

REQUIRED READING



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In Stuart Hall’s essay ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, 1994, Hall speaks to cultural identity as being both fluid and constantly in production in the Caribbean Diaspora. If we consider this process in the Caribbean itself, where creolisation, assimilations, syncretisms and resistances are constantly in negotiation, all in the shadows of conquest, colonisation, slavery, emancipation and Independence, we can explore where the location points of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in the ‘New World’, ‘the primal scene, where the fateful/fatal encounter was staged between Africa and the West’, emerge. The specificity of identity location- the fraught, and at times traumatic or celebratory tensions of these locations, is explored in the works of Jamaican artists Leasho Johnson and Monique Gilpin.

LEASHO JOHNSON

Leasho takes a dark humorous twist on the Black body by using a core embodiment of avatars. These serve as caricatures of gendered Dancehall power dynamics by imagining the constructs through which that gender is expressed in everyday living in post colonial contemporary life.

In his portraiture work Leasho works towards an abstraction that merges man and object, exposing the core vulnerability of how a black male engenders his identity as a societal man. The fears and anxieties of the contemporary male is fraught with historical stereotypes and contemporary cultural demands, and navigating these give light to the internal tensions between authenticity and dissonance. It is at these nerve centers where the vulnerabilities reveal themselves. The hardened external identity of these men in his work, is toned with objects of claimed material and cultured ‘worth,’- an effort to recreate/reclaim an identity that slavery, and a plantation society, has stripped them of. He questions whether constructs are chosen, or thrust upon them. Whether they are the unpondered wounds of history, or the visceral clothing of choice, of revolt and independence. He wonders if notions of belonging, manhood and power require submission to cultural norms, or a taking of arms against them. As such, he is giving life to ‘Blackness’ as a complex myth through the lens of dancehall and the dynamics of contemporary realities.

In ‘Belisario and the Soundboy’ and ‘The Speaker

series’ Leasho samples the the historical colonial European imagery of JB Kidd, Duperley and John J. Audubon’s ‘Birds of America’ with avatars and Black men to interrupt the colonial documentation of ‘wilderness’ and emphasise both the historical disempowerment and the contemporary victory. This disruption of power is also present in his works ‘When sugar was queen’ and ‘When paradise isn’t enough’ where he also uses this colonial referencing, along with elements of the plantation economy, in the narratives of both ‘Monarchy as Ruler’ and ‘Jesus as Saviour’.

MONIQUE GILPIN

Monique’s ‘The Porcelain Series’ is a dialogue between the tensions of stability and instability which emerge in the traditional and contemporary realities of living. Porcelain figurines are commonplace in traditional Caribbean households. As documented in Michael McMillans ‘The West Indian Living Room’, 2009, the front room, in which porcelain figurines hold a particular place harking to British sensibilities, porcelain is ‘a conservative element of Black domestic life which is more complex and rich than the generality of the society ever realises’.

This traditional domestic object is imbued with powerful colonial fractures and meanings, and yet simultaneously embody a predictable and stabilising force in the Caribbean psyche of ‘Home’. Monique recreates porcelain as Black bodies in highly saturated images, in three dimensional empty space. Identities that struggle in this contemporary reality, to cling to the psychological stability of seemingly simpler times whilst knowing that an object such as this is a wound to the psyche, a historical displacement of self due to the child’s psychological value of a colonial object, in what should be a safe space- Home. The bodies contort as they resist transformation, adjust to transformation, and seek stability somewhere in that tension.

‘Required Reading’ emerged from ongoing conversations between Lucy Davies, 198 Contemporary Arts and Learning, and Susanne Fredricks, Suzie Wong Presents, about collaborating to increase the visibility of emerging contemporary visual artists from the Caribbean in the UK. 1:54’s invitation to be included in this years Special Projects Programme has culminated in a cementing of this partnership, and we are very pleased to be initiating it at 1:54’s sixth staging in London.

We would like to thank the artists- Monique Gilpin and Leasho Johnson, our sound engineer Natural High Music, Jamaica, and our editor Gary Stewart. We would also like to thank 1:54 for this opportunity.

198 Contemporary Arts and Learning’s mission is to nurture and support the career of emerging, under-represented artists and to advance public interest in the visual arts. Founded in 1988, 198’s motivation initially focused on the need to provide a platform for Afro-Caribbean and Asian artists as part of the Black Arts Movement. For nearly 30 years this work has evolved and continued to develop with projects that consider the work and study of emerging cultural identities, through exhibitions, workshops, education projects and critical debate with artists, thinkers, activists, young people and local and artistic communities. We advocate for diversity within the visual arts and provide opportunities for those wishing to develop careers in the creative and cultural industries.

Our artistic programme provides a platform for participation, exchange and dialogue for artists, our partners and diverse audiences. Our exhibitions and artist led projects provide a framework for events which bring together individuals and organisations inside and outside of the arts to engage in debate and creative practice. Our work is particularly focused on issues of social inclusion and diversity and seeks to engage with global issues while being rooted in the history of our locality.
<https://www.198.org.uk/>

Suzie Wong Presents The Caribbean, Seen Headquartered in Kingston, Jamaica, Suzie Wong platforms emerging contemporary visual artists of the Caribbean to new audiences, and focusses on creating new opportunities with curators and collectors within and beyond the Archipelago, and for international exhibitions, gallery representation, and residency programmes.
www.suziewongpresents.com

198 Contemporary Arts & Learning



Supported using public funding by
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Above: Yeng yeng #1, 2018, Oil paint, gold leaf, spray paint on archival paper, 50”x 60”, Leasho Johnson



Left: Lives Matter II, Porcelain Series, 2015, Digital print on PVC, 60” x 40”, Monique Gilpin

Previous Page: Pum pum paradise 2016, Mixed media on Canvas, 37” x 54”, Leasho Johnson.



Left: *When sugar was queen #1*, 2018, Oil, spray paint, gold leaf, vinyl on archival paper, 30" x 44", Leasho Johnson.



Above and details: *'Land of Big Hood and Water'*, 2017, *'Cocktales and pum pum'*, 2017, Installation @ 'We Have Met Before', National Gallery of Jamaica and the British Council, 2017, Leasho Johnson.



Left: *Speaker series*, Oil and vinyl, 18", 2018 Leasho Johnson.



Below: *Walk like a dog #1*, 2018, Earthenware, gold leaf, vinyl record, 12" x 12" x 8.5", Leasho Johnson.

Right: Porcelain
Disposition II,
2015, Digital
print on PVC,
60"x40"
Monique Gilpin



Far Left:
Porcelain
Disposition VI,
2017, Digital
print on PVC,
60" x 40"
Monique Gilpin

Left: Porcelain
Disposition I,
2015, Digital print
on PVC, 60"x40",
Monique Gilpin

Below: Lives
Matter, Porcelain
Series, 2018,
Digital print on
PVC, 60" x 40"
Monique Gilpin





Left: *Porcelain*
Disposition III, 2015,
Digital print on PVC,
60x40, Monique Gilpin