

# t r a n s f o r m e r

## Notes on Float

“Water? What do you mean by that? I don’t understand it.” This is what a fish would say if it had a human mind. Please stop trying to understand *being*. You have already had significant glimpses of *being*, but the mind will always try to squeeze it into a little box and then put a label on it. It cannot be done. It cannot become an object of knowledge. In *being* subject and object merge into one. [emphasis added]

Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now*

It follows from what I have said thus far that, broadly speaking, contemporary curating aims to display some aspect of the individual and collective experience of what it is, or was, or might be, to be contemporary.

Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*

It is the fruit of many hours of conversation, many months of research, and many years of thought and experience. Still, I find myself ill-equipped to write about Float. This exhibition is like the works that comprise it, untethered. It escapes even (and especially) language.

Though it presents itself as an exhibition of Caribbean contemporary art- and it is, with all four artists and the curator living and working in the Caribbean- it sits very uncomfortably in that category. Unlike most exhibitions that carry the title “Caribbean...”, Float cannot be said to, and does not aspire to, represent the Caribbean region or any part thereof. Float is not about being from the Caribbean, it does not really seek to give an insight into Caribbean/Jamaican/Trinidadian culture, it does not respond to prevailing notions of those cultures. It is not for or against anything, it only shouts “Present!” when its name is called.

In a postcolonial world, that is unusual. We all feel the extent to which us vs them, black vs white, developing vs developed, margin vs centre informs contemporary ways of being, seeing and thinking. Much of the art produced in the Caribbean navigates the space within and between these binaries, focusing on matters of political identity. And the reason is clear, in a place like the Caribbean the image has particular debt.

Krista Thompson illustrates this in her book *An Eye for the Tropics*, which traces the impact of “tropicalisation” on image-making in the region. She writes: “Tropicalisation here describes the complex visual systems through which the islands were imaged for tourist consumption and the social and political implications of these representations on actual physical space on the islands and their inhabitants.”<sup>1</sup> In *Re-worlding a World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary*, art historian Erica James further points out that “the Caribbean has been envisioned externally as a place without Art: a view reflected and reinforced in the region's absence in increasingly global discourses of art history.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. Print. (p 5)

<sup>2</sup> Erica James, *Re-worlding a World: Caribbean Art in the Global Imaginary*. Dissertation, Duke University. Ann Arbor: UMI, 2009. (UMI Number: 3383513.)

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Being a “Caribbean artist” is often also proving you exist, followed by demanding the right to say what your existence is like.

The works in Float acknowledge the weight of this imposed otherness, and abandon it. Deborah Anzinger gives you tropical landscapes and Rodell Warner gives you beach and waves but they recall Tumblr, spray paint, music videos, the disorientation of contemporary existence, not sun-soaked vacation. Leasho Johnson gives you ceramics, neon orange, Japanese Kawaii aesthetics, sexual politics and a healthy serving of complicity. These curvy neon bodies are naked to your gaze, laid bare for prying eyes, but their arrest of your vision is both active and passive. They let you look and *make* you look.

These works cut loaded signifiers (bodies, landscapes, palettes) free of their native contexts and work them into imagined constellations. Their mother tongues are honed in communities both virtual and physical, their contexts are universal in their very specificity. It is true, these works are susceptible to careless reading (or writing), but they exchange safety for freedom.

Float is of the Caribbean. It speaks from a place off-centre, but it is not about being off-centre. It is not about positing new centres either, which is usually what happens when margins and centres get to reflecting on each other and themselves. It is far more about networks that undermine centres. It is oblivious to its own off-centred-ness, it does not know its place. It is irreverent, forgot itself.

Here, striking and curious objects (subjects?) are cut from the societies and environments in which they apparently function. Much as Marlon James’ photographs free their subjects from their un-lovely contexts and exhault them with the gaze of fashion photography, these floating objects claim an agency- a subjecthood- through a rejection of any anchor or assigned meaning.

This indexes the increasing extent to which life in (and of) the economic and cultural “periphery” escapes the easy binaries posited by the anti-colonial/anti-imperialist discourse of earlier generations. These are not exotic (or oppressed, or resistant) objects from some other place and time. They are simply present, consuming the same diet of visual language, vomiting its contents to form the same one-of-a-kind stew. This is no surprise, as life everywhere is experiencing this topsy-turvy. The financial crisis of the last few years, the Arab Spring, the Russia-Ukraine crisis; tectonic plates are shifting the world over, brotherhoods are crumbling, and bedfellows grow more unlikely.

As Terry Smith has said of contemporary art, “It does not follow a set of rules; rather, it adopts an approach arising from an emergent set of attitudes.”<sup>3</sup> This show is an irreverent presence, lacking the certainty of explanation, the false guarantee of articulation, it is taking space. It facilitates these works’ floating ambitions, stretching their already elastic physical and social boundaries and sling-shotting them playfully, almost carelessly, into the disjunctured, sutured space-time of the global contemporary. The idea is not to have them say anything, these works tell no stories. The only story is in their being.

-Nicole Smythe-Johnson

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. New York: Independent Curators International, 2012. (p 29)