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ON MARCEL PINAS

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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.