



# Look Again: A Review of “Trade Windings” at the Museum of Contemporary Art

BY CHARLES VENKATESH YOUNG | AUGUST 6, 2024



Carrie Mae Weems, “Ebo Landing” from the “Sea Islands” series, 1992, gelatin silver prints and text panel. Three parts, each framed: 21” x 21”. Gift from The Howard and Donna Stone Collection/Photo: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

One of the first exercises in John Berger's widely-lauded "Ways of Seeing" proceeds as follows: Berger invites us to view a reproduction of van Gogh's effulgent "Wheatfield with Crows." Then, he commands us to turn the page, where the same painting can be seen with the following caption: "This is the last picture that van Gogh painted before he killed himself." Berger fluidly demonstrates that no matter what the visual content of the painting may be, it has been conquered by the text—the aesthetically pure has been rendered contingent. This effect is exploited to the maximum in "Trade Windings: De-Lineating the American Tropics" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which makes light of colonial exploitation in the American Tropics by disrupting some of that region's most idyllic symbols: the sublime forest and the calm, vast sea.

Carrie Mae Weems follows Berger's formula to a T in "Ebo Landing," a triptych in which both outer panels depict the wild landscape of Georgia's St. Simons Island, full of rugged palm trees and boggy terrain. Its central panel, however, colors these naturescapes with a haunting history: "One midnight... a ship bringing in a cargo of Ebo (Ibo) men landed at Dunbar Creek... the men refused to be sold into slavery; joining hands together they turned back toward the water... They all drowned." With those words, the landscape loses all innocence—the dark, stalky plants that inhabit it become pathetic effigies of every lost life. A similar mechanism underlies Noé Martínez's "Grammar of Absences." Martínez films a beach for twenty minutes, witnessing its usual goings-on: frolicking children, carefree bathers and the ocean's constant ebb and flow. Nonchalant as one of the beachgoers, a soft-spoken Francophone narrator, relays the unnameable horrors that visited the enslaved peoples who arrived at beaches much like this one during Mexico's colonial period. There's a profound tension here: it's hard to believe this peaceful ocean witnessed such events, perhaps because it seems to conceal the past as quickly as it conveys the present—viewers watch in real time as footprints on the shore are erased, assimilated into the ocean's Procrustean mold.



Xaviera Simmons, "On Sculpture #2," 2011, color photograph, 40" x 50". Restricted gift of Emerge, in memory of Andree Stone/Photo: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

If Martínez's film is trying to make a point concerning the relationship of colonial massacres with the idealized natural environment, Xaviera Simmons' "On Sculpture #2" does it significantly faster: Simmons has photographed the endless ocean but superimposes upon it—making sure to line up the horizon lines—a shot of swimsuited men and women diving off of a recreational ship. The image instantly recalls such slaughters as the Zong massacre, in which merchants threw more than 130 enslaved Africans overboard in order to claim an insurance payment. Simmons' message? You can't both have your cake and eat it. There can be no leisurely hopping into the ocean without memory of the death plunges taken centuries ago. And there can be no admiration of the ocean's stillness without knowledge of the equally still "railroad of human bones" (Amiri Baraka's phrase) laying at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.

You can expect all this and more from "Trade Windings," which goes on to litigate the exploitative history of such innocuous consumables as tea and coffee, among other things. This show is a profound triumph, not just because of what it aims to do—every year, there are too many shows to count that attempt to rebut colonial narratives—but because of what it does. It eschews the realm of ideas (where so many of these shows become trapped) for the realm of things, identifying genuine points of contention in which colonial legacies are being forgotten and complicating our perceptions of these concepts with stunning efficiency.

"Trade Windings: De-lineating the American Tropics" is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 East Chicago, through December 1.