged angel.² Here, set against an impenetrable black abyss, the figure levitates with his back to the viewer in a triple representation of blackness. He is naked. His body is shown from the upper buttocks to the brows of his face. The torso twists counterclockwise in space to position the head in profile, as if the angel has just become aware of the viewer's presence behind him. His limbs slowly emerge from the darkness, a visual deferment of form that serves to emphasize the glossy pair of black wings anchored to the figure's back, ready to rustle and, if necessary, take flight. The wings cup the angel's upper back, encircling mysterious scars that interrupt his smooth skin surface, archiving violence and the extended life of a body that has seen and experienced *things* that will always remain



Figure 1. René Peña, *Untitled*, 2018; photograph.

unknown. The artist's technical control of light through a subdued tonal range also suggests narrative intent. In places where the black feathers completely reflect light, they *appear* white, pointing to the illusion of whiteness and, through formal inversion, the signifying capacity of blackness.

Untitled (archangel) inserts itself into the totalizing narrative of Western art history and unsettles the claims this history makes through historic black absence. This image objectifies and then disassembles this void by formally asserting the sublime qualities of blackness within a transcendent form. It conceptually disavows any reading of black skin, black surfaces, and blackness itself as signs of moral darkness notably seen in Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century enlightenment story that



Figure 2. Peña creating the Archangel, 2018. Photographs by the artist.

revealed the moral roots of racial determinism embedded in contemporary frames of looking, famously recounted in Paul Gilroy's seminal text *The Black Atlantic*.³ Peña's oeuvre exhibits a profound understanding of the historical stakes of looking for black people and *at* black people. His practice troubles the presumed objectivity and spatial and temporal authority of the colonial eye and imperial art histories to reveal the ways power shapes how one sees (see fig. 2).

This work folds time to examine the historical *presentness* of blackness in Cuba, the greater Caribbean, and the Americas by forcibly fracturing temporally bound, Western frames of looking. Like the absented black bodies in Western art history, in these spaces, far from transcendent, black ontology is experienced as a social affliction, a moral failing in societies such as Cuba's, where social, economic, and political access has been historically overdetermined by one's position in hierarchies of color despite the rhetoric of revolution. *Untitled* (archangel) holds in its image, form, and signification the horror *and* transcendent capacity of black skin, black ontology, black being, or what I describe conceptually as *the black sublime*. Drawing on the work of Immanuel Kant, I argue that in a global Caribbean context *the work* enacts epistemic sovereignty through its assertion of blackness as a sublime condition. I will trace an interwoven epistemological thread that links Kant's notion of the sublime to European imaginings of blackness, Cuba, slavery, pseudoscience, art, and criminality in order to position how blackness historically enters Peña's work and is then critically repositioned beyond the dreams of a once aspirational raceless society to speak to matters of race more broadly.

II

In one of the most studied treatises to emerge from the European Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant described the sublime as something possessing the capacity to overwhelm us, an infinite thing or event that pushes one's mind beyond its ability to interpret, comprehend, or contain it.⁴ The sublime describes the quality of immeasurability—God, beauty, and nature; death and evil—things that exist beyond man's control that occupy a physical or conceptual space where the descriptive capacity of language fails. For Peña, this is where blackness lives.

The art historian Paul Neill notes that Kant was an important Enlightenment figure in Cuba.⁵ His ideas helped shaped theories of race during a period when Cubans, basking in the wealth of a burgeoning slave-based plantation economy in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, sought a new moral excuse for the continuation of slavery. Despite revolutions, abolitions, and emancipations happening in territories that encircled the island, to maintain its economy, Cuba kept true to the racial hierarchies that organized slave societies. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, when the island's census indicated that there were far more black and mixed-race persons on the island than those of European descent, Cuba's leaders, fearing a repeat of Haiti and determined to protect its plantation economy, implemented the *blanqueamiento* program. This was a far-reaching policy intended to literally whiten the Cuban population by alleviating asymmetries in population numbers and easing the racial fears of the economic and political minority of European descent that governed the island.⁶

Kant's racial theorization was useful in this context because as a *religious* text it affirmed the prognostications of pseudosciences that equated embodiment and skin color with moral capacity and criminal depravity. The darker the body, the more prone to immorality and criminal behavior one was seen to be. Though these racial theories were later debunked, we grapple with their afterlives and the interdependent and interdisciplinary knot of racial formation to this day. The scientific methods introduced by and fine-tuned in nineteenth-century phrenology to measure and record the physiognomy of races and assign meaning, for example, became foundational to teaching life drawing classes in art academies the world over and continue to do so to this day. Phrenology also laid the groundwork for Western criminology, which depended on the "scientific" assessment of physical traits to determine criminality. This was most famously observed in a suite of commissioned portraits of "criminals" and "mental patients" by the French artist Théodore Géricault in the early nineteenth century. Rather than by the sitter's name, each portrait was labeled according to his or her criminal proclivity, such as *The Kleptomaniac* (1822) or *Woman with a Gambling Mania* (1822).

With the advent of photography, the belief that one's moral failings could be determined by physical traits was transferred to this new media, and the "mug shot" then became the principal *scientific* instrument to determine physical signs of criminality. This is of particular importance in the context of Cuba because, as Kris Juncker has shown, the early work of the renown Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz was heavily dependent on similar methods of *scientific assessment*, and it was this work that helped shape public policies aimed at Afro-Cubans' religious practices, resulting in growing restrictions placed on this population by the state, whether individuals practiced or not. The signification of blackness on the island, as elsewhere, was being driven by factors completely external to black being. While this is an attenuated summary of a deeply complex and interwoven process, it is known that Ortiz completed his studies at the University of Madrid in the area of criminal ethnography, which Juncker describes as "a late Victorian field of study that attempted to predict the criminal dispositions of individuals by means of their race and culture."⁷⁷ While the book based on his thesis, *Los negros brujos* (*The Black Sorcerers*), focused on Afro-Cuban religious practices, it also sought "to determine the visual characteristics of Afro-Cuban criminality."⁷⁸ His typology of the Afro-Cuban sorcerer as criminal was adopted by Cuban police and politicians to support policies aimed at this population. In other words, the state's curtailing of Afro-Cuban religious practices based on Ortiz's research became a surrogate for policing blackness in the twentieth century.⁹

The assignment of morality to race in Cuba deeply rooted in Enlightenment thought was not eradicated by the 1959 revolution. Instead, its historical life demonstrates the degree to which inequality resulting from perceptions of race remain embedded in contemporary Cuban society. Though several hard-won gains have been made on the island, the rhetoric of social and political equality through revolution has served to hide the reality of racial inequality. Uncovering this ideological drag has centered the work of scholars and cultural workers such as Pedro Sarduy, Ann Helg, Jafari Allen, Alejandro de la Fuente, and others notably working in a range of disciplines that points to the epistemic complexity of racial constructions. Their scholarship has illuminated how access to better paying jobs in the tourism industry, better health care, and education are still largely determined by one's visible distance from ontological blackness.¹⁰ More fundamentally, the work of these scholars redress the ways value systems shaped by racialization have impacted national memory by the way historical narratives, particularly those of the visual and performing arts, as well as gender, sexual, and political histories, have been written.¹¹ This is the social and cultural milieu from which Peña's art emerges. *Untitled* (archangel) conceptually examines how access to resources and opportunities is marshaled on the island and how social inequalities emerge from, and become consolidated by, this access.¹² Within the Kafkaesque space of Cuba, black ontology becomes marked as a social affliction through the limiting effects of black skin. Peña's oeuvre interrogates what it means to be raced and gendered, what it means to have one's being framed within a system of reductive signification mapped onto the body one occupies. It explores the possibilities of transcendence within sociopolitical spaces but also art history.

III

Known for his moody black-and-white photographs of ordinary Cuban domestic interiors, René Peña began turning his camera on himself around 1992. In these early photographs, he purposefully reduces the personal space between a nude, black male subject and the audience (see fig. 3). The images lie close to the picture plane to fully dominate the composition, becoming irreducible. Though focused on Peña's body, the images disavow assumptions of autobiography. His manipulation of light and surface allow for a degree of ambiguity that decouples the body from racial and sexual binaries and the social and political associations embedded therein. The intentional directness of these images is in stark contrast to the quietude of his earlier photographic interiors, which were often presented from oblique, unexpected angles (see fig. 4). The photographs provide an unfamiliar visual path into the private spaces of everyday Cubans, in ways akin to Berenice Abbott's engagement of New York City at the beginning of the twentieth century. For Peña, the Cuban home is no less sublime a space than the vastness of Abbott's New York; each frame envisions a world from an unconsidered point of view, its tonal range precisely heightened. In Peña's series, the blacks are blacker, and the whites are grays appear brighter because of their contrasting relationship to the blacks. These tonal relations are both technically and conceptually imagined. In *Untitled* (Madonnas), from the *Hacia Adentro* series (1989–93), the viewer is in intimate association with a female figure whose back is turned toward the picture plane (fig. 5). Her body is rendered in a flat, almost undifferentiated shade of black. It absorbs light like a shadow. Dressed only in a white bra, with

her hair pulled back in a loose bun, the woman appears to be in mid-motion, leaning out of the right side of the compositional frame, the axis of her body echoing that of the metal bar securing the exterior door. Compositionally and conceptually, her body is in direct opposition to the picture of the Madonna hanging on a nail in the groove of a window or door frame that appears perma-



Figure 3. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Ritos*, 1992; photograph.



Figure 4. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Hacia Adentro*, 1989–93; photograph.



Figure 5. René Peña, *Untitled*, de la serie *Hacia Adentro*, 1989–93; photograph.

nently shuttered. The emphatic realness of this intimate encounter is juxtaposed against the unknowability of the figure beyond the rubrics of race and gender and the ambiguity of the moment captured, adding greater signification to its heightened tonal range.

Unlike the interiors, the figurative works are immeasurable, with no known markers to ground the viewer. They deny the passive possession afforded the gaze and instead demand contemplation through a crucially limited distance that denies access to the haptic elements of the image; one can look but one cannot touch. These works appear less subtle, more intentional, orchestrated and visually signified as opposed to knowable. However, by the end of the 1990s, Peña's works started to further disassociate elements in his pictures from indexical readings tied to their symbolic life in society. They began to put the constructed aspects of vision, the culturally informed lens through which we see in sharper relief. In the language of light, Peña's images now defamiliarize and unsettle rote readings. During this period, Peña's work pushed against the limits of stereotypical significations of the black body. Works such as *Untitled* (knife; 1994–98) are distilled and direct but address mythologies around black male sexuality-violence and death as well as associations between toxic masculinity and blackness (fig. 6). *Untitled* (lace; 2009) lingers at the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality, to disturb easy readings of the performance of singular and discreet identities (fig. 7).



Figure 6. René Peña, *Untitled*, 1994–98; photograph.



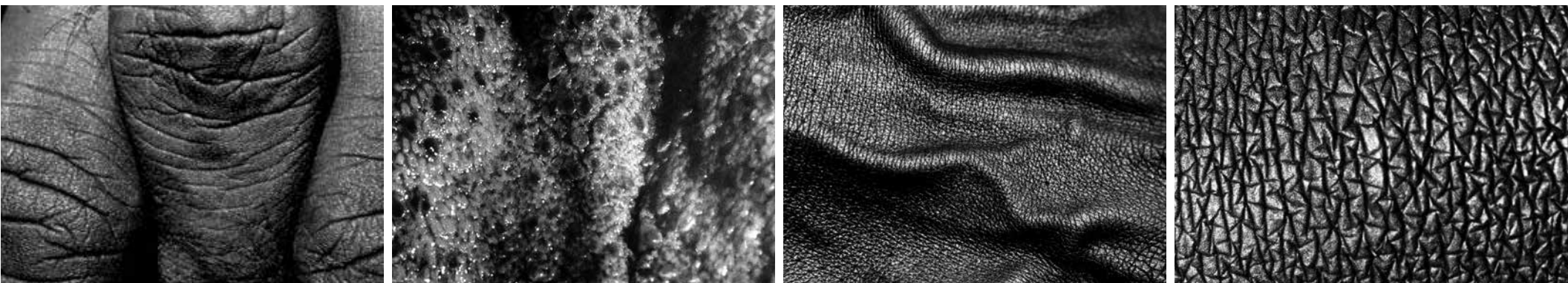
Figure 7. René Peña, *Untitled*, Lace Mantilla, 2009; photograph.

In the series *Man Made Materials* (1998/2001), the artist reaches a level of nuance and play that prefigures the sublime qualities of *Untitled* (archangel). Peña comes in even closer to the surface of his body, abstracting the parts from the whole and disassociating what viewers see from their prior perceptions of the black body (see figs. 8, 9, 10a, and 10b). These works asks viewers to contemplate the critical capacity of the black skin surface in postmodern Cuban society and global Caribbean imaginaries and are purposefully disorienting. The composition and discursive intentions of works such as *Untitled* (fingers), *Untitled* (tongue), and *Untitled* (skin), and later *Untitled* (archangel), turn the implications of Kant's racial theories inside out, unmasking them as chimeras. What was once thought theoretically impossible to achieve through black being, through signifying opacity, now overwhelms us to reveal the persistence of a black imaginary separate from its ontology. Peña has expressed a level of bemusement by the way his work has been seen within labyrinthine constructions of race, not just on the island but beyond its borders. He recounted to me a story from an exhibition in which this series of photographs was first shown.¹³ A white woman came up to him, insisting that *Untitled* (Skin) was an incred-

ible image of an *elefante*. For Peña, who was bemused by the observation, the woman's unquestionable faith in her misrecognition and the ease with which she projected her knowledge onto the artist standing before her, whose skin had been misread as that of an elephant, affirmed the conceptual dimensions of the project.

Untitled (archangel) takes this work a step further. It makes a claim for blackness as a sublime condition rather than a sign of darkness, or of unknowability, by disaggregating the ideology of black skin from the humanity of black being through form. The withdrawal of light and the evocation of darkness emerge as compositional characters in the work, serving to heighten its narrative potential by subduing formal contrasts, thus inverting the affective potential of light and dark in a zero-sum game. Like the ekphrastic image embedded in the memory of Cuban author Antonio Benítez-Rojo—two black women leisurely walking and talking on a late summer day during the Cuban missile crisis when the island was under threat of nuclear annihilation—at this point the descriptive will of language fails, and in “a certain kind of way,” black being enters the sublime.¹⁴

In the years leading up to *Untitled* (archangel), Peña created a series of photographic images using his body, that reinterpreted canonical artworks from Western art history. The series is in conversation with works by a number of black diasporic artists—such as Kerry James Marshall, Mickelene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, Omar Victor Diop, and Awol



Figures 8a through 8d. René Peña, *Untitled*, from the series *Man Made Materials*, 1998–2001; photograph.

Erizku—interested in disassembling the mythologies of art histories and the intentionality of black absence in it while making a claim to these histories. Peña's interventions are clearly situated in personalized environments or symbolic conditions, as seen in *Marat Negro (after David)* (2009), the artist's take on Jacques David's *Death of Marat* (1796) (see figs. 11a and 11b), or in the figure emerging from blackness in *Samurai (after Donatello)* (2006), a redux of Donatello's *David* (1430–40). By taking on the subject of the ultimate heavenly creature in black in *Untitled (archangel)*, Peña brings together the conceptual threads from his oeuvre to form a new discursive plateau and generate a discourse that enunciates fully in the social and political contexts in which the work was conceived as well as in the history and traditions of art making to which he lays claim to, even as he reimagines them. Here, unmoored from the strictures of symbolic regimes of race, the work demands a new accounting. Scarred, yet beautiful and rising, *Untitled (archangel)* lays claim to everlasting life in the face of contemporary challenges to living—in Cuba, in the Caribbean, in the Americas, and in the world—while black.



Figure 11a. Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1796 detail; oil on canvas, 65 x 50 in.



Figure 11b. René Peña, *Marat Negro (after David)*, 2009; photograph.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This statement is based on the known archive. By “Western art,” I mean the historical development and designation of art history as a discipline in Europe and the United States, in concert with what has been described as the project of the West. This established the arts of Europe and later America as the central fulcrum of modernity, the standard bearer in which all other art practices were regarded as being peripheral to. In this history that extends from a non-African Egypt through Greece to Rome, on to Constantinople, into medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment, and modern Europe, and across the Atlantic to postwar America, there is no record of an angel in the heavenly realm of Christianity taking the form of anything other than a white person. There are examples of black angels in Ethiopian art and early Christian art in West Africa, which in the Ethiopian case predates European Christianity, but not in the art history René Peña was trained in.
- 2 As I discuss later in this essay, Peña is engaged in an ongoing conversation with canonical images from the history of Western art.
- 3 In Gilroy’s recounting, Edmund Burke conveys how the mere sight of an unnamed black woman, with her dark, black skin, produced feelings of terror in a boy whose sight had recently been restored. In the story, Burke views black skin—black ontology—as equivalent to conceptual darkness; darkness (understood explicitly as the absence of light and implicitly as the absence of morality) is not just signified by but embedded in the skin of a black woman. He surmises that for the boy, freed from the darkness of blindness, to look upon dark “things” such as a black rock, or in this case, a dark-skinned black person, initially translated psychologically as a return to the horror of blindness, where the black body performed the blinding effect of light, becoming a type of sublime force. The sublime embodies both beauty and horror, a capacity on full display in, for example, Arthur Jafa’s 2016 film *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 9–10; and Arthur Jafa, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, digital color video with sound, 7:30, 2016.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 45–232.
- 5 Paul Niell, *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba: Classicism and Dissonance on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754–1828* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 216.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 205, 209–11. Niell discusses the practice of whitening by the Havana society and the philosophy of “social improvement” that couched the fear of a dominant black and mixed-race population that drove it. Europeans were encouraged to migrate to Cuba in response to the promise of free land, no taxes, and the chance of social and economic advancement. Entirely white towns were planned to accommodate the arrivants.
- 7 Kristine Juncker, *Afro-Cuban Religious Arts Popular Expressions of Cultural Inheritance in Espiritismo and Santería* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 12–40.
- 9 As Miguel Arnedo posits, for all the recognition accorded Ortiz, his work betrays not only an acceptance of the racial hierarchies that placed those of African descent and their seminal contributions to an understanding of modern Cuba at the bottom, but also that how this view undergirded his theoretical position meant that his concept of transculturation worked best when African culture was seen to disappear into what was understood as European culture or whiteness. What Ortiz proposed could be described, one hundred years after the practice was first introduced on the island, as cultural *blanqueamiento*. See Miguel Arnedo, “Arte blanco con motivos negros: Fernando Ortiz’s Concept of Cuban National Culture and Identity,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20, no. 1 (2001): 88–101.

- 10 Pedro Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., *Afro-Cuban Voices: On Race and Identity in Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000).
- 11 In art history, the contributions of black Cuban artists, particularly those drawing on African-derived religious and social practices, were in large part written out of Cuban art history in an concerted effort to align the Cuban story with Western modernism. Art history projects like *Queloides: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art* (Havana and Pittsburgh, 2010–11) have played a key role in this recovery work, and works such as Sarduy and Stubbs’s 2000 *Afro-Cuban Voices* and Jafari Allen’s 2011 *¡Venceremos?* are examples of this type of scholarship coming from various disciplines over time. Alejandro de la Fuente, ed., *Queloides: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Sarduy and Stubbs, *Afro-Cuban Voices*; and Jafari S. Allen, *¡Venceremos? The Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 12 René Peña, email communication with the author, 9 July 2018.
- 13 René Peña, in conversation with the author, 2 May 2018, Miami, Florida.
- 14 Benítez-Rojo’s story recounts an event from his childhood in Cuba during the October 1962 crisis. Faced with the threat of nuclear annihilation, everyone heeded the government’s call to clear the streets and remain inside, windows and doors shut. As one can imagine, there came a point when the boy, feeling trapped and hot, just *had* to open a window to look outside and feel a fresh breeze. As he did this, Rojo recalls seeing two black women on the street below, walking and talking to each other in what he describes as “a certain kind of way.” He says that when he saw the women walking in this *certain kind of way*, while the rest of the islanders were holed up in their homes, he instantly knew that there would be no nuclear holocaust. It wasn’t that the women had conjured away the apocalypse, but that the language of knowing and peace they performed through their black bodies illuminated a truth he could not articulate in words but fully understood. In an experience that was beyond verbal language, through these black women, in opposition to Burke’s horror, Benítez-Rojo encountered the transcendent quality of the black sublime. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, trans. James E. Maraniss, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 10.

Anna Jane McIntyre

ARTIST

Anna Jane McIntyre

COUNTRY

UK / Trinidad

TITLE

Game Face (Now You Know)

MEDIUM

Mixed media: Linden woodcut prints, Akua printing inks, Arnhem 1618 cotton rag printmaking paper, Winsor & Newton watercolours, copper nails, stories, lies, facts, assorted truths, omissions, hearsay, heresy, graphite, mixed emotions, pencil crayon, blood, sweat, tears, spit, elbow grease, rhinestones, glue, gold leaf, silver leaf, bronze leaf, glitter, Darjeeling tea, Trinidadian cocoa, Trinidadian cinnamon, Québécois sage smoke

DIMENSIONS

60 in. w x 122 in. h
(1524 mm w x 3099 mm h)

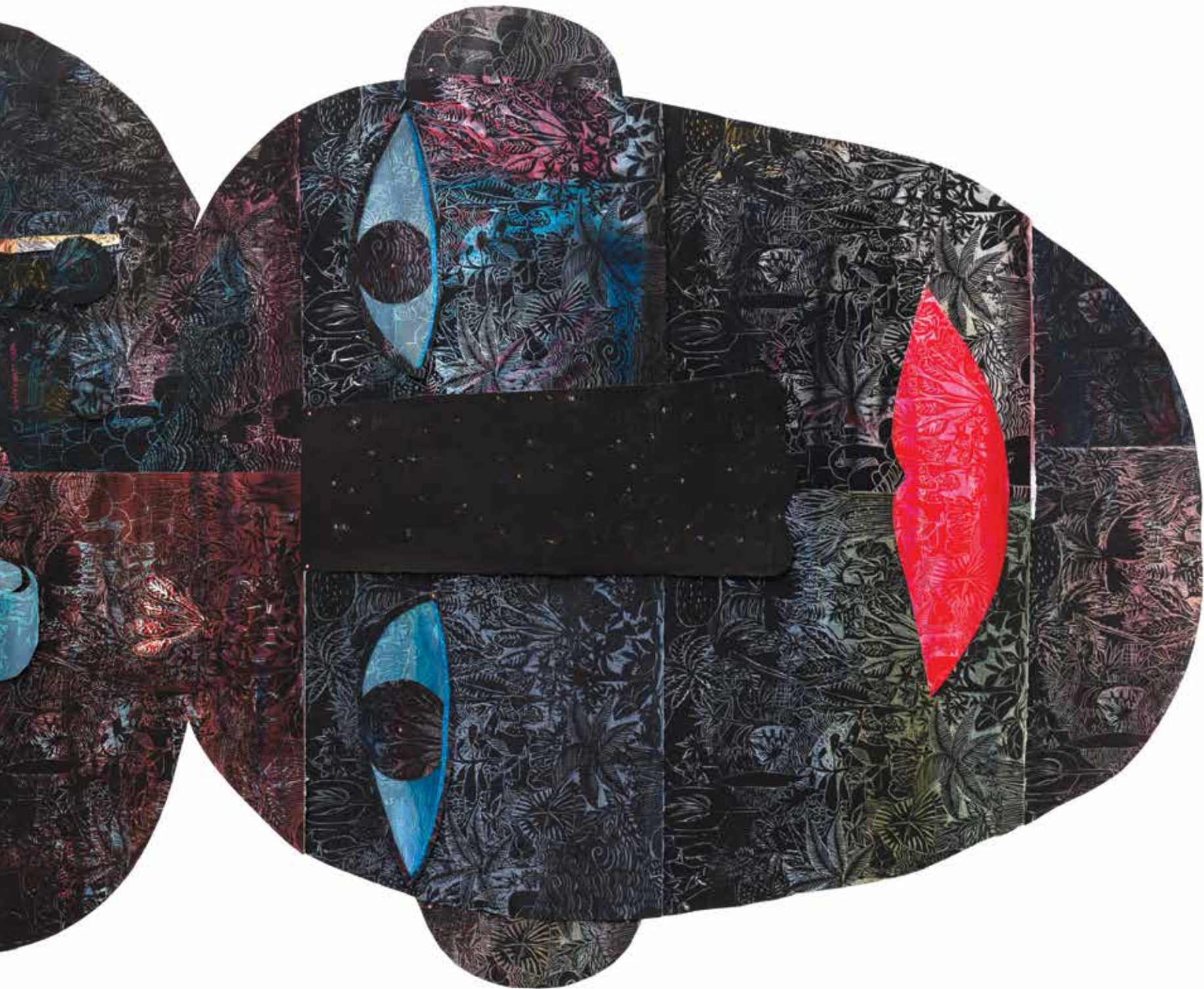
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Jean-Michael Seminario

YEAR

2018





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Christina León

ON ANNA JANE McINTYRE

24

Of Face and Forest: Tricky Textures in the Work of Anna Jane McIntyre

So history is spread out beneath this surface, from the mountains to the sea, from north to south, from forest to the beaches.

Maroon resistance and denial, entrenchment and endurance, the world beyond and dream.

(Our landscape is its own monument; its meaning can only be traced on the underside. It is all history.)

—Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

Forests display a form of sensate resilience, an ability to show relation and affliction. The forest of El Yunque in Puerto Rico was the first area to show signs of recovery in the devastating aftermath of Hurricane María. The time of a forest is multilayered; it remembers the deep time of volcanic movement, registers the present through environmental signals we still have yet to decipher and envisions a futural promise with the glimmer of new growth. Caribbean forests have historically and figuratively been sites of dense meaning making as well as spaces of escape from the onslaught of colonial land management from the plantation matrix—a system that exterminated indigenous peoples from the land and tried to manage the very same land with the forced labor of the enslaved and the indentured. Despite years of monocultural investment in crops like sugar, Caribbean ecologies sometimes find a way of taking land back, ruining the exploitative work of coloniality and creating a space for dreams of other, more free worlds.

Game Face (Now You Know) (2018), Anna Jane McIntyre's latest work for *Small Axe*, creates a face from a forestry of prints, collaging fetid materials that assemble a face that quietly blooms from land and history alike. From afar, the piece registers as the abstracted face of the artist: a black woman, face adorned with red lips and blue lining on the lower eyelid, with a small, contained afro puff. McIntyre's *Game Face* is neither spare nor unadorned, but is instead made up of incongruent and collaged patterns of drawn forest foliage, small iconographies, demanding a long encounter that slowly reveals less about the artist's facial identity and more about the viewer's awareness of this face and its tricky textures and larger-than-life scale. McIntyre has created an aesthetic encounter with a scalar theory of difference, charged with ecologies of history that defy the objectification of black women's visage.

Rather than charting the interiority with the face as an easy portal or as a verifiable identification document, *Game Face* beckons one outside the forest for a broader, scalar view of its details.

Textures of the Weave: Into the Forest, into the Face

The forest imaginary conjured by McIntyre's *Game Face (Now You Know)* is not an Edenic garden. This forest recalls the creative ruminations of Cuban surrealist Wifredo's Lam's *The Jungle* (1943), wherein the trees are peopled and the African diaspora pulses collectively. The woven, layered composition of McIntyre's work resonates powerfully with Édouard Glissant's directive: "Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly *one must focus on the texture of the weave* and not on the nature of the nature of its components."¹ Following Glissant's ethos, the face and the features it holds are not reducible to the characteristics of the stereotype or to referentiality to, and singularity of, the artist's own face. It is a composite that demands attention to composition. These entangled ecologies of forest spread out across the skin of *Game Face*, incorporating natural and synthetic forms, patterns, and objects that travel through the Caribbean and into its diasporic resonances in Canada and Great Britain.

Recent work in environmental humanities asks us to think urgently about the Anthropocene and to consider lives, thoughts, and meaning making in the more-than-human world. One consistent critique of such movements, though, is that moves to discard the human, or merge the human with ecology, also tend to eschew concerns that are perceived as matters of race and gender and, therefore, as too humanistic. This elision of the social human has the often pernicious outcome of re-centering and universalizing masculinist, white, and global North conceptions of ecology. As we well know, though, environmental disasters disproportionately affect the most vulnerable places and peoples—certainly islands and island peoples. Instead of separating nature and culture, to think like a forest is to think the two together—to think with images and senses that register the colonial, imperialistic, and extractionist violence laid upon lands and peoples. According to Eduardo Kohn, the point of thinking like a forest is to think with images, and, indeed, *Game Face (Now You Know)* creates a pointillism of images, textures, quiet sounds, and haptic textures.² The layered surface of *Game Face* does not grant one access to a black woman's interiority, but asks one to chart a new relation to image and entanglement.

McIntyre purposefully chose materials that not only create a fascinating mosaic of woodcut prints on cotton rag paper but also emit organic, lively smells. One must use a whole repertoire of senses to encounter this artwork. Come closer, linger over the foliage. Look,

smell, listen. McIntyre based the outlines of *Game Face* on her own 2017 passport photo, resulting in a resemblance that McIntyre ambivalently asserts is, and is not, her: "[It's] me/not me."³ The passport photo operates as a kind of silhouette boundary for the piece, outlining how the artist's face and hair have been captured and coiffed. What does it mean that the shape and outline of this face derive, in some fashion, from a passport? Consider the surveilling aspect of a passport. It allows entry to some and marks difficulties for others, constricting movement and attempting to regulate the flows of migration. Taking the silhouette or outline of a passport photo as a frame acknowledges the visual life of social affliction and the ways photography has often been a policing art. For example, Simone Browne shows how blackness has always been watched closely by visual capture: "Surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness."⁴ As such, the passport operates as an undeniable frame for the imbrication of visibility and violence. Playing tricks with state subjection, McIntyre creates an ecological tapestry of face, using collage, the human hand, and the reproducibility of woodcut to assemble a face larger in scale than her entire person. This large, looming face transforms into a forest with the intimacy of the close-up. Yet only at a distance can you see the entirety of the face, thus scaling the viewer down by virtue of the object's large size.

From afar, the primary tone of the face's skin appears to be black, but on closer examination we find that its blackness is adorned and entangled with other tones. The eyes well up with blue, which may be an ocean of tears that sediment into glittery, indigo eyeliner. Look closer still and we see that in this facial ecology, forests may grow in the eye—or is it a reflection? Land and water find pathways into one another. One eye holds a foliage, another waves. The red of the lips seems to be the most starkly contrasted palette, sensually enclosing the speaking mouth and letting sound be something different than a human voice. Is this game face smiling? Is the woman holding a secret? We look closer to see the lips as a scene from a forest's floor, lush with leaves as a figure on a horse makes its way through the vegetation. Who is riding the horse—a friend or foe? We cannot know, because this person has been beheaded by the lip's line. Other objects



appear in the vegetation: a tractor, a toothy grin that topples into a crown, and a water wheel. Perhaps the glimmering toothy smile we see atop this *Game Face* is dislocated from the ruby-red mouth. And this smile, too, is haunted by the past consumption of black culture and caricature through blackface, a menacing reminder of how black bodies have been forced to entertain and smile through exploitation. Now this toothy smile becomes a small adornment, dislocated from its proper place on the face and used as a barrette. Muted, overlapping, and fractal textures lure and confuse in *Game Face*. The forest reveals as much as it hides, reminding us that forests of the Caribbean hold histories of marronage, fugitivity, and guerrilla resistance.

In the puff of canopy atop *Game Face (Now You Know)*, we see a water wheel that spills water onto the dense foliage of hair. First built in Scotland and then assembled in Tobago in 1765, the Arnos Wheel registers the relics of coloniality. It was rebuilt in 1856 for more expedient function in the sugar plantations. Upon its retirement, the Arnos Wheel sits in a natural forest refuge in Tobago, a former sugar plantation. The wheel no longer circulates in the exploitatively lucrative time of sugar's modernity and instead is caught—as many former sites of the plantocracy—between the speed of the island's ecological comeback and the consistent pleas of the tourists who delight in the hanging bats and lush landscapes surrounding the wheel. Monoculture has given way to the enmeshment of regrowth, the land taking time back and halting the wheel. When it was still turning, the Arnos Wheel propelled a plantation where at least 220 enslaved peoples lived and worked with the peril of losing an arm feeding sugarcane to this wheel, which, in turn, fed colonial greed. In 2015, local vandals chimed in with nature's agency and burned the site. Now, the wheel sits unused, charred, and the site struggles to attract tourists. Browsing travel guides, it seems that the main attraction of the Arnos Wheel is the decrepit ruin of a plantocracy, the flora and fauna that have reclaimed the land and the various plants, like rope plant, that are also part of the forced African diaspora. This wheel invokes Michelle Cliff's notion of *ruination*—a word that “signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. When a landscape becomes ruinate, carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest.”⁵ As an accessory or an adornment to *Game Face (Now You Know)*, the Arnos Wheel serves as a reminder that the dominating forces of coloniality do indeed break down and get reclaimed in the ruinate work of forestry—the resilience of land that arrests the wheel's exploitatitve turns, halts its oppressive production, and repurposes it to create a new topology for birds to nest.

The composition of *Game Face* is a collage that provides camouflage; the game in the title seems to be one of hide and seek. Often eclipsed by the legacy of her hus-

band Aime, Suzanne Césaire was a formidable Caribbean critic in her own right and referred to the appearance and thinking of the Caribbean as a “great camouflage.” The Césaires often thought with forests, specifically the Absalon tropical forest close to the Mount Pélée volcano in Martinique. There, the forest was “the privileged site of communion for themselves and . . . a remarkable circle of writer, artist, and intellectual intimates,” including Wifredo Lam, André Breton, André Masson, and René Ménil.⁶ During the years of World War II, which ensnared the French territories into the Vichy Regime, Suzanne Césaire wrote “The Great Camouflage” for *Tropiques*, an essay inspired by her time in the forest, grappling with her political critiques of postslavery debt and her interest in surrealism. Césaire’s notion of camouflage is as a game of hide and seek, where the Caribbean presents itself in parts and wholes—turning between overwhelming beauty and absolute dispossession. In this space, the forest takes on a life of its own, and “life lights up in vegetal fire.” The camouflage of the forest holds the sounds and visions of the night, presenting a frenzy of animism: “Here the tropical vines rocking vertiginously, take on ethereal poses to charm the precipices, with their trembling fingertips they latch onto the ungraspable cosmic flurry rising all throughout the drum-filled nights.”⁷ Note that in this camouflage vines rock and drums fill the night—the human, inhuman, and material world blend and beat together.

The radical ambivalence at the core of Césaire’s notion of camouflage could perhaps be an invitation to consider the danger at the core of human relation, where the primary sense of the landscape is beauty that hides affliction, struggle, and resistance. Any face-to-face encounter, and especially one as charged as the racialized and gendered aesthetic encounter with *Game Face (Now You Know)*, carries risk and vulnerability. The facial forestry of *Game Face* becomes an affective landscape of the quotidian navigation of a visual world where xenophobia and gendered violence register, but so too do escape and resistance. The image’s ecology not only visualizes affliction but also feels it and imagines beyond it. As the history of blackface might signal, racism is not a closed story wherein racial subjection can only lead to stultifying objectification. Erik Lott shows that the very counterfeit nature of blackface, rather than its visual veracity, has made it a slippery and enduring trope of racialized and racist performance in which black performers learned to engage in order to gain the stage and wages.⁸ The texture of *Game Face* plays with this history but refuses the caked-on makeup, whether by cork or grease, of blackface—rendering a black face with defiant femininity and a forested vitality to tell a story in images and foliage, rather than with the script of minstrelsy.

From Suzanne Césaire’s “The Great Camouflage” to Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, black women writers have long thought about how beauty can hide injustice and how black women’s bodies are often the most vulnerable at the crossroads of such pursuits of profit and pleasure. Visibility is a very specific kind of trap for women in the African diaspora.⁹

Inspired by Hortense Spiller’s work, Nicole Fleetwood draws our attention to modes wherein black women artists have contended with such hypervisibility in what she calls “excess flesh.” And this resistance does not shatter the problems of visibility. Instead, black female bodies who enact excess flesh resist “dominant visual culture[,] and . . . its troubling presence can work productively to *trouble* the field of vision.”¹⁰ The excess flesh grafts onto a forest, rearranging a field of vision that wants to consume and dominate. Xenophobic fantasies of the dark—of what is deemed “below” and needing cultivation—entwine blackness and forest. But so too do we see the deft acts of fugitivity that seized upon simplistic, colonial fantasies—hewing a different relation to land. The time of the forest is both past, present, and future. We often go to forests to see the effects of climate change, to look for resources that may guide us into the future. Both real and imagined,¹¹ there is a promise in the peril: “[The forests are] places and people of black identification that are most lively as horizons of possibility, a call from afar that one keeps trying and trying to answer.”¹² Communication in a forest reaches beyond language to the semiotics of root systems, the call of birds, the flickering sounds that vary according to time of day. While some creatures sound their morning call, others come alive at dusk. Lingering in this encounter with *Game Face (Now You Know)*, we find the weave of relations within the face becoming more important, more haptically salient, and more motivating than the identification of the singular face. In this face’s forest, we are called to listen.

Quiet Image, Resounding Face

How can we listen to this image of a forested face? In speculating on images like the passport and other forms of identification, Tina Campt contends, “The choice to ‘listen to’ rather than simply ‘look at’ images is a conscious decision to challenge equating vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound.” She finds promise in listening to these noisily quiet and insistently quotidian images that require us to attend to their context and bring our whole sensorium to feel their effects on us. Such a listening asks us to home “our attention on their sonic and haptic frequencies and on the grammar of black

fugitivity and refusal that they enact reveals the expressiveness of quiet, the generative dimensions of stasis, and the quotidian reclamations of interiority, dignity, and refusal marshaled by black subjects in their persistent striving for futurity.¹³ This forest creates a sonic disruption in the taking in of a face, suffusing it with a terrain that seems more-than-human in a form of quiet refusal marked by the closed lips of *Game Face*.

There is a subtle performativity and animism to this face that gives way to the relational stirrings between air, paper, and movement. When one walks by *Game Face (Now You Know)*, one may hear the rustle of layers of prints. The layered leaves of this face are not glued down and flattened, but rather arranged in place with copper nails, a metallic conduit for energy work. Neither exactly fixed in place nor fully free to disperse, these layers are saturated with so much ink that they are weighed down. In that flux of cotton rag paper with woodcut prints, the trees that give way to paper are rendered as new leaves, enmeshed in organic and synthetic material, creating quiet but insistent sound. Fred Moten writes, “Where shriek turns speech turns song—remote from the impossible comfort of origin—lies the trace of our descent.” In Moten’s sonic genealogy, sound operates to mitigate and, perhaps, transform the violence of objectified visuality:

Might it not be necessary to hear and sound the singularity of the visage? How do sound and its reproduction allow and disturb the frame or boundary of the visual? What’s the relation between phonic materiality and an original maternity? If we ask these questions we might become attuned to certain liberating operations sound performs at the intersection of racial performance and critical philosophy that had heretofore been the site of occlusion of phonic substance or the (not just Kantian) pre-critical oscillation between the rejection and embrace of certain tones. *Sound gives us back the visuality that ocularcentrism had repressed.*¹⁴

Moten is often cited for his register of the resistance of the object, which plays with, rather than conforms to, the violence of a white supremacist visual culture that enjoys blackness as entertainment, as object, as a visage captured and rendered static without movement. It is through the musicality of *Game Face* that we are invited to hear a rustle, a song, the imprint of cries and laughter and sounds blending a sonic tradition that murmurs in the beat of diaspora, the ludic notes that attenuates pain and affliction—creating music from misery and contrapuntal echoes across various displacements.

This quietly sonic piece was not made in silence. A clamorous and dissonant set list accompanied the process of sculpting this forested face in McIntyre’s art studio: back in time reggae, soca, Detroit house music, the BBC radio program *Desert Island Discs*, the CBC radio program *Writers and Company*, and many author interviews, such as with Toni Morrison and James Baldwin. Though these songs do not register through visual, referential symbols, the process of creating *Game Face (Now You Know)* was also a deep listening to, and with, blackness—a listening in detail.¹⁵ Listen simply to the title, which McIntyre signals is a breath: “Breathe in, Game Face, breathe out, Now You Know.”¹⁶ Here, in this breath that fortifies the self for the face-to-face encounter, presenting the risk of relation, we hear other echoes and lung capacities of iconic hip-hop. The title of the work itself

conjures a sonic register in addition to its breathy insistence: a mash up of Public Enemy’s “Game Face” and Notorious BIG’s “Juicy” remixed, yet again, through a black and markedly feminine face. *Game Face* orchestrates a cover of these songs rendered through forested femininity.

In the Caribbean, songs often feature storytelling and folklore that choose the forest as their setting.¹⁷ Humming along, children learn what lurks after dark: soucoyants, diablasses, and other tricksters that dwell. It is neither a place of Edenic bliss nor a place of certain danger. The forest may hide and may reveal, with its fascinating camouflage and more-than-human world. As Glissant suggests in the epigraph, Caribbean surface and landscape are suffused with history—a glimmering camouflage that refuses to be taken in all at once.¹⁸ Deep, thick histories weave together to grant a forestry of face in *Game Face (Now You Know)*. The texture of this face reveals the weave of “Maroon resistance and denial, entrenchment and endurance, the world beyond and dream.” Texture becomes the trickster and we cannot fix the face or silence its song. *Game Face (Now You Know)* is face alive with ecology, suffused with history, scaled to overwhelm—breathing, fluttering, and demanding an encounter.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (1997; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 190 (emphasis mine).
- 2 See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
- 3 Anna Jane McIntyre, telephone interview with the author, 4 September 2018.
- 4 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 10.
- 5 Michelle Cliff, “Caliban’s Daughter,” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures* 3, no. 3 (2003): 157, www.jstor.org/stable/40986153.
- 6 Keith L. Walker, translator’s introduction to Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), xv.
- 7 Suzanne Césaire, “The Great Camouflage,” in *The Great Camouflage*, 45.
- 8 See Eric Lott, “‘The Seeming Counterfeit’: Racial Politics and Early Blackface Minstrelsy,” *American Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1991): 223–54.
- 9 Michel Foucault writes, “Visibility is a trap.” Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 200.
- 10 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 113 (italics in original).
- 11 This forest might be, rather than a window into one soul, what Nadia Ellis calls territories of the soul, “those spaces that embody the classic diasporic dialectic of being at once imagined and material.” Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 6, 11.
- 14 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 235 (italics in original).
- 15 See Alexandra T. Vasquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).
- 16 McIntyre, interview.
- 17 In her work on the pernicious, colonial epistemologies that are deprived humanisms, Sylvia Wynter writes that “the African presence . . . ‘rehumanized Nature’ and helped to save [the African slave’s] own humanity against the constant onslaught of the plantation system by the creation of folklore and folk-culture.” Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dances as Cultural Process,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970), 36.
- 18 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 11.

Marcel Pinas

ARTIST
Marcel Pinas

COUNTRY
Suriname

TITLE
A KIBII KONI "The hidden knowledge"

MEDIUM
Mixed Media

DIMENSIONS
196.8504 in. w x 59.05512 in. h x 78.74016 in. d
(5000 mm w x 1500 mm h x 2000 mm d)

PHOTO CREDITS
Marcel Pinas H

YEAR
2018













Nicole Smythe-Johnson

ON MARCEL PINAS

36

The Trouble with Being Seen: Marcel Pinas's *A Kibii Koni*

I imagine that for most viewers, an encounter with Marcel Pinas's most recent work would be frustrating. Commissioned for exhibition in an art gallery, the work is deliberately reticent, literally and figuratively closed to its audience. The installation comprises three piles of trunk-like metal containers, eleven total. They are all weathered, rusted through in places. A few hold stubbornly to their original color, blue or green, but others seem to have surrendered to time, settling into burnt orange or brick red. Or maybe they started out that color; it's hard to tell.

Though three of the trunks are open, we are not free to reach in or examine too closely. Each trunk is fitted with a pane of glass bearing symbols handwritten in chalk. The sheen of the glass makes looking in a confrontation with your own reflection. And though the symbols suggest text, not ornament, no translation is provided. The interiors of the three trunks are blue, that color known as *haint blue* in the US South. One has the feeling that we, the audience, are the unwelcome spirits, circling impatiently, intent on wringing meaning from objects that are not interested in engaging us. We cannot enter; we have not been invited.

The easiest trunk to see into contains folded fabric, stacked spine out, as if the trunk were a shelf and the multicolored textiles, books. There is yellow, cyan, navy blue, green, red, a bit of white, and a few more earthy tones. Most have gingham patterns, but there are also a few in paisley; two are embellished with embroidery. They could be anything: blankets, clothing, table cloths? They could be wrapped around something, another layer of hiding. Again, it's hard to tell. In the other two trunks we find objects that look vaguely ceremonial—gourd bowls, white balls (maybe clay or chalk?), bird feathers, and what some might recognize as Florida water, a perfume-like liquid used in religious ceremonies across the Americas. Only one thing declares itself unequivocally: a label indicating the brand of the trunk, "'Crown' Brand, Registered Trademark, Made in Great Britain." Maybe these things were once British, but they're not anymore. British things speak to us in English; we know their alphabet.

The title of the work is *A Kibii Koni*; no satisfaction there. Maybe try Google Translate? Setting it to "detect language," You will be disappointed. The all-knowing Google tells you this strange phrase is English, and gives it back to you unchanged. What does the exhibition label say? The artist is named Marcel Pinas, born in 1971 in Moengo, Suriname. Maybe you know where "Suriname"

is, maybe you don't. You Google that. You find Dutch colonialism, gold and bauxite, "melting-pot culture," tropical forest . . . and civil war? You've never heard of this war. Maybe you get stuck there; violence has a way of holding the attention. You drift into massacre. You catch the work in your peripheral vision; it is slipping away, enacting its own fugitivity. You circle back; you input "Moengo." Again, you are disappointed. Wikipedia offers barely a paragraph. They are asking for your help: "This Suriname location article is a stub. You can help Wikipedia by expanding it."

I've seen Pinas present on his work many times. He is generous—there are always dozens of slides and uplifting anecdotes—but you probably won't get what you came for. Part of the disconnect is the way Pinas defines his "work." To hear him tell it, the installations and paintings he's produced over the last two or three decades are not the work. They are a small part, a kind of by-product of his work as a community activist in Moengo. In 2010, Pinas founded Tembe Art Studio, a community art center whose primary program is an art residency that brings artists from around the world to this small town in northeastern Suriname.

Located in a former hospital, Tembe houses a recording studio, a research center, and half of the two-part Contemporary Art Museum of Moengo (Camm), Suriname's first museum dedicated to contemporary art. The project has also spawned a guest house, restaurant, craft shop, jewelry line, home furnishings line, and an annual festival that brought twenty thousand people to Moengo in its last staging. These all fall under the umbrella of the Kibii Foundation, which Pinas will tell you aims to rejuvenate the culture and economy of Moengo in the aftermath of colonial domination, bauxite extraction, and civil war.

In some ways, the Moengo story is not unique. Throughout the Caribbean and further afield there are examples of towns, and whole nations, that have suffered the effects of global capitalism, environmental degradation, war, and colonial histories. Projects like those of the Kibii Foundation are not unique either. Artists such as Rick Lowe, Theaster Gates, Tanya Bruguera, and Miguel Luciano have developed artistic practices that hinge on community activism. There are of course also elements of specificity. While the communities and histories that Gates, Lowe, Bruguera, and Luciano engage are undoubtedly endangered, they enjoy a visibility, as they did even prior to these projects, that the Surinamese Maroons of Moengo don't have. Though, it must be said, such visibility is not always enjoyable.

Suriname is one of the smallest countries in South America, and it has one of the smallest population densities in the world. The nation came into being only in 1975, with most of its approximately 560,000 people concentrated in the coastal capital, Paramaribo. Moengo and its Maroon population are another step removed, several hours' drive outside the capital, shrouded in dense, tropical forest. What's more, the Maroons, who make up most of Moengo's population, are defined by their decision to separate themselves from the rest of Suriname. As

the descendants of enslaved Africans who ran away from plantations to create autonomous communities in the interior, separation and invisibility were the terms of their survival.

The discovery of bauxite in the early twentieth century brought foreign investment and jobs and put the Maroons at the center of the economy of Suriname (then a Dutch colony). In fact, Moengo started out as an Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) company town. The middle class expanded. Alcoa built hospitals (including the building that now houses Tembe Art Studios), schools, and roads, as well as a dam that still provides half of the nation's electricity. Over just about a century, Alcoa (via its local subsidiary, Suralco) dominated the global bauxite market, leaving red-mud lakes of noxious chemicals and deforested lands in its wake. The civil war in the late 1980s between the Surinamese army, led by Suriname's current president, Desi Bouterse, and his former bodyguard, Maroon politician Ronnie Brunwijk, brought traumatic violence to Moengo and the surrounding villages. During the same period, the Dutch government withdrew aid and imposed sanctions, and Suralco began a slow winding down of operations that climaxed in 2015. The Surinamese economy has been in crisis since, and illegal gold mining has added to the nation's social and environmental woes. The Maroons, who have always suffered discrimination from city dwellers of all ethnicities, bear the brunt of the crisis. As Suriname is to the world, so Moengo is to the capital: twice removed from the kind of investment and engagement that revitalizes economies and supports cultural institutions.

In several of my conversations with Pinas, he has talked about how his time as an art student at the Edna Manley College of Visual Art in Kingston informs the way he works. He often begins his talks with an anecdote about being in Kingston and seeing the ways the Jamaican people and government self-consciously champion Jamaican cultural production and see it as a form of revenue generation. Pinas's assessment is correct, in part. The Jamaican music industry in particular enjoys substantial support from locals and the diaspora, and the government has recently taken "Brand Jamaica" as a battle cry, seeking recognition for Kingston as a UNESCO Creative City and registration of geographical indication for Jamaican-made products.

Nonetheless, Jamaica's economy continues to flounder, with the nation's most prolific producers, the urban poor, disproportionately affected. Crime rates are unphased, and many Jamaican cultural producers find the government more of a hindrance to than a facilitator of cultural production.¹

There's another tension: artist-led regeneration has acquired something of a bad name—"artwashing." For every Project Row Houses there is a Wynwood Walls.² Gentrification may seem an unlikely risk for Moengo, since it is generally an urban phenomenon and Moengo hardly qualifies. Nonetheless, when creative work does manage to generate capital, the proceeds usually pool in only a few hands. More often than not, those hands do not belong to the producers themselves.

The Kibii Foundation is conscious of the risk. The project includes training people from Moengo and the surrounding communities, particularly youth, in music and film production, theater, and research techniques. CAMM, the Moengo Festival, and the research center are envisioned as outlets for these activities, building an archive of Maroon culture generated by the Maroons themselves, as opposed to that produced by researchers from outside the community. What little there is of the former is also collected, and sometimes exhibited, by the research center, the result, in large part, of a partnership with the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

If you ask Pinas about his work, this is what he'll tell you about. When I asked him to distinguish between his studio practice and his community practice, he told me, "The studio is where I go to think about the community work. I go out into the community, then I go into the studio to think about what I'm doing in the community, then I go back out into the community." It's interesting then, that while the community work is focused on documenting and displaying maroon culture as it occurs in Moengo, packaging it for consumption by others, *A Kibii Koni* seems determined to resist easy consumption. It's hard not to interpret the installation's two-faced gesture as indicative of a tension that Pinas's matter-of-fact presentations of "his work" do not accommodate.

The "Brand Jamaica" and "artwashing" examples do not quite get at this tension. They are by-products, not the thing itself. The thing itself is similar to Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's case for opacity. There is something in these kinds of projects that seeks a troubling transparency. Glissant explains:

If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce.

. . . I understand your difference, or in other words, . . . I relate it to my norm. I admit you to existence, within my system. I create you afresh.³

This seems especially keen in the case of the Maroons because the foundation of their culture is literal and figurative opacity. They refused "admission to existence" within the system of the colony, which would recreate them as slaves. To achieve this, they withdrew into the impenetrable forest, creating their own languages, customs, and systems of knowledge. The Kibii Foundation is in an agonistic position, then, attempting to establish legitimacy for a way of life that is founded on resistance to the very basis of the modern state (Surinamese and every other): possession and conquest.

A Kibii Koni articulates the problem far better than these last few paragraphs, but in so doing, it challenges my capacity to grasp it, in the Glissantian sense, in these few words.⁴ What do I mean? Should I tell you the things the work has chosen not to disclose? Should I explain that *kibii koni* is an Ndyuka term meaning "the hidden knowledge"?⁵ Should I tell you that the trunks are called *toombo*, which means something like "your wealth"? And that they are traditionally a collection of an individual's treasures, those things they will leave to their community when they die: ceremonial objects, the cloth they want to be buried in, their hammock, and so on? Should I tell you that the cloth is called *pangi*, and that it is customarily woven by Maroon women and used as a kind of ceremonial dress for men? Should I tell you that the ball of white clay is called *pimba*, and that it is used to paint the skin and mark ceremonial space? Should I tell you that it is also believed to have medicinal purposes and is traditionally eaten by pregnant women? You'd probably also find it interesting that the symbols foregrounded on the glass are texts in Afaka script, named for Afaka Atumisi. In 1910 Atumisi invented the writing system of fifty-six characters to render the Ndyuka language. The syllabary has never been widely

used, largely because of the penetration of missionary schools teaching Dutch around the same time, but Pinas has been very deliberately putting the symbols back into circulation since his early mixed-media paintings. He never translates them; they are just there, insisting on speaking in a language only a few dozen can understand.

I'm sure you'd find all this interesting. I could even tell you what the script means, but maybe we should stop here. Have I spoiled it? Is this installation now an ethnographic artefact? Has it lost all its power? I fear it may have, that I've dishonored it somehow. I've pried its locked trunks open—please don't touch the artwork. I've made it abandon its native tongue. It no longer confronts with stubborn opacity; it no longer forces you to contend with all you do not know. You have everything now; you see right through it.

And now all we have is symbols of some exotic—and maybe dying (all the non-Western ones are; it's very sad, really)—culture in aged metal boxes branded with European monarchy. That's not what was supposed to happen. I didn't mean to do that, but there was no other way to tell you how the boxes hide things. There was no other way to tell you not just “something is hidden” but also give you some sense of *what*. It's just a sense. My language is poor; it couldn't do things justice. Maybe all the languages are. Even the Afaka script, written on transparent glass, just occludes. It reflects your puzzled face more than anything else. The work is playing peek-a-boo; you think you grasp, but no, it's just your reflection. I think I've told you, but I've only troubled your ideas about what an artwork is, more like an artefact than you thought. An artefact that has not been made to account for itself, and in so doing submit to your regime of understanding.

Perhaps this is the real difference between Pinas's studio and community practice. The latter is designed for easy grasping, the other refuses it. The tension between the two is what keeps them both interesting.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Mel Cooke, “Biases Perceived in Noise Abatement Act,” *Jamaica Gleaner*, 7 December 2009; and “Noise Abatement Act Killing Entertainment Industry—Crawford,” *Jamaica Star*, 21 December 2018.
- 2 Rene Rodriguez, “Much of Wynwood Is Now in the Hands of Developers. Can the Neighborhood Stay Cool?,” *Miami Herald*, 20 August 2018.
- 3 Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *The Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189–90.
- 4 “In this version of understanding,” Glissant writes, “the verb ‘to grasp’ contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation” (*ibid.*, 191–92).
- 5 The Ndyuka is one of six groups that make up the Surinamese Maroons.

Patricia Kaersenhout

ARTIST

Patricia Kaersenhout

COUNTRY

Netherlands / Suriname

TITLE

Food for thought
(Paulette Nardal)
(Elma Francois)
(Claudia Jones)
(Gerty Archimede)
(Suzanne Cesaire)

MEDIUM

Digital print on cotton, beads, felt, african fabrics,
wooden dowel

DIMENSIONS

42.90625 in. w x 60.2344 in. h
(1090 mm W x 1530 mm h)

44.09375 in. w x 49.21875 in. h
(1120 mm W x 1250 mm h)

42.125 in. w x 59.0625 in. h
(1070 mm W x 1500 mm h)

43.3125 in. w x 59.0625 in. h
(1100 mm W x 1500 mm h)

42.5156 in. w x 51.96875 in. h
(1080 mm W x 1320 mm h)

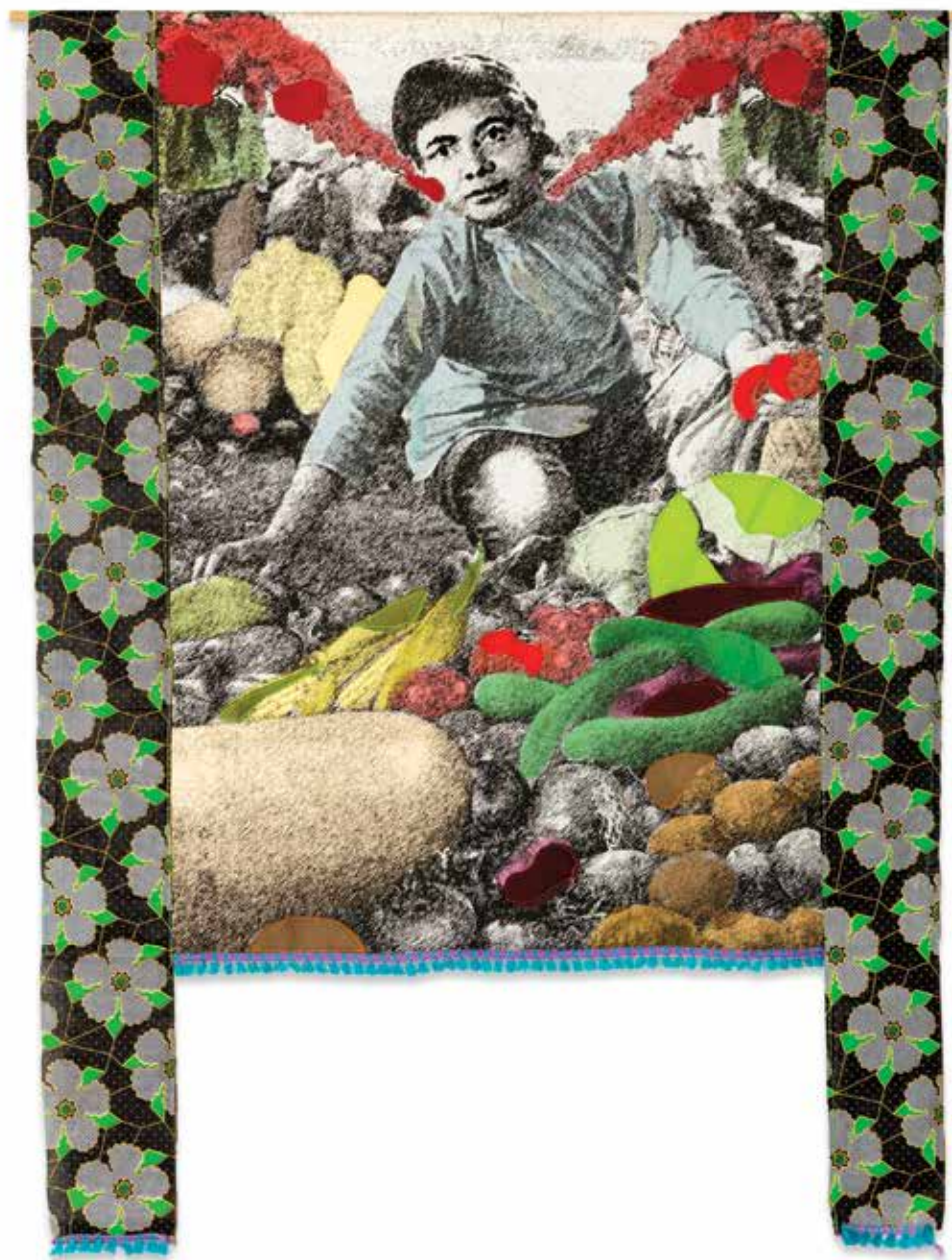
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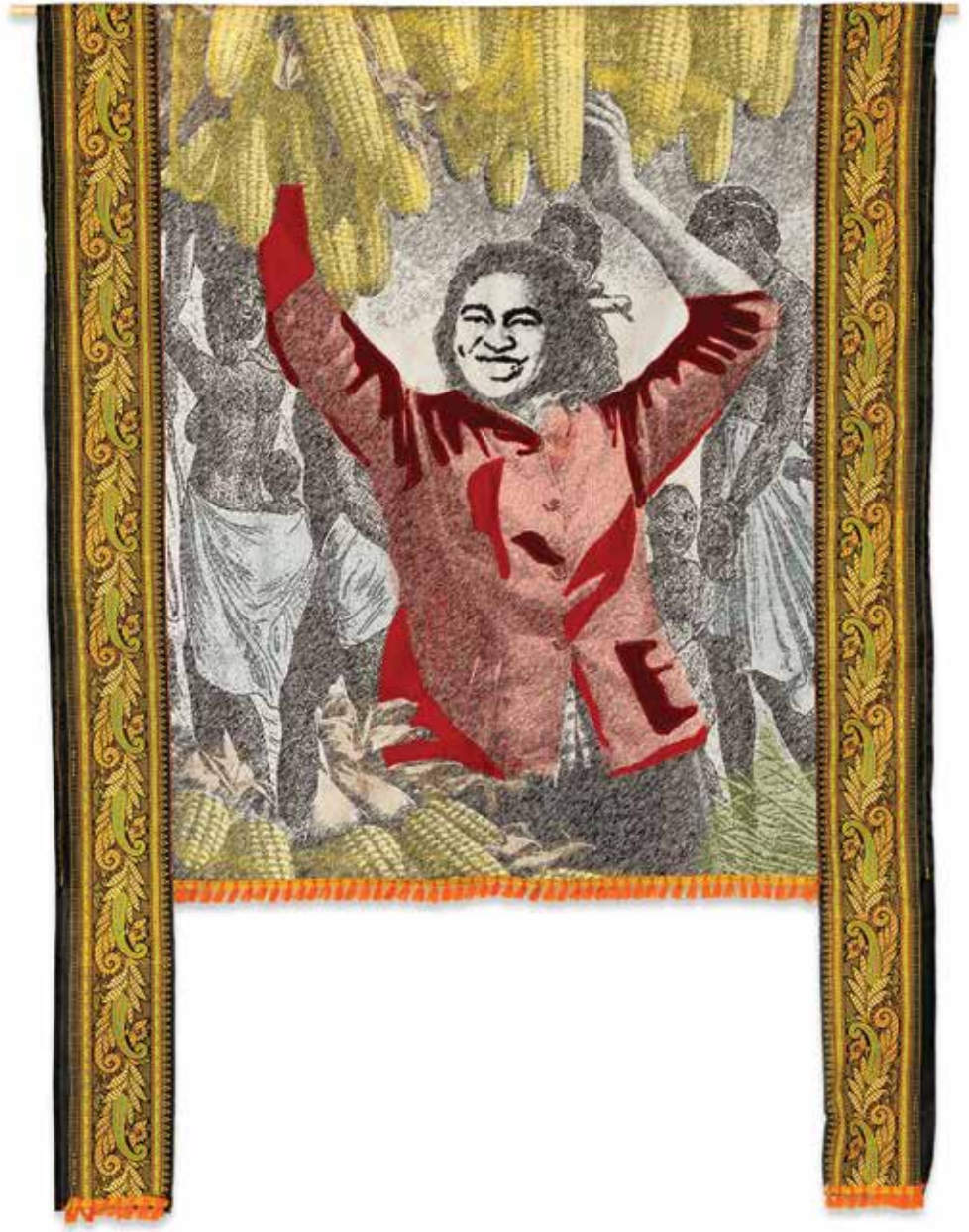
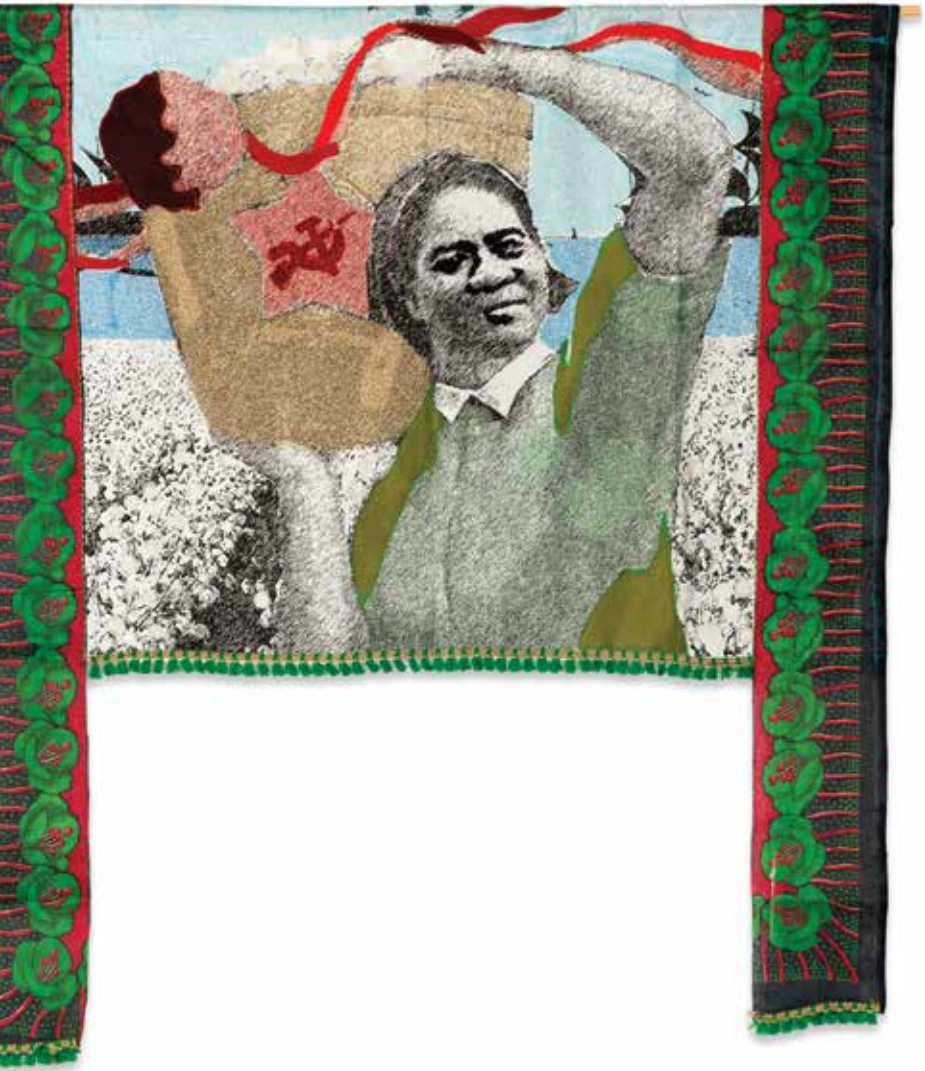
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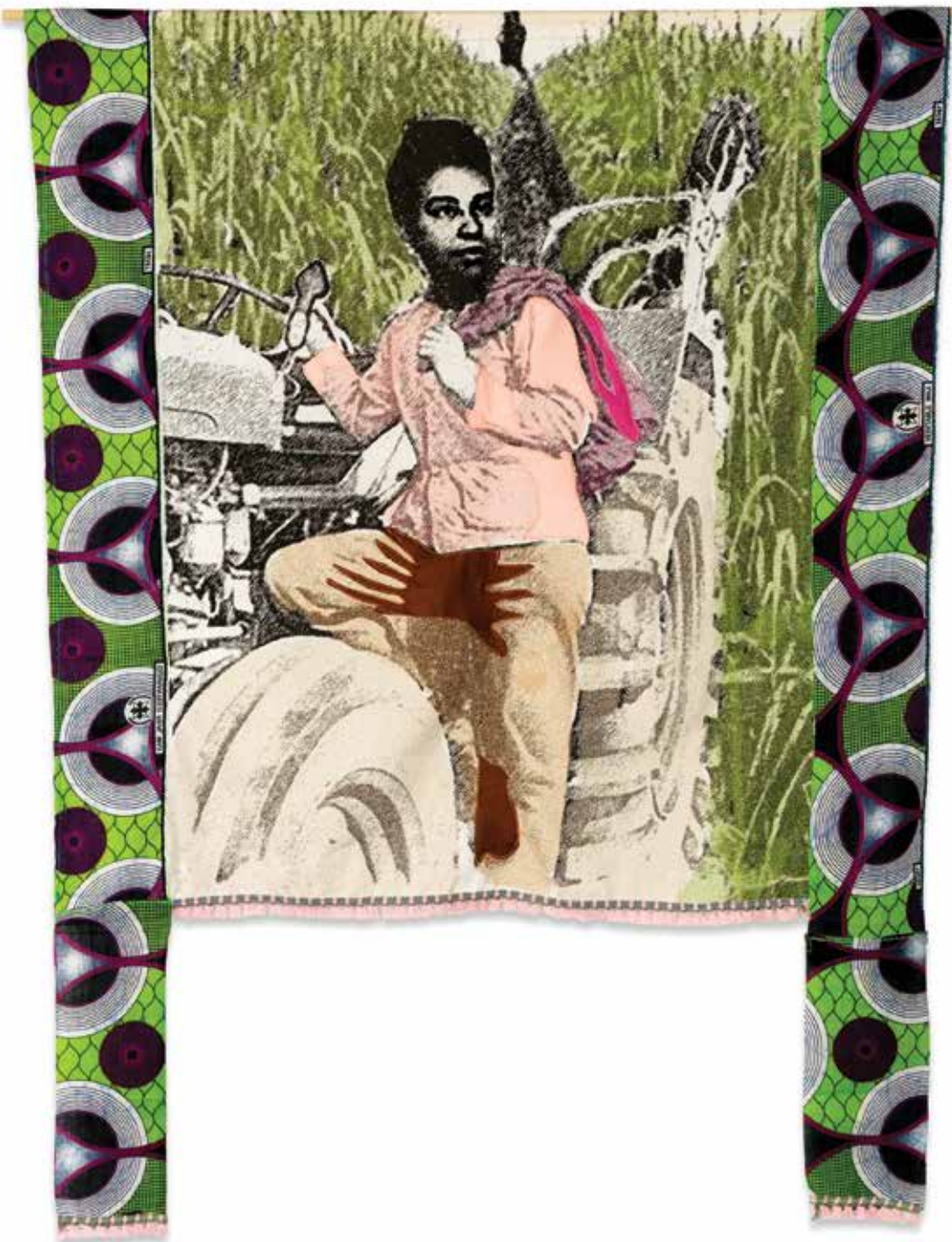
YEAR

2018

Work courtesy of Wilfried Lentz









Anna Arabindan-Kesson

ON PATRICIA KAERSENHOUT

44

The Grounds of Erasure: Patricia Kaersenhout's Archival Vision

Patricia Kaersenhout's *Food for Thought* (2018) is composed of five collaged cotton screen prints that hang like standards (fig. 1). Narrow side panels edged with Dutch-made West African wax-printed textiles frame a larger central panel with female figures in a landscape.¹ A geography of circulating commodities (textiles, gold, enslaved Africans) frames the mobile image economy of the Caribbean. We see coconut trees, sugarcane, cotton fields, a vegetable garden—all references to the region's economic production and visual tropes that brought the Caribbean "into view" for European viewers. The destruction of indigenous communities, the clearing of the land, and the implementation of the plantation economy were geopolitical acts that were both masked and mirrored in the historical art conventions that arranged figures in the natural world to reinforce the idealization of the land and the naturalization of those who lived on it.²

This history of erasure, registered archivally and continued visually in the Caribbean, underpins Kaersenhout's understanding of social affliction. Exploring how these archival erasures have structured the suffering and experience of black and brown Caribbean women, Kaersenhout works speculatively to rupture these registers of denial and to envision alternative modes of representation.³ Accordingly, when we look at the central panel of these prints, we see the artist exploring the implications of this paradoxical visibility. First, she directs us to the objectification of the black female body through its conflation with meanings of the Caribbean landscape.⁴ This history frames her depiction of these five black feminist intellectuals: Claudia Jones, Suzanne Césaire, Elma van Franco, Gerty Archimede, and Paulette Nardal. While crucial to the development of Caribbean intellectual and political thought, they have often been marginalized from these histories.⁵ In *Food for Thought*, we see how the politics of a radical sort of visibility also bears the strictures of the very genealogy of erasure being transformed. In other words, these processes of erasure structure the very conditions of their disavowal.

A form of portraiture, the prints memorialize these women while responding to specific historical elisions, such as the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in 1956 that brought leading black intellectuals together to discuss issues of slavery, colonialism, and Negritude.⁶ While largely organized by black Caribbean women whose intellectual work also framed its debates,

it was the voices and intellectual concerns of black men that were centralized. Or consider this: Paulette Nardal—one of the first black women to study at the Sorbonne—and her sister, Jeanne, were the first intellectuals to theorize the key concepts of Negritude while organizing literary salons that brought together many black intellectuals in 1930s Paris. Yet it is Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas who have largely been credited as the fathers of the movement. Similarly, Suzanne Césaire and her critical writings, her involvement in the development of Afro-surrealism, and her role as editor of the journal *Tropiques* receive less attention than that given to her husband and his works. Elma van Francois, Claudia Jones, and Gerty Archimede were also significant activists and politicians whose contributions to Afro-Caribbean intellectual thought and black communism remain downplayed, marginalized, or forgotten.⁷ Thus Kaersenhout aligns herself with more recent developments in the field, as scholars begin to foreground the centrality of these women to our understanding of Caribbean radical thought and its legacies for the field of black studies as a whole.⁸



Figure 2. Patricia Kaersenhout, *Distant Bodies*, 2011; photoprints on fabric, 40 x 30 cm. Photograph by Tor Johnson. Courtesy of Gallery Wilfried Lents and the van Abbemuseum.



Figure 3. Patricia Kaersenhout, *The Soul of Salt*, 2016/2018; installation, 7500 kilos of sea salt. Palazzo Forcella de Seta, Manifesta 12, Palermo, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Food for Thought brings together two ongoing material investigations in Kaersenhout's practice: memorialization and invisibility. In *Distant Bodies* (2015), she created fabric collages imprinted with bodies of women who have been objectified and silenced by colonial Dutch photography (fig. 2). Beginning from the grounds of erasure, she resituates these women by giving them new backgrounds beyond the colonial archive, from where they ferociously return our gaze. In *The Soul of Salt* (2018), large piles of white salt symbolize the Atlantic Ocean and the tears shed by those forced to cross it (fig. 3). Materializing the very site of black negation, the accumulation of salt also visualizes a form of black radical freedom. It references an oral history retold by enslaved communities that by refusing to ingest salt, they could fly back to their homes in Africa. In the work's most recent iteration at Manifesta 12 in Palermo, a group of refugee women accompanied the

installation by singing the African American freedom song “Many Thousands Gone,” and viewers could take salt home. By historicizing the often antiblack “climate” around contemporary European immigration debates, Kaersenhout also centralizes the “universality” of the history of slavery to challenge the dissonance between self-image and reality in Dutch society where racial discrimination and colonial violence are denied yet continually restaged in public discourses.⁹

In *Food for Thought*, Kaersenhout uses portraiture to materialize the implications of archival erasure as, above all, embodied. Using a digital process of cutting and pasting, Kaersenhout draws on a vast body of Caribbean landscape imagery that is spliced with less accessible black-and-white photography of her central characters.¹⁰ In this sense, she works in, and from, the wound of erasure itself, to centralize the physical relationship of the five women to their imaginary landscapes. Black women’s labor underpinned the plantation economy and by extension the history of capitalism. These black women’s intellectual labor underpinned Caribbean radical politics. In both histories, it is their bodies that remain invisible. It is fitting, then, that here they are shown laboring, their physical comportment connecting them to a long history of female labor in the Caribbean; just as much, it is a symbol of their own intellectual labor.

The labor of these women and the histories they recall also reference the Caribbean as a site of consumption. The agricultural commodities the women harvest have sustained European and North American appetites. Now the Caribbean sustains them in other ways—through tourism, sex work, T-shirts, shoes, underwear. The invisible labor of black and brown women who work to produce these goods, and their overrepresentation in low-paid tourism work such as cleaning, continues to perpetuate this relationship of Western consumption and (unseen) Caribbean production.¹¹ Perhaps what is most confronting here is that we see how these histories of consumption inform and even structure the dynamics of contemporary Caribbean scholarship.

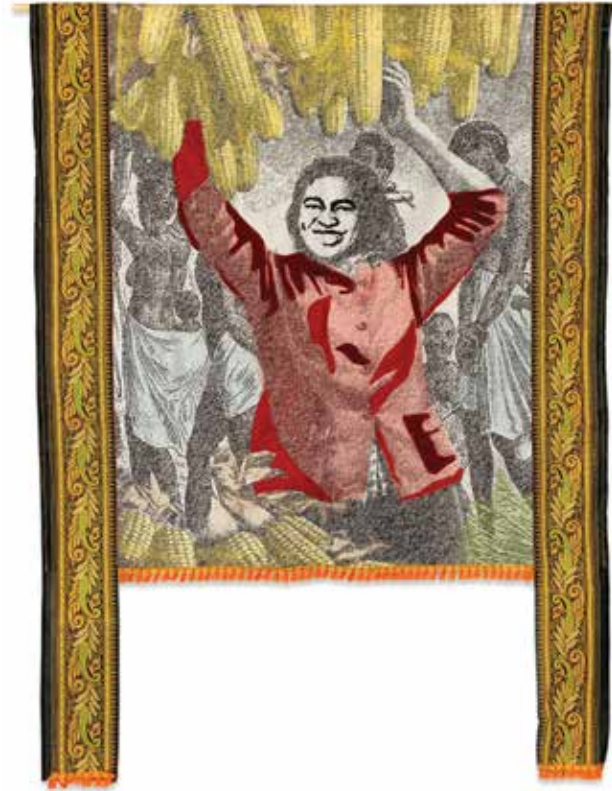


Figure 4. Patricia Kaersenhout, Claudia Jones panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 42.125 x 59.0625 in.

Embedding these women in the landscape, Kaersenhout draws attention to their physical form. While the women’s poses are familiar, they also mark their strength. Claudia Jones is statuesque, her arms seeming to hold up the print itself as she reaches for the bright yellow corn cobs. She stands slightly at an angle, evoking those classicized figures of laboring peasants that populate nineteenth-century French and British paintings. In her red jacket—reminiscent of the Mao suit and symbolizing her communist politics—and with arms raised, Jones recalls victorious depictions of allegorical female figures.



Figure 5. Patricia Kaersenhout, Elma Van Francois panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 44.09375 x 49.21875 in.

Like Jones's, the print depicting Elma van Francois, drawing on her biography—she was a cotton picker as a child—emphasizes her communist politics and her physical strength as features that transform her into a sculptured figure of power and vision.



Figure 6. Patricia Kaersenhout, Paulette Nardal panel from *Food for Thought*; photoprint on fabric, 42.90625 x 60.2344 in.

Paulette Nardal is given a more intimate engagement with the landscape: surrounded by a cornucopia of delights, she seems to emerge from the land itself, giving her a dreamlike quality accentuated by two streams of red that flow from the sides of her face to the edges of the frame.



Figure 7. Patricia Kaersenhout, Suzanne Césaire panel from *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 42.5156 x 51.96875 in.

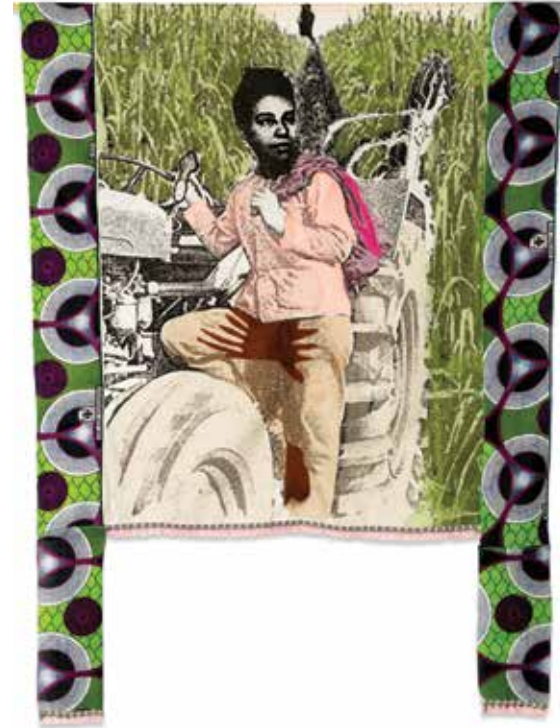


Figure 8. Patricia Kaersenhout, Gerty Archimedes, *Food for Thought*, 2018; photoprint on fabric, 43.3125 x 59.0625 in.

Both Suzanne Césaire and Gerty Archimedes are connected to the land through the machinery they use—a trowel for Césaire and a tractor for Archimedes. Césaire’s white and purple dress reflects the starlike fronds of the coconut trees behind her. She is as tall as the trees, her body—like the trowel she carries—projecting out toward the viewer. Archimedes perches on the large wheel of a tractor, surveying the scene. Shorter than the sugarcane behind her, she is nonetheless firmly grounded within the landscape around her.

While historically women’s bodies might have been embedded within plantation landscapes so as to naturalize their labor, here the land provides something like a firm footing. This is a reference to the way these women’s work has drawn, as Rhoda Reddick shows, from the very terrain of the Caribbean itself to challenge and reformat frameworks of antiracism, Pan-Africanism, and postcolonial discourse throughout the twentieth

century.¹² But this relationship also emphasizes their modernity, calling to mind the ways agricultural labor provided black women whose forms of mobility challenged the spatial logics of slavery itself.¹³ While historically the land became the site on which the labor of black women could be erased, here it becomes the site of the women’s emergence into the visual sphere. In the case of Jones, this is particularly haunting. Jones’s image is juxtaposed with ghostly figures of enslaved women, as if her memorialization emerges from the modernity of the women behind her. But their unclothed bodies remind us that this modernity was registered, cruelly, on the flesh.

Kaersenhout’s interest in the legacies of archival invisibility foreground the notion of the unthought: a form of forgetting that is also a refusal to acknowledge these legacies as horrors themselves.¹⁴ In their ghostlike form, these women, their classicized bodies reinforcing their visual elision into form, cannot, it seems, be fully formulated conceptually because the foundational moment—the brutality of plantation slavery—of their erasure remains elided in official historical archives. Being unthought is a kind of violence enacted

ontologically and epistemologically. This is reinforced by Kaersenhout's use of cotton fabric as the ground for the printed image. Cotton not only underpinned colonial expansion in the Caribbean, it framed the commodification of black enslaved bodies, as both currency and slave clothing. The historical equivalence of cotton and blackness is also suggestive, as if in this instance cotton might take the place of black flesh itself. Thus this history of commodification and of labor, underpinned by the lives of the enslaved, is here literally enacted on the works' material ground.

Returning to the ground, to the flesh—as a site of suffering—is nevertheless a way of rupturing these registers of denial, while also asserting other possibilities for envisioning the experience of black women.¹⁵ I am captivated by the colors Kaersenhout has infused in each of her prints. Not only do they literally highlight essential features of these women, they also disorientate our reading of the landscape. The colors defamiliarize these scenes, taking them out of the realm of the recognizable and into the realm of the imagined and the mythical. These prints are dreamlike, saturated in deep hues, created from a juxtaposition of disconnected forms and imbalances of scale that evoke the sensuality of artists such as Frieda Kahlo and the revolutionary aesthetic of muralists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros or even the mythopoetic landscapes of Aubrey Williams.¹⁶ We might read this as Kaersenhout's distillation of the radical imaginary of their subjects into visual form, which compel us to approach the archive, and its art histories, contrapuntally, as a site for speculation.¹⁷

Influenced by Communist posters from the mid-twentieth century, and interested in these women's involvement in anticapitalist movements, Kaersenhout disrupts these visual lineages further. With their technicolor hues, the images take on the appearance of film or public service posters, the women's bodies appearing almost larger than life. Here, then, Kaersenhout collages two vastly different sets of imagery: the visual language of elision, associated with Caribbean landscape imagery, and the visual language of hyperbole associated with propaganda. While formally they seem to function as the inverse of each other, Kaersenhout has grasped their similar ideological purpose as modes of communication that rely on emotional appeal through the repetition of specific motifs (the smiling worker/the domesticated slave, for example) and specific visual conventions (the scale of figure to ground or framing devices to focus lines of sight). Splicing these connections on the surface itself, Kaersenhout creates a new visual language, a new genealogy of visibility perhaps, from which she is able to commemorate these Afro-Caribbean women. Their commemoration, like historical portraiture, grounds them even as the women transcend the limits of particularity, the limits of their erasure.

Food for Thought is in close conversation with a long history of Caribbean intellectual thought—not least that of the women it honors—in which erasure is the ground from which the Caribbean is written back into histories of empire, postcolonialism, capitalism, and

the Americas.¹⁸ These forms of history writing are, according to David Scott, “reparatory,” in that they are histories of the present that center on “the perpetration of historical evils and injustices and the moral and material harms that these have spawned.” Reparatory history is, he continues, “a history of the fundamental claim that unrequited wrongs *remain wrongs still*, that they do not fade with the mere passage of time.”¹⁹ Directing us to see erasure as a form of vision itself, Kaersenhout foregrounds the translation work of images in making visible meanings about the Caribbean that rely on the invisibility of black and brown lives and their experiences. This she probes, like a wound, such that it becomes a space from which to see alternate histories and their futures. Her work begins from erasure because it is a space in which particular memories—flesh memories²⁰—can be located, and once located, they become the terrain that yields new critical paradigms and “emancipatory spaces.”²¹

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Dutch company Vlisco has been manufacturing these kinds of fabrics for West and Central African consumers since at least the nineteenth century. For more on this, see Suzanne Gott et al., *African-Print Fashion Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization, and Style* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2017); John Picton, *The Art of African Textiles* (London: Lund Humphries, 2000); and Silvia Ruschak, "The Gendered Luxury of Was Prints in South Ghana: A Local Luxury Good with Global Roots," in Karin Hofmeester and Bernd-Stefan Grewe, eds., *Luxury in Global Perspective: Objects and Practices, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 169–91.
- 2 See Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).
- 3 For more on the possibilities and precarities of black flesh as a site of suffering, see Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 737–80.
- 4 See Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–91; Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 15–52; and Patricia Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean: Cultural and Visual Translation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 289–335.
- 5 These women were part of a heterogeneous collection of mid-twentieth-century intellectuals, artists, scholars, and workers spread across the Caribbean and Europe. Their writings and teaching sought to overturn the epistemological violence of the Caribbean's colonial past, while their anticolonialism also laid the groundwork for new constructions of Caribbean identity and movements for self-government. See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52–68; and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 241–406.
- 6 Patricia Kaersenhout, interview with the author, 28 August 2018.
- 7 For more, see Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012); Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996); Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*; Imaobong D. Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018); and Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).2018
- 8 See, for example, Rhoda Reddock, *Elma François: The NWCSA and the Worker's Struggle for Change in the Caribbean* (London: New Beacon, 1988); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, "Erasures and the Practice of Diaspora Feminism," *Small Axe*, no. 17 (March 2005): 129–33; Michelle Stephens, "Disarticulating Black Internationalisms: West Indian Radicals and the Practice of Diaspora," *Small Axe*, no. 17 (March 2005): 100–111; Carole Boyce Davies, "Sisters Outside: Tracing the Caribbean/Black Radical Intellectual Tradition," *Small Axe*, no. 28 (March 2009): 217–29; Davies, *Left of Karl Marx*; Claire Tancons, "Women in the Whirlwind: Withholding Guadeloupe's Archipelagic History," *Small Axe*, no. 39 (November 2012): 143–65; Rhoda Reddock, "Radical Caribbean Social Thought: Race, Class Identity, and the Postcolonial Nation," *Current Sociology* 62, no. 4 (2014): 493–511; Jennifer M. Wilks, "Revolutionary Genealogies: Suzanne Césaire's and Christiane Taubira's Writings of Dissent," *Small Axe*, no. 48 (November 2015): 91–101; Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); and Keisha Blain and Tiffany Gill, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019).1988
- 9 I am thinking here, in particular, of Christina Sharpe's discussion of antiblack violence and its histories and legacies using meteorological terms and of David Scott's description of the "universality of claims of black people against the injustices that shaped their historical experience of enslaving and racially discriminatory powers." See Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 25–68; and David Scott, "Preface: A Reparatory History of the Present," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): viii. See also Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

- 10 Kaersenhout, interview.
- 11 See Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (London: Routledge, 2003); and Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean*.
- 12 See Rhoda Reddock, "Diversity, Difference, and Caribbean Feminism: The Challenge of Anti-racism," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 1 (April 2007), sta.uwi.edu/crgs/april2007/journals/Diversity-Feb_2007.pdf; and Reddock, "Radical Caribbean Social Thought."
- 13 See Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004), 112–15.
- 14 As Saidiya Hartman has formulated, drawing on Hortense Spiller's theorization of captive flesh, black flesh figures as an inner register of violence against black diasporic subjects that has emerged from slavery but continues as slavery's afterlife. See Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201; and Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. See also Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-slavery Subjects* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.
- 15 For more on the possibilities and precarities of black flesh as a site of suffering, see Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness."
- 16 For more on this, see Roshini Kempadoo, "Timings, Canon, and Art History," *Small Axe*, no. 47 (July 2015): 167–76.
- 17 See Krista A. Thompson, "'Call the Police. Call the Army. Call God. And Let's Have One Helluva Big Story': On Writing Caribbean Art Histories after Postcoloniality," *Small Axe*, no. 25 (February 2008): 169–81.
- 18 This scholarship centralizes the space of the Caribbean as a foundation on which Western modernity was built and a terrain from which these foundations are being dismantled. Not only have histories of the Caribbean challenged narrow definitions of colony/metropole, they are now uncovering the spatial logic and embodied practices of slavery and emancipation formulating new conceptions of mobility and circulation that reformat our understanding of the connections that exist between people across national and imperial boundaries. See, for example, C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938); Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Colony and Metropole in the English Imagination, 1830–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds., *Caribbean Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2000); Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Slavery and the Politics of Place: Representing the Colonial Caribbean, 1770–1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lara Putnam, *Radical Moves: Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Shalini Puri and Lara Putnam, *Caribbean Military Encounters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Ada Ferrer, *Insurgent Cuba: Race, Nation, and Revolution, 1868–1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Natasha Lightfoot, *Troubling Freedom: Antigua and the Aftermath of British Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Reena N. Goldthree, "New Directions in Caribbean History," *American Historian*, no. 16 (May 2018); and Lillian Guerra, "Why Caribbean History Matters," *Perspectives on History*, 1 March 2014.1938
- 19 Scott, "Preface: A Reparatory History of the Present," x (italics in original).
- 20 Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, "Black Studies—Grammars of the Fugitive," Goldsmiths College, 6–7 December 2013, archive.org/details/Blackstudies-grammarsoffugitive; Roshini Kempadoo, "Spectres in the Postcolonies: Reimagining Violence and Resistance," in Celeste-Marie Bernier and Hannah Durkin, eds., *Visualizing Slavery: Art across the African Diaspora* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).
- 21 Annalee Davis, Joscelyn Gardner, Erica Moiah James, and Jerry Philogene, "Introduction: Art as Caribbean Feminist Practice," *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 35.

Ricardo Edwards

ARTIST

Ricardo Edwards

COUNTRY

Jamaica

TITLE

Pirate Bwoy

MEDIUM

Digital Painting

DIMENSIONS

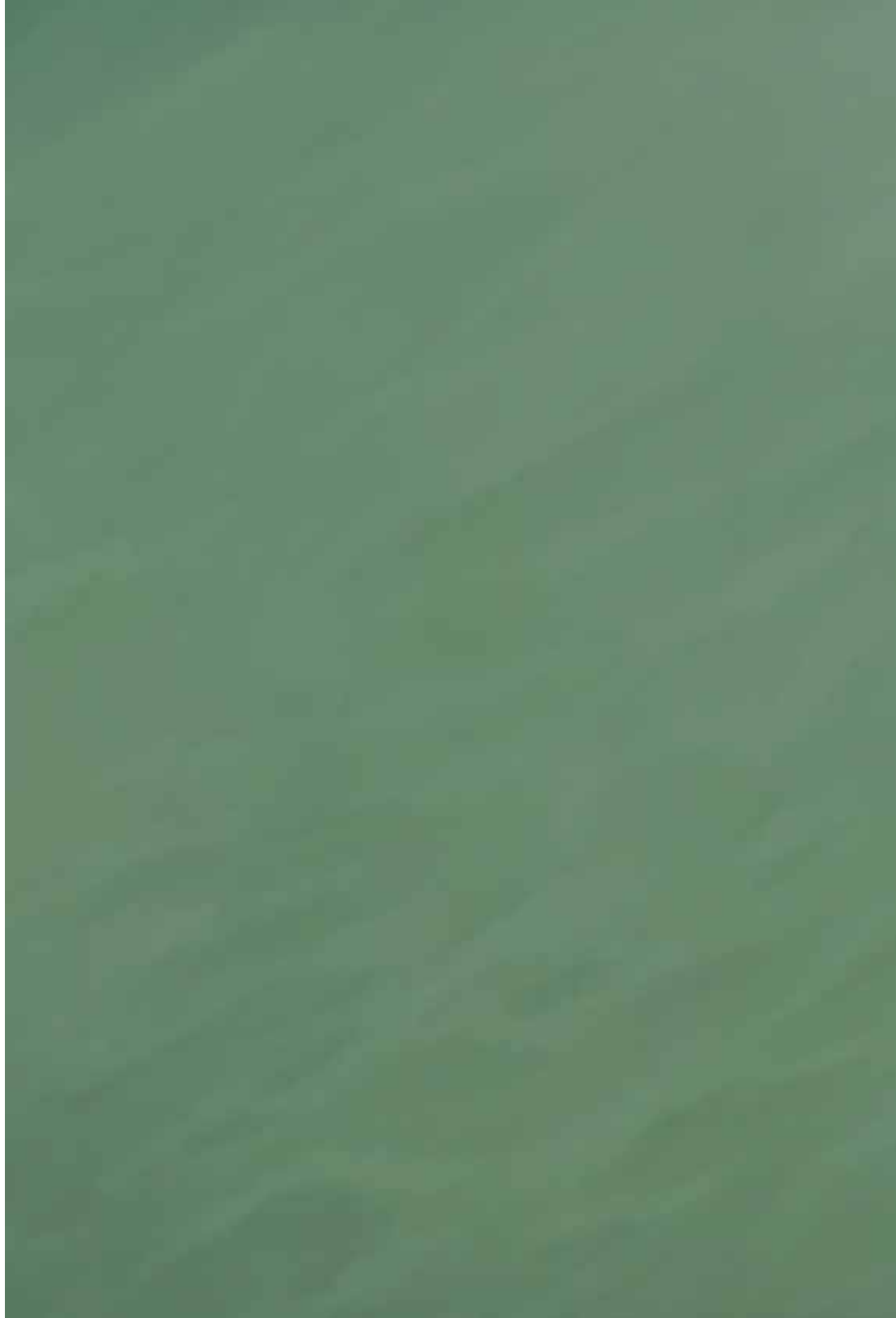
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(1791.5382 mm w x 1018.2098 mm h)

CREDITS

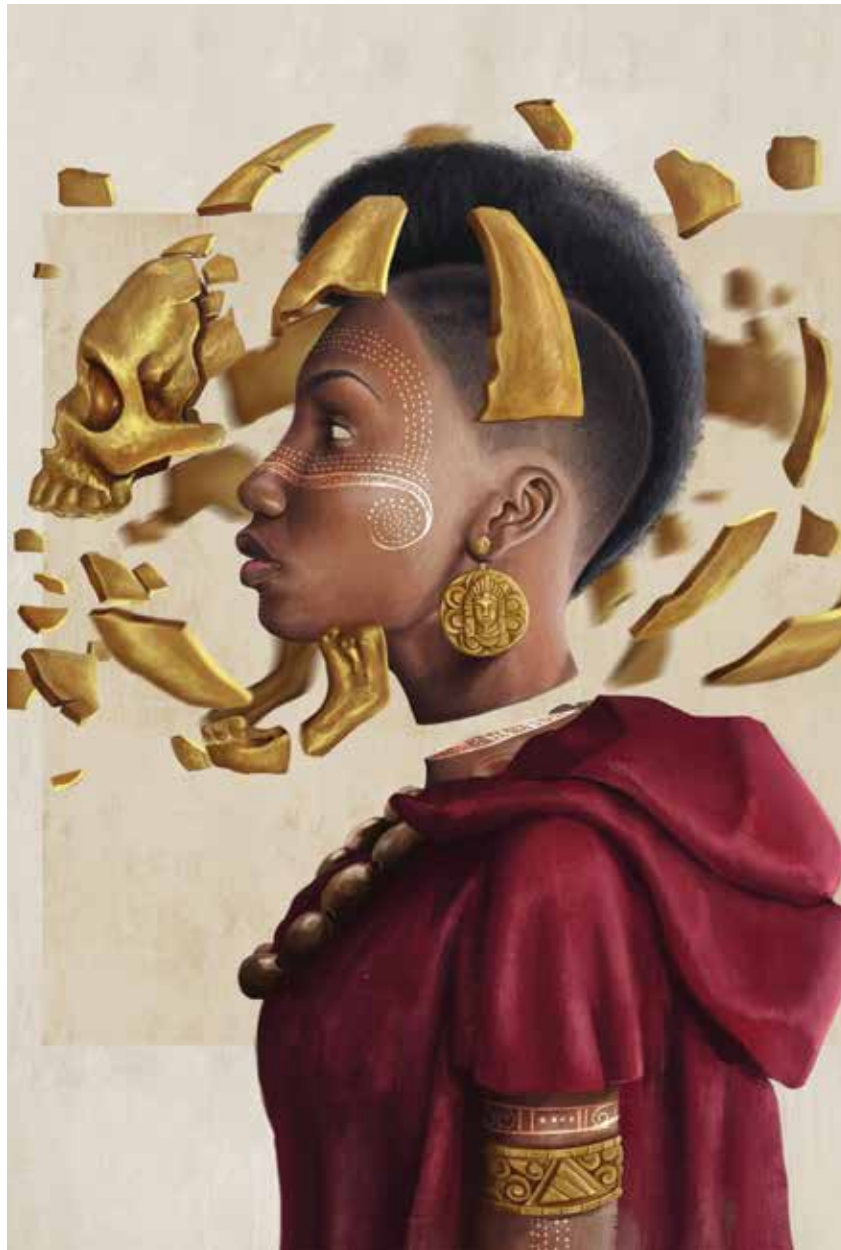
Ricardo Edwards

YEAR

2018









Yolanda Wood

ON RICARDO EDWARDS

56

Face, Gesture, and Power: The Symbolic Visual Afflictions of Ricardo Edwards

We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are.

—Anaïs Nin

The work of the young Jamaican artist Ricardo Edwards (b. 1994) interpellates the critic interested in the subject and its representation within the symbolic coordinates of social afflictions. Edwards's figures and spaces on graphic and pictorial media dislocate the meaning and logic of significations to construct other critical emergences, assessing the identity-authority relation as forms of power from within the subject and its own context. Focused on bodies, faces, and gestures, the artist deploys a language of great expressive intensity, with all the visual subterfuges that interrogate essences and appearances. He describes himself as a self-taught visual and digital artist based in Jamaica but in communication with the globalized world.

A wide array of artistic techniques generates exceedingly subtle paradoxes through opposition and contrast. His pieces travel across different media and take root in cultural circuits, such as album covers and other media, while the best way to encounter them is on the social networks that foster planetary communication. The subjects and their settings are thus suggestive of new tensions that Edwards uses to evoke his emplacement in the contemporary world. His unofficial album art for Joey Badass (Jo-Vaughn Virginie Scott), stylized as Joey BadA\$\$, a New York rapper and urban music artist who has a substantial promotional record in hip-hop and is an emblematic figure among millennials, highlights both the qualities of the rapper's public image through hairstyle and clothing, employing certain pop visual resources, and the characteristics of the music with which he is identified by locating the figure against a geometrized background of buildings and skyscrapers, some of which resemble high-powered speakers to amplify the music in the public spaces and neighborhoods of the city.

The cover art for the album *Lily of da Valley* by Jamaican reggae artist Jesse Royal shows another way of constructing meaning.¹ A tropical landscape is represented in the form of a tondo that appears behind the head of the portrait of Royal as a black man with dreadlocks and a tattooed, bare chest. That landscape, like a halo, seems to deify Royal with the attributes of his own setting and furnish a symbolic power to an identity stemming from zones of social exclusion and marginality, thus embodying a form of subaltern counterpower. These games of appropriations and inversions convey Edwards's critical stance toward human afflictions resulting from past and still existent tensions. A golden motif, like a flower, hangs from the chain around the singer's neck, and because of its central position on the chest, accrues great visual force.

Techniques such as superimposition and layering contribute to creating hybridity in the way Homi K. Bhabha understands it, which, in Edwards's work, consists of putting into dialogue visual temporalities of both an atavistic and modern cultural space, thereby generating the visual interstices through which the symbolic afflictions of the asymmetries and alienations that constitute a transhistorical historicity can emerge.² In *Golden Culture* (2015), this issue takes on the importance of a visual poetics for the artist by putting into tension the play of relations among face, gesture, and power.³ In the foreground, gold rings, a chain, and a watch adorn a black body that, looking more like a photograph than a painting, validates the symbolic authority of the precious golden color that is—at the same time—called into question by the sign that the figure makes with his hand, a sign of mockery and defiance.

It is through this dynamic of contradictions that the artist produces a visual universe in the face of social afflictions, one in which he includes and represents himself to give greater legitimacy and sense of belonging to time and place. In the cover image for the single “My Dream” released by Nesbeth, when the mask (also golden) is removed to reveal the face of the dreadlocked musician dressed in a military uniform, a whole ensemble of forces is interlaced through these various forms of camouflage that disclose and conceal superimposed identities, among them the very mask itself, depicting a lion, which is an attribute signifying power in the Rastafari culture that references Haile Selassie's Ethiopia.⁴ The frontal positioning of his figures in the aforementioned works is an act of critical sincerity in search of a viewer who can interpellate their meaning and who can capture the intense potentiality of the gestures and bodies in all their ambivalence, which are outside all complicity with a history of afflictions in the social body, where the subjectivities and discourses find expression in a tense relation with the power that resides in the very musical genres that these albums disseminate.

In *Expectation* (2017), we see a posture of defiance, with a provocative attitude, in an urban setting. The artist situates his own image in a place of imposed boundary, and he stands on that edge. His unbuttoned, “tropically” patterned shirt, his graffiti-covered jeans, and the

pistol in his hand seem to relate visually to a confrontation; the figure appears to refer back to a residual social form, with his threatening posture and “look” of marginality and violence. By all appearances, it is a demonic image—given the horns contrasted with the full moon that appears in the background. In this and in other works by the artist, the empty atmospheres surrounding the characters are very interesting. They are charged with a deep ambiguity by the provocative silences they generate in the visual composition, which, in turn, concentrates all the viewer's attention on the expressions, attitudes, and values projecting from the images: the faces, the bodies, and their gestures, all alluding to the artistic intention to highlight a conflict that is human and social in nature, one that evokes an expression of resistance in which the viewer can discern the loneliness of those represented, shown in profile and in a somewhat evasive pose, as in *Expectation*.

Violence, repression, and power constitute a triangle of forces in Edwards's work. The postures of his figures, their gestures, the appearance of various forms of weaponry, such as swords or pistols, combine with faces of beautiful black women with colored braids and other charming features, like gold earrings and nose rings. These create an appreciable contrast to, for example, the figure of the policeman in *Serve and Protect* (2015).⁵ His face is covered with a skull mask with horns; he has gold tattoos and bloodstains on his shirt, and he is immersed in a liquid, a stagnant and motionless body of water, that covers him up to the waist. A sense of stillness approximates a form of shipwreck, which impedes passage and neutralizes movements, perhaps as a revelation of other modes of affliction on the psychosocial level.

“My main inspiration,” Edwards has said, “comes from my culture and the exploration of my own obscure thoughts.”⁶ If there is something of himself in these highly distinct portraits, in the works presented for this curatorial and critical initiative of *Small Axe*, it is precisely the artist, his setting, and his memories that are shown with greatest intensity. The shock of nearly drowning when he was fifteen years old and swimming with his cousins out beyond the reefs has remained engraved in his memory. And, perhaps intentionally or not, the appearance of water recurs in his works. But without a doubt, for

the artist, much more is at stake. As he puts it, “The situation is exactly the same on dry land, there is no difference. . . . You can drown in these same streets. This environment makes or breaks you. I’ve seen too many youths drown out here . . . circumstances, environment, influence, upbringing, lack of sources, violence, the list goes on.”⁷

The social body is the metaphorical space for constructing symbolic analogies that develop political and cultural connotations according to the artist’s poetics. Everything aids him in looking critically at his environment and developing symbolic forms of reflection in relation to what he has termed a corrupt system: “The system is corrupt. . . . When faced [with] overwhelming darkness often you become that same darkness.”

In *Pirate Bwoy*, space and context become the protagonists of Edwards’s visual imaginary, and this is expressed in the very naming of the work, since piracy has identified the Caribbean as its site par excellence over the centuries, and identifies in particular, Edwards thinks, those who occupied Port Royal during the colonial period in Jamaica. *Bwoy*, it can be noted, is written using the spelling of the English-based Creole of the islands and shows the influence of Rastafari language. In short, an entire declaration is made.

Edwards’s encounters and experiences pass through the singular and unique gaze of an artist who inhabits space in a very sensitive way: “Most of the time, escaping your reality seems almost impossible,” he has remarked. In the manner of the Foucauldian subject, the artist situates himself at the event of his own existence, and assumes it, as the French philosopher explained, without any linearity or narrative succession but from within the deeply felt zone of the rupture and break.⁸ *Pirate Bwoy* indicates the realities and conflicts of a setting where the afflictions that permeate the artist up to the present emerge from the perspective of the local and the personal, from the affective intra-history of his own existence. In this respect, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes the “elusive” meaning of the event from any present, and states that for this reason, it is shown to be “neutral, neither general nor particular, *eventum tantum*,” or, rather, “it has no other present than that of the mobile instant which represents it.”⁹ In this visual universe, this work reveals very significant aesthetic-artistic values.

In a vertically oriented, rectangular composition, a central element summons the viewer. A roughhewn boat at anchor and a young man sitting inside it constitute the essential focal points in the middle of a panorama of serene, opaque waters devoid of all transparency. Everything refers to a moment of singular stillness that destabilizes the gaze and confronts it with this disturbing immobility. In these dichotomies, the piece weaves together an emotional state of perplexity.

All the objects are simple and humble, everything harks back to the life that the artist inhabits, and it is this, Edwards has said, which makes his work real for him—“It’s the most honest thing I know how to do”—and which provides an ethical dimension to his creative activity and visual poetics. In the artist’s notes to which I have referred, Edwards took great interest in disclosing to me—and now I do the same for readers—everything that went into his work from the reality of his surroundings. “Not literally,” he clarifies of finding expression, “[but] as I feel it.” Through photographs, Edwards transported me to the fishing locale located five minutes from the beach where he grew up. I am grateful to him for having taken me on this visual journey to his living spaces, which proved indispensable for penetrating his artistic imaginary and, in particular, the work *Pirate Bwoy*.

In these photographs, there appeared simple boats with fishing equipment, the small houses of coastal communities, a whole coastal maritime culture characterized by rudimentary methods used to meet the conditions of survival in relation to the environment. “The boat,” Edwards says, “is a representation of where you’re from[,] . . . like home. The beginning of a story,” which he differentiates from “HISTORY” in uppercase letters. This whole universe speaks to who we are in terms of how we are and how we occupy the space of a social condition.

All this is reinforced by the attributes of the “pirate boy,” the simplicity of his dress and the emptiness of the boat’s interior. His crown and the weapon he carries in his hand are thus emphasized. The crown, made from pieces of recycled materials, fragments of shiny cans and bottle caps, is assembled and worn with pride. The weapon is a wooden pistol, as children are accustomed to making in poor regions to imagine their games of cops and robbers, to carry out their hunts and seek hideouts where they cannot be reached by the “bullets” of these violent fantasies. This indexes an entire imaginary emerging from popular culture, from craft traditions, and the creative capacity of subaltern spaces to recreate and reproduce elements of power, both symbolic and real, with which they live and coexist.

What is interesting about *Pirate Bwoy* is the way the lone child in the boat anchored in the sea is given these attributes: on his head, above stooped and naked shoul-

ders, he wears the crown that allegorically is shown to be unconnected with any expression of authority, while the pistol lies limp in his hand, perhaps tired, to define a situation of nostalgic disillusionment that can be seen in his face, gestures, and attitude. All these contrasts make the work enigmatic. The artist elaborates on the symbolic relationship: “Imagine being stranded at sea and the only resource you have to survive is a gun. YOU DON’T. It’s the same thing when you’re stranded in the ghetto.” The piece is a proposal inviting decipherment, an image of solitude made even more disturbing by the age of the figure represented as among the potential victims, the most vulnerable group in the existing social order that produces its effects of exclusion and marginality. In this semantic field of afflictions, the work emits a silent scream that has the value of social criticism.

The sea where the pirate boy’s boat is anchored is neither the paradisiacal turquoise blue of touristic images nor the tenebrous, ferocious sea that devours illegal migrants, subjects—both of them—very frequently represented in insular artistic imaginaries. The viewpoint chosen by the artist turns out to be fundamental; it flattens the image to allow us to take it in its entirety from a higher point that seems to look down on the scene from the heavens. The work, the artist said, saw its first version in a drawing represented according to a three-quarter landscape view, in which the boat and youth were seen from the side in an oblong compositional format. However, he considered changing this panorama in the painting *Pirate Bwoy*: “I wanted to illustrate a perspective of God.”

A spiritual perspective comes into play that has been articulated since biblical times—Paul, referring to our momentary afflictions, says, “[They] are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”¹⁰—which, although it achieves special expressions in Jamaica and Rastafari religious thought, involved a sign in the act of creating an allegorical space in which the image as expressed by the artist could exist. This supposes a focus and a point of view committed to the universe of beliefs of divine meditation that contributes symbolically to the notion of temporality—timelessness that is generated and elicited by faith. And thus Edwards wonders, “If things will always be like that . . . [then] most of the time, escaping your reality seems almost impossible.”

—Translated by J. Bret Maney

ENDNOTES

- 1 Jesse Royal, *Lily of da Valley* (Easy Star Records, 2017).
- 2 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–2.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Nesbeth, “My Dream” (Entertainment Soul, 2015).
- 5 See the cover of *Small Axe* 54, November 2017.
- 6 Ricardo Edwards, quoted in “Ricardo Edwards Illustrations,” *Welhous*, n.d., www.welhous.com/designart/ricardo-edwards-illustrations.
- 7 Unless otherwise cited, quotes by the artist are from his notes in correspondence with the author, 2018.
- 8 See Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 5.
- 9 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (1969; repr., New York, 1990), 151.
- 10 2 Cor. 4:17–18, New International Version.

Yolanda Wood

ON RICARDO EDWARDS

Rostro, gesto y poder: las simbólicas aflicciones visuales de Ricardo Edwards.

No vemos las cosas como son, las vemos como somos.

—Anaïs Nin

La obra del joven artista de Jamaica, Ricardo Edwards (1994), interpela al crítico que se interesa por el sujeto y su imagen en las coordenadas simbólicas de las aflicciones sociales. Sus figuras y espacios sobre medios gráficos y pictóricos, dislocan el sentido y la lógica de los significados para construir otras emergencias críticas, enjuiciadoras de la relación identidad-autoridad como formas de poder desde el sujeto y su propio contexto. Centradas en el cuerpo, los rostros y la gestualidad, el artista elabora un lenguaje de gran intensidad expresiva, con todos los subterfugios visuales cuestionadores de esencias y apariencias. Se declara un artista autodidacta, visual y digital...basado en su isla natal pero comunicado desde ella con el mundo global.

Un amplio catálogo de recursos artísticos, generan las más sutiles paradojas por oposición y contraste. Sus piezas se desplazan a diferentes soportes y se instalan en los circuitos de la cultura, en carátulas de álbumes discográficos y otros medios, mientras que la mejor manera de encontrarlas es sobre las redes sociales que comunican el planeta. Los sujetos y sus contextos son entonces evocadores de nuevas tensiones que Ricardo Edwards utiliza para evocar su inserción en el mundo contemporáneo. Su carátula para el disco de Joey Badass (Jo-Vaughn Virginie Scott), en la grafía publicitaria, Joey Bada\$\$, rapero de nuevayork, artista de música urbana con un amplio récord promocional en el hip-hop, figura emblemática entre los millennials; pone en valor las cualidades de su imagen pública a través del peinado, y el vestuario, empleando ciertos recursos visuales de impacto pop, y los propios de la música que lo identifica al situar la figura ante un fondo geometrizado de edificios y rascacielos, en los que algunos semejan bocinas de alta potencia para amplificarla en plazas y espacios ciudadanos.

La carátula para el album Lilly of da Valley (Easy Star Records, New York, 2017) del cantante jamaicano de reggae Jessey Royal, muestra otro modo de construir el sentido. Un paisaje tropical se representa a manera de tondo tras el rostro de su imagen de hom-

bre negro con dreadlocks, pecho desnudo y tatuado. Ese paisaje, como aureola, parece deificarlo con los atributos de su propio contexto y aportarle un poder simbólico a una identidad procedente de las zonas de la exclusión social y la marginalidad, lo que encarna una forma de contrapoder desde lo subalterno. Esos juegos de apropiaciones e inversiones significan una postura crítica de Ricardo Edwards ante las aflicciones humanas por tensiones pasadas y aún presentes. Un motivo de oro, como una flor, cuelga de la cadena del cantante, y por su ubicación central sobre el pecho, adquiere gran fuerza visual.

Recursos como la superposición e intercalación contribuyen a crear una hibridez a la manera en que la distingue Homi Bhabha, lo que significa en la obra de Edwards poner en diálogo tiempos visuales de un espacio cultural moderno y atávico a la vez para generar los intersticios visuales por donde emergen las aflicciones simbólicas de las asimetrías y alienaciones que construyen una historicidad-transhistórica. (Cfr. Bhabha, H.1994 El lugar de la cultura p.17). Este asunto en *Golden Culture* (2015), adquiere la relevancia de una poética artística del autor, al poner en tensión el juego de relaciones entre el rostro, el gesto y el poder. En primer plano, anillos, cadena y reloj dorados sobre el cuerpo negro que se diría más fotografía que pintura, validan la autoridad simbólica del preciado color que resulta cuestionada -a la vez- por el signo que la figura realiza con la mano, signo de burla y desobediencia.

Es en esa dinámica de contradicciones donde el artista dimensiona un universo visual ante las aflicciones sociales, en el cual se incluye y autorrepresenta para dar mayor legitimidad y sentido de pertenencia a un tiempo y a un lugar. Cuando la máscara (también dorada) se desplaza en *My dream Nesbeth* (Entertainment Soul, Album Reggae Gold 2016) para mostrar el rostro del músico, ataviado con traje militar y dreadlocks, todo un juego de poderes se entrelaza en esos varios camuflajes, que muestran y ocultan identidades superpuestas, entre ellas la máscara misma, un león, por demás, un atributo de poder en la cultura rastafari que refiere la Etiopía de Haile Selassie. La posición frontal de sus personajes en las obras mencionadas, es un acto de sinceridad crítica hacia la búsqueda de un observador que interpele el sentido, y que advierta la intensa potencialidad del gesto y el cuerpo en todas sus ambivalencias, los que se muestran ajenos a toda complicidad con una historia de aflicciones en el cuerpo social, donde las subjetividades y los discursos se expresan en una relación de tensiones con el poder que habita en los propios géneros musicales que difunden estos álbumes.

En *Expectation*, se muestra una postura de desobediencia, con actitud provocadora, en un entorno urbano. El artista sitúa su propia imagen en un sitio donde se prohíbe tirar basura. Su vestimenta de camisa "tropicalmente" estampada y abierta, su jean graffiado y la pistola en mano, parecen referir visualmente una confrontación entre lo que se enuncia en la consigna escrita y lo que se aprecia, pues la figura parece remitir a otra forma residual de la sociedad con postura en acecho y empaque de marginalidad y violencia. A todas luces una imagen

demoníaca con los tarros en contraste sobre un fondo de luna llena. En esta, como en otras obras del autor resultan muy interesantes las atmósferas de vaciamiento que rodean sus personajes, cargadas de una profunda ambigüedad por los silencios provocadores que se generan en la composición visual, lo que a su vez concentra toda la atención en las expresiones, las actitudes y los valores que se proyectan desde las imágenes: los rostros, los cuerpos y su gestualidad, todos alusivos a las intenciones artísticas de resaltar un conflicto de base humana y social, que evoca una expresión de resistencia, en la que se distingue la soledad de los representados, situados de perfil - como en esta pieza -, en cierta pose evasiva.

Violencia-Represión y Poder constituyen un triángulo de fuerza en la obra de Edwards. Las posturas de sus figuras, su gestualidad, la aparición de diversas formas de armamento como sables o pistolas, con combinaciones de rostros de hermosas mujeres negras con trenzados de colores, y otros encantos como dorados aretes y narigueras. Contrasta sensiblemente con la figura de un policía cubierto con la máscara de un cráneo con cuernos y también tatuajes dorados y manchas de sangre en su camisa, inmerso en un líquido, un agua estancada e inmóvil que lo cubre hasta la cintura. Una sensación de fijeza simula una forma de naufragio, que impide el desplazamiento y neutraliza los movimientos, quizás como revelación de otros modos de aflicción en el plano psicosocial.

El artista ha dicho: "Mi principal inspiración proviene de mi cultura y la exploración de mis propios pensamientos oscuros". (<http://www.wel-hous.com/designart/ricardo-edwards-illustrations/>). Si algo hay de sí mismo en esos retratos tan particulares, en la obra que presenta para esta propuesta curatorial y crítica de Small Axe, es justo el artista, su contexto y sus memorias las que se muestran con mayor intensidad. Un susto por ahogamiento cuando tenía 15 años y nadaba con sus primos más allá de los arrecifes, ha quedado guardado en sus recuerdos. Y quizás con intenciones o no, el agua vuelve a estar y a aparecer en sus obras. Pero sin dudas, para el artista se trata de mucho más, pues dice: "la situación puede ser exactamente la misma en la tierra seca...ud. puede ahogarse en las mismas calles. Este entorno te hace o te rompe. He visto demasiados jóvenes ahogarse aquí ... circun-

stancias, ambiente, influencia, educación, falta de recursos, violencia, la lista continúa...” (The situation is exactly de same in dry land, there is not difference...you can drown in these same streets. This environment makes or breaks you. I’ve seen too many youths drown out here...circumstances, environment, influence, upbringing, lack of sources, violence the list goes on...” Edwards, R. “Notes”, 2018).

El cuerpo social es el espacio metafórico para construir las analogías simbólicas que adquieren connotaciones políticas y culturales según la poética del artista. Todo le sirve para mirar críticamente su entorno y elaborar sus formas simbólicas de reflexión ante lo que ha dicho “es un sistema corrupto...Cuando te enfrentas a una oscuridad abrumadora, a menudo te vuelves la misma oscuridad.” (“The system is corrupt...When faced overwhelming darkness often you become that same darkness” “Notes”, Edwards, R, 2018)

Con el título *Pirate Bwoy*, espacio y contexto se hacen protagonistas de su imaginario visual, y así se expresa desde el propio enunciado de la obra pues la piratería remite al Caribe como su lugar de excelencia a través de los siglos, y en particular -piensa Edwards- a los que ocupaban Port Royal durante la colonia en la isla de Jamaica; *bwoy* como se notará, aparece escrito con la grafía propia del créole anglo de las islas con ascendencia del lenguaje rasta. En fin, toda una declaratoria.

Sus vivencias y experiencias pasan por la mirada única y singular de un artista que habita su espacio de manera muy sensible: “La mayoría de las veces, escapar de tu realidad parece casi imposible”, ha dicho. A la manera del sujeto foucaultiano (Cfr. Foucault, M. 2006 *La arqueología del saber*. p. 11), el artista se sitúa ante el acontecimiento de su propia existencia, y lo asume, como lo explicara el filósofo francés, sin ninguna linealidad o sucesión narrativa sino desde la zona sensible de las fracturas y los quiebres. *Pirate Bwoy* envía a las realidades y conflictos de un contexto donde emergen las aflicciones que permean al artista hasta la contemporaneidad desde la perspectiva de lo local y personal, de la intrahistoria que habita en los afectos de su propia experiencia. En ello, Gilles Deleuze, distingue el sentido “esquivo” del acontecimiento a todo presente, y precisa que por eso se muestra “neutro, ni general ni particular, eventum tantum...”; o, mejor sin otro presente que “el del instante móvil que lo representa”. (Deleuze, G. *Lógica del sentido*, www.philosophia.cl p. 110) En ese universo visual,

esta obra muestra valores estético-artísticos muy significativos.

En una composición de formato rectangular orientado verticalmente. Un elemento central convoca al espectador. Un bote rústico anclado y un joven sentado en su interior, constituyen los esenciales puntos de atención en medio de un panorama de aguas serenas, opacas, sin ninguna transparencia. Todo remite a un momento de singular quietud que desestabiliza la mirada y la confronta con esa inmovilidad turbadora. En esas dicotomías la pieza entrelaza un estado emotivo de desconcierto.

Todo lo objetual es sencillo y humilde, todo viene de la vida que el artista habita y es eso, ha dicho Edwards, lo que hace su obra real para él, es lo más “honesto que sé hacer” (“it’s the more honest thing I know how to do” Edwards, R “Notes”, 2018), lo que aporta una dimensión ética en su modo de actuación creadora y en su poética artística. En las notas del autor a las que he hecho referencia, el artista puso todo interés en revelarme – y así lo hago a los lectores – todo lo que de la realidad de su entorno entró a esta obra. “no de manera literal” – precisa – sino para expresarlo “como lo siento”. A partir de imágenes fotográficas, me trasladó hasta el sitio de pescadores situado a cinco minutos de la playa donde creció. Agradezco a Edwards esta posibilidad de llegar en ese viaje visual hasta su espacio de vida que resultó imprescindible para penetrar a su imaginario artístico y en particular a la obra *Pirate Bwoy*.

En esas imágenes aparecían los botes sencillos con enseres de pesca, casas pequeñas de comunidades costeras, toda una cultura de borde marítimo caracterizada por medios rudimentarios para las condiciones de supervivencia a partir de la relación con el entorno. El bote, como la casa – ha dicho Edwards – es la representación de dónde eres...” el inicio de una historia”, que el autor diferencia de la Historia, en mayúsculas. (The boat is a representation of where you’re from...like home. The beginning of a story. HISTORY “Notes” Edwards, R, 2018) Todo ese universo habla de quiénes somos en tanto cómo somos y cómo se habita el espacio de una condición social.

Todo ello se refuerza con los atributos que porta el “pirate boy”, con la simplicidad de su vestimenta y el vacío del bote en todo su interior. Se destacan entonces su corona y el arma que lleva en su mano. La primera, realizada con pedazos de materiales reciclados, fragmentos de latas con brillo y chapas de botellas, todo integrado y llevado con honor. El arma, una pistola de madera, como la suelen hacer los niños en los territorios de la pobreza para imaginar sus juegos de policías y ladrones, realizar persecuciones y buscar escondites donde no ser alcanzados por las “balas” de esas fantasías violentas. Todo un imaginario proveniente de la cultura popular, de las tradiciones artesanales y la capacidad creativa de los espacios subalternos, que recrean y reproducen elementos del poder, tanto simbólicos como reales, con los que habitan y coexisten.

Lo interesante en *Pirate bwoy* es el modo en que el niño solitario en un bote anclado en el mar, lleva esos atributos: en su cabeza, sobre los hombros encorvados y desnudos porta la corona que alegóricamente se muestra ajena a toda expresión de autoridad; mientras que la pistola se hace flácida en su mano, quizás cansada, para definir una situación de desencanto nostálgico que se aprecia en su propio rostro, su gestualidad y actitud. Todos esos contrastes hacen la obra enigmática. Y el artista elabora la relación simbólica: “Imagina estar varado en el mar y el único recurso que tienes para sobrevivir es un arma. No lo logras. Es lo mismo cuando estás varado en el guetto (Imagine being stranded at the sea and the only resource you have to survive is a gun. YOU DON’T. It’s the same thing when you’re stranded in the ghetto. “Notes” Edwards, R, 2018). La pieza es una propuesta para descifrar, una imagen de soledad que trastorna aún más por la edad de la figura representada al ser parte de las potenciales víctimas, las más sensibles del orden social establecido con sus impactos de exclusión y marginalidad. En ese campo semántico de las aflicciones, esta obra emite un grito silencioso con valor de denuncia social.

El mar donde está anclado el bote de este niño pirata, no es ni el paradisíaco-azul turquesa de las imágenes turísticas ni el tenebroso y bravío que devora a los migrantes ilegales, temas -ambos-tan frecuentes en los imaginarios artísticos insulares. Resulta fundamental la vista elegida por el artista, que allana la imagen para permitirnos abarcarla en su totalidad desde un punto superior que parece mirar la escena desde el cielo. La obra, ha dicho el artista, tuvo su primera versión en un dibujo representado según una visión paisajística en tres cuartos, en la que se aprecia el bote y el joven de manera lateral en un formato de composición apaisado. Sin embargo, consideró modificar ese panorama en la obra pictórica “*Pirate bwoy*” porque, “Yo quería ilustrar la perspectiva de Dios”. (“I wanted to illustrate a perspective of God”. “Notes” Edwards, R, 2018).

Se trata de una perspectiva espiritual como aparece enunciada ya desde los textos bíblicos (Pablo refiriéndose a la aflicción decía que “ produce...un cada vez más excelente y eterno peso de gloria; no mirando nosotros las cosas que se ven, sino las que no se ven, pues las cosas que se ven son temporales, pero las que no se ven son eternas” Corintios 2:14: versículo 17.), que si bien adquiere expresiones singulares en Jamaica y en el pensamiento religioso rasta; se trató de un signo en el acto de creación de un espacio alegórico para la existencia de la imagen como lo expresa el artista; lo que supone un enfoque y un punto de vista comprometido con el universo de creencias de una mediación divina que contribuye simbólicamente a la noción de temporalidad- intemporalidad que se genera y provoca a partir de la fe. Y entonces el artista se pregunta “si las cosas serán así para siempre... [pues] la mayoría de las veces, escapar de tu realidad parece casi imposible”.

Miguel Luciano

ARTIST
Miguel Luciano

COUNTRY
Puerto Rico

TITLE
Weights, 2018

MEDIUM
Sculpture
Iron cannon balls, Spanish colonial era
(early 18th century), Puerto Rico; steel.

DIMENSIONS
12 in. w x 12 in. h x 72 in. l
(304.8 mm w x 304.8 mm h x 1828.8 mm l)

PHOTO CREDITS
Miguel Luciano

YEAR
2018









Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard

ON MIGUEL LUCIANO

64

Form Interrupting History: Notes on Miguel Luciano's Art Practice

New York-based, Puerto Rican multimedia artist Miguel Luciano's recent untitled sculpture—a pair of cannonballs connected with long bars and fashioned into barbells—encourages viewers to reconsider his body of work. The cannonballs are similar to those found in the Spanish colonial forts of Old San Juan, Castillo de San Cristóbal, and Castillo San Felipe del Morro. Luciano inherited the cannonballs from his grand-uncle. They have been in his family's possession ever since. Last year, Luciano shipped the cannonballs from Puerto Rico to his studio in Brooklyn, New York.

At first glance, the completed work seems to depart from his previous works both in form and process. Yet Luciano creates and uses objects, whether mobile or inert, glossy or matte, to *interrupt*. In his attention to what he calls the histories of “resistance and resilience from the post–Civil Rights era to the post–Hurricane Maria present” in Puerto Rico and its diaspora, his art practice disputes the idea that the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is benevolent.¹

To interrupt, generally, is to stop a conversation in order to begin another. To shift the mood. To surprise. Visually, interruption becomes a relation between the object and its context. Motionless objects might move, or objects in motion might come to a stop. Everyday objects, or even waste, command attention as art objects. Historic objects, like the cannonballs, seem anachronistic and pull the viewer to another place and time. Colonial histories, in turn, come to bear on the present. In this way, Luciano uses objects to illustrate that the project of Puerto Rican decolonization, like that throughout the region, is incomplete and ongoing. He does so in conversation with his predecessors and contemporaries across the Caribbean and in the Americas.

The Body of Work

Taken together, Luciano's newest work and art practice uses the iconography of Puerto Rico, and of the Caribbean more broadly, to reconsider the history in the present. As anthropologist Arlene Davila insists, "Cultural nationalism . . . is a direct result of the limits imposed by colonialism."² Luciano is also in conversation with scholars of Puerto Rico across disciplines who insist on the study of culture in order to understand the political economy of the nation and its diaspora.³ In this way, Luciano's practice marries formalism and politics.

To interrupt, Luciano appropriates, employing an object for a purpose other than its intended use. For example, the plantain is at the center of *Pure Plantainum* (2006), a series in which he plated the starchy fruits in platinum. Plantains originated in Southeast Asia, South Asia, and West Africa. Botanists, who accompanied European settlement in the Caribbean, brought the fruits to the region.⁴ By using a suffix akin to *-ium* in chemistry, Luciano changes the fruit into an element. As a necklace, as in the now-familiar work *Plátano Pride* (2006), the plantain conjures a tradition of "bling" as adornment (fig. 1). It also conjures dispossession, through agriculture and resource extraction, in the Caribbean.



Figure 1. Miguel Luciano, *Plátano Pride*, 2006; chromogenic print, 40 x 30 in.

Luciano also uses assemblage toward interruption. In his case, this technique cannot be separated from the work of a mechanic. He affixes flags to bicycles, as in his exhibition *Ride or Die* (2017); puts sound and video systems in a *piragua* cart in *Pimp My Piragua* (2009–); and, more recently, in *Studebaker, Plátanos y Machete* (2018–), encases trucks and their cargo in glossy, saturated colors.⁵ From familiar vehicles, Luciano creates spectacles. And, in the case of *Pimp My Piragua*, as tracks such as Princess Nokia's "Brujas" echo from the speakers, he broadcasts popular culture as a link between Latinx, Caribbean, and African American communities (fig. 2).⁶



Figure 2. Miguel Luciano, *Pimp My Piragua*, 2009; customized tricycle-pushcart, sound system, video, and LEDs. Photograph by Jason Wyche.

Here, I trace the use of Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic iconography in Miguel Luciano's work of visual interruption. In the end, I meditate on the conceptual questions his practice raises: Who could be said to be "speaking" through taken-for-granted geographies or historical narratives? Who—including and apart from Luciano—or what interjects? For what purpose? In this way, Luciano's entire body of work could be conceived of as a performance of interruption: staging speech acts and scenes only to take them in another direction.

Luciano in Conversation

There are connections between Luciano's art practice and that of his contemporaries across the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora. As Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens write, an archipelagic approach to contemporary Caribbean art, and especially art from the hispano-

phone Caribbean, demands “a logic of analogy, whereby the very strategies, themes, and mediums engaged by contemporary Caribbean visual artists encourage a recognition of unexpected mirrorings and inevitable unities across Caribbean spaces and bodies.”⁷ Flores and Stephens’s insights build on the work of anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who advocated for the study of the Caribbean across national borders and language difference.⁸

I present some instances of this “unexpected mirroring” between Luciano’s barbell work and the work of other Puerto Rican and Caribbean artists. The works I place in conversation with Luciano’s barbell work all consider national iconography. In particular, they each address the flag or Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic geographies as key features of nationalisms. They similarly use the techniques of appropriation and assemblage toward what I am calling interruption.

The barbell work is at the center of the analysis. I also spend time with ‘51 (*Se acabaron las promesas*) [*The Promises Are Over*] (2012–17) and an in-progress installation involving New York City bike racks. I place his body of work in conversation with works by two Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic artists: Christopher Cozier, a Trinidadian cultural worker and mixed-media artist, and Hiram Maristany, a New York–based photographer and former member of the Young Lords. In particular, Cozier’s mixed-media work questions symbols of nationalism, while Maristany’s photography uses moments of tenderness to intervene in the built environment of 1970s Puerto Rican New York. Beyond an archipelagic approach, insists historian Harvey Neptune, it is important to “recognize the entire New World, the United States included, as available as sites (and cites) for our scholarly enterprise.”⁹ Luciano’s art practice enables such connections.

Even as Luciano’s barbell work sits in the studio, its composition evokes its journey throughout the New World. Its weights—the cannonballs—gesture to the history of the United States and its Commonwealth, too. Puerto Rico, as an unincorporated territory of the United States, is legally “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense.” The island is on the geographic and constitutional margins of the nation-state.¹⁰ Yet as an art object, Luciano can ship the cannonballs across the boundary between Puerto Rico and the so-called US mainland. Just as Puerto Ricans travel throughout the Caribbean and back and forth from the US mainland, so too can this object travel

throughout the island’s sphere of influence.¹¹ As they travel, the cannonballs are no longer “foreign in a domestic sense.” They become incorporated into the barbell, an everyday and familiar object (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Luciano’s cannonball barbells in his studio, 2019. Photograph by the artist.

The cannonballs appear light, belying their true weight. Might Luciano have created these spheres out of plaster and left them hollow? Painted them unevenly to mimic rust? But for both the bar and the cannonballs, their true composite materials determine color and surface. The bar is custom fabricated to mimic a standard regulation weightlifting bar and, as such, is matte carbon steel. Only from a distance does it reflect ambient light. The cannonballs were once matte, in a similar fashion to the bar; over hundreds of years, however, rust has accumulated on them. The bar fits into the openings of the cannonballs, as though the projectiles themselves were made for this particular purpose:

bespoke barbells. But they are solid. Once meant for loading into cannons, the balls are now inert as part of the barbell work. They rest on a studio floor and, one day, will rest on an exhibition floor.

While the work is not figurative, it gestures to the body. As makeshift barbells, the sculpture could conceivably be lifted, in simple or complex movements: with arms in front, or behind the neck and over the shoulders, or overhead. Or they could roll from the sides. But



Figure 4. Miguel Luciano, '51 (*Se acabaron las promesas*) [*The Promises Are Over*], 2012–17; 1951 Schwinn Hornet, custom platform, LEDs, and flags.

Luciano's effort—in lifting the balls, one hundred pounds each, and affixing them to the bar—is the final physical exercise to be performed with these barbells. Any exercise, from this point on, must be conceptual. And the lifter, who would grow stronger through this exercise, is absent. The sculpture invites anyone to contemplate the weight; the weight of its history is all of ours. The barbell work might be understood, then, as a window to the work of interruption throughout Luciano's practice—and in Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora art broadly.

Throughout Luciano's work, the Puerto Rican flag is an omnipresent yet fraught national symbol. It uses and inverts the red, white, and blue of the flag of the United States of America as well as of the Cuban flag. It signals the struggle of Puerto Rico and Cuba against Spanish colonialism; it also visualizes that Puerto Rico is “foreign” to the United States “in a domestic sense.” In contemporary Puerto Rican art practice, as Michelle Joan Wilkinson writes, artist Juan Sanchez uses the Puerto Rican flag as “evidence” of nationalism in progress.¹² Similarly, Luciano uses hue and assemblage in '51 (*Se acabaron las promesas*) to contest political sovereignty through the Puerto Rican flag (fig. 4).

Here, the Puerto Rican flag appears in black and white, instead of the characteristic red, white, and blue. Relatedly, Max Haiven notes how members of Moriviví, an art collective founded by young Puerto Rican women, use a black-and-white Puerto Rican flag as part of their austere palette.¹³ Luciano has also rotated the flag ninety degrees. From the top, the white five-pointed star leads into the black-and-white stripes. While the Puerto Rican flag would normally fly alongside the US flag, it stands alone here.¹⁴

Interrupting the bottom third of the flag is a 1951 Schwinn Hornet, placed perpendicular to the viewer. The bicycle is a glossy black and enamel white, featuring horns, lights, and brakes. On the back are several small Puerto Rican flags, matching the bicycle's palette. With this bicycle, Luciano references the history of Puerto Rican bike clubs on the island and in New York City. While this is a functional bike, it is mounted and made static in the exhibition space. It sits on a glossy black platform in the shape of the island of Puerto Rico. Underneath the platform is a soft blue LED light that suggests Mosquito

Bay, a bioluminescent bay. Here, Luciano carries the natural features and iconography of Puerto Rico into the exhibition space.

The title, '51, refers to the year of the Schwinn bike in the work but also to the 1951 referendum in which voters passed Public Law 600 “for the organization of a constitutional government by the people of Puerto Rico.”¹⁵ The installation also, however, calls up the economic austerity measures that curtailed Puerto Rican self-government. In 2016, the US Congress enacted PROMESA (the Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act), which allowed the oversight board to make economic decisions for Puerto Rico unilaterally. The subtitle of the work doubles as

the name of a Puerto Rican activist organization, *Se Acabaron las Promesas*, which has used civil disobedience to protest the federal law.

In another part of the region, Christopher Cozier illustrates the alienation at the heart of nation building in Trinidad and Tobago. In his *Attack of the Sandwich Men* (2004), the sandwiches, wrapped identically, recall schoolchildren sitting dutifully in rows (fig. 5). The new state does not fully cast off the “sound colonial education”¹⁶; its “regimentation” remains.¹⁷ The past in the present. Schoolchildren themselves become a product not unlike the commercial sandwiches they sometimes eat, reminiscent of US consumer goods. Or, in line with the title’s *attack*, the sandwiches suggest a military force. Entering the global economy and political landscape requires mass production and fortification.



Figure 5. Christopher Cozier, *Attack of the Sandwich Men*, 2004; installation, rows of packaged sandwiches in wax paper, flags on toothpicks. Courtesy of the artist.

But by staging this “regimentation,” Cozier can unveil the fetish of nationalism. While the black-and-white Puerto Rican flag in Luciano’s ‘51 insists on Puerto Rican nationalism, even as the island remains an unincorporated US territory, Cozier’s flags in *Attack of the Sandwich Men* are part of a critique of both British colonial rule and US influence in Trinidad and Tobago.

Like its flag, Puerto Rico and its diasporic geographies are terrains of struggle. And New York City was the site of collaborations between African Americans and Puerto Ricans: from strategy around the war on poverty to the breakfast programs that both the Young Lords and the Black Panthers employed. Luciano and Maristany use and reuse objects to illustrate the imprint of Puerto Ricans, other Caribbean peoples, and African Americans on US cities.

In *Young Man with Roses* (1971), Maristany represents a moment of tenderness on 111th Street, in the peak years of the Puerto Rican presence in New York.¹⁸ This moment disrupts the dispossessed or “socially afflicted” city. The subject sits

on a railing, and the image recalls and riffs on Nicholas Hilliard's painting *Young Man among Roses*; Maristany's photograph not only interrupts the city but also an art historical tradition of representing lovesick young men. The location of Maristany's subject and his manner of sitting, knees open, suggest a familiar kind of New York black masculinity.

But the young man holds the roses between his knees. He seems vulnerable: he relaxes his shoulder, such that his shirt slips down. His thoughts are not in the moment, but rather, perhaps, with the person for whom the roses are intended. This is a moment of rest. His lightly muscled arms, together with his corduroys, worn in the knees, suggest that he is otherwise playing or doing physical labor—or both. An older man sits close to him, bisected by the left frame. He looks across the young man's gaze and seems to have an object or subject in focus. In addition to the intimacy that the roses suggest, the young man and his companion are contemplative.



Figure 6. One of Luciano's New York bike rack installations, 2018. Photograph by the artist.

A planned work of public art continues Luciano's work in interruption and is in line with his commitment to community engagement. In his current installations, Luciano modifies a bike rack (fig. 6). Through a mechanical relationship—by literally locking onto the bike rack—the work brings a multivalent Puerto Rican figure into the abstract infrastructure of New York. It suggests an indigenous sun symbol from the ancient petroglyphs of the Tainos, the indigenous people of Puerto Rico. In another way, it calls up the work of Taller Boricua, a New York-based art collective active in the 1960s and 1970s that foregrounded the likenesses of Taino and Yoruba deities in figurative drawings. Yasmin Ramirez cogently argues that member Jorge Soto's drawing *El matrimonio de Atabeya y Changó* (circa 1975) can be “understood as an allegory of the Puerto Rican migration to New York and the birth of ‘Afro-Taíno’ consciousness among his fellow artists at the Taller.”¹⁹ Luciano builds on this practice to comment on contemporary urban development.

In order to use the rack, a rider must now engage with its new shape. With more material on the rack, it expands and even blooms. The work is a nod to the Taino and broader indigenous lands on which the settler colonial project of the United States and the gentrification of New York City—culminating with the displacement of Puerto Ricans, Caribbean peoples, and African Americans—are based.

With Further Interruptions

Through new aesthetic and conceptual approaches, Miguel Luciano's objects propose new answers to the problems of the contemporary Caribbean. While the work of viewing the bike rack sculpture is conceptual, the installation also speaks—as do Luciano's previous works—to ongoing struggles on the island and in the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Luciano turns interruption, a speech event, into a visual phenomenon. He uses familiar techniques like appropriation or assemblage toward interruption. He takes an object out of its context; he joins unlike things to create new objects. To return to earlier questions, Who could be said to be speaking before Luciano's objects intervene? To whom does the weight of the conversation shift?

In conversation with artists in Puerto Rican and in Puerto Rican New York, with artists across the Caribbean, Luciano addresses an ongoing conversation about decolonization and sovereignty in the region.²⁰ Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States resounds with that of the overseas territories of France and of the Netherlands' territories. One cannot distinguish, however, between those and the seemingly sovereign nation-states of the region. Many of the latter are indebted to institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund or are subject to US interventionism. Luciano's artistic relationship to Puerto Rico and its diaspora, then, sheds light on a common Caribbean condition.

For Luciano, form intervenes in history. Critics of linear progressive time often use grammar. There is the past conditional tense that points to "what could have been."²¹ Or the subjunctive "that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities."²² But if narrative history were a single person speaking, from slavery to freedom, from colonialism to independence—even as that timeline does not hold—another might speak *across* it to create a dialogue. Thus the direction and pace of historical time is not only a question of grammar. It is also visual: moving back and forth or across to dispute taken-for-granted historical narratives. In the aftermath of European settlement and colonialism, slavery, and neocolonial rule, and in conversation with far-flung interlocutors, Luciano interrupts in order to create space. For dispute, for celebration, for ambivalence.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Miguel Luciano, e-mail to Kaneesha Parsard, 10 April 2018.
- 2 Arlene M. Dávila, *Sponsored Identities: Cultural Politics in Puerto Rico* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 10.
- 3 See Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). In order to study Puerto Rican migration as part of an "historical system," Grosfoguel refuses the culture-economy dichotomy (14). In a different way, Frances Aparicio analyzes Puerto Rican music forms in order to lay bare race, gender, and class, in *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010).
- 4 Jill Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 11.
- 5 See *Small Axe* 57 (November 2018), which features *Pimp My Piragua* on the cover and five sculptures from *Ride or Die* (115–22), including '51 (*Se acabaron las promesas*) [*The Promises Are Over*] (see fig. 4).
- 6 See Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 7 Tatiana Flores and Michelle Stephens, "Contemporary Art of the Hispanophone Caribbean Islands in an Archipelagic Framework," *Small Axe*, no. 51 (November 2016): 81.
- 8 Mintz's commitment to the integrated study of the Caribbean can be found in many of his works. In a conversation with Charles V. Carnegie, "The Anthropology of Ourselves: An Interview with Sidney W. Mintz" (*Small Axe*, no. 19 [February 2006]: 106–79), he reaffirms this commitment.
- 9 Harvey Neptune, "The Lost New World of Caribbean Studies: Recalling an Un-American Puerto Rico Project," *Small Axe*, no. 41 (July 2013): 185.
- 10 Christina Duffy Burnett and Burke Marshall, "Between the Foreign and the Domestic: The Doctrine of Territorial Incorporation, Invented and Reinvented," in Christina Duffy Burnett, Burke Marshall, and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *Foreign in a Domestic Sense: Puerto Rico, American Expansion, and the Constitution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 1.
- 11 See Hilda Lloréns, "Dislocated Geographies: A Story of Border Crossings," *Small Axe*, no. 19 (February 2006): 74–93. Lloréns regards the work of crossing the boundaries between literary genres as akin to crossing geopolitical borders. She draws attention to stateside travel from Puerto Rico as well as to interisland Caribbean migration (91–92).
- 12 Michelle Joan Wilkinson, "Haciendo Patria: The Puerto Rican Flag in the Art of Juan Sánchez," *Small Axe*, no. 16 (September 2004): 66.

- 13 Max Haiven, "Black Flags and Debt Resistance in America's Oldest Colony," *ROAR Magazine*, 2 August 2016, roarmag.org/essays/black-flags-debt-resistance-americas-oldest-colony.
- 14 See "Uso de las banderas del Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico y de los Estados Unidos," *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico Policia*, 22 May 2015, policia.pr.gov/orden-general/uso-de-las-banderas-del-estado-libre-asociado-de-puerto-rico-y-de-los-estados-unidos.
- 15 Puerto Rican Federal Relations Act, 81st Congress, 2nd sess., chap. 446 (30 June 1950), 319–20, www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/81st-congress/session-2/c81s2ch446.pdf.
- 16 Derek Walcott, "The Schooner *Flight*," in *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Baugh (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 128.
- 17 Sasha Dees, "Christopher Cozier," *Africanah.org*, 4 July 2015, africanah.org/chris-cozier.
- 18 See Hiram Maristany's *Young Man with Roses*, from the Smithsonian American Art Museum, at americanart.si.edu/artwork/young-man-roses-110760.
- 19 Yasmin Ramírez, "Nuyorican Visionary: Jorge Soto and the Evolution of an Afro-Taíno Aesthetic at Taller Boricua," *Centro Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 30.
- 20 See Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
- 21 Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 40.
- 22 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June 2008): 11.

Belkis Ramírez

ARTIST
Belkis Ramírez

COUNTRY
Dominican Republic

TITLE
Volare

MEDIUM
Printed bed sheets

DIMENSIONS
196 in. w x 394 in. d
(4978.4 mm w x 10007.6 mm d)

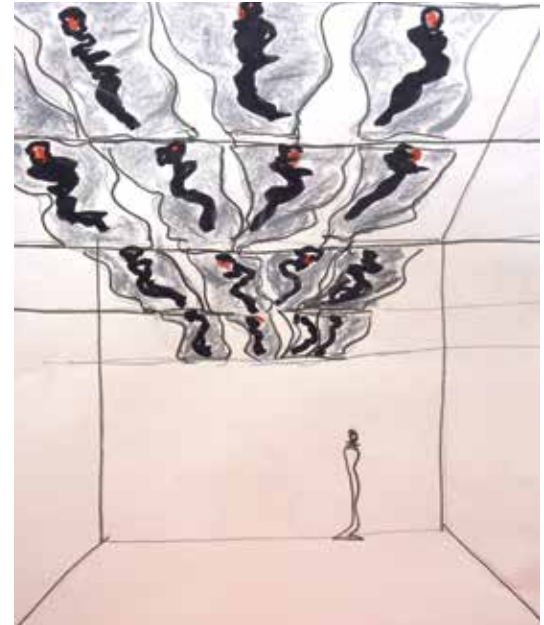
PHOTO CREDITS
Mariano Hernández

YEAR
2018









Marielle Barrow

ON BELKIS RAMÍREZ

76

Of Migration and Memory: Belkis Ramírez's *Volare*

They are dressed in black, nine women adorned as if in mourning, hands clasped or hidden in stately, solemn appearance. Womanly but demure figures appear in two-dimensional form on white sheets, as if in procession. Their bodies are equidistantly separated. In their formal reverence, these womenfolk leave much unstated as they stand straight laced, staring eyes, feet together, neatly coiffed, side by side, one ahead of the other, with measured gaits and placement. Artist Belkis Ramírez, in lieu of the formality of the white canvas, has chosen to stream a trio of airy white sheets clipped to clotheslines, draped from the ceiling as if hung for a wedding, to portray her unadorned females. White sheets are a domestic canvas of social affliction, a papering over.

The figures' silence on these white masses hangs as a weight, even as the celebratory form of these billows dance in the airflow of fans specifically directed at the installation. Silence and celebration, a coupling of irony that describes the patina of this social condition with which we are grappling. Social affliction is a shame we have grown accustomed to because of its uncanny ability to exist in this way. Ceremonial, seemingly prescribed modes of appearance must be maintained lest these women are criticized. Scrutiny of imagined onlookers seems etched into their skin—these flattened female forms are grooved and marked. Ramírez has used the technique of printing wood onto the sheets to create them, transferring the scratches of the chisel onto the flat surface. These marks are imprints that mar, mirror, and perhaps diminish our own scars.

For a change, these unknown, anonymous women have been unveiled, looking down upon us. Though their billows seem poised for flight, their forms are anything but in flight. Their ascent to the ceiling above our heads bemoans their fall. Dreams of flying are self-admonished. And their forced meeting in this space is not embraced, only peripherally acknowledged in the even white spaces between them. It is a gathering with echoes of distance, a haunting. It is a gathering of pained, traumatized women, made anonymous through their sufferings, defamed and diminished through their hurts. Through this act of assembling images on the familiar, tactile object of the white bed sheet, Ramírez creates a metonymic point of entrance to the uncomfortable conversation in which she is inviting us to engage. Notions of social affliction that come to the fore through this act of gathering can be entertained within our own sanatoriums of memory, where healing is imagined and made possible. For within memory, emotional migration can

be realized. And it is here that the artist meets us, impels us. In this moment of coming together of bodies—anonymous, unknown, and real—Ramírez deploys the visual of social affliction inciting us to flight, migration. We are, in this moment, acutely, uncomfortably aware of the coordinates of our point of departure and the journey that our migration might entail.

Volare (2018) is that liminal threshold space where flight or fight is determined, a Janus-faced condition where the public and private collide. We encounter *Volare* where the silence of social affliction, its ignorance, its patriarchy, is visually denounced, even as the pain of its familiarity remains written into the women's bodies. It is through this provocative positioning that Ramírez invites us to consider social affliction within a process of *migration and memory* shifting our vantage point. In repositioning our gaze and in the alterity of these women poised for flight, looking down upon us, a visual methodology of affliction is imagined—one in which the act of gathering of ghosts enacts a poetic of liberation, transcendence of violence. Yet one is uncertain as to whether their gathering for flight foreshadows an act of migration, a reclamation of home, or both. This duality is a poignant methodology signaling a necessity for action in retracing the past to activate alternatives, signaling a need to anchor another possibility of “home.”

Migrations

Is this congregation a point of departure from social affliction, an announcement of its death, its residues, its mourning, or is it a proclamation of impending death, a bemoaning of social affliction and thus flight into the netherworld? These white, even spaces between their womanly forms mirror the structures of violence in which they have been entrenched. Is this a symbolic “unghosting” of structural violence in multi-valent proclamation? But how, if the imprinting of the two-dimensional surface in lieu of three-dimensionality of form seems to reflect a kind of paucity of recognition? It is a thin recognition built into our presence as black women.

Perhaps this gathering is a recognition of the collectivity of solitary experiences, the publicness of the private. And we hope that this procession becomes a route, a pathway; we hope for something different. What these formal stances do not hide is a blank canvas. Despite the white of these sheets, sullying, tension, despair, acceptance, and revolt are written into their etched imprints. They are witnesses presenting silent testimonies. Rife with conflicts, these women haunt us to aid their escape from these bodies, these garbs. Reflecting a historicity of silence, of silent violence, their protesting procession follows the patterns and structures through which this violence was constructed; white sheets covering shame now unveil it, solemnly. The visuality of social affliction in Ramírez's *Volare* uses the very weapons of affliction in a dramatic almost black-and-white portrayal.

Ramírez shares that these nine women once belonged to a 2001 installation titled *De maR en peor* (a play on “De mal en peor,” which translates to “From bad to worse,” and *mar*, “sea”). Presenting the issue of human trafficking in the Dominican Republic,¹ *De maR en peor* comprised thirty-three female figures—two-dimensional wooden carvings, hanging from fishhooks of various sizes.² “The sea is present in the crossing,” explains Ramírez. “They hung as prey and bait.” Of the installation, Ramírez shares, “It was one of my most iconic pieces,” and of the women, “I use them in *Volare* as a way to release them, metaphorically speaking.”³ Their translation from prey of the sea into their detailed imprints on the white bed sheets speaks of a spiritual flight but opens their interpretation to myriad other invocations through their new material and positional presence, some perhaps ironic. What is appropriate to ask of these textured presences in space that perform a ghosting and “unghosting” of our presence in the past? What is appropriate to say to their ghosts, to their families and loved ones? What does the aesthetics of pain produce?

Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, challenges us to locate the space we call home, the space of our true gathering. Home is constructed through the process of imagining, languaging, and aestheticising toward a re-visioning of self even in the gathering spaces of others. Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, articulates a narrative of gatherings: gatherings across the psychological space of time, the gathering of historical images, the gathering of old spirits in new places and renewed spirits of old places for the purpose of restoration.⁴ Guyanese novelist Wilson Harris, through his work, seems to locate himself in the forged restorative gathering space of the imagination, describing himself, “the author,” as one who is “the complex ghost of his own landscape of history or work.” However, Sam Durrant argues that through this ghosting, Harris separates himself from the position of “author as sovereign subject.”⁵ These writers all present the Afro-Caribbean ghost that lingers in space and the importance of coming together to tell multiple stories. It is a ghost that is searching for a time-space to gather the fragments of identity. Within this act of gathering lies home. The processes of searching and gathering allow us to locate our culture.

A Visual Life of the Image

Perhaps it is George Lamming's introduction to the idea of this gathering space as "sacred" that speaks to where *Volare* seeks to take us. Lamming presents the image of the gathering in the sacred Haitian Ceremony of Souls, through which opportunity is presented for the communication of the living with the dead, that the dead may lay to rest any quarrels of their life and rest in peace.⁶ The construction of a visual iconography in forming this "sacred" of Caribbean identity and Caribbean womanhood can potentially repair home. It no longer leaves us homeless, as Nietzsche asserts. But a sacred of any identity implies repetitive visitation for this sacred to emerge. The sacred also suggests the symbolic potential of repeated imagery while repetitions in varying contexts produce what we might call a "visual life" of the image. Multiplicities of imagery underlie an image's transformation into iconography, while the visual life might be used to describe how these instances of the appearance of the image hang together. And it is visual iconography that can augment the symbolic potential of such labor (the work accomplished through the artistic enterprise of creating iconographies) to alter everyday reality through the transformation of personal experience. *Volare* has only just commenced a visual life, starting with *De maR en peor*.

While *Volare* succeeds in portraying social affliction in entering and implicating the viewer in its complexities, it risks failure in sustaining a visual life. Life suggests continuity (even if social affliction leans toward punctuation or stagnation of that life), while appearance of work in a gallery is a temporary rather than sustained engagement. Other forms of work can be instructive here in thinking through where the visual life of social affliction may reside or transpire and how it could incite transformation. Site-specific work and performance art both facilitate alternative "livelihoods," different strains or possibilities of a visual life of social affliction. Resonances and dissonances with *Volare* can be found in the site-specific work of Bahamian artist Antonius Roberts and in the performance art of Trinidadian artist Michele Isava. Expectations of the visual life of social affliction differ between these varying formats of installation, site-specific work, and performance art.

Ramírez's *Volare* is in some ways an extension of the symbolic work of Roberts's site-specific installation *Genesis*—twelve women with grooved indentations of scars, sculpted from trees still rooted in the ground.

The entire artistic site created by Roberts and Tyrone Ferguson is known as *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* (2005) and sits on an old slave plantation, the Whyllly plantation in Nassau, The Bahamas. *Sacred Space* consists of the wooden figures of *Genesis* and a patio with low wooden stools carved by Roberts overlooking the sea. The balcony is protected by a metal railing, and the figures are encircled by metal gongs fashioned by Ferguson—bells of all sizes, strung from the trees, played by the wind. Surrounded by the bells chiming from the trees as though heralding spirits, the figures' sometimes silhouetted forms against the sky or sea seem to acknowledge the possibility of journeying. Inspired by the location, the artists created this site-specific installation without permission on the government-owned land.

Anchoring and gathering on an old slave plantation signals a reclamation of home. While still rooted, the *Genesis* women's positioning on a clifftop allows them to "meet" the sky when viewed from different vantage points. This dual positioning locates the *Genesis* women similarly to the *Volare* damas. Both works create an emotional space for testimony through a duality that suggests both a relationship to home but with a possibility of/for flight. As a site-specific work, however, *Genesis* can become a visual iconography within a Caribbean landscape, a physical space with alternative visual markers that can be repeatedly and ritually visited. *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* can and has become a physical space of emotional and spiritual respite (figs. 1–3).

Illegally created, this act of defiant reclamation of a "home" site—an old plantation—spurred public debate in the newspapers as to the right to stake symbolic ownership of this public space. By adopting formal positions, the *Volare* women express



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Antonius Roberts and Tyrone Ferguson, *Sacred Space at Clifton Pier* (2005); installation of *Genesis*, twelve scarred female figures carved from rooted trees (Roberts), with handcrafted bells strung from trees (Ferguson). National Heritage Park, Nassau, The Bahamas. Photographs by Marielle Barrow.

a marked, structural defiance, much as do the women of *Genesis*. But this defiance must have latitude and longevity in keeping with the gravity of social affliction. The necessity of this project concerning social affliction lies in its disturbing proximity to so many lives, its intimacy. Visual presences that attempt this kind of labor are enlivened through a popular visual life rather than a mere “visitation.” They must come “home.” In other words, the accessibility to *Volare* is so limited that restorative, redemptive work accessed through the visual can barely enter everyday life for everyday people. The artwork itself is rarely able to experience a sustained visual life, repetition, and visibility in varying times, contexts, and spaces. What becomes of these potent women after exhibitions? Where do they rest, stay? Where *should* they rest? Where *should* they lie?

In many cases, the labor of these works takes on another, virtual life, as in the works of performance artist Michele Isava. A performative sentiment to *Volare* connects with Isava’s oeuvre. Isava exhibits what I have called a “performative memory-life” that taps into our cultural memory.⁷ Her performance work bears the ephemerality of episodes, an episodic temporality that is absent in the form of Ramírez’s presentation of social affliction, except that the *Volare* women, once removed from their display in a gallery setting, perhaps revert to obscurity. Whereas the rootedness of *Genesis* reclaims and anchors home, the temporality of *Volare* and Isava’s works necessarily call into question or problematizes the notion of home within social affliction.

In *Why Did You Go So Far?* (2011), Isava steps out of an entrapped space between a bed frame, covered with a white sheet, strung vertically from a window frame.⁸ In the gallery space, the white bed sheet mocks, while it mirrors, the white child’s dress that she wears and the white feathers in a pile on the ground. She attempts to escape the contraption of the bed—and her own despair—through frantic movement and the periodic chanting of “Emergency, emergency” (figs. 4–6). The composure of *Volare* is antithetical to the desperate anxiety of Isava’s performance. However, repetition of the forms of the *Volare* women is analogous to Isava’s repetitive chants of “Emergency, emergency”; they both present the reality of a cyclical entrapment. Memory traps Isava within its veil even as it unveils—the predicament of #MeToo. Similarly concerning are the ways the work of visualizing social affliction installed within hallowed halls raises the auger of the museum as civilizing an uncivilized institution of structured violence. It is a space to which these women seemingly conform and yet attempt to flee. It is not the people’s space. It is not home. These women have not yet escaped the sheets upon which each episode of their slow demise is etched.

While the visual life of this installation of *Volare* may be unknown, the artist gives visual life to social affliction through her body of works, acting, as Marianne de Tolentino says, “as a manifesto against different forms of violence.”⁹ Ramírez’s works more generally reflect a



Figures 4, 5, and 6. Michele Isava, *Why Did You Go So Far?*, 2011; stills from performance, Grimmuseum, Berlin. Filmed by Christopher Hewitt.

tendency to move from two-dimensional surfaces of her installations into an invitation not simply to look but to participate, to enter their absurdity. Paralleling the absurdity of violence, the three-dimensionality of the artwork is the interaction between artwork and audience. While presenting us with ghosts of the black female body, Ramírez’s works begin to indict us to perform the memory in our own bodies, to engage the pain of the ghost in an act of conductive artistry. Memory here is an act of ghosting of the black body, where a migratory gathering of

ghosts begins to make the white sheets of our beds a mnemonic unsettling of the social affliction to which we have grown accustomed. In child's play, the white sheet becomes the process of ghosting, sometimes with slits cut open for the eyes. Disturbingly reminiscent of the KKK costume, these confections of play, public persecution, and private perversions represented by Ramírez's women printed on sheets can cause us to reflect on the work of symbols within the individual mind and social fabric of society. Distortions, layers, and confections mock our notions of good in society.

Double Politics

Ramírez works within a double politics of the visual life of social affliction. The first layer of politics is one that is being played out by dominant forces through the visual context of the geopolitical landscape. Caribbean women are stereotypically presented in blazing color, often full breasted, too often exposed, pleasure seeking and pleasure giving. This is a masking of the violence inflicted yet a lens revealing the objectification of women that is part and parcel of a larger scope of violence. Ramírez avidly denies this politics and the visual trope of colorful Caribbean artwork that references a geopolitics via the gaze by presenting her women in funeral garb, devoid of color. The second is a politics generated by art, with the potential for the witness of art to facilitate unmasking.

The politics of masking functions on a subversive level where citizen subjects are interpolated as traumatized incapacitated victims based on an embedded collective memory of past traumas. While trauma and victimhood may be real, this is not the whole truth. Incapacitation is incomplete. Joseph Roach warns us of the negative possibility looming in memory, "how memories torture themselves into forgetting by disguising their collaborative interdependence across imaginary borders of race, nation and origin."¹⁰ By establishing this collective imaginary, the multiplicity of stories is sometimes lost, and as memory rife with forgetting becomes embedded as culture, the capacity for alternatives is subdued.

The Spaces Between

Counteracting the visual politics of society where concealment leads to reproductions of violence, the politics of the visual sphere is engaged by visual artists in reinventing the collective self. Ramírez deploys this through

nonindexical representations in the telling of atrocity. Jill Bennet, in *Empathic Vision*, probes the role of nonindexical representation in the context of postcolonial contemporary visual art. Is this nonindexical link to reality a more powerful means of disruption of the sensible than the indexical—the realism of photographs, for example? These recognizable yet radically unfamiliar forms in their scarring make the images transactive or conductive rather than communicating a direct and easy truth. The defamiliarization of the form in its etched smoothness on the white cloths allows for some distancing and masking of pain permitting for spatial and temporal gaps, perforated boundaries, and relationships as spaces of understanding and connection. Art, then, negotiates trauma and witness, allowing for inhabitation, surrogacy, confections. It facilitates an alternative meaning-making process, since meaning is not directly given. It is in this ability to forge new denotations in the gaps that is the power of art; positive meanings can also be forged in the midst of the mire.

Artworks can allow for an encounter, in the Deleuzian sense, that forebears critical thought, in which audiences begin to engage in building relationships with sites and persons without the substantive visual iconographies of monuments. In actively negotiating the strangeness of the artwork, individuals begin to negotiate the strangeness of trauma from an interior point of navigation. They begin to inhabit fluid spaces. The politics of such contemporary art is thus the politics of creating spaces for the engendering of agency through the generation of hermeneutic processes.

Both Roach and Bennet accede that surrogation is the topoi of memory.¹¹ But surrogation plays within both domains—within visual politics of society and within a politics of the visual sphere engaged by artists. Surrogation here—this technique or happenstance of displacement of feeling into the sculptural, painted, or printed figures—seems part and parcel of this visual life of social affliction. It is perhaps here that the danger lies, as "the body as place" becomes a zone for capture or play.¹² In this regard, Bennet reflects on the ways the body becomes witness. She deals with nuances of witness in deconstructing the structure of witness looking at oscillation as an aspect of witness, the movement between "feeling and non-feeling, psychic shock and numbing." She also deals with positioning as a critical element of witness—witness, secondary witness, and the possibility of "viewing from the body" that contemporary art seems to facilitate.¹³ This displacement is a significant tool of healing from the violence of social affliction in *Volare*. As the pain is displaced onto these printed figures that are carded for flight, it is also symbolically released. Migration as in (spiritual) flight rather than via the sea, as in trafficking, is a critical possibility here. Ghosts are thus an important manifestation for the possibility of healing and journeying home. While this flight and these ghosts acknowl-

edge trauma, this stage of migration facilitates escape, movement, an alternative trajectory. While we mourn its occurrence, we lay it to rest.

In my own artwork concerning migration, I reflect on the process of “othering,” particularly through light and, much like Isava and Ramírez, through masking. Playing with the notion of light and its difference in the Caribbean, as it filters through and around the billowing curtains, I contrast the linear imprint of the light cast on my body by using the blinds of the window shade in my foreign apartment. The blinds become a metaphor for a process of othering.

“Othering” is about moving through spaces, being in otherspaces and discovering what **we** become in each space.

It speaks of migrations—**spiritual, emotional, and physical.**

Becoming other in a new space left its IMPRINT on my

b o d y that merged and morphed creating **me** as “Other” rather than this new space as other.

These spaces and stages of alterity or otherness represent both presence and absence—presence of the new. This process of being imprinted was a **masking**, the prints cast by the blinds shifted *agency*. Those prints became louder than my **brown skin**. Their **voices** began to shape me, while my movement shaped them.

Volare’s flight is a process of othering, a process of migration in which these women’s movement onto the sheets, the ceiling, and beyond shape them, in lieu of the vicious hooks that once marked them as prey and bait. In its installation, *Volare* requires light.

Volare is the domain of the public and private, the fertility of darkness in producing light. It is transience, memorializing and embeddedness, cyclical, repetitive, yet signifies the seeming disposable, replaceable ensign of patriarchy. *Volare* recognizes the past but charts a passage, a cartography in space for a new journey, a new possibility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Dominican Republic continues to struggle with trafficking today. A total of 102 people were trafficked in 2018; of them, 89 were female, 57 were children. US Department of State, *2018 Trafficking in Persons Report—Dominican Republic*, 28 June 2018, www.refworld.org/docid/5b3e0b564.html.
- 2 Elena Valdez examines Ramirez’s *De maR en peor*, as well as her 2016 installation *Amadas (Loved Ones)*, in “Writing the Feminine: The Representation of Women in Contemporary Dominican Visual Art,” *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 126–40. The cover of the issue features woodcut figures from Ramirez’s 2014 *A través de tus ojos (Through Your Eyes)*.
- 3 Belkis Ramirez, interview with the author, Maryland, 10 October 2018.
- 4 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004); Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).
- 5 Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 53, 54. Durrant quotes Wilson Harris, “Interior of the Novel: Amerindian/African/European Relations,” *Explorations* (1970).
- 6 George Lamming, “The West Indian People,” in *Caribbean Essays: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Salkey (London: Evans Brothers, 1973), 5–16.
- 7 Marielle Barrow, “Counter-Memory and Cultural Capital: The Arts as Sustainable Civic Practice in the Caribbean” (PhD diss., George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, 2016).
- 8 See Michele Isava, *Why Did You Go So Far?*, 2011, 8:20, vimeo.com/30237362.
- 9 “Un manifiesto contra distintas formas de violencia”; Marianne de Tolentino, “Belkis Ramirez, testimonial o premonitora,” *Hoy Digital*, 3 May 2014, hoy.com.do/belkis-ramirez-testimonial-o-premonitora (translation mine).
- 10 Joseph Roach, preface to *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xi.
- 11 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 12 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 60.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 59.

Blue Curry

ARTIST
Blue Curry

COUNTRY
The Bahamas

TITLE
Untitled

MEDIUM
Installation

DIMENSIONS
330.5 in. w x 144 in. h
8394.7 mm w x 3657.6 mm h

PHOTO CREDITS
Blue Curry

YEAR
2018









Chandra Frank

ON BLUE CURRY

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Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead: On Tourism, Leisure, and Aesthetic Traps

Tourism as social affliction—it's a proposition that Bahamian artist Blue Curry explores through a white wall and twelve showerheads with colorful bathing suits hanging from them. Curry, who is based in London, takes everyday scenarios from tourist culture and places them into a contemporary art space. While the twelve bathing suits are presented as one installation, Curry stresses that each has its own sculptural quality. These qualities are pronounced through focusing on the materials; a slight fold might highlight the frills

and motives of the swimsuit. In the presentation of the bathing suits in a conceptual arts space, Curry invites viewers to think beyond the garment and to start imagining its sculptural value.

Initially, Curry had envisioned a slow drip of water coming from the swimsuits, but in my conversation with him, it quickly became clear that he tends to stay away from inserting elements that might come across as too staged or performed.¹ The showerheads are thus hung without a water drip. For Curry, who grew up in The Bahamas, the bathing suits remind him of his childhood; his mother's or sister's dripping swimsuit, after a visit to the beach. The bathing suits in this installation, carefully selected by Curry and sourced from different shops in London during the sales, are used in reference of the dominance of tourist culture in The Bahamas and in response to the overarching theme of social affliction of this exhibition. In this sense, the bathing suits are used as a means to explore how the visual lives of social affliction are bound up within tourist culture. Yet Curry stressed to me several times that he does not want to insert a



Figure 1. Blue Curry, *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, 2018; installation, twelve bathing suits on showerheads.

heavy-handed identity politics narrative with displaying the swimsuits; rather, he is interested in engaging questions of the visual lives of social affliction from a somewhat playful perspective. Positioning the swimsuits as a found visual of tourist culture, Curry converses with their form and sculptural potential.



Figure 2. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

The Bahamas have long been portrayed as a generic “tropical island,” complete with notions of “unspoiled” land and references to paradise.² The Bahamas are a former British colony and, after gaining independence in 1973, remain part of the British Commonwealth. The creation of this tropical paradise lends itself for critical questions on leisure culture. The bathing suit seems to fit right in with the making of a tropical paradise—particularly in the context of the tourist economy. Early tourist advertisements for The Bahama’s often portrayed white women in white bathing suits on a boat or beach, surrounded by blue waters and palm trees. Within the Caribbean context, The Bahamas is often understood as one of the most successful forms of tourist destinations. The myth of paradise comes from colonial rule, slavery, and travel narratives. Further, Caribbean tourism is understood to be a direct offshoot of the

plantation system. This directly informs why tourist culture and its economies can indeed be read as a social affliction. Tourism continues to have a violent capitalist and racialized history that relies on the maintenance of the myth of untouched paradise.

The recent Netflix documentary *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened*, about the failed 2017 Fyre music festival in The Bahamas, shows how the region was used as a tropical backdrop to sell exuberantly expensive tickets for a luxury experience. The promotional videos for the festival show deserted islands in blue waters and women (the majority are white) jumping off boats. Apparently the location of the festival would be a private island previously owned by Pablo Escobar. While the documentary is mostly focused on what went wrong in terms of the mismanagement of money, construction, and planning, there is an important behind-the-scenes story that reveals the racial and social inequalities embedded in tourist culture: Fyre Festival founders had hired hundreds of Bahamian contract workers who were abandoned without any pay. This is where tourism and ideas of social affliction become visible.

The tourist industry, Curry explained to me, was everywhere on the island he grew up on. In his work, Curry thus incorporates these sentiments and contradictions of being sur-

rounded by tourism as the islands’ main economy. He is committed to unpacking the bubble that tourism creates through taking a certain cliché from that culture and placing in within a different framework. In doing so, a new relationality with a particular object might emerge. Curry is intrigued by the traces that tourist culture leaves behind and poses questions on how these traces become part of a constructed national identity. The dominant and encompassing nature of tourist culture within the Caribbean make it hard to determine what is “real” and what comes forth out of the need for capitalist commodification. For Curry, within this configuration, clichés from leisure culture start to trouble what is perceived as “real” in terms of visual culture: “I look at the exotic quite intensely: what is considered exotic, how we got there, through colonialism, and, you know, discoveries and exploring and all that stuff. But then the exotic . . . There can be a temporal exotic.”

In writing about *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, I’m most invested in grappling with the complexities that the work brings about. How do we think about the social affliction of tourism and what are the tensions that come with bringing this work into a contemporary arts space? In exploring these tensions, it is important to think about tourism beyond questions of mere representation. In other words, this discussion is not merely about how the Bahama’s is portrayed and how artists such as Curry play with the visual imagery coming from tourist culture. Tourist culture is about the embodied experience of social affliction as well. The way that bodies are read within the tourism landscape is inherently gendered and racialized.

In Curry’s work there is play with caps, tasseled T-shirts, customized beach towels, combs, plated golden jewelry, sand, and sunscreen lotion. These are objects that exist within tourist culture and bring up questions about embodiment, objects that take on specific meaning when they appear within tourist culture *and* when they are deliberately taken out of that context. For Curry, these objects are also inherently of interest because of their playful character. This makes me curious, since Curry has emphasized his work being “light” vis-à-vis other artists in the exhibition. What makes these specific objects light? Is it the objects themselves or how Curry uses them?



Figure 3. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*



Figure 4. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*

The swimsuit, as an object, might be understood as a light commentary on the clichés of leisure culture, but also it directly feeds into the production and consumption of the exotic. In this sense, the bathing suit is a somewhat expected object, from a Western point of view. There is already a certain expectation of what a “Caribbean aesthetic” woven into the object would look like. This idea of what is expected makes it useful to further mediate on how the visual lives of social affliction become permeated within the Caribbean context. Social affliction becomes part of the everyday and the mundane. It is this tension that Curry enjoys wrestling with in his work.

The bathing suit operates, as do other objects and practices that are placed within the framework of tourism, within a cultural arena beyond tourism as a business industry. Curry’s twelve dangling swimsuits are thus a response to a particular type of visual culture, one that is built out of a conglomeration of the exotic that tourism thrives on, as Curry explains. Needless to say, the maintenance of paradise aesthetics becomes a social affliction in everyday life for Bahamians.

“It’s Better in The Bahamas”



Figures 5 and 6. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*

“Frills, giant sequins—I find that . . . the things that we wear to the beach become a uniform of leisure,” Curry explains. He proposes the bathing suits as sculptural objects, placing emphasis in the work on the materiality of the bathing suit. While his initial interest in the swimsuit stems from its aesthetic potential, it is inevitably a gendered object. Hanging on the showerheads, emptied of ownership, they leave us to imagine the bodies that once fit into them.

CF: “Why women’s bathing suits?”

BC: “That aspect of fantasy . . . that is always layered onto the Caribbean is so visible in women’s swimming costumes.”

“It comes from a found visual, from tourist culture, that I think that everyone is familiar with,” Curry says of the swimsuit, “and what happens if that shifts into a really clean conceptual space? The bathing suit becomes . . . very sculptural. I identified that a long time ago.” In the conceptualizing the bathing suit as a sculptural object, Curry plays with the notions of fantasy attached to the garment. This fantasy itself is of course already

gendered and racialized. Curry thinks of Western women in England getting ready for their holidays and the swimsuit as a must-have item. For Curry, the swimsuit is not just about beach culture but about the very making of visual tourist culture and its aesthetics. The creation and upholding of the fantasy is not geographically bound to The Bahamas, but exists within the wider framework of tourist culture in the Caribbean.

Curry states of *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, “I don’t want this to be a piece about what I think about tourism.” One of Curry’s trademarks is that he likes to leave the viewer with lots of ways into the work, as he describes it. There is purposely little information provided with this installation, leaving the viewer to make sense of how the swimsuits fit into the larger theme of the visual culture of social affliction in the Caribbean. What stories are attached to these green-panther-print and pink-pelican swimsuits? Curry decidedly stays on the margins of how his work might be read. Yet in conversing with him about The Bahamas, the contradictions of the meaning of the work become clear. On the one hand, Curry is not interested in making a work about what he thinks about tourism, but on the other hand, this *is* a work on what he thinks about tourist culture in The Bahamas.



Figures 7 and 8. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

Curry has produced, perhaps unintentionally, an installation that reveals how he engages tourist culture as a white Bahamian. About 90 percent of the island is black, leaving about 4.7 percent white Bahamians. In locating the impact of tourist culture on Curry’s own life, it becomes clear that his experiences contour the direction he takes with the swimsuits. Not being read as Bahamian, and having the choice to blend in with tourist culture, has provided Curry with particular access: “As long as I didn’t use local dialect, me and white friends could go to the hotel swimming pools; we could go and watch a show; we could do almost anything because we could pass in that way.”

For fun in his younger years, Curry would pretend he was on a holiday and see firsthand what it meant to enter the tourist bubble in The Bahamas. Slipping into and out of these spaces shaped Curry’s artistic practice. He acknowledges that black Bahamians wouldn’t be able to enter the premises of casinos, which are off limits for Bahamians, and did not have the privilege of accessing these spaces. This further informs the stark processes of racialization that underlies the making of visual culture. With a majority black population, there is an immediate expectation of “authenticity” linked to the tourist experience on the islands. This too is something Curry reflects on, since he is not the one that embodies this “authenticity” or the “exotic.” In this sense, when we grapple with social affliction in Curry’s art, we also have to question how social affliction might become embodied. As alluded to earlier, tracing the visual lives of social affliction within tourism goes beyond representation. The tourism industry relies on the imagery attached to it but that also affects bodies differently. This becomes clear in the documentary on the Fyre Festival: it is black Bahamians who end up doing the majority of the manual labor for the organizers without pay. In the presentation of the tropical paradise imaginary, there are fixed roles.

The visual culture of social affliction is therefore bound up with the question of object/subject. Curry’s work and our conversations show that the bathing suits within his understanding of The Bahamas reference the objectification of leisure culture. Looking at Curry’s oeuvre, it could very well read as an assemblage of what is made into the exotic. Notions of objectification are tied to the promotion of consumption culture, which within the Bahamian context also speaks to the visual presence of violence that remains. What stands out in Curry’s work is how he tends to meaning-making processes of the exotic. Yet as he does so, I wonder about the presence and absence of blackness in his work. Tourist culture relies on the commodification of blackness, and within its visual culture it also renders black Bahamians as sculptural objects in the paradise imaginary. This is, one could argue, the embodied afterlife of colonial plantation slavery.

A lot of the imagery in Bahamian tourist advertisements shows white women walking on a beach, sometimes in wedding attire,

or sipping cocktails. Black Bahamian women are seen massaging white men on a beach or as generally ready to serve tourists. White women are able to have romantic getaways, don sunhats, ride horses on the beach, and “relax and pamper themselves,” while black Bahamians are actively not portrayed as participants in leisure culture. The gendered and racialized dynamics of tourism in The Bahamas reveal how white womanhood is constructed as the main aesthetic worth preserving and serving. Black Bahamians are typically incorporated into music, dance, and carnival advertisements—the “authentic” experience of “local culture” is another asset for the tourist industry. Advertisements for The Bahamas will often include the promise of taking tourists back in time, fixing black people into a static timeframe in which nothing ever changes for them, while tourists come and go. Overall, The Bahamas are portrayed as a happy and diverse place that will take care of all your needs. The very geography of the islands, according to tourist advertisements, is “just waiting to be explored.” This becomes part of the tourist sale and an extension of colonial exploration.

Curry approaches the questions of authenticity that inform Bahamian tourist culture through grappling with the visual aesthetics of irony in his work. The use of irony in the conceptual art world is by no means new, but it poses interesting questions in relationship to the theme of social affliction. Can social affliction ever be understood through irony? In which ways does irony illuminate or negate the visual life of social affliction? Curry explains that in art making you can’t avoid the making of the exotic. There is always something foreign to bringing objects into a space, outside the environment: “If I’m choosing these bathing suits, and they have tiger print on them and frills and all of these sort of indicators of the exotic, and they are in a white gallery space, then it just adds up.”

For Curry, the irony of the work is tied to bringing the swimsuits into a setting where they are out of place. I am interested in the irony that Curry insists on as creative practice, and I question how we might read irony and in which ways irony gets (un)read within the imaginary of the Caribbean. In other words, I am curious about for whom the irony within the artwork is intended. Perhaps the use of irony also relates to the embodied experience of social affliction. While this might be unintended, I wonder whether the irony used in the work might actually be about the embodied position of the artist within The Bahamas. The question of authenticity—and

what gets read as authentically Bahamian—also becomes bound up in Curry’s presence.

In some ways, Curry pokes fun at the bathing suits by propping and staging them as the main point of attention. In other ways, Curry, as discussed earlier, does tend to the deeper layers of the work. It’s the deliberate ambiguity that Curry enjoys playing around with. This ambiguity also comes forth out of his frustration with more traditional Bahamian art forms. He recalls how he grew up with an emphasis on storytelling,

wooden sculptures, and long hours of labor that went into painting. So-called folk culture often becomes a commodity that is packaged as Caribbean or Bahamian culture. These aesthetics become a trap—how does one move out of the commodification of a single aesthetic when its directly tied to the making of wealth? In other words, this mode of art making becomes a mode of survival as it feeds directly into dealing with the violence that comes with being trapped into the precarity of being dependent on tourist culture.

Curry’s critique of local art forms thus has to contend with the question of access and



Figures 9 and 10. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

privilege. It is his intention to break with the dominance of storytelling and traditional forms of art making, such as the perpetual aesthetic of the hibiscus flower, that according to Curry, is portrayed with a lack of irony. This makes the use of irony complicated—what is ironic to whom? Who picks up on the use of irony? Does irony only come out within a conceptual art space? Curry’s work invites the viewer to think through these questions that inevitably come up when looking at his art: “And then, in an odd way, when I produce this stuff in a contemporary art world, they think I am producing what contemporary art in The Bahamas is. They think that this must be what contemporary art is. It’s funny because nobody at home is entertaining this work.”

Curry is interested in completely disrupting the narrative *and* using a contemporary conceptual art space to do so. The simplicity of his constructions goes against the idea of having to work to produce an artwork, Curry explains. In doing so, he moves away from the notion that labor equals quality artwork. This might be part of an ironic gesture—another take on what gets read as authentic Bahamian art. While Curry offers lots of twists and turns in conceptualizing the work, he does state that he is serious about it: “I am not making fun of anyone.” Curry sees his artistic practice as somewhat of a trick—open for interpretation but without a clear framework. Purposely vague. How the installation of the swimsuits might be read outside the context of The Bahamas is therefore entirely up to the viewer. The bathing suit might just remain a familiar object that is merely out of place in the gallery or seen as the next London hipster rage. Or it might evoke a set of questions on locality, geography, territory, spectacle, and tourism. The histories tied to the bathing suits might fill the room—some speaking louder than others. Other histories might keep haunting.

This haunting is inherently produced by the presence and absence of blackness that is intertwined within Curry’s work. The presence of something quite mundane such as a bathing suit brings up histories of exploitation, segregation, and commodification that shaped The Bahamas. Perhaps there are limitations to capturing social affliction through the use of irony. Social affliction here becomes a much more complex narrative about who is rendered visible and invisible and how violence becomes inscribed in the making of geography and political economy. It is the presence of this violence that calls for a deeper interrogation of the abjection of black Bahamians that is present in the wider discussion on tourist culture and authenticity. The commodification and consumption of blackness occurs within the contemporary art world in similar ways to tourist culture. Seeing the bathing suits as sculptural objects within the context of a haunted colonial presence in the form of tourism also stages whiteness in this encounter.

While Blue Curry as an artist remains in the background, unwilling to give too much of himself away in the work, he does (want to) participate in, and frequently is invited into, conversations on the direction and future of Caribbean art, and he absolutely feels a proud stake of ownership in what becomes read as Bahamian art. In response to the potential hesitance of the art world to include a white Bahamian artist to represent questions of home, locality, leisure, and tourism (in reference to the UK context), Curry says, “It takes a particular type of ‘woke’ curator to include me in a show, who can see beyond that.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 This conversation took place 18 September 2018 at Curry’s London studio and is quoted throughout.
- 2 See Mimi Sheller, “Natural Hedonism: The Invention of Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds,” in David Timothy Duval, ed., *Tourism in the Caribbean: Trends, Developments, Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23–38.

Florine Demosthene

ARTIST
Florine Demosthene

COUNTRY
USA / Haiti

TITLE
Wounds #17

MEDIUM
Mixed Media - Ink, oil stick and glitter on mylar

DIMENSIONS
48 in. w x 36 in. h
1219.2 mm w x 914.4 mm h

PHOTO CREDITS
Florine Demosthene

YEAR
2018









Nijah Cunningham

ON FLORINE DEMOSTHENE

96

Life without Form

Nothing in the world can rob us of the power to say “I.” Nothing except extreme affliction. Nothing is worse than extreme affliction which destroys the “I” from outside, because after that we can no longer destroy it ourselves. What happens to those whose “I” has been destroyed from outside by affliction? It is not possible to imagine anything for them but annihilation according to the aesthetic or materialistic conception.

—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

French philosopher Simone Weil defined affliction (*malheur*) as the “uprooting of life,” something “more or less protracted equivalent to death.”¹ Her description of affliction as an extreme form of suffering that “destroys the ‘I’ from outside” provides a useful point of departure for addressing the distribution of pain and anguish across the Caribbean and its diasporas, as well a good starting point for approaching the idea of social affliction that lies at the heart of this convening of artists and writers.² Weil poses a question about the fate of the afflicted and asks if it is possible to imagine it as anything other than a state of *annihilation*. She contends that annihilation, according to its “aesthetic and materialistic” conceptions, best describes what happens to those caught in the grips of frequent and prolonged suffering. Annihilation, for Weil, is akin to a process of “decreation,” which, as she defines it, “makes something created pass into nothingness.”³ This vanishing horizon also structures her thought when she contends, “Affliction is above all anonymous; it deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference—a metallic chill—which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul.”⁴ Decreation transforms people into things and freezes those it touches with an indifferent chill. In the end, all that remains is a metallic object—perhaps a part in a machine, like a cog or crank—emblematic of the fate of those who are bound to suffering and deprivation. And while this destruction of the self is where Weil will elsewhere locate a supernatural grace, it is clear that the possibility of such transcendence hinges on her presuppositions regarding how the “uprooting” of life leads to its annihilation and, ultimately, the creation of “life without form.”⁵

Weil's philosophical reflections on affliction greatly inform recent liberal-humanist theorizations of political violence and suffering.⁶ More notably, however, Weil's reference to aesthetic and materialistic conceptions of annihilation lays the ground from which I seek to approach the idea of social affliction and its relation to Florine Demosthene's art. Weil touches on a key problematic that, in my eyes, Demosthene embraces as a creative resource. Together, Weil and Demosthene help us rethink the social experience of suffering and duress as well as reassess the tropes of dehumanization in which life is stripped of its meaning and left naked, bare, and without meaning. Thinking of the two together, we might be able to better grasp the stigmatizing effects of violence in its various manifestations—for example, political oppression, organized abandonment, epidemics, and climate catastrophes—that are woven into the social fabric of the Caribbean.

Born of Haitian descent in the United States, Demosthene has traveled from New York City to Haiti, back to the United States, and then to South Africa and Ghana over the course of her life journey. Now she shuttles between these multiple locations. Her uniquely diasporic sensibility is refreshing. In her art, she disregards the ordinary coordinates of space and time. Continents, archipelagoes, and islands in her work have long faded into thin air, and the Caribbean emerges as part of a variety of nodes within a dynamic assemblage unbound to the territorial logics of sovereignty and global capital. She creates complex mixed-media paintings consisting of mylar, glitter, and ink, in which we find figures floating against ominous backgrounds. Everything is already uprooted in the dramatic scenes depicted in her works, as if she is offering us a powerful visual metaphor for the placelessness that defines Caribbean and African diasporic life. Listen to how Demosthene describes the challenge of addressing histories of loss and displacement: "It is like trying to locate yourself in this history and you don't even know what this history is."⁷ The visual encounter with her art is a similar stepping into the terrain of the unknown and the unthinkable.

What is remarkable about Demosthene's art when viewed in relation to Weil's philosophical reflections is that Demosthene's work is not so much *about* affliction—social or otherwise. She does not represent the "uprooting of life." Instead, such uprooting moves through her work like a quite refrain or leitmotif created by her dedicated engagement with the historicity of the black female body. She mainly puts her creative energies into reimagining the lived experiences of the forgotten and discarded black women in history. And yet, in her effort to retrieve these anonymous lives, the artist faces a similar impasse as Weil, who attempts to reconcile things with her idea of decreation. Both focus on how violence transforms life. However, where Weil sees a process of decreation that annihilates the self, I suggest that Demosthene enables us to see the more partial and incomplete process of life's *deformation*.

This essay explores the interplay of visibility and social affliction through a consideration of Demosthene's aesthetic practice. I am particularly interested in how her use of abstraction sets things into motion. Demosthene helps us reimagine affliction through what I describe as her *deformation of the human form*. Whereas Weil argues that affliction "destroys the 'I' from outside," Demosthene focuses on what endures annihilation. Through her abstraction of bodies, Demosthene invites us to think about the feelings, sensations, and strivings that animate those who have been touched by the indifferent chill of death. If social affliction can be understood as referring to generalized forms of dispossession, of prolonged states of suffering, and of ongoing deprivation that stigmatizes individuals and social groups and, for some, is akin to a living death, then Demosthene makes visible the alternative configurations of life that might or could have emerged from such an uprooting.

Take, for instance, artist's description of her recent solo exhibition at Gallery 1957 in Accra, Ghana, titled *The Stories I Tell Myself* (2018). "For me," Demosthene explains, "my art has been a peeling away of layers of preconceived ideas; but in the way a snake sheds its skin, this slow shedding process can be viewed as a continual rebirth of my identity."⁸ Exploring themes of gender and sensuality, *The Stories I Tell Myself* takes as its point of departure the anonymous black women in the history of the Caribbean and the broader African diaspora. Demosthene describes the figures that appear in these pieces as "heroines," underlining the paradoxical status of those systematically excluded from categories of historical agency. In order for us to apprehend the heroism and prowess of those who have been discarded and forgotten, we have to disabuse ourselves of the traditional conceptions of agency and power. Demosthene presents this challenge in the form of a question: "Would you be willing to suspend all your preconceived notions of what a heroine is supposed to be?"⁹

In a piece whose title is derived from that of the exhibition, *The Story I Tell Myself* (2018), we find an example of the artist's deformation of the human form (fig. 1). Note how the figure on the left contorts itself and attempts to dislodge the arm that appears to be



Figure 1. Florine Demosthene, *The Story I Tell Myself*, 2018; mixed media on wood panel, 52 x 40 in. Courtesy of the artist.

stuck inside the monochromatic body. The figure on the left tilts away from the other, which looks over its shoulder as it falls forward toward the right side of the painting.

These opposing movements establish a sense of effort and exertion that is further amplified by Demosthene's use of color and lines. The pinks and browns resemble the muscle tissue. Instead of a soul, here we find a more materialist rendering of interiority that foregrounds the motility of the physical body as a living organism. The backward looking gaze of the figure on the right wavers between interest, curiosity, and concern. It is unclear if the two figures are one body or if they would share the same ill fate were they to be dislodged from each other. The face at the bottom of the painting is almost like an omen of things to come, until we notice the facelessness of the figure still struggling to free its arm. Perhaps, instead of falling forward, the monochromatic figure is reaching to pick it up: *saving face*, both literally and figuratively. When we attend to how Demosthene deforms the human in *The Story I Tell Myself*, what can easily be read as the liberation of a "true" self becomes a meditation on dignity as mode of practice that is more diffuse and inchoate than to the moral concepts of the sanctity. In other words, dignity and saving face draw our attention to efforts at redressing stigmatized condition of the afflicted. We are left to contemplate both the quality and magnitude of this labor that aims at making meaning in the face of the deprivation.

I want us to look at *Wounds # 17* (2018) again and again. I want us to double back precisely when we think we have seen enough. We have to unlearn how we see and instead attend to how things come together precisely when the human form is torn apart and disfigured. The painting calls for this constant approach and reorientation as a result of Demosthene's decision to produce the work as a diptych. While, when placed side-by-side, the two images appear to perfectly align, a subtle vertical line remains visible and recalls the separation that haunts the painting like a trace of a severed bond that can never be fully repaired. We also can trace some continuities from Demosthene's earlier solo exhibition to *Wounds # 17*. Note how the bodies we find in *Wounds #17* fall in line with Demosthene's general tendency to exaggerate different aspects of the black female body in a manner that plays with proportions or, to use her words, verges on the grotesque. Speaking in reference to the works featured in *The Stories I Tell Myself*, Demosthene explains, "All the works are created flat by pouring inks onto a sheet of drafting film. As the inks intermix and dry, I blot out certain areas, in order to create depth and layers. Certain types of inks create a chemical reaction on the paper and I allow that to just be part of the work. I use the oil stick on top of the inks as a way to delineate the space a bit more."¹⁰ There is a sense of immanence created by the chemical reactions between the ink, water, and drafting film. The hazy visual effect produced by the tension between the floating ink and the evaporating water gives her surfaces a kind of metaphysical thickness or depth. The colors swirl into each other but appear not yet settled, as if they were caught in a process of intermixing: becoming-color. *Wounds #17* features a similar dynamism of the surface as the artist strategically deploys different hues of pink, brown, green, blue, and grey to distinguish flesh from fabrics and the general atmosphere. The bare leg in the middle of the piece stands out not only because of the contrast of its brown-pink against the blue-grey background but also because of the intensity of the colors' intermixing in comparison to the subtler and more defuse swirls that surround. The intensity of the flesh accentuates the sense capacity, strength, and vitality that belongs to the minor figures in history that the artist wants to remember.

In *Wounds #17* the deformation of the human form is less explicit but nonetheless effective. In addition to color, Demosthene utilizes posture and spacing to defamiliarize the human form and challenge assumptions about human agency and the body's inherent capacities. In *Wounds #17*, when the figure on the left leans forward and stretches out its hand, this gesture forges a relation between the liveliness of one and the inanimacy of the other, which the artist further highlights with purple and turquoise lines of glitter. As Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero tells us, the figure of the "upright man" in modern philosophy "is literally a subject who conforms to a vertical axis, which in turn functions as a principle and norm for its ethical posture" If this upright posture represents ideal notions of autonomy,

agency, and self-possession, the figure leaning toward and reaching out to the inert body takes on a different ethical posture—one defined by attraction and vulnerability, affection and need. Like falling in love, to lean toward the other, Cavarero contends, is "to be moved outside of the self, to give into the attraction coming from another person."¹¹ From this perspective, the inert body, then, might not simply await to be acted on but, instead, compel the other to reach out and move it from the outside. Whereas Weil determined that affliction "destroys the 'I' from outside," in *Wounds #17* a similar displacement of the self occurs in a moment of affection. Here, posture functions as a charged medium through which the categorical distinction between self and other blur. Demosthene's incorporation of glitter, with all its reflective and decorative qualities, further enhances this blurring effect. It is as if there is something illuminative about that interrelation and space of a suspended touch. We can quickly note where else glitter appears in the painting: there are subtle lines that shimmer in the upper left corner like lines that diagram a constellation, dark purple streaks dripping down the lower half of the painting as if seeping from underneath the surface, and small amounts of silver twinkling in the figures' eyes. Here, glitter not only reflects light but also functions as a "medium of figuration, visibility, and concealment."¹² It is a form of visual surplus that strains at the limits of the visibility. Perhaps, where we may see only a missed connection, the glitter between that outreached hand and this motionless shoulder signals what escapes the field of vision: the affects and desires that move through the bodies of the afflicted and the inchoate forms of social life that they might or could have created among themselves. Like the diptych form, separation and distance are sites of connection. Perhaps, then, wounds, as a figuration of loss and rupture, are precisely what draw lives together and generate social forms. Demosthene puts this point best when she tells us, "We are wounded people. . . . There is no other way I can put it. . . . This thing is the driving force. . . . This wound is passed on."

Let us end on a poetic note. *Wounds #17* has a familiar ring to it, for those acquainted with Caribbean poetry. A metaphor for the injuries and deprivations inherited as the legacy of slavery and colonialism, the

wound is at the center of the well-worn opposition in modern Caribbean poetry between the Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. On one end, we find Brathwaite's thematization of the "hurts of history" by way of his linguistic play and experimentation with language that attest to the breach of the Middle Passage and, at the same time, signal the emergence of a nation-language from "broken tongue" of the dispossessed.¹³ On the other end, we find Walcott's repudiation of what one distinguished poetry scholar describes as Brathwaite's "separatist aesthetics of affliction" in favor of a pluralist vision of a cross-cultural poetics.¹⁴ Demosthene undoes this opposition with her own thematization of wounds and, like Brathwaite and Walcott, she finds sources for creative innovation within the context of pain and suffering. *Wounds #17* recalls previous works featured in *The Stories I Tell Myself* that share its name but are differently numbered. Usually, titles are the linguistic frames of visual works of art. But in Demosthene's *Wounds* series, the titles take on new operations as they link the one with the many, the singular work or art with a series that is in the process of unfolding. Demosthene's use of the serial form riffs on the ruptures and broken bonds that wounds connote in such a way that harkens back to Brathwaite and Walcott, while at the same time pointing to something like what we might call a poetics of social affliction.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 440.
- 2 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2003), 27.
- 3 Gustave Thimbon, introduction to Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, xxxv.
- 4 Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," 445.
- 5 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 28.
- 6 See Alexander Wehiley, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Alessia Ricciardi, "From Decreation to Bare Life: Weil, Agamben, and the Impolitical," *Diacritics* 39, no. 2 (2009): 75–84.
- 7 Florine Demosthene, telephone interview with the author, 10 February 2019. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the artist are from this interview.
- 8 Florine Demosthene, quoted in *The Stories I Tell Myself*, press release, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana, 2018.
- 9 Ayodeji Rotinwa, "Florine Demosthene Is Conjuring the History of Black Heroines—and Creating New Ones," *Artsy Magazine*, 29 March 2018, www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-florine-demosthene-conjuring-history-black-heroines-creating-new.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 6.
- 12 Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 36.
- 13 Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 249, 210.
- 14 Jahan Ramazani, "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction," *PMLA* 113, no. 2 (1997): 405. See Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990).

Kara Springer

ARTIST

Kara Springer

COUNTRY

Barbados / Jamaica

TITLE

The Earth and All Its Inhabitants

MEDIUM

Installation

DIMENSIONS

120 in. w x 84 in. h x 48 in. d
3048 mm w x 2133.6 mm h x 1219.2 mm d

PHOTO CREDITS

Kara Springer

YEAR

2018









Claire Tancons

ON KARA SPRINGER

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Retinal Errantry and Spatial Precarity: Kara Springer's *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*

One of few Caribbean artists of her generation engaged with minimalism and abstraction, design and architecture, uncommon, or uncommonly known, to and appreciated in Caribbean art, traditionally construed as representational and figurative, painterly and sculptural, Kara Springer stretches different chords to her bow and seems to aim at targets different from the customarily socially and politically inflected trajectories of her contemporaries. Or does she? Might Springer not aim differently at similar targets instead or reposition these targets according to her very own spatial and sensorial coordinates?

A lightbox fashioned after LED-advertising signs strapped to a cart-like mobile platform hand-drawn by the artist herself puts both the artist and her work into a mutually dependent movement suggestive of a spatial sensibility attuned to both the environment within which the contraption could be wheeled and the female artist body that could carry it forth. The motif of an upright ladder beaming from the lightbox adds further spatial complexity to an assemblage, appealing as much to horizontal motion as to vertical elevation. Of her intentions for her new commission, *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, Springer has stated, "It is scaled to my body so that I can carry it around," and, at the same time, "It is beyond the comfort of what I can manage with my body."¹

Born in part of her current child-rearing experience and coming into motherhood, combined with her stated desire to engage with scale in relationship to her body, Springer's spatial sensibility is of a taller order than simply metric. Indeed, it seems as though she prefers to deploy a more organic spatiality despite the concurrent counter-impulse to "frame" and "have control over this form," to "instill symmetry and stillness." By what effects and affects might framing an object—framing a frame, as it were—simultaneously moving and still, and of which one's body is a part, be produced? And how might such embodied spatial assemblage participate in forms of affliction, social and otherwise? How do social affliction and spatial construction relate to each other?

The outcome of an ongoing conversation between an artist and a curator/critic, this essay is a reflection on, as well as the completion of, an artistic and critical writing process with a curatorial outlook. Altogether, the artist's work and the critic's essay question the very space of social affliction as a place from which to position oneself or as a location from which to look for spaces to push back against. This cultural location may be at once more relevant to, and informative of, the artist's process in relationship to

the space of the Caribbean, the sociospatial experience of blackness, and the spatial sense of the feminine self.

The imbrication of these various spaces wherein to locate the artist's culture—a culture that is uniquely her own—might itself be mirrored by the three-pronged overlapping processes that preceded the formalization of the current iteration of the work: an action in a landscape, a photograph, and an assemblage. For before there was a lightbox strapped to a wooden cart, before there was a color photograph of a ladder to the sky, there was an action and a landscape. After the completion and exhibition of the assemblage there might be other actions and other landscapes. The following extricates the various cultural spaces and creative processes of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, each always already superimposed onto the other(s), all imbricated into one another, ever precariously.

The Space of the Caribbean

The crispness of the clouds' contours, backlit by the sun against the blue backdrop of a fading day, belies the workings of digital photography. By contrast, the silver-toned body of water underneath is reminiscent of the era of the albumen print. Any sense of a Caribbean picturesque is absent. Yet the body of water covering this surface of the Earth is the Atlantic Ocean, and this piece of Earth is The Bahamas; the island, Providence; the city, Nassau.

The photograph, unlike what one might initially assume—owing to the improbability of such a sight, the perils associated with staging such a scene, and the flat rendition of the proverbial ladder to the sky—is not a montage. As the artist recalls, the ladder held up long enough before it fell over. Her attraction to the representation of the stairway to heaven, hackneyed though she acquiesces it is, endured. And though the ladder aims as surely for the sky as the water does for the horizon, its location in the ocean summons up other possible historical visions rooted within a Caribbean imaginary.

A ladder in Caribbean waters conjures up memories of the ships against which it could abut: ships of conquistadors and slavers then; cruise ships and tourists' schooners now. Under such considerations, the metaphor of the ladder to the sky acquires a more ominous meaning. Albeit typically also made of rope rather than solely manufactured from wood, a ladder to the deck of a ship rather than up to the sky suggests contrary motions, none representative of the artist's own motions while carrying out her invisible performance—diving underwater to secure the ladder and getting out of the shot for the picture to be taken by a collaborator or, alternatively, swimming back quickly to the shore to take the picture herself.

Neither slave thrown overboard, eschewing the use of a ladder, nor pirate climbing up to the promise of bounty, the artist instead acted as a shipmate, diving to anchor and gain access to the unknowable of a landscape steeped in a history from which she strives to

extract and abstract it. Equally unknowable and given equal weight are the heights of the sky and the depth of the ocean: the photographic composition gives as much space to the water coming forward from the horizon line, where the ladder at once disappears under and refracts over the surface of the ocean as a wavy shadow, as it does to the space above or rather beyond where the ladder ends in the blue.

By which criteria other than the physical landscape might a Caribbeanscape be considered? Might the contrast between the accelerated act of diving underwater and setting a precarious photo shoot on the beach versus the stillness of the resulting photograph and eerie atmosphere of temporary eternity account for the instable equilibrium by which so many Caribbean activities are carried out? Or might the likewise tentative setup of the LED panel, strapped onto a wooden cart, or the apparatus's errant motion through the Miami urban-landscape? What do the precarity and errantry of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, in its ongoing process of becoming, produce as discourse and practice of and with the Caribbean?

The Sociospatial Experience of Blackness

Of the two archetypal African-diasporic motives that have come to define aspects of the contemporary black experience and elements of the aesthetics of blackness, *errantry*, a quintessential Caribbean trope, articulated by way of Édouard Glissant, more so than *fugitivity*, which is common to African American contemporary thought, might better carry forth the artistic effects produced by Springer's work.

This artistic Caribbeanscape that bridges over errantry and precarity has been best expressed over the decades by Trinidadian artist, curator, and critic Christopher Cozier, most recently in a lecture for Berlin Biennial X, whose programmatic title "Intransigent Forms and Itinerant Ways (Looking at Shifty Things while Shifting)" threads just this linkage with *shifty* endorsing the meaning of the precarious and *shifting* standing in for errantry.

If a sense of the precarious permeates previous Springer productions—through the visual or material frailty of her media of choice: neon signs, plastered fabrics, streamlined sculptural structures, owing to her design background—her use of direct modes of address seem-

ingly more immediately rooted within a sociospatial experience of blackness provides additional insights into the way she structures physical space in order to open up frames of utterance.

Their System Is Not Working for Us (2017) was set in a vacant lot against the bleak blight of a Philadelphia neighborhood, and *A Small Matter of Engineering, Part 2* (2016), reading “white people. do something,” stretched across the lawn of the Temple University campus. The former, a vertical neon sign, the latter, a horizontal fabric banner. Both, beaming white letters against a black background, assert the space of blackness in aesthetic contrast with and in ideological opposition to the creeping coercion of institutional whiteness. *Let’s Get Free*, an in-process neon work in blue cursives rather than white block letters, emphasizes this American racial legacy and exhorts to exit from it.

A former Tyler School of Art student and Philadelphia resident, Springer, as a Canadian citizen of Jamaican and Bajan descent, could learn and apply such codes of duality, operative within the historically segregationist context of American society. Tellingly though, she resorted to no such divisive rhetoric or dualistic structure for a work that, with the title *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, revokes such procedures and invites instead processes one might call integrationist—in aesthetic if not ideological terms (bearing in mind the Caribbean’s own fractious politics)—with an emphasis on the seamlessness of the image.

Whereas Springer’s American work threads in material opacity, her Caribbean work deals in structural lightness. The uniformly black panels of the neon and fabric works make way to wide open wooden white structures, whether cubes or portals of sorts, abandoned on sandy shores or engulfed by a foamy sea that seem to diffract retinal preemption through architectural angles.

What other elements might *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants* provide in order to ascertain a Caribbean regime of visibility rooted within retinal errantry as a conceptual device to diffract the prehension of the context of blackness and abstract interpretations of the Caribbean landscape?

The Spatial Sense of the Feminine

Comparison with another older work of Springer’s—a color photograph of a pink-clad black woman with a tattooed cross on her back—provides further

elements to tease out another important aspect of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants* more readily verbalized by Springer than visibly embodied by the work: a spatial sense of the feminine.

Avoidance is key to understanding Springer’s choice and framing of her subject. For avoidance is double in this photograph: the subject’s election of her back for adornment, rather than her chest, where a crucifix would be more readily expected to dangle at the end of a golden chain, and the artist’s framing of her posing subject from the back as well, denying the viewer a formal encounter with her while simultaneously protecting her from the bearer of the gaze, in a formal metonymic operation of sorts where this willfully truncated subject, whose primary feminine attributes, bosom and bottom, are only hinted at, stands in for an image and embodiment of a self-possessed contemporary female subjectivity.

Supporting this view is the fact that Carmen Maria Machado’s *Her Body and Other Parties*, a collection of short stories weaving organic considerations of the feminine with an oneiric sensibility for the paranormal, comes into conversation with Springer around the making of *The Earth and All Its Inhabitants*, whose conjunctive title emulates Machado’s own.² Bring into equivalence both titles, and the female body becomes the earth, its other parties, all the Earth’s inhabitants.

Formally, the work does not readily betray any overt stereotypical feminine trope—although this formal restraint could be considered one. One has to return to Springer’s aforementioned statements to understand how she negotiates space and scale in relationship to her gendered body in a constant back-and-forth with discomfort. While space and scale expand beyond the horizon line in the photograph, they contract no further than the sight of the gallery floor or of the pavement in the final assemblage.

Further spatial disorientation and contrary motion complicate a live encounter with the work with sharp horizontal (the sea in the photograph, the wooden platform of the assemblage, the floor of the gallery space), vertical (the ladder in the photograph), and diagonal (the strap holding wooden cart and LED panel together) lines. A sense of linearity prevails, with forward and backward motion the only alternatives for the platform on wheels. Only one’s projection into the sea and its evocation of swimming or sinking diverts toward a wider range of motions, bringing us back to the rotations of the Earth and the revolving futures of all its inhabitants.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Kara Springer, conversation with the author, New York, 29 June 2018. Unless otherwise cited, all quotes from the artist are from this interview.
- 2 Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (New York: Graywolf, 2017).

CONTRIBUTORS

ANNA ARABINDAN-KESSON

ANNA ARABINDAN-KESSON is an assistant professor of black diaspora art, jointly appointed in the departments of African American Studies and Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. Born in Sri Lanka, she also trained and practiced as a registered nurse in Australia, New Zealand, and England. Her first book, *Black Bodies, White Gold: Art, Cotton, and Commerce in the Atlantic World*, is under contract with Duke University Press. Along with Mia Bagneris (Tulane University), she was awarded an ACLS Collaborative Research Fellowship for a new book project, “Beyond Recovery: Reframing the Dialogues of Early African Diasporic Art and Visual Culture, 1700–1900.”

MARIELLE BARROW

MARIELLE BARROW is a Fulbright Scholar, social entrepreneur, and visual artist. Her research investigates the formation of countercultural memory and cultural capital across Caribbean artistic practice, which she translates into practical intervention through the 3rd Saturdayz curatorial project in which visual and performance artists intervene in national discussions. She has worked across the Caribbean and in the United States and Africa in cultural programming and as a creative industries consultant. In 2010 she initiated the *Caribbean InTransit* project, an arts education, open-access, peer-reviewed journal of Caribbean arts, and the This Is ME training program for at-risk youth. She holds a PhD in cultural studies.

NIJAH CUNNINGHAM

NIJAH CUNNINGHAM is an assistant professor of English at Hunter College, City University of New York. His teaching and research focus on issues of time and aesthetics in twentieth-century African American and African diasporic literature and culture. He is currently working on a book manuscript titled “Quiet Dawn,” which considers the ambiguous legacies of black and anticolonial revolutionary politics. His work has appeared in *Small Axe*, *Women and Performance*, and the *New Inquiry*. He has also curated exhibitions, such as *Hold: A Meditation on Black Aesthetics* (Princeton University Art Museum, 2018). He is part of the Small Axe Project.

BLUE CURRY

BLUE CURRY was born in Nassau, The Bahamas, and works primarily in sculpture and installation, using an idiosyncratic language of commonplace objects and found materials to engage with themes of exoticism, tourism, and culture. He has exhibited in the Liverpool, SITE Santa Fe, and Jamaica biennials; the Caribbean Triennial; and in galleries and institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Art Museum of the Americas, the Museum of Latin American Art, the Nassauischer Kunstverein, P.P.O.W, Fondation Clément, Studio Voltaire, and Halle 14. He currently lives and works in London.

FLORINE DEMOSTHENE

FLORINE DEMOSTHENE was born in the United States and grew up between Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and New York. She earned her BFA from Parsons the New School for Design, New York, and her MFA from Hunter College, City University of New York. She has exhibited extensively through group and solo exhibitions in the United States, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, Europe, and Africa, with recent solo shows that include *The Stories I Tell Myself* (Gallery 1957, Ghana) and *The Unbecoming* (Semaphore Gallery, Switzerland). She is the recipient of a Tulsa Artist Fellowship, an Arts Moves Africa Grant, and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant. She has participated in residencies in the United States, the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Ghana, and Tanzania. Her work can be seen at the University of South Africa, the Lowe Museum of Art, and the PFF Collection of African American Art, and in various private collections worldwide. She resides between New York, Accra, and Johannesburg.

RICARDO EDWARDS

RICARDO EDWARDS was born in Jamaica in 1994 and brought up in rural St. Ann. He is a self-taught visual artist who has explored and experimented with many different forms of visual communications throughout the years, which has led to him being described in a diverse range of ways: tattoo artist, graphic designer, animator, background artist, character designer, and illustrator.

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CHANDRA
FRANK

CHANDRA FRANK is an independent curator and a PhD candidate at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her work interrogates the role of archives, transnational diasporic queer kinship, and the politics of pleasure, with a specific emphasis on the black, migrant, and refugee women's movement in the Netherlands during the 1980s. She has curated and organized public programming for 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, Framed Framed, the Institute for Creative Arts in Cape Town, the Durban Art Gallery, and Tate Exchange. Her writing has been featured in *Discover Society*, *Africa is a Country*, *Warscapes*, and *Feminist Review*.

ERICA
MOIAH JAMES

ERICA MOIAH JAMES is an art historian, a curator, and an assistant professor at the University of Miami. Her research centers on modern and contemporary art of the Caribbean, African, and African American diasporas. Recent publications include "Charles White's J'Accuse! and the Limits of Universal Blackness" (*Archives of American Art Journal*, 2016); "Every Nigger is a Star: Re-imagining Blackness from Post Civil Rights America to the Post-Independence Caribbean" (*Black Camera*, 2016); "Caribbean Art in Space and Time" (Barbados Museum, 2018), and "Decolonizing Time: Nineteenth-Century Haitian Portraiture and the Critique of Anachronism in Caribbean Art" (*NKA*, May 2019). She is a 2019 fellow at University of Miami's Humanities Center and is completing a monograph titled "After Caliban: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary."

PATRICIA
KAERSENHOUT

PATRICIA KAERSENHOUT was born in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents. She developed an artistic journey in which she investigates her Surinamese background in relation to her upbringing in a European culture. The political thread in her work raises questions about the African diaspora's movements and relations to feminism, sexuality, racism, and the history of slavery. She considers her art practice to be a social one. With her projects she empowers (young) men and women of color and supports undocumented refugee women.

CHRISTINA LEÓN

CHRISTINA LEÓN is an assistant professor of English at Princeton University. Her research and teaching center around Latinx/a/o literature and Caribbean literature, in addition to critical engagements with feminist theory, queer theory, and performance studies. In fall 2016, she was a member of the residential research group *Queer Hemisphere*; *América Queer* at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine. She is currently at work on her first monograph, titled “Brilliant Opacity: Queer Latinidades and the Ethics of Relation,” which theorizes opacity as an ethical reading practice and an artistic praxis for contemporary cultural productions of *latinidad*. She is also a coeditor of a special issue of *Women and Performance* titled “Lingering in Latinidad: Aesthetics, Theory, and Performance in Latina/o Studies” (2015). Her articles have appeared in *Sargasso* and *ASAP/Journal*, and some of her translations will appear in the forthcoming *Havana Reader*, to be published by Duke University Press.

MIGUEL LUCIANO

MIGUEL LUCIANO is a multimedia visual artist whose work explores history, popular culture, social justice, and migration through sculpture, painting, and socially engaged public art projects. His work has been exhibited extensively throughout the United States and elsewhere and is featured in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, El Museo del Barrio, the Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, and the Museo de Arte y Diseño de Miramar. He is a Socially Engaged Art Fellow with *A Blade of Grass* and is currently working as an artist in residence within the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Civic Practice Partnership and Residency Program.

ANNA JANE McINTYRE

ANNA JANE McINTYRE was born in London to a Trinidadian father and British mother. Split between a fascination for both the sciences and arts, she began her postsecondary education studying marine biology at University of British Columbia. She earned a BFA from Ontario College of Art and Design and an MFA from Concordia University. Her work exploring cultural negotiations has been made possible through support from the Canada Council for the Arts, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec, Studio 303, La Table ronde du Mois de l’histoire des Noirs, and the Montréal, and arts interculturels (MAI). She lives in Montreal.

CONTRIBUTORS

KANEESHA CHERELLE PARSARD

KANEESHA CHERELLE PARSARD is a Provost's Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, where from 2020 she will be an assistant professor. She is a scholar of gender and sexuality in Caribbean literature and visual arts, particularly their representations of the aftermath of slavery and indenture. Her scholarship has been supported by the Mellon Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies and can be found in *Small Axe*, *American Quarterly*, and *Indo-Caribbean Feminist Thought*.

RENÉ PEÑA

RENÉ PEÑA was born in Havana and studied English at Havana University. His photographic work has been shown in Cuba and elsewhere in galleries, art fairs, and museums, including the Fototeca de Cuba; Foto Fest, Houston; International Art Fair, Arco, Spain; Havana Biennial, Havana; the Patricia Conde Gallery, Ciudad de México; and KyotoGraphie, Kyoto. His works are also part of private and public collections such as the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana; the Southeast Museum of Photography, Daytona; Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; the Farber Collection, Florida; the Beatrice Liaskowski Collection, Zurich; the Contemporary Afro-Cuban art collection of Chris von Christierson, London; the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh; and the Institute of Latin American Studies, Harvard University. He lives and works in Havana.

MARCEL PINAS

MARCEL PINAS was born in 1971 in the village Pelgrimkondre, in the district of Marowijne, Suriname. As a teenager he moved to the capital, Paramaribo. His art teacher in school recognized his talent and convinced him to enroll at the Nola Hatterman Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1990. He studied at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts in Jamaica and was artist in residence at the Vermont Studio Center in the United States and at the Rijksacademie in Amsterdam. The theme *Kibri a Kulturu* (preserve the culture) is his main driving force and source of inspiration. With his art he aims to create a lasting record of the lifestyle and traditions of the Maroons and hopes to create a worldwide awareness and appreciation for the unique traditional communities in Suriname and the serious threats they are facing today. He is the founder of the Kibii Foundation.

BELKIS RAMÍREZ

BELKIS RAMÍREZ was born in Santiago Rodríguez, Dominican Republic, in 1957. She studied art and architecture at the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo and took engraving courses at the University of San José, Costa Rica, and Altos de Chavón, Dominican Republic. She is the recipient of numerous national and international residencies and awards. Her work has been shown in many thematic exhibitions, including *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, New York, and *Mover la Roca*, Miami. Her work also appeared at the 55th Venice Biennale; the 11th Havana Biennial; the 1st International Triennial of the Caribbean; Horizontes Insulares; and the 1st Polygraphy Triennial of Latin America and the Caribbean, among many other venues. She died in May 2019.

DAVID SCOTT

DAVID SCOTT teaches in the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University. He is the author, most recently, of *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (2017). He is the editor of *Small Axe* and the director of the Small Axe Project.

NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON

NICOLE SMYTHE-JOHNSON is a writer and an independent curator based in Kingston, Jamaica. She has written for *Terremoto*, *Miami Rail*, *Flash Art*, and the *Jamaica Journal*, among other publications. In 2016 she was awarded the inaugural Tilting Axis Curatorial Research Fellowship, on the basis of which she visited Scotland, Grenada, Barbados, Suriname, and Puerto Rico, looking at curatorial practice in alternative and artist-run spaces. Most recently, she was assistant curator on *Neither Day nor Night* (2017), an exhibition of the work of Jamaican painter John Dunkley at the Perez Art Museum in Miami. She is acting editor of the *Caribbean Quarterly*.

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KARA
SPRINGER

KARA SPRINGER is a visual artist and an industrial designer of Jamaican and Barbadian heritage, born in Barbados and brought up in Southern Ontario. Her interdisciplinary practice explores the intersections of the body and industrial modes of production through sculpture, photography, and designed objects. She completed a BSc in life sciences at the University of Toronto, concurrent to a BDes in industrial design from the Ontario College of Art and Design. She also studied new media and contemporary technology at the École Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle (ENSCI–Les Ateliers), Paris. Her work has been exhibited at the Frankfurt Museum of Applied Arts in Germany, the Politecnico di Torino in Italy, the Cultural Center of Belem in Portugal, and the 2014 Jamaica Biennial.

CLAIRE
TANCONS

CLAIRE TANCONS is a curator and scholar invested in the discourse and practice of the postcolonial politics of production and exhibition. For the last decade, she has charted a distinct curatorial and scholarly path in performance, inflecting global art historical genealogies with African diasporic aesthetics, as well as decentering curatorial methodologies as part of a wider reflection on global conditions of cultural production. Her contributions to curatorial practice includes *En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* (with Krista Thompson), which received an Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award; *Hétéronomde*, the first edition of the Tout-Monde Caribbean Contemporary Arts Festival (with Johanna Auguiac, Miami, 2018); and a large selection of artists of the Americas for *Look for Me All around You* (Sharjah Biennial 14, Emirate of Sharjah, 2019.) She is the recipient of a 2018 Creative Capital, Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers grant for her book-in-progress, "Roadworks: Processional Performance in the New Millennium."

YOLANDA
WOOD

YOLANDA WOOD was born in Santiago de Cuba in 1950. She is professor emerita of the history of art at the University of Havana, where in 1985 she founded the chair in Caribbean Art. She has served as the vice-chancellor of the Instituto Superior de Arte in Cuba (1985–91), the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters at the University of Havana (1994–2000), and as a Cuban cultural advisor in Paris (2000–2005). She was the director of the Caribbean Studies Center and *Anales del Caribe* at Casa de las Americas (2000–2016). Her most recent book is *Islas del Caribe: Naturaleza-arte-sociedad* (2012).

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small axe project

