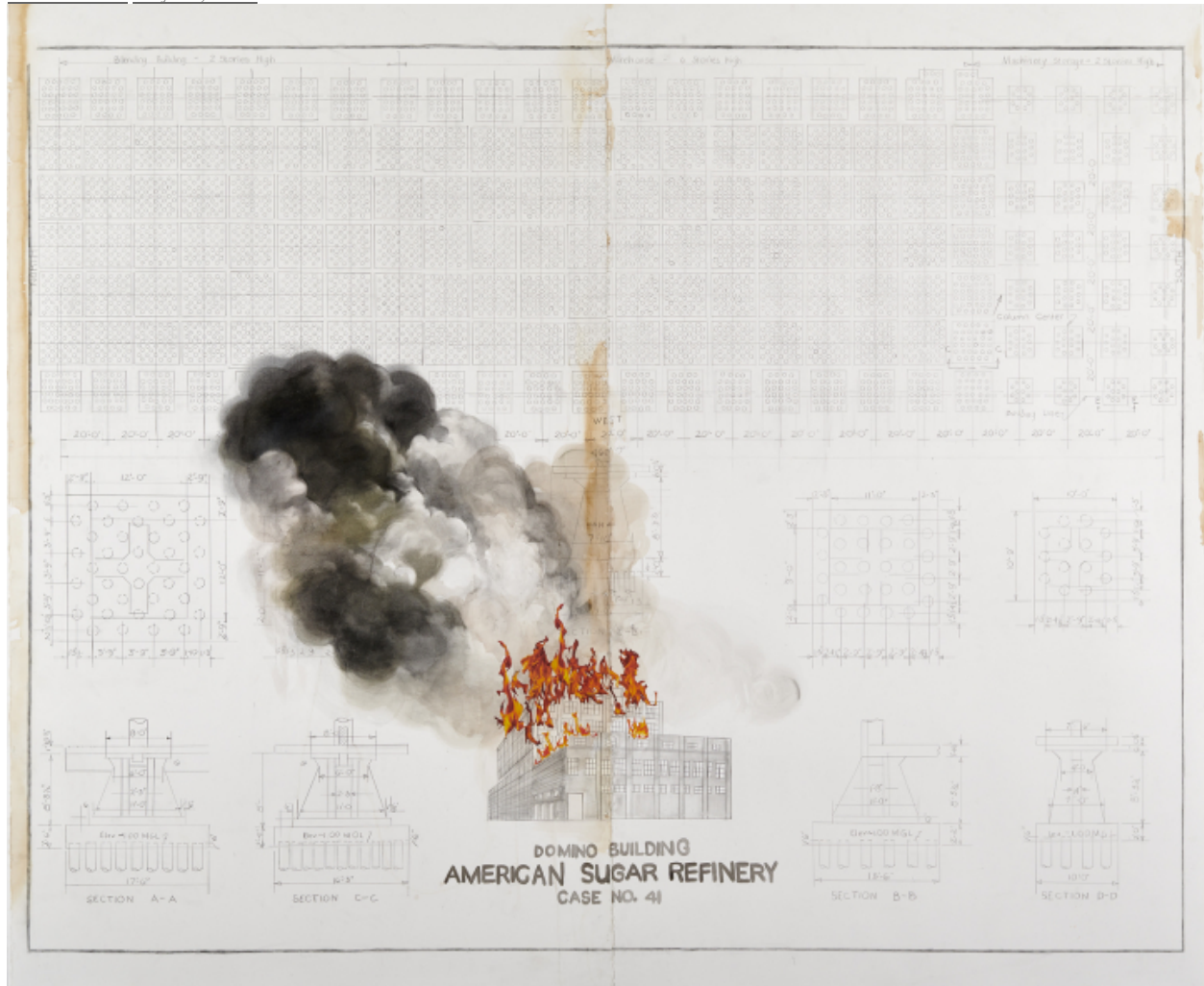


HYPERALLERGIC

A Caribbean Present Steeped in a Colonial Past

In *Coffee, Rhum, Sugar & Gold: A Postcolonial Paradox*, ten artists explore the implications of colonialism's violent legacy.

Zoe Samudzi July 29, 2019



Firelei Báez, "Love that does not choose you (Collapse the rooms and structures that depend on you to hold them)" (2018), Gouache on paper (Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta, Chicago) (all images by John Wilson White of Studio Picasso for the Museum of the African Diaspora)

SAN FRANCISCO — *Coffee, Rhum, Sugar & Gold: A Postcolonial Paradox* seeks to understand the enduring legacy of European colonialism in the Caribbean through the work of ten contemporary artists. The paradox named in the show's title speaks to the commonality and cultural ubiquity of these materials — the drivers of colonial slave economies in the Caribbean — and how their assimilation into contemporary society has enabled a forgetting of their

primacy as cash crops of European coloniality. A further paradox lies in the fact that many of the Caribbean nation-states that have emerged from these former plantation economies presently exist as raw exporters of fruits, extracted mining products, natural gases, and fertilizers, and are also consumer markets for the finished manufactured and agricultural products sold back to them through trade agreements and manipulated global markets. These resource-rich states, to varying degrees, are trapped in political and economic relationships with their former colonizers in order to participate in the international financial marketplace; it is within this context that Dexter Wimberly and Larry Ossei-Mensah curate this show, put on at the Museum of the African Diaspora.



Ebony G. Patterson, “A View In” (2015), Mixed media jacquard woven tapestry with hand-cut elements (Courtesy Jenkins Johnson Collection, San Francisco, California)

The emergent themes of the show can be broadly cast into three categories (though none of the artists fit singularly into any one): corporeality (interpretations of politics around the body), place (examinations of place, space, and time), and religion and spirituality. The most extravagant figurations of the body are Ebony G. Patterson’s paired pieces “A View Out” and “A View In” (both 2015). Black embodiment in colonial contexts are so often portrayed with explicit relation to labor and servitude, and so her expressions of opulence offer a critical foil to what can become a flattening and single-dimensionality in such portrayals. Her

stunningly detailed “neo-baroque” stylings draw from Old Mastery and remind us that baroque music and art flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries, the peak of the transatlantic slave trade. Her work gestures to an archival-historical correction, a reminder that European excesses and cultural advancements of the time were only made possible by chattel enslavement.



Phillip Thomas, "Pimper's paradise, the Terra Nova nights edition" (2018), Mixed media on canvas (Courtesy of artist and RJD Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York)



Phillip Thomas, "Pimper's paradise, the Terra Nova nights edition" (2018) (detail), Mixed media on canvas (Courtesy of artist and RJD Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York)

Phillip Thomas's own evocation of grandiose Old Mastery (particularly, and fittingly, from France) seems to juxtapose a seemingly white-aspiring post-colonial Black bourgeoisie against a literal wallpapered backdrop of Black suffering, with silhouetted detailings of white

militarism and hanging Black bodies alongside depictions of white leisure. It is a “present[ation] of the audience to themselves,” per the wall text hanging beside “Pimper’s paradise, the Terra Nova nights edition” (2018). It seems to visually articulate the adage that the revolution will inevitably eat its children, or here, the pessimistic reality that post-colonial leaders will swear an oath of fealty to power and capitalistic excess before their people’s wellbeing.



Didier William, “Lonbraj mwen se kouwon mwen 1 – 3” (2019), Collage, acrylic, and wood carving on panel (Courtesy of the artist)

Occupying the liminal space between body politics and religiosity in his depiction of the body as a vessel for a kind of spiritual warfare is Didier William’s creation of fluid, flowing figures despite the rigid immovability of the wood from which they are carved. It

serves as an analogy for the arduous labor of Black reimagining in the fight against a white hegemony as he, in his own words, is “compelled by a body that’s tougher to consume.” His work is created from familial oral traditions and mythologies and rituals from Haitian Vodou, all in service of a queered imaginary that subverts the colonial gaze.



Lucia Hierro, *Aesthetics y Politics* (2019), Site-Specific Mural (Courtesy of the artist)

It feels almost impossible to consider Lucia Hierro’s “Embajador” (2017) without comparison to Andy Warhol’s pop aestheticization and elevation of everyday items like the Campbell’s Soup can to cultural relic. Unlike Warhol, though, Hierro seeks to comment on personal consumption within broader

economic structures — this piece, from her larger series *Mercado*, makes sculptures of items accessible to working-class people in the United States and the Caribbean to force new

contextualizations of these objects and their existence within and between cultures. “Embajador,” notably, translates to “ambassador.”



Andrea Chung, “Proverbs 12:22” (2019), Sugar, beads, rice, herbs, spices, and paper, Site-Specific Installation (Courtesy of the artist)

Contrasting Hierro’s portrayal of capitalist commodities as secular religio-cultural iconography is Andrea Chung’s creation of Christian Bibles using sugar, spices, and beads (notable colonial commodities) as her sculptural medium. She yields a space for relational examination. The accompanying wall text posits: “How can I talk about labor in relation to sugar? How can I talk about the physical things that happen to you based on the ingesting of sugar?”. The inclusion of beads significant to non-Christian Afro-diasporic practice feels like a notable tongue in cheek gesture, as does the readily available play on words between “the ingesting of sugar” and the (very often nonconsensual) consumption of colonizing Christian doctrine.



Leonardo Benzant, “The Tongue On The Blade: Serenade For Aponte And All Those Who Have Vision” (2017), Chickenwire, paper mache, fabric, sawdust, coffee, sand, string, clay, acrylic gel medium, monofulmatnet, and glass seed beads (Courtesy Clair Oliver Gallery, New York)

In the center of the top floor gallery space is Leonardo Benzant’s formidable sculptural work “The Tongue on the Blade: Serenade for Aponte and All Those Who Have Vision” (2017), a transatlantic diasporan piece acknowledging both “ties [to] and disjunction from an ancestral past.” Parts of the seed-bead threading felt distinctly African (with color combinations seen in Ndebele or Maasai beading), and other parts felt Afro-Caribbean, with color combinations from *eleke* beads in Afro-diasporic practices in the Americas. It was a trans-diasporan acknowledgment befitting Benzant’s invocation of José Antonio Aponte, an Afro-Cuban military officer of Yoruba descent who organized one of Cuba’s most famous slave revolts, the Aponte

Rebellion, in 1812.



Lavar Munroe, “And the Dogs Went Silent: Gun Dog 1 – 3” (2017), Cardboard, deconstructed junkanoo costumes, found toys, found marbles, rubber gloves, PVC pipe, found shoes, string, spray foam, spray paint, wood, lollipop, feathers, latex house paint, and polyester resin (Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco and New York)



Installation view of *Coffee, Rhum, Sugar & Gold: A Postcolonial Paradox* at the Museum of the African Diaspora
Lavar Munroe, “Church in the Wild” (2019), Mixed media on canvas (Courtesy of the Artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco and New York)



Adjacent to Benzant’s sculpture is Lavar Munroe’s “Church in the Wild” (2019), a beautiful and eerie graffiti-like portrayal of three saintly Black girls enrobed in religious symbols and who seem to be emerging from a swamp. In addition to producing autobiographical work, Munroe describes also being informed by “critical investigation and theories surrounding mythology and literature,” made evident by the triadic *Gun Dogs* (2017) sculpture series that evokes the hellhound Cerberus; the hellmouth here, though, is the plantation space.



Firelei Báez, “Love that does not choose you (Collapse the rooms and structures that depend on you to hold them)” (2018) (detail), Gouache on paper (Courtesy of the artist and Kavi Gupta, Chicago)

Also in the consideration of space is Firelei Báez’s illustration of the architectural plan for the Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn, which bears a striking resemblance to the famous Brookes slave ship plan. Her illustration of the 1882 fire recalls the plant’s near-destruction as both historical record and anti-colonial catharsis. The Brooklyn refinery was the original refinery of the American Sugar Refinery Company, which had sugar and lumber investments in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other parts of the Caribbean. And in true neocolonial fashion, Domino Sugar Corporation was sold to Florida Crystals Corporation in 2001. Florida Crystals is a part of FLO-SUN, a sugar conglomerate run by the Fanjul brothers, owners of Fanjul Corp., a sugar dynasty whose familial origins trace back to cane sugar mills, refineries, and distilleries in 19th century Cuba. Like

many wealthy Cubans dispossessed by the 1959 communist revolution, the Fanjul family relocated to Florida.



Adler Guerrier, “Untitled (Place marked with an impulse, found to be held within the fold) iv” (2019), Ink, graphite, collage, acrylic, enamel paint and xerography on paper (Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery)

In *Coffee, Rhum, Sugar & Gold*, the work of Haiti-born Adler Guerrier reflects on the city of Miami as an “embodiment of realized (and unrealized) moments in American political and social history.” He utilizes urban environments in his consideration of the politics of place and space and multiplicity of meaning that spaces may occupy: Miami is both home to a sizeable and historically mistreated Haitian population, as well as wealthy Hispanic immigrants from Cuba that fled from the Castro regime.



Angel Otero, ““Slots’ Sl#1 (SCA03)” (2013), Fired Steel and glazed porcelain (Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul)

In the final consideration of space are Angel Otero’s veranda pieces, sculptural forms of steel and glazed porcelain. Verandas, of course, are both functionally decorative and protective architectural pieces, but in the botching of the Hurricane Maria disaster relief and in the midst of [#RickyRenuncia](#) protests on the island within a historical context of the American colonization of Puerto Rico, they can also represent a carceral containment.

The work contained within this show reminds us of the nonlinearity of colonial time: it debunks the liberal mythology of time’s equation with social progress and illustrates a present still steeped in a colonial past.



Ebony G. Patterson, “A View Out” (2015), Mixed media jacquard woven tapestry with hand-cut elements (Courtesy Jenkins Johnson Collection, San Francisco, California)

Coffee, Rhum, Sugar & Gold: A Postcolonial Paradox is on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora (685 Mission St (at 3rd), San Francisco, CA; ground floor of the St. Regis) through August 11. The exhibition was curated by Dexter Wimberly and Larry Ossei-Mensah.