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The Three Principles *for* -2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by
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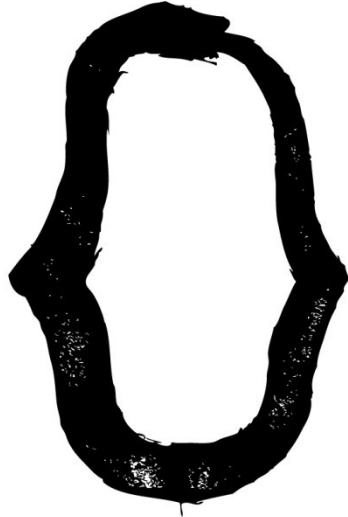
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Abstract

Utilizing alchemy as an allegory for the political, social, cultural history and present of the Caribbean, I discuss critical themes, approaches, methodologies their development, application and evidence in my thinking and art practice.

The Three Principles

for -2012



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Introduction

Cliché (it takes one to know one), alchemy as allegory and the experiment of the Indies

Pleased to meet you

It is true that I am, and this is a matter of legality, a citizen of one of many modern states that at one point in history existed as the colony of one or more European empires. It is also true that many of those states are classified as (this is another matter of legality) third world nations/states or developing nations/states.

Now that I have situated myself as a citizen of a former colony, possibly the former subject of a European empire, or at least a generation removed from that 'status', let me now admit to being from the Anglophone Caribbean (as opposed to the francophone/hispanophone/Dutch speaking Caribbean, this is a very important distinction to make) an artist, male and of mixed ethnicity.

I would also like to say, that like many artists thus described (we can omit 'mixed ethnicity' for the moment), I make work about suffering - I am a male artist from the third world, citizen of a nation that is a former European colony, who makes work about suffering, history, anxiety and (if what has transpired thus far is any indication) identity.

If this seems cliché, I would like to take this opportunity to share with the reader why that does not matter in the least. Even in the (country/nation/state) place that I am from, there exists the sentiment (the mantra of some neo-racists) that Black people can't keep blaming slavery for their current condition. There is talk of a lack of industriousness, or of laziness, that "Africans doh ha no head for business" and then some "Africans" parrot these

sentiments as 'ole talk' despite evidence to the contrary. There is a reluctance to engage/acknowledge the continued effects of slavery and indenture (which in the narrative of competing suffering in the Caribbean, has routinely been characterized as something close to a mild inconvenience based on the assessment that the levels of abuse under indenture did not rise to those which existed under slavery, and as such generally does not often merit mention in a discussion of historic injustice in the Caribbean) upon the psyche of a people, which is evidenced in the past and projects into the future. There is a consensus among some types that the time for that conversation has passed, that even in what can (I think correctly) be described as a 'Black Nation' (where I am from), there appears to be the insistence that black people need to just move on. That history is past/passé, and it is time for Black people to get over it and look to the future. Another set of decisions seemingly taken on behalf of those who, historically, have been deprived of the power to articulate their own fates either through the imposition of direct force, state or imperial power and now through this 'consensus' that would deny even the power that can be recouped through the evocation of their most recent and cruel history. The powers that severed the link to their ancient past would scheme to deny the potency of a more recent, troubling history. It is for this reason that it does not surprise me that the artist described earlier can be thought of, or, at least appear to be somewhat "stock".

I would like to impress that in making these points I am being preemptive and not defensive. In order to discuss those things that inform the content of my work I must establish with the reader the validity of these avenues of inquiry to a contemporary conversation on subjectivity. I do not wish to do more than mention the systemic discrimination against persons of non-European decent in the European diaspora that may manifest itself in the

domestic and foreign policies adopted by these states (thus impacting not only the citizen/subject of color in these states but also nations outside the European diaspora, since the apex of economic and military power/influence resides in the 'First World' which is almost entirely made up of states within the European diaspora). Although the visible and identifiable existence of this kind of discrimination exacerbates the conditions I mentioned in this introduction, ultimately, as I have indicated earlier, having lived in a place that can be described as belonging to the afro/indo diaspora, my concerns at this moment are not entirely centered on this kind of institutional discrimination/disenfranchisement, via or located in these nations, that discussion is already well joined.

I see the Caribbean as an interesting site in terms of its 'shallow' history. I say this because the 'Caribbean' as a place, in one way, has been remade or only came into existence after Columbus in the 15th century, and further can be said to exist (as a site) primarily in the European imagination (Thompson). Whatever organization that existed and that continues to exist was imposed or inherited by the colonial powers that dominated and controlled the territories that make up the Caribbean.

The entirety of the indigenous population of the islands was in one way or another eradicated, the population that now inhabits the islands was transplanted from one part of the world or another. Cultures that never co-existed before or those which were previously unaware of the existence of the other(s) were made neighbors in what I see as an ongoing cultural/political/territorial experiment.

In order to discuss the developments/findings in this experimental 'place' I choose to look at/employ the language of alchemy. The terms and processes outlined in alchemy presented the latitude and complexity that made it a ready and accommodating allegory for the



1(from) the dimming I (2010), graphite and alkaline soap on paper (10in x 10in)

cultural conditions and development in the Caribbean and specifically Trinidad as I sought to describe them. It was also important to find a pre-existing European epistemological model/structure in which to couch/create this allegory for Caribbean experience in order to acknowledge the crisis of original language/voice experienced in the post-colonial world (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin).

Alchemy offered a most attractive model; the proto-science straddles the enlightenment imperative for empiricism and older predications for myth, code/subterfuge, spiritual and social improvement, mysticism, secret knowledge and secret societies. The notions of inclusion and exclusion are implicit, reinforced and exaggerated alchemy itself is a collection of material, pseudo religious and scientific allegory masking either the *true* means to transform lead into gold (base into the refined/elevated) through the production of the philosopher's stone – or the elixir of life which, as the name suggests can extend life indefinitely. Or the entire alchemical practice could be a coded path toward enlightenment and self-realization (within the grand elegant scheme of the operations of the universe). The presence of figures such as the adept and the initiate and the uninitiated further strengthen the inside/outside potential of this metaphor.

The detailed and diagramed descriptions of alchemical processes of separation, distillation, combination etc. materials in their base form that can be refined into another form The detailed and diagramed descriptions of alchemical processes of separation, distillation, combination etc. materials in their base form that can be refined into another form (flower of zinc/sulfur) described in the coded and poetic language, intended to mislead the uninitiated and throw them off of the path - lend themselves to be adapted to a layered narrative of the improbable diversity of flesh, resources, languages and classes that exists in constant flux in a small – obscure enough place called the Caribbean.

I emphasize the material/process link to meaning/obscured meaning in a way that not only references alchemy/magic/process, but that is presented in a transformative/flux/unstable phase/state. Thus the allegory of the Caribbean/idea of the Caribbean (as unstable and in

flux) exists not only in the conceptualization of the work but is born out in the choice of the material as well as the way the material performs.

It is also fitting that alchemy the pseudo/proto-science is credited in history as a precursor to modern chemistry but otherwise discredited. This corresponds to my feelings about the (largely black) nationalist narratives in the Anglophone Caribbean, in the way that alchemy promised these fantastical rewards at the end of its path – but in the cold light of late 20th/early 21st centuries, it is clear there was no path, no ultimate prize, just a modernist promise of *Nationhood* (and whatever that meant in the 1960's) that is fading into social political and ideological tragedy (Scott).

Here I will discuss my work in terms of *three principles* of alchemy *sulfur, salt and mercury*, each of these substances holds properties that correspond or can be made to relate to ideas that I attempt to work through in my practice of thinking and making. The three principles also form a godhead/trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit or Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. This Trinity gives me cover while allowing me to acknowledge the religiosity that presents itself as part of the predicament of the post-colonial Caribbean subject and presents another layer in which (as the alchemists did) I conceal/encode meaning and intention.

To the Arabic idea that metals were composed of the two principles of mercury and sulphur and were generated slowly in the earth from these, Paracelsus seems to be responsible for adding the principle of salt. The basis of matter was the alchemical trinity of principles-- salt, sulphur and mercury. Salt was the principle of fixity (non-action) and incombustibility; mercury was the principle of fusibility (ability to melt and flow) and volatility; and sulphur was the principle of inflammability. (Fromm)



Sulfur

History, Slavery, Indenture and Shame

Sulphur is the oily fraction that can be extracted from substances; in the case of plants it is the essential oil (magicalpath)

Evidenced in my art making are the ways I seek to look at and deal/cope with history. An engagement of history is crucial, not only to my practice as an artist, but to the formation of the identities of persons from the Caribbean.

A complicated relationship to self and shame is entered into at an early age for West Indians when as part of the primary school social studies education the history of the island is recounted. Children learn of the benevolent British, the sugar plantation system and the unruly slaves that were cruel and 'revolted' and 'rebelled' (as a citizen grew older these words were replaced with more suitable terms; 'struggle' and 'resistance') and killed their masters and burnt the fields. Very little was said about the cruelty of the slave/plantation owners and the colonial system – in the institutions.

The time I am speaking of is the post-independence period in Trinidad. Once outside the gates of the neo-colonial educational institution and on the street, there was the music of Robert Nesta Marley and the Mighty Sparrow spilling from shops and houses to correct for young citizens the oversight of the primary school social studies curriculum. But within the walls of the institution, the imperative was to be well behaved, to 'learn your lessons' and to be socialized into your station – students were taught that people with skin and bodies and hair like theirs were (historically) ill-behaved and thus their progeny were prone to misbehavior as well. Derogatory terms/phrases such as 'black hen chicken' (usually followed by a negative remark such as; 'ignorant', 'harden', 'don't/can't learn') 'neg neg' or 'coolie' were freely employed to embarrass students who fell out of line, or if they exhibited

behavior that was found to be disappointing. Underperforming in spelling or sums were also occasions for a student's identity to be used to ridicule poor performances. Shame was routinely used as a policing tool, coupling shame with references to skin, hair, race and gender – the indicators of identity taught students at an early age to despise themselves. Authority figures incriminated themselves by commenting on the laziness or stupidity of a student and attributing those qualities to some deficiency that comes with the students' ethnicity.

This is an example of how shame and ethnicity become coupled at a young age through neo-colonial state institutions, it is not a new example, nor is it unique to the Caribbean, it is however common in societies that have suffered the cruelty of colonial domination and abuse. Self-hate is common though generally under-acknowledged in post-colonial states where the new ruling class had historically been the underclass. The (not so simple) transference of power at independence could not compensate a society, adequately remedy or free a people from the shame of having been abused and dominated.

Coinciding with the independence movements in the Caribbean were Black Power movements in the Caribbean and the United States – which meant civil rights for African Americans in the United States, and the rise to dominance of Black Nationalist sentiment in the Caribbean. The slogan 'black is beautiful' became popular and remains as an important phrase in the history of resistance in the African diaspora. I read that phrase, and its popularity as the response to the kind of institutionalized conditioning I indicated earlier – that indicated to non-Europeans that they were in some way not proper, inferior and ugly. The phrase speaks to reclamation and affirmation of humanity and pride for people of color, it is also a response to having been shamed.

Shame has manifested itself in my practice in works like *Toussaint et George* (2010) [2], where Toussaint l'ouverture and George Washington - the two grand historical figures face off in a contest that asks the viewer to consider each revolutionary's credentials, and asks 'can they stand as equals?' The answer become complicated, the debate is swallowed up in longstanding equivalencies and compensations/calculations that must be made when considering race in history/historiography.

The concept of shame and the body is palpable in *the missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled* (2011) [4]. *The missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled* is a caramelized sugar wall drawing of a standing (un-gendered) figure, which due to heat and humidity slips down the wall and puddles on the floor, leaving behind a faint mark/stain. During this process, streams of melting sugar leak from the bowels of the figure as the sugar that formed the figure loses its integrity - its control, and responds to the inevitability of its material properties, its environment and time.

I revisit the figure and excretion in *making water for monsters* (2011) [6], this graphite and linseed oil drawing on paper, shows a (un-gendered) squatting figure “pissing or shitting or whatever - gold” (Shelton). This work addressed history, shame and abjection. At the time I was working on a series of drawings of sea monsters as a comment on the fear and the unknown space/site, the monsters and what they represent psychologically gave in *making water for monsters* its title and context. The blackened form/body (in one way) became the subject/object of fear and at the same time of abject labor. Where the sea monsters acted as a metaphor for the unknown, new world/industry, the unfamiliar site and the *other* – the figure became the engine of that industry (and its profits) – still an *other* (an unknown) and



2 Toussaint et George (2010), graphite, linseed oil, pencil and acrylic on panel (10in x 8in)

also the locus of the habitat for fear. The figure is the slave/indentured servant who shat and 'made water' on the ground – in the field, this body leaked more 'properly' but no less poignantly than the figure of *the missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled*.

While there are many references to the body and strength/restraint, pain, dignity and abjection in the work I have made in the last year and a half, the work that operates most distinctly in addressing shame, abjection, history and place is *the sweet of my brown* (Ouditt) Ouditt, Steve. "Creole In-Site." *Annotations 4* (1998): 40. (2012) (see Notes on - 2012).

Through my practice I wonder after the legitimacy of the *past is passé* argument toward the history of colonialism. With (as history tells us) slavery being abolished over two hundred years ago, and the system of indenture labor (in the West Indies) abandoned for nearly one hundred years, there are few if any who can claim to remember what it was like, to have been subject to that life and to suffered its effects directly. This would of course be true if the effects of slavery and indenture were limited to the bodies that bore the strain of the fields and plantations and the houses and barracks and taunts and rapes and beatings and murders and humiliations and separations etc. What can the modern (displaced) African or Indian know directly of slavery or indenture? Further to that, what can a person, potentially a generation removed from knowing what it is to be a colonial subject claim to know (directly) of colonialism?

Should persons so removed, having had their primary experience of slavery, indenture, and colonialism via articles in history books (most often written from the perspective of the entities that perpetrated slavery, indenture and colonialism), be so concerned with these matters, as though they were contemporary issues? Indeed slavery and indenture (as it relates to the sanctioned industry of forced labor employed by European powers from the 16th through to the 19th century) has ended, but the effects of slavery and indenture endure in the psychology and status of those groups that were involved in/subject to those inequitable labor and production practices. They manifest in (for the generations that grew up during the buildup to or in the immediate aftermath of the independence moments), an unfortunate association with identity and shame. This is one aspect of being black/brown in the Caribbean.



Salt

The Body, Waste, Multiculturalism & the Politics of Polyethnicity

Salt, was not seen as the common salt, but as the body of a substance. After the sulphur and mercury had been extracted, the remaining material could be burned (a process of purification) and reduced to ash, and further to a very fine powder and was therefore the salt. (magicalpath)

His Wisdom was theirs to have; but they had eaten salt and made themselves too heavy to fly. So, because now their future would be in the islands, he preferred not to place temptation in their way by revealing to them the mysteries of flight. (Lovdlace)

But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt. ((KJV))

Figuration has always played a role in my art practice, recently I became less interested in the figure per se and more interested in the body. Rendering the figure has always been a matter of skill and training, understanding anatomy and the structure of the human form. Once learnt and trained, the task was to forget and to feel, to allow the figure to fail, to become flawed and beautiful.

In 2007, as a participant in the three islands artist workshop in Tanera Mor Scotland I made life sized figure drawings on paper and proceeded to treat them like bodies. One drawing was escorted to a loch on the island and drowned, another was escorted to the top of a low hill and buried.

The drawings transcended figuration and became bodies – stand-ins for each person that participated in what was a ritualized observance of frailty and mortality. Through these two actions I was able to make a distinction between the drawing of a figure, and the drawing of a body.

At the core of my practice is a desire to convey/communicate something about the experiences of bodies I have witnessed and/or understood (something about) or

experiences that can only be made familiar/common through the body, reside in the body or can be understood through asking the body.

The truth about race, politics, post/neo-colonialism, gender, class, Americans, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, the devout and the heretic is that our arms will ache, our bones will hurt, our feet will blister, we will all tire, and because of that, we can understand each other. Through the body I can empathize with people that are removed from me – ethnically, culturally, economically, politically and so on, and they can empathise with me.

The drawing and sculpture I make reference the body – in its frailty and abjection (Kristeva). Any person who has been sick or has seen illness, who has witnessed death, has broken a bone or scraped a knee or felt cold, alone or ashamed – can recognise the body in these moments, and sometimes feel for/with another body.

It is important to acknowledge in a conversation about the body and ‘feeling’ the question of the ‘*real*’ (Baudrillard). With respect to the *loss of the real*, there is a barrier of passivity that can/must be breached in order to transcend the ‘simulated world’ and make contact with our bodies – through sensations that can only be felt, that deny or find language inadequate (in order to articulate), what Lacan referred to as trauma, a connection with the real. Through a (re-)connection with the vulnerabilities and weaknesses of the body and experiences that exist outside of language (pain, terror, excitement etc.) – where the body is no longer an ‘image’ (external) but becomes one’s *being* and one’s *self* (internal), an avenue for communication opens up, a ‘common tongue’ that is pre-language and pre-socialization based on the felt and the capacity for empathy.



3 model 03 for archipelago (2011), incandescent light bulb, lamp fixture and brown sugar

This is where intimacy and ritual become important to my practice. It is simple enough to be overwhelmed by a work; it is a separate thing to be overtaken by one. The latter is always my goal, to allow the work to solicit, and not demand or impose, to be discovered as opposed to being apparent/unavoidable. The aim of my work is not to allow the viewer to enter it, but rather for it to enter the viewer and by doing so allow the viewer to enter themselves.

In *model 03 for archipelago* (2011) [3], I arranged 75-100 W incandescent light bulbs onto small heaps of raw (brown) sugar. The resulting action saw the vaporization, liquification, and caramelization of the sugar heaps as the light bulb sank into the burning, liquid pile and became more and more insulated, burned hotter and brighter and finally exploded (once

exploded another similar sculpture was set up close by creating a honeycomb archipelago of violently failed light bulbs). The experience of this piece (and the implied danger) situated the viewer in their bodies.

The work in part performed as allegory for colonial occupation (or for any force/domination) but also functioned (and more interestingly, for me) as a way to expand the 'experience' of a work beyond its modest physical scale into a space and into the bodies of the viewers.

The scent of the cooking/burning sugar evolved from pleasant to omnipresent to choking and nauseating over time. Looking at the work 'burned' traces on the viewer's retina, to look directly at the piece for any length of time would cause the viewer's eyes to hurt (once in the presence of the work it was difficult not to observe the bulb burning and burrowing its way into the mounds of sugar, thus almost ensuring some pain/pleasure relationship to occur). The exploding light bulbs added an element of (implied) danger to the already nauseatingly sweet, painfully pleasurable experience of the work. The 'danger' of exploding shards of glass made the viewer aware of the limits of his or her body, spatially as well as in terms of its fallibility. Through the introduction of scent, (extreme/actual) light, and implied danger, I believe this work cut across the notion of simulation and into the realm of the real, ideology/language/symbol/signification exists outside of the realm of the body - as bodies, we are close to being the same in that we share a sense of the limits and vulnerabilities of our bodies.

'Cosmopolitan', was a big word for a seven year old (I possessed more than my fair share of 'big words' at that age thanks to my mother's insistence on her children's language skills).

The word had become part of the new nation's branding. Apart from being the birthplace of calypso, steel pan and limbo, we were instructed (in the way that states do instruct) that we had this too, to be proud about. The island was cosmopolitan (which sounded close enough

to metropolitan to carry with it a notion of development/advancement) and the truth is that it may well have been one of the few places that so many cultures met and interacted peacefully. What the marketing left out was that this circumstance was in no way the result of a choice to settle made by (the majority of) those that now inhabit the island. The mercantile class (largely made up of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants) and the colonists class (French, Spanish and British), a distinct minority, would have settled the island willingly, the islands Portuguese migrants were the first wave of indentured labourers, but there were Portuguese merchants as well - one can argue that they too had some choice in migrating to the West Indies. The Indians and Africans were brought to the island through a combination of trickery and force.

The island counts among its citizenry: Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Anglicans, Protestants and other Christian religious sects, the only major world religion without a presence on the was Judaism. Still the island managed to represent Judaism by adopting as the insignia of the national police force a humming bird floating at the centre of the Star of David, white against a blue field/ground. Undoubtedly the island was a melting pot of world people and culture, and with no major sectarian clashes between Muslims and Hindus or Christians – between Catholics and Anglicans or other protestant groups, it seemed as though the island was indeed a paradise in which these groups, embroiled in conflict elsewhere in the world, could live together in peace, “every creed and race find an equal place” as the national anthem declares - the little island as paradise and cosmopolitan, yes.

It may have not just been the cosmopolitan (/metropolitan) idea, but the totality of the national branding exercise that projected a shimmering idea of harmony – which was of course an ideal, and a myth. Multiculturalism (like many other serious issues in the west indies) once reduced to a slogan and a marketing tool on the one hand, appeals to the

primary school student needing to behave properly, the slogan functioning as ideology hails/interpolates the citizen/subject to act the role of the 'cosmopolitan' (Althusser). In this way the concept of the *cosmopolitan* is used coercively as the reality of multiculturalism – which requires work – is not given the attention it requires.

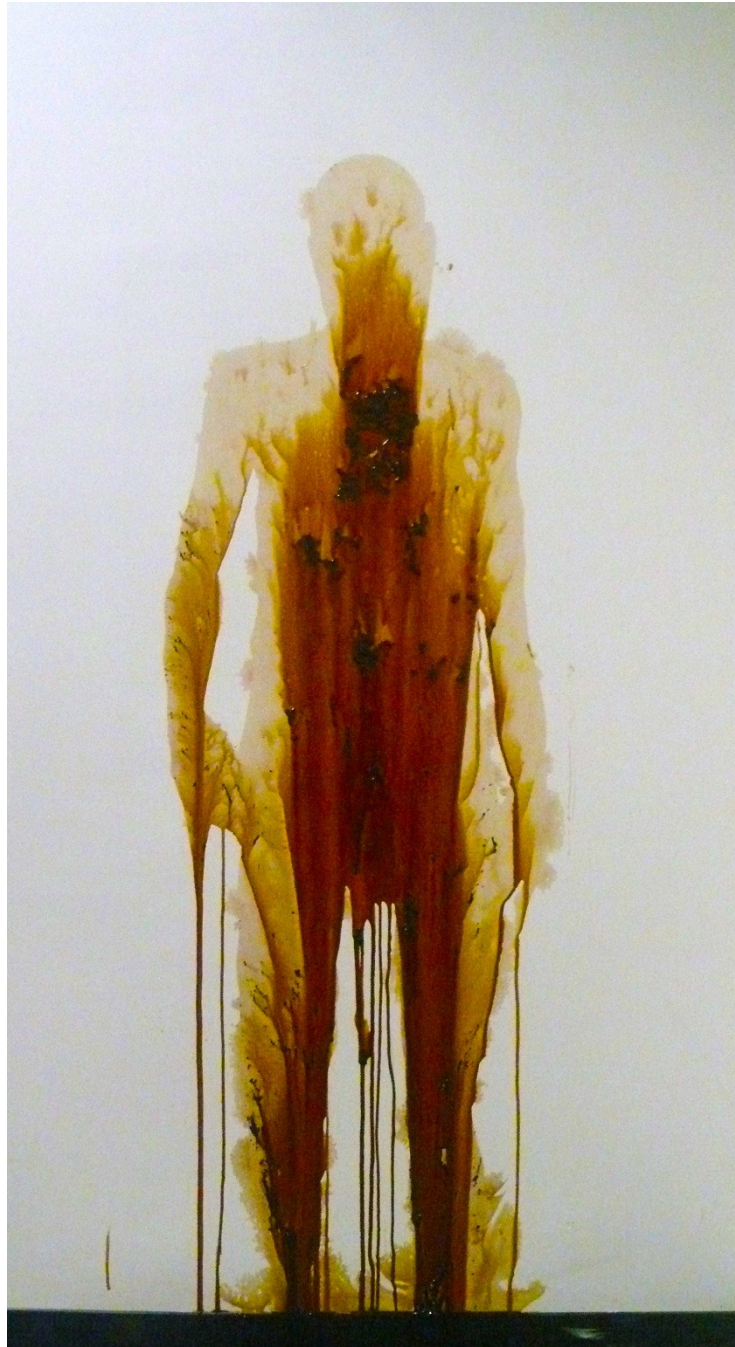
By 'virtue' of having African and Indian heritage, here in the Caribbean I can claim both histories within a body too small to bare the wounds, those of slavery and those of indenture. With these hurts come the balm of Spanish heredity and a French surname - these carry no boon, no lands, no wealth. Rather, they are tokens of another kind of hurt, one that my flesh cannot feel. Medals won by women (related to me) abused (somehow), lost in the thicket of time, the glint of those trophies in my father's fair skin and grey green eyes (he remembers his hair was 'softer' before puberty).

On the (post-colonial) island identity is eviscerated and then it becomes inundated with the same, we look into our veins for a/our place in this world. We speak in terms of blood, Spanish blood, Indian blood, French Creole, and African. Does it make sense? To take notes anymore? To be burdened with the requirement for explanation, to measure ourselves, measure again in (up to) blood - two eighths this, half that? Attempting to keep track of a deep and expanding history of miscegenation?

Measurement is of particular importance to the inhabitants of these new world islands, these societies that were born into/out-of enlightenment ideas of science, society, class, industry and labour. To measure, or more precisely, to measure up/down or measure against is an obsessive preoccupation for small islanders. So it is no surprise that ethnic purity/impurity would be subject to a system of measure.

The politics of the bi-racial/multi-racial Caribbean citizen compounds contemporary complexities upon a region that has not yet been able to take proper stock of less recent

social and political phenomenon. Polyethnicity in my view (and in my experience,) creates a unique cultural observer/satellite figure, one that may always participate but never truly be a *part of*, a *guest* of the culture(s) to which s/he belongs. At the same time multi-racialism validates (Caribbean) culture(s)/societies and becomes an emblem of the possibility for co-operation toward the idea of cohesive cosmopolitanism. This dialog between inside and outside, centre and periphery informs my view of the way the Caribbean exists culturally and politically in a global context.



4 the missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled (2011),
caramelized brown sugar on wall

Works like *making water for monsters* (2011), *fancy Toussaint* (2010) and *the missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled* (2011) emphasize these fractured positions by taking on multiple, nuanced and open meanings. Affirming established thought on the

Caribbean and their detractors with equal enthusiasm, and then introducing the many steps between those poles to the conversation until a conceptual web of contradictions that begin to resemble the complexity of the contemporary Caribbean space as an experimental settlement begins to emerge. The role of Man and Woman, of *badman* and victim, state and citizen, indo creole and afro creole, laborer, industrialist, public servant, the living and the dead (as in deities that die and are resurrected/reincarnated) overlap and exchange agency, authority and complicate each other in 'symbols' and forms and actions.

In the moment of the collapse of the heroic Afro-creole narrative (of the nineteenth century) to the pressures of inadequate social and financial resources (jeopardizing the harmonious cosmopolitan/Caribbean ideal), the deterioration of trade compacts with former colonial actors along with capital and human flight in response to weak economies and political instability (during the period of self-governance). Where the naive idealism of *Independence* and the backward looking *Emancipation/Arrival* festival narratives begin to fade, the region rediscovers itself in pre- Independence resistance and the erosion of notions of Nation into tribes and new tribes into multiculturalism in less cohesive forms than those envisioned by the 'father(s) of the Nation(s)' in the 1960's.

It is in this instant that the silhouetted figures that appear in *making water for monsters* (2011), *fancy Toussaint* (2010) and *the missing the murdered the maimed and the manhandled* (2011) exist, ambiguous, their direction undetermined/shifting, free, obscure, and opaque, inviting/involving race, gender, age, nationality, class, and lifestyle by refusing all of those indicators. A figure that appears to present itself as 'blank' - due to the lack of the normal signs that identify it – assumes the same problematic station of the 'everyman' as the 'body' works do, they attempt to make the same point, in a particularized way.

Where the works that evoke the body declare (inclusively) 'we are the same' these works declare (defiantly) 'we *will be* the same' that the future of mankind is inevitably polyethnic.

The figures have the potential to be both specific and universal; they speak to the shudder of life in the Caribbean, but acknowledge that struggle is not local alone, that humanity is shared and that our bodies are the same - they hold on to us and then they fail.



Mercury

The anxiety of place/no(n)-place, Flight, Homelessness and Diaspora

Mercury is the most volatile of the principles, and generally is extracted via the process of distillation (being the 'Spirit' of the matter) (magicalpath).

I have always been intrigued by Duchamp's valise, the idea that an artist's major works could be made to fit into a suitcase, ready for travel, for airport and train terminals became important in one decision to work to a particular scale (on manageable, less bulky, less heavy supports like paper) not as a style, but as a response to the transitory requirement for contemporary works in the Anglophone Caribbean (or from any art periphery). A concern I share (or perhaps inherited is the more honest word) from artist Christopher Cozier. I recall Cozier, while speaking to me about his work *Tropical Night*, a collection/selection of drawings on paper (22.9 x 17.8) numbering 189 when installed at TATE Liverpool (Afro Modern 2010), perhaps in the context of that show, in describing the wall space that the work will occupy, and other details of his installation and then off-handedly mentioning that the entire display could be made to fit in a shoe box.

The idea that transportation/portability of the work – from the peripheries to the centre(s) became as much of a concern in the work as the formal elements of the work, meant that for the periphery - portability became form.

Chris is saying: "If you just take this"--he picks up the stack of paper, holds it in the air for a moment, puts it back on the table with a gentle thud; it has weight, it casts a shadow—"if you just take that as an object, what it says is, all of these thoughts are in there.

"There is no end in sight. (Laughlin).

If portability from the periphery is formal, then can it be read as content too? I use scale in my work to create situations of intimacy, but there are more pragmatic concerns at work as well. There are also conceptual concerns about place and size being played out.

Cozier's trick, of making the small big, of condensing the work, its scale, its ideas – to be exploded at its destination made practical and conceptual sense to me. It is an insurgent strategy; it acknowledges the lack of resources/institutional supports at the margins of the art world while affirming the artist's ability to participate/infiltrate/perform.

The strategy insists that the work itself (not the ideas) must be manageable and discreet, able to withstand the check-in gate, be dismantled and reconstructed, reconfigured in order to be realized, this method acts as a metaphor for the artist and the Caribbean. The art world (always away) that hardly exists at 'home', the artist, likewise does not exist at home, the *person* becomes reconfigured at the check-in counter.

V.S Naipaul (The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies – British, French and Dutch in the West Indies and South America (1962)), Antonio Rojo (The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective) along with other West Indian/Caribbean thinkers and writers repeatedly expressed uncertainty about what the Caribbean is. I take that insecurity to question the idea of the Caribbean entirely.

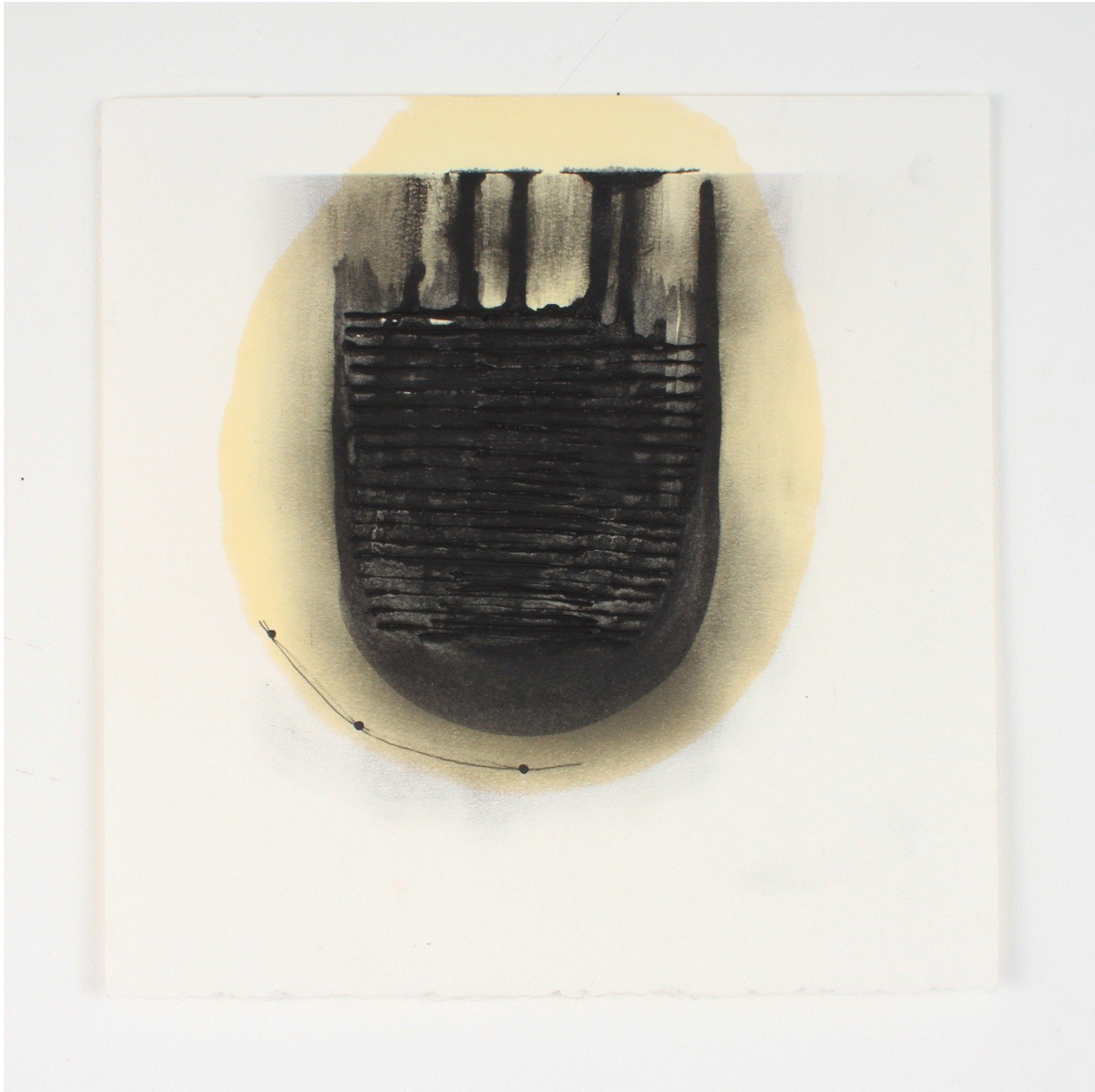
The Caribbean can be said to be a construction of/for European desire, whether to satiate an appetite for profit and territory/empire in the era of colonial/imperial occupation or as an exotic location for adventure/misadventure (Thompson). Contemporarily it is, in large part, a place defined by slogans, marketing campaigns and public relation strategies (in place of actual ideology, there is marketing) directed at Europe and North America. With the

exception of Trinidad, which has an oil industry, the Caribbean depends heavily on tourism and agriculture industries to sustain their economies.

What hold does this imaginary place have on those that actually live there? This is constantly in question. No one can claim fealty to 'ancestral lands' for instance, nor can anyone claim that the lure of abounding opportunity calls/keeps/demands their presence. The post-independence 'branding' campaign in Trinidad (and other territories in the Caribbean) intended to socialize/nationalize its citizens, though crude and politically expedient was quite successful. Every Trinidadian has some idea of what s/he is by virtue of being born on the island, behaviours that were permitted, expected – and all of this fed into the image being presented to the wider world, specifically Europe and North America, the image of the cosmopolitan island of harmony, energy, and the accommodating passive other – the exotic.

The trouble is that the Trinidadian citizen/subject is as much that within the sovereign territory of Trinidad as s/he is in London, New York, Toronto or Miami and sees no distinction: none exists really. Caribbean people are extremely migratory, so terms like diaspora apply. I question the reality of the Caribbean as a place, as a site where a kind of civilization/culture has taken root. There have been strong 'back to Africa' and 'back to India' sentiments (and movements) in the short post-independence history of the islands. It is not an odd thing for the children of the Chinese, Syrian or Lebanese who settle in the islands to seek spouses from their nation of origin.

The question for me is; whose imagination *sustains* the Caribbean? Is it the European imagination of the colony/playground (no doubt responsible for its formation) or the



5 (from) gathering instruments (2012), graphite and linseed oil on paper (11in x 11in)

imaginings of those who have been socialized by slogans, but still bear deep resentment toward the history and circumstances that have borne them to this reality, and remain uninvested in the project of the island – evidenced by the high levels in the Caribbean of the phenomenon known as ‘brain drain’ and of emigration on the whole. In either case the reality of the fiction is encroaching on the territory of the imaginary site, the slogans are failing and the cultural success of the Caribbean can no longer support the social and political failures in the none-place.

It is not difficult to see why attachment to the site or the physical space that define a Caribbean nation can be called into question when the history of the site and how the people that live there came to be there is considered.

There is no idea or history with the strength to tether a person to the site, the site itself (like the art strategy) is portable. The Caribbean is wherever its people are. There are Trinidad style carnivals wherever concentrations of West Indian expats settle in major metropolitan cities.

There is an absurdity to the history of the islands and the presence/coexistence of its citizenry - when that thinly veiled absurdity feeds the reality of the conditions/power relations in the islands (socially and politically) one way a people can, and do cope, is through fantasy, invention and escape. When reality is too cruel and justice for the wrongs suffered by an entire race (or two), that continue to define/determine their lives is never a topic of conversation – escapism becomes a sanctuary for their hopes ambition and energies. This is what Trinidadian carnival was and in many ways remains. This is also, one of the conceptual threads behind the work *gathering instruments* (2011) [5].

In this work I re-join a mythology crafted (and still being developed) as an alternative version of history, crediting magical/alchemical processes for adding dimension to and expanding the world, thereby creating an allegory for the extension of the social, cultural and political space throughout history. *Gathering instruments* consists of thirteen drawings that purport to be (diagrams) 'fragments' or 'remembrances' of a device and a process that would allow a (seafaring) voyager to approach the horizon as a destination, once there items/instruments (imaged in the drawings) would be assembled to enact a process of

calling/summoning/joining of one world to another – thus improving/adding dimension to the world, making it more spherical, more perfect.

Implicit in the project of ‘finding a new world’ is dissatisfaction with the current space. This dissatisfaction profound enough to prompt the abandonment of the world that exists for a world that is as yet unknown, the despair in the work lies in the realization that – though, for billions of people a new accommodation is desperately sought – one in which fairness/some balance can be restored to the world, magic does not exist – and the new world is a fantasy, but like the horizon, remains a destination. Justice is just on the horizon.



6 making water for monsters, graphite, linseed oil, spray paint and glitter on paper (36.5in x 63.5in)

Nikolai Mahesh Noel Thesis Show 2012

Title of show: -2012

List of works:

(wall works from left to right) -

the sweet of my brown (Ouditt)Ouditt, Steve. "Creole In-Site." *Annotations* 4 (1998): 40.

2012

(fabric and brown sugar on shelf)

Yoke

2012

(wood, rope, metal screws/nails, earth/soil mounted on wall)

A trace for Mercury

2012

(graphite powder, linseed oil, orange highlighter marker on incised paper)

Charles' trench

2012

(earth/soil, metal nails and fabric)

(floor works) -

member

2012

(salt, water, cast brown sugar)

-2012

2012

(earth/soil, water, cast brown sugar)

Some kind of vessel

(2011-) 2012

(cast brown sugar)

Who will love

2012

(low tack adhesive and the dirt the viewer/visitor walk in/around with)

Notes on -2012

In -2012 I have come back to titling works.

In this work I have found a way through the larger political/historical narratives and structures that concerned and dominated my work in the past (in a crude way) to a simpler, sadder and more sensitive place. I arrived there through a sustained investigation of my motives – for making (art)work – for making a kind of work that identified and criticized power – for its interest in history – the kind of history I referenced and so on. Finally, what does that have to do with me?

It is a simple thing to get lost in the cloud of the historic injustices perpetrated in the formation of the New World – they stretch backward and forward – there effects are felt throughout the African, European and Asian diaspora. The Caribbean is a site for every crime, presented as a matter of fact – it is history, the statute of limitation for theft, rape, murder, genocide (and so on and so on) has elapsed/expired, and the profits from these crimes are secure in purses and pockets lined by new constitutions, bargains struck and in the language in new and newer history books that teach victims to look only at one another, not for solace, but for fear and competition – the colonial extraction gambit.

What does this have to do with me? Personally?

It was important, I think, for me to be away from [home] the Caribbean in order to, or allow myself to be honest about my motivations, and have that transform my work. At home a popular strategy for engaging '*our past*' is to intellectualize the content of the work before the work is even made, I have done this several times, this is a move, like hiding the

wounds, proving to the world that you are smart – that creoles are capable of forming complex ideas too. Take some of the sting away, for others and for yourself. It is like chanting “black is beautiful” when you have been socialized your entire life to see your blackness/brownness as ugly, and crippling in less cosmetic ways. But it is OUR PAST and our bodies have not healed from the wounds – my reaction to history is far more visceral than an encyclopedia article on colonial history in the Caribbean can contain/convey. I am not an indentured laborer from India, nor can my position/contemporary status be understood through many conversations about slavery. For me history has a smell, it has a taste, I feel it in my arms like a weight – it chokes and disorients me when I think of the many ways I have been touched (harshly) by it – how much of it I have to willfully ignore in order to make it through a day. It is a paralytic toxin.

I am concerned with politics and history, and this is my response, finally, because the structure of the world I was born into makes me poor. It makes my mother poor, it made my grandmother live out her entire life poor and then it finally killed her. This is not simply a question of economy or of class, though those questions are of obvious concern. Nor will I accept that this is the way the world is, because more than any other place in the world, the Caribbean is definitely the way the ‘world’ has been *made*. Rather, this is a question about power and circumstance, the way that power, exercised as it is, impacts the bodies of its subjects. The way it excludes, marginalizes and discards human lives. I try to find a voice so that I can mourn (properly) the living, and the lives of those who have passed. We all deserve to be treated so much better.

My work is about making a place for all the hurts that history has given *us* to gather, a place for them to be quiet, and finally find some rest.

further notes –

materials list for 2010 - 2012

Earth/soil, sugar, salt, incandescent light bulbs, cumin/jeera, paper, linseed oil, graphite powder, acrylic paint, wood, cutlass, fabric, ink, hot plate, raw pigment, rope, spray paint, glitter, plastic, rust, metal screws, metal nails.

-2012 is a show about poetry, mortality, despair, grief, the body, absence, transcendence, shame, history and most of all honesty. It required great discipline and belief on my part to edit the show so that those themes could be uncluttered, unconfused and uncontested by other works that belong to other mechanisms for coping with brown skin in the New World.

member(2012)



In *member* I identify and isolated a particular genetic trait passed on, on my mother's side of my family (Indo-Trinidadian). I have seen it in her hand and in the hands of her mother's sisters, in the hands of my siblings in my hands and in the hands of my son Shea.

The existence of this trait became another way for me to measure history and to contemplate mortality. To consider that a genetic trait sheared and passed down through a bloodline can have a lifespan of its own. I can imagine it with a consciousness of its own, a slower mind, wiser, loftier, assured – unafraid.

My father's family's genetic gift is an early onset of grey hair, (thanks Daddy), through my parents' marriage, these traits are in a relationship as well, and as I have a family, so will they, and they will survive my body.

They will pass on too – eventually.

The title 'member' references the body, the isolated/severed finger is a body's member – the reason and means of that isolation is unclear. What I am asking the viewer to notice is the way the finger is formed, how it bends. What I am looking at is my mother's finger, my grandmothers' finger.

I looked at my grandmothers' hands for a long time as a child and in making this piece I considered this visible genetic trait (more than my greying hair) had the potential to frustrate history and subjectivity. My hands are so similar in shape to my grandmothers' hands, I can imagine a moment in the not too distant future staring down on my hands, and seeing hers. It would be like a visitation, an inhabitation – it may cause a schism in the way I process my identity. It would be like seeing a ghost, or not like that at all.

- Salt leeches moisture from cast sugar accelerating the decomposition process

*the sweet of my brown (Ouditt)*Ouditt, Steve. "Creole In-Site." *Annotations 4* (1998): 40.(2012)



Is a work that took courage for me to see/make. I have been interested in finding alternative ways of quoting the body in my work. I have previously shown this work along with 'member' when what I had been interested in all along was the bodily nature of the stain left behind when the cast sugar form came into contact with the fabric.

If the show -2012 has anything to do with presence/absence (missing), in my mind this work does it the best. It is a vaulted sadness. I am very proud to have finally, in the installation of this show, seen this work and for having the courage to show it unaccompanied.

It is an elegantly displayed soiled cloth with a bloodlike – shitlike – sweatlike – discharge fused, still glistening as if wet, as if still fresh, into its fibers and weaves. Presented as a (low) relic (Christ sweating beads of blood as he prays to his father in heaven, pleading not to be abandoned), a remnant and a trace, something so simple it has to be important, and it is.

The excretion is not blood, or shit, or dirt from a wet grimy forehead after a day in the dust and sun but brown sugar. Brown sugar cooked till it is no longer sweet but has become unpleasant, dark and bitter. If sugar can lose its sweetness like salt could lose its savor, then the New Testament 'salt of the earth' material metaphor could be re-written as (a trick I picked up from Ouditt here) 'sugar of the earth', then Matthew (I always listen to Matthew when he speaks) 5:13 (KJV)re-addressed to those who have worked sugar could read:

Ye are the sugar of the earth: but if the sugar have lost his sweetness,
wherewith shall it be sweetened? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to
be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

This biblical passage then becomes allegory for pre/post/neo-colonial Caribbean history.

Rest assured, the crimes in the Caribbean history are indeed biblical.

What is the soiled cloth then? Is it the relic? Is it a token of sacrifice – of martyrdom (in a Christian sense or in an Islamic sense)? Is it a record of effort (residue of labor) or can it speak in some way of/to shame, abandonment, despair and hopelessness as well? What can be said of a simple scrap of cloth, in the scenario I present (shit, blood, sweat, dirt - sugar)

that is used and discarded – to be set considerately upon a shelf, to be contemplated. What can be said? What do we think?

The title of the work quotes a section title of the text *Creole In-Site* by Trinidadian artist (of Indian decent) Steve Ouditt.

A trace for mercury (2012)



Is the only reference to my graphite drawings, the use of alchemy as allegory in discussing Caribbean history, ethnicity and of migration, flight and ‘radical’ escapism. The reason I chose to include this piece is that these traces (stencils) retain the ‘body’ and gesture of more ‘refined’ works while calling to those works, absent in the space.

This work is a trace, and becomes abandoned too.

A trace for mercury is light, delicate and vulnerable; the hint of a face in profile emerges from the smeared, scraped on dark material which was forced through the baroque incisions made into the thin paper. There is an oil stain, seeping from the black material. The hint of a profile is obscured to the mouth or just below the nose by this black stuff, drowning, or just held (in place) – there is no evidence of distress – the object is beautiful,

tender and fragile (unframed and exposed). There is just a hint of color, orange, the old kind.

Yoke (2012)



This work is the result of an investigation/assignment I gave myself. I wanted to use field materials to describe the bodies and work of the field. To ask these materials to do what my drawings could do, and something more, in this way I still consider these works to be drawings.

In this investigation I made six works using weather treated wood, earth/soil, metal screws, sugar and rope. I was in search of an 'elegant' solution to a most ugly problem/question.

Like much of the work in this show, yoke is quite fragile. The shims holding it together are worked till brittle and prone to snap, the joints are held together by soil/earth and subjected to different stresses. In a way the object was abused into formation,.

I wanted to consider indenture in Trinidad, the experience of being Indo-Trinidadian, the relationship with soil/earth, labor and pain. I thought that ones proximity to soil/earth is an indicator of class/ station, how the soil around them behaves, how well-mannered it is, if it

threatens to fall on – or out from beneath a house, the way it creeps toward or away in those situations, the smell of it, sharp when it rains, the ruin of it all. Legs with ocher clay caked to the shins.

Some kind of vessel (2012)



The cutlass is an object I have thought of as ‘available’ – more than any other tool the cutlass has marked the history and culture of Trinidad. It was a tool used to explore the island by European explorers/colonists and to tame and maintain the terrain thereafter. It was used on the sugar plantations by enslaved Africans and indentured Indians. It remains a common tool for gardening and maintenance by the average Trinidadian, as well as a instrument of violence.

Some kind of vessel is the blade of a cutlass cast in sugar. The instrument of cultivating/reaping the sugar crop is formed by the sweet product of that labor. When laid on the floor the shape of the blade recalls the profile a ‘kind of vessel’ – a boat, it resembles a smile/grin.

As some kind of vessel slowly softens and melts into the floor the knife plays into the myth of Excalibur as well – the irretrievable blade – like history, it is present; it can be seen, studied and revisited, but the blade can never operate as a blade again. The cutlass, in this sense is made unavailable.

-2012 (2012)



I once had a reoccurring dream in which during the course of the dream I would spit/cough my teeth out into the palm of my right hand. Once I related the dream to my mother and subsequently my grandmother I was informed that in a dream ‘rotten teeth or falling teeth mean dead (death)’. No one died, and I no longer have that dream, but due to that experience I became sensitive to the presence of teeth outside of the body (/mouth) as holding the potential to evoke the uncanny and the corporal.

I have used teeth in my work in order to speak about race, class, fear, styling and intimidation, to play on or play up stereotypes and prejudices. In this case teeth became as my grandmother said – death.

For this work I cast the teeth of my lower jaw in sugar, so that it would melt and degrade over time, and set the object on a (moist) mound of soil/earth. The mound was the remains of a collapsed 5ft earthen plinth. As the cast sugar teeth degraded it took on a serpentine quality while the the sugar that was being shed from the casting resulted in a bloodlike stain on the earth.

This work was, more than any other in the exhibit, was a contemplation of mortality and death, and as the teeth degraded, or rather lived out its life, becoming snake-like and slug-like - glistening and inhuman. As this is happening the mound of earth is drying out and becoming pale, ashy and distant. These transformations identify our own mortality – death as the (final) other.



7 Charles' trench (2012), soil/earth on fabric

Nikolai Mahesh Noel

STATEMENT

My practice has as its centre a number of concerns and questions about and around the history and development of the Caribbean (and its peoples), the region to which I 'belong', and the ways in which observations from this enquiry inform the way I see contemporary culture.

Through the use of the silhouetted figure I attempt to engage and describe something of the experience of the multi-ethnic creole in the multicultural, polyethnic, multilingual Caribbean. The image projected onto the Caribbean, and the one that is reflected back to the world is one of cultural and ethnic harmony. An archipelago basking in the happy outcome of the brutality of colonial institutions and enterprise, a paradise bequeathed to the sons and daughters of slaves, indentured labourers, plantation owners and expatriated merchants. While much of the Caribbean buys into and propagates this myth (it is in their interest to do so) the reality of the ethnic/cultural/political landscape competes with the physical landscapes of the islands both in their beauty and their hidden or apparent dangers. The silhouette in my drawings possesses the ability to *shift*, to face the viewer and then turn away or vice versa. The *shiftiness* describes the way the multi-ethnic creole is viewed within the Caribbean, there is no ethnic allegiance written in her/his blood in regions where contests for power still find their frontlines along ethnic fault-lines. At the same time multi-ethnicity is celebrated at the level of 'Nation' as an emblem of possibility. In this way the shift in the drawings point to the inside/outside-ness embodied by the multi-ethnic creole in the more ethnically diverse Caribbean territories, this individual is allowed to participate but not to be a part of, perpetually a guest of the culture(s) to which s/he belongs.

The material investigations and choices intimate to these works allude to the personal and political histories I attempt to engage. Be it soil displaced by coffins in cemeteries used in *Diable I* and *Charles' trench*, or sugar used to replicate the blade of the instrument of reaping on the sugar plantations (*Sugar Cutlass*), for the tending of property/surroundings, as well as a weapon used to carry out violent attacks against neighbours, family members and lovers. *Member*, also cast in sugar, isolates a particular genetic trait that runs in my family, this becomes another way for me to consider survival, mortality and history, through the 'lifespan' of these (genetic/identity) traits within a family/bloodline.

As I seek different ways of looking at and measuring history through this work, what is of particular interest to me is the way that political, historical, and personal abjection acts upon a body. As well as to acknowledge the dignity and elegance of those who suffer the effects of the lives history has written them into.

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